ACTIVIZENSHIP

CIVIC SPACE WATCH REPORT 2020 • STORIES FROM THE LOCKDOWN
Civic space in Greece in rated “Narrowed” on the CiViCUS Monitor.

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\(^1\) and the highest unemployment rate in the European Union\(^2\) – and the migration 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 is 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.

\(^1\) Eurostat January 2019.  
\(^2\) Eurostat October 2020.
**THE SECTOR IN NUMBERS**

Population of the country (2020): 10.4 Million

Number of CSOs (2018): 7,190

**Distribution of CSOs by Field of Activity (2015)**

*This data does not include 983 largest CSOs.

- Animal Protection: 1%
- Arts & Culture (museums, theatre, cinema): 20%
- Children & Youth: 2%
- Education & Research: 5%
- Elderly & Handicapped: 5%
- Environment & Sustainability: 5%
- Health & Welfare: 7%
- Hobbies & Entertainment: 6%
- Local Neighborhood Associations: 22%
- International & Development: 1%
- Religious: 6%
- Sports: 7%
- Human Rights & Social Solidarity: 12%

**The Economic Weight of the Sector**

Number of people employed by the sector (2018): 4,000 employees (16% of the CSO workforce)*

*This data refers to formal and professional CSOs.

Number of volunteers (2015):
- 7,100 regular volunteers
- 12,769 irregular volunteers
- 0.2% of the total population
- + 28% of volunteers compared to 2013

**Sources of Income for Associations in % (2015)**

- Private funding: 36.3%
- Foundations: 8%
- Member contribution: 7.7%
- European programs: 4.1%
- Co-founded programs: 7.2%
- State funding: 32.3%

*Source: 2018 Report on the State of Civil Society in the EU and Russia - EU-Russia Civil Society Forum*
COVID-19 ADDS UP TO THE UNRESOLVED ECONOMIC AND MIGRANTS’ CRISSES

Government toughens stance against civil society

The coronavirus outbreak started in Greece in March 2020 and became the third major crisis of the country in the last 12 years, succeeding a decade-long economic depression and a never-ending refugee emergency. In a context where the conditions for civil society and the safeguards of the human rights of the most vulnerable societal groups were already frail, the coronavirus has provided the Greek government with an additional justification to crack down violently on civil society. There is a fear that emergency measures will become permanent.

CIVIL SOCIETY’S CONTEXT
Civil Society in Greece has been historically weak, especially in comparison to other European countries. For various social, cultural and political reasons, civil society organisations have been few, with limited resources and marginal impact. In recent years, the landscape of organised civil society has been slowly changing. The country’s economic crisis which started in 2008, created new needs and opportunities that mobilised the sector. High levels of unemployment, increased poverty, and reduced social services led to new initiatives and a spike in civic engagement, mostly spontaneous and informal. The social and solidarity economy grew organically, in an effort to replace existing economic and business models that were inefficient or dysfunctional. Private donations and funds from abroad replaced state funding which had the effect of changing the focus of many pre-existing organisations.

As Greece was still struggling to overcome the economic crisis, a second crisis put the country back in the international spotlight. In 2015, over 850,000 refugees came to Greece, mostly attempting to reach western Europe. Greece and the EU’s unpreparedness led to a deficient response to the influx of newcomers. In turn, civil society actors, both formal and informal, began working to fill the gaps, including covering basic needs, legal aid, conducting rescue missions, and beyond. The availability of large amounts of funding from the EU brought many new organisations to Greece, expanded international

organisations that were already present in the country and created the conditions for local NGOs to, once again, shift the focus of their work.

Between 2015-2017, at the peak of the migration flow into Europe, it is estimated that around $803 million in aid came into Greece, which includes all significant bilateral funding and major private donations. This funding was directed both to the government to shore up its asylum system and to CSOs working with refugees. It has been called the most expensive humanitarian aid effort in history. Five years on, the reality on the ground does not reflect the level of financial investment that was made in Greece’s reception system, which still struggles to cope with new arrivals, even though they have significantly decreased. Greece’s asylum-seekers and migrants rely on the support of CSOs in the absence of government programmes to apply to or support from the state. Despite the fact that needs are unchanged, funding for refugee support is decreasing, forcing organisations to scale down or close their operations.

