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Civil Society as the Arena of the New European* Climate Hegemony:
A neo-Gramscian Approach to European Green Transition

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Introduction

The relationship between the European Union and its emerging civil society has always been the subject of academic debates. As civil society was naturally built at the national level, the European construction process developed ways for European civil society to take shape. From the first election for the European Parliament that took place in 1979 to the Lisbon Treaty that provided a tool for participatory democracy called the European Citizens' Initiative (Sasvari 2015), the goals of European Platforms and Networks of NGOs were to impact the direction of the European Union's actions and development by highlighting the needs and ambitions of their clientele (Dirk 2012). Nowadays, as the effects of the European Green Deal (EGD) are impacting European society, the role of the organized European civil society will be to balance the ambitious climate goals with social fairness and inclusivity.

The need for protective social policies that should come together with the green transition (Zimmermann–Gengnagel 2023) emphasizes the role of the Platforms and Networks of NGOs in influencing the EGD by advocating for inclusive policies that take into consideration the needs of European citizens and vulnerable communities, ensuring that no one is left behind (Pianta and Lucchese 2020: 6). Vulnerable European citizens could turn to supporting populist parties and climate sceptical political leaders may slow down the green transition (Thalberg et al. 2024; Stegemann–Ossewaarde 2018). However, the role of the organized European civil society is not just to provide feedback for EU institutions in drafting new policies but also to ensure that a consensus for the green transition is reached between European citizens.

Literature review

This research uses a critical approach that will provide the theoretical framework to understand the complex relations between social forces shaping European policies and the role of civil society. The neo-Gramscian theory, rooted in the ideas of the Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci, focuses on the European integration process, stating that it is a project driven by dominant economic groups' interests by concepts like hegemony, social forces, civil society, or organic intellectuals. For example, Andreas Bieler (2005) suggests that neo-Gramscianism, using the concept of class struggle, provides deep insights into how the socio-economic agenda shapes European policies. Harald Köpping Athanasopoulos (2020) sees European integration as part of the global neoliberal hegemony where international capital benefits from this process in front of the broader societal interests. In this case, European integration is more than a process; it is assimilated with a hegemonic project that shapes social relations and public policies in favor of the elite interests. Bieler and Morton (2001) and Apeldoorn (2004) emphasized how neo-Gramscian theory has been applied to understand hegemony and structural changes in the European Union, while Levy and Egan (2003) explored how neo-Gramscian framework can be applied to corporate strategies, highlighting the intersection of capital, social forces, and state policies in environmental negotiations and providing an explanation on how European integration process is shaped by the corporate interests through regulatory frameworks.

Neo-Gramscian analysis views European integration as a political project that impacts all facets of EU social norms and identities, including economic policy, by acting as a transnational vehicle for capitalist hegemony. However, the EGD and the transition to a Net Zero society require a new hegemonic project to be shaped. At this point, Harald Winkler adapts the neo-Gramscian theory to understand the just transition process to a green European society. He applies and modifies some core concepts of Grasmci's thought, such as ideology, hegemony, change agents, and fundamental conditions to articulate a theory that understands just transition as an ideological element that will bring together coalitions of change agents (Winkler 2020: 1). The role of the change agents (such as trade unions, NGO Networks, social movements, governments, businesses, or international organizations) is basically to form an alliance and to reinforce a new cultural hegemony that supports moving away from high-carbon and inequality-driven economy (Winkler 2020: 8).

The concept of hegemony provided by neo-Gramscian theory allows the research to go beyond the traditional Marxist mechanisms of power in society. The relevance of Gramsci's concept of hegemony is particularly important today in the context of globalization and the dominance of neoliberal ideologies (Johnson 2007: 102–6), shaping the hegemonic model known as fossil capitalism (Huber 2009; Griffiths 2023). According to Cader and Sundrijo (2023), hegemony involves a more critical role of cultural and ideological factors over coercive power in constructing the people's collective will.

This is how the dominant classes maintain their leadership, creating common sense and projecting their interest as universal.

The contestation of the hegemonic fossil capitalism conducted by the change agents takes place in civil society. In the neo-Gramscian approaches, civil society is understood as a social realm that can drive social transformation and as a site where "hegemony is consented, sustained, reproduced and channeled, but also where counter-hegemonic and emancipatory forces also could emerge" (Icaza Garza 2006: 488). Therefore, civil society is more of a relational concept, where the hegemonic project is maintained or changed through consent rather than coercion (Rupert 1998: 431). As coercion is a feature of the national state, the European Union lacks this way of social intervention.

Going deeper into Antonio Gramsci's political thinking, one can also find organic intellectuals who can be identified as change agents. The concept of organic intellectuals in neo-Gramscian theory positions specific individuals as crucial drivers in forming and maintaining a hegemonic structure. A simple definition is that organic intellectuals exercise leadership by organizing social hegemony (Evans 2005). In contrast with traditional intellectuals, who have their roots in a previous mode of production and continue to maintain their sphere of influence and structure in a context of significant changes in production and political and social organization (Silva 2022), organic intellectuals are deeply rooted in the structure of the class and actively contribute to shaping the direction and consciousness of their respective classes (Pijl 2005). Gramsci explains the identity of the organic intellectuals by stating that everyone has the potential to be an intellectual, even if not everyone fulfills the social role of an intellectual (Gramsci 1971). Therefore, organic intellectuals will be part of the change agents' concept that can contribute to the new European climate hegemony.

To conclude, according to the neo-Gramscian theory, civil society is an arena where the contestation of the fossil capitalist hegemonic model takes place, while a new European climate hegemony of just transition may arise conducted by the change agents that joined the alliance, such as organic intellectuals, trade unions, NGO Networks, social movements, governments, businesses, or international organizations. At this point, the research question of this paper is formulated as follows: "Who are the change agents within European civil society that have aligned with the alliance, and how fostering a counter-hegemonic discourse against the traditional economic model?"

Methodology

To answer the research question, this paper will employ qualitative content analysis to understand the commitment of the change agents in the transition process to a Net Zero economy. To achieve this, the change agents will be split into three categories: individuals (Climate Pact Ambassadors), organizations (NGOs,

Networks of NGOs, movements, trade unions, and political organizations), and private companies. The description, action plans, or public profiles of change agents will be examined using the qualitative content analysis method after an in-depth and structured process of coding and categorizing textual data to find patterns, themes, and meanings. This method involves collecting data from official websites like the European Climate Pact ('Meet Our Ambassadors', n.d.), where the profiles of 879 Climate Ambassadors are available as the research is performed in May 2024, or individual websites of all 43 organizations that joined the Alliance for Just Transition ('European Alliance for a Just Transition', n.d.) until May 2024. The results will be assessed using neo-Gramscianism as a critical theory of understanding the European integration process to emphasize the role of the change agents in promoting a just transition to a new European climate hegemony using civil society as an arena for contesting the present hegemonic structure of fossil capitalism.

Analysis

The neo-Gramscian definition of civil society, as a realm where the formation of a new hegemonic project takes place, allows us to go beyond the traditional definition of civil society and to identify all the active actors in promoting a just transition. Following the research of Harald Winkler, the fundamental conditions for social and economic change will be achieved when change actors (social movements and NGOs, transnational corporations, firms, organized labor, states, cities, or intergovernmental organizations) that share similar visions, values, mindsets, or narratives will generate alliances of change agents coalescing around ideological elements and will gain the support of other actors (Winkler 2020: 6). As the paper is focused on consensus building for reaching a European climate hegemony and as the primary vehicle of change is the European Union through its member states, European citizens who are facing difficulties adapting to the new economic conditions might develop adversities to all these regulations. Therefore, the critical change actors that could mediate and achieve consensus building are individuals, NGOs (organizations, movements, networks, or political parties), businesses, and trade unions.

Regarding individual involvement, the most prominent role belongs to European Climate Pact Ambassadors (CPAs). They are key figures in the consensus-building process initiated by the European Commission and act on a voluntary base at the national and supranational levels. The European Climate Pact is a tool of the European Green Deal aiming to engage individuals, communities, and organizations in climate change mitigation activities and promote sustainable development. The role of the ambassadors is to inform, inspire, and support climate actions within their networks and communities ('Become a Pact Ambassador', n.d.). According to Jale Tosun, CPAs are crucial in promoting participatory governance and are a crucial component of the European Union's strategy for transitioning to sustainable development.

The European Green Deal's ambitious objective requires CPAs to play a crucial role in this transformation (Tosun 2022). They were selected based on their steadfast dedication to climate action, and, to maximize the impact of their climate advocacy, they must set an outstanding example, motivate others, and cultivate relationships (Tosun–Pollex–Crumbie 2023).

In another comprehensive study, Jale Tuson, Lucas Geese, and Irene Lorenzoni evaluated CPA profiles to determine how committed these individuals are to taking climate action. They discovered that CPAs represent both older and younger generations and that their perspectives on advocating for climate action can vary significantly. Older participants usually mention their worry for future generations as a significant incentive, whereas younger ambassadors are more likely to include their peers in climate projects directly (Tosun–Geese–Lorenzoni 2023). Nevertheless, the role of the ambassadors and their commitments will not make them genuine organic intellectuals in a Gramscian way unless they are not representative of their environment, and they are not performing a variety of activities related to climate change. At this point, the qualitative content analysis conducted on the public profiles of the CPAs ('Meet Our Ambassadors', n.d.) shows that the distribution of the ambassadors in national states is as follows: Italy – 13.49 percent, Spain – 12.06 percent, Germany – 8.66 percent, France – 7.68 percent, Greece – 5.92 percent, Belgium – 5.92 percent, Netherlands – 4.50 percent, Poland – 4.28 percent, Portugal – 4.28 percent, Romania – 3.40 percent, Bulgaria – 2.74 percent, Luxembourg – 2.63 percent, Austria – 2.52 percent, Hungary – 2.30 percent, Sweden – 2.19 percent, Ireland – 2.19 percent, Slovakia – 2.08 percent, Lithuania – 2.08 percent, Czech Republic – 2.08 percent, Croatia – 1.54 percent, Finland – 1.43 percent, Latvia – 1.43 percent, Slovenia – 1.32 percent, Denmark – 1.10 percent, Estonia – 0.77 percent, Cyprus – 0.77 percent, Malta – 0.66 percent. This distribution shows a fair distribution where the most populated EU states have higher percentages regarding the number of ambassadors, while the small states have fewer.

Besides representativeness, the variety of activities that ambassadors conduct is also crucial because it shows the diversity of the social sector where they act. The qualitative content analysis on their public profiles and focused on critical words regarding their commitments and activities revealed the following results: Awareness: 27.38 percent, Sustainability: 19.37 percent, Energy: 13.89 percent, Education: 13.29 percent, Research: 10.65 percent, Policy: 7.40 percent, Transport: 3.65 percent, Advocacy: 2.23 percent, Conservation: 1.42 percent, Waste Management: 0.71 percent, as *Figure 1* shows. Therefore, all these categories can be split into three activities: Education and raising awareness, sustainable practices and research, and public policy advocacy. Summing up, 40.67 percent of the ambassadors mentioned rising awareness and education as their main activities for 2024, which means that they will participate in public events, draft formal education courses for the curriculum, or undergo training sessions. Through these activities, they will spread the European message regarding climate change and a just transition to a green economy and try to reach a consensus among regular citizens. 30.02 percent of them

will promote sustainable practices among individuals, businesses, and member states using research tools and good practices models. 29.3 percent of the ambassadors are focused on public policy advocacy and are active in climate change-related sectors like energy, transport, nature conservation, and waste management.

Figure 1. (author's contribution)

Main Activities Areas of Climate Ambassadors
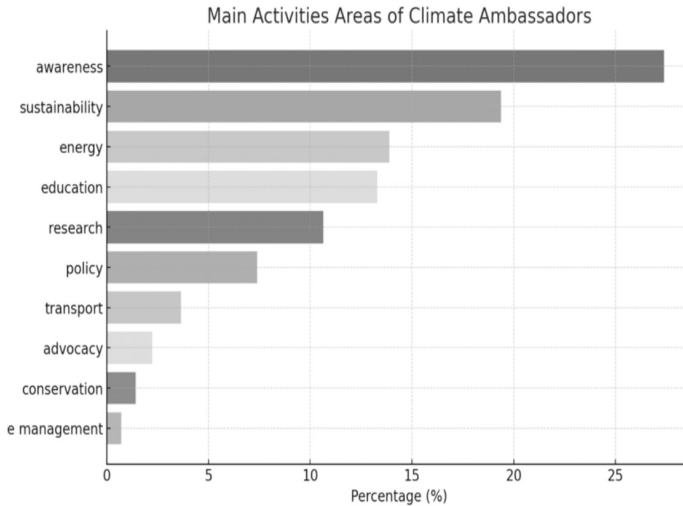
Another category of change agents vital for building a new hegemonic project in the civil society arena are organizations such as non-governmental organizations, movements, networks, or political parties. For a clear picture of the organizations that are actively promoting the European message of just transition, the paper will focus on the analysis of the European Alliance for a Just Transition, an informal group of organizations that share a common vision for a Just Transition to a social and sustainable Europe ('European Alliance for a Just Transition', n.d.). The forty-three members of this alliance were analyzed based on the type of organization, activity area, description, strategic vision, and number of members (if it was a network of organizations from EU member states). The qualitative content analysis conducted on all the information gathered about these organizations shows that 41.86 percent of them are Networks of NGOs, 18.60 percent are Political Organisations, 18.60 percent are NGOs, 9.30 percent are Think Tanks, 9.30 percent are Advocacy Groups, 2.33 percent are Union Federations (see *Figure 2*). Furthermore, only 25.58 percent represent environmental organizations, 55.82 percent represent other social causes (women's rights, people with disabilities, education, fight against poverty or democracy), and 18,60 percent represent political causes.

Figure 2. (author's contribution)

Percentage of Organisations by Type
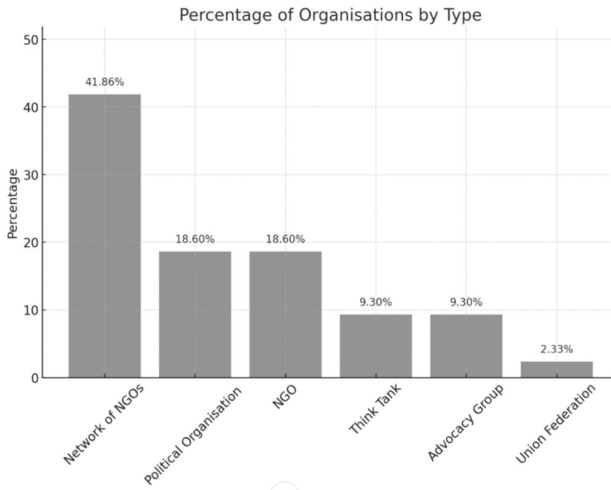
Because environmental organizations are already familiar with climate change, climate action, pollution, circular economy, reforestation and afforestation, environmental protection, waste management, or carbon footprint, the question is how many other organizations incorporated the climate fight into their activities? According to qualitative research, 62.5 percent of the organizations listed online that do not have "Environment" as their activity area still contain environmental activities in their descriptions or strategic visions. According to Figure 3, the impact of joining the European Alliance for a Just Transition can be seen in the distribution of presents between descriptions or strategic visions only 31.25 percent of them have environmental activities in the description, while 59.38 percent are in the strategic vision. It shows a process of adaptation and reorientation toward green activities. Another relevant aspect is that, of the forty-three members of this alliance, approximately 55 percent mention either "just transition" or "climate justice" in their descriptions or strategic visions, making them more reliant on the hegemonic project of the European Union.

Figure 3. (author's contribution)

Environmental Activities Mention in Non-Environmental Orgs
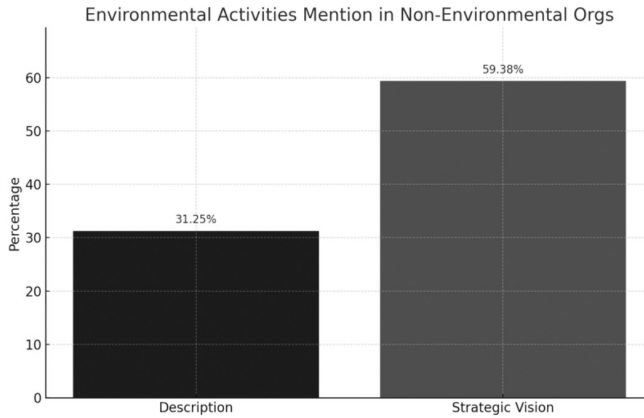
Furthermore, part of the concept of European civil society from the neo-Gramscian perspective, is private companies. Their transformative role should not be neglected, as the European Commission is asking them to get more involved in the green transition process and to support NGOs through CSR activities. However, at this moment, no formal alliance was established yet, as in September 2022, CSR Europe, together with the EU Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights, Nicolas Schmit, and CEOs of leading companies met in Brussels to initiate a broader EU Business Alliance for Just Transition ('Business Leaders Join Forces with the Commission for an Inclusive Green Deal' 2022). When the alliance is established, an in-depth analysis can be conducted also on private companies.

Discussion

After the analysis conducted for the relevant change actors in the consensus-building process for a European climate hegemony, in this chapter, the research will focus on arguing why the identified actors are so important for the proper implementation of the European Green Deal and for achieving its objectives. A relevant approach in this regard belongs to Zimmermann–Gengnagel (2023), who analyzed how different stakeholders respond to the social issues raised by the ambitions of the EGD in various social domains. Therefore, according to *Figure 4*, they identified the most important actors involved in EGD debates and transition as Environmental NGOs, composed of Climate Actions Network (70 percent), WWF, Greenpeace, and SDG News Europe (30 percent). Then, they identified the industry and employers' associations as covering 23.2 percent of the debate topics regarding EGD, trade unions at 9.9 percent, activists at 9.4 percent, and social NGOs at 2,9 percent.
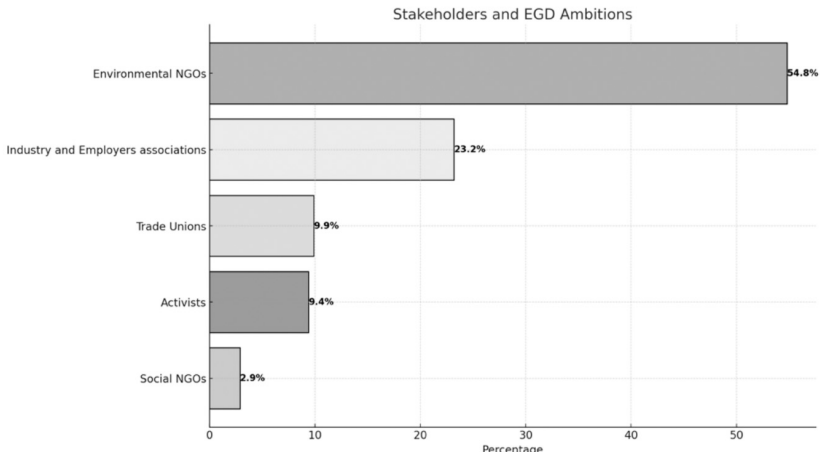
Zimmermann–Gengnagel emphasize in this way the crucial role of civil society, which, along with the European Commission and Member States, is ensuring that the green transition is socially inclusive, addresses redistributive conflicts, and gains broad societal support (Zimmermann–Gengnagel 2023). The actors of civil society they identified with a significant role in EGD debates and transition overlap with the actors discussed in the current research paper: activists are understood as individuals, environmental NGOs, and social EGOs together as NGOs and networks of NGOs, industry as private companies and trade unions.

The most relevant individuals or activists that could have been identified for this research are the European Climate Pact Ambassadors. Their activity is focused on climate change and EGD transition policies, trying to engage EU citizens in debate and activities that will raise awareness of the necessity of a green transition. As this paper pointed out, the importance of CPAs is due to the high degree of representativeness and the wide variety of activities that ambassadors conduct. In terms of activities, CPAs could conduct personal activities using the identity given by the European role and could organize satellite events that are part of the European Climate Pact events ('Events', n.d.). When this research was performed, 337 satellite events were registered as follows: 94 in 2024, 32 in 2023, 83 in 2022, 122 in 2021, and 6 in 2020. These events engage EU citizens in various activities such as conferences and summits, public debates, training and workshops, info days, expert meetings, visits, exhibitions, political meetings, campaign launches, competitions, and award ceremonies.

In the case of NGOs and networks of NGOs that have the most extensive coverage, according to Zimmermann and Gengnagel in EGD debate and implementation, the research focused on the organizations that joined the European Alliance for a Just Transition. As long as the Just Transition Mechanism (JTM) is not all about financing, the involvement of communities, local authorities, social partners,

and non-governmental organizations became a high priority of the European Commission (Spani 2020: 3). But the importance of NGOs in the Europeanization process is not a new subject, non-state actors being for decades essential for the EU governance process and for addressing the EU's perceived democratic deficit (Schoenefeld 2021). Alex Warleigh is developing this subject, stating that NGOs can influence the EU's policies as political campaigners because EU actors do not expect NGOs to tell what they want to hear (Warleigh 2001: 635–36).

Trade unions that are part of the organization's changing actors in this analysis agree on the need for climate neutrality. However, they are more concerned with aspects related to employment, re-employment, and the quality of jobs for the workers who lost their previous jobs due to the green transition and strongly advocate for training and reskilling programs after they faced the closure of power plants, mines or shale oil plants (Demetriades–Adăscăliței 2023: 17). This is why trade unions are not very interested in setting the climate ambition policies too high, at least not on the short term (Galgoczi 2024). Nevertheless, for the transition to be just, the involvement of trade unions is vital, and they should be included in all the governance processes to ensure consensus building among workers.

Private companies in the industrial sector and other employer associations will play a significant role in the European green transition. Even if the EU's Business Alliance for Just Transition is not yet established, the EU regulation will push big companies with a high carbon footprint to be part of the change. The first legislative tool is the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) that entered into force on 5 January 2023 and pushed around 49.000 companies across Europe (including non-EU companies that generate over EUR 150 million) to report also on environmental matters ('Corporate Sustainability Reporting – European Commission', n.d.) and the second is the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism which entered into application on 1 October 2023 and tries to tackle carbon leakage by identifying the companies that moved their carbon-intensive production to countries with less climate legislation and will make sure that the carbon paid for imported goods is similar to the domestic carbon price ('Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism – European Commission', n.d.). These reforms will have a significant impact shortly as more companies will be involved in CSR environmental activities while big industrial players could invest in and develop the carbon offset market.

Conclusions

This paper explores the role of civil society, understood through the neo-Gramscian lens, as a critical arena for contesting the hegemonic project of the fossil fuel-based economic paradigm and cultivating a counter-hegemonic discourse. The new European climate hegemony, based on the ideology of a just transition to a green economy, aims to gain popular support for the transition policies, mitigating the risk of social instability and the ascendancy of populist factions.

Therefore, the research explicitly addresses these change agents within European civil society by employing a qualitative methodology to identify the relevant actors and analyze their relevance and potential impact. Findings indicate that change agents could be identified across individuals, organizations (NGOs, networks, movements, trade unions, political organizations), and private companies. Zimmermann and Gengnagel also identified these change actors as the most influential actors in the EGD debates and transition process, with NGOs and trade unions covering 67.4 percent, industry, and employers' associations at 23.2 percent, and activists at 9.4 percent.

Regarding individuals, the most representative change actors identified are the European Climate Pact Ambassadors. They are key figures in the consensus-building process, acting voluntarily and aiming to engage individuals, communities, and organizations in climate change mitigation activities and promoting sustainable development. The 884 Climate Ambassadors profile analysis shows good representativeness at each member state and various areas they are willing to engage in during the mandate. Most ambassadors, around 40 percent, are engaged in activities like raising awareness and education, which accurately overlap to build consensus; a third of them is promoting sustainable practices among individuals, businesses, and member states, while the other third is focused on public policy advocacy being active in climate change related sectors like energy, transport, nature conservation, and waste management.

Regarding the analysis conducted on the organizations that joined the European Alliance for a Just Transition, it shows a dominance of NGOs, networks of NGOs, and political organizations that are adapting their discourse and strategic vision to climate-related topics, while more than half of all members were mentioning "just transition" or "climate justice" in their descriptions or strategic visions. After excluding about 25 percent of these organizations from analysis because they are already involved in environmental activities, the paper revealed that 31,25 percent of them already mentioned environmental activities in their description while 59,38 percent were updating the strategic vision for future actions. The private companies that could be essential change agents are not yet constituted in a formal alliance, as the process started in September 2022. Climate topics are now part of the CSR activities of individual companies.

Answering the research question of this paper, who are the change agents within European civil society that have aligned with the alliance and how fostering a counter-hegemonic discourse against the traditional economic model, the study showed that the most significant change agents are Climate Pact Ambassadors as an individual acting on a volunteer base and perform a variety of activities and different type of organizations that joined the European Alliance for a Just Transition and that are adapting discourse and strategic vision to climate-related topics. The way these change actors are fostering a counter-hegemonic discourse is diverse. CPAs use their national or local influence and recognition to engage people, while the organizations analyzed use public and private funds to perform their activities.

Other secondary conclusions from this research are that EGD is still in the initial phase, and not all the networks are set. Private companies and trade unions still lack more attention from the EU's institutions, but as the research showed, more regulations are to be implemented. However, there are two main pillars of consensus building for a European climate hegemony: individual activists and organizations like NGOs and Network of NGOs. Besides these entities, private companies have an enormous potential to play a key role, while trade unions will remain essential partners in social dialogue.

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Cultivating Civic Engagement:* The Role of Universities in Promoting Democratic Values to Social Science Students[1]

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Introduction

In contemporary society, the concept of civic engagement appears as an essential condition for the functioning of democracy and social well-being. Civic engagement transcends simple participation in the electoral process and encompasses a wider spectrum of activities: civic and community participation, activism, and public dialogue. Thus, cultivating civic engagement is a mission, duty, and responsibility for universities, particularly for social science programs. They derive from the need to form and shape not only professionals but also responsible and involved people from a civic and social point of view. However, the mechanisms by which higher education institutions can effectively cultivate such engagement among students remain a subject of debate and investigation. This study seeks to bridge this gap by exploring the strategies used by universities to promote civic awareness among students. Methodologically, this article proposes a study on one of the most important universities in the field of social, political, and administrative sciences in Romania. By analyzing the perceptions and experiences of students, the research provides new empirical data on how educational practices influencing civic and political engagement are evolving, or, conversely, reveals institutional shortcomings in fulfilling the mission of promoting civic engagement among students. In this sense, a standardized questionnaire was distributed to the students from the political science bachelor's degree program to analyze their perceptions and experiences regarding how the study programs and the teachers'

activity incorporate the component of civic and political involvement. Data analysis highlights how and if higher education programs cultivate and shape student engagement through academic programs, extracurricular activities, or community partnerships.

Contextual shifts in higher education

The environment of higher education is undergoing significant upheaval, marked by technological innovation, dwindling public investments, shifting demographics among students, and a growing realization of the inadequacy of traditional educational approaches to prepare learners for the challenges of modern society (Gleason N. W. 2018: 5–8; Mtawa N. N.–Nkhoma N. M. 2020: 112-–13). Despite these challenges, there is a resounding call to reimagine higher education as more than just a platform for workforce preparation. In the European Higher Education Area, the promotion of civic engagement has consistently been highlighted as a key aim in fostering a „Europe of knowledge" under the EHEA framework (Arrufat, A.–García-Ramos, D., 2020: 6–8). This endeavor aims to equip individuals with the essential skills needed to confront the evolving demands of contemporary times while fostering a sense of unity through shared values and collective identity within a shared social and cultural milieu. The significance of education and collaborative educational efforts in nurturing and reinforcing stable, peaceful, and democratic societies is widely recognized as crucial (The Bologna Declaration, 19. 06. 1999). However, the critical question remains: Can civic engagement be effectively promoted and institutionalized within academic settings to ensure meaningful and sustainable outcomes for all stakeholders involved? Academic programs dedicated to civic engagement and social action offer a promising avenue. These programs provide a dedicated space for students, faculty, professors, and community partners to engage in a deep, critical, and systematic exploration of the complexities inherent in community-based teaching, learning, and research. By fostering interdisciplinary activities, such programs enable participants to cultivate the skills and knowledge necessary to become informed and engaged citizens. However, these goals and strategies are not always easy to implement. At the macro level, there are a multitude of barriers that make the mission of universities difficult. Today, the students are multitasking and possess a global mindset. They feel more connected to the world than ever before. While many of today's students are members of different organizations and teams, the act of participation in such groups cannot be seen as civic engagement or genuine concern for the good of the community (Bauml, M.–Davis, Smith–Blevins, B. 2022). The tide of volunteerism among the youth of today is not as great as many would hope, although voluntary participation in different organizations contributes to the formation of practical skills necessary for involvement in community life (Putnam 2000: 367) and shapes civic attitudes through socialization as an explanatory mechanism (Angi et al. 2022: 255).

More often, some students volunteer as a method of obtaining scholarship money, rather than their want to improve society. The need for leadership is evident as there are many issues to be dealt with in the world. Who then will be those to deal with such issues? And by what means will they do so? These are all questions that must be taken into consideration when pondering what civic engagement means and what it means to cultivate civic engagement among students. On the other hand, the mission of universities becomes all the more difficult as the civic engagement of youth is decreasing. (Putnam, R. 2000: 284) highlighted a decline in civic engagement during the latter part of the 20th century, evident in reduced political involvement, charitable contributions, and community engagement. This trend extended to college students, with entering first-year students displaying lower political engagement but increased involvement in volunteer work (Astin–Sax 1998: 256–258). This has been evidenced by the steady decline of voter participation in most Western democracies (Ezrow–Krause 2023) and, to a certain extent, the rise of anti-social behavior and violence among youth. When apathy and disengagement occur in society, it can lead to an erosion of social capital and the very fabric that holds society together. This has led to a wide range of negative social indicators that a lack of civic engagement has produced (Macfarlane, 2005). These include poor educational standards, low trust levels in public institutions, a breakdown in family and community networks, a rise in anti-social behavior and crime, and a general decline in the overall health of a nation's democracy (Putnam, 2000: 325–33). From this perspective, providing a good education in citizenship and the value of being an active and informed member of society is a way to ensure a better future for the next generation of citizens.

Dimensions of Civic Engagement

Civic engagement encompasses a broad spectrum of behaviors, values, and skills aimed at making a positive impact on society (Ehrlich 2000). The definition of civic engagement spans from traditional political activities to social justice orientation, leadership skills, and intercultural understanding (AACU apud Bowen 2010: 1–2; Smith et al. 2017; Campbell D. E. 2006: 29–31). Civic engagement is an umbrella concept, which includes a series of attitudes and behaviors with effects in the political or non-political area of society. In the political sense, it involves working towards improving one's community by having an active role in the political decision-making process. This can be done by directly influencing government policy by encouraging others to get involved and take an active role in public life or by participating in different activities such as volunteer work, education, mass media, community service, and advocacy. It is important to note that civic engagement in political activism cannot exist without the non-political side and vice versa. It is a combination of the two that positively affects the community and creates social capital. Ehrlich (2000: VI) defines civic engagement as "working to make

a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values, and motivation to make that difference. It means promoting the quality of life in a community, through both political and non-political processes. This is a very involved definition that suggests that individuals must be engaged at all times to better society. In the education area, a simpler definition would be that university students take the time to contribute to society in various forms. This can be done in a multitude of ways, but the main goal is to examine ways to be an active member of the community. For David Crowly, civic engagement must encompass the dimensions of social change. The author states that an active citizen contributes to the life of the community and influences the future through her actions. (David Crowley (n.d.) apud in Adler–Gogin 2005: 239).

Putnam's definition of civic engagement provides a foundational understanding of the concept.

The author's emphasis on social capital and civic engagement underscores the value of informal social activities, associational involvement, and political participation in fostering community cohesion and collective action[2] (Putnam 1995: 664–667). Even though the author did not give an exact definition of civic engagement, his thesis regarding the meaning of the concept becomes much clearer when he discusses „civic disengagement" which he sees as an „equal opportunity affliction. The sharp and steady declines in club meetings, visits with friends, committee service, church attendance, philanthropic giving (...)" which have steadily declined over the last few decades. (Adler–Goggin 2005: 239; Putnam 2000:185). For Elisa Diller, civic engagement is" any activity where individuals unite in their capacity as citizens" (Diller 2001 in Adler–Goggin 2005: 238).

In conclusion, civic engagement is a dynamic blend of both political and non-political efforts that work together to improve community life and build social capital. This active participation not only includes traditional forms of political activism but also involves volunteer work, educational outreach, advocacy, ONG-s membership, etc. illustrating that an effective civic engagement is deeply rooted in a commitment to both political processes and social change. Moreover, students' civic engagement reflects a broader trend in which citizens are increasingly engaged in issues they believe should be addressed not only by politicians or parties of the left or right but also by civil society in assembly (Loia 2023: 103). Furthermore, the perspectives shared by authors like Elrich, Putnam, or Diller underline the transformative power of civic engagement in shaping social structures and influencing individual or collective actions in public life. This holistic approach demonstrates that the efforts of civic engagement are inclusive and address the diverse needs and challenges of the community/society.

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2 https://www.socialcapitalresearch.com/putnam-on-social-capital-democratic-or-civic-perspective/

Research Methodology

This study used a structured questionnaire distributed to students across the Faculty of Political Science who explored both institutional frameworks and student perspectives on civic engagement in higher education. In the context of this study, the role and actions of higher education institutions in supporting and facilitating civic engagement form a critical dimension of the analysis. This dimension assessed how universities undertake and fulfill their mission to cultivate civic engagement among students. It also included a short evaluation of the faculty curriculum regarding the inclusion of civic and political engagement courses, which equip students with essential knowledge about societal structures. Additionally, it examined the availability of experiential opportunities such as volunteer work and internships in non-governmental organizations that allow students to apply theoretical knowledge practically. This dimension also considered the extent to which universities organize extracurricular events that promote civic engagement and foster a proper environment to open discussions and debates on civic and political issues. The second dimension of the questionnaire used Thomas Ehrlich's model of civic engagement, which is particularly suited for demonstrating and measuring students' civic engagement through distinct constructs such as *knowledge, attitude, behavior, and democratic participation.* To evaluate these constructs, specific items from the questionnaire have been selected and categorized according to these dimensions.

Study sample

The questionnaire was completed by 94 students from 3 different specializations within the Faculty of Political Sciences. The students had 14 days at their disposal and the degree of completion was low, out of a total of 440 students, only 94 (approx. 21.36%) responded to this request. This dataset provides a comprehensive overview of the demographic and academic characteristics of students. The sample is primarily female, with 67% of the participants, and male students representing the remaining 33%. This indicates a higher engagement or selection bias towards female students in the study. In terms of academic standing, the majority of the students are in their second year, accounting for 564% of the sample, with first-year students comprising 33%, and third-year students making up 10.6%. This distribution suggests a concentration of younger undergraduates, particularly those in the earlier stages of their academic careers. Regarding their backgrounds, a significant majority, 78.7%, come from urban areas, while 21.3% hail from rural environments, reflecting a strong urban influence in the sample. In terms of employment status, the vast majority (72.3%) are not employed, aligning with typical full-time student status, whereas 11.7% work in the private sector, and 6.4% are employed in the public sector.

Findings

Role of Higher Education Institutions

The findings offer a clear indication of the university's commitment to its role, as reflected by significant student participation in civic engagement initiatives. Curricular inclusion of civic engagement is confirmed by 74.5% of students which states that their study programs include courses dedicated to civic and political engagement. For 45.7% of students civic and political subjects are integrated directly into the content of their courses., while 25.5% noted that these subjects are introduced through specific courses. Also, the presence of extracurricular activities related to civic engagement is substantial, with 69.1% of students acknowledging that debates and discussions on social and political issues are an integrated part of the course content. The distribution of resources for civic information is diverse and well-distributed, with 31.9% of students utilizing guides and informational materials, and another 30.9% turning to the university's web resources.

Student Civic Engagement

Knowledge

Students' knowledge of civic engagement is reflected in their concerns about social issues. Their answer to the question „What does civic engagement mean to you?" reveals a strong recognition among students of the importance of being involved in community and political elections, with 85.1% and 75.5% agreement, respectively. This suggests that students associate civic engagement with proactive community involvement and democratic participation. However, affiliation with political parties or NGOs is less commonly associated with civic engagement, indicated by lower percentages of 12.8% and 39.4%, respectively. Student responses imply that while they appreciate the importance of civic actions, their perception of engagement is broader and potentially more practical than formal political affiliation. Moreover, students are overly concerned about education (83%), human rights (77.7%), and health (66%). Additionally, most students (57.4%) read about social or political issues daily, suggesting a considerable level of engagement with current events. This consistent exposure to information informs their concerns and shapes their understanding of the key areas where civic engagement is vital. Regarding the sources from which students receive information about societal challenges, mass media stands out as the primary source (77.7%), followed by online platforms (64.9%) and faculty (58.5%). The reliance on mass media and online platforms may indicate a modern approach to information gathering, where students actively seek out information beyond the traditional academic setting. However, the significant role of faculty as information sources underscores the value of educational institutions in shaping students' civic understanding.

Figure 1. Students' knowledge

Legend:
- What does civic engagement mean to you?
- How often do you read news about social or political issues?
- Which social issues concern you the most?
- What are your main sources of information regarding the problems facing society or certain communities?
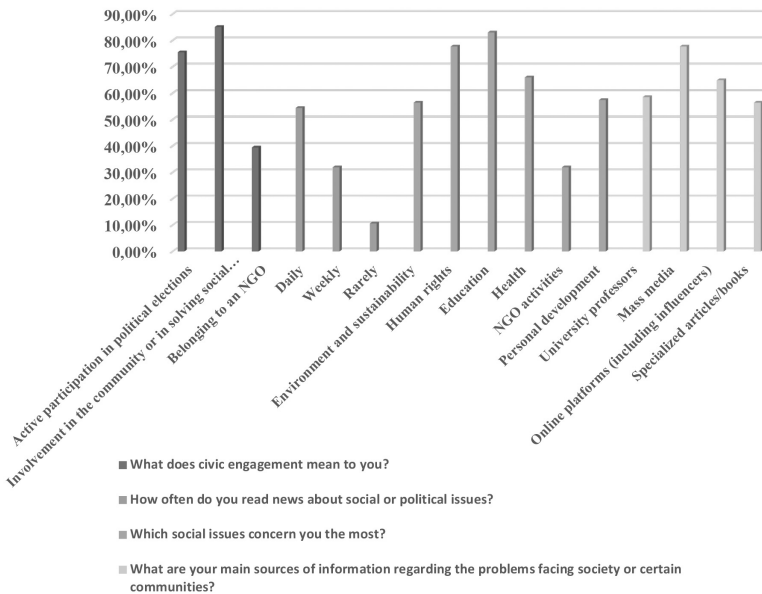
Source: Analysis developed by the author based on data collected from students, in 2024

Attitude

The student's attitude towards civic involvement results from their actions, but also from their self-assessed level of involvement. 89.4% of students indicate that they have signed an online petition or supported a social cause at least once. This significant majority reflects a willingness to engage with civic issues, suggesting a translation of civic awareness into concrete actions. However, the simple act of signing a petition does not necessarily equate to deep civic involvement, which is echoed in the literature. For instance, Putnam's concept of ,bowling alone' might suggest that while modern technology facilitates certain types of civic action, it does not always lead to sustained, in-depth participation or replace the social capital built through more traditional forms of communal engagement (Putnam 2000). Other answers further clarified this view, revealing that only 12.8% of students describe their level of civic engagement as ,high,' while a larger portion, 63.8%, rate their involvement as ,moderate.' This implies a certain level of caution or self-awareness among students regarding their civic activities. It is a reflection that aligns with the perspectives described by (Ehrlich, 2000), which advocate for educational institutions to play a more substantial role in fostering not just civic actions, but a deeper sense of civic responsibility. Moreover, the frequency of discussions with professors about society or community issues, shows that only 74% of students frequently engage in these conversations, whereas 44.7% never do.

This disparity suggests that while students may be informed and nominally active, there is a gap in dialogue with professors on these topics, which could otherwise enhance their understanding and commitment. Perrin and Gillis (2019) argue that it is vital for higher education to provide an environment where such discussions are norms rather than exceptions, thereby encouraging a more robust civic identity among students.

Figure 2. Student attitudes
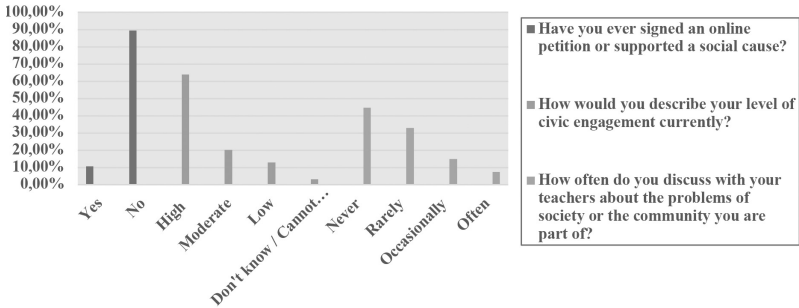
Source: Analysis developed by the author based on data collected from students, in 2024

Behaviors and democratic participation

Student answers represent a mixed picture regarding civic engagement behavior and democratic participation. The evidence of civic engagement is proved by a considerable proportion of students (89.3%) who reported access to volunteering opportunities through their programs. Regular discussions with representatives are for 40.4% of students, which indicates some level of engagement. However, 43.6% of students are not aware of the activities offered by the university which indicates evidence of limited civic engagement. Only 36.2% of students participated in council elections, suggesting potential apathy or lack of awareness about the council's importance. A substantial number of students (over 60% across categories) felt their programs lacked adequate integration of civic engagement. In terms of democratic participation, 51.1% of students state that they participated in the elections for the appointment of student representatives, but there is variable awareness regarding the decisions made in faculty councils, with 30.9% feeling relatively informed (score 3 on a scale from 1 to 5) which indicates that students' perceptions of their level of information are not uniform. Some feel more informed, others less so, which shows a variety in the level of knowledge or interest of students in the decision-making processes of the faculty or university. In addition, almost half of the students occasionally discuss their problems with student representatives and 45.7% indicate that their degree program offers volunteer op-

portunities or internships in non-governmental organizations, which is a positive indicator of a culture of engagement.

Figure 3. Student behavior

■ Have you ever participated in a community event or a social campaign initiated by your university?

■ Have you been involved in organizing a community event or a social campaign?
  Yes

■ Did you participate in the elections for student representatives in the faculty council/university senate?

■ How often do you discuss student issues with the student representatives in the council/senate?

■ Does the study program you are enrolled in offer volunteer opportunities or internships in non-governmental organizations?

