Perspectives of Capacity Building in the CEE Region

(Re)Building Democracy³

18- 20 June 2024 | Pécs, Hungary

Conference
SUMMARY

Organized by:

EMBERSÉG EREJÉVEL

NIOK

ökotárs alapítvány

ASPEKTUS CSOPORT

AIM AND FRAME OF THE CONFERENCE

(Re)Building is a meeting point for organizations, experts, and donors dealing with the development of the civil sector for over three years. It is our conviction, backed up by international research, that a strong, resilient, well-functioning democracy is based on a strong, independent civil sector. During the last decade, a democratic backlash occurred in the Central Eastern European region, which can be seen in legislation, the autonomous functioning of civic organizations, and active citizenship.

Smaller or weaker organizations in rural areas are more dependent on local power, which influences their opportunities. A simple look at voter preferences in peripheral areas also suggests a stronger susceptibility to illiberal ideas. In recognition of the above processes, there is a growing focus on building the civic organizations' capacity in the countryside lately, so also at the (Re)Building³ conference. This event has offered an opportunity to talk about common issues and problems and help each other, as the limited civil space is a shared experience.

'How can we support well?' This was our key question for the conference in 2024. How can we make capacity-building programs responsive to the needs of our beneficiaries, taking into account their current resources, especially in rural areas? General or tailor-made? Project or core funding? High outreach or focused small-scale programs? How can we concentrate on the internal resources of our grantees and build on them to make them more effective? Other topics were networking as a tool against shrinking civil space and digitalization as a way to increase efficiency.

KEYNOTE PRESENTATION - AFTER THE EU ELECTIONS

Opening lecture by András Bíró-Nagy (Policy Solutions) and Q&A

In this presentation, we gained insight into what the results of the elections were, what political trends can be observed, and what they might mean for the region's CSOs. According to the presenter, this election was more predictable, because it is an aggregation of elections and so, big surprises rarely occur.

The parties representing the same values but in different countries balance each other out, and the election results of the larger countries (such as Germany, and France) play a big role in this. The main political positions are in the hands of large coalitions (such as EPP), when assigning, they pay attention to political, gender, and geographical balance. Highlights of the election are that the progressives (liberals and greens) suffered a greater defeat, and the breakthrough of the radical right, Euro-skeptic parties happened to some extent (not as significantly as the media forecasted), although polls never showed this possibility.

At the same time, several actors have not yet joined a party (non-aligned), and according to the forecasts, relatively many will gravitate to the Euro-skeptics. The right is also divided along the lines of the Russian-Ukrainian war. Three main European political parties stand out: the European People's Party (mainstream, center), which did the best in elections, then the Euro-skeptics (radical right), and lastly, the Socialists and Democrats. Building a grand coalition is needed and is still in progress, as this coalition consisting of usually three parties governs the European Parliament. In the CEE region, EPP lost some seats, social democrats are doing badly, and most of the non-aligned MEPs will probably join to the right.

There will be a noticeable change in priorities: less progressive topics will be on the agenda, i.e., the climate issue or policies will be pushed into the background, while economic decisions will become much more important for the sake of economic performance (the green transition is very costly). In the same way, the issue of security will come to the fore as the Russia-Ukraine war is still on the agenda, there will be a commissioner for defense position again and the pro-Ukrainian attitude remains. The amount of resources for the rule of law will probably not change (this is a basic requirement for joining parties). Exactly how the resources will be developed is still pending.

[WORKSHOP]: LOCAL PERSPECTIVE 1/2

Roundtable discussion with Rita Völgyi (Wildflower Association), Zsanett Pandúr (Pécs Basket Community), Gábor Vidák (Solution for Security Foundation) and Vilja Arató (Power of Humanity Foundation) as moderator, followed by small group discussions

We use the word rural a lot in the context of civil sector development, and most donors have a special focus on small, grassroots organizations. But do we know enough about rural organizations, their needs, and their different survival strategies? To answer this question, former grantees of Power of Humanity Foundation were invited, which are local, grassroots organizations for a panel discussion to hear their thoughts directly. The first topic considered the advantages of the above-mentioned grant program, as Power of Humanity Foundation invested a lot of time and energy in making it attractive to applicants by using and turning around its own negative experiences. Advantages and differences can be summarized as follows: the possibility of meeting and connecting with other CSOs with similar missions, participating in training and organizational development, people-oriented processes with a lot of attention from the supporting organization, supporting and enabling unique ideas to form, understanding the mission, professional attitude, and the flexibility.

