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Executive Summary

I was commissioned by Civitates to conduct an evaluation of its subfund 1 portfolio of grants for coalitions across Europe. It wished to know (1) whether the coalitions are working well, (2) (for some Working Group members) whether they are having impact on the shrinking of civic space in their countries, and consequently, (3) whether the “coalition approach” is an appropriate one. To the end of answering these questions, I conducted 88 interviews, by Zoom.

A. Principal findings

1. Working Group members had varying expectations of coalitions at this point, with some wanting evidence of impacts, and others wanting just a showing that the coalitions are functioning well
2. The legislative advocacy groups have had some significant wins
3. Attempts eventually to move public opinion about the sector have delivered their communications outputs, but there is no evidence as to whether the content has actually reached, let alone impacted, public attitudes
4. Trainings were delivered (subject to Covid); there was some satisfaction expressed by some trainees, but there was almost no evidence yet as to whether the trainings have actually “taken” – i.e., whether the skills trained on have been deployed
5. Efforts to build coalitions with partners outside the capitals were mixed, with “top down” efforts like that of Civilisation less effective than more “democratic” efforts like those of Open Spaces
6. Promised research for external audiences by Peace Institute and VoxPublic were launched in prominent public settings, with some impact in the case of VoxPublic, but there has been little effort to move beyond simply the launches, as to how to use/disseminate the reports more widely
7. Most coalitions responded appropriately to Covid, given their particular projects

B. Conclusions

1. Subject to point 7 below, and with the exception of CILD (and possibly of VoxPublic, for which I don’t have enough information really to judge), *all the coalitions are very much in place*, have specific long-term plans, and promised outputs have been delivered.

2. The *legislative advocacy* efforts have been targeted strategically, and have delivered valuable results – with CeRe and Via Iuris in the lead, but with substantial participation by partners; in NeoN’s case, there was a more distributed but still highly collaborative output. There is little need for comment further here.

3. As to the *communications* work: As noted, promised outputs have generally been delivered. These efforts have succeeded in collecting persuasive content about civil society generally, and putting it out both online and offline, including by radio and television. But it is entirely unclear if the “unpersuaded middle” has been reached, let

alone been impacted to any degree (though it is early days, and expectations should be calibrated accordingly). There was, in fact, a virtually even split between those who thought the unpersuaded middle had been reached, and those who didn't. No-one however, had any evidence to support their assertions. A central problem here is that these coalitions did not seem to have had a plan as to how to *target* the communications to a general audience, and no ability or at least effort, to collect *evidence* as to any asserted impacts on public sentiment. Such targeting, and evidence collection, is of course highly challenging (and expensive), but it is also unclear how either the grantees or Civitates can judge if the grants are successful absent some such showings.

4. On *trainings*, it is again, early days, and the trainings indeed took place – as noted, some performed online. I did not, however, see evidence of plans to determine over the medium term whether the trainings have actually “taken.” The “impact” inquiry has so far been about satisfaction by trainees at the end of the trainings – which indicates very little.

5. Similarly with *research*, while the promised reports (particularly by Peace Institute and VoxPublic) have been written and *launched*, there was no indication in either case of a plan for the reports to be disseminated more widely, over what time period, and so forth.

6. Two explicit efforts to *reach out to local groups* working in communities outside the capitals had different outcomes: Open Spaces expanded from four to seven cities, with many local groups participating in each centre. On the other hand, the Civilisation effort to reach into the regions bore little fruit. As the country expert put it, the latter was a “top down” effort, which probably caused unease in the field for fear of their being viewed as political actors because being connected to political actors. Open Spaces, on the other hand, was viewed as “democratic,” and committed simply to enabling civil society activity, rather than fighting against the shrinking of civic space – though in fact, this very effort would have that effect to some degree.

7. As to the *coalitions themselves*, they show a sharp distinction between (1) those whose principal aim is to bring partners together, and have them mutually support and collaborate with each other (e.g., NeoN, Open Spaces), and (2) (actually more commonly) one group or a couple or three of them, working from the capitals, with outreach to local groups, *not to bring them together*, but rather for them individually to work with those capital-based groups individually (Citizen Participation Forum, Klou, Peace Institute, CILD). Others were somewhere in the middle (CeRe, Via Iuris, and (possibly) Civilisation). (Again, I can't quite say how VoxPublic works.) Both of these approaches are appropriate; and indeed, even a *single* organisation might well also function as a field supporter. The crucial point, from Civitates's perspective, is that it should *exclusively* look for proposed efforts to “build coalitions”; it should rather look for proposals that simply aim to strengthen the field as a whole, so as, in turn, to strengthen the fight against shrinking civic space.

8. That said, there was almost universal agreement that funding *coalitions is better way than funding individual organisations*. This was for two principal reasons: (1) a

representation to policymakers that multiple organisations are involved in an advocacy effort makes more of an impact on them than advocacy by a single group, and (2) coalitions serve to protect and promote the interests of civil society, and especially groups in the field. This finding is consistent with the point made in the previous paragraph. Whether *field building* or *field servicing* is the aim, multiple organisations will be represented, either if (1) the effort is explicitly to bring partners together to support and protect each other, or (2) it is for one or a handful of capital-based groups to reach out to the field, train local organisations on communications or safety issues or whatever, and in that way strengthen the sector.

9. Finally, as to *ultimately achieving* impact, grantees tended to set out only long-term goals, achievable beyond the grant period. Without more – *short-term goals* – it is difficult, or even impossible, for either grantees or Civitates to determine if, the delivered outputs are moving the situation towards achievement of the coalitions’ long-term goals.

C. Recommendations

- In light of differences of opinion in the Working Group, it should determine, prior to the next call for proposals (and subject to honest differences of approach between members), what *sorts* of impacts (e.g., output delivery, impact showing, etc.) they will expect of grantees working in each relevant category (e.g., training, communications) over the grant period
- Civitates should consider with care proposals to shift public opinion through communications. The Secretariat should work with grantees proposing to do such work, to develop specific plans for targeting and reaching the unpersuaded middle, and to set out what evidence ought to be collected to confirm that that population segment has been reached
- The Secretariat should work with trainings-focused grantees, to set out what specifically they expect *the trainees* to do with the knowledge they gain in the trainings, and how the grantees will track if they are deploying those learnings
- For proposed research, Civitates should insist on clarity as to how the resulting reports will be disseminated, including asking for details about how the grantees will target their intended audience
- Relevant to the three previous points, Civitates should encourage, perhaps require, that prospective and current grantees set out clear and specific *short-term* goals, along with a showing of how they are causally relevant to the long-term goals, and an indication of the evidence they will use to show that the short-term goals have been achieved
- Civitates should take on board the broad array of arrangements that it has counted as “coalitions,” and consider rebranding the next round of grants as being open to any effort to strengthen civil society in order for it to respond to shrinking space – be it through coalition building, training groups on the ground on communications, fundraising, and so forth
- Grantees that have a strong aim to expand their coalitions through bringing in organisations from the field should be worked with, to enable them to adopt an approach that is not, and is not perceived to be, “top down”

I. Introduction

I was commissioned by Civitates to conduct an evaluation of its subfund 1 portfolio of grants for coalitions across Europe. In a nutshell, Civitates wished to know (1) whether the coalitions are working well, (2) (for some Working Group members) whether they are having impact on the shrinking of civic space in their countries, and consequently, (3) whether the “coalition approach” is an appropriate one. (See Appendix E for detailed answers to the ToR questions precisely as they are posed.)

To the end of answering these questions, I conducted 88 interviews, by Zoom. Appendix A contains the interview list.

The rest of this report consists of the following:

- Section II briefly describes my methodology, with more details provided at Appendix B
- Section III summarises the feedback from the Working Group, as a frame for the discussion in Section V (the details of this feedback are provided in Appendix C)
- Section IV sets out a summary description of the data from interviews (the full interview data can be found in Appendix D)
- Section V contains an *analysis* of the field interview data and a discussion of some key points arising from it, as well as some general reflections on (1) whether all the “coalitions” in the subfund 1 portfolio are genuine coalitions (with implications for the next subfund 1 call), and (2) subfund 1’s approach of supporting *only* coalitions in the fight against the shrinking civic space in Europe – an issue of prime importance to Civitates
- Section VI ends the report with a set of recommendations

II. Methodology

In this brief Section, I only describe the interview *set* that we selected. Appendix B contains a detailed rationale of the interview choices made for this effort.

Per the agreement with the Secretariat team and the Working Group members overseeing this project, I proceeded as follows:

- For six of the 11 coalitions, I conducted interviews with (1) at least three coalition partners including the leads (generally “internals,” for short), and (2) up to six outside external observers (“externals”); I depended on the leads to find and introduce me to both internals and externals
- For the other five coalitions, I conducted purely “internal perception” inquiries, with the coalition leads and at least two coalition partners

In addition, I ended up adding one country expert for eight of the nine countries in which grants were made (with France not accounted for): Experts were recommended by Tin Gazivoda, Ewa Kulik, and Stefan Schaefer, and I selected one for each country from their recommendations. The experts spoke to the state of civic space in their countries,

and I have included those comments in brief opening remarks for each coalition. Where they also commented on the particular coalitions in their countries (which most of them did), I have added that content to the impact reflections, in the main text and to the detailed descriptions of interviewee feedback in Appendix D.

III. Working Group's expectations of coalitions at this moment

Everyone I spoke with in the Working Group (i.e., almost all of them) thought that it is still early days for the coalitions, just two years out, with (1) one year devoted mainly to their creation or solidifying, and (2) the second year, when projects were meant to be rolled out, interrupted by the pandemic. But beyond that, there were very different answers as to what was expected from the coalitions at this point, and thus, what this evaluation needed to inquire into.

Eight members only wanted to know if the coalitions continued to be robust, had clear plans for how they would proceed, and were delivering the *outputs* they'd promised to deliver. On the other hand, five members wanted more, despite acknowledging the two above points: they were interested in knowing if the basic theory of change – that supporting coalitions was an appropriate means of responding to the shrinking of civic space – had been vindicated, at least to some degree. For these, some showing of *impact* from the coalitions' work was necessary – some wanted fairly robust showings, while others would be satisfied with qualitative perceptions, and/or anecdotes.

For the group *not* requiring impact showings, in the event that I set out evidence that the coalitions in fact consist of partners coordinating their work, exchanging knowledge and best practices, following what others are doing, and delivering outputs, they would, I inferred, be comfortable going to their boards and recommending renewals of the grants. The group *emphasising the appropriateness of the coalition model*, and hence to some extent, *impacts*, would, on the other hand, only go to their boards with confidence, with a showing, perhaps with hard data, or at least with anecdotes, that the impacts promised in the 2018 applications had indeed been achieved to the extent reasonably possible.

Necessarily then, I addressed both issues in interviews. But it is fair to say that Civitates could be clearer about what it expects out of the coalitions, and in what time frame. This would be helpful (1) to the coalitions themselves, so that they can adjust their work plans accordingly, and (2) to Civitates, as it goes into its second round of grant-making, and is envisaging what it should communicate to grantees about what is expected of them, and what they need to show, with evidence, in their reports.

To be clear, I do not suggest that a single answer should be adopted by all Civitates partners – there are real differences between them, and these should be respected. That acknowledged, there should at least be a clear recognition of these differences, and these should somehow be translated into a “theory” for expectations going forward.

IV. Feedback from the field

Input from the field is substantial and varied; its details, as noted, can be found in Appendix D. Here, I set out the key points in subsections A and B as to impacts perceived to have been achieved by the coalitions; in subsection C, I describe some adjustments made due to Covid; and in subsection D I go through how coalition leads said the Civitates convenings had impacted *them*.

A caveat: The descriptions in the Appendix of the state of civil society in the nine countries where grantees are working, and the even briefer sentence or two that I use below for each coalition, are descriptions, as I have said, principally from the country experts. Sometimes, they are buttressed by comments by internals or externals. In any event, they are entirely top line, essentially describing if civil society is at significant, or reduced risk, as compared to 2018. I do not purport to provide any analysis – e.g., of the specific details of a new government in place, or changes in public sentiment that might make attacks on CSOs more or less likely. With limited time and resources, such research was not feasible. In any case, the top line descriptions do provide good contextual framing for the assertions of impact of the various coalitions, and that is why I have provided them.

And a note: At the end of the description of each coalition, I have included a brief comment on “Deliverables.” This is in response to the desire of most, if not all, Working Group members, to know whether the promises made in the applications *about outputs* were actually kept. In those paragraphs I do not comment at all on whether any of the things delivered were impactful. That discussion occurs in the accounts of the coalitions themselves, and are analysed in the discussion in Section V.

A. Coalitions examined with both internal and external interviews

1. Citizen Participation Forum (Bulgaria)¹

The civil society situation in Bulgaria was said “never to have been as bad as it is now,” with smears and attempts to create legislation targeting the sector. However, civil society has become vibrant, cooperating more than it has before.

In that context, the most prominent accomplishment by this coalition was said by internals to be the production of a documentary highlighting the work of five CSOs on Covid relief. An “intensive” campaign was conducted, with media interviews, and coverage on national television and other prominent outlets. Externals, on the other hand, were sceptical as to the actual reach of this product, with two people saying that “no-one,” or “one or two” people, would have seen it on television, and in any event it might not have gotten beyond the progressive bubble. In contrast, internals were more confident about its impact beyond the bubble. In addition, the online communications effort was

¹ I interviewed three partners, and six externals including the country expert.

I note that in the descriptions below, I give the proper names (in English) of those coalitions that have such names. For the rest of the report, however, and other than Civilisation, NeoN, and Open Spaces, whose names I expect are familiar as such to the Civitates, I will refer to the other coalitions by the names of their lead partners (e.g., “CeRe” instead of “Tamtam”).

mentioned by both internals and externals – with an external saying she² had learned how to do media interviews. And two externals mentioned the 150 stories about the work and the value of CSOs generally. One said he was “absolutely sure” that the stories were covered by local media, though another external said the campaign was too modest to have reached “sympathetic” media.

Deliverables: (1) strengthening of the coalition, (2) running a project to convey a better image of the sector to the public, and (3) training CSOs to produce stories on that theme

(2) was delivered, though with a shift from communications about the volunteers project to one “advertising” positive contributions by CSOs to Covid relief efforts; (3) was delivered, but perforce through a combination of offline and online events; I do not comment on point (1) at this point as there is some question as to whether Citizen Participation Forum is a coalition per se – see Section V.D. for more about this.

2. VoxPublic (France)³

CSO access to policy and law-making is limited, and some vulnerable minorities, particularly in Muslim communities, are targets of improper policing and policymaking. One external described the situation, otherwise, as “fine,” while the internals had a bleaker picture.