Source: Analysis developed by the author based on data collected from students, in 2024

Conclusions and recommendation

The data illustrates a robust inclination towards civic engagement within the student body, showing a blend of curricular and extracurricular participation that reflects a strong institutional commitment to civic values. This finding aligns with scholarly discussions on the role of higher education in fostering civic engagement, such as those by Thomas Ehrlich (2000), who highlights the transformative potential of integrating civic responsibility into the curriculum. However, there is a gap between student involvement in civic activities and their participation in more structured political processes, such as council elections. Recommendations for universities should include enhancing structures that facilitate deeper, more sustained civic participation. This could involve more integrated courses on civic and political engagement, increased opportunities for dialogue with faculty, and fostering environments where democratic participation is both encouraged and valued.

The insights into students' knowledge and attitudes towards civic engagement highlight a dynamic interface between academic influences and personal initiative, with a significant reliance on mass media and online platforms for information. This suggests a modern, yet fragmented approach to civic education, where students are active but potentially lack depth in their civic understanding. To address this, it is recommended that institutions invest in more robust academic resources and training that encourage critical engagement with civic topics (Fernandez 2021: 678). Enhancing faculty-student interactions and providing more forums for dis-

cussion could bridge the information gap and promote a more nuanced under-standing of civic issues. Furthermore, aligning with findings from Putnam (2000) and Perrin–Gillis (2019), institutions should consider fostering a community culture that goes beyond cursory involvement, to cultivate a deeper sense of civic identity and responsibility.

Finally, the behavioral data and students' self-assessment of their civic engage-ment suggest variability in their experience and engagement levels. While many are involved to some degree, there appears to be a lack of uniformity in the depth and effectiveness of this engagement. This underscores the need for tai-lored approaches to civic education that consider diverse student backgrounds and engagement levels. Recommendations might include more personalized civic engagement pathways like using socioscientific issues. Socioscientific issues in education, particularly in science education, help students understand the broader impacts of science on society and the diverse perspectives that can inform deci-sions about scientific and technological developments. (Dauer et al. 2021; Hodson D. 2020: 595–596). It encourages students to engage in debates, analyze data, consider multiple viewpoints, and understand the values and ethics underlying scientific debates. The goal is to prepare students not only to understand scientific content but also to become informed, critical consumers of scientific information, and responsible citizens capable of making decisions about complex scientific is-sues that affect their lives and communities (Ratcliffe–Grace 2003; Birmingham–Calabrese 2014 apud in Dauer et al. 2021: 2).

Moreover, the results of this research are comparable to the conclusions of other recent studies that explore the role of higher education in promoting civic engagement. For example, in Europe, there is an advocacy for a university cur-riculum that integrates specific components of civic engagement into academic programs, along with mechanisms for evaluating and monitoring the impact of these activities on students (European Parliament, 2021), while research from the US underscores the broad effectiveness of community and civic experiences in higher education, it highlights the need for larger, multi-institutional studies that focus on diverse outcomes to fully understand the impact of these practices on civic engagement. (Chittum, J. R.–Enke, K. A. E.–Finley, A. P. (2022). Therefore, the evaluation of the impact of university study programs is an ongoing task that con-tributes to the continual adjustment of educational strategies, ensuring that civic engagement among students becomes a consistent practice, a fundamental goal, and a deeply held belief.

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Fotó/Photo: István Péter Németh

Green Policies, Gray Areas:*
Farmers' Protests and the Environmental Policy Dilemma in the European Union

Vlad Bujdei-Tebeica

Introduction

The beginning of 2024 marked a significant escalation in the intensity and frequency of farmer protests, underscoring widespread discontent with the current agricultural policy frameworks, notably those influenced by the European Union's environmental regulations. These protests, which spanned various EU countries including France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Poland, and Romania, not only disrupted local and national economies but also brought to the fore critical debates around sustainable agriculture, food sovereignty, and national versus EU-level governance.

Farmer protests are not a new phenomenon in the European Union; they have been a significant aspect of European agricultural politics for decades. Historically, these protests have often erupted in response to falling prices, rising costs, or new EU regulations perceived as out of touch with on-the-ground realities. For instance, in the early 2000s, French farmers blockaded roads to protest changes in EU agricultural policies that they claimed favored agribusiness over small-scale producers. Similarly, in 2009, dairy farmers across Europe staged numerous protests in response to plummeting milk prices due to EU quota changes. These historical protests set a precedent for current demonstrations, underscoring recurring themes of economic vulnerability and resistance to top-down regulatory changes that fail to account for local and regional farming contexts.

The 2024 farmers' grievances, while diverse, shared common themes centered around the perceived overreach of EU policies – particularly the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and the European Green Deal – which are often seen as misaligned with the practical realities of farming.

The protests were characterized by dramatic demonstrations and blockades, signifying a deep-seated resistance against what many farmers view as untenable environmental regulations that compromise their livelihoods without sufficient compensatory measures or support. This wave of dissent provides a poignant context to explore the intersection of environmental policy, national sovereignty, and the viability of traditional farming practices within the modern European political and economic landscape. Over the years, while there have been notable advancements, CAP has consistently been criticized for its failure to fully integrate environmental protection into agricultural practices effectively. Guy Pe'er (2019) points out the significant mismatch between the CAP's financial distributions and its achievements in environmental and social spheres, arguing that the policy's heavy reliance on direct payments does not sufficiently tackle critical environmental challenges like biodiversity loss, climate change mitigation, and sustainable land use. Peter and his team suggest a radical overhaul of the CAP, advocating for a shift to a more targeted and performance-based system where funding is intricately linked to the achievement of environmental benefits and sustainability improvements.

On the other hand, the European Green Deal (EGD) is presented as much more than a climate initiative; it is a transformative economic and social agenda aiming to achieve climate neutrality by 2050 within the European Union. The comprehensive strategy outlined in the EGD suggests a significant shift towards a sustainable development model that could potentially redefine the European economic landscape. A study authored by Sarah Wolf, Jonas Teitge, Jahel Mielke, Franziska Schütze, and Carlo Jaeger, argues that the EGD is not only a climate strategy but also a significant socio-economic opportunity that could reshape the European economy into a sustainable development model (Wolf et al., 2021).

However, Eckert and Kovalevska (2021) argue that the rhetoric used in the Green Deal not only serves to strengthen the European Commission's authority but also tends to obscure complex sustainability issues under layers of technical jargon. This obfuscation can alienate the public and obscure the real challenges involved in transitioning to sustainable practices. The optimistic depiction of the EGD's potential effects contrasts sharply with the more daunting, on-the-ground realities of enacting comprehensive environmental protection and genuine ecological sustainability.

Thus, this disenfranchising discourse of the EGD poses significant challenges by fueling the rise of right-wing politics within European agrarian movements is significantly influenced by the socio-economic changes wrought by neoliberal policies, particularly after the 2008 financial crisis. Natalia Mamonova and Jaume Franquesa (2020) argue that policies such as the CAP and EGD have deepened economic inequalities and fostered disenchantment among rural populations, creating a fertile environment for right-wing populist rhetoric. This rhetoric frequently taps into national identity and socio-economic insecurities, appealing to rural constituencies who feel left behind by mainstream political agendas and marginalized by the broader economic structures.

Caradaică's examination of voluntary carbon markets, particularly those focused on forestry projects for carbon removal, serves as an example that illustrates a significant disconnect between European Union policymaking and the actual beneficiaries of such policies. This misalignment exemplifies the challenges in aligning broad environmental initiatives with local economic realities and stakeholder interests, highlighting a trend that often leads to the prevalence of anti-environmentalist and Eurosceptic discourse across the EU. Despite the well-intentioned design of these policies, they frequently encounter skepticism from local industries and member states. This skepticism often stems from the perceived economic and bureaucratic burdens these policies impose, which can severely impede their effectiveness and acceptance.

The central hypothesis of this study explores the relationship between anti-environmentalist and Eurosceptic discourses as they manifest in farmer protests across the European Union. This research aims to dissect and understand the nuances of these discourses across various member states, with a specific focus on agricultural policy debates driven by the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and the European Green Deal (EGD). While we anticipate that anti-environmentalist and Eurosceptic sentiments may frequently intersect within these protests, the hypothesis posits that the presence of one does not necessarily imply the presence of the other.

To investigate, we will employ discourse analysis on the manifestos and public statements of the main actors involved in the farmer protests of early 2024. Our study encompasses six European countries: Germany, France, Spain, Italy, Poland, and Romania. This selection ensures representativity across different political contexts within Europe, covering Western Europe, Southern Europe, and Central-Eastern Europe. By choosing two countries from each region, we aim to facilitate comparability and draw more nuanced conclusions about the regional variations in how these discourses are shaped by local political, economic, and social contexts. This methodological approach will allow us to provide a detailed comparative analysis that contributes to a deeper understanding of the interplay between environmental policies and national sovereignty concerns within the EU. These six countries have been chosen out of the countries that had the largest farmers' protests in late 2023 – early 2024.

Throughout this paper, we will first look at the existing body of literature covering the topics of anti-environmentalism and Euroscepticism, to understand the state-of-the-art of these two phenomena. The second step is to investigate each specific country's case study, by briefly describing the farmers' protests that took place in each country's case study and by analyzing the manifestos and the demands of these protests. When analyzing these documents, special consideration to specific points that relate to either anti-environmentalism or Euroscepticism, or both.

Anti-environmentalism

Anti-environmentalism, a phenomenon characterized by opposition to environmental policies and skepticism towards the scientific consensus on environmental issues, has gained traction in various global contexts over the past decade. This stance is typically marked by resistance to regulatory efforts aimed at protecting and preserving the environment, including policies on climate change, pollution control, and biodiversity conservation. The rise of anti-environmental sentiment is significant because it challenges the efforts to address some of the most pressing issues facing humanity today, such as climate change and environmental degradation.

To add to the complexity of the anti-environmentalist issue, Angela Turck, Lasse Schloemer, and Wiltrud Terlau delve into the so-called "trilemma" of land use, which encompasses the intertwined goals of mitigating climate change, ensuring food security, and preserving biodiversity. This trilemma reflects the challenges farmers face in balancing these often conflicting demands, with each goal seemingly at odds with the others when viewed from a traditional agricultural perspective (Turck et al. 2023).

Radical right parties strategically frame environmental issues to mobilize voter support by tapping into broader socio-political anxieties. These parties frame environmental policies as threats to national sovereignty, economic growth, and cultural identity, effectively transforming what are traditionally seen as universal valence issues into contentious positional issues. This reframing aligns with their broader populist and nationalist agendas, appealing to voters who perceive environmental regulations as impositions by elite and external forces, such as the European Union or global governance frameworks (Gemenis et al. 2012).

In a study covering the farmers' protests in the Netherlands that took place in 2019, Van der Ploeg examines the phenomenon in the context of deep-seated grievances against environmental regulations, perceived threats to farming practices, and the broader socio-political tensions manifesting as rural populism. The farmers, facing regulatory pressures to reduce nitrogen emissions and other environmental impacts, rallied against what they perceived as an unjust targeting of their livelihoods. This protest movement, however, is characterized by the author as a form of regressive populism, which, while mobilizing significant rural support, does not necessarily address the underlying challenges of sustainability and equity within agricultural policy (van der Ploeg 2020).

In their seminal work, "The Handbook of Anti-Environmentalism", Stoddart, Tindal, and Dunlap explore the multifaceted nature of opposition to environmentalism, highlighting how resistance spans from overtly corporate-driven agendas to more subtle, internally critical perspectives within environmental movements themselves. They split the existing anti-environmentalist discourses into 'critical' or 'reflexive'.

They present a clear distinction between traditional anti-environmentalism, which is typically championed by corporate interests and conservative ideologies that favor market freedom over stringent environmental regulations (critical), and the emerging 'reflexive' anti-environmentalism. This latter form is particularly intriguing as it emerges from within environmentalist circles, pointing out the adverse consequences or exclusionary practices that can arise from environmental initiatives. This nuanced exploration helps illuminate the complex dynamics and diverse opposition that environmental policies face, reflecting broader societal debates about how best to achieve sustainable environmental outcomes (Tindal et al. 2022), and will be critical for the analysis of the farmers' demands in the six European countries.

Euroscepticism

Euroscepticism in Europe has emerged as a significant and dynamic force shaping the continent's political landscape over the last 20 years. This phenomenon, characterized by a critical or outright negative stance toward the European Union and its institutions, has roots in a diverse array of socio-economic and political anxieties. The term itself encompasses a broad spectrum of attitudes, from reformist skepticism, which advocates for specific changes to the Union's policies or structures, to rejectionist skepticism, which argues for a country's withdrawal from the EU.

Several crises have acted as catalysts for Eurosceptic sentiments. The sovereign debt crisis in the early 2010s exposed economic vulnerabilities and led to severe austerity measures in several EU countries, which, in turn, fueled disillusionment with EU governance. The 2015 migration crisis further compounded this issue, as the influx of refugees challenged the Union's border policies and sparked debates over national security and cultural integration. Perhaps the most significant manifestation of Euroscepticism was the United Kingdom's 2016 referendum on EU membership, which resulted in a decision to leave the Union, marking the first instance of a member state choosing to exit. This event, known as Brexit, not only underscored the feasibility of withdrawal but also emboldened Eurosceptic groups across the continent, advocating for similar referenda in their own countries.

Theoretical approaches to studying Euroscepticism are varied and multidimensional, reflecting the complexity of the phenomenon itself. Authors, such as Paul Taggart (1998), have emphasized the importance of understanding Euroscepticism as not only a response to political and economic developments but also as a deeper expression of political alienation and disenchantment with mainstream political options. Catherine de Vries (2018), on the other hand, has contributed to the economic explanations by exploring how perceived economic disadvantages or disparities due to EU policies catalyze Eurosceptic sentiments among citizens. Furthermore, Catherine Sorensen's work has delved into the identity-based theories of

Euroscepticism, suggesting that it often arises from fears that EU membership erodes distinct national cultures and identities (Sorensen 2008).

When it comes to the relationship between Euroscepticism and environmentalism, the European Green Deal has been a particularly easy target for Eurosceptic criticism. In a study done for the European Commission, Andrés Rodríguez-Pose and Federico Bartalucci provide a comprehensive examination of the disparate regional impacts of the green transition within the European Union. The authors develop a Regional Green Transition Vulnerability Index to measure the varying susceptibilities of EU regions to socio-economic upheavals triggered by the shift towards low-carbon standards (Rodriguez-Pose–Bartalucci 2023).

Rodríguez-Pose and Bartalucci illustrate that less-developed, peri-urban, and rural regions, particularly in Southern and Eastern Europe, are more vulnerable to negative repercussions from the green transition. The paper highlights that these regions are already economically fragile and could experience intensified hardship due to policy shifts aimed at mitigating climate change. The authors argue that if these transitions are not managed carefully, they could exacerbate social discontent and potentially increase support for climate-change-skeptic political movements, particularly from the radical right.

Country profiles

France

The French farmers' protests are perhaps the longest in Europe, starting back in October 2023. The farmer protests in France that began in late October 2023, spearheaded by the National Federation of Agricultural Holders' Unions (FNSEA) and Young Farmers (JA), have intensified significantly by January 2024. These protests, originating in Occitanie, involved peaceful actions such as flipping road signs at town entrances, a movement sometimes called "On marche sur la tête" (We're walking on our heads), which then spread to other regions of France.

The intensification of the movement coincided with the upcoming European elections, starting with an unauthorized blockade of the Toulouse-Tarbes highway (A64) by farmers in Occitanie on January 18, 2024. The escalation included an explosion at the regional environmental agency's building in Carcassonne on the night of January 18–19, claimed by the Comité d'Action Viticole, though no injuries occurred as the building was empty at the time.

The manifesto from the FNSEA does not overtly express anti-environmentalist sentiments or a general Eurosceptic stance. Instead, it focuses more on specific grievances related to agricultural policy and its effects on farmers, without outright rejecting environmental concerns or the European Union as a whole. In the manifesto, the term "food sovereignty" appears twice, underscoring its significance to the authors' agenda. The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) is discussed on

multiple occasions, with four negative mentions highlighting dissatisfaction and criticism from the authors. However, it also receives three positive mentions, suggesting a recognition of its potential benefits or roles in supporting agriculture. Additionally, the European Union itself is criticized three times, indicating a clear stance of discontent or opposition towards EU policies and actions as they pertain to agricultural practices[1].

While there are criticisms regarding the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and mentions of EU-related challenges, these are contextually targeted at how these policies impact the agricultural sector rather than indicative of a broader ideological opposition to the EU or environmental regulations per se. The references to CAP, both positive and negative, highlight concerns about policy effectiveness and equity, rather than fundamental opposition to the EU's environmental goals.

Given the specific agricultural focus and the nature of the criticisms, the manifesto seems to advocate for reforms and better consideration of farmers' needs within the existing frameworks rather than opposing them on a foundational level. Therefore, it would be more accurate to describe the manifesto as expressing a reflexive anti-environmentalism combined with a soft Euroscepticism aimed at specific policy reform.

Germany

Germany also has a long-standing tradition of farmers' protests and dissatisfaction with the CAP. Wiebke Nowack and Harry Hoffmann provide an in-depth look at the grassroots movement in Germany, which has been advocating for significant changes in agricultural practices and policies since 2011 through the "We are fed up" (Wir haben es satt, WHES) demonstrations in Berlin (Nowak–Hoffmann 2019). These protests, drawing substantial participation, have spotlighted various issues in Germany's agricultural sector, emphasizing the need for a shift from large-scale industrial farming to more sustainable, small-scale practices. Highlighting the dissatisfaction with the Common Agricultural Policy, the protestors have called for a reallocation of its budget to better serve public and ecological interests.

On December 18, 2023, the German Farmers' Association initiated a nationwide protest under the rallying cry "Too much is too much! Now it's over!" in Berlin. Approximately 6,600 demonstrators, including many farmers, converged at the Brandenburg Gate, echoing the Farmers' President Joachim Rukwied's demands to maintain agricultural subsidies. Concurrently, similar demonstrations unfolded in other German cities including Freiburg, Leipzig, and Chemnitz, signaling widespread discontent across the country. The protests captured heightened public attention on January 4, 2024, when a contingent of 100 farmers, along with other protestors, blocked the Hilligenlei ferry at Schlüttsiel port in North Frisia.

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1 https://www.fnsea.fr/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Manifeste-final-FNSEA_Sortie-de-crise-COVID–19.pdf

This action notably delayed Federal Minister of Economics Robert Habeck and his wife, who were returning from a day trip. The situation escalated when the protestors refused Habeck's proposal to send a delegation onto the ferry, and he in turn declined to address the crowd directly, citing privacy concerns, leading to the ferry departing without further engagement.

Throughout early January, individual protests persisted, culminating in a co-ordinated week of action starting January 8. This included blockades of several highway access points across Germany, significantly disrupting traffic and impacting services such as the AWO hospital in Jerichow, which faced delays in receiving employees, patients, and supplies.

The demands articulated by German farmers reflect a deep-seated frustration with both national and European agricultural policies, characterized by concerns over taxation, regulatory pressures, competitive disadvantages, and media portrayal. The German Farmers' Association, along with Agriculture Connects Germany (LsV Germany), has been vocal about opposing the planned tax increases that directly impact the economic viability of farming operations. Specifically, they have targeted the imposition of an agricultural vehicle tax and the withdrawal of subsidies for agricultural diesel, seeing these fiscal policies as serious threats to the competitiveness of German agriculture[2]. Despite the federal government's offer to cancel the introduction of the vehicle tax and phase out the diesel subsidy over three years, these concessions were deemed insufficient by the farming community, which demands a complete withdrawal of these and other perceived fiscal burdens.

Additionally, the protests have highlighted perceived discrepancies in how the agricultural sector is portrayed in the media. Farmers have expressed dissatisfaction with what they consider a biased and one-sided media portrayal of their protests and general situation. This culminated in direct actions such as blockading broadcaster buildings and disrupting newspaper deliveries, underscoring their frustration with public representation. The German Farmers' Association has criticized these actions against the media, emphasizing the importance of press freedom but also indicating a need for more balanced and comprehensive reporting on agricultural issues[3].

Spain

The agricultural protests in Spain in 2024 are part of the broader wave of demonstrations across Europe. These protests have been primarily supported by major agricultural associations such as Unión de Uniones, ASAJA, COAG, and UPA, along with independent groups of farmers and livestock producers.

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2 https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/innenpolitik/landwirte-subvention-ampel-100.html

3 https://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article250137260/Bauernproteste-Achte-genau-darauf-was-die-so-senden-wenn-es-nicht-stimmt-steh-ich-sofort-auf-der-Matte.html

The primary grievances focus on restrictive agricultural policies implemented by both the European Union and the Spanish government. Notably, the protesters are challenging the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), the European Green Deal, and the National Law of the Food Chain, which are seen as detrimental to traditional farming practices. These policies advocate for a shift towards sustainable agriculture, including banning certain pesticides and fertilizers, which has sparked concerns among farmers about increased costs and reduced competitiveness[4]. The protests have also been marked by significant incidents, such as attacks on Spanish trucks in France[5], leading to substantial economic losses. In response, the Spanish government, including figures like the Minister of Agriculture, Luis Planas, has engaged with agricultural unions to negotiate measures that would grant more freedoms and reduce taxes for rural workers, reflecting a critical national dialogue about the future of agriculture in Spain and its alignment with broader EU policies[6].

In terms of demands[7], Spanish farmers are focused on reforms within the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), seeking significant reductions in bureaucracy and the environmental costs imposed by current regulations. These demands highlight a deep-seated belief that the CAP, in its present form, stifles the efficiency and profitability of farming operations, making it unsustainable[8]. Alongside CAP reforms, there is a strong push for fair trade practices, with farmers advocating for the establishment of mirror clauses in trade agreements. These clauses would ensure that agricultural imports meet the same environmental and safety standards as domestic products, thereby protecting local farmers from unfair competition and aligning international trade with domestic agricultural standards.

The demands reveal a strain of anti-environmentalism, particularly in the criticism of the environmental costs associated with the Common Agricultural Policy. Spanish farmers argue that these environmental regulations are impractical and add undue financial and administrative burdens that hinder their operations. This sentiment underscores a broader discontent with environmental policies that are perceived as out of touch with the practical realities of farming, suggesting that current regulations may need recalibration to better align with the operational capacities and economic realities of farmers.

Euroscepticism is evident in the Spanish protesters' demands regarding trade

4 https://www.eldiario.es/economia/planas-guino-agricultores-plenas-protestas-razon-hay-problema-competencia-desleal_1_10947140.html

5 https://www.diariodesevilla.es/economia/agricultores-franceses-frontera-camiones-es-panoles_0_1870014589.html

6 https://www.elperiodico.com/es/economia/20240305/agricultores-pleno-parlament-cataluna-direc-to-ultima-hora-debate-propuestas-97771490

7 https://www.20minutos.es/noticia/5221530/0/las-diez-medidas-que-reclama-campo-ue-gobierno-las-comunidades-autonomas/

8 https://www.eldiario.es/economia/planas-guino-agricultores-plenas-protestas-razon-hay-problema-competencia-desleal_1_10947140.html

agreements and the negotiation of mirror clauses.

The call to halt negotiations with major trade partners and to implement stricter controls on imports reflects a desire for greater national control over agricultural policies and trade practices. This stance indicates a skepticism toward the European Union's handling of trade agreements, which are viewed as favoring external interests over local farmers' needs. The demand for flexibility in the CAP further illustrates a pushback against EU-wide policies, advocating for reforms that prioritize national interests and the specific needs of local agricultural communities.

Italy

The Italian farmers' protests, predominantly driven by dissatisfaction with European agricultural policies, highlight a range of economic and regulatory challenges that have sparked significant unrest among agricultural communities. Central to these grievances are the EU mandates requiring that 4% of fields remain uncultivated and the controversial bans on pesticides deemed essential by farmers. These regulations are viewed as severe impediments to farming operations, prompting calls for the renewal of an exemption from the IRPEF (personal income tax) on agricultural income, initially introduced in 2017. Additional demands aim to improve the income conditions for those within the sector[9].

The protests escalated from January 31, with tractor-driving farmers initiating blockades at motorway toll booths to press for the elimination of anti-pesticide laws. This movement peaked on February 4, when farmers and ranchers orchestrated extensive blockades along key exits on the Autostrada Adriatica (A14), affecting locations like Castel San Pietro, Pesaro, and Porto San Giorgio[10]. The disruptions continued with significant blockades on major communication routes such as the Strada Statale 2 Cassia. On February 9, over 200 tractors converged on the Grande Raccordo Anulare, Rome's major ring road, in a partly authorized demonstration, though unauthorized blockades also occurred[11]. The protests, which primarily took place in Northern and Central Italy, saw further escalation on February 19, with tractors occupying major thoroughfares in Rome, such as Via Nomentana, effectively paralyzing significant parts of the city[12].

The protests in Italy encapsulate a deep-seated dissatisfaction with current EU agricultural policies, which they argue place undue burdens on their traditional ways of farming under the guise of environmental sustainability[13]. Central to their

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9 https://www.ilpost.it/2024/02/02/proteste-agricoltori-italia-richieste/

10 https://www.ilrestodelcarlino.it/cronaca/dove-protesta-trattori-oggi-afftnn6q

11 https://tg24.sky.it/cronaca/2024/02/10/protesta-trattori-raccordo-roma

12 https://www.romatoday.it/attualita/trattori-roma-20-febbraio-2024.html

13 https://www.politico.eu/article/italy-rome-giorgia-meloni-farmers-to-cross-the-rubicon-with-rome-blockade/

concerns is the EU Green Deal, which they critically refer to as "environmentalist extremism."

The farmers contend that the Green Deal's stringent regulations threaten the economic viability of traditional farming by imposing unsustainable practices that are not aligned with their operational realities.

Italian protests have been marked by a strong anti-environmentalist sentiment, particularly evident in their opposition to the EU Green Deal and novel food products like lab-grown meat and insect flour. The farmers express fears that these innovations, along with stringent environmental regulations, threaten their traditional ways of life and farming practices. This stance highlights a broader skepticism towards environmental policies that are perceived as being imposed without sufficient consideration of their practical and economic impacts on traditional agriculture.

Euroscepticism is another prominent theme in the protests in Italy. The farmers' critique of the EU's influence over national agricultural policies, exemplified by their rejection of the Green Deal and disdain for Brussels' perceived interference in Italian farming, underscores a broader distrust of EU governance. The call for a rewrite of EU policies and the demand for protective measures against imports resonate with a desire for greater national sovereignty over agricultural decisions and policies. This sentiment is further amplified by the government's rhetoric, which positions Italian farmers as defenders of national tradition against external influences.

Poland

In March 2024, the EU's decision to renew duty-free Ukrainian agricultural imports while increasing protections for sensitive EU products sparked significant unrest among Polish farmers[14]. The easing of import restrictions led to an influx of Ukrainian agricultural goods, such as grain and produce, into the Polish market[15]. This glut caused a substantial decrease in demand and prices for local Polish products, as the market became saturated with Ukrainian imports that were perceived as lower quality[16]. The situation escalated as Polish farmers, supported by nearly all national farmers' unions, launched widespread protests, blocking major roads to express their discontent with the EU policies, which they argued were detrimental to local agriculture. These protests also included grievances about the broader implications of the European Green Deal, such as stricter greenhouse emissions regu-

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14 https://www.gazetaprawna.pl/wiadomosci/kraj/artykuly/9474436,kolejne-protesty-rolnikow-4-kwietnia-co-zaplanowali-organizatorzy.html

15 https://www.dw.com/pl/prasa-polscy-i-czescy-rolnicy-blokuj%C4%85-zbo%C5%BCe-z-ukrainy/a-68297725

16 https://www.money.pl/gospodarka/rolnicy-protestuja-to-nie-unia-i-ukraina-sa-ich-najwiekszymproblemem-6998103587711488a.html#:~:text=Rolnicy%20protestuj%C4%85%20na%20granicy%20z, kt%C3%B3ra%20zalewa%20%C5%9Bwiat%20tanim%20zbo%C5%BCem.

lations and animal welfare laws. The situation was further complicated by geopolitical tensions, as some protest elements displayed pro-Putin and anti-Ukrainian sentiments, which the Polish foreign ministry speculated might be influenced by external forces aiming to destabilize the region.

The opposition of NSZZ RI "Solidarność" to the EU Green Deal reflects a confluence of anti-environmentalist and Eurosceptic sentiments prevalent among certain sectors within Poland. The union argues that the Green Deal, with its stringent environmental mandates, would disproportionately harm Polish farmers by escalating costs and restricting traditional farming practices, thereby threatening the viability of family farms. This resistance is also rooted in a broader Eurosceptic viewpoint, which critiques the European Union's influence over national policies, asserting that such EU-driven initiatives do not sufficiently consider the unique economic and social contexts of member states like Poland. This opposition highlights a clash between environmental goals set at the EU level and national economic interests, encapsulated in the union's pushback against perceived overreach.

Despite being major beneficiaries of CAP funds, as Bilewicz argues, polish farmers exhibit strong dissatisfaction (Bilewicz et al., 2022). The discontent with CAP is partly attributed to its environmental implications, which align with broader themes of anti-environmentalism. The policy has inadvertently encouraged practices that contribute to environmental degradation, such as promoting large-scale, intensive agricultural methods that are less sustainable and more damaging to ecosystems. The farmers' resistance to such regulations stems not only from economic concerns but also from a perception that these policies are misaligned with the practical realities of farming. This reflects an anti-environmental sentiment, where environmental regulations are viewed as impractical impositions that threaten their traditional way of farming and livelihood.

Bilewicz also underscores a strong Eurosceptic sentiment among these farmers, which emerges from their perception that EU policies, particularly CAP, fail to adequately reflect the unique agricultural context of post-socialist states like Poland. The dissatisfaction is rooted in the belief that EU policies are designed with a Western European bias, disregarding the historical and socio-economic backgrounds of Eastern European nations. This sentiment is compounded by the farmers' experiences of inequality and inefficiency in subsidy distribution, which reinforce their skepticism towards EU governance and its impact on their agricultural and economic independence.

Romania

Romania is no stranger to government-changing protests. The Europeanisation process was seen as a modernizing force throughout society, and thus any European policy reforms would be welcomed. The 2017–2019 protests were also an example of civil society support for European policymaking (Dogot 2023). On the

other hand, the recent farmers' protests pose a striking contrast to the protests that occurred 5 years prior.

The farmers' protests in Romania took place in January and February 2024. Although not as extensive as their Western counterparts, these protests are nonetheless just as important to analyze. The scale of the protests was similar, however. Some estimates put the total number of vehicles used to block access in the largest cities at about 4500[17]. The main Eurosceptic party, AUR, also tried to capitalize on these protests. Having previously criticized the Romanian authorities' support for Ukraine in the conflict with Russia (Bujdei-Tebeica 2023), AUR tried to support the criticism of Romanian farmers against Ukrainian grain imports. However, this attempt did not amount to much, the protesters opting to not politicize their grievances.

Overall, the manifesto from Romanian transporters and farmers highlights significant discontent with current policies, both national and EU, reflecting broader tensions within sectors that feel overlooked or disadvantaged by these policies. The document underscores a critical intersection of economic, environmental, and political issues facing the agricultural sector in Romania today[18].

The manifesto shows signs of anti-environmentalist sentiment, particularly in its opposition to environmental regulations that affect farming practices. For example, the demand for the elimination of diesel excise taxes and the opposition to certain EU environmental mandates reflect a preference for economic benefits over environmental protections. This stance suggests a conflict between the immediate economic interests of the agricultural sector and the long-term environmental sustainability goals promoted by the EU.

The call for the reintroduction of customs duties on Ukrainian products and the clear emphasis on national over EU-wide agricultural strategies reflect a Eurosceptic stance. This is evident in the demands for state-level interventions and legislative adjustments that prioritize Romanian agricultural interests over broader EU regulations and market dynamics. Such demands highlight a desire for greater national control over agricultural policies, indicating a pushback against perceived EU overreach in local agricultural matters.

Overall, the AAC's demands are reflective of a sector under strain from both external economic forces and internal regulatory challenges. They underscore a critical balancing act between maintaining agricultural productivity and navigating the complex terrain of EU regulations and international market dynamics[19].

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17 https://newsweek.ro/actualitate/video-george-simion-pus-pe-fuga-de-un-protestatar-nu-ai-ce-cauta-aici-intinde-o

18 https://www.euronews.ro/articole/lista-celor-76-de-revendicari-ale-agricultorilor-si-transportatori-lor-ieftinirea

19 https://www.zf.ro/zf-24/care-sunt-cele-15-puncte-de-pe-lista-de-solicitari-cu-care-merg-22231805

Conclusions

The conclusion of our analysis shows that farmer protest discourses can be distinguished along two main axes: critically anti-environmentalist and reflexively anti-environmentalist, as well as sovereignty-based Euroscepticism and social Euroscepticism, following Sorensen's taxonomy. Reflexive anti-environmentalist and socially Eurosceptic discourses are more prevalent in France, Germany, and Spain, indicating a response to environmental policies that is more reflective of concerns about practical impacts rather than outright opposition. On the other hand, critical anti-environmentalist and sovereignty-based Euroscepticism are found more prominently in Italy, Poland, and Romania, where there is a stronger direct opposition to EU policies perceived as imposing unnecessary burdens.

This delineation suggests that while anti-environmentalism does not necessarily imply Euroscepticism, these discourses often coexist within the protests across all studied cases. The interaction between these discourses highlights a complex landscape of agricultural discontent within the EU, where economic, social, and national sovereignty concerns intersect with environmental regulations. The study's findings underscore the need for EU policymakers to consider these nuances in farmer perceptions and responses, aiming for more tailored and inclusive policy frameworks that address both environmental goals and the socio-economic realities of European farmers.

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How Civil Societies Are Undermined:*
An Analysis of Factors That Endanger Civic Freedoms

Eugen Gabor

Introduction

At the end of the 20th century, liberal democracy was broadly seen as the political option capable of obtaining global hegemony. Its main competitors, who defined the evolution of the *age of extremes* (Hobsbawm 2015), were deposed of their influence and appeal (Fukuyama 1992: 248). However, the first decades of the 21st century witnessed the emergence of new challenges for open societies. Already in the 1960s, political scientists argued that populism was on the verge of becoming an alternative to the political model promoted by the Western bloc (Ionescu–Gellner 1969: 1). At that time, populism was associated with the malformations that appeared in the democratization processes of former colonies. Later, fully developed democratic regimes also started being affected by the ascension of populist movements. Growth in migration flows and the crisis of representative democracy paved the way for electoral successes for illiberal parties; some of them managed in the 2000s to become members of governing coalitions (Aicholzer et al. 2014: 132). Social, economic, and political factors offered opportunities for anti-establishment politicians willing to undermine political pluralism. Globalization and European integration were among the elements that weakened the social-democratic left (Bandau 2022: 6), while the ideological transformations that severely reduced the differences between mainstream parties that used to be adversaries alienated important parts of their voters (Akkerman 2003: 152–153).

After 2010, the legitimacy of those who governed was further reduced in numerous liberal democracies, and, gradually, a new political elite gained ground. For instance, in Hungary, Viktor Orbán managed to build a so-called illiberal democ-

racy on the ruins of several Socialist-Liberal cabinets by altering the constitutional order (Halmai 2019: 300). In the United States of America, the authoritarian traits of Donald Trump's personality (Kellner 2018) are still shaping the political arena. On the other hand, authoritarian leaders that already had a hegemony established managed to solidify it and use it as a basis for aggressive foreign policy actions. The Russian President Vladimir Putin (March 2023), the Chinese leader Xi Jinping (Shirk 2018), and the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan (Gunter 2024) are excellent examples in this regard.

Currently, a so-called polycrisis is experienced worldwide (Lawrence et al. 2024). Climate change is an ongoing existential threat to humans, the effects of the COVID–19 pandemic are only partially removed, and Russia's invasion of Ukraine is threatening global peace. The impact of this polycrisis on the authoritarian wave described above cannot be determined before the elections for the European Parliament due in June 2024 or before an outcome becomes foreseeable in the Ukrainian War.

Shaping an overview is not possible without an element that is not always receiving in literature the attention it deserves: the role of civil societies in building or preserving liberal democracies. Identifying some of the main factors that undermine civil societies can be helpful for understanding which are the most important vulnerabilities of liberal democracies.

Our analysis is preceded by a brief section of theoretical and methodological considerations. The main section focuses on information from several reports and studies based on data regarding the state of civil societies collected worldwide. Relevant to our endeavor are those countries that either went through a significant decline in upholding civil rights and liberties or improved aspects like the freedom of association, assembly, or expression. We focus only on evolutions that took place after the COVID–19 pandemic began. Our conclusions are based on comparing the data provided by non-governmental organizations and linking it with the elements presented in the theoretical section.

Theoretical and methodological considerations

Civil societies, in the current meaning of the concept, are a product of modernity. The Swiss-French philosopher Benjamin Constant argued that in antiquity, political mechanisms ruled over the private lives of citizens. Only representative systems were created later, by reducing the political involvement of individuals, an autonomous space where privacy was respected (Constant 1997). The German philosopher Georg W. F. Hegel stated that civil societies are a consequence of the rising role of the bourgeoisie in Western communities. Skeptical regarding the involvement of the state in what they perceived as private matters, the advocates of strong civil societies focused on economic issues (Hegel 2008: 180-196). Influenced by this perspective, Karl Marx argued that the way civil societies are organized in

capitalism undermines the possibility of the democratic organization of proletarians (Niemi 2011). On the other hand, the French political philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville considered that civil organizations are a pillar of democratic regimes (Tocqueville 1969). Later, Tocqueville's perspective became far more influential than Marx's, regardless of the ideological background of those who studied this topic. Nevertheless, some academics highlight the danger of hijacking civil organizations and transforming them into tools for building closed societies (Berman 1997).

One of the most widely used definitions of civil society, one that is not free of controversies because of its range, is the following: „*Civil Society comprises the private domain which exists in the space between (a) the state and its various apparatuses, and (b) the economy and its various expressions; flourishes where the state is in pluralistic democratic mode and the economy is in capitalist mode; is a Western European/North American phenomenon which has contributed to the creation of the conditions for freedom, democracy and successful economic performance.*" (British Council 1999). Another definition that is relevant to our endeavor was provided by John Keane. Keane states that the concept „*… both describes and anticipates a complex and dynamic ensemble of legally protected nongovernmental institutions that tend to be nonviolent, self-organizing, self-reflexive, and permanently in tension, both with each other and with the governmental institutions that "frame," constrict and enable their activities.*" (Keane 2009)

The contemporary understanding of civil societies is based on their separation from the state. It is difficult to imagine such an autonomous sphere in an absolutist monarchic regime. Therefore, until the end of the 18th century, civil society was associated with good governance. Later, although the boundaries between the political system and civil society were delineated, the latter was often presented as essential for the proper functioning of the former. Liberal democratic theories state that the role of civil society is to disseminate ideas generated by public opinion in the political arena, to educate citizens on public matters, to bring to accountability the dignitaries that abuse their powers, etc. (Baker 2002: 1) In opposition to Marx's perspective, currently the dominant view in the literature is that civil society is autonomous not only in its relationship with the state but also in its relationship with the market (Van Rooy 2004: 6–7).

Totalitarianism and civil societies cannot coexist. Totalitarianism lacks the moral component that is usually important for the functioning of the civil sphere. Monitoring, coercion, and punishment are the pillars of its universe (Cheung 2021: 229). Today, the specter of authoritarianism is far from a ghost of the past. As mentioned above, in the USA, Donald Trump upturned the political arena, promoting an authoritarian populist vision. American democracy, although its history is marked by several flaws, was widely seen as an example of resilience. Alexis de Tocqueville is not the only author who considered the development of civil organizations as a main cause of this resilience (Levitsky–Ziblatt 2018). Today, this characteristic is questioned by Trump.

Levitsky–Ziblatt (2018: 24–25) present four key indicators of authoritarian behavior: rejection of (or weak commitment to) democratic rules of the game; denial of the legitimacy of political opponents; tolerance or encouragement of violence; and readiness to curtail civil liberties of opponents, including media. The fourth aspect is the most relevant to our study. An authoritarian politician proposes or implements policies that restrict civil liberties. Moreover, the right to assembly and organization is weakened, and the possibilities of protesting against the rulers are reduced. Not only political rivals but also critics from mass media or NGOs are presented by exclusionary populists as a threat to the national interest.

Saskia Brechenmacher and Thomas Carothers (2019) published a study regarding the perils that civil society agents face worldwide. Some of the worrisome elements they identified are the following: technological innovations are instrumentalized by autocratic governments for restricting the civic space; illiberal politicians are increasingly successful at the polls; international institutions are weakened or hijacked by anti-democratic alliances. The democratic liberal camp has difficulties neutralizing this trend. It lacks strategic clarity, and the causes of the new reality are still unclear to those who should help undo it. Moreover, Western regimes find it difficult to act to protect foreign civil organizations, given that in their own countries, open society is endangered.

Our goal is to highlight social, economic, or political elements that contribute to the shrinking of the civil sphere. The information we analyze is provided, among other sources, by two projects meant to present the global landscape of the state of civil societies. Firstly, CIVICUS is a worldwide network of civil structures that is „...dedicated to strengthening citizen action and civil society throughout the world." (CIVICUS n.d.) It promotes values like justice and equality, knowledge, and principled courage. We focus on elements presented in the last two reports realized by CIVICUS, named People Power under Attack (2023 and 2022). Secondly, the V-Dem (Varieties of Democracy) project is meant to measure the latest evolutions regarding the condition of democracies all over the globe. It is realized by an institute affiliated with the University of Gothenburg (V-Dem 2015).

We are not constructing a quantitative analysis based on the data offered by these projects. We are extracting information to put forward preliminary conclusions meant to create a basis for future research. The descriptive and explanatory components of our research relate to a normative one. A descriptive study has the role of „gathering data and facts" (Mitulescu 2011: 35) on issues and phenomena that are unknown or in a continuous process of transformation. In our case, as mentioned above, the information is extracted from public documents. The explanatory dimension is enabled by the comparative approach. Given that we focus on the cases that, according to CIVICUS, recently experienced the greatest fluctuations regarding the state of civil society, it can be argued that our research includes a multiple case study, useful for identifying „...factors that appear in multiple situations." (Chelsea 2007: 601)

Civil society – current transformations

According to CIVICUS Monitor, in 2023, the main violations of civic freedoms consisted of the following: intimidation, protest disruption, detention of protesters, censorship, harassment, detention of journalists, attacks on journalists, excessive use of force on protesters, and detention of human rights activists (CIVICUS Monitor 2023). One year earlier, in 2022, the overview was similar (CIVICUS Monitor 2022). The right to protest and freedom of speech are among the main targets of the enemies of open societies.

In 2023, seven countries *(Table 1)* registered significant downgrades regarding the state of civil society. Among them, we can identify not only states like Venezuela or Kyrgyzstan, which are labeled by Freedom House as *not free* (Freedom House 2024), but also Germany. This highlights an element presented above civic freedoms are vulnerable in the Western world as well. On the other hand, in five countries *(Table 2)* the situation of civil society organizations improved (CIVICUS Monitor 2023).