This capacity-building process brought not only advantages but also disadvantages, which rather stemmed from the specificities of the programs and organizations. Challenges were to believe that projects can be done in a such supportive environment, reaching out to motivated children and youngsters (because they live in rural, closed communities), having difficulties with local government (because of political elections), setting up the community from scratch, and planning the next steps of expansion. Challenges for small groups in applying for grants like this could be the unfriendly, rural, political environment around them, difficulties with working together with local institutions, lack of proper information about grants and possibilities, lack of foreign language skills, moreover lack of motivation and mentality according to the representatives.

<u>WORKSHOP</u>: LOCAL PERSPECTIVE 2/2

If they need to advise donors, they would suggest breaking down their program into smaller, more accessible parts (as projects are not always understandable and manageable for rural organizations), being more available and caring about the supported organizations, building networks and proper channels, delegating mentors from already existing organizations, and making themselves, calls more visible.

After the panel discussion, groups were formed and the discussion on the local perspective continued. One group continued to think about the challenges of rural organizations. According to them, there is a lack of initiative among people, or the organization is built around one strong character. Donors are usually far away, and it is difficult to keep in touch with the beneficiaries, so it would be important to place meetings online. The local political and relational conditions strongly determine the possibilities, and the existence of trust is also questionable. CSO members are not conscious, and in addition, civil's work can be highly politicized, e.g., volunteer firefighters.

<u>WORKSHOP</u>: QUANTITY AND QUALITY

OPERA workshop facilitated by Ágnes Molnár (Alternative Communities Foundation) and András Nyirati (Power of Humanity Foundation)

For donors, a high number of beneficiaries typically means efficient use of resources in re-granting programs. Meanwhile, beneficiaries get bored with routine training that does not make a difference for them in the long term. This creates a dilemma of quantity or quality. The question is: How can we implement tailor-made development processes with numerous beneficiaries? More precisely, what are the factors that increase the long-term impacts of capacity-building processes and the factors that make intensive capacity-building processes attractive? According to these two questions, the participants were divided into two groups based on personal interest in the topics and then worked alongside the OPERA method which stands for Own suggestions, Pair suggestions, Explanations, Ranking, Arranging.

Section 1: What makes an intensive capacity-building process attractive to CSOs/groups?

- re-granting and gaining financial support/grants
- being part of an institutional strategic development
- needs assessment and based on that a flexible partnership approach
- minimizing administrative burdens
- mentoring
- open and inclusive call for CB process
- peer learning or support
- networking opportunities
- validated EU certificate in education and training

Section 2: How can we increase the long-term impact of capacity-building processes?

- creating networks, follow-up activities, peer support
- combining long-term financial support and mentoring (to help them put their knowledge into practice)
- preparing groups for transition (regards their inner life or structure)/change management
- coordinating themselves
- having fun (storytelling)
- improving (foreign) language skills
- fundraising (even in non-traditional sectors such as the private sector)
- supporting organizational and mindset change
- defining what the impact is
- keeping their autonomy

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WORKSHOP: DIGITALIZATION 1/2

Roundtable discussion with Maja Durlik (TechSoup Europe), Radka Bystřická (VIA Association), Nejc Horvat (Today is a new day), Miklós Merényi (K-Monitor) and Anikó Porkoláb (NIOK Foundation) as moderator, followed by Q&A

Digitalization is an important tool for capacity building, as it offers a range of opportunities to help NGOs mobilize their internal resources. However, there is resistance from organizations to use IT tools in their daily work and perhaps intermediary organizations are not aware of the latest developments. The participants of this panel discussion all came from an organization that deals with technology and actively uses it. Based on their experiences, the overall IT knowledge of civils varies: some organizations use IT tools quite well, and some that still need to improve a lot. The challenges of digitalization can be data protection, the elimination of surveillance, AI, achieving systemic change in the way CSOs use technological tools, educating civilians on what the tools can be used for, digital resilience, and lack of media literacy. Besides that the problem lies with the lack of managerial IT skills and change management skills, hardware possibilities, lack of understanding of cybersecurity, and funding, because IT is treated as an investment not as utilities.

The representatives' organizations aim to help other organizations by combining digital mapping and activism. In this case, mapping means research, an assessment of the technological state of the organizations, which lays the foundation for subsequent interventions. They also provide small grants, training, and digital assessment tools. In addition, emphasis is placed on the acquisition of hardware, in cooperation with local contractors, and on the development of cybersecurity. It is also important that they try to involve local civils to create and maintain local embeddedness, and also start pro bono coding projects. Digitalization is also critical from the point of view of democracy because there is no significant difference between online and offline democracy. CSOs are the maintainers of democracy, and digitization helps them in their work, e.g., by creating effective communication. There is also a form of online activism, called clicktivism, which can form honest communities, and with the help of digital tools, power can be called to account.

