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# Key Societal Trends, Challenges and Opportunities for the Civil Society in the Visegrad Region

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# KEY CONCLUSIONS

This analysis focuses on four long-term trends we can observe in the development of civil society in the Visegrad (V4) region. There are demographic changes, digitalisation and socio-economic and environmental trends that shape the societal environment and interact with acute consequences of COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine. While a number of serious threats are looming over the civil society sector, the multiple crises also offer important opportunities. We attempt to highlight the specificities of the region not to strengthen them, but to contribute to mutual rapprochement with other parts of the EU in developing a stronger civil society and democracy. We are committed to promote cooperation between the CSOs in these countries, notwithstanding the differences in the political conditions that exist in each country in the region for their operation.

## Ageing, depopulation and the rise of illiberalism

- Central and Eastern Europe is one of the fastest ageing and depopulating regions in the world, especially in its rural areas.
- There is a connection between ageing-depopulation of ethnically homogenous Visegrad countries and the rise of illiberalism in the region as a defensive reaction to this trend.
- Moreover, these trends can also be perceived within the civil society sector. The employees of the Visegrad region CSOs have usually been part of the organisation for decades.

## Digitalisation

- The Visegrad region performs below the EU average according to the key digitalisation index.
- Aware of the trends, Visegrad prime ministers signed a joint declaration calling for mutual cooperation in achieving sustainable digital transformation with help of EU resources.
- There is a lack of connection between well-established CSOs that often do not use the potential of digital technologies well and younger, more informal groups that use them well but lack the organisational structure.

## Socio-economic and green sustainability

- The Visegrad region saw a significant dip in GDP during the pandemic as well as higher inflation rates in 2022.
- Broader Central and Eastern Europe still faces structural inequality compared to EU-15
- Visegrad countries still depend on fossil fuels. Czechia and Poland are amongst the EU countries with the largest greenhouse gases per capita.
- The political narratives are sceptical and the populations are afraid of green transformation based on the bad experiences with the restructuring from the 1990s.

## Democratic and civic space

- The perception of the civil society sector in the V4 region is ambivalent depending on the country as well as on the topics.
- General democratic inclination seems to be strongest in Slovakia feeding from the energy of the 2018 anti-corruption movement. Czechia seems to be in a mode of sustaining the level while right-wing coalitions in Hungary and Poland have consolidated political control over the judiciary, media, cultural and education institutions, and **weakened critical voices**
- In **Czechia and Slovakia**, the general regulatory environment for CSOs is **rather friendly**. Both Hungary and Poland have introduced legislation burdening the human rights CSOs while privileging government-organised NGOs.

- Human rights CSOs stay at the margin of state funding in all the Visegrad countries. This has been made worse by the pandemic. There was a spike in individual online donations.
- The culture of public participation in the Visegrad region is still low. A notable example can be found in civil society's participation in negotiating the Recovery and Resilience Plan.

### **COVID-19 and War in Ukraine**

- Visegrad politicians are split regarding the support for Ukraine. Hungary stands in direct opposition to Poland, Czechia and Slovakia, who were amongst the first to visit Ukraine after the beginning of the war and support Ukraine's membership in the EU.
- Visegrad countries, Poland in particular, have accepted millions of refugees and struggle to integrate them on a permanent basis.
- Civil society plays a massive role in managing this humanitarian crisis, often grinding their teeth after years of migrant integration NGOs being undermined by the governments.
- Similarly, Visegrad civil society played a key role in handling the pandemic, earning some visibility and credit for that. Yet it harmed their operations, reduced funding and limited participation of many CSOs in decision-making.

### **Opportunities for the civil society**

- CSOs proved their key role in responding to societal needs and challenges during the COVID-19 and Ukraine war crisis. The public perception about CSOs has improved, and CSOs need to harness this potential to be recognised as legitimate and effective partners of the government. Where possible, they need to look for establishing stronger partnerships with the public bodies and other stakeholders for systemic changes.
- Civil society needs to play a crucial role in handling the demographic changes, especially in isolated and rural regions.
- Digitalisation of civil society needs to be comprehended in all its aspects. Civil society sector in all V4 countries needs large investments into digitalisation of its operations. The EU, national and private funding should recognise these needs and support the digitalisation of the already underfunded non-profit sector. At the same time, civil society needs to respond to the changes in society related to digitalisation - adapt to new ways of communication, governance and fundraising, mobilisation of activists and supporters. It has a crucial role also in safeguarding human rights and fundamental freedoms, participatory democracy, and good governance in the digital era, as well as fighting digital poverty and inequality.
- Nation-wide movements need to build stronger networking not just within the V4 region but broader Three Sea Initiative and CEE regions. CSOs need to extend the range of the actors to cooperate with to support grassroots mobilisation.
- Especially in the context of the war in Ukraine, the V4 CSOs can serve as a key bridge between civil society in Ukraine, Russia and Belarus on one hand and Western European CSOs and networks and EU institutions on the other.

# INTRODUCTION

In this study we examine the key factors affecting the functioning of civil society organisations (CSOs) and challenges and opportunities for civil societies in the Visegrad countries. We do so while acknowledging the existing differences among these countries that more than thirty years ago formed an alliance to accelerate their development towards democracy and closer relationships with the countries of the European Union (EU). As EU-members, and quite clearly under the influence of migration to Europe in 2015 these countries started to alienate due to centrifugal political tendencies, emphasising regional specificities, populism and nationalism. For some time now, the societies of the Visegrad countries have been evolving under considerably different political conditions. Nevertheless, we consider it useful to analyse major trends civil societies face in these countries that remain similar in order to open further possibilities for sharing experiences and promote cooperation between the CSO's in these countries. The aim is not to highlight the specificities of the region in order to strengthen them, but to contribute to mutual rapprochement with other parts of the EU in developing a stronger civil society and democracy.

The analyses of the state of the civic space in this region have usually focused just on the rise of illiberal forces, populism and backsliding of democracy and its negative consequences for civil society. Yet, more factors shape the civic space in the region.

This short study tries to go a bit deeper and shed light on some other long-term societal trends that have an impact on the state of the civic space. More specifically, it focuses on challenges connected with demographic changes, digitalisation, socio-economic and environmental issues. While the rise of populism and the shrinking of civic space are not omitted, the topics also include actual phenomena of the war in Ukraine and the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The study, however, does not focus just on the problems and obstacles. The second part gives the mentioned issues a positive spin when seeing some opportunities arising from these phenomena.

# KEY SOCIETAL TRENDS IN THE VISEGRAD REGION

The most prominent acute and unforeseen events that greatly influenced the global macro trends in the recent years was the COVID-19 pandemic, and complemented by the Ukrainian war in the recent months. The development of the civil society has for quite some time been influenced by long-term megatrends that shape the pulse of society globally, with its specifics in the European context.