In 2022, the group of states that were downgraded in the *People Power under Attack* report was significantly bigger than it will be in 2023, including 15 members. Among them, we can find not only the Russian Federation (which launched its military aggression in Ukraine in 2022) or Afghanistan (which came once again under Taliban rule in 2021), but also EU members like Greece and Cyprus. Regarding the states that improved their condition, the authors highlight ten cases. Unlike in the next report, countries from the EU and the Americas are included (CIVICUS Monitor 2022).

Table 1. Downgrades regarding the state of civil societies

2022	2023
Antigua and Barbuda	Germany
Dominica	Bosnia–Herzegovina
Suriname	Kyrgyzstan
Cyprus	Senegal
Ghana	Sri Lanka
Greece	Bangladesh
United Kingdom	Venezuela
Guatemala	
Lesotho	
Tunisia	
Afghanistan	
Myanmar	

Russia	
Tajikistan	
Hong Kong	

If we enlarge slightly the analyzed period, we can observe that between 2018 and 2023, in Africa, countries like Ghana, Tunisia, and South Africa had their scores reduced by the CIVICUS Monitor experts. On the other hand, the Central African Republic or Sudan improved their situation. In the Americas, Ecuador, Haiti, and Venezuela moved in the wrong direction, while in the Bahamas civil society organizations became more autonomous. Interestingly, the USA had its score reduced in 2020, but later, this negative trend was reversed. In the Asia Pacific area, Afghanistan, India, and Myanmar had downgrades, while Mongolia is one of very few cases with an upgraded score. In Europe and Central Asia, several countries devolved: Belarus, Germany, Greece, Poland, Russia, the UK, etc. The cases with improvements are fewer: Austria, Moldova, etc. The Czech Republic had a brief decay that was stopped after a crucial electoral moment. In the Middle East, Iraq and Jordan had a downgrade. Here, no country managed to improve its score (CIVICUS Monitor 2023).

Table 2. Upgrades regarding the state of civil societies

2022	2023
Bahamas	Timor-Leste
Czech Republic	Benin
Latvia	Lesotho
Armenia	Libya
Chile	
United States of America	
Cote d'Ivoire	
Burundi	
Central African Republic	
South Sudan	

It is important to highlight that the *People Power under Attack* reports place the analyzed countries in five categories: Open, Narrowed, Obstructed, Repressed,

or Closed (CIVICUS Monitor 2023–2022). Therefore, although, as we saw above, both Germany and Russia experienced a decline recently, the two are in different areas of our landscape; in Germany, civil society organizations are narrowed, while in Russia, they are closed.

Based on the information presented above, we selected six cases for our analysis: the UK, Germany, the Czech Republic, Russia, Afghanistan, and Tunisia. Europe is overrepresented: two countries (Germany and the Czech Republic) are EU members, one (the United Kingdom) recently left the EU, and one (Russia) is partly a European country. We decided in this way because of the peculiarity of having in recent years experienced a significant wave of democratic backsliding in different European regions.

United Kingdom

Between 2018 and 2021, civil society organizations in the UK were presented as narrow. Their situation changed in 2022 when the country was downgraded to the obstructed category, where it remained in the latest *People Power under Attack* report (CIVICUS Monitor 2023). This evolution is a symptom of a European crisis: *„Although Europe has the most countries rated as open, rating changes highlight that no region is immune to state restriction of civic freedoms, with Greece and the UK now downgraded to the obstructed rating and Cyprus to narrowed rating."* (CIVICUS Monitor 2022)

The main reason behind downgrading the UK is represented, according to the CIVICUS Monitor (2022) experts, by a deterioration of the freedom of peaceful assembly. In April 2022, the *Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts (PCSC) Act*, drafted by representatives of the Conservative government led by Boris Johnson, was enacted. This law imposed restrictions on the rights to protest and assembly based on arguments regarding the disruption of individual or collective activities through noise or the right to transport (Manchester City Council 2024). Moreover, in April 2023, the Conservative government led by Rishi Sunak managed to enact the *Public Order Bill*, which, among others, forbids protests near transportation networks or oil and gas and energy supplies (Amnesty International 2023).

Other sources suggest that the situation regarding the state of civil society in the UK is less grim (we must note that the above-mentioned bills apply only in England and Wales; Scotland and Northern Ireland are outside their district). Based on the V-Dem index, the conclusion is that civil society participation is at an elevated level. Although there were brief and slight downgrades in 2019 and 2021, in 2022, the UK equals its highest score in this regard, 0.95/1 (Our World in Data n.d.). However, we must highlight that this index focuses not on how authorities treat civil society organizations but on how willing citizens and organizations are to get involved in the public sphere. Moreover, given that the analyzed period stops in 2022, we cannot say that the index reflects the effects of the above-mentioned bills.

It must be emphasized that political decisions lie behind the deterioration of the state of civil society organizations. Governments confirmed by a Parliament that was democratically elected shaped these laws, which were approved by the legislative. The restriction of civic freedoms can start at the ballot.

According to the *Economist Intelligence* Unit, the UK's score regarding civil liberties worsened between 2015 and 2022, from 9.4/10 to 9.1/10 (Our World in Data n.d.). There is a clear correlation between another decision taken at the polls, the one regarding the UK's withdrawal from the EU, and this downgrade. Being an EU member is not a guarantee for preserving an autonomous and thriving civil sphere; for example, Hungary and Poland are, just like the UK, in the category of obstructed civil society organizations, according to CIVICUS Monitor (2022). Nevertheless, for the moment, being outside the EU is a factor that reduces the chances of blocking legal initiatives that can harm civil society.

The Brexit vote was fueled by an intertwining of ideological and technological factors. David Miliband (2020) argues that the *fake news* phenomenon, facilitated by social networks like Facebook, has a growing influence on politics in states like the UK or the US. Digitalization can be used by the resurgent radical right to reach its harmful goals for liberal democracies and civic spheres. However, it must be stated that Brexit became possible not only because of the populist manipulative discourse but also because of the EU's democratic deficit, highlighted by the Eurozone debt crisis (Muller 2016: 96).

Germany

Until 2022, civic space was rated in Germany as open. The situation changed in 2023 when Germany was relegated to the narrowed category. This decision was a consequence of the fact that the German state was among those „*...that escalated repression of environmental activists."* (CIVICUS Monitor 2023)

For instance, in January 2023, approximately 700 protesters who opposed the extension of a coalmine were removed by the police from the village of Lutzerath, which was planned to be destroyed to allow a company to proceed with extracting coal. The authorities used force disproportionately to empty the village (Nolting 2023). Moreover, a movement called *Last Generation*, which participated in acts of non-violent disobedience, became a target for the judiciary system. Police members often use pain-inducing techniques against the so-called *climate terrorists*, while other options for repressing them, like detentions, are pondered (Singelnstein–Obens 2023).

Once again, the conclusions of the People Power under Attack reports are not reflected by the V-dem Civil Society Participation Index (Our World in Data n.d.). Germany has an almost perfect score of 0.98/1. However, our observations presented above are relevant in this case as well: the index focuses on the willingness of citizens and organizations to engage in civic activities and the analyzed period stops in 2022.

On the other hand, the *Economist Intelligence* Unit's index highlights a trend regarding the upholding of civil liberties in Germany that could become worrying: the country's score decreased between 2017 and 2022 from 9.7/1 to 9.4/1 (Our World in Data n.d.).

Firstly, it is both ironic and worrisome that movements meant to protect the environment are repressed under the supervision of a governing coalition that includes an ecologist party (Alliance 90/The Greens). Secondly, the German case reflects the importance of international politics and economic developments for the state of civil societies. The mentioned coalmine was opened because of the energy crisis generated by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Moreover, the authorities might tend to use violence against non-violent disobedience acts that disturb economic activities in periods when the economy is struggling. In 2023, the German economy fell into recession (Trading Economics n.d.).

The German case also highlights the role of ideology in weakening civil societies. The repressive acts against environmental NGOs are favored by the resilience of climate change denialism in Western societies. This denialism, although it changes its shape as time goes by, remains a vital component of right-wing discourses (Cann–Raymond 2018). The anti-elitism promoted by exclusionary populism is undermining trust in the scientific arguments regarding climate change (Krange et al. 2021).

Czech Republic

Between 2018 and 2020, the Czech Republic's rating regarding civil society was open. In 2021, the country was relegated to the narrowed category. However, in 2022, it regained its original status, which was maintained in 2023 as well (CIVICUS Monitor 2023). Crucial to this development was the government change that followed the parliamentary elections held in 2021: „*Under the government of Prime Minister Petr Fiala a few positive changes have been documented. For example, the draft legislative proposal to strengthen the editorial independence of Czech Television.*" (CIVICUS Monitor 2022)

Mass media's independence is vital for preserving the autonomy of the civil sphere. On one hand, a media institution can be weaponized against open societies by private interests. On the other hand, those who hold political power can use public media structures to undermine the checks and balances system. In January 2022, Fiala's cabinet committed in a Policy Statement to amend the legislation regarding Czech Television and Radio, one of the goals being to ensure the sustainability of funding. In the same document, the government stated that climate change is unquestionable (Government of the Czech Republic 2022).

The European Commission's most recent report regarding the rule of law in Czechia acknowledged the positive impact of the legislative modifications that targeted the public media. The report also highlights the progress regarding the independence and transparency of the judiciary system (European Commission 2023: 1).

The freedom of justice is essential for the proper functioning of civil society organizations. The image reflected by the V-Dem Civil Society Participation Index is once again slightly different from the one presented by the People Power under Attack reports. Firstly, we can notice that in 2023, the Czech Republic's score is significantly lower (0.79/1) than the ones of Germany (0.98/1) or the UK (0.95/1). Secondly, according to the index, the Czech Republic had its highest score (0.82/1) in 2017, the year in which, in December, the right-wing populist Andrej Babis took over the position of Prime Minister. Later, slight fluctuations were observable, the lowest point being in 2020 (0.78/1) (Our World in Data n.d.). On the other hand, the *Economist Intelligence* Unit provides a landscape that matches the one presented by CIVICUS Monitor. In 2015, in the Civil Liberties Index, Czechia's score was 9.4/10. A sharp decline followed in 2017, with the country scoring 8.5/10. The negative trend was inverted after the Fiala government was appointed. (Our World in Data n.d.)

The case of the UK highlighted the harmful impact that elections can have on the state of civil society organizations. Czechia represents a different kind of example: civil liberties are enhanced, not undermined, at the polls. In 2021, Andrej Babis, rightfully labeled as the *Czech Donald Trump* (Heijmans 2019), lost the parliamentary elections. This result paved the way for a genuinely democratic government that, until now, has undeniably had a positive impact on the efforts to maintain the Czech Republic in the category of open societies.

Downgrades, like the one experienced after Babis took office, are possible not only because of external factors, like elections or geopolitical evolutions but also because of the internal dynamics of the civil space. In Central and Eastern Europe, as well as in other geographical regions, some NGOs tend to avoid political subjects in their activities, focusing on individual or community endeavors. Although some argue that this approach is proper for respecting the separation between the state and civil society, it can become counterproductive (Quigley 2000). If civil organizations avoid the political battlefield, leaders like Babis can benefit.

The Russian Federation

Until 2021, Russia's rating in the *People Power under Attack* reports was repressed. In 2022, the country was downgraded to the closed category. This status was maintained in 2023 as well (CIVICUS Monitor 2023). Vladimir Putin's decision to invade Ukraine, whose sovereignty and territorial integrity had been targeted by Russia since 2014 (Rusu 2023: 157–158), created the conditions for further undermining civil liberties: „*In Russia, the government's crackdown on civic space further intensified since it launched its full-scale war on Ukraine (…) Nationwide anti-war protests have been brutally repressed, with over 19,500 people detained since February 2022.*" (CIVICUS Monitor 2022) Russia's aggression also impacted the activity of external NGOs. As mentioned above, the German authorities restricted civil liberties because of the energetic and economic conditions shaped by the Ukrainian war.

On the other hand, the necessity of sheltering Ukrainian refugees boosted civic activity in several European countries (CIVICUS Monitor 2022).

On December 1, 2022, the *foreign agents law* came into effect, additionally restricting the freedom of speech. Anyone with views that contradict the position of the authorities can be labeled as a *traitor* and suffer legal consequences (Human Rights Watch 2022). The death of opposition leader Alexei Navalny, which occurred in February 2024, is a direct consequence of the climate built by the Putin regime. Hundreds of people were detained by the authorities for publicly gathering to honor Navalny's memory (Amnesty International 2024).

In Russia's case, the image provided by V-Dem is quite like the one provided by the *People Power under Attack* reports. According to the Civil Society Participation Index, Russia had its highest score (0.60/1) between 1992 and 2000. In 2001, its score plummeted to 0.54/1. In 2020, the figure was 0.43/1. Two years later, after Russia invaded Ukraine, the situation was much grimmer: 0.25/1 (Our World in Data n.d.). The conclusions put forward by the *Economist Intelligence* Unit are alike: Russia's score in the Civil Liberties Index decreased from 4.1/10 in 2021 to 2.4/10 in 2022 (Our World in Data n.d.)

Russia's situation proves that foreign policy decisions and policies that impact the civil sphere can be intertwined. Moreover, large parts of the population can be convinced to renounce their civil liberties by propaganda, which creates the false image of a looming existential threat generated by foreign enemies. The presidential election that reconfirmed Putin in March 2024 was neither free nor fair (Euronews 2024). Nevertheless, studies show that most Russian citizens still support their authoritarian leader (Van Brugen 2023).

The Putin regime's propaganda is distributed through tools generated by the latest technological developments, not only internally but also abroad (Natea 2023: 158). The Kremlin has a role in the perpetuation of the *fake news* phenomenon mentioned above. Once again, ideology is a key part of the image we are observing. The messages emitted by the Russian propaganda are fueled by a worldview that has notable Conservative elements (Colton 2022) and is replicated mostly by individuals with right-wing political sympathies (Soares et al. 2023).

Afghanistan

The Central Asian country's situation is partly like that of Russia. Until 2021, Afghanistan's rating in the *People Power under Attack* reports was *repressed*. In 2022, the country was downgraded to the *closed* category. This status was maintained in 2023 as well (CIVICUS Monitor 2023). As mentioned above, the civil sphere was virtually dissolved after the Taliban regained political power: *„Afghanistan has been downgraded due to severe restrictions on civic space imposed by the Taliban following their takeover in 2021. Activists who have been critical of the Taliban have faced arrest, unlawful detention, abductions, torture, and extrajudicial execution."* (CIVICUS Monitor 2022)

Freedom of expression, association, or assembly was all but erased by the new government. The regime also radically changed the status of women in Afghanistan: they were banned from several public activities. The secular worldview that existed in the country for a brief period before 1979 and that slowly gained roots once again was replaced by religious values that are in opposition to basic human rights. A few NGOs were able to continue their activities, although the regime crackdown maintained its intensity. These organizations operate in clandestinity and focus on humanitarian aid (Tapesh 2023).

The Civil Society Participation Index (V-Dem) reflects the dramatic decline in this domain in Afghanistan. In 2020, its score was 0.74/1 (the highest score, 0.76/1, was registered in 2015). In 2022, the score was reduced to 0.12/1, lower than in the 19th century. In the Civil Liberties Index, the *Economist Intelligence Unit* provides a similar image: from 3.8/10 in 2020, Afghanistan's score decreased to 0.3/10 (Our World in Data n.d.).

Firstly, Afghanistan's case reflects once more the importance of foreign policy decisions in shaping the state of both internal and external civil societies. Following the path opened by the Trump administration, the Biden administration decided to bring home its troops from Afghanistan after a conflict that lasted almost 20 years. Based on reasons linked to the internal political struggle, this decision enabled an autocratic restoration, which is fatal for the Afghan civil space. Secondly, the policies of the Taliban prove once again that religious fundamentalism and civil society cannot coexist. Undeniably, the essence of the worldview promoted by fundamentalists is totalitarian (Tibi 2007).

The current situation of Afghan civil organizations is partly a consequence of the international community's inability to build mechanisms meant to support NGOs in grim environments. The strategic confusion mentioned by Brechenmacher and Carothers (2019) is a key cause of this situation. Directing funds to structures that have the goal of spreading humanitarian aid or limiting abuses is often hampered by indecision or bureaucratic procedures. Moreover, the mission of international organizations like the United Nations (UN) is sabotaged by the animosities between its main members (Tapesh 2023).

Tunisia

Until 2021, Tunisia's rating in the *People Power under Attack* reports was obstructed. This rating was encouraging for a country that was not completely immune to the Islamist challenge. There were reasons to argue that Tunisia was the only case of successful democratization among the states that were swept by the revolts known as the Arab Spring. However, in 2022, Tunisia was relegated to the *repressed* category, where it remained in 2023 as well (CIVICUS Monitor 2023). The main responsible for this decline is Kais Saïed: „*The 2021 decisions of President Kais Saïed to freeze parliament, suspend the constitution, dismiss the head of government and indefinitely extend his extraordinary powers has resulted in a more*

hostile environment for civil society." (CIVICUS Monitor 2022) We have in this case a clear example of hijacking a democratization process. The leader of the executive branch becomes a tyrant by erasing the separation of powers.

In August 2022, a new Constitution was adopted, which offered a legal background to the new political reality. The fundamental law states that the president cannot be impeached and has the authority to appoint the prime minister and the cabinet. Given that his position was significantly strengthened, Saïed proceeded to persecute political opponents and civil society organizations. Besides the constitution, additional legislation was used to reduce the freedom of the press, further constraining the civic space (CIVICUS Monitor 2022).

V-Dem's index regarding civil society participation confirms the conclusions of the *People Power under Attack* reports. After reaching a historically high score of 0.91/1 in 2013, Tunisia saw its situation worsen significantly after 2020. In 2022, its score was only 0.61/10 (Our World in Data n.d.). The *Economist Intelligence Unit's* Civil Liberties Index is another instrument that reflects the failure of Tunisia's democratization. Between 2015 and 2019, the country's score was 5.9/10. In 2022, it shrank to 5/10 (Our World in Data b n.d.).

It is important to mention that Saïed was elected president in free and fair elections held in 2019 (Yerkes 2019). His acts represent an excellent example of a democratically elected leader who upturns the will of the citizens. Saïed's actions represented a capitalization of adverse conditions. The president took advantage of the turmoil generated by the pandemic and the economic difficulties that accompanied it. Such developments can occur in consolidated democracies as well, but where civil society is deeply rooted, wannabe autocrats might find it more difficult to implement their plans.

Although seen broadly as a pragmatic technocrat who focuses on growing his political influence and is uninterested in ideological details, Saïed can use to his advantage some of the core concepts of global right-wing radicalism. For instance, racism is becoming a key element of his approach. Recently, NGOs and their representatives were brutally repressed for trying to protect the rights of Black African migrants (Human Rights Watch 2024). As in many other countries, the fears of some citizens become a weapon that the autocrat uses against his opponents.

Conclusions

Seva Gunitsky (2017) argues that upturns in international relations have a profound influence on the transformations of political regimes: democratic waves are generated by external elements. These waves can have negative equivalents: authoritarianism can also become contagious. Democratic and anti-democratic metamorphoses are triggered by hegemonic shocks (sudden changes in the statute of a global power).

Our case studies highlight the importance of international politics for consolidating/weakening civil societies. Could it be argued that today we are experiencing a hegemonic shock? It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide an answer to this question. Nevertheless, some of the information we presented suggests that there is a correlation between a severe crisis in American politics and society and a global regress in civil liberties.

The UK's case highlights the impact of foreign policy decisions (London never fully internalized its status as an EU member) on the internal civil environment. Russia's aggression in Ukraine influenced civil societies both internally and externally. In Afghanistan, civil society organizations became victims of a decision taken in Washington.

One of the main conclusions of our paper is that foreign policy matters. An equally important one is that elections matter. The situation of civil society organizations in the UK changed after the Brexit vote and after the parliamentary elections held in 2019. In the Czech Republic, civil society regained its full autonomy after the legislative elections held in 2021. The presidential elections in Russia are constantly marked by irregularities, but their result reflects the will of most Russian citizens. In Tunisia, Saïed gained the opportunity to shift towards authoritarianism after being democratically elected president.

History also matters. The USA and the Czech Republic managed to improve the state of their civil society, not only because of electorally generated government changes but also because of having a significant tradition in upholding political and civil liberties. However, this does not mean that Europe or Northern America should be less worried regarding the current surge of illiberalism. The interwar period's lessons should never be forgotten.

Other factors are also highly relevant to the evolution of civil societies. Economic difficulties might influence the authorities to restrict the right to protest. Moreover, open societies cannot survive without an independent judiciary system and an independent mass media. The relationship between the state and the citizens should be characterized by trust. Otherwise, civil organizations might be overshadowed by populist movements. The lack of trust weakens democracies (Dobrescu–Durach 2023: 44).

Our case studies tend to confirm at least some of the conclusions put forward by Brechenmacher–Carothers (2019). The process of digitalization encompasses not only opportunities but also significant risks for liberal democracies and thriving civil societies. Disinformation shapes an environment in which the activity of NGOs is often obstructed. International organizations like the UN or the EU have limited possibilities for altering this reality. The UN Security Council's mission is sabotaged by its authoritarian members. In the EU, illiberal states use their veto rights to block important decisions of the European Council.

A crucial aspect is that NGOs operate in a climate dominated by ideology. The latest developments we described clearly contradict the assumption that globalization is shaping a post-ideological order.

From the UK to Afghanistan and from Tunisia to the Czech Republic, ideology is still the main driving force behind social and political evolutions. Western liberal democracies can overcome their strategic confusion regarding civil societies only if they replace economic pragmatism with an unambiguous commitment to democratic values.

Civil organizations are not mere objects of actions taken by others. Even if the global landscape is characterized by democratic backsliding, they still have the possibility, in many countries, to be proactive and to fight back when their autonomy is endangered. As Quigley (2000) argued more than two decades ago, if NGOs deliberately avoid political topics, at one point they might find it difficult to continue their mission.

The causal connections are not easily definable in our endeavor. Eric Fromm (1941) argued that Protestantism is an effect of the emergence of the capitalist economic system. Later, the spreading of Protestant cults favored the further development of capitalism. This evolution has similarities with the one we described: the weaknesses of the civil sphere can be seen both as a cause and as an effect of the ascension of illiberal/autocratic movements. After the Cold War ended, NGOs failed to function as an antidote to the emerging radical parties or movements. Later, this radicalism contributed to a loss of autonomy for civil space.

We do not claim that the image we shaped through our case studies is complete or definitive. We opted for a small-N analysis, which, unlike a large-N analysis, is well-suited for qualitative research (Collier–Elman 2008: 781). Moreover, we focused especially on external factors, like the way ideology's impact on several aspects of political and social life is affecting the activity of civil organizations. The role of the internal dynamics of NGOs was observed only to a short extent, which is one of the main limitations of our paper.

Studies that use different methodological tools and focus on more countries could shape additional conclusions or even reevaluate the importance of some of the aspects we focused on. One who observes a transforming landscape is always in danger of lacking precision in his endeavor. Nevertheless, we are confident that our study can be helpful for better understanding a topic that is vital for the political and social development of the 21st century.

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The contribution of civil society organisations*
to the implementation of the principles
of good governance at the local level

Vanya Kashukeeva-Nusheva

Relevance of the concept of good governance

Over the last two decades, the debate about how public institutions should function has focused on the concept of "good governance" – an understandable term, but its content sounds abstract to the public. Several national and international organizations, institutions, and research centers have drawn attention to good governance, placing it alongside the issue of fighting corruption. Such an approach has its profound reasons – good governance can be seen as the "flip side of the coin" of the social phenomenon of corruption. If the fight against corruption is primarily associated with measures that expose and sanction abuse of power and ineffective governance, then good governance is associated with a complex set of measures that create an enabling environment for more effective governance in the public interest and put up effective barriers to potential abuses before they occur.

A similar approach can be found in the first studies and publications on the relationship between anti-corruption and sustainable economic development, produced in the mid-1990s by international financial institutions. In 1996, the International Monetary Fund highlighted the link between anti-corruption and good governance. In its handbook, „The IMF approach to promoting good governance and fighting corruption "IMF defines good governance through its core „aspects, including by ensuring the rule of law, improving public sector efficiency and accountability, and addressing corruption" (IMF 2005).

The World Bank defines good governance as a model of government based on three components: 1) a process in which government is elected and replaced as a result of free and democratic elections; 2) the capacity of government to formulate and implement sound policies; and 3) respect by citizens and the state to the institutions that govern their economic and social interactions (Kaufmann–Kraay–Zoido-Lobatón 1999).

When addressing the topic of good governance, several researchers – representatives of the academic community – focus on the interrelationship between good governance and the way public institutions function. According to Susan-Rose Ackerman, good governance is possible when „all types of institutional structures join forces to achieve substantive outcomes and enjoy public legitimacy" (UNODC 2021, Rose-Ackerman 1999).

When looking at the complex issue of the functioning of public institutions, the focus is more often on institutions at the national level. However, the complex institutional structure of modern societies cannot function adequately unless it integrates into a common mechanism the institutions operating at various levels – national, regional, and local. In this context, local authorities not only have a key role to play in the socio-economic development of local communities but also carry out a range of activities delegated by the state and can build a solid foundation for the effective implementation of the principles of good governance.

In dynamic societies, it is particularly important for institutions to function effectively and to adapt according to the needs of society. In this regard, Douglas Nord places particular emphasis on the cooperation between public institutions and civil society structures. In his point of view, the direction of development and institutional change depends on „the interaction between institutions and organizations that shapes the direction of institutional change" (Nord 2000: 18). An identical approach to issues of good governance has been applied by several NGOs, which focus their attention primarily on the inclusion of „civil society as a voluntary actor ", and as an entity that is a corrective of governance (TI Bulgaria 2009: 13).

In modern democratic society, NGOs perform essential functions, related to the protection of civil rights and interests, mobilizing citizens in support of public causes, and exercising civic control over the institutions (Kashukeeva-Nusheva–Hristova–Toneva 2019: 75). In the context of governance at the local level, their role as a corrective to local government institutions is particularly important. It is for this reason that the attention of several studies of public institutions at the local level has focused both on assessing the way civil society structures function and on their contribution to good governance at the local level. In the region of Central and Eastern Europe, studies of the capacity and contribution of non-governmental organizations are a particularly valuable guide for the direction in which civil society is developing in emerging democracies and for the process of their consolidation. For example, one of the researchers of civil society in the West Balkan region – Diana-Gabriela Reianu, emphasizes her research on the develop-

ment of civil society in Montenegro, stating that „an empowered civil society is a crucial component of any democratic system" (Reianu 2024).

Research on the contribution of civil society organizations to the implementation of good governance principles at the local level

In 2015, Transparency International Bulgaria developed a research methodology that assesses local-level institutions (mayor, municipal council, municipal administration) and civil society structures (NGOs, political parties, media, and business) in terms of (1) their capacity, (2) principles of their governance and (3) their role in the 27 largest municipalities, which are regional centers. The Local Integrity System Index study is based on more than 270 indicators that allow for comparative analysis by the municipality, institutions and structures studied, and trends over the period 2015-2023. Each indicator is rated on a scale of 1 (lowest value) to 5 (maximum value). The survey not only provides an assessment of the contribution of NGOs to the development of local communities but also allows for a comparison of civil society structures in different regions of the country, thus providing an overall snapshot of civil society structures in the country.

Figure 1. Local Integrity Index – 2022: Civil society – non-governmental organizations ranking
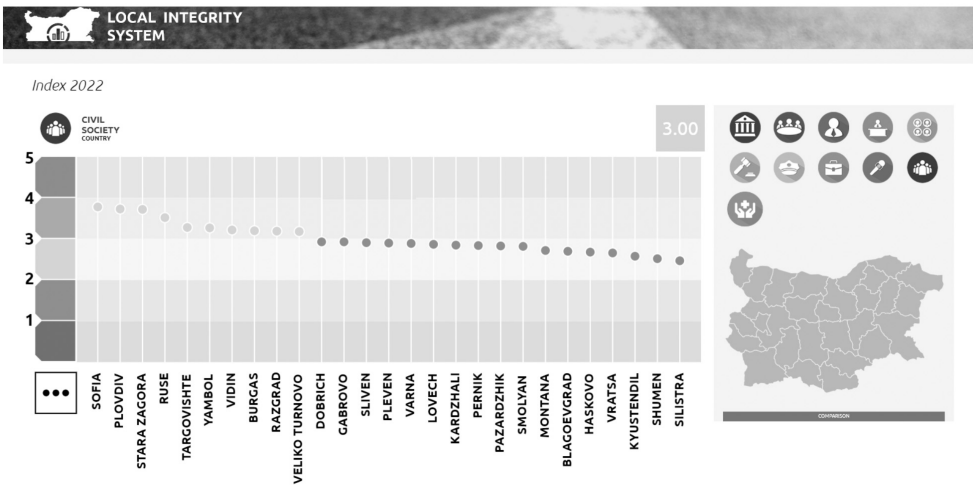
Source: Local Integrity System Index, https://lisi.transparency.bg/en/post_year/civil-society-2022-country-overall/

NGO Capacity and Governance

The study shows that the main positive contribution to the overall score is made by indicators related to the governance principles of NGOs, while the lowest values are related to their role as structures capable of exercising citizen control over public institutions.

The index of local NGOs for 2022 has a value of 3.0 points, and in 2023 – 3.02 points, with the highest scores being given to NGOs in large cities – Sofia, Plovdiv, Ruse, Stara Zagora, Burgas. This score is the result of the capacity-building, transparent, and accountable management of the organizations, which allows them to function independently, combining skilfully civic control and partnership with local authorities.

Data from Transparency International Bulgaria's Local Integrity Index study show that the NGO sector in small towns suffers from a lack of sufficient financial resources, and there are almost no financial programs at the local level aimed at good governance, civic control, and anti-corruption. In the country's smaller cities, the lack of financial resources hampers the activities of NGOs.

This deficit has also been identified by other studies of local communities. For example, research by the International Republican Institute states that „NGOs are either financially dependent on the municipal budget or are asked to join small projects or to help address a local crisis" (IRI 2022: 9); Most NGOs are „local interest groups (sports clubs, pensioner groups, etc.) or providers of delegated social services for the municipality, i.e. citizen-oriented NGOs are almost non-existent outside the capital" (IRI 2023: 6).

Despite these problems, the results of Transparency International Bulgaria's research show that there are good practices of municipalities that provide financial support for anti-corruption initiatives and NGO projects aimed at good governance at the local level.

Such is the case of Stara Zagora – a city located in south-central Bulgaria. Since 2006 Stara Zagora has established a municipal fund that supports NGOs that have won projects and need co-financing. The fund was established by a decision of the Municipal Council and an ordinance[1] has been created for its management, which defines the rules for co-financing or bridge financing of NGO projects.

In the capital Sofia, there are several programs and funds to support initiatives of NGOs, with funding provided by both public resources and businesses. Funding is secured from both public and business resources, and information on application requirements is published promptly and accessible to all interested organizations through the City Council website.[2]

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1 http://www.starazagora.bg/images/stories/municipality/adm_acts/naredba_finansovo_podpoma-gane.pdf .

2 http://sofiacouncil.bg/?page=news&id=595

The study shows that in several small and medium-sized cities in the country, the lack of financial resources is compensated by the ability of civil society organizations to mobilize intangible resources. In this regard, the essential role of volunteers in the implementation of civic initiatives is highlighted. The data allow concluding that the key to maintaining the capacity of NGOs is their ability to mobilize volunteers, experts, and prominent personalities with authority in society. Equally important is NGOs' satisfaction with the fact that their initiatives receive authentic civic support.

For example, several civil society organizations in the country have managed to mobilize hundreds of volunteers to monitor the elections. Examples of such civic campaigns are available in the period 2009–2023. One example is provided by the civic initiative to monitor the electoral process „It's my decision ", which integrates the efforts of volunteers from over 20 NGOs from all regions of the country.[3]

Contribution of civil society organisations to the implementation of the principles of good governance at the local level

The International Republican Institute study highlights one significant problem – a small number of organizations specializing in anti-corruption or civic control operate at the local level. The 2023 report states that as a rule, „most municipal NGOs are local interest associations (sports clubs, pensioner groups, etc.) or providers of delegated social services for the municipality (childcare, services for victims of domestic violence, education for persons with special needs, etc.), i.e., citizen-oriented NGOs are almost non-existent outside the capital "(IRI 2023: 6).

Transparency International's research shows that, except for the large cities mentioned above, anti-corruption organizations and organizations do not exist, and few organizations are carrying out civic oversight. However, good examples can be identified of organizations whose contribution to the prevention of political corruption and the establishment of good governance principles at the local level is expressed in several ways: (1) independent citizen monitoring of the activities of local institutions, including investigations of abuses and ineffective performance of local government institutions; (2) initiatives to ensure transparency in the activities of institutions and to hold institutions accountable; (3) interaction with local authorities and transfer of know-how in good governance, anti-corruption and modernization of public institutions.

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3 http://samizbiram.bg/?lang=en.

Access to public information as a tool for citizen control and prevention of abuse of public resources

A fundamental principle of good governance is ensuring publicity, transparency, and accountability about the work of institutions. One of the deficits identified in both TI-Bulgaria's (Kashukeeva-Nusheva 2023: 14) and the International Republican Institute's (IRI 2023: 9) studies is the formal approach of local authorities to fulfill these obligations. Often, local authorities provide formal responses, and this discourages NGOs from further anti-corruption monitoring. Despite the difficulties, several positive examples can be cited from the activities of organizations in Pernik, Varna, Dobrich, and Burgas, which, through their consistent efforts to hold local government institutions to account, have led to the disclosure of misuse of public funds or have prevented schemes to sell municipal and state property.

The example from Pernik is related to the consistent efforts of a civic organization to remove the veil on the non-transparent contract relations between media and local authorities in the period 2011–2015. Several activists of a local society organization noticed that one of the local media did not publish any critical material. Until 2015, the public in Pernik had no information on the contracts for media coverage of the municipality's work. The active work of the NGO „Active for Pernik "changed this practice. It has started to steadily seek information about the contracts between the municipality and the local media. Having failed to obtain the data it sought, it turned to the courts for assistance, citing the requirements of the Access to Public Information Act. From the information obtained, the municipality had concluded contracts for media coverage and thus it had ensured its media comfort.[4] The case is assessed as an important achievement for civil society because it is not only related to the purchase of a positive image by concluding contracts with selected media but also because the municipality of Pernik has accumulated a huge public debt in previous years.

The cases from Northeast Bulgaria are related to the decent work of civil society organizations that manage to preserve public property from the decisions of local municipal authorities. The NGO „Civil Society for Dobrich "challenged in court a decision of the local municipal council to sell part of the central square to a bar.[5] A positive example is also provided by the activities of several NGOs in the so-called „sea capital "Varna, which for many years have sought to protect the city's Sea Garden from development. For example, „Green Varna "activists reveal that the municipality prepares documents that permit construction in this area without having mandatory public consultations. In 2023, a group of active citizens created a Facebook community „Varna can protect its Sea Garden ", which continues to ensure publicity of the process and mobilize citizens against decisions that harm the public interest.[6]

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4 http://www.perunik.com/news/192058/Vestnik-Sapernik-uspya-da-prilapa-dogovor-za-360000-lv.-ot-obsthina-Pernik.

5 http://dariknews.bg/view_article.php?article_id=1435907.

6 https://www.facebook.com/groups/MorskataRevived/?locale=bg_BG.

Good examples of public consultation and public councils

The direct involvement of NGOs in the discussion of strategic documents, development policies, and joint anti-corruption initiatives is one of the key prerequisites for the effective implementation of good governance principles. Several deficits have been identified in this respect. According to the organizations themselves, the reasons are rooted in the lack of experience, capacity, and self-confidence to carry out this type of civic action. The studies cited show a mixed picture – in some municipalities, public deliberations are effective and provide a real opportunity for citizen participation, in others the process is carried out formally, without meaningful discussion, and without considering the views of the participants... „In short, municipal participatory mechanisms are not perceived by citizens as relevant and engaging, nor as effective" (IRI 2023: 9).

However, there are several good examples of established partnerships between NGOs and local authorities. For example, because of TI Bulgaria's initiative, a set of recommendations has been formulated for 8 municipalities that are at the bottom of the Local Integrity Index ranking,[7] or municipalities whose local authorities have demonstrated a willingness to develop policies to prevent corruption and adopt good governance principles (Vidin, Lovech, Veliko Tarnovo, Shumen, Ruse, Blago-evgrad, Pernik, Smolyan).

Good practices related to effective interaction between civil society organizations and local authorities.

Research on the interaction between civil society structures and institutions at the local level shows that there are many good practices both in large cities and in small municipalities. In this regard, examples can be given from three municipalities that differ in size and socio-economic characteristics.

Sofia is not only the capital and administrative center of the country but also the center where the most active NGOs operate. To create conditions for better dialogue with citizens, Sofia Municipality has created a section on the municipality's website called „Get Involved "(https://www.sofia.bg/en/participate). It provides a platform for public dialogue and citizen participation in six categories: „Share your opinion," „Polls", „Public discussions," „Public consultations," „Apply for municipality programs, „Participate in municipality campaigns." In the public consultation section, information is published on the topic, the time and place of the debate, the deadline for submitting comments to the relevant administration, as well as instructions on how to access the materials.

The „Public Consultation "section (https://www.sofia.bg/en/public-consulta-tions) contains information on the topic, place, and time/period of the public

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7 https://lisi.transparency.bg/years/2023/.

consultation, contact details of the responsible officials, attached documents, comments received and answers to questions raised, opinions expressed and comments, which are available on the Single Portal for Public Consultation of Sofia Municipality.

A good example of transparency and equality of access is provided by the practice of the Architecture and Public Works Department in Sofia Municipality, which maintains adequate access to information on expert advice (https://nag. sofia.bg/Pages/Render/198), professional consultations, public hearings, and public consultations. The website of this structure provides timely and well-structured information on a register of citizens and organizations wishing to receive regular information related to spatial development and spatial planning in the Capital City Municipality (https://nag.sofia.bg/Pages/Render/858); notices of public consultations; structured information on public consultations and professional consultations (https://nag.sofia.bg/Pages/Render/861); a register of public consultations (https://nag.sofia.bg/Pages/Render/1201); information on the public consultation, together with the attached documents (https://nag.sofia.bg/Pages/Render/989).

Good practices for interaction with citizens: „Public forum for Implementation of partnership projects in Troyan municipality"

Troyan Municipality is a small municipality in the North Central region, with a population of thirty-six thousand inhabitants. The local authorities maintain an ongoing dialogue with citizens on all issues of public importance and have provided a variety of tools for seeking public opinion from the stage of initiating management decisions. What is original and valuable in the practice of Troyan municipality is the way projects are selected. The process is public, and transparent and involves the most active and socially engaged organizations and citizens. Every year after the deadline for submission of project proposals, the Mayor of Troyan invites citizens to participate in the public forum, where they decide which civic initiatives should be financially supported (IPA 2015: 70–71).

Conclusion

In summary, the numerous studies of civil society structures in Bulgaria outline a picture that has similar characteristics to the picture in several Central and Eastern European countries. The newly established non-governmental organizations make a significant contribution to the processes of democratization and modernization of public institutions at the national and local levels. Although NGOs suffer from a deficit of financial resources, they manage to compensate for this deficit with their ability to mobilize the expertise and energy of active citizens and volunteers, thereby having a significant impact on the development of local communities and being a key factor in the consolidation of the democratic process in their countries.

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Notes

Source: Local Integrity System Index, https://lisi.transparency.bg/en/post_year/civil-society-2022-country-overall/.

http://www.starazagora.bg/images/stories/municipality/adm_acts/naredba_finansovo_podpomagane.pdf .

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Fotó/Photo: István Péter Németh

Civic Engagement and Cultural Heritage:*
Lessons from the Herculane Project

Bogdan Berceanu

Introduction

Cultural heritage is globally recognized and is supported by international organizations such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (Rodzi et al. 2013).As defined by UNESCO (Institute for Statistics 2009), cultural heritage includes artefacts, monuments, a group of buildings and sites, museums that have a diversity of values including symbolic, historic, artistic, aesthetic, ethnological or anthropological, scientific and social significance.

The significance of cultural heritage in society is emphasized by the United Nations (UN 2016) Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 11, which aims to safeguard cultural heritage and promote participatory planning. This goal highlights the need for greater efforts to protect the world's cultural and natural heritage. This aspect has made cultural heritage an important dimension of the more complex concept of sustainable development, as well as the specific implications it can have at the local level (Duxbury et al. 2016). Thus, cultural heritage is acknowledged as a crucial element for sustainable local development, contributing to the identity of territories and the cultural diversity of local communities (Gravagnuolo et al. 2021).

Moreover, the SDGs include indicators to address the percentage of cities with an established framework for direct civil society participation in urban planning and governance, operating consistently and democratically. This highlights the importance of allowing individuals to engage in matters that affect their locality, should they wish to do so (Mc Candlish–Mc Pherson 2020).

Within the European Union, cultural heritage is defined as a collective good of societal significance and mutual benefit. This entails the engaged participation of various stakeholders within multi-dimensional and participatory frameworks of public initiatives. These stakeholders include public authorities, private entities, civil society organizations, NGOs, the volunteer sector, and interested individuals. They play active roles in decision-making, planning, preservation, and protection of cultural goods (Žuvela et al. 2023).

The importance of conserving cultural heritage is acknowledged by the international (UNESCO, 2020), European (EC no. 116/2009; EU no. 2019/880), and national legislation (The Romanian Law of Preserving Cultural Monuments, 2001). Financial resources from public bodies are allocated to the most significant heritage buildings and sites, while smaller and less significant sites may receive less funding attention from institutions (Gravagnuolo et al. 2021).

In Romania, historic monuments are protected by law, regardless of their ownership or state of preservation. The protection of historic monuments is a crucial aspect of a sustainable future, based on social, tourism, urban, and spatial strategies at the national and local levels. The State should guarantee and ensure the protection of historical monuments through public administration bodies.

In many cases, public administration authorities are responsible for safeguarding heritage, but, for assorted reasons, often fail to provide sufficient financial and management resources for heritage sites. This is also the case for the town of Băile Herculane/Herculane Baths spa resort, one of the oldest thermal baths in Romania and Europe. Many of the historic buildings are poorly preserved, and some are badly degraded to the point of collapse, as is the cease of the Băile Neptun/Neptun Baths building.

This paper aims to examine the role of civic engagement in safeguarding cultural heritage goods in cases where public authorities have failed to do so. It is anticipated that non-governmental and non-profit organizations will assume a role in addressing societal needs where the state and other institutions lack the necessary resources to do so (Albu–Zakota 2022). The Herculane Project, initiated by a Romanian non-governmental organization (NGO) – Locus Association, provides valuable insights into the interplay between civil society, public administration authorities, and the preservation of cultural monuments.

To achieve this, we will start with the hypothesis that civic engagement is a vital mechanism for safeguarding cultural goods in the face of challenges to preserving cultural heritage, such as funding constraints and limited governmental intervention.

To accomplish the research objectives, we will seek to address the following research inquiries:

I. How does civic engagement, as demonstrated by the Herculane Project in Romania, affect the preservation of cultural heritage goods in the absence of adequate governmental support?

