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Romania: re-shaping the CSO sector in difficult conditions

Abstract

Over the past 30 years, civil society organisations (CSOs) in Romania have evolved both in quantitative and qualitative terms. Following the democratic transformation of the Romanian society, the role of CSOs has changed — from mainly being an active critic of the mistakes of the incipient democracy of the '90s and of the human rights status quo, to becoming an advocator and convener of citizens' and communities' interests in participating and benefiting from democratic development. This article represents an overview of the development and transformation of Romanian CSOs in a post-communist society characterised by low trust, corruption, difficult development conditions and

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weak state capacity. Starting from recent research, we provide information regarding the size, dynamics and specific development trends and current challenges faced by Romanian CSOs.

Key words: civil society organisations, development, civic space, challenges, post-communism

Introduction

Following the political and economic regime changes from 1989 in former communist countries from the Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) region, we have witnessed the marked development of organisations operating outside the state and the market (Toepler & Salamon, 2003). Labelled with various terminologies, such as “non-profits”, “non-governmental” and “civil society organisations” (CSOs), “third sector organizations” and, more recently, “social economy organisations”, these entities are essential to the well-functioning of the democracy while promoting good governance. They also empower different categories of citizens by representing their interests as well as the interest of communities and the society at large. In the first two decades (1990–2010), the number of CSOs involved in general interest service areas, particularly education and social welfare, has sharply increased. The CSOs have promoted innovative modalities and approaches to reforming public services, thus increasing their effectiveness and efficiency. They have also played an active role in policy entrepreneurship in terms of advocating with the public authorities to adopt participatory decision making regarding the allocation of public resources and the opening of the public market to third sector actors.

The Johns Hopkins Comparative Non-profit Project described the non-profit sector in Romania at the beginning of 1990s as one of the “smallest not-for-profit sectors in Eastern and Central Europe” (Salamon et al., 2000; Salamon et al., 1999). During that time, the associative sector had a relatively small size. However, by the 2000–2019 period, we have witnessed an increase of almost four times in the number of associations and foundations that emerged. In Romania, the majority of CSOs are registered as associations (referred to as non-governmental organisations or NGOs).

At present, Romania has thousands of registered CSOs in various forms, such as associations and foundations, cooperatives and credit unions as well as labour unions and social movements, to name a few. Most of the literature about CEE CSOs emphasise the weakness and fragility of the sector (Howard, 2003; Toepler & Salamon, 2003; Petrova & Tarrow, 2007) as well as the fact that the activism of the sector has been generated through international assistance aimed at empowering the civil society (Aksartova, 2006; Petrova & Tarrow, 2007; Carothers, 1999).

A theoretical model using the “social origin” theory as a starting point, i.e. an explanatory theoretical framework that successfully explains how current institutions influence the development of non-profits in different countries (Salamon et al., 2000; Salamon & Sokolovsky, 2010), highlights the fact that existing institutions bear a decisive

influence on the general profile of the CSO sector. With its development and structure, the civil society sector–state relationship is considered one of the most important advancements in the present-day welfare state and good governance practice, although this is often overlooked by public debates and research (Salamon & Sokolowski, 2010; Salamon, 2010). The advocacy work undertaken by CSOs is an expression of their main roles, such as the representation of the groups' interests and the empowerment of those groups or categories of citizens who watchdog the government actions, among others (Salamon, 2002; Salamon & Geller, 2008; Mosley, 2011; Almog-Bar & Schmid, 2013).

Another theoretical strand providing an explanation to the CSO development in Romania is represented by the process of “Europeanisation” (Borzel & Rise, 2000; Le Gales, 2001; O’Hagan, 2004; Kendall, 2005; Beckfield, 2008; Cowles et al., 2001). Romania became a member of the EU at the beginning of 2007. Since then, it has been gradually integrated into the supranational European policy as a national member state of the EU, thus increasing its exposure to common European models of policy reforms. Europeanisation is a process that brings about isomorphic changes to the welfare states. As policy actors, the CSOs are part of the process of setting national agenda policy solutions and ideas based on shared experiences and expertise. Both the development of legislation on CSOs and practice consolidation in Romania are strongly linked with the European trends.