In their report for the European Economic and Social Committee Divjak and Forbici<sup>1</sup> defined five major societal trends that should affect European CSOs until 2030. These were **demographic changes, economic crisis, digitalisation, populism and shrinking civic space**.

## A/ DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGES

Demographic changes (including population ageing and migration) are probably the most dominant trend in the EU, yet the least visible as it does not manifest itself so acutely. The EU has one of the oldest demographics in the world. The median age is rising steadily (43,9 in 2020)<sup>2</sup> and the percentage of young people to 14 years is getting smaller by year (only 15,6 % in 2017).<sup>3</sup>

### Depopulation of the region

Central and Eastern Europe is a region that struggles with low birth rates coupled with a strong emigration drive and strict immigration policies, which means it is highly probable that every single country will see its population decline. Visegrad countries, in particular, are one of the biggest victims of these trends. V4 is one of the fastest shrinking regions in the world. According to the estimates, the V4 population should shrink by 31 % by 2100, from 63,8 to 44 million people.<sup>4</sup> Czechia is the only country expecting a mild decline from 10,7 in 2019 to 10,3 in 2100, mainly due to strong immigration, yet Slovakia and Hungary should expect a 30 % drop and Poland even 40 % drop by 2100.<sup>5</sup>

### Depopulation of rural areas

EU and V4 depopulation are especially significant in rural regions. The quality of life, including lower living costs, more space or less pollution, is not able to outweigh structural problems, like fewer work opportunities, lack of infrastructure, modern transportation, degradation of basic services like schools and healthcare, absence of cultural services or abandonment by institutions. By 2050 EU rural areas should have less than 8 million inhabitants.<sup>6</sup>

The demographic changes are also followed by an economic decline as the ones who migrate are usually the young and/or educated people, which decreases birth rates, leaves an ageing population, a higher risk of poverty, with lower economic, cultural and other activities. Rural areas cannot be simply saved by migration from other regions outside of the EU as the migrants usually concentrate in urban areas of rich regions.<sup>7</sup> Visegrad Insight and Ivan Krastev stress that the depopulation of the region and especially its rural areas and the brain drain of young and educated people to the West are defining demographic trends for Central and Eastern European countries.<sup>8</sup>

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1 Divjak, Tina – Forbici, Goran (2017): The future evolution of civil society in the European Union by 2030. EESC. [https://www.eesc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/files/the\\_future\\_evolution\\_of\\_civil\\_society\\_in\\_the\\_eu\\_by\\_2030.pdf](https://www.eesc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/files/the_future_evolution_of_civil_society_in_the_eu_by_2030.pdf)

2 Eurostat (2020): Are you younger or older than the median age in your region? <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/ddn-20211013-2>

3 Divjak, Tina – Forbici, Goran (2017): The future evolution of civil society in the European Union by 2030. EESC, pp. 11.

4 Kafkadesk Prague Office (2019): the Visegrad region 's population decrease by 30% by 2011. Kafkadesk. <https://kafkadesk.org/2019/06/21/central-europes-population-to-decrease-by-over-30-by-2100/>

5 Ibid.

6 Zurro Sanchez - Colomer, Lucia (2020): Nobody lives here! Rural depopulation in the EU and citizen Engagement in „emptied Spain“. Society. <https://www.eyes-on-europe.eu/nobody-lives-here-rural-depopulation-in-the-eu-and-citizen-engagement-in-emptied-spain/>

7 Ibid.

8 Ognyan, Georgiev (2022): Depopulation – Why the CEE is not doomed to lose people forever. Visegrad Insight. <https://visegradinsight.eu/depopulation-why-the-cee-is-not-doomed-to-lose-people-forever/>

## Illiberalism and demography

Moreover, Krastev demonstrates well that the demographic changes are connected to the rise of illiberalism in the region<sup>9</sup>. Firstly, it is mostly the young liberal voters who are keener to and well-equipped to emigrate which leaves behind an overrepresented older generation who fears changes as they are - in many cases rightfully angry - victims of the post-communist transition. Secondly, he claims that the rise of illiberalism might be seen as „an attempt to preserve the power of shrinking ethnocultural majorities in the face of population decline and increased migration.“ Ethnically homogenous countries of the Visegrad region are fighting this „return to diversity“ as they see it as a threat, not an opportunity. The illiberal trend is not based on absolute closure of borders but rather sovereign control over who and how can come. Foreigners can come to work and serve us but they barely become „one of us“.

## Ageing CSOs

Lastly, the civil society sector (management, board members, and volunteers) is ageing as well. Research from CEE shows the average number of years spent working in an organisation is 14.5, yet in Hungary and Poland, it is more than 20 which minimises the will of young people to enter established organisations. Moreover, there is a continued involvement of founders or directors of organisations, which makes leadership succession and internal promotion difficult.<sup>10</sup> The engagement of a new generation of socially engaged citizens will be crucial to ensure new energy and innovation in the sector. Yet, there is a generational gap within the civil society sector also as to the perception of the biggest societal challenges. A suggestion is being made that climate change may be increasingly seen as the key driving issue among a young generation, while for the older guardians of the 1989 generation it mostly were issues of anti-corruption and professionalisation.<sup>11</sup> These developments will directly affect the CSOs' ability to follow modern approaches in fundraising, advocacy, public relations etc.<sup>12</sup>

## B/ DIGITALISATION

Another trend that Divjak and Forbici stress is the importance of digitalisation. They claim that the technologies such as the Internet of Things, big data, blockchain or artificial intelligence will have an important role to play in a wide range of areas (e.g. gender equality, good governance, transparency and accountability, fight against corruption, job creation and private sector development, access to microfinance, education and health).<sup>13</sup> Digital transformation is defined as a profound transformation of organisational activities, processes, competencies and models to use opportunities of a mix of digital technologies and accelerate impact across society.<sup>14</sup>

## Digitalisation of civil society

Similarly, OECD considers digital transformation to be a key trend for civil society. Digital transformation is providing new ways to exercise the freedoms of association, peaceful assembly, and expression, unfortunately, as well as new ways to restrict those rights.<sup>15</sup> The EU as well recognises the importance of digitalisation with the introduction of the Digital Service Act which aims at creating a safer digital space where the fundamental rights of users are protected and establishing a level playing field for businesses.<sup>16</sup>

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9 Krastev, Ivan (2020). Depopulation is eastern Europe's biggest problem. Financial Times. <https://www.ft.com/content/c5d3e0ae-36eb-11ea-ac3c-f68c10993b04>

10 Cloet, Quincy (2020): Civil society Futures in the Visegrad region . Visegrad Insight, pp. 14. <https://visegradinsight.eu/app/uploads/2020/06/Civil-Society-Futures-in-Central-Europe-DemocracE-European-Futures-Report-III.pdf>