II. What insights can be gained from this case study to guide efforts to enhance civic initiatives in cultural heritage preservation worldwide?

Methodological Framework

This article aims to discuss civic engagement and cultural heritage from a theoretical and conceptual perspective followed by a study regarding the Herculane Project. The article intends to be narrative (Martin 2014), it follows a clear and logical structure, adhering to conventional academic formatting and style guides.

A qualitative approach was employed (Klein–Myers 1999), using interpretive description (Thorne 2014) and a review of secondary literature to answer the research questions.

The investigation material comprises social media representations, online websites such as the Herculane Project website, articles, and public information with references to the situation of cultural goods belonging to the town of Băile Herculane. The research methods used are content analysis, document analysis, and case study.

Cultural Heritage and Civic Action

Cultural heritage is a crucial element of civilization, encompassing symbolic significance and contributing to the cultural memory and identity of both individual nations and humanity. It enhances the lives of people universally, fostering unity through collective memory, shared knowledge, and the advancement of civilization. The use of heritage occurs in different arenas and takes on significance as a vehicle for political, cultural, and entrepreneurial purposes, as well as educational and emancipator (Nilson–Thorell 2018).

According to the Heritage Convention (UNESCO 1972) the cultural heritage is composed of:

– *monuments:* architectural works, works of monumental sculpture and painting, elements or structures of an archaeological nature, inscriptions, cave dwellings, and combinations of features, that are of outstanding universal value from the point of view of history, art, or science;

– *groups of buildings:* groups of separate or connected buildings which, because of their architecture, their homogeneity, or their place in the landscape, are of outstanding universal value from the point of view of history, art, or science.

– *sites:* works of man or the combined works of nature and man, and areas includ-ing archaeological sites which are of outstanding universal value from the histori-cal, aesthetic, ethnological, or anthropological point of view.

Historic buildings and cities (as in the case of Băile Herculane) are valuable as-sets that can produce resources and generate economic benefits when managed efficiently. By attracting visitors, entrepreneurs, and businesses in search of distinc-tive places, the enhancement of urban heritage can generate economic impact in the form of real estate appreciation, job creation, and income growth in the activi-ties related to heritage services (Bertacchini 2020).

Considering these aspects, it can be affirmed that safeguarding cultural herit-age is a crucial responsibility of the state and public administration authorities. This involves fulfilling three major requirements: acknowledging, supporting, and protecting cultural heritage *(Figure 1)* (Florea et al., 2020).

Figure 1. Requirements for Safeguarding Cultural Heritage

Source: Florea et al. 2020.

These requirements can be achieved through diverse actions such as conserva-tion, renovation, and restoration. Although heritage conservation primarily focuses on safeguarding or restoring the unique physical characteristics of historic urban centers, their cultural and economic significance can be fully realized through renovation, revitalization, and adapting their functional purposes to accommodate shifting economic and social dynamics (Bertacchini 2020).

Protecting cultural heritage goods can be a challenging task for national or local authorities due to budget constraints, legal limitations, and administrative capac-ity. Civil society organizations can provide valuable expertise, grassroots legitimacy, and the ability to mobilize public support (Haque–Baker 2006).

Starting from the assumption that the term civil society refers to a society of citizens (Polgár 2023), we consider that civil society and cultural heritage are linked

through their mutual roles in preserving and promoting societal values, identity, and cohesion. Thus, in this case, civil society's civic actions, such as advocating for the preservation and protection of cultural heritage by mobilizing public support, raising awareness, and influencing policy decisions (Rigney 2016), serve as custodians of cultural heritage goods.

Thus, in the following section, we will examine the case study of Băile Heruclane to determine whether civil society and civic actions played a role in advocating for the preservation and protection of cultural heritage.

Lessons from the Herculane Project

Short information about Băile Herculane

Băile Herculane/ Herculane Baths is today a Romanian town resort in the Caraş-Severin county. Băile Herculane spa was first documented in 153 AD during the Roman period. It still bears the Latin inscription "Ad Aquas Herculis Sacras Ad Mediam."[1] It was subsequently ruled by the Hungarians, Austrians, and after 1918 by Romanians. In the 19th century, cultural and leisure functions were added to the main function of the medical treatment center, leading to an unprecedented development. The settlement is visited by notable figures of the time, such as Emperor Franz Joseph I of Austria, who described the Herculane Baths as "the most beautiful resort on the continent", and his wife, Empress Elizabeth of Austria, who owned property in the town - Villa Elisabeta (Town hall of Băile Herculane website).[2]

The Băile Herculane resort has existed for two millennia, thanks to the effectiveness of its thermal springs and its picturesque location in a valley sheltered by mountains. The area is currently part of the Natura 2000 protected site.

Considering its historical heritage, Băile Herculane can be viewed as an open-air museum due to its extensive architectural legacy. According to Law no. 442/2001(on the protection of historical monuments), the place's identity is defined by a set of 74 objectives listed in the National Heritage Institute's 2010 List of Historical Monuments.[3] These objectives include 14 archaeological sites, 55 architectural ensembles and monuments, and 5 public monuments in the form of statues.

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1 "At the holy waters of Hercules near Mehadia".

2 Natura 2000 is a network of protected areas that covers Europe's most valuable and threatened species and habitats. It is the largest coordinated network of protected areas globally, extending across all 27 EU Member States, both on land and at sea.

3 In accordance with Law no. 422/2001 on the protection of historical monuments, these monuments are an essential part of the national cultural heritage and are protected by law. They are classified into two groups: *category A* – historical monuments of national and universal value, and *category B* – historical monuments representative of the local cultural heritage.

Among these, we mention:
– Băile Neptun/Neptun Baths (also known as the Austrian Imperial Baths) together with the Iron Bridge, heritage building category A (see *Figure 2.*).

Figure 2. Băile Neptun/ Neptun Baths and the iron bridge over Cerna River

Source: Google Images accessed 27.03.2024.

– the stone bridge in the historic center, heritage category A (see *Figure 3.*).
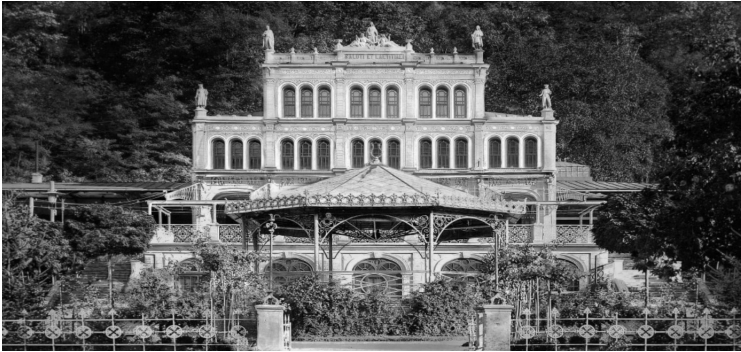
Figure 3. The stone bridge with the covered corridor
(before and after the renovation from 2023)

Source: Google Images accessed 27.03.2024.

– the Casino complex, heritage building category A (see *Figure 4.*).

Figure 4. The Casino complexes.

Source: Google Images accessed 27.03.2024.

During Romania's transition from communism to democracy, attempts to privatize the Băile Herculane resort were unsuccessful. It is important to note that 35 people are currently indicted and the trial is still pending. In addition, a substantial number of heritage goods have deteriorated due to inadequate investments. BăileNeptun is one of the heritage buildings that is in an advanced stage of degradation. In some parts, it is even in a pre-collapse stage due to water infiltrations and poor interventions. In 2019, two structural walls and a roof collapsed due to a lack of funding and legal issues (See *Figure 5.*). Băile Neptun are considered the symbol of the Herculane Baths due to their special eclectic architecture and historic legacy.

Figure 5. Băile Neptun degradation situation

Source: Google Images accessed 27.03.2024.

The situation of the Neptun Baths is also influenced by a unique legal situation, which is not the focus of our study but will be researched in the future. In summary, the building is currently the public property of the Băile Herculane town due to an exchange contract between a private owner and the town.

Under contract no. 2754/2012, only the building was transferred to Băile Hercu-lane town, while the land on which it stands remains in private ownership. This is due to ongoing legal disputes that have yet to be resolved by the court. The current legal situation prevents local public administration authorities from applying for European or national financing programs. Therefore, the only work that can be conducted at present is to secure and remove the public danger label from this building. Civil society has understood this situation and is standing by through the Herculane Project.

The Herculane Project

The Herculane Project was initiated by the Locus Association, a Romanian NGO established in 2017 by a group of young architectural students and graduates.

Currently, the *Locus* Association serves as the driving force behind the civic activities of the Herculane Project, and the NGO is comprised of a diverse team of individuals from a range of professional backgrounds. The team includes individuals with diverse professional backgrounds, such as architecture students and graduates, economists, IT specialists, journalists, marketing, and communication experts, collaborating artists, engineers, historians, and others. The team exhibits diversity not only in terms of professional expertise but also in terms of age and geographical location. Members range in age from 18 to pensioners/retirees, and hail from cities such as Timişoara, Bucharest, Cluj-Napoca, and London, as well as from the local community of Herculane Baths (HerculaneProject.ro 2024).

This diversity serves to illustrate the broad appeal and significance of Băile Herculane to various demographic groups, both nationally and internationally.

This is further evidenced by the NGO's status as a member of the European organization Europa Nostra[4] The association's first and main objective is to preserve the historic thermal complex, Băile Neptun/Neptune Baths, through the Herculane Project platform *(Figure 6.).*

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4 Europa Nostra was established on 29 November 1963 in Paris. It is recognized as the largest and most representative heritage network in Europe, covering 40 countries. Europa Nostra maintains close relations with the European Union, the Council of Europe, UNESCO, and other international bodies (https://www.europanostra.org/, accessed: 24.03.2024).

Figure 6. The Herculane Project's official web platform

Source: https://herculaneproject.ro/en/, accessed: 28.03.2024

Today the Herculane Project extends its goals and, as described by their platform (herculaneproject.ro) has two dimensions: the reactivation of Băile Neptun and the social and cultural reactivation of Băile Herculane.

One of the main steps taken to preserve this heritage building was the development of a technical project by a team of specialists and volunteers on behalf of the Locus Association.

Additionally, a public–civil partnership was concluded, which can be defined as an alliance of public entities (public authority, public administration, public institutions, public agencies, public enterprises, etc.) and civil actors (associations, organizations, alliances, networks, etc.) sharing rights and responsibilities in governing and managing cultural heritage goods (Žuvela 2023).

Thus, a Collaboration Protocol was concluded with Băile Herculane Town Hall and the Locus Association, which was approved by the Local Council decision no. 24/2018. The protocol aims to ensure the security, rehabilitation, and enhancement of the building.

According to legal provisions, all the actions taken by the Association are reversible and temporary. They aim to prevent degradation caused by meteoric water infiltrations, unstable elements collapsing, and human-made damage such as theft or breaking of ornamental elements.

At the same time, the NGO launched a public campaign on the internet, social media platforms, and mass media to collect funds through donations and sponsorships.[5] The campaign was promoted with the motto" *Get involved! The aim was to implement urgent measures described in the ethnic project to save Neptune Baths, a historical monument of national interest that was in a state of pre-collapse. Donate and help us save Neptune Baths."* The funds raised through the public campaign helped the Project undertake important activities to save the historical building.

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5 See, for more detailes: https://herculaneproject.ro/en/media/, accessed: 29. 03. 2024.

These activities included supporting elements in a stage of collapse, roofing work, supporting vaults and ceilings, protecting ornamental elements, and sanitizing the building.

The efforts of the civic initiative culminated in 2022 when Băile Neptun was included among the 7 Most Endangered sites,[6] selected from the 12 sites short-listed by a panel of international experts (https://7mostendangered.eu/sites_list/ selected-2022/, accessed: 28. 03. 2024).

The second dimension of the project aims to reactivate the social and cultural aspects of Băile Herculane resort through a series of civic and educational actions. These actions aim to stimulate social and cultural development and support cultural diversity.

In 2018, one of the first civic actions was the organization of a summer school in Băile Herculane called the *Architecture Bath.* The program included theoretical activities and field trips focused on restoration and historical urban studies, to discover techniques for enhancing architecture in the Austrian Baroque style. Through the action of *HerculTURA* – the NGO initiated, organized, and guided architectural tours through Băile Herculane. The *Herculane Baths Cultural* Site proposed a hybrid of cultural events that would combine the fascination of the architectural heritage of the Băile Herculane with visual arts. All these civic actions mobilized public support. In 2023, the event *Heritage First!* was organized, the first biennial dedicated to cultural heritage in Romania, with the participation of over 100 people, including representatives from institutions such as the Ministry of Culture, the National Institute for Cultural Heritage, and the Order of Romanian Architects (Herculane Project.ro 2024).

Discussion and conclusion

This paper aims to examine the relationship between civic engagement and cultural heritage. According to Gravagnuolo et al. (2021), civic organizations play a crucial role in saving cultural heritage from abandonment through civic action. They serve as platforms for individuals to come together, mobilize resources, and effect change. This is supported by literature, videos, websites, and practical experience reports. To emphasize this link, the research focused on the case study of the Herculane Project.

Considering the ambiguous legal situation of the historical spa complex Băile Neptun, and the legal and financial limitations faced by local public authorities, the research hypothesis was validated through analysis of the study.

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6 The 7 Most Endangered Programme is a civil society campaign aimed at preserving Europe's endangered heritage. It raises awareness, provides independent technical assessments, proposes recommendations for action, and seeks to rally support to save the selected endangered sites. Being on the 7 Most Endangered List often serves as a catalyst for action and an incentive for mobilizing the necessary public or private support.

Civic action has been demonstrated to be an effective instrument for influencing heritage preservation efforts. This is evidenced by initiatives such as the Herculane Project in Romania, which was led by an NGO. In this project, the NGO collaborated closely with individuals, public authorities, private entities, and international partners to mobilize resources and expertise for the restoration and revitalization of heritage sites in the region.

About the first research question, we observed from the case study that the Locus Association conducted several civic actions, as highlighted in the table below.

Table 1. Dimensions of civic engagement for cultural heritage in Băile Herculane

HERCULANE PROJECT	
Cultural heritage	**Civic actions**
Băile Neptun	– media campaign of promotion and sensibilization "regarding" the tragic situation of the historical building – conclusion of a public–civil partnership with Băile Herculane Town Hall – collection of funds through donations and sponsor ships – technical analyses and emergency interventions for protecting and preventing the collapse of some parts of the building – listing the heritage spa complex among the 7 Most Endangered sites
Băile Herculane resort	– encouraging social and cultural growth – fostering cultural variety and utilizing culture as a means of communication among diverse groups – backing cultural creation and diverse forms of expression – establishing an educational structure to cultivate future professionals in the domain – mass– media promotion of Băile Herculane as a cultural destination and therapeutic traditions

Source: Author elaboration.

The Locus Association proposes that Băile Neptun maintain its current function as a medical spa, while also integrating wellness, commercial, and social functions. Additionally, the NGO has worked to develop and sustain the cultural heritage goods sphere by mobilizing public support, raising awareness, and influencing policy decisions. For instance, the Town Hall of Băile Herculane mobilized to access a European Union program to finance the rehabilitation of the Stone Bridge (as shown in *Figure 2.)*, which is one of the few heritage monuments with no legal issues.

Regarding the initial research question, it is also possible to identify an important lesson that can be derived from the Herculane Project. This highlights innovative approaches to heritage management. Through adaptive reuse and creative interventions, the project seeks to revitalize historic buildings, such as the Băile Neptun spa complex, and spaces, such as the town of Băile Herculane. This is achieved by making them economically viable while preserving their cultural significance.

Regarding the second research question, the case study shows that heritage's cultural and social value makes it significant for many people, regardless of its property regime (Borchi 2020). It is important to note that civil society organizations emphasize civic engagement, philanthropy, and commitment to public issues. The analysis suggests that collective actions could compensate for several vulnerabilities related to national legislation and regulations, but not replace them. This is due to their ability to mobilize public support for the finalization of emergency interventions.

Consequently, another generalizable lesson could be derived, namely, that community engagement has a significant impact on heritage preservation. In this case, the Locus Association acts as an NGO, engaging local communities in the initiative. By collaborating with residents, businesses, and other stakeholders, the Herculane Project fosters a sense of ownership and pride in preserving the cultural heritage of Băile Herculane.

For Băile Herculane, the Locus Association's civic engagement through the Herculane Project has attracted visitors and entrepreneurs seeking unique destinations. This is supported by data from the National Statistical Institute (2023), which shows that the resort is the top destination in Caraş-Severin County, attracting almost two-thirds of all tourists.

The study presents a model for the use of material heritage in cultural tourism at national and international levels. According to Bertacchini (2020), civic initiatives focused on heritage conservation and cultural atmosphere could potentially drive sustainable development. This highlights a perspective for future research, which we consider exploring in the future.

In conclusion, the Herculane Project serves as a case study of significant value in the field of heritage conservation and civic initiatives. The" Locus" Association demonstrates effective lessons for preserving and promoting cultural heritage in the modern context, through community engagement, public-civil partnerships, innovative approaches, and cultural tourism development.

Finally, at the end of this work, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of the research. As the paper is primarily based on empirical insights, the limitation of this research lies in its subjective interpretation of results. This is a common challenge in qualitative research, which requires a clear distinction between objective and subjective evaluations.

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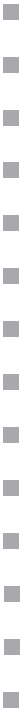
From Civil Society Organisations to Pirate Parties* to Digital Democracy

Zoltan Zakota

Introduction

Reshaping our political and social systems for a sustainable future requires a multifaceted approach that addresses several key areas: political reform, social change, economic development, environmental preservation, and technological innovation. When dealing with politics, we cannot ignore the antidemocratic tendencies that are increasingly infiltrating our everyday lives. Under these circumstances, it is crucial to acknowledge that one of the most important tasks of political reform is strengthening democracy. The current political discourse is replete with buzzwords such as proportional representation, direct democracy, sustainability-focused governance, transparency, accountability, and equity. Among the many actors attempting to infuse these terms with substantive meaning, some new entities are proposing innovative solutions utilizing the means of the Information Society (IS): digital parties, such as the pirates.

These parties, some of which emerged from anti-establishment protests, have rapidly spread across the globe in just two decades. Their journey is one of transformation, evolving from grassroots movements to established political players. They possess a clear digital agenda, focusing on issues like copyright reform, unrestricted access to information, and online privacy. They strongly advocate for net neutrality and the unrestricted flow of knowledge. However, most have recognized the importance of broader democratic values for political success. Beyond their digital focus, they also advocate for traditional democratic ideals, including civil

rights, transparency, and combating corruption. They promote free speech, and direct democracy, and explore alternative forms of citizen participation in government, often leveraging technology (e-democracy). While the future impact of these parties remains uncertain, their influence is undeniable. They have challenged traditional political norms and brought issues of the digital age to the forefront. They have spurred the emergence of a new generation of digital parties, reshaping the European political landscape and inspiring similar movements worldwide. This paper aims to briefly present these political formations, with special attention to their origins and their relationships with civil society. After outlining the broad framework, I will present a case study of one of the most prominent and successful of these formations.

Literature and Methodology

This article is a qualitative analysis of the relationship between civil society organizations (CSOs) and digital parties (DPs), with particular emphasis on pirate parties (PPs). I primarily used secondary sources, supplemented by some personal conversations. The literature on digital parties, particularly pirate parties, is surprisingly rich, given their brief history of less than twenty-five years. Notable authors in this field include Anja Adler, David Altman, Sebastian Berg, Radu Carp, Rick Falkvinge, Catherine Fieschi, Gregory Fossedal, Martin Fredriksson, Paolo Gerbaudo, Jeanette Hofmann, and Matt Qvortrup. The programs of the parties also provide insight into the values and policies they represent. For statistical data, I relied on corresponding Wikipedia pages, which proved to be high-quality synthetic sources in this case. I refrain from extensively presenting the theoretical background due to length constraints and because I have briefly covered it in a previous article (Zakota 2023). However, a thorough analysis of the topic would warrant a separate study.

Shared values and differences

Civil society organizations and pirate parties share a complex and evolving relationship, primarily based on their value systems. Here is a breakdown of the key connections:
1. *Transparency and openness:* Both PPs and CSOs advocate for transparency in government and access to information. They believe citizens should have a clear understanding of how decisions are made and the data that informs them.
2. *Free speech and digital rights:* Both groups champion the protection of free speech online and advocate for strong digital rights. They view unrestricted access to information and the ability to express oneself freely as crucial aspects of a healthy democracy.

3. *Citizen participation and engagement:* PPs and CSOs encourage active citizen participation in shaping policies and advocating for change. They believe a strong civil society is essential for a functioning democracy.

   While there are areas of overlap and potential collaboration, it is important to note that CSOs and PPs typically have distinct organizational structures, goals, and methods of operation. CSOs encompass a wide range of non-profit, non-governmental organizations working on various social, environmental, and human rights issues. In contrast, PPs are political entities focusing specifically on digital rights, civil liberties, and democratic reform, often through participation in electoral politics. The two main categories of differences are:

– *Focus and scope:* CSOs address a wide range of issues beyond those central to PPs. While PPs focus heavily on digital rights and copyright, CSOs may address issues like social justice, environmental protection, or human rights.
– *Institutional politics vs. grassroots activism:* PPs participate in politics by contesting elections and proposing legislation. In contrast, CSOs operate outside traditional political structures, relying on advocacy, campaigns, and social pressure to achieve their goals.

   Overall, the relationship between PPs and CSOs is one of both collaboration and distinction. While they share core values and occasionally work together on specific issues, they operate in different spheres with varying degrees of engagement with the formal political system.

Policy Overlap

   CSOs and PPs both engage with political and social issues, particularly advocating for transparency, digital rights, and democratic reform. Despite their different operational methods, there are several connections and overlaps between the two. Here are some key areas where the goals of CSOs overlap with the political objectives of PPs:

– *Advocacy for digital rights:* Both CSOs and PPs often advocate for digital rights, including issues such as internet freedom, privacy protection, and access to information. They campaign against censorship, surveillance, and restrictive copyright laws that limit individuals' rights online.
– *Copyright reform:* PPs are known for their stance on copyright reform, advocating for a more balanced approach that protects creators' rights while allowing for fair use and access to information. This aligns with the goals of some civil society groups working on intellectual property issues.
– *Data privacy:* Data privacy is a growing concern for both. They advocate for strong data protection laws and individual control over personal information.

- *Net neutrality:* Both groups support net neutrality principles, ensuring equal access to the internet without throttling or prioritizing content.
- *Transparency and accountability:* CSOs and PPs may push for reforms that promote openness in governance, fight against corruption, and demand transparency and accountability from those in power, both in government and corporations.
- *Participatory democracy:* Both CSOs and PPs often promote participatory democracy, encouraging citizens to actively engage in political processes beyond traditional voting. They support initiatives such as citizen-led decision-making, participatory budgeting, and direct democracy mechanisms.
- *Alternative political platforms:* PPs often emerge as alternative political movements challenging the status quo. They prioritize issues related to information freedom, intellectual property reform, and civil liberties. While CSOs typically operate outside formal political structures, they may align with PPs on specific policy goals or collaborate on campaigns and advocacy efforts.
- *Youth engagement:* PPs tend to attract younger people who are tech-savvy and concerned about digital rights and civil liberties. Similarly, many CSOs engage with youth and use digital platforms to gain support and raise awareness about social and political issues.
- *Coalition building:* In some cases, CSOs and PPs may collaborate or form alliances on specific issues where their interests align. For example, they may work together on campaigns related to internet freedom, copyright reform, or civil liberties, leveraging their respective strengths and networks to achieve common goals.

One reason for this overlap may be attributed to the fact that many PPs are rooted in civil society activism and, as a party, they still use organizational and communication techniques typical of CSOs. Emerging from the digital world, they represent a fresh wave of political movements with deep roots in online activism. Although many digital parties do not adopt an ideology in the traditional sense and do not place themselves on either the right or the left side of the political spectrum, some left-wing affiliations can be observed in many cases (Carp 2023).

The shifting landscape of organization and communication

„On June 7, 2009, the Swedish Pirate Party received 225,915 votes in the European elections, becoming the largest party in the most coveted sub-thirty demographic" Rick Falkvinge, the leader of the party at the time, attributed the victory to their swarm-wise working style: "A swarm organization is a decentralized, collaborative effort of volunteers that looks like a hierarchical, traditional organization from the outside. It is built by a small core of people that construct a scaffolding of go-to people, enabling many volunteers to cooperate on a common goal in quantities of people not possible before the net was available" (Falkvinge 2013: 13–14).

There are two key issues in this definition, both resembling the functioning of a CSO:
– Using volunteers who cooperate on a common goal.
– Using the internet to gather as many such volunteers as possible.

Traditionally, social movements have been characterized by shared ideologies and collective identities, often rooted in grand narratives of justice, equality, or liberation. Although this ideological cohesion provided a solid foundation for mobilization and collective action, recent years have witnessed a shift in the landscape of social movements. There is a growing trend towards movements that are:
– *Networked:* Leveraging digital technologies like social media, these movements facilitate communication, collaboration, and resource sharing across geographical boundaries.
– *Issue-Specific:* These movements focus on specific, time-bound issues such as environmental protection campaigns or movements against police brutality.
– *Identity-Based:* Movements centered on shared experiences of marginalized groups can be powerful, but they may not always translate into a broader, unified ideology.

The rise of personal relations has induced a shift towards networked, issue-specific communication, placing greater emphasis on personal connections and shared experiences. This shift is evident in several key aspects:
– *Peer-to-Peer Mobilization:* Social media platforms facilitate direct connections among individuals, bypassing traditional leadership structures. This fosters a sense of collective action grounded in shared experiences.
– *Emotional Resonance:* Personal stories and testimonials shared online can create strong emotional connections to causes, motivating participation even without a fully formed ideology.
– *Focus on Shared Values:* Movements may coalesce around shared values like human rights, environmental protection, or social justice, without adhering to a rigid set of beliefs.

Digital channels, especially social media platforms, significantly facilitate the development of transnational movements by leveraging personal connections. This impact manifests in several ways:
– *Global solidarity:* social media allows individuals from diverse backgrounds to connect and build solidarity around shared issues, transcending national borders.
– *Decentralized action:* networked movements do not rely on centralized leadership, enabling rapid mobilization and coordinated action across different countries.
– *Rapid diffusion of ideas:* successful tactics and campaign strategies can be quickly shared and adopted globally, leading to a domino effect of social movements.

This innovative technology also implies several challenges and considerations, the most important being the following:

– *Echo chambers and confirmation bias:* social media algorithms can create echo chambers where users are primarily exposed to information that confirms their existing beliefs and this can hinder constructive dialogue and limit the reach of movements.
– *Short-term focus:* the fast-paced nature of online communication may favor short-term mobilization over long-term strategic planning for achieving lasting social change.
– *Sustainability and impact:* sustaining momentum and achieving concrete results can be challenging for movements reliant on personal connections without a strong ideological foundation.

This new type of communication is addressed by the new types of digital parties, pirates among them. "New technology is thus seen as providing the potential for a tremendously popular communication, where people can communicate directly with one another on a global scale, individually or en masse, without mediations from corporations or authorities. This new state of connectedness is, however, threatened by censorship imposed by not only more or less authoritarian governments but copyright regimes." (Fredriksson 2015: 9–15)

From pirate parties to digital parties

Although pirate parties have only a history of not even two decades, a new player has appeared on the political scene for some time: the digital party. Although some authors use the terms as synonyms, they should not be confused, because, despite some superficial similarities and obvious affiliations, the two categories are fundamentally different.

According to Paolo Gerbaudo "The digital party is the new organizational template seen across several new political formations that have been created in recent years, from the Pirate Parties that have emerged in many Northern European countries, to left-wing populist formations such as Podemos in Spain and France Insoumise in France, down to new campaign organizations such as Momentum, driving the surge in popularity of Corbyn's Labour Party in the United Kingdom. Despite their manifest differences, these various formations display evident commonalities in the way in which they promise to deliver a new politics supported by digital technology; a kind of politics that – as featured by different elements of this opening scene – professes to be more democratic, more open to ordinary people, more immediate and direct, more authentic and transparent." (Gerbaudo 2019: 4)

At the same time, it seems as if the new political formation also means a kind of return to the roots, to the activist past. By this, I mean that one of their main means of communication is directly addressing the individual through social media

networks and one of their key promises is the broadening of democracy by these means. Gerbaudo calls this type of party "a 'platform party' because it mimics the logic of companies such as Facebook and Amazon of integrating the data-driven logic of social networks in its very decision-making structure; an organization that promises to use digital technology to deliver a new grassroots democracy, more open to civil society and the active intervention of ordinary citizens." (Gerbaudo 2019: 5)

Nowadays digital parties' participation is described as distancing from traditional political parties, to be seen as "movements, fluid aggregations of individuals, participatory spaces, […] as 'open spaces' where the citizens can gather to cooperate, without the implications of conformity traditionally associated with the political party." (Gerbaudo 2019: 82)

The Realm of E-Democracy

Three forms of democracy have emerged within the realm of Information Society (IS): digital democracy, direct democracy, and liquid democracy. These forms differ significantly in both their role and their toolkit, but they all share a common feature: they have evolved during the turn of the century. In some regard, these diverse types of democracy have converged in recent decades. One of the reasons for this can undoubtedly be found in the spread of new ICT tools, while the other is the need to reach an ever-wider audience by these means.

All three models have the goal of empowering the citizens, which means providing technologies, tools, and platforms for them, to express their opinions and influence decision-making, to attain their goals. These cover a wide range, both existing and emerging, but all of them are ICT-related, such as:

– *Traditional media:* television and radio broadcasts can be used to disseminate information and facilitate discussions.
– *Online platforms:* websites, forums, social media, and e-government portals enable interactive communication and information sharing.
– *Online voting systems:* can be used for elections or public opinion polls. Security and accessibility considerations are crucial for online voting.

Digital democracy, also known as electronic democracy, e-democracy, or internet democracy, leverages information and communication technology (ICT) to enhance and promote democratic processes. Its core concept involves utilizing technology to empower citizens and improve their participation in decision-making at various levels (local, national, and global).

Digital democracy can be understood "as a concept that links practices and institutions of collective political self-determination with its mediating digital infrastructures. Digital democracy has both an analytical and a normative dimension.

As an analytical lens, digital democracy investigates how the use of digital technologies may influence the conditions, institutions, and practices of political engagement and democratic governance. As a normative concept, it enables us to think about democracy as an open, alterable form of political organization that is always in the making." (Berg–Hofmann 2021)

Direct democracy is a form of democracy in which citizens can participate directly in decision-making processes rather than through elected representatives. In a direct democracy system, citizens can propose, vote on, and enact laws and policies without intermediaries through "a *mechanism of direct democracy* as a publicly recognized, institutionalized process by which citizens of a region or country register their choice or opinion on specific issues through a ballot with universal and secret suffrage." (Altman 2019: 6) The deployment of these tools, characterized by Matt Qvortrup as "supply-side politics" (Qvortrup 2013: 151–155), in the political struggle is often initiated by CSOs. These are the following:

– *Initiatives:* allow citizens to propose new laws or constitutional amendments directly, bypassing the legislature.
– *Referendums:* allow citizens to vote directly on specific laws, policies, or constitutional changes proposed by the government or initiated by citizens themselves.
– *Plebiscites:* allow authorities to pose a question to the citizenry for them to answer.

While direct democracy can empower citizens and promote greater political participation, it also has challenges and limitations, including potential issues with minority rights protection, the complexity of decision-making, and the risk of populism. As such, direct democracy is often used in conjunction with representative democracy, where citizens elect representatives to make decisions on their behalf, to balance the advantages of direct participation with the need for efficient and accountable governance.

Under the pressures and the promises of the digital revolution, populism became a significant source of danger not only for digital parties but also for CSOs, by placing the promise of authenticity at the center of their appeal and thus being able to exploit the promises of democracy and subvert them. "It is a kind of political jiu-jitsu, in which rather than using its force against its democratic opponents, populism has turned the opponent's force on itself." (Fieschi 2019: 157)

Liquid democracy "is a hybrid form of indirect and direct democracy, [with] a smooth transition between the two. Each participant can decide for themselves how far they want to pursue their interests or how far they want to be represented by others. In particular, the mandator can reclaim the voting rights transferred to the delegate at any time and does not have to wait until a new electoral period to do so. This results in a network of delegations that is constantly in flux." (Piratenwiki 2022)

Rick Falkvinge highlights the affinity between the idea of liquid democracy and his swarm concept: "This voting right can be assigned differently for different is-

sues, and be assigned in turn, creating a chain of trust to make an informed vote. This taps into the heart of the swarm's social mechanisms of trusting people and friends, rather than fearing to lose. 'Trust over fear.' We like that. That is swarm think. The German Pirate Party calls this *liquid democracy.*" (Falkvinge–Swarmwise. The Tactical Manual to Changing the World 2013)

To many, liquid democracy is a story of failure, which evolved from a panacea for disenchantment with politics to a display of mass tyranny and digital surveillance. The controversial nature of the concept is due to its different definitions, but in general, liquid democracy is identified with the occasional flexible delegation of one's voice. Moreover, the term liquid democracy exaggerated, albeit for understandable reasons, the hopes for participation that arose during the founding of the Pirate Party. (Adler 2018: p. 9)

One of the main fields where these three forms of democracy meet is that of the sets of objectives. They overlap in many regards, as we can see from the following list:

– *Popular sovereignty* is the base principle of democracy, meaning that ultimate political authority rests with the people. Through direct participation, citizens exercise their sovereignty by directly shaping the laws and policies that govern them.
– *Increase citizen engagement and participation* by encouraging more people to participate in democratic processes beyond traditional voting. Especially direct democracy places a strong emphasis on citizen participation in the political process, by giving them the right to directly participate in decision-making through mechanisms such as citizen assemblies, town hall meetings, referendums, and initiatives.
– *Enhance transparency and accountability* by making government decision-making more open and accessible to public scrutiny, by promoting these values publicly in the political process. When citizens directly make decisions, there is even greater transparency in the decision-making process, and elected representatives are held directly accountable to the electorate.
– *Decentralized decision-making* is often needed by a democracy, with decisions made at the local, regional, or national level based on the scope of the issue. This decentralization allows for greater responsiveness to local needs and preferences.
– *Improve communication* by facilitating real-time, two-way communication between citizens and policymakers.

The expected benefits of using the above-mentioned tools are mostly the same for each of them:

– *Increased inclusivity:* can potentially allow for participation from a wider range of citizens, overcoming traditional barriers like geographical limitations or physical disabilities.

- *Informed decision-making:* easier access to information allows for more informed public discourse and policy choices.
- *Streamlined processes:* online tools can facilitate faster and more efficient communication and voting procedures.

     Finally, the challenges all three systems must face are the same:
- *Digital divide:* not everyone has equal access to technology or the digital literacy skills to participate effectively.
- *Security and privacy:* concerns exist regarding online voting security and the potential for manipulation or fraud. Additionally, data privacy issues need to be addressed to ensure citizen trust.
- *Echo chambers and misinformation:* online platforms can create echo chambers where users are primarily exposed to information that confirms their existing beliefs. Countering misinformation and promoting critical thinking skills are essential.

All these similarities are the result of some kind of "convergent evolution" in the new ICT ecosystem. Overall, the use of electronic means in attaining democracy represents an evolving approach to enhancing democratic participation in the digital age. While challenges remain, it holds significant potential for fostering a more inclusive, informed, and engaged citizenry.

The Case of German Pirates

In the summer of 2006, for the first time, like-minded idealists, utopians, and humanists who were dissatisfied with the negative developments in the world met on piratenpartei.de, where one of those involved had thankfully already installed forum software. "The Pirate Party Germany was founded on September 10, 2006, in Berlin: 100% liberal, social, digital, grassroots democratic and transparent." (Piratenpartei Deutschland 2024) Even the birth happened in an iconic place: the C-base e. V., a non-profit organization that reconstructs a fictional, crashed space station with a hackerspace. (c-base e.V. n.d.) Originally founded as an "extended living room" by the seventeen founding members on August 12, 1995, c-base now sees itself as the hub of the Berlin nerd and hacker scene. The c-base logo sticker contains the words culture communication carbonite. (Wikipedia 2023)

The first time they made their voice heard in German politics was the 2009 European Parliament (EP) election when their result would have brought them a mandate without the existence of a threshold. But this was enough an impetus to generate a significant increase in membership for the party after the elections. (Wikipedia 2024) At the next EP elections, in 2014, now without a threshold, they managed to get enough votes to have a seat in the EP. (Wikipedia 2024) This result was also repeated in the 2019 EP elections, although with a much smaller number of votes. (Wikipedia 2024)

The numerical evolution of the number and proportion of voters, as well as the number of seats gained, can be seen in the following table *(Table 1)*.

Table 1. Evolution of the number of votes cast for German Pirates in the EP elections.

	2009	2014	2019
n	229,464	425,044	243,302
%	0.9	1.4	0.7
Seats	0	1	1
Source:	(Wikipedia 2024)	(Wikipedia 2024)	(Wikipedia 2024)

The Pirates ran in the federal election for the first time in 2009, on fifteen state lists (not in Saxony), and achieved the best result among the small parties, but that was not enough to get any mandate. (Wikipedia 2024) Although they succeeded in significantly increasing their voter base in the following federal elections, in 2013, unfortunately, it was not enough to win any seats in the Bundestag. (Wikipedia 2024) They suffered a spectacular decline in the next federal elections, in 2017, when not only did they not get a mandate, but the number of votes cast for them also dropped noticeably (Wikipedia 2024), a decline that continued in the 2021 elections. (Wikipedia 2024) The numerical evolution of the number and proportion of voters can be seen in the following table *(Table 2)*.

Table 2. Evolution of the number of votes cast for German Pirates in the federal elections.

		2009	2013	2017	2021
First votes	n	46,770	963,623	93,196	60,550
	%	0.1	2.2	0.2	0.1
Second votes	n	847,870	959,177	173,476	169,591
	%	2.0	2.2	0.4	0.4
Mandates	n	0	0	0	0
	Source:	(Wikipedia 2024)	(Wikipedia 2024)	(Wikipedia 2024)	(Wikipedia 2024)

Despite their deficient performance in the federal elections, in September 2011, the German pirates saw a momentous victory in the Berlin state elections, by winning 73,333 first votes (5.0%) and 130,105 second votes (8.9%). So, they became the fifth biggest faction in the regional parliament by getting a total of fifteen seats out of 149. (Wikipedia 2024)

Rick Falkvinge, founder of the Swedish Pirate Party, welcomed the success in Berlin, writing in his blog post: "We all stand shoulder to shoulder in fighting for the next generation – one of us succeeding is all of us succeeding. Tomorrow, people will look to your success, and the movement will grow yet more. You are the source of inspiration for the next wave of civil liberties activists." (Falkvinge, Pirate Party of Berlin WINS, Enters Parliament n.d.) Five years after the formation of the first pirate parties, the activist vocabulary was still in use. The same grassroots, populist spirit was reflected by the party slogans, like: "We have the questions, you have the answers," or "The Internet is in the hands of the users." (Marsh 2011)

But it was not just the vocabulary the key ingredient of their success. As Sarah Marsh pointed it out before the elections: "Berlin, a hub for information technology startups with a young and creative population, is a Pirates stronghold and the place where the party faithful are placing their biggest bets – Pirates from all around Europe have piled into the city to help in the campaign." The campaign needed the activists indeed, as only a modest budget of 50,000 euros was available.

The party became a lot more professional in the half-decade since its establishment, as evidenced by the fact that it has expanded its political offer with several social and liberal goals. They managed to get rid of the "group of nerds interested mainly in some issues around Internet use" image. As Holger Liljeberg of the Info polling institute said: "The Pirates are in tune with the Berlin vibe with their relaxed campaign. […] They focus a lot on liberalism, freedom, and self-determination. […] And you find technology fiends more often in big cities than in the countryside, and Berlin." (Marsh 2011)

As for the structure and operation of the party, in addition to the traditional party structure, the Pirate Party includes working and service groups, which is remarkably like the structure of IT organizations. The working groups (Arbeitsgemeinschaften – AG) are voluntary and openly organized. Party membership is not necessary to be able to work with the AG, what counts is knowledge and enthusiasm for the topic. Some working groups have their own rules of procedure and rules for accepting new members. Service groups (Servicegruppen – SG) do not work programmatically but rather perform specific tasks within the party such as public relations, graphics/design, etc. The admission requirements here also vary and can also include approval from the federal executive board. (Piratenpartei Deutschland 2024) The party has state associations (Landesverbände) for all sixteen constituent states of the federation.

As for the tools used by the party for bilateral communication, there are the following (Piratenpartei Deutschland 2024):
– *Cryptpad:* an online notebook where all pirates work cooperatively.
– *Piraten-Wiki:* its online lexicon that contains all information about vision, values, topics, processes, members, programs, protocols, events, applications for party conferences, lists of all regular meetings, working groups, and much more.

– *Mumble:* a free voice conferencing software, which is a central working tool among pirates.
– The *Discourse Forum* is the central discussion platform for pirates, sympathizers, and interested parties, where political and organizational topics can be discussed.
– *Mailing lists* are like group discussions via email on a topic; each list contains any number of email addresses of pirates interested in something.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the impetus for the founding of the New Left and the Green Parties often came from those activists who for a long time preached the futility of political parties, while asserting the primacy of civil society and social movements. By expanding their agenda to include issues such as setting a minimum wage, and offering a new alternative to stale mainstream politics, the Pirates have taken on a role like the former role of the Greens, who meanwhile entered the Parliament, formed coalitions, in short, became part of the political establishment. The pirates started similarly, as a movement, but their path took them in a different direction.

Conclusion

In recent decades, many civil society organizations have become parties and integrated into the political-institutional system. Some of them became a pirate party, while others followed a much more populist line. But what they have in common is a much looser networked organizational structure than that of traditional political parties, as well as the intensive and extensive use of digital tools in reaching their audience.

The evolving role of personal connections in nowadays parties presents both opportunities and challenges. While it empowers individuals to connect and mobilize for change on a global scale, it also raises questions about the sustainability and long-term impact of these movements. Their future may lie in a hybrid model that leverages the power of personal connections and shared experiences while recognizing the importance of strategic planning, ideological grounding, and building coalitions across diverse groups. By critically examining these trends and fostering responsible use of technology, we can ensure that they continue to be a powerful force for positive change in a globalized world.

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Mediterranean migrations: NGO as the voice of the voiceless?*
The role of NGOs in communicating Mediterranean migration effectively: challenges and opportunities

Daniela La Foresta– Maria Nicola Buonocore

Introduction

Since the mid-1990s, a considerable number of individuals have annually crossed the Mediterranean Sea from the Northern coasts of Africa and Turkey to reach Europe. Recent years have witnessed a surge in migration towards Europe via the Mediterranean Sea, particularly from countries like Libya, Syria, Iraq, and Tunisia, following the "Arab Spring" uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

Multiple factors drive migrants to choose Europe as their destination. Linguistic and cultural ties, geographical proximity, and economic incentives are significant in their decision-making process.

