

Austria

France

Russia

Special chapter
on COVID-19

2020
Report
on the
State of
Civil
Society
in the
EU and
Russia



EU-RUSSIA CIVIL SOCIETY FORUM
ГРАЖДАНСКИЙ ФОРУМ ЕС-РОССИЯ

The EU-Russia Civil Society Forum e.V. (CSF) is an independent network of thematically diverse NGOs, established as a bottom-up civic initiative. Its goal is to strengthen cooperation between civil society organisations and contribute to the integration of Russia and the EU, based on the common values of pluralistic democracy, rule of law, human rights and social justice. Launched in 2011, CSF now has 183 members and supporters - 81 from the EU, 98 from Russia and 4 from the UK.

The Forum serves as a platform for members to articulate common positions, provide support and solidarity and exert influence on governmental and inter-governmental relations. These goals are pursued by bringing together CSF members and supporters for joint projects, research and advocacy; by conducting public discussions and dialogues with decision-makers; and by facilitating people-to-people exchanges.

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2020 Report on the State of Civil Society in the EU and Russia

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ISBN 978-3-947214-07-5

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PREFACE

The COVID-19 crisis, political challenges and civil society solidarity

By Kristina Smolijaninovaite

The Annual Report of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum (further Forum) reflects the current situation in a range of civil society organisations (CSOs) across Europe. The report presents key trends in the sector, the challenges that some CSOs face and their responses to them, which are illustrated by concrete examples in the text. In the last five years (2016-2020), the Annual Reports have covered 18 EU member states. The 2020 issue contains five chapters: a comparative overview, case studies from Austria, France and Russia and a report on the impact of COVID-19 on civil society.

Nick Acheson’s comparative chapter presents an overview of the last five-years’ research collected by the Forum and analyses the evidence using external data. It highlights pressures on civil society from changes in terms of how CSOs are funded and due to increased government regulation. At the same time, civil society is threatened as ‘right wing’ populist political parties gain strength. These pressures are common across the EU and Russia to varying degrees.

While Austria has an established civil society and CSO sector with strong links to government both at national and local levels, author Ruth Simsa argues that CSOs have experienced considerable pressure in recent years. Two factors have been particularly significant. First, successive governments in Austria have adopted a policy of short-term competitive funding for CSOs and have also, as in many EU countries, reduced funds in relation to the services expected from CSOs. Second, and more recently, the governing right-wing populist political party questioned the legitimacy of CSOs and cancelled their funding for promoting minority group interests and human rights. CSOs have countered these pressures by adopting more business-like methods and by forging new alliances to seek greater solidarity.

CSOs in France continue to flourish with many new associations being founded every year and which provide a range of essential public services. The authors of the chapter, Edith Archambault and Lionel Prouteau, highlight the increased competition for financial resources and the trend towards the use of ‘managerialism’ among CSOs, which is drawn from the world of business and favours institutional similarity. The authors argue that if service-providing CSOs adopt these practices, this might undermine their ability to advocate and to influence public policy. Additionally, research indicates that the number of CSOs employing staff has stagnated, while numbers of volunteer associations have grown.

As in previous Reports, there is an update on the situation in Russia written by Viacheslav Bakhmin. The conditions for CSOs in Russia are already worse than those in EU countries and they deteriorated again towards the end of 2020. The State Duma passed a number of legislative initiatives aimed at tightening control over the media, the internet and the non-profit sector. Another distinctive trend in Russia has been a series of spontaneous protests over local issues in places that are often far from the major cities of Moscow and St. Petersburg.

The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 brought new challenges that underlined the importance of collaboration and mutual support. Thus, this year's report offers a chapter on the role of civil society and COVID-19 in Europe and Russia. Its authors Anna Sevortian and Brian Harvey examine CSOs' rapid humanitarian responses including many inspiring innovations. However, they also highlight how COVID-19 created 'shadow pandemics', such as a growth in domestic violence and restricted rights and freedoms. Additionally, the authors hope that governments and the general public will listen more to CSOs and appreciate their contribution to social solidarity.

This report marks the end of a five-year period of research into conditions in individual countries. We will continue in 2021 and turn our attention to topics related to civil society and CSOs in the EU and Russia. This will include issues such as climate change, informal civic initiatives and civic engagement.



Five years' research on civil society in Europe and Russia 2016-2020: a paradoxical story of growth in human services, financial crisis and declining influence

Comparative overview

By Nick Acheson

Introduction

There have been a number of valuable comparative studies of civil society in Europe especially since the economic crisis of 2008/2009. This rich and growing literature suggests that European civil society has experienced a period of profound change, reflecting the unsettled political backdrop that followed in the wake of the 2008/2009 economic crisis. Chiefly focused on formal civil society organisations (CSOs), this literature has presented a consistent picture of greater regulatory pressure, the widespread introduction of business methods in public administration leading to market pressure from for-profit competitors, fiscal retrenchment and loss of voice in the democratic process.¹

The EU-Russia Civil Society Forum project sits within this tradition of scholarly research on contemporary civil society in Europe.² Two features of the Forum's research series add value in this context. First, the empirical focus on the perceptions of civil society actors, both of the challenges they have faced and some of the responses they have made provides insights into how they have understood their circumstances and shaped their actions. Second, the inclusion of Russia and the distribution of the 18 sampled countries in the European Union (EU) between West and East and between long-standing members and post-2004 EU accession states provides sufficient variety to examine similarities and differences in civil society perceptions across a wide range of differing circumstances.

The series has coincided with the unfolding of two deep crises in Europe that have been particularly influential in unsettling the context for the development of civil society, shaping the experiences recorded in the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum data. First was the long-lasting impact of the financial crisis of 2008/2009 which was marked by austerity budgets, widening inequalities in many countries, and accelerating and deepening penetration of markets into social relations. Public administration was both subject to severe budgetary restraint and to an ever-increasing use of business methods in governments' funding decisions, forcing CSOs to adapt. Second was the refugee crisis of 2015, throwing many CSOs into the frontline response. Austerity and the refugee crisis worked together in many European states to foster a rise in populist and anti-immigration political parties. Our evidence, focusing on the years since 2015, suggests in the process public perceptions of the legitimacy of civil society were damaged and, more seriously in some states, new divisions within civil society were created.

It is possible that the longer-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis in Europe and Russia will upend some of these trends. For one thing, as our accompanying essay in this volume on civil society and the COVID-19 crisis attests, civil society's response has demonstrated just

¹ There is a global literature on this topic going back to the 1970s, the numbers of papers accelerating after 2000. Among the recent papers of particular relevance to Europe we may note the following: Anheier et al., 2018; Bode & Brandsen, 2014; Milbourne & Cushman, 2015; Bloodgood & Tremblay-Boire, 2017; Zimmer & Pahl, 2018; Pape et al., 2020; Simsa & Zimmer, 2020.

² We define civil society as including "registered and non-registered non-profit and non-governmental organisations, civic initiatives and social movements, except political parties, religious communities, educational and scientific institutions, trade unions, and employers' organisations". This approach follows general practice in research in this area, although by including civic initiatives and social movements in the definition it is wider than those organised around the concept of the "third sector".

how vital it still is for social solidarity and front-line human services. At the same time some of those interviewed for that essay expressed concern about whether this new-found vigour could be turned into more political influence, or at the very least assist being taken more seriously by governments. Against a backdrop of governments adopting unprecedented powers to direct citizens' daily activities, powers they may be reluctant to give up, the cumulative evidence of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum suggests that some scepticism is warranted.

Austerity and the accompanying acceleration of steps embedding market discipline in state civil society relations on the one hand and the challenge to democratic norms by the rise of right wing 'populist' movements and political parties on the other are separate phenomena. But evidence gathered by the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum research shows how they are also intertwined, and how their impact has been felt across EU Europe and Russia.

In this overview paper, I look back over the past five years and draw on this research to show how civil society has been shaped by and understood and responded to these twin challenges. The research has covered 18 EU countries, four in each year from 2016 to 2019 and two in 2020 in addition to Russia. The research was carried out by a local research team in each case but using a shared methodology that has developed over the years but has been applied consistently across the countries studied in each year. For the first three years an online standardised survey was followed by a set of one-on-one interviews and a focus group. The survey was dropped in 2019 and 2020 with interviews being conducted. Focus groups have been conducted each year except in 2020 when, apart from in Austria, they have been ruled out by COVID-19 restrictions.

The wide coverage of the research and the consistency in the methodology affords the opportunity to draw tentative conclusions about the scope and extent of these challenges and the range of responses that civil society has adopted. As background, Table One sets out the countries studied and the years in which the studies were conducted.

Table 1. Countries covered in the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum Research by date of study

2016	Germany	Spain	Poland	Hungary	Russia
2017	Netherlands	Italy	Lithuania	Bulgaria	Russia
2018	Ireland	Greece	Czech Republic	Romania	Russia
2019	Sweden	UK	Estonia	Slovakia	Russia
2020	Austria	France			Russia (summary update)

The takeaway message of the research is the slow and steady decline in civil society's freedom to express views and influence public debate. The situation is best summed up by a Czech respondent who said: "The real state of play of (Czech) civil society is that it is slowly but surely deteriorating, even if the situation is not critical as it is in other countries in central Europe" (Havlicek, 2018, p.71). The conclusion of a slow deterioration, but not critical everywhere, reflects the situation across the states covered in the study, offset by evidence of significant signs of resilience especially where civil society has the capacity to develop new strategies. Although it has multiple causes and is manifested in a variety of ways, this is a single story of decline, or at least threat of decline, evident to a greater or lesser extent across all the countries we have surveyed. In short, while many CSOs have adapted well to changing circumstances and have proved quite resilient, the promise of civil society as a guarantor of democratic norms and provider of a voice for the powerless remains under threat. And this is true to a greater or lesser extent whether in Russia or the most serene and stable looking democracy.

There are limitations in these data. With the exception of Russia, they offer a snapshot of different countries in different years. The Russian studies are themselves annual snapshots. Trends have to be inferred rather than measured and while there are similarities, each country has its own history, institutional arrangements and experience. During a period of rapid change, the variation in dates in which the studies were conducted presents problems as the data can age quite rapidly; the situation may have changed in those countries reported on in 2016 especially. In Poland there was a dramatic change in circumstances for CSOs between the fieldwork and the report being published. We share the problem of methodological nationalism in that data in one country is not equivalent to data in another, common to all comparative studies of this type.

Secondly, by being based on self-selection through responses to an online survey and an expressed willingness to participate in a follow up interviews, the methodology creates a bias towards organisations that are both accessible and interested in the project. The data is skewed towards better established CSOs and to a lesser extent those with an interest in international networking, rather than social movements and 'bottom up' citizen initiatives. The response rate to the online survey in the years it ran was generally very low and it is hard to know how representative of a more general population of CSOs respondents have been. The research focus on CSOs and the more accessible ones at that, has meant that other important aspects of civil society mobilisation are often missing from the analysis, although this varies. This is a particular problem as new, and less well-documented, initiatives can be a good indication of the vibrancy of civil society in the face of crisis.

In his overview essay in the 2016 EU-Russia Civil Society Forum report, Demidov concluded that there was clear evidence of increasing limitations in civil society "space" either through concrete measures or through the indirect effect of greater securitisation in more stable democracies (Demidov, 2016, p.34). We should add to this the indirect effect of a steady increase in the use by governments of market-type competitive mechanisms in funding decisions forcing CSOs to change their behaviour, reining in their advocacy activities, and adopting managerial styles copied from private companies. This has been made more difficult by the widespread long-term impact of the austerity that followed the 2008-2009 financial crisis in Europe.

Taken together, both direct assaults on civil society and the indirect effects of marketisation, are drivers of a long-term global trend of deteriorating conditions for civil society. As Demidov (ibid.) stressed, it is important to view all the states in the study including Russia as participating in diverse ways in this single trend. This raises the important question of how to conceptualise this. The literature on civil society has tended to treat autocratic or quasi-democratic states such as Russia separately to mature democracies. The central question in the literature on autocratic or quasi-democratic states has been why does civil society, supposedly an anchor of democratic governance, flourish in non-democratic contexts?

Conversely comparative studies of civil society in Western Europe have focused on the impact of austerity and the increasingly pervasive use of market-type mechanisms to manage the distribution of resources to civil society from the state on the capacity of civil society to live up to its democratic aspirations or potential. For example, one notable recent study has used a "barriers" lens to show the impact through a loss of voice and the trend towards a greater commercialisation of activities (Zimmer & Pahl, 2018).

The findings of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum study indicate that in general the further east and south you go in Europe, the greater the threat to civil society and the less capacity

there is for a resilient response, with the situation in Russia especially worrying. But the findings also emphasise the variability and connections within this pattern and that outcomes are not solely connected to a state's past life within the Soviet Union's sphere of influence or even part of the Soviet Union itself as were the Baltic states. We need a better way to understand both the pattern and the underlying variability.

State capture of civil society

It has long been argued that civil society has a central function in sustaining democratic forms of government. The ability of citizens to associate as they might collectively wish and use that ability to freely express their collective views even if these are opposed to those of the government of the day has long been held to be an essential trait of democracy, alongside universal suffrage and clean elections (Dahl, 1971). Both the freedom to mobilise and to organise in a permissive legal regime nurture and sustain the civic culture needed for democracy to flourish (Almond & Verba, 1963).

Despite the lengthy time since the role of civil society in underpinning democratic norms and practice was recognised in democratic theory, scholars have only recently turned their attention to its role in states that have become increasingly autocratic. Two decades of research on civil society in authoritarian or quasi-democratic states reveal that CSOs can operate in even the most repressive environments where there is no guarantee of either freedom of association or of speech (Lewis, 2013; Bode, 2014; Knox & Yessimova, 2015; Toepler et al., 2020). Often, as in the case of Russia, civil society takes on a dual aspect, with a split between CSOs performing state approved roles such as the provision of essential welfare services or certain kinds of volunteering judged to be non-political, and the marginalisation or even repression of critical voices (Skokova et al., 2018). Approved CSOs only remain so as long as they refrain from being too critical of government. So the relevant measure of the democratic credentials of civil society is not the existence or otherwise of CSOs, but the extent to which they have not been captured by the state to serve governments' political programmes and given legitimacy only to extent that they do so (Moder & Pranzi, 2019; Simsa, 2019).

Moder and Pranzi (ibid.) argue that state capture of civil society is an important policy tool for authoritarian regimes wishing to stifle dissent and promote CSOs that fulfil their government programmes. Hence also the extent of state capture is a measure of the extent to which regimes are becoming more autocratic.

But the concept of state capture can be usefully extended to incorporate situations where governments in otherwise democratic regimes endorse and support CSOs that help government programmes while ignoring and thereby sidelining those that do not. Here state capture may be an indirect effect of other policies rather than a direct assault, especially those that recruit CSOs to deliver core welfare programmes under contract, but it can nevertheless have a negative impact on the capacity of civil society to fulfil its democratic functions.

The most common form of CSO in Europe is associations of members. Many of these are small and run by volunteers and are focussed on sports, leisure and culture. These dominate in some countries such as Poland and Sweden, where CSOs play a small role in providing essential services. In others such as the Netherlands and Germany, CSOs are core providers of human services in partnership with the state; in yet others, such as Spain, social

services are the dominant CSO category, a legacy of the historic role of the Roman Catholic Church during the years of the Franco dictatorship when secular CSOs were banned. Such variety should be borne in mind in considering overall trends which will be manifested in different countries in very different ways.

The evidence we have gathered since 2015 supports the general proposition that state capture of some CSOs either directly or indirectly, and the accompanying marginalisation of others left out of the government funding loop has been increasing over the past five years. State capture and the marginalisation of other civil society voices compromise CSOs' freedoms of association and expression and reduce the capacity of civil society. However, these can occur for a number of reasons and it is also the case that the situation varies greatly amongst and between the states covered in the study. The evidence paints a complex picture of change in which the general direction may be discerned but its consequences for the future of civil society in any particular country may be harder to make out.

CIVICUS takes a strictly normative view of civil society as a space of civic freedom rather than as a set of CSOs. CIVICUS defines an open society as follows:

“Civic space is the bedrock of any open and democratic society. When civic space is open, citizens and civil society organisations are able to organise, participate and communicate without hindrance. In doing so, they are able to claim their rights and influence the political and social structures around them. This can only happen when a state holds by its duty to protect its citizens and respects and facilitates their fundamental rights to associate, assemble peacefully and freely express views and opinions. These are the three key rights that civil society depends upon. The CIVICUS Monitor analyses the extent to which the three civil society rights are being respected and upheld, and the degree to which states are protecting civil society.”³

Its Civil Society Index is thus a measure of the extent to which countries enable an open civic space, that is to say one where restrictive legislative and regulatory pressure limiting freedom of association, freedom of assembly and free expression is largely absent. It publishes an annual 'State of Civil Society' report based on qualitative and quantitative data covering 187 countries worldwide. Based on qualitative data drawn from informants in each country, the Index categorises countries by the extent to which they are: open; narrowed; obstructed; repressed; or closed. From a world-wide perspective, EU Europe remains a bastion of free association and freedom of assembly.

Its most recent report concludes that only 3% of the world's population live in countries that are fully open. The world-wide and colour coded interactive map published by CIVICUS instantly illustrates that Europe remains a stronghold of free civil society as defined (CIVICUS, 2020). In the EU, only Hungary is classified as neither open, nor narrowed, but obstructed. It does suggest a subtle gradation between West and East. The majority of the EU's 12 'open' countries are among the so-called "older" democracies which joined the EU pre-2000.

³ See more on <https://monitor.civicus.org/whatiscivilspace> (accessed 13 July 2020).

Only 2 of these 'open' nations - Estonia and Lithuania - are among the post-2000 members and were also either part of the Soviet Union or in its sphere of influence. A third, Slovenia, was once part of Yugoslavia. Leaving Hungary aside, a small majority of EU states are however, 'narrowed' rather than 'open'. It suggests that in a global context, being a member state of the EU is associated with civil society freedom, but that in a small majority of cases, there is evidence that states in the EU fall short of a democratic ideal.

The challenges: reshaping the welfare function of civil society and closing down dissent

The extent to which states are falling short is a reflection of a very challenging time for civil society in Europe and a growth in uncertainty in Russia during the period covered by the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum research. This section will draw on the evidence from this research to explore the perceived impact on civil society of the two overlapping processes of first, reshaping the welfare function of civil society and secondly, attacks on its independence and right of dissent.⁴ Together these have contributed to shortfalls in civil society's role in sustaining the basis of good democratic government.