11 Cloet, Quincy (2020): Civil society Futures in the Visegrad region . Visegrad Insight, pp. 15.

12 Divjak, Tina – Forbici, Goran (2017): The future evolution of civil society in the European Union by 2030, pp. 1.

13 Ibid, pp. 19.

14 Esses, Diána - Csete, Mária & Nemeth, Balint. (2021). Sustainability and Digital Transformation in the Visegrad Group of the Visegrad region an Countries. Sustainability. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13115833>

15 OECD (2020), Digital Transformation and the Futures of Civic Space to 2030, Development Policy Paper, OECD Publishing, Paris <https://www.oecd.org/dac/Digital-Transformation-and-the-Futures-of-Civic-Space-to-2030.pdf>

16 European Commission (2022): The Digital Service Act package. <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/digital-services-act-package>

## Digitalisation in the region

The digital performance of the Visegrad countries is not the most impressive. Czechia performs the best – both in terms of the 2019 Network Readiness Index and the EU 2020 Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) – while Hungary, Slovakia and Poland are ranked lower but close together. However, the Visegrad countries perform below the EU average according to the EU's DESI-Index and thus have improvement needs: Czechia is ranked 17<sup>th</sup>, Hungary on the 21<sup>st</sup>, Slovakia on the 22<sup>nd</sup> and Poland on the 23<sup>rd</sup>.<sup>17</sup>

Digital and human skills are especially important. In terms of the 2020 DESI component of human capital, the Visegrad countries range slightly below the EU average, whereby Czechia is close to it (14<sup>th</sup> place, 19<sup>th</sup> place Hungary, 20<sup>th</sup> place Slovakia and 22<sup>nd</sup> place Poland). In Czechia, 62% of individuals have at least basic digital skills thus ranging above the EU average (58%). In Slovakia, the share reaches 54%, in Hungary and Poland less than half of the population have at least basic digital skills (49% in Hungary, 44% in Poland). The 2020 European semester country recommendations suggest supporting digital skills and access to digital learning in Czechia and Slovakia.<sup>18</sup>

Visegrad governments are aware of these challenges. In 2021, the prime ministers signed a declaration focused on mutual cooperation with the goal of sustainable digital transformation of the region by effective use of EU resources available under the Multiannual Financial Framework 2021-2027 and NextGenerationEU.<sup>19</sup>

## Perils of digitalisation

Thanks to the ageing CSOs staff, many older and well-established CSOs do not use the potential of digital technologies well. On the other hand, younger organisations seize every available opportunity to accelerate the digitisation process, yet they often do not have the organisational structure and often fail to last longer than one campaign.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, with higher digitalisation, the CSOs face a threat of surveillance by states or data theft by corporations.<sup>21</sup>

## C/ SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND GREEN SUSTAINABILITY

Divjak and Forbici claimed the economic crisis to be the third defining trend. In the late 2010s the crisis was fading, yet the growth was not strong enough and the countries were struggling with both the austerity measures and the public debt. The fragile recovery was undermined by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020-2021 and most recently dealt a heavy blow by looming recession (or even stagflation) as a consequence of the War on Ukraine.

### Economic crisis

These problems are particularly persistent in the Visegrad region. The government debt rose significantly (more than 5%) in most countries. The Czech Republic saw a decline in its economic transformation score. The country recorded the region's third-largest decrease in GDP in 2020, which followed very slow growth in two previous years. Slovakia has been heavily dependent on car exports which led to weakened growth already in 2019. In Poland, PiS's policies have ensured growth, employment, and budget stability, yet it came at the cost of strong clientelism. Also, like most other EU states in the region, the country's economic stability is reinforced by significant EU funding that accounts for as much as 25% of economic growth in Poland.<sup>22</sup> Hungary was the largest recipient of Chinese capital flows in 2020 valued at 2.058 billion euros. Loans from the Russia-backed International Investment Bank have been increasing at a 25% growth rate since 2017 in Hungary, Slovakia, and Czechia. The US on the other hand is the largest export market outside the EU for the 3SI region.<sup>23</sup>

17 Hanzl-Weiss, Doris (2021): Making the most of the recovery in Visegrad. Visegradinfo. <https://visegradinfo.eu/index.php/v4-mirror/617-making-the-most-of-the-recovery-in-visegrad>

18 Ibid.

19 Visegrad Group Joint Declaration on Mutual Cooperation in Digital Projects. Visegrad group. Krakow (2021). <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/download.php?docID=458>

20 Cloet, Quincy (2020): Civil society Futures in the Visegrad region. Visegrad Insight, pp. 2,16.

21 OECD (2020): Digital Transformation and the Futures of Civic Space to 2030: Four scenarios and what they could mean for development co-operation providers Development Policy Paper, OECD Publishing, Paris <https://www.oecd.org/dac/Digital-Transformation-and-the-Futures-of-Civic-Space-to-2030.pdf>

22 Sikk, Allan (2022): Regional Report East-Central and Southeast Europe Stuck in Reverse. Bertelsmann Stiftung, pp. 9-10 [https://bti-project.org/fileadmin/api/content/en/downloads/reports/global/BTI\\_2022\\_Regional\\_Report\\_ECSE.pdf](https://bti-project.org/fileadmin/api/content/en/downloads/reports/global/BTI_2022_Regional_Report_ECSE.pdf)

23 Przybylski, Wojciech – Jarończyk, Kamil (2021): Towards 3SI Civil Society Forum. Visegrad Insight, pp 17-18. [https://visegradinsight.eu/app/uploads/2021/07/Visegrad-Insight\\_18\\_2021-3SI-2025.pdf](https://visegradinsight.eu/app/uploads/2021/07/Visegrad-Insight_18_2021-3SI-2025.pdf)



## Structural inequalities between CEE and EU-15

The European 5G readiness index shows that the greatest disparity between EU-15 and the CEE countries lies in the ability to provide an environment that fosters R&D and innovation.<sup>24</sup> Yet, apart from the East and the West divide, there is also a clear gap in the North-South connectivity of the region in the general plan of EU infrastructure, and the Trans-European Network of Transportation (TEN-T). These structural inequalities are present not just between regions but also within countries and are not limited to innovation and transport infrastructure, but also extend to socio-economic gaps among various social groups. Rising inequality is one of the key issues for the EU now.<sup>25</sup>

## Green and just transition

The growing structural and socio-economic inequalities need to be understood together with probably the most dominant issue nowadays, which is the environmental challenge, in particular the climate change.