The aim of the present article is two-fold. First, the article will provide structured information about development of the CSO sector in Romania. Starting from recent research, the article will inform about the size and dynamics of the CSOs sector, its organisational sub-sector typology and development stages. Secondly, the article will comment on the development trends and challenges of the CSOs regarding funding, legislative framework development and building a successful partnership with the Government.

To this end, the article is structured as follows. The first part presents the main stages in the development of the CSO sector in Romania. The analysis continues with a presentation of the sector’s structure and dynamic based on recent secondary data presented in various reports. The third part focuses on the legal framework and evolution of political conditions, which enable the Romanian CSOs to survive and develop. The last part of the article is dedicated to an analysis of the identified trends and challenges faced by CSOs.

Methodology

The analysis of the development of CSOs in Romania entails the use of mixed research methods, including quantitative (e.g. secondary data analysis) and qualitative methods (e.g. interviews, social document analysis and public policy analysis). This work included secondary data analysis using the latest reports available in the country as well as interviews with 13 different CSO experts and representatives working in various fields of action and

umbrella CSOs. The presentation of the CSO sector in Romania was made based on the data extracted from the REGIS database of the National Institute of Statistics. This comprises records of the fiscal balance sheets of CSOs presented in various reports, including the comparative report on the EU–Russia Civil Society Forum. This report was released in 2019 with the aim of presenting a comparative analysis of the civil societies in Romania, Greece, Croatia, Ireland and Russia. Since the elaboration of that report (2018), Romanian society has experienced different political, fiscal and societal changes. These changes will be presented in the current article based on public policy analysis.

Development stages in the evolution of civil society in Romania

The fall of the communist regime in 1989 opened a new chapter in the history of Romanian society, signalling a possible re-launch of the CSOs and the implementation of systemic changes after 50 years. All the reforms in the political, economic and social areas in the last thirty years influenced the development of the so-called ‘third sector’. After all these years, we can see that CSOs played a great role in promoting liberal democracy, protecting the rule of law, advocating for all the communities they represent and empowering the citizens to participate and ask for changes. For the Romanian democracy, civil society represents a driving force in facilitating social and economic development. In the last three decades, Romanian civil society experienced several development stages with specific trends and challenges.

The first stage starts after the fall of communism, which represents the re-launch of the third sector. By then, the citizens discovered the associative principle and started to come together to form associations and foundations, politically independent organisations, mutual societies and independent trade unions. This stage is an opposition period, which is generally characterised by a complicated environment that features an outdated and underdeveloped legislative framework, low citizen trust and participation and a negative legacy of communism.

The second stage was specific to the period of 1996–2000 when the third sector consolidated and became more involved in advocating for a new law for the CSO sector in Romania. The consolidation and development of CSOs was made possible by the international support and funding from private and public organisations, such as the Soros Foundation, EU, EEA Grants, UNAIDS, USAID, and so on. In 1996, the Democratic Convention of Romania won the elections, because of the political changes that happened around that time and the contributions made by the CSOs. Henceforth, strategic decisions shaping the CSO–Government relationships have been adopted, and many public authorities have set up special units facilitating cooperation and partnership with CSOs in many policy areas.

After 2000, Romanian society concentrated on becoming a member state of the EU, and all the efforts of civil society had to support the process of accession by putting good governance on the agenda. In this third stage, the welfare mix system was consolidated, which was partly due to the work undertaken by Romanian CSOs. Moreover, some key

legislations were adopted regarding free access to public information (Law No. 544/2001) and transparency of decision making (Law No. 52/2003).

The fourth stage started in January 2007 when Romania became an EU member state, and the CSOs became strategic partners in structural policy reforms. On the one hand, some EU funding helped the organisations professionalise their work and enabled them to learn how to collaborate with public authorities to better address the citizens' needs. On the other hand, due to the legislation and low capacity of the State to implement all the programs, the funding came with very bureaucratic procedures and financial risks. Needless to say, the process has not always been smooth and consensual, and CSOs have often criticised the reduced administrative and policy capacity of the Government worsened by endemic corruption. Furthermore, the majority of international donors other than EU have reduced their technical support and funding over the years.

