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Civil Society in Romania: Mapping the vulnerabilities of a consolidating sector

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Introduction

The extensive burnout² that accompanies leadership in non-governmental organisations (NGOs) represents a core indicator of the fragility and lack of sustainability of the civil society sector in Romania. That fragility is further augmented by limited funding sources, bureaucratic funding procedures, governmental attitude, and limited, albeit increasing, citizen trust in NGOs.

In such a context, the research objective of this article is to map and analyse the areas of fragility of the Romanian civil society sector. While civil society is key for a sustainable democracy, it exposes constitutive and functional vulnerabilities within Romania's society. This article departs from an overview of the civil society sector in Romania to focus on an in-depth analysis of current systemic challenges. In conclusion, the article offers recommendations for funders and civil society organisations.

The research relies on existing literature to provide a brief overview of the current state of civil society in Romania. By exploring the aforementioned research objective, I expect to uncover several vulnerabilities which can be categorised based on the level of their manifestation. Therefore, I expect to uncover such vulnerabilities at systemic, sector, community, organisational, and individual levels.

This article relies on a qualitative-interpretive methodology, interpretive description³ and review of secondary literature. It employs field-observation and reflection on civil society practice, building on the author's field experience of over 25 years in Romania's civil society sector.

A core limitation is represented by the reduced availability of data for quantitative analysis. However, relying on qualitative methodology enables a level of reflection that can reveal areas for further exploration and documentation. This article also contributes recommendations for government, funders, and civil society organisations.

¹ The Făgăraş Research Institute and the University of Bucharest

² Pietroşel, Andreea (2020) *Corina Murafa, Ashoka Romania: Foarte mulți lideri din societatea civilă sunt supuși unui mare risc de burnout*, RFI România, November 12, 2020.

³ Thorne, Sally E. (2014) "Applied Interpretive Approaches" pp. 99-115 in Ed. Patricia Leavy, *The Oxford Handbook of Qualitative Research*, New York: Oxford University Press.

Romanian civil society - a brief historical perspective

Romania is a former totalitarian country, which began its incremental democratic transition in December 1989.⁴ The characteristics of the Communist regime and its impact on society are essential components for understanding the functioning of civil society today. When the regime changed, there was only a small number of engaged citizens and civil society organisations.⁵ The conceptualisation of civil society in post-Communist Romania and its impact on the democratisation process exposes particularities that have been documented in the literature.⁶ The totalitarian-Communist regime in Romania brought a significant downturn, not only in regards to organised civil society, but also to the country's social construction.⁷

After 1989, the civil society sector was re-activated, and shaped by both internal and external factors.⁸ The EU accession process played an essential role in consolidating civil

society.⁹ Furthermore, international assistance played a key role in developing the civil society sector.¹⁰ Joining the EU led to, however, ambivalent support for the development of civil society and also put pressure on the civil society sector.¹¹ Accession led to a reduction in the number of donors supporting civil society organisations, limiting their reach, and leading, at first, to the shrinking of civil society.

The literature recognises the relevance of civil society activity in various fields of practice and policy, such as transitional justice.¹² The literature also offers a comparative analysis of the evolution of civil society sectors in post-Communist countries, drawing lessons for regime change¹³ and indicating different institutionalisation trajectories.¹⁴

In recent years, the emergence of social movements¹⁵ and community philanthropy organisations, such as community foundations and similar organisations, indicates another vital step for consolidating Romania's civil society.¹⁶ The COVID-19 pandemic¹⁷ and the

⁴ Tismaneanu, V. (1993). The Quasi-revolution and its Discontents: Emerging Political Pluralism in Post-ceanușescu Romania. *East European Politics and Societies*, 7(2), 309–348 <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325493007002005>

⁵ Bădescu, G., Sum, P., & Uslaner, E. M. (2004). Civil Society Development and Democratic Values in Romania and Moldova. *East European Politics and Societies*, 18(2), 316–341 <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325403259915>; Kligman, G. (1990). Reclaiming the Public: a Reflection on Creating Civil Society in Romania. *East European Politics and Societies*, 4(3), 393–438 <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325490004003002>; Hopkins, Mitchell O (2012) "Romania's Civil Society and its Moral Underpinnings: The Symbolic Discourse of a Post-Socialist State," *Multilingual Discourses Vol. 1.1 Fall 2012*