The EU call for the Green Deal goes hand in hand with the call for just transition and needs to be shaped by civil society as much as possible. The European Green Deal, introduced in 2019, is based on three pillars: no net emissions of greenhouse gases by 2050, economic growth decoupled from resource use and no person, and no place left behind.<sup>26</sup>

## Fossil region

The energy production in the region is deeply dependent on fossil fuels and nuclear energy. Czechia and Poland face the biggest fossil fuel challenges: These two countries are amongst the EU countries with the largest greenhouse gases per capita. Czechia is the fourth largest per capita greenhouse emitter in the EU (2020), and Poland is the seventh largest emitter. Slovakia and especially Hungary have lower per capita emissions and rank below the EU average (16<sup>th</sup> place and 23<sup>rd</sup> place respectively).<sup>27</sup>

The share of renewable energy in gross final energy consumption was below the EU average of 18.9% in 2019 in all four Visegrad countries: it lies at about 17% and 16% in Slovakia and Czechia, 13% in Hungary and only 12% in Poland. While Slovakia and Czechia already outperformed their national 2020 target for renewables in 2019, Hungary almost fulfilled it, Poland still missed it by 3 per cent.<sup>28</sup>

## Not so green political narratives

The political narrative in the region is not the greenest. Poland plans to continue expanding the Turów mine, which was agreed by the new Czech government. Victor Orbán called the goal of the Green Deal a „utopian fantasy“.<sup>29</sup> And the Czech prime minister, Petr Fiala, approved a new tender for the nuclear plant in Dukovany.

## Fears of another unjust transition

A healthy future and decoupling of the economy from fossil fuels are legitimate goals. Moreover, the EU claims it does not want to leave anyone and any place behind, which is especially important for the CEE region. The illiberal forces are using legitimate anger and fears accumulated in the region since the 1990s. These are rooted especially in the collateral damage of rapid privatisation and restructuring of the entire economies which left many behind and caused strong social inequalities.<sup>30</sup>

To address this and avoid “two-speed decarbonisation of Europe”, the EU set up the massive Just Transition Mechanism (JTM), a concept within its broader Green Deal Investment Plan, which is worth €1 trillion. The JTM mobilises around €60-100 billion in investment to support the countries, regions, and citizens who need the funding the most.<sup>31</sup>

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24 Ibid, pp. 18.

25 Social Europe (2021). Inequality in Europe.  
[https://brussels.fes.de/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Inequality\\_in\\_Europe\\_-\\_final.pdf](https://brussels.fes.de/fileadmin/user_upload/Inequality_in_Europe_-_final.pdf)

26 European Commission (2021). European Green Deal.  
[https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal_en)

27 Hanzl-Weiss, Doris (2021): Making the most of the recovery in Visegrad.

28 Ibid.

29 Reuters (2021). ‚Utopian fantasy‘: Hungary’s Orban dismisses EU climate policy plans  
<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/utopian-fantasy-hungarys-orban-dismisses-eu-climate-policy-plans-2021-10-21/>

30 Apaydin, Daniela (2021): When the Green deal is no deal. Fair Observer.  
<https://www.fairobserver.com/region/europe/daniela-apaydin-eu-green-new-deal-climate-policy-divisions-17600/>

31 European Commission (2021): The Just Transition Mechanism: making sure no one is left behind.  
[https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal/finance-and-green-deal/just-transition-mechanism\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal/finance-and-green-deal/just-transition-mechanism_en)

## D/ DEMOCRATIC AND CIVIC SPACE

The last two trends are the usual suspects when talking about the Visegrad region, meaning the rise of populism, fragmentation and polarisation, backsliding of democracy and rule of law and shrinking civic space.

### State of democracy and civil society<sup>32</sup>

The general democratic orientation of the institutions seems to be the most progressive in Slovakia where the tragic events of 2018 (the murder of an investigative journalist and his fiancée) initiated strong social movements on anti-corruption, human rights and gender equality, which have been enhanced by the results of local, presidential and European parliament elections. In 2021, Slovakia's justice system underwent some significant reforms and created the Whistle-blower Protection Office. In Czechia, the general state of democracy is solid, but there is a need to improve the independence of media, including the media of public service and stick to the anti-corruption agenda, among others. The situation in Poland and Hungary is more pressing. Both Hungarian right-wing coalitions led by Fidesz and the Polish Law and Justice government (albeit to a lesser degree) have consolidated political control over the judiciary, media, cultural and education institutions, and weakened all critical voices - including local authorities, civic organisations and independent media.

### Ambivalent perception of the civil society sector

The most positive perception of CSOs is in Slovakia where more than three-quarters of the population believe that CSOs belong to a democratic society and that most CSOs serve the citizen's benefit. More than half believe that CSOs manage their resources transparently. In Czechia, Hungary and Poland the most negative attitude relates to CSOs defending migrants and minorities (LGBTQ, Roma people) and, particularly in Poland, also to CSOs advocating for sexual and reproductive rights. The positive perception in Czechia is around education, youth, humanitarian aid, social services, and charity. In Hungary, it is health, children, green and climate change-related causes. In Czechia, a rather negative attitude to the sector as a whole (although the actual vocabulary of such questions matters a lot - non-profit, non-governmental, civil society or concrete types of civil society organisations each have a different connotation) does not impede sympathy to well-known CSO brands. In the Czech Republic and Hungary, a high percentage of citizens (around one-third) support CSOs financially. The perception in all the V4 countries is deeply influenced by negative narratives of the media and (mostly right-wing or populist) politicians about „the political“ NGOs (human rights, LGBTQ, rule of law and watchdog organisations) who are claimed to serve foreign interests while ignoring their contribution to meeting people's needs.<sup>33</sup> The situation is most pressing in Hungary, but quite serious also in Poland where there is ongoing judicial harassment and intimidation by police and ultra-conservative groups.

### Legislative and regulatory conditions for CSOs<sup>34</sup>

In **Czechia and Slovakia**, the general regulatory environment for CSOs is **rather friendly**. Meanwhile, in **Hungary**, the registration and reporting requirements for CSOs are **burdensome**.<sup>35</sup> A new law on organisations "capable of influencing public life" was introduced focusing on foreign-funded CSOs, while religious or sports organisations are exempt. The European Court of Justice (ECJ) found Hungary's 'Stop Soros' from 2018 (targeting migration CSOs) laws in contradiction with EU legislation. **Poland** has initiated several propos-