The principal impact identified by interviewees was the publication of the Observatory report, detailing attacks on CSOs. In fact, it was written by an academic who only a bit later became affiliated with the coalition. However, I was told that its launch, by the coalition, was attended by prominent coalition members, as well as by a good number of journalists, and it was covered by *Le Monde* and others – though one external said that the coverage was actually rather limited. Importantly, the report was noted by city governments including in Lyon, and an official there said she was thinking about how to engage with the Observatory, but things had not moved beyond that.

Two internals pointed to the growth of the coalition to 16 (the final reports says there are 20 partners now). They said that there had been progress in getting partners to work together.

Two internals mentioned a guide created by the coalition, on responding to attacks. Only one of these said he had tried to use it, but he found it to be “useless.”

Finally, two of the three externals said that they knew about the report, but otherwise knew nothing about the coalition.

Deliverables: (1) producing a report on attacks, (2) conducting trainings and producing a guide on how to respond to attacks, (3) conducting communications to the public about

² I have *randomly* employed the pronouns “he” or “she” when I refer to individuals, so as to preserve anonymity to the extent possible.

³ I interviewed three partners, and three externals, and no country expert.

the sector, (4) assisting CSOs to challenge policymakers, (5) running a national event to discuss the shrinking space

(1) was achieved; (2) the guide was produced and delivered; the trainings were not as far as I know (no interviewee mentioned trainings in any event); (5) was not possible; and I heard nothing about (3) and (4).

3. Civilisation (Ökotárs Foundation in lead, Hungary)⁴

The country expert and some others described the situation for civil society as having relaxed somewhat. But anti-lgbt rhetoric, as well as rhetoric about much of civil society being George Soros-supported “foreign agents” continues “every day.” There is little solidarity between service delivery groups in the regions and the larger capital-based groups.

Both internals and externals said that the coalition had solidified, with significant cooperation, and a security system in place (though untested because attacks have diminished). The cooperation, though, is mainly between groups in Budapest, because efforts to bring in organisations from the regions have not yielded significant results yet – this was acknowledged to be a long-term effort. One person attributed the reduction in attacks to a general perception, in part based on this coalition, that “the word [is being spread] of [the sector’s] strength and solidarity.” Some externals said that the coalition is “visible,” particularly in left-leaning media, though again, the visibility is mainly of national groups – a negative fact, said one external.

Both internals and externals mentioned some advocacy efforts with respect to some legislation (e.g., the 1% tax system, and restrictions on foreign funding). Some modest advances were noted (e.g., a CSO refusing to register for receiving funding, with no ill consequences, and a “slight increase in 1%-related contributions to civil society). And two externals mentioned the creation and rolling out of the heart symbol, which both thought had reached outside the bubble.

Deliverables: (1) continued running and solidifying of the coalition, (2) advocacy in relation to the 1% tax provision, (3) mapping of CSOs outside Budapest, (4) outreach to some such CSOs to invite them to join the coalition, (5) facilitated joint action between local and national groups

(1), (2) and (3) were achieved; (4) was only achieved marginally (five “promising” groups found over the two years of the grant) because of the resistance of local CSOs to join the coalition, for fear of being lumped together, insofar as their reputations are concerned, with advocacy and monitoring groups; and advances as to (5) were materially affected by Covid, and by the fact that so few local groups were inclined to join the coalition.

⁴ I interviewed three partners, and six externals including the country expert.

4. Open Spaces (Marom in lead, Hungary)⁵

This effort is exclusively focused on enabling local groups (including groups in Budapest) to meet together, as well as to work together across cities and towns, in collaborative projects, and meetings. Three cities have been added to the prior four-city network. Externals said that the coalition “connects [and creates a team out of] diverse groups,” and facilitates the getting together of groups that typically “don’t talk to each other.”

Two people said that partners in three cities facilitated the showing of a human rights documentary at home. And one person, described the Aurora centre – the first such centre, and the hub of the coalition – as a “jewel” in Budapest.

Deliverables: (1) providing space for local CSOs to run their work, (2) connecting CSOs, both within their communities, and across cities, and (3) conducting a publicity campaign highlighting the work of CSOs

(1) and (2) were delivered; (3) was partially delivered, because local CSOs were able to “advertise” their work in their spaces. No interviewee mentioned any communications outreach to the general community.

5. Civic Organisations, It Works (Klon in lead, Poland)⁶

The situation for civil society is at least as threatening as it was in 2018; as one person said, “year by year it is getting worse,” with “awful smear campaigns” that are swaying the public to some extent. Control of public media by government is expanding, and funding for the sector is decreasing.

Coming into the situation, the coalition was working on a communications campaign to rebut the smears. All interviewees focused on this campaign, which featured the development and dissemination of stories, meant to feature the work of CSOs, both in relation to Covid, and more generally. Both internals and externals were convinced that the stories were getting out to the public through various media, including radio and major online outlets, as well as through social media. There was, however, a real split as to the actual reach of the stories. Internals and two externals argued that the media coverage was “huge,” and was reaching beyond the “bubble,” but two other externals argued that the content was mainly visible to progressives. Some evidence was provided as to the actual reach of the content, though this did not distinguish between people inside and outside the bubble.

Deliverables: essentially (because the 2018 application goes through many sub-goals), (1) readying social media and developing media contacts for a communications campaign, and (2) running the campaign, featuring the work and value of CSOs across the sector

⁵ I interviewed three partners, and six externals including the country expert.

⁶ I interviewed three partners, and six externals including the country expert.

Both (1) and (2) were delivered, with expanded content in relation to the specific contributions of CSOs to Covid relief. There is a question here too as to whether this is a real “coalition,” and this may be why there was no reference to strengthening it. Again, see Section V.D.

6. Tamtam, NGOs for the Citizen (CeRe in lead, Romania)⁷

The situation for civil society has improved under the current government; as one person said, it is a “totally different country.” “Every now and then” there are threats, including from attempted legislation; and the country needs “repairs” now that the situation has stabilised.

All three internal, and one external, pointed to the solidification of the coalition – significant cooperation, coming to the aid of CSOs that needed it – though, as one of these said, some letter-writing initiatives had “something missing” so far as government responses were concerned.

All said that the main impacts of the coalition related to legislative advocacy. A policy developed, and presented to a range of MPs on a potential Freedom of Assembly law resulted in a draft law reflecting much of the policy recommendations; it has been passed by the Senate and is waiting for further action. Advocacy on an anti-money laundering bill, and against an effort to reduce the protections of the Freedom of Information law, were mentioned by both internals and externals. Both internals and externals noted that, while CeRe clearly led these efforts, as one external person put it, “four to five” partners were highly visible, and “dozens of CSOs” signed onto, e.g., the Freedom of Assembly policy proposal.

One internal and one external pointed to a communications campaign, consisting of a set of cartoons being published. The internal said it “was not a big hit,” and the external said that the reach was insufficient, and that more funding was required for it to be adequate.

Deliverables: (1) communicating the value that the sector contributes to society, (2) developing a solidarity mechanism and strengthening the coalition, (3) advocating in relation to problematic legislation

(1) was delivered in principle, though the results were admitted to be meagre; (2) was delivered; there was testimony as to how partners coordinate on policy development and advocacy, and there were signs of strengthening the coalition; and (3) was delivered.

⁷ I interviewed three partners, and five externals including the country expert.

B. Coalitions with internal interviews only

I say “only” because in fact, I interviewed, as well as internals, one or two externals for CILD and for Peace Institute.

1. Ravni BG (Bulgarian Fund for Women in lead, Bulgaria)⁸

(See the above discussion of Citizen Participation Forum for an account of the state of civil society in Bulgaria.)

The “It’s Up to Us” project was cancelled due to Covid, and the main effort turned to solidifying the coalition. A mutual help mechanism was developed, though not yet tested (as attacks have diminished). Also, there was a communications effort, with some trainings carried out. One internal said that the trainings provided guidance on doing media interviews; another said that while “nice,” the trainings “might be a waste of time.” One internal said his organisation had joined the coalition because the lead organisation is so prestigious.

Deliverables: (1) growing and solidifying the coalition, (2) running a communications campaign on the value of civil society to society at large, and (3) running trainings – I am not sure if this was meant to be for partners or for local groups – on communications

(1) was delivered; (2) was not delivered due to Covid, though I wonder, in light of what, e.g., Citizen Participation Forum accomplished, if more could have been done; and (3) was delivered to some extent.

2. Winning the Narrative (CILD in lead, Italy)⁹

The country expert said that, prior to the Covid crisis, the situation of CSOs working on migration issues – the core constituency for the project – had been seriously under threat, with smears about them and about migrants. Since Covid though, both government and media have abandoned their animus against this work for now, as they are entirely responding to the crisis.

There were two in-person trainings, and then online trainings due to Covid. Two trainees who attended the in-person trainings were positive about them. For one, the principal value was just getting together with other groups, because she “felt alone” in her work; and the other said he is using what he learned “in many ways.”

No evidence was presented as to the impact of the training on the work of the two physically trained groups, nor of their communications outreach to their communities.

⁸ I interviewed four partners, and the country expert.

⁹ I interviewed three partners, and four externals including the country expert.

Deliverables: (1) conducting meetings with partners, to get their buy-in to messaging and outreach to relevant local groups, and (2) conducting trainings for strategically chosen local groups, to enable them to better message in their communities on migration issues

(1) was delivered, but it took “a while”; and (2) was delivered partially, mainly due to Covid restrictions.

3. NeoN (Glopolis in lead, Czech Republic)¹⁰

While the situation in the Czech Republic is “not perfect,” with some continuing smears and rhetoric about many CSOs being foreign agents, and cuts in funding for “political” CSOs (resulting in their being “on the edge,”), there have not been attacks. There had been some decline in the public’s trust of CSOs following the migration crisis.

As in March 2020, I found the coalition’s structure to be byzantine. However, all four partners said that NeoN has managed to get groups that had not cooperated before to cooperate now, across issues. A “representative voice” has been cultivated, as well as “common speech” for partners.

“Orange alerts” have been instituted, where legislative initiatives are monitored, and coalition level responses are organised and rolled out. I was told that alerts have resulted in various successes, including, as one person said, preventing the appointment of an unsuitable candidate to the Board of the public broadcaster (though another was not sure this had happened, but said that at least the effort received media coverage), and preventing another proposed appointment of (again) an unsuitable candidate, to be deputy ombudsman (though another unsuitable candidate was ultimately appointed (!)). (There is also a mutual support system of “red alerts” in place, but it is as yet untested because not yet needed.)

Deliverables: 1) creating a “strong and resilient” coalition, (2) creating a system of red (and as it turned out, orange) alerts, (3) creating active thematic working groups, (4) assisting coalition partners’ engagement with and advocacy towards policymakers, and (5) communicating to the public about the sector

(1) – (4) were delivered. While the interviews did not touch on (3), my interviews with the lead a year ago indicated that it too has been delivered. (5) I heard nothing in interviews about this, and thus cannot comment on it.

4. Voice of Civic Organisations (Via Iuris in lead, Slovakia)¹¹

The civil society situation is “much better than in Hungary,” with attacks on CSOs much decreased under the current government, and freedoms not under threat. There are some warning signs though, including cuts in funding for all but “friendly” CSOs, and attempts by the right wing to impose foreign funding restrictions. The sector has little opportunity to participate in government consultations.

¹⁰ I interviewed four partners, and the country expert.

¹¹ I interviewed four partners, and the country expert.

All four partners described, in the run-up to the 2020 Parliamentary elections, the development of a policy paper delivered in person to a range of political parties, many of which took some or many of its recommendations (e.g., adapting rules for grants to CSOs out of the European Structural and Investment Funds) into their own manifestos – though one partner described the parties’ responses as “rather shallow.” Two partners argued that some recommendations made their way into actual government policy. In addition, all the partners pointed to the creation of a diverse coalition of around 50 members: because of its diversity, it is a “very important” accomplishment.

Deliverables: (1) “defending the status quo” and “preparing CSO legislation” (though the first has a communications element as well), and (2) “building consensus among CSOs” including through providing a common platform for them to come together to discuss issues, and so forth

Both of these were delivered.

5. Peace Institute (Slovenia)¹²

Three of the five interviewees painted a bleak picture of developments for civil society. The new government has been smearing the sector, has slashed funding to it, and has attempted (but so far failed) to enact anti-CSO legislation. Party-run media contribute to the smears, particularly directed at journalists and independent media.

The promised reports on attacks on civil society and on mapping media ownership were both developed and published. I did not hear more about the latter, but was told, as to the former, that it was launched, and was sent to international bodies (e.g., the Council of Europe) as well as to local media and government. One person said that “for sure,” some of the international bodies had taken note of the report, while another thought it had not gotten much attention.

Many, but not all of, the trainings of CSOs on how to respond to attacks were cut back due to Covid, and attempts to run them online were poorly attended. A report was produced on how the pandemic has been affecting the sector – but, when launched online, I was told that it only reached “progressives.” As well, a production of cartoons, depicting CSO work, was developed and displayed in city hall – though only a handful of people have seen it due to the pandemic.

There was one scathing criticism of this work by a well-placed external,¹³ who said that (1) the report on attacks did not make much of an impact because the coalition did not know what to do with it, and (2) the trainings duplicated trainings conducted by other groups, and thus were superfluous in the country.

¹² I interviewed two partners, and three externals including the country expert.

¹³ It is worth noting that this person works in an organisation that is in direct competition with the coalition, as to training CSOs. While I took this potential bias into account, I found the input plausible, and thus have mentioned it here.

Deliverables: (1) mapping media ownership, (2) mapping attacks on CSOs, (3) training CSOs on how to respond to attacks, (4) broadening the coalition, not by adding new partners, but by sharing knowledge and expertise with non-partner CSOs in the field

(1) was not mentioned, but I expect it was delivered; (2) was delivered; (3) was only partially delivered due to Covid; and similarly for (4).

C. Responses to Covid

Covid responses were for the most part sensible and sensitive. Some examples:

- The Bulgarian Fund for Women moved from its “It’s Up to Us” project to more robust coalition building
- Klon, while continuing to collect stories from the field generally (though remotely) about the work of the sector, expanded to include stories about the Covid relief efforts by local groups
- CeRe *did not* discontinue its advocacy work, which was actually *facilitated* by being at a distance, because there was increased accessibility of targets due to their working from home
- Open Spaces cancelled all in-person meetings, while the partner centres had to close; in their place a documentary film festival (to be online) was planned, along with increased strategy development at coalition level; and online projects were developed and carried out by the centres
- Citizen Participation Forum substituted the collection and dissemination of stories about CSO assistance in Covid relief work in place of the planned local volunteerism project
- Peace Institute cancelled most of its in-person trainings, but developed a communications effort – the above-mentioned cartoon exhibition published online and present in the entrance to city hall – as well as a series of articles on how Covid was affecting CSOs
- Via Iuris joined and contributed to a Crisis Group, whose aims were to monitor developments in Covid responses by government, and to respond where needed

(I do not mention NeoN here because I was told that it did not need to make adjustments; its work has been mainly online from the start.)

