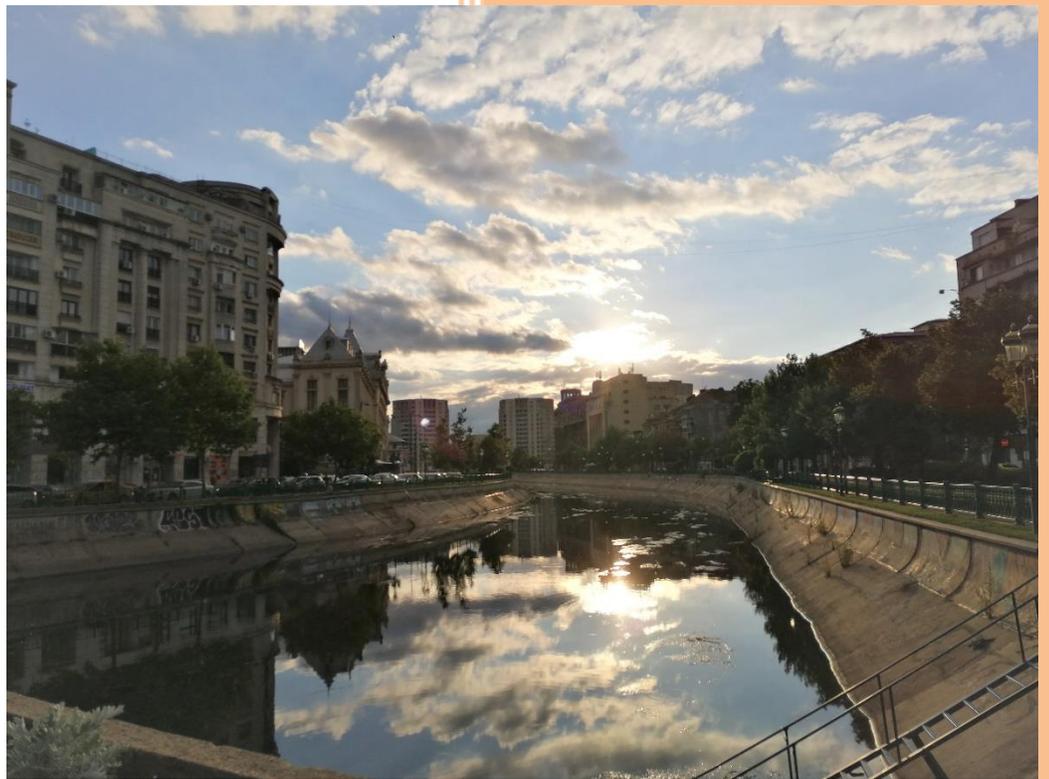


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THE CIVIL SOCIETY'S RESPONSE TO THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC IN THE CENTRAL-SOUTH-EASTERN EUROPE AND THE CAUCASUS



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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic crisis poses a significant influence over the correct information of the population. The problem of the disinformation and the potential abuses can influence the capacity of the state to keep social and health systems under control.

During the ongoing pandemic, the societies of South-Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus region are facing several common challenges that are crucial in the limitation of the up-bottom disinformation or risks associated with the propaganda related to the pandemic. From the very start, a large part of the civil society's specific actions has had to deal with a series of impediments that have led, in some cases, to abuses by the authorities and the limitation of the democratic principles and human rights. For example, on March 30 the Hungarian Parliament adopted a controversial decision by which the Prime minister can lead the country in a discretionary manner¹. In the Republic of Moldova, the monitoring of the human rights situation has shown that the *“people in closed institutions, such as psychiatric hospitals and temporary placement centers for persons with disabilities”* are vulnerable to abuses². Furthermore, the lockdowns adopted as a measure of public health protection have limited the information flow by imposing media censorship and limiting access to public information³. In Ukraine, it was important to avoid hate speech promoted against people travelling from abroad and to prevent new topics for the Russian propaganda about the authorities' capabilities to manage the situation. Additionally, the Armenian civil society has expressed concerns over the media restrictions during the state of emergency⁴ and the implementation of the structural reforms.

