

# ACTIVIZESHIP

CIVIC SPACE WATCH REPORT 2020 • STORIES FROM THE LOCKDOWN

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Civic space under lockdown

Civil society unlocks its potential

2020 has been characterised by the COVID-19 health emergency that produced consequences on our societies, economies and democracies that are unprecedented in Europe in times of peace. We have changed our life to protect ourselves and others. We have all been expected to act responsibly as individuals and as a community.

On the one hand, the need to provide a quick and strong response in a short time has increased the use of exceptional powers by the Governments at the expenses of democratic checks and balances. Some Governments took advantage of this exceptional situation to legitimate their attempt to concentrate powers in their hands but, even in countries where governments have been praised for their balanced approach, the situation of exception has exposed serious risks for European democracies, adding to the trend of deterioration documented in previous years.

On the other hand, 2020 has been characterised by an awakening of active citizenship to ensure at the widest possible scale effective access to basic rights that the crisis has put at risk. Many have found creative ways to be useful to their communities, to offer social and cultural tools against isolation, to volunteer for providing support to the weak and vulnerable which often happen to be the poorest, to act as watchdogs vis a vis the consequences of the democratic and social crises, and to propose societal alternatives. Everywhere, organised civic actors, as well as citizens and people spontaneously, have been and are in the front line to witness the precarious situations people suffer from, trying to respond to people's needs, to alert on the limitations and adverse consequences of implemented public policies, to react against abuses of power, to put solidarity for all at the centre of the response to the crisis. Civic space under the lockdown has been narrowed but, even under detrimental conditions, has shown a high level of dynamism.

The European Civic Forum, together with its members, has contributed to this dynamism and observed these trends through the Civic Space Watch (<http://civicspacewatch.eu/solidarity-amid-covid-19-crisis/>), a platform collecting resources on threats to fundamental rights as well as positive initiatives, including those aimed at countering these threats. The ECF Secretariat carried out

media monitoring and liaised daily with NGOs on the ground. The analysis builds on the results of this monitoring activity, over 350 resources collected in the period between January to October 2020, as well as on three consultation meetings with the ECF working group of national platforms of NGOs (3 and 23 April, 14 October 2020), two surveys on the impact of COVID-19 on fundamental rights and on civil dialogue and economic sustainability of the sector, and five interviews with local NGOs.

The analysis showcases the challenges civil society faced throughout the year 2020, with a particular focus on how the public measures triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic affected civic space, and how civic actors responded. The first part of the analysis focuses on the challenges civil society faces along four elements we believe are crucial for civil society to enact its full potential:

1. A conducive political, cultural and socio-economic landscape;
2. Respect of civic freedoms;
3. Meaningful dialogue between civil society and governing bodies;
4. A supportive framework for CSOs' financial viability and sustainability.

The second part looks at civil society's responses. The analysis is complemented by six country case studies written by national watchdog and seven interviews with the awarded stories of the Civic Pride awards 2020.

## 1. COVID-19 shakes the socio-economic, political and cultural landscape

Decades of insufficient public investment in and privatisation of the healthcare sector and social protection infrastructures have debilitated Europe's capacities to respond efficiently to the health crisis. As a consequence, many states have restricted freedom of movement and the access to public space in order to decrease the pressure on the health system - struggling to meet the demands of the population and to keep the limited available means accessible to the highest risk groups.

The health crisis developed quickly into a social and economic crisis, with tens of millions of people put out of work, many losing partially or in total their sources of income and, in large numbers becoming unable to meet the basic needs of their families for food, housing and health protection. The economic shock triggered by the consequences of the health emergency is exacerbating societal needs and existing inequalities. Adding to those who were already fragile, entire groups were exposed to socio-economic difficulties. States did implement measures trying to compensate, at least in part, the disrupting effects on households and businesses, showing a willingness to act unseen in the last decades. But these economic measures have often been insufficient and limited.

