Key Takeaways
from Civil Society in the Visegrád Region: Fall 2019
Practitioner Convening
Background

In September 2019, Over Zero convened civil society representatives from the Visegrád four or “V4” (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia) working to combat discrimination, xenophobia, hate speech, and other group-targeted rhetoric and violence. This event took place as part of a series of convenings seeking to offer a regional lens to negative trends in the region – growing polarization, ethnic nationalism, and group-targeted rhetoric and violence – and promising strategies for pushing back. Just as effective strategies to divide and discriminate have proven to transcend borders, so too can effective strategies to counteract negative trends when they are adapted to local dynamics.

The convening was a space for participants to (1) analyze and learn about one another’s contexts; (2) candidly discuss programmatic challenges or failures and collectively problem-solve; (3) celebrate successes and consider how effective approaches might be adapted or replicated elsewhere; and (4) explore different approaches for adaptive learning, including research-based tools for evaluating programmatic impact.

Notwithstanding differences across the four Visegrád countries, key themes emerged around the shifting landscape for civil society work: the impact of political changes, unprecedented pressure on NGOs and cultural institutions, and Central Europe’s place within the broader international community.
This report reviews key themes that emerged over the weekend, as told from the participating civil society organizations’ perspectives.

These themes include:

- Civil society’s potential shift from the “dominant perspective” in society – “are we in a new normal?”
- Visegrád-based civil society organizations’ (CSOs) relationship with the EU and the UN
- The impact of polarization on civil society’s work and broader engagement in the region
- Creative strategies for constituency-building, designing programming, and funding

Representatives from the following organizations participated in the convening and contributed to this report:

- Artemisszió Foundation (Budapest)
- Haver Foundation (Budapest)
- Menedék (Budapest)
- POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews (Warsaw)
- Open Ideas Foundation (Gdansk)
- Mareena (Bratislava)
- Ocalenie Foundation (Warsaw)
- Multicultural Center (Prague)
- Transitions Online (Prague)
- The Metropolitan Area of Gdańsk-Gdynia-Sopot
Current trends analysis

ARE WE IN A “NEW NORMAL”? WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE TO UNDERSTAND AND ADAPT TO THE CURRENT ENVIRONMENT?

• Recent shifts indicate that the post-1989 liberal democratic transitions were incomplete. Some pockets of society didn’t full buy into, got left behind, or grew disillusionsed with liberal democracy (often for legitimate reasons including losing their jobs and a stable living). Civil society became (and largely remains) detached from those pockets.

• Extremist parties have gained seats in parliament or their positions have been co-opted by mainstream parties. This has accompanied and intensified extreme societal polarization.

• Rhetoric has maligned and politicized civil society, undermining public trust in NGOs and cultural institutions and those involved in their work. For instance, “helpers” has become a pejorative term.

• NGOs and cultural institutions can no longer rely on their positive reputation as “doing social good.” As part of this, relying on old communication strategies is no longer sufficient. Instead, new work is needed to evaluate and adapt civil society and NGOs’ work in evolving societies, and eventually “sell” this work to the public and governments.

“ I think there’s been a big shift for all of us [civil society] from speaking from a dominant perspective in terms of narrative, culture, and values to [currently] being in more of a minority position...this [has been] a very fundamental shift for us. We still tend to think from a dominant perspective when we analyze the surrounding situation – we’re constantly upset, disappointed, wondering about lost opportunities, and puzzled about next steps. I think a new strategy is needed for the current context.”
CSOs are like firemen in a burning house. We are running around trying to put out the fires, but the flames are already raging, and it feels like we are too late.

• One participant noted that civil society work is increasingly about “survival.” The result is a preoccupation with day-to-day realities at the expense of longer-term strategic thinking.
• Participants noted how the context was shifting differently across the region, particularly contrasting Slovakia with Hungary using the metaphor of a frog in boiling water.
  • In Slovakia, the murders of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová went too far too fast: public protests galvanized a series of positive changes that continue to shape society (the frog was quickly dropped in boiling water and jumped out). In Hungary, illiberal shifts happened more gradually and are now more deeply entrenched in the system (the frog was dropped in warm water and the temperature was raised slowly).
• Given these realities, there’s a need for organizations to pool their experiences and insights, engage in collective problem-solving, and ultimately identify new or updated approaches to this work.

Current trends analysis
AS CIVIL SOCIETY IS MALIGNED AS BRUSSELS-BACKED, V4 ORGANIZATIONS HAVE LIMITED REPRESENTATION IN BRUSSELS.

- There is an uptick in rhetoric labeling CSOs as “Brussels-backed,” “Soros-funded,” “EU puppets” – labels all intended to attack civil society as urban elites out of touch with their countries.
- At the same time, V4-based CSOs are receiving limited support and funding from and representation in EU and UN conversations and policymaking.
  - Some expressed that these bodies seem only minimally interested in better understanding civil society’s needs and perspective in the region.
  - When the EU does provide funding or support, it’s extremely limited and only goes to bigger, more established organizations (as opposed to grassroots efforts).

“"You go to Brussels and search for help because you think you work within the values of the European project – democracy, human rights, ending racism. And you don’t find contacts, help, money... they don’t know us, they don’t know about Central Europe and its complexities – and they don’t care."

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POLARIZATION CHALLENGES PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT WITH CIVIL SOCIETY.