WORKSHOP: DIGITALIZATION 2/2

Looking into the future, the participants expect changes in the digital world affecting CSOs. More and more malicious actors are gaining ground for themselves, just as AI is advancing, which is neither objective nor safe, but at the same time, it can and will be used to do a significant amount of work. Therefore, the maintenance of democracy also requires more and more effort. The development of cybersecurity policies will be important, but at the same time, the gap, and discrimination between civil organizations in terms of their opportunities will grow. However, for them to survive, adaptation will be necessary, because manual work is too expensive. In addition to all this, it would be influential to maintain locality and create a European-level ecosystem for organizations.

The audience also brought up open source software, which was supported by the participants of the round table, but at the same time, they were considered dangerous due to their uncontrollability and the need for technical skills. Members of the audience were also curious whether there might be a blacklist consisting of harmful software, which turned out not to exist, but there were initiatives to detect harmful cookies and trackers. It was also mentioned that the development of it skills is essential, but at the same time, it is among the least popular in practice, which can be made more exciting by rethinking the training.

Survey of digitalization that was referred to: https://sdruzenivia.cz/state-of-digitalization-in-czech-nonprofits-survey/

[WORKSHOP]{.underline}: CIVIL EU PRESIDENCY

Roundtable discussion with Tina Divjak (CNVOS Slovenija), Jana Milerova (Glopolis), Bálint Gábor Hamvas (HAND Association), and Veronika Móra (Ökotárs Foundation) followed by Q&A

The rise of populist illiberal regimes made civil society in many countries monitor their EU Presidency to try to shape the agenda or even establish a parallel civil presidency. We have experience from the Czech Republic (2022), Slovenia (2021) and Romania (2019). Other countries that will hold the presidency shortly, such as Hungary and Poland, have similar initiatives that could benefit from sharing previous experiences. In this section, participants talked mainly about the already existing, recent Czech and Slovenian experiences. Both countries have had EU presidents twice. One period was difficult: they could not cooperate because of the government, while the other was better. In the other period, it was easier to cooperate with the government, and advocacy in domestic affairs was also more successful. The most important lesson from these experiences is that it is necessary to prepare for this period in advance and to establish national, even EU-wide cooperation between CSOs, and between civil society and the government.

Hungary already held the presidency in 2011, and in the second half of 2024, Hungary will hold the EU presidency again. In connection with this, a nationwide civil partnership is realized, and a series of events are launched in the joint coordination of several organizations.

[WORKSHOP]{.underline}: NETWORKS, COALITIONS, COOPERATION 1/2

Roundtable discussion with Myrto Chliova (Aalto University), Marie Peřinová (Open Society Fund Prague), Genevieve Shea (National Democratic Institute), Bálint Farkas (Civilisation Coalition), Balázs Makádi (Motivation Education Association / Aspect Group), and Agnes Molnar (Alternative Communities Association / Aspect Group) as moderator, followed by Q&A
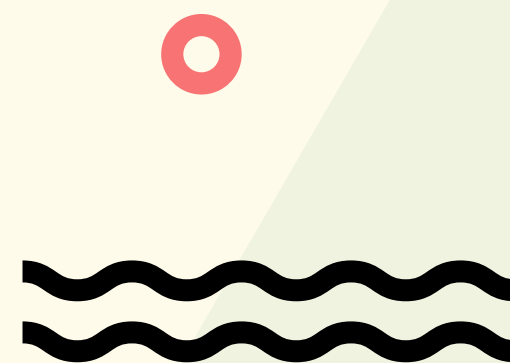
This session started with a short presentation in which the speaker presented research made with NGOs (link can be found below). The research question was how we can think about coalitions and networks under democratic backsliding. Due to the debilitation of the vertical space (e.g., attacks by the state, shrinking of opportunities for advocacy, dismantling of resource flows), it is worthwhile for organizations to create a horizontal space as a reaction. The most important features of this space that civil coalitions must have to cooperate successfully are the following. Collective identity with broad goals and bridging issues, self-governed structure with creating shared spaces and establishing internal rules, and outreach capacity with creating new forms of broad audience engagement. If that happens, outcomes can be shared norms, collective vigilance, and targeted grassroots engagement. The main takeaways are (1) that established and fragmented fields that rely on the state might undergo a similar trajectory, (2) full convergence or becoming a traditional union might not be the point of broad coalitions, (3) broad networks cheap as a buffer and platform in the long run, and (4) divergent efforts useful for issue or value-aligned organizations; can also be more hierarchical if the situation calls for it.

