



EMBERSÉG
EREJÉVEL

CONFERENCE REPORT (RE)BUILDING DEMOCRACY: SUCCESSIONS AND CHALLENGES OF CAPACITY BUILDING IN THE CEE REGION

AIM AND FRAME OF THE CONFERENCE

Introduction speeches by Eszter Szücs & András Nyirati

In the past few years, warning signs of shrinking, or even closing spaces can be observed in many areas of the civil society in the Central-Eastern-European Region. The backlash of democracy was exacerbated by the extreme pressure of the pandemic and the war in Ukraine which had far-reaching and long-term consequences for CSOs. They had taken and are taking outstanding roles in reacting to the rapid and serious changes in society by mobilizing and awakening solidarity to extreme measures. It is clear to see that the work of CSOs is essential for society and investing in them enables them to respond appropriately in crisis situations. However, before doing so, it is advised to sit down and reflect on our work as CSO members in order to evaluate successes and challenges and plan new directions. This conference was organized to enable the sharing of knowledge, tools, thoughts, and good practices for countries affected by the aforementioned shrinking space. The structure of the conference was based on the following model: Reflection – Analysis – Planning – Action, which is also the structure of the present summary.




REFLECTION

Last 5 years of professional life – work in small groups then sharing in circle

Although we seemingly experience the same or similar conditions as parts of a greater, global connection, our personal experiences can differ according to context. This exercise's aim was to build a timeline of professional ups and downs, and good and bad memories by using shareable stories.

A peak into a group's work consists of the following downsides and highlights:

Downsides	Highlights
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Political context: attacks from government and media• Unequal partnerships• Balancing personal and professional life• Being unrecognized, questioned• Difficult circumstances, administration	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Connections• Resources• Structuring and developing• Recognition and opportunities



An important note is that downsides were seen in some cases as opportunities in the constant process of replanning, rebuilding and reorganizing.

Common sharing showed that similarities arose among the personal stories told. On the one hand, political changes such as elections greatly influence the professional lives and opportunities of CSO members. On the other, narratives against civils constructed by political stakeholders

appear to have commonalities (e.g., civils as enemies) which leads to the realization of having to construct own narratives. Media relations, especially reliable ones seem to have important roles as they provide a platform for representing civil work and spreading more appealing narratives. The Covid pandemic had obviously a great influence on everyone's lives: as it limited the possibilities of personal contact and parallelly emphasized the role of the online world. The challenges or even the crisis caused by the virus brought new opportunities where solidarity could be awakened. Positive and negative outcomes go hand in hand and in constant circles as they build the foundation of transformation: after trying out new things or going in new directions there is always a need for reflection and for the formulation of lessons learned.

ANALYSIS

Presentations and Q&A – Good practices by Pavel Antonov, Péter Peták and Lilla Dézma, Monika Nikzentaitis-Stobbe, extensive research by Dobrena Petrova, principles by Anna Zamejc

This section provided insight into the problems we face as CSO members and offered ways to solve them by formulating important principles, while simultaneously raising more questions. The structure of this section consisted of five presentations followed by a part offered for discussion. In the closing part of this section, main lessons were summarized as the follows:

1. SITUATION OF CSOS AND THE NEED FOR CONNECTING

- Although the context might differ in terms of cultural specificities, the needs of civil society are similar across borders underlying somewhat similar development trajectories in the CEE Region.
- Building and nourishing partnerships among civic actors on a regional and international level should be a common practice – creating frequent chances to meet is one way to allow that.
- Not only regional and international networking should be targeted but establishing partnerships on a national level should be emphasized and realized as well.



2. FOCUS, PURPOSE AND IMPACT OF CSOS

- Traits of grassroot movements can be of guide: the bottom-up structure, and the idea of being communities instead of organizations should be kept in mind to empower dialogue and co-creation.
- In the act of connecting to and connecting people a less professional(ized) and less individualistic approach could be of help. A principle for that could be framed as follows: not for them, not with them, let them do it themselves.
- A more emphasized focus should be directed to rural areas and emerging groups.

3. CONDITIONS AND MODES OF CSOS' OPERATION

- One main condition and aim of civic actors is trust-building which can be reached with good leadership, engagement, personal relationships and involvement.
- Trust-building involves the creation of safe spaces where opinions can be expressed and also of brave spaces where ideas can be discussed and challenged.
- Communication is key therefore media allies should be formed. Media plurality and quality journalism are essential in the representation of CSOs.
- Public support for civil society is a basic need for CSOs' operation – good perception can be created by media and also by reaching out to people.

4. FUNDING AND ITS CONDITIONS

- Flexibility of donors, diversification of funding can be a great help for civic actors – they should provide feedback on this.

The general purpose and conditions of funding is needed to be rethought for a more autonomous and sustainable distribution which supports more long-term programs of CSOs.

5. SELF-DEFINITION OF CSOS

- Understanding ourselves, our roles is key – critical self-assessment can be the base of redefining ourselves and reframing old, not anymore useful terms and perceptions if needed.
- In recent political contexts attacks against CSOs are frequent for which there are not any good ways to survive but expectation of them and preparation for them could be a way to react.
- Failures are natural in the operation of CSOs – identifying and accepting them is part of the process and constitutes the basis of further development.



6. POSSIBLE WAYS OF REACHING AIMS

- An important aspect is the combination of funding and capacity building as more focus could be shifted to the engagement of citizens and creating a stable supporting network.
- Diversity of approaches and tolerant discussions over them can help overcoming polarization, fuel cooperation, and enable the creation of much needed sector vision.
- Stepping out of comfort zone is also key for development and reaching goals – an essential step could be the frequent discussion with not just like-minded actors or people.
- Reports, research and analysis should be an integral part in the operation of CSOs. Analysis should be always up-to-date, and aim to understand the needs of communities for creating programs that serves them.

PLANNING

Everyone

In this section ideas for future plans were collected based on the lessons and impressions of previous parts. For this purpose OPERA method was used which stands for Own suggestions, Pair suggestions, Explanations, Ranking, Arranging. After completing these tasks the following plan appeared:

1. **Sharing knowledge:** database, experts, resources, results from analysis
2. **Sharing practices, practical resources:** methodology – toolbox trainings
3. **Recommendations at donors/common lobbying**
4. **Sharing of experience:** regular meetings, deeper sharing, trainings, workshops, study visits
5. **Connect our supported organizations**
6. **Security**
7. **Advocacy together**
8. **Sharing/developing strategies**

ACTION

In the last part of the conference based on the previous sections personal and organizational intentions on local, national and international level were formulated regarding future action. Among this were the study of each other's work and practices and also this summary.



Based on the feedback of participants, the conference met their expectations or even exceeded it. Participants were satisfied with the organisation, but it is also clear that it will be easier in the future if we start communicating even earlier before the event date. We got positive feedback on the diversity of the programme and the balance between the different type of activities.



“ENOUGH TIME WAS GIVEN FOR TEAMWORK AND INFORMAL MEETINGS WHICH IS THE CORE TO ESTABLISHING NEW RELATIONS WITH PEOPLE.”

“THE STUDIES PRESENTED WERE INTERESTING AND REALLY RELEVANT TO WHAT WE DO ON THE DAILY BASIS.”

“I REALLY LIKED THE EXPERIENCE OF SHARING OUR STORIES FROM THE LAST FIVE YEARS.”



“IT WAS A REALLY WELL STRUCTURED PROGRAM AND ALSO THE INVITED PEOPLE WERE VERY WELL SELECTED.”



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