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- 32 For a general description of the rise of populism and decline of democracy in the Visegrad region : More-Hollerweger, Eva - Bogorin, Flavia-Elvira - Litofcenko, Julia - Meyer, Michael Civil (eds., 2019): Society in Central and Eastern Europe: Monitoring 2019, ERSTE Stiftung.  
Hummel, Siri - Pfirter, Laura - Roth, Johannes - Strachwitz, Ruper Graf (2020). Understanding Civil Society in Europe: A Foundation for International Cooperation. IFA: Stuttgart, pp. 71-78.  
<https://doi.org/10.17901/AKBP1.12.2020> ;  
Sikk, Allan (2022): Regional Report East-Central and Southeast Europe Stuck in Reverse. Bertelsmann Shifting.  
[https://bti-project.org/fileadmin/api/content/en/downloads/reports/global/BT1\\_2022\\_Regional\\_Report\\_ECSE.pdf](https://bti-project.org/fileadmin/api/content/en/downloads/reports/global/BT1_2022_Regional_Report_ECSE.pdf) ;  
Przybylski, Wojciech - Jarończyk, Kamil (2021): Towards 3SI Civil Society Forum. Visegrad Insight, pp. 12-14.  
[https://visegradinsight.eu/app/uploads/2021/07/Visegrad-Insight\\_18\\_2021-3SI-2025.pdf](https://visegradinsight.eu/app/uploads/2021/07/Visegrad-Insight_18_2021-3SI-2025.pdf)  
Cloet, Quincy (2020): Civil society Futures in the Visegrad region . Visegrad Insight. <https://visegradinsight.eu/app/uploads/2020/06/Civil-Society-Futures-in-Central-Europe-DemocrCE-European-Futures-Report-III.pdf>
- 33 Novakova, Nataliya (2020): Civil Society in the Visegrad region : Threats and Ways Forward. German Marshal Fund, pp. 4.  
[https://www.gmfus.org/sites/default/files/Novakova%2520-%2520Civil%2520Society%2520Central%2520Europe%2520-%252012%2520October\\_Financial.pdf](https://www.gmfus.org/sites/default/files/Novakova%2520-%2520Civil%2520Society%2520Central%2520Europe%2520-%252012%2520October_Financial.pdf)
- 34 Hummel, Siri - Pfirter, Laura - Roth, Johannes - Strachwitz, Ruper Graf (2020). Understanding Civil Society in Europe: A Foundation for International Cooperation. IFA: Stuttgart, pp. 75-77.  
Meyer, M. - Moder, C. - Neumayr, M. et al. (2020) Civil Society and Its Institutional Context in CEE. *Voluntas* 31, 811-827. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-019-00106-7>
- 35 More-Hollerweger, Eva - Bogorin, Flavia-Elvira - Litofcenko, Julia - Meyer, Michael Civil (eds., 2019): Society in Central and Eastern Europe: Monitoring 2019, ERSTE Stiftung, pp. 8.  
<https://philea.issueelab.org/resources/35585/35585.pdf>

als burdening the sector. E.g., 'Lex Czarnek' aiming to **increase the control** of CSOs in education; the draft of the Act on NGO Reporting would add an additional reporting burden. Both in Hungary and Poland, the new government-organised NGOs (GONGOs) benefit from privileged access to policy-making, financial support and a favourable political climate for their activities.<sup>36</sup>

### **Access of CSOs to financing**

The Czech state budget allocations for CSOs for 2022 show that 50% of the total budget of 8,5 billion Czech Crowns (343 million Euro) goes to sports. On the contrary **democracy and human rights stay at the margin**: minorities in general 0,6%, Roma minority 0,3%, gender equality 0,08%, and anti-corruption even 0,06%. Both in Hungary<sup>37</sup> and Poland, we witness a trend of uneven and non-transparent distribution of funds in favour of "GONGOs" that are directly controlled by politicians and institutions controlled by the ruling parties. In this context, it has a mostly negative impact on the financing of the organisations defending the rule of law or fundamental rights.<sup>38</sup> This was made even worse in Hungary as in 2021, third-period negotiations of the EEA & Norway Grants were not concluded which means a loss of 10 million EUR. In Slovakia, the financing of the civil society sector, especially in the field of culture, appears to be insufficient, due to the problems with the de minimis scheme. The pandemic negatively influenced corporate donations both in the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia. The positive news is that there was a spike in individual online donations.

### **Access to civic dialogue/participation<sup>39</sup>**

Both in Czechia and Slovakia, there were problems with civil society's participation in negotiating the Recovery and Resilience Plan. Apart from the fact that most plans omit the resilience aspect, the preparation processes in V4 were deeply fraudulent. Slovak CSOs were excluded from pre- and post-consultation. Both in Czechia and Hungary the state, in general, circumvents existing consultation mechanisms. The Hungarian government also used the pretext of the COVID-19 pandemic to limit further avenues of participation or the expression of dissent. In a more long-term perception, both in Czechia, Hungary and Slovakia, the state has failed to establish meaningful partnerships with civil society and the representation of the sector is still underrated. In **Hungary**, the government only consults the like-minded CSOs and approaches citizens directly with manipulative „national consultation surveys“. Yet, there is **hope in Czechia**, a well-implemented new Strategy for cooperation with NGOs and the Methodology for participation may represent an improvement of this trend and establish a strong civil dialogue. In **Slovakia**, a new platform for umbrella organisations was established.

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36 Hummel, Siri - Pflirter, Laura - Roth, Johannes - Strachwitz, Ruper Graf (2020). Understanding Civil Society in Europe: A Foundation for International Cooperation. IFA: Stuttgart, pp. 53.; Hollerweger, Eva - Bogorin, Flavia-Elvira - Litofcenko, Julia - Meyer, Michael Civil (eds., 2019): Society in Central and Eastern Europe: Monitoring 2019, ERSTE Stiftung, pp. 12

37 More-Hollerweger, Eva - Bogorin, Flavia-Elvira - Litofcenko, Julia - Meyer, Michael Civil (eds., 2019): Society in Central and Eastern Europe: Monitoring 2019, ERSTE Stiftung, pp. 9.

38 Meyer, M. - Moder, C. - Neumayr, M. et al. (2020) Civil Society and Its Institutional Context in CEE. *Voluntas* 31, 820. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-019-00106-7>

39 Březovská, Romana - Karásková, Vendula (2021): The Future of Europe: What Role for Visegrad Cooperation? Potential of the V4 countries to contribute to the Conference on the Future of Europe in relation to the climate agenda and the involvement of the Western Balkan countries. AMO, pp. 6. [https://www.amo.cz/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/AMO\\_The\\_Future\\_of\\_Europe\\_What\\_role\\_for\\_the\\_V4\\_final.pdf](https://www.amo.cz/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/AMO_The_Future_of_Europe_What_role_for_the_V4_final.pdf)

# TWO MOST RECENT CHALLENGES – PANDEMICS AND WAR

## E/ COVID-19

### Impact on Europe

From February 2020 till May 2022, COVID-19 has caused around 2 million deaths in Europe overall.<sup>40</sup> It also hit the EU economy hard, after the 2008-2013 financial crisis, a period when Europe was buffeted by global financial shocks followed by the euro area's sovereign debt struggles. In 2020, the GDP of the EU shrank by 5,9 %, and hundreds of thousands of jobs were lost.<sup>41</sup> Even though it seems that the economies have been restarted. It should grow around 4 % in 2022.<sup>42</sup>

### Economic impact on the region

The Visegrad economies have been hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic, especially its second wave. In response, macroeconomic policies have been markedly relaxed, with fiscal stimulus packages reaching up to 14% of GDP in Poland and Czechia. The recovery of the Visegrad economies from 2021 onwards should be significantly helped by the massive inflow of EU transfers, particularly from the newly established Next Generation EU recovery fund.<sup>43</sup> The Recovery and Resilience Facility forms the main part of this help with a sum of EUR 672.5 billion, distributed in grants (EUR 312.5 billion) and loans (EUR 360 billion). The Visegrad countries will receive for the period 2021-2023 grants of about EUR 6.7 billion in Czechia, 6.3 billion in Hungary, 23 billion in Poland and 5.8 billion in Slovakia (in 2018 prices).<sup>44</sup>

### Disinformation

Similar to other European countries, the pandemics provided fertile ground for the social forces to deploy manipulated information taking advantage of the uncertainty in the societies. Both international (China, Russia) and local actors (far right and illiberal conservatives) were undermining the democratic institutions and principles by undermining their capabilities to handle the crisis.<sup>45</sup>

### Challenges for CSOs

The restrictions brought by the anti-covid measures have had a negative influence on civic space. According to FRA research, 3 out of 4 CSOs felt a negative impact on their operation, even though most of them found the measures justified.<sup>46</sup>

In general, it seems that the COVID-19 pandemic has not created many new problems but mostly exaggerated the issues which were hurting the civil society sector way before the pandemic.