In the last decade, the number of professional organisations in the area of general services, particularly education and welfare, has sharply increased. Some organisations have promoted innovative modalities/approaches to reform the public services in order to increase their effectiveness and efficiency. They have also played an active role in urging public authorities to adopt participatory decision making regarding the allocation of public resources.

When Romania became an EU member, the CSO sector has been confronted with a challenging situation: how to diversify the funding sources. The national-level philanthropic donations (coming from companies, foundations and individuals) have become another important source of income, along with public sources (grants and subsidies, contracts with public authorities and the use of the 2% law provision), which also provide funds for a wide range of small and medium-sized organisations, among others (Lambriu & Vamesu, 2010; CSDF, 2017, p. 79, 96). At present, the EU remains as the most important income source for CSOs, mainly through the European Social Fund managed by Romanian public authorities (the Management Authorities). In this case, the development of Romanian CSOs depends greatly on the policy and management capacity of the Government. Unfortunately, things do not always work this way in reality. Too often, the contractual relationships with the Government have been difficult to maintain due to delays in contracting or reimbursements, a weak evaluation system and cancellations of funding programs, all of which have become increasingly frequent in recent years (CSDF, 2017, pp. 79–83).

In the past ten years, we have witnessed the rise of critical masses of citizens against corruption and various government decisions. This period marks the fifth stage of CSO development in Romania. The first massive protests were launched against Rosia Montana Gold Corporation and high-level corruption. In 2015, after the tragic event in which a massive fire at the *Colectiv* nightclub killed many young people, another mass of citizens protested on the streets of Bucharest against corruption. After the latest event, the government stepped down and a new technocrat government came into power. One of its first decisions was to create the Ministry of Public Consultation and Civic Dialogue. The agenda of the Ministry included, amongst other priorities, one referring to

non-governmental goals of increasing the transparency of the decision-making processes, improving the quality of public consultations and establishing satellite accounts for the third sector.

In 2016, a new election was held, and the Social Democratic Party came back to power. The mistrust and ensuing tension between the Government and civil society continued. In January 2017, a vast protest was spurred spontaneously by the people against the Government's decision to amend the Penal Code of Romania and reduce penalties for abuse of power and acts of corruption. Many CSOs reacted against this decision and supported the protests. Mass demonstrations and political scandals marked this new stage in the CSO–Government relationship, and the slogan “Corruption Kills” became one of the most popular slogans used throughout Romania. As over 600,000 citizens protested against corruption in the Government, the solution was for them to reverse the decision and choose another strategy. The strategy was to change the penal code and civil code in the Parliament and to impute the relaxation of the anti-corruption efforts. After all the amendments on the judiciary system, in May 2019, the Socialist Government organised the European Elections. The majority of the Romanians used the elections as a form of protest, blaming the ruling party and demonstrating that the nationalist, illiberal ideas are not appealing to civil society. In December 2020, after a censure motion, the Social Democrat Party was removed from power, and a new Liberal Government was installed. Their declarations and policy reforms have somewhat relaxed tensions in the CSO–Government relationship. These were instrumental in re-launching dialogues and in reversing the damaging secondary legislations made by the past governments and all their attempts to reduce the space of civil society in general.

Romanian civil society in numbers

According to the Ministry of Justice roster, there are more than 115,000 Romanian CSOs, including associations and foundations, cooperatives and credit unions as well as labour unions and social movements, with different forms of legal incorporation. The associations and foundations, known generally as NGOs, represent the most developed types of CSOs in Romania.

According to 2015 data from the National Institute of Statistics, there are 42,707 active organizations with 99,774 employees (average number of 2.34 employees in non-profit organizations), and most of them rely on volunteers' work. Territorial dispersion is uneven and indicates a concentration in urban areas (approx. 75%); moreover, 55% of associations and foundations are located in the three most developed regions (CSDF, 2017, pp. 22–23). Due to such a distribution, the rural and poor areas — usually the ones with the most serious social issues — remain undeserved with a low level of service accessibility.