The responsibility for the failure to adequately and humanely address the influx of migrants into Europe does not rest on Greece alone. The EU approach of relying on Turkey as a proxy to stave off migration whilst pumping money into Greece - among the economically weakest countries in the Union - in the hope that migrants who crossed into Europe will remain in Greece, has created a broader crisis that affects Greek and European civil society as a whole. Moreover, the EU has yet to implement a comprehensive programme of humanitarian assistance or to share the burden of support meaningfully.

In a context of suffering caused by the economic crisis and bitterness toward EU-imposed austerity measures that followed, the Greek public, which had exhibited relative compassion in its stance towards migrants, has begun to express its outrage at perceived EU neglect. It is thus no surprise that Greece elected a government – led by the established centre-right party New Democracy (ND) – whose campaign centred on taking a tough stance against migration and CSOs that work with migrants. In this regard, both Greece and the EU bear significant responsibility for the closing space for civil society and civic engagement that is taking place in the country.

Syriza, the left-wing coalition that ruled Greece between January 2015 and July 2019 was known for anti-austerity and anti-establishment positions which enabled its defeat of ND in 2015. After several years of failing to confront Greece’s creditors, and to change the terms of Greece’s post-crisis bailout measures fundamentally, Syriza lost the following elections, and ND returned to power. Since the change of government in July 2019, significant new challenges have emerged. One of the Prime Minister’s earliest, symbolic actions was to close all squats in Exarcheia, the Athens neighbourhood that is home to self-managed spaces, migrants and anarchists.

ND’s attempt to ‘clean up’ the area led to arrests and violent attacks against people in need and those who support them. Police presence on the streets of Athens and incidents of police violence also increased markedly.

The relationship between government and NGOs was already problematic, characterised by a lack of cooperation and communication. This is a systemic problem that can be partially attributed to Greece’s fragmented and inefficient public sector. When ND came to power, it immediately made clear that neither refugees nor CSOs assisting and defending them are welcome in the country. By restricting asylum procedures and increasing returns, neglecting asylum-seeker and refugee integration, and limiting the freedom of NGOs working on migration, the party created a profoundly hostile environment for civil society. It also created fertile ground for far-right groups to continue their xenophobic and racist acts, including violent attacks. In the first months of 2020, the situation escalated to the point where organisations operating on the Greek islands and the Evros land border were

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attacked on numerous occasions and were forced to cease their activities. In September, Greek police filed a criminal case against 33 members of four NGOs running Search and Rescue (SAR) operations in the Aegean sea, accusing them for a series of illegal activities. This prosecution adds to a list of cases of criminalisation of solidarity that have taken place in Greece in the last years, a worrying trend with which the government is trying to intimidate organisations helping refugees and stop them from reporting pushbacks and other violations by authorities whilst minimising flows.

CHALLENGES FOR CIVIL SOCIETY IN GREECE IN THE COVID-19 ERA

State response and societal impact
The Greek government adopted very early measures in response to the coronavirus outbreak. A state of emergency was never declared, but urgent measures were taken in March for the prevention of the spread of the disease and against its negative financial impact. Although a number of actions to protect businesses and employees were adopted, government assistance did not benefit all given that a significant portion of the country’s population, especially younger people and marginalised groups, work in the black market. Temporary restrictions of movement for all residents were imposed for six weeks which prohibited all forms of movement without a special permit; violations could lead to fines by the police for breaching lockdown rules.