The question of how to guarantee the democratic life in a situation of emergency has been a challenge in the context of the Covid-19 crisis. In order to take shift decisions, a general tendency to concentrate powers at the Government level while limiting the role of institutions in charge of checks and balances has been reported across Europe. In countries where the functioning of democracy and the rule of law was already strained, authorities have taken advantage of the situation to further concentrate their powers and to pass controversial legislation unrelated to the COVID-19 emergency. As we move towards a normalisation of the virus in our lives, in the long-term, the danger is to normalise emergency and coercive practices that have emerged.

In this context, where institutional mechanisms of separation of powers and accountability are shrinking, civic actors' role as checks and balances become more crucial. However, these have been critically weakened with the narrowing of civic space

and downsizing of their capacities to act due to the economic impact of the economic shock on their resources. Nevertheless, communities, associations and social movements have mobilised quickly and successfully to provide effective accesses to basic rights that the crisis has jeopardised, to monitor and advocate for justice for all.

The solidarity response to the crisis that emerged from the grassroots opened an opportunity for rebuilding the trust in collective approaches that had been shrinking over the last period, after decades of rising individualism and generalised competition. However, the lessons unveiled by the COVID-19 pandemic are a matter of discussion that is far from reaching consensus. Societal despair caused by the socio-economic hardships and uncertainty for the immediate future risk to fuel distrust in institutions. The general feeling of joining forces in a common struggle and high trust in Governments that has characterised the first phase of the emergency has quickly been replaced by contestation, including in the form of protests in the streets. Regressive political parties and movements are already trying to surf these societal tensions with various degrees of success depending on the country.

## 2. The deterioration of civic freedoms continues

The 2019 report on civic space in the European Union showcased how restrictions (*de jure* and *de facto*) to civic freedoms are growing across the region following certain trends and contributing to shrinking the space of action of civic actors. In 2020, some of the challenges to the exercise of civic freedoms are generated by the democratic test posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, which reproduced and magnified some of the trends already emerged. Others happen in parallel to the health crisis. All of them cumulate with the ones documented in previous years and create an extremely testing environment in which civil society operated in 2020.

### 2.1 Restricting freedom of association using transparency legislation

Following the footsteps of the Hungarian law on the transparency of organisations supported from abroad dubbed “Lex NGO” that was ruled a breach of the right to association by the European Court of Justice, **in 2020 three countries (PL, BG, EL) have proposed or introduced legislation officially aimed at improving transparency, but the facto discriminately overburdening and stigmatising the sector.** The use of transparency legislation to restrict freedom of association is a trend already emerged in the 2019 report. While these pieces of legislation present differences, they raise similar concerns and potential threats to the civic sector, including double reporting requirements draining CSO resources; disproportionate sanctions in case of non-compliance; discrimination of CSOs vis-a-vis other entities (like private companies) that are not subject to the same requirements; vilification of the sector in the eyes of the public. This kind of legislation contributes to negatively affecting CSOs capacity to focus on their mission in contexts where freedom of association is also challenged by smear campaigns, difficult dialogue with public authorities and reduced financial resources.

### 2.2 Closing the public space, restricting the freedom of peaceful assembly

As the COVID-19 virus spread across the region, national authorities started to restrict the public

space and limit the possibility for gatherings of people. During the first wave of the pandemic, in most EU countries freedom of assembly was restricted as a byproduct of restrictions on movement and gatherings, without specifically mentioning the right to peaceful assembly, and leaving certain ambiguity as to what activities were permitted and which were restricted due to the “*broad and vague*” wording. Often, the vagueness in addressing the right to peaceful assembly resulted in excessive discretion left to competent authorities to decide whether to allow assemblies.

In a general tendency across Europe, **the requirement to notify authorities of planned assemblies has started to *de jure* or *de facto* function as an authorisation system**, even in case of small gatherings of a handful of participants. As a result, even where a total ban was not in place, often local authorities restricted the right to freedom of assembly on the basis of public health concerns. In several instances, **peaceful protesters have been dispersed, fined or arrested on the grounds of not having notified or received authorisation** from competent authorities. Additionally, public authorities have often shifted the responsibility to guarantee compliance with social distances during public demonstrations on the organisers rather than see it as a shared responsibility.

