Asociace pro podporu demokracie a lidských práv
/ Association for Democracy Assistance and Human Rights

Visegrad advocacy know-how sharing: Conclusions & best practices

Below you can find outputs/conclusions and best practices discussed during a workshop of several Visegrad CSOs held in July 2021 in Prague. The workshop aimed at discussing issues pertaining to the working of the civil sector across the region: the spread of non-democratic values, a need for deepening public trust and civic engagement, and cooperation on the EU level. During the workshop was also discussed the role and the use of various resources needed for the daily work of the CSOs.

Shrinking spaces across the V4 states: state politics, policies, and NGO advocacy practices

- State Strategies towards the CSOs were adopted in the Czech Republic only, where CSOs were given a place to cooperate on the Strategy itself via a working group at the Government Council for NGOs. In the other three countries, the state policy is still either unclear (e. g. Slovakia) or repressive as in Hungary or Poland where formal legal and administrative pressure on CSOs occur ("formal legality");

- Several participating organizations have a good experience with joining "platforms of platforms" such as Civilization (Hungary), Hlas (Slovakia), or NeoN (Czech Rep.) - this contributes to accountability of the CSO sector and addressing the various political actors with the respective issues in the scope of the civic sector. Participation at the platform level contributes also to a more precise formulation and abstraction of particular issues of each participating platform, although this might prolong the whole effort;

- Generally, there is a good experience with bilateral meetings and closed roundtables with stakeholders (MPs, MEPs, ministries, etc.; under the Chatham House Rules) – the participants tend to be more open in sharing their views, expertise, and thoughts. The closed meetings importantly contribute to a shared view and solutions of the respective issues;

- In the Czech Republic and Slovakia, there is also good experience with briefings and submission of policy recommendations to various public representatives at both national and EU level on EU initiatives and legislature and thus forming and contributing to the official position of a member state;

- Before parliamentary and EU elections, a number of participating organizations have a good experience with the submission of substantive policy proposals with their own agenda to political parties;

- In general, it is necessary to search for all possible paths for advocacy: from ministry officials (non-political) to politicians and political parties.

Bottom-up mobilization, campaigns, local authorities, and public trust: partnerships in the making?

- Building a successful campaign needs substantive research both on the topic itself in the country of its origin and society's attitudes towards the topic in the country of the campaign (following the path: analyses - source verification - advocacy - media work - activism);

- The empowerment and mobilization of active citizens, groups, and communities are key, using tools like that of community organizing. Working with professionals: PR + media, IT, professional lobbyists, and various influencers depending on the target audience;

- No general idea is applicable in every country: What works in one country may not work in another country. No campaign fits all – we need to take into account local specifics and possible obstacles, especially in Poland and Hungary.

Advocacy at the EU level - an opportunity yet to be fully used?

- The EU advocacy offers numerous opportunities how to both shape the EU decision-making process and look for additional venues for bypassing the national level when the advocacy is not possible there, therefore it is worth investing resources;

- Powerful networks and Brussels-based allies are strongly desirable to understand the climate in the so-called "Brussels Bubble", including when and how to intervene and through which channels to maximize the efforts;

- There are a number of new opportunities, namely: the Conference on the Future of Europe (or its CSO alternative), the European Democracy Action Plan (EDAP) and digital regulation, or the new edition of the Rule of Law Report. These were mentioned as concrete examples to engage in and provide Central European inputs;

- The EU has limited competencies regarding civil society, however, EU institutions can and should be urged to develop a comprehensive EU-level civil society strategy/policy exploring the tools and avenues to counter shrinking civil space;

- An insight perspective from the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) was given by the former Czech representative Roman Haken who shared his perspective on the work of the Committee as well as its limits for the CSO

advocacy and representation in the EU decision-making process, he pointed to the limited impact of EESC on the overall process but suggested to facilitate contacts for the sake of access to information and building up the coalition of like-minded forces;

- Strong emphasis was placed on the role of civil society as a bridge between the EU and national decision-making process, which is often fragmented and/or missing information and insight from the European debates, e.g. on the topic of regulation of the digital market and social media platforms. This might be a benefit of the civil society that is in place to provide expertise and know-how in different policy fields;

- The EU level was also highlighted for allowing for new opportunities for funding, including from the Equality, Rights and Values Programme, but also a number of others, which should be better used by the CSOs, especially given the opportunity to establish wider coalitions of forces eligible for the larger European funding;

- Finally, a strong PR and communication capacity was suggested by the Czech participants (TI CZ) to prevent organizations from being labeled as foreign agents or Brussels advocates "against" the national interests connected to the V4 elites;

- Such a communication campaign should also encompass discrepancies in declarations and votings of national populist politicians that often use Brussels and CSOs as scapegoats for their own failures.

Role of resources and knowledge in advocacy: resource scarcity or abundance?

- Covid-19 pandemic has had a huge impact not only on the development of CSO-academia/think-tanks-business 'transversal' cooperation but more generally on the role of both resources-knowledge and finances;

- Cooperation with both, academia/think-tanks, and business can bring new inputs to the CSO's activities, however, none are without their flipsides: academic cooperation can be challenging due to different paces of operation, as well as the varying ideas of standards of each other sector's work;

- Academic/think-tanker's insights and the data collected by them can bring the much-needed data for the work of CSOs; business-based cooperation can bring on the other hand technical improvements and solutions which would be CSOs, academia, and think-tanks only hardly able to achieve, given by both their capacities for such solutions' development and financial limits;

- In the region developing civic-tech organizations can be mediators of such technical, knowledge-based solutions, neither they are without their own issues: one of these issues is a high rotation of volunteers, who are key for a successful operation and development of projects;

- Another issue for the civic-tech organizations – similarly, as for the CSOs – is that of funding. As the public budgets are expected to be a source of extended cuts, there is a need of finding both private and business donors, which may be, however controversial in their own activities/sources of income;

- Future developments of cross-sector/transversal cooperation are to be focused on more involvement of the state and local authorities, and on the other hand on the mobilization of the young generation(s), who might be able to contribute with their knowledge (and financial) resources, and more importantly, bring the potential of future societal transformations.