Whilst these measures were to be imposed only when strictly required, and with respect to the principle of proportionality and the rule of law, in

THE AUTHOR

Dominika Spyratou is Advocacy Officer at SolidarityNow, in Athens. Her work focuses on defending the rights of refugees and other marginalised groups and on promoting their social inclusion and integration. Prior to joining the organisation, Dominika worked at the Civil Society and Human Security Research Unit at the London School of Economics, where she managed research and dialogue projects aiming to understand conflict and violence and bridge the gap between citizens and policymakers. She holds an M.A. in International Relations from the University of Sussex and a B.A. in Balkan Studies from the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki.

AUTHORITIES HAVE BEGUN ISSUING FINES AND THREATENING CRIMINAL CHARGES AGAINST CSOS WORKING IN RECEPTION CENTRES, FORCING THEM TO CEASE THEIR WORK ON THE ISLANDS

JANUARY 2015: Syriza, a left-wing coalition, wins the elections. JANUARY 2016: A new legislation provides for the control and close monitoring of NGOs and volunteers operating on the island of Lesvos. Some incidents of judicial harassment and criminalisation of civil society have been reported by international NGOs after the implementation of this law.

APRIL 2016: Greek police arrest and fine several NGO ships involved in search and rescue of immigrants in the Mediterranean.

AUGUST 2018: Greece exits bailout programme.

JULY 2018: New Democracy wins the elections.

2008: Global Financial Crisis
2009: Socialist party wins the elections.
2010: First Rescue Package. Eurozone approves no billion euros rescue package. The deal opens the season of austerity measures, structural reforms and privatisation.

JANUARY 2015: Syriza, a left-wing coalition, wins the elections with anti-austerity agenda.
2015: European migrant crisis: 850,000 refugees arrive on the Greek coast that year.
2016: Golden Dawn trial starts over alleged violence committed by the group since 2008.

JULY 2018: Government agrees on third bailout programme despite popular rejection in a referendum carried out in June.

FEBRUARY 2019: Police raid squats and arrest migrants and activists in Exarcheia, the self-governing community of Athens.

AUGUST 2018: Greek police arrest and fine several NGO ships involved in search and rescue of immigrants in the Mediterranean.

APRIL 2018: Greek police arrest and fine several NGO ships involved in search and rescue of immigrants in the Mediterranean.
CSOs witnessed and reported incidents where the police were issuing on-the-spot fines to homeless people on the grounds of ‘unnecessary movement’. In a country where the number of shelters for the homeless do not cover the needs of those sleeping rough and with almost no programmes geared toward their support and re-integration, such actions raised concerns over the police’s real intentions.

Even more worrying were the measures that the government adopted in refugee reception centres and camps across the country. The already dire living conditions in overcrowded facilities on the East Aegean island hotspots - an issue that civil society has been raising and pressing authorities to address for years - became an even graver concern as a Covid-19 outbreak in such conditions could have had catastrophic outcomes. In March 2020, the number of people in the hotspots, including children and vulnerable groups, was approximately 37,400 whilst their total capacity was less than 6,100. To prevent a surge of the virus in these facilities, the government put them on lockdown, potentially trapping thousands of healthy people with others carrying the virus. Lack of running water, toilets and isolation spaces; inadequate healthcare facilities inside the hotspots; and the inability of people to leave them, even to get necessary supplies when food distribution and other services are limited, risked lives. The EU Commission, INGOs and NGOs have repeatedly expressed their concerns and demanded decongestion. Despite attempts by the government to create a response plan to prevent a new wave of the disease, the conditions remain inadequate. Meanwhile, authorities have begun issuing fines and threatening criminal charges against CSOs working in reception centres, forcing them to cease their work on the islands. Luckily, no Covid-19 cases have been reported in the hotspots during the six-week lockdown period. The approach to camps on Greece’s mainland has been similar. Three camps were put in quarantine when some refugees tested positive for the virus, and one went on isolation due to a Covid-19 outbreak in a nearby Roma settlement, arbitrarily restricting the movement of hundreds of people.

In March, the Greek government adopted an emergency legislative decree that suspended the registration of asylum applications for one month, placing all newcomers indiscriminately in detention; human rights groups decried the decree as a violation of international law. Covid-19 emergency measures further affected access to asylum as the Greek Asylum Service suspended its operations for several weeks. The inability of recently arrived asylum seekers to submit applications for the next month.

