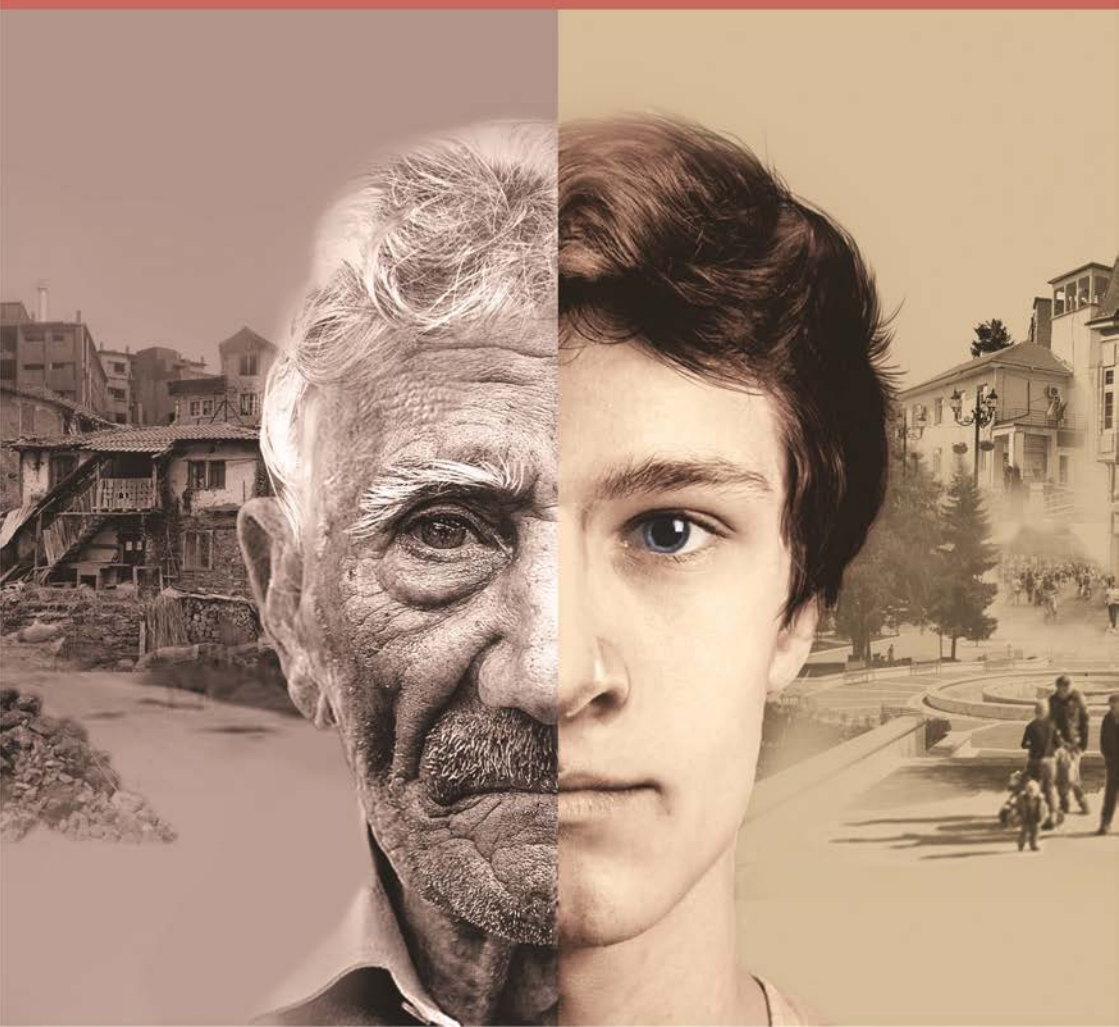


FROM 'CIVIC DESERTS' TO CIVIC COHESION

How exploring Europe's peripheries
can inspire ways of improving civic life



From 'civic deserts' to civic cohesion

How exploring Europe's peripheries
can inspire ways of improving civic life

Authors: Louisa Slavkova, Dobrena Petrova,
Leonie Sichtermann, and Mila Moshelova

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or distributed in any form without a permission in writing from the publisher, except in cases of using brief quotes for non-commercial purposes, authorized under the copyright law.

© Sofia Platform Foundation

ISBN: 978-619-92101-1-6

Published by Sofia Platform Foundation

www.sofiaplatform.org

Authors: Louisa Slavkova, Dobrena Petrova, Leonie Sichtermann, and Mila Moshelova

Proofreading: Maria Vassileva

Cover picture: Vesselin Pramatarov

Visual on page 8: Julia Hoffmann

Design by: Arsenia Hristova

Print by: Advertising agency "Meka M" Ltd.

CONTENT

INTRODUCTION	6
I. THE MODEL ‘CIVIC DESERT’ – CIVIC COHESION	8
Underlying factors behind civic desertification	11
Harbingers of hope	17
II. CIVIL SOCIETY AND CIVIC-MINDEDNESS IN BULGARIA, HUNGARY, POLAND, AND ROMANIA	18
Civic infrastructure	19
Civic literacy	27
III. ‘CIVIC DESERTS’: FOUR CASE STUDIES IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE	39
1. PROFILE OF LOCAL CIVIC ACTORS	41
Type of actors	41
Size of team	43
Annual budget	44
2. THE LOCAL ENVIRONMENT	46
Opportunities and challenges	46
Local trends	49
Civic infrastructure	51
Civic literacy of target groups	52

3. WHAT LOCAL CIVIC ACTORS DO IN ‘CIVIC DESERTS’ 54

Target groups	54
Key topics	56
Geographical scope	59
Impact	60
What the actors do to enhance civic infrastructure	61
What the actors do to enhance civic literacy	63

4. ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITIES 65

Organizational capacities	65
Funding sources	67
Ensuring financial sustainability	69

IV. SOME IDEAS FOR HOW TO IMPROVE CIVIC LIFE IN EUROPE’S PERIPHERIES 72

CONCLUSION 93

ABOUT THE AUTHORS 94

BIBLIOGRAPHY 95

ANNEX 1 – METHODOLOGY 100

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS 104

ABOUT US 104

PARTNERS 105

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CAP	– (EU) Common Agriculture Policy
CEE	– Central and Eastern Europe
CSOs	– Civil Society Organizations
CSOSI	– Civil Society Organizations Sustainability Index
ECJ	– EU European Court of Justice
EEA	– European Economic Area
EU	– European Union
NEETs	– (Youth) not in education, employment or training
NGO	– Non-governmental organization
NUTS	– Nomenclature of territorial units for statistics
OECD	– Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

INTRODUCTION

Global freedom is in decline for the 15th consecutive year, with more countries experiencing deterioration than democratic improvements. Freedom House's 2021 annual report¹ speaks of a deepening democratic recession in 2020. Europe is historically the best performing region in terms of liberal democracy, but even here its principles have been under pressure in recent years. Illiberal populist leaders and parties in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) have attacked independent institutions. Hungary has become the first member state of the European Union (EU) to be classified as only partly free, and Poland has adopted a series of measures to break down judicial independence, dominate the media and mute criticism from civil society. Equally worrisome is the serious lack of trust in societies towards government, business, NGOs and media, the diminishing faith in democracy (especially among young people) and low voter turnout.

Vibrant civic life and a resilient civil society sector are an integral part of any democratic society. In previous research, we observed that civic life in the peripheries differs from civic life in capital cities, as do the challenges that civic actors are facing. Meanwhile, a lot of attention is being paid to civil society on the national level and in large urban centers, while little attention, resources, and research are being devoted to civil society on the local level. This report is an attempt to address that gap. In addition to analyzing the challenges to civic engagement locally, we have also formulated recommendations on how to improve civic life, hoping that if adopted, they can lead to enhanced democratic engagement.

A strong discrepancy in attitudes between capital cities and the rest of the country, as observed on electoral maps, is what brought our attention to areas outside big cities in Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, and Romania. We want to offer an analytical model to understand the underlying reasons for this discrepancy. A simple look at voter preferences in peripheral areas suggested a stronger susceptibility to illiberal ideas. Looking closer at such regions, we noticed certain repeating trends that affect the state of civil society, espe-

cially in CEE. These recurring trends include: poverty, depopulation and an aging population, unemployment, emigration, poorly maintained physical infrastructure, economic stagnation, corruption on the local level, captured municipalities, etc.

Anecdotal evidence from interviews with experts² pointed us to specific regions in CEE that, according to respondents, were strongly affected by these negative trends: Bulgaria's Northwest (Severozapaden), Hungary's North and Northeast (Észak-Magyarország and Észak-Alföld), Poland's Northeast (Podlasie), and Romania's South (Sud-Muntenia).

We took these four so-called civic desert³ regions as case studies and analyzed the work of civic actors there, as well as the challenges they face, using various methods such as desk research, semi-structured expert interviews, questionnaire survey of civic actors, and a validation workshop.

This report is a call to civil society, philanthropies, policy-makers, and media to engage with the civic realities on the ground outside the capitals, large urban centers, and cities of Europe, especially in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Civil society in peripheral areas is facing a set of challenges, different in nature from those in urban centers and differing in scale from country to country, that receive little attention and research. They deserve to be better studied in order to be addressed adequately in the long term.

The report consists of IV chapters. **Chapter I** introduces the concepts of 'civic deserts' and 'civic cohesion'. **Chapter II** presents a brief overview of the state of civil society on the national level in the four countries based on the latest research available – Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, and Romania. **Chapter III** presents the findings of the questionnaire survey of local civic actors in these four regions identified as 'civic deserts'. And, finally, **Chapter IV** offers recommendations and examples of promising practices for improving civic cohesion in peripheral areas.

² See full methodology in Annex 1.

³ In this report, we use the term 'civic desert' either in quotation marks or with the 'so-called' prefix to mark two things: 1) that the term does not comprise a judgment but rather flags a problem, and that 2) the definition of the term is an extreme in the analytical model we apply, rather than a complete representation of reality.

¹ Freedom House (2021): *Nations in Transit 2021. The Antidemocratic turn*, p. 22.
https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-04/NIT_2021_final_042321.pdf.

I. THE MODEL 'CIVIC DESERT' – CIVIC COHESION



The term 'civic desert' was coined by a team of researchers at the Tisch College's Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) at Tufts University in 2017. The authors, Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg and Felicia Sullivan, looked at millennial voters' opinions after the 2016 presidential election in the US. They discovered a striking urban-rural gap among young millennial voters, with rural voters significantly favoring Donald Trump compared to the national sample (53% rural Trump supporters under 30 years old compared to 55% supporting Hilary Clinton on the national level)⁴. They set out to learn what caused this difference in opinion and investigate attitudes about politics and civic institutions among youth in rural areas.

Since living in rural areas is not just a matter of geography and population size, but also about "power and access to institutions that benefit individuals

⁴ Kawashima-Ginsberg, Kei & Sullivan, Felicia (2017): "Study: 60% of Rural Millennials lack Access to Political Life." The Conversation, 27 March 2017. <https://theconversation.com/study-60-percent-of-rural-millennials-lack-access-to-a-political-life-74513>.

such as youth [...], nonprofit and civic organizations," they classify the target groups in their survey according to "access to opportunities for building interpersonal connections and by their civic and political engagement."⁵

In this context, they coin the term 'civic desert' to classify millennial voters living in:

*"places characterized by a dearth of opportunities for civic and political learning and engagement, and without institutions that typically provide opportunities like youth programming, culture and arts organizations and religious congregations."*⁶

It is important to note that 'civic deserts' can occur in any type of geography, although they are most commonly found in rural areas (60% of youth in rural areas live in a 'civic desert' compared to 30% of youth in urban and suburban areas)⁷. Their analysis indicates that youth living in a so-called civic desert "are generally less experienced in civic and political life and largely disengage from politics; have few, if any, opinions about current affairs; and are less likely to believe that civic engagement like voting and civic institutions – from Congress to local nonprofits – can benefit the community."⁸

Thus, they observe a relationship between institutional access and opportunities for civic and political engagement and learning, and levels of political engagement and susceptibility to illiberal ideas.

We built on this definition to formulate our own interpretation of 'civic deserts' in the European context.⁹

'Civic deserts' are places perceived as offering few to no opportunities to actively participate in and learn about civic life, mainly because of deficient civic infrastructure and low civic literacy.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Based on a dozen semi-structured expert interviews with civil society actors. See full methodology in Annex 1.

Civic infrastructure is the physical and organizational structure necessary for civic participation. It includes the public spaces and actors that support the civil society sector (e.g. meeting spaces, CSOs, informal groups, networks, institutions, community centers, libraries, museums, schools, etc.).

Civic literacy is defined as having the competences (knowledge, skills, values, attitudes) that enable citizens to actively participate in society. Civic literacy is also the understanding of citizens themselves that they are civic actors who can contribute to positive change. It is the goal of civic education.

If we apply the notion of 'civic desert' as a model to assess civic life in peripheral areas, it represents one extreme where no opportunities for civic engagement can be found. On the other end of the spectrum, we place the notion of a civically cohesive place.

'CIVIC DESERT'

CIVIC COHESION

Civic cohesion is thereby defined by citizens having plentiful opportunities, the ability, and the motivation to actively participate in the civic life of a democratic community. It is enabled by strong civic infrastructure and civic literacy¹⁰, just as a 'civic desert' is impacted by their absence.

10 See definitions of 'civic infrastructure' and 'civic literacy' above.

Underlying factors behind civic desertification

The factors described above that affect participation in so-called civic deserts can be summarized as civic factors, since they relate to the state of civil society in a specific locality and to the civic-mindedness of its people. However, we observe that there are political and structural (or socio-economic) factors that also have a significant impact on participation and engagement. In this report, we focus primarily on the civic factors, but we find it important to also describe the other sets of challenges, without which the picture would be incomplete.

The following is a list, albeit not exhaustive, of the main political and structural factors that contribute to the civic desertification of a region.

Poverty and social exclusion

Poverty and economic stagnation play a major part. As some of these 'civic deserts' may be border regions, they are badly connected to the rest of the country and the capital, they are underdeveloped in terms of physical infrastructure, they lack skilled labor and good educational institutions. While economic growth is heavily concentrated around urban areas, these regions' economies are slower. They have demographic problems, attract less investment, and offer worse employment opportunities.

In Eastern and Southern parts of the EU and the Baltics, the risk of poverty and social exclusion is higher in rural areas than in Western Member States, where it is a bit higher in cities."

11 Kiss, Monika (2021): *Demographic Outlook for the European Union*. Members' Research Service. European Parliament. pp. 11, 41-42. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/690528/EPRS_STU\(2021\)690528_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/690528/EPRS_STU(2021)690528_EN.pdf);
Eurostat (2020): *Living conditions in Europe – poverty and social exclusion*. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Living_conditions_in_Europe_-_poverty_and_social_exclusion#Key_findings.

This is the case for remote and less urbanized areas. In Bulgaria, for example, as much as 33% of the overall population,¹² and 47.9% of those living in rural areas, is at risk of poverty and social exclusion according to data for 2018.¹³ In particular, the Northwest region has the lowest average life expectancy in the EU for 2018 (73.3 years),¹⁴ the highest risk of poverty or social exclusion, and the lowest tertiary educational attainment on a national average.¹⁵ The risk of poverty in some of Romania's rural regions also exceeded 30% in 2018¹⁶ and is as high as 44.3% in rural and remote regions.¹⁷

In Hungary, the Northern Great Plain region is at the highest risk of poverty or social exclusion on a national average. Meanwhile, Northern Hungary is marked by the lowest tertiary educational attainment¹⁸ and one of the lowest life expectancy rates in the EU (74.6 years).¹⁹ These regions have higher comparative levels of unemployment among the local population, as well as a higher concentration of young people who are neither employed, nor pursuing education or training (so-called NEETs).

On a European level, there are EU policies targeting such developments, such as the EU Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). It funds and supports farmers, rural development, and agricultural measures for affordable food and natural resource management. One of its aims is to "keep the rural economy alive by promoting jobs in farming, agri-food industries and associated sectors."²⁰ However, the administration of this policy in certain countries is hindered

by corruption – an obstacle to its aims and the employment opportunities it aims to create. Bulgaria is an example of this. EU subsidies are distributed among a handful of big producers, making it difficult for small local agricultural businesses to benefit from CAP or compete with the larger producers. EU efforts to prevent this by capping payments to individual farmers were circumvented by the practice of distributing subsidies among affiliated companies.²¹ Thus, a policy intended to essentially alleviate poverty and incentivize local economies risks making the situation worse, contributing to more desertification, more job loss and underdevelopment.²² Similar issues with beneficiaries of subsidy distribution have been observed in Czechia, Hungary, Slovakia, and Romania.

Depopulation

Poverty and social exclusion coincide with high levels of emigration, which in turn alters the age structure of their populations. Often, children are left on their own or in the care of grandparents as parents travel abroad for work. Even though some emigration is seasonal, related to taking up seasonal jobs in agriculture or tourism in other EU countries, it has an impact on the local life of the community because the people are simply absent. When temporary, labor mobility does not impact population trends negatively, but it does have an impact on the community and civic life.

12 USAID (2020): *2019 Civil Society Organization Sustainability Index. Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia*. 23rd edition, October 2020, p. 58. <https://www.fhi360.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/csosi-europe-eurasia-2019-report.pdf>.

13 Kiss, pp. 41-42.

14 Eurostat Regional Yearbook (2018). <https://ec.europa.eu/statistical-atlas/viewer/?config=RYB-2018.json&mids=BKGCNT,C02M01,CNT0VL&o=1,1,0.7&ch=POP,C02¢er=50.76077,-0.27499,2&nutsId=HU31&>

15 EuroHealthNet: Health Inequalities Portal. "Bulgaria." <https://health-inequalities.eu/jwdmap/bulgaria/>.

16 Kiss, pp. 41-42.

17 Ibid, p. 42.

18 EuroHealthNet: Health Inequalities Portal. "Hungary." <https://health-inequalities.eu/jwdmap/hungary/>.

19 Eurostat Regional Yearbook (2018).

20 European Commission: *The common agricultural policy at a glance*. https://ec.europa.eu/info/food-farming-fisheries/key-policies/common-agricultural-policy/cap-glance_en.

21 Vateva, Denitsa. (2021): "The Bulgarian giants in agricultural subsidies." *Capital*, 12 March. https://www.capital.bg/biznes/zemedelie/2021/03/12/4185030_bulgarskite_giganti_v_zemedelskite_subsidi/?fbclid=IwAR3_OoJfNsVjEilbkfn-hnlj99ZM3MYIf13fs6yEm6lp7fNRLMEH6KD-VY.

22 See Sabev, D., Kopečný, O., Trošok, M., Kotecký, V., Máriás, L., Učeň, P., Rizea, A., Calistru, A. (2021): *Where does the EU money go? An analysis of the implementation of CAP funds in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia and Romania*. Greens/EFA Group in the European Parliament. <https://extranet.greens-efa.eu/public/media/file/1/6769>.

Yet rural depopulation is not a new phenomenon. For many governments in Southeast Europe it has long been too costly and complex to seriously address the issues at stake.²³ If internal EU migration continues along the same pattern, countries in Eastern Europe will “see significant declines in their population.”²⁴

Looking at population forecasts, it becomes obvious that this is a pressing issue; the 'civic desert' regions under investigation in this report are faced with a striking prognosis for depopulation within the next decades.²⁵ According to Eurostat data, all four countries whose 'civic desert' regions are examined in this report – Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, and Romania – have negative population trends, as shown by comparative data for 2018, 2019, and 2020²⁶.

The lack of job opportunities is one reason for emigration, but corrupt local governance²⁷ and a lack of social services²⁸ are also detected in so-called civic deserts. Over the past 30 years, these factors have led to a steady depopu-

- 23 Vracic, Alida & Judah, Tim (2021): *Turning the Tide? The COVID-19 pandemic has created unexpected opportunities for the depopulating countries of South-East Europe – even in rural areas*. A brief for UNFPA's Regional Office for Eastern Europe and Central Asia.
- 24 Lutz, W., Amran, G., Belanger, A., Conte, A., Gailey, N., Ghio, D., Grapsa, E., Jensen, K., Loichinger, E., Marois, G., Muttarak, R., Potancokova, M., Sabourin, P. and Stonawski, M., *Demographic Scenarios for the EU*, p. 45, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2019. <https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC116398>.
- 25 For Bulgaria, see: National Statistical Institute Bulgaria (2018): "Population projections by district and sex. (2020-2080)." <https://nsi.bg/en/content/2996/population-projections-districts-and-sex>. For Hungary, see: Forbes.hu: "One of five settlements might be depopulated in Hungary," 11.08.2021. <https://forbes.hu/uzlet/magyarorszag-falvak-demografia-kutatas/>. For Poland, see: <https://www.euractiv.pl/section/grupa-wyszehradzka/news/polska-wies-jak-powstrzymac-migracje-do-miast/>. For Romania, see: Statista. Population in Romania in 2020 with a forecast until 2050, by county. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1256084/romania-population-forecast/>.
- 26 Eurostat (2021): *Population change – Demographic balance and crude rates at national level*. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/demo_gind/default/table?lang=en.
- 27 Ana Martinez Juan (2016): *Rural areas and poverty*. European Parliamentary Research Service. <https://epthinktank.eu/2016/12/16/rural-areas-and-poverty/>.
- 28 European Commission (2012): *Social Impact of Emigration and Rural-Urban Migration in Central and Eastern Europe*. <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=89&newsId=1778&furtherNews=yes>

lation, with young people being tempted to leave, which in turn contributes to an increasingly aging population. While the proximity to magnet cities attracts the local population primarily for working opportunities, people relocate rather than commute to magnet cities in the long term, because their choice to leave is motivated not just by work opportunities, but also by the lack of civic and cultural life.