⁶ TISMANEANU, V. (2001). Civil Society, Pluralism, and the Future of East and Central Europe. *Social Research*, 68(4), 977–991. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40971522>

⁷ Bădescu, G., Sum, P., & Uslaner, E. M. (2004) Civil Society Development and Democratic Values in Romania and Moldova. *East European Politics and Societies*, 18(2), 316–341 <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325403259915>

⁸ Necșulescu, A.-H. (2011). Geneza apariției ONG-urilor din România. *Studia Politica: Romanian Political Science Review*, 11(3), 525–556. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssor-448658>. Nițu, Anemari-Helen (2022) Organizațiile societății civile, de la răul necesar la partenerul vital, în ed. Liliana Corobca, *Panorama postcomunismului în România*, Iași: Polirom.

⁹ Cristina Elena Parau (2009) Impaling Dracula: How EU Accession Empowered Civil Society in Romania, *West European Politics*, 32:1, 119–141, DOI: 10.1080/01402380802509917.

¹⁰ Tătar, Marius I (2006) *Importing Democracy from Abroad: International Assistance for Civil Society in Romania*, Oradea: Editura Universității din Oradea.

¹¹ Kutter, A., Trappmann, V. (2010) Civil society in Central and Eastern Europe: The ambivalent legacy of accession. *Acta Polit* 45, 41–69 <https://doi.org/10.1057/ap.2009.18>.

¹² Stan, L. (2013). Civil Society and Post-communist Transitional Justice in Romania. In: Simić, O., Volčič, Z. (eds) *Transitional Justice and Civil Society in the Balkans*. Springer Series in Transitional Justice. Springer, New York, NY. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4614-5422-9_2

¹³ Mungiu-Pippidi, Alina (2010) "The Experience of Civil Society as an Anticorruption Actor in East Central Europe," pp. 5–33 in *Romanian Journal of Political Science*, 10:2; Michael Bernhard (2020) What do we know about civil society and regime change thirty years after 1989?, *East European Politics*, 36:3, 341–362, DOI: [10.1080/21599165.2020.1787160](https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2020.1787160)

¹⁴ Meyer, M., Moder, C., Neumayr, M. et al. (2020) Civil Society and Its Institutional Context in CEE. *Voluntas* 31, 811–827 <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-019-00106-7>

¹⁵ Heemeryck, Antoine (n.d.) "Social Movement and Civil Society in Post-communist Romania: Local evolution, global comparison, in *Anthropological Researches and Studies*, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26758/8.1.25>

¹⁶ Cibian, Stefan (*forthcoming*) New Power and the Creation of a New World: Community Philanthropy Organizations and Power Structures in Local Communities.

¹⁷ Fierăscu, Silvia, Zoltan Levente Fejes, and Ștefan Cibian (2022) Maparea mobilizării Industriei Binelui în limitarea efectelor pandemiei de COVID-19, la nivelul zonei metropolitane Cluj-Napoca, pp. 117–164 în eds. Alin Croitoru and Alexandru Iorga, *Dezvoltarea Comunitară în România: concepte, procese, metode de analiză*, Bucharest: TRITONIC. Nițu, Anemari-Helen (2022) Organizațiile societății civile, de la răul necesar la partenerul vital, în ed. Liliana Corobca, *Panorama postcomunismului în România*, Iași: Polirom.

2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine¹⁸ have caused significant mobilisation among civil society organisations in Romania, demonstrating their societal value and increased capacity.

In Central and Eastern Europe, at a regional level, we can observe an increasing trend towards authoritarian governance, which also impacts Romania. That trend has a direct negative consequence for democratic-leaning civil society organisations.¹⁹ It also exposes the emergence and consolidation of civil society organisations linked to illiberal or extreme right-leaning governments.