In three cases, adjustments/substitutions were not so clear:

- CILD did not, as far as I could tell, do much extra due to the pandemic, other than carrying out some trainings online instead of already-planned trainings on the ground
- VoxPublic made considerable promises about public outreach and the like, in addition to creating and rolling out the Observatory report – though much of it turned out to be impossible to do in the pandemic. While, once Covid hit, more work on the website was reported, I am unsure that the amount of effort delivered was matched by the amount that would have taken place under the original plan

- Civilisation’s case is a bit harder. I remember Vera Móra telling me even last year that the coalition was “on hold” because of the difficulty of reaching out to the regions, and now, such outreach in person is foreclosed. That said, a survey of CSOs was done to report on their responses to Covid (I am unclear if this was a particularly extensive effort), and legislative advocacy in Budapest continued. I don’t know if this amounts roughly to the *amount* of activity promised in the 2018 application

D. Impacts of the Civitates convenings

While not explicitly asked for in the ToR, I asked all coalition leads, with respect to the convenings, (1) what they had learned in them, (2) whether they are collaborating or cooperating with other coalitions due to meeting them at the convenings, and (3) what improvements to the convenings might be made. The details, as already noted, can be found in Appendix D. I summarise the input briefly here.

Nine leads said they had *learned things of value to them*, most prominently:

- they had appreciated the opportunity to share strategies and tactics with other coalitions
- they had learned about the civic space situations in other countries
- the Coombes training on hope-based communications and the Bruno Selun workshop were mentioned frequently, and were much appreciated

Eight leads specifically mentioned *collaborations or communications with other coalitions* as a result of the convenings, including, again most prominently:

- information exchanges outside the convenings themselves
- working on joint projects, or planning such collaboration

Five leads, on the other hand, did not report any specific collaborations: two of these, however, said that the convenings had at least made such collaborations *possible*, so, as such, I have included them in the previous count as well.

As to *possible improvements* to the convenings, while there was no clustering of responses, I did hear that:

- workshops might be more focused and less theoretical
- more trainings would be appreciated
- opportunities to share experiences in the learning initiatives would be useful
- it would be good for documentation from the convenings to be circulated

V. Discussion

A. Deliverables delivered?

As can be seen, most of the deliverables, including the ones that were adjusted in whole or in part due to Covid, came through. This shows, in most cases, that the coalitions (with a caveat as to which of the grantees are in fact “coalitions” – again, see Section V.D. for this) have solidified, have had plans in place, and have respected them in their work. This is impressive.

As also briefly noted, I only have some question in this regard about CILD and VoxPublic – CILD because not much in fact got done, and I had the sense that the core partners were not quite on the same page; VoxPublic because, at least based on the relatively few interviews – but this might just be, therefore, only an artefact of whom I ended up being put in touch with – there doesn’t seem to be much visibility of the coalition, and not much coordination amongst its partners except for the launch of the Observatory (and perhaps some contributions by partners to the report, though no-one mentioned this).

B. Impacts achieved

The impact analysis needs to be divided between (1) coalitions whose main aim was to solidify themselves, with respect to mutual solidarity, knowledge sharing and the like – where the main impact aimed for was the securing of the sector, and building the capacity of coalition partners, (2) coalitions whose main aim was to conduct legislative advocacy, and (3) coalitions whose main aim was to communicate to the general public, or to governments and parliaments (or both) the value that civil society contributes to society writ large. This might be in terms of CSOs’ specific issue areas (e.g., education CSOs contributing to extra-curricular activities, Roma-focused groups serving Roma communities in various ways), or it might be, once the pandemic hit, showing how CSOs have added value for Covid relief.

1. Coalition building

For many of the Civitates partners, as indicated above, a showing that the coalitions are stable, diverse, have strategic plans, and are working on projects, would be quite enough; the “impact” of the coalition work, so to speak, would be simply on coalition partners. (Though, of course, a showing of some impacts of the *actual work* – even just an individual story or two – would be welcome additions.)

The evidence is plain that sustaining and strengthening, or *at least* collaboration, has been achieved for a fair number of the groups. For instance, the coalitions focusing on legislative reform – CeRe, Via Iuris, and, as it has turned out, NeoN – have developed genuinely coordinated efforts: joint monitoring, joint meetings or calls to legislators or political parties or other policymakers, and joint inputs, with all or most coalition partners as signatories. These are groups with clear joint strategies as well, hammered out in joint calls or meetings.

Other groups made a similar showing. Open Spaces, is the most prominent, though restricted by Covid; it has built the coalition up to seven cities, is running meetings of the centres online, and there is continuing development of strategy (and, as was hinted at in a couple of interviews, some adjustments to the coalition structure); while at the same time, local partners are running new online events. Again, the Bulgarian Fund for Women turned explicitly to coalition-building efforts due to having cancelled their main project, and all three interviews pointed to achievements in this regard. (NeoN, too, shows considerable interaction between partners, beyond the orange alert activities.)¹⁴

Even with the grantees where much of the basic work is being conducted by one or two organisations sitting in the capital – CILD, Klon, Peace Institute – there is significant joint work, in the sense that one or two (or even three) CSOs are working together, to support or train organisations in the field, with those efforts reaching good numbers of other CSOs.

The only grantees with respect to which I have some doubt about much impact so far as coalition building are concerned are CILD and VoxPublic. For CILD, collaboration between the three national partners was fraught, and even now I have some sense that they are still not quite on the same page. VoxPublic is a somewhat more obscure case, as I have noted – obscure just because the interviews were limited. Partners did work together on the launch of the Observatory report; but I just do not have a sense of what else was happening at coalition level. – To be clear on this point, I have explicit scepticism as to whether the CILD efforts to build a coalition have borne fruit (though I don't doubt that it is potentially promising in this regard); in the case of VoxPublic, due to the difficulty in running interviews, I just can't judge one way or the other if that coalition has been solidified.

2. Legislative advocacy

The principal actors here were CeRe and Via Iuris. They both reported significant and impressive impacts: legislative or policy proposals were developed through coalition efforts; principal actors (parliamentarians, political parties) were engaged and sometimes convinced to take on the policy recommendations; and some problematic legislative efforts were headed off (to some extent). Both, too, deployed their partners strategically, leveraging their individual relationships with key figures.

NeoN also reported some modest success, through their orange alerts, involving multiple coalition partners, in heading off some legislative challenges. But its principal, and very impressive, accomplishment in this regard, in a country where threats to the sector are presently limited, is the creation of a smart mechanism (the orange alerts), that seems

¹⁴ Other groups perhaps in this category include the Bulgarian Fund for Women (four mentions), Cere (three mentions), Civilisation (five mentions, particularly for capital-based joint advocacy), Via Iuris (four mentions) and VoxPublic (two mentions), for each of which there were, as just indicated in the parentheses, references to coalition strengthening as part of the coalitions' work. I put this only in a footnote just because I don't have direct experience of this strengthening, as I do with NeoN and Open Spaces, though the interview data cannot be discounted. In any event, I will continue to cite Neon and Open Spaces in a few places below, just for illustrative purposes, as clear instances of *both* coordinated efforts and strengthening of their individual partners.

well suited to responding to legislative, regulatory, or even implementation problems (e.g., abusive police practices) as they arise.

There is little more to say on this topic: legislative advocacy efforts have genuinely been impactful; and they have critically involved multiple coalition partners. Given this, there is reason to think that more Civitates support will result in more positive impacts going forward.

3. Communications projects

The discussion here is necessarily more complex. CILD, Klon and Citizen Participation Forum had communications projects as their principal promised activities. Peace Institute and VoxPublic had important communications efforts in relation to reports they developed (and in Peace Institute's case, also for an exhibition); and CeRe had a modest effort through its cartoon campaign.

The *theory* for CILD, Citizen Participation Forum and Klon was that facilitating the production (or producing themselves) of content about the value of the civic sector, which *actually reaches* the “unpersuaded middle,” will in fact build the latter's trust for the sector, in the face of smears against it as a whole. But it is quite unclear whether those efforts reached that population segment. Opinions on this matter were sharply divided. Eight interviewees thought, as to the particular coalition they were commenting on, that there *had been* reach to that unpersuaded middle, and nine said that there had not been. And *no-one could cite any evidence* specifically showing that there had been any specific reach or impact beyond the progressive bubble.¹⁵

Accordingly, the verdict at this point is out as to whether these coalitions' efforts' actually have reached the unpersuaded middle, and thus at least had a *potential* impact on it, *because* there is no serious evidence one way or the other. That said, that very lack of evidence, as well as the sharp *speculative* divide between interviewees as to the communications' reach into this population segment, points to a significant fact that both the coalitions and Civitates should take on board. It is this: none of the organisations (perhaps with the exception of CILD), as far as I can tell, has had a plan for *how to target* specifically the unpersuaded middle, other than through the above-described efforts that seem simply aimed to *get the content out*. And to be frank, (1) I am unsure whether the groups themselves are up to doing the kind of research needed to show whether or not they've reached (let alone impacted) the unpersuaded middle, and (2) the Civitates grants, at least, likely are not sufficient to commission such research from outside experts.

I realise that these assertions are harsh. But they come from much (but not all) of the actual data from interviews, as well as from my own observations of these efforts through the interviews I did this time, and in January of last year as well. Targeting is hard, and tracing impact is even harder. What one needs, at a minimum, is a *theory of change* for *how* the content is in fact going to change minds, and *an approach to communications*

¹⁵ Some statistics have been gathered as to reach, but they are silent, as far as I can tell, as to *who* has been reached.

outreach that is specifically designed to reach the desired audience target. I found neither of these in place.¹⁶

To be fair, the Civitates grants for the explicit communications efforts did not require targeting; nor, as far as I can tell, did they require evidence as to the actual impact of these efforts beyond the bubble. Still, Civitates, going forward, should at least query whether it should continue supporting these efforts, on the basis that, due both to grantee capacity and to the likely lack of enough funding to hire external experts, it may be *impossible* to say whether those grants are accomplishing what they are aiming for.

That all said, and as one interviewee pointed out, there may well be very valuable effects from these communications even if their reach is limited. Progressives, i.e., people “in the bubble,” indeed are likely to see the Citizen Participation Forum and Klon content. This may well reinforce their trust in the sector. It might motivate them to become more involved. They might even be moved to provide financial support, if they can, to some sector efforts. These, clearly, would be worthy achievements. But they do represent a different (though perhaps complementary) theory of change, and implicate different metrics for, and ways of, accessing relevant data.

Finally, it is worth pausing for a moment over a very interesting effort precisely to target and impact non-progressives. It is CILD’s. I cannot comment as to its efficacy *to date* because it was, with the exception of two in-person trainings, and some less effective online ones, more or less aborted due to Covid (though the “power mapping” was done). But in principle, this effort quite precisely *targets* local communities, with expected contextual nuances. In addition to that targeting, any impact on the perceptions and attitudes of the public in these communities probably *can* be canvassed fairly easily, because the targeted audiences are small, and surveys or other techniques may be realistic in relation to them. But as I say, it is just too early to make any assessment in practice here.

Communications efforts meant to change minds are hard. I do not underestimate this. I also fully recognise that the efforts by, e.g., Citizen Participation Forum and Klon, though quite fully developed at this point, are necessarily long-term efforts, and major results cannot be achieved in a year or two. But, as I will discuss more fully in Section V.C. below, at least as to *confirmation*, there are steps that can be taken, both by Civitates and by its “communications” grantees – setting *intermediate* goals, and specifying what kind of evidence might be adduced to show that *they* are being achieved – that can mitigate some of the uncertainties that I have set out above.

¹⁶ The efforts by CeRe (cartoons), the Peace Institutes (cartoons exhibited at city hall), Civilisation (to be “visible” in at least left wing media), and Open Space (showcasing CSOs in its annual festival) are modest, and may well, too, be restricted to the same bubble. I can’t comment further on these, as there were very few, and mainly general, comments about this in interviews.

4. Training efforts

Many of the coalitions have engaged in, or at least planned, training – CILD (on how to message on migration to local communities), Citizen Participation Forum (on how to tell stories and work with media), Klón (on how to tell stories), Peace Institute (on responding to attacks), and to some modest extent, Civilisation. All of these were impeded materially by the pandemic, and it would be quite unfair to expect much of them.

For the most part though, even for those trainings that were carried out, there was an evidence gap as to their impact that could not realistically be filled by my interviews. It is just too early to see if the trainings really “took,” particularly where so many were conducted online due to the pandemic. I did hear from a couple of trainees that the trainings – the in-person ones in any event – were much appreciated opportunities to meet other groups and to exchange information and experiences with them. But the trainings were not very long, and there were not very many of them; and in only one case did I hear from a trainee that she was in touch with other trainees once the trainings were done.

In this regard, I only have some advice for Civitates, which I suspect is already well understood but worth underlining: Trainings are only as good as the *application by trainees of what they have been trained on*. Obviously, this cannot be assessed by satisfaction surveys done merely at the end of training sessions. It can *only* be assessed some time after. The questions here are, just by way of example, these:

- Are the stories being told by Citizen Participation Forum or Klón about the work and value of local groups, actually being deployed by the groups themselves, without much in the way of editing by the coalition leads, due in part to trainings they attended?
- Have local groups trained by CILD carried out contextually designed communications, again due to the training by that coalition?

These are questions that can be tested through follow-up surveys, perhaps a year after the trainings have been done. Better, they can be tested through *modest* evaluations, maybe affordable even out of the Civitates grants. These latter could involve visits to selected grantees to see what they have learned, how they have applied that learning, to what effect in their communities. Civitates would do well to insist on such inquiries, at an appropriate time, where it is supporting training efforts – again, to confirm or not whether the grants are achieving much.

5. Practical research

While the CILD “power mapping” and the mapping by Civilisation of civil society in the regions might be included here, I do not discuss them, because both were meant for internal purposes. In contrast, Peace Institute and VoxPublic produced reports meant for public consumption, and these are worth commenting on.

Reports by each of them covered attacks on CSOs, and appear to have been significant efforts (the VoxPublic work perhaps was larger just because the country covered is quite

a bit bigger). I have found, though, quite a difference, in respect of reported roll-outs and hence potential impacts (I say “potential” just because both were published during Covid).

The VoxPublic report was launched at what interviewees described as a prominent event, with partners present and vouching for its importance, with journalists present too, and with coverage on significant media. As a direct result, as argued in interviews, cities including at least Grenoble and Lyon (where a partner is very active), responded positively to its findings. The Peace Institute, on the other hand, does not appear to have had a plan for what to do with its report, other than sending it to international institutions, with no clear idea – as an external argued – of what impact in Slovenia doing so would have had.