However, this migration often involves difficult journeys, with reports indicating threats to human lives as migrants traverse hazardous routes through the Sahara Desert and embark on makeshift maritime passages towards Italy, Malta, and Spain. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has highlighted the frequency of incidents involving distressed migrants at sea, underscoring the challenges faced by European Union (EU) member states in responding to this humanitarian crisis in the Mediterranean Sea.

The mortality rate associated with clandestine migration has been alarming, with the Mediterranean route consistently recording a considerable number of migrant deaths from 2013 to 2024. The Mediterranean remains the deadliest route, with 864 deaths reported in 2022 alone. In 2023, the International Organization for

Migration (IOM) recorded the highest number of deaths since 2017, with at least 2,498 women, children, and men perishing or going missing in the Central Mediterranean Sea (Figure 1.).

Figure 1. Number of dead and missing people at sea between 2013 February 2023.
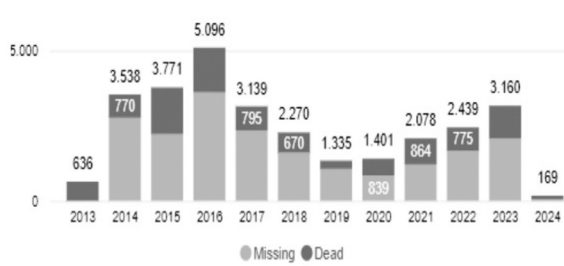
Source: United Nations Refugee Agency, Mediterranean and Northwest African Maritime routes, updated on 29 February 2023.

Rescue and disembarkation operations, ensuring safety, can be seen as a moral imperative, and under international law, it is an intricate endeavor involving various actors with specific responsibilities (Orav 2022).

The stark statistics highlight the significant challenges facing European nations in managing migration flows and coordinating search and rescue efforts, often necessitated by non-governmental organizations[1] (NGOs) operating not only at the national or state level but also at local and transnational levels. Indeed, the involvement of NGOs is imperative to mitigate casualties.

Numerous NGOs have been actively responding to emergencies in the Mediterranean Sea since 2015. Between 2014 and 2017, more than ten NGOs conducted Search and Rescue (SAR) operations off the coast of Libya. However, a massive portion of these NGOs conducting SAR missions are small organizations with limited resources and expertise. Even larger NGOs, such as Doctors Without Borders (MSF), renowned for their experience in providing humanitarian aid, lacked prior experience in conducting maritime rescue activities (Cusumano 2019).

Moreover, NGOs must have political, institutional, and financial independence from public or private authorities. Therefore, they rely on their capacities to attract specific target audiences and stakeholders through their publicity on media platforms (Powers 2014), using communication strategies to communicate and promote their activities and thus obtain funds.

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1 According to the definition of the United Nations, an NGO is "any non-profit, voluntary citizens' group which is organized on a local, national, or international level. Task-oriented and driven by people with a common interest, [...] perform a variety of services and humanitarian functions, bring citizens' concerns to Governments, monitor policies, and encourage political participation at the community level." (United Nations. Civil Society, accessed on 15/02/2024).

A communication strategy encompasses various elements such as goals, objectives, key messages, communication channels, tactics, and metrics to gauge success.

NGOs, particularly those focused on migration-related issues, traditionally relied on traditional media in their communication strategies (Dimitrova–Ozdora, 2022). However, with the advent of technological advancements, especially social media, they have increasingly shifted towards digital tactics to enhance their advocacy efforts and expand their influence in a rapidly changing world.

Despite heightened public awareness about the dangers faced by migrants in the Mediterranean Sea and the considerable number of rescue operations conducted by NGOs and other agencies, the number of deaths and missing individuals has continued to rise in recent years. According to data from the International Organization for Migration (IOM), 2023 marked the deadliest year for migration across the Mediterranean Sea since 2018.

This research aims to investigate and examine how NGOs operating in the Mediterranean leverage digitalization in their communication models and interactions with users. The primary aim was to assess the extent and effectiveness of these organizations in fostering participation and inclusion through relational models. These models utilize web opportunities to integrate a cognitive approach – focused on consultation and informational content – with methods that encourage the broad expression of users' emotional and experiential dimensions.

By utilizing information sourced from NGOs' official websites and social media platforms between December 2023 and February 2024, we were able to identify their strengths and weaknesses in the digitalization and nature of their communication. The specific matrix used for the content analysis is composed of two different dimensions. It is mostly replicable for other relevant studies.

The work is divided into four paragraphs.

The first paragraph sets the background on the migration phenomena in the Mediterranean Sea and the Search and Rescue operations. In the second and third paragraphs, we analyzed the online communication strategies of the NGOs operating in the Mediterranean Sea. In the fourth paragraph, we elaborate on the results of the qualitative analysis.

The Search and Rescue operations and the migration crisis in the Mediterranean Sea

The Mediterranean Sea is a maritime route particularly affected by migration flows. Often this route is navigated by people moving further away from their countries of origin along smuggling routes, trying to reach Europe.

The Mediterranean Sea has three main referred routes: "Western," "Eastern" and "Central" (*Figure 2.*).

Figure 2. Migration flows in the Mediterranean Sea.
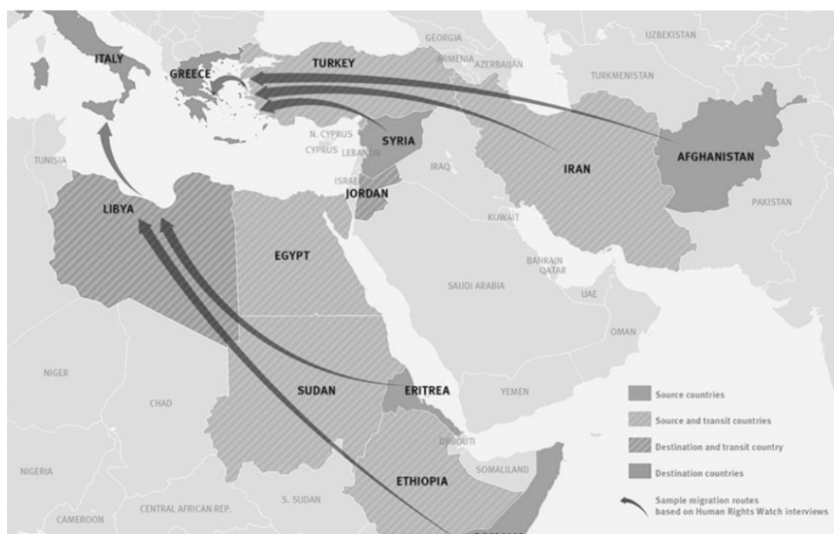
Source: The United Nations refugee agency.

Italy, Spain, and Greece stand out as European Union (EU) countries grappling with significant numbers of migrants in the Mediterranean Sea, primarily originating from Southern African countries via Libya and Tunisia.

Since 1999, EU member states have grappled with irregular migration, notably increasing towards Western Europe by land and sea from 2000. The continuous political unrest in the Middle East and North Africa exacerbated migration flow (Wolff, 2015). The tragic loss of migrant lives underscores the urgent humanitarian crisis, with over 22.000 deaths since 2000 (Brian–Laczko 2014). To respond to this crisis, the EU initiated strategies and agreements with third states to bolster control of sea borders, focusing on regions such as the Italian islands, the Canary Islands, the Strait of Gibraltar, Malta, and Greece. Notably, the Italian-Libyan agreement in 2008, facilitated by EU financial support to the Libyan government, aimed to stem the flow of African migrants to Europe (Edwards et al. 2019). While this agreement led to a drastic reduction in migrant numbers, criticism arose due to its perceived violation of the principle of non-refoulement outlined in the 1951 Geneva Convention (Toaldo 2015).

Experts argue that the migration crisis post-2014 poses one of the most significant challenges for the EU, stemming from various social and political factors in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, including the Arab Springs in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and other states affected by political instability, civil conflicts, and terrorist activities in Syria and Iraq (El Ghamari–Daniiloudi-Zielińska 2022).

These migration flows started to represent a crisis for European countries around 2015, when the number of arrivals reached the major peak specifically

the Eastern Mediterranean route which involves maritime migration from Turkey to Greece and, to a lesser degree, Cyprus, and Bulgaria. Subsequently, the number of irregular arrivals on the Eastern route decreased due to the agreement signed between the EU and Turkey in 2016 (Frontex 2019).

The central Mediterranean, most directed to Italy and Malta, remains the most critical, due to the lack of effective political authority, particularly evident in Libya due to institutional inadequacies amid economic and political instability (Toaldo, 2015; Edwards et al., 2019). According to the IOM, the Central Mediterranean route remains the most perilous and deadly in the Mediterranean Sea (IOM report 2024). This route is characterized by extensive trafficking activity, with migrants and refugees subjected to human rights abuses, including torture, forced labor, and sexual violence, perpetrated by criminal groups involved in human trafficking and smuggling.

The situation on the Western Mediterranean route involves crossings from Morocco or Algeria to Spain. According to Frontex, the Spanish Coast Guard detected around 57.000 irregular arrivals in 2018. This number dropped to 24.000 in 2019 and further to 17.200 in 2020, before rising again to 18.500 in 2021. The number decreased again in 2022 (Frontex, Western Mediterranean route 2021).

A key factor in maintaining relatively low departure levels from this route is the strong cooperation between Spain and Morocco in coordinating surveillance on the Strait of Gibraltar and the Atlantic coast. The Moroccan Coast Guard also receives assistance from Spanish authorities (Fine 2019). Additionally, the adoption of the Team Europe Initiatives in December 2022 between the EU and transit countries like Morocco has been significant.

Overall, despite all the agreements signed by the countries of destination and the countries of transit regarding the management of the migration crisis in Europe, according to the data collected by the agencies, we can say that the EU failed to manage the dangerous situation in the Mediterranean Sea.

Maritime Search and Rescue missions in the Mediterranean Sea (SAR) and the intervention of the NGOs

In a global context, rescue and search operations are defined as actions conducted by professional and trained persons, whether by land, sea, or air, to help people in distress, regardless of their nationality or their status. In the EU context, SAR is the operations of the EU members to assist any vessel or person in distress at sea regardless of the nationality or status of such a person or the circumstances in which that person is found under international law and respect for fundamental rights (Migration and Home Affairs, EU Commission 2023). The International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue (SAR Convention), entered into force in 1985, "was aimed at developing an international SAR plan, so that, no matter where an accident occurs, the rescue of persons in distress at sea will be coordinated

by a SAR organization and, when necessary, by cooperation between neighboring SAR organizations" (International Maritime Organization).

In compliance with this legal framework each coastal state organizes its maritime authorities, with its technical capabilities (Brutton 2017), as we said before combatting this kind of crisis requires coordination and cooperation with states because of its shared responsibility.

For the efficiency of operations, the SAR convention provides the division of the world's oceans into maritime regions *(Figure 3.)*. According to the definition adopted by Frontex in its report, the SAR region is *"an area of responsibilities with each assigned to a national maritime rescue coordination Centre. In these centers, the National Coast Guard receives information about emergencies in their rescue zone and coordinates the rescue. Such as in the Central Mediterranean Sea, the rescue zones are divided between Italy, Malta, Libya, and Tunisia. It is the responsibility of anyone who discovers or learns about an emergency at sea to immediately alert the rescue center responsible for that area."*

Figure 3. Delimitation of SAR regions in the Mediterranean Sea.
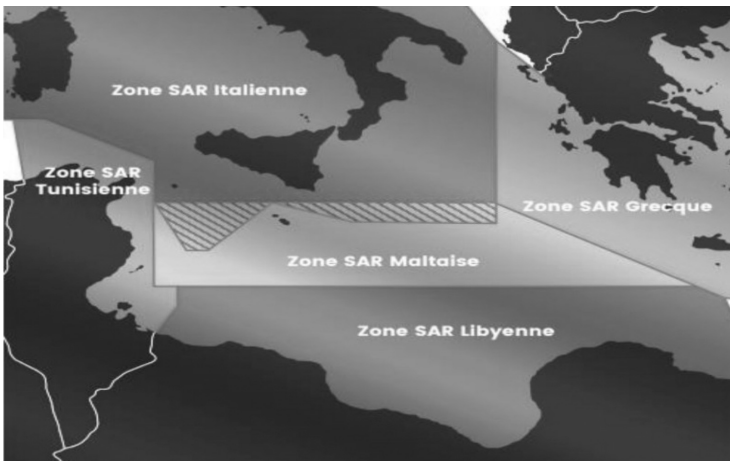
Source: Booklet for the civil society "State obligations relating to rescue at Sea."

Coastal states are obligated to engage in cooperative agreements for conducting SAR operations. In this context, it is crucial to acknowledge two significant aspects. Firstly, a maritime SAR region delineates a geographical area where the coastal state holds responsibility for coordinating SAR activities, distinct from an extension of its national boundaries. Secondly, the coastal state cannot deploy all SAR resources necessary for rescuing individuals in distress within its entire maritime SAR region (Button 2017).

These regions are managed by National Maritime Rescue Coordination Centers (MRCCs), which coordinate rescue operations in collaboration with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and coastal guards from each nation.

For instance, the Italian Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre plays a pivotal role in the Central Mediterranean, operating within Italian waters and partnering with other nations' RCCs, with funding from the European Union.

However, before 2013, the Central Mediterranean lacked dedicated rescue vessels, with Italian and Maltese authorities typically conducting such missions. In response to significant migrant deaths, including the 2013 Lampedusa tragedy, Italy launched its first SAR operation, *Mare Nostrum* (Brady 2014). However, *Mare Nostrum* was discontinued at the end of 2014 due to concerns that it functioned as a "pull factor" for migration and faced political and financial challenges (Del Valle 2016).

To fill the gap left by the Italian initiative, Frontex launched *Operation Triton* in November 2014, primarily focusing on border control but also including SAR operations. The EU also initiated Operation Sophia, targeting human smuggling. Despite the increase in SAR operations, efforts to strengthen the asylum system remained limited, with a greater emphasis on border control and combating irregular migration (Farugues and Di Bartolomeo 2015).

Since 2014, the reduction in SAR operations at sea and the concurrent rise in migrant deaths have prompted several international NGOs, such as MOAS, Sea Watch, Sos Méditerranée, Sea Eye, MSF, and Proactiva Open Arms, to commence their operations in the Mediterranean (Waisbord 2011; Cusumano–Villa 2019).

Given the significance of these NGOs' operations, this study aims to explore the impact of digital marketing as a communication strategy on public opinion and policymaking, alongside their communication with diverse target audiences across various media platforms (Waisbord 2011).

The digital transformation of communication strategies of the NGOs

This paragraph explores how NGOs implement their operations through traditional communication strategies and adapt to digital tools with the development of ICT. It examines the effectiveness and accountability of these strategies, as well as how NGOs attract individuals through both social media accounts and traditional media.

Effective communication strategies are essential for social and humanitarian organizations to accomplish their main objectives, which include raising public awareness of the dangers of irregular migration and motivating the community to take part through volunteerism and donations.

Communication strategies have significantly contributed to expanding the image of NGOs through connections with diverse audiences to let them be more informed on the one hand increase people's mobilization and facilitate fundraising on the other hand (Cabanillas–Ostio–Esparcia 2023). Generally, the NGOs need to build a strong connection with donors and stakeholders achieving higher fundraising success, in contrast, the NGOs will experience a drop in funding and donor

support (Sofia–Chaudhry 2021). To this end, accountability is also pivotal (Kyriacou 2008). SAR NGOs must prove that they are credible and responsible by providing frequent updates on their operations at sea "saving lives," describing their decision-making methods, and responding to any issues that come out. In contrast, they will be subject to failure and incredibility which could make it harder for them to conduct SAR missions successfully and increase their funds (Dimitrova–Heidenreich–Georgiev 2022). This accountability is frequently undertaken through numerous mechanisms such as social media, NGO annual reports, official websites, and traditional media.

However, in the context of migration, SAR activities in the Mediterranean Sea are not only NGOs' responsibility but also governments and their local agencies. In this situation advocacy and lobbying are important tools provided by the NGOs to influence the government agencies and policy makers to adopt specific recommendations and regulations concerning their mission and their goals. Moreover, through media platforms such as interviews, press releases, and videos published on their websites, NGOs can exercise pressure on governments and international organizations to address the primary reasons for irregular migration and help those vulnerable people to install in safe places. In this case, it is necessary to understand the meaning of advocacy which refers to a range of activities that aim to influence change in a policy or practice that involves sending messages or acting for a particular humanitarian crisis (Gurunj 2014).

As highlighted by the organizational legitimacy theory adopted by Schuman, the main goal of the NGOs is to maintain their influence, and their impact on the stakeholders and specifically maintain public trust. Through strategic positioning of their profile and their means of mediation, NGOs can increase their credibility (Fenton 2010) with the different stakeholders *(Figure 4.).*

Figure 4. The key stakeholders identified by the sampled NGOs

Source: Maja Wisenberger, 2018.

The NGOs' strategy can use two ways of communication, first based on traditional media strategies, and second, digital marketing or online media.

According to Reiman, *"social media platforms differ from the traditional communications tools using their dependence on direct and indirect interaction with friends, followers, and constituents"* (Reiman 2012). Numerous studies argue that users would rather get informed from social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram rather than traditional media (Manetti–Nitti–Bellucci 2022).

The online communication strategies of the different NGOs in the Mediterranean Sea.

As a case study, we selected six of the most recognized and active NGOs operating in the Mediterranean: Migrants Offshore Aid Station (MOAS), SOS Mediterranée, Doctors without Borders (MSF), Sea Watch, Sea Eye, and Initiative-taking Open Arms.

We proceeded to analyze information on their official websites and social media platforms.

Considering the results presented in our bar chart we acknowledged that the best option for our analysis was to focus on the most popular websites used by the organizations as a strategy of communication: Facebook, Instagram, and X *(Figure 5.)*.

Figure 5. The number of followers on social media platforms by NGOs.

	Sea Watch	Sea Eye	SOS Méditerranée	MSF	Open Arms	Moas
■ Instagram	279.000	38.100	37.100	7.648	33.900	4.157
■ Facebook	320.000	75.000	52.000	11.000.000	255.000	40.000
■ YouTube	10.400	602	11.000	30.500	3.270	1.760
■ Tik tok	48.700	0	213	83.800	1404	0
■ Twitter	106.400	39.400	34.500	232.800	20.800	21.300
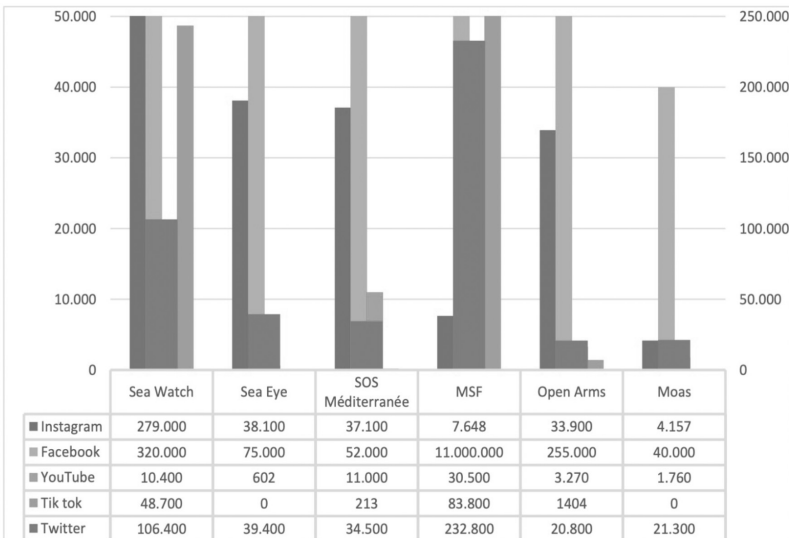
Source: Elaborated by the Author (data collected from NGO websites).

As we can see the MSF has a greater number of followers than others on X (232.8 thousand) also in Facebook which reached 11 million followers, and has a strong social media presence, selecting which platform is the most suitable to use, how to interact with supporters, and what kinds of information to provide are all related to understanding how to accomplish your objectives.

According to the information collected by MSF's Facebook, we note that MSF frequently shares videos about the humanitarian crises in the Mediterranean Sea. This information is presented in the form of short videos that promote their successful rescue operations at Sea.

As for Sea Watch, it surpasses MSF in terms of Instagram followers, respectively 279 thousand and 37.1 thousand. We note that Sea Watch, like many other NGOs, prefers to use Instagram as a powerful tool for communication. Instagram has over one billion users in the world, which has raised awareness, especially the younger audiences. Through it, NGOs can share effective stories through images and videos after verification.

YouTube, the largest video-sharing platform, plays a significant role in the communication strategies of NGOs. It allows the NGOs to share videos documenting their successful operations in rescuing people and thus they can use this platform to have a powerful emotional impact, inspiring viewers to donate. Through YouTube, the NGOs can receive feedback about their activities, their interventions, and their humanitarian assistance. This specific platform is considered a useful platform for Sea Watch, SOS Mediterrane, and MSF, which have the highest numbers of followers compared to MOAS, Sea Eye, and Open Arms.

To understand how NGOs use the opportunities offered by digitalization, research was conducted to survey their models of communication and relationship with users. In particular, the research aimed to try to understand to what extent, and with what results, those organizations activate processes of participation and inclusion based on relational models that, using the opportunities of the Web, combine the cognitive approach, based on consultation and purely informative content, with forms aimed at encouraging the widest expression of the emotional and experiential sphere of users.

The analysis conducted between December 2023 and February 2024 used two macro domains of interaction, centered on the factors "Engagement" and "Information", for which specific measure indicators were identified.

Through the dimension referable to the variable "Engagement," it was intended to let emerge the ability to solicit the attention of users (potential and/or real); to this end, the following indicators were used:
– WhatsApp contact.
– Email.
– Possibility to share videos and photos.
– Community and campaign events.
– Login for users.
– Frequency of updating social media pages.

Concerning the "Information" dimension, the attitude of NGOs to integrate purely rational aspects with emotional and creative aspects in promotion actions, capable of emphasizing options for personalization and intensification of identification processes, was investigated.

The following indicators were considered:

- FAQ presence (frequently asked questions), assist the visitors to understand the NGO's mission.
- Dedicated app (allows the NGOs to engage with users directly through smartphones).
- Area reserved for operators, bloggers, press.
- Guides and tool kits.
- Attractiveness of the graphic and multimedia content "videos and photos".
- Annual reports.

Based on these key elements, we proceed with the analysis, synthesizing the observation in dichotomic variables: the value "1" was assigned in case of the indicator's presence, while the value 0 in case of absence. By summing the scores of individual items, an integrated score was obtained for each NGO (Figure 6.).

Figure 6. The extent of engagement and information
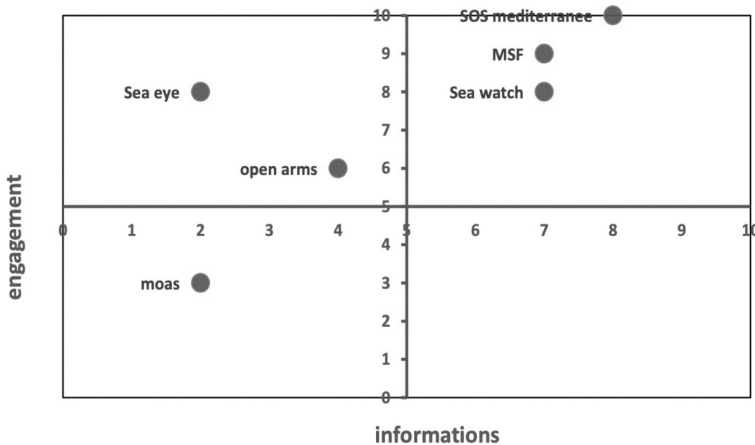
Source: Elaborated by the Author (data collected from official portals of the NGOs).

We can see that SOS Mediterranee MSF and Sea Watch employed efficient and clear information that conveyed the organization's purpose, projects, and impacts. Also, they provide access and instruments for volunteers, and stakeholders to engage. These instruments are volunteer Sing Up, and donations portals, contact us through social media accounts, which improve the efficiency and the value of the information adopted on their websites and increase the awareness of the users about the emergency cases in the Mediterranean Sea.

Regarding the MOAS, there is a limited quantity and lower quality of information regarding the organization's activities in search and rescue missions in the Mediterranean Sea, although in recent years MOAS has been operating in other countries, such as Ukraine, Sudan, and Afghanistan.

Generally, studies discern between emotional and rational information. The emotional information can provide many advantages for the NGOs, motivating the public to donate, advocate their issues, and increase visibility. On the other hand, some NGOs can also provide informative content with a rational dimension, focusing on facts, data, and statistics, such as the number of rescued people, how many operations they conducted daily, and logical information.

In our application of rational and emotional dimensions, we based our analysis on the content of their official websites and collected the following indicators:
– The content of documentary videos and photos.
– Personal stories of migrants.
– Appeals: urgent calls for action.
– Donor appeals.
– Publication of reports and activities.
– Statistics and data.

From the analysis, it is evident that the level of rational and emotional information employed by the NGOs differs from one to another *(Figure 7.).*

Figure 7. The level of emotional and rational informative content of the NGOs' websites.
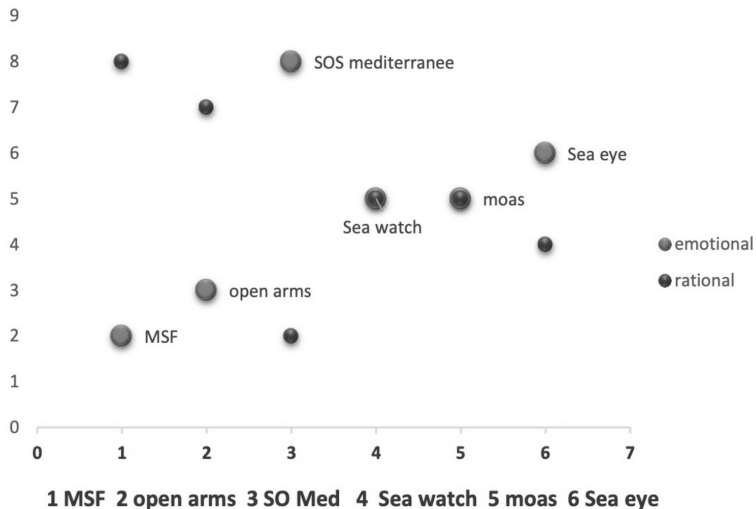
Source: Elaborated by the Author (data collected from official portals of the NGOs).

We noted that the MSF website provides rational information related to its humanitarian activities, in which its focus is on providing medical assistance to urgent crises. MSF publishes its financial reports annually and data statistics such as the number of people assisted by them. In a few cases, they publish emotional videos or photos of migrants in critical situations, but it is limited.

On the contrary, SOS Mediterranee uses more emotional content as a marketing strategy, shared daily on social media platforms and its official website life stories of those rescued. They published a film named "Io Capitano" by Matteo Garrone portrays the adventure of a teenager named Fofana Amara who took the risk to cross the Mediterranean Sea to Europe. The objective of this emotional film is to address a specific message to people about how perilous the journey at sea.

Open Arms has a rational dimension rather than emotional, first because there is a limited number of emotional photos and videos of rescued people or emergency cases. Second, Open Arms is an organization that shares with its public audience more information regarding successful operations conducted by them at sea and on land. Their projects and collaboration with stakeholders, as volunteers and donors.

As for Sea Watch, we noted a combination of empathy and rational behavior, although emotion is at the core of Sea Watch's goal. They highlight the enormous human suffering experienced by refugees and migrants undertaking dangerous sea journeys. From a rational perspective, Sea Watch operates with strategic methods, they advocate for ensuring safe routes, and their independence from political aspects affirms that their actions are based on the mission.

Following the same strategy as Sea Watch, MOAS' informative content is mixed between the rational and emotional aspects. It promotes its principles of solidarity and integration because it believes that effective assistance requires participation. Finally, Sea Eye's website focuses on information about their actions during search and rescue operations at sea, also providing details about lost people at sea and their dangerous journey, sharing emotional photos and videos of irregular migrants especially women and children as the most vulnerable people as the other NGOs.

In summary, these NGOs employ a variety of communication strategies, understanding the importance of using both emotive and rational arguments to persuade the public about the humanitarian work they undertake. Each strategy plays a different part in drawing attention to and supporting its objectives.

The communication challenges facing the NGOs in the Mediterranean Sea

Ensuring arrangements for saving lives, cooperation and coordination with the responsible actors for the rescue of people in distress at sea around states' coasts is an international obligation as confirmed by the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS) in (Chapter V), the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in its (article 98, paragraph 2), and the International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue.

Nonetheless, the numerous legal framework governing SAR and disembarkation imposes several duties on governments of member states, including a solid and unchangeable commitment to preventing maritime fatalities and a duty of due diligence that requires effective and efficient SAR response coordination, international protection, and the non-refoulement of rescued individuals. EU member states are not permitted to strategically decide not to rescue lives at sea or push them back to insecure countries.

Therefore, the NGOs continued to play a vital role in saving migrants in distress at the Mediterranean Sea, which covers the gap left behind by States. They played an advocacy role to address the migration issue and the suffering of migrants and refugees during their dangerous journey at Sea, via the use of digital social media strategies. But despite their crucial life-saving mission the NGOs today face challenges and problems with the EU states and other transit states (Carrera and Cortinovis 2019).

An improvement of the NGOs' communication strategies is crucial for boosting their influence and effectively expressing their goal. As our research has shown, several of the analyzed NGOs would need a more in-depth strategy capable of properly informing people, also to increase their participation. This is especially true for MOAS. The most traditional NGOs, such as MSF, have a more engaging and informative strategy in place.

Digital engagement and presence, the NGOs specifically in the humanitarian field need to keep their official websites, and social media platforms like X, Instagram, and Facebook updated with relevant data and information. Increasing the opportunity for the public to participate and join conversations and networks. Blogging means that they regularly publish informative blog posts. Increasing the number of press releases. Advocating for policy changes through public campaigns such as charity festivals. The non-profit sector is a sector based on donations collected from private individuals, also public funds. So, for financial transparency, the NGOs must share annual reports, and financial statements, and so for them, to guarantee the future of the organization and to catch more funds.

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Shaping Romania's National Recovery and Resilience Plan*
An Analysis of the Involvement of Civil Society Organizations

Nicolae Toderaș

Introduction

For over three decades, the European Commission (EC) has guided member states to apply the principle of partnership in managing European funds. Being a key principle, it propels the involvement of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) throughout the implementation of programs financed by European funds – from identifying needs, prioritizing, designing, and monitoring implementation to evaluating and revising programs (as per Commission Delegated Regulation No. 240/2014). Through this approach, the aim of the partnership would lead to the prevalence of socio-centric governance arrangements, an aspect that fosters achieving a higher degree of upward convergence in the EU.

The Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) is a temporary funding instrument established by the EU to overcome the crisis generated by the COVID–19 pandemic, as well as to support the green and digital transitions. Funding is granted to member states until August 31, 2026, based on a National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) negotiated and approved by the EC. Compared to the classical European funds to which member states are accustomed, the implementation of the RRF also focuses on the institution of a different governance system (Capati 2023). Thus, it was expected that, during the shaping phase of the NRRP, the involvement of stakeholders, including CSOs, would unfold in an agile interaction framework through various national thematic networks. This is intended to contribute to the strengthening of new mechanisms of democratic representation

specific to socio-centric governance at the level of member states. In the case of Romania, the drafting phase of the NRRP can be paralleled with the period of EU accession negotiations which took place between 2000–2004. As emphasized by Ciot (2023), throughout the accession negotiations, Romanian CSOs were involved in the preparation, implementation, and decision-making regarding EU accession. Therefore, there is a precedent in Romania's recent history for CSOs' involvement in achieving a national strategic objective. Half of the interviews conducted in this research (N=6) highlighted the fact that CSOs were involved during the EU pre-accession period. However, following the historical moment of EU accession, their involvement in policy-making processes has gradually decreased.

At the supranational level, at the end of the approval phase for most NRRPs, confusion was found regarding the involvement of CSOs by the provisions of the RRF regulation. On one hand, the EC positively appreciated that stakeholders, especially CSOs, were involved in the process and continue to play a key role in the implementation of plans (European Commission 2022: 4). On the other hand, the European Parliament took a critical approach and emphasized that CSOs and the academic environment were not sufficiently involved in shaping the NRRPs (European Parliament 2021: 87). Also, a series of studies and analyses highlight the fact that at the EU level, CSOs have been marginalized or ignored in the process of shaping the NRRPs (Vanhercke et al 2021; Zeitlin et al 2023), contradicting the arrangements of socio-centric governance. Given this state of confusion, there is a clear need for further investigation into the dynamics of CSOs' involvement processes in shaping the NRRPs and identifying the causes underlying the opening or closing of processes about the CSOs.

According to the data presented in section 34 of Romania's NRRP, to define and prioritize the reforms and investments to be included in the plan in correspondence with the bottom-up approach, consultations were carried out on two levels. The first level consisted of organizing, in February 2021, 20 inter-ministerial meetings and twelve thematic public consultations. Associations of local and regional authorities, social partners, CSOs, the business community, and other relevant stakeholders participated in these events. The second level consisted of conducting a written consultation on the completion of an online form for reform and investment proposals. According to the information described in Romania's NRRP in section 34, a total of 1939 proposals were received, which were systematized in a database and subsequently analyzed on thematic clusters to adopt relevant proposals by country-specific recommendations. This process ensured a series of scale-up, multiplication, or experimentation interventions that were included in components such as the environment, health, social inclusion, good governance, education, tourism, and culture.

The first iteration of drafting Romania's NRRP was carried out from June to December 2020, when the top-down decision-making approach prevailed regarding the types of investments included in the first version of the plan. The involvement of social partners in the elaboration of plan components was quite limited.

However, in the case of social inclusion, there was tighter cooperation, resulting in a larger allocation for interventions dedicated to this sector.

The second iteration of consultations took place from January 2021 to September 2021. This period encompassed several sequences opening to CSOs and the economic environment, thereby instituting a temporary framework closer to the socio-centric governance concept. The change in approach was due to the takeover of governance by the political coalition formed after the parliamentary elections on December 6, 2020. According to the sharing of political objectives, the responsibility for updating and preparing negotiations for Romania's NRRP with the EC fell to the *Save Romania Union* Party. Being a party rooted in civil society (Mătiuța 2023), its representatives were interested in opening the process to CSOs and updating the first version of the Plan according to the EC's requirements through successive bottom-up consultation iterations.

The analysis focuses on Romania's experience in involving CSOs in the shaping phase of the NRRP and is structured in five sections. The first section presents the research design. A synthetic analysis of the literature is then carried out and the way the CSOs were involved in shaping Romania's NRRP is presented and discussed. The next section presents the results of the conducted interviews, and finally, the results are analyzed and potential perspectives regarding the potential for changing the current situation are discussed.

Research design

The research aims to analyze the way CSOs in Romania have been involved in the shaping of Romania's NRRP. The hypothesis considered focuses on the fact that, during the drafting phase of the NRRP, an environment conducive to creating institutional arrangements specific to socio-centric governance was established. However, these arrangements were not enduring and could not alter the path dependency specific to state-centric governance arrangements. Therefore, to test this hypothesis, perceptions of CSOs regarding their involvement in the shaping of Romania's NRRP are presented. After the analysis of the collected data, I aim to answer the following two questions:
1. What factors influenced the involvement of CSOs in the shaping of Romania's NRRP compared to other European fund programming processes?
2. What are the prospects for improving the current governance regime concerning the management of European funds from the perspective of CSO involvement?

The analysis combines qualitative evidence from both primary and secondary data sources. As primary sources, the semi-structured interview method was used. Secondary data sources included official documents from EU institutions and public documents, articles in specialized scientific journals, studies, analyses, and

reports from the category of grey literature, as well as statements from political decision-makers in Romania.

In the period from February to March 2024, I interviewed twelve people holding leadership positions in relevant CSOs, including from the perspective of involvement in the Economic and Social Council and the European Economic and Social Committee, and with an impressive portfolio in the reference areas of the NRRP (Appendix 1). The interviews targeted also CSOs promoting advocacy-type initiatives or supplementing public services. The interviews were structured around the following seven key perception variables:

1) Previous experiences of CSOs involvement in strategic decision-making moments/processes for Romania.
2) Perception of how CSOs were involved in the elaboration of the NRRP.
3) Initial expectations by CSOs and their dynamics throughout the NRRP elaboration.
4) Expectations of authorities regarding the involvement of CSOs in the elaboration of the NRRP.
5) The effectiveness of CSOs' involvement in the elaboration of the NRRP.
6) Causes of the current state of the governance regime concerning the management of European funds.
7) The potential for improving the current governance regime concerning the management of European funds from the perspective of CSO involvement.

The research is based on the theoretical and conceptual framework specific to the new historical institutionalism in the field of European integration. According to this approach, institutional arrangements defined in the past can persist linearly for an extended period. Usually, arrangements change marginally, adapting incrementally to changing political environments (Pollack 2018). At certain critical junctures, particularly due to external pressures, institutional arrangements undergo substantial changes. Typically, these kinds of changes are temporary and reversible. Sometimes, critical junctures can lead to the stabilization of arrangements resulting from substantial changes. Looking back, the RRF has favored the creation of such a critical juncture.

State-centric governance arrangements are oriented towards policymaking in a top-down manner. Thus, public administration is autonomous and entirely responsible for policy conception, carrying out reforms, and associated investments. Only under certain conditions, to respect decision-making pluralism, CSOs are also involved, equally with the economic environment (known as "social and economic partners"), to support the substantiation, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of processes. The involvement is formal and mimics the principles and values of good governance. Therefore, the space allocated to CSOs is extremely limited, although it can make essential contributions to the policy-making process, especially in the field of assessment of public interventions (Toderaș 2023: 262).

At the opposite end, socio-centric governance arrangements are oriented towards the involvement of CSOs and social partners as much as the public administration.

In this context, CSOs and other social, economic, or cultural partners thus use their forces of non-electoral representation as much as political parties do (Loia 2022:12). The policy-making process is carried out in a bottom-up and mixed manner, and the principles and values of good governance are fully applied and respected. Thus, all involved actors, regardless of their status, behave as trustworthy partners and are responsible for the commitments undertaken. In this arrangement, public administration retains only the authority to control and sanction in case of non–compliance.

Literature review

In the specialized literature, the topic is addressed from the perspective of ensuring inclusion in the shaping of NRRP, subsequent negotiations with the EC, as well as the first years of implementation. Analyses and reports from the grey literature category predominate, especially those carried out by umbrella-type CSOs at the European level. However, academic literature tangentially examines this topic, either from the perspective of instituting the RRF or from the perspective of the design and implementation of NRRPs. Nonetheless, some articles and studies also point to the way CSOs were involved in the process of shaping the NRRPs.

The analyses highlight the fact that CSO involvement was inadequate or superficial, both at the European level and the national level (Vanhercke et al. 2021; Dumitriu 2022; Zeitlin et al. 2023). These reveal that formal consultation requirements were met, but the quality of the process was low. The consultation process and involvement in shaping the NRRP were adequate only in Portugal and Belgium, and to a lesser extent in Spain (Zeitlin et al. 2023). In Poland, involvement was broad and aimed to ensure a judicious allocation of funds to avoid polarization and regional disparities (Hartwell et al. 2022).

Bokhorst–Corti (2023) highlighted that this situation is a consequence of the EC's definition of the type and mechanism of RRF implementation favoring the centralization of the decision-making process. This led to an enhancement of the democratic deficit at the internal level of the member states, as well as at the EU level. The cause of this phenomenon lies in the fact that the process of deepening European integration leads to the state becoming impermeable to societal interests and demands promoted by CSOs. Hence, in the context of designing and implementing the RRF, the impermeability character is strengthened precisely by applying the performance-based principle that underlies the management of this temporary financial instrument. Therefore, designing the NRRPs did not permit the establishment of a policy-learning framework extended to actors outside public administration. Consequently, old institutional arrangements prevailed, contrary to the theory of change that underpinned the RRF foundation.

Research results

From the twelve interviews conducted, it is apparent that the involvement of CSOs in key decision-making processes related to Romania's national strategic objectives is considered fluctuating and insufficient. Although there is a legislative framework that stipulates the participation of CSOs in these processes, most interviewees highlighted that this involvement is considered formal and mimicked just to meet legal requirements (N=8), without having a real and substantial impact on the final decisions. In addition, the lack of transparency and openness from state institutions was pointed out, resulting in limited CSO involvement. However, there are some examples of genuine and effective involvement of CSOs, especially during the pre-accession periods to the European Union, when they played a significant role in areas such as judicial reform or anti-corruption. However, in the case of programming and managing European funds, the situation appears far better compared to other sectors or public domains. Most of those interviewed (N=8) indicate that there is openness, and throughout time the interaction with certain ministries has been constructive and beneficial, or that there was a gradual increase in the authorities' openness in recent years. The following consideration is relevant in this context: "*In the latest funding cycle, civil society was massively involved*" (I.5). However, even in the case of programming and managing European funds, the feeling persists that CSOs are often seen as troublesome structures or potential obstacles for authorities and that consultation processes are carried out just because they are required by the financial regulations specific to European funds (N=4).

In the opinion of all interviewed persons, the NRRP is considered a major national strategic objective. Thus, the plan is viewed as crucial for Romania's development. The subject of funding and proper allocation of every cent and synchronization of the plan with national objectives is reflected in most of the interviews. However, there are also concerns about the timely completion of the proposed reforms and investments under the NRRP to benefit from the allocated funding, which could be considered a strategic failure.

The dynamics of designing the NRRP were perceived and experienced differently, ranging from non-involvement (especially in the energy sector) to hyper-involvement (e.g. youth and social inclusion), and subsequently to a sudden interruption of involvement. In general, concerns were expressed about the lack of coherence, transparency, and adequate consultation with CSOs from the initial stages of NRRP design (the period from June to October 2020). The following considerations are emblematic: "*It was more like a rollercoaster, with very strong peaks and troughs. When you expected that wow, okay, now it's going to be solved, we're going to be super involved, let's make worksheets, let's ..., it turns out that absolutely nothing has happened and absolutely nothing that came as input from civil society is taken into account at all*" (I.12) and "*It was a rather accelerated and unplanned dynamic of the process*" (I.6).

In less than half of the interviews (N=5), the chronology, iterations, and critical moments specific to drafting Romania's NRRP were briefly outlined and described. The majority of those interviewed claimed that they were invited to provide feedback and proposals, but later in the process (only from January 2021 onwards), their contributions do not appear to have had a significant impact on the outcome. For example, the following consideration is relevant: *"It was something like too little, too late, in the sense that the vision was already harmonized, made. Nobody wanted to change anything anymore. Things were calculated down to the last comma, but this involvement was opened to civil society to check off a participatory process"* (I.10). Nevertheless, more than half of the interviewees (N=7) mentioned that they had positive and productive interactions with certain ministers and state secretaries during the process, but these were later confused by unexpected changes or ones not communicated in time.