Markets, Civil Society and Human Welfare Services

Because of the variable ways in which national statistics are collated, our data does not give a very clear overall sense of this, but the last two decades have seen a significant increase in the economic footprint of civil society across Europe and Russia as CSO numbers have increased and, although the pattern varies greatly, in many countries have taken on new areas of welfare responsibility. Salamon & Sokolowski (2018) addressed the comparability problem by developing a composite measure using employment statistics as a proxy indicator of the growing economic place of civil society. Their study covers all the 28 then EU states and Norway (but not Russia) and concludes that the total CSO workforce (both employed and volunteers) comprises 29.1 million FTEs or 13% of the European labour force. Of these, 55% are volunteers (ibid, pp. 54-55). Most of these jobs (72%) are engaged in services, that is to say education, social services, healthcare, housing and community development (ibid, pp. 56-57). They found that overall this workforce had been increasing by an annual average of 3.4% far outpacing employment growth as a whole in all the countries covered with the exception of Denmark.⁵

By any account, such figures show that CSOs have become a significant part of the European economy, especially significant in recording CSOs' enormous capacity to mobilise volunteers. But our evidence of the perceptions of civil society actors shows this has not resulted in a greater sense of security; rather it confirms that the consolidation of CSOs to fulfil core welfare functions, has been accompanied by reducing budgets and increasingly onerous regulation across all the countries in the study.

While there are exceptions, notably in Scandinavia, civil society has been consolidated as an essential part of the systems of human service delivery in Europe and Russia. But this

⁴ All the evidence cited in the section is drawn from the relevant country reports. These can be found at <https://eu-russia-csf.org/reports> (accessed 13 July 2020).

⁵ The figures are averages and should be interpreted with caution as the times over which change is observed varies between countries.

has been accompanied in most countries by a fundamental change in how it has been incorporated into the wider welfare architecture. This has turned CSOs into contractors rather than partners in securing the health and welfare of the population. While partners can expect to be invited into discussion with governments about both what should be done and how to do it, contractors are asked to fulfil their contractual obligations, set by the purchasing government authority with little or no room for negotiation.

The rise of the use of market mechanisms to structure the relationship between civil society and the rest of the welfare system has been extraordinarily destabilising even in states with a long history of welfare partnerships, illustrated by the experience of the Netherlands. Here the welfare state settlement rested on the foundation of shared responsibility between the state and civil society. Our study of the Netherlands reported that this system, known as "pillarisation", had effectively collapsed. Interviewees referred to both the state's withdrawal from civil society, in which CSOs have been frozen out of policy debates, and to increasing competition between CSOs for declining resources.

Such a loss of government interest in the potential of CSOs to contribute to policy debate is found in other EU countries. In France, neglect of intermediary CSOs has made it harder for citizens to have their voice heard. In Ireland, a direct consequence of the 2008/09 financial crisis was the collapse of national partnership structures that had enabled CSOs to participate in strategic economic and social planning, replaced by ad hoc relations, some more productive than others, greater use of funding by contract and what could be an overbearing degree of oversight. One interviewee in the Irish study reported (Visser, 2018, p.29):

"I am a board member of a HSE [Health Service Executive, Ireland's public health provider] funded organisation, we can't do any lobbying or campaigning, the HSE sits in on board meetings, but is not a board member, and comments on activities. This organisation is being directed by a funder, and that is a Problem."

The effect of these changes in approach has not always been direct and experience has not been uniformly negative. In Germany, which historically has shared a rather similar partnership approach to the Netherlands, the pressure has not been felt as acutely. Interviewees were generally positive, and most saw their situation as relatively stable. But even here, reliance on short-term project funding and the pressure this created for fund-raising were seen as the biggest challenges.

In Spain, the survey data suggested that perceptions about the general position of CSOs among respondents was similar to those in Germany in that fewer than 20% thought that matters had got worse in the previous three years. The Spanish data, however, revealed a big difference between perceptions of the overall situation of civil society and respondents' perceptions of their own organisations. These were much more negative, with almost three quarters reported as feeling negative about their finances. Although not always as strongly differentiated as in Spain, this distinction was commonly expressed across the countries in the study. In general, respondents were more negative about their own situation than they were about the situation in general. This nicely illustrates the paradox that the overall growth in importance of civil society in meeting human welfare needs has happened at the same time as individual CSOs feeling increasingly insecure.

The reason for this lies in the most significant challenge reported in almost all the countries studied, namely the uncertainty and financial pressure that had resulted from the use of short-term project funding, accompanied by greater regulatory oversight, at the cost of longer-term and more stable funding relationships. This problem has made long-term planning in pursuit of a CSO's objectives harder to achieve creating pressures both to "follow the money" and adjust objectives accordingly, and to increase competition between CSOs. This has been the central impact on the operations of CSOs of market mechanisms coming to dominate the management of their relations with their government funders.

The change has sometimes been dramatic. In the UK in the period from 2004 to 2013, the percentage of government funding through contracts increased from 57% to 85%. Increasingly rigorous target setting has coincided with systematic reductions in pricing, pressurising many CSOs to continue to provide services at lower cost. Smaller organisations and those based in poorer localities have suffered the most. Similarly, in France the share of public subsidies in overall government funding fell from 66% in 2005 to 45% in 2017, with a corresponding rise in contracts. At the same time the growth rate in public funding had declined, both processes leading to greater competition between CSOs.

Overall CSOs have proved resilient, as evidence of their continuing presence in the welfare "market" attests. But our evidence suggests they have struggled to maintain their focus on long-term goals, build alliances within civil society, express an independent voice shaping public debate and influence parliamentary legislators. In many of the countries we studied this loss of democratic capacity contributed to a common fear among the interviewees of a loss of legitimacy and public trust.

This has sometimes been reflected in changes to the law. In the UK, for example, interviewees referred to the "chilling effect" of the "excessively restrictive" 2014 Lobby Act, and in Ireland laws on the use of funding to advocate for interest groups have restricted CSOs' freedom to lobby and subjected advocacy activities to new forms of regulatory oversight. In Ireland and in Italy, interviewees expressed fears that public scandals about the misuse of money and alleged corruption among a small number of CSOs, have had a negative impact on public perceptions of civil society more generally. One Italian respondent commented: "In general, the public perception has worsened due to superficial media campaigns linked to specific cases generating growing public distrust" (Poledrini, 2017, p.46).

Changes in the laws regulating lobbying and worries that CSOs were losing legitimacy in the eyes of the wider public suggest that the combination of contracts, cuts and increasing oversight has not played out the same way everywhere. Our evidence suggests the widespread preference for short term project funding can also be a means towards exerting political control over funded CSOs, or it can be the result of a lack of clarity over the purposes of government support. As a result, it is sometimes hard to separate the impact of market pressures from other factors.

Thus, the relationship between political context and funding is often complex and frequently subtle. In Italy, political conditions for civil society were viewed as becoming more problematic. Interviewees reported a mixed picture, but difficulties were being created by a combination of increasing complexity and regulatory oversight and reducing interest in civil society among politicians. Funding cuts had highlighted a lack of supportive infrastructure within civil society itself, a lack of lobbying power and reducing dialogue with government.

In Slovakia, for example, while funding had increased overall, it had not kept up with the growth in numbers of CSOs and the amounts provided were typically too low to support the employment of staff. The project focused and short-term nature of the funding was viewed as the result of a lack of strategic focus in these funds with little guarantee that what was funded last year would be funded in the next. As a result, interviewees identified lack of capacity and professionalism as a significant challenge. But this was tied to what was perceived as a lack of understanding by government of the wider role of civil society or what its contribution to good government might be, which meant that there was too much uncertainty to enable CSOs to plan effectively.

At the same time direct political pressure was becoming more of an issue. Interviewees noted that not only was there intense pressure on human rights CSOs, but that critical narratives were becoming more mainstream and not confined to political parties of the far right. Lack of capacity among CSOs, the result of inadequate and short-term funding, weakened civil society's response to such assaults on its legitimacy. But at the time of the research there was no evidence that shortcomings in funding were linked to a deliberate programme to weaken civil society.

In contrast to Slovakia, in the Czech Republic a clear state policy of support for CSOs had been finally introduced in 2015 which recognised them as a force for public good and supported the development of partnerships with the state. But following the 2017 General Election matters were reported as becoming more complex and difficult. Poor public understanding of the role of civil society had opened the door to attacks from both the political 'right' and 'left', and the politicisation of government grant decisions. Greater financial uncertainty had prompted a "fightback" by CSOs, but the unpredictable legal and financial environment had led to greater competitive pressures among CSOs and difficulties in relations between those that were larger and well-established and newcomers.

Both countries provide examples of the complex interplay between politics and money. In both cases, pressure from right wing populist parties and an underlying lack of public understanding of the wider role of civil society have called the legitimacy of some CSOs into question creating greater uncertainty in CSOs' relationships with government and, in the case of the Czech Republic, providing an opening for politicians to influence funding decisions in favour of their supporters. However, at the same time civil society has remained vibrant.

The Baltic states we studied, Lithuania and Estonia, provide an interesting counterpoint to this experience. Recognition of the independent contribution of civil society to the public good was embedded in the constitutions of both states. Governments supported the establishment of an effective civil society infrastructure in both and established resilient partnership mechanisms that continue to function. As elsewhere, however, funds have increasingly been short term and provided by contract with similar challenges reported of difficulties in planning and contract compliance. But this has not been accompanied by a collapse in the partnership structures with government in either country as occurred in Ireland. The Lithuania study, for example, reported striking levels of openness and participation in the political process underpinned by legal obligations on government to consult. Similarly, in Estonia, the partnership structures had survived the arrival of the far-right Party, EKRE (Conservative People's Party of Estonia) in government, although the study warned that growing public mistrust in institutions and a polarisation in society posed longer term threats.

This evidence suggests that there is seldom a direct link between funding decisions and loss of civil society voice. While there are examples where the link was clearly identified by interviewees, for example in the Netherlands, the UK and in Ireland, even there it was more the result of a general loss of government interest and the indirect impact of contracting, than in the imposition of non-lobbying conditions, although there were a number of instances where interviewees noted that had happened. Market pressures were clearly felt to be an issue with interviewees in many of the countries studied identifying increased competition between CSOs, making coalition-building in civil society, and sustaining mission focus among the difficulties it was creating. The more CSOs were pulled into contractual funding to provide core welfare services, the less interest there seemed to be in governments in civil society's wider roles.

But the evidence also suggests that short term funding and ad hoc relations with government open the door to greater government political control and this has become especially problematic when narratives that see civil society as a threat begin to take hold or are used by powerful elites to defend their interests. It is at this point that methods of government funding to CSOs shade into becoming a means of political control.

For a time, Austria experienced an inflexion point where authoritarian type policies were introduced in a context of increasing financial and regulatory pressure for civil society (Simsa, 2019). Historically there has been a vibrant civil society operating in close collaboration with a well-developed welfare state; CSOs have professionalised and adopted private sector management techniques as funding was increasingly driven through competitive tendering and the use of short-term contracts. In recent years many reported experiencing financial difficulties as funding streams reduced or dried up. The election of a right-wing coalition government involving a far-right populist party in 2017 led to the adoption of many of the strategies of authoritarian regimes including attempts to delegitimise civil society, exclude it from consultations, and target CSOs that did not agree with the government's agenda. CSOs with a human rights perspective were particularly vulnerable with cuts not only to refugee and asylum seeker CSOs, but also to women's organisations. The politicisation of funding decisions came in the context of, and was in effect served by, the way the use of contracts had already shifted power in favour of governments.

Closing down dissent

The evidence shows how the civil society actors we interviewed across a wide range of countries clearly perceived how a rapidly changing funding environment, which prioritised and closely regulated CSOs' ability to deliver human services, offering short-term money with no guarantee of renewal, had compromised their freedom of action, even if this was not necessarily the intent. Russia offers the clearest indication of what can happen when the link between access to government support and political control becomes more explicit.

Russia has participated in the general trend of increasing the importance of CSOs in welfare services. Policy to sub-contract social welfare services to CSOs dates from 2013 and our evidence charts how in general those CSOs involved have risen to the challenge becoming more professional in the process. The impact of this trend is clearly evidenced in the crucial role of CSOs in Russia in the response to COVID-19, as reported in the essay on COVID-19.

But it illustrates what happens when governments link this to deliberate policies of political control. Our series of annual studies in Russia track the growing importance of the Presidential Fund, a centrally administered fund that at the time of the first report in 2016 was

already dominating the resources available to CSOs, constituting almost 59% of all available government money. This has had some benefits as was clear from the research conducted in 2019. These funds were reported to be well managed and had distributed money to hitherto neglected regions outside Moscow and St Petersburg, allowing the development of essential services more widely. The increase in available funds had served to further cement the role of CSOs as welfare partners in Russia and they are now heavily involved in government initiatives such as building long-term palliative care systems and search and rescue services.

The rise of so-called SONPOs has come at the cost of government being able to exert greater political control over the CSOs involved.⁶ The 2016 interviewees made the problems this created very clear. First, the reduction of funds from other government sources was creating real difficulty as CSOs were finding their existing revenue was drying up with no guarantee that they would be able to access the expanding pot of Presidential Funds. Second, was the related perception that the Funds were only available to a closed group of CSOs with little clarity over how to join this group, if you were on the outside. The evidence from 2019 suggests that there had been some improvements to the management of the scheme, especially in the transparency in grant-making decisions. But the central issue identified in 2016, that there was a direct trade-off between fund access and independence, remained. In effect, as one 2016 interviewee remarked:

“The sector's fragmentation and lack of mutual trust have been caused not only by government policies, but also by certain internal trends, i.e. when certain NGOs were created specifically to become the recipients of Presidential grants; although they are called NGOs, in reality their only purpose is to consume this resource” (Skokova, 2018, p.138).

By 2019 interviewees were noting that these CSOs' (GONGOs⁷) main purpose seemed to be regime support rather than doing any of the work that should be done, their influx seen as a consequence of the expansion of government funding. But:

“They don't mess at all with the areas where the work has to be done, where real outcomes are required” (Freik et al., 2019).

The fragmentation between insider and outsider CSOs had been made worse by a lack of trust that the emergence of the GONGOs had precipitated. Lack of trust over the actual motives of some CSOs and their ultimate source of control had been reinforced by the way that the funds were administered, coupled with the discontinuation of alternative funding routes.

The government's ability to exert control over CSOs that hoped to deliver important welfare services through centralising the funding mechanism has been matched by ever-changing and increasingly complex legal requirements over registration and reporting, imposing more onerous burdens on existing CSOs and making it harder for new organisations to establish themselves. Until 2006, civil society had been left to develop largely without government restrictions but in the years that followed there had been a straightforward policy of constructing a segment of civil society that focused solely on human services and avoiding

⁶ Socially Orientated Non-Profit Organisations.

⁷ Government Organised Non-Government Organisations.

political activity. CSOs with funding from abroad and engaged in activities deemed by the authorities as political have been categorised as foreign agents and barred from competing for government funding. Our study in 2019 reported that many of these organisations had been subject to harassment and other forms of direct pressure. The arbitrary way in which CSOs can be categorised as engaging in political activity has resulted in self-censorship and fear of offending the authorities among many CSOs.

Hungary offers the clearest example in the EU of use of state policy to control civil society, where the law was changed in 2011 to define the concept of public benefit as actions “worthy of support and beneficial to the state and the government”. Our study of Hungary suggested that this law change enabled the government to use the existing legal and administrative framework to exclude civil society, making much of its work impossible, and shutting it out of dialogue with government. While CSOs have retained a substantial presence in Hungarian society, numbering almost 64,000 in 2014 employing 153,000 people and mobilising approximately 490,000 volunteers, respondents to the survey and the interviewees agreed that while financial pressures were severe, political challenges were their biggest problem, including self-censorship, the erosion of trust, stigmatisation and the impossibility of standing up for their own interests.

These were found to be typical impacts on civil society in countries with authoritarian type regimes. The report on Poland offers particular insights because of when it was done. The research was carried out in early 2016 just after the right-wing populist Law and Justice Party had gained power in the 2015 general election. After the fieldwork was completed, the new government proposed centralising government control of civil society in one department within the Prime Minister’s office. Amplified by media, now also under government control, senior government politicians were questioning the legitimacy of many CSOs. Partnership structures were summarily closed down and experienced CSOs found themselves frozen out of government contracts, their place being taken by new and hitherto unknown CSOs. The report, although reflecting the early days of the Law and Justice Party government, suggests some familiar themes: centralising control of funding; widespread media smearing; and the emergence of regime friendly GONGOs.

Hungary and Poland offer the clearest examples in the EU of the strategies typical of governments wishing to capture civil society and close down its capacity for dissent and the pressure this exerts. Corruption in government can also have similar effects. Here governing elites also can resort to scapegoating civil society when it suits them. In both Romania and Bulgaria where civil society actors have participated in anti-corruption protests, partnerships between the state and CSOs that assisted and consolidated the process of EU accession have gone into reverse. Interviewees in Romania referred to legislative changes, bureaucratic harassment, strong negative political declarations and strategies to deter or prevent collaboration. In Bulgaria media campaigns have accused CSOs of receiving foreign funds against Bulgaria’s national interest. Although aimed at CSOs critical of government, the negativity has spread more widely. Lack of transparency in funding decisions and the creation of CSOs that are far from independent, but close to government officials, politicians and business leaders serve to channel funds to “affiliates”. As in Romania, mechanisms designed to aid collaboration between government and civil society have fallen into abeyance.

Russia, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Bulgaria offer the strongest evidence of government policy to close civil society’s capacity for independent action and capture it for state purposes. They all share in the same range of strategies. But we have found evidence that the use of media to scapegoat elements of civil society, measures to reduce the ability of CSOs to speak to

government and questioning the legitimacy of CSOs that do anything other than provide state funded welfare services are much more widespread. In practice they have affected countries right across Europe to a greater or lesser extent, sometimes through increased regulation of lobbying activities and sometime as a by-product of market-based management of funding streams. A coarser tone to public debate has emerged in many states following the refugee crisis of 2015 amid continuing concerns about immigration in general.

The rise of markets in public welfare and the penetration of business methods into CSOs on the one hand and state attempts to capture civil society and marginalise dissenting voices on the other are separate phenomena. But not only do they have overlapping consequences in a general narrowing of civic space, but their manifestation also overlaps. A clear conclusion of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum study is that both processes are evident everywhere the study has gone. Thus, even in states like Sweden where state civil society relations remain very stable and where CSOs have a relatively small role in providing core welfare services, the impact of populist anti-immigrant rhetoric can be observed on how they are publicly perceived and what they feel they can do. Conversely in Russia access to the Presidential Fund has encouraged and facilitated the engagement of many CSOs in developing effective social interventions, especially outside the metropolitan centres of Moscow and St Petersburg, but at the cost of being subject to arbitrary regulatory control that limits their freedom of action.