Clearly, from the Civitates point of view, a report done is only as effective as its strategic roll-out; and ideally, of course, showings of impact would be provided by grantees. To some extent, such a showing was provided by VoxPublic. Very little in this regard, however, was provided by Peace Institute. It would be reasonable for Civitates, going forward, to seriously examine how reports are presented, with what media and social media coverage, with how many requests there have been to see them, and with what acknowledgments by target audiences.

6. Outreach to local groups to join coalitions

The results here are decidedly mixed. The *explicit* efforts in this regard to have local groups join their coalitions were by Civilisation and Open Spaces. It might be said that the communications work by, e.g., Citizen Participation Forum and Klon, did so too, since they too involved outreach into the field to enable local organisations to tell their stories.

Focusing for the moment on Civilisation and Open Spaces efforts (and perhaps the one by the Bulgarian Fund for Women): I was told by various interviewees, including some country experts, that generally speaking, local organisations, particularly service providers, are often dependent on local government funding. These are wary of joining coalitions led by, or prominently populated by, capital-based organisations that tend towards political advocacy and/or monitoring. This is because it is typically those latter groups that are objects of smears, and the local groups fear that they will lose their funding, or indeed their local footholds, if they are identified with the capital-based groups. Certainly Civilisation has faced exactly this challenge – while Open Spaces has not. Moreover, as far as I can tell, the Citizen Participation Forum and Klon efforts, even though run by capital-based organisations, did *not* face this challenge, perhaps (though I am speculating) exactly because the local groups were not being asked to *join* the coalitions.

I am unsure quite what to conclude from this. Certainly, the Open Spaces project is not presented as, and probably isn't, an advocacy or monitoring effort (though some campaigning is done). Rather, it is an explicit effort simply to enable civil society organisations, be they advocacy groups, or artists or service providers, to *do their work*

more effectively. This is quite different, at least in appearance, from an effort to move organisations to join an advocacy or monitoring effort. Civilisation's effort, in this regard, was described as "top down," while the effort by Open Spaces was described as "democratic." (It is worth noting that efforts by the legislative advocacy groups, e.g., CeRe and Via Iuris, do not focus very much on bringing into their coalitions local groups.)

Beyond Civitates being aware of these differences, I believe there should be a joint effort between it and its grantees to sort out when outreach into the field is possible and appropriate (as it clearly is for Open Spaces), and when it is not (e.g., in Via Iuris's case). Expectations on both sides can be calibrated, based on a joint brainstorming on this issue.

C. Where short-term goals and showings will be useful, and should be encouraged

The essential point I make in this subsection is this: where core goals are long-term, Civitates and its grantees need some signposts for progress towards those goals – that is, *intermediate goals*, which provide assurance to both that the latter are going in the right direction. These, additionally, will give some sense of what is working and what is not, what might be adjusted and how, whether the whole enterprise needs to be rethought, or whether the enterprise ought to be scrapped in its entirety.

A word more about intermediate goals: By these, I mean goals that are set for the *short term*, and are meant to be steps towards more major goals (e.g., changing public opinion about CSOs; facilitating a robust ability of groups on the ground to respond to and defend themselves against attacks; facilitating the sustainability of hyper-local groups through trainings on communications, fundraising and the like).

The training efforts by this cohort of grantees, and even more so the communications efforts, have more long-term goals, and the ultimate impacts aimed for require patience. Yet, the application documents for these efforts tend only set out the ultimate impacts sought – e.g., the shifting of public opinion. For this reason, and as is evident from the foregoing, it is virtually impossible to assess any impacts of this sort *now*.

Even though these impacts cannot, then, be tested over the short term, this does not mean that *nothing* can be tested over that period. This is because – and I think this is absolutely crucial – (1) *short-term* goals *can* be set, (2) a causal story can (and must) be told as to why the achievement of those goals will move the situation closer to achievement of the longer-term goals, and (3) the sorts of evidence that would show that the short-term goals have been achieved can (and must) be set out.

Consider, first, Citizen Participation Forum and Klon, for each of which the ultimate goal is to shift public opinion. Short-term goals might include:

- securing the publication or broadcast by media provably reaching a “middle” audience
- the occurrence of comments by officials, negative or positive, indicating how visible the efforts are
- the occurrence of comments/likes and so forth about the content on social media sites *that are mainstream*
- outreach to the local groups featured in the content by people in their own communities, to volunteer or otherwise engage with the groups (e.g., attending their public events, asking to be on a newsletter mailing list if such exist)

A brief, and probably easy, account could be expected of how these achievements could start to move local public opinion in the right way. And a plan to collect evidence that such aims have been achieved, too, should be expected, and should be relatively straightforward for the groups to provide.

As to *trainings* of local groups on communications, short-term goals, short of showing impact of their communications on their communities’ attitudes to civil society generally (or even just in their communities), might include:

- trainees contacting the trainers with questions or requests for assistance
- trainees reporting that they are trying to use what they are learning, without yet any particular showing that that usage is moving public sentiment (or whatever else is being aimed for)
- evidence in the actual communications work of trainees showing a difference in the quality of those communications due to the trainings

Evidence for these, too, would be relatively easy for grantees to collect.

Admittedly, the legislative advocacy work is rather different in this regard. If legislation or regulations are actually changed during the project periods, and if the advocacy was a major effort in that context, an inference of impact by the effort would be fair. Even if the legislation has not changed, a showing that the advocates were invited by policymakers or political parties to the table would be a proxy showing (see more below on the concept of “proxy indicators) that the advocacy had gotten some leverage. Or if officials explicitly respond to the advocacy, or if there is significant media coverage about it, these too, which are easily enough evidenced, are good proxy indicators of impact. Generally speaking, such desired accomplishments occur soon after, or concurrent with, the advocacy effort, and so can be evidenced directly in progress or final reports – and it would be reasonable for Civitates to expect such showings (as in fact have been provided by, e.g., CeRe). Thus, generally speaking, grantees working in these areas need not set intermediate aims (e.g., creating specific proposals for pending legislation); the final goals are, or often can be at least, themselves relatively short-term.

In sum, and to repeat this important point in somewhat different terms, assessments of “where the coalitions are,” particularly in the early days of long-term projects, are essential for increasing the likelihood of success, or for making critical adjustments.

Grantees need to have short-term goals, then, and to know what evidence they will need to track progress towards them, as a means of ultimately getting to and accomplishing their long-term goals (if all goes well) – and Civitates needs to be in the loop as to all of this as well.

D. Are all the subfund 1-supported groups really coalitions?

As I have hinted at various places above, varying *coalition structures* are evident in the range of grantees chosen in subfund 1. Clearly, some of the grantees are literally coalitions, by which I mean, a set of CSOs that constitute a group whose projects are genuinely joint as between them (or some of them), and which provide mutual support and solidarity for each partner.

NeoN and Open Spaces coalitions are clearly coalitions in this sense, and their cases are instructive here. They have been created, in whole or in part, to ensure that their partners work together on advocacy, mutual learning, and providing solidarity to each other; and without a doubt, this is what they have accomplished. Of course, even in these cases, part of the “coalition” efforts support the work of the individual members – think of the Open Spaces individual community centre work. But even there, a critical part of the project is for those individual community centres, and even some of the groups that benefit from the centres, to meet each other and to run joint projects. Civilisation, at least as to national groups working in the capital on advocacy, probably fits in this category too.

At the other end of the spectrum are groups that do not strike me as coalitions in any robust sense. These are efforts, where one or two CSOs work together and provide services or support to other CSOs, and in which those latter CSOs are *not* connected, at least through the supported “coalition,” to each other. The Peace Institute is clearly like this – as the lead acknowledged. In that case, the Institute, along with the Slovene Association of Journalists, provides trainings to other CSOs on responding to attacks, and the Peace Institute alone has produced a report. In a word, this is a case where two groups are *service providers* to the field.

My sense is that the Klon “coalition” fits this description as well, as actually was acknowledged by the lead. In this case, Klon itself, along with a technical support team, collects stories from the field and ensures their dissemination, without the groups whose stories are being told necessarily working or even connecting together. CILD (along with The Good Lobby), too, probably falls into this category.¹⁷

Somewhere in the middle is CeRe, where this organisation itself is, according to interviews, very much in the lead, is the most visible, and coordinates the coalition’s efforts. Interviews also made clear, however, that the partners’ collaboration *with* CeRe, in advocacy as well as in policy development, has been crucial.

¹⁷ I have a suspicion that Citizen Participation Forum fits here too, particularly on the basis – set out a bit more fully in Appendix D – that the documentary appears to have been produced and disseminated by three groups only, all in Sofia. But because I am unsure about how the 150 stories are collected, my suspicion in this regard may be unfounded.

The significance of all this is clear enough. In some cases, subfund 1 grants effectively go to lead organisations (typically *collaborating with* one or two other organisations working in the capitals), and in other cases they go for real coalition building. In all cases though, the core work is *on behalf of* the field, with an aim of enabling work to combat the shrinking of civic space. Accordingly, Civitates might consider, in its next grant cycle, having a broader description of what is on offer from it. It could specify, for instance, that its grants will go to any effort that is field building to assist diverse collections of groups to work, individually or together, on shrinking space issues. This might mean grants could go to supporting explicit efforts to create “collections” of groups working together, supporting each other, and so forth. But it also could include grants to individual organisations, or to a couple of organisations, for work to strengthen or to highlight work in the field. In this sense, for example, Peace Institute might not be considered an outlier – though in my previous report, I had the impression that it was. (This, by the way, is not in any way a recommendation one way or the other as whether the grant to Peace Institute should be renewed.)

I understand that the Civitates’s definition of “coalition” is very broad, and it might well already easily have accommodated initiatives at both ends of the spectrum that I have just delineated as “coalitions.” This may, however, obscure the main point: that sometimes a grant to a single organisation, or maybe a couple of them, to *provide services to the field*, or even simply *to build the field*, may well be appropriate. A call for “coalitions” may well miss out on such opportunities, and accordingly this ought to be taken into account when the next round of funding is undertaken.

E. Testing Civitates’s theory of change

Given the importance of Civitates’ theory of change, I describe here in detail what I heard back in interviews on this topic, rather than summarising it very briefly here and putting the details in the Appendix.

I asked all the country experts, and any coalition interviewees where I thought it was appropriate to do so, the following question:

Suppose Civitates had come to you and said: We wish to support, through funding, efforts that respond to the shrinking space. We will provide funding either for (1) building or sustaining of coalitions, or (2) the work of two or three prominent capital-based CSOs, which are especially good at advocacy, or communications, or litigation, for their *individual* work at national level. Which of these would you recommend?

I confess that what I heard surprised me a good deal. Here are the details:

Two interviewees recommended supporting individual CSOs. In one case, with respect to Slovenia, the reason given was that in this small country “solidarity is already there.” In the other case, it was because coalition members would be likely to fight amongst themselves for a share in the coalition financial support.

Nineteen people, on the other hand, argued that support for coalitions was the better strategy. There were two principal reasons for this: First, as eleven people argued, coalitions have considerable impact *in advocacy* in the interviewees' countries – and every country but France was represented here. The basic idea, with details below, was that policymakers, parliamentarians and other officials take policy input, argumentation, and even requests for meetings, more seriously when the input/argumentation/requests come from a significant number of CSOs, rather than from one, or even from a number but put in separately.

Some comments in this regard, all to the same effect:

- Not only governments and parliaments, but even media, respond more favourably to input from a number of groups than they do to input from individual groups; “loads of signatures” will move both of these actors
- Generally, as three people noted, there is no need for submissions to be branded as from a “coalition”; it is the number of signatures or other representations that matter
- Numbers, particularly where they represent a “breadth of constituencies,” matter – this is especially so where such numbers include small CSOs working locally, and that represent local communities
- An official said that numbers are able to “make noise,” and that she reacts more strongly to submissions by multiple groups than she does to individual submissions
- If an MP receives letters from individual groups with “three different opinions,” s/he is not likely to do anything – but will react if letters come from a united front
- Representation from multiple groups is especially effective when individual groups within the collective are known to have contacts or relationships with different parts of government, or with different policymakers, or both
- Single voices rarely get what they are seeking in their advocacy

The second reason, put forward by eight interviewees, relates to contributions by coalitions to their partners. One basic idea was that coalitions create solidarity between their partners, making them more resilient to threats. A second idea, somewhat more prominent, was that coalition partners are able to provide assistance to each other, beyond mutual protection. As to the latter, some details include:

- Coalitions can leverage the differing skill sets of their partners, both for external advocacy, and for strengthening partners through the learning skills had by others
- Local groups can meet national groups, and vice versa, and each can provide knowledge and contacts to the other
- Local groups, through being coalition partners, will have more credibility locally
- National groups will have more credibility by being connected to local groups, because thereby they will have a basis for saying they represent the sector as a whole and will not necessarily be viewed as “elites”

A comment: my interviews covered nine countries, seven of which are in Eastern or Central Europe, and the above feedback came from those seven, and from Italy (i.e., not France). A handful of interviewees suggested that the first reason above, namely that numbers matter to legislators and policymakers, may well be a feature of the region, and might not be such a strong factor elsewhere. I can't speak to this one way or the other – but given that the majority of the support provided by subfund 1 in fact goes to Eastern or Central European coalitions, Civitates should take comfort that, in fact, the coalition approach is the right one, with more predictable impacts than if it were instead to support individual groups. (But recall, with respect to CILD, Klön, Peace Institute and arguably CeRe, the work is not exactly *by* coalitions, but is rather *for* coalition partners, or for civil society more broadly. Numbers may not be so evident in those efforts.)