In October 2019, a new presidential decree allows the use of drones to support and enhance the activities of the Hellenic Police for crime prevention, traffic control and border surveillance. This legislation does not include any guarantees against data breaches nor does it refer to other data protection legislation.

CSOs that work with refugees and migrants in Greece are given 10 days to register with the Citizen Protection Ministry, or risk being banned from operating in the country.

A new law requires NGOs to register and certificate to work with migrants is passed accompanied with aggressive narrative of the Migration Minister.

Far-right patrols attack refugees, volunteers, and locals in Lesvos, where over 20,000 refugees are hoping to be allowed to move to the mainland.

The coronavirus reaches Greece: the first case is detected.

Pushbacks and violence at borders: Greek security forces and unidentified armed men at the Greece-Turkey land border detain, assault and strip asylum seekers and migrants, then force them back to Turkey.

To prevent an outbreak of the virus in the migrant camps, the government put them on lockdown.
asylum applications also prevented them from accessing their right to healthcare and had a negative impact on the lives of the most vulnerable. CSOs working in camps have been reporting increased gender-based violence incidents and mental health-related problems - a direct outcome of the quarantine measures.

In June, the government started lifting lockdown restrictions and opening up to tourism. For most people and businesses life returned to normal whilst movement restrictions continued to apply to hotspots and camps. At the time, there had been no Covid-19 cases in the islands’ reception centres, and no cases were recorded in the camps on the mainland since April. The unjustified and discriminatory confinement measures imposed on migrants, which remain in place today, perpetuate an insidious and inaccurate narrative about the correlation between the spread of the virus and refugees and create a spurious justification for further restrictive measures which the government had already been considering prior to the pandemic.

The first Covid-19 case in a hotspot was recorded in Moria camp on the island of Lesvos in early September. The camp was immediately quarantined, and a couple of days later it burned to the ground following an arson attack that was allegedly a reaction to the new, harsher restrictive measures. More than 12,000 were left homeless and, once again, tensions rose between local communities and newcomers. It remains unclear whether the new temporary facility on Lesvos established by the government to host displaced people will function as an open or closed centre, raising alarm bells for civil society organisations which fear that the already inhumane policies that led to the tragedy will become more cruel.

Restrictions to public gatherings, freedom of assembly and association

Lockdown restrictions prevented people from gathering in groups of more than ten individuals in open spaces. Despite government warnings against large gatherings, one large peaceful demonstration was held on May Day where participants took all necessary protection measures, and the police did not interfere. No major incidents took place during the six-week lockdown period. Yet, with the gradual lifting of the restrictions from 4 May, and as young people started gathering in public spaces in larger numbers, the police intervened to enforce public health measures and some such interventions turned disproportionately and unjustifiably violent.

Since the election of the new government, which came into power with an agenda promising heightened security and the imposition of ‘law-and-order’, an increasingly common and worrisome tactic is the use of tear gas and excessive force by security services at demonstrations and protests. Police activity and violence has come as no surprise, including at student protests over the abolition of the university asylum law, which prohibited police from entering university campuses, during a march

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12 Access to public healthcare is directly linked to the completion of an asylum applications

13 https://www.solidaritynow.org/en/restrictions/

14 https://www.thenationalherald.com/archive_general_news_greece/arhivos/hundreds_of_protesters_gathered_in_greece_s_major_cities_to_mark_may_day-273820/

15 https://balkaninsight.com/2020/05/14/in-pandemic-era-greece-fighting-for-control-of-the-square/