While these trends exist in all 'civic desert' regions, their intensity varies from place to place. They have to be examined individually for each specific context.

On the national level, a major factor shaping desertification is a general dysfunction of democracy, which manifests as insufficient rule of law, malfunctioning institutions, state capture through large scale corruption, and the concentration of state power. This applies, to various degrees, to all four countries investigated in this report.

History and geography

In some 'civic desert' regions, history and discrepancies along former imperial borders that date back more than a hundred years still matter.

In Poland, for example, differences in both the economic landscape and voter turnout can be observed in the eastern parts formerly controlled by Russia, Austria-Hungary and Prussia between 1795 and 1918. The electoral map resembles the old borders – the results from the 2015 presidential elections were repeated in the 2020 elections: along the pre-1918 border, the East voted predominantly for Andrzej Duda from the Law and Justice (PiS) party, while the West supported the Civic Platform (PO) and its candidate Rafał Trzaskowski. The only exception is large cities such as Warsaw, where the liberal camp is strengthened by younger and more affluent voters. This can be understood in the context of different historical developments in the 19th century, with rapid industrialization in the West and slow development under tsarist rule in the East. Today, the four Eastern provinces in Poland belong to the poorest regions in the EU and have strong rural-urban migration amongst

young people. Many of those who feel left behind are susceptible to the nationalist rhetoric and the monetary programs of PiS²⁹.

Similar developments can be observed in Romania. Before 1918, the northern regions of the country were part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, while the Ottoman Empire controlled the southern regions. In the 2014 presidential elections, voters from the Northwest favored the liberal Klaus Iohannis, while the rest of the country, the territory previously within the borders of the Ottoman empire, voted for Victor Ponta, who represented the successor party to the communist regime. This result might be rooted in the fact that the Northern regions remained more open to the West during communist rule. However, this correlation becomes somewhat blurred in recent political developments.³⁰

Furthermore, 'civic desert' areas can be found within regions that were heavily industrialized under communism, but whose economic situation changed when factories and plants closed down during the transition to democracy. In most cases, there was no national strategy to support those areas by offering the population economic alternatives. After losing their jobs, many inhabitants had no choice but to migrate to capitals or urban centers to secure their economic survival. Those who did not migrate are largely living in poverty and social exclusion and are concentrated in segregated areas.

Regional disparities, geographical distance, social and economic poverty, and fewer employment opportunities are key factors behind desertification – both demographic and civic. This plays a role in encouraging both emigration and internal migration. At the same time, the degree of centralization of power and resources in a country or, to put it another way, the lack of decentralization on the local level, is another contributing factor. The local level is not in a position to distribute resources, fund public services, or tailor service provision according to the needs of the local population.

29 The Economist (2018): "Imperial borders still shape politics in Poland and Romania," 21.11.2018. <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2018/11/21/imperial-borders-still-shape-politics-in-poland-and-romania>; Map of Polish presidential elections, second round results by county. https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/e/e3/2020_Polish_presidential_election_-_2nd_round_results.svg/800px-2020_Polish_presidential_election_-_2nd_round_results.svg.png.

30 Ibid.



Harbingers of hope

And yet, recent trends show some positive developments. With increasing numbers of people choosing to move, or at least spend more time outside the big cities in more rural areas, the potential for changing the civic fabric of 'civic deserts' is growing. While different determinants can be behind urban-rural migration flows, it is important to note how new technologies bring lifestyle and workplace changes. The development of digital skills, and thereby more possibilities to work remotely, allows for work outside traditional office environments, and out of smaller towns and communities, including settling in such places. Urban-to-rural migration has transformative potential for income generation, entrepreneurship, new skills and social interactions, as well as demand for civic life and educational opportunities.

In addition to the domestic movement, reverse migration of people living abroad and going back to their home country can be observed all around the globe. Bulgaria and Hungary, as well as the Baltic states, are examples of a trend in reverse migration or return since 2016.³¹ Meanwhile, research suggests that around 558,000 Bulgarian nationals living abroad decided to come back to their hometown at the outset of the Covid-19 pandemic.³²

This includes the return of hundreds of thousands of people from Southeast European countries who had worked and lived in Western European countries, since the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020. They all have different reasons for returning, among them job loss and a desire to be closer to relatives.³³

Urban-to-rural migration has immense potential to generate new opportunities on the local level, including in 'civic desert' regions. Meanwhile, returnees from abroad bring a different civic-mindedness to those places, along with the motivation to take initiative and improve the local situation, thus inspiring others to become active as well. Both of these processes deserve further research and exploration as means of improving the overall environment in 'civic deserts'.

31 Kiss, p. 22.

32 Georgiev, Ognian (2020): *The Grand Return – Covid 19 and Reverse Migration to Bulgaria*. ECRF and KAS. <https://ecfr.eu/wp-content/uploads/Remigration-Report-ECFR-EN.pdf>.

33 Vracic and Judah.

II. CIVIL SOCIETY AND CIVIC-MINDEDNESS IN BULGARIA, HUNGARY, POLAND, AND ROMANIA

	Bulgaria	Hungary	Poland	Romania
Population ³⁴	6,916,548	9,749,763	37,950,802	19,286,123
Number of CSOs ³⁵	≈49,000	≈85,167	≈143,000	≈117,510
Number of active CSOs ³⁶	≈20,000	≈61,000	≈85,000	≈58,755
Number of active CSOs/ 1000 citizens ³⁷	2.89	6.25	2.23	3.04

- 34 National Statistical Institute Bulgaria (2020): "Population by districts, municipalities, place of residence and sex as of 31.12.2020." <https://www.nsi.bg/en/content/2975/population-districts-municipalities-place-residence-and-sex>.
The World Bank (2021): "Population, total – Hungary." <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=HU>.
The World Bank (2021): "Population, total – Poland." <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=PL>.
The World Bank (2021): "Population, total – Romania." Accessed at: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=RO>.
- 35 USAID (2018): "The 2017 Civil Society Organization Sustainability Index for Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia." In More-Hollerweger, E. et al. (2019) *Civil Society in Central and Eastern Europe: Monitoring 2019*. ERSTE Foundation, Vienna, p. 42. <https://www.erstestiftung.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/civil-society-in-central-and-eastern-europe-monitoring-2019-1.pdf>.
KSH (2018): "3.2.1.3. Number of registered business units – Legal form '14 (2014–). STADAT tables. Hungarian Central Statistical Office." In More-Hollerweger, E. et al. (2019) *Civil Society in Central and Eastern Europe: Monitoring 2019*. ERSTE Foundation, Vienna, p. 70. <https://www.erstestiftung.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/civil-society-in-central-and-eastern-europe-monitoring-2019-1.pdf>.
USAID (2021): p. 172.
USAID (2021): p. 184.
- 36 USAID (2021): *2020 Civil Society Organization Sustainability Index. Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia*. 24rd edition, September 2021, p. 60. <https://www.fhi360.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/csosi-europe-eurasia-2020-report.pdf>.
USAID (2021): p. 107.
Ibid.
Ibid.

The following chapter gives a general overview of the state of civil society on the national level in Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, and Romania, by looking at the state of civic infrastructure and civic literacy. The report then dives into the findings from the four regions in greater detail.

Civic infrastructure is examined by looking into the general ecosystem of civil society actors. In particular, this chapter summarizes what distinguishes the space they operate in, their organizational capacities, and their financial sustainability for participation in civic life on the national level. Civic literacy is then studied using available data on the attitudes, values, and skills which allow citizens to make the most of available civic infrastructure and to be civically engaged.

Civic infrastructure

Ecosystem of civil society

The Freedom House report 'Nations in Transit 2021',³⁸ which we quoted in the introduction, classifies Bulgaria, Poland, and Romania as semi-consolidated democracies, and considers Hungary a transitional or hybrid regime.³⁹

According to the 2020 CSO Sustainability Index (CSOSI) for Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia, overall CSO sustainability remained stable⁴⁰ in Romania, Bulgaria, and Hungary, while almost all dimensions measured by the Index marked a decline in Poland.

Over two consecutive years – 2019 and 2020 – the CSOSI paints a picture where a biased, often economically dependent, and politically manipulated media acts to the detriment of CSOs in the four case studies. Specifically,

- 37 Republic of Bulgaria National Statistical Institute (2020); USAID (2021).
KSH (2018); USAID (2021): p. 107.
The World Bank (2021): "Population, total – Poland." And USAID (2021): p. 172.
The World Bank (2021): "Population, total – Romania." Accessed at: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=RO>. And USAID (2021): p. 184.
- 38 Freedom House (2021): p. 22.
- 39 Csaky, Zselyke (2020): *Nations in Transit. Dropping the Democratic Facade*. Freedom House. Available at: https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/05062020_FH_NIT2020_vfinal.pdf.
- 40 USAID (2021): pp. 60 (Bulgaria), 107 (Hungary), 171 (Poland), 184 (Romania).

such media is a factor in subverting trust in, and the resilience of, the civil society sector by mediating political and smear campaigns. In some ways, media emerges as more of a challenger than a partner to CSOs and is damaging to the general public perception of CSOs among the population.

For example, following media attacks in 2019⁴¹ and 2020,⁴² there was an outflow of people from feminist CSOs in Poland, and some of these organizations shut down. Those working with refugee populations, such as the Refugee.pl Foundation, also ceased their activity.

LGBTQ+ causes and organizations have become a main target not only in Poland, but to a significant extent also in Bulgaria, where an intense campaign in late 2018 and 2019 targeted children's organizations and LGBTQ+ communities. The toxic debate around the ratification of the Council of Europe's Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (the 'Istanbul Convention') was a turning point for the increase in 'anti-CSO rhetoric'. As a result, 'gender' and 'NGO' have become derogatory terms in Bulgarian public discourse.⁴³ The 'Istanbul Convention' was not ratified amidst a polarized and heavily politicized public discourse.

In Hungary, similar campaigns and negative political rhetoric peaked with hostile groups interrupting LGBTQ+ events. Other targets in scapegoating CSOs are the Roma, the founder of the Open Society Foundation, George Soros, or the EU.

In light of these trends, it is important to note, as the next chapter shows, that on the local level sexual minorities, the terminally ill, migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers, and people with physical or mental disabilities are not the focus of our respondents' work.

In general, although CSOs have started to pay more attention to online communication, when traditional media outlets are not an avenue for publi-

41 USAID (2020): 2019 Civil Society Organization Sustainability Index. Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia. 23rd edition, October 2020, p. 110. <https://www.fhi360.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/csosi-europe-eurasia-2019-report.pdf>.

42 USAID (2021): pp. 114, 171.

43 Smilova, Ruzha (2020): "Bulgaria." In More-Hollerweger, E. et al. (2019): Civil Society in Central and Eastern Europe: Monitoring 2019. ERSTE Foundation, Vienna, p. 43. <https://www.erstestiftung.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/civil-society-in-central-and-eastern-europe-monitoring-2019-1.pdf>.

cizing their work, most cannot escape the negative 'opinion bubble'⁴⁴ of disinformation that emerges. This is not only due to negative publicity, but also because very few of them have the capacities and resources to use media platforms effectively. Nevertheless, the overall public perception of CSOs remains mainly positive.

Organizational capacities

Few CSOs manage to develop their organizational capacities, usually because they lack resources, and often because there are few opportunities to do so.

This is especially true for organizations in rural areas and in 'civic deserts', as we will see from our analysis of regional data. Although most understand the importance of planning and developing strategies, not many have the resources and capacities to plan ahead.⁴⁵ Centralized funding, lack of managerial expertise and internal structure, insecure financial circumstances, as well as understaffing remain the main challenges in resilient long-term planning. As our mapping confirms, these trends are even stronger on the local level.

The following statement about Poland from CSOSI 2019 is a fairly accurate summary of the situation in all four countries:

*"CSOs still rely on project-based work, which causes their operations to be unstable and forces them to concentrate much of their efforts on fund-raising. CSOs also have small teams and membership bases, as well as weak cooperation networks."*⁴⁶

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought further limitations to CSO organizational capacity. It has exacerbated difficulties around strategic long-term planning and necessitated more ad hoc operations. Indeed, CSOs have played a major role in responding to the immediate needs of vulnerable groups at the outbreak of the pandemic in all four countries.

44 USAID (2020): p. 110.

45 USAID (2020): pp. 61, 105, 169, 179.

46 Ibid, p. 169.

In addition, Covid-19 had an impact on CSOs' human resources, with many CSOs in Poland, Hungary, and Romania being forced to reduce their staff.⁴⁷ In keeping with a trend that predates the pandemic, CSOs in all four countries are unevenly positioned as potential employers, and the sector remains uncompetitive with few opportunities for career development.

In Bulgaria, few CSOs focused on strategic planning and many faced 'problems sustaining themselves'⁴⁸ in 2019. Yet in 2020, capacity saw slight improvements, with the majority of CSOs adapting to new realities thanks to organizational expertise and understanding of planning processes acquired in previous years.⁴⁹

Similarly, Romania marked an improvement in the sector's organizational capacity in 2020 with organizations' "efforts to maintain and improve their sustainability and capacities".⁵⁰ A main focus for CSOs was enhancing their social media and online communication skills to adapt to the challenges of remote work. Based on findings from the World Bank's 2020 CSO survey, the CSOSI 2020 notes a tendency for smaller CSOs to struggle to attract volunteers compared to larger ones.⁵¹

In 2020, Hungary's overall organizational capacity worsened while the infrastructure supporting the civil sector also deteriorated somewhat due to both the Covid-19 crisis and lack of government support. As a result, disparities widened between CSOs in large urban centers and smaller CSOs with fewer resources, while mid-sized rural organizations disappeared 'almost completely'.⁵² With EU structural funding and government support unavailable to most CSOs, "foreign support, especially grants provided by international philanthropic donors, remains crucial for many CSOs, particularly human rights, watchdog, and advocacy organizations".⁵³

47 USAID (2021): p. 109, 175, 186.

48 USAID (2020): p. 60.

49 Ibid, p. 62.

50 Ibid, p. 185.

51 Ibid, p. 186.

52 Ibid, p. 108.

53 Ibid, p. 110.

Funding sources and financial sustainability

Financial scarcity is one of the biggest challenges for civil society in all four countries, and resources remain significantly centralized in the capitals. This becomes particularly visible in the data provided by regional research in the following chapter – two thirds of our respondents report an annual income of under 50,001 Euro.

Some national governments place additional burdens on CSOs to restrict their access to resources. While non-profits in Bulgaria are exempt from taxation, CSOs are treated as de facto for-profits for EU funding.⁵⁴ In 2019, the ruling Bulgarian coalition made an attempt to limit income sources for some associations (judges, prosecutors, and other legal professionals) to only fees, donations from members, and EU funding. This would also bar these associations from obtaining funds from non-members, donations from private bodies, or economic activities etc., which represent a significant portion of the resources in this sector.⁵⁵

CSOs in Romania have expressed concern over a lack of transparency in the allocation of state funds.⁵⁶ And while they are still allowed to fundraise freely, foreign funding is strongly stigmatized in both Hungary and Poland, and organizations there, especially smaller CSOs, often do not have the capacity to effectively raise funds and attract staff.⁵⁷

The significance of each source of funding varies by country. In Bulgaria, organizations receive little funding from the national government. The largest sources are foreign organizations, such as the America for Bulgaria Foundation and the Active Citizens Fund. Some of the traditional funding partners,

54 Smilova, p. 44.

55 USAID (2020): pp. 59-60.

56 Ioan, Alexandra (2020): "Poland." In More-Hollerweger, E. et al. (2019): *Civil Society in Central and Eastern Europe: Monitoring 2019*. ERSTE Foundation, Vienna, pp. 124-128. <https://www.erstestiftung.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/civil-society-in-central-and-eastern-europe-monitoring-2019-1.pdf>.

57 USAID (2020): pp. 104-106; pp. 169-171.

however, have stopped funding organizations, e.g. the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation and the Oak Foundation.⁵⁸ Both corporate and individual support has declined in 2018, according to Bulgaria's Donor Forum: 'According to aggregate data for the last ten years in the World Giving Index, only 16% of people in Bulgaria have donated to a CSO'.⁵⁹

Public and EU Structural funding play a significant role in supporting the Hungarian CSO sector. They account for 45% of the overall funding. CSOs in Budapest receive about half of the sector's funding, provincial towns about a third, and 12% goes to smaller locations. Favoritism on the part of the government amplifies the uneven distribution of resources. Independent organizations rely on crowdsourcing and micro-donations to support their work. Foreign funding has an overall marginal role, albeit crucial in the case of watchdog and advocacy organizations.⁶⁰

In Poland, as well as in Hungary, 'funding bias' remains an issue. Polish CSOs which "do not support the current authorities or that operate in areas that the ruling party perceives negatively, such as equal opportunities, domestic violence, and the environment, must seek other sources of funding."⁶¹ In Poland, however, the two most common sources are local government funds (unlike in Bulgaria and Romania), and membership fees.⁶²

In Romania, 7.9% of the organizations receive 82% of the total income in the sector. Organizations cannot rely on state funding; they have determined that the most accessible sources are donations from foreign funds, businesses and individuals.⁶³ Individual donations are made through the 2% income tax redistribution.⁶⁴ The largest sources of foreign funding in 2019 in Romania were European Structural Funds 2014-2020, the European

58 Ibid, p. 61.

59 Ibid, p. 62.

60 Ibid, pp. 105 – 106.

61 Ibid, p. 169.

62 Ekiert et al. (2017): "Country report: Poland." In Vandor et al. (2017): *Civil Society in Central and Eastern Europe: Challenges and Opportunities*. Erste Foundation, Vienna, p. 80. https://www.erstestiftung.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/civil_society_studie_issuu_e1-1.pdf.

63 Ioan, p. 126.

64 Ibid, p. 127.

Economic Area Financial Mechanisms 2014-2021, and the Romanian-American Foundation.⁶⁵

The Covid-19 pandemic had inevitable consequences for CSOs and worsened their financial situation in all four countries, according to the 2020 CSOSI. Yet, they were often the first to meet growing societal demands and adapted as much as possible to the new circumstances.

A serious challenge was the lack of state support, with the partial exception of Poland, where some aid, though insufficient, was made available. In Hungary, CSOs were not included in the furlough schemes designed to help retain employees throughout lockdown.⁶⁶ Similarly, no government help was provisioned for civil society to help with pandemic-related challenges in Bulgaria.⁶⁷

During the Covid-19 pandemic, we have witnessed incredible acts of solidarity from philanthropies, companies, and private citizens. However, it is too early to say whether there will be any lasting changes in the patterns of giving.

Legal environment

The legal environment for CSOs deteriorated in Bulgaria in 2020. There were attempts by the junior governing coalition partner, United Patriots, to restrict the functioning of CSOs by proposing a special register of foreign-funded organizations. This was met with opposition from the sector and the European Commission.⁶⁸ CSOs were also attacked because of their role as service providers in partnership with the state within the framework of the Social Services Law. The Law was postponed and contested before the Constitutional Court amid a fierce anti-CSO public campaign by politicians, media,

65 USAID (2020): p. 180.

66 USAID (2021): p. 172.

67 Ibid, p. 64.

68 Ibid, p. 60.

and conservative NGOs. An increased administrative burden was reinforced by the obligation to “carry out individual risk assessments and adopt internal rules to counter money laundering” for CSO’s with annual incomes of over BGN 20,000 (EUR 10,000) as part of the Law on Measures Against Money Laundering.⁶⁹

The legislative environment has remained particularly hostile in Hungary, where the ‘foreign-funded agents’ narrative is often weaponized by the state. The 2017 Act on Foreign Funded Organisations was ruled to be in breach of the freedom of assembly, the right to privacy, and the free movement of capital by the EU European Court of Justice (ECJ) in 2020.⁷⁰ However, it still defines the environment which CSOs must navigate.

In Poland, the legal domain in which CSOs carry out their operations also suffered for the second year in a row. The most significant development in 2020 was undeniably the harsh ban on abortions by the Constitutional Court⁷¹ which led to mass protests around the country and gathered international attention. Meanwhile, government authorities “constantly put pressure on and harassed CSOs that disagree with government policy.”⁷²

In Romania, there were no significant legal changes in 2020, but attempts to ease the legal landscape for CSOs are a priority, and efforts to do so are ongoing.

Overall, the ecosystem within which CSOs operate in Bulgaria, Poland, Hungary, and Romania on the national level is characterized partially by a hostile political backdrop, media as a factor in shaping perceptions, a politicized and centralized imbalance in access to funding, and often an unfriendly legislative environment.

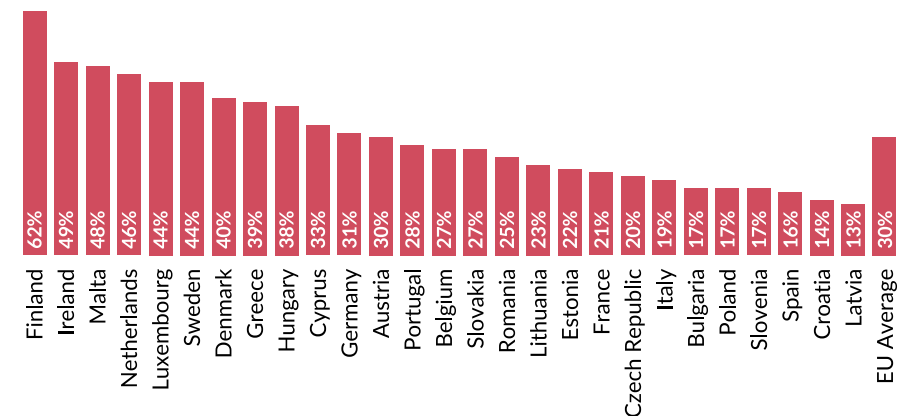
Now that we have examined civic infrastructure, we can unpack the other side of the coin of civic engagement – civic literacy.