Over and above that, the regional civil society denounced several negative campaigns for sharing fake news, conspiracy theories, or supporting illiberal governance decisions. In these cases, the relevance of the NGO's work and their capacity to react provides the consequence in protecting the social order and the rule of law. The COVID-19 affected not only the quantity but also the quality of the implemented reforms, showing at the same time the importance of internal resilience in the

¹ John Shattuck, 'Coronavirus versus Democracy: 5 Countries Where Emergency Powers Risk Abuse', The Conversation, 2020, <https://theconversation.com/coronavirus-versus-democracy-5-countries-where-emergency-powers-risk-abuse-135278>.

² Civil Rights Defenders, 'Moldova: Civil Society Responds to New Challenges Amid Coronavirus Pandemic', Civil Rights Defenders (blog), 2020, <https://crd.org/2020/06/16/moldova-civil-society-responds-to-new-challenges-amid-coronavirus-pandemic/>.

³ Vaceslav Balan and Vladyslav Stegnyy, 'COVID-19 Pandemic: Lessons for Media Freedom in Moldova' (Freedom House, 2020), https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-06/Balan%20and%20Stegnyy_FINAL-EN.pdf.

⁴ Ruzanna Stepanian, 'Armenian Media Deplore Restrictions On Pandemic Reporting', Free-Europe Radio (blog), 2020, <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/30497220.html>.

face of threats of external origin.

On the other hand, the current circumstances offer for the national civil societies a set of conditions to increase the voluntary participation of the population in actions to defend their interests, and an opportunity to reflect on the values that are truly important to any society: human rights, human dignity, democracy, freedom and the rule of law.

This policy brief is based on a succinct analysis of the impact of the new Coronavirus pandemic on the internal capacities of the civil society to act and deliver common goods for the target groups. This analysis identifies some national and regional particularities during this pandemic and the impact on public policy consumers.

The ESGA⁵ research also seeks to identify the mixed-methods approach of the civil society to combat the threats from the authorities, but also the disinformation and social terrorism campaigns.

From regional...

The governmental authorities from Central-South-Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus used a combination of actions to consolidate the governmental powers, the COVID-19 pandemic being an opportunity to enforce the grip on the countries⁶. This reality was caused by a lack of preparedness to deal with these new types of threats. The governmental authorities also acted differently due to the presence of internal factors or specific situations they were facing. In some states, the government has tried to manage the risks by imposing harsh measures and restrictions that have harmed human rights. Other countries have experienced the consolidation of some public institutions, endowing them with several coercive instruments, which were not previously part of the instrumentation of political actors. Another category failed to avoid external assistance from less credible partners. Only a few states have managed to control the spread of the pandemic, without limiting the promotion of fundamental freedoms.

As it was mentioned in a previous discussion, these actors turn this crisis into an opportunity to promote some interests, more political cores stepping up their surveillance capabilities, and to extend their general influence.

The monitoring of several civil society actions or initiatives aimed at combating misinformation, fake news, conspiracy theories, and even the undemocratic actions of the states,

⁵ For more information: <http://www.esga.ro>

⁶ James Lamond, 'Authoritarian Regimes Seek To Take Advantage of the Coronavirus Pandemic', Center for American Progress, 2020, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/news/2020/04/06/482715/authoritarian-regimes-seek-take-advantage-coronavirus-pandemic/>.

allowed the identification of several complicated situations, generating uncertainties and hesitation in making decisions. In recent months, we have either highlighted the fact that there are wider risks related to the responsibility of public services and civil society in the counterwork of the destabilizing elements⁷, but the reaction capacity was poor, either because the national bureaucracy acted according to the political rules or because the NGO's funding system collapsed^{8 9}.