As the numbers of hospitalisations and infections started to be under control and governments slowly lifted COVID-19 related restrictions, some states that maintained limitations on large gathering of people made exceptions for demonstrations. However, freedom of assembly remained restricted in some countries even as other areas of public life were opening (i.e. RO). Additionally, **in several states, while demonstrations are allowed, authorities have introduced other forms of restrictions** in addition to the respect of hygienic measures (social distancing and wearing of protective masks), **such as on the form of the assembly (static v. marching) and limitations to the number of participants.**

It is important to note that throughout the year, regulations and attitudes of authorities concerning the right to peaceful assembly have changed rapidly inside member states, creating uncertainty on the exercise of this right. Additionally, in some country, while the right was protected *de jure*, public officials have discouraged the use of public demonstration as a means for political participation. The public discourse has also sometimes blurred the lines

between people gathering for the purpose of protest and for other socialising purposes.

### **2.3 Securitising the public space, policing dissent**

The COVID-19 pandemic has been framed as a matter of public security. Especially in the first phase of the pandemic, the public discourse described the efforts to slow down the spread of the virus as a “war” against the virus and shifted the responsibility to “fight” the pandemic on the individual citizens. In most states, the aggressive security narrative went hand in hand with the use of coercive methods to enforce the COVID-19 related restrictions and the closing of public space. In this context, citizens lost confidence in using the public space for the most basic everyday needs let alone occupying it for the purpose of public participation and protest. Even when the deployment of the security apparatus to enforce the restrictions and the security discourse were not directly targeting civic freedoms, they created a climate of mistrust and terror that affected people’s ability to make use of the public space and exercise their fundamental rights. In some case, the sole act of gathering in the streets and living the public space became an act of protest and resistance.

#### **2.3.1 Deploying the coercive apparatus to police the pandemic**

In most countries, the enforcement of the restrictions was carried out by the police patrolling the streets. In some countries, governments also deployed the military to enforce the restrictions on freedom of movement. Some states introduced harsher sanctions and granted (or attempted to grant) police forces new powers to enforce them (i.e., IE, PL). For example, some member states granted police officers the power to inflict on spot fines (i.e., AT, LT, LV). In some countries, the police were granted additional powers to manage or sanction content deemed fake by the authorities (i.e., HU, RO) or in access to private data for the purpose of tracking the spread of the virus raising issues of surveillance (i.e., BG, PL, SI, HR).

In many countries, police forces have been questioned for abuse of their powers in imposing fines (i.e., AT, RO, PL, ES) as well as for the use of force against the public (i.e. HR, RO, ES, BE, FR, EL). Fines and policing abuses across Europe disproportionately impacted racialised groups,

including Black people, Roma and people on the move and migrants, as well as homeless. In this sense, the pandemic amplified a tendency of police abuse against these groups that in many countries already existed.

#### **2.3.2 Heavy-handed policing of freedom of assembly and protests**

In some cases (i.e., examples documented in HU, PL, SI, FR), the coercive apparatus in place to police the COVID-19 rules were applied against people exercising their right to peaceful assembly, with peaceful protesters facing administrative and criminal sanctions for breaking the COVID-19 restrictions raising concerns on the intent of authorities to curtail dissent. A number of arbitrary arrests of peaceful protesters not linked with the COVID-19 restrictions, in some instance with violence, was also reported (i.e., in FR, BG, PL, ES), including during the Black Lives Matter demonstrations (i.e., FR, BE, DE, EL).