Civic literacy

Attitudes, values, and trust in institutions

A feeling of inclusion is key to the functioning of a democratic society, as citizens feel that they have opportunities to impact and participate in shaping the system.⁷³

A particularly low percentage of people in Bulgaria and Poland believe that the government takes their views into account when making decisions. In Romania and Hungary, these numbers are slightly higher:



Inclusive decision-making, by country. Source: Transparency International (2021), p. 27.

69 Ibid, p. 61.

70 Ibid, p. 108.

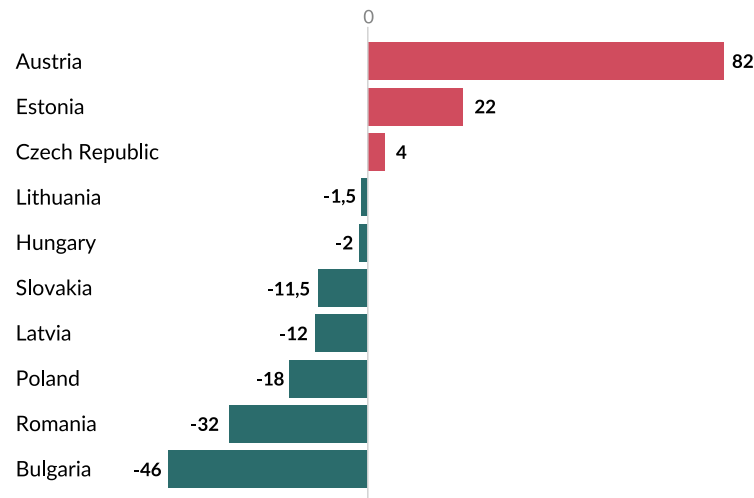
71 Ibid, p.172.

72 Ibid.

73 Milner, Henry (2001): "Civic Literacy in Comparative Context – Why Canadians should be concerned." *Policy Matters* (Institute for Research on Policy Matters), vol. 2, no. 2, p. 7.

FROM 'CIVIC DESERTS' TO CIVIC COHESION

Satisfaction with the system of governance is another key component. GLOBSEC's Index of Satisfaction⁷⁴ with the System of Governance based on factor analysis shows Bulgaria's satisfaction at a score of (-46), or halfway to complete dissatisfaction (-100). Romanians come second to last with (-32), followed by Poland at (-18) and Hungary at (-2). Estonia, in comparison, scores at +22.



Index of satisfaction with the system of governance. Source: GLOBSEC (2020), p. 14.

While Hungarian, Polish, and Romanian citizens prefer democracy as a form of governance, around 45% of Bulgarians would favor a regime with authoritarian tendencies, including a strong and decisive leader who would not have to bother with elections or parliament.⁷⁵ A majority of people think that democracy is good for their respective countries.

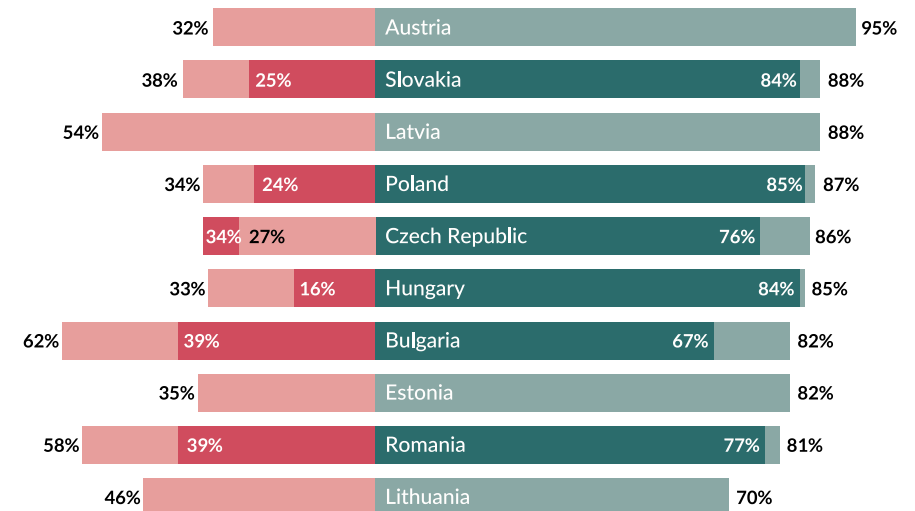
⁷⁴ GLOBSEC (2020): *Voices of Central and Eastern Europe. Perceptions of democracy and governance in 10 EU countries*, p. 14. <https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Voices-of-Central-and-Eastern-Europe-read-version.pdf>.

⁷⁵ Ibid, p. 13.

CIVIL SOCIETY AND CIVIC-MINDEDNESS IN BULGARIA, HUNGARY, POLAND, AND ROMANIA

Those who agree that democracy as a system based on equality, human rights and freedoms and rule of law is good for their country, (2021 data)

Those who agree that having a strong and decisive leader who does not have to bother with parliament or elections is good for my country, (2021 data)



Which form of government is good for your country? Source: GLOBSEC (2021), p. 66.

According to OECD's 'Government at a glance 2021' report, in Hungary, trust in the government stood at 42.9% in 2020, and was much lower in Poland, at 27.3%.⁷⁶ Citizen trust in the national government of Bulgaria as well as in other institutions, leaders, and parties has seen a steady decline over the last decade. According to polling by Alpha Research in September 2020, confidence in the government stood at 12.8% against the backdrop of months-long anti-government protests.⁷⁷ Trust in parliament stood at a mere 7.6%. Similarly, the government and parliament are among the least

⁷⁶ OECD (2021): *Government at a Glance 2021*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/1c258f55-en>.

⁷⁷ Alpha Research Agency (Sep 2020): "Continued support for the protests and unclear exit from the political crisis." <https://alpharesearch.bg/post/971-produljavashta-podkrepa-za-protestite-i-neiasen-izhod-ot-politicheskata-kriza.html>.

trusted institutions in Romania. As Romanian Insider reports, representative public opinion data from April-May 2019 shows 12.4% confidence in the government and 9.8% in parliament⁷⁸. Meanwhile, GLOBSEC's 2020 findings show that an average of 72% of CEE citizens do not trust political parties.⁷⁹

Trust in EU institutions

Despite their mistrust in national government, according to the Standard Eurobarometer 2020, the citizens of all four countries are generally satisfied with how democracy works in the EU – Bulgaria at 57% and Romania at 59%, whereas Poland stands at 73% and Hungary at 63%. The majority of respondents in all four countries agree that they see themselves as EU citizens. At least half of those polled 'tend to trust the EU' (Poland 56%, Romania 54%, Hungary 53%) and almost half in Bulgaria – 48%. Poland has the biggest increase among EU countries – +7% compared to autumn 2019 – and Bulgaria marks the sharpest decrease of 12%.⁸⁰ About half of respondents in all four countries hold a positive view of the EU.

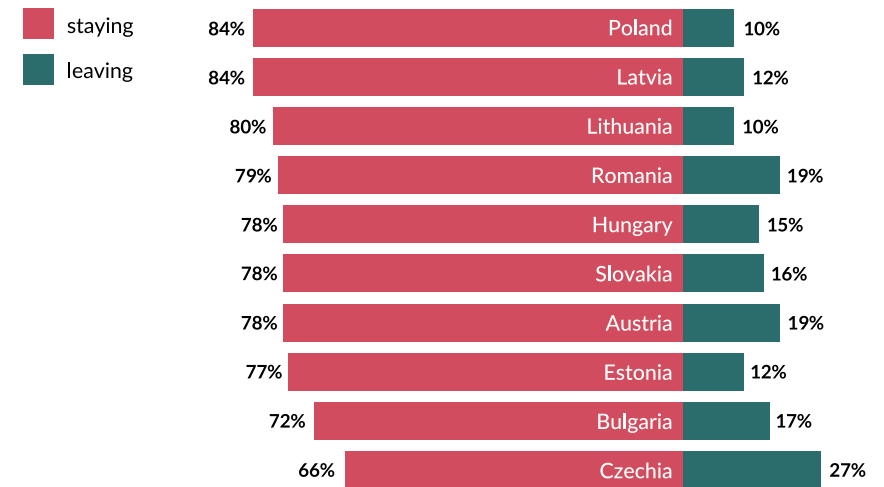
Importantly, the EU is more trusted compared to national governments in all CEE countries. All four are overwhelmingly in favor of remaining part of the EU – 84% in Poland, 79% in Romania, 78% in Hungary and 72% in Bulgaria.⁸¹

78 Romanian Insider (17 May 2019): "Study: The Government and Parliament are the least trusted institutions in Romania." <https://www.romania-insider.com/government-parliament-least-trusted>.

79 GLOBSEC (2020): p. 16.

80 Standard Eurobarometer 93, Summer 2020. October 2020. <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2262>; Eupinions (19 Nov 2020): "Examining the Results of the Latest Eurobarometer Report – Part 1." <https://eupinions.eu/de/blog/examining-the-results-of-the-latest-eurobarometer-report-part-1>.

81 GLOBSEC (2021): GLOBSEC Trends 2021 – COVID-19. Central and Eastern Europe one year into the pandemic, p. 38.



EU – Stay or leave. Source: GLOBSEC (2021), p. 38-39.

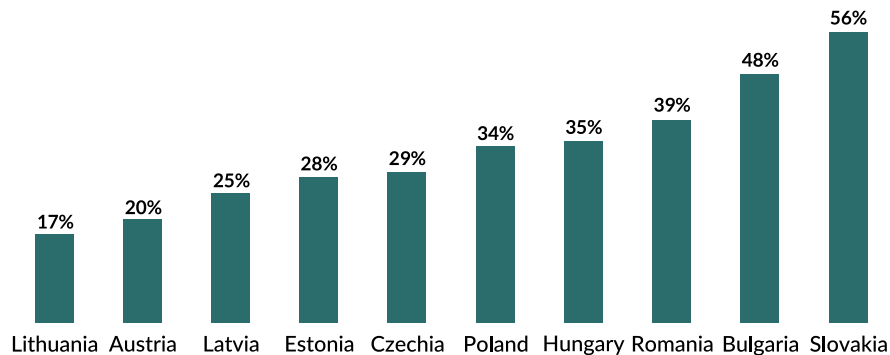
Belief in conspiracy narratives

Misinformation is increasingly a threat to democratic politics across the world. Low levels of civic literacy provide fertile ground for conspiracy theories to take root, while distrust of media, democracy, and civic values fuels a willingness to believe conspiracies.

In addition, research demonstrates the phenomenon of public information inequality, or the growing gap between those who have the ability to access relevant information, understand it, and have the competence needed to analyze and distinguish it from misinformation, versus those who lack these abilities.⁸²

82 Sokolova, Tsvetelina (2021): "Dr. Boyan Zahariev: 'Corruption is not the root cause of our problems, it is the consequence,'" Mediapool, 25 November. <https://www.mediapool.bg/d-r-boyan-zahariev-koruptsiyata-ne-e-parvoprishinata-za-nashite-problemi-tya-e-sledstviето-news329253.html>.

In Romania 51% and in Bulgaria 52% of the population believes that world affairs are orchestrated by secret groups aiming to establish a totalitarian world order. Poland with 41% and especially Hungary with 29% stand as less prone to such narratives, with the average being 41% for all CEE countries. Out of the four, Bulgaria holds the strongest beliefs in conspiracy theories and misinformation narratives (48%) compared to Romania (39%), Poland (34%) and Hungary (35%).⁸³



Degree of belief in conspiracy theories and misinformation narratives.
Source: GLOBSEC (2020), p. 46.

At least a third of Romanians (32%), Poles (38%) and Bulgarians (39%) agree that Jews have too much power and exert secret influence over world governance; in Hungary, the number is 49%. GLOBSEC's 2020 findings show that "latent anti-Semitism and unresolved historical grievances are still present in the region, while, in many countries, significant parts of the 'unsure' population could be swayed either way."⁸⁴ The 'long arm' of foreign powers and influences is perceived to be behind anti-government protests by 49% of Hungarians, while 45% of Romanians believe Western powers orchestrated the fall of communism in the country.

Regarding the Covid-19 pandemic, skepticism in both Romania and Bulgaria is evident with a relatively high percentage of people believing the pandemic to be fake. In Bulgaria, for example, 17% of respondents in a survey agree with

⁸³ GLOBSEC (2020): p. 46.

⁸⁴ Ibid, p. 48.

the statement that the virus is fake and over 40% think that the pandemic was an operation planned by hidden forces. Meanwhile, 30% of Romanians believe Covid-19 is fake.⁸⁵ Alarming, the two countries are at the bottom of the list of EEA countries ranked by vaccine uptake in the adult population.⁸⁶ As of 13 January 2022, Bulgaria also has the second highest incidence of death per 100 Covid-19 cases among the twenty most affected countries, and the highest mortality rate per 100,000 worldwide.⁸⁷

According to the GLOBSEC 2020 Study,⁸⁸ there are two main factors behind the quest for alternative explanations of reality and the predisposition to misinformation narratives: a readiness to trade freedoms for greater security and socio-economic betterment, and a tendency to support more autocratic leadership as opposed to liberal democracy. Distrust in the media, dissatisfaction with the system, and dissatisfaction with life serve as secondary predictors. A perceived lack of security and the lack of a sense of belonging to society further contribute to the need to look for alternative forms of governance, alternative villains, etc. Worryingly though,

"While pushes for changes in the system of governance can eventually lead to a stronger public debate about reforms, the justification of one's dissatisfaction through imaginary plots and culprits dangerously leads to greater passivity."⁸⁹

Thus, a suspicious, disappointed, and passive society is unwilling to participate in democracy and remains vulnerable to undemocratic narratives and actors. Dissatisfaction with systems of national governance is a particularly alarming sign of susceptibility to autocratic tendencies.

⁸⁵ GLOBSEC (2021): p. 10.

⁸⁶ Statista (2021): "Share of adults who are fully vaccinated against COVID-19 in the European Economic Area (EEA) as of December 9, 2021, by country." <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1218676/full-covid-19-vaccination-uptake-in-europe/>.

⁸⁷ John Hopkins Institute Corona Virus Resource Center (2022): Mortality Analyses. <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/data/mortality>.

⁸⁸ GLOBSEC (2021): p. 46.

⁸⁹ Ibid, p. 52.

Trust in media

An independent media landscape is vital to a vibrant democratic society. Mass media is a strong tool for information, persuasion, and organizing citizens around a cause. However, a growing problem is that the available forms of communication are susceptible to the spread of misinformation and prejudice. For citizens, media literacy and access to reliable information are a crucial part of citizenship and making informed decisions.⁹⁰

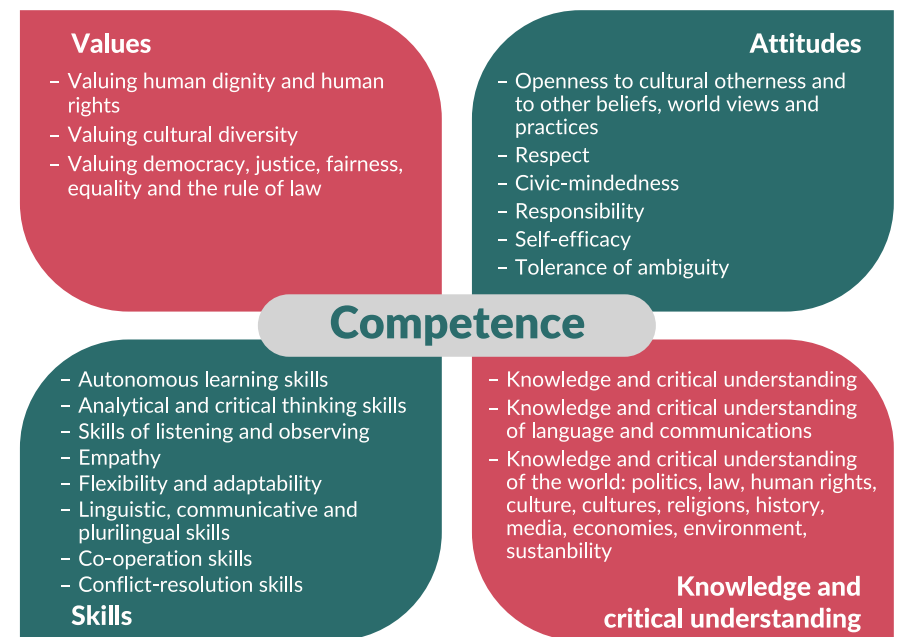
According to the World Press Freedom Index 2021, Romania has the most satisfactory media environment out of the four countries, scoring 48th out of 180 countries. Meanwhile, Poland, Hungary, and Bulgaria belong to the list of countries considered more problematic. Bulgaria ranks lowest among all EU countries in the World Press Freedom Index for the fifth consecutive year with its 112th place, down from 87 in 2013.⁹¹ Compared to 2020, Poland has dropped down two spots to 64th place, and Hungary three to 92nd. In all four countries, a majority of people distrust mainstream media. This is especially true for Hungary, where mistrust has been rising significantly just in the last year (from 55% to 69%).⁹²

Civic competences

As we turn to the question of attitudes, values, and skills behind civic engagement, it is important to note that there is little systematically gathered data available on the national level, and even less on the regional level, which makes the task of assessing the civic competences of the citizens of a given country or region difficult. When conceptualizing civic competences, a helpful point of departure is the Council of Europe's reference framework of Competences for democratic culture. It is an overview of:

*"all of the competences that are needed to take action to defend and promote human rights, democracy and the rule of law, to participate effectively in a culture of democracy, and to live peacefully together with others in culturally diverse societies."*⁹³

The four aspects of the framework are values, attitudes, skills, knowledge and critical understanding. These competences are necessary in order for citizens to respond adequately and effectively to 'demands, challenges and opportunities' within their environment.⁹⁴



Competences for Democratic Culture.

Source: : <https://www.coe.int/en/web/digital-citizenship-education/a-conceptual-model>

90 Crocco, Margaret; Shuttleworth, Jay M.; Chandler, Thomas (2016): *Science, Media, and Civic Literacy: Rachel Carson's Legacy for the Citizen Activist*. In: *Social Studies and the Young Learner*, Vol. 28, Iss. 3, pp. 21–26.

91 World Press Freedom Index 2020. <https://rsf.org/en/ranking/2021>.

92 GLOBSEC (2021): p. 72.

93 Council of Europe. *Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture*. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/reference-framework-of-competences-for-democratic-culture>.

94 Council of Europe. *Competences for Democratic Culture. Living together as equals in culturally diverse democratic societies*, pp. 11, 23. <https://rm.coe.int/16806ccc07>.

Research suggests that when these skills, knowledge, attitudes and values are fostered, the result is more civically literate citizens who are likely to:

- Vote;
- Understand governmental processes and principles of interaction between state and citizens;
- Know how to exercise the rights and obligations of citizenship at the local, state, national and global levels;
- Know how to stay informed and identify political issues that are important to them;
- Actively participate in public life at the local and national level and are aware of how positive political change can be initiated;
- Be more tolerant of others and their political views and less likely to be influenced by negative and divisive campaigning;
- Uphold various values and attitudes concerning human rights, democratic governance, intercultural communication.

In Bulgaria and Romania, young people (14-29 years of age) who are not employed, in education or in training (NEETs) are more likely to come from rural areas. They are less socially engaged, less likely than non-NEETs to take an interest in politics, to vote, to trust institutions or to engage in civic participation. Families with lower levels of educational attainment and from poor, predominantly rural households are more likely to drop out of school before attaining a degree, especially in Bulgaria and Romania.⁹⁵

In both countries, young people also express low levels of interest in and knowledge about politics. The vast majority of young people in both countries are not satisfied with the state of democracy in their countries, feel poorly represented in national politics, and would like to have a stronger voice in politics. In a 2019 study, only 7% of young Bulgarians and 9% of Romanians

95 Lavrič, Miran; Tomanović, Smiljka & Jusić, Mirna (2019): *Youth Study Southeast Europe 2018/2019*. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, p. 25.

stated that they know a lot about politics, and only 7% of Bulgarians and 12% of Romanians expressed a general interest in political issues.⁹⁶ Thus, civic and political engagement is not seen as a viable means of addressing the issues mentioned above. Furthermore, experience with issue-based and other forms of political engagement is generally not common; the same is true for volunteering.⁹⁷

In Hungary, 38% of respondents in a youth survey stated that they do not have an interest in politics. Similarly, one third of respondents to the same survey in Poland stated that they are not at all or not very interested in politics and public affairs. For both countries, it has been observed that the higher the level of education amongst respondents, the higher the interest in politics. 52% of Polish respondents confirmed that their interest in politics has grown due to the Covid-19 pandemic.⁹⁸

Citizens need to have the skills and knowledge to make a change in their communities as a prerequisite for active civic participation.

A higher socioeconomic status and cultural capital contribute to active engagement, whereas being outside of employment and education correlates negatively with it. Within Europe, a general trend can be observed regarding NEET youths in CEE countries: they are less democratically and socially committed than those employed or enrolled in education or vocational training.⁹⁹

96 Ibid, p. 63.

97 Ibid, p. 61ff.

98 National Democratic Institute (NDI) (2020): *Youth Attitudes on Politics and Democracy - Poland*. NDI Survey of Young People in Central Europe, July 2020, p. 21; National Democratic Institute (NDI) (2020): *Youth Attitudes on Politics and Democracy - Hungary*. NDI Survey of Young People in Central Europe, July 2020, p. 6.