Three main areas of the challenge were: a) daily work being undermined by limited outreach opportunities and physical access to beneficiaries; b) reduced funding and c) limits on participation in decision-making.<sup>47</sup> Almost 70 % of the CSOs claimed they had problems providing the service to beneficiaries, which had a disproportionately negative effect on the most vulnerable groups with limited access to the internet. And

40 Stewart, Conor (2022): Number of new coronavirus (COVID-19) deaths in Europe since February 2020. Statista. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1102288/coronavirus-deaths-development-europe/>

41 Lloyd, Naomi (2022): Europe's COVID recovery: economy bounces back but risks remain. Euronews.next. <https://www.euronews.com/next/2021/12/15/europe-s-covid-recovery-economy-bounces-back-but-risks-remain>

42 Clark, D. (2022): Gross domestic product growth rate forecasts in selected European countries in 2022. Statista. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1102546/coronavirus-european-gdp-growth/>

43 Astrov, Vasily – Holzner, Mario (2021): The Visegrád Countries: Coronavirus Pandemic, EU Transfers, and their Impact on Austria. The Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies, pp. 9-10. <https://wiiw.ac.at/the-visegrad-countries-coronavirus-pandemic-eu-transfers-and-their-impact-on-austria-dlp-5600.pdf>

44 Hanzl-Weiss, Doris (2021): Making the most of the recovery Visegrad. Visegradinfo. <https://visegradinfo.eu/index.php/v4-mirror/617-making-the-most-of-the-recovery-in-visegrad>

45 Krzysztozek, Aleksandra (2021): Disinformation during pandemic: How can Visegrad countries combat it successfully? Visegradinfo. <https://visegradinfo.eu/index.php/v4-mirror/624-disinformation-during-pandemic-how-can-the-visegrad-countries-combat-it-successfully>

46 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2022): Protecting Civic Space in the EU, pp. 17. [https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra\\_uploads/fra-2021-protecting-civic-space\\_en.pdf](https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2021-protecting-civic-space_en.pdf)

47 Ibid, pp. 17.

90 % of the respondents had to cancel or postpone activities or events.<sup>48</sup>

Around 80 % of CSOs participating in research for EESC perceived a negative impact of the pandemic on the entire civil society sector in their country.<sup>49</sup>

In most EU states the CSOs did not benefit from the recovery funding and were faced with a substantive cut in public funding (the case of the Czech Republic<sup>50</sup>, Hungary<sup>51</sup>, Poland<sup>52</sup>). Also, corporate donations diminished due to the reduction of CSR funding.<sup>53</sup> Foundations and associations were most affected.<sup>54</sup>

Lastly, the pandemic led to limited consultation and reduced access to decision-making as well as more complicated access to information. Even when CSOs had a chance to present their opinion it happened at the last moment and under tight deadlines.<sup>55</sup> This was a case in the Czech Republic where the government proceeded with the largest public tender in history to construct additional blocks of the nuclear power station Dukovany or with the Construction act.<sup>56</sup> A similar case was the approval of the industrial investment planned in Göd by the Hungarian government.<sup>57</sup>

As was the case with the preparation of National recovery plans that did not include civil society at all or after pressure<sup>58</sup> (case of the Czech Republic<sup>59</sup>, case of Hungary<sup>60</sup>, to a lesser extent Poland<sup>61</sup>). Even worse, some governments used the pandemic to reduce the transparency of their functioning. Moreover, they sometimes introduced “measures which have restricted fundamental rights - above all, freedom of assembly and freedom of expression. This was partly a case of the Czech Republic<sup>62</sup>. In Hungary, the limitation of freedom of assembly was more obvious when, e.g., religious forces were allowed to assemble while the civic organisations were fined<sup>63</sup>. In Poland, the government was shutting down protests even though the Supreme court ruled it cannot ban public assemblies. It was aimed mainly at the protest against the ban on abortions<sup>64</sup>. The governments have also sought to silence critical voices, particularly those from journalists and civil society activists.<sup>65</sup> This was especially the case in Hungary<sup>66</sup> and Poland<sup>67</sup>.

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48 Ibid, pp. 18.; Pazderski, Filip et al. (2022): The implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on fundamental rights and civic space: Executive summary. European Economic and Social Committee, pp. 3. <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/it/our-work/publications-other-work/publications/implications-covid-19-pandemic-fundamental-rights-and-civic-space>

49 Pazderski, Filip et al. (2022): The implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on fundamental rights and civic space: Executive summary, pp. 3.

50 Glopolis (2022): Czech Republic: European Civic Forum response to the 2022 European Commission stakeholder consultation on rule of law in the European Union. Civic Space Watch, pp. 9. <https://civicspacewatch.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Czech-Republic.pdf>

51 Ökotárs - Hungarian Environmental Partnership Foundation (2022): Hungary: European Civic Forum response to the 2022 European Commission stakeholder consultation on rule of law in the European Union. Civic Space Watch, pp. 5. <https://civicspacewatch.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Hungary.pdf>

52 The National Federation of Polish NGOs (2022): Poland: European Civic Forum response to the 2022 European Commission stakeholder consultation on rule of law in the European Union. Civic Space Watch, pp. 12. <https://civicspacewatch.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Poland.pdf>

53 Sassu, Răzvan-Victor - Vaş, Eliza: The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic for the European Non-governmental Sector. EuropeNow. <https://www.europe-nowjournal.org/2020/10/06/the-impact-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-for-the-european-non-governmental-sector/>

54 Pazderski, Filip et al. (2022): The implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on fundamental rights and civic space: Executive summary, pp. 4.

55 Ibid, pp. 4.

56 Glopolis (2022): Czech Republic: European Civic Forum response to the 2022 European Commission stakeholder consultation on rule of law in the European Union, pp. 12.

57 Ökotárs - Hungarian Environmental Partnership Foundation (2022): Hungary: European Civic Forum response to the 2022 European Commission stakeholder consultation on rule of law in the European Union, pp. 6.