Existing studies and data on Romanian civil society

Studies on the evolution of the Romanian civil society sector are somewhat limited, mainly because of lack of data. Romanian institutions fail to collect much data on civil society-related indicators. Furthermore, they are circumspect in even sharing data they possess. Therefore, it is nearly impossible to have a good overview of the sector's size,

activity, and contribution. Several indexes and indicators exist and periodically assess the evolution of the civil society sector or specific components. Examples include the CIVICUS Index on Civil Society,²⁰ the 2022 Global Philanthropy Environment Index Romania IUPUI,²¹ Civil Society Organization Sustainability Index,²² and the Bertelsmann Stiftung's Sustainable Governance Indicators 2022.²³

A limited number of studies have been developed by the Civil Society Development Foundation (FDSC), presenting the evolution of the civil society sector over time. The most recent study was made in 2017.²⁴ FDSC has also recently launched a report mapping data sources on the civil society sector.²⁵ The Centre on the Study of Democracy (CSD) at Babeş-Bolyai University also covers relevant aspects related to civil society and civic participation.²⁶ The Association for Community Relations (ARC) analyses trends in philanthropy every few years, conducting a nationwide survey, and publishing a report. The last report was released in 2016, while the next one is planned for 2023-2024.²⁷ The Făgăraş Research Institute

¹⁸ Cibian, Stefan and Zoltan Levente Fejes (2022) *Intervenția societății civile din România în adresa crizei umanitare din Ucraina 2022: Contribuții și provocări*, Făgăraș: Editura Institutului de Cercetare Făgăraș.

¹⁹ Marcin Ślarzyński; Transformation of Civil Society in Poland under the United Right Government: From Compartmentalization to Political Division. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 1 March 2022; 55 (1): 131–154. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1525/j.postcomstud.2022.55.1.131>; Pintilescu, Corneliu and Attila Kustán Magyari (2020) "Soros conspiracy theories and the rise of populism in post-socialist Hungary and Romania" in eds. Anastasiya Astapova, Onoriu Colăcel, Corneliu Pintilescu, Tamás Scheibner, *Conspiracy Theories in Eastern Europe*, London: Routledge.

²⁰ Epure, Carmen, Oana Țiganescu, and Ancuta Vamesu (2001) *Romanian Civil Society: An Agenda for Progress – A preliminary report on the CIVICUS Index on civil society project in Romania*, CIVICUS Index on Civil Society Occasional Paper Series, Vol. 1, Issue 9; Fioramonti, Lorenzo and Heinrich, Volkhart Finn (2007) How Civil Society Influences Policy: A Comparative Analysis of the CIVICUS Civil Society Index in Post-Communist Europe. Overseas Development Institute and CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation, Report March 2007, Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2100418> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2100418>

²¹ Cibian, Stefan and Levente Fejes (2022) The 2022 Global Philanthropy Environment Index Romania, IU Lilly Family School of Philanthropy, <https://scholarworks.iupui.edu/handle/1805/28258>.

²² USAID (2022) *2021 Civil Society Organization Sustainability Index For Romania*, accessed at [https://storage.googleapis.com/cso-si-dashboard.appspot.com/Reports/CSOSI-](https://storage.googleapis.com/cso-si-dashboard.appspot.com/Reports/CSOSI-Romania-2021.pdf)

[Romania-2021.pdf](#).

²³ Wagner Andrea, Lavinia Stan, and Martin Brusis (2022) Romania Report. Sustainable Governance Indicators, Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung, <https://doi.org/10.11586/2022114>

²⁴ Kivu, Mircea (2017) *România 2017: Sectorul Neguvernamental – profil, tendințe, provocări*, Bucharest: Fundația pentru Dezvoltarea Societății Civile. Lambru, Mihaela and Ancuța Vameșu (2010) *România 2010: Sectorul Neguvernamental – profil, tendințe, provocări*, Bucharest: Fundația pentru Dezvoltarea Societății Civile.

²⁵ Voicu, Bogdan, Ștefania Andersen, and Dana Țălnar-Naghi (2021) *Sectorul non-profit românesc: date existente, infrastructura de colectare, utilizarea datelor și posibile soluții de eficientizare*, Romanian Quantitative Studies Association and Civil Society Development Foundation.