Fighting back

The study asked informants to identify examples of good practice in addressing these challenges in all the countries covered. These fell into quite a narrow range of responses that were common across most participating CSOs whatever country they were based in. First, the pressure to professionalise the management of CSOs was felt strongly in many countries, especially where a lack of management capacity was identified as a problem. This brought its own problems especially the danger it posed to the management and retention of volunteers in those CSOs that were largely volunteer driven. Closely associated with this was the need to diversify sources of income in order to preserve CSOs’ freedom of action and secure their future financial viability at a time when funding was becoming more precarious and uncertain.

In a context where there was little evidence that philanthropy could fill the gap, and many CSOs were finding it hard to raise significant funds from their membership, the most general response across Europe was a switch to a social enterprise business model in which CSOs developed their capacity to sell their services either to other organisations or directly to the public. In many cases this was a natural extension to the way they had become sellers of their services to governments. A good example is the growth in the numbers of ‘work integration social enterprises’ (WISE) aimed at supporting people who find it difficult to get jobs without help, often with the support of the EU European Social Fund. Our evidence includes a number of good examples. CSOs were also letting out space, developing cafes and social meeting places and offering bespoke training and support. The good practice examples in our reports are evidence of the creativity of civil society in navigating difficult times while attempting to stay on mission. But they also evidence the widespread adoption of business-like solutions and the growth in professional management, often copying practices developed in private for-profit companies.

In many countries CSOs have sought to defend their interests by coalition-building and forming alliances that attempt to circumvent the fragmentation and competition that followed the introduction of market mechanisms into government funding regimes. This strategy has been most notable where civil society has retained the capacity to do so by having strong enough civic roots and a clear shared agenda. In Poland CSOs developed a collective and shared programme for renewal, a Strategic Roadmap for Civil Society Development after a two to three-year participatory process involving many organisations from different parts of the country. In Austria CSOs developed a solidarity pact that aimed to enhance solidarity among CSOs from diverse sectors to protect and develop civil society's scope for action and to defend its contribution to democracy. Similarly, in the Czech Republic cooperation and alliance building has been a crucial civil society response to recent challenges. Conceived as a network of networks, it created the 'Strategic Framework for Sustainable Development in the Czech Republic 2030' around which CSOs could coalesce. The value of the initiative was summarised by one informant in the Czech study as:

“(lying) in providing a safe space for regular dialogue, co-ordination and communication among CSOs that would not normally communicate with each other as their agendas do not normally bring them together” (Havlicek, 2018, p.69).

The desire to improve cooperation was also seen in countries such as Estonia where political pressures were less intense, but CSOs felt the need to combat competitive pressures and make links with new forms of organising, especially by younger people on issues such as climate justice where sharing resources and expertise might be particularly helpful.

Because of its empirical focus on existing CSOs and institutions, our research has been less good at picking up trends in civil society that are more spontaneous and often bypass established consultation forums. But it is important to record their emergence and potential significance. This year's report on France speculates that the loss of legitimacy and effectiveness of CSOs in representing citizens' interests in public debate may have had a role in allowing space for the emergence of grassroots movements of citizens such as the “yellow vests” there, which began as a popular uprising against changes in fuel tax. A further example might be the “Sardines movement” in Italy in which citizens mobilised to counter the influence of Matteo Salvini's far-right League political party (The Guardian, 2020). And in Poland the ruling of the Constitutional Court on abortion law in autumn 2020 has provoked direct action from within civil society in response, including the tactic of single person pickets that have also been used in Russia.

The evidence from our research records trends over the past five years. Despite becoming consolidated in many countries as key providers of state funded human services, it records CSOs as experiencing a period of declining influence and struggles with financial and political pressure at a time when patterns of volunteering are changing and challenging taken-for-granted forms of civil society organising. The use of social media has fomented the growth of micro-interest groups undermining older solidarities. But it is also an important amplifier of protest movements that might be started by very few people but which “strike a chord” in a wider population through easily spread messages and it has been a feature of recent citizen mobilisations. This been a striking new development in Russia, noted first in our 2019 report and recorded as a notable trend this year, where mass mobilisation has taken place often far from centres of power in Moscow and St Petersburg around specific issues of immediate concern and usually without reference to existing CSOs. Moves by the Russian state to further regulate social media platforms in response are an indication of their potency.

Such developments suggest a more general trend of dualling civil society, long observed in states such as Russia. CSOs retain their central role in citizen welfare, risking capture by the state, while dissent remains the preserve of social movements, with little contact between the two dimensions. However, the response to COVID-19 has served as a potent reminder of civil society's latent powers of social solidarity and service, despite declining political influence. To the extent that CSOs can continue to express values of human solidarity and care through their work, this offers some hope of civil society being a source of democratic renewal in the future.

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Austria: trouble in the “island of the blessed”

By Ruth Simsa

Civil society overview

In recent decades, Austria has had a relatively strong economy, a developed welfare system and a stable democracy. Therefore, it was often called – ironically – the “island of the blessed” (Demokratiezentrum, 2014). Civil society and civil society organisations (CSOs) are a vital part of the country. CSOs are valued in welfare state arrangements - there is a high degree of social stability and quite good relations between government and CSOs (More-Hollerweger et al., 2014).

Nevertheless, in recent years, conditions for CSOs have deteriorated. Over the last decade, there has been a shift towards more neoliberal ideologies including privatisation of social tasks and to an economisation of political governance (Zimmer & Simsa, 2014). Alongside these changes there has been a decrease in public funding, especially after the global financial crisis in the late 2000s (Pape et al., 2020). A study of the financial situation of Austrian CSOs in 2015 showed that public funding had become more unstable leading to more challenges for these organisations (Simsa, 2015). With the rise to power of right-wing populist parties, between 2017 and 2019, the situation took a new turn. From the end of 2017 to May 2019, Austria was ruled by a coalition government that can be characterised as right-wing populist. In a gradual move towards authoritarianism, the general political climate for civil society deteriorated. CSOs were faced with attempts to undermine them and weaken their influence in terms of reduced political participation in legislative processes, and reductions in funding for critical CSOs. Changing patterns of civil society as a consequence of authoritarian politics (Moder & Pranzl, 2019) were increasingly evident (Simsa, 2019). This situation led CIVICUS to downgrade its civic space rating for Austria from open to narrow Civicus (2018). Since the beginning of 2020, a new coalition government of the Conservatives and the Greens has been running the country. How this will affect civil society remains unclear as does the impact of coronavirus. The lockdown in the spring of 2020 not only restricted civil rights but also caused severe economic problems for many CSOs.

CSOs in Austria are deeply involved in political decision-making. CSOs have engaged in dialogue and negotiations with the government in many areas and have often been involved in legislative processes. Further, they provide social services and in return, they receive large shares of their funding from public sources. The public sector thus plays an important role for CSOs, influencing their organisational and financial structures. CSOs are particularly active in social services, healthcare and education. Furthermore, federalism and self-governance of the nine federal provinces are reflected in civil society and there are both strong local and umbrella organisations at the federal level.

Social movements, particularly workers’, women’s and environmental movements have long traditions and in the past few decades they have increasingly sought cooperation. This means Austria can be described as a consensus democracy (Dolezal & Hutter, 2007).

Size and scope of civil society

Unfortunately, only limited data on CSOs are available in Austria (Simsa et al., 2013). Until now, data on CSOs have not been regularly included in official statistics. Thus, any attempt to map civil society must draw on different sources and also older data. Without doubt, CSOs play an important role in the daily life of Austrian citizens. More than 124,000 CSOs provide welfare services, engage in advocacy and strengthen community building (Statistik Austria, 2019).

The following table gives an overview of CSOs with at least one paid employee by field of activity and the value added.

Table 1. Number of CSOs, number of employees, value added.

Field of activity	Number of CSOs	Number of paid employees	Value added in EUR million
Scientific research and development	65	1,825	27.29
Education	3,053	29,277	980.04
Human health activities	320	29,882	1,679.43
Residential care activities	468	29,398	1,042.33
Social work activities without accommodation	2,473	90,525	1,978.38
Creative, arts and entertainment activities	67	1,625	12.96
Libraries, archives, museums and other cultural activities	71	651	8.15
Sports activities and amusement and recreation activities	648	4,596	146.87
Activities of membership organizations	3,552	46,664	1,422.87
Total	10,717	234,443	7,298.36

Source: Neumayr et al., 2017. All figures for the year 2013.

Civic engagement is relatively high. Almost half of the population (46%) does some kind of volunteer work, 31% are active in formal volunteering in CSOs (BM für Soziales, 2019), and two thirds donate. The largest fields of volunteering are culture, disaster relief and sports (Pennerstorfer et al., 2013). The vast majority of Austrian CSOs are run only by volunteers (Neumayr et al., 2017).

The statistics below represent the percentage of the population working in the field. One percentage point represents about 73,000 individuals. For example, in the sports sector about 580,000 people are volunteers. This table also includes the share of male and female volunteers in each sector.

Table 2. Voluntary work in different fields of activity in 2016.

Sector	Population working voluntarily in the field in %	Men in %	Women in %
Disaster relief	7	82	18
Culture, arts and recreation	6	48	52
Environmental work	4	47	53
Religion	4	32	68
Social work and health	5	33	67
Advocacy and political work	3	69	31
Community work	2	53	47
Education	3	31	69
Sports	8	65	35
Refugee work	2	36	64

Source: BM für Soziales, 2019.

CSOs with paid employees mainly operate in the education and social work sectors as well as sometimes being umbrella organisations. These CSOs employ around 234,000 people. In 2015, about 6.5% of the population were in paid employment in CSOs. From 2000 to 2010, the overall number of contractual relationships in CSOs increased by 39%. The biggest rises were in nursery schools which saw an increase of 93% and in social services, which grew by 76%.

Public funding of social services accounts for the largest share of revenue for CSOs. Almost 50% of the sector's income is derived from contracts with public authorities, while another 17% comes from public subsidies. The remaining sources of CSOs' income are revenues from sales to private organisations and individuals (22%), private donations (9%), membership fees (2%) and sponsorship (1%) (Pennerstorfer et al., 2015). The total production value of CSOs was around €7 billion (1.9% of GDP) and €4.7 billion value added in 2005 (Haider et al., 2008). Unfortunately, this is the most recent data available.

Legal framework and political conditions

The legal framework

The Austrian legislative framework is quite favourable for CSOs. In the Rule of Law Index, Austria ranks at number 8 out of 113 countries in the overall score (World Justice Project, 2018). However, this was one place lower than in the previous assessment in 2016 (Bogorin et al., 2019).

The essential legal basis for civic engagement in Austria includes the right of free assembly and freedom of association, both going back to the Constitution of 1867. Furthermore, citizens have the right to voice their opinions in demonstrations. Other forms of direct democracy play a minor role.

Austria is politically divided into nine federal provinces, each of which has extensive rights due to the principle of subsidiarity. CSOs face different national and regional laws and have therefore developed a range of action strategies. As a result, there are far more local CSOs than nationwide organisations (Pennerstorfer et al., 2013; Simsa et al., 2016). There are close links between many CSOs and political parties or the Catholic Church. Within this system, the situation for more or less "independent" CSOs is still quite difficult (Neumayr et al., 2017). Recently established CSOs have increasingly sought political independence.

In Austria CSOs comprise a range of legal forms including associations, cooperatives, foundations, non-profit private limited companies and non-profit stock corporations. Nevertheless, most CSOs are associations (Neumayr et al., 2017). The right of association goes back to the Constitution of 1867. In view of Austria's experiences with fascism, the constitution also aims to safeguard the freedom of assembly in addition to other civil rights. Therefore, it was made easy and cheap to register as associations. Founders must only declare the association to the authorities and it can be prohibited only in the case of suspected illegal activities. It requires at least two persons, clear statutes that include the name, purpose and location as well as organs of the organisation and the mode of their appointment and other minor points. An association must be non-profit-oriented. Over the past 50 years, the number of registered associations has more than tripled to about 120,000. From 2003, their activities have not been recorded. At that time, sports, savings and cultural associations represented the largest groups (Simsa et al., 2015).

Further statistical information on the other legal formats under which some CSOs operate is not available due to poor data in Austria (More-Hollerweger et al., 2014). There are about 500 private-limited or publicly-limited companies and co-operatives, and about 700 charitable foundations, which also form part of civil society.

Political developments affecting civil society

In recent years, there has been some turbulence in politics and civil society in Austria. Civil society involvement increased dramatically in the so-called refugee crisis of 2015-16. Civil society actors played an important role in maintaining humanitarian standards and in crisis management (Simsa, 2017), against a background of increasing political polarisation around the issue of immigration. The 2017 National Council election led to a coalition between the conservatives (ÖVP) and the right-wing national conservatives (FPÖ), both of which had run a polarising election campaign strongly focused on the refugee issue. Although the country has a strong social-democratic tradition, this is also true for right-wing populism, with the FPÖ party clearly having right-wing extremist roots (Pelinka, 2019). The Social Democratic Party had supported neoliberal policies for decades but it lost its core electorate as the refugee crisis created a clear shift to right-wing populist parties. This culminated in a coalition of the ÖVP and the FPÖ in 2017. This government presented simple solutions to all kinds of social and economic problems and represented exclusive concepts of solidarity (Hofmann et al., 2019). Further, it also espoused what might be described as “anti-elite rhetoric” (Pelinka, 2019). See more: Süddeutsche Zeitung, 2017, Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2018). An analysis of the impact on civil society clearly showed that this government also developed clear authoritarian strategies (Simsa, 2019). The impact of these changes was visible in the public discourse, where CSOs were faced with attempts to undermine and delegitimise them and also with increased polarisation across society. Furthermore, communication between political actors and CSOs decreased, which limited the possibilities for CSOs to participate in the legislative processes. It also affected access to financial resources, especially for CSOs working in fields that conflicted with the government’s agenda.

In the 2020 COVID-19 crisis, political conditions changed considerably again but the outcome remains uncertain. During the lockdown, civil rights were restricted and CSOs faced much economic uncertainty. Responses to a survey of the umbrella groups of public benefit organisations (IGO) in March 2020 suggested that the CSO sector was facing financial losses of several hundred million euros (IGO, 2020).

Challenges: between the dominance of the market and ideological goals

Common trends in Austrian civil society reflect those in other Western European countries, particularly in Germany (Zimmer et al., 2014). They pose manifold challenges for the sector.

Becoming business-like

Managerialism is becoming more relevant. Increasingly, CSOs are gaining legitimacy by behaving more like businesses. Thus, the balance between mission and market increasingly seems to have moved in favour of CSOs becoming more business-like. Marketisation often causes internal conflicts about the extent to which CSOs are becoming businesses. As one respondent noted:

“The secret is to refer to social values when communicating with those inside the organisation, but to have a more business-oriented approach when dealing with those outside the CSO. Then somehow this must be translated into something meaningful for those in the organisation.” (Interview A17)

Doing well while doing good

Since the 1990s, CSOs have increasingly applied professional management methods and hired managerial staff. Furthermore, CSOs are faced with increasing pressure to measure their impact. Regarding the professionalisation of leadership and management, there is a high degree of reflexivity regarding adequate leadership styles and processes. As one interviewee observed:

“It is becoming more and more important to communicate the impact (of the organisation) with statistics, especially with local politicians. They are not interested in the content or do not understand it. Therefore, we have to communicate with figures, such as demonstrating what any return on investment might be.” (Interview A17)

Reduced welfare expenditure and changing relations between the public sector and the civil society

Relations between the public sector and CSOs have changed in the last two decades. Neoliberal policies of deregulation and privatisation of social tasks have been implemented in Austria, although these have been mitigated by a comparatively good welfare state. In a Delphi Study, Austrian experts expected a further decrease in public funding in relation to demand, putting pressure on CSOs to diversify and to engage in new income-generating activities (Neumayr et al., 2017). With the shift towards new public management, CSOs have lost their privileged position in welfare state arrangements. Quasi-markets have increased controlling and accountability mechanisms. Competitive tendering procedures have been opened up to commercial providers and their share of the market has been rising in the last decade. One interviewee noted that:

“Charitable organisations have to explain themselves more and more, so charity is no longer a value in itself, but one must always justify it...at the moment we are coming under increasing pressure to legitimise or justify our existence.” (Interview A2)

Growing importance of private donors

Although the sector is still highly dependent on public funding, private donors have gained in importance. In particular, private foundations are increasingly becoming the centre of attention for fundraising strategies. Yet, compared with the relatively high private wealth in the country, there are comparatively few charitable foundations. So far, they have not played an important role in civil society.

Financial problems

Many organisations have reported financial problems. As many have to concentrate on increasing their revenues from business activities, some interviewees feared that this might restrict their advocacy work. In an online survey with 251 CSOs in 2019, 41 percent reported a decrease of government funding (Simsa & Neunteufl, 2019). Sometimes financial cuts are “hidden”, when funding is not increased with respect to inflation. Various interviewees made this same point:

“The gap between salary development and financing or valorisation has widened e.g. Styria [a federal province of Austria] promised a 2 percent increase, but costs have risen by 3 percent.” (Interview A17)

“The funding for federal youth work...has simply not been adjusted in line with inflation for, I think, 20 years. And if you extrapolate that over a long period that meant that a few years ago there was a real terms loss of 25 percent of the budget.” (Interview A6)

“This is systemic...If you look at the cultural budget as a whole, it is de facto becoming less and less, due to inflation.” (Interview A15)

Nevertheless, overall, and especially by international comparison, the financial situation of most CSOs in Austria is relatively stable.

Blurring boundaries

The common trend of blurring boundaries has increased the number of “hybrid” actors like social entrepreneurs, social businesses, venture philanthropists and public-private partnerships. In addition and consequently, there has been intensified competition between profit and non-profit providers over scarce funding resources. As one respondent noted:

“Over the past fifteen years...there has been a commercialisation of social and care work, which has meant that more and more profit enterprises, which are involved in these activities receive state subsidies.” (Interview A10)

Developments in voluntary work

Turning to civic engagement, there is more diversity, but less stability and loyalty. There have been slight reductions in voluntary work mainly due to urbanisation and lower engagement rates in cities compared with rural areas. Furthermore, volunteering has become more project oriented and increasingly linked to individual goals and values. CSOs will thus have to treat their volunteers in a more differentiated way to attract and organise them (Neumayr et al., 2017). This is a challenge, especially for small CSOs. All CSOs have to adapt their management of volunteers in order to address the need of more project-oriented civil engagement. As one interviewee observed:

“We are making extreme efforts, we are looking very intensively and very closely at changes in society. We have a volunteer management staff unit in our company that is very intensively involved in this change. We are also trying to adopt new forms of volunteering such as abandoning the requirement for volunteers to stay with the organisation for a long time as this is no longer appealing for many people.” (Interview A19)

Challenges posed by the changed political climate

The most severe changes of the last year have been authoritarian politics and the new political climate in general. There has been a clear polarisation of discourse. The delegitimisation of CSOs took place through the devaluation of their activities, and the increase in a generally negative, exclusionary rhetoric. For example, one interviewee reported that:

“Expressions are used like NGO madness in the Mediterranean...asylum industry...A certain enemy image of civil society organisations is being created.” (Interview A6)

A constant devaluation affected and still affects CSOs that deal with vulnerable target groups. Furthermore, their clients are denigrated using terms such as “cheaters” or “asylum fraudsters”. A frequent allegation is that CSOs only work for their own [profit] interest. Several interviewees commented on these changes:

“There are suddenly the good and the bad in civil society.” (Interview A2)

“The verbal attacks had already become harsher...but when [Chancellor] Kurz accused [the NGO] Doctors Without Frontiers of helping illegal refugees this really was breaking a taboo...this was the Federal Chancellor who legitimised this... the attacks on the non-profit sector or some of the organisations are getting harder.” (Interview A12)

There have also been attempts by the government and officials to intimidate representatives of CSOs through threatening telephone calls and legal action against some organisations. These are not fundamentally new, but, according to interviewees, were of a different, more hostile nature than before (Simsa, 2019).