VI. Recommendations

- In light of differences of opinion in the Working Group, it should determine, prior to the next call for proposals (and subject to honest differences of approach between them), what *sorts* of impacts (e.g., output delivery, impact showing, etc.) they will expect of grantees working in each relevant category (e.g., training, communications) over the grant period
- *If impact showings* are expected, Civitates should consider providing earmarked funding, as part of the grants, for grantees to do explicit impact inquiries (to the extent reasonably consistent with their core work)
- Civitates should provide more guidance as to what it will count as coalitions being robust
- Civitates should consider with care proposals to shift public opinion through communications. The Secretariat should work with such proposed grantees to develop specific plans for targeting and reaching the unpersuaded middle, and to set out what evidence ought to be collected to confirm that that population segment has been reached
- For trainings-focused grantees, again, the Secretariat should work with them to set out what specifically they expect their trainees to do with the knowledge they gain in the trainings, and how they will track if they are deploying those learnings
- For proposed research, clarity as to how the resulting reports will be disseminated, and as to how such grantees will target their intended audience, should be required.
- Relevant to the three previous points, Civitates should encourage, perhaps require, that prospective and current grantees set out clear and specific short-term goals, along with a showing of how they are causally relevant to the long-term goals, and an indication of the evidence they will use to show that the short-term goals have been achieved
- Civitates should take on board the broad array of arrangements that it has counted as “coalitions,” and consider rebranding the next round of grants as being open to any effort to strengthen civil society in order for it to respond to shrinking space – be it through coalition building, training groups on the ground on communications, fundraising, and so forth

- Grantees that have a strong aim to expand their coalitions through bringing in organisations from the field should be worked with, to enable them to adopt an approach that is not, and is not perceived to be, “top down”

Appendix A: Interview Table¹⁸

A. Working Group members

	Person	Foundation
1.	Roy Virah-Sawmy	Programme Manager, Civitates (Secretariat)
1.	Stefan Schaefers	King Baudouin Foundation
2.	Adrian Arena	Oak Foundation
3.	Tim Parritt	Oak Foundation
4.	Walter Veirs	Mott Foundation
5.	Markus Lux	Robert Bosch Stiftung
6.	Ewa Kulik-Bielińska	Stefan Batory Foundation
7.	Tin Gazivoda	Open Society Foundations
8.	Franz Karl Prüeller	Erste Foundation
9.	Luisa Chiodi	Stiftung Mercator
10.	Tamara van Strijp	Adessium Foundation
11.	Menno Weijs	European Cultural Foundation
12.	Andreas Grau	Bertelsmann Stiftung
13.	Nicolas Borsinger*	Fondation Puech

B. Field interviews¹⁹

1. Both external and internal Interviews

Citizen Participation Forum (in lead), Bulgaria

Person	Position	Organisation
1. <i>Iva Taralezhkova</i>	<i>Board Chair</i>	<i>Citizen Participation Forum</i>
2. <i>Vessela Tsankova</i>	<i>Chairperson</i>	<i>Civic Initiatives – Lovech</i>
3. <i>Nikolay Vasilev</i>	<i>Director the “A New Beginning – See Yourself in Someone Else”</i>	
4. Boryana Dimitrova	Head, Social, Political and Electoral Studies	Alpha Research

¹⁸ Asterisks indicate an exchange only by email. All other interviews were conducted through Zoom calls.

¹⁹ Italicised names refer to coalition leads (first entry) and partners; non-italicised names refer to externals.

5. Rossinka Prodanova	Journalist	Bulgarian National Radio
6. Krassimir Bozhanov	Director of “Modernisation of State Administration”	Directorate as the Council of Ministers
7. Adriyana Mihaylova	Founder and Managing Director	Imp-Act Agency
8. Bisser Spirov	Director	LUMOS Bulgaria

La Coalition (VoxPublic in lead), France

Person	Position	Organisation
1. <i>Jean-Marie Fardeau</i>	<i>National Delegate</i>	<i>VoxPublic</i>
2. <i>Adrien Roux</i>	<i>Director</i>	<i>Alliance Citoyenne</i>
3. Laetitia Lafforgue	President	Fédération des Arts de la Rue
4. Lynda-May Azibi	Parliamentary Collaborator for MP Mathilde Panot	
5. Frederique Pfrunder	President	Mouvement associatif
6. Julie Nublat-Faure	Deputy Mayor, Sports, etc	City of Lyon

Civilisation (Ökotárs Foundation in lead), Hungary

Person	Position	Organisation
1. <i>Vera Móra</i>	<i>Director</i>	<i>Ökotárs Foundation</i>
2. <i>Vilja Arató</i>	<i>Project coordinator</i>	<i>With the Power of Humanity Foundation</i>
3. <i>Mónika Bálint</i>	<i>Executive Director</i>	<i>Civil College Foundation</i>
4. Bence Horváth & Illés Szurovecz	Journalists	444.hu
5. Istvány Sebestény	Nonprofit expert	Central Statistical Office
6. Szilárd Teczár	Journalist	Magyar Narancs
7. Gábor Kerpel-Fronius	Vice-Mayor	Budapest City Hall
8. Bence Jáboresik	Editor	Miskolc Alternative Generation

Open Spaces (Marom in lead), Hungary

Person	Position	Organisation
1. <i>Ádám Schönberger</i>	<i>Founder, “Leader”</i>	<i>Marom Klub Egyesület</i>
2. <i>Julia Salamon-Bohém</i>		<i>Szombathely</i>

3. Szabolcs Szutorisz	Grand Café	Szeged
4. Bence Horváth	Journalist	444.hu
5. Danial Radai	Vice-Mayor, 8 th District	Budapest City
6. Ildiko Bokrétás	SzocLab	Pécs
7. Norbert Falus*	Szakszervezet	Kecskemét
8. Enikő Gyureskó		Verzio Human Rights Film Festival

Civic Organisations: It Works (Klon/Jawor in lead), Poland

Person	Position	Organisation
1. Dorota Setniewska	Communication and Promotion Specialist	Klon/Jawor Association
2. Alicja Pacewicz	CEO	Szokla z klasa
3. Michal Serviński Marcin Golabek	Board Member Board Chair	Wzmacniacz Association
4. Magdalena Kicińska	Editor-in-chief	Pismo magazine
5.* ²⁰	Representative	Warsaw City
6. Malgorzata Waszkiewicz	Journalist	TOK RM
7. Stanslaw Król	Group Leader	Oleśnica Bajk Stajl
8. Filip Pazderski	Head of the Democracy and Civil Society Program	Institute of Public Affairs

Tamtam – NGOs for the Citizen (CeRe in lead), Romania

Person	Position	Organisation
1. Oana Preda	Director	CeRe (Romania)
2. Irina Zamfirescu	Project Coordinator	ActiveWatch
3. Dan Barbulescu	Executive Director	Văcărești Natural Park Association
4. Petre Florin Manole	Deputy General Secretary (and former MP)	Social Democratic Party
5. Ana Ciceala	Local Council	City of Bucharest
6. Alina Stefan	PR Director	FCB Bucharest
7. Laurentiu Colintinenu	Journalist	

²⁰ I did not get the name of the person at Warsaw City who responded to my written questions.

2. Internal interviews only

Bulgarian Fund for Women (in lead), Bulgaria

Person	Position	Organisation
1. Svetlana Mihaylova	Coordinator, BFW Coalition	BFW
Gergana Kutseva	Deputy Director	BFW
2. Yavor Konov	Chairperson	Ivor Foundation
3. Margarita Spasova	Board Chairperson	Forum for Glocal Change
4. Srebrina Efremova	Founder, Manager	Foundation Generation

NeoN (Glopolis in lead), Czech Republic

Person	Position	Organisation
1. Petr Lebeda	Founder and Director	Glopolis
2. Aleš Sedláček	Chairperson	Czech Council for Children and Youth
3. Marta Smoliková	Director	Open Society
4. Oldá Vagner	Chairperson	Association for Media and Democracy
5. Tomáš Urban	Head, Media Department	People in Need

Italian Coalition for Civil Liberties and Rights (CILD in lead), Italy

Person	Position	Organisation
1. Andrea Menapace	Executive Director	CILD
2. Valentina Ferrari	Junior Project Manager	The Good Lobby
3. Luisa Chiodi	Director, OBC Transeuropa	Unità operativa del Centro per la Cooperazione Internazionale
4. Stefania Andreotti	Journalist and video maker	ferraraitalia
5. Natalia Lupi	Coordinator, Climate Change	WeWorld

The Voice of Civic Organisations (Via Iuris in lead), Slovakia

Person	Position	Organisation
1. Ivana Kohutková	Coordinator, Civil Society Program	Via Iuris
2. Lenka Riskova	Project Coordinator	Centre for Philanthropy
3. Katka Batkova	Former Director	Slovak Youth Council (now with Via Iuris)
4. Martina Strmenova	Coordinator, Not in Our City Platform	Centre for Community Organising

Peace Institute (in lead), Slovenia

Person	Position	Organisation
1. Brankica Petković	Head of Centre for Media Policy	Peace Institute
2. Špela Stare	Secretary General	Slovene Association of Journalists
3. Natasa Posel	Director	Amnesty International Slovenia
4. Mateja Veble	High Officer, Department of Culture	City of Ljubljana

Country experts

Person/Country	Position	Organisation
1. Boris Strečanský (Slovakia)		
2. Peter Nizak (Hungary)		
3. Elenonora Poli (Italy)	Senior Fellow	Istituto Affari Internazionali
4. Tina Divjak (Slovenia)	Head of Advocacy	Centre for Information Service, Cooperation and Development of NGOs
5. Magdalena Pekacka (Poland)	Executive Director	Polish Donors Forum
6. Robert Basch (Czech Republic) Barbora Horavova	Executive Director Program Director	Nadace OSF

7. Ionuț Sibian (Romania)	Executive Director	Civil Society Development Foundation
8. Marin Lessenski (Bulgaria)	Program Director	European Policies Initiative

Appendix B: Some Details about the Methodology

Ideally, for an *impact* inquiry, which is part of what the ToR asks for, I would make site visits, and would conduct a wide range of *external* interviews. For instance, if the work to be evaluated is legislative advocacy, I would interview, in addition to the grantee, at least the following:

- a few advocacy targets: e.g., MPs, officials in the relevant Ministries, to determine the degree to which they are aware of, and take seriously, the advocacy work – this would include MPs or officials who are clearly *unsympathetic* to the advocacy, but are involved in the issues
- some other NGOs working in the same or allied fields, on their views about the efficacy of the grantee’s work
- other outside observers who ought to know about the work: as the case might be, journalists, think tank staff, and so forth

There might be a dozen external interviews for each grantee, from which I would “triangulate” a judgment about the impacts of its work.

If I were to undertake such an inquiry here, however, the number of interviews needed would be well over 150: 12 externals for 11 coalitions, interviews with coalition leads and some partners, and with some country experts; and of course with Civitates staff and donor partners. There would be my travel time and expenses as well (though none of the latter, in fact, during the pandemic).

This is far beyond what the budget that the evaluation could (or should) have handled, for subfund 1 as it exists now. That is why we limited the inquiry: only five or so external interviews, for only six of the coalitions, with the other five coalitions limited to the lead and one or two partners.

I note two disadvantages to working at a distance, and with such limitations in the number of interviews I could feasibly do. First, I was entirely dependent on coalition leads for selections of and introductions to externals. Inevitably, and perfectly understandably, this was going to bias the sample with respect to judgments about the efficacy of the coalitions’ work – though it was my task to cut through such bias as much as I possibly could. And second, due to the above limitations, I was unable to do what I otherwise would have – ask externals for recommendations for *other* outside interviewees, to escape that bias. Accordingly, the tentative conclusions I’ve drawn in the main report must be tempered by this understanding – though I do believe that, on balance, the input from externals is reliable.

Appendix C: Feedback from the Working Group

It was, in my view, crucial to have interviewed Working Group members *first*. They, along with Roy Virah-Sawmy, after all, are the client for this project, and it is always my practice to be crystal clear about what the client wants to know, before embarking on the relevant inquiry. Sometimes this differs to some extent, sometimes considerably, from the ToR that started the inquiry process.

These interviews were particularly needed, I thought, because I know that the foundations represented in the Working Group are quite different from each other, and have different approaches to and expectations of their grant-making. It might well turn out, therefore, that quite different things were expected from my work. If that turned out to be the case, those differences would need to frame whatever findings the field interviews turned up.

The core questions for the Working Group interviews were the following (though I note that I did not get to every question for each interview – as I let them take their natural courses):

- What is the evaluation for, generally speaking? What do you want to know?
- In particular, do you want to be shown, per the ToR, that the coalitions indeed are having impact, and what, specifically, such impacts have been?
- If impacts are *not* sought, (1) why are they not sought? And (2) what do you want to know instead?
- In respect of what you want to know, what evidence do you want to be presented with?

Here is what I found:

As to what the evaluation is for, five people focused on subfund 1's theory of change. Four of them said that they wanted to have some direct evidence that the theory, in the words of one of them, had been "vindicated." Since, the theory was that coalitions are an effective means by which the shrinking of civic space can be resisted, I took it that these four wanted direct evidence that there had been significant resistance to the shrinking, and that it has made some difference. (That said, one person said that the theory was only "theoretical," while another described it as "throwing the dice.") In slight contrast, one person who also focused on the theory of change, wanted to know only if there has now developed robust collaboration and solidarity between coalition members, so that they are now *able* to resist the shrinking space. In effect, this person, while his emphasis too was on the theory, thought that a showing of the robustness of coalitions would be a *proxy* vindication of it. Other Working Group, however, members did not mention the theory at all.

That same distinction became more apparent when I asked more specifically about *impacts*. Five people definitely wanted to be shown that impacts have been achieved with respect to shrinking space. Two years is enough to justify expecting this, one person said; two of these specified that, for them, it would not necessarily be a negative if no impacts

could be shown, *provided that* the coalition leads had good reasons for why this turned out to be the case, and plausible plans for how to adjust to be more impactful going forward were in place. And one person, represented both here and in the next paragraph, argued that for some countries, e.g., Italy, France, Slovakia, it would be reasonable to ask for evidence of impacts; for others, e.g., Hungary or Poland, this would simply be unrealistic.

On the other hand, seven people²¹ (with the one crossover noted just above) did *not* expect to be shown impacts. Three of these were explicit that it is, as one of these put it, just “far too early” to expect that the coalitions would have made measurable progress in resisting the shrinking – and I suspect that all seven actually would have agreed with this assertion. A couple of people suggested that it is unclear if the theory of change itself required a *direct* showing of external impacts. The idea here seemed to be, similar to the one person mentioned in the previous paragraph, that the creation and operation of a robust coalition of civil society organisations would be a proxy for a showing of impact: such robust coalitions *cannot help but* have (relevant) impacts. (A handful of people added that, as one said, “in the best world,” some showing of impact might be forthcoming, but for now, anecdotes “would be a plus,” or as another said, some “tidbits” would be welcome.)

What is clear is that the above sort of evidence is *not* what the “internally minded” interviewees sought. For them, expressed in different ways, the core desired showing is that the coalitions are working well, and that they are providing partners with the sense of being backed-up, i.e., of security through numbers and common commitments. Some added that I should be looking for whether the “deliverables” came through (e.g., a communications campaign, the creation of rapid response mechanisms, outreach into rural areas to recruit new members). One person wanted to be sure that the activities undertaken were “new,” and a couple of people wanted evidence that the plans and strategies in place were mature, and conducted, as one person said, with an “evaluative frame of mind.”

The question of the time frame for impacts came up in my first review, from last March. There too, there was some variation in views from the Working Group. While no-one expected a showing of impact back then, there were some who thought that a review early next year (i.e., 2021) *ought to be focused on impact*, because enough time would have elapsed. Others, however, thought that even the two-year time frame was too short.