²⁶ Bădescu, Gabriel, Claudiu Ivan, Daniela Anghi, Oana Negru-Subțirică (2018) *Educație pentru Democrație în Școlile din România*, Berlin: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. Marian, Cosmin Gabriel (2019) *Literature on Inheritance: A Summary of What Can Be Learnt*, Journal of Interdisciplinary History of Ideas 8 (2019), 15, p. 6:1–6:16. Bădescu, Gabriel (2010) *Associations and Democracy in Romania*, Accent.

²⁷ Asociația pentru Relații Comunitare (2016) *Tendințe ale Comportamentului Filantropic în România: Donatori individuali, Sectorul de afaceri, Organizații neguvernamentale*, accessed at https://issuu.com/oanaionitanasui/docs/tendinte_ale_comportamentului_filan. Brasovean, Ioana, Cătălin Gheorghe, Dana Pirtoc, and Alina Porumb (2008) *Tendințe ale implicării sociale în România*, Asociația pentru Relații Comunitare, accessed at <https://www.yumpu.com/ro/document/read/18255497/tendinte-comportament-filantropic-2008-asociația-pentru-relatii->

is currently conducting a study regarding civil society capacity in the Țara Făgărașului region.²⁸

Romanian civil society today: A brief inventory of vulnerabilities

The civil society response to the COVID-19 pandemic has shown the importance of NGOs in emergency situations. The response to the humanitarian crisis related to the Russian Federation's invasion of Ukraine has had the same impact. In the thirty years since the fall of the Communist-totalitarian regime, a well-articulated web of civil society organisations has emerged. These organisations, as their mobilisation during crises indicates, are working proactively towards achieving their goals, and contributing to the well-being of their local communities.

This predominantly positive situation is due to multiple factors that have supported the emergence and consolidation of the civil society sector over the last three decades. Based on the reviewed literature, some of these factors relate to the legal provision of rights that enable citizens to assemble and work for their communities; the EU integration process that limited authoritarian pressures on the civil society sector; the funding provided by private and public grant makers, and, increasingly, by individuals; the growing network of infrastructure organisations, such as community foundations, federations, resource centres, and others; and the transformation of the citizenry in terms of acquiring democratic values and skills that facilitate the development of more impactful organisations.

While the civil society sector has grown significantly since the end of the Communist-totalitarian regime, significant challenges continue to confront the sector. These challenges limit its rapid growth, and, at times, threaten the existence of civil society

organisations altogether. Regarding these challenges, we can identify areas of fragility at systemic, community, organisational, and individual levels.

Systemic challenges and areas of vulnerability

While the general public and some politicians have been consistently sceptical of NGOs, from 2017-2019 the Romanian government had an open anti-NGO policy. It further limited civil society space by suspending funding and limiting institutional relations. These were the most severe restrictions that had been placed on civil society since 1989.

The 2017 Government also provoked some of the largest post-1989 protests in Romania, by aiming to adopt legislation to make certain forms of graft legal. Systemically, such experiences indicate a fundamental vulnerability within the civil society sector in front of authoritarian-leaning political power.

Limited systemic revenue sources for NGOs augment that vulnerability. In Romania, there is a limited number of organisations building endowments,²⁹ while fiscal incentives for donations and sponsorship are insufficient for ensuring financial sustainability. Furthermore, material assets such as offices and premises for running activities are limited, hard to secure, and, most often, not owned by NGOs.

While there are many formally registered associations and foundations, the number of active organisations is much lower. That exposes a further systemic challenge related to NGO legislation and administrative procedures. Although improved, the current legislation continues to put significant limitations on manifesting one's freedom of assembly and the functioning of established organisations. Furthermore, power dynamics limit civil society organisations' impact on policy processes.

²⁸ Cibian, Stefan *et. al.* (forthcoming) *Societatea Civilă din Țara Făgărașului și din zonele adiacente*, Făgăraș: Făgăraș Research Institute Publishing House.

²⁹ The Partnership Foundation, the Association for Community

Relations, and several community foundations. The largest endowed Foundation functioning exclusively in Romania is the Romanian-American Foundation.