#### **2.3.3 Policing freedom of expression and association**

Since the outbreak of the global pandemic, across Europe, several governments have restricted access to information, locked out the media and displayed a general intolerance against criticism. This was also showcased by the records of smear campaigns against civil society countries (i.e., CZ, EL, PL, SI, HU). In some countries (i.e., HU, BG, RO, PL, FR), authorities have made moves to control and sanction citizens, activists and journalists that are critical of their actions. The gravity of the actions changes greatly in terms repercussions on the activists, but all contribute to creating a chilling effect on citizens and activists holding public authorities accountable. In a few countries, records have shown police interference with journalists and citizens covering their actions (i.e., FR, BE, BG, HR). These interferences include arrests and physical assaults. Reports (FR, EL) also showcase the use of coercive power against associations working with migrants.

### **2.4 Legislative changes restrict freedom of assembly beyond COVID-19**

The 2019 report documented how, in recent years, a number of countries have toughened their approach to public demonstrations by restricting the space accessible to protests and

increasing sanctions. In 2020, new laws on public demonstrations was introduced in Greece and discussed in France and Poland, while in Italy and Spain's governments started revising their legislation on the matter.

### 2.5 Data gathering and surveillance

As “tracking the virus” has become the mantra in the tackling of the health crisis, concerns about the expansion of surveillance technologies and the right to privacy have been voiced by civil society and human rights bodies across Europe. These warnings have become especially pressing with moves providing or attempting to provide law enforcement agencies with additional powers to collect and use private data, including on cellphone, tracing apps and other technologies (i.e., BL, PL, SI, HR). These powers can be extremely intrusive and not proportional to the need. Additionally, there is a serious risk that these data could be used beyond the tracking of the spread of the virus, for example, in criminal proceeding enforcing COVID-19 restrictions and others.

These developments could have serious consequences on civic space. For example, when data are collected in the context of public demonstration (i.e. DE, ES). Privacy is an important prerequisite for the exercise of fundamental rights, including the right to peaceful assembly and expression. Being identified in the context of public demonstrations can have a deterrent effect on public participation, especially for communities that are most at risk of marginalisation. These concerns are magnified by the expanding use of artificial intelligence to monitor the respect of COVID-19 rules, as well as to provide faux security following recent terrorist attacks, in many cities in Europe in a context of legal vacuum and lack of public oversight. Examples of using surveillance technologies and social media to track protesters and sanction them have also been documented (i.e. SI, FR) and reinforce the worry that data collected can be used beyond health purposes.

## 3. The dialogue between civic organisations and governing bodies is challenged during the crisis

Civic and social organisations are in a privileged position to understand the impact of policies and lack of thereof on the wider population and specific groups. Thus, they can be important allies for authorities that want to tackle societal vulnerabilities and environmental concerns by providing data and proposals. However, **the exceptional circumstances triggered by the COVID-19 health emergency created huge obstacles for the proper functioning of civil dialogue.** Institutions needed to act quickly and effectively to slow the spread of the virus and reduce the heavy impact that the restrictions had on the economy and the population. The increased workload, coupled with social distancing and telework, greatly affected the capacities of institutions to respond to the increased number of requests for dialogue and consultation.

Generally, **across Europe, the emergency procedures reduced the opportunities for consultation and influence by shifting the power from the legislative branch to the executive one.** Additionally, the closing of the public space together with the overwhelming presence of COVID-19 news on the media made it difficult to get other messages across and created new challenges for civil society to put pressure on governments when institutional frameworks for dialogue were not respected, not available or restricted.

Nevertheless, while there were several challenges and limits, in many European countries (I.e. IR, ES, IT, RO, FR, AU, LV) the national platforms of NGOs reported appreciation for the attempt to listen to civil society's recommendations, especially with regard to public funding to the sector. In Ireland and Latvia, positive steps were announced to strengthen the civil dialogue. At the same time, even in countries with a relatively open dialogue between civil society and governments, the quality and the impact of the exchanges depended on the Ministry as well as on previous relations between the individual civic organisation and authorities. Bigger networks of civic organisations were in a better position to be taken into account, while smaller or more critical organisations found additional difficulties to influence the policymaking. Additionally, **consultation processes at national**

levels did not always lead to a concrete impact on policies and sometimes civic organisations were left with a feeling that the civil dialogue was a mere **ticking-the-box exercise**. Moreover, as a general trend, the civil dialogue is particularly rare on European matters. This was true also during the pandemic.