58 Sassu, Răzvan-Victor - Vaş, Eliza: The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic for the European Non-governmental Sector.

59 Glopolis (2022): Czech Republic: European Civic Forum response to the 2022 European Commission stakeholder consultation on rule of law in the European Union, pp. 13.

60 Ökotárs - Hungarian Environmental Partnership Foundation (2022): Hungary: European Civic Forum response to the 2022 European Commission stakeholder consultation on rule of law in the European Union, pp. 6.

61 The National Federation of Polish NGOs (2022): Poland: European Civic Forum response to the 2022 European Commission stakeholder consultation on rule of law in the European Union, pp. 14.

62 Glopolis (2022): Czech Republic: European Civic Forum response to the 2022 European Commission stakeholder consultation on rule of law in the European Union, pp. 8.

63 Ökotárs - Hungarian Environmental Partnership Foundation (2022): Hungary: European Civic Forum response to the 2022 European Commission stakeholder consultation on rule of law in the European Union, pp. 4.

64 The National Federation of Polish NGOs (2022): Poland: European Civic Forum response to the 2022 European Commission stakeholder consultation on rule of law in the European Union, pp. 9.

65 Pazderski, Filip et al. (2022): The implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on fundamental rights and civic space: Executive summary, pp. 3.

66 Ökotárs - Hungarian Environmental Partnership Foundation (2022): Hungary: European Civic Forum response to the 2022 European Commission stakeholder consultation on rule of law in the European Union, pp. 1.

67 The National Federation of Polish NGOs (2022): Poland: European Civic Forum response to the 2022 European Commission stakeholder consultation on rule of law in the European Union, pp. 1.

## F/ WAR IN UKRAINE

According to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human rights, there were more than 7000 civilian casualties, half of them killed, since the beginning of the Russian military invasion in February 2022. The UNHCR states that 5.7 million refugees already left the country because of the war and 7.7 million Ukrainians are internally displaced<sup>68</sup>, the biggest European refugee wave since World War II.

While far from over, the war in Ukraine has already triggered or deepened multiple crises far beyond Ukraine. A new wave of refugees to Europe can be expected in the autumn as a result of food shortages in the MENA region, let alone another wave of COVID-19. Stagflationary pressures will push more people into unemployment, towards the poverty line, burden public resources and - supported by continued disinformation campaigns - erode support for the pro-Ukrainian, pro-European and even pro-democracy policies, especially in the CEE countries.

### Approaches in the region

The Visegrad region has strong ties to Ukraine, but the countries demonstrate a very divergent approach. While Poland, Czechia and to a lesser degree Slovakia quickly supported President Zelensky<sup>69</sup> and Ukraine's membership in the EU<sup>70</sup>, Viktor Orbán's government espouses the most pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian stance in the EU.

Even though the Visegrad countries have had a reputation for being closed to refugees/migrants, all of them accepted hundreds of thousands of refugees, 2 millions in case of Poland<sup>71</sup>. After a wave of unprecedented solidarity in the first month after invasion the Visegrad countries are facing more systemic obstacles to integration of the war refugees (in labor market, schools, social and health care system) in a situation of dwindling support and rapidly surging energy, food and other prices.

### Challenges for the civil society

It is still not very clear what the consequences for the CEE civil society are. Yet, we must admit that the role of civil society is absolutely crucial. After many years of attacks against migration CSOs, it has been the civil society that handled the first waves of refugees and managed the humanitarian crisis since the first days of the Russian aggression. Civil society across Europe has provided direct financial, legal, humanitarian and psycho-social support to both those crossing the border and those affected in Ukraine<sup>72</sup>. Yet, the limited resources (both human and economic) have brought many organisations to the edge of exhaustion.<sup>73</sup>

Just before the anticipated strong wave of next shocks, social cohesion in the region is already weak. Public surveys show people are lacking hope, sense of justice and assurance that the political leaders can handle what is looming behind the horizon.

It is vital for organised CSOs to help stabilise society in such a critical situation, or at least prevent further aggravation. Much of civil society, government and progressive business is in the same boat more than ever. Increased support for populist and extremist parties, or even fall of governments, would have dire consequences not only for the situation of many vulnerable groups, but also for democratic institutions and the civil society sector as a whole. We have experienced such backlash in the aftermath of the financial and migration crisis in the past decade.

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68 UNHCR (2022): Ukraine Refugee Situation. Operational Data Portal UNHCR. <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>

69 The Government of the Czech Republic (2022): Prime Minister Fiala held a meeting with Ukrainian President Zelensky in Kiev on further aid and sanctions against Russia. <https://www.vlada.cz/en/media-centrum/aktualne/prime-minister-fiala-held-a-meeting-with-ukrainian-president-zelensky-in-kiev-on-further-aid-and-sanctions-against-russia-195806/>

70 The Editorial Board (2022): V4 countries in favour of Ukraine's EU membership. Visegrad Post. <https://visegradpost.com/en/2022/03/02/v4-countries-in-favour-of-ukraines-eu-membership/>

71 Zachová, Aneta - Sieniawski, Bartosz - Hudec, Michal - Ellena (2022): Visegrad countries U-turn on migration over Ukraine, welcome refugees. Euractiv. [https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short\\_news/visegrad-countries-u-turn-on-migration-over-ukraine-welcome-refugees/](https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/visegrad-countries-u-turn-on-migration-over-ukraine-welcome-refugees/)

72 European Civic Forum (2022). Civic Pride: Civil actors in Times of Crisis. <https://civic-forum.eu/civic-pride>

73 Ibid.

# OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE VISEGRAD REGION

## A/ SECURING BETTER IMAGE, PARTICIPATION AND FUNDING

CSOs have played a crucial and constructive role in handling the immediate consequences of both the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. It has increased their visibility. Both society in general and public administrations in particular have acknowledged the work of the CSOs is indispensable. This **rapid switch in the perception** is a huge opportunity for civil society, especially in the Visegrad region, where the populist attacks both from politicians and media have been particularly strong in recent years.

At the same time, the current dire situation offers a number of other opportunities for impact and acknowledgement of CSOs around the key societal challenges. More or less systemic **policy changes** that CSO has been calling for unsuccessfully long before the war in Ukraine can be achieved as its result. These policy aims include the reform of asylum and integration policies, removing of barriers in the labour market (nostrification, flexible working arrangements and part time jobs), greater availability of childcare facilities, more inclusive schools, good governance, anti-corruption and free media reforms or faster and socially responsible (just) transition not only to renewable resources, but also to energy efficiency and savings.

It is obvious that states cannot effectively address all the challenges alone and need closer cooperation with other stakeholders, including the CSOs more than ever. The civil society organisations of the Visegrad region can use this opportunity to advocate for and establish stronger **partnerships** with the public bodies. This is a chance to change the shape of the relationship especially for NGO with focus on migration, gender equality or environment who have been structurally undermined or outright harrassed for a decade or more.