The same variation may well persist through the *next* grant cycle. Some Working Group members’ may have the opinion that, in view of the fact that the achievement of most long-term goals is still a long way off, that a successful grant in that cycle would still focus on in robust coalitions, while others will want to see, at this later cycle, some

²¹ The numbers here add up to 11, while I interviewed 13 people in all (one by email) in this category. This is because I have not included two people here – Adrian Arena, because the Oak representation in subfund 1 is Tim Parritt, and Roy Virah-Sawmy, because this part of the inquiry was restricted to Working Group members.

evidence that the coalitions are making some progress with respect to the shrinking of civic space.

Appendix D: Coalition Interview Data

In this extensive Appendix, I set out detailed input from the interviews related to all 11 of the coalitions, as well as from the country experts.

Three notes: First, with the exception of Vox Public,²² the cooperation with coalition leads was truly excellent. My interventions with them were extensive, and time consuming for them. They needed to be interviewed, most twice. In addition, and as noted, in six cases, they needed to find five or so external people; and they needed to do introductions for all interviewees. As it turned out, in most cases I was able to interview three (or more) partners (including the lead). And as to the externals, with the exception of Vox Public, I interviewed typically five or more people, and in one case four.

Second, I have divided the country expert data in two: as to the situations in their countries, I have led with them in the discussions of the coalitions. On the other hand, I have included their comments on the coalitions themselves as external voices on relevant points within the coalition data discussion. For example, if an expert notes that a communications effort has had significant media coverage, I would count that as one more supporter of that point, along with any other external person who made the same point. Additionally, I have included comments by internal interviewees, where appropriate, in the descriptions of the civil society situation in their respective countries.

Third, as will be apparent, the descriptions of the state of civil society in the various countries are *very* brief; I do not pretend that they do more than scratch the surface. That said, I am persuaded that they are sufficient to frame the coalition work in the respective countries, and for that reason are worth including here.

A. Coalitions' activities and impacts

1. Extended interviews

a. Citizen Participation Forum (lead partner, Bulgaria)

I interviewed three internal people (“internals,” for short) and five external ones (externals), in addition to the Bulgaria country expert.

As to the situation for civil society in the country, as described by one internal and one country expert: there was an especially disturbing crisis in 2019, in relation to the Istanbul Convention and a Charter for the Liberation of Children, where officials and politicians smeared not only the groups working on those issues, but civil society as a whole. Advocacy and monitoring groups, moreover, have little or no access to government funding. And, directly relevant to Citizen Participation Forum's efforts

²² VoxPublic was, as I've said, the exception to the rule: For instance, despite their strong efforts with respect to the Observatory report, including a prominent launch with media presence, of which more below, Mr Fardeau said he was not able to find a single journalist for me to interview. And, in the end, he only came up with three externals for me.

described just below, CSOs have little access to mainstream media, and most of their communications have been through social media, which is “very particular.”

Both interviewees said that the situation even now is highly problematic; one of these said that it has never been so bad as it is now, with smears and legislative efforts targeting the sector, e.g., an effort to require registration for receipt of foreign funding. On the other hand, both said that the internal situation for CSOs was promising: they are cooperating more than they have in the past, and their advocacy and communication at local level have had some impacts.

Covid has had a significant impact on the project. Instead of conducting the effort to increase local volunteerism and to tell stories about it in media, there was a total switch, based on strategizing by the coalition, to collect and publish stories about CSO responses to the pandemic. This would consist of developing a documentary, and publishing it, along with about 150 stories on the same theme, on the country’s main NGO portal,.

All *internals* pointed to that documentary, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T8g0-jKTtfY&t=61s>. Its aim, as they indicated, was to show the value that five CSOs added in their communities through their efforts in Covid relief. There was an “intensive media campaign” based on it; two said that the target audience was the unpersuaded middle. The launch was well attended by journalists, and there was significant media coverage, on television, and radio, both nationally and locally, and in social media. On the other hand, an internal, echoed in external interviews, said that the most prominent media event – the airing of the documentary on national and regional television – had had hardly any impact: “no-one” in Bulgaria watches television, and the coalition approached the station only “for prestige.” This person also said that while the media coverage was a small step forward, he was pessimistic about the potential of such communications outreach to persuade the thus-far-unpersuaded. Finally, two said that the featured groups hosted discussions in their town or villages.

The only other aspect of the project commented on by these interviewees was the communications training effort, described mainly as providing of online materials that, as one person said, assisted their own organisation in doing media interviews, and in conducting online meetings.

External input was quite modest. Three externals pointed to the documentary. While one of these said that “one or two” people saw the television airing of it, another said it had been very visible and that it was “psychologically adequate.” Two interviewees mentioned the 150 stories and the dedicated website for disseminating this content. Two were confident that these were being covered by a wide range of local media; one was “absolutely sure” about this. On the other hand, another person argued that the social media campaign was relatively modest, because it had not been extensive enough, and it didn’t manage to reach many “sympathetic” media.

Finally, and this is just my impression from these interviews: this was mainly an effort by three CSOs based in Sofia: Citizen Participation Forum, the Bulgarian Centre for Not-

for-Profit Law (which was mainly responsible for training), and the NGO portal that hosted the documentary and the 150 stories. The wider coalition, as far as I can tell, only provided some support: participating in strategy discussions, and providing access to local groups.²³

b. La Coalition (VoxPublic, lead partner, France)

As described in the footnote 22, I was provided with a quite modest list of interviewees; while I interviewed three internals, I was only put in touch with three externals. I have therefore treated all the interviews in a single presentation, rather than breaking the externals out from the internals.

While there was no outside expert (*not* the fault of VoxPublic), I did hear a few comments about the situation for civil society in France. One person said that there is continuing oppression, particularly by police, of vulnerable minorities – particularly Muslims. Another spoke generally about attacks on CSOs. A third said that “there are always risks”; and a fourth described the increasing shutting off of hitherto public spaces as “insidious.” And, of course the Observatory report, described below, points to particular attacks on CSOs. In sharp contrast, one external described the situation for CSOs as “very fine,” though he added that the national government doesn’t take input from the sector seriously, and the sector therefore is unable to do much in the way of public advocacy, which he said is a “big problem.

Covid had a significant impact on the coalition’s work. In-person trainings were stopped (though I should note that no-one other than the lead mentioned trainings at all) and local visits were cancelled. Advocacy was done by video, and more time was devoted to website development. And digital security was emphasised to partners.

There were, in essence, just two impacts cited across the board. Two internals pointed to the increase in coalition partners to 16 (the final report indicates that there are now 20 partners), and noted that this “took time.” Related, two pointed to the simple fact that the groups are in fact working together – producing a guide for CSOs on how to respond to attacks (downloaded around 1500 times); he added that the collaboration was more important than the guide. (One person, who had tried to use it, said that the guide is used by virtually no-one, and that it is “useless” for his advocacy work.) A second example of collaboration was that of an article, published in *Libération* (with a progressive audience), responding to an “attack” on several NGOs, and describing the value of the sector.

Almost all the input, however, was about the Observatory report, detailing “repression” suffered by CSOs and journalists/media. All interviewees pointed to it. Points made included:

²³ The final report, too, emphasises the external communications efforts, including the documentary. It describes the online trainings as focused mainly on “action plans, budgets, and contracts, etc.” while the reference to trainings in interviews seems to refer to communications work. And while the report describes a significant coalition-strengthening effort, interviewees did not mention it – though the reference to group strategizing on the switch in the communication plan has some suggestion of activity at coalition level.

- The launch was attended by various journalists, though one person said there were not enough of them (and acknowledged that Covid was probably responsible for this), and it was covered by major media, including *Le Monde*
- An internal argued that the report would not have had the impact it did have had it not been supported and been used as the basis of advocacy by prominent coalition members
- One person said the report was useful for her, to let members of her association know that “things are not normal”
- The report was noticed in a number of cities and made a modest impact there; one internal and an external pointed in particular to Lyon, where a city official has taken the report seriously, and is considering potential collaboration going forward with the Observatory, though nothing specific has been planned yet
- An MP is drafting a law based on the report’s findings, though it was said that it is unlikely to be enacted
- Two interviewees said that two MPs attended the launch, but both of these (MPs) were sceptical about the report
- One internal said that the report gave the sector a “common language” and showed that the issues worked on by his organisation are shared by other groups
- One person said that the report will be useful for his group’s advocacy

One person said he “thinks” that the coalition’s analysis of (and resistance to) two laws, one to increase police powers, and another to reduce further CSO participation in relation to government initiatives, might have had some impact, though details were not forthcoming.

I should add that two of the three externals said that they really don’t know the coalition per se; all they know about it is that it produced the Observatory report.²⁴

c. Civilisation (Ökotárs Foundation, lead partner, Hungary)

Clearly, as the Hungarian country expert said, and as was echoed by others, the situation in Hungary is terrible. Indeed, in interviews of people from *other* countries, two country experts volunteered that their countries were not as bad as Hungary, while a third said that in her country, the new government was trying to be an “Orban clone” – all of these thus showing their awareness of the especially challenging situation in Hungary.

Recent scandals, particularly for lgbt groups, were noted, and two people said, in about the same words, that the anti-Soros “foreign agent” rhetoric could be heard every day. Particularly relevant to Civilisation, two people made the point that there is not much solidarity between service delivery groups, especially those outside Budapest, and the more prominent advocacy and monitoring organisations. On this point, it was suggested that more “constituency building” was needed, as between these two types of groups, in order to explode the myth that all civil society is foreign controlled – as one person put it,

²⁴ The final report focuses principally on the points made in interviews, though it adds a couple of things: that there were meetings with some government officials after the Observatory report was released; and that prior to the pandemic, the coalition itself was presented in a number of public events.

the increased visibility of local groups, in part through improved messaging, will actually protect the more prominent groups. (One person said, as to the latter, that the Open Spaces coalition is working on such messaging, and is the more promising group so far as local capacitation work goes. He added though that the Civilisation work at national level, of which a bit more below, is also a crucial part of a strategy to resist the shrinking civil society space in the country.)

I should note, finally, that three people said that the situation, though very difficult in 2018, has relaxed somewhat.

I interviewed three internals, and six externals. I heard the following:

Responses to Covid were quite extensive. In addition to all meetings shifting to online, planned visits by national groups to the target regions outside Budapest were cancelled; an offline campaign too was cancelled. On the other hand, a survey of partners, of their strategy adjustments with respect to, and activities undertaken for, Covid relief, was conducted.

As to *internal* interviews: All three interviewees pointed to the creation of a mutual support system, though it was not tested because there had been no recent attacks. In addition, some CSOs, including some groups from outside Budapest, were able to meet with, and profit from the experiences of, more experienced CSOs working in Budapest. Still, the main efforts were mainly limited to national groups in the capital, simply because the effort to bring into the coalition groups in “white” regions – where CSO activity was limited – was only partially successful; as one person said, the results were “mixed.” According to another person, while a mapping revealed 10 possible coalition members outside Budapest, and there was some training for them and small grants to them, only five groups emerged as promising. In sum, Civilisation is at this point mainly a “national” coalition simply because there was “no other way to grow the field.”

Further comments from internals:

- Two people argued that the decrease in attacks in the country reflected a new perception that the cooperation of Civilisation partners (and perhaps other informal groupings of CSOs) “spreads the word of [sector] strength and solidarity.” Another person said that there was a “union of CSOs” that now can respond to attacks; and two others pointed to activity by the coalition with respect to the restriction on foreign funding
- An online campaign, deployed through a grant from the Sigrid Rausing Trust, with respect to the 1% tax provision, resulted in a “slight increase” in donations to one or another part of the sector
- One person recounted that after Budapest city elections that brought in a somewhat progressive government, recommendations made by the coalition to the city (though I did not get details about what these were), were implemented somewhat, though he “was a bit disappointed”

While I did interview six *external* persons, and the country expert too, there was very little in the way of clustering around specific impacts. What I did get was the following:

- Two people mentioned advocacy and activity in respect of the restriction on foreign funding, including that some CSOs refused to register, with no ill consequences, implying that it is possible to stand up to government. It was said that this could not have happened if CSOs had worked on this individually; one person said, as well, that there had been communications for the campaign
- Three interviewees said that, through the coalition, CSO members were working more closely together than they had in the past, though added that these were mainly large capital-based groups
- Two people mentioned the heart symbol as having had widespread recognition, in part due to a “huge demonstration.” One of these thought that such recognition got beyond the usual bubble, while the other said that it had not done so – and one other person, not commenting specifically on the symbol, also thought that some campaigning managed to reach outside the bubble. None of these interviewees cited any evidence for any of these claims
- Somewhat related to the previous point, one person said that the coalition is “visible” at national level, on social media and at least in left-leaning media, but noted (1) what was acknowledged by internals, that the coalition is perceived (correctly) as consisting mainly of large CSOs working on national issues (in contrast, he said, to Open Spaces), and (2) the coalition’s visibility is to some degree a negative; he added in this regard that it would need to translate “theory into practice” if it is to succeed in bringing in more smaller CSOs in the regions, and that for now it is a “top-down approach”
- One person said, as a criticism (one well recognised by the coalition lead), that Civilisation must expand to some non-controversial groups, to gain real credibility
- Another person, despite her having been identified as an informed person, said that she knows very little about the coalition other than its “civil map”²⁵

d. Open Spaces (Marom, lead partner, Hungary)

See the Civilisation subsection, just above, for a summary of inputs about the situation for civil society in Hungary.

I interviewed three internals and five externals. I note that “partners” (i.e., the internals) are the community centres, but the key stakeholders are what the lead referred to as “allied organisations,” the ones that take advantage of those centres. I treated these latter as externals.

²⁵ Civilisation’s final report, first, painted a bleaker picture of the current situation than the country expert and others did – pointing to repressive measures taken during the pandemic, and to adverse reactions by government to somewhat progressive court decisions. And there was of course mention of the ECJ decision demanding repeal of the foreign funding law, which has yet to be implemented. In addition, the report provided a fair bit of detail about the 10 organisations in the regions that had received small grants, and a bit more information about trainings that had been undertaken (but this was not mentioned in interviews). There were no impacts asserted that were not reported in interviews.

The pandemic has had a dramatic effect on the coalition's work, with all the centres closed, and in-person events, which are at the heart of the project, cancelled. Work has continued online however, to organise online events, to plan a documentary film festival, and to develop continuing strategy at coalition level. Partners have increased their online offerings in relation to their own cities; these include some cultural events and discussions.

As to *internal* input: The coalition lead reported that three new cities have been added to the network, to now a total of seven. Three people said that the online materials during the pandemic have maintained the network – for brainstorming and the like. Two internals specifically pointed to the “Grand Café” and to an online series call “Small Talk.” All three internals pointed to the cross-country meetings on thematic issues (with some participation of allied organisations as well as the centres) in Budapest. Two noted that there were coalition-wide coordinated campaigns (e.g., one on climate change), and other events where two or three cities collaborated. In one case, I was told that a student strike began in Budapest, and through connections with Aurora (the centre that initiated the coalition), it spread across the country.