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| 23 March 2020 | The government introduces a general lockdown to all the country. |
| 4 May 2020 | Extension of lockdown for refugees camps, where social distancing is impossible and tensions are rising as life is more restricted, while Greece’s government prepares the country to welcome tourists. |
| 23-4 May 2020 | Civil society in Greece and across Europe calls to “leave nobody behind” and to evacuate overcrowded refugee camps. |
| May-June 2020 | Police violence intensified against the first social gatherings in the public squares. |
| 30 July 2020 | MSF isolation centre for refugees in Lesvos receives fines and potential criminal charges by local authorities related to urban planning regulations. The centre is forced to close. |
| 9 September 2020 | Fires destroy Moria’s migrant camp, leaving nearly 13,000 people without shelter. |
| 29 September 2020 | Greek police accuse 33 NGO members of helping migrant smugglers. |
| 7 October 2020 | Greece’s neo-Nazi party Golden Dawn is branded a criminal organisation and leaders are sentenced to 13 years in prison. |
over the death of George Floyd;\textsuperscript{17} and at an anti-fascist rally on the day that the leadership of Golden Dawn -Greece’s neo-Nazi party- has been convicted of running a criminal organisation.\textsuperscript{18} It was during the same challenging times that the government passed legislation restricting the freedom of association and assembly. A new Law (No. 4662/2020) followed by a Ministerial Decision (3063/2020) regarding the registration and certification of organisations active in the field of migration, introduced unnecessary and disproportionate barriers on NGOs and was adopted without adequate and timely public consultation. Part of the government’s campaign to create a hostile environment for civil society organisations, the new legislation hinders organisations’ ability to undertake their work and exercise their legal right to association.

Although Greece has maintained a “Greek and Foreign NGO Members Registry” since 2018, the latest legislation grants extraordinary powers to the Ministry of Migration and Asylum around the control of NGOs, including the discretion to reject applications for registration without a clear reason. The rules governing the registration and certification of organisations are arbitrary and have become stricter and more costly, while the reporting requirements place an unjustifiably heavy administrative burden on NGOs. All of this has had a chilling effect on civil society activity.

According to the Council of Europe’s Expert Council on NGO Law, Greece’s “Ministerial Decision and related legislative provisions should be substantially revised so that they are brought in line with European standards”.\textsuperscript{19} This opinion is endorsed by most organisations working with migrants and refugees in the country.\textsuperscript{20} Following a legislative amendment, the Ministerial Decision was revised in September. The new decision did not take the Expert Council’s recommendations into account, and it introduced even more cumbersome requirements by making the certification procedure - previously optional for certain organisations - mandatory for all migration NGOs.\textsuperscript{21}

Another law (4370/2020) restricting the right to freedom of peaceful assembly was passed on 9 July, following a heated debate in the parliament and protests in which the police violently intervened.\textsuperscript{22} The consultation period was equally short and inadequate, the principles of necessity and proportionality were not followed, and some of the law’s provisions are not in accordance with international human rights law endangering the public’s right to demonstrate. For instance, organisers are required to notify the authorities about a public assembly, which enables their dissolution. Restrictions have been imposed on simultaneous assemblies, and organisers can be held liable for the actions of participants.\textsuperscript{23}

\textbf{NEW GRASSROOTS GROUPS EMERGED TO HELP THE HOMELESS, ELDERLY, UNEMPLOYED AND OTHER VULNERABLE GROUPS AFTER SHOPS, RESTAURANTS AND SERVICES CLOSED}

\textbf{THE CURRENT CRISIS PRESENTS CHALLENGES FOR CIVIL SOCIETY WHICH HAS AN IMPORTANT ROLE TO PLAY IN ITS RESOLUTION}

\textsuperscript{19}https://rm.coe.int/expert-council-conf-exp-2020-4-opinion-ngo-registration-greece/6800e9d
\textsuperscript{20}https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/EUR2527062020ENGLISH.pdf
\textsuperscript{21}https://www.solidaritynow.org/en/registration/
\textsuperscript{22}https://www.dw.com/en/greece-protests/a-54119094
\textsuperscript{23}https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/EUR2527062020ENGLISH.pdf

\begin{footnotesize}
\textbf{BILL ON PUBLIC OUTDOOR ASSEMBLIES AND OTHER PROVISIONS}
\end{footnotesize}

\textbf{As tabled on 29 June 2020}

\textbf{Restrictions on the right of peaceful assembly}

\textbf{Notification Requirements} - Article 9 para 1(d): Authorities have great discretion to dissolve assemblies where a notification is not made.