A constant and very important issue for the non-profit sector has been to secure the financial resources necessary for their activities (Lambru & Vamesu, 2010; CSDF, 2017). The resources of most CSOs in Romania come mainly from grants, followed by sponsorships and donations and, on a lower scale, contracts with public authorities

(CSDF, 2017). Another possible financial resource apart from the traditional methods (grants, sponsorship, subsidies, donations, membership fees, etc.) is the development of their respective economic activities, which would enable them to independently operate and achieve their social goals. As a result of measures to incentivise organisations to carry out economic activities, their number has increased by 12% (5,302 groups) with 13,117 employees (13% of employees in associations and foundations) in the last 15 years (CSDF, 2017, pp. 96–97).

The fields of activity for CSOs in Romania range from social services, education, culture, environmental protection, sports and leisure, healthcare, local development, tourism and human rights, to name a few. According to the NIS data from 2015, most associations and foundations are active in the social-charitable field (21%), followed by sports (19%), education (13%) and culture (12%), as cited in the latest CSDF report (CSDF, 2017, pp. 27). Associations and foundations that are active in the social-charitable field comprise 30% of the total employees, 23% of the total sector income and 24% of fixed assets; only 9% carry out independent economic activities (CSDF, 2017). The majority of the active associations and foundations are in the most developed regions of the country, namely, Bucharest City and Ilfov County, the Centre and the North-West. Around 62% of the active CSOs in these three regions are involved in health; 57% are in civic, educational and environmental associations and foundations; and 52% are in the social area and 50% are in the local development/tourism field. In the poorest regions of Romania (North-East, South-East, South and South-West), 38% comprise social active associations and foundations, 30% cover health, 42% handle local development/tourism, 36% handle educational projects, 35% cover environment projects and 33% are civic rights associations. (CSDF, 2017, p. 30).

Both civic involvement and volunteering have grown incrementally during the last decades, as indicated by different comparative opinion polls, such as the World Value Survey. However, their status is not comparable to the levels of civic participation and volunteering in Western countries. Nevertheless, the citizens' interest in public affairs and in developing and legitimising a new political participation paradigm became one of the dominant dimensions of the transition from the political culture prior to 1989 to the one that is characteristic of open societies and liberal democracies. Amongst the indicators of such a dynamic include the sharp increase in public participation to demonstrations, protests and rallies and the rapid development of new associative patterns and online participation.

Legal framework and political conditions

For more than 80 years, the legislation regulating associations and foundations remained unchanged, functioning under the framework of Law No. 21/1924. The situation in Romania after 1990, at the level of enacting citizenship rights within a democratic society as well as good governance practices and institutional democratisation, required major changes in the legislative framework. In Romania, each type of CSO has its

own legislation. In particular, unions run on Law No. 54/2003, and political parties are established by Law No. 114/2015, which amended and supplemented Law No. 14/2003 regarding political parties. The CSOs (e.g., associations, foundations and federations) function based on the Government Ordinance (GO) No. 26/2000, which amended Law No. 21/1924, with the purpose of reviewing the definitions of associations and foundations as well as prohibiting any intrusion of the public authorities. Among others, this law stipulated a minimum patrimonial level, modified the compulsory number of members required to register an association, mentioned the possibility for associations and foundations to conduct economic activities, introduced the concept of public utility and established the CSO National Register, which functions under the Ministry of Justice.

Equally important as the legislative framework is the secondary legislation, which enables the associations and foundations to function and develop in accordance with international standards. The introduction of public–private partnership practices and the development of a welfare mix system are represented by the enactment of Law No. 34/1998 regarding subsidies for private entities providing social assistance services, which opened up numerous cooperative/partnership opportunities with the public sector. This is followed by other new laws and government ordinances, which facilitated further public–private partnerships and social contracting in various policy areas.