One internal, explaining why he brought his centre into the coalition, said he saw Aurora described online, found the material inspirational, and understood that the network was decentralised.

Most of the comments from *externals* were general ones about the work; and there were lots of these:

- The centres are “free spaces”
- The coalition “connects people from all over the country”
- It connects people and organisations that otherwise would not know about each other, and individuals meet other individuals whom “they would not otherwise meet”
- Even organisations within a city that know each other “don’t talk to each other the way” they do inside the centres
- It “connects diverse groups”
- It creates a “team” out of diverse groups
- It builds partners, though it is a long-term process and there is “a long way to go” – another external said, in the same vein, that the work, with local groups in their communities, was going “in the right direction” but that it was a mid- or long-term effort
- Externals and internals help each other “in a coordinated way,” in part through coalition meetings and news updates

- A journalist said that the local events generate a significant amount of media coverage, and he finds it very interesting that CSOs and their events outside Budapest are highlighted
- The local empowerment results from allied organisations being brought together not only in their home towns, but also with organisations in other cities, with which they can and do collaborate

Two people spoke about the human rights documentary film festival: while the films themselves were created independently of the coalition, the coalition facilitated its being shown in five new cities/towns, in addition to the two that they already had in place.

Finally, one person reflected on the Aurora centre in Budapest in particular. He described it as a “jewel in Budapest,” almost unique, a “safe space.” Another spoke about the “democratic” festival that the coalition lead runs and where CSOs are featured, and that is attended by “thousands” of people.²⁶

e. Civic Organisations: It Works (Klon/Jawor, lead partner, Poland)

I interviewed three internals (though one of these interviews was with the technical team that assisted with the communications work, and was not literally a coalition partner, as far as I could tell) and five externals, in addition to the country expert.

One internal, as well as the country expert, had input on the state of civil society. The key points made were these:

- The situation for CSOs is at least as threatening now as it was in 2018 – “year and year it is getting worse” with “awful smear campaigns” that are tending to sway public opinion
- Various laws are being enacted that target CSOs and limit their activities
- There is increasing control by government of public media
- Funding from government to the sector is highly restricted, and goes mainly to conservative groups through the Freedom Institute

The *internal* interviews revealed the following:

The pandemic had some impact on the coalition. The communications campaign continued with its messaging as to the value of CSO work generally. But in view of Covid, because “life is no longer beautiful,” some messaging, through the collection of more stories, highlighted what CSOs were doing as part of Covid relief, under the heading “It Works – Now.”

Internal interviewees explained that the project involved, in the first place, training partners so that they could assist the local NGOs whose stories the coalition wanted to feature. Then those latter CSOs actually would provide the content, i.e., their own stories.

²⁶ The final report devotes a fair bit of space to describing coalition communications efforts, and it mentions a significant number of board meetings and regional meetings, which I didn’t hear about, at least explicitly, in interviews.

As to the work that emerged, the internal focus was entirely on the communications campaign. All internals mentioned the stories about local NGOs. Media coverage was emphasised: stories, in *Vogue*, *Pismo*, in some newspapers, on TOK radio, and on OnNet, the country's largest online site. Events in Gdansk and Warsaw were also mentioned.

The reach of the coalition's communications, one person said, was around 4m, but she, and another person, were concerned that this content had not extended beyond the bubble ("trying to break out," but it's a challenge"), and another could not say with any confidence that any of it had shifted public opinion.

One person said that there had been some success in persuading the large advocacy/monitoring groups to refer to themselves as "social organisations" rather than as "NGOs," to avoid the stigma of smears against the "NGO sector."

Finally, a key partner acknowledged that this is not, in truth, a real coalition. Rather, (as I would say, like Citizen Participation Forum and Peace Institute, and possibly the CeRe-led coalition), Klon leads and organises the outreach to local groups, for their stories. The partners are "tools rather coalition members per se," which is why the technical people, who assisted with content production, were included as a "partner."

All the *externals* too focused exclusively on the communications. These all understood the core effort of the project to be to "really bring examples" of CSO work, to create a positive image for the sector. One said that it was a "top quality campaign" and that it had been the "most useful campaign in Poland for many years."

All, too, commented on the visibility and reach of the stories. One person said that the project "had managed to reach out to the public," another said there was "huge" media coverage, reaching the "middle" as well as progressives, and three others said that, in way or another, the content was visible to a wide range of radio listeners (though they did not specify whether the relevant audiences consisted of more than progressives).

But two others disagreed, saying specifically that the content was mainly visible to progressives (because many of the media that treated it (e.g., covering it directly, conducting interviews, etc.) themselves had progressive audiences); and the other saying that the content was simply not visible enough (but another said that it had high visibility at least in Warsaw).

One person mentioned the event in Gdansk; no-one mentioned the one in Warsaw. And, one person suggested that it would have been better to have provided grants to the local CSOs themselves, so that they could have gained more visibility in their own communities.²⁷

²⁷ The final report provides more detail on the civic space situation than the country expert and the other commenter did, but the theme was the same: the extremely difficult time CSOs are having – particularly LGBTI groups, women's rights groups, groups working more generally on sexual freedom, and even some groups working on civic education.

f. Tamtam, NGOs for the Citizen (CeRe, lead partner, Romania)

I interviewed three internals and five externals, including the country expert.

The situation for civil society in the country was described by three people as having improved since the current government came into power. As one person said, Romania is a “totally different country” since then. There have been less abuse of, and fewer threats to, CSOs – though, as one person said, “every now and then” there are threats (e.g., attempts to introduce problematic legislation); and as another said, there is a need for “repairs” to the damage wrought by the previous government. There has been some outreach by government to civil society, and there are numerous opportunities for the sector now. – This general assessment is reflected in the feedback from the coalition lead.

All three *internals* spoke about the response to Covid. For one thing, and surprisingly, there was actually *more* opportunity to advocate with officials, as everyone was working from home. And, in response to repressive measures taken by government in the name of “public health,” the coalition established a monitoring system, reporting abusive practices on its website and making recommendations to government, including that it should pass any new practices through Parliament.

As to impacts reported internally, I heard the following. First, the coalition has achieved an appreciable degree of solidarity, with a mechanism in place for mutual support. This general assertion was supported with a number of examples, including:

- Support was provided by the coalition through letter writing in relation to abuse in the media towards an association of educators that had proposed sex education for schools. The association was thankful for being shown that it was not alone
- Some advocacy through letters was conducted in support of a coalition partner whose oversight of a city park was cancelled, though the letter only got a “polite response”

Interviewees were honest that examples like these did not have material results – as one person said, “something was missing,” because officials acknowledged these letters but did little in response to them. Rather, the examples were meant simply to show that the coalition is indeed working in solidarity.

The coalition’s legislative advocacy was mentioned by all three internals. Two mentioned work in relation to freedom of information, including the coalition having had a hand in defeating a government proposal to require requesters to provide reasons for their requests. Two mentioned efforts in relation to an anti-money laundering bill, where an article-by-article analysis was submitted to government, with the result that some

The report also gives more details on the communication work as to social media; and describes more fully the project’s effort to “make the voice of representatives of CSOs better heard in the public debate” through online talks on various human rights themes; and through online videos featuring CSOs working on key issues. And it describes the visibility of this content on the media outlets mentioned in the interviews. I don’t think that any fully new impacts were asserted.

burdensome provisions were dropped. And one person mentioned work with a number of opposition parties to draft a new Freedom of Assembly law, resulting in a new draft having been submitted, and passed by the Senate. – For all of these, it was clear that CeRe took the lead, but 5-7 other partners were very much involved, I was told. As one person said, the collaboration was of the “utmost importance.”

Finally, a modest communications campaign, consisting of a set of cartoons being published, was mentioned by two people. It was meant to highlight the impacts that civil society has been able to achieve, though, as one person said, it was “not a big hit.”

The *externals* very much reflected the above input. Two people said that the Freedom of Assembly advocacy was impressive and effective. “Four to five” partners were very visible, with “dozens of CSOs” signing onto the proposal the coalition had created. Partners met with a wide range of political parties. One person said that the campaign “got traction,” while another, the former MP who actually put the bill forward, said that the coalition was the main partner for him in the effort. The bill has passed the Senate, and is now being considered by Parliament.

One person said that the coalition’s main contribution to date was its simply having managed to get organisations working on very different issues to work together – it is, he said, the only visible coalition working on transparency and accountability.

One person, in addition, pointed to the communications campaign. She said that there had been positive feedback to it, and “tens of thousands of unique visitors,” though she added that (1) the reach of the campaign was too modest, and (2) more funding is needed to increase that reach. And she said that most reactions to the content were from people within the progressive bubble. She also said, though, that this was not necessarily a problem, as the content might encourage that audience to become more involved in civic affairs, and even to provide financial support to the sector.²⁸

Finally, two notes: First, three people, one internal and two external, said that the most visible CSO, by far, was CeRe, with Oana Preda in particular being mentioned as a highly effective advocate. As one person said, when she hears about the “coalition,” she thinks only of CeRe. Second, that said, Ms Preda herself argued that CeRe alone could not have had the impact that the coalition has had: there was too much work just for her. Additionally, other partners had contacts in government that CeRe did not have, and the fact that multiple actors were working together, Ms Preda said, had more impact with officials than CeRe alone would have had.

²⁸ While the final report contains much more detail on various matters, it does not assert any impacts that were not observed and reported in these interviews.

2. Internal perception interviews

a. Ravni BG (Bulgarian Fund for Women, lead partner, Bulgaria)

See the Citizen Participation Forum discussion for details about the civil society situation in Bulgaria.

I spoke with four partners in this coalition.

Covid had a particularly strong impact. It hit two weeks before the “Its Up to Us” campaign was to be launched and so it was, in its original form, scrapped. There followed a series of online meetings to plan how to adjust. It was decided that, because it was going to be too difficult to build a joint strategy, it would be left to the local groups, with grants from the Civitates funds, to “do what they could.” Some did (virtual) communications campaigns online, along the lines of what they had initially planned, while others became service providers for Covid relief, with particular emphasis on communications. One produced a guide (I didn’t learn on what).

With the joint communications campaign scrapped, attention, I was told, shifted to the coalition itself. All pointed to the sheer creation of the coalition as a major achievement. Solidarity had been achieved, though not tested because there had been no specific threats. One person said that it had been valuable just to know what other groups were doing, and another said they had developed more confidence to work with others (and indeed was working with two other partners on projects).

Partners began to think about communications – and this was said to be a first step towards more effective communications in the sector. One partner said they had gotten some “strange” but useful ideas and had based a communications project on the training, and another said that the trainings had provided useful guidance on doing media interviews and press releases. One person, however, said that while the trainings were “nice” to go to, they “might be a waste of time.”

Finally, one person said that her group joined the coalition in part because of the lead organisation’s prestige.²⁹

b. Winning the Narrative (CILD, lead partner, Italy)

I interviewed three partners, and because the opportunity arose, and the potential input would be valuable, two trainees as well.

I note, as Civitates will know, that this project was specifically focused on messaging with respect to the migrant crisis in Italy. The country expert I spoke with told me at the outset that she was not particularly connected to civil society, and might not have very useful information for me. She was able to say though that the situation for civil society, prior to the pandemic, at least for those working migration issues, was not good. Back then, the media were awash with negative stories about migrants and the CSOs working

²⁹ While the final report provides more detail on all three impacts mentioned above, it does not indicate any impacts that were not discussed by interviewees.

to assist them. Since Covid, however, attention has shifted almost entirely away from migration. But the situation is “explosive.” She agreed with the general approach of the coalition to “change the narrative,” to show that migrants not only are not threats, but actually contribute to the economy in meaningful ways. (I should add that the final report from CILD expands on this input, indicating that prior to Covid and the change of government in 2019, media and journalists were under attack; and CIVICUS, a monitor of the health of civic space, downgraded Italy from “open” to “narrowed.”)

Covid has had a dramatic effect on the project. Where all five cities identified for training were expected to be sites for in-person training, only two ended up being so. Online workshops and webinars were conducted for the others.

Input from the three partners was quite sparse, and focused for the most part on the “power mapping” meant to identify CSOs in key cities working on migration issues, in order eventually to train them on messaging that would be specifically relevant and impactful in their local settings. Outputs were identified: the identification of key groups in five cities, and the delivery of in-person and (after Covid) online ones. One partner said that, other than satisfaction surveys, it is far too early to look for impacts from the work. It is particularly early, according to two of these persons, because it “took quite a while” to get all coalition partners on the same page about how to do the trainings, what to put in them, and so forth.

The two trainees, however, were quite positive. One of them said that she had “felt alone,” and the training she attended gave her the opportunity to meet others who are “like minded,” and to share knowledge and best practices with them. She is now networked with some of them. Both trainees said that they are applying what they learned. One said that she knows better now how to target her output (e.g., newsletters), and she “hopes” her messaging is more strategic now. The other said that she is using what she learned in “many ways,” including how to convey the identity of her organisation to others, and how to communicate in a “positive way.”³⁰

c. NeoN (Glopolis, lead partner, Czech Republic)

The Czech Republic country expert echoed what I heard from Glopolis staff earlier this year. The situation is not at all like Hungary, but is not “perfect.” There are continuing smears on the sector, including rhetoric that some CSOs are foreign agents. And many CSOs are “on the edge” because of cuts in government funding for them. There has been some decline in public trust of CSOs, particularly due to the migration crisis: it fell from 60% to 30%. And finally, service providers, the expert said, tend not to describe themselves as in “civil society” for fear of being painted with the same brush as advocacy and monitoring groups.

³⁰ The final report emphasises the power mapping, and goes into detail about the number and types of trainings (both online and offline). In addition to the satisfaction survey noted above, the only impact it mentions is the citation of the mapping in a report. It also summarised a range of activities, mainly by CILD, but outside the scope of the Civitates grant – and for one of these, a campaign focused on the “undecided middle,” the report indicates that part of the campaign’s content “is built on the work and strategies developed in [inter alia] ... the Civitates project.”

I interviewed the Neon lead and three of its partners.

Very briefly as to Covid: I was told that there was little change required, as meetings and other communications were typically virtual anyway.

As with my interview with them in the previous evaluation, I could not quite get to the bottom of the structure of the coalition. It continues to have a plethora of working groups, thematic groups (e.g., PR, advocacy), a “backbone” committee, and I don’t quite know what else. One person noted that Petr Lebeda, the lead (and a thoroughly charming and helpful person), is something of a “thinker,” and that that might explain in part the bewildering structure.

That said, this time around I got a strong sense that something important is happening internally. All three partners, as well as the country expert, said that, notwithstanding its informality, NeoN is succeeding, where no-one else has, to bring CSOs and networks together, across sectors and interests. It has facilitated the creation of a “representative voice” across issue areas; it provides CSOs the ability to have a “common speech” in advocacy; and it allows for partners to gain other “perspectives” than their own. And the country expert added that it’s “very important what they are doing.”