Many interviewees noticed a reduction in opportunities for participation in political decision-making processes which came with the new government being in power. CSOs have been largely and systematically excluded from legislative processes, and there has been hardly any dialogue between CSOs and the federal government or individual ministries. These changes were noted by some interviewees:

“So the government is now not interested in participation, cooperation or exchange...it is a completely different style, where a small group makes the central decisions and everything else is completely insignificant.” (Interview A12)

“They don’t talk to us. They won’t talk to us. That’s the new thing. Until now, I’ve always had the feeling you can still talk to someone.” (Interview A1)

A clear change was the practice of shorter legislative procedures, which left little time for input from CSOs. The review periods were very short and left no room for discussion.

A further challenge has been the severe cuts in funding which have affected critical and diversity-oriented CSOs in particular. In sectors such as migration, arts, women, labour market and development policy, CSOs have experienced such severe cuts in public funding that they may no longer be able to operate. One representative of labour market organisations notes that:

“This is already the second year of cuts...now you can see some organisations are starting to close down.” (Interview A1)

Massive cuts in the women’s sector, which primarily affect autonomous, critical and feminist institutions, were described as “ideological reconstruction”:

“This is something new. Well, I don’t think we’ve ever experienced such brutality before.” (Interview A5)

In refugee and asylum policy, only part of the severe cuts can be explained by the decline in asylum applications, and in many cases, the care and integration of migrants has also been affected. Here, too, a systematic process has been observed by some interviewees:

“There have been considerable cuts in areas such as assisting refugees, in legal advice, and in integration measures. That is their central intention: we don’t want any refugees... we actually don’t want integration at all.” (Interview A2)

With these cuts, or even the threat of cuts, the aim has been to prevent criticism. Civil society is thus working on new strategies and narratives on the issue of refugees. As one respondent noted:

“We clearly need new narratives regarding refugees, we are a rich country that could do more, but civil society must be more proactive.” (Focus group 1)

CSOs describe politics as increasingly authoritarian. At the moment, the functions of CSOs seemed to be subtly changing, with a gradual weakening of voice and advocacy. It is unclear whether the split between grass-roots and traditional CSOs will increase, or if we will see a rise of civil society protests, activism and new means of participation. Nevertheless, with a new government in power in 2020, CSO representatives hope for a change in politics and the political climate:

“We are all so glad that the Green Party is part of the government now. We have already noticed a change in discourse. They talk to us and respect us.” (Interview A20)

Challenges imposed by the COVID-19 crisis

The COVID-19 crisis has left most CSOs facing an economically hard time and there is a threat of many associations closing. Depending on the duration of the closure and on government support, the economic damage in the non-profit sector will be between 500 million and one billion euros (Interview A13). Cultural festivals throughout the country, with more than a million visitors and 40 million euros in revenues have been cancelled. Sports clubs are losing admission revenues, sponsorship and livelihoods. Private non-profit museums will lose more than one million admissions this year, and thus a considerable part of their financial base. Charity concerts, sponsored runs and other fundraising events have been cancelled and there is no compensation for this loss of income.

The large CSOs in sectors such as social services, rescue services and disaster control are also suffering losses due to the reduction in services, e.g. patient transport and blood donations, and due to the probable loss in donations because of the economic situation. Many small associations may be adversely affected. Many CSOs employ vulnerable target groups, such as senior citizens or those with addiction issues. As a result, they will have to remain closed much longer than their competitors.

It is positive that the Federal Government has recognised this emergency and has included CSOs as one sector deserving of emergency support. It is especially in times of crisis that the value of CSOs is recognised, particularly as a source of social resilience. Nevertheless, in April 2020, after six weeks of shutdown, conditions for the emergency support of CSOs remained unclear, unlike the situation for business organisations, and they had still not received any assistance (Interview A20). Some changes were made in May 2020 but there is still uncertainty as this respondent observed:

“It is something really new and promising, that for the first time, CSOs were mentioned in the announcements for government support. Yet, so far, nothing is clear and if they don’t get money soon, many will be endangered...it would have helped very much, if they had included CSOs in the system of national accounting. Now the fact that we have minimal data is having an impact on us.” (Interview A13)

Many CSOs in the care and social sector compensated for COVID-19 related shortfalls by increasing their mobile services. Had it not been for this response, Austrian society would have collapsed. CSOs also care for the socially marginalised and the poor. But during the lockdown CSOs had limited operational capability. Freedom of opinion and assembly as well as democratic participation were severely restricted. It is still unclear, what the consequences of this situation will be for the political climate and citizens’ rights.

Solutions: balancing business and grassroots demands

Austrian CSOs have reacted in many ways to the challenges outlined above. Here, we present three strategies as best practice examples. Generally, many CSOs have tried to professionalise their governance structures and management and to strengthen their entrepreneurial capabilities. This is similar to the responses of those CSOs across Europe which are also facing challenging policy environments (Pape et al., 2020). Organisational innovation such as pooling resources, setting up umbrella organisations, networking and forming new alliances with the private sector, has become a key response. Two of the solutions discussed below reflect answers to the general trend of professionalisation. The third case represents a strategy to create and strengthen networks and pool resources. It is still too early to include reactions to challenges posed by the coronavirus crisis. Nevertheless, civil society representatives will continue to push for an economic stimulus package for the sector to secure the continued existence of CSOs (Interview A13).

A response to polarisation and attempts to delegitimise civil society – the Solidarity Pact

One response to authoritarian politics was the strengthening of cooperation among different civil society actors. The effects of polarisation within society, the delegitimation of CSOs and the reductions in public funding caused uncertainty and fear, according to one respondent:

“But in principle there is already a climate of fear in many different situations, of no longer saying critical things. Yes, fear, insecurity and just a big insecurity overall.” (Interview A3)

Yet, besides defensive reactions, civil society also developed new forms of resistance, proactive work on alternative narratives, and increased solidarity. An example of this was the formation of the Solidarity Pact. Founded by 12 CSOs from different sectors such as environmental, social, cultural, women or developmental work, it aims for the protection and development of civil society’s scope for action, social security and democracy: “Should individual population groups or organisations be subjected to state repression, we will jointly and in solidarity provide assistance and take action” (Solidaritätspakt, 2020).

In the Solidarity Pact, strategies and campaigns are developed and legal advice is offered to ensure effective activities. This serves a common, proactive approach to repression and attacks on population groups or organisations. Two interviewees, whose organisations are part of the Pact describe the positive effects:

“This solidarity pact is an exciting and important space where...new things can be created and where people can strengthen each other.” (Interview A3)

“I would say that this is one of the positive things that we are cooperating much more strongly than in recent years and in a much more cross-cutting way with many organisations and we show solidarity...saying nothing will not protect us from cuts...it is important to be loud, to resist and to put the arguments on the table.” (Interview A1)

Meanwhile, more than 50 organisations in Austrian civil society are members of the Pact. They meet regularly and observe developments that are relevant for civil society. They formulate common resolutions, organise press conferences and other forms of public expression and develop strategies to support each other.

Professionalisation of leadership structures in response to reductions of funding and the complex and bureaucratic funding environment – The PSN

The Psychosocial Network (PSN) is an organisation offering social services in Austria, in the fields of social psychiatry, addiction and family consulting. It is a best practice example for professional strategy development, succession planning and leadership. The organisation has grown significantly and in the last 10 years it has doubled in size. Previously, the culture of the organisation was family-oriented, with people knowing each other well and having close relationships. The management maintained considerable personal contact throughout the whole organisation. With the growth of the organisation and the challenge of tighter budgets, the organisation moved from a family culture to a professional one. After the retirement of the founder of the organisation in 2016, significant changes were implemented. Both the management structure and the overall culture of the organisation were changed. A new management level of regional-directors was established. The four designated regional managers along with the new managing directors now form a team of leaders. But there is a clear decision-making structure that gives most influence to the top management. There have also been attempts to introduce clear communication throughout the organisation. Speaking clearly about goals and rules has made the process transparent and means top-down decisions are more likely to be accepted. A crucial topic was, how to deal with the contradictory demands of managerialism versus the “human” culture of the organisation. This included language, with the goal of establishing common ground about dealing with economic and managerial questions. Thus, extra time was granted for talking about an adequate and common language concerning the new tasks and the new structure. Now, four years later, most employees have adapted to the new structure and it works very well. As one manager noted:

“It was difficult for the employees, it took them two years to adjust to the new structure...Now, regional managers are well accustomed to the new role, and they are widely accepted.” (Interview A17)

One of the most important factors behind this success was the long-term and careful organisation of the process, reflection, and the involvement of many members of the organisation.

“It was important that we made regular progress checks. We checked where there was a need to adapt. We also involved the heads of the facilities more...and we tried to listen to displeasure, and to react to it without overturning everything, I call it a dynamic balance.” (Interview A17)

The process was thoroughly planned, supported by external consultancy, enough time was given to strategic planning and discussion and the process was communicated with care. The management dedicated resources to the process, gave attention to both structural and cultural aspects of the organisation and kept in mind that for an effective implementation of structural changes it is necessary to take into consideration different expectations, modes of communication, employee self-concepts and other aspects of the organisational culture.

Dealing with the trend of hybridisation – a social business

The association “Magdas Hotel – Social Business der Caritas der Erzdiözese Wien” is a hotel, run by a big CSO in Vienna. It employs people who face challenges integrating into the labour market, such as immigrants, long-term unemployed or people with disabilities. The hotel opened in 2015 and it was working successfully until recently when it had to close for about three months because of the COVID-19 crisis. Magdas is an innovative project founded by the Catholic charity, Caritas. The idea behind a social business is to combine economic activities and social benefit in order to solve social or environmental problems. This is based on the view that social businesses have to ensure financial and economic sustainability without any donations or public subsidies. Investors are repaid, but they receive no further financial return. Profits made are supposed to be reinvested and employees should receive fair wages at market levels and enjoy better working conditions (Yunus, 2007).

Many employees of the founding organisation saw a potential contradiction between social and economic interests and had concerns about a well-known CSO running a social business. Nevertheless, the founders of Magdas wanted to address social issues in an innovative way and show that such a project can be economically stable, thus becoming a role model for profit organisations. Caritas invested € 2.5 million in the infrastructure for the hotel and restaurant. The hotel has to pay back this debt.

Currently, the hotel is mainly working with refugees, who lack experience in the hotel industry. Therefore, 10 professionals employed by the CSO are training them and a social worker takes care of cultural and personal problems.

Besides ideological goals for establishing the hotel as a social business, this approach was also chosen because of the limitations of publicly funded projects for labour market integration of vulnerable groups. Similar social projects funded with public money usually provide job opportunities for no longer than half a year, a period too short to gain a foothold in the labour market. However, the necessity to be economically successful, while aiming at the inclusion of people furthest from the labour market, provides challenges for both the management and staff. There is not much room for unprofessional behaviour. Employees are not seen as clients but as “normal” staff. One manager of the CSO observed that:

“The aim of economic success limits our social claims, but it provides necessary certainty as well. The employees of the hotel must attain the skills to meet the guests’ demands...Once refugees are taken seriously, they start to build up self-confidence again.” (Interview A16)

Due to its innovative and creative character, the project received a high degree of media attention, thus marketing expenses have been low and the project has attracted volunteers. Compared with profit-oriented hotels, Magdas hotel has less hierarchy as the goal is to provide staff, who may be facing personal problems, with supportive working conditions. However, there are lower expectations from visitors because they understand that many employees are facing numerous challenges.

Conclusions

Civil society has an important role in Austria. The country has a well-developed democracy with traditionally strong links between civil society and the government, and relatively high levels of civil society participation. The political framework conditions and the legislative framework for civil society have traditionally been comparatively good. The number of CSOs has grown steadily in recent decades and about a third of the population does voluntary work in CSOs. Many CSOs rely heavily on public funding with about 50% of their income derived from contracts with public authorities, while another 17% comes from public subsidies. Due to the cooperation of the state and CSOs, specifically in social services and health care, this dependency on public funding has been stable over recent decades. CSOs also have played an important role in politics and in shaping the political climate. Yet in spite of a long tradition of social movements, civil society has usually not been very confrontational and the political climate has thus been characterised as consensus democracy. In recent years, CSOs have been prominent in the so-called refugee crisis and in the climate movement. It remains to be seen whether the latter, especially, will lead to greater CSO engagement with politics.

Nevertheless, in recent years, the environment for CSOs has deteriorated. First, there has been the impact of increasingly influential neoliberal ideology regarding social welfare, which led to reductions of public funding in relation to the demand for social services. Second, the move towards greater political polarisation and authoritarian politics has created severe challenges for CSOs. In recent years, CSOs have experienced the combined impact of a right-wing populist government, the polarisation of rhetoric between the “good” and the “bad” segments of society as well as drastic restrictions on political participation. Furthermore, cuts in public funding took place immediately after that government came to power. They were not dramatic in absolute terms, but posed an existential threat to many critical organisations and contributed to fear and uncertainty in the sector. All of these changes can be interpreted as indicators of “autocratisation”. Since 2020, a new government consisting mainly of conservatives but also the Green Party has been in office. This will not change the political climate fundamentally, but there is hope for a higher acceptance of civil society and again greater CSO involvement in political processes.

With the COVID-19 crisis the situation for civil society has changed dramatically and many outcomes remain unclear. Declining donations, the loss of event revenues and economic returns are all major challenges for CSOs.

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Focus Group 2: (Substitute due to the COVID-19 crisis) Online Conference: COVID-19 and its effects on the Civil Society; 4 presentations, more than 300 participants (See more: NPO-Institut, 2020).

France: a large and diverse civil society facing significant concerns

By Edith Archambault and Lionel Prouteau

Civil society overview

Historical context

In France, the principle of freedom of association was established in the 1901 law on contracts of association. Since then, the development of civil society organisations (CSO) has often been the result of wider social, economic and political changes. For example, the introduction of paid holidays (in 1936-37) encouraged the foundation of sporting and leisure associations after the Second World War. From the 1960s onwards, the development of social security and disability rights legislation stimulated the expansion of non-profit organisations in health, social and welfare services. From the seventies, driven by the rise in new social movements, numerous associations were founded to champion causes such as the environment, feminism, and the fight against social exclusion (Archambault, 1996; Belorgey, 2000).

Today, CSOs are important providers of services in areas such as home care and residential care homes for the disabled and the elderly. They have a quasi-monopoly in providing residential facilities for emergency cases such as the reception of refugees and asylum seekers. They are also the main providers of sports services and they are also frequently involved in leisure, arts and culture activities. The bulk of CSOs are associations regulated under the 1901 legislation. There are far fewer CSOs which are foundations or endowment funds. Distributive foundations and endowment funds finance projects implemented by other organisations while operating foundations have paid staff to manage their activities directly.

Civil society in numbers

In 2017, there were about 1,500,000 registered associations (Tchernonog & Prouteau, 2019). Only 159,000 of them, namely 10.6%, employed waged workers. Therefore, the vast majority of associations rely solely on volunteers (Table 1).

Table 1. Number of associations regulated under the 1901 Act in 2017 by field of activity.

Field of activity	Associations only volunteer-staffed	Association with paid staff	Total
Sports	320,000	43,700	363,700
Leisure activities	307,700	12,600	320,300
Culture	305,700	38,600	344,300
Defence of causes and rights	163,000	9,300	172,300
Management of economic services and local development	32,600	7,000	39,600
Education, training and employment integration	36,700	11,600	48,300
Health and social services*	120,300	30,200	150,500
Humanitarian or charitable action	55,000	6,000	61,000
Total	1,341,000	159,000	1,500,000

*including residential nursing and care facilities

Source: Tchernonog & Prouteau, 2019.

Approximately two thirds of associations are involved in recreational activities such as sports, culture and leisure. But this share is higher (70%) among associations which are staffed only by volunteers than among associations with paid employees (60%). The opposite is true for health and social services.

In 2018, there were 4,202 foundations and endowment funds (Observatoire de la philanthropie, 2019). Their number has almost quadrupled since 2001. The development of endowment funds explains a substantial part of this increase. There were 1,651 such organisations in 2018. In 2017, 19% of foundations were operating and 81% were distributive foundations.

In 2017, 24% of foundations were active in social services, 18% in health and medical research, 17% in arts and culture and 9% in higher education and continuing training. Endowment funds were relatively more active in arts and culture (27%) than in social services (17%) or health and medical research (17%).

The economic dimension of CSOs

The resources of CSOs in France highlights the extent of their economic power. In 2017, for associations regulated under the 1901 legislation these resources amounted to about €113 billion of which almost 90% was held by organisations with paid staff and the rest by associations only staffed by volunteers. Therefore, resources are concentrated in a minority of associations. The origin of these resources differs depending on whether associations have employees or not (Table 2).

Table 2. The structure of the resources of associations regulated under the 1901 Act in 2017.

Nature of the budgetary resources	Organisations without waged employees	Organisations with waged employees	Total
Public subsidies	15%	21%	20%
Contracts with public bodies	5%	27%	24%
Fees and commercial sales	47%	41%	42%
Subscriptions	26%	7%	9%
Donations and sponsorship	7%	4%	5%
Total	100%	100%	100%

Source: Tchernonog & Prouteau, 2019.

Indeed, public funding (subsidies and contracts) account for almost half of the total resources of associations with staff while this share is only one fifth for associations without paid employees. On the other hand, subscriptions amount to more than a quarter of the budgetary resources of associations staffed solely by volunteers but only to 7% for those that have paid staff.

In addition, the level and structure of resources available to associations differ depending on their sphere of activity. For example, in the sports sector, 35% of the resources of associations came from subscriptions and 23% were of public origin (either the government or local authorities) but, in the education, training and employment integration sectors, these shares were respectively 4% and 56%. Public funding is also very important in the health and social services sector (46%).