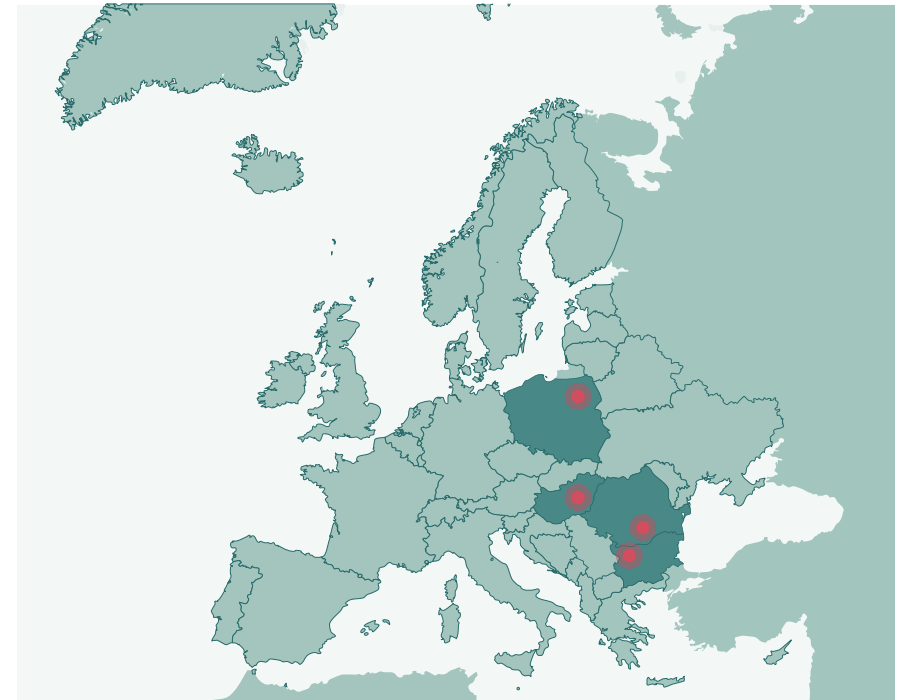
99 Bălan, Mariana (2016): Economic and Social Consequences triggered by NEET youth. "Dimitrie Cantemir" Christian University Knowledge Horizons - Economics. Vol. 8, No.2, pp. 80-87.

Evidence also suggests that a correlation exists between the experience of living abroad for longer than six months, or staying abroad for education or training, and the increased civic and political engagement of a young person. Bulgaria and Romania are amongst the countries within the CEE region with the lowest educational mobility.¹⁰⁰

Summary

This chapter examined the context in which civil society organizations operate on the national level in Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, and Romania. CSOs face difficulties counteracting negative publicity and political targeting due to limited access to pro-government media platforms and limited communication expertise. Organizational capacity is hindered by a lack of long-term strategic planning due to both financial uncertainty and insufficient capacity. It is further restricted by limited access to state funding, with a large portion of it unevenly allocated to few, often openly pro-government CSOs. The legislative environment in Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, and Romania remains dynamic. A number of hostile regulatory proposals and acts target CSOs that receive foreign funds, thus progressively attempting to capture the civil society sector and to fuel distrust towards civil society. Meanwhile, democracy remains the preferred form of government. There is, however, dissatisfaction with how the political system functions, as showcased by the levels of public mistrust in democratic institutions, as well as support for conspiracy narratives. While these can be valid indicators of how critical citizens are evaluating the quality of their government, this scrutiny does not seem to translate to more active civic engagement, but rather contributes to citizen passivity. In the next chapter, we turn to the civic realities on the local level in four so-called civic desert regions.

III. 'CIVIC DESERTS': FOUR CASE STUDIES IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE



In the following, we present the most significant findings from an online questionnaire survey of 183 local civic actors from the four target regions.¹⁰¹ The questionnaire survey had two general aims. The first was to confirm whether the civic reality on the local level is different from that on the national level. The second was to find out more about the two key determinants of civic participation – local civic infrastructure in which actors operate, and their assessment of the civic attitudes and competences of the

¹⁰⁰ Lavrič, Tomanović, and Jusić, p. 73.

¹⁰¹ The detailed results for each region can be accessed at www.mappingcivicdeserts.com. In this report, we present a comparative overview of the most significant findings for all mapped regions.

local population and their target groups (civic literacy).¹⁰² We attempted to accomplish both aims with an online questionnaire survey, in which we inquired about:

- 1) the profile of local civic actors in 'civic deserts',
- 2) the local environment in which they operate,
- 3) their work (their target groups, topics, geographical scope, impact, and activities), and
- 4) their organizational capacities.

By inquiring into these four key areas, we operationalized our understanding of civic infrastructure and civic literacy.¹⁰³ We are aware that the survey is not representative of the target regions, and that our findings are based on the perceptions of the respondents whom we were able to reach.¹⁰⁴ But anecdotal evidence can be a helpful start when filling a gap in the available information about the state of civil society on the local level in CEE, and serves as a starting point for further research. It also offers an analytical model through which it can be studied in the specific context of civic deserts.

What follows is a presentation of the findings from the survey into the four key areas described above.

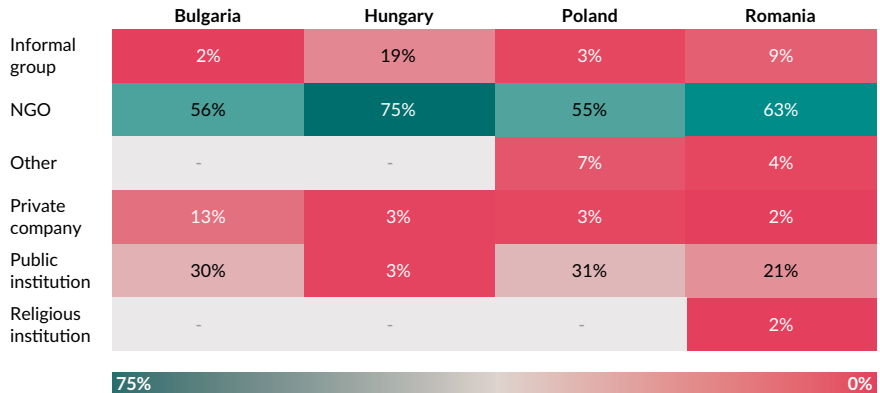
1. PROFILE OF LOCAL CIVIC ACTORS

Type of actors

Total



Per region



¹⁰² See full definitions of 'civic infrastructure' and 'civic literacy' in chapter I.

The survey looks at a variety of actors who engage in civic activities in the broadest sense, even if this is not the primary focus of their work, for example private companies. The overall mix is not surprising, given that civic work is most often performed by civil society, less so by local institutions and even less so by companies.

During the three and a half months designated for collecting data, 183 local actors participated in the study. Although NGOs¹⁰⁵ represented more than half of respondents in each of the four regions (Bulgaria's Northwest – 56%, Hungary's North and Northeast – 75%, Poland's Northeast – 55%, Romania's South – 63%, whole sample – 62%), a broad mix of local actors responded to our survey, including public institutions (22%), informal groups (8%), and private companies (6%).

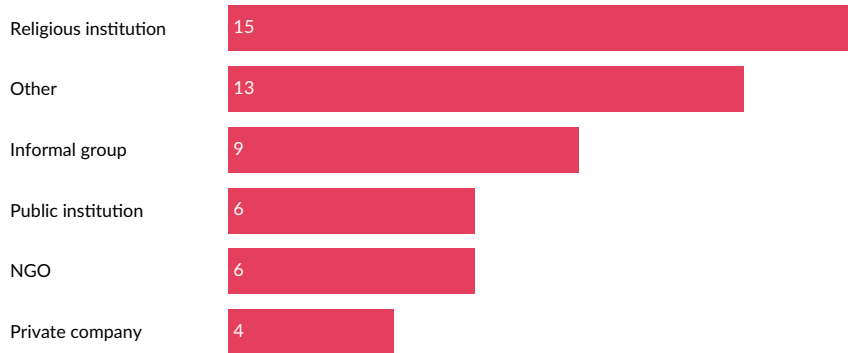
In terms of sub-categories of types of actors, NGOs generally defined themselves as either associations or foundations in 75% of cases, followed by community-based organizations (13%). However, community-based organizations constitute a larger share of NGO responses in the Northwest region of Bulgaria with 41%. Public institutions were mostly focused on education (80% of them were either libraries, educational institutions, or community/cultural centers) while informal groups defined themselves as community initiative groups in 57% of cases.

It is important to note a few differences between the type of actors in each region. Public institutions were not represented in Hungary's North and Northeast (only one respondent). Informal groups were mostly represented in Hungary (19% of responses) and to some extent in Romania (9% of responses). Private companies were under-represented in all regions, except for Bulgaria's Northwest (13%).

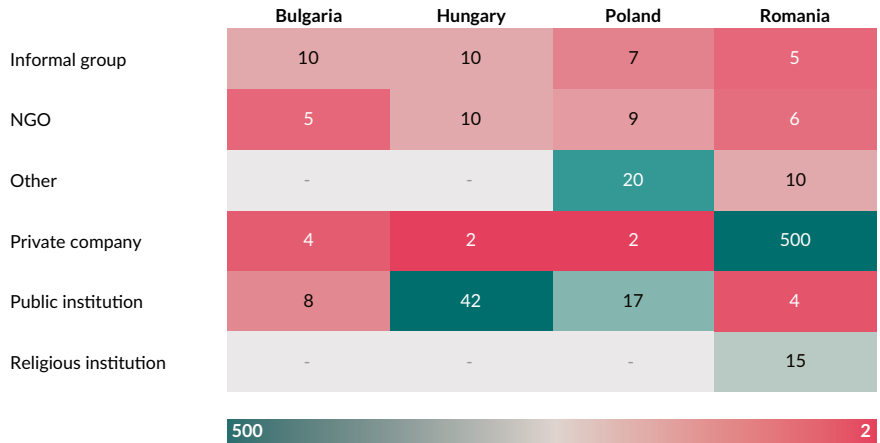
¹⁰⁵ When discussing findings from the questionnaire survey, we speak of NGOs in order to differentiate between NGOs and other types of CSOs (e.g. informal groups).

Size of team

Per type of actor



Per region

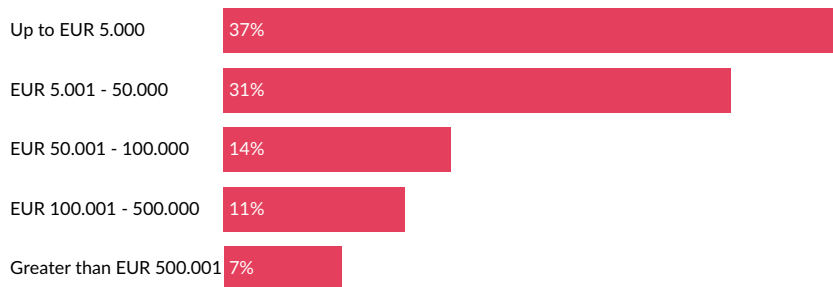


In general, participating organizations are small to mid-sized with an average of seven team members. Both public institutions and NGOs have similar-sized teams (six members), but teams tend to be bigger in Hungary and Poland compared to Bulgaria and Romania. Even though the survey is inquiring about the "size of the permanent team," we assume that the average

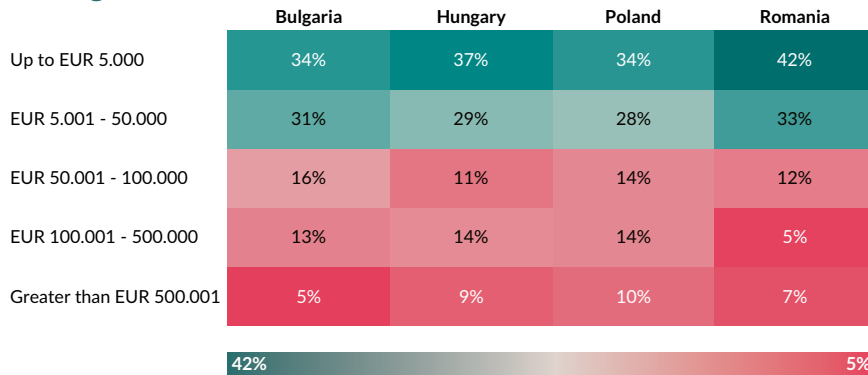
of seven team members, especially when it comes to civil society actors, includes volunteers or other non-permanent staff members. Moreover, the bleak picture painted by the following section on funds suggests that, at least in civil society, most organizations cannot afford any permanent staff at all.

Annual budget

Total



Per region



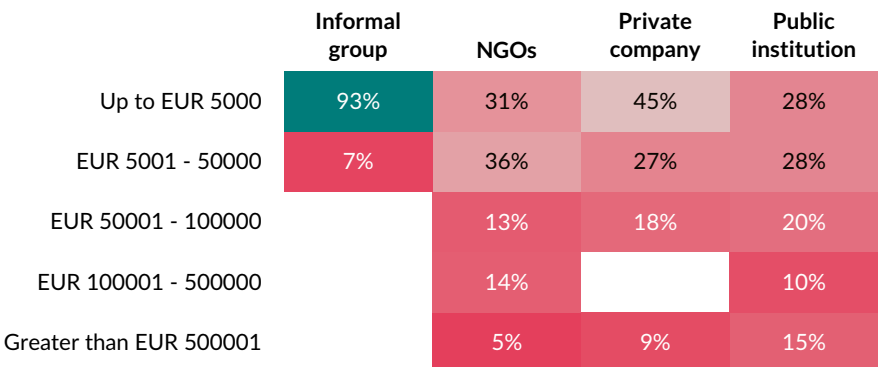
Most participants in the survey (68%) have annual budgets with an average of under 50,001 euro, and 37% of these even operate with less than 5,001 euro per year.

Although public institutions operate with slightly higher budgets, more than half of them (56%) still reported budgets of under 50,001 euro. Around 67% of NGOs report annual budgets of under 50,001 euro. These results indicate that NGOs probably have fewer permanent team members than reported in the previous question, or none altogether.

Even if we factor in the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and reduced funding, the question in the survey asked for an average annual budget, so we can assume that the respondents did not focus on the financial impact of the pandemic only.

Although we do not have a clear overview of the respondents' operational costs, if we couple these results with the sustainability problems outlined further down (see page 69), we can conclude that funding is one of, if not the biggest challenges to stability, professionalization, growth, outreach, and relevance of local actors. These results confirm that financial scarcity and the centralization of resources in the capitals are among the biggest challenges for civil society on the local level in all four countries.

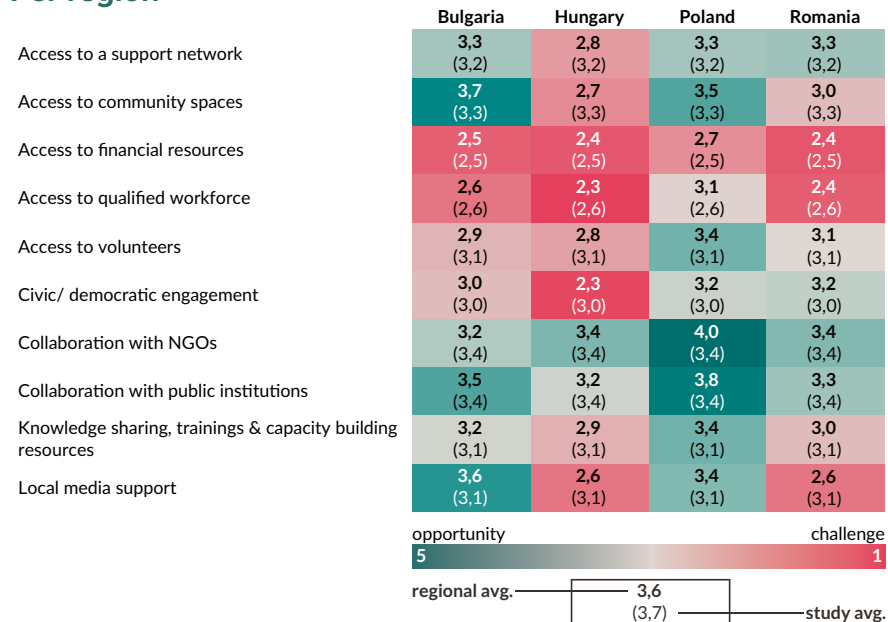
Per type



2. THE LOCAL ENVIRONMENT

Opportunities and challenges

Per region



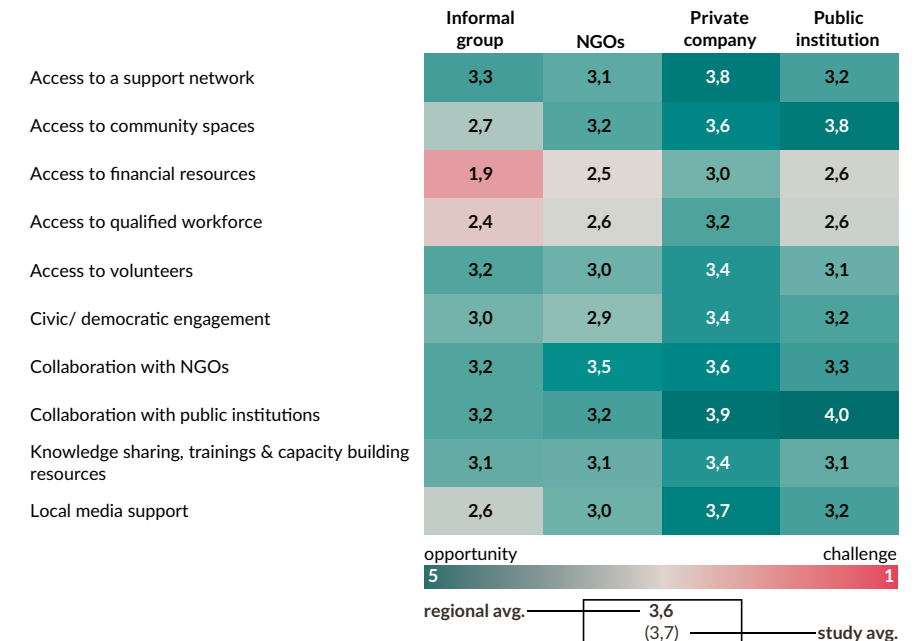
In this section of the questionnaire we wanted to gain a better understanding of the local environment of the four regions, focusing on:

- challenges to civic life such as lack of resources or volunteers,
- significant trends that impact the whole of society,
- local state of civic literacy, and
- civic infrastructure.

The biggest challenges, about which there was almost unanimous consensus, are access to financial resources (2.5/5) and access to a qualified workforce (2.6/5), followed by a lack of civic/democratic engagement (3/5).

We observe some curious differences in perceptions between the different types of actors who responded to the survey. In general, public institutions provided a somewhat more optimistic view of the challenges and opportunities in the regions compared to NGOs.

Per type



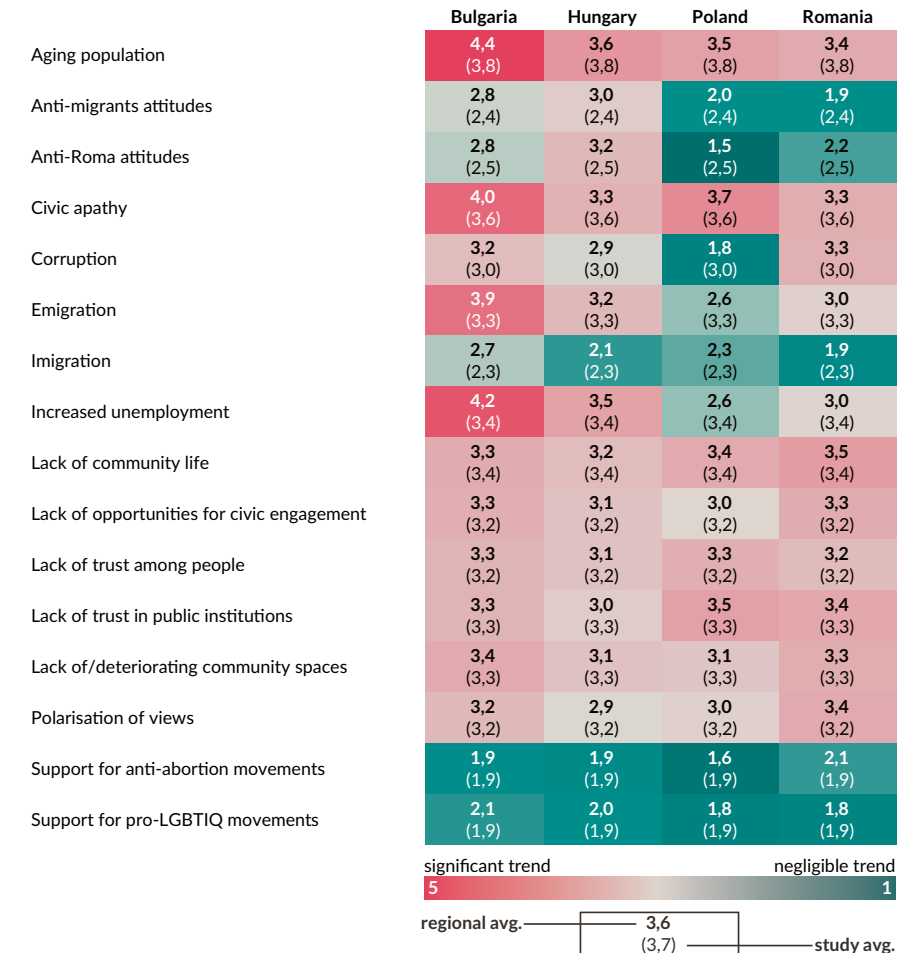
At first glance, collaboration with different types of actors does not seem to be a great challenge. Both collaboration with public institutions (3.4/5) as well as with NGOs (3.4/5) were among the most highly rated opportunities overall, followed by access to community spaces (3.3/5). However, when we look at the perceptions of different types of actors, we see a different picture. Public institutions rate collaboration with public institutions (4/5) higher than NGOs do (3.2/5). Likewise, NGOs rate collaboration with other NGOs (3.5/5) higher than public institutions do (3.3/5).