\textbf{Regulation of Spontaneous Assemblies} - Article 3 (3): Competent authorities can dissolve spontaneous assemblies if participants do not adhere to restrictions imposed on them, including identifying an organiser.

\textbf{Limitation of Counter-Demonstrations} - Article 7 (1) (c) and (2): Assemblies can be prohibited if another demonstration with an opposing aim takes place in the same or area and time.

\textbf{Liability of the Organizers} - Article 13 (2): Organisers can be held responsible for the compensation of those who have suffered harm to their life, physical integrity and property by the participants.

Whilst it is likely that these laws would have been proposed regardless of the pandemic, their timing and the conditions under which they were passed call their legitimacy into question and expose the duplicitous nature of the government’s agenda.

Further challenges
Civil society in Greece is facing significant limitations on its ability to operate during the pandemic. Once the country went into lockdown, organisations had to adapt quickly. Public services closed down or were reduced, leaving the burden of support on NGOs. Where feasible, CSOs had to promptly move their services online, usually with no additional resources. Organisations worked round the clock during the first weeks of the lockdown to map needs and transfer their work to the digital environment – from language and employability courses to legal aid and psychosocial support. Keeping people in need informed about Covid-19 developments and related measures was challenging – the Greek government does not have a robust system through which to disseminate information online, nor does it provide translations even of urgent announcements. For newcomers who do not speak Greek, this brought added stress, fines, and risk.

Online activities increased dramatically, but not everyone had access to them. Slow or lacking internet in camps and settlements and a dearth of digital equipment and literacy are just a few of the problems CSOs were scrambling to resolve. In-person services, which were in higher demand during the crisis, were even more difficult to carry out given the lockdown restrictions.

Government aggression, the paucity of funding and lockdown restrictions were already having an adverse effect on CSOs when the pandemic hit, and they were forced to adapt their services. Uncertainty surrounding the sustainability of existing funding schemes and severe delays in the agreement of the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) – the EU’s long term budget – for 2021-2027, due to the pandemic among other reasons, make it difficult to plan ahead and allocate resources for new activities. The new MFF proposal which was finally agreed in July allocated funds to address the health crisis and was welcomed by civil society. At the same time, there are concerns that these funds may not reach those groups that are suffering the most from the pandemic since civil society in Greece is not involved in the planning and monitoring of EU funded programmes according to the partnership principle.

Government and civil society have failed to open a constructive dialogue, resulting in a lack of action by the government to protect the sector from the pandemic’s negative impacts. General measures to alleviate economic hardship such as an extension on tax deadlines and loan payments; flexible work arrangements; and the provision of special-purpose leave for workers were helpful. However, a targeted approach tailored for the third sector and its beneficiaries is necessary, especially in the face of a potential second coronavirus wave.

PATHWAYS TO RECOVERY
Despite the challenges, there have also been positive developments. Online civic engagement increased dramatically, especially dissemination of information about weathering the lockdown and how the government was confronting the crisis. Covid-19 also sparked a surge of volunteering and community organising at the local level; new grassroots groups emerged to help the homeless, elderly, unemployed and other vulnerable groups after shops, restaurants and services closed.

Positive initiatives to ensure the respect of fundamental rights were also adopted by public authorities. At the local level, new shelters opened their doors to the homeless, offering immediate help, free meals and support services. CSOs’ role in establishing shelters and offering services, sharing know-how and providing personnel was crucial. At the national level, previously announced forced exits of thousands of recognised refugees from accommodation schemes were paused until the end of the lockdown; tenants unable to work were offered reduced rents; banks were


25 Unfortunately, the issue reoccurred after the lifting of the lockdown measures https://www.solidaritynow.org/en/exits/
instructed to freeze mortgage payments; and selected public services went online making social benefits and pharmaceutical services accessible. On their own, these initiatives are not sufficient to cover the requirements of people in need. Yet they are an entry point for further support work at the local, regional and national levels and more systematic collaboration between public authorities and CSOs.