After conducting bottom-up consultations, several representative CSOs were involved in the drafting of NRRP components, as well as in agreeing upon them with the authorities involved (especially those in the environmental field, social services, youth policies, health, etc.). For example, one of the major challenges was agreeing with the Competition Council on the investment package addressed to CSOs. However, the organizations involved exhibited proactive and agile behavior in supporting the justification efforts and in negotiating the proposed interventions with the EC services on a case-by-case basis.

Interview participants perceived variations in the level of openness from authorities throughout the NRRP process. While some reported an elevated level of openness and dialogue (in the case of social, environmental, and health sectors), others indicated a lack of transparency, limited, closed-off, superficial, and late collaboration (in the case of energy sectors and even education). For example, in the case of the energy sector, the following perception is dominant *"The government team that led this process worked with private consultants, probably for reasons of efficiency and rapidity. Stakeholder involvement suffered"* (I.9). These variations seem to have been related to personnel changes and priority directions of various ministries and ministers. The following consideration is emblematic: *"On the youth area, the openness was at its maximum. Authorities were open to the participation zone. So open that we were invited, even in the negotiation with the European Commission when the first iteration was discussed"* (I.4). Likewise, considerations were also stated that they were more active in defending their causes and proposals in the first iteration of the process (June–October 2020), when *"discussions were somewhat deeper and the dialogue was good"* (I.7). All interview participants specified the methods and tools used in the consultation and involvement process of CSOs to shape the NRRP. The answers confirm the tools and methods described in the previous section of this analysis. Moreover, the interviewees' responses highlight the fact that in many cases, the methods and tools used varied depending on the phase of the process or the specific organizational culture of the involved ministries. However, several criticisms were also stated regarding the use of

involvement and consultation methods and tools. Thus, although hybrid consultations with CSOs were conducted thematically, targeted participant selection was not ensured. Also, the consultations were not managed in a structured manner and a follow-up process was not ensured, including on the reform and investment proposals submitted.

The interviewed CSOs expressed a variety of expectations regarding their involvement in shaping the NRRP. Firstly, the majority (N=10) hoped for early and continuous involvement in the process, allowing them to direct and adjust their measures, including ensuring coordination and specialized human resources for such complex strategic planning activities. Expectations ranged from the desire to be recognized as essential parts of this joint effort and to develop a broader dialogue and greater transparency in the process, to benefit from funds from this temporary instrument. Thus, some organizations expected their proposals to be considered and integrated into the final document, while others wanted to be included in the funding as beneficiary groups (such as the case of creative industries or cultural workers – I.3).

The majority of those interviewed (N=7) would have liked the organizations they represent to assume responsibilities in the NRRP implementation, while others (N=3) argued this is the government's duty, not the CSOs', as one comment exemplifies: *"We can't take on something where we don't have decision-making power – the decision was with the state"* (I.2). For some organizations, taking on responsibilities in implementation would be seen as an opportunity to have a greater impact and to use their experience and expertise to ensure that the NRRP achieves its objectives. Others (especially those in major infrastructure fields) pointed out that CSOs cannot replace governmental authorities or do not have the necessary resources. However, there is a general recognition that civil society can play a key role in monitoring the implementation of the plan.

Regarding the materialization of expectations, all interviewees stated that their expectations were not fulfilled following their involvement in the NRRP drafting process. The majority of those interviewed highlighted their disappointment, pointing out that *"our competencies were used when they were needed, and then the dialogue closed, which is quite frustrating"* (I.11). Despite the efforts made, most of those who stated that the organizations they represent were involved in the consultation and conception of reform and investment proposals emphasized that the forwarded proposals were not integrated into the final plan submitted to the European Commission.

Some respondents indicated that some aspects of their proposals were integrated into the plan, particularly in areas that violated the DNSH principle in environmental investments, energy efficiency of buildings, and local development. However, grievances were highlighted regarding the fact that certain sectors, such as the railway or social services, were neglected or did not receive sufficient funding. Even if there were positive interactions with certain responsible authorities, these did not always lead to tangible results. Some interviewees (I.4; I.5; I.7) high-

lighted that during official negotiations with the EC services, some non-integrated proposals were suggested to be funded from the programs financed by the EU cohesion policy. However, even if this promise was respected, it was later found that the respective proposals had been diverted in favor of the public sector. Similarly, the interviews reveal a broader range of perceptions regarding authorities' expectations of CSOs. Thus, some responses (N=8) indicate that authorities would have expected CSOs to have practical contributions and innovative ideas from them, while others (N=4) stated they rather felt seen as an obstacle or just as a tool to fulfill formal requirements, more of a necessary exercise than an opportunity to receive substantial feedback. In this sense, the following consideration is suggestive: *"The impression was that the competent authorities do not have time and interest for a substantive interaction with civil society organizations"* (I.9). A few positions (N=3) suggested that authorities' expectations were perceived as CSOs effectively taking over drafting tasks that would otherwise have fallen to public officials without expertise in programming such complex interventions (a phenomenon noted especially in the field of youth policies – I4). However, in the case of two responses, it was indicated that at that time perception was created that the authorities did not seem to have clear expectations.

From the process of elaborating the NRRP, interview participants specified that they had learned several important lessons. Firstly, these refer to the need to act proactively and strategically. Thus, forming strong coalitions and getting involved from the initial stages of the process using lobbying mechanisms rather than advocacy is important. Also, there is a critical need for structuring the interaction and consultation process better, including timely identification of relevant organizations and individuals who can provide relevant expertise. Another lesson learned focuses on the efficient management of expectations so that processes are approached and managed realistically. Therefore, the importance of political thinking and insight is definitive to anticipate, and correct certain turns in the policy-making processes caused by political decision-makers.

The responses from those interviewed indicate a range of ideas about how CSOs' involvement in the decision-making process regarding European funds could be improved. Among the suggestions mentioned are involving these organizations from the initial stages of the process, cultivating better relationships with them, identifying organizations that can provide added value, and improving the education and training of both CSOs and authorities. Also, some participants point out that deeper structural issues could be resolved by establishing funding instruments for CSOs, especially those in small towns and rural areas, to compensate for the lack of human resources and skills in substantiating, implementing, and monitoring public interventions. Finally, developing a stronger culture of civic dialogue can be achieved by mandatorily involving the Economic and Social Council in all processes of managing European funds.

Regarding the factors or agents of change in the way CSOs are involved in managing European funds, most responses (N=9) suggest that change should start

endogenously, from the level of civil society organizations, by increasing confidence in their ability to add value to the policy-making process. This process also includes the need for institutional reform at the level of public administration, by making changes in organizational culture, as well as adequate training of officials considering the principles of good governance. Additionally, several responses (N=4) indicate the crucial role that exogenous factors could play, such as EU institutions (especially the EC), OECD, UNESCO, and other international organizations in boosting dialogue and CSOs involvement in managing European funds.

Analysing the results and prospects for changing the status quo

In the analysis of Romania, the services of the European Commission underlined the fact that "public consultations and the integration of feedback received from civil society are not systematic" (European Commission 2021: SWD 276). As can be seen from the research findings, all interviewees validate this consideration by the EC, even though the situation is better in the field of European funds compared to other public sectors. Romanian authorities have a varying degree of openness to CSOs' involvement in decision-making processes regarding European funds. However, there is a persistent perception that consultation processes are carried out primarily to ensure compliance with European regulations. Thus, CSOs are involved in the public consultation stage after the elaboration of policies, programs, and proposals for public interventions financed by European funds. Therefore, the results highlight that persistent issues regarding CSOs' access and participation in national strategic planning and evaluation continue to exist.

Regarding the first research question on the factors that influenced CSOs' involvement in drafting Romania's NRRP compared to other European funds management processes, the following aspects are relevant. First, the NRRP design required varied efforts to ensure bi-directional communication between involved government authorities and CSOs. The RRF was difficult to understand, equally so for both public authorities and CSOs, due to the lack of analysis capabilities of public policies at a macro level, as well as understanding the specificities of the RRF. Therefore, while certain CSO proposals were considered for some sectors, due to the specific eligibility conditions of the RRF, these were either partially accepted and maintained or modified, not accurately reflecting the original intentions of the CSOs anymore. At that moment, this method of integration could not be fully explained and understood by both parties. Hence, the disappointment and frustration at the end of the process are understandable.

Secondly, there is a persistent perception that the two sectors operate in parallel, but in diverse ways. In general, CSOs are knowledgeable about grassroots processes, but they do not have an overall sectoral view, nor do they have appropriate resources for active and responsible participation in all phases of deliberative processes, akin to lobby structures.

On the other hand, public authorities lack experience in collaborating with CSOs and grassroots evidence. Additionally, due to the inability to balance the inter-ministerial and territorial authority collaboration flow with the CSO's collaboration flow, in certain negotiation processes with EC services, the points of view of public administration were given more weight than those of CSOs. In the event of opportunities like the NRRP, these two worlds must converge to generate strategic planning documents of much higher quality than what was developed in 2021. This underscores the need for CSOs to cultivate a deeper understanding of public policy implementation mechanisms and anticipate certain complex processes.

Thirdly, in the absence of coalition contexts and the coagulation of a common sectoral vision, the problem of establishing sectoral consensus arose. As emerged from the analysis of the interviews, CSOs are disproportionately involved compared to other societal components (such as employers' associations, trade unions, or lobbying organizations) that act much more cohesively. For example, a coalition phenomenon of organizations only occurred during consultations in the social field through the creation of the Social Platform of Romania, or through the conception of a component dedicated to youth policies. Thus, the noticeably brief time did not allow for successive iterations that would have led to identifying a compromise between various stakeholders and which would have favored a tougher negotiation with public authorities and EC services. Also, the mix of perspectives on the expectations that government authorities had of CSOs suggests that there is a degree of uncertainty regarding the potential and quality of contributions expected from CSOs in policy-making processes.

Regarding the second research question, as emerged from the perceptions expressed by interview participants, for the moment no certain prospects are foreseen for changing the current governance regime concerning European funds management from the perspective of a larger and more responsible involvement of CSOs. According to the perception drawn from analyzing the interviews, the governance regime can be incrementally improved so that in successive temporal iterations it approaches the paradigm specific to socio-centric governance. This requires first carrying out a series of structural reforms at the public sector level, especially at the subsidiary level, in parallel with strengthening the administrative capacities of CSOs. A boost to this process is the acceleration of implementing investment four from component fourteen of the NRRP. As also emerged from the research, structured involvement of CSOs from the initial stages of designing programs financed by European funds is essential. Furthermore, changing the image of CSOs within public administration and demonstrating their contribution potential to complex processes of managing European funds can be achieved through regular invitations of officials to activities carried out by CSOs. In addition to this, organizing ongoing professional training programs in which public officials and CSO representatives participate concurrently can contribute to energizing cooperation between the two sectors.

At the same time, improved communication, and relationships between CSO representatives and political party leaders could boost transformative processes in public administration from the perspective of involving CSOs in implementing public interventions.

Conclusions

The CSO's involvement in drafting the NRRP consisted of legitimizing the definition of priorities and ways of economic and social recovery and taking on appropriate roles in contributing to the implementation of reforms or public investments included in the plan, especially in the case of those aspects that face strong resistance to change from the political environment or public administration. There are plenty of such examples implemented at the grassroots level, with or without European funds, in areas such as education, social inclusion, health, reducing energy poverty, reforestation, waste management, etc. However, the degree of CSOs' involvement in shaping the NRRPs depended heavily on the political and administrative culture, type of democracy, political conjunctures at that time, as well as the degree of decentralization and deconcentrating of the governmental authorities.

The research highlighted that in the process of shaping Romania's NRRP, the involvement of CSOs was dynamic but inconsistent. On one hand, in the initial phase, CSO involvement was extremely limited and carried out in a hermetically sealed and restricted framework. On the other hand, in the second phase, the openness to CSOs and their inclusion in the process was much greater, yet this effort did not have a concrete outcome. Too few proposals coming from CSOs were accepted following internal political deliberations and negotiations with EC services. Also, CSOs are involved with specific roles in implementing, monitoring or evaluating investments in too few reforms and investments in the NRRP.

According to the research results, in shaping Romania's NRRP, the arrangements specific to state-centric governance prevailed, even though arrangements close to the socio-centric governance regime were used in certain fields and critical moments of the process. These attempts were too small in scale and without the potential to demonstrate their effectiveness and thus produce a critical juncture. The phenomenon thus indicates the constancy of the state-centric governance regime in the field of programming and managing European funds, without a certain potential for approaching the socio-centric governance paradigm in the next period. The interviews conducted thus partially validate the research hypothesis. As derived from the research results, the fundamental cause of this phenomenon lies in the fact that a mature civic and participatory culture does not yet exist to favor the establishment and irreversible maintenance of arrangements that would provoke the change of current arrangements.

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Appendix 1. Interviews with CSO representatives

Interview code	Name of the organization	Name of the person interviewed	Role in the organization
I.1	Worldwide Fund for Nature – WWF România	Diana Cosmoiu	Climate and Energy National Manager
I.2	Pro Infrastructura Association	Ionuț Ciurea	Executive Director
I.3	Association for Theatre, Film, Music, and Dance – MUZE	Răzvan Ailenei	President
I.4	National Youth Foundation	Mihai Vilcea	Chairman of the Administrative Board
I.5	Federation of Non-Governmental Organizations for Social Services - FONSS	Diana Chiriacescu	Director, ESC member
I.6	Romania Energy Center – ROEC	Eugenia Gușilov	Director
I.7	NGOs Federation for Children – FONPC	Bogdan Simion	Director, ESC president
I.8	Association for Integrated Territorial Development Valea Jiului	Alexandru Kelemen	Executive Director
I.9	Energy Policy Group	Radu Dudău	President
I.10	Center for the Study of Democracy	Corina Murafa	Expert, EESC member
I.11	Sexul vs Barza Association	Adriana Radu	President, ESC member
I.12	Funky Citizens	Elena Calistru	President, EESC member

Collaboration and innovation in social services:* hybrid organizations and areas of interaction

Milena Hristova Yorgova

Introduction

Debates surrounding changes to the welfare state and the expanding role of social services in maintaining the well-being of citizens have drawn attention to non-governmental organizations and their potential to reduce social and economic risk and vulnerability. These organizations face several challenges in adapting to changing ideological and political frameworks, which necessitate compromises in their degree of autonomy and are justified in terms of their survival.

An intensive hybridization of non-governmental organizations to solve problems in the social sphere occurs with the rise of the ideas of the new public management and the new public governance. Synthesized, this leads to changes in the positions of the state towards non-governmental organizations and their admission into some traditional security zones. This is dictated by the need to find forms of state intervention that are more adequate to market processes and is associated with implementing various political strategies in the field of public social services aimed at limiting costs[1], changing management[2], and changing financing[3] (Yorgova 2023).

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1 Refer users to services offered in the community and family.

2 Adoption of national standards guaranteed by the state; introduction of the contractual principle in the provision of services; privatization of the public sector.

3 Introduction of fees for social services; increase in user fees; financing through transfers from social security and other public funds, redirection of services to the non-governmental sector.

The aim is to achieve more efficiency and effectiveness, and at the same time guarantee adequacy in terms of scope, variety of forms of support, accessibility, and quality of social services about the needs and expectations of citizens.

Non-governmental organizations are placed to operate in a competitive environment dominated by the understanding of *better management* of public social services. This requires them to rationalize their behavior as providers of social services by adopting higher requirements for accountability and professionalism on the one hand, and on the other hand – strengthening their market orientation and using business management practices. They are expected to demonstrate entrepreneurship in search of effective solutions, orientation of activity towards achieving results, focus on citizens as users, greater flexibility to changes in the demand for social services, cooperation between multiple interdependent participants that contribute to the provision of social services (government bodies, businesses, non-governmental organizations, citizens), innovation leadership (Manliev 2021).

Non-governmental organizations are forced to develop an increasingly high degree of *relational culture of cooperation* with the state and the businesses, based on jointly defined goals, distribution of responsibilities, and search for collective agreement (Petrov 2022). The paradigm of interaction between them, the state, and the businesses is changing in the direction of intensification of actions in each of these sectors on the one hand, and on the other – expansion of cross-sectoral integration, new frameworks of cooperation, and innovation. This is provoked by the complicating and deepening, especially in recent years, social and economic challenges to which the EU member states are responding, in the context of social services, with changes in the trajectory of welfare states – from reducing the state intervention towards a proactive strong welfare state (EC 2023). An institutional environment is established that stimulates hybridization and pushes non-governmental organizations as providers of social services from actions motivated by value rationality to actions determined by purposive rationality. Researchers (Cooney 2006; Milbourne 2013; Petrov 2022) express concerns to what extent, under these conditions, non-governmental organizations can maintain their social values and legitimacy and represent a distinctive and independent force in society.

Civil society and civil sector: evolution and characteristics

Civil society is usually defined as "the multidimensional, internally contradictory, dynamically changing reality of the private interests of individuals as free and autonomous subjects" (Encyclopedic Dictionary of Sociology, 1997: 88). In a dynamic plan, the concept is associated with the self-initiative of individuals in defense of their private interests, and in a static plan – with the set of immediately emerging institutions, which in their entirety represent the diverse interests of the members of a given society and play the role of a balancer and limiter of the state's intervention in public life.

By applying an exogenous approach to the definition of the concept – civil society is defined as a dynamic space outside the family, the state, and the market, which is created by individual and collective actions, organizations, and institutions, where common interests are publicly defended (Dakova et al. 2003). For Gancheva (Gancheva et al. 2009), this reality lies between the state and the private sphere, resp. the actions of the government, the legislature, and the judiciary, and the individual actions within the family, the confidential business, and the home. According to Gorchilova (2010), civil society plays the role of a corrective, a guarantor of rights compliance, a testing ground for innovative solutions, a mechanism for empowering citizens, and mobilizing support that often crosses local, regional, and national borders. It is a platform, a terrain on which the state, the market, and the people interact.

At the current stage, as a result of the geographical expansion of the idea of civil society with a focus on its practical functioning in different world regions and at a supranational level, the views on it are becoming more and more ambiguous, and the research searches are more about delineating its boundaries and for the analysis of national peculiarities in its functioning, its role, and contribution in different societies. Researchers point out (Kákai–Glied 2017; Hummel et. al 2020; Reianu 2024) that the civil societies in individual European countries have different characteristics, manifested in cultural and historical traditions, the focus of work, the scope of funding, etc. This makes it to some extent difficult to describe the civil sector and prescribe priorities (Reianu 2024), Gorchilova (2010) notes that moral and ethical considerations recede into the background"as if a tacit consensus is being reached that civil society in itself is something good, useful and characteristic of progress and democratic development" (Gorchilova 2010: 197). In recent years, however, there has been growing criticism of the "overly optimistic expectations with which the civil society is burdened" and "voices of expectation that civil organizations will continue to prove their legitimacy and democratic claims have been increasingly heard" (Gorchilova 2010: 212).

A fundamental characteristic of civil society is its pluralistic nature. Its structure is open, with an unlimited number of self-regulating and self-managing elements of formal and informal types. The most clearly distinguishable part of it is the formal (legally registered) civil organizations.

The civil sector is an element of civil society, but it is not a substitute for it. (Dakova et al. 2003; Gancheva et al. 2009; Tsenkov et al. 2010) The term "civil sector"is used to cover the entire range of organizations that enable citizens to associate, and that are not driven by profit motives (Petrov 2022). Tanev (2008) also notes that the civil sector is the institutional form of civil society and encompasses the entire system of specific institutions that enable citizens driven by motives other than profit to connect. For Pozharevska (2005:231) it is "a sector that lies between the state and the market, includes activities with a social orientation, the purpose of which is not to distribute profit and represents a significant social and economic force – a key element for the social policy of any country".

Researchers (Salamon–Anheier 1997; Dakota et al. 2003; Gancheva et al. 2009; Tsenkov et al. 2010; Alcock 2010; Milbourne 2013; Petrov 2022) note the extraordinary variety of organizations that make up the civil sector, as well as the various nuances in the terminology used in their research. Broadly speaking, civil sector organizations are identified by four related themes: formality, independence, non-profit distribution, and volunteerism. The general understanding of them is that "they carry out an explicitly stated mission; are voluntary in origin and also often rely on volunteers; have socializing functions at the meso- and sometimes at the macro level; have advocacy functions, but also create social services and goods themselves; are not politicized in principle, but can perform political functions; do not pursue profit, but generate income, incl. their own; they have their idea of values, materialize it in interests, but respect the interests of others as well; in their totality they constitute the civil sector" (Petrov 2022:24).

Civil sector organizations are designated as non-governmental, non-profit, voluntary, civil, and charitable. All these terms are used interchangeably, although they express subtle differences in the understanding of the nature and purpose of organizations. According to Petrov (2022:25), "Behind these different names are different purposes and the different terms should be evaluated according to their usefulness in describing the part of reality that is of research interest". There are international variations in the terminology used. Authors (Dakova et al. 2003; Pozharevska 2005; Gancheva et al. 2009; Tsenkov et al. 2010; Petrov 2022) note that in Bulgaria the term "volunteer" is not so popular, while "civil" is used relatively more frequently and implies the idea of pressure and action by independent citizens, while "charitable" leads to associations of direct assistance to the people in a disadvantaged position. The use of the terms "non-governmental" and "non-profit", resp. "non-governmental organizations" and "non-profit organizations" acquires wider citizenship. Usually, when civil sector organizations are considered from a liberal perspective and in combination with local (economic) development, they are defined as non-profit, and when considered at the national level and about their role in public policy, they are more frequently called non-governmental. (Dakova et al. 2003:35)

In the context of social services, the understanding of "non-governmental" organizations emphasizes the distinction between governmental structures and development initiatives, as well as their role in public policy processes, and the use of "non-profit organizations" emphasizes the role of these organizations as providers of social services that do not distribute profit and work in the public interest.

Hybrid organizations and hybrid zones

The localization of the civil sector from the point of view of its connection with the state and the market leads to the construction of several models of interaction. These models are based on the idea of balance and interdependence of the three sectors.

According to Tanev (2008), this idea is based on the understanding that there does not exist and that it is not possible to have only one general social regulatory sphere, and that there are three levels of conflicting, parallel existing interests: the first level is the level of economic relations; the second covers relations at the level of society, which is the proper domain of politics, and the third is the intermediate level of groups, the relations between them and between them and society.

It is assumed that the three sectors obey different logic and pursue different goals. They are in complex interactions, simultaneously in a state of partnership and opposition. According to Paton (2009), the state is characterized by formality, regulation, coercion, redistribution; the market is characterized by entrepreneurship, investment, accumulation, and competition, while the civil sector is characterized by association, reciprocity, altruism, and democracy. Intersectoral interaction is illustrated by a triangular model, the vertices of which are occupied by the public, market, and civil sectors (Paton 2009; Alcock 2010).

Evers and Laville (2004) also adopt a triangular model for locating the civil sector, but according to them, it is part of the core of a triangle formed by other poles – state, market, and community (families, households, and other informal organizations). Civil sector organizations act as mediators to the main sources of welfare. They are distinguished from the community (informal) sector by their formality, from the state by their private nature, and from the market by their non-profit orientation.

The civil sector finds itself between the three sectors, both related to and distinct from them, but part of the mixed welfare economy. This model recognizes that civil sector organizations can occupy border areas between the sectors and exhibit characteristics of both the civil sector and other sectors (Alcock 2010).

The potential for civil sector organizations to overlap has drawn the attention of researchers (Alcock 2010; Billis 2010; Milbourne 2013; Karre 2020). Hybrid organizations are seen as a manifestation of the complex and overlapping relations between the state, the market, and the civil sector within the mixed welfare economy. Billis (2010) developed a circular model of three-sector interaction to capture this expanding hybridization, within which hybrid zones are identified. Each of these zones includes similar types of organizations that differ in their initial origins and value-goal impulse.

Based on the Billis' model, the following organizations can be distinguished:

– *Public-private hybrid organizations.* These are organizations that combine the logic of the state with the interest of the business. A public body and private individuals usually own them. Benefits such as risk sharing, and cost savings are sought in them. They are financed partly publicly and partly through revenue from the sale of goods and services, or shared by the state, local authorities, and private entities. The initiative to create them can come from the public sector, e.g. state enterprises, or from the business (chambers of commerce, tourist offices, etc.).

– *Public-civil hybrid organizations.* They carry out activities delegated by the state,

e.g. social services. They are financed by taxes and private donations. The impulse for hybridization can come "from below" or "from above".
– *Civil-business hybrid organizations.* These are organizations that integrate business models, and volunteer logic, and pursue more than one goal. The spectrum of hybridization is broad, including variations in the ratio between social purpose and profit. They can be broadly classified into 1) organizations that are primarily mission-oriented, usually with non-profit legal status, reinvesting their profit in social goals (a non-governmental organization that implements an economic activity[4] that is additional and related to the subject of the main activity, social enterprise); 2) organizations for which the leading motive is profit, which they distribute to the owners, but which also include some social goals, mostly in connection with certain adverse consequences of the functioning of the economy (socially responsible businesses, corporate social responsibility) (Karre 2020; Petrov 2022).

In the context of social services, the hybrid zones between the civil and state sectors and between the civil and business sectors are of interest particularly those hybrid organizations which, although originally belonging to the non-governmental sector, have a different value-goal impulse. In general terms, these are organizations that have a legal organizational form – an association and a foundation but have distinctive features:[5] some work for the public benefit, and others – invest in the "shared benefit"; some work "not for profit", and others - "for profit", but reinvest it in social goals meaningful to the community. The two types of organizations put human needs in the center, with a focus mostly on improving the quality of life of vulnerable groups of the population, but adopt a different logic: some rely primarily on state funding, while others look for new tools and financial mechanisms, incl. by including the social services produced and provided by them in commercial activity and introducing business models. In addition, both types of organizations operate in an environment that involves the creation of multiple partnerships and various forms of connections with and within the community based on shared values and principles. And – as providers of social services – some organizations provide mostly state-delegated social services, and the other organizations – operate as subjects of the social economy and provide social services as a business with social added value. Both types of organizations

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4 Business activity is any activity of an NGO aimed at making a profit, regulated by the statute of the organization, but the income from which is used only to achieve the goals defined in the statute, without the possibility of profit distribution.

5 The manifestation of these features has specificity in a national socioeconomic and legislative context, e.g. in Bulgaria, the Law on Social and Solidarity Economy Enterprises (2018) introduces a statute, not a new legal form, for social enterprises. Associations and foundations can be registered as a social enterprise in the Register of Social Enterprises. "In this sense, the presence of more than one legal form is admissible as long as there are no restrictions in this direction and not the commercial activity, but the social purpose and activity are determining for the enterprise to function as a social enterprise. The economic activity serves the social goals and mission of the enterprise." (Todorova 2021:69)

are defined as so-called private providers of social services in a legislative context. They are perceived as a resource for compensating deficits in the public provision of social services on the one hand, and on the other – their participation is loaded with expectations for better quality of services because of innovation, flexibility, and striving to improve services in the process of their provision.

Social services: cooperation and innovation through hybridization of non-governmental organizations - Bulgaria's experience

A study of publications and documents (EC 2006; EC 2007; EC 2011; EC 2022) of the EU about social services gives reason to note that they are considered within the framework of documents with non-binding legal force. There is currently no common European definition, but efforts are being made to reach a common definition.[6] Available definitions of social services are contextually determined. They depend on the specific environment and level of consideration (EU level, individual Member State level, regional and local level) and are usually linked to specific policy needs. Furthermore, they reflect the national context – scope, quality, organization – and depend on established traditions, values, culture, economic opportunities, etc. of the society within which they are located. (EC 2022)

The practice established so far in the EU considers social services as part of services of general interest. Social services are defined as person-centered; designed to meet vital human needs; are guided by the principle of solidarity and contribute to the protection of fundamental rights, human dignity, and non-discrimination. They aim to ensure the creation of equal opportunities for all and social inclusion (EC 2006; EC 2007).

In general terms, it can be assumed that social services are a range of services designed to provide support to meet a wide range of social needs in society, to specific groups within society, and to individuals in specific situations. A key characteristic of social services is their interactive nature, which distinguishes them from other types of social benefits (social assistance in kind or the form of monetary transfers) (EC 2022).

In the national context, based on the legislation in Bulgaria (Law on Social Services), social services are defined as support activities. The spectrum of this support includes 1) prevention and/or overcoming of social exclusion, 2) realization of rights, and 3) improvement of the quality of life. The common focus in the spectrum of support is social inclusion. Social services are referred to as the so-called personal social services. Individuals and families receive care, security, support, protection, information, and advice, which enable them to maintain their

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6 A proposal for a common definition of social services in the EU was made in European Commission (2022): *"Study on social services with particular focus on personal targeted social services for people in vulnerable situations"*. The proposed definition follows established practice and tries to correctly reflect the diversity of social services.

physical and social functioning during difficult periods of life and prevent them from falling into extreme poverty and social isolation. Social services help users cope with difficulties in everyday life maintain or improve their quality of life, and fully participate in basic areas of public life.

The main providers of social services in Bulgaria are the municipalities. Private providers can also provide social services. These are physical persons registered under the Commercial Law and legal entities, both Bulgarian and foreign from member states of the European Union, or member states of the Agreement on the European Economic Area. Municipalities are responsible for the provision of social services financed from the state budget. They can independently organize and implement all activities or outsource the provision of social services to private providers. Private providers, however, need to have a license issued by the Agency for the Quality of Social Services (AQSS). They can also create social services which they finance independently.

According to the data of the Agency for the Quality of Social Services (RLSP 2024), there are 504 licensed private providers, of which 267 are providers with a legal organizational form – association, and foundation. Of the provided social services, 85% are financed by the state budget. It is not surprising, given the legal framework, that the most used way of providing social services is through independent organization and implementation of activities by the relevant municipal administration. The second most widespread form is outsourcing the management of social services to private providers, through which private providers manage approximately 17% of the funds allocated from the state budget for social services. Only 7% of the social services are funded by private providers (AQSS 2023).

According to data from the Register of Social Enterprises in Bulgaria (RSE 2024), most of the social enterprises included in it have the legal organizational form EOOD (Ltd). Registered as active social enterprises are sixteen non-governmental organizations with the legal organizational form of association and foundation. Researchers (Todorova 2021; Nachev 2022) note that a significant part of the registered social enterprises have limited resources – human and material, which does not allow them to deploy large-scale production activity, requiring a serious capacity to implement and use modern communication and information technologies in production. They carry out a wide range of economic activities in the fields of services and industry,[7] and their social activities and/or goals are also in a wide range[8] Nachev (2022) points out that sustainability is a problem for social enterprises, as it is most often associated with the presence of investments and the established

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7 social work, social services for vulnerable groups, provision of food products and essential goods for people in remote places, building maintenance and landscaping activities, food production, clothing production, etc.

8 improving the quality of life of vulnerable groups; provision of training, provision of supported employment, implementation of social work (including without accommodation as well), support for social inclusion of vulnerable groups, qualification and retraining of persons from vulnerable groups on the labour market, etc.

culture of consumption of products and services from social enterprises. In the context of social services provided by non-governmental organizations with the status of social enterprises, micro-enterprises are more sustainable than small and medium-sized social enterprises. It is also found that they are more sustainable in the "industry" sector compared to the "services" sector. This is associated with the manufacturing of a product that satisfies needs that have arisen more permanently over time, in contrast to the offering of services that require a longer process of construction, institutionalization, and validation among service users. Social enterprises, while having the potential to address socio-economic challenges, are still not fully recognized. The study of the established practice in Bulgaria (Tsenkov et al. 2010) about the provision of social services by private providers gives reason to indicate that non-governmental organizations are perceived in the social services sector as a partners of the state rather than of the citizens. Many of these have emerged to fill deficits in social service provision as test laboratories for the creation of new social services and staff training.

A survey (BCNL 2022) of public attitudes towards non-governmental organizations shows that citizens expect the state to engage in solving serious social problems, and non-governmental organizations to play a complementary role by providing services and by working to achieve higher independence and social inclusion, advocacy, and protection of the rights of the people from vulnerable population groups. Manifestations of direct political pressure and sporadic donation campaigns of non-governmental organizations are not perceived particularly positively by the citizens. A kind of paradox is also registered – on the one hand, an increase in the positive attitudes towards non-governmental organizations based on solving specific problems, personal experience, participation, and a sense of representation, and on the other hand – when they are considered the political process, they acquire strongly negative connotation.

According to several authors (Todorova 2021; Petrov 2022; Dakota et al. 2003; Gancheva et al. 2009; Tsenkov et al. 2010), the political expediency of the state is the driving factor in the hybridization of non-governmental organizations as providers of social services – on the one hand, promotion and implementation of policies for social inclusion, regional development, employment, etc., and the other hand – increasing the capacity of non-governmental organizations to provide social services through partnership and/or through public procurement management mechanisms, and/or through stimulation of social entrepreneurial initiatives. Thus, the state takes advantage of the experience and expertise of non-governmental organizations in addressing public problems and needs by compensating for the inherent limitations of these organizations through regulation and funding.

The cooperation between the state and the non-governmental organizations in the context of social services expands their access to resources, guarantees the stability of their funding, provides channels for influencing the content of social policies, and this creates conditions and better opportunities to fulfill their social mission, but it can also lead to a loss of identity, lack of flexibility and innovation.

The presence of strong regulatory frameworks in the social services sector, as well as the dependence of funding on political will, can make non-governmental organizations too bureaucratic, distancing them from their civil nature (Petrov 2022).

Conclusions

Social services are an essential element of the European social model and contribute to the implementation of the principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights. They change and develop in response to social challenges and changing societal expectations. The dynamics of the changes in social services are determined by the changes in the economy and society.

Social services are extremely crucial in maintaining the integrity of society. Their social value and the presence of significant external effects determine the intervention of the state. It supports, regulates, and controls social services to generate higher public welfare, resp. their providers by promoting pluralism in the supply and greater flexibility to changes in demand for social services.

The provision of social services is carried out under broad representation, in which various non-governmental organizations participate actively. The partnership between the interested parties is established as a leading principle, which aims to improve the link between the services with the requirements of the users, increase the transparency in the decision-making process, and - more efficient distribution of financial resources. In this regard, non-governmental organizations are involved at various levels in the formation and implementation of social policies and practices.

The European Union takes a coordinating role in building a political commitment to enforce a vision of social services as preventive and supportive at all stages of life. However, this requires investments, an adequate legislative framework, and an active social dialogue. The search for solutions will inevitably stimulate sector hybridization and lead to new forms of collaboration and innovation.

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Fostering Democratic Values for the Future:[*]
An In-Depth Exploration of Romania's Preuniversity Education System

Mihaela V. Cărăuşan

Introduction

Everyone's value system and society become essential in building the future, and education plays the most crucial role. Considerable research was done on engaging public and technical issues to increase deliberation and consensus (Burgess 2012; Fung et al. 2003; Gastil–Levine 2005; Rowe–Frewer 2005). However, a unique method has not yet been discovered. Each society lives by its internal core values, and even if we discuss more global values, such as sustainability, the capacity to adapt and internalize is different. Education is the only constant that can help researchers establish a familiar path. Although there is always some level of influence in a common framework, the value creation cannot vary significantly across the democratic spectrum of European Union member states.

In theory, values are considered in numerous disciplines and areas of study, encompassing personal, cultural, biological, and social meanings (Hamilton 2006). When we research values, we explore what is significant to us, such as security, freedom, wisdom, and independence. The various definitions of values, each pointing to what is desirable or not, reflect the interdisciplinary nature of their study, inviting us to appreciate the breadth and depth of a topic.

Values significantly influence most, if not all, motivated behavior. Every behavior has positive implications for expressing, upholding, or achieving specific values, but it also has negative implications for the values in opposing positions. People's behavior balances their opposing values. (Schwartz 2009: 18) Attitudes and values

are related, but they are different concepts. Attitudes refer to an individual's feelings or opinions about something, while values are the principles or standards of behavior that individuals or groups adhere to. Attitudes can be seen as emerging from or reflecting values. Our values, beliefs, personal circumstances, behavior, education, knowledge, and character influence our attitudes. It is argued that attitudes can change while values and beliefs are less flexible (Appleton 2014). Values world shifts, such as sustainability development, often involve reevaluating societal values and can lead to significant changes in behavior and policy, making them a crucial aspect of sustainability efforts (Horlings 2015: 167).

The Research Methodology

To pursue research on democratic values of the future, we started from the main hypothesis that even though sustainable development goals have been implemented for almost ten years, their supported values are not yet known. Because of this, the co-creative future is far from what we may want. Education is the central pillar when discussing the future of the next generations. Education for sustainable development gives learners of all ages the knowledge, skills, values, and agency to address interconnected global challenges, including climate change, loss of biodiversity, unsustainable use of resources, and inequality (UNESCO, 2023).

The research construct of the study is built around quantitative analysis based on bibliometric data and analysis of topic-related Eurobarometer results obtained in the last years on themes such as climate, education, green transition, justice, rights, and values. As a research tool for determining the sustainability values in the literature published in the Web of Science Core Collection, we used van Eck and Waltman's visualization of similarities algorithm – VOSViewer software. Through this tool, we determined the relationship between sustainability value topics by placing direct and indirect connections between them on the same map. Moreover, we used the Web of Science as the primary source for collecting data on sustainability values, as it is one of the most frequently used sources of bibliometrics data. The specific terms used for data collection are provided when the results of the visualization of similarities are displayed. Along with VOSviewer, the Eurobarometer was used to answer two central research questions: Are European citizens ready for a green future? What are the necessary values to co-create a responsible future?

The qualitative content-conceptual analysis was the only possible research tool for Romania's case study due to the lack of databases and information about the content of preuniversity curricula. Through this tool, we determined the presence of certain words, themes, or concepts in qualitative information on each subject taught in the Romanian preuniversity system. The curricula of each preuniversity discipline were collected from the Romanian Ministry of Education using the only available language – Romanian. Because of the language limit, to increase the research level of continuity, the other tool, VOSviewer, we could not use.

Besides the language limit, another limit we did not expect to meet is the dwindling number of research registered in the Web of Science Core Collection. The main keyword on which the research was done was "sustainability values." Sustainability is not anymore about moving forward according to the state path is more about building together a shared future, and because of this, the government must ponder more on co-creation.

Responsibility for the Future

The research started from the premise that the values of tomorrow's society are built today, and this process is not just the responsibility of one, the citizen. Cross-sector partnerships (Austin 2010) must be the crucial point of democratic systems. In this sense, Visser (2011, p. 5) stated, "Being responsible also does not mean doing it all ourselves. Responsibility is a form of sharing, a way of recognizing that we are all in this together. 'Sole responsibility' is an oxymoron." Knowledge of building partnerships among the members of a democratic society for a better co-creation process requires theoretical and practical guidance. Guidance in young democracies, such as the Romanian one, is not yet well developed, and the core principles of transparency and access to information are still the sole reference.

With an 'active' and 'reflexive' individual (Clarke 2005; Martin 2010), co-creation is increasingly seen as a way of reimagining the harmonious relationship between citizens and state and European institutions. The future generations of the European Union, besides those born in a democratic context, need guidance to experience democratic processes; a collaboration of schools with state and society organizations to continually broaden and deepen the relationship with new value renewal must be part of an unremitting process.

A much deeper commitment to integrative processes requires deploying more valuable resources, a better vision of the future, and more leadership effort. Therefore, investments in co-creation are of more excellent value for the partners of the process and society. Besides, the sociological engagement of citizenship as 'political participation' critically viewed this re-imagining (e.g. Contandriopoulos 2004; Rose 1996). The inherent ambiguities of the 'active citizen' role and the lack of actual power transfer that could support it were also highlighted in the literature (Marinetto 2003; Martin 2010).

The 'active citizenship' studies were divided by authors into two large categories: in the first, domination is the core value, and according to it, the citizens are called to relate to the governmental power (e.g. Martin 2010), while in the second social movements or awareness of everyday needs are the triggers of participation (Isin–Turner 2002). Therefore, we discuss active citizenship as 'top-bottom' impunity or 'bottom-up' empowerment.

As Isin (2009: 369) argued, citizenship in various stages of social development and based on contextual needs citizenship may encompass both mentioned situations.

Hybridity (Cornwall–Coelho 2007) within the national state and European regions may be maintained, and control can be solidified in some areas, while freedom to citizens and liberation can be awarded in others.

The increased fusion for sociologists such as Schinkel and Van Houdt (2010: 698) is the core meaning of neoliberal governance, the so-called 'neo-liberal communitarian governmentality' in which citizens and community values and responsibilities are interlocked.

As we revealed, citizenship and governance are, at least for us, the two fundamental pillars of democracy, which enable the entire system to function in terms of capability and efficiency. Governance is the result of the entire executive process done by the government for the citizens with the citizens' participation. Governance refers to the political system (Moore 1993: 39) in which the national resources are used to develop the country or region. The citizens' interactions with the government make democracy successful and deem the political system democratic.

The World Development Report (1997) opened the discussion on the importance of citizens in the governance process and the state's effectiveness. The idea behind bringing the citizens' participation forward was to unveil the inner core of transparency and accountability of governance. The process depends on two main factors: first, to provide the space where the citizens can act as government partners, and second, the facilitation mechanisms created to encourage citizens' participation. Co-creation as one participation mechanism is intrinsic to the governance and contributes to social development.

Democracy the Path to Sustainability

For the health of democratic societies, scholars from diverse disciplines (Tocqueville 1969/1835; Tönnies 1940; Bellah et al. 1985; Wilson 2000) emphasized the importance of engagement in public life. Also, efforts were made to identify factors for better political and civic participation (Brady, Verba, and Schlozman 1995; Verba, Schlozman–Brady 1995). The trust of people with no and little direct interactions was exposed as the primary contributor to collective action (Putnam, 2000; Stolle, 2001). Putnam suggests that this cultural shift has enormous implications for the institutional support of civic participation. However, when we open the discussion on future development, we must address questions on declining involvement in social and civic life. What does citizen engagement do?

Schlozman, Verba, and Brady (1999) stated that there are three ways to think about people's engagement.
1. participation in voluntary organizations enhances the development of the social capacities of individuals.
2. voluntary associations cultivate democratic virtues and build the community pillar.
3. group participation makes the protection of collective interests possible.

The lack of engagement is the result of the lack of democratic values. The values that the ones before us protected and which the future generations should build their future.

Nevertheless, how can we educate the people within the democratic value system when the school dropout rate in Romania was and is one of the highest in the European Union? Eurostat, May 2023, data showed that the early school leaving rate in Romania has remained constant in recent years, from 17% in 2013 to 15.6% in 2022, while the European average has fallen from 12% to 9%. From where almost three million people will take their democratic values and learn to be engaged socially and civic. Except for Bucharest (7.9%), the early school leaving rate is significantly above the EU27 average in all regions of Romania. Similarly, early school leaving rates by region have been constant over the last ten years everywhere in Romania, which shows that state interventions to reduce the phenomenon have failed.

Based on these results, we inquired into the preuniversity system's capacity to provide value for the future. We wanted to determine to what extent the next generations are ready to support a democratic path and a sustainable future.