Concerning paid labour, according to the National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE), in 2015 there were 1.85 million employees in associations regulated under the 1901 Act. This represented 8.1% of all French employees. Measured in terms of full-time equivalents (FTEs), the number of jobs was a little more than 1.57 million FTEs, namely 7.6% of all paid employment in France. There are no more recent official statistics on employment in associations but partial data from other sources suggests that the current state of affairs is roughly the same. In terms of added value, the contribution of associations to Gross Domestic Product is estimated at 3.3% (Tchernonog & Prouteau, 2019).

The economic power of foundations and endowment funds is significantly lower than that of associations despite their strong growth since 2013. In 2018, there were 127,000 employees in these types of CSOs. In 2017, the total amount of expenditure was €10 billion euros for the foundations and from 220 to 270 million euros for the endowment funds (Observatoire de la philanthropie, 2019). That same year, the former had €26.5 billion in assets and the endowment funds had from 1.3 to 1.6 billion euros. These assets are highly concentrated since 3% of foundations had 62% of total assets. The same is true for expenses. Indeed, operating foundations accounted for 75% of total expenses. 47% of foundation expenses were allocated to health and medical care and 29% to social services.

With regard to resources, there was a substantial difference between operating foundations and the distributive ones. Up to 67% of the resources of the former came from public funding (subsidies and contracts) while 72% of the resources of the latter derived from private donations. Endowment funds also largely relied on private donations (63%).

Association membership and volunteering

A national survey conducted in 2017 estimated the rate of individual membership of associations at 48% of the population aged 18 and over (Prouteau, 2020). This equates to more than 24 million members. This rate of membership has been fairly stable over the last 20 years.

The same survey showed that 43% of respondents volunteered in organisations which were predominantly associations. However, volunteers were not always members of associations in which they worked for free. Such a rate of participation equates to a little less than 22 million volunteers (Prouteau, 2020). Unlike the rate of membership, the rate of participation in voluntary work has increased in recent decades.¹ If, for convenience's sake, FTE is taken as the unit of measurement, the total volume of voluntary work in 2017 was estimated to be between 1,320,000 and 1,450,000 FTEs, the overwhelming majority of which was carried out in associations (between 1,275,000 and 1,410,000 FTEs). Calculated by field of activity, the three fields of a recreational nature (sport, arts and culture and leisure activities) accounted for 43% of the total volume of time given (Table 3). Social, humanitarian and charitable activity accounted for more than a quarter and the defence of rights, causes and interests for almost one fifth.

¹ From a survey conducted by Insee in 2002, the rate of participation in voluntary work was estimated at 28% and the Drees-BVA survey estimated it at 32% (Prouteau & Wolff, 2013).

Table 3. Distribution of the volume of voluntary work by field of activity.

Field of activity	Volume of voluntary work
Arts and culture	10.5%
Sports	20.2%
Leisure activities	12.2%
Social – humanitarian and charitable activity	28.1%
Health	3.5%
Defence of causes, rights and interests	17.9%
Education and training	5.1%
Other	2.5%
Total	100.0%

Source: Prouteau, 2018.

The only form of volunteering measured here is that done within an organisation, that is to say formal volunteering. There are no precise statistics concerning informal volunteering which is also an important contributor to civil society.

Legal framework and political conditions

Legal status of CSOs

Neither administrative authorisation nor formal declaration is required to found an association regulated under the 1901 legislation. The Act distinguishes three types of associations. The first comprises the unregistered associations that are perfectly legal but have no legal capacity. The second type consists of registered associations. They have limited legal capacity. In particular, their assets are restricted to the buildings that are strictly necessary to fulfil the purpose for which they have been founded. They cannot receive donations or bequests. The third type is made up of the so-called public-interest associations. They are recognised as such by public authorities after a lengthy administrative process. They have an extended legal capacity and can receive donations and bequests but they are subject to controls and requirements from the public authorities.

Partner relationships between associations and public authorities can take different forms. For example, associations can be approved. An approval is a unilateral measure taken by the public authorities when they want to maintain a special relationship with the organisations concerned by this measure. These organisations have to meet certain conditions, particularly relating to their internal operations. A public service delegation contract can be another form of public non-profit relationship. This is when CSOs are given the authority to carry out a civil service function or to run a public service. This type of partnership is common at a local level.

For most of the twentieth century there were only a few foundations in France unlike other European countries such as Germany, Sweden, Denmark or the UK (Archambault et al., 1999; Archambault, 2003, 2019). It was not until 1987 that foundations were given a legal definition. Nevertheless, over the last 20 years, public authorities have supported their development through several legislative measures. Today, there are three general forms

of foundation and four specialised forms. Among general forms, public utility foundations are the oldest. Their establishment is long, complicated and requires state authorisation although this establishment process was simplified by the 2003 Patronage Act. The corporate foundation is the second form. These were introduced in 1990, and may be used by companies for their sponsorship and charitable actions. The third form is the sheltered foundation. This entity does not have a legal status distinct from the organisations that shelter it and may be another or even a public institution, such as the *Institut de France*. The four specialised forms of foundations are: scientific cooperation foundations, partnership foundations, university foundations and hospital foundations.

Endowments funds were established by law in 2008. These are non-profit organisations that receive resources given to them freely and irrevocably to serve what is known as the general interest. They are easier to set up than foundations and require no prior authorisation from any authority whatsoever.

Associations regulated under the 1901 Act and foundations are exempted from business taxes under the following conditions. They must not distribute profit or surpluses to owners and they must not be in competition with for-profit enterprises. Furthermore, they must not provide the same product with the same price and with the same publicity as for-profits. With respect to tax incentives for donor contributions, France has a particularly generous system but its efficiency is debatable (Fack & Landais, 2010).

Political conditions

In the last twenty years, CSOs have experienced significant changes in their relationship with the state and the mode of public financing. The decentralisation of public governance that began in the early 1980s has grown since that time, with new powers transferred from central government to lower-level authorities. The latter have become increasingly important financial partners of CSOs. This is especially the case with departments whose remit includes social action. Their share in the public funding of CSOs has increased while the share of central government funding has decreased.

The impact of decentralisation on the relationship between the public authorities and CSOs has been mixed. On the one hand, the greater proximity between these partners may lead to the strengthening of participatory democracy promoted by CSOs (Demoustier, 2005). On the other hand, however, these close links may be used by local public authorities to subject CSOs to close scrutiny which restricts the autonomy of the latter, with the risk that they are viewed solely as service providers. This risk of instrumentalisation has increased with the changes in the modes of public funding. Indeed, in line with the guidelines advocated by the New Public Management movement and also as a result of EU legislation on state aid and competition, the authorities have favoured contracts over subsidies as a source of funding for CSOs. The share of subsidies in public funding for CSOs decreased from 66% in 2005 to 45% in 2017 (Tchernonog & Prouteau, 2019). Over the same period, the growth rate of total public funding slowed, which prompted CSOs to search for new resources.

This context has increased the competition among CSOs for access to public and private resources and also between CSOs and for-profit enterprises which are now operating in certain areas of activity which were once the preserve of non-profits, such as home care services. At the same time, public regulation has been tightened in terms of procedural requirements, reporting systems and evaluation of projects and outcomes. This is especially true in the social and medico-social arena. The regulation of this sector is based on criteria drawn from the

world of business and therefore CSOs are expected to import management tools from that sector. So, they are exposed to the risk of 'managerialism' (Avare & Sponem, 2003).

Several initiatives introduced by the authorities have modified the political environment for CSOs. The NOTRe Act adopted in 2015 changed the borders of the regions. Now each local government has fields of intervention assigned by law.²

At the end of 2017, the government decided to dramatically reduce the number of subsidised jobs. These contracts were originally intended to improve the social and vocational integration of people furthest removed from the labour market. These jobs are commonplace in the CSO sector.

At a more general level, recent legislation has created concerns among CSOs about the future viability of their socio-economic model. In 2014, the Social and Solidarity Economy Act was passed by Parliament. In France, the popular concept of social economy refers to organisations that adopt certain principles of functioning. In concrete terms, until the 2014 Act, social economy referred to associations regulated under the 1901 Act as well as cooperatives, mutual societies and foundations. The 2014 Act widened the scope of this sector by adding commercial companies that pursue an objective of social utility and meet certain conditions (CNCRES, 2014). The 2019 Pact Act concerned the growth and transformation of companies. Among other things, this legislation created a special status (the so-called "Société à mission") which companies may adopt if they pursue one or more social or environmental objectives.

Although these new legislative measures pertaining to social entrepreneurship are only applicable to companies that meet particular requirements, they are perceived by CSOs as a threat to their identity because they blur the boundaries between the for-profit and non-profit sectors (Haut conseil de la vie associative, 2019; Bidet et al., 2019).

In recent years, the government has largely neglected the role of intermediary bodies, including CSOs. This partially explains why certain sections of the population have sought to express their discontent through spontaneous social movements such as the "yellow jackets" movement in the winter of 2018-2019.

Challenges: finance, politics and coronavirus

France, according to social origins theory, was analogous with the statist pattern of civil society over the 19th and the first half of the 20th century. However, after the Second World War French civil society grew faster and accelerated in the 1980s due to a closer relationship with government at all levels. Now French civil society is more akin to the welfare partnership pattern, which is shared by most western European countries (Salamon et al., 2017). However, employment growth in associations has stopped since the 2007-08 financial crisis, while employment in foundations has grown rapidly due to the favourable 2003 Patronage law.

Therefore the interviews for this study deal with these two kinds of organisations - associations and foundations. But due to the coronavirus pandemic they were done in unusual

² This law enlarges the regions to a size similar to those in other European countries, especially Germany. The powers of the 13 new regions were increased.

conditions. Leaders of both types of CSO were called by phone during the lockdown from 23 March to 10 April, 2020. Thus the transcripts are approximate and the initial sample was biased because many targeted CSOs were closed without any means of contact. All of the respondents said they faced an unprecedented situation as they had to cope with lockdown as well as existing challenges. Therefore, the coronavirus crisis has only added to the list of issues which CSOs have been facing over the past two or three years.

Decline and change in public financing have been the main issues in recent years

In 2018 and 2019, government support at national, regional and municipal levels continued to decline and had different impacts on associations according to their activity. There was little impact on grassroots voluntary associations. Large CSOs in education, health and social services were protected by multi-annual contracts with public authorities so their public funding depended on their activity. However public funding is often late and that has created cash-flow problems as CSOs have found it difficult to access bank loans due to a reduction in their capital. On the other hand sports, culture, advocacy, human rights and small social CSOs were strongly affected by the reduction of subsidies. In addition to public funding retrenchment, the long-term trend towards replacing grants with competitive bidding for contracts has eliminated small associations which cannot tender because of a lack of qualified staff. Operating foundations are dependent on public money, like associations in the same field, while distributing foundations are not. Among distributing foundations, the situation of corporate foundations is unique:

"Our only source of revenue is the annual grant from our founding corporation which has been the same during the five year contract. But its renewal depends on the expected prosperity of our founder and what percentage of corporate donations is eligible for tax deductions." (Interview FR11)

Human resources and governance challenges

Employment in associations grew from 1950 to 2008. Since then it has plateaued with a slight decline over the past two years. On the other hand, employment in foundations has grown rapidly: foundations have multiplied and some large fundraising associations have become foundations as well (Archambault, 2020). As one interviewee noted:

"There is no problem in hiring employees because our mission makes sense to younger people who are the bulk of our staff. But staff turnover is high because our wages are lower than the labour market and the best trained people leave to look for work elsewhere." (Interview FR1)

Volunteering has grown continuously since it was first recorded in 1990. Young volunteers are more numerous than a decade ago. But there is a high turnover among this demographic due to changing work or family commitments (FR3). At the opposite end, volunteer boards may be mainly composed of elderly people, who are often the founders of small CSOs created a few decades ago. This is the case for a family foundation (FR12) and a voluntary association (FR6), interviewed for this study. So the renewal of their governance is their main challenge. For larger associations, the heavy workload of the chairperson and increased legal liability are often obstacles to finding an active person to replace the existing president. Even retirees are reluctant to handle such a considerable burden.

Unfavourable political and destabilising social changes

In 2017, one of the first decisions of President Macron's government was to end the programme of subsidised jobs which were considered ineffective in enabling the long term unemployed to join the mainstream labour market, although existing contracts were allowed to run out their term. Associations had 130,000 subsidised jobs, paid for mainly by government, and their progressive loss had an impact, especially on sports and social CSOs. As one respondent noted:

"In 2018, we lost three well trained subsidised jobs. It was impossible to replace them with volunteers and we cannot afford to pay qualified employees with a diploma. In addition, school rhythms have changed with the change of government. Therefore, we reduced our peri-school sailing activities." (Interview FR3)³

Donations from the wealthiest donors fell by up to 50% in 2018 following changes in the wealth tax which reduced the numbers of people paying and the amount they had to pay. This tax gives a tax exemption of 75% of donations.

Another mid-term political change was the implementation of 2015 NOTRe Act.⁴ For CSOs, it meant changing and engaging with more distant interlocutors to build new partnerships. For national federations, this law implied a loss of their political role to their newly empowered regional counterparts (FR10).

Social CSOs highlight a change among the most vulnerable population:

"Our beneficiaries are younger, more likely to be single, they are more often migrants or refugees, they come less from Eastern Europe and more from sub-Saharan Africa, they are more often Muslim. This change is sometimes difficult for older volunteers, especially if the people who need help don't speak French." (Interview FR4)

However, for the interviewees all these mid-term challenges were overshadowed by the coronavirus pandemic, the subsequent lockdown and the predicted consequences for CSOs and civil society at large.

Different situations of CSOs during lockdown and the challenge for volunteers and employees

During nearly two months from March to May, most CSOs were closed, as well as enterprises engaged in activities which were considered as "non-essential". Those CSOs running schools and third education establishments had to close at the same time as public schools and universities. However, charitable organisations offering food and services to the homeless and other vulnerable populations were considered as essential activities. This included services such as nursing homes (or EHPAD), residential facilities for the

³ Peri-school activity is a sport or leisure activity that pupils have to choose and do after normal school hours.

⁴ See footnote 2.

disabled, refugees or those facing other social care challenges.⁵ Those CSOs with accommodation continued to work around the clock, with a reduced staff and no or few protections for their employees and residents in the early weeks of the pandemic. In EHPAD, there were high numbers of deaths, among residents mainly, but fewer fatalities in other establishments where residents were younger.

Most volunteers were confined at home, so CSOs providing food and services to the needy relied on young or middle-aged volunteers for help with meals and food distribution or shopping for seniors. Those volunteers were either new entrants or had previous volunteering experience in cultural, sports and recreational associations or were students whose schools and universities had closed due to the crisis.

Many CSO employees were confined during the lockdown because their employer was closed or they were placed on partial unemployment.⁶ That was the case with CSOs involved with sports, recreation, training, local development, the provision of social services without accommodation and WISEs.⁷ As one respondent noted:

"Our growing association collects, repairs and sells waste textile items and it is also a WISE to train 43 long-term unemployed people in environmental conservation. We opened a subsidiary in another town on 9 March and it was closed eight days later due to the lockdown! So, I asked for partial unemployment for all the staff, temporary and permanent." (Interview FR13)

But in performing arts associations, which were hit by the cancellation of summer festivals, short-term labour contracts were ended and many were left unemployed without any financial support from the state.

A wide range of employees in CSOs, most executives of all civil society, teachers employed by education CSOs, and the entire staff of think tanks and distributive foundations worked from home. Websites of advocacy organisations and federations gave up-to-date information on policies regarding their clients during lockdown. In some foundations, board meetings were held by teleconference so that grants could be quickly awarded to selected associations (Interview FR12). Annual general meetings of associations, usually in spring, took place under the same conditions, with digital votes (Interview FR9).

Of course, for the staff of CSOs providing food and shelter to the population in need, there was more work than usual and volunteers were welcome. According to one interviewee:

⁵ EHPAD is the French acronym for a residential establishment for dependent elderly.

⁶ Partial unemployment means that you cannot work for external reasons (e.g., freezing weather for construction workers; in this case the company continues to pay its employee almost completely). In the case of COVID-19, the State paid wages during lockdown, instead of employers.

⁷ Work Integration Social Enterprises.

“There was a specific problem for homeless people. Most of them had been temporarily housed in deserted hotels. But many were totally destitute because they usually survived on begging or moonlighting. Thus, in addition to meal distribution, some services, such as free laundromats and luggage storage, remained open, albeit with reduced hours. However, the clients missed the association welcoming them every day. It was a place of social contact and also advocacy for their rights, which was normally run by older volunteers who could no longer get involved.” (Interview FR7)

In residential care services for the elderly, the disabled and also other social services with accommodation, there was also more work than usual because many members of staff were absent. Visits were forbidden at the beginning of the lockdown and, to minimise the risk of infection, all residents were confined to their rooms. These conditions were eased after a few weeks. Private non-profit hospitals also provided overwhelmed public hospitals with resuscitation beds.

To conclude, CSOs are in very different positions depending on their main area and activity. The representatives of CSOs interviewed for this study forecast a drop in resources, funding and capacities which will hamper their future service provision. They fear a deep economic crisis after the lockdown and a substantial loss in financial support from both government and private donors.

Solutions: innovative responses to current and mid-term problems

Resilience and adaptability to changing circumstances are recognised advantages of CSOs. Therefore, they have found innovative solutions to their financial, human resource and political problems. Some of them have been tried before and some are new responses to the current situation. Of course, when facing the coronavirus pandemic it was necessary to be innovative to address an unprecedented crisis.

Facing public funding retrenchment, a rise and diversification of private resources

The reduction of government subsidies and the rise of public procurement through tenders began in the early part of this century under the influence of the New Public Management model. Therefore, CSOs learned to bid for and sometimes to share the tenders. One respondent gave this example:

“There are three nautical clubs in our large seaside town and all of them are associations. We offer sailing activities for beginners and we bid for school age municipal tenders while the two other clubs bid for college and high school age tenders. And we usually win!” (Interview FR3)

Facing the reduction of public funding, most CSOs tried to increase their private resources and to diversify income streams. Raising membership dues was the first choice for small and middle-sized organisations especially in the fields of culture, sports and recreation, en-

vironment and local development. To balance the consequences of this rise for disadvantaged families, they adopted a variable rate based on household taxable income. Increasing commercial resources was another way of improving income. One association boosted the proportion of direct second-hand sales which was more profitable than selling to partners (Interview FR13). Other CSOs sought grants or awards from foundations (Interviews FR1, FR7, FR14) with the result that foundations saw their bureaucracy increase as they received an influx of grant applications and had difficulties following up the awards they made (Interview FR11). According to one respondent:

“Since the beginning of our scientific cooperation foundation, devoted to inquiry-based science education methods for school age children, we have benefited from public grants up to nearly 100%. In 2018, the main grant was stopped and we obtained 33% of our budget from some large corporate foundations last year. Growing international awareness of our programs allowed us to get grants from interested large European and American foundations such as the Siemens Foundation and the Smithsonian Institute.” (Interview FR14)

To cope with cash flow difficulties, CSOs raised their own funds by maintaining their surpluses (Interview FR1). According to a recent survey, the average cash flow of associations covers three months of their activity (Le Mouvement associatif, 2020). It is higher in distributive foundations. For example, there may be enough cash flow to cover two years of activity in a familial foundation which subsidises and monitors five small associations, mainly in developing countries and which wants to keep the regularity of its grants whatever the changes in its income (Interview FR12). Sheltered foundations are protected from cash risk by the sheltering foundation which usually invests their money. They may also use short-term loans between sheltered foundations (Interview FR8).