Another important legislative event is the reform of the procurement legislation, which aligned the Romanian legislation to the EU procurement rules. The new Romanian legislation on procurement was enacted in 2016, providing opportunities for CSOs interested in promoting the services of general interest and special provisions regarding social clauses and reserved contracts. CSOs are mainly influenced by the institutional environment in which they operate to the point that the latter determines their nature and the roles played from one society to another. They are assigned social and economic significance based on the political culture in which they developed and on the support provided through public policies.

Meanwhile, the representation of the CSOs within the national Economic and Social Council was blocked for many years. Finally, in 2017, the CSO sector became a member of the CES, and CSO representatives were appointed in various governing bodies (CSDF, 2017). In 2018, 13 of 15 organisation members of ESC were suddenly subjected to changes, because they were deemed too vocal in voicing their positions against the legislative changes proposed by the ruling party.

The existing legislation regulates free access to public interest information and mandatory public consultation when requested by citizens. Such transparency offered a good platform for CSOs in their advocacy efforts involving different public interest subjects. Nevertheless, the implementation of these transparency laws remained questionable. On the Government's side, recent studies have shown that public authorities are slow to respond to citizens' request for public information. The mechanisms that allow free access to information and public consultation on administrative decisions are there, but the perceived need for participation remains at a very low level. On the side of public authorities, but also on the CSOs' side, the most recent CSO leaders' barometer,

published by the CSDF, indicates that in 2016 ‘21% of organizations requested public information at least once in 2015, and 13% made written requests for public debate’ (CSDF, 2017, p. 102).

During the past three years, the political actors, especially the ruling parties (Social Democrats and ALDE), reduced the space of civil society, came up with different measures and introduced changes in secondary legislation. The CSOs’ interactions with authorities and political actors became very tense. In terms of fiscal changes, in the past three years, there have been several changes in the fiscal code that negatively affected the CSOs (e.g., new reporting procedures, a new register of CSOs at the level of The National Tax Administration Agency, anti-money laundering regulations and the necessity to report the beneficiaries). However, these also had good effects, such as a 2% to 3.5% increase in the amount that can be redirected by citizens to a CSO from their own taxes. Furthermore, the fiscal changes adopted by the end of 2018 indirectly affected the CSO sector by changing the minimum wage, healthcare contributions taxes and other aspects (Ioan, 2019, p. 123).

The USAID Sustainability Index of CSO reveals that, in 2018, all the indicators from the index have decreased compared with those in 2017 and 2016. CSOs were very vocal in preserving justice and monitoring the impacts of government initiatives. CSOs also had a huge contribution in protecting LGBTI rights when they advocated for boycotts during the referendum to change the constitution. However, the legal framework became worse, and there were many attempts to excessively regulate the funding and activities of CSOs in Romania.

Many CSOs are very critical of the impacts of frequent and unpredictable legislative changes that affect the effectiveness and efficiency of the organisations. Amidst a very volatile legislative environment, it is quite difficult to generate an organisational strategy and implement it. Hence, CSO management’s decisions have increasingly become more *on the spot* as they try to keep pace with the legislative changes. A recent example is the reform of the Fiscal Code, which has placed undue pressure on the CSO sector. We can mention that there are different proposals brought into public debate related to the adjustment of the GO 26/2000 (referring to reporting, public benefit status, dissolution of CSO procedures, etc.).

After 30 years of democracy in Romania, there is still a lack of understanding amongst the general population — and especially amongst politicians — about the role of civil society in promoting and protecting democratic values. Thus, the relationship between public bodies and CSOs must be further improved, and this is a situation that can be observed in almost all the post-communist countries in the region.

Challenges and possible solutions for CSO development in Romania

Currently, in Romania, there is a consolidated associative sector confronted with important challenges in funding, legal framework and political and societal environments. In all development stages of Romanian CSOs, irrespective of their domain of activity,

all categories of organisations have been affected by the difficulties of gaining access to long-term funding. Moreover, after the country's accession into EU, in 2007, the withdrawal of all the important international donors considerably diminished the diversity of funding sources for CSOs. After 2007, the Romanian government became the most important funding resource for the CSOs programmes and activities. Unfortunately, public financial crisis affected the development of CSO and the social programmes and projects they carry out.