A similar discrepancy can be observed in terms of how access to community spaces is assessed by different types of actors. Public institutions appear to have more positive perceptions of access to community spaces (3.8/5) than NGOs do (3.2/5). The reason behind this discrepancy could be that a significant part of the respondents representing public institutions identify as libraries and community centers, who are themselves managers and providers of community spaces. Therefore, it is likely that they have a more positive perception of the accessibility of community spaces.

Looking at the responses from region to region, respondents from the Northeast in Poland perceive that the region offers the most opportunities (3.4 overall rating) compared to the other three regions. Local actors from the North and Northeast in Hungary report the most skeptical perceptions (2.7/5 overall rating). This discrepancy is most evident when it comes to civic/democratic engagement (2.3/5 vs 3/5 overall), access to community spaces (2.7/5 vs 3.3/5 overall), and local media support (2.6/5 vs 3.1/5 overall). Collaboration with both NGOs and public institutions were rated much higher in Poland, while civic/democratic engagement, local media support, and access to community spaces were the topics which showed the strongest variation between the four regions.

Local trends

Per region



The goal of this question in the survey was to find out how civic actors assess trends relevant for civic work and for the civic desertification of a region.

An aging population seems to be a significant trend in all regions. It has been rated as most significant in Bulgaria (4.4/5) and Hungary (3.6/5), while in Poland (3.5/5) and Romania (3.4/5) it comes second (after civic apathy in Poland (3.7/5) and lack of community life in Romania (3.5/5)). Several other trends stand out as significant for all regions: civic apathy (3.6/5), lack of community life (3.4/5), lack of trust in public institutions (3.3/5), lack of or deteriorating community spaces (3.3/5), lack of opportunities for civic engagement (3.2/5), lack of trust among people (3.2/5) and polarization of views (3.2/5).

Observing these trends in all regions is important to us, as they suggest both that citizens do not express interest in civic engagement, and also lack the opportunities and spaces for it. These trends show that the state of civic infrastructure and civic literacy in the four 'civic desert' regions is deficient, as we will also see in the responses to the following two questions.

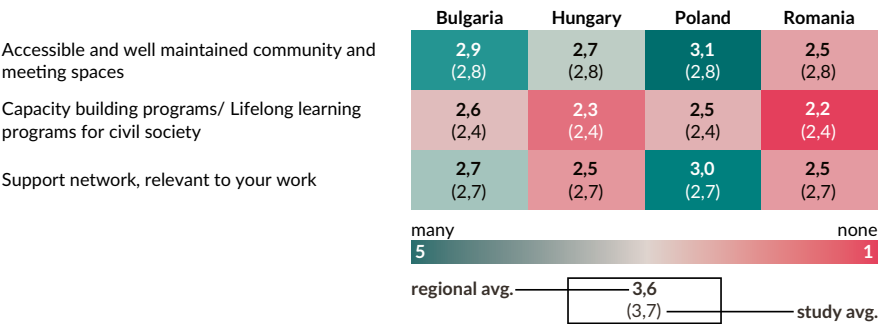
Despite these similarities, responses also demonstrate some notable variations from region to region. Respondents from the selected regions in Bulgaria and Hungary perceive emigration and increased unemployment (3.9/5 and 4.2/5 for Bulgaria and 3.2/5 and 3.5/5 for Hungary) as more significant issues compared to respondents from Poland (2.6/5 and 2.6/5) and Romania (3.0/5 and 3.0/5). Respondents from Poland have rated corruption (1.8/5) and anti-Roma attitudes (1.5/5) as distinctly less relevant to their region compared to all other regions (3.0/5 and 2.5/5 study average).

In general, trends referring to minority groups like the Roma population, the LGBTQ+ community, or migrants are rated as negligible, although anti-Roma and anti-migrant attitudes are slightly more observable in Bulgaria and Hungary. At the same time, we see that negative attitudes related to different minorities as well as minorities' rights are relevant on the national level in all countries (see page 20). We do not have a clear picture of the reasons behind this discrepancy. It could stem from a lack of awareness about minorities' rights or the confidence to address them in a survey. Still, we can carefully draw the conclusion that civic life faces different challenges on the local level compared to the national level, and that different topics and trends are relevant on each level. Despite regional variation, an aging

population and civic apathy are perceived by local civic actors as the biggest challenges in their region.

Civic infrastructure

Per region



Another possible explanation for the high levels of apathy is the lack of opportunity to be civically active. In the following question, respondents gave their assessment of three key elements of the local civic infrastructure which normally enable civic participation, namely meeting spaces, opportunities for capacity building, and support networks.

What can be immediately observed is their deficient state in all regions.

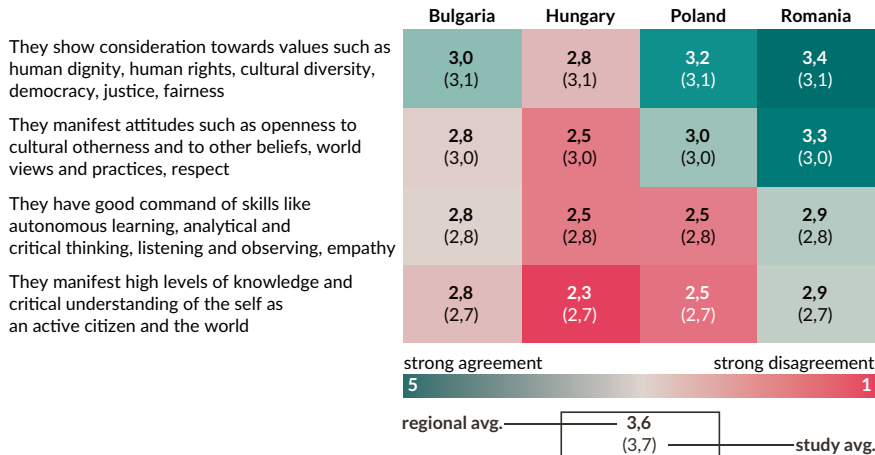
These results, which range from 2.3/5 to 3.1/5, point to a clear need for more accessible and better-maintained meeting spaces for citizens, opportunities for capacity building and lifelong learning, and support networks in their region.

Looking closer at the differences in the responses based on the type of actor (NGOs rate 2.6/5 while public institutions rate 3.4/5), NGOs flag a dire lack of spaces that their organizations, as well as regular citizens, perceive as open to them. Having access to, and participating in, capacity building programs is equally deficient across the four regions and scores the lowest of all. This

finding confirms the observed lack of relevant, tailored capacity building opportunities, especially programs that consider the realities on the ground in peripheral areas. The lack of support networks is rated equally low and raises further concerns, given the importance that respondents ascribe to it, with public institutions (2.9/5) reporting more positive perceptions compared to NGOs (2.5/5) (see page 61 and page 65). This finding confirms our observation that local actors often feel alone in what they do and increases the importance of creating and sustaining networks that offer support, exchange, and peer-to-peer learning (see recommendations on page 76).

Civic literacy of target groups

Per region



The purpose of this question was to learn how respondents assess the level of civic literacy of their target groups by rating its four components individually: values, attitudes, skills, knowledge. In this survey and report, the oper-

ationalization of civic literacy is based on the Council of Europe's Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture.¹⁰⁶

In all regions, respondents gave the highest rating to the civic values of their target groups (3.1/5), followed closely by attitudes (3.0/5). Local actors report more skeptical perceptions of the civic skills and knowledge of their target groups (2.8 and 2.7/5). Respondents from the South of Romania assess all components of the civic literacy of their target groups (values, attitudes, skills, and knowledge) as highest compared to the other regions. Despite slight variations in ratings on all components, however, respondents rate the civic literacy levels of their target groups as relatively low.

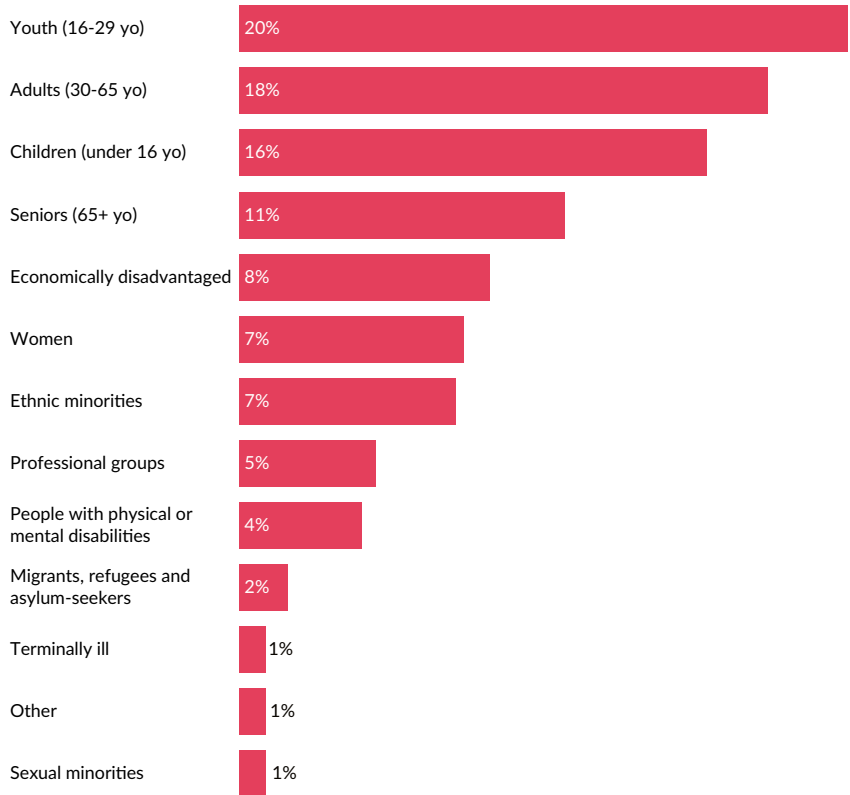
This set of questions was probably the most difficult to answer and our conclusions are mainly assumptive. Still, it seems that local actors attribute civic apathy (from the trends examined above) more to a lack of knowledge, skills, and attitudes rather than values. This observation is especially relevant for those engaged in civic education, as they might want to adjust their formats in a way that focuses even more on developing skills, expanding knowledge, and nurturing attitudes. Even though a segment of the respondents state that they work in the field of civic education, our observation is that there are hardly any civic education activities outside the big cities and capitals. Thus, the low levels of civic literacy present one possible explanation for the high levels of apathy (see recommendations on page 86).

106 Council of Europe. *Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture*. See <https://www.coe.int/en/web/reference-framework-of-competences-for-democratic-culture>.

3. WHAT LOCAL CIVIC ACTORS DO IN 'CIVIC DESERTS'

Target groups

Total



Per region

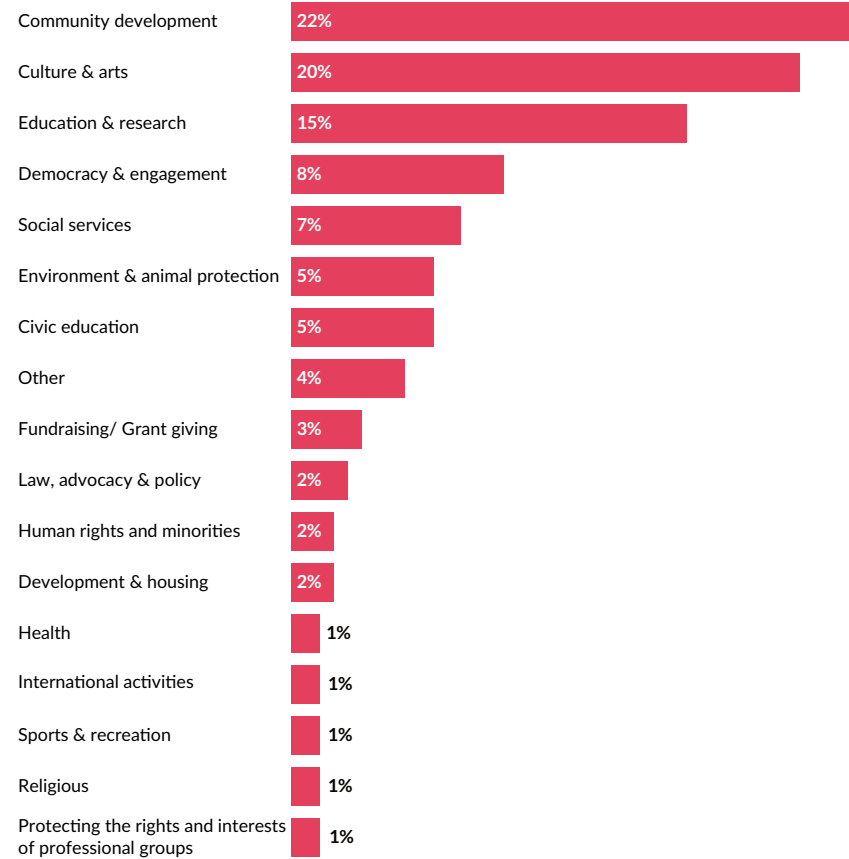
	Bulgaria	Hungary	Poland	Romania
Youth (16-29 yo)	24%	17%	17%	21%
Adults (30-65 yo)	18%	19%	20%	15%
Children (under 16 yo)	15%	16%	12%	17%
Seniors (65+ yo)	10%	9%	17%	9%
Economically disadvantaged	7%	8%	4%	12%
Women	5%	7%	11%	8%
Ethnic minorities	5%	9%	8%	7%
Professional groups	7%	5%	1%	4%
People with physical or mental disabilities	3%	6%	4%	4%
Migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers	1%	1%	4%	1%
Terminally ill	1%	1%	2%	0%
Other	1%	1%	1%	1%
Sexual minorities	1%	1%	-	0%

Local civic actors in the four 'civic desert' regions work with a variety of target groups in their activities. The most common target group is youth (20%), followed by adults (18%), children (16%), seniors (11%), and economically disadvantaged individuals (8%).

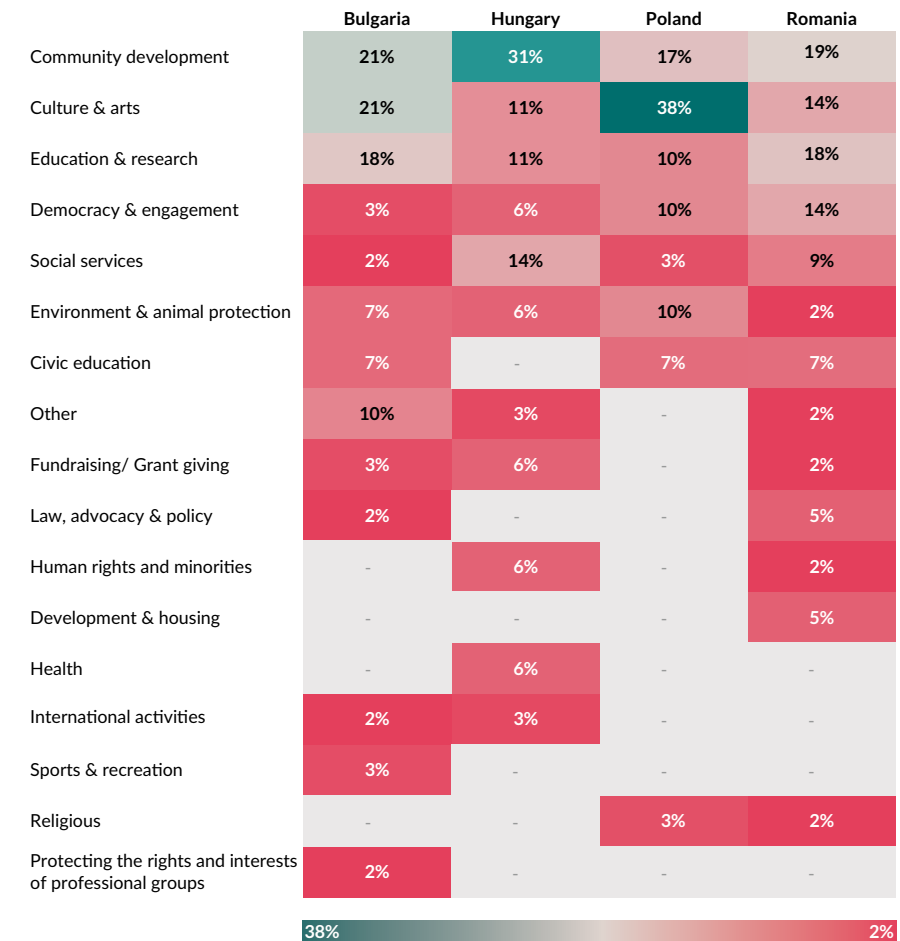
A general pattern observed here is that NGOs have more diverse types of target groups compared to public institutions. Nonetheless, in both cases, sexual minorities, the terminally ill, migrants, refugees, and asylum-seekers, or people with physical or mental disabilities were almost non-existent on our respondents' agendas. These answers concur with our earlier observation that trends referring to minority issues are not perceived by local civic actors as significant or relevant in their region .

Key topics

Total



Per region



This question aims to identify the topics on which respondents focus their civic work. Community development was overrepresented as the main field of activity (22%), followed by culture & arts (20%), and education & research (15%). While the latter two are predominantly mentioned by public institutions, NGOs from the study typically lean towards community development

(26%) and education & research (14%) activities. All in all, NGOs have a larger and more fragmented palette of activities compared to public institutions. The strong focus on community development demonstrates the specific character of civic life on the local level, where community relations are of great importance. In their civic activities on the local level, respondents focus on improving community life and community connections, rather than on topics like law and policy.

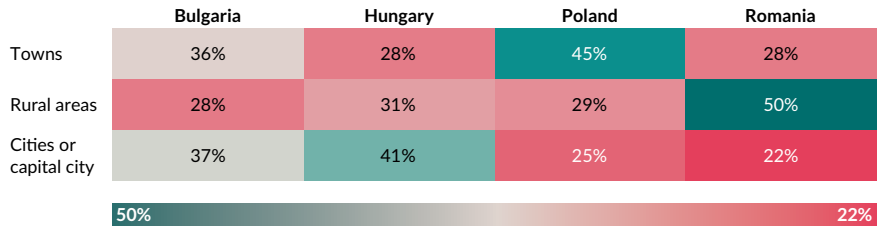
There are some notable regional differences. In Hungary's North and North-east region, 31% of local actors work on community building, almost twice as many as in Poland's Northeast (17%). On the other hand, in Poland's Northeast region, 38% work in culture, almost three times as many as in Hungary (11%) and Romania (14%). Most actors who work on democracy and engagement are based in Romania's South (14%), almost five times as many as in Bulgaria (3%) and Hungary (6%). One can only speculate if the differences can be ascribed to the local political situation or other country-specific trends, and they remain an interesting topic for further inquiry.

Geographical scope

Total



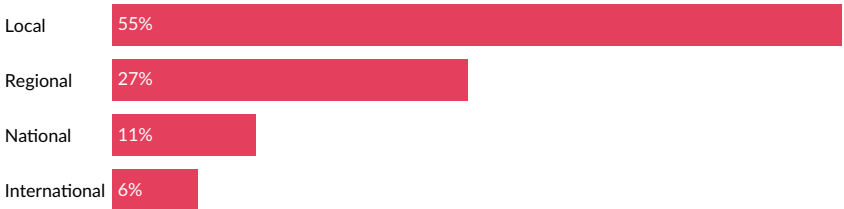
Per region



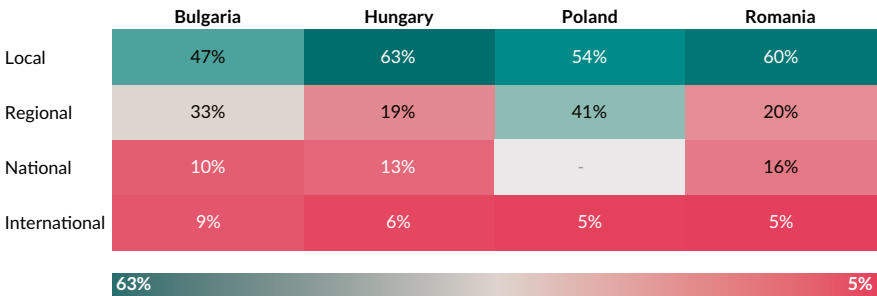
Respondents primarily carry out their civil society work in either rural areas (36%) or towns (33%), followed by cities or the capital city (31%). 40% of respondents mentioned working in all types of localities. Rural areas were predominantly mentioned in Romania (50%) compared to cities in Bulgaria (37%) and Hungary (41%).

Impact

Total



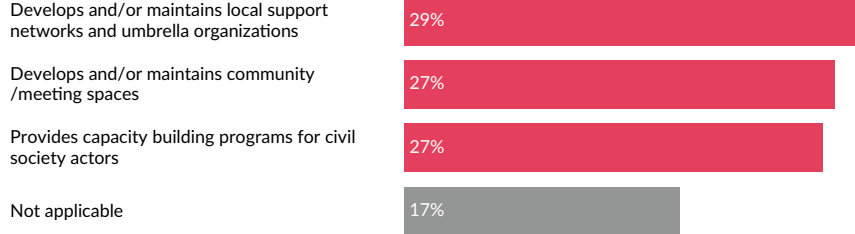
Per region



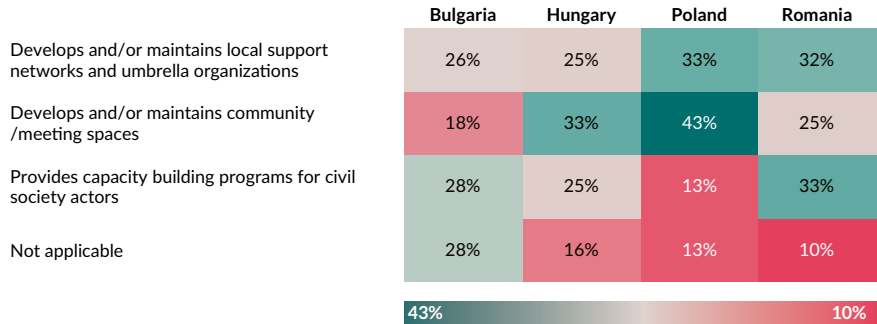
Most respondents carry out their civic activities on the local level (55%), followed by the regional level (27%). Only a combined 17% of respondents said that their activities have a national or international impact. These results confirm that the respondents we were able to reach engage in primarily very localized activities, have local expertise, and have less experience working on a regional, national, and international level. Considering the small annual budgets that respondents report, this comes as no surprise. However, these findings also suggest that the actors who have expertise related to local realities do not have the capacities or competences to access decision and policy-making processes on the regional, national, and international levels.