It is also a great opportunity to secure **better (or any) funding**. In the context of the war in Ukraine, the European Economic and Social Council stresses the need to allocate EU financial support both to governments and civil society organisations acting on the ground.<sup>74</sup> This applies to national funding as well. For many years the more critical or progressive NGOs have had their budgets cut in favour of pro-government or „apolitical“ NGOs, or those dedicated to sports or social services.

## B/ DIGITAL CONSTITUENCY BUILDING AND DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE

Digitalisation is an **ambivalent process**. On one hand it has the potential to support modernization of governance and green transition as well as increase efficiency and outreach of the CSOs. On the other hand, digitalisation involves risk of further technological marginalisation, societal fragmentation and abuse by illiberal forces.

Civil society organisations can reach out to new audiences while reducing costs by moving part of their operations online.<sup>75</sup> Digital technology can help institutionalised organisations attract new skilled employees, recruit constituency and volunteers and embrace the live energy of more digitally skilled social movements<sup>76</sup>. Digitalisation can play a crucial role in networking by reducing the distance between various contexts and allowing for greater cooperation, sharing experiences and joint solutions to societal problems.<sup>77</sup> Lastly, digitalisation can also play an important part in fundraising, in particular crowdfunding.<sup>78</sup> As we have seen in

74 Mallia, Stefano - Röpke, Oliver – Boland, Séamus (2022). Resolution: War in Ukraine and its economic, social and environmental impact. The European Economic and Social Committee, pp. 5. <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/files/qe-09-22-154-en-n.pdf>

75 Cloet, Quincy (2020): Civil society Futures in the Visegrad region , pp. 15.

76 Divjak, Tina – Forbici, Goran (2017): The future evolution of civil society in the European Union by 2030, pp. 45.

77 Cloet, Quincy (2020): Civil society Futures in the Visegrad region , pp. 16.

78 Ibid, pp. 5

Czechia<sup>79</sup> or Poland, the pandemic showed that crowdfunding and online donations can become flexible, sustainable, independent sources of income **connecting the CSOs closer with their constituencies**.

The civil society, however, needs to ensure a **democratic, inclusive model of digital governance** which respects fundamental rights and doesn't widen societal gaps, including responses to disinformation within democratic principles. As we have seen during the pandemic and war in Ukraine, disinformation can be one of the biggest threats to democracy. The civil society sector plays a crucial role in raising awareness about this phenomenon. It should also launch education initiatives focused on digital literacy.<sup>80</sup>

All this is more acute in the V4 region. Digital exclusion is high and digitalisation is perceived mainly through the optics of business and governance transition, so civil society needs to play an active part, to broaden this limited perspective.<sup>81</sup>

## C/ KEEPING THE MOBILISATION ALIVE AND FOSTERING REGIONAL SOLIDARITY

The rise of populism, backsliding of democracy and rule of law also led to empowerment of the civil society in the region. A strong **grassroots mobilisation** has defined the last few years. Community-based, grassroots initiatives have been popping up. Some countries report an increase in advocacy and watchdog activities.<sup>82</sup> Strong, nation-wide social movements emerged for instance around a harsh abortion ban law in Poland or pro-democracy demonstrations organized by "Million Moments for Democracy" in the Czech Republic<sup>83</sup>. Established CSOs in the V4 region can further support such movements, both nation-wide and cross-border

Transnational and European cooperation within civil society seems to be on the rise. Even during the pandemic, multiple organisations built bigger and stronger alliances across national borders. Current fragmentation and growing vulnerability within the national context may even have positive consequences for civil society in the long run.<sup>84</sup>

The V4 civil society may extend both its territorial focus and the range of actors to cooperate with. A **Three Seas Initiative Civil Society Forum** could be a healthy complement to the government and business parts of the 3SI annual summits. Administratively light and digital friendly, the Civil Society Forum could **include groups** such as informal movements, experts as well as official civil society organisations, educational networks, pro-bono lawyers and advocacy groups, even representatives of municipalities.<sup>85</sup>

## D/ POST-WAR RECONSTRUCTION OF UKRAINE AND EASTERN EUROPE

Ukrainian civil society is a key factor in alleviating the impact of the war, negotiating the end of the conflict and, in future, the reconstruction of the country. For that its voice should be heard in the EU and its member states in all Ukraine-related discussions.<sup>86</sup> Many European CSOs have been carrying out direct advocacy to European and national policy-makers to stand up for Ukraine.<sup>87</sup> Yet many of the key advocacy networks are Brussels based with no direct links to Ukraine. Many of the Visegrad region CSOs have strong connections to Ukrainian civil society and they can serve as a **bridge in the dialogue between the Ukrainian civil society and the rest of the EU**.

79 Gregor, Jan (2021): Data: Detailní analýza online darování během koronavirové krize. Svět neziskovek. <https://svetneziskovek.cz/management/data-detailni-analyza-online-darovani-behem-koronavirove-krize>

80 Krzysztozek, Aleksandra (2021): Disinformation during pandemic: How can Visegrad countries combat it successfully?

81 Visegrad Group Joint Declaration on Mutual Cooperation in Digital Projects (2021).

82 More-Hollerweger, Eva - Bogorin, Flavia-Elvira - Litofcenko, Julia - Meyer, Michael Civil (eds., 2019): Society in Central and Eastern Europe: Monitoring 2019, pp. 13.

83 Sikk, Allan (2022): Regional Report East-Central and Southeast Europe Stuck in Reverse, pp. 7.

84 Visegrad Insight (2020): Hard to ignore: What's next for Civil Society in the Visegrad region. <https://visegradinsight.eu/civil-society-central-europe-hard-to-ignore/>

85 Przybylski, Wojciech - Jarończyk, Kamil (2021): Towards 3SI Civil Society Forum, pp. 4-5.

86 Ibid, pp. 6.

87 European Civic Forum (2022). Civic Pride: Civic actors in Times of Crisis.



A sustainable development in the whole of the CEE also requires as democratic and prosperous Russia and Belarus as possible. A strong civil society in both countries must be part of such future. Yet they face stronger repression than ever.<sup>88</sup> The Visegrad or 3SI civil society may serve as the voice of raising the **support of civil society in Russia and Belarus** as well as securing visa and material support for those members of civil society running away from these countries.

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88 Mallia, Stefano - Röpke, Oliver – Boland, Séamus (2022). Resolution: War in Ukraine and its economic, social and environmental impact, pp. 6.

# STRONGER ROOTS

**THE ANALYSIS WAS WRITTEN AS A PART OF THE STRONGER ROOTS PROGRAM.**

The Stronger Roots Program aims to increase the resilience of civil society organisations and their networks, strengthen their social capital, and embed them in the communities and societies in which they operate. It is implemented by Open Society Fund Prague, the NIOK Foundation, Open Society Foundation Bratislava and Glopolis.