If these solutions were insufficient, CSOs reduced or deferred some activities or programs to reduce their costs. As they are reliant on people to keep their operations going, they preferred to avoid firing full-time employees and, if they had to cut jobs, they reduced temporary staff such as interns or those on short-term contracts (Interview FR1).

Retention of employees and volunteers and rejuvenation of governance

In terms of human resources, CSOs which have little funding to raise wages must use other ways of retaining staff such as attractive working conditions, interesting tasks and more responsibilities (Melnik et al., 2010). If CEOs and other executives leave the organisations for better salaries or career advancement, they are often hired by a larger CSO in the same field. Therefore, the two organisations can benefit from this exchange of skills and relationships.

Associations hired a majority of their employees in the years after 1980, following the passage of the 1983 Decentralisation Act which increased partnerships with local authorities. More than three decades later, and with as many as 700,000 of their current workforce approaching retirement in the next five years, they must look to attract younger people to replace the retirees. Universities and other further education establishments now offer specialised courses focusing on the management of non-profit organisations or social economy enterprises.

Besides paid employees CSOs need to retain volunteers and so good working conditions are also important. It is also crucial to turn occasional volunteers into regular ones. Delegating more responsibility and avoiding routine tasks is one way of achieving this goal. Some CSOs offer an agreement of mutual commitment between volunteers and their association, but some volunteers don't sign up to this agreement because it feels too similar to an employment contract (Interview FR13).

Another challenge for many CSOs is bringing new blood into the management of their organisation. According to one interviewee:

"Our voluntary association replaced an earlier organisation which was inactive because its president and treasurer were too old. We had the same mission of developing education and health facilities in two villages in Madagascar. That was thirteen years ago and now we are old! Maybe we will have to perform hara-kiri to be replaced by a younger association!" (Interview FR6)

Of course, that radical solution is easy in France because of the limited bureaucracy and near zero cost of creating a new association regulated by the 1901 Act. In addition, the assets of the defunct association can be simply transferred to its successor. As many as 70,000 associations are created every year and only half are still going five years later (Tchernonog & Prouteau, 2019). Many of these new associations embody the concerns of young people. The ephemeral nature of many associations is indeed a quality which allows them to adapt to social change (Bloch-Lainé, 1994).

To lighten the burden on the presidents of large organisations, some CSOs have suggested diversifying the skills of board members and delegating more responsibilities or performing a collective presidency held by two or three people working together (Interviews FR10, FR2).

Pooling the risks from political change through networking and lobbying

Over the past decade the concept of territorial poles of economic cooperation (PTCE) has become increasingly popular. They are groupings, in a given territory, of social and solidarity organisations associated with socially responsible small and medium enterprises and university research teams. According to one respondent:

"Our association is devoted to heritage preservation and we are currently restoring a fourteenth-century deserted and dilapidated monastery. We partnered with the regional authority to rebuild these beautiful ruins. We created a WISE to train young unemployed people with no skills in heritage restoration. This WISE works with local construction enterprises which transfer skills to the young unemployed people who are part of the WISE. Sometimes these enterprises hire them. Artists have residencies in the rebuilt parts of the monastery and shows are regularly put on for the public, especially in the summer. In addition, we also rent out some parts of the monastery for professional and family events. It is a win-win project and a real attraction for tourists in our Northern region." (Interview FR2)

Federations of CSOs, grouped together by sector of activity or by legal form, have existed for many decades and have entered into relations with public authorities at various levels and aim to influence their policy decisions (Interview FR10). Another innovative solution has been for associations, which assist the same vulnerable population, to work together to negotiate a longer term relationship with public funding bodies. This has been the experience of one respondent:

"Our CSO provides breakfasts and recreation for the homeless. It is a friendly place thanks to some thirty volunteers. We offer a range of cultural activities for those who are interested including visits to the theatre, cinema, shows, movies and museums. A social worker helps them two times a week. Three years ago, our volunteers noticed that their clients had to carry their belongings everywhere. So we decided to organise a luggage storage facility in a disused public day-care centre in the same street, given and renovated by the municipality. It is now open from 7-9am and also from 7-9pm. Therefore it is run only by new volunteers, who are often younger, before and after their normal work commitments. There is storage for the belongings of up to 55 people and it is full. We receive a small but regular subsidy from the municipality." (Interviews FR7 and FR8)

To cope with the reduction of high donations linked to the changes in the wealth tax and the consequent number and level of donations deductible from this tax, a foundation made personal calls to major donors to ask them to keep the same level of donations prior to the change. Therefore, donations went up in 2019 (Interview FR12).

Of course, many of the lockdown challenges have been partially solved by its end. However, the future of civil society depends on the durability of the solidarity movement which appeared during these two months and on the severity and the length of the subsequent economic and social crisis.

Conclusions

French civil society was repressed for much of the 19th century but it is now similar in size to many of France's European neighbours. Its vibrant growth is particularly evidenced by the sharp increase in the number of associations founded each year, between about 65,000 and 70,000, and the expansion of voluntary work. This vitality deserves to be emphasised in a country where the state has long been regarded as an omnipotent institution in defining the general interest and providing public goods. However, such a situation should not conceal some questions as to the future of civil society. These questions pertain to three dimensions of civil society, namely the economic, social and civic-political aspects.

From an economic point of view, it has been noted in this chapter that CSOs, essentially those with paid staff, play an important role as service providers in certain fields of activity. Some challenges they face have been highlighted: increased competition for financial resources, the marketisation of these resources and the trend towards managerialism which favours an institutional isomorphism and finally concern about the future of their socio-economic model as well as their "raison d'être". Such challenges explain why, unlike volunteer associations, the number of associations with employees is no longer increasing.

Will these challenges intensify in the near future? Will public policy toward CSOs change? In view of the demographic, social and economic perspectives, the needs which CSOs can meet are numerous. These include local services and retirement homes for an increasing ageing population; day-care, nursery schools, summer camps and other facilities for children; combatting the rise of poverty and unemployment after the coronavirus crisis; and helping to improve the resilience of local communities, the necessity of which has been underlined by the pandemic.

To cope with these needs, CSOs can take advantage of two opportunities. The first one is the recent growth of distributing foundations following the passage of the favourable 2003 Act on patronage. Foundations offer venture capital and monitoring for innovative associations which want to experiment with new services or participative social policies. The second opportunity is the Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) Act of 2014. This law is aimed at increasing co-operation among SSE organisations of different legal status, namely cooperatives, mutual societies, associations, foundations and social enterprises, to facilitate a scaling up of the entire sector. It also allocates CSOs more public money for competitive investment projects. Finally, it intends to promote a more diverse economy than one driven solely by capitalism. Similar SSE laws are increasingly common in many countries (Caire & Tadjudje, 2019).

CSOs, particularly small grassroots associations, offer numerous opportunities for increased social capital. As a result, it might be expected that this would lead to a high level of collective trust and social cohesion. However, in this respect, France is in a rather paradoxical situation. Indeed, despite France's large network of associations, levels of collective trust are low when compared with European neighbours. For example, the most recent European Value Study survey suggests that less than 30% of French respondents trust others compared with three quarters of respondents in Denmark and Norway, and between, 40% and 50% in Germany, United Kingdom, Spain or Austria (Galland & Grunberg, 2020). French society is fragmented. Fourquet (2019) refers to an archipelago-type structure. The causes of this fragmentation are multiple and its reduction cannot be an issue for civil society alone. Nevertheless, CSOs can help to tackle this significant problem by, for example, widening the recruitment base of their members. Indeed, too often,

participation in associations is socially selective. The higher the level of economic and cultural capital, the higher is the rate of membership.

Turning to the civic and political dimensions of civil society, CSOs play a role in both the local and national public spheres. They advocate legislative measures to promote their causes. For example, campaigning by feminist associations over the past two decades has resulted in a number of significant achievements. These include an increase in the number of women in Parliament and other elected assemblies, increased representation of women on the boards of companies and improved gender pay equality. The passage of the 2013 "Marriage for All" Act, which legalised gay marriage, was due in part to pressure from France's LGBT movement. Human rights CSOs have promoted new rights such as those of corporate whistle-blowers. The right of privacy against intrusion by web giants in their use of personal data is another area where CSOs have been increasingly active. Robotics and artificial intelligence will also give rise to new areas of concern and activism among human rights CSOs.

However, despite this, the role attributed to civil society in French democratic life remains limited even as France experiences a crisis of trust in democracy. This crisis, which is probably more serious for France than for its European neighbours, concerns the representative political system. It takes the form of increasing abstention rates in elections and a high degree of mistrust of political institutions, politicians and elected representatives except mayors and elected municipal officials who maintain a high level of public trust. A recent poll found that 70% of respondents did not trust the government, 65% did not trust the National Assembly and 62% did not trust the Senate (Sciences Po, 2020). These rates are higher than those observed in the UK and Germany. More worrying, four out of ten respondents considered that no progress is made in a democracy and it would be better to have democracy and greater government efficiency. This state of affairs is fraught with danger for democracy and civil society. The solution to this crisis might be more participatory and deliberative democracy, which leads to a greater emphasis on the role of civil society and its organisations.

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List of interviews

Interview FR1: National think tank, medium association, chair person

Interview FR2: Local culture and Heritage preservation association, large, deputy director

Interview FR3: Local sport association, medium, chair person

Interview FR4: National social services, faith-based association, large, board member

Interview FR5: National and international Public utility foundation, large, board member

Interview FR6: Third world development, voluntary association, small, chair person

Interview FR7: Local day reception for the homeless, voluntary association, small, chair person

Interview FR8: Local social service voluntary association, small, founder and chair person

Interview FR9: National Support to fundraising CSOs association, medium, CEO

Interview FR10: National Federation of health and social CSOs, medium, board member

Interview FR11: National corporate foundation, medium, chair person

Interview FR12: Family foundation, sheltered by FR5, small, chair person

Interview FR13: Environment association and WISE, large, chair person

Interview FR14: National and International scientific education foundation, large, founder president

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Russian civil society in quarantine: a host of problems and some new opportunities

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By Viacheslav Bakhmin

This report offers a brief overview of the progress of civil society organisations (CSOs) in Russia in 2020. This was a year marked above all by the coronavirus pandemic, the impact of which will be our main focus. Since this is an overview, we do not go into detail about every aspect of the non-profit sector. Rather, we offer a number of specific examples, accompanied by study data, which help to give a picture of the current situation in Russia.

The structure of Russia's CSOs, their legal and regulatory framework and the political context in which they operate have not changed significantly compared to 2019. However, there have been several major events in 2020 with significant media coverage that have had an impact on Russia's civic activism, and that are likely to continue to influence things going forward. These have included the referendum on reforming the Constitution, proposed by President Vladimir Putin; the protests in Khabarovsk at the arrest of the popular local governor, Sergei Furgal, who was elected against the wishes of the authorities in 2018; and the events following the presidential elections in Belarus, which prompted a wave of sympathy and solidarity across Russian civil society. Having said this, the greatest impact on citizens this year has of course been the coronavirus pandemic, in Russia as across the rest of the world.

COVID-19 and CSOs

The pandemic and the subsequent restrictions imposed during the quarantine period have had a dramatic impact on the country as a whole, including the activities of CSOs. In March, according to research by the Charities Aid Foundation (CAF), almost half of CSOs reduced face-to-face meetings, scrapped events planned for the next two to three months and cancelled business trips in Russia and abroad (67%). In Moscow, 83% of organisations surveyed had moved their staff to remote working, and 44% had closed their offices during quarantine, while in the regions only a quarter of those surveyed had taken these measures. Only 9% stated that their work had not changed in any way (CAF, 2020a).

The financial situation for non-profits also worsened significantly in March. Many supporters of charitable foundations were themselves affected financially by the pandemic and were unable to continue donating, despite the fact that the number of people in need of support was now much higher. There was also a drop in corporate support as businesses suffered the consequences of the pandemic. According to research conducted by the *Dobrye goroda* ('Good Cities') community across 55 towns and cities, 30% of CSOs in Russia's regions suspended their activities or reduced their workload. The number of requests made to some CSOs for assistance increased by 30%, while for others it fell by roughly the same amount. This all depended on the area the organisation was working in and its level of activity following the onset of the pandemic (Frejman, 2020).

These difficult circumstances have led to increased cooperation between Russia's most active non-profit organisations. As early as March, CSOs launched a number of large-scale campaigns to bring organisations and citizens together to deal with the consequences of the pandemic, and to seek urgent action from the authorities and wider society to support the sector. A number of foundations supported an online campaign organised under the hashtag '#ifthefoundationsdisappear'. CSO staff, volunteers, supporters and beneficiaries took to social networks to discuss what would happen if the foundations they were involved in closed down. On 1 April, the foundation *Nuzhna pomoshch* ('Help Needed') launched the

'*Spasaem tekhn, kto spaset nas*' ('Save our saviours') campaign to help non-profit organisations in financial crisis. This campaign was supported by several television channels, actors, directors and broadcasters. Other organisations launched similar campaigns on behalf of their own beneficiaries. For example, the charity *Nochlezhka* ('Overnight stay'), with the campaign '*Ty ne odin*' ('You are not alone'), the foundation *Starost v radost* ('Enjoyable Ageing'), with the campaign '*My ryadom*' ('We're by your side') and the foundation *Vera* ('Belief'), with the campaign '*Ne umyvaem ruki*' ('Let's not wash our hands'). The CAF established the Rapid Response Fund programme to support non-profit organisations helping those affected by the pandemic. The Civic Chamber, the Presidential Council for Civil Society and Human Rights, the association *Vse vmeste* ('All Together'), the All-Russia People's Front and other foundations issued a joint call to support CSOs, stressing that their income was falling during the pandemic at a time when their work was becoming ever more necessary (ASI, 2020a).

These joint efforts yielded results. In April, the number of online donations in aid of socially vulnerable groups in Russia almost doubled. Support grew for CSOs helping the poor, victims of violence, orphans and people with disabilities. The average amount per donation also increased. These were the findings of analysts from Yandex Money and the project '*Esli byt tochnym*' ('To be precise') from the foundation *Nuzhna pomoshch* (Nuzhna pomoshch, 2020). The rates and levels of donations supporting socially vulnerable groups varied over the year, but generally remained higher than last year.¹ Sberbank Private Banking is the division of Sberbank, Russia's largest bank, responsible for clients with assets over 100 million roubles. They published data showing that their clients' spending on charity reached its peak in May 2020, with a fivefold increase compared to the same month in 2019. Their clients were actively involved in fundraising for foundations dealing with the impact of the coronavirus pandemic (Sberbank, 2020).

CSOs were forced to adapt to the new conditions and demands of the pandemic by moving part of their work online and developing new ways to offer help to beneficiaries. This transition would have been difficult for most CSOs to make without financial support. Fortunately, major grant-making foundations also announced their own anti-crisis projects and programmes. For example, in March, the Potanin Foundation invited CSOs working during the public health crisis to participate in two grant contests, one of which was held monthly from March to September. This project helped the most active CSOs to bolster their resource base, organise remote working with target groups and develop fundraising opportunities. Another grant programme from the same foundation, *Shkola Filantropii* ('School of Philanthropy'), supported local initiatives by CSOs working to improve the quality of life of the most vulnerable. The foundation allocated 900 million roubles to these projects.²

The Timchenko Foundation and the Silver Age alliance created the *Zabota Ryadom* ('Help at hand') coalition to support the elderly, which brought together 126 organisations from 46 regions of Russia. The Timchenko Foundation also created the *Otkrytaya Dver* ('Open Door') programme to help CSOs working with vulnerable groups, as well as to provide assistance to medical workers and those in need through its partners across 16 regions of the country.

¹ See more: Benchmarking NPO. *Esli byt tochnym* journal. <https://tochno.st/benchmark> (accessed 2 November 2020).

² See more: Grant competitions. Vladimir Potanin Foundation. <https://fondpotanin.ru/competitions> (accessed 2 November 2020).

In total, the foundation distributed over 1.3 billion roubles to help combat the pandemic and its consequences (Timchenko Foundation, 2020). In September, the CAF launched the *Ukreplenie NKO* ('Strengthening NPOs') partnership, aimed at reinforcing the capacity of CSOs and supporting their staff.

Many charities have carried out urgent reorganisations of their programmes, focusing their efforts on direct support for those worst affected by the pandemic, and on providing support for hospitals and medical staff. Levels of volunteering have increased, as they always do during crises. The 'Medical Volunteers' movement, the Association of Volunteer Centres and the All-Russian People's Front launched '#WeAreTogether', a large-scale government-backed campaign. The campaign saw volunteers coming together to deliver food and medicine to elderly people in quarantine. In four months, 118,000 volunteers across Russia helped more than 3.4 million people. The campaign also raised 1.8 billion roubles from individuals and businesses during the pandemic (ASI, 2020b). Numerous smaller-scale initiatives were carried out independently by local foundations and CSOs across the country in their respective communities, in collaboration with local businesses.

To help mitigate the consequences of the pandemic, the federal government also prepared a package of support measures for CSOs, alongside the help offered to small and medium-sized businesses.³ These measures included a reduction in the number of inspections (except for organisations recognised as 'foreign agents'); the deferral of rent and reporting to the Ministry of Justice; and allowing organisations' governing bodies to meet online. Charitable foundations were given permission not to conduct their mandatory audits for 2019.

The Ministry of Economic Development drew up two registers of non-profit organisations eligible for assistance. The register of organisations to be offered additional support due to the pandemic includes socially oriented non-profit organisations (SONPOs) which, as of 1 January 2017:

- were recipients of grants and subsidies through programmes implemented by federal executive authorities, regional executive authorities, and local government bodies;
- were Presidential grant recipients;
- were providers of social services;
- were Providers of Public Benefit Services.