In some countries, **civil society reported that the time available for consultation was shortened (i.e. BG, EE, LV) or suspended (i.e. RO, HU)** in disregard of institutional frameworks of civil dialogue on some policies adopted. Lack of meaningful dialogue with the sector is deemed to be an important factor for lack of reactivity of the government to many societal emergencies (i.e. DE, EL).

In some countries, **authorities not only disregarded civil society but also made moves that will affect the quality of public participation in the future (HR, SI, BG)**.

Among the issues that made civil dialogue and civil society's advocacy more challenging in times of crisis was access to information, especially concerning fast-track, continuously changing legislation. In some countries, governments suspended transparency legislation or parts of it (i.e. HU, IT, ES, BG).

## 4. Economic difficulties of the sector soar during the crisis

In the previous annual report from 2019, we wrote how "Issues related to funding" was the second most frequent category on the Civic Space Watch concerning developments negatively affecting freedom of association. In this context where funding for the sector had already been affected by the financial crisis and funding restrictions, especially concerning civic organisations with watchdog and advocacy functions, were documented in several EU countries, **the COVID-19 crisis additionally had a huge economic and financial impact on many parts of the civic sector**. This issue has a short-term impact, with many organisations at risk of being forced to stop or downscale their operations. It also has long-term consequences: the landscape of civic organisations is undergoing a fast and profound change as many will stop existing or completely change their activities, in the absence of meaningful support from public institutions.

**Public support for the sector often arrived quite late, with many governments prioritising funding for businesses first**. Only a minority of the European countries created specific funding for the sector fit for its specificities (i.e. AT, IE, IT, LT, PL). Many other countries included NGOs in some of the measures supporting employers and businesses (i.e. BE, BG, FR, DE, EE, RO, SI, ES). However, in most cases, only a part of civic organisations was actually eligible for this support, and this funding was unfit for the specific needs of the sector.

**In some countries, the economic difficulties caused by the lockdown implemented in most EU countries have been exacerbated by the decision of public authorities to shift the priorities of national and EU funding for NGOs to tackle the health emergency**. In some cases, these moves raised suspicion that they were aimed at disadvantaging specific sub-sector of NGOs that are critical of the authorities (i.e., HU, SI, HR, CZ).

## 5. Civil society unlocks its potential

Civil society organisations and movements play an essential role in supporting communities. From one country to another, civic actors have different status and modus operandi. The tasks and functions they perform also vary. But everywhere they are in the front line to witness the precarious situations people suffer from, trying to respond to people's needs for effective access to rights, to alert on the limitations and adverse consequences of public policies. From the onset, the crisis has shown how diverse and fundamental civic actors' roles are.

### Community support and solidarity

Faced with the exceptional circumstances triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, citizens and associations have been organising to respond to pressing societal needs produced by the health emergency and the isolation. Many citizens in this crisis have experienced the value of solidarity and practised it daily through mutual support in their neighbourhoods and beyond. Especially the first phase of the crisis saw a surge in volunteers spontaneously initiating actions, many for the first time in their lifetime. Often these actions could benefit from the organisation of associative infrastructures.

A crucial area of action was boosting the capacity of public healthcare institutions through support for medical workers, fundraising for hospitals, running information campaigns about the pandemic, and producing and distributing medical supplies. All over Europe, many CSOs used their platforms to contribute to the spreading of trustworthy information concerning the virus and governmental measures. These efforts have been particularly crucial to reach out to the most marginalised communities. Associations have also provided advice to understand how the government measures would impact and support specific groups and the wider population in order to help them to access governmental aid.