There was, in my first interview in January, some emphasis on the creation of “red alerts,” which would be triggered when a CSO was being attacked. This has not been tested, but this is no-one’s fault: the situation in the country has relaxed somewhat, and there simply have not been any attacks.

I got the same general answer from all interviewees when I asked about external impacts: all referred to “orange alerts.” Roughly, these function as follows: partners, and some working groups, are monitoring for problems and opportunities – at this point, principally at legislative or regulatory levels. When a problem is noted, a notice goes out to the whole network, while (usually) a relevant working group considers what response is most appropriate. Once done, the lead for advocacy goes to the group or groups most qualified for it (e.g., if it’s an LGBTI issue, an LGBTI group will lead). Actions are organised, e.g., a letter campaign, or phone calls. These occur in the name of the individual organisations rather than in the name of NeoN; as one person said, it’s more impactful to have 15 organisations sending letters than having one letter with 15 signatures. As another person said, the orange alerts are a way of getting vital information “out to the public sphere.”

The sheer existence of this system, which has been triggered frequently, strikes me as an impact in itself – it seems smart and pretty well organised. Additionally, it has had, I was told, some (perceived) *external* impacts. For instance:

- Two people said that, in part through the input of NeoN partners, a proposed appointment of an unsuitable candidate to be deputy ombudsman was defeated (though an equally unsuitable person ended up being appointed)

- Two people mentioned a proposed appointment of, again, an unsuitable person to the Board of the public broadcaster; one of these said the appointment had been withdrawn, while the other said that it had gone through, but that NeoN partners had gotten their commentary into the media
- One person mentioned some success in pushing back on a provision of the Public Procurement law that would have provided for a particularly problematic treatment of taxes. Along with Transparency International, the orange alert was said to have had some role in wide media coverage, and the withdrawal of the proposal by government

Finally, as to impacts, one person pointed to NeoN’s having been invited to participate as to the civic sector in a government consultation on its upcoming 10-year plan. While this person commented generally that that input was informed and important, I did not get any details.³¹

d. The Voice of Civic Voices (Via Iuris, lead partner, Slovakia)

According to the country expert, and like, e.g., Romania, the situation for CSOs is “much better than Hungary.” While the previous government “followed Orban’s playbook,” the current one does not. Attacks on CSOs have decreased; the government does not say that the CSOs are not constructive; and more generally, freedoms are not under threat.

Still there are some warning signs. There have been some recent (but failed) efforts from the right wing trying to impose foreign funding restrictions on CSOs; and CSOs typically are not brought to the table for policy discussions and the like. As well, mainly “friendly” groups receive public funding, while advocacy and monitoring groups get little or no such funding.

I interviewed four partners for this coalition. The input included the following points:

Covid has had only a modest effect on the coalition. Some things have of course gone online – some public meetings, and discussions with coalition members. Additionally, they joined, as a coalition, a larger group called the Crisis Group, which developed a list of steps that government needed to take to help CSOs in the context of the pandemic. And three people mentioned a communications effort by the coalition, through newsletters and blog posts, emphasising CSO assistance during the pandemic to vulnerable groups (though it was noted that little of this made its way to media).

On impacts: the most prominently mentioned, by all four interviewees, was the development by the coalition of a policy paper in the run-up to the 2020 Parliamentary elections. Meetings were held with most political parties, which ended up with some “like-minded” ones adopting some of the paper’s recommendations in their manifestos (e.g. strengthening funding for CSOs, maintaining the 2% tax assignment system, and adapting the rules for grants out of the European Structural and Investment Funds to finance more civil society activities). That said, one person suggested that, while this had

³¹ The final report provides more detail on the orange alerts, and on various specific ways in which the coalition has been solidified through internal communications. But no further impacts were asserted.

been a “useful exercise,” the parties’ reactions were “rather shallow.” Yet, two people argued that post election advocacy resulted in the new government actually adopting some of the policy paper demands.

All interviewees pointed to the collaboration with the Crisis Group. And again, all of them pointed to the actual creation of a diverse coalition, now with around 50 members – it’s “very important” that the coalition, in virtue of this diversity, can say that it represents the sector as a whole. [

Two more comments, from one person each:

- Due to being coalition partners, groups have become more interested in communications, though, this person added, many still are not, and that this is a long-term effort
- The coalition has been an important partner for advocacy in relation to implementation of the European Commission’s Recovery and Resilience Facility. In this regard, it organised a meeting with the Ministry of Finance to discuss broader civil society participation in that implementation. A propos of this effort, the country expert said that while there have as yet been no major breakthroughs, the mere fact of access to the Ministry of Finance is a promising step³²

e. Peace Institute (lead partner, Slovenia)

Three people, including the country expert, painted a bleak picture: all three argued that the situation for civil society is *much* worse than it had been in 2018, before the new government came in. Now there are smears, funding cuts, and restrictions on demonstrations (more, presumably, than required in relation to the pandemic). There have been efforts, failed so far, to enact legislation aimed at harming the sector. Party-run media contribute to the smears (though there are some independent media that are quite sympathetic to the sector); and two people specifically mentioned the declining situation for journalism, with funding cuts and efforts to repress public media.

While this was meant to be an internal inquiry, I ended up interviewing two externals, as well as two internals. With one exception, I lump these together, given the meagreness of the information I got from the interviews as a whole.

The two internals and one external made the following points. First, as to Covid: one training session was delayed and when done, with masks, was poorly attended. (All the trainings were focused on how CSOs should respond to attacks, particularly through legal means.) Because trainings were so difficult to carry out online, the focus shifted to writing and disseminating a report on how the pandemic was affecting the sector. The report on this was launched only online, and, as I was told, only reached “progressives.” (This was in addition to the report discussed next.)

³² The final report provides more detail on the means by which the coalition has been solidified, as well as some further information about the legislative advocacy (and *adds* that there was some *prepared* advocacy, to be run in the event that there were developments in a registration requirement for so-called “foreign agents,” but the law was not passed and so nothing further needed to be done.)

The principal effort, also mentioned by three people, was the publication of a report detailing attacks on CSOs. It was disseminated broadly, including to international audiences, and these latter audiences “for sure” took note of it. It was said that it had succeeded in increasing the visibility of attacks in the country. But one person was sceptical of this; as she said, the report was put out but there was little ability to do much with it; she was sceptical, in particular, of what impact the report might have had just because it was disseminated internationally.

The trainings were mentioned, but understandably, in view of the pandemic, were not very prominent. These were described by one person, as I have noted above, as a basic education in how to respond to attacks. As well, a communications toolkit developed in the project was mentioned by one external, who said that it had been useful in updating the profile of her organisation.

Finally, two people mentioned a series of cartoons facilitated by the coalition; the series was put up online and was covered by a newspaper. It was also displayed in the city hall – though, as an official there said, due to the pandemic, only a few dozen people had actually seen it.

One external was particularly scathing about the project – and while I found this input credible, I must preface it by saying that her organisation is in some sense a competitor to the coalition, in that it provides security training to the sector as well. That said, she argued that the coalition’s trainings are superfluous for the country; that the reports produced are mainly academic, with little chance of changing minds in the public or government; and that the effort is really a service provision effort rather than an effort at coalition building.

As to the latter point, Brankica Petković, of the lead organisation, Peace Institute, acknowledged that the project is really one led and carried out by two organisations: hers and the Slovene Association of Journalists. It is not at all a coalition building effort. Rather it is, indeed, a service provision effort for the sector, enabling it, through training, to respond to threats and attacks, and publicising those same attacks through the research and writing effort, culminating in the report just discussed.³³

B. Feedback on Civitates convenings

I asked the leads from each coalition about their experience with the convenings. In particular, I asked about (1) what they had learned in them, (2) whether they are deploying what they learned, and (3) whether they are collaborating or cooperating with other coalitions due to meeting them at the convenings.

³³ The final report, which is not easy to read, provides details about coalition activities, but does not seem to report any impacts that are not already reflected in the interviews.

As to the convenings themselves, the following points were made:

- Nine interviewees said, in different terms, that they learned important things during the coalition meetings, including good practices by other coalition members. They appreciated the ability to consult others on strategy and tactics and on messaging, and to learn about the shrinking space in other countries. More generally, as one person said, it was good to learn about “new things”
- Two specific workshops were mentioned as having been particularly useful:
 - The Coombes presentation on hope-based communications was mentioned by seven interviewees; three said they are deploying lessons learned there and two said that, while the workshop was good, the lessons were not applicable in their country context
 - Five mentioned the workshop by Bruno Selun; one said it was “very timely”; and another mentioned the Freedom Tracker, which persuaded him to translate some of his organisation’s Covid reporting into English
- One person said that it was useful to learn that the French and Italian coalitions were facing similar problems to those facing coalitions and civil society generally in Eastern and Central Europe
- The opportunity to meet donors, two people said, was very useful

On collaboration with other coalitions due to having met them at the convenings:

- Eight interviewees said that there had been some collaborations, including
 - (1) information exchanges and (2) signing another coalition’s letter
 - contributing to another coalition’s initiative on a European policy paper
 - receiving assistance from another coalition on a grant submission
 - planning collaborations with two different coalitions, one with respect to a panel discussion, and the other a joint research project
 - developing two projects with other coalition members, though one had to be cancelled due to the pandemic
- Five interviewees, on the other hand, reported no collaboration; while I did not get much as to why, one person said this was because there were no Civitates budget allocations for this; another said collaboration would not be useful because his group was not really a coalition; and two people said that while Civitates had indeed made collaboration possible, they had not taken advantage of this possibility to date (as these two said that it made the collaboration possible, I have also included that input just above, as two of the eight)
- Two people said that the convenings helped them make contacts with groups outside the Civitates work

There was no clustering of responses to my question about possible improvements, though I heard from one person each, that

- The working group meetings should be more focused
- Workshops should be less theoretical and more practical
- There should be more trainings

- Documentation from the convenings should be disseminated to the coalitions
- Some time in the convenings should be devoted to sharing what had been picked up in the learning initiatives
- It was unclear if the *online* meetings have much value; the last one was too long and “quite boring”

Appendix E: Answers to the ToR Questions

I provide very brief answers to each bullet point in the ToR. The questions or issues are in italics, and my answers are in plain text

I note the distinction drawn in the main text between (1) “real” coalitions – NeoN and Open Spaces are the best examples – and (2) groups, typified by Peace Institute, that are coalitions only in the sense that there are one or two organisations working together for some kind of assistance to CSOs in the field, where the latter are not being organised to work together, or to exchange knowledge and practices. For convenience, I will refer to the former as coalitions, and to the latter as lead-group collaborations.

1. To what extent did each coalition have the impact they initially sought?

- *The short and long term goals of the coalitions*

I did not perceive a distinction in the 2018 applications, at least for the most part, between short- and long-term goals, other than creating (or continuing) coalitions, and then moving on to long-term goals. That said, the groups – all coalitions – that worked on legislative advocacy all had significant wins (i.e., impacts), and at the same their partners were clearly collaborating.

The groups with communications as their core projects, with an aim to swaying public opinions, tended to be lead-group collaborations – typified by Klon. For reasons covered in detail in the text, it is just unclear what progress the communications have had on public opinion, or indeed whether the communications themselves have reached the “unpersuaded middle” – they may have, and may not have. So, this question, as to these groups, is unanswered at present.

Similarly, groups, e.g., CILD, Peace Institute, that have had trainings as substantial components – which have been the most sorely affected by Covid – do not have data as to whether the trainings have “taken,” though there were a few anecdotes from trainees, that they had learned some things (e.g., how to conduct media interviews) that they are applying now. In general though, in part because of Covid, but in part because of lack of evidence, I cannot conclude that the goal of training (which I have assumed to be that trainees have picked up and are deploying new skills) has been achieved.

- *The impact on the coalition members*

The coalitions, NeoN and Open Spaces for sure, and possibly Civilisation, have manifestly impacted partners, as evidenced both in internal and external interviews. Knowledge and best practice exchanges have happened, and some joint activities and projects have been undertaken. The partners do not feel alone, and feel more secure than they had been before joining.

The lead-group collaborations may well have one or two partners collaborating, but these for the most part were on pre-planned projects. The beneficiaries were groups in the field,

- *Any indication of impact on the broader civil society landscape in the respective national contexts the coalitions operate in*

Direct impacts on the landscape too can be divided into two: The legislative advocacy, insofar as it has promoted progressive legislation with respect to civil society, has likely had some impact in the sense of setting out some protections, and protecting against some abuses. On the other hand, and as already noted many times, it is just too early, and the evidence is lacking, to say whether the other main means by which the landscape might have been impacted, i.e., communications to the general public, has had any traction.

2. To what extent was the coalition’s structure, including its configuration and choice of partners, and the strategy adopted efficient and effective (in relation to the above)?

- *Some structures/strategies have yielded more results than others in their specific contexts*

I confess I did not get much information on this, except what I’ve covered also many times: for legislative advocacy, or for *mutual* support, a flat and consensual structure is presumably ideal, and this is certainly what is to be found in CeRe, NeoN, and Open Spaces, and perhaps even Civilisation (as to national groups anyway). For the service provision, a “top down” structure is typically in place, with the experts doing the training, or story facilitation. In that sense, a couple of organisations in the centre may well be an optimal structure – though I do not say for a moment that this is the only possible structure. Thus, CILD, Klon, and Peace Institute, at least, probably work well as a structural matter.

- *The coalition had an added value in the broader civil society landscape in the national context*

This question feels as though it is a restatement of the third bullet point for question 1, and I reiterate that answer here.

3. To what extent were the outcomes set by the sub-fund achieved and to what extent did these outcomes contribute to the strengthening of civil society?

- *Enhanced collaboration between CSOs*

This, again, brings up the same distinction as above: coalitions as against lead-group collaborations. On the one hand, the coalitions, as I have rehearsed, have generally made a strong showing as to collaboration between their partners. For the lead-group collaborations, the goal has not principally been for collaboration of groups on the ground (e.g., trainees), though I have noted that some trainees interviewed did appreciate the opportunity to meet other groups at in-person trainings. In this sense then, the lead-group collaborations have not led to (at least significant) collaborations (other than between the one or two or three capital-based partners working together in the outreach to the field).

- *Increased resilience and resistance capacities of CSOs*
- *Exchanges of best practices and lessons learned among civil society actors at national and European levels*

and some online offerings, did result, presumably, in some informal exchanges of best practices and lessons learned, but I don't think this happened in any systematic way.

- *Contributions to policy debates at the national level, as well as indirectly at the EU level, which have an impact on the operating environment of CSOs*

The legislative advocacy groups – certainly CeRe and probably Via Iuris as well – appear to have indeed contributed to policy debates, through their development and delivery of policy papers, and their interactions with politicians and policymakers. It is too early to expect that the communications-focused groups will have had any such effect.