As of 21 July 2020 there were 24,235 organisations on this register. Another register of those NPOs most severely affected by the coronavirus pandemic contained 11,043 organisations as of 20 August 2020, and included:

- private educational organisations licensed for educational activities;
- charitable organisations reporting to the Russian Ministry of Justice;
- NPOs from the list of organisations which fund science, education, culture and the arts, and which are not subject to taxation.⁴

³ All these measures are set out on the specially created website <https://covid.economy.gov.ru/nko> (accessed 2 November 2020).

⁴ Ibid.

As promised, the Government and the Civic Chamber are working together to set up a single register of NPOs eligible for state support following the pandemic. This register should include organisations from both registers drawn up by the Ministry of Economic Development. SONPOs included in the register are offered exemptions from taxes, advance tax payments, and insurance contributions to state extrabudgetary funds for the second quarter of 2020. They are also exempt from paying rent on federal property for four months and receive a 6-month deferral of rent on state, municipal or commercial property. Legal entities which assist these organisations will also receive tax benefits. The NPOs themselves can also access soft loans at a rate of 2% interest.

In addition, the state provided volunteers and socially oriented non-profit organisations with free personal protective equipment. This equipment was distributed on the basis of applications made to the Association of Volunteer Centres (Kommersant, 2020).

However, not all CSOs have been able to access state support and help from funding bodies, and many remain in a precarious situation. A CAF survey conducted from 25 May to 8 June 2020 among 194 non-profit organisations, most of them working outside Moscow, found that 78% of CSOs surveyed needed financial support for current programmes, salaries and administrative expenses. However, the quarantine period has also provided new opportunities for CSOs. The CAF study found that during the pandemic, some CSOs began devoting time to organisational development (one third of respondents), as well as learning to use digital tools and technologies to provide online support to their beneficiaries (one third of respondents) (CAF, 2020b).

At the same time, federal and local authorities have used the pandemic as a pretext to restrict civil liberties, banning all forms of public protest. By the end of March, the authorities in 45 Russian regions had banned all public events, despite the fact that a state of emergency had not been declared and that, under the state of high alert, assemblies, rallies and pickets cannot be banned. During the state of high alert, the monitoring of citizens' behaviour and whereabouts increased, with new mobile applications developed for these purposes and the widespread use of facial recognition technology. On 1 April, a law was passed penalising the spread of unreliable news about emergencies, including the spread of COVID-19. This severely limited the ability of CSOs and the media to combat rights violations, including those committed against groups such as health workers or prisoners (Novaya Gazeta, 2020).

The crisis has exposed the weaknesses of Russia's non-profit organisations. A shortage of equipment and a lack of skills and experience in the use of technology prevented CSOs from switching fully to remote working during quarantine. Many organisations had no strategy in place, no alternative funding sources, and no buffer. As a consequence, they were left without sufficient funds, despite growing demand for their work. The increased demand for their services due to the pandemic forced CSOs to shift from a systemic to a targeted approach, and from offering planned to emergency aid. However, there was also a major drop in the funds raised for their ongoing programmes. For example, the foundation *Zhivoi* ('Alive') raised 176 million roubles for personal protective equipment at the height of the pandemic, several times more than its entire budget for last year (ASI, 2020c). Donors who had previously favoured 'intelligent' rather than targeted aid switched to simpler, more straightforward forms of support. Some experts have seen this as a step backwards, towards an outdated approach to charity (ibid.).

At the same time, CSOs have demonstrated an enormous capacity for mutual assistance, solidarity and enthusiasm. One feature of the pandemic response has been regional cooperation, with CSOs in different towns and cities coming together to help those in need. For example, the *SOSedi* ('Neighbours') coalition, an association of large non-profit organisations from Perm, was established in late March 2020 to support local people during the pandemic. The *SOSedi* team included members of the Perm Immortal Regiment, GRANI Centre (Centre for Civic Analysis and Independent Research) projects, the *Dedmorozim* foundation, the Liza Alert search and rescue brigade in Perm, the *Matroskin* animal shelter, the *Territoriya pere-dishki* ('Breathing Space') centre for the homeless and the *Territoriya semi* ('Family Territory') organisation for vulnerable families (Productive Initiatives Development Society, 2020).

It is too soon to say to what extent the changes brought about by the pandemic described here will affect CSOs in the long term, since pandemic-related restrictions are still in place to varying degrees. Nevertheless, it is already clear that the pandemic will have long-term consequences for the sector.

The main trends for the sector in 2020

The main trends remain the same as last year, though some have intensified. **The rise in civil protest** has continued despite the restrictions put in place due to the pandemic. Quarantine, coupled with the fact that many businesses have suspended operations, has radically changed the pattern of protest. On the one hand, restrictions introduced to curb the pandemic have themselves been a source of social unrest and protest. On the other, additional legal and administrative obstacles to traditional and popular forms of protest such as demonstrations and picket lines have been implemented. Protest has primarily been expressed through open letters and video messages, while specific forms of 'quarantine protest' have also emerged such as online demonstrations and pickets (Center for social and labor rights, 2020). The authorities continue to use the fight against coronavirus to pressure and illegally detain civil and political activists who participate in peaceful single-person pickets. Yet from the beginning of March to August 2020 there were at least 775 pickets across Russia, both single-person pickets and picket lines. Although the ban on public events cannot be applied to single-person pickets, according to data from human-rights monitoring organisation OVD-Info, 269 people were arrested in Moscow for carrying out single-person pickets in the first six months of 2020 alone, more than in the previous two years combined (Agora Group, 2020).

Over the course of the year, there has been a great deal of activity in defence of human rights and in solidarity with journalists, politicians, detained activists and the citizens of Belarus. Below are a few examples.

In April, more than a hundred human rights activists, lawyers and writers demanded that the journalist, Elena Milashina, who was attacked in Chechnya in the lobby of her hotel, be granted state protection, and that criminal proceedings be launched against the head of Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov. Many individuals and organisations spoke out in support of the antifascist and anarchist activists in Penza who were handed lengthy prison sentences on fabricated charges related to forming a terrorist organisation. In Khabarovsk there were daily demonstrations following the arrest of the former governor, Sergei Furgal, who was accused of involvement in the murders of several businessmen 15 years ago. There have also been protests in support of Mr Furgal in Novosibirsk, Vladivostok, Omsk and other Russian cities. In August, regular rallies were held outside the embassy of the Republic of Belarus in support of the protests there. On 15 July 2020, demonstrations were planned in a number of cities

against the constitutional amendments that came into force on 4 July, giving new powers to the office of the President and allowing Vladimir Putin to stand for election again in 2024. Local authorities refused to sanction the demonstrations. In Moscow, the protesters initially collected signatures demanding the withdrawal of the amendments, before beginning a march through the city. According to OVD-Info data, 147 people were arrested following the 15 July protest (OVD-Info, 2020).

The environment has also been a source of protest across Russia. Kushtau Hill, the largest of the shihan hills in the Republic of Bashkortostan, was thrust into the public eye after the Bashkir Soda Company was given permission to use the area for limestone mining. In August 2020, the confrontation between the company and environmental activists defending the hill, which is home to over 40 rare and endangered species of plants and animals, triggered widespread protests, clashes with riot police and the detention of activists. Following the intervention of Vladimir Putin, Kushtau Hill was declared a protected natural area of regional importance (RBC, 2020).

The polarisation of the CSO sector continues apace and has even increased in 2020. The legal environment has worsened for activist groups, independent organisations, human rights activists, independent journalists and the media. Civil protest has been severely suppressed, the number of CSOs categorised as 'undesirable organisations' has greatly increased, pressure on CSOs listed as 'foreign agents' has not abated, and criminal cases have been launched against journalists and civil activists. The government's declaration of support for CSOs during the pandemic had little impact on organisations recognised as 'foreign agents', since they received virtually no presidential grants or government subsidies.

Towards the end of the year, deputies of the State Duma put forward a number of legislative initiatives aimed at tightening control over the media, the internet and the non-profit sector. One proposal included banning educational activities that do not have the approval of the federal authorities. Another would allow people engaged in political activity or the gathering of military-technical information who receive money from abroad to be declared 'foreign agents'. The media would also be obliged to acknowledge any material used that had been provided by a 'foreign agent'. Unregistered public associations could be declared 'foreign agents' if they are engaged in political activity and receive money from abroad. CSOs owned or managed by foreigners would also be treated as such. These organisations would be required to coordinate their activities with the government. Yet this is only part of a host of repressive legislative initiatives put forward in recent weeks (BBC, 2020). It is difficult to say which of them will actually become legislation, but it is clear that legislators intend to further restrict the work of CSOs and strengthen control over the spread of information.

At the same time, the authorities have shown an increasing willingness to recognise the achievements of loyal CSOs and to use their experience as the basis for government programmes. As Elena Topoleva, director of ASI and a member of the Civic Chamber noted, "were it not for NGOs, we would not have a palliative care system, orphanage reform, supported living and much else" (ASI, 2020d). In 2020 specifically, the authorities were looking at implementing models developed by CSOs working with the homeless and on supported living for people with mental disabilities (Kremlin.ru, 2020a). In an address to the Federal Assembly on 15 January, the President ordered the government to arrange for the supply of vitally important medicines, including those required for seriously ill children, that were currently unregistered in Russia. This followed major CSO-led campaigns supported by the media. He also instructed ministers to work on the creation of a single database of victims of political repression (TASS Agency, 2020).

This polarisation has had an impact on both the working conditions of organisations and their ability to collaborate with one another. There has been a widening of the gap between 'loyal', 'safe' NGOs, dealing with social services and charity, and 'dangerous' human rights organisations, although there are some examples of mutual support.

The growing role of the Presidential Grants Foundation (PGF)

State funding remains a crucial source of financial support for many non-profit organisations. However, the most prominent, active human rights organisations and organisations designated as 'foreign agents' very rarely receive state support, with many deliberately avoiding any association with state financing, which they consider toxic. At the same time, funding from abroad is limited and also comes with risk. It is only available to a small group of independent organisations that are either already recognised as 'foreign agents' or are at risk of being classified as such.

In 2020, by order of the President, an additional grant contest was held for CSOs dealing with the impact of the pandemic. The PGF offered total funding of 2 billion roubles through this contest, shared between 900 non-profit organisations. A total of 5,319 initiatives by non-profit organisations were supported in 2020, with total funding amounting to an unprecedented 10.7 billion roubles (Kremin.ru, 2020b). The role of the PGF has also expanded, and it will now co-finance regional NPO-development contests from 30% to 70%. Last spring, the government recommended that regional authorities support NPOs in accordance with the PGF model, including the principles of a single window and maximum transparency. So far in 2020, two regions (Chelyabinsk and Perm) have responded to this call.

Increasing importance of the internet and IT for civil society

During the quarantine period, all service organisations were forced to either stop working or move online. As a result, there was an increase in the use of IT and the internet, and many organisations acquired the new skills required to work remotely with beneficiaries. Furthermore, many organisations came to realise the advantages of hosting events online in terms of increased participation levels, particularly from the regions. It is likely that online event formats tried out during the pandemic will continue to be used and developed for awareness-raising and other projects going forward. The huge educational potential of online resources had not been fully exploited prior to the pandemic, but these tools have now become much more popular. The GRANI Centre has created a database of online courses for CSOs working in the field of social innovation. The database now includes 130 online courses from Russian universities, 230 online courses in undergraduate topics, and more than 700 courses across 20 Russian online platforms, as well as courses from Russian CSOs themselves (ASI, 2020e). The St. Petersburg NGO Development Centre alone offers ten free online courses for CSOs and plans to launch three more by the end of the year. The 'Social Technologies Greenhouse' project, which offers a wide range of training and services in accessible language for professionals working in the social sphere, has played an important role in fostering the use of IT by CSOs.

Charity and volunteering

As we described above, the charity and volunteering sectors have been given a new impetus by the pandemic. In Moscow, where the rate of infection was highest, hundreds of people responded immediately to the call for volunteers to help the elderly by doing shopping, walking dogs, taking out rubbish, or simply giving them someone to talk to. To organise this, the Moscow authorities turned to charities with experience in volunteer coordination. In just two months, there were more than 167,000 requests to buy and deliver medicine in Moscow (Mos.ru, 2020). The level of online giving also grew, and the pandemic highlighted the importance of private donations for CSOs. A study by MasterCard found that a quarter of Russians surveyed made online donations during the quarantine period. It is notable that almost half of the 25% of Russian respondents who had made donations online said that this was the first time they had given to charity (Izvestia, 2020).

Abandoning legal status in favour of activism

Another trend identified by researchers over recent years is the active rejection of legal entity status by civil society groups (EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, 2021). This is particularly evident in the field of human rights, where there is greater pressure on organisations than in other areas, and the bureaucratic requirements demanded of them significantly outweigh their capacity to obtain funding. There are many examples of organisations that have ceased to exist as legal entities but continue to operate. The decision to liquidate an organisation may be taken as a result of the authorities taking it to court for legal infractions and not waiting for these to be rectified, or it may be taken by the CSO itself due to its inability to function as a legal entity. Recent examples of this kind include the Tver branch of Memorial, the Anti-Corruption Foundation, the movement *Za prava cheloveka* ('For Human Rights'), the organisation *Rus sidyashaya* ('Russia Behind Bars') and the Agora International Human Rights Group. More often, however, activists are reluctant to register their organisation with the Ministry of Justice in the first place, for fear of the bureaucratic oversight and costs involved.

Conclusions

The difficulties faced by the non-profit sector in 2020 with the arrival of the coronavirus pandemic have put the sustainability of Russian civil society to the test. CSOs faced a host of problems for which most of them, like society at large, were unprepared. However, working under uncertain, even precarious conditions is something many Russian CSOs are used to. Flexibility, adaptability, responsiveness and a willingness to collaborate have allowed the sector to weather the most acute phase of the crisis. Moreover, new coalitions and partnerships have emerged which, like the online tools tried out during the pandemic, will continue to be used in the sector going forward.

Acknowledgements

We would like give special thanks to Olga Drozdova, who was an advance reader of this essay and whose valuable comments and advice were extremely helpful, as well as to Elena Shakhova and Elena Belokurova.

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Europe, Russia, civil society and COVID-19

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by Anna Sevortian and Brian Harvey

The COVID-19 pandemic was the global event of 2020, with an impact on continents, countries, families and individuals. How did it affect civil society groups and civil society organisations (CSOs)?¹ Did it change them? How will CSOs be different in the future? We spoke to civil society actors around Europe and Russia in mid-2020 and found out what other experts were saying.²

Humanitarian response

Their first response was humanitarian. Straight into action were frontline social NGOs and those working with people living in poverty. Social NGOs were inundated with calls for advice and practical help. According to Juraj Nemec of Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica, Slovakia, NGOs found themselves at the forefront of helping people who needed food and social care, “which they did really well”. “In the early days of the pandemic everyone wanted to help the healthcare system professionals, the doctors - and this completely overshadowed the need to help other groups in the direst need” said Mitya Aleshkovsky of the ‘Help Needed’ Foundation in Moscow, Russia.

It quickly became clear that some people were more affected than others. Mary Murphy of Maynooth University, Ireland drew attention to what she called the ‘shadow pandemic’ of domestic violence which applied extra pressure on NGOs as domestic abuse hotlines “lit up”.³

Refugees were in particular need. The International Organisation for Migration pointed out that even with European borders locked, migrants still crossed the Mediterranean - at least 13,000 - and NGO vessels like Ocean Viking went back to sea to rescue them. On the western Balkans route, many refugees found themselves not only locked down, but stranded and isolated from external contact. NGOs were even denied access, as after burning down of the Moria camp in Lesbos, Greece, in September 2020. Civil society organisations endeavoured to bring food, provide medical help to those still on the move, assist the victims of police violence and denounce unhygienic conditions. They could not provide enough, but they were the only ones to step in at all.

All over Europe, the actions of CSOs were documented either by CSOs themselves or by activists and researchers, for example by Interface, the journal of social movements.

1 Here, unless the context indicates otherwise, the term Civil Society Organisations (CSO) is used as a broad term including registered Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), voluntary and community organisations, unregistered groups, networks and individual activists in social and civic action.

2 For this article, we have used data obtained through extensive desk research and interviewing (interviews conducted between July and September 2020, online/ via email). Our initial list of 30 interviewees included country and thematic experts on civil society, based on the suggestions of the researchers who wrote country analysis for this and previous Reports. The list was then further developed by us, to cover the diversity of the countries and thematic fields. The interviewees were asked five questions (see Annex 2 for questions and people interviewed). We also drew on research on civil society in Russia, commissioned by CSF in August 2020 (18 interviews) and tested our preliminary findings and collected additional data at two online conferences in October 2020. This article reflects opinions and trends observed after the first wave of COVID-19, which might be a limiting factor in evaluating the overall effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on civil society in Europe and Russia.

3 Recordings of reports are available on the page of the Citizens’ Assembly site “Gender Impacts of COVID-19” at www.citizensassembly.ie/en/what-we-do/meetings/online-seminar/speakers (accessed 03 December 2020).

In Greece, NGOs such as Agroecopolis reorganised. Small producers suddenly cut off from their normal retail outlets set up new distribution networks direct to consumers. In Spain, social movements mobilised to rebuild the public health service and protect tenants, documented by Uppsala, Sweden-based professor Miguel Martínez (Interface, 2020). Some CSOs were in a better position to respond than others. *Cittadinanzattiva* (Citizen Initiatives) in Italy already had a strong focus on public health and patient rights, so quickly began advocacy for COVID-19 patients and vulnerable groups, commented on government policies for protection (e.g. masks, immunisation) and moved to find fresh funding.

Maria Chertok of CAF Russia foundation reported that as NGO activities became increasingly focused on humanitarian aid redistribution, it would be more difficult to go back to the full spectrum of their work later. Eventually they would have to switch off ‘crisis mode’. They put all their resources into their immediate response and nothing else. They worked for 14-15 hours a day without weekends, shared Mitya Aleshkovsky. They suffered financially, their staff were stretched and often lacked support to prevent their own burnout. Maria Chertok hoped that their role would be properly acknowledged. Russian and German experts feared that NGOs, so concentrated and visible on the humanitarian front, would afterwards struggle to re-establish their legitimacy in advocacy and their voice in a democratic debate (ECNL, 2020).

A rapid shift from physical to virtual

Civil society organisations found new ways of working with their clients. Under pressure, they quickly provided new, or extended existing services, especially food (e.g. parcels) and shelter. They adapted their services to deliver them online, remotely (e.g. advice, counselling) and door-to-door. CSOs reacted quickly, flexibly and more efficiently than governmental bodies which they outperformed - they were the fastest ‘first responders’ (Social Platform, 2020).

There were big internal changes within CSOs. They had to keep their workplace staff healthy, while developing systems for others working from home. In the workplace, they provided Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and took other protective measures for their own staff (e.g. masks, spacing, disinfectant). Some entrepreneurial CSOs converted their rooms into 3D printing facilities and textile workshops to make PPE and masks for themselves and others.