Romania needs a change in the current development paradigm to face the challenges of the 21st century. We live in a period marked by globalization, increasing inequalities, and aggravating environmental problems.

In the Romanian context, sustainable development represents the desire to achieve a balance, a synthesis between the aspirations of the citizens born in democracy, the society on which they depend and to which they should engage, and the European context that allows self-realization.

The worldwide realities and the United Nations and European Union time horizon that looks over generations at the state's capacity to meet 'the needs of the present generation without compromising the chances of future generations to meet their own needs' are more under question. In this global economic, social, and environmental context, governance must be ready to give an agile answer to new global challenges by proposing strategies anchored in regional and international organizations' agendas (2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development). The capability to organize public administration for a prompt and sustained reaction by citizens based on democratic values is now more than ever put under pressure. The global action plan, which Romania chooses to support in the coming years, is aimed at alleviating poverty, combating inequalities and social injustice, and protecting the planet until 2030.

The Stockholm Conference (1972) resulted in the creation of a UN Program by adopting a Declaration on Environmental Protection, within which legitimacy was given to the concept of sustainable development with its three pillars: economic, social, and environmental. Nowadays, the 2030 UN Agenda for Sustainable Development, with its seventeen goals and 169 actions, follows the same pillars under which the nations must:

– be able to meet their basic needs for employment, food, energy, water, and sanitation – social equity.
– approach the quality of life for economic growth.
– conserve and improve the available resource base through a step-by-step change and development of technologies – environment.

From the social point of view, a cohesive society is needed, which benefits from the improvement of the education and health system, from the reduction of inequalities between men and women, and between the urban and rural areas, leading to the promotion of an open society, in which citizens they can feel appreciated and supported. In a fair institutional framework, there is a need to cultivate the population's resilience so that citizens can realize their dreams at home. At the same time, the state must help increase the citizens' potential by addressing the problems related to health, education, and the limits of the free market, issues that can be answered through public policies, resulting in a higher standard of living for all citizens. Capital increases social - creating a civic sense defined by trust between citizens - and will unlock the potential of Romanian citizens to realize themselves through their forces while ensuring their communities' sustainable development.

Among the significant values and objectives on which the Romanian National Action Plan Sustainability (2020: 7–8) is shaped, we find as fundamental the ones that address the democratic institutions, resilient, open, transparent, in permanent dialogue with citizens, with the ability to anticipate changes, demographic growth, safety in freedom, multiculturalism, equality, and well-being for all citizens. Moreover, education is part of the following values that should contribute to social protection, reduction of inequalities, and inclusion for all categories and social groups without barriers and discrimination.

Questioning the Green Future to Come

The Sustainable Development Goals represent the international effort to find an answer to a growing World within the same space. Each state practices the UN vision of the future for the next generations through national strategies. None of these national, European, or international strategies can be implemented without the citizens' involvement. Co-creation has become more required than ever. However, without a well-informed citizen, the entire construct will collapse. In the Eurobarometer on democracy-citizenship (2023: 528), it was emphasized that only half of the respondents (50%) feel well-informed about their rights as a citizen of the EU. In comparison, a third (33%) said they do not feel very well informed, and 16% do not feel informed. At the Member State level, the proportion of people feeling well-informed ranges from 26% in France to 64% in Poland and 50% in Romania. Still, in the Special Eurobarometer on justice, rights, and values (2021: 514), 65%

of Europeans agree that the core values of the EU, such as fundamental rights, democracy, and the rule of law, are well protected in their own country. On a multiple-answer question to choose if the respondents do any social and civic actions, close to a fifth of respondents (17%) mention that they are making politically motivated consumer choices, while only 15% mention posting opinions on current issues on online social media networks. Also, one in ten EU citizens mention getting involved in NGOs and civil society organizations, while close to the same percentage (9%) mention getting involved in trade unions, political movements, or parties, and 7% are not engaged in such activities. Most Europeans see participation in local, national, and European elections as the main civic activity (75%). Only 8 % of Romanians participate in volunteering activities, and half (4%) are involved in NGOs and civil society organizations, reflecting the actual situation of building a co-creative democracy. Education is correlated with increased involvement in trade unions, political movements or parties, NGOs, and civil society organizations, with a higher likelihood of making politically motivated consumer choices and taking part in volunteering activities or local community projects (Special Eurobarometer 514:2021: 18).

In 2019 (Flash Eurobarometer 478), young people, with more than two-thirds (67%) of respondents, said protecting the environment and fighting climate change should be a priority for the EU in the years to come. The majority (56%) also said improving education and training or fighting poverty and economic and social inequalities should be a priority. Romania scores 57% for education, only 41% for environmental protection, and 6% for health and well-being. However, 44% considered that promoting human rights, democracy, and shared values is essential. As the report stated, respondents who completed education aged fifteen or younger are more likely than those who completed education at an older age to mention fighting poverty and economic and social inequalities. The more actively a respondent participates in civic, social, and political activities, the more likely they think each area should be a priority. While civil society institutions and practices in the region have rapidly and extensively spread, the 'internalization' of the 'norm' of civil society has emerged as a standard in assessing the capacities of civil society to bring or contribute to a change. (Polgár 2023)

Valuing the topics that are taught sufficiently in schools, within the same 2019 Flash Eurobarometer, more than four in ten respondents think critical thinking, media, and democracy (42%); climate change, environment, and eco-friendly behaviors (41%), and entrepreneurship and financial competences (41%). In Romanian, the most mentioned answer with a value of 39% was health education (physical and mental), and democracy scored fifth in a row with only 25%. The respondents who are still studying (48%) or are engaged in social, civic, and political activities are the most likely to mention critical thinking, media, and democracy (44%).

The transition to a green future that leaves no one behind is supported by 88% of EU citizens (Special Eurobarometer 527, Fairness perceptions of the green transition, 2022). Nevertheless, only 46% of Europeans are confident that in 2050,

sustainable energy, products, and services will be affordable for everyone, including low-income people. Romanian is in the last place in the European Union, with only 29% of the action taken to fight climate change over the past six months. (Special Eurobarometer 538: 2023). Nevertheless, when the impact of a product on the environment is considered, Romania is in third place by rating it as especially important (37%) and significant (47%) when making a purchasing decision (Flash Eurobarometer Ecolabel 535: 2023).

The reviewed Eurobarometer surveys describe what citizens believe they can do, what they are called to do, and what they expect from the government to do, and shine a light on the future development of Romania in the European Union context. Additionally, it evaluates the state's performance in different democratic areas to ensure a fair transition to a sustainable future. It discusses the role of education in both process – democracy and sustainability. Furthermore, the higher the level of education was each time the questions were addressed, the higher the participation and awareness of EU and national development issues was. (Balázs, 2020) Without preuniversity, a higher level of education, such as a bachelor's and further master's degree, cannot be reached.

Education of Future Generations' Values

Within the Web of Science Core Collection, we reflected on 153 studies that resulted from the research with the keyword "sustainability values." As we already mentioned, we used this bibliometric data to help us establish the correlation among topics and concepts presented in correlation with the values of sustainability. The counting method was full; items were grouped in five clusters with a clustering resolution of one and a minimum cluster size of one. Out of 1507 terms, forty-seven met the threshold five, and at the default choice of 60% most relevant terms, only twenty-eight items remained; among them, only seventeen were correlated.

Figure 1. Sustainability values within the literature review
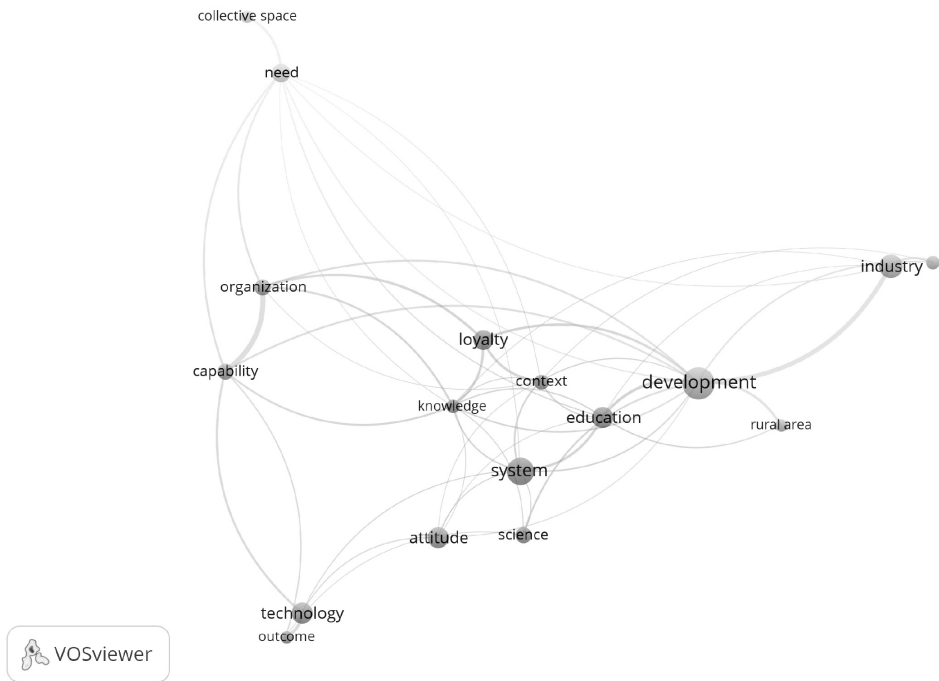
Source: Author based on the data from Web of Science Core Collection.

The bibliometric data helped us reveal the subjects to which we should pay more attention in the Romanian preuniversity education system. We used the categories with at least two registered articles in the research. The selected subjects from the curricula were correlated to the Web of Science Categories, so selection criteria were established. The intersection of concepts between categories and subjects was established based on their general description.

Table 1. Preuniversity disciplines correlated with the Web of Science Categories

Web of Science categories	Number of them	Related discipline in the Romanian preuniversity curricula
Green Sustainable Science Technology	54	Sciences
Environmental Sciences	51	
Environmental Studies	44	
Management	22	Project management
Business	18	Entrepreneurial education
Engineering Environmental	10	–
Education/Educational Research	9	–
Hospitality Leisure Sport Tourism	9	–
Regional Urban Planning	7	European Union Institutions
Development Studies	5	Education for Development
Engineering Civil	5	–
Engineering Industrial	4	–
Ethics	4	Philosophy
Multidisciplinary Sciences	4	–
Public Administration	4	Education for Democracy
Social Sciences Interdisciplinary	4	–
Water Resources	4	–
Business Finance	3	–
Communication	3	–
Economics	3	Economics
Food Science Technology	3	Education for Health
Agriculture Multidisciplinary	2	–
Biodiversity Conservation	2	Biology
Ecology	2	–
Energy Fuels	2	–
Engineering Chemical	2	–
Engineering Manufacturing	2	–
Engineering Multidisciplinary	2	–
Construction Building Technology	2	–
Geography	2	Geography

Source: Author.

The Romanian preuniversity education focuses on developing and diversifying critical skills and forming specific skills depending on the field, profile, specialization, or qualification. It includes the following branches and profiles:
– theoretical field (humanist and real profiles).
– technological chain (technical profiles, services, natural resources, and environmental protection).
– vocational sector (military, theological, sports, artistic, and pedagogical profiles).

These fields of study are intended to help students choose a career according to their affinities. In our quest to find out why Romanian scores so low in democracy and sustainability, we considered it necessary to look at the preuniversity disciplines. After we selected the disciplines based on the Web of Science categories of the bibliometric data on the "sustainability values," we managed to search in the curriculum of each one of them for the items determined because of VOS Viewer analysis. The research was done on the Romanian education framework, plans, and school programs (2023), all available only in Romanian. This meant that we had to translate the terms from English to Romanian to find them in the syllabus. Among the fields, profiles, and specializations, we wanted to determine which subjects/disciplines will educate the future generation about green development and co-democratic society.

The Romanian preuniversity system within the curriculum areas includes counseling and guidance, language and communication, mathematics, and natural sciences, human and society, informatics-technologies, and others that are at the school management's decision. This last curriculum segment demonstrates the capacity of the school governance to adapt to the new democratic and sustainable requirements. To test the research hypothesis, we studied all the disciplines that were supposed to raise inner values in young students by gaining competencies for a better and more sustainable democratic future.

Table 2. Sustainability values within the disciplines of the preuniversity system in Romania

Values	Mandatory Subjects (1)	Dependent subjects on the school management (0.5)	Attributed value
Attitude	– Philosophy	– Education for de- mocracy – EU institutions	2.0
Capability	–	– Education for health – Education for de mocracy	1.0
Collective/ Community	– EU institutions – Entrepreneurial education	– Education for health – Education for democracy – Project management	3.5
Development	– Sciences – Economics – Geography – Entrepreneurial education	– Education for development – Education for health – Project management	5.5
Environment	– Biology – Sciences – Entrepreneurial education	– Education for development – EU institutions	4.0
Loyalty	–	–	0.0
Organization	– Biology – Geography – Entrepreneurial education	– Education for development – Education for health – Education for democracy – Project management	5.0
Outcome	– Biology – Economics – Geography	– Education for health	3.5
System	– Biology – Sciences – Geography	– Education for development – Education for health – EU institutions – Project management	5.0
Technology	– Biology – Sciences – Geography	– Education for health	3.5

Source: Author

A value was given for each discipline in which an item was identified: 1 for mandatory discipline and 0.5 for elective disciplines. The sum of them is the level of value in the path to reach Romania's future co-creation and sustainable development. As revealed in Table 2, the most common use of the items as sustainable values is within the elective disciplines, which means only some students have access to them, which directly depends on the high school management.

The correlation of preuniversity disciplines with environmental and sustainability concerns was one of the leading research paths, and within a few mandatory subjects' references in competencies were made, such as Sciences (XI grade), Geography (IX, X, XI grades), Biology (XII grade).

In other disciplines dependent on the school management decision, detailed competencies on democracy, civic engagement, and sustainability were found Education for Democracy, repetition, already mentioned. Education for Development, and Entrepreneurial Education. Moreover, no references were discovered in one discipline within which we were expected to find references to sustainability and environmental impact – Project Management. As a result of the entire research path, we hypothesized that the low participation of citizens in this process of development of co-creation and sustainability is the consequence of the low level of values, more precisely, sustainability values.

Conclusion

By exploring the disciplines that contribute to the democratic values frame, we managed to find an answer to the lack of involvement of Romanian citizens as active actors in the democratic system. The study emphasized the importance of their participation in manifesting democratic power within the state and at the European Union level through the lenses of co-creation. We questioned whether the education system effectively prepares the future generation to be responsible in the future co-democracy. The Eurobarometer surveys helped us to have a better comparative view of Romania within the context of the European Union. Sustainability was the core concept through which the pre-university education system was analyzed. We can easily conclude that the role of education is increasing, especially the pre-university one, because of the high drop-out rate in Romania (for 2022, it was 15.6%, 6% higher than the European average), and democratic and sustainable values need to be better promoted among young students. Here, we do not refer to the disciplines that are part of the school management decisions but the core ones, which must not have only general ideas on the environment, society, and the world.

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How can we halve food waste by 2030 in a consumerist world?*
The crucial role of civil society in keeping the public attention on the green agenda

Nicoleta Nicolae-Ioana

Current debates and Policy evolutions in the field

Food Waste is a recent concern for world leaders and scholars, although it has existed for decades and is causing pollution and other side effects. The issue of food waste (FW) effects on the environment has been on international forums' agenda since 1979 along with the World Climate Conference, which called nations "to halt preventable environmental damage", and afterward with the creation of the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change in 1988 (Smith 2020: 41). However, the awareness of FW as a global phenomenon came much later. After more than 30 years, in 2011, a few concrete initiatives emerged: "Save Food", which advanced the subject of global food losses onto the political and economic agenda in Germany and the Food and Agriculture Organization's (FAO) Communication informing that around 1/3 of the world's food was lost or wasted every year. Two years later, FAO launched the first study on FW's environmental impact. Following this study, the topic of food waste is gaining global attention. In September 2015, the United Nations (UN) General Assembly adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development with 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets to mitigate the current economic, social and environmental challenges, and therefore food loss and waste. All world leaders have been committed to achieving the targets of this "ambitious vision for sustainable development." In this context, the European Union (EU) launched in 2020 the Circular Economy's Action Plan and the Farm to Fork Strategy as an essential part of the well-known European Green Deal (The European Commission 2024).

Food waste is included in SDG 12[1] – Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns and is related to SDG 2 – Zero Hunger (UN 2015). Empirical data reveals that, in 2022, 1.05 billion tonnes of food were wasted in households, food service, and retail, compared to 931 million tonnes in 2019 (Food Waste Index Report UNEP 2024: 46), causing 8% to 10% of global emissions GHG (Food Waste Index Report UNEP 2021: 20). Households produce over 60% (i.e. 631 million tonnes), food service 28% and retail 12%. According to the Food Waste Index 2024, released at the end of March 2024 by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), this amounts to 132 kilograms of FW per capita per year, compared to 121 kilograms per capita per year in 2019. Related to these data, FAO (2023: 7–8) estimates that in 2022, up to 783 million people worldwide faced hunger. On the other hand, the World Bank estimated in 2020 that the food wasted globally is worth more than US$1 trillion (Food Waste Index Report UNEP 2024: 2).

At the EU level, data indicate that in 2021, there were more than 58 million tonnes of fresh mass food waste, from which 54% of the total FW (i.e. 31 million tonnes) were produced by households, with a 132 billion euro market value calculated for the underlying asset (The European Commission 2023: 42; Eurostat 2023).

As a member of the EU, Romania is aligned and committed to the European Union's green policies regarding FW[2] and started this process by preparing the accession to the EU (SFWR 2021: 6). With "low confidence" reported data, Romania produced 2022 over 1.32 million tonnes in households, representing sixty-seven kilograms of FW per inhabitant per year, but no data regarding food services and retail (Food Waste Index Report UNEP 2024: 166). Considering the purpose of public policies and active Environmental Non-Governmental Organizations (ENGOs) but also the approaches and challenges regarding environmental and sustainable development issues, this article hypothesizes that *a robust civil society influences the adoption of efficacious and improved public policies regarding FW and contributes to maintaining green topics on the public agenda.* This paper aims to identify the factors that explain civil society's ability to influence public policies on FW and keep green topics on the governmental agenda. In this sense, I have carried out a literature review to identify the current situation and the levers available to Romanian civil society and data analysis. Data were gathered via eleven semi-structured in-depth interviews with representatives of central public authorities, HoReCa, civil society, and Romanian consumers conducted in the spring of 2022.

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1 Sustainable Development Goal 12 of the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* includes a target 12.3, which provides: "halving food waste per capita at the retail and consumer level and reducing food losses during production and supply chains by the end of this decade" (UN 2015).

2 The Romanian authorities claim that they are concerned about the FW problem. Therefore, Romania adopted the National Action Plan on Combating Food Waste in 2014, the Law No. 217 on reducing food waste, the so-called "Anti-Food Waste Law", in 2016, the Sustainable Development Strategy 2030 in 2018, and modified the Anti-Food Waste Law in 2024. Few national campaigns, debates and conferences were initiated and conducted in partnership with academic and Civil Society Organizations.

The state of Civil Society

Scholars highlight that, nowadays, civil society is in the attention of democratic governments, holding a pivotal role in maintaining the health of democracies, fulfilling international goals regarding the management of environmental problems, and achieving the ones related to sustainable development[3]. On the other hand, scholars consider the growing involvement of civil society in policymaking over the past few decades to be one of the most significant trends (Wuthnow 2004; Pirvulescu 2016; Anheier 2017). In addition, scholars consider that civil society is one of the most important stakeholders (Bryson et al. 2010; Caniato et al. 2014; Miles 2015; Morone–Imbert 2020; Archip et al. 2023).

Civil society is a polysemantic concept with "variable geometry," depending on the specific context in which it is used, on the era and society, and the lexical or ideological evolution, being in a "continuous redefinition" (Pirvulescu 2016: 22). For Dinham (2009: 50), civil society is "understood as that intermediate realm somewhere between the nation-state and the individual". The most popular definition is that of civil society as a collection of organizations functioning as intermediaries between the government, the family (e.g. individuals, households), and the economic production/the market (Kopecký–Mudde 2003: 5).

Moreover, Chandhoke (2007: 607) underlines that civil society was rediscovered and given prominence in political practices, becoming nowadays an "answer to the malaise of the contemporary world". Afterward, in the 1990s, civil society became "a mantra for everyone from presidents to political scientists", and civil society became a "key element of the post-cold-war zeitgeist" (Carothers 2000: 19). Furthermore, Fukuyama (1995: 4–12) underlines that "liberal political and economic institutions depend upon a healthy and dynamic civil society for their vitality", explaining the crucial role of social capital and the trust level within society.

Furthermore, Anheier (2017: 4–5) considers that civil society is part of the New Public Management model, defined as "an arena of self-organization of citizens and established interests seeking voice and influence" and facing inevitable weaknesses such as *resource inadequacy*, *paternalism*, *free-riders*, and *particularism.*

Moreover, Dinham underlines that "the public policy matrix" is closely related to the members of civil society who "inform and influence it" (2009: 50). In this light, Anheier invokes that the relationship between Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and the state is "complex and multifaceted" (2017: 6). Thus, governments see differently the roles that civil society can play in the future: 1) primarily as service providers and disregard their advocacy capabilities: 2) sources of new ideas and innovations; and 3) organizations that interfere with the policy-making process, attempting to exert influence or even dictate governmental agendas (Anheier 2017: 6).

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3 Fukuyama 1995; Carothers 2000; Gemmill and Bamidele-Izu 2002; Wuthnow 2004; Smismans 2006; Chandhoke 2007; Dinham 2009; Bryson et al. 2010; Böhmelt 2013; Dodge 2014; Caniato et al. 2014; Miles 2015; Anheier 2017; Morone and Imbert 2020; Archip et al. 2023; Bernauer 2023.

In a highly complex world, civil society faces numerous challenges and obstacles. In this regard, Gemmill and Bamidele-Izu (2002: 88) point out that also the "funding matters", aiming at the funding co-dependency, which is unlikely to change but does raise some questions regarding the independence of NGOs research and analysis, calling for transparency and accountability. Furthermore, Heemeryck (2018: 257) states that "financially, the NGOs are fully dependent on their funders". In addition, Nastase and colleagues (2019: 852–853) argue that the lack of civic culture is associated with both the dearth or fragility of independent CSOs[4] and the non-participatory method of local administration.

Civil Society and the Green agenda

Over the past years, there has been a noticeable shift in the public and academic spheres towards environmental issues. This shift can be traced back to the intensified efforts of the UN and the EU in combating climate change and other environmental problems since 2015, and to the increased involvement of the political sphere. Smismans (2006: 174) argues that environmental policy, which initially emerged due to public pressure and environmental movements, has now expanded to encompass a wide range of issues, including tourism, agriculture, and transportation, as well as new areas like climate change.

In this light, scholars prefer to approach civil society involvement in global environmental governance (Gemmill–Bamidele-Izu 2002; Robert et al. 2004; Bernauer 2023), but they also approach the national and local dimensions (O'Brien 2009; Böhmelt 2013). Gemmill–Bamidele-Izu (2002: 77–78) identify five key roles of civil society regarding global environmental governance, which I also consider valid for domestic activities: a) information collection and dissemination; b) policy development consultation; c) policy implementation; d) assessment and monitoring; and e) advocacy for environmental justice.

Considering the levers used by civil society to maintain or change the green agenda, Dodge (2014: 161) explains that CSOs are using storylines to influence the dynamics of the deliberative process and to promote their perspectives on environmental issues and the formulation of public policy, regardless of existing barriers or challenges. The scholar underlines that civil society specifically uses storylines to a) "set the agenda for environmental hazards; b) create the structure of public discourse by altering the rules; c) create the content of public discourse by forming meanings around environmental policy; and d) couple/align forums, arenas, and courts throughout the system (Dodge 2014: 161).

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4 It is essential to distinguish between COSs and NGOs, as Non-Governmental Organisations is the term used for associations and foundations, which are considered a fundamental expression of civil society, and Civil Society Organizations, include a broad range of representation associations (Epure et al. 2001: 1–2).

In his turn, O'Brien (2009: 145–146) argues that the status of ENGOs has evolved, moving towards professionalism and collaborative efforts with administrative establishments. This shift signifies a departure from non-conventional social actions. The scholar further emphasizes that NGOs recognize the importance of increasing public involvement in shaping government actions and note that believing in the government's ability to provide solutions can hinder change in this area In addition, Smismans (2006: 174–202) points out that, at the EU level, civil society players have "a crucial role in providing the Commission with information, expertise and strategies" and validation. The author concludes that the ENGOs are acting nowadays as "watchdogs" for how EU policies are implemented at the national level and as monitoring agencies in general (Smismans 2006: 205).

On the other hand, moving towards the domestic dimension, Böhmelt (2013: 702) explains that if governments are unable to gather data regarding climate change, they can turn to ENGOs, who invest significant resources in policy research and provide data, analysis, and knowledge. The scholar highlights that, given the history of civil society advocacy through participation in UNFCCC negotiation delegations, ENGOs will not be able to influence or alter state policy regarding climate change, compared to the corporate organizations' lobbying success (Böhmelt 2013: 710). Moreover, O'Brien (2009: 153) adds that ENGO participation is tolerated rather than being welcomed.

Furthermore, related to nations' international cooperative behavior, Robert, and colleagues (2004:39) invoke the importance of the number of ENGOs registered in a state as one of the most significant indicators. The scholars emphasize that "the number of [E]NGOs in a nation appears virtually synonymous with its likelihood to participate in environmental treaties" (Robert et al. 2004: 39). Extrapolating from this argument, one might consider that the number of ENGOs might be a crucial indicator for efficient environmental public policies and maintaining the green agenda at public and governmental attention.[5]

Therefore, the development and evolution of a solid and vigilant civil society are essential for influencing the adoption of efficacious and improved public policies regarding FW. It also contributes to maintaining green topics on the public agenda to achieve the ambitious goals set by the international community, which aim at the well-being of people and the Planet, as well as future generations.

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5 In 2024, according to the Ministry of Justice, the Romanian NGO National Register accounts for 116.419 associations and 20.796 foundations without available data regarding the total number of ENGOs. As Albu–Zakota underline, the main issue with this record is that, while it lists the registered organisations, it is unknown how many of them are active (2022: 216). An EBRD report estimated in 2020 that only half of registered Romanian CSOs are active (EBRD 2020: 21).

The state of Civil Society in Romania

The Communist regime in Romania played an essential role in shaping the development of civil society. It hindered the establishment of inclusive and participatory modes of governance by replacing grassroots civil society organizations with top-down, centralized structures for control (Kluvánková-Oravská et al. 2009; Stringer—Paavola 2013). Therefore, during the Romanian communist dictatorship, "civil society was almost non-existent and civic culture completely atrophied" (Albu—Zakota 2022: 207). The NGO sector, however, emerged swiftly following the fall of the Ceausescu regime in 1989, advocating for the preservation of the environment, cultural heritage, and democratic ideals (Parau 2009: 121). Despite the challenges it faced, such as the Romanians' distrust of formal organizations and a preference for private/informal networking, the sector stabilized over time[6] with the passage of the 2000 Government Ordinance on Associations and Foundations and other dedicated laws, and the growth of a more qualified labor force (O'Brien 2009: 150).

Furthermore, Parau (2009: 137) argues that, in Romania's case, the empowerment of NGOs resulted from the Executive's overriding desire for EU membership and its acceptance into the global community, giving rise to an advocacy network that has been trying to impede it. In this context, Romanian civil society made "a valuable contribution,[7] which paved the way for future social dialogue, collaboration, and cooperation, specifically for a European democracy" (Ciot 2023: 240). In addition, Heemeryck (2018: 257) considers that the most influential NGOs in Romania are active in democratization and the development of civil society, most of them becoming solid due to the significant involvement of US and European organizations.

On the other hand, Margarit (2018: 219) underlines that Romania's public sphere had one of the most turbulent and persistent periods of popular mobilization and civil unrest in its recent post-communist history between 2013 and 2015, beginning with the anti-fracking campaign and the protests against mining exploitation in Rosia Montana and culminating in the Colectiv Revolution. "In a country where the communist past left deep scars, the social movements of the past (…) years could

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6 Nevertheless, after a decade, Romanian NGOs needed more financial and human resources in most areas, including internal organisation management and fundraising. Few were involved at the regional, national, or international levels; most of them worked on small-scale projects that provided social services (e.g. child protection or health care), or they educated the public about new topics like environmentalism, human rights for minorities, the rule of law, and government accountability (Epure et al. 2001: 8-33). Moreover, closer to the accession moment, Romania had only a few influential NGOs, while the rest of civil society remained "generally weak and etiolated, partly due to overdependence on donor funds" (Nicholson of Winterbourne 2006: 64, cited by Parau 2009: 121).

7 Ciot (2023: 237) explains that Romanian civil society made a substantial contribution to 11 negotiating chapters: the four freedoms of movement; competition policy; agriculture; transport policy; taxation; social policy and labour force employment; energy; education, professional training, and youth; regional policy; environment protection; and justice and home affairs.

not pass unnoticed. Moreover, these events marked the rise of an authentic civil society, willing to prove its opposition toward the political actors and decisions and, simultaneously, to demand them to act accountably and legitimately," argues the scholar (Margarit 2018: 219). On the other hand, Albu–Zakota (2022: 213) recall that "the Romanian civil society is a construction without a solid foundation" considering the early age of the democracy. The authors explain that it is essential for CSOs to be "strong, independent of political and commercial factors, and able to constantly monitor the activity of the authorities", to carry out the watchdog function (Albu–Zakota 2022: 213).

The evolution of the Romanian ENGOs

Romania's environmental preoccupations began to take shape with a conservation attitude emerging spontaneously after the fall of Communism in 1990, despite the initial governmental indifference to the environment and the development of Romanian ENGOs[8] (Stringer–Paavola 2013: 141). In this light, Stringer–Paavola (2013: 141) highlight that the interest of the government and the nation's scientific community in environmental policies increased with the EU accession, which required and expected the Romanian authorities to address ecological issues, such as biodiversity conservation and environmental degradation. With the advent of Europeanization, the Romanian environmental sector, though weaker, presented more opportunities for social players, albeit with limited capacity to utilize them (O'Brien 2009: 150–153). In contrast to Hungary and Poland, Romania was considered an "environmental laggard," and therefore, Europeanization[9] had a profound influence on Romanian environmental action (Börzel–Buzogány 2010: 718). Stringer–Paavola (2013: 144) also underline that Romania's transition towards more inclusive environmental governance methods has been significantly bolstered by its EU membership, but "the lack of civil society remains a barrier to the more widespread internalization of conservation".

In addition, Jiglau (2016: 221) invokes that the collaborative efforts of Romanian ENGOs with European associations or networks of associations, their participation in international conferences and events, and their experience exchanges with other NGOs have played a pivotal role in the professionalization of environmental organizations. Furthermore, O'Brien (2009: 155) underlines that, in Romania, environmental issues are still low on the political agenda, and participation is seen

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8 These ENGOs represented only 5% of the total number of NGOs, and most of them were local or regional players with limited influence or awareness on a national scale (Stringer–Paavola 2013: 141).

9 The scholars pointed out that the ENGOs in CEE nations like Poland, Hungary, and Romania have grown in professionalism and strength due to the Europeanization of environmental policy. However, state-civil society interaction has remained relatively poor (Börzel–Buzogány 2010: 717–728).

more as a duty than a necessity.[10] The author concludes that, although Romanian ENGOs participate in decisions that are peripheral to themselves, and environmental issues continue to be side-lined in favor of economic development, there are indications that they are starting to take a more active part in influencing policy and decision-making processes (O'Brien 2009: 155). Nevertheless, following the "two big scandals" that sparked environmental protests and made authorities aware of the influence of NGOs – the Dracula Land in Sighisoara in 2001 (an investment projects project with a significant impact on the environment) and the Rosia Montana mining operation in 2002,[11] Romania's environmental status changed (O'Brien 2009: 152).

Hitherto, the most famous example of an environmental social movement in Romania was the one caused by the Rosia Montana mining project that generated the Salvati Rosia Montana (SRM) movement,[12] also known as "the Romanian Autumn." Margarit (2018: 220) considers that this movement is the most complex of all the Romanian protests because of demonstrated cooperation on local, national, and international levels, serving as the impetus for future Romanian civic movements and undoubtedly had an impact on how they developed and were implemented. The non-heterogeneous environmental mobilization brought together residents of Rosia Montana and its environs, NGOs[13] operating locally,

10 O'Brien observes that this result from the upkeep of closed political institutions and processes derived from the legacy of non-democratic governance. According to the scholar, ENGOs are still perceived as agitators who impose limitations on government actions rather than partners whose voices validate issues that should be discussed and resolved (O'Brien 2009: 155).

11 Related to these two cases Parau (2009: 136–137) points out that the Nastase government was less willing to compromise over its initiated project Dracula Park, considering that the negotiation occurred at the beginning of the EU pre-accession process, compared to Rosia Montana, which took place at the end of the process and saw more willingness to compromise. The author recalls that, initially, the Nastase Executive was reluctant to constrain itself in the case of Dracula Park, a project they had initiated, but constrained itself much more quickly in Rosia Montana, as it was not 'their' project and offered uncertain benefits (Parau 2009: 136–137).

12 The SRM movement is the most significant environmental movement in post-communist Romania, which opposed in 2002 the most prominent open pit in Europe, a cyanide-leaching gold and silver extraction project proposed by Rosia Montana Gold Corporation (RMGC), a subsidiary of a Canadian multinational mining company Gabriel Resources Ltd. (Branea 2015; Heemeryck 2018). Branea (2015: 266) explains that the case developed into Romania's most significant and intricate environmental dispute, with a large cross-border and international component. Moreover, the case was closed earlier in March this year, after Canada's Gabriel Resources, which sought compensation after its plan to construct Europe's largest open-pit gold mine in the western Romanian town of Rosia Montana failed, lost an arbitrage trial against Romania carried out by the International Court of Arbitration of the International Centre for Settlement of Investment Disputes (Reuters 2024).

13 The SRM movement had at its core a small non-governmental organization organized by locals against the mining project, Alburnus Maior, helped by an activist, and only a few NGOs which worked closely: Greenpeace Romania, ReGeneration, the Independent Centre for the Development of Environmental Resources, Rosia Montana Cultural Foundation, Terra Millennium III, and Architecture. Restoration. Archeology Association (Branea 2015: 268). The scholar reveals that the civic movement was possible only with the involvement of a Swiss-French environmental activist, who assisted Alburnus Maior's local organization in formulating a plan of action that

nationally, and internationally, coalitions of NGOs, unofficial organizations, trade unions, professional associations, universities, and other academic bodies, student organizations, churches, sports fans, artists, public intellectuals, and private citizens (Branea 2015: 266).

Regarding the FW agenda, Archip and colleagues (2023: 6) included civil society as a critical sector involved in food waste reduction, along with public administration, food business, and consumers, which have a considerable influence on the formulation and application of plans and directives. The scholars conclude that there are still significant issues to tackle when approaching waste management in Romania, including *path dependency*, *fragmented and ineffective decision-making*, and the lack of proper communication and engagement between various stakeholders (Archip et al. 2023: 16).

Besides all this, in Romania, food waste is not seen nowadays as a subject with major environmental consequences, such as mining and deforesting projects, which is why only a few NGOs manage it. At the governmental level, the FW dimension is regulated in Romania by the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD), which has a limited partnership with food waste NGOs.

Qualitative research on Food Waste and Civil Society implications

In 2022, I researched food waste management at the household level. I gathered qualitative data via eleven semi-structured in-depth interviews with representatives of central public authorities, HoReCa, civil society, and Romanian consumers. From the beginning, civil society was considered one of the stakeholders responsible for managing FW in Romania, second after the state.

When I started the qualitative research process in February 2022, I established a list of stakeholders, as potential interviewees, comprising institutions of the central public administration in Romania, such as the MARD, the Department of Sustainable Development of the Romanian Government or the Romanian Parliament, NGOs running programs to combat FW, the Federation of Food Banks in Romania, social shops, retailers, chefs and restaurants that promote the concept of zero food waste, young people who develop applications to combat FW and also consumers. Because the process of reaching all the representatives of the stakeholders taken into account was difficult and time-consuming, although I reached some contact data, primarily such as e-mail addresses or profiles on online services (e.g. LinkedIn, social media), the list was permanently changing.

Therefore, at the end of the allocated period for collecting qualitative data, February-June 2022, I conducted eleven in-depth interviews with important actors

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mostly involved contesting any papers released by government agencies at Gabriel Resources' request (Branea 2015: 267). Moreover, Branea points out that the SRM movement was also instrumental in pressuring the European Parliament to adopt a resolution urging the European Commission to ban cyanide gold mining across the continent (2015: 286).

within the FW process. One of the missing stakeholders was the retailers, who were reticent about having an interview or avoided answering the e-mails or the messages. Ten interviewees were activating in Bucharest, and one in the Romanian city of Sfantu Gheorghe, from Covasna County. Moreover, ten interviewees were Romanians, and one was an Austrian established in Romania. The interviews were held in three diverse ways as follows: five using Google Meet online meetings, five on the phone, and one using e-mail. I prepared a set of fourteen questions, which were not applied entirely to all the interviewees, and during the discussions, there were some other supplementary ones. One of the fourteen questions addressed, the 10th, was related to the responsibility for tackling FW. It was formulated as follows: "Who has the responsibility to take action to combat food waste: the state, the business community, civil society, or citizens? Argue, please!" The interviews were held between May 13 and June 07, 2022.

Discussion and findings

The interviews revealed that civil society as a soft power could influence Romanian public policies regarding FW and has a crucial role in covering the key areas of education, communication, awareness, and changing consumer behavior. Moreover, the data underline that, after the central authorities, civil society is the next stakeholder that has the responsibility for taking action to reduce FW. Regarding the responsibility to act on reducing FW, five interviewees consider that *everybody/all the stakeholders* have such responsibility. Moreover, eight of the participants in the research identified the *state* as being responsible, and seven interviewees pointed out the *civil society.* Furthermore, six of the respondents opted for the *business* and for the *citizens*. In addition, the interviewees identified other responsible stakeholders such as the *mass media*, the *Church* with all its cults, and also the *influencers* and *food bloggers.* In addition, the research, underlines that ENGOs should cover *education, communication, awareness, and changing consumer behavior* by "implementing as many projects as possible by Chefs and NGOs", and "educating citizens from a financial perspective – *FW means money thrown in the trash bean*", and "social movements such as the one created by the *Eat Foundation*".

On the one hand, the data reveal that interviewees consider civil society more as a "doer" that acts rather than as a party that influences the policies and maintains the green agenda in public and governmental attention. On the other hand, the identification of civil society as a stakeholder responsible for taking action to combat FW also involves the action to influence public policies regarding reducing food waste, as it results from the broader discussions with the interviewees. Moreover, it should be noted that the Anti-Food Waste Law in Romania as a public policy was only possible with the contribution and influence of a few Romanian ENGOs,

as noted by one interviewee. Thus, the adoption of the first Anti-Food Waste Law is an excellent example of influencing the public policy regarding FW in Romania.

The initiator of the Anti-Food Waste Law, a young liberal deputy, explained, in the interview we had in May 2022, that the law was based on a broad consultation and improved at the initiative and argumentation of an NGO:

The first legislative initiative [on FW] was in 2013, and it took a long time because it involved a broad consultation. Romania was unprepared and did not have the institutions and NGOs ready. There had to be debate and preparation of the market and the actors involved. Then, when the law was in the plenary of the Chamber of Deputies, and it was on the final vote, an NGO appeared and told us that the law is very good, but, practically, through it, we were closing the possibility of social stores, of those who sell at low prices for the population with low income. Expressly, the law stipulated that goods approaching their expiration date should be donated 100% free of charge and should not be sold at a reduced price, precisely to avoid a black market. However, there were civil society representatives who said that this possibility exists in France, Denmark, Austria, and Germany. It also exists in Romania through two stores, one in Bucharest and another in Sibiu, that sell at a reduced price on a list of low-income people. So I had to close and stop the law that was on the final vote and come back after a year or so of debate to find an appropriate form that would also allow this form of social economy, these social stores, to develop in Romania and exist. (The Anti-Food Waste Law initiator interview May 26, 2022)

Furthermore, as one of the young people who developed applications to combat FW in Romania stated in her interview, civil society actions and collaborations bring hope for changing the food waste situation:

Associations and NGOs have started to move a lot in Romania. I am delighted that this mentality of - "This is not done here, and no one shows interest" or "The authorities do not show interest here" has changed. Nowadays, there are all kinds of civic workshops and small groups that have started to move a lot, and some concentrated hubs that at a given moment meet and say: "Let us collaborate." We are all optimistic that change will come from there and opportunities will open up. (BonApp Developer interview May 27, 2022)

The Romanian FW public policies

One could say that the public policies on FW in Romania could be easily reduced to the Anti-Food Waste Law No. 217 adopted in 2016, and entered into force after two years of blockade and a substantial change in the provisions, and another amending and supplementing Low promulgated in March 2024. It is noteworthy that the Anti-Food Waste Law in Romania, before its drafting, was not a subject of genuine public interest or debate. However, a small segment of Romanian civil society, particularly the non-governmental sector through organizations like SOMARO

– Social Store, More Green, Workshops without Borders, Carousel, Resource Centre for Public Participation, Terra Millennium III, Food Bank, and Romanian Food Consumers Association *Optimum Cibum*, played a pivotal role in formulating this law (Gheorghica 2019).

Moreover, at the initiative of the MoreGreen Association and the Resource Centre for Public Participation, 34 other ENGOs asked the Romanian parliamentarians to adopt the law and to allow them to participate in the plenary session of the Chamber of Deputies dedicated to this vote on October 18, 2016 (Horeca Romania 2016; Green Report 2016). In that context, the Romanian civil society representatives highlighted in online statements that the most significant initiatives[14] undertaken in Romania to address FW in a direct/practical way belong to the private sector, especially the non-profit and non-governmental sectors (Gheorghica 2019).

Conclusions

Food Waste is a recent concern for world leaders and scholars, although it has existed for decades and is causing pollution and other side effects, gaining global attention since 2013. The United Nations' target for halving FW and the related actions required by *the 2030 Agenda* should be achieved in just six years, and there is a lot to be done. Scholars consider civil society an essential stakeholder in public environmental policies, the so-called *green agenda*, although it faces many challenges, limitations, and blockages.

In recent years, both the public and academic spheres seem to pay much more attention to environmental issues, starting, on one hand, with the intensification of actions regarding combating climate change and other environmental problems by the UN and the EU since 2015 and, on the other hand, through a more visible involvement of the political sphere. Taking into account academic writing, the consumption-based economic model, and the governmental approaches, the development and evolution of a solid and vigilant civil society, considered as part of the New Public Management model (Anheier 2017: 4–5), is not just essential but powerful in influencing the achievement of sustainable development goals.