**CONCLUSION**

The current crisis presents challenges for civil society which has an important role to play in its resolution. It had to find new and creative ways to assist the most vulnerable whilst making sure that fundamental rights are respected. Restrictions on movement and other extraordinary measures that governments are taking to stop the spread of Covid-19 limit these rights, making the work of civil society both more difficult and crucial.

Like with all crises, however, there are also new opportunities for civil society. With people more likely to mobilise around health issues, the time is ripe for building new alliances, gaining support and holding the government accountable for its actions. It is also time for civil society to seek opportunities to start building an effective, long-term dialogue with government, which is long overdue and the best path forward.

Case study updated to 28 October 2020.
We are the refugee and migrant communities. We are on the field with the refugee population that resides in camps and other facilities. We are witnessing people suffering in the streets. The situation caused by COVID-19 is multidimensional and there are aspects of it that remain invisible to the wider society. Many of us, refugees and migrants, lost their job and cannot resume it because of the lockdown in many cases. Since the very beginning of this crisis we have mapped down the people’s problems, in cooperation with refugee and migrant communities. We have bought hundreds of vouchers of and we gave the opportunity to families and individuals to buy what they need, prioritising their own needs. The Greek Forum of Refugees also supported self-advocacy and self-organising initiatives in order to support and stand by the most vulnerable and people affected by the lockdown. We empower their voices in order to raise awareness of the atrocious conditions they face, to the wider public and, especially, to the decision makers and CSOs.

Greek Forum of Refugees
PROTECTING THE MOST VULNERABLE MEANS PROTECTING US ALL

Migrants and refugees' communities want to be part of the discussion on the solutions

Interview with Moussa Sangaré, Ivorian Community of Greece, Greek Forum of Refugees

Can you tell us about the Ivorian Community of Greece and the Greek Forum of Refugees?
The Ivorian Community of Greece is a community organisation composed for the majority by people from the Ivory Coast - my country - but in the statute we are open to everyone; we welcome any nationality without discrimination. We have some members from European countries or from other countries in Africa. We are a diverse organisation, but the aim is to promote the Ivorian culture in Greece and to work for the integration of Ivorian people in Greece. We support our members with anything they need. We do not only work on problems, but also on the solutions. We advocate for the rights of the Ivorian people and of our members on many issues: discrimination, employability, housing, integration, education...Because we are very diverse with different needs, we are working on many issues, not only on a specific one. I am a person of action rather than words, so it is difficult to list all the actions I did!

One day, I learned from one member of our community about the organisation called ‘Greek Forum of Refugees’ that works with migrants and refugees’ communities, for the self-advocacy of these communities. Since I believe that when we are together, we are stronger and we can do anything, I want to have networks on every level: national, European, international ... for that reason the Ivorian Community of Greece joined the Greek Forum of Refugees and, a few months later, I was elected to be a member of the Board at Greek Forum of Refugees. Now I am the Vice-president of the Forum. Inside the Greek Forum of Refugees, we have different communities, such as the communities from the Ivory Coast, from both Congo-Kinshasa (Ed.: the Democratic Republic
of the Congo) and Congo-Brazzaville (Ed.: the Republic of the Congo), from Afghanistan, Burundi. We are involved in many issues: the rights of refugees, of migrants, of Greek people, of humans... Anywhere there is to advocate for rights, we are there. We communicate with the Greek Government because we believe it is key to finding solutions. It is true that there are problems in Greece. But we, migrants and refugees, do not want to be only beneficiaries of services of the government or NGOs. We also want to give our point of views and help to find solutions. We have to do things together. 

What pushes you to be an activist in Greece and what is it like to be a refugee activist in the country?