Civic actors have been active in supporting communities to better cope with the pandemic also by providing social services to all people in need, including the elderly, patients, people in quarantine, sidelined minorities, migrants and refugees, and marginalised and rural communities. In many cases, these self-organised solidarity experiences

established forms of cooperation with local institutions in order to articulate their action and implement public policies. This articulation could be seen, for example, in Italy, where many mutual help groups distributed vouchers and parcels of the Municipalities to supplement the lack of public services in their communities.

Another crucial aspect of organised solidarity was providing relief to the psychological and community traumas caused by isolation and loneliness. Associations have deployed their expertise to provide mental health support online and via telephone, as well as online collective spaces to create a sense of belonging and entertainment. Cultural activities online blossomed during the crisis, in a period in which many felt vulnerable: online meetings, broadcasts, cinema, theatre, discussions... were organised in the attempt to provide people with an opportunity to stay together, not to lose sociality, to remain mentally active. Many cultural events held online by civic actors have also been used as fundraising opportunities to support medical staff and groups most hit by the crisis.

### Informing public policies and holding institutions accountable

Being in close contact with vulnerable groups and the population at large, civic organisations and social movements have a deep understanding of societal challenges and how public policies (or lack of thereof) affect them. At the national and European level, CSOs have closely monitored the legislation introduced to face the health emergency, its impact on democracy, human and civil rights as well as the policing of the measures. All across Europe, civic actions have sprung showcasing how they disproportionately impacted migrants, Roma, homeless people, those in detention centres and prisons, LGBTI people, people of colour and the low-income class.

Governments and institutions at all levels have found valuable, yet demanding partners in civic actors who alerted of the conditions of the population and provided them with information and policy proposals. When authorities would not take into account the alerts of civic actors, they organised contestation and mobilised the public. The online space has been crucial to mobilise support for advocacy proposals and protest. Still, associations and movements also found creative ways to carry out mobilisations in the streets while maintaining safety measures.

At the beginning of June, protests have sparked in cities all across Europe after the murder of George Floyd in the United States. This wave of demonstrations has brought into the spotlight the issue of institutional discrimination and police violence that also exist for many decades in Europe and has been regularly documented during the lockdown. They are forcing Europe to face the present inheritance of its colonial past. Other groups that have been particularly hit during the pandemic also have self-organised or mobilised in protest.

### Putting solidarity at the centre of the agenda for recovery, proposing alternatives

While the outbreak of the pandemic created a lot of confusion and anxiety, it also opened a window of opportunity to call for substantial and comprehensive reforms in order to change the way societies, economies and institutions work. Many civic organisations and social movements have been joining forces and calling for a just and fair society for years. Joined initiatives flourished with the aim to urge to start thinking about a desirable future for the 'day after' the health emergency, to brainstorm collectively the changes the crisis should make inevitable. This mobilisation for alternatives did not only target specific sectors but also allowed for broader inter-sectoral coalitions and demands. At the core of all the demands and mobilisations that encompass a broad approach, is the idea that to recover from the collective trauma we experience, solidarity from all and with all has to be at the centre of the political agenda at national and European level.

## The space for LGBTI activism is under pressure

The COVID-19 crisis has put an extraordinary burden on LGBTI organisations. Like in other fields, many members of LGBTI communities were unable to have their basic needs met. Thus civic organisations acting for LGBTI rights faced an increased request for service provision in the face of decreased internal resources. Attempts to fill humanitarian gaps left by the States' response to the emergency have taken away their capacity to do the usual work, including advocacy, policy work and standard-setting through strategic litigation. Additionally, organisations faced new obstacle accessing advocacy spaces which are vital to informing governments' policies. In the long run, the loss of funds, together with the likelihood of this funding not being replaced, is likely to cause significant sustainability issues for many organisations. All of this is happening in a context of stagnating progress on or even deterioration of LGBTI rights overall. Nevertheless, successful civil society initiatives popped-up across Europe to keep the LGBTI connected and the spirit of the Pride alive despite the restrictions.