Civil society had to reorganise and learn how to make the big move to online working, ‘a rapid shift from physical to virtual’. In Slovakia, “all mass activities were banned, all major international activities were cancelled, we did not organise anything offline for four months”, said Juraj Nemec. With public demonstrations no longer allowed, CSOs had to develop media-based interventions, reported Anke van Dam, Director of AFEW International, Amsterdam, Netherlands and “had to improve their internet skills and equipment”. They had to learn to change their internal communications to Zoom conferences and webinars. This was not always easy, for some civil society activists were not very technically competent, and they did not always have modern equipment.

Their advocacy methods had to change too. Advocacy visits migrated online and so did human rights and other educational courses. According to András Léderer of the Hungarian Helsinki Committee in Budapest, Hungary, community outreach became very limited and personal advice had to go online. Annegret Wulff of MitOst association, Berlin, Germany observed their international staff and partners adapting fast to digital management, virtual teams and developing skills in using sophisticated information technology tools. Sotiris Petropoulos of HIGGS, Athens, Greece believed the future lies in ‘adaptable programming, using offices less and investing in IT and artificial intelligence’. In Espoo, Finland, CSOs introduced chatbots and smartbots which operated in sixteen languages and could talk to up to 10,000 people at a time.

Civil society groups showed that they could react very quickly and flexibly. From now on, they would be more ‘techy’ (technological). “CSOs also found their voice in the public debate on the digitalisation [of public services and business operations] in Germany”, observed Mirko Schwärzel of *Bundesnetzwerk Bürgerschaftliches Engagement* (BBE), the Berlin-based association of German NGOs. There are certainly new risks in ‘going all digital’, warned Olga Sadovskaya of Committee Against Torture, Nizhny Novgorod, Russia. Risks, and “a big need to improve digital security, for which not much quality training was available”.

Challenges of adaptation

Not all organisations and groups across Europe and Russia adapted equally well or were able to meet the growing demand for assistance. Annegret Wulff spoke of the reality in Germany: “a lot of people are suffering and civil society is not necessarily helping that much”.

The financial environment became more difficult: revenue declined and CSOs had to learn that less money would be available. Cittadinanzattiva reported that CSOs in Italy suffered a loss of funding of 40-50%. Fundraising events could no longer be held. According to Juraj Nemec, CSOs lost donors and sponsors, while government grants decreased too. A study by Maecenata Foundation, Berlin, Germany, predicted a considerable shortfall in donations over the medium term (Schrader M. & Roth J., 2020).

The London-based Charities Aid Foundation watched how some governments stepped in to ease cashflow but did nothing about the overall funding situation of CSOs. Other governments helped only the for-profit economic sectors or provided assistance to CSOs within an overall ‘economy rescue package’. Interestingly enough, the Russian government made additional support available for ‘socially-oriented’ NGOs via a grant competition. However, in almost all cases, additional public funds were directed toward responding to immediate needs arising from the pandemic.

The donor community demonstrated a lot of flexibility in adapting to the new circumstances, but understandably directed extra funds toward a coronavirus response rather than institutional support.⁴ Oksana Oracheva of Potanin Foundation, Moscow, Russia watched through the donor’s lens how civil society adapted. In spring 2020, this private foundation’s budget doubled to provide additional grant funds for cultural institutions and CSOs. She believed that “though many people in Russia realised in 2020 the importance of the NGO sector, not all NGOs will survive COVID-19”.

⁴ EU-Russia CSF Donors’ Conference (online), 09 September 2020.

According to Dr. Alžbeta Brozmanová Gregorová of Matej Bel University, “CSOs were weakened due to a loss of funding. Training, volunteering and promotion suffered. Not all CSOs were able to move their activities online, so they stopped”. Anna Skvortsova of the NGO Development Centre, St.Petersburg, Russia shared this concern. According to their own research, every fifth NGO in the region might go out of business, some of them dealing with pressing social issues. In May 2020, the House of Hope on the Hill, a St.Petersburg rehab centre for people with chemical addictions, announced its closure after 24 years of service.

New generation of activists?

New CSOs emerged, a sure sign of social change. In the view of one Italian women’s NGO, *Non Una di Meno Roma*, “something is moving on the ruins of the pandemic”. Across Italian cities, numerous *Brigate Volontarie per l’Emergenza* (Crisis Volunteer Brigades) formed to deliver food and medicine although they often ran into difficulties with police enforcing lockdown regulations.

In Germany, *Seebrücke* (Sea Bridge) was formed to help refugees (its early protest actions were broken up by police). New organisations providing food for the poor appeared, for example *100% Karlsruhe*, which multiplied rapidly into similar solidarity groups. Activists in Leipzig formed *Nachbarn für Nachbarn* (Neighbours for Neighbours), a chat and practical help group (e.g. groceries) for neighbours. *Ecken wecken* (Waking Corners) combined solidarity, self-help, charity and the politics of social change, a powerful mixture.

Sotiris Petropoulos of HIGGS spoke of a new “mode of cooperation” in Athens, Greece, where a centre for the homeless was opened by the municipality, with active participation by CSOs and businesses. A small team, GIVMED, collects near-expiration medicines from pharmacies in Greece and gives them to those in need.

People started self-organising to bring meals to the doctors at hospitals or to take care of pets whose owners got sick. According to Mitya Aleshkovsky of the Moscow-based ‘Help Needed’, “the number of people who realised that the situation was critical grew significantly – and they started helping others – financially or through volunteering”.

Filip Pazderski of Institute of Public Affairs, Warsaw, Poland shared several inspiring – and previously unknown – examples of organising that went beyond the normal patterns of CSO activity there. A Facebook group ‘*Widzialna Ręka*’ (Visible Hand) started coordinating support to the elderly and vulnerable in spring and soon collected over 100,000 members.⁵ It is still active in the capital and regions. In Gdansk, a group of Chechen refugees started sewing masks and offering them to the community; an online rap ‘Hot 16 challenge 2’ collected over zł3m for medical staff in Polish hospitals and bought seven fully equipped ambulances (UNHCR, 2020).

All these experiences of people mobilising and organising may even produce something as valuable as digitalisation – a new “generation, new wave of active citizens”, concluded Maria Chertok. On the other hand, according to Berlin-based Maecenata Foundation, health risks and additional workload during the pandemic might also produce the opposite effect with many volunteers possibly not returning after the pandemic (Schrader et al., 2020).

⁵ See more at “*Widzialna Ręka*”. Visible Hand Facebook group. www.facebook.com/groups/widzialnareka (accessed 03 December 2020).

A pandemic of non-freedom?

Several 'shadow' pandemics unfolded in 2020 including closed borders, restricted rights and freedoms. Mirko Schwärzel of BBE in Germany saw how "civil society was about civic space and the lockdown really affected it, when you shut down all public life, it creates questions for democracy". Olga Sadovskaya of Committee Against Torture, pointed out that COVID-19 made the public oversight of closed institutions in Russia exceedingly difficult. Their lawyers could hardly get access to the penitentiary system institutions. Human rights organisations from other countries confirmed this observation (EPLN, 2020).

Worldwide, access to justice was hindered at the start of lockdowns and did not necessarily return to normal afterwards. In May 2020, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) issued guidance on access to justice during the pandemic. Richard Susskind, a founder of the Remote Courts Worldwide website, saw the transformative potential of technology for the execution of justice. "More people in the world now have access to the internet than to justice", he said (Financial Times, 2020).

Often it was "civil society voices who kept a debate about rights and freedoms alive", noted Filip Pazderski. His country, Poland, went through a presidential election during the epidemic in 2020 and political activism could not be "put on hold". Protesters set up single-person pickets but even though they observed health regulations, they had to pay maximum fines for taking a stand. Anatoly Lebedev, working with an environmental NGO 'BROC' in Vladivostok, Russia, drew attention to the wide-scale weekly mass protests in Khabarovsk after the arrest of the regional governor in the summer of 2020. "People ignored the restrictions - taking action about violations of their constitutional rights was more important", he explains, "it shows that the civil society in Russia is stronger than ever before".

While some CSOs questioned limits on personal freedoms, restrictions on the press and tracking systems, others drew attention to the bail-outs of big, already profitable businesses, like airlines. According to U4, part of the Christian Michelsen Institute in Bergen, Norway, the virus was a great opportunity for corruption, over-pricing and the circumvention of normal procurement but civil society groups were the organisations that could best keep watch and challenge corruption. (Steingrüber et al.). The shortage of PPE inevitably invited opportunities for bribery in the delivery process, but it was much more than that. European social networks warned of a real risk that the "huge sums of public money" channelled into recovery plans were at risk of 'abuse, misallocation, discrimination and environmental harm'.⁶ Interface published documentation on how, "while we remained inside [in lockdown] the Greek government waived taxes for the wealthy, gifted funds to private companies and repealed laws for environmental protection" (Interface, 2020).

It was important to be aware that not all countries responded in the same way, said Sevasti Chatzopoulou of Social Europe.⁷ Governments distrustful of civil society, like Greece, took a policing, monitoring, micromanaging approach while at the other end of the spectrum such

⁶ See more at <https://ecas.org>, <https://cultureactioneurope.org/news/eu-covid-19-measures-at-a-glance-what-for-the-ccs> and <https://civicspacewatch.eu/solidarity-amid-covid-19-crisis> (accessed 03 December 2020).

⁷ See more at <https://www.socialeurope.eu/social-trust-and-government-responses-to-covid-19> (accessed 03 December 2020).

as in the more trustful Scandinavian countries, governments engaged civil society in an approach based on trust, solidarity, cooperation, dialogue and community feeling.⁸ The crisis taught us a lot about how governments regarded their relationships with civil society.

Lessons learned and the future

The first lesson was, in the words of one CSO, that "we were not all in this together". Some people suffered more than others, especially those living in poverty - "the well-off could adjust to working from home, but millions experienced hardship", like those dependent on income support or working in the gig economy.

The crisis revealed systemic flaws. According to Mary Murphy, "The virus thrives on and lays bare existing inequalities and has been particularly impactful on those experiencing multiple inequalities - gender, ethnicity, inequality and class".

An example was delays in health screening for women. In Social Europe, Daša Šašić Šilović, chair of the international board of the Central and Eastern European Network for Gender Issues, drew attention to the 'new stratification' of those living in poverty, especially disadvantaged children whose education fell behind from lack of schooling.⁹

Netherlands-based AFEW found that conditions deteriorated for some of the most vulnerable populations such as drug users, sex workers, people living with HIV, prisoners, tuberculosis and viral hepatitis patients, labour migrants, refugees and internally displaced people. For them, it was ever more difficult to access health services and medication, with specific outcomes in the forms of social stress, homelessness, domestic violence.

Anke van Dam says that we must look at the broader picture, "although the virus exposed urgent health and social needs, it also exposed the bigger problems in society, which should be the focus of future advocacy". This lesson is accepted at the European level for the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) stated that, "it is imperative to understand why certain social groups were left more vulnerable during the crisis, both in terms of insufficient protection against contagion and loss of livelihood" (Zahradik et al., 2020).

For Alžbeta Brozmanová Gregorová, the lesson was that civil society must be stronger in advocacy. Rupert Graf Strachwitz of the Maecenata Foundation, Berlin, Germany agreed. In Germany, "civil society was not at all well heard compared to businesses and their associations voicing concerns about industry". He feels that civil society must speak with one voice, especially since CSOs will have a significant role to play in community-building after the months of isolation and restricted movement.

⁸ Publications that establish the importance of trust in the democracies' response to COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/03/31/do-authoritarian-or-democratic-countries-handle-pandemics-better-pub-81404>; <https://items.ssrc.org/covid-19-and-the-social-sciences/democracy-and-pandemics/populist-technocratic-and-authoritarian-responses-to-covid-19> and <https://www.dw.com/en/coronavirus-finland-sweden-role-model/a-55664117> (accessed 03 December 2020).

⁹ See more at <https://www.socialeurope.eu/one-virus-diverse-impacts-the-pandemic-and-women-in-central-and-eastern-europe> (accessed 03 December 2020).

Anna Skvortsova watched the whole CSO sector in Russia “going through adaptation”. Her conclusion was that many of its leaders were not ready for the pace of change and should get better at change and crisis management. For Annegret Wulff, COVID-19 permitted a reflection on the broader social impact of CSOs. “We all need to keep questioning ourselves about the relevance of our response and make sure we keep learning from this crisis as citizens and societies”. Filip Pazderski emphasized the value of, “society taking care of each other, of the vulnerable”. This new collective experience creates a ‘good ground for the future development’.

By summer 2020, civil society organisations had mobilised to argue, in the words of the European Civic Forum, “the future must be better than the past”. If CSOs were so important, even heroic, in responding to the virus, they must be part of the next stage. The European Citizen Action Service called it recovery *and* reconstruction.¹⁰ This, they argued, meant recognition, funding and consultation. The European Economic and Social Committee accepted that organised civil society was “a key player in the fight against the pandemic and in recovering from it”. But it is uncertain as to how well this understanding is shared at governmental, regional and local level.

Gratitude to civil society does not necessarily translate into political change. In June 2020, Europe’s most prominent civil society networks made an appeal to the European institutions. They were bitterly disappointed that the European plan - “*Repair and prepare for the next generation*” - did not consult with, acknowledge, or support the role of civil society. The European social networks specifically called on the European institutions to ensure that reconstruction be social, rights-based and ensure funding for, and dialogue with, CSOs.

What type of reconstruction? Many CSOs and social analysts have already laid out their stall - social, environmental, urban, rural, health, disability, while others have set down cross-cutting themes. Mariano Votta of Cittadinanzattiva says that his hope is that “fragile and distressed sections of the population are finally placed at the top of the political agenda, at a national and local level”. According to Mary Murphy, there must be a “gender sensitive recovery in policies (e.g. labour market) and services” (e.g. health, childcare).

Amidst all these voices, there is the hope that arising from the ruins of the pandemic is a fairer, greener, equal, honest world in which proper attention is paid to civil society.

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10 See more at “The European Citizen Action Service” (ECAS), (accessed 27 November 2020).

List of interviews

Alžbeta Brozmanová Gregorová, faculty at the Matej Bel University, Banská Bystrica, Slovakia

Anatoly Lebedev, Director at BROOC Environmental NGO, Vladivostok, Russia

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Annex 1: In-depth interviews questionnaire used for Austria and France reports

Interview – PART 1 (for internal use by the researcher)

Closed questions:

- 1 Name of the organisation (not obligatory)

- 2 In which field does your organisation primarily work?
 - human rights and democracy, international aid
 - environment
 - social services, incl. healthcare
 - youth, civic and vocational education
 - history and culture
 - sport and hobby clubs
 - community development, NGO resource centres, think-tanks
 - Social enterprise
 - Social movements
 - others

- 3 In what organisational and legal form does your organisation operate?
 - registered non-governmental non-profit organisation
 - Non-registered organisation – grassroots initiative (local)
 - Non-registered organisation – big major social movement (regional / national / international level)
 - other: ...

- 4 How long has your organisation been in existence?
 - less than 1 year
 - 1-10 years
 - 11-20 years
 - more than 20 years

- 5 How many people (full and part-time employees, volunteers and interns, members) are usually involved with your organisation?
 - Less than 10 people
 - 10-50 people
 - 51-200 people
 - More than 200 people

- 6 Budget of your organisation (in the last year):
 - We work on a voluntary basis (no staff and salaries, only volunteers)
 - Less than €1000 per year
 - Less than €10,000 per year
 - Less than €100,000 per year
 - More than €100,000 per year
 - I do not want to disclose this information

7 On which level does your organisation work mostly?

- On the local / regional level
- On the national level
- On the international level

8 How do you evaluate the context conditions for your organisation with regard to the following aspects?

Context conditions with regard to:	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Not applicable
	1	2	3	4
Legal framework				
Political support by the state				
Financing in general				
State financial support				
Private donations				
Public opinion				
Volunteering				
Media coverage				
Organisational capacity				
Sectorial infrastructure				

9 Has the situation of your organisation became better or worse during the last 3 years?

- better
- worse
- stayed the same
- difficult to say

Interview - PART 2

10a What are the **main challenges your organisation has faced** in the last 12 months? Are these challenges new or have they existed for some time? Have these challenges changed the way your organisation operates (e.g. themes, activities or organisational structure)?

10b Are these challenges similar or different to those facing other organisations that you work with?

10c Do you think these are challenges which face all civil society organisations in *country*?

11a Are you aware of any interesting innovations or solutions which have been initiated by civil society in order to overcome these negative trends?

11b Has your organisation developed any solutions which you think might be replicated by others? Can you provide any written descriptions of these practices which could be shared with others?

12 Do you think there are any broadly positive developments for civil society at the moment? What do you think will be the new opportunities in the future?

13 May we publish your interview anonymously through open data storage, so that it can be used by other researchers?

(Researcher may elaborate on topics of his/her own choice for each particular interview)

Annex 2: Interview questions for the chapter “Europe, Russia, civil society and COVID-19”

- 1 How has COVID-19 affected your organisation or group and its work?

- 2 How has it affected other NGOs and social movements in your country? Any inspiring examples of civil society action during COVID-19?

- 3 Is civil society now stronger, weaker or otherwise changed? Examples?

- 4 What is the most important lesson that civil society organisations should learn from their experience in 2020?

- 5 How will civil society groups be different after 2020?

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Translator (Russia Chapter): Robin Munby

Publisher: EU-Russia Civil Society Forum e.V., Berlin, Germany

Print: Standartų Spaustuvė, Vilnius, Lithuania

Print run: 300 copies. Publication date 11 March 2021

Disclaimer: This document has been produced with the financial assistance of our donors. The contents of this publication are the sole responsibility of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum e.V. and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of our donors. The opinions expressed by the authors are their own and do not necessarily represent the views of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum.

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ISBN 978-3-947214-07-5



“This report is a thoughtful analysis of the current trends in civil society in both the EU and Russia. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound effect on civil society. Keeping in mind these challenging circumstances, this report reminds us of the importance of civil society solidarity, cooperation and alliance-building in protecting fundamental rights and democracy.”

Franz Neunteufl, executive director, IGO – Interest Group of Public Benefit Organisations, Vienna

“This report is a thorough summary of what happened to the Russian “third sector” during the COVID-19 pandemic, including strict lockdowns and pervasive state involvement. The review sets out the main trends dispassionately and pays tribute to the inherent complexity of social life. 2020 was a year of challenges and development, isolation and mutual support, legislative clampdown and monetary assistance, governmental intervention and increasing public confidence in NGOs.”

Ekaterina Schulmann, political scientist and lecturer at the Moscow School for the Social and Economic Sciences, Moscow

Your feedback and contributions

Your comments and proposals are very welcome, especially on themes and countries which might be included in future reports. Send your feedback and ideas to research@eu-russia-csf.org

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