The CSO sector has often expressed concerns about the scarcity of the funding. A number of public programs and EU structural fund reimbursement programmes were delayed or suppressed, demonstrating the limited policy and administrative capacity of Romanian governments, which impeded the efficient use of European funding. In almost all the programmes launched in the past years, CSOs were excluded from the list of eligible applicants, indicating the Government's low level of trust in the roles of these CSOs. Moreover, the consultation processes were either reduced or removed from the public policy initiatives despite the transparency laws and all the regulations that are in place.

The adoption of the "2% Law" (Law No. 571/2003), through which the taxpayers may decide on the destination of an amount representing up to 2% of the annual tax on their salary incomes (to support the non-profit entities and churches and to grant private scholarships), has generated positive effects relative to the development of the CSOs. Nowadays, many small CSOs are almost exclusively using the "2% Law" for supporting their activities. This law was the subject of different changes in 2018 and 2019, including the introduction of a new register at the National Fiscal Administration Agency, a new scheme of 3.5% for social services and the possibility for the agency employees to control the CSOs and the destination of the money received. After the introduction of the 3.5% scheme only for social services, with some advocacy efforts, the Government made some new changes and extended the percentage for all the CSOs and not only for social services.

Meanwhile, corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices are still in an early stage in Romania, and the possibilities of collecting funds from individuals are poorly regulated by law. Therefore, they are difficult to implement as they are being restricted by the slow mechanism of donations from individuals. During the past five years, more initiatives of individual donations have been raised, and further examples of best practices have emerged. For example, one of the most well-known CSOs, *Asociatia Daruieste Viata*, successfully raised funds to build a hospital.

Nevertheless, CSOs remain on the outskirts of the welfare system, covering risks and representing interests but without constant and consistent State support. Similar to other CEE countries, Romania has been slow and inconsistent in promoting relevant reforms to modernise public services, which foster the right environment for the development of the CSOs in a welfare mix system framework. Although the public-private partnership between the Government and the CSOs in the services of general interest has a functional legislative framework in Romania, the development of a system that is coherent, predictive

and oriented to citizens' needs is lacking, both at the central and local levels. Another important issue is the Government's lack of vision regarding the role of CSOs in a welfare mix system, even though the CSOs have progressively enhanced their role within the system as service provider in many policy areas for more than two decades.

The evolution of the political context and the changes in values and attitudes towards CSOs are another important challenge faced by the CSOs. The first two decades after the fall of the communist regime seemed to go in the right direction in terms of the transition and development of Romanian society. However, in the last few years, the trends have been reversed. Similar to the situation in all the neighbouring countries, the Government's representatives attempted to reduce the access of the CSOs into the public space. Hence, the relationship between civil society and the Government became tense once again.

In 2017, a public discourse attaching "the foreign agent" stigma to the CSO sector started as a campaign with specific reference to George Soros. This type of narrative was disseminated by the mainstream media, which was controlled by former governing political parties and was characteristic of an important segment of the political class. In the last three years, we have witnessed strong attempts to describe some of the most relevant CSOs as being "enemies of the nation", thereby discouraging citizens from supporting and trusting CSOs. Those CSOs, pointed out as enemies, became the preferred targets of the defamation/denigration campaigns by the Government's whole propagandistic "arsenal" wherein the media campaigns also targeted individuals working for the CSOs.

As a consequence of the degradation of the political environment for CSOs, we could also see setbacks of advocacy initiatives. The relationship between the Government and the CSO sector seems to have entered a deadlock. CSOs are reporting frequent situations wherein the adoption of public budget is done without public consultation or transparent information. However, transforming such difficulties as opportunities enabled CSOs to rethink their mission and their strategies while continuing to promote innovation and diversify their income sources. All of these changes have been observed in different organisations, which employed various strategies in advocating for legislative changes.

Many organisations are connected to and cooperate with European/International platforms, coalitions and organisations. The considerable and systematic support of the non-governmental sector through international assistance programs has shown positive results in the form of a sector with a shaped identity as well as an increasing managerial capacity and interest for advocacy work due to the financial support for this specific area.