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14 Among the notable initiatives of Romanian ENGOs in addressing FW are: the "Bio & Co project" – a food solidarity program organised by the Workshops without Borders Association; the "Romania against Food Waste" project by the MoreGreen Association, in partnership with www. foodwaste.ch and the Resource Centre for Public Participation; the "Too good to be wasted" educational project for students; and the "Romanian values food" project by Terra Millennium III. These initiatives, along with the efforts of social NGOs like SOMARO – Social Store and the network of food banks in Romania, have significantly contributed to the fight against FW.

Another known project is the launching of the first Food Bank at the initiative of a German international discount retailer (i.e. Lidl) and Junior Chamber International (JCI). The first Food Bank opened its doors in Cluj in 2016, and the second opened in Bucharest in 2018 (Cantaragiu 2019: 511). Another JCI project with Lidl's support is "Food Waste Combat", launched in 2021 (Gheorghica 2019).

At the EU accession moment, Romania was seen as an "environmental laggard" (Börzel–Buzogány 2010: 718), and scholars pointed out, besides the negative aspects related to funding, state authorities' ignorance and societal challenges, the significant influence of Europeanization, and progresses registered after the EU membership (O'Brien 2009; Parau 2009; Börzel–Buzogány 2010; Stringer and Paavola 2013; Jiglau 2016; Heemeryck 2018). Some might consider that Romania is still a "laggard" on some specific issues, and food waste seems to be among them.

This paper aimed to identify the factors that explain *Romanian civil society's ability to influence public policies on FW and keep these green topics on the governmental agenda.* In this sense, I have conducted a literature review to identify the current situation and the levers available to Romanian civil society and data analysis. Thus, I sought to map the situation of civil society in Romania in the context of the worldwide green agenda launched in 2015, with attention to the environment and focusing on the FW area. As far as I know, there is a limited literature regarding the subject of environmental civil society in Romania (O'Brien 2009; Parau 2009; Börzel–Buzogány 2010; Stringer–Paavola 2013; Branea 2015; Jiglau 2016; Margarit 2018). It is worth mentioning that their focus is on the social movement Salvati Rosia Montana and the prevention of the the Dracula Park deforestation project in the area of Sighisoara (O'Brien 2009; Parau 2009; Branea 2015; Jiglau 2016; Heemeryck 2018; Margarit 2018), other environmental issues or green public policies than food waste. I have yet to identify any academic article or book dedicated to FW and civil society's implications in this field in Romania.

Therefore, my analysis brings attention to this topic, which does not seem to be a national priority nor to be framed in emergencies or phenomena with devastating environmental consequences, provides input, and opens the opportunity for further, more comprehensive analysis or research on this topic.

My qualitative research conducted in the spring of 2022, revealed that civil society as a soft power can influence Romanian public policies regarding FW and has a crucial role in covering the key areas of education, communication, awareness, and changing consumer behaviour. Furthermore, more than half of the interviewees underlined that, after the state, civil society is the next stakeholder responsible for taking action to reduce FW.

On the one hand, the data reveal that interviewees consider civil society more as a "doer" that acts rather than as a party that influences the policies and maintains the green agenda on the public and governmental attention. On the other hand, the identification of civil society as a stakeholder responsible for taking action to combat FW also involves the action to influence public policies regarding reducing food waste, as it results from the broader discussions with the interviewees. Thus, it should be noted that the Anti-Food Waste Law in Romania as a public policy was only possible with the contribution and influence of a few Romanian ENGOs, as noted by one interviewee.

The hypothesis I have formulated in this article, that *a robust civil society influences the adoption of efficacious and improved public policies regarding* FW and contributes to maintaining green topics on the public agenda, was confirmed by the vast majority of scholars.[15] The second part of my hypothesis is also confirmed by Anheier's (2017: 6) consideration that the CSOs interfering with the policy-making process are attempting to exert influence or even dictate governmental agendas and by Dodge's (2014: 161) idea that civil society uses storylines to "set the agenda for environmental hazards". In addition, my research confirms the conclusions of Archip and colleagues (2023: 6), who included civil society as a critical sector involved in FW reduction, significantly influencing the formulation and application of plans and directives. Moreover, my findings contribute to several scholarly conclusions regarding the growing involvement of civil society in policy-making over the past few decades as one of the most significant trends (Wuthnow 2004; Pirvulescu 2016; Anheier 2017).

Nevertheless, my assumption can be considered refuted by Böhmelt (2013: 710), who concluded that ENGOs would not be able to influence or alter state policy regarding climate change (at the global level) compared to the corporate organisations' lobbying success. However, one might say that Böhmelt's outcome is invalidated by the Romanian Anti-Food Waste Law case, which demonstrated the power of civil society to influence public policymaking in an EU member state.

Recalling that, in Romania, environmental issues are low on the political agenda (O'Brien 2009: 155), the development and evolution of a strong and vigilant Romanian civil society is vital for the fulfilment of the ambitious goals set by the international community, which aim at the well-being of people, the Planet, and future generations. In this light, broader research is needed for analysing the number of active Romanian ENGOs in the food waste sector and for mapping their implication and outcomes in FW public policies as an essential topic on the international green agenda.

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15 Fukuyama 1995; Carothers 2000; Gemmill and Bamidele-Izu 2002; Wuthnow 2004; Smismans 2006; Chandhoke 2007; Dinham 2009; Bryson et al. 2010; Böhmelt 2013; Dodge 2014; Caniato et al. 2014; Miles 2015; Anheier 2017; Morone and Imbert 2020; Archip et al. 2023; Bernauer 2023.

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The influence of cultural dimensions on social enterprise[*] models: a comparative study between Italy and Romania

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Introduction

In recent years, the European Union has developed various Social Economy initiatives. However, there is no widespread and homogeneous diffusion among the member states (Monzón–Chaves 2017). This is because cultures and legal systems vary greatly. Social enterprises, composed of cooperatives or associations, are included in the definition of social economy. In recent years, some laws have allowed the creation of social enterprises with the legal form of corporations. These enterprises are required to pursue the general interest, adopt democratic management, and limit the distribution of profits (Borzaga–Salvatori 2024)

Numerous studies in the literature have investigated various phenomena related to social enterprises, such as social entrepreneurship (Dees 2012; Jaén et al., 2017; Pounder 2021) or social innovation (Defourny–Nyssens 2013; Shaw–De Bruin 2013; Vickers et al. 2017). However, there appears to be little interest in the cultural factors that influence them, even though they may provide a greater understanding of the phenomenon (Pounder 2021). Therefore, the topic of social enterprises is worth exploring further, especially considering that their existence is deeply rooted in specific social, economic, political, and cultural contexts (Defourny–Nyssens 2013; Hyanek, 2012). In the European context, the institutionalization of social enterprises has led to the promotion of new legal forms to better define their social purpose (Defourny–Nyssens 2008). This paper presents a comparative analysis of social enterprise models in Italy and Romania. The legal frameworks for social

enterprise operations in these two European countries were designed based on their specific cultural values, and economic, social, and historical evolutions. The countries were selected based on their cultural differences and varying levels of development, while still being subject to the same EU legislation on the social economy. The purpose of this paper is to investigate whether cultural dimensions can explain the diversity of social enterprise models found among different EU member countries.

Literature review

Several studies in the literature have investigated the cultural dimensions of social enterprises. However, these studies mainly focus on mission drift, which refers to the conflict between social and economic dimensions (Cornforth 2014; Esposito et al. 2023; Yaari et al. 2020). Other authors have explored the cultural dimension at the organizational level (Eti-Tofinga et al. 2017), as well as the potential of social enterprises to generate cultural change at the systemic level (Gonçalves et al. 2016). Social enterprises (SEs) are defined as hybrid organizations that integrate social purposes with economic activities. To be sustainable in the long term, it is necessary to demonstrate the ability to achieve social, environmental, and economic goals simultaneously (Gidron 2017; Yaari et al. 2021).

The European Commission's Social Business Initiative (SBI) provides the most comprehensive definition of 'social enterprise', structured along three dimensions (Borzaga et al. 2020). The first dimension is the entrepreneurial/economic dimension, where social enterprises (SEs) engage in stable economic activities and share characteristics with traditional enterprises. The second dimension is the social dimension. SEs aim to provide cultural, health, educational, and environmental services to communities or specific groups with social needs. Unlike traditional cooperatives, SEs prioritize the general interest. The third dimension refers to governance. SEs adopt ownership structures and governance models that involve stakeholders in designing solutions, limiting profit distribution to ensure the general interest is upheld. Various methods are employed to operationalize this constraint.

The types and configurations of SEs are diverse and context-dependent (Kerlin 2006; Cibor 2012). Research has demonstrated that region-specific factors can impact the conceptualization of social enterprise, affecting organizational form, legal structures, and the supporting environment (Kerlin 2009). One of the factors that vary by region is culture. The importance of cultural dimensions is emphasized in neo-institutionalist theory (Osborne 2010), which identifies culture as a key factor in explaining the behavior and strategies of all types of organizations, including nonprofits (Cornforth 2014; Meyer 2010; Senge 2013; Suddaby et al. 2010). Several scholars have analyzed the relationships between macro-level cultural variables and various phenomena related to social enterprises using Hofstede's (1980, 1991)

cultural dimensions (Harms–Groen 2017; Kedmenec–Strašek 2017; Nicholls–Cho 2006). Cultural dimensions are considered the most applicable to management studies (Pounder 2021).

This paper aims to contribute to this literature by focusing on cultural dimensions. According to Salamon et al. (2000) and Kerlin (2010), regional differences in social enterprises can be explained by the cultural dimensions of countries.

Methodology

To examine the features of social enterprises in Italy and Romania, we employ a descriptive analysis. A dataset was created based on the analysis of secondary data from the respective national registers: the Unique National Register of Third Sector (RUNTS) managed by the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy (March 2024 version) for Italy, and the Unique Register of Social Enterprises (RUIES) managed by the National Employment Agency of the Ministry of Labor and Social Solidarity (December 2023 version) for Romania. The legal forms category was used to analyze the datasets. Descriptive analysis was performed using Stata 16. The results were used to identify the dominant social enterprise model in the two countries. Defourny and Nyssens' model (2017) was selected as the theoretical reference. A concept-theoretic analysis was then conducted to investigate the consistency between Hofstede's cultural dimensions and the identified dominant social enterprise model.

Comparative analysis: social economy in Italy and Romania

The social economy in Italy has a longer tradition than in Romania. The first social enterprises in Italy began in the 1970s and have since experienced continuous development (Poledrini–Borzaga 2021). At the turn of the 21st century, Italy recognized pluralism and increased contributions from SEs. In contrast, due to communism, this process was slower in Romania and Eastern Europe. Only after the fall of the communist regime in 1989 did private initiatives, including nongovernmental organizations, become active and relevant to Romanian society and economy. However, communist politics and practices led to a general distrust of cooperative and nonprofit organizations. Since 2000, there has been a resurgence of social organizations. Most SEs in Romania were established in recent years, often with the help of resolute European or national funding. In Italy, the diffusion of SEs is a bottom-up process. Civil society recognizes the need to participate in collective welfare through business activities that do not prioritize profit. Conversely, in Romania, the process appears to be top-down, with public funding stimulating the emergence of this category of enterprises. This does not indicate a decreased interest in the common good among the community, but rather a lack of resources to initiate such initiatives without top-down support.

In Italy, the legislative framework is well-developed. The primary regulation dates to 1991 and centers on social cooperatives (Law no. 381/1991). Since 2015, several other initiatives have been introduced, including Law No. 208/2015 on benefit corporations and Law No. 106/2016, which regulates the third sector and social impact bonds. According to 117/2017, entities of the Third Sector are defined as private organizations established for non-profit purposes. This includes voluntary organizations, associations for social promotion, philanthropic entities, social enterprises (including social cooperatives), associative networks, mutual aid societies, recognized or unrecognized associations, and foundations. Organizations in the Third Sector are registered for civic, solidarity, and socially useful purposes. They perform one or more activities of general interest through voluntary action, free provision of money, goods, or services, mutual aid, or production or exchange of goods or services. The term 'social enterprise' refers to a regulatory qualification that can be applied to any private organization with legal subjectivity, including commercial companies. This qualification assumes that these organizations are primarily dedicated to conducting business activities of general interest according to an entrepreneurial criterion. Additionally, they do not pursue a profit-making purpose but rather civic, solidarity, and socially useful purposes. They adopt responsible and transparent management methods and encourage the involvement of all stakeholders in their activities, as stated in Legislative Decree No. 112/2017. Although the social economy has a strong tradition in Italy, the legislative framework does not provide a common regulation, resulting in the concept of the social economy being less recognized compared to other European countries (Dagnino, 2022). However, the sector, particularly the cooperative one, is solid and relevant to the Italian economy and society.

In Romania, social enterprises are regulated by two main laws. The first, Law No. 1/2005, regulates the organization and functioning of cooperatives. The second, Law No. 219/2015, is dedicated to the social economy and serves as the regulatory framework for social enterprises. Despite the legal context for operations, sector representatives complain about the need for more consistent support from the state (Lambru–Petrescu, 2017, 2019). As stated in the Law on Social Economy No. 219/2015, a social enterprise is "any legal entity governed by private law that carries out activities in the field of social economy and holds a social enterprise certificate". In Romania, the social enterprise certificate can be obtained by cooperatives, associations, foundations, credit cooperatives for employees or pensioners, agricultural companies, and other organizations that comply with the principles of organization and operation established by law. The certificate is awarded if the following criteria are met: acting for social purposes and/or in the general interest of the community, allocating at least 90 percent of the profits made to the corporate purpose and the statutory reserve, committing to transfer the remaining assets after liquidation to one or more social enterprises, and applying the principle of social equity to employees and directors, among whom there can be

no difference greater than a ratio of 1 to 8, guaranteeing fair salary levels. In addition, the Social Economy Law recognizes the insertion of social enterprises. This is a common type of social enterprise in Romania where at least 30 percent of the employees are disadvantaged people.

Table 1. Comparative summary table on Social Enterprises

	Italy	Romania
Regulation	Legislative Decree No. 112/2017	Law no. 219/2015
Development Process	Bottom-up, driven by civil society.	Top-down, stimulated by public funding
Definition of Social Enterprise	Regulatory qualification for private organizations with a focus on social good and entrepreneurial activity.	Legal entity with a "social enterprise certificate" complying with specific criteria.
Eligible Entities	Cooperatives, associations, foundations, mutual aid societies.	Cooperatives, associations, foundations, limited liability companies, and other conventional enterprises, mutual aid societies.
Key Requirements	– Non-profit purpose with a focus on civic, solidarity, and social good. – Responsible and transparent management. – Stakeholder involvement.	– Social purpose and/or general interest. – Allocate at least 90% of profits to social purposes and reserves. – Commit remaining assets to social enterprises upon liquidation. – Principle of social equity for employees and directors. – Guarantee fair salary levels. – Option for "insertion" social enterprises with at least 30% disadvantaged employees.
Overall Framework	Well-developed, but lacks a common regulation for the entire social economy.	Established legal framework, but sector representatives call for more consistent state support.

Source: authors' elaboration.

Overall Framework Well-developed, but lacks a common regulation for the entire social economy. Established legal framework, but sector representatives call for more consistent state support.

Descriptive analysis

To address the research question, the study aims to investigate the conceptual relationship between the cultural dimensions of the two countries and the legal form chosen for social enterprise establishment, as representative of a social enterprise model.

According to Defourny and Nyssens' framework (2017), four main models are considered:

– *The Entrepreneurial Nonprofit (ENP) Model.* Nonprofit organizations engage in business activities to support their social mission. This model includes business activities that allocate profits to support a social mission, even if they are not related, and subsidiaries of nonprofit organizations that generate profits for the parent company.

– *The Social Cooperative (SC) Model.* Cooperatives are "mutual interest enterprises." They are owned and democratically controlled by their members to serve general purpose interests. Members participate in the enterprise both as 'associates' and as 'users' - consumers who purchase goods or services produced by the cooperative itself or producers who use the cooperative to process and sell their output. The social mission can address members who share a mutual interest and contribute to the general interest of the community.

– *The Social Business (SB) Model.* Social businesses are focused on a social mission and aim to address social problems. They can be created by for-profit enterprises that pursue social entrepreneurship projects for the public good. These enterprises often rely on nonmarket resources to support the production of goods or services for the public good.

– *The Public-Sector Enterprise (PSE) Model.* Public sector spin-offs can lead to the creation of social enterprises. Local public agencies may establish community enterprises to promote local development or collaborate in managing social enterprises in the area. They can also transfer the provision of social services to new social enterprises or outsource public services through the organizational form of the social enterprise.

Table 2. shows the structure of the social enterprise sector in Italy and Romania. The data is sourced from the respective national registers. In Italy, The Single National Register of the Third Sector (RUNTS) provides information on the structure and activities of Third Sector entities. As of March 2024, RUNTS has registered 123,576 third-sector organizations, including 23,658 social enterprises. Romania's National Employment Agency, under the Ministry of Labor and Social Solidarity, maintains the Unique Register of Social Enterprises (RUEIS). This register contains information on certified social enterprises. As of December 2023, the RUEIS lists 2,915 social enterprises.

Table 2. Descriptive table of legal forms in Italy and Romania.

Italian Legal form

```
              Legal form |      Freq.     Percent        Cum.
-------------------------+-----------------------------------
             association |        175        0.74        0.74
               consortium|         11        0.05        0.79
              foundation |         68        0.29        1.07
 limited social enterprise|      1,213       5.13        6.20
      mutual aid society |        279        1.18        7.38
          public company |         11        0.05        7.43
         religious entity |        10        0.04        7.47
          simple society |         93        0.39        7.86
       social cooperative |     21,798      92.14      100.00
-------------------------+-----------------------------------
                   Total |     23,658     100.00
```

Romanian Legal Form

```
              Legal form |      Freq.     Percent        Cum.
-------------------------+-----------------------------------
             association |        276        9.47        9.47
              federation |          1        0.03        9.50
              foundation |         13        0.45        9.95
 limited social enterprise|      2,609      89.50       99.45
      mutual aid society |          6        0.21       99.66
       social cooperative |          9        0.31       99.97
   union of legal entities|          1        0.03      100.00
-------------------------+-----------------------------------
                   Total |      2,915     100.00
```

Source: Stata16.

In Italy, social cooperatives make up approximately 92% of all social enterprises, with the remaining 5% being limited liability companies that meet the criteria for being a social enterprise. It is important to note that social cooperatives can also take the legal form of limited liability companies, but what sets them apart is their cooperative structure. The prevalence of social cooperatives in Italy can be traced back to historical factors. The cooperative movement originated after World War II when a group of volunteers initiated the social solidarity cooperative movement. The goal was to create stable and financially sustainable enterprises independent of the volatility of public and private financing mechanisms. Over time, the efforts of volunteer groups have attracted public resources, increasing their contribution to the GDP of the Italian economy (OECD 2022). The legal framework for social cooperatives has since been developed. Italy pioneered the category of social cooperatives in Europe with the recognition of Law 381/1991 in 1991. This law provided a model of legislation and a definition of a social cooperative that serves as an example for all European countries. Law 106/2016, also known as the 'Third Sector' reform, mandates that existing social cooperatives register with RUNTS to comply with new regulations. As a result, cooperatives are now considered de facto social enterprises (Borzaga et al. 2020). Therefore, the Social Cooperative model is the most prevalent.

In Romania, most certified social enterprises, approximately 90%, take the legal form of limited liability companies (SRLs), while NGOs (associations, foundations, federations, and unions) account for the remaining 10%. Thus, according to Barna et al. (2023), the Social Business Model is the dominant model for certified social enterprises in Romania. These are limited liability companies that have developed business activities guided by a clear social mission. The preference for this model is also justified by the fact that it involves lower incorporation costs, shorter registration time, and a simplified management structure compared to an association or foundation.

Discussion

This study attempts to explain the differences through Hofstede's (1980, 1991) cultural dimensions. According to Hofstede (1984, 1991), a society's culture influences the values that underlie behavior. These cultural dimensions include power distance, individualism versus collectivism, motivation toward achievement and success, and uncertainty avoidance.

Table 3. Hofstede's cultural dimensions for Italy and Romania

Hofstede's cultural dimensions	Italy	Romania
Power distance	50	90
Individualism	53	46
Motivation towards Achievement and Success	70	42
Uncertainty Avoidance	75	90

Source: The Culture Factor Group: https://www.hofstede-insights.com/country-comparison-tool?countries=italy%2Cromania (2023).

As shown in *Table 3.*, Italy presents a tendency towards decentralization of power and decision-making, with a preference for teamwork and an open management style, particularly among the younger generation. In contrast, Romania accepts hierarchical order and centralization of power, expecting guidance in decision-making.

Italy does not have a clear preference for individualism or collectivism, with a noticeable regional divide. The Center-North is more individualistic, while the South is more oriented toward collectivism, highlighting the importance of the family network and social group. Romania is a collectivist society, with a strong commitment to group and loyalty.

Italy is seen as a decisive society, oriented toward success and competition. In contrast, Romania is seen as a consensual society, where the focus is on well-being and appreciation for what one does, rather than on being the best.

Both Italy and Romania exhibit a strong aversion to uncertainty. In Italy, this is reflected in a preference for formality and detailed planning, resulting in an elevated level of bureaucracy. In Romania, uncertainty aversion is demonstrated through adherence to rigid codes of conduct and a preference for security and tradition, which can hinder innovation.

Based on the scores presented, an analysis can now be conducted to assess the theoretical-conceptual validity of cultural dimensions in explaining the differences observed in social enterprise models.

– *Power distance.* In Italy, the cooperative form reflects a preference for teamwork and open management, which is consistent with the rejection of formal supervision. Cooperatives provide a fertile ground for sharing skills and activities, promoting mutual interests, and working towards the common good. However, there is a risk that the emphasis on the individual interests of members may overlook the broader sociocultural impact that social enterprises aim to generate. In Romania, where hierarchical distance is significant, the Social Business model prevails. This model, commonly based on limited liability companies, prioritizes a clear hierarchical structure and concentrates responsibility on the entrepreneur. However, there is a risk of a lack of exchange of ideas and shared values within the organization. Greater stakeholder involvement and active employee participation could enhance the positive impact of this model on the Romanian economy.

– *Individualism vs collectivism.* In Italy, a division on the dimension of individualism versus collectivism is apparent, with the North-Center being more oriented towards individualism and the South being more inclined towards collectivism. However, this trend does not seem to be reflected in the data on the location of social enterprises, which are concentrated in the Center-North, despite the individualist inclination. In contrast, the South has low civic participation, which suggests untapped potential for actively contributing to the collective interest. This may be due to widespread pessimism that limits initiative and entrepreneurial motivation. The Social Business model reflects Romania's collectivist culture, where commitment to the group results in a social enterprise that integrates the social mission into the economic activity itself. The decision to engage in social business activities may stem from a sense of loyalty and commitment to the community.

– *Motivation towards achievement and success.* In Italy, the cooperative model is influenced by the tension between competition and social impact. Social cooperatives aim to gain bargaining power and strength in the market, but this must be balanced to ensure positive social impact and avoid poorly socially oriented cooperatives. Effective public oversight, including requirements for transparency and sharing of social budgets, is necessary to maintain the social orientation of cooperatives. At the same time, the emphasis on the financial stability of Italian enterprises encourages increased investment and improved supply quality. In Romania, where the culture is more consensus-oriented, work is viewed not only

to achieve success but also to earn a livelihood. This contrast is evident in the Social Business Model, which prioritizes its employment mission. However, there is a risk of underestimating the business aspect, innovation, and continuous improvement, especially due to the dependence on external funding to ensure business continuity.

– *Uncertainty Avoidance.* Both countries have high values in this dimension. The cooperative model could provide a positive response to managing uncertainty by focusing on general interest and solidarity. In Italy, social cooperatives could be perceived to mitigate uncertainty by providing structure and social support to deal with collective challenges, especially in a society that values formality and detailed planning. In the Romanian context, Social Business could integrate uncertainty reduction into its social mission. It could focus on programs and initiatives aimed at providing stability and security in the communities in which it operates, in addition to pursuing its core social goals. Additionally, in a context of strong social inequalities and complex economic challenges, the social business model could be the most suitable response, given the centrality of the social mission.

Table 4. Results: theoretical relation.

Social Enterpise Models \ Cultural Dimensions	Power distance	Individualism vs Collettivism	Motivation towards Achievement and Success	Uncertainty Avoidance
Social Cooperative Model (IT)	-	?	+	+
Social Business Model (RO)	+	-	-	+

Source: Authors' elaboration.

Therefore, cultural dimensions at the theoretical conceptual level could explain the differences found in Italy and Romania regarding the legal forms taken by registered social enterprises. These differences were analyzed based on the dominant social enterprise model, and the research question was answered.

Conclusion

Italy has a longer tradition of social economy compared to Romania, with social enterprises emerging in the 1970s and experiencing continuous growth. Social cooperatives, driven by regulatory changes, are prevalent in Italy. In contrast, Romania's social economy development was slower due to communism. Only after 1989 did private initiatives gain traction, with a resurgence of interest

in social organizations since 2000, often supported by European or national funding. Although associations are a common type of nonprofit organization, certified social enterprises are typically limited liability companies, coherent with the Social Business Model.

These differences in social enterprise models can be explained through Hofstede's cultural dimensions. The specific cultural values, and economic, social, and historical evolutions of the two European countries have contributed to the design of different legal frameworks for social enterprise operations.

This study acknowledges methodological and conceptual limitations that should be considered when designing future research. Specifically, due to the absence of empirical data and the focus on specific contexts (Italy and Romania), generalization is not possible. To obtain community-level results, further investigation could consider all European countries. Future research requires more in-depth methodological approaches to fully explore the complexity of the relationships between cultural dimensions and social enterprise models. This paper focuses on the cultural variable represented by Hofstede's cultural dimensions. However, the success of social enterprise models can be influenced by various external factors, including the regulatory, economic, or political environment.

In addition to the highlighted limitations, this contribution has several theoretical implications. Firstly, by incorporating the cultural dimensions and models of social enterprises provided in academic literature, it establishes a theoretical foundation for designing and conducting empirical studies that explore the social economy in greater depth. Such studies could confirm, deepen, or challenge the theoretical conclusions of this paper. The analysis indicates that a society's cultural traits can influence the entrepreneurial preferences and organizational forms of social enterprises, guiding entrepreneurial choices and social innovation. It is important to conduct a comparative analysis when designing policies and strategies to support the development of the social economy. This could provide useful insights for policymakers, social entrepreneurs, and academics. Finally, this work aims to promote a broader debate on the topic in both academic and practical circles. While acknowledging the limitations of the social enterprise model and its contextual dependence, it is crucial to promote enterprises that uphold values such as public participation and the strengthening of democratic institutions. Social enterprises could serve as a catalyst for change and transformation towards a more inclusive, equitable, just, and democratic society.

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Mihail Caradaica

Civil Society as the Arena of the New European Climate Hegemony:
A neo-Gramscian Approach to European Green Transition

Using a neo-Gramscian approach, this paper explores the concept of civil society as an arena where European climate hegemony is built. The EU's green transition, which involves deep social and economic transformations, needs extensive popular support to avoid social instability and the rise of populist parties. To achieve this, the European Commission is trying to construct a counter-hegemonic discourse that challenges the traditional modes of a fossil fuel-based economy by creating an alliance of actors around the ideology of just transition. Therefore, the study addresses the following research question: who are the change agents within European civil society that have aligned with the alliance, and how is fostering a counter-hegemonic discourse against the traditional economic model? By employing a qualitative methodological approach, the study explores the crucial function of civil society in the European green transition, exposing the most important agents and how these agents facilitate the formation of a new climate hegemony.
Keywords: Change actors, civil society, European integration, green transition, hegemony.

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Magdalena Albulescu

Cultivating Civic Engagement:
The Role of Universities in Promoting Democratic Values to Social Science Students

In contemporary society, the concept of civic engagement appears as an essential condition for the functioning of democracy and social well-being. Civic engagement transcends simple participation in the electoral process and encompasses a wider spectrum of activities: civic and community participation, activism, and public dialogue. Thus, cultivating civic engagement is a mission, duty, and responsibility for universities, particularly for social science programs. They derive from the need to form and shape not only professionals but also responsible and involved people from a civic and social point of view. However, the mechanisms by which higher education institutions can effectively cultivate such engagement among students remain a subject of debate and investigation. This study seeks to bridge this gap by exploring the strategies used by universities to promote civic awareness among students. Methodologically, this article proposes a study

on one of the most important universities in the field of social, political, and administrative sciences in Romania. By analyzing the perceptions and experiences of students, the research provides new empirical data on how educational practices influencing civic and political engagement are evolving, or, conversely, reveals institutional shortcomings in fulfilling the mission of promoting civic engagement among students. In this sense, a standardized questionnaire was distributed to the students from the political science bachelor's degree program to analyze their perceptions and experiences regarding how the study programs and the teachers' activity incorporate the component of civic and political involvement. Data analysis highlights how and if higher education programs cultivate and shape student engagement through academic programs, extracurricular activities, or community partnerships.

Keywords: Civic engagement, higher education, university mission, community, students.

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Vlad Bujdei-Tebeica
Green Policies, Gray Areas:
Farmers' Protests and the Environmental Policy Dilemma in the European Union

This paper presents a comparative analysis of farmer protests across seven European countries (France, Germany, Spain, Italy, Poland, and Romania) from late 2023 to early 2024, focusing on the intersection of anti-environmentalist discourse and Euroscepticism within these movements. Amidst growing tensions between agricultural practices and environmental policies, these protests highlight how civil society can pose a threat to the implementation of environmental policy across the European Union (EU). Utilizing discourse analysis and comparative methodology, the paper examines the platforms and public statements of the protesting groups to identify core themes of resistance against environmental regulations and EU agricultural policies. Furthermore, it incorporates a Euroscepticism lens to explore how anti-EU sentiments exacerbate the protests, reflecting broader issues of sovereignty, identity, and economic survival in the face of EU-wide policy directives. Our findings suggest that while environmental policy concerns are at the forefront, a significant undercurrent of Euroscepticism influences the discourse and demands of these protests, presenting a multifaceted challenge for EU policymakers. By analyzing these protests in a comparative context, this study contributes to the understanding of contemporary European social movements and the intricate balance between environmental sustainability and agricultural livelihoods within the EU policy framework.

Keywords: Farmer protests, agriculture policy, Euroscepticism, anti-environmentalism.

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Eugen Gabor

How Civil Societies Are Undermined: An Analysis of Factors That Endanger Civic Freedoms

Several studies highlight the fact that the first decades of the 21st century are characterized by a resurgence of authoritarianism, which contradicts the optimistic visions of the 1990s regarding the so-called end of history. For instance, Freedom House argues, presenting relevant data, that since 2006, a process of democratic backsliding has been in place worldwide. Not only developing countries or regions are affected but also countries in Europe and Northern America, where democracy once seemed inexpugnable. This illiberal wave thrives on the weaknesses of civil societies and has the effect of further reducing the dimensions of the civic space. Although those who promote open societies are on the defensive, their cause is far from being an obsolete remnant of the second half of the 20th century. However, their endeavors can be ineffective if the causes of the antidemocratic forces' success are not properly acknowledged. The main goal of this paper is to contribute to a better understanding of the factors that are vital for building or strengthening closed societies. To shape relevant conclusions, we analyze information from projects like People Power under Attack, realized by the CIVICUS global civil society network or V-Dem (The Varieties of Democracy), managed by an institute affiliated with the University of Gothenburg (Sweden). We focus especially on countries that experienced sharp transformations regarding the state of their civil societies in the last 3–5 years. Our findings underline, among others, the importance of the electoral process and foreign policy in influencing the evolution of the civic space. Cases like the Czech Republic suggest that the decline of civil society can be stopped at the polls. The Russian Federation is an example of a successful suspension of civic freedoms under the pretext of protecting the population from toxic foreign interference.
Keywords: Democratic backsliding, civil society, elections, foreign policy, illiberalism.

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Vanya Kashukeeva-Nusheva

The contribution of civil society organisations to the implementation of the principles of good governance at the local level

The article examines the contribution of civil society organizations to the implementation of the principles of good governance at the local level. The analysis is based on the results of a comparative study on the interaction between civil society organizations and local authorities in the twenty-seven largest municipalities in Bulgaria, which are regional centers. The research presents data on the forms of citizen participation in outlining policies for the development of local communities, modernization of local government institutions, and increasing the accountability of local authorities. The article is based on comparative research data of international NGOs that not only conduct research in this field but also implement initiatives to improve the interaction between civil society and public institutions at the local level. In this regard, the major focus is presented on the good practices identified in the Local Integrity System Index – a comparative study of Transparency International – Bulgaria, which is the national chapter of the international anticorruption organization Transparency International.
Keywords: Civil society, good governance, local authorities, Bulgaria.

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Bogdan Berceanu

Civic Engagement and Cultural Heritage:
Lessons from the Herculane Project

In the current global context, the cultural sector faces various challenges related to funding, access, and participation. This paper aims to identify potential pathways for civic initiatives. The purpose of this narrative article is to discuss the role of civic engagement in protecting cultural heritage goods when public authorities fail to do so. The Romanian Law of Preserving Cultural Monuments is central to this discussion. It delineates the responsibilities of both governmental and non-governmental entities in safeguarding the nation's cultural heritage. Thus, the Herculane Project- situated in Băile Herculane (Herculane Baths), initiated by a Romanian non-governmental organization (NGO) offers invaluable lessons on the dynamics between civil society, public administration authorities, and the preservation of cultural monuments. The work presents a qualitative analysis of the mechanisms through which civic engagement has influenced the trajectory of the Herculane Project. It explores how local communities, NGOs, and grassroots movements

have mobilized to advocate for the preservation of Băile Herculane's cultural heritage. The conclusion of this paper aims to demonstrate the relevance of contemporary civil societies in preserving cultural heritage goods. It underlines how the best practices employed by the NGO in charge of the Herculane Project can be applied to other cases while considering the dynamics of cultural heritage preservation.

Keywords: Civil society, sustainable future, social systems, NGOs, heritage goods, public administration authorities.

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Zoltan Zakota
From Civil Society Organisations to Pirate Parties to Digital Democracy

Reshaping our political and social systems for a sustainable future requires a multifaceted approach that addresses several key areas, such as: political reform, social change, economic development, environmental preservation, or technological innovation. In order to achieve a sustainable future, we need to implement its ideals in every societal sector. When dealing with the political system, we cannot ignore the antidemocratic tendencies arising or taking over our everyday life even in the Western World. Under these circumstances, political reform is a must and we have to admit that one of its most important tasks is strengthening democracy. The actual political discourse is full of ideas like proportional representation, direct democracy, sustainability-focused governance, transparency, accountability, and equity. Among the many actors that try to solve these problems there is a group that proposes some new solutions, based on the means of Information Society, Pirate Parties. Emerging from the digital world, they are a fresh wave of political movements with deep roots in online activism. These parties, some born from anti-establishment protests, have rapidly spread across the globe in just two decades. Their journey is one of transformation, from grassroots movements to established political players. Pirate Parties have a clear digital agenda, focusing on issues like copyright reform, open access to information, and online privacy. They champion net neutrality and the free flow of knowledge. However, most of them have recognized the importance of broader democratic values for political success. Beyond their digital focus, Pirate Parties also advocate for traditional democratic ideals, including civil rights, transparency, and combating corruption. They promote free speech, direct democracy, and exploring alternative forms of citizen participation

in government, often leveraging technology (e-democracy). The future impact of Pirate Parties remains uncertain, but their influence is undeniable. They've challenged traditional political norms and brought issues of the digital age to the forefront. Pirate Parties have reshaped the European political landscape and inspired similar movements around the world. My paper aims to briefly present these political formations, with special regard to their origins in and their relations with civil society. After outlining the broad framework, I present some of the most notorious of these formations.

Keywords: Information and Communication Technologies, Information Society, Network Society, Digital Democracy, Pirate Parties

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Daniela La Foresta–Maria Nicola Buonocore
Mediterranean migrations: NGO as the voice of the voiceless?
The role of NGOs in communicating Mediterranean migration effectively: challenges and opportunities

The Mediterranean Sea has always represented a unique melting pot of cultures and peoples, holding a strategic position: since the mid-1990s it has been the preferred route for migrants to reach the European continent. Adverse weather conditions overcrowded and illegal routes, as well as the difficult management of the emergency by the EU, make the Mediterranean one of the most dangerous routes, with reports of migrant accidents being an everyday occurrence. Since 2014, approximately 29.000 migrants have gone missing or died in the Mediterranean, with the highest number of fatalities recorded in 2016 and the central route (UNHCR, 2022). The complexity of the situation indicates how it cannot be solved solely by the countries most affected by the phenomenon: indeed, cooperation and coordination with states, NGOs, and other maritime agencies are necessary. NGOs play a central role in the management of the situation, with the Council of Europe calling on states to cooperate constructively with NGOs to ensure the effective protection of human rights. Approximately 38 NGO ships conducted SAR operations in the Mediterranean Sea between 2016 and 2022 (FRA). This research aims to analyze the online communication of the pre-eminent NGOs that operate in the Mediterranean Sea. Greater importance is attributed to communication strategies: through them, organizations can spread their values and promote their actions, while raising public awareness. Thus, the focus is on the core online communication tactics used to achieve their goals.

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Nicolae Toderaş
Shaping Romania's National Recovery and Resilience Plan
An Analysis of the Involvement of Civil Society Organizations

During the shaping of Romania's National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP), an environment conducive to the creation of institutional arrangements for socio-centric governance was established. However, these arrangements were not enduring and could not modify the specific path dependency of state-centric governance arrangements. This research presents and analyzes perceptions regarding the extent and way Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) were engaged in the shaping process of Romania's NRRP. Based on semi-structured interviews with the relevant CSOs, factors that have influenced the involvement of CSOs in shaping Romania's NRRP about other European fund programming processes, the lessons learned from this process, as well as possibilities of enhancing the current governance regime specific to European funds management were examined.

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Milena Yorgova
Collaboration and innovation in social services: hybrid organizations and areas of interaction

Welfare states in modern European societies face serious economic, political, and demographic challenges. This requires new frameworks of cooperation and innovation, as well as a higher degree of interaction between the state, the market, and civil society.

Civil sector organizations respond to dynamic changes with hybridization. The research interest has been provoked by the expanded use of their hybrid potential to reduce social and economic risk and vulnerability.

Keywords: Civil sector, hybrid organizations, hybrid zones, social services, welfare state.

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Mihaela V. Cărăuşan
Fostering Democratic Values for the Future:
An In-Depth Exploration of Romania's Preuniversity Education System

This paper takes a unique approach to exploring the intricacies of Romania's education system, delving into the subjects that contribute to the democratic values frame. We will investigate the active role of individuals in shaping cultural norms and emphasize the importance of their participation in manifesting democratic power within the state. Moreover, the study questions whether the education system effectively prepares the future generation to be responsible members of society. The paper starts with the concept of co-creation and assesses whether individuals are ready to understand or know its implications. It reviews the empowerment of individuals as active decision-makers in societal processes and their ability to critically reflect on social movements and evolution. Furthermore, the research explores whether the upcoming generation possesses values that enable them to reject or aspire to different ideologies. In addressing the relationship between individuals and civil society, the paper investigates when and how nongovernmental organizations play a role in the education of future generations' values. An essential aspect of the study is an analysis of the education system's contribution to promoting Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Romania. The research evaluates whether citizens have the necessary values to protect and support a sustainable future. The methodological framework for the paper is structured around a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods, such as literature and document review, content and comparative analysis, and a multidisciplinary approach to gather comprehensive insights. Through this comprehensive examination, the paper aims to contribute valuable insights and recommendations for enhancing Romania's preuniversity education system, strengthening civil society, and promoting a sustainable future.
Keywords: Development, participation, civic engagement, responsibility.

Mihaela V. Cărăuşan, a distinguished academic and expert in her field, was born in 1976 and has held positions in the government; the nongovernmental sector; and academia. She is Deputy Dean at the Faculty of Public Administration, National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, and Executive Director at the Association Centre of Academic Excellence. Her professional development includes training followed at the Centre International de Formation Européenne from Nice, France (1998), Venice Commission – Council of Europe (2001 and 2007), the Romanian Institute of Diplomacy

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Nicoleta Nicolae-Ioana
How can we halve food waste by 2030 in a consumerist world?
The crucial role of civil society in keeping the public attention on the green agenda

The United Nations' target for halving Food Waste (FW) and the related actions required by the 2030 Agenda should be achieved in just six years, and there is a lot to be done. Considering that FW worldwide is causing 8% to 10% of GHG, the phenomenon has become a preoccupation for the European Union (EU). As a member state, Romania is aligned with the EU policy lines regarding environment and sustainable development. Bearing in mind the consumption-based economic model, the governmental approaches, and challenges regarding environmental and sustainable development issues, a robust civil society is needed to influence the adoption of efficacious and improved public policies regarding FW and to contribute to maintaining green topics on the public agenda. This paper aims to identify the factors that explain civil society's ability to influence public policies on FW and keep these green topics on the governmental agenda. In this sense, I have carried out a literature review to identify the current situation and the levers available to Romanian civil society and data analysis. Data was gathered via 11 semi-structured in-depth interviews with representatives of central public authorities, HoReCa, civil society, and Romanian consumers conducted in the spring of 2022 for my dissertation paper. The interviews revealed that civil society as a soft power can influence Romanian public policies regarding FW and has a crucial role in covering the critical areas of education, communication, awareness, and changing consumer behavior. Moreover, the data underlines that, second to the central authorities, civil society is the next stakeholder responsible for taking action to reduce FW. The development and evolution of a solid and vigilant civil society is essential for influencing the adoption of effective and improved public policies regarding FW and contributes to maintaining green topics on the public agenda to achieve the ambitious goals set by the international community, which aim at the well-being of people, and the Planet, but also of the future generations.

Keywords: Green agenda; food waste; civil society; public policies; governmental agenda.

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Antonio D'Alessio–Alexandra Zbuchea–Alessandro Scaletti
The influence of cultural dimensions on social enterprise models: a comparative study between Italy and Romania

In the current context of increasing social inequalities and global economic fragility, the social economy represents a new economic model with people at its center. It promotes poverty reduction, a transition towards sustainable cities and communities, and responsible consumption and production. In recent years, various social economy initiatives have been developed in the European Union, inspired by the community's legislative and regulatory framework. European social economy development follows different rhythms due to the socio-economic, cultural, and political diversity of various Member States. However, this diversity is often overlooked in academic literature, which tends to focus on individual country-level examinations. To address this gap, a comparative study was conducted between Italy and Romania, two culturally different countries with varying levels of economic development. This study aims to investigate the relationships between Hofstede's cultural factors and dominant social enterprise models for each country. A descriptive analysis of the two contexts was conducted to determine if cultural factors influence one social enterprise model over another. The study sheds light on how social economy manifests uniquely across diverse cultural settings. The findings may be useful for political leaders when selecting appropriate policies and development strategies for the social economy, to achieve a unified and shared vision and definition.
Keywords: Social enterprise, culture, comparative study, European Union, social economy.

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