What the actors do to enhance civic infrastructure

Total



Per region



This question aims to understand whether actors engage in any activities to enhance the relationships and connections in civil society (civic infrastructure), and what those activities are. Building or maintaining local support networks and umbrella organizations (29%) seems to be the main method which respondents apply in order to enhance the civic infrastructure in their region. It is important to note that the high rate here comes predominantly from NGOs (32%), while public institutions do not seem to focus on building or maintaining local support networks (14%). Given that, as we saw in the previous section, respondents criticize existing access to support networks, attempts to sustain it have clearly not been sufficient.

Community meeting spaces come in second place with 27% (the result is 43% in Poland, which significantly increases the survey average). The provision of capacity building programs for other civil society actors (27%) is overall less prevalent compared to maintaining community meeting spaces, except in Romania, where a larger share of respondents mentioned this activity (33%). While capacity building programs are generally also lacking on the national level, recent years have seen an increase in capacity building opportunities in capital cities and large urban centers (see page 21). On the local level, however, the need is greater, while access to such opportunities is even lower. Since most of the actors who participated in the survey are of a small size, it stands to reason that they can hardly offer capacity building to others.

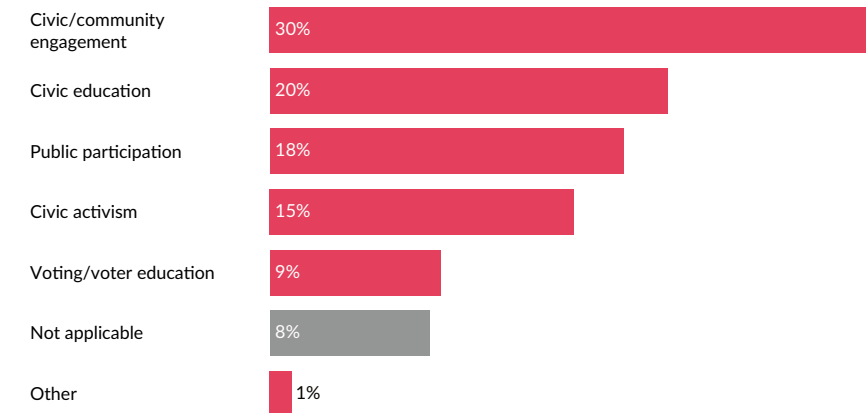
Another particularity in the findings is that public institutions do not, as we mentioned, take on the role of a support network. They also do not provide capacity building opportunities, but instead focus on facilitating access to physical community meeting spaces (42%). This is understandable since most of these public institutions are libraries or community centers. These results also correspond with the more positive perceptions public institutions report in terms of access to public spaces (see page 47). With this in mind, the fact that NGOs do not consider institutional spaces as civic spaces speaks further of the disconnect between the two sets of actors, additionally confirmed by their divergent perceptions of local civic realities.

Per type

	Informal group	NGOs	Private company	Public institution
Develops and/or maintains local support networks and umbrella organizations	35%	32%	33%	14%
Develops and/or maintains community/meeting spaces	29%	24%		42%
Provides capacity building programs for civil society actors	24%	29%	33%	20%
Not applicable	12%	15%	33%	24%

What the actors do to enhance civic literacy

Total



Per region

	Bulgaria	Hungary	Poland	Romania
Civic/community engagement	30%	38%	34%	25%
Civic education	21%	12%	18%	23%
Public participation	14%	19%	21%	18%
Civic activism	12%	14%	13%	19%
Voting/voter education	8%	5%	5%	11%
Not applicable	14%	10%	7%	3%
Other	1%	2%	2%	1%

38% 1%

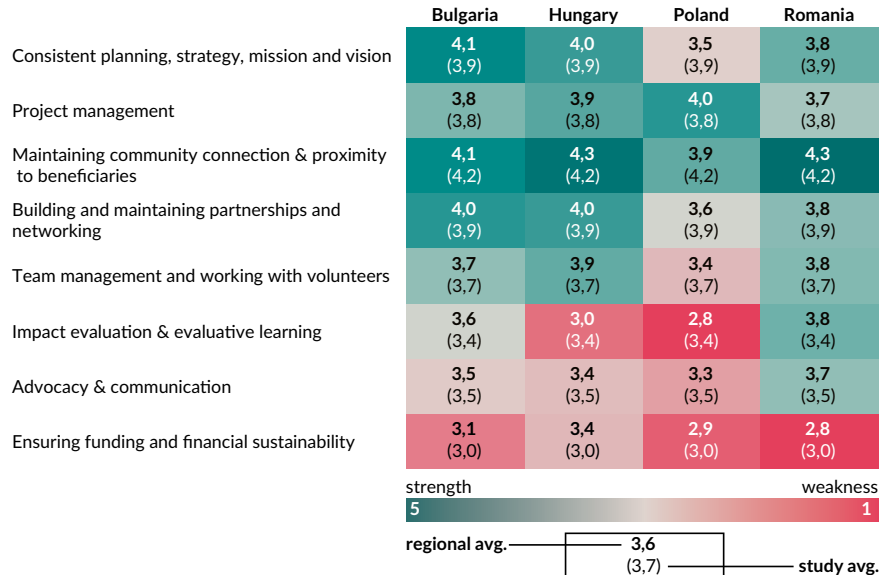
The purpose of this question is to understand whether actors engage in any activities to enhance the democratic values and skills of their target groups (civic literacy) and what those activities are. Civic/community engagement was rated highest by actors in all regions (30%), followed by civic education (20%). Not surprisingly, NGOs are more focused on civic/community engagement (30%) compared to public institutions (26%).

While actors recognize trends and challenges related to civic apathy, low democratic/civic engagement, weak civic knowledge, and skills, the activities they undertake as part of their civic work are not focused on encouraging public participation, civic activism, voter education, or even civic education. Rather, civic actors in 'civic deserts' concentrate their work on civic/community engagement. This does not in itself mean that community work does not empower participation, but it highlights the fact that civic work is different on the national and on the local level, where civic life happens predominantly through community work. At the same time, it might also signal other tendencies, such as lack of competences or capacities for other activities. Again, it is worthwhile investigating the underlying reasons behind this and other findings.

4. ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITIES

Organizational capacities

Per region



This question looks at how respondents assess various organizational capacities. Overall, civic actors rate the organizational capacities of the entity they represent relatively high, with an average score of 3.7 out of 5. Average ratings in all regions revolve around the study average of 3.7; the regional average was slightly lower than the study average only in Poland (3.4/5 compared to 3.7/5).

Considering the strong focus of their work on community development and engagement, it comes as no surprise that respondents perceive maintaining community connection and proximity to beneficiaries as their strongest organizational capacity (4.2/5). It is curious that building and maintaining partnerships and networks is among the most highly rated capacities (3.9/5), given

that responses related to partnerships and support networks throughout the survey are ambiguous. Their availability is rated as low, yet actors (predominantly NGOs) report that they deal with developing and maintaining such networks in their work. And in this instance, respondents signal that building and maintaining them is an organizational strength. We can assume that, because they are invested in maintaining partnerships and networks, they have developed skills to do so and are able to observe the need for more accessible support networks in their work. However, we cannot draw this conclusion with certainty, and it would be valuable to look into the causes for these results.

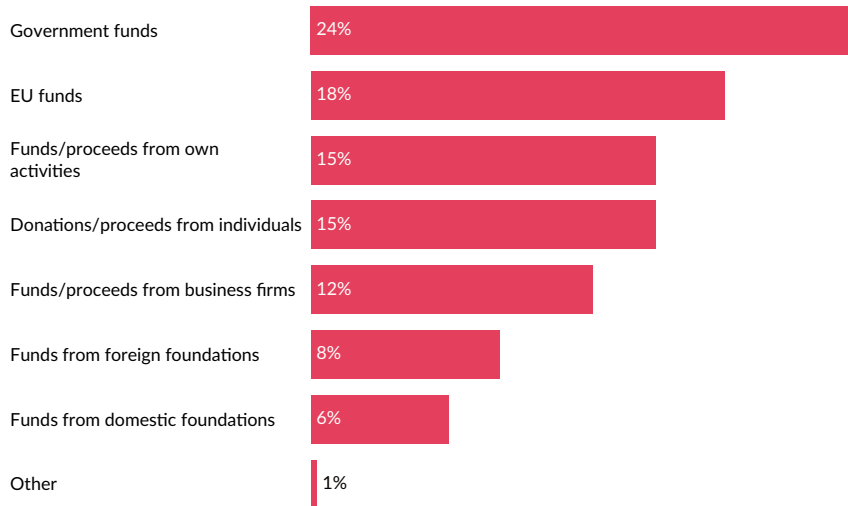
Both planning strategy, mission and vision (3.9/5), as well as general project management (3.8/5), were rated above average. Expert feedback on these results and the small operational budgets of civic actors give us reason to doubt how realistic this self-assessment is, as these areas are, in fact, rather challenging, especially for NGOs.

Ensuring funding and financial sustainability was rated lowest, with an average score of 3 out of 5, followed by impact evaluation and evaluative learning (3.4/5), and advocacy and communication (3.5/5).

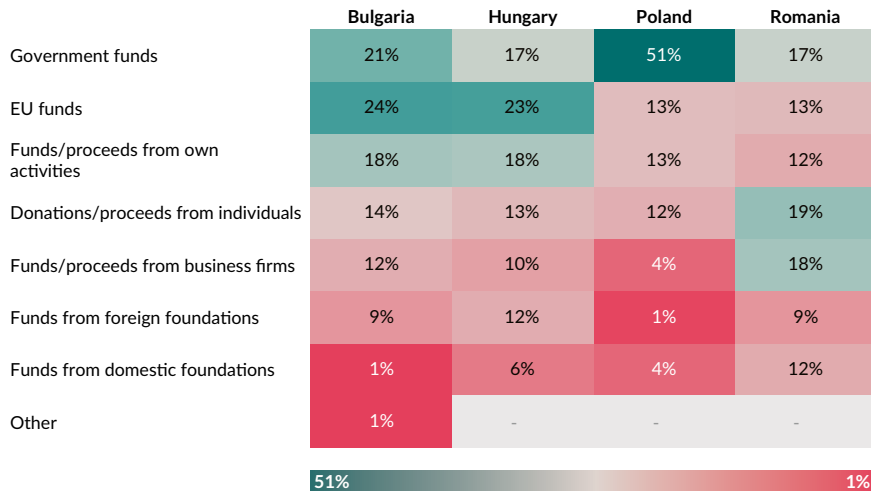
As for different types of actors, companies rated almost all capacities higher than other types of actors, while public institutions are most skeptical of their organizational capacities.

Funding sources

Total



Per region



The purpose of this question is to understand the sources of funding for local civic actors and whether they differ from those on the national level. As mentioned before, most local actors work with an annual budget with an average of less than 50.001 euro, and 37% of these actors operate with less than 5.001 euro per year (see page 44). Funds coming from different government levels (24%) represent the main source of funding followed by funds coming from the EU (18%). This is followed by individual donations and proceeds (15%), funding from their own activities and services (15%), and funds/proceeds from businesses (12%). The fact that funding from their own activity was rather well represented could signal the fact that entities are slowly moving away from more uncertain sources in order to be more financially sustainable.

That being said, the importance of each funding source varies a lot from region to region. In the Northwest region in Bulgaria, EU funds (24%) seem to be the most important source of income, followed by government funds (21%), and funds/proceeds from their own activities (18%). Civic actors in Bulgaria on the national level, however, do not rely much on either government funding, or proceeds from their own activities, and the largest source for the sector is funding from foundations.

In the North and Northeast of Hungary, EU funds (23%) outweigh government funding (17%) in importance. Funds/proceeds from individuals take second place (18%). On the national level, government funds and EU funds are the two most important sources of income while funds/proceeds from their own activities are not particularly important.

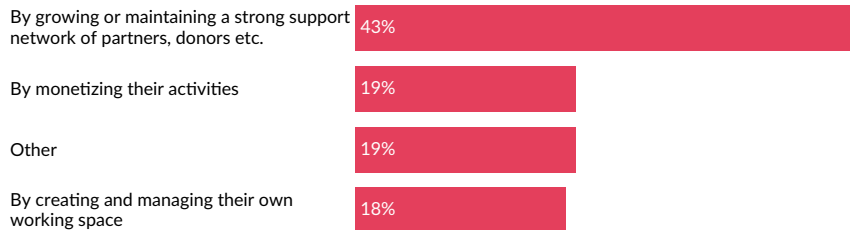
In the Northeast region of Poland, more than half of respondents mention funding from public sources (51%), an absolute outlier compared to the other local sources of funding, as well as the other regions. On the national level, the two most significant sources of funding are local government funds and membership fees (not well represented on the local level). The strong reliance on public sources in Poland is problematic as 'funding bias' is a significant issue, and actors who are not supportive of the current authorities are being singled out (see page 24).

The situation in Romania is very different. Here, neither EU (13%), nor government funding (17%) are that prominent, but funds coming from alternative sources like donations/proceeds from individuals (19%) or businesses (18%), or funds coming from domestic (12%) and international foundations (9%). On the national level, Romanian civic actors receive public funding (still, just 7.9% of organizations receive 82% of the total funding in the sector), donations from foreign funds, businesses, and individuals (see page 23). Funding sources in Romania on the local and national level seem to differ the least compared to the other three countries.

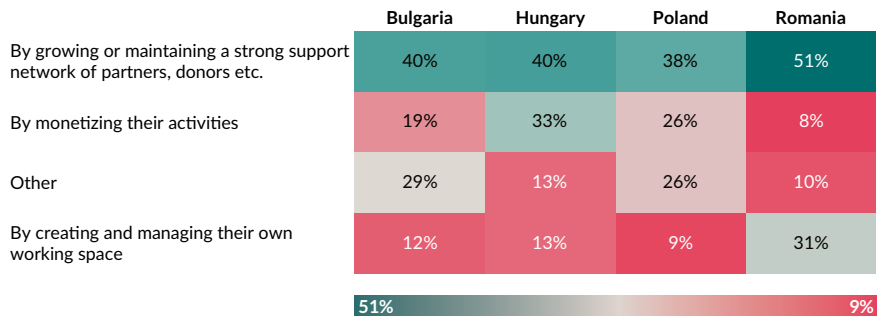
Naturally, the different types of local civic actors receive their funding from different sources. NGOs rely heavily on EU funds (18%) and donations (17%), while smaller entities like informal groups mainly rely on donations (25%).

Ensuring financial sustainability

Total



Per region

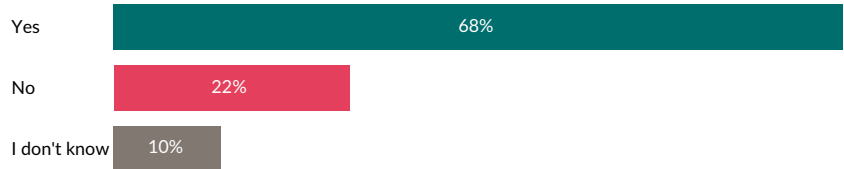


The most significant challenge in terms of organizational capacities in all regions is access to funding and ensuring financial sustainability. The purpose of this question is to understand what strategies local civic actors apply to ensure financial sustainability. Actors primarily mentioned growing or maintaining a strong support network of partners and donors (43%), to which we should also add the responses marked as “Other” (19%), which predominantly mention applying to funding calls from different sources. Neither monetizing their activities (19%), nor managing their own workspaces (18%) play a very important role overall. At a regional level, respondents from Romania referred to managing their own working space to a significant degree (31%), and respondents from Hungary to monetizing their activities (33%). As expected, public institutions rely heavily on state funding (49%), and half of the NGOs primarily focus on their support networks (50%) of funding partners.¹⁰⁷

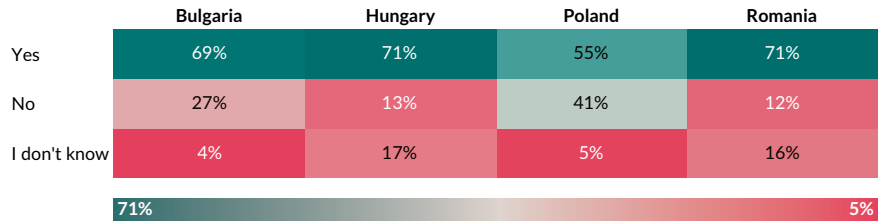
¹⁰⁷ In this question, support network refers mainly to funding partners, rather than a support network of other actors with similar activities as understood in all previous questions.

Do the actors consider the region a 'civic desert'?

Total



Per region



Finally, we asked respondents whether they agree that the definition of 'civic desert' provided in the survey applies to the target regions where they work. 68% of the respondents in all regions agreed. In the Northeast of Poland, only 55% responded affirmatively to this question, compared to around 70% elsewhere. This corresponds with the overall more positive perceptions of local actors regarding local opportunities and challenges, trends, and the state of civic infrastructure and civic literacy, in the Northeast region of Poland.

Another interesting discrepancy observed is between NGOs and public institutions. 72% of NGOs agree that the region where they work can be understood as a 'civic desert', compared to only 54% of responses from public institutions. As in most other responses, NGOs report more critical perceptions of the local environment compared to institutions. We do not know whether this discrepancy throughout the survey is due to the essentially different nature of the work both types of actors do, because NGOs might be more attuned to the issues selected by our study, or due to other factors.

IV. SOME IDEAS FOR HOW TO IMPROVE CIVIC LIFE IN EUROPE'S PERIPHERIES

There is certainly no one-size-fits-all solution to improving local civic life in Europe's peripheries, neither can improvements happen overnight. But our mapping points to specific needs and gives some ideas about how both civic literacy and civic infrastructure can be improved locally.

We found that, in every region we studied, there is a person, a group or even an organization willing and motivated to engage. What they lack is capacities, resources, and support. Particularly, in centralized countries like Hungary and Bulgaria, where most resources for civil society are received by organizations in the capitals and large urban centers, local organizations are generally either not able to survive this scarcity of resources, or are social service providers. While the latter kind of work is very important, it creates a certain power dynamic with local authorities, putting organizations in the position of contractors working for them. The lack of resources also leads to challenges to professionalization, hiring permanent team members, attracting highly-skilled colleagues, organizational development, engagement with policy-makers or institutions on the national level. The less stable local organizations are, the less capable they are of sustaining and developing their work, including writing good project applications, fundraising, or effectively managing their projects. In addition, actors in the peripheries hardly engage in civic education activities – because they lack capacities, knowledge, funding, or awareness. All these factors result in civic apathy, as locals are perceived as lacking the attitudes, knowledge, and skills to engage, while also lacking the opportunity to do so.

While more and more capital-based organizations work in peripheral areas, they often engage without co-creating sustainable structures with local actors that would continue to exist beyond their involvement. The broader question of the state of civil society on the local level deserves continuous and structured research to be able to identify ways to enhance its entire infrastructure, impact, and resilience.

In the following section, we formulate recommendations to civil society, philanthropies, and researchers. This non-exhaustive list starts with key principles for working locally, describes concrete needs and examples of promising practices, and advocates for the topic to receive attention on an EU policy level.

KEY PRINCIPLES OF WORKING LOCALLY

“You have the watches, but we have the time” refers to the fact that time operates differently on the local level. A significant part of working with local actors is gaining their trust by investing in relationship building. This means that time and personal engagement are the most important resources to be allocated. The opening quote illustrates how important it is, in any capacity building program or civic education endeavor, to take the time to build trust with local actors and communities.

“Every village has one crazy person” is a quote from one of our interlocutors, and is a way of saying that every town or village has an enthusiast, someone with the energy or leadership skills that this work requires. Identifying that person or these citizens is a crucial first step before developing or implementing any activities, especially if one arrives to a certain locality as an outsider. Paying attention to the local context and to existing relationships is equally important. Some communities have community organizers who are trained to work with particular groups, like the elderly or the Roma communities. Along with traditional places of community life, these are a good place to start: community centers, libraries, schools, informal groups, community organizers, journalists, arts and culture clubs, firefighters, scouts, etc.

“Local authorities – friend or foe?” points to various facets of local power. Our mapping confirmed that institutions interpret reality through a more optimistic lens and are generally less critical of the state of civic life than civil society. Moreover, they focus mostly on culture and the arts, and education and research, whereas the civil society actors we mapped work on a much wider range of topics and are the ones focusing on civic participation. Most NGOs find it difficult to work with local institutions. The reasons for that range from captured municipalities to extreme politicizing and polarization. Apart from political reasons, there is a general distrust and lack of cooperation between civil society and local authorities, partially based on a lack of experience working together or on lacking of capacities and skills for cooperation.