Despite the context, during this critical period, civil society carries out a key role in eliminating an important number of organic forms of reinterpretation of the objective facts, perceiving its educational and opinion-forming character among beneficiaries. The fundamental problem naturally arises in the highly divided societies, as well as in those where the democratic element is weak or completely absent, where the credibility of state or social institution is poor.

For example, Romania remains a fragile democracy, even if today it is a member of the European Union and NATO. The political parties downplayed the civil society for the past 30 years and have desperately tried, by any means, to discredit the fundamental and innovative idea of the civic community, of appropriate action for the benefit of another in a disinterested way. Moreover, around the 2016 general elections, some political actors considered the civil society a factor of national instability, because it campaigned for the defense of the rule of law and drew attention to the fact that some changes in the national legislation will pave the way to abuse¹⁰. The decent people sincerely believed this and rightly, so, the televisions loyal to political parties energetically promoted the anti-civil society messages, and today it is extremely difficult to precisely measure the profound influence that the civil society invariably has on the population, especially in critical times.

The civil society, through public cohesion with journalists, contributed to the annulment of the decision of the *Coordinating Council of Audiovisual* (CCA), mobilized resources and volunteers to beneficiaries from vulnerable communities, offered help to doctors, expressed its views on the amendment of existing legislation on the activity of NGOs (required the vote on the law without dangerous amendments). Regarding the debates on various public policies, at first, the situation was

⁷ Angela Grămadă and Cătălin-Gabriel Done, 'Main Trends in Disinformation in the COVID-19 Era. Study Cases: The Republic of Moldova and Romania' (ESGA, 2020), <http://www.esga.ro/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Policy-Brief-Desinformation-1.pdf>.

⁸ Saul Mullard and Per Aarvik, 'Supporting Civil Society during the Covid-19 Pandemic. The Potentials of Online Collaborations for Social Accountability.' (Anti-Corruption Resource Center, 2020), <https://www.u4.no/publications/supporting-civil-society-during-the-covid-19-pandemic.pdf>.

⁹ Angela Grămadă, '5G Sefinunqihă, Fihl G-ejruhi «gănlkrujămf» Măruqlăng Qhăpăvlrnrul Nl Ul Vlêđ Sêunrjrułnênr. Żăjăsuuănlh Nl Suăăđăżrđănlh Răjăpărhl Mêrnrđnênrđ', 1in, 2020, <https://www.1in.am/2817753.html>.

¹⁰ Jonathan Day, 'România: Cum Atacă Guvernul ONG-Urile Și Libertățile Acestora', Libertis (blog), 2017, <https://www.liberties.eu/ro/news/romania-tot-mai-putin-spatiu-pentru-societatea-civila/12830>.

quite uncertain, because public institutions were also afraid to promote them for security reasons for employees, but also because the legislation governing quarantine or the state of emergency came with high financial sanctions. Subsequently, online debates took place, and civil society joined online and showed a willingness to remain watchdogs and continued to draw attention to the less good decisions of the authorities, monitored public procurement, informed the population, proposed new measures, and public policies. Romanian civil society has communicated its problems to the authorities in the form of concrete public policy proposals, capable of generating more opportunities in unstable times and more security for those NGOs that fall under new types. threats, especially of a financial nature.

We have many examples in the region: the debate about the situation of the Street children, how to protect them from the pandemic; online consultation with the Romanian Prime-Minister on topics that were of high interest for civil society, fiscal proposals for the NGOs employees, asking the authorities to treat the CSOs as SMEs. Civil society is not only a partner for the central and local authorities but also a generator of revenues to the state budget through the projects they attract.

...to national

First, the response capacity of the civil society is different from a country to another. The reaction is conditioned by several factors such as resources, education, and capacity to mobilize resources. For understanding the local situations with all the consequences that may arise from them, we must look at each element as a whole and situational.

