

CSO RESILIENCE: WHAT DOES IT MEAN AND HOW CAN WE STRENGTHEN IT?

- Reflection Paper -

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According to the [EU Global Strategy for Foreign and Security Policy](#), civil society's contribution is essential for state and societal resilience by promoting democratic values and the rule of law, holding governments accountable, ensuring public participation and working with communities. However, civil society space is shrinking more and more worldwide, leaving civil society organisations (CSOs) unable to contribute to their full potential at making communities and societies more resilient. Generally speaking, **resilience is defined by the capacity to recover quickly from difficulties but now that civil society space is shrinking, we must focus on ways of strengthening CSO resilience.**

This reflection paper brings into discussion the **concept of resilience** from the perspective of civil society within the Black Sea Region, exploring what CSO resilience stands for and how CSOs, the Black Sea NGO Forum, as well as other stakeholders can contribute to strengthening it. **The content of this paper is based on the input gathered from over 100 participants at the XIth edition of the Black Sea NGO Forum (12th-14th of November 2018, Brussels), coming from 10 countries covered by the Black Sea Synergy (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bulgaria, Georgia, Republic of Moldova, Romania, Russia, Turkey, Ukraine).**

SHRINKING SPACE FOR CIVIL SOCIETY: TODAY'S REALITY

In recent years, the space for civil society action has been severely restricted. The newest report published by [CIVICUS "People Under Attack"](#) (November 2018), based on the updates from the [CIVICUS Monitor](#) platform, shows that at global level civil society is under serious attack in 111 out of 196 countries, with just 4% of the world's population living in countries with an open space for civil society.

In regard to the Black Sea Region, 7 countries are rated obstructed (Armenia, Republic of Moldova and Ukraine), repressed (Belarus, Russia and Turkey) or even closed (Azerbaijan), with only 4 of them being rated narrowed (Bulgaria, Georgia, Greece and Romania) and no country being considered open. Civil society action is restricted in various forms, ranging from attacks on human rights and freedoms, restrictive legal frameworks and administrative burdens to limited participation in decision-making processes and restricted access to funding sources.

Nonetheless, civil society is recognized, both at global and European level, as an essential actor in achieving long-term sustainable development (UN [Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development](#)), as well as building resilient societies and communities ([Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council "A Strategic Approach to Resilience in the EU's External Action"](#)). Moreover, civil society has vast expertise and know-how in many fields, ranging from good governance, local democracy, citizen participation to environmental protection, education, and youth empowerment that could be used to advance policies, generate development and create resilience (["Towards a Stronger & More Sustainable Civil Society Cooperation at the Black Sea" - Position Paper on the Black Sea Synergy Review](#)).

In order to enable civil society to bring its valuable contribution, its own resilience needs to be taken into account and supported, both from an internal and external point of view.

During the two interactive sessions on the theme of CSO resilience organised at the Black Sea NGO Forum, Xith edition (12th-14th of November 2018, Brussels), the following conclusions and recommendations were underlined by participants:

HOW WOULD A RESILIENT CSO LOOK LIKE?



WHAT SHOULD A CSO DO IN ORDER TO STRENGTHEN ITS RESILIENCE?

An inward perspective – Take care of your people, be strategic and visionary

- ✓ Create a human resources (HR) strategy, continuously invest in your staff and encourage teambuilding;
- ✓ Build visionary leadership with the capacity to see upcoming global and local changes and challenges and adapt to them;
- ✓ Evaluate institutional and operational strategies periodically and adjust them to current realities;
- ✓ Carry out a risk assessment and have a response mechanism for emergency situations within the organisation;
- ✓ Build strong governance and accountability, elaborate clear and transparent internal policies and procedures;
- ✓ Elaborate a funding strategy that focuses on funding diversification – state funds, foreign funds, fundraising from the local community and businesses;

An outward perspective – Tell your story, engage communities and build strong partnerships

- ✓ Invest in PR and proactive communication - make your CSO visible to the public via conferences, fora, social media, broadcasting;
- ✓ Fight CSO stereotypes and negative image by being transparent and creating public campaigns with a focus on success stories and impact;
- ✓ Communicate your results beyond your target group;
- ✓ Go local – educate people within local communities on CSO role & contribution;
- ✓ Focus on youth and education;
- ✓ Carry out effective networking, cooperation and partnerships at local, regional and international levels;
- ✓ Be active in regional and international networks;

- ✓ Elaborate a marketing and communication strategy;
 - ✓ Offer high-quality services and expertise;
 - ✓ Maintain a good communication within the organisation.
- ✓ Build partnerships with a variety of stakeholders (state, businesses etc);
 - ✓ Share your knowledge / expertise/ know-how within the region.

WHAT EXTERNAL FACTORS INFLUENCE CSO RESILIENCE?

- ❖ **Governments:** Policies and legislation that allow civil society to operate freely and support its development (e.g. respect of human rights and freedoms, unrestricted access to public information, unrestricted access to funding resources, tax incentives etc);
- ❖ **Donors:** Core funding for organisational development; Support for long-term projects; Support for networks and coalitions; Support for cooperation and experience sharing within the region.
- ❖ **General public:** Increased public participation; Recognition of CSO role & valuable contribution to society.

HOW CAN THE BLACK SEA NGO FORUM SUPPORT CSOS IN STRENGTHENING THEIR RESILIENCE?

- ❖ Facilitate **CSO partnerships** at regional level and support **active thematic working groups**;
- ❖ Create an **effective granting mechanism**;
- ❖ Support and create tools for **exchanging of experience, ideas and know-how** in the region;
- ❖ Invest in **capacity building**;
- ❖ Have a **multi-stakeholder approach** – facilitate partnerships with a diversity of stakeholders;
- ❖ Facilitate the participation of CSOs in **international processes**;
- ❖ Network and **coordinate with other fora/ structures** for more impact;
- ❖ Create a platform for **advocacy at EU level**;
- ❖ **Advocate for effective granting mechanisms** for regional cooperation and provide more contacts with donors.

The Black Sea NGO Forum is a regional event under the framework of the Black Sea Synergy, initiated in 2008 by the Romanian NGDO Platform – FOND and currently supported by the European Commission and the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Forum’s goal is to create an open space for debate, mutual knowledge and understanding, communication and cooperation among civil society representatives, governments, international organizations and donors active in the Black Sea Region, with a focus on sharing good practices in various domains and success stories of regional cooperation.

The two interactive sessions on CSO resilience were part of the Black Sea NGO Forum’s continuous efforts to raise awareness on the importance of creating an enabling environment for civil society in the Black Sea Region, one of the main directions of the Forum according to the [Strategic Framework](#) endorsed by participants in 2015, and an essential condition for creating formal and informal thematic networks on specific thematic cooperation areas.

The conclusions and recommendations of this reflection paper will be widely disseminated to our database of Black Sea NGO Forum participants, as well as relevant stakeholders such as EU institutions, global coalitions and networks, donors active in the region and other regional initiatives.