Another set of challenges is related to the engagement of the CSOs in policy making, specifically as advocates for various societal agenda. Here, the challenge is two-fold: on the one hand, we have a Government with low administrative and policy capacity and a partially reformed public sector; on the other hand, we have a CSO sector that also has limited knowledge on how to build and maintain functional advocacy networks and a limited capacity to gather and analyse data to be used on advocacy initiatives, among others. The level of discourse in Romania, advocacy and citizens' participation are broadly considered by governmental institutions and civil society as modalities to ensure

greater transparency and accountability of the political system and to increase citizens' involvement in decision making. Yet in practice, much of what is done in the name of both advocacy and citizen's participation remains largely fragmented, being a reactive advocacy for Government legislative initiatives.

Some of the CSOs are focusing on improving leadership and management skills as well as investing in policy research and general advocacy skills. In a recent survey by the CSO Leaders` Barometer (2016), the main areas of interest for advocacy activities were related to measures generating a more favourable environment for associations and increased funding for their programs (19%). Moreover, 16% of the respondents addressed issues related to good governance and improved transparency in policy making (CSDF, 2017, p.110).

Nurturing a good relationship with mass media is also one of the CSOs strategies to survive and evolve in the present context. Mass media still holds an important role in informing and mobilising citizens on important topics, such as environmental protection, anti-discrimination, and the fight against corruption, to name a few. In many advocacy campaigns implemented by the CSOs, one common objective is to inform the audience about the CSOs and their role in society as a counterpart to fake news and the battle of the politicians fighting with the "anti-nationalistic enemies". Even though the amount of propaganda and manipulation on the public agenda continues to increase, CSOs are using cheap, smart and innovative online communication and mobilisation tools. In this way, there is hope that they can continue to limit the risks and challenges posed by the partisan media.

Upon taking a closer look on the relationship between CSOs and public institutions from the national and EU levels, it is very clear that the Government still intends to put pressure and maintain control over the civil society as well as to reduce their space when it comes to funding and freedom of expression.

During the past years, civil society advocated for systemic changes in order to promote civic culture, volunteering, good governance and common values in all the sectors. For that, the Government should invest in different educational programs and a better legislative framework, which will encourage and promote good practices amongst civil society actors. Moreover, the policy-makers and civil servants need to know more about the role of associations and foundations in building the values of society as we know it today. Helping the CSOs gain access to different EU funds can also create an environment of innovation in helping the citizens protect their rights and gain more space in the public arena.

Conclusions

The analysis of recent trends and challenges faced by Romanian CSOs shows that, despite almost three decades of investment in civil society and development of good governance, many aspects indicate a step back in efforts to foster a comprehensive and supportive environment for the third sector. After 2015, the relations between

Government(s) and CSOs became tense. The highly rhetoric narrative of the governing political powers accused the CSOs of representing “foreign interests” aimed at destabilising the elected power in Romania. In opposition, the CSOs have intensified their actions against the government, highlighting the endemic corruption and abuse of power. The Government has consistently shown efforts to expand its regulatory power and control the CSOs, making it clear that it is not an enabling partner for CSOs, who have made contributions to strengthen the general development and democratic values in society. From the Government’s perspective, there was never a genuine political commitment, a compact document or any other type of political commitment. Occasionally, the CSOs are mentioned in official documents as potential or strategic partners, yet this role has never been implemented in actual practice.

The CSOs’ development is banking on the opportunities generated through available funding, mainly EU funding. For a considerable number of organisations, it is a daily struggle to keep their own objectives alive and continue their agenda. The difficult access to financial resources, the reduced diversity of existing financial sources, the low level of citizens’ participation and weak civic culture as well as low policy advocacy skills and capacities are all important factors challenging the sustainability of CSOs in the country. Throughout the years, the Romanian CSOs have to deal with a series of sectoral issues and deficiencies. Despite CSOs’ attempts over the years to develop a more strategic approach to its own sectoral development and to foster a good relationship with the government, these objectives have never been fully achieved. Hence, a constructive engagement of civil society is the only warranty for the development of democracy and rule of law in a post-communist country, such as Romania.

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