WORKSHOP: NETWORKS, COALITIONS, COOPERATION 2/2

The presentation was followed by a round table discussion, in which the invitees shared their thoughts on civic networks. They were the first to formulate what is characteristic of effective civic networks, which can be summarized as follows:

- deep understanding of the social context,
- mutual trust,
- partnership,
- ownership,
- shared vision, aligned perspectives,
- responding to actual needs,
- working with divergent partners,
- reaching local and regional members,
- broad coalitions that can defend democracy,
- inclusivity,
- well-developed procedures,
- back-office staff,
- having a coordinator,
- being selective about the purpose

On the question of why donors should support civil coalitions, the following thoughts were formulated. They can be good intermediaries: they usually have resources, expertise, and motivation, and even a small donation is enough because it multiplies. They can learn together, and share knowledge, and the vulnerability of CSOs decreases. How donors support organizations is also important: it is worth assessing their needs, thinking in terms of multi-year support, providing strategic support, supporting advocacy and peer learning. It is also essential to provide mentoring, connect donors, work in a consortium, give patience and protection, and to think through what it means when the support ends. An important thought is that it is not the coalition that should be visible, but the cause. Based on the audience's questions, it was also conceptualized how a coalition works well: it is worth working with jointly created internal rules, in which the emergency meeting should also be conceptualized to respond quickly.

The presenter's research report can be found here:
https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fo/9qxnm337w8jwagpw5lxlf/ANz3LdAZcA0P9mWV9LTFTq0?rlkey=exyatwc35xjl1lvuympsuw20m&e=1&dl=0

<u>WORKSHOP</u>: THE BIG FUNDING DEBATE

Experts with short lectures: Rosena Ivanova (Bulgarian Fund for Women), Marcin Górecki (Shipyard Foundation), facilitated by Bendegúz Tikász (Civil College Foundation / Power of Humanity Foundation)

At the beginning of the session, the two invited speakers argued in a few words against/for the project and core funding. One of the presenters emphasized that in the case of core funding, a high degree of trust and faith is needed to give and receive financial support. The other, in the case of project funding, said that it would be worthwhile to link these amounts to development, for example, to carry out organizational development for a specified goal. After the short presentations, on papers placed at four tables, arguments for and against the two phenomena (core + and - , and project + and -) had to be collected, so that each group went around each table. Then they went one more round, looked over the arguments, and those that needed to be supplemented or were considered false, were drawn out and argued for.

The most important lesson from the workshop was that most people know and are familiar with project funding. They have a lot of experience with this method and they clearly saw its weaknesses and strengths. And some people also have experience with core funding or have strong opinions about it. At the moment it seemed to be something that everyone thought was the perfect solution, even if they needed it for different problems. On the one hand, people can see what they want in it, and on the other hand, it can open up opportunities for experimentation.

WORKSHOP: THE DONOR PERSPECTIVE 1/2

Roundtable discussion with Hedvig Morvai (ERSTE Stiftung), Olesia Gardner (USAID), Eszter Szucs (Civitates), and András Nyirati (Power of Humanity Foundation) as moderator, followed by Q&A

In the last discussion, representatives of the donor organizations spoke, first expressing their opinion about the status of civil society in the CEE region. According to them, these organizations are specifically vulnerable to political changes, which makes it difficult for them to have a long-term strategy, they are in continuous crisis and survival mode. The pressure on individuals is very high, including on sustainability, because the rate of fatigue and burnout is very high. The shrinking space is not necessarily an Eastern phenomenon, but the strategies formed here to cope with it continue to emerge and migrate to Western countries. In addition to all this, they have great motivation and determination, and their capacity development opportunities are constantly being questioned, and many legal obstacles hinder their work.

In the next question, they explained what the donors think about cooperation. Overall, it depends on the type of donor, e.g., private philanthropies can specialize in other topics and have other responsibilities. Donors do not have a clear segment either, each of them has a different, own story. In any case, networking and partnership are considered good and as an advantage, because of their high sustainability. Despite that, it is important that the supported organization has its fundraising strategy, and has good coordination and communication. On the part of donors, an open channel through which they can receive inputs matters a lot, but it is not established at the moment. One consequence of that, there is no information about who is supporting whom.

WORKSHOP: THE DONOR PERSPECTIVE 2/2

The last topic aimed to elaborate on the donor's strategies and future focus. The focus is on the creation of the funding landscape. New donors will probably appear, so a larger budget will become available, but this will take time. More proactive actors will be needed, coalitions will be supported, and emphasis will also be placed on psycho-social well-being and media independence. For the time being, it can be said that the donor organizations are in the negotiation phase.

See you next year!
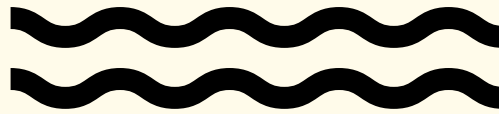# Interested? Get in touch!

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