“Democracy at an arm’s reach.” The nature and quality of local democracy can be very different from what philanthropy expects. It can be very issue-specific. Examples of how it functions can include how clean or green a certain neighborhood is, or whether residents have access to a library. Thus, sometimes strengthening democracy is not about enabling access to institutions or making legislative changes, but about fostering community spirit, providing a meeting place, effective participation in community development, rejuvenating a playground, or renewing road signs. The very tangible character of this work also takes into consideration the different local dimensions and the demands of local communities for things like community building, social inclusion, and youth empowerment.

“Solutions are good, but what is the problem?” refers to the importance of assessing the needs of actors and communities before designing any solutions. Needs assessment and assets assessment should be an integral starting point for any initiative. A positive approach that aims to look beyond deficits and gaps, and to identify the resources already available to community members, can provide the groundwork for further development. This can go a long way toward making any work on the local level stronger and more sustainable by identifying and building on the skills of residents, institutions, and networks of communities. It can also have an empowering effect. Our conversations with civil society actors indicate that.

WHAT: ACCESSIBLE LOCAL FUNDING AND SUSTAINABILITY TRAINING

WHY: Consensus exists that one of the biggest challenges in all four regions we studied is access to financial resources, as well as access to a qualified workforce and volunteers. Local civil society actors are greatly underfunded, with an average annual budget of under 50,001 euro regardless of the type of organization. Many organizations even operate with less than 5,001 euro.

To ensure financial sustainability, access to funding sources as well as financial sustainability and fundraising skills need to be improved.

Respondents emphasized that they primarily rely on growing or maintaining their strong support networks of partners and donors for funding. Overall, most funding comes from different governmental and EU funding programs. Individual donations as well as revenues from their own activities and services is the next biggest source of income, followed by support from business. This varies from region to region. In Bulgaria, foreign funders are more important than government and EU funding,¹⁰⁸ while in Hungary¹⁰⁹ EU and government funding comprise 45% of overall funding. Polish organizations seem to rely mainly on public funding¹¹⁰ and those in Romania on donations from individuals or businesses. The latter datum is corroborated by the comprehensive World Bank report "Rapid Assessment of Romanian CSO in the Context of COVID-19,"¹¹¹ which points to a shift in local funding in Romania; it is worth exploring for lessons learned and practices that can be shared across the region.

108 USAID (2020): p. 61.

109 Ibid, p. 105.

110 Ibid, p. 170.

111 World Bank (2020): *Rapid Assessment of Romanian CSO in the Context of Covid-19*. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/374111602685815317/pdf/Rapid-Assessment-of-Romanian-CSO-in-the-Context-of-COVID-19.pdf>.

The fact that local NGOs operate with very small budgets suggests that their work is inconsistent and lacking permanent staff. At the same time, overall low levels of civic participation result in low access to volunteers.

Summarizing the question of lack of funding, the following aspects are worth considering:

- Availability of local funds and whether local civic work is a priority to philanthropy and EU funding programs. If so, are these accessible, made available in the local languages, and are they offering needs-based capacity building programs in addition to funding? Accessibility of funding opportunities in terms of paperwork and legislation, as well as terminology.
- Capacity building seems crucial for the sustainability of local organizations.
- Trainings in financial sustainability for local actors that look into various funding opportunities and go beyond classic fundraising skills. The trainings should begin with needs assessment and consider models that allow local organizations to cooperate and share resources (workforce, administration, financial coordination, fundraising, spaces). Also consider the importance of trainings to enhance general financial literacy.
- Peer-to-peer learning activities that bring together local actors and more professionalized organizations based in the capitals and urban centers.
- Support programs that encourage local volunteering, focusing on different target groups like students in schools, senior citizens in social clubs, etc.
- Mechanisms for cooperation with local businesses and authorities (where possible).



EXAMPLES OF PROMISING PRACTICES

In addition to allocating special funds for civic work in peripheral areas, there are also programs like the Civic Europe Idea Challenge¹¹² implemented by MitOst,¹¹³ which supports organizations both financially as well as through capacity development on some of the topics mentioned above. Some other examples of existing capacity development funds are those provided by the EEA and Norway Grants,¹¹⁴ the Human Capital Operational Program¹¹⁵ through the European Social Fund, and the funds for Strengthening the capacities and partnership of nongovernmental non-profit organizations¹¹⁶ in the Czech Republic.

WHAT: SUPPORT FOR NETWORKING AND SAFE SPACES

WHY: One assumption we can make based on how difficult it was for us to apply the snow-balling principle to map local civic actors in the four so-called 'civic deserts' regions is that these actors are not in the habit of thinking and acting in networks. Even though they mention local support networks as a source of funding, this is often the sole purpose of these networks. During our interviews, we heard numerous times how important safe spaces are, especially for actors who operate in difficult political environments. At the same time, the low levels of networking suggest that actors either distrust each other, lack the skills to network, or might have other impediments to networking such as lack of resources (time, spaces, funding), or all of the above. This topic deserves further investigation, as networking is key for establishing trustful working relationships with other civic actors (CSOs, institutions, informal groups, businesses, etc.), becoming more effective and innovative in one's approaches, and, ultimately, coming closer to a shared understanding of challenges and opportunities for action.

This last point is an important topic for all four regions we studied. Perceptions of local reality differ depending on the type of actor who responded to our questionnaire. While access to financial resources and a qualified workforce are a topic for all actors in all four regions, NGOs see opportunities to collaborate with other NGOs, and public institutions see opportunities to collaborate with other public institutions, but collaboration between NGOs and institutions is not perceived as likely. Informal groups view the collaboration with public institutions, as well as knowledge sharing and capacity building resources as their biggest opportunities within their local environment.

Having a space for exchanges and discussions seems crucial for approaching a shared understanding of (civic) life and how to improve it. At the same time, cross-sectoral networking is a great way to make use of complementary strengths and shortcomings, as well as to learn from each other.

112 Civic Europe. "Idea Challenge. What we do." <https://civic-europe.eu/idea-challenge/>.

113 MitOst e.V. <https://www.mitost.org/>.

114 See <https://eeagrants.org/topics-programmes/fund-regional-cooperation>.

115 See <https://www.pwc.ro/en/services/tax-services/people-and-organisation/pocu.html>.

116 See <http://www.czechaid.cz/en/temata/loca-projects/strengthening-the-capacities-and-partnership-of-nongovernmental-non-profit-organizations/>.

For example, our mapping shows that most local actors operate with an annual budget of under 50,001 euro, most of them with under 5,001 euro. This is mainly due to lack of funding, but it is worth exploring how small entities who share the same mission can collaborate to increase their impact, share team members, office spaces and costs, and build coalitions or networks so they can advocate with a stronger voice or have greater visibility.



EXAMPLES OF PROMISING PRACTICES

Creating online maps of civic actors that increase their visibility (such as the map that resulted from our mapping, which can be found at www.mappingcivicdeserts.com, or see The Austin Social Innovation Ecosystem Map¹¹⁷ or Detroit Philanthropy and Higher Education¹¹⁸); creating mobility funds to increase exchange; support cross-sectoral networking and partnerships as the Association NGO support center¹¹⁹ does in the Northeast region of Poland, Podlasie.

117 See <https://kumu.io/UnLtdUSA/austin-social-entrepreneurship#the-austin-social-innovation-ecosystem-map/civitas-learning>.

118 See <https://kumu.io/NH7/detroit-philanthropy-and-higher-education>.

119 See (in Polish) <http://owop.org.pl/public/projekty/civic-europe-capacity-building-program-poland>.

WHAT: ENABLE THE CULTIVATION OF PARTNERSHIPS AND KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE

WHY: Closely related to networking is the question of building partnerships and opportunities to learn from each other as equals in a non-hierarchical environment. The mapping suggests that, just like networking, partnerships can also use a boost, both within civil society as well as with representatives of institutions, businesses, and others not only locally, but also on a national or international level.



EXAMPLES OF PROMISING PRACTICES

The project Quarteira decide/ Quarteira decides by Oficina¹²⁰ organizes a process in which three neighborhoods in the Portuguese city of Quarteira work together to select projects to be implemented in their communities through the Participatory Budgeting (PB) methodology. This project enables the partnership of actors on different levels, such as institutions, citizens, and civil society, thus facilitating the transfer and exchange of knowledge and skills, as well as the inclusion of community members in the preparation, selection, and implementation of projects relevant to them.

120 See <https://www.oficina.org.pt/quarteira-decide.html>.

WHAT: ADVOCACY AND COMMUNICATION SKILLS TRAININGS FOR GREATER OUTREACH AND VISIBILITY

WHY: Our findings confirm a need for capacity building when it comes to advocacy skills and communication. The challenge for civic actors is not communication with their target groups, but rather their strategic communication when sharing the impact of their work with a broader audience, using targeted messaging and the right communications channels.

Good communication is crucial for visibility, legitimacy, partnerships, and sustainability. Especially in a challenging political context, visibility might be the only way of preserving one's work.

Advocacy, on the other hand, looks into the full set of competences necessary for a bigger, systemic impact on the area one is focused on. Advocacy efforts can range from creating greater visibility and awareness of a certain topic, to policy or institutional change, passing legislation, creating public pressure, changing ways of thinking – and these efforts can take place on a local, national or European/ international level. Our mapping shows that local civic actors rarely have an outreach beyond the local level, which means that they require additional advocacy and communication skills, as well as a thorough knowledge of, and opportunities for interacting with institutions on the national and European/international levels. Successful advocacy is not just a matter of having expertise in a certain area, but also of having visibility, being active in networks, and having strong communication and outreach skills.

As with the other topics discussed earlier, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to this kind of training, which should be tailored to the civic actors' needs. In light of the challenges to the public image of CSOs, it is important to be able to communicate one's impact efficiently and to know how to contribute to a more inclusive public debate. There is growing evidence of campaigns targeting actors working on human rights issues, which means

that even the best campaigns of well-intentioned civic actors could be undermined. This makes it even more important for civic actors to be good communicators with visibility that contributes to their legitimacy in their respective field.



EXAMPLES OF PROMISING PRACTICES

One type of support is offering advocacy consulting as the Resource Center for Public Participation (CeRe)¹²¹ in Romania does. They offer advocacy consulting to citizens, initiative groups, and organizations, as well as annual advocacy exchange programs with the US to help citizens put forward their ideas. Another approach they take is connecting citizens and various organizations with decision-makers in order to advocate for their causes. Another example on the European level is the Connecting Europe program by the European Policy Centre¹²² and Stiftung Mercator.¹²³ The program brings project partners from across Europe and policy-makers in Brussels together to engage in open dialogue and exchange.

121 Resource Center for Public Participation. <https://cere.org/english-version/>.

122 European Policy Centre. See program website: <https://www.epc.eu/en/programmes/Connecting-Europe--European-Policy-Centre~110d3c>.

123 Stiftung Mercator. <https://www.stiftung-mercator.de/>.

WHAT: IMPACT EVALUATION, COMBINED WITH EVALUATIVE LEARNING

WHY: Another capacity building need highlighted in the mapping of the four regions is focused on impact, evaluation, and evaluative learning. Impact evaluation assesses the changes that can be attributed to a certain activity.

It is crucial for the long-term, sustainable impact of any activity to be cognizant of both its achievements and shortcomings in order to improve.

Given the overall results, it is surprising that respondents rank high their ability to plan strategically, formulate a mission and a vision. In our interpretation of the data, the whole set of topics ranging from mission, vision, founding an organization, defining its impact, and learning ways to evaluate it, is linked together and deserves targeted attention. Designing capacity building programs for all of these components would be a good way to 1) improve and sustain activities, or 2) design and plan new ones. Providing training opportunities that support the 'local enthusiasts' before they have formalized their work (e.g. by registering an organization) is one possibility. Training opportunities for existing organizations is another. Interestingly, the need for such capacity building is signaled by both NGOs and institutions, so it is worth designing programs that match the work of both, or designing joint programs.

As mentioned in the key principles of working locally, philanthropies and institutional supporters should keep in mind that local organizations are sometimes not familiar with their terminology, especially regarding impact and evaluation, and even that can become an impediment to local actors. What is more, our experience shows that it takes time and practice to learn how to differentiate between outputs, outcomes, and impact, as well as define indicators and learn the different approaches to impact measurement.



EXAMPLES OF PROMISING PRACTICES

Training opportunities for organizational development, planning, monitoring, and evaluation of projects are available from PME-Campus¹²⁴ or the Horizontal school.¹²⁵ Accessible practical guides and tools, such as the Civil Society Toolbox¹²⁶ and the Social Impact Navigator¹²⁷ by Phineo,¹²⁸ are also hugely helpful to organizations that want to evaluate and structure their internal processes and increase their impact.

124 See (in German) <https://pme-campus.de/>.

125 See <https://horizontal.school/>.

126 See <https://civilsocietytoolbox.org/>.

127 See <https://www.social-impact-navigator.org/>.

128 See <https://www.phineo.org/en>.

WHAT: HOLISTIC SUPPORT FOR CIVIC EDUCATION

WHY: We have attempted to map the perceptions of local civic actors regarding the civic literacy levels of local citizens. Even though the feedback only allows us to formulate assumptions, the responses point to an urgent need for civic education¹²⁹ in peripheral areas.

As the online survey suggests, one of the biggest challenges locally is civic apathy and lack of civic engagement. These correlate with low levels of civic literacy, specifically attitudes, skills, and knowledge that enable participation.

At the same time, few report engaging in civic education activities, which speaks to a need to approach civic education support from various angles, i.e. strengthen the capacities and competences of local actors to offer civic education activities, coupled with support to measure their impact, while also taking into account that practicing democracy on the local level has a lot to do with the life of the community. Civic education is not very prominent in civil society in the countries examined, certainly compared to the German-speaking part of Europe. At the same time, challenges to civic culture are so multifaceted that the need for civic education grows every day, while the ecosystem around it (both nationally and locally) is lagging. Unlike countries where civic education has been practiced for decades, in the four target countries there are deficiencies on various levels – in funding, awareness, expertise, capacities, but also in materials and methods. Even though there are inspiring examples of civic education work both on the national level and locally, those efforts are clearly insufficient. Furthermore, they are sometimes framed as contrary to the so-called traditional values of the local communities, which makes civic education work even more difficult, especially if it addresses minority rights.

¹²⁹ When we speak of civic education in the local context, we mean non-formal (outside the classroom, in civil society, involving mainly young people) and informal civic education (in informal settings, third spaces, where civic education happens unintendedly, also involving adults).

Against that background, all of the recommendations for capacity building listed above apply, but with a focus on actors engaged in civic education.



EXAMPLES OF PROMISING PRACTICES

Examples of a holistic approach to civic education can be found in the work of organizations such as the Sofia Platform Foundation¹³⁰ in Bulgaria or the Theodor-Heuss-Kolleg¹³¹ in dozens of countries in Europe and North Africa. An important attempt to map the ecosystems of civic education in twenty-one European countries is the 'Mapping civic education in Europe' project by THE CIVICS Innovation Hub¹³² piloted in 2021. The local level offers many examples of inspiring civic education work, many of which can be found on the project webpage of Civic Europe.¹³³

¹³⁰ See <http://sofiaplatform.org/project/civic-europe-eng/>.

¹³¹ See <https://theodor-heuss-kolleg.de/>.

¹³² See <https://thecivics.eu/>.

¹³³ See <https://civic-europe.eu/>.

WHAT: ACCESS TO WELCOMING AND INCLUSIVE CIVIC SPACES

WHY: Access to, and improving the general condition of civic spaces is an obvious need according to respondents in the mapping. However, these are also questions that institutions and NGOs assess differently.

Whereas institutional representatives believe that there is no shortage of civic spaces, civil society actors see them either as lacking or deteriorating.

Part of the explanation behind this divergence is that usually local institutions own and run these spaces. However, NGOs do not perceive these spaces as accessible and inclusive. As part of the framework of the Civic Europe program, which targets peripheries, there have been many projects aimed at creating such spaces. Examples include designing a welcoming civic space at a school that young people can embrace as theirs, or sprucing up bus stations that local children identify as a public space of their own. Since one of the definitions of a 'civic desert' is the disappearance, or total lack of opportunities for engagement, the availability of such places is significant. Such spaces might be designed for a different purpose (i.e. a library, a café, an interest club, a bus station, etc.) but because they effectively bring people together, they act as a place where local civic life can and should be happening (i.e. so-called third spaces).

Expert interviews also point out the need for community spaces, but in general they place a stronger emphasis on the need for inclusive and safe spaces – and not just in the sense of actual physical spaces.



EXAMPLES OF PROMISING PRACTICES

Access to welcoming and inclusive civic spaces is made possible when such spaces are created. An example of promising practices is the space created and managed by the Alternative Communities Association¹³⁴ in Hungary. Another approach is turning existing spaces into spaces that host various civic activities, meetings, trainings etc., like EduCaB,¹³⁵ which works with local libraries and turns them into places for the community and civil society.

¹³⁴ See <https://www.altkozegy.hu/>.

¹³⁵ See <http://www.educab.org/our-values-and-actions.html>.

WHAT: RESEARCH AND DATA COLLECTION ON CIVIC LIFE AND CITIZEN ATTITUDES ON THE LOCAL LEVEL (NUTS 2 regions)

WHY: One of the main findings of our two-year effort to better understand civic life in four European regions of the NUTS 2 size, while also not being able to travel, is that there is a big gap in data available on the local level when it comes to civil society, civic spaces, and civic competences such as values, attitudes, skills, and knowledge. There are dozens of studies and indexes assessing the state of civil society, and every country does its own polling to study attitudes, values, and perceptions. These range from Eurostat data to Pew Research Center¹³⁶ data and various indexes such as the CSOSI,¹³⁷ the GLOBSEC trends,¹³⁸ democracy scores measured by Freedom House,¹³⁹ the Corruption Perceptions Index by Transparency International,¹⁴⁰ the Edelman Trust Barometer,¹⁴¹ assessments by the National Democratic Institute.¹⁴² For comparative data on civic attitudes, there is the European Values Study,¹⁴³ which is conducted every five years. None of these sources, however, allow the systematic study of levels different from the national.

Since the EU often operates on the level of NUTS 2 regions, it would be useful to also apply this metric to gathering data on the state of civil society and civic-mindedness.

136 Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/>

137 USAID (2020): p. 110.

138 GLOBSEC (2020); GLOBSEC (2021).

139 Freedom House.

140 Transparency International (2020): Corruption Perception Index 2020 Results Table. <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2020/index/nzl>

141 Edelman Trust Barometer (2021). <https://www.edelman.com/sites/g/files/aatuss191/files/2021-03/2021%20Edelman%20Trust%20Barometer.pdf>

142 National Democratic Institute (NDI) (2020): *Youth Attitudes on Politics and Democracy – Poland. NDI Survey of Young People in Central Europe*, July 2020; The National Democratic Institute (2018): *Central Europe – Youths, Politics, Democracy. Public opinion research in Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia*.

143 See <https://europeanvaluesstudy.eu/>

Making this kind of data available would help everyone whose work concerns the local level, be it institutions, civil society, policy-makers, or businesses.



EXAMPLES OF PROMISING PRACTICES

Several new initiatives attempt to fill this gap of local data by developing new tools. The Democracy Resilience Index,¹⁴⁴ launched in 2021 by GlobalFocus¹⁴⁵ in Romania is a quantitative instrument that measures democratic resilience on a micro-level. The Civic Health Index (CHI)¹⁴⁶ is a nationally representative survey developed by the Sofia Platform Foundation in Bulgaria¹⁴⁷ with a local sample from a 'civic desert' region (Vratsa in the Northwest region). It is also a tool that can be used to assess the conditions that enable civic participation on both the local and national levels in Bulgaria and beyond. The 'Rapid assessment of Romanian CSOs in the context of COVID-19' report by the World Bank¹⁴⁸ looks at the capacities of CSOs in Romanian municipalities in the context of CSO crisis response, based on qualitative and quantitative data.

144 See <https://www.global-focus.eu/2021/06/democratic-resilience-index/>.

145 See <https://www.global-focus.eu/>.

146 See <http://sofiaplatform.org/project/civic-health-index/>.

147 See <http://sofiaplatform.org/>.

148 World Bank (2020): *Rapid Assessment of Romanian CSO in the Context of Covid-19*.

WHAT: CIVIC COHESION IN EU COHESION POLICY

WHY: EU programs like the Cohesion Fund focus mainly on physical infrastructure as a means to alleviate inequalities, and in doing so overlook the fact that for communities to flourish and grow (including population-wise), they also need a civic life. The Cohesion Fund, for example, focuses on strengthening the economic, social, and territorial cohesion of the EU, but fails to include civic cohesion in its policy.

Civic cohesion, a new term coined by this report, is crucial to a shared European understanding of, and commitment to democracy. While social cohesion – meaning trust, acceptance, solidarity, and connectedness among people – is of great importance, each community should also have opportunities for civic engagement. In order for that to happen, the work of civil society actors needs greater support, access to civic education must be enabled so that civic skills and knowledge can be enhanced, and civic infrastructure should be strengthened by enabling access to community spaces (e.g. cultural centers, libraries, museums) and opportunities for capacity building. This is especially true on the local level in centralized countries, where opportunities and resources are scarce.

Therefore, it is worth exploring ways of integrating the notion of civic cohesion into the EU's overall approach to cohesion as a clear commitment to the various aspects of this concept, in order to achieve the "overall harmonious development" of its members.¹⁴⁹

CONCLUSION

The recommendations outlined above are not exhaustive, nor are they a quick-fix plan for how to turn a 'civic desert' into a civically cohesive place. As described in Chapter II, there are factors impacting the reality of 'civic deserts' beyond civic apathy and lack of a local civil society. Even the best efforts to induce civic life may be doomed to fail if a locality is plagued by irreversible depopulation or unemployment. It would require more thorough research to identify and separate causes and effects. We believe that efforts to improve civic cohesion inevitably lead to better social cohesion and vice versa, as long as additional enabling factors are identified. We see the contribution of this report as the practitioners' attempt to draw more attention to the reality of 'civic deserts,' as well as articulating questions that deserve further exploration.