- Alongside limited external support, civil society efforts are also challenged by societal polarization and distrust.
- There’s a circular engagement problem with CSOs. As society becomes polarized, there’s less contact with or understanding of other groups, making it more difficult to engage these groups in programming. Meanwhile, as the usual audiences continue to engage with civil society, CSOs become increasingly associated with specific groups or communities. Their work continues to evolve based on these groups’ feedback, and others become even less likely to engage.
  - One participant expressed that even when an organization is invited to a school—a venue with considerable reach across the social spectrum—it’s difficult to reach or effectively engage classes whose teachers are resistant to CSO work.

TRADITIONAL APPROACHES TO CONSTITUENCY-BUILDING AND PROGRAMMING ARE STRUGGLING.

- As civil society’s reputation is maligned or politicized, it is increasingly difficult to reach “outside the bubble” to new target groups. Traditional communications and promotional approaches for reaching these groups are not working.
  - It’s increasingly difficult to communicate the value of CSOs’ work to new audiences, as individuals have been inundated with misinformation and have grown resistant to facts.
- Relying on traditional partnerships is also proving problematic. Government partners have become increasingly unreliable in this work (though they’ve long been traditional partners in CSO efforts). As government offices have backed out of or dropped support for civil society, programming has suffered, losing funding and/or implementation support.
- There is a need for working more closely with new communities: identifying community gatekeepers and using them as entry-points for working with new audiences to build trust over the longer-term.
RIGOROUS EVALUATION IS A CHALLENGE.

- Overall, there is a strong interest in conducting rigorous evaluation of programming to better understand programmatic impact and continue adapting and improving work.
- Even with this interest, several structural factors make conducting evaluations difficult: timeline constraints, donor requirements, and limited participant trust and willingness to complete the evaluations.
  - Participants also expressed the importance of distinguishing between immediate and longer-term impacts and developing evaluation approaches that discern both.
- Participants shared several approaches to bypassing these challenges, but expressed they are eager to learn and try new, more systematic approaches:
  - Placing evaluation forms or sticky notes for feedback creatively around events or workshops so participants can informally provide feedback when they have a free moment. This ensures implementers aren’t asking more time from participants to complete evaluations and also elicits more immediate feedback.
  - Holding informal conversations or roundtables with organizational stakeholders to candidly discuss what is and is not working and solicit ideas for new projects. This also builds a sense of ownership or investment in the organization and its work.
  - Collaborating with local researchers or academics to use research scales and insights to evaluate programmatic impact – this could be through survey measures, observation, focus groups, or some combination thereof.
DIVERSE PARTNERSHIPS AND NETWORKS

• Engaging diverse partners – from creatives and marketing agencies to private sector companies – has allowed programming to withstand political shifts that might otherwise prove destabilizing. This also helps in reaching new audiences beyond those typically attending civil society events.
  • One participant noted how social media influencers are often eager and well-positioned to help. “They are waiting for ideas from CSOs. We’ve called them after major events and they respond, ‘thank you for calling, we’re crying and want to do something – what do we do?’”
• Involving stakeholders in the project starting from the needs-assessment ensures programming is responsive to the target communities it seeks to engage.
• Building longer-term relationships rather than project-based partnerships, often through engaging in diverse networks. Since funding and therefore work is largely project-based, it’s difficult to develop relationships that extend beyond singular projects (especially with limited resources). One approach to navigating this is through cultivating longer-term networks that maintain relationships even beyond an individual project.
• Organizations can also call on network partners to serve as messengers or channels to new communities otherwise beyond reach.

What has been working? Creative approaches to partnerships, design processes, and funding.

“We are forced to be creative again, to try new models and approaches. On the one hand, it’s frustrating and overwhelming, but it’s equally inspiring and stimulating. We’ll also become more independent if we do it well.”
What has been working?

**DESIGN, IMPLEMENTATION, AND RAPID RESPONSE**

- Locally grounded design that involves target communities in the needs-assessment, design process, overall evaluation, and considerations for next steps. Engaging local spokespeople as messengers and entry points to new communities is particularly helpful in strengthening community engagement in civil society activities.
- Community-building programs are successful, particularly when developed in partnership with target communities. This turns organizations into community centers where residents can come for cooking classes, to watch a movie, or to share ideas about programming ideas. This also builds a sense of local ownership over the work.
- As certain issues or terms have become politicized, organizations are increasingly reframing or recharacterizing their work to sell it to a broader audience. CSOs have also reframed their work from something people might feel obligated to support to something people want to participate in because it’s fun and brings a sense of community.
- As rhetoric targeting specific groups and civil society has escalated, it’s helpful to have existing networks and approaches in place to respond quickly and demonstrate support and unity from diverse sectors of society.
- It’s also helpful for targeted groups to learn from one another’s experiences and responses. Participants noted how the LGBTQ movement in Poland learned from groups targeted during the refugee crisis.
- Participants emphasized the importance of looking ahead to forecast and anticipate risks and complete the necessary groundwork for rapid response networks to mobilize.

**FUNDING**

- Crowdfunding is becoming increasingly popular, as traditional funding sources are becoming less reliable.
  - Several participants noted that while better-known organizations, smaller organizations struggle to gain traction here.
- Organizations are also increasingly implementing for-profit wings, providing diversity trainings to corporations in the region.
- Private sector partnerships are also helpful in providing in-kind support.