In the case of Armenia, the fastest reaction and mobilization of public opinion against censorship caught the attention of the international public opinion. Here we consider the authorities' attempts to force the independent press to publish only controlled content about COVID-19 as a very bad one. Authorities have used existing state of emergency legislation in force to control people's minds. Civil society reacted immediately and consistently. Consequently, we were able to highlight how the central authority took steps back under the pressure of public opinion, mobilized in this regard by civil society and journalists. Armenian civil society provided an example of how to be a watchdog in a time of the pandemic. There have been similar attempts in the Republic of Moldova: imposing censorship and controlling the content of information on how the authorities cope with the crisis. In the case of Moldova, the cohesion of civil society, of experts who had partnerships with the press, was essential to overturn the decision of the President of the Audiovisual Coordinating Council. The mobilization took place on social media as the face-to-face protests were prohibited by

the decision of the authorities.

The censorship was the element that the authorities in different states did not hesitate to use to control the behaviour of the masses. Without the reaction of civil society, things would have been much worse from the perspective of respecting the right to information.

The fundamental freedoms and rights have been violated in most states in the region. There are many restrictions in place, **there are limitations that the young generation has not known so far and the comparative assessment of the impact of SARS-CoV-2 will be a long process** (for example, the freedom of movement, the freedom of peaceful assembly – in the majority of the countries in the region).

It was difficult not only to offer the social services for the beneficiaries of the social programs but also it was difficult to travel to different regions, to be involved. In this context, the support of volunteers was very important. The pandemic helped to assess the involvement of the voluntary movements and to provide assistance for those in need.

The freedom of peaceful assembly was affected negatively. The protests were banned in some countries, in other countries it was possible to organize only small protests and with many rules imposed on the organizers: protests of the LGBT community in Georgia, political protests in Moldova, protests against COVID restrictions in Romania or Georgia, etc.

In the same context, of the extension of public debates on how civil society has been affected by the pandemic, it is relevant to mention the fact that authorities or external factors as propaganda tools have used several NGOs. In most cases, these religious, conservative NGOs voluntarily took over or conditioned conspiracy messages. Most of the messages promoted by this part of civil society harmed the measures to reduce the infection promoted by the government authorities. The fight against vaccines, 5G technologies, and the uselessness of wearing masks were just some of the messages promoted during press conferences. In addition to these messages, geopolitical messages or messages of appreciation of some humanitarian actions often were promoted, diminishing the importance of others. Thus, the impact of the general efforts of the society was reduced, creating space for propaganda and false debates.

The increase in the number of false messages and propaganda associated with the pandemic required the identification of additional resources for programs dedicated to combating propaganda. Thus, most important projects have included new analyzes, positions, and educational programs that can explain to citizens how to avoid the elements of organized misinformation and not become victims. As previously mentioned, the disinformation campaigns associated with the

spread of COVID-19 required both human and additional financial resources, as well as donor amendments to the priorities they had set for the region. These donor interventions would have had minimal results if the cohesion between the analytical environment, civil society, academia, and the press had been lacking. Cooperation between civil society actors, government authorities (support for the implementation of reforms), academia, and journalists have proven to be a useful experience in times of uncertainty.

Civil society has been exposed both financially and in terms of human resources to the spread of the pandemic. However, most representatives of the associative sector understood in due time how important is the coherence of actions, strategies, but especially of cohesion and cooperation with local and central public authorities. The real impact of the COVID-19 pandemic can be evaluated only in the end. In the short term, the impact is already visible in the restrictive measures adopted during emergencies and which will remain in force until new directives. In the medium term, it is important for NGOs to continue to monitor the quality of the decision-making process, to assist in the development of public policies, and to come up with effective solutions and recommendations to reduce the impact of new risks and threats.

All the elements mentioned above, which influenced the situation of the civil society, were adopted by the governmental authorities, by political leaders with or without vision, who were inspired by the regional tendencies. In this context, the priority topics for future analyzes should be the quality of leadership at the regional level during COVID-19, but also the behavior of foreign actors with interests in the region, who supported propaganda, misinformation, and weak resilience of partners.

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