### Czechia

CSOs helped Czech democracy to grow amidst the post-communist transition but, as in other Eastern European countries, they are still facing low trust by the public, weak government recognition and insufficient media attention. In recent years, and especially since the 2017 elections, the public perception of NGOs has been characterised by a steady decline, mirroring similar developments across Central and Eastern Europe. This distrust reflects societal fears and suspicions that opportunistic political forces are sometimes exploiting to limit democracy. They have repeatedly attacked voices that are critical of their actions by labelling them as "political", threatening cuts of state funding and closing their access to the policymaking. Nevertheless, these worrying developments do not affect the overall sustainability and resilience of the Czech CSOs. In this context, the COVID-19 crisis magnified these trends: on the one hand, democratic voices have been targeted by smear campaign of politicians; on the other hand, civic actors have been on the frontlines to respond to the socio-economic and democratic challenges raised by the pandemic.

## Germany

The legal, fiscal, and administrative frameworks for civil society in Germany are reasonably good. The civil society contains an important “corporatist” sub-sector that works closely with and is predominantly funded by the State and plays an essential role in the welfare system, as well as a sub-sector which engages in advocacy, watchdog, and deliberative democracy functions. In recent years, a trend emerged towards limiting the space of civil society dealing with “political” issues. Public benefit associations that regularly express themselves politically are at risk of losing their non-profit status, thus, their tax incentives. A surge in far-right movements has also created worries amidst democratic civil society. While the COVID-19 measures were largely met with citizens’ approval, they reduced the opportunities for civil society to participate to the policymaking, creating a feeling of neglect.

## Greece

Organised civil society in Greece has been historically weak, especially in comparison to other European countries. Nevertheless, the pauperisation of the population produced by the harsh austerity policies during and after the bailout period – with over one third of the population at risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2017 and the highest unemployment rate in the European Union – and the migrantion crisis that exploded in 2016 has led to the emergence of many informal initiatives that are not captured by the data of the infographics. The bitterness towards EU-imposed measures as well as the outrage at perceived EU neglect on migration issues explain the electoral victory of a Party campaigning for “law and order”. Since its coming to power in summer 2019, the right-wing New Democracy Government has restricted civil society space, especially for groups acting for migrants’ rights, in a context that was already challenging for civic groups. The coronavirus outbreak in 2020 became the third major crisis of the country in the last 12 years providing the Greek government with an additional justification to crack down violently on civil society.

## Ireland

Civil society in Ireland is very diverse, ranging from informal local groups to formally-registered national charities or quasi-public bodies, like universities and hospitals. It was greatly affected by the decade of social and economic crisis following 2008. Due to the policies of austerity, the public support to the sector dropped by 41% between 2008 and 2014. The state remains the primary funder for many organisations. While civic actors are active in the political life of the country, state funding has prioritised (and has sometimes been restricted to) service provision over advocacy work. In this context, as elsewhere in Europe, the Irish charity sector was hugely impacted by the COVID-19 crisis, with a drop in fundraised income amounting to 445 million Euro. While the Government is among the few in Europe to provide a special fund for charities, the situation for many organisations remains precarious. Despite the difficulties, civic actors continue playing a vital role whether delivering services to the population or advocating and keeping the Government accountable. The current crisis also opens opportunities to reinforce the partnership between the sector and authorities.

## Slovenia

Slovenian civil society covers wide-ranging areas of action, with relatively high levels of volunteering. Yet, CSOs have long experienced problems of limited financial and human resources, especially for advocacy. While vilification by political figures occasionally targeted civic actors, particularly in the field of environment and migration, the legislative environment significantly improved in spring 2018 when an NGO Law - among other things - defined the term “NGO” and created an NGO fund to strengthen the sector, including the long-term employment rate. Nevertheless, a rapid deterioration of civic space and rule of law has characterised 2020, after the formation of a new right-wing Government coinciding with the declaration of the pandemic in the country. Since mid-March, the Government has repeatedly attempted and often succeeded in changing democratic rules and limiting dialogue with the sector. These moves found the opposition of civil society and citizens protesting and revitalising Slovenian civic mobilisations.

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