I think I was born an activist. In reality, my activism did not start in Greece, it started when I was born. I never wanted to see injustice, poverty and human rights not being respected. I started from my family, from my neighbours. When I was given money to go to school, I used this money to help poor children, who did not have shoes or food for example, while I was also a child.

In my country (the Ivory Coast), there is also a problem of ethnic discrimination. I come from the North, I am a Muslim, and when I was little, the governments there targeted Muslims of the Ivory Coast as rebels or foreigners. One of the reasons of the war in my country was ethnic discrimination. I lost a lot of people close to me during the war and I left my country. And it was another reason for me to remain an activist.

When I arrived in Greece in 2012, I was arrested by the police at the borders and I was sent with other people in a detention centre (in jail). I truly believe that the people who make the laws on the detention of refugees and immigrants do not respect human rights. They certainly do not have an education on the value of the human being; they sign some documents, but they do not know what happens outside of their offices. Maybe they even think it is the right thing to do. I was in detention for seven months; it was very difficult. Then, thanks to my phone, I found a lawyer online and I proved to her that I came to Greece because I was in danger in my country. She went to Court and the Court decided to release me. I came to Athens, and that was also difficult because at that time the Golden Dawn Party members were attacking and killing refugees and migrants. I was afraid to go out because I felt that at any time I could be arrested [Ed.: by the police] or killed [Ed.: by the far-right squads]. That is then that my desire to be an activist started to grow more and more. I started to learn about how things were going in Greece. Back then, there was no organisation, no community for Ivorians. So, I decided to change this so that we can face all the difficulties here in Greece together as a community. I am still trying to learn how to change things, how to advocate for change.

How has the pandemic impacted your community and your activism?

Since I founded the organisation in 2018, I have done many actions - as I said I am a man of action. So, when the pandemic started, I had many contacts and many people came to me asking how they could help. But, to support my community, I needed to learn what the needs of our members were.

When I learned that the first case of COVID-19 happened in Thessaloniki, I used our platform to quickly inform the members of the community about what the virus was, what we had to do and what we had to avoid doing. I shared the news from the Greek government
about what was happening in Greece and also in the world. Every week, I had video calls with members of my community to ask what I could do for them as the President and what we could do together as a community. A big issue was that many members had lost their jobs; this was the case for many people in Greece. Their first need was to survive inside the house, to find food. We had a meeting inside the Greek Forum of Refugees, and we decided to start fundraising online to collect money and provide vouchers so that people could buy food. We raised over 5000 Euro. We bought a lot of vouchers from the supermarket and distributed them to different communities and to homeless people without discrimination. Other organisations also helped. Some members of my community could not go out during the pandemic because they do not have documents, so I went with my car to buy groceries for them. I was going outside every day to find solutions for my community. I had a lot of positive feedback from them. The Greek Forum of Refugee did not keep these vouchers only inside community members, we helped anyone who needed help! We shared everything with other communities from Mali, Guinea... We also have an African solidarity group with communities from six countries now. We did not want to only focus on one community, we wanted to focus on all people in need. So we also helped homeless people regardless of their identity.

Are you and other migrants and refugees’ communities also organised transnationally?
I am not in contact with other communities outside Greece, except for other Ivorian diaspora communities. But we are part of some big organisation in Brussels, for example I am a Board member of PICUM [Ed.: the Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants].

Do you think that the European Union can be an ally in your struggle? In what way?
Yes, the European Union can do much better. The problem is the willingness.

What lessons can be learned from this initiative that can potentially inform a post-COVID-19 institutional and societal response?
Now we know that ‘we are in the same boat’ - this is an expression that I like to use a lot! It means that the Coronavirus does not discriminate. In face of the virus, we are all the same. And I think that many people now understand that security of refugees and migrants means security for all. So, we should work all together for a better future. Through cooperation we can change things. In the past, there was a lot of violence but it decreased thanks to the work of civil society. What was happening in 2012 cannot happen now. I appreciate what civil society does in Europe and everywhere in the world. If we continue these actions, we will all have a better life. ■

The interview was carried out on 8 July 2020.
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