¹⁴⁹ See [https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/policy/what/glossary/c/cohesion-policy#:~:text=Cohesion%20policy%20is%20the%20European,its%20Member%20States%20and%20regions.&text=174\)%2C%20the%20EU's%20cohesion%20policy,level%20of%20development%20between%20regions](https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/policy/what/glossary/c/cohesion-policy#:~:text=Cohesion%20policy%20is%20the%20European,its%20Member%20States%20and%20regions.&text=174)%2C%20the%20EU's%20cohesion%20policy,level%20of%20development%20between%20regions).

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Louisa Slavkova

Louisa is a political scientist, director of the Sofia Platform Foundation, a non-governmental organization working in the field of historical and civic education. In 2021 she co-founded the pan-European hub for civic education – THE CIVICS. In the past she has worked with ECFR and served as advisor to the Bulgarian MFA. Louisa is author and editor of textbooks and publications on foreign policy, democracy, and civic education.

Dobrena Petrova

Dobrena is research & project assistant at the Sofia Platform Foundation. She holds a BA in International Relations from Queen Mary University of London. During her degree she does an internship in the Bulgarian Embassy in London. Since 2019, she is a certified mediator of out-of-court dispute resolution. Since 2021, she is also project coordinator at THE CIVICS.

Leonie Sichtermann

Leonie is Transition Dialogue project coordinator & assistant at the Sofia Platform Foundation. She holds a MA in Peace and Conflict Research from the university in Frankfurt am Main and a BA in politics and sociology (Eichstätt and Brussels). Since 2022, she is part of THE CIVICS. Previously, she was working in the field of social and political transformation processes in fragile contexts at Steps for Peace in Berlin (2014-2016).

Mila Moshelova

Mila is a PhD Candidate in Political Science at the Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski and a Visiting Fellow to the Chair of Comparative Politics at the European University Viadrina, Frankfurt Oder, (January – April 2022). Previously, she worked as a project manager at the Sofia Platform Foundation and as a project coordinator at the European Council of Foreign Relations and the Centre for Liberal Strategies.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alpha Research Agency (2020): "Continued support for the protests and unclear exit from the political crisis." <https://alpharesearch.bg/post/971-produljavashta-podkrepa-za-protestite-i-neiasen-izhod-ot-politicheskata-kriza.html>.
- Bălan, Mariana (2016): "Economic and Social Consequences triggered by NEET youth." "Dimitrie Cantemir" Christian University Knowledge Horizons – Economics. Vol. 8, No. 2, pp. 80–87.
- Bradshaw, Samantha & Neudert, Lisa-Maria (2021): *The Road Ahead: Mapping Civil Society Responses to Disinformation*. National Endowment for Democracy. <https://www.ned.org/mapping-civil-society-responses-to-disinformation-international-forum/>.
- Council of Europe (2016): *Competences for Democratic Culture – Living together as equals in culturally diverse democratic societies*. <https://rm.coe.int/16806ccc07>.
- Council of Europe (2022): *Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture*. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/reference-framework-of-competences-for-democratic-culture>.
- Crocco, Margaret; Shuttleworth, Jay M.; Chandler, Thomas (2016): "Science, Media, and Civic Literacy: Rachel Carson's Legacy for the Citizen Activist." *Social Studies and the Young Learner*, Vol. 28, Iss. 3, pp. 21–26.
- Csaky, Zselyke (2020): *Nations in Transit. Dropping the Democratic Facade*. Freedom House. https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/05062020_FH_NIT2020_vfinal.pdf.
- Edelman (2021): *Edelman Trust Barometer (2021)*. <https://www.edelman.com/sites/g/files/aatuss191/files/2021-03/2021%20Edelman%20Trust%20Barometer.pdf>.
- Ekiert et al. (2017): "Country report: Poland." In Vandor et al. (2017): *Civil Society in Central and Eastern Europe: Challenges and Opportunities*. Erste Foundation, Vienna. https://www.erstestiftung.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/civil_society_studie_issuu_e1-1.pdf.
- Eupinions (19 Nov 2020): "Examining the Results of the Latest Eurobarometer Report – Part 1" <https://eupinions.eu/de/blog/examining-the-results-of-the-latest-eurobarometer-report-part-1>.
- Euractiv.pl (2021): Polska wieś: Jak powstrzymać migrację do miast? <https://www.euractiv.pl/section/grupa-wyszehradzka/news/polska-wies-jak-powstrzymac-migracje-do-miast>.

- European Commission: Glossary. "Cohesion policy." https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/policy/what/glossary/c/cohesion-policy.
- European Commission (2012): "Social Impact of Emigration and Rural-Urban Migration in Central and Eastern Europe." <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=89&newsId=1778&furtherNews=yes>
- European Commission: *The common agricultural policy at a glance*. https://ec.europa.eu/info/food-farming-fisheries/key-policies/common-agricultural-policy/cap-glance_en.
- EuroHealthNet: Health Inequalities Portal. "Bulgaria." <https://health-inequalities.eu/jwdmap/bulgaria/>.
- EuroHealthNet: Health Inequalities Portal. "Hungary." <https://health-inequalities.eu/jwdmap/hungary/>.
- European Union (2020): "Standard Eurobarometer 93," Summer 2020. <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2262>.
- Eurostat (2018): "Regional Yearbook (2018)." <https://ec.europa.eu/statistical-atlas/viewer/?config=RYB-2018>.
- Eurostat (2020): "Living conditions in Europe – poverty and social exclusion." https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Living_conditions_in_Europe_-_poverty_and_social_exclusion#Key_findings.
- Eurostat (2021): "Population change – Demographic balance and crude rates at national level." https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/demo_gind/default/table?lang=en.
- Forbes.hu (2021): "One in five settlements might be depopulated in Hungary, 11.08.2021." <https://forbes.hu/uzlet/magyarorszag-falvak-demografia-kutatas/>.
- Freedom House (2021): *Nations in Transit 2021. The Antidemocratic turn*. https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-04/NIT_2021_final_042321.pdf.
- Georgiev, Ognian (2020): *The Grand Return – Covid 19 and Reverse Migration to Bulgaria*. ECRF and KAS. <https://ecfr.eu/wp-content/uploads/Remigration-Report-ECFR-EN.pdf>.
- Global Focus (2021): "Democratic Resilience Index – A pilot project in Romania, Hungary and the Republic of Moldova." <https://www.global-focus.eu/2021/06/democratic-resilience-index/>.

- GLOBSEC (2020): *Voices of Central and Eastern Europe. Perceptions of democracy and governance in 10 EU countries*. <https://www.globsec.org/publications/voices-of-central-and-eastern-europe/>.
- GLOBSEC (2021): *GLOBSEC Trends 2021 – COVID-19. Central and Eastern Europe one year into the pandemic*. <https://www.globsec.org/publications/globsec-trends-2021/>.
- Ioan, Alexandra (2020): "Poland." In More-Hollerweger, E. et al. (2019): *Civil Society in Central and Eastern Europe: Monitoring 2019*. ERSTE Foundation, Vienna, pp. 124-128. <https://www.erstestiftung.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/civil-society-in-central-and-eastern-europe-monitoring-2019-1.pdf>.
- Juan, Ana Martinez (2016): "Rural areas and poverty. European Parliamentary Research Service." <https://epthinktank.eu/2016/12/16/rural-areas-and-poverty/>.
- Kawashima-Ginsberg, Kei & Sullivan, Felicia (2017): "Study: 60% of Rural Millennials lack Access to Political Life." *The Conversation*. 27 March 2017. <https://theconversation.com/study-60-percent-of-rural-millennials-lack-access-to-a-political-life-74513>.
- Kiss, Monika (2021): *Demographic Outlook for the European Union*. Members' Research Service. European Parliament. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/690528/EPRS_STU\(2021\)690528_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/690528/EPRS_STU(2021)690528_EN.pdf).
- Lavrič, Miran; Tomanović, Smiljka & Jusić, Mirna (2019): *Youth Study Southeast Europe 2018/2019*. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. John Hopkins Institute – Corona Virus Resource Center (2022): *Mortality Analyses*. <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/data/mortality>.
- Lutz, W.; Amran G.; Belanger, A.; Conte, A.; Gailey, N.; Ghio, D.; Grapsa, E.; Jensen, K.; Loichinger, E.; Marois, G.; Muttarak, R.; Potancokova, M.; Sabourin, P. and Stonawski, M. (2019): *Demographic Scenarios for the EU*. Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.
- Milner, Henry (2001): "Civic Literacy in Comparative Context – Why Canadians should be concerned." *Policy Matters* (Institute for Research on Policy Matters), vol. 2, no. 2.
- National Democratic Institute (2018): "Central Europe – Youths, Politics, Democracy. Public opinion research in Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia."
- National Democratic Institute (2020): "Youth Attitudes on Politics and Democracy – Poland. NDI Survey of Young People in Central Europe."

- National Democratic Institute (2020): "Youth Attitudes on Politics and Democracy – Hungary. NDI Survey of Young People in Central Europe."
- National Statistical Institute Bulgaria (2020): "Population by districts, municipalities, place of residence and sex as of 31.12.2020." <https://www.nsi.bg/en/content/2975/population-districts-municipalities-place-residence-and-sex>.
- National Statistical Institute Bulgaria (2018): "Population projections by district and sex." (2020-2080). <https://nsi.bg/en/content/2996/population-projections-districts-and-sex>.
- OECD (2021): *Government at a Glance 2021*. OECD Publishing, Paris. <https://doi.org/10.1787/1c258f55-en>.
- Reporters without borders (2020): "World Press Freedom Index 2020." <https://rsf.org/en/ranking/2021>.
- Romanian Insider (2019): "Study: The Government and Parliament are the least trusted institutions in Romania." <https://www.romania-insider.com/government-parliament-least-trusted>.
- OECD (2021): *Government at a Glance 2021*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/1c258f55-en>.
- Sabev, D.; Kopečný, O.; Trošok, M.; Kotecký, V.; Máriás, L.; Učeň, P.; Rizea, A.; Calistru, A. (2021): *Where does the EU money go? An analysis of the implementation of CAP funds in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia and Romania. Greens/EFA Group in the European Parliament*. <https://extranet.greens-efa.eu/public/media/file/1/6769>.
- Smilova, Ruzha (2020): "Bulgaria." In: More-Hollerweger, E. et al. (2019): *Civil Society in Central and Eastern Europe: Monitoring 2019*. ERSTE Foundation, Vienna. <https://www.erstestiftung.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/civil-society-in-central-and-eastern-europe-monitoring-2019-1.pdf>.
- Statista (2020): "Population in Romania in 2020 with a forecast until 2050, by county." <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1256084/romania-population-forecast/>.
- Statista (2021): "Share of adults who are fully vaccinated against COVID-19 in the European Economic Area (EEA) as of December 9, 2021, by country." <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1218676/full-covid-19-vaccination-uptake-in-europe/>.
- Sokolova, Tsvetelina (2021): "Dr. Boyan Zahariev: 'Corruption is not the root cause of our problems, it is the consequence,'" Mediapool, 25 November. <https://www.mediapool.bg/d-r-boyan-zahariev-korupsiyata-ne-e-parvoprichinata-za-nashite-problemi-tya-e-sledstviето-news329253.html>.
- The Economist (2018): "Imperial borders still shape politics in Poland and Romania, 21.11.2018." <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2018/11/21/imperial-borders-still-shape-politics-in-poland-and-romania>.
- Transparency International (2020): Corruption Perception Index 2020 Results Table. <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2020/index/nzl>.
- USAID (2020): *2019 Civil Society Organization Sustainability Index. Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia*. 23rd edition – October 2020. <https://www.fhi360.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/csosi-europe-eurasia-2019-report.pdf>.
- USAID (2021): *2020 Civil Society Organization Sustainability Index. Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia*. 24rd edition – September 2021, p. 60 (Bulgaria), p. 107 (Hungary), p. 171 (Poland), p. 184 (Romania). <https://www.fhi360.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/csosi-europe-eurasia-2020-report.pdf>.
- Vateva, Denitsa (2021): The Bulgarian giants in agricultural subsidies. Capital, 12 March 2021. https://www.capital.bg/biznes/zemedelie/2021/03/12/4185030_bulgarskite_giganti_v_zemedelskite_subsidii/?fbclid=IwAR3_0oJfNsSvjEilbkfn-hnlj99ZM3MYIf13fs6yEm6lp7fNRLMEH6KD-VY.
- Vracic, Alida & Judah, Tim (2021): Turning the Tide? The COVID-19 pandemic has created unexpected opportunities for the depopulating countries of South-East Europe – even in rural areas. A brief for UNFPA's Regional Office for Eastern Europe and Central Asia. <https://eeca.unfpa.org/en/publications/turning-tide>.
- Wikipedia (2021): "2020 Presidential elections. Map of Polish presidential elections, results of the second round by county." https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/e/e3/2020_Polish_presidential_election_-_2nd_round_results.svg/800px-2020_Polish_presidential_election_-_2nd_round_results.svg.png.
- The World Bank (2021): "Population, total – Hungary." <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=HU>.
- The World Bank (2021): "Population, total – Poland." <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=PL>.
- The World Bank (2021): "Population, total – Romania." <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=RO>.
- World Bank (2020): *Rapid Assessment of Romanian CSO in the Context of Covid-19*. <https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/document-detail/374111602685815317/rapid-assessment-of-romanian-cso-in-the-context-of-covid-19>.

ANNEX 1 – METHODOLOGY

Semi-structured expert interviews

Our first source was a dozen semi-structured expert interviews which took place in the process of selecting partner organizations to co-create and implement three Capacity Building programs¹⁵⁰ for CSOs in Hungary, Poland, and Romania¹⁵¹ as part of the Civic Europe program.¹⁵² This part of the process identified the four mapped 'civic desert' regions and highlighted some of the similarities among them that lead to low civic engagement (e.g. peripheral regions, depopulation, emigration, etc.).

Desk research

We engaged in desk research in order to inform our methodology, learn more about the national context of civil society in Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, and Romania, and to find existing literature about the four target regions on the local level.

¹⁵⁰ See <https://civic-europe.eu/capacity-building/>.

¹⁵¹ The Capacity Building program in Bulgaria was piloted in 2019 before the programs in Hungary, Poland, and Romania. The program does not focus on a single region but supports active individuals throughout the whole country. The partner organization implementing the program performs a double role in the program and is also one of the two main partners in the Civic Europe program – the Sofia Platform Foundation. The decision to focus on the Northwest region in Bulgaria was therefore not based on expert interviews, but on desk research.

¹⁵² See <https://civic-europe.eu/>.

Mapping methodology

Survey design

Data for our mapping was collected through an online survey, which was based on the snowball data sampling method. The survey consisted of four parts and thirty-eight questions in total. The first part, the profile of the entity (eighteen questions), aims to understand the general characteristics of respondents and their activities (type of entity, subtype, number of years of activity, areas of activity, budget, main beneficiaries, etc.). In general, these questions required either single or multiple-choice responses from a pre-given list with the option of adding personalized answers if existing ones did not fit.

The second part (three questions), asked respondents for an assessment of their organizational capacities by rating them from 1 (lowest) to 5 (highest).

To understand how local organizations view the situation on the ground, the seven questions of the third part asked participants to rate regional challenges and opportunities, trends, as well as the democratic skills and values of their target groups.

The last section of the survey served a dual purpose. It asked participants to refer other local actors from the region and to provide basic information about them. As part of the snowballing survey method, this is used to identify new potential participants who will be invited to fill out the survey, but also as a way to visualize and analyze the regional networks of civic actors. The participating respondents are visualized in an interactive online map which can be accessed at www.mappingcivildeserts.com. Due to a low referral rate, findings on local networks were not conclusive and the snowballing method was supplemented with the addition of new contacts.

The survey was designed by the co-authors' team with the support of a data collection and visualization agency in Romania – Studio Interrobang.

The full survey questionnaire can be found at www.mappingcivildeserts.com.

.

Outreach

Five local actors per NUTS 3 region (one for each entity type defined in the survey: non-governmental organizations, informal groups, religious institutions, public institutions, and private businesses) were proposed by the Civic Europe¹⁵³ team and its cooperation partners. The selected actors received an invitation to participate in the survey via email (from civic@sofiaplatform.org) and if necessary, local phone operators contacted them to invite them to fill out the form and to refer new actors to participate. The entire process was repeated for each newly referred actor.

Due to the low referral rate, the snowballing method was supplemented with the addition of new contacts in all regions. The findings described in the case studies and in the report *From 'civic deserts' to civic cohesion. How exploring Europe's peripheries can inspire ways of improving civic life* are not representative of the mapped regions but speak to the perceptions of the local civic actors we were able to reach.

Data collection

The data was collected between May and the mid-July 2021. This phase was split into two parts: an initial pilot, which was conducted only in Romania for a total of fifteen participants in order to calibrate the form contents, and the main data collection phase, which took place in all four countries. The data was collected by the data collection and visualization agency in Romania, Studio Interrobang, with the support of the team of co-authors and local phone operators in each region.

Data analysis

The data analysis was done in two phases. The first phase took place between July and August 2021. It encompassed translating data from local languages and aggregating it in English. This phase was implemented by the data collection and visualization agency in Romania, Studio Interrobang. The second phase took place between September and December 2021, and consisted

of an analysis of tendencies for the different types of actors, first for each region individually and then comparatively. This phase was implemented by the co-authors together with Studio Interrobang.

Data visualization

Data was visualized in the comparative graphs used in this report, regional graphs, and regional interactive maps of local actors, which can be found under 'Case studies' at www.mappingcivicdeserts.com by the data collection and visualization agency in Romania, Studio Interrobang.

Data validation

Feedback on the preliminary findings was collected in eight semi-structured interviews with a total of eleven civic actors between mid-July and mid-August 2021. This part of the process led to some of the examples of promising practices presented alongside our recommendations. Lastly, we organized a workshop with six civil society actors active in the mapped regions to discuss and validate the preliminary findings in September 2021.

¹⁵³ See <https://civic-europe.eu/>.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Mapping 'civic deserts' was made possible with the support of various individuals and organizations. We would like to thank everyone who took the time to fill out the mapping questionnaire. We would also like to thank the Stiftung Mercator for supporting the Civic Europe program and thereby the mapping of so-called civic deserts. We thank the Civic Europe program's team in Germany and cooperation partners in Hungary, Poland, and Romania for all their support in providing valuable feedback on the survey design and contacts in the target regions, as well as the rest of the team at the Sofia Platform Foundation. We are grateful to Alexandra Stef, Mihaita Lupu, Ruxandra Pop, the team at Global Metrics, as well as the team at the Tisch College's Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) of Tufts University for their valuable insights and feedback. We thank everyone who shared their experiences in our interviews and workshop. We are grateful to the local phone operators in Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, and Romania who followed up with the participants in our questionnaire. We thank Georgi Totev from Lens2Lens for the creation of the introductory video to this report, available at www.mappingcivicdeserts.com. And last but not least, we would like to give a big thank you to Razvan Zamfira and the team at Studio Interrobang for their support, data collection, analysis, and visualization, and for setting up of www.mappingcivildesert.com.

ABOUT US



Sofia Platform

Sofia Platform Foundation¹⁵⁴ is a non-governmental organization working to enhance the democratic political culture and to inform the debate on communism, transition, and democracy. The organization does so by means of civic education, capacity building for the local level and dealing with the history of the recent past.

¹⁵⁴ See <http://sofiaplatform.org/>.

PARTNERS



Civic Europe¹⁵⁵ is an incubator for locally rooted civic initiatives, organizations, and individuals in Central, Eastern, and Southern Europe realized by Sofia Platform Foundation and MitOst, funded by Stiftung Mercator. It supports locally rooted organizations and projects in two ways: through the Idea Challenge on the one hand and Capacity Building on the other. The Idea Challenge funds and mentors up to 20 ideas per year. The Capacity Building program fosters the capacities and ecosystems of locally rooted organizations and individuals who want to make a change in their communities. It supports individuals and organizations working in the fields of civic education and civic engagement in Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, and Romania.



MitOst e.V.¹⁵⁶ connects motivated people in a diverse and open network in Europe and its neighboring regions. MitOst supports cultural exchange and civil society engagement through its projects. The goal of the association is a lively civil society that goes beyond cultural, linguistic, and political borders.



Stiftung Mercator¹⁵⁷ is a private and independent foundation. Through its work it strives for a society characterized by openness to the world, solidarity and equal opportunities. In this context it concentrates on strengthening Europe; increasing the educational success of disadvantaged children and young people, especially those of migrant origin; driving forward climate change mitigation and promoting science and the humanities. Stiftung Mercator symbolizes the connection between academic expertise and practical project experience. One of Germany's leading foundations, it is active both nationally and internationally. Stiftung Mercator feels a strong sense of loyalty to the Ruhr region, the home of the founding family and the foundation's headquarters.

¹⁵⁵ See <https://civic-europe.eu/>.

¹⁵⁶ See <https://www.mitost.org/>.

¹⁵⁷ See <https://www.stiftung-mercator.de/>.

How does civic life on the local level differ from civic life in capital cities and urban centers? What are the challenges that local actors in 'civic deserts' are facing? How can civic education address these challenges?

This report presents the mapping of four 'civic desert' regions in four countries in Central and Eastern Europe. It looks at civic actors there and the challenges they are facing and offers recommendations for civil society, philanthropy, policy-makers, and media to engage with the civic realities on the ground with the goal of strengthening civic cohesion in areas with low civic engagement.

Mapping
«civic deserts»

More information at:
mappingcivicdeserts.com