A further systemic challenge relates to civil society-related skills taught in schools. We can see a very slow transformation of the educational sector to include open citizenship classes and learning. In essence, Romanian educational institutions fail to encourage students to understand their rights, responsibilities, and to develop skills to put these teachings into practice. These educational gaps underscore and perpetuate a limited level of understanding and citizens' trust in NGOs.

Within the civil society sector, a critical vulnerability relates to the inability of funders and donors to adapt their funding requirements to the capacity level of beneficiary organisations. Funding for civil society tends to be tremendously bureaucratic, leading organisations to limit their activity. Limited to no funding exists for capacity building. Flexible, multi-year, or general-purpose funding is also marginal.

Community challenges and areas of vulnerability

At a community level, NGOs encounter vulnerabilities in multiple ways. Organisations find it difficult to mobilise participants for their activities (be it as members, volunteers, staff, or board members). We often see competition among local NGOs, rather than collaboration. Developing and maintaining a built infrastructure for civil society also represents a systemic vulnerability. It fundamentally impacts how organisations operate and how they can carry out their activities. A further vulnerability relates to the ability of local organisations to demonstrate impact: to understand community challenges, collect data, and communicate impact.

The overlapping crises and transformations brought on by climate change, digitalisation, automation, and security threats represent an

emerging challenge for civil society organisations working in local communities. These overlapping crises and transformations require enhanced collaborative efforts for strengthening local sustainability. While the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by the United Nations (UN) in 2015 offer a common global agenda, they are far from being easily applicable in local communities in Romania by NGOs and municipalities.³⁰ These challenges have been augmented by the COVID-19 pandemic³¹ and the war in Ukraine. Such vulnerabilities within local communities put further pressure on the civil society sector.

Organisational challenges and areas of vulnerability

Vulnerabilities also exist at an organisational level. The specialised knowledge needed to manage an organisation well, weak leadership, and limited human resources generate a problematic organisational culture and gaps in NGO performance. A key vulnerability relates to the diversity of tasks needed to be performed by NGO employees and high psychological pressure generated by limited sustainability, leading to fragility.

Individual challenges and areas of vulnerability

At an individual level, socialisation in a culture that insufficiently values civic engagement, philanthropy, and commitment towards public issues, makes citizens unable to support NGOs' functioning. Furthermore, economic strategies for ensuring a living for individuals often involve multiple jobs, leaving very little time for commitments toward civil society and community work. NGOs continue to employ limited staff and engage limited numbers of volunteers.

³⁰ Cibian, Stefan (2021) "The SDGs and Cities from the Black Sea Region: Exploring Macro-Challenges Limiting a More Sustained Engagement" in Eds. Nadiia Bureiko and Dimitrios Triantaphyllou, *Quo Vadis Civil Society in Europe's Neighbourhoods?* NGO Quadrivium, NGO Promotion of Intercultural Cooperation, and

the Center for International and European Studies, Kadir Has University.

³¹ Shulla, Kalterina, Bernd-Friedrich Voigt, Stefan Cibian, Giuseppe Scandone, Edna Martinez, Filip Nelkovski, Pourya Salehi (2021) Effects of COVID-19 on the sustainable development goals (SDGs), pp. 1-19 in *Discover Sustainability*, 2:1.

Conclusions and recommendations

The above analysis indicates that several vulnerabilities are related to national legislation and regulations, donor and funder behaviour, community actions, NGO decisions, individual career choices, and democratic values and skills among citizens. In conclusion, I put forward recommendations for national and local authorities, funders, donors, and organisations.

Recommendations for national authorities

- Adapt Romania's educational policies and curricula at all levels of education to reflect the freedoms and liberties stipulated by the Romanian Constitution. Without skills that enable citizens to use their freedoms, democracy, including freedom of assembly, will remain on paper.
- Transform the organisational culture of schools and universities to promote democratic values and skills.
- Invest in inter-sector partnerships to consistently improve policies.
- Develop frameworks and legislation for inter-sector and public-private partnerships that enable communities to thrive.
- Articulate an approach towards the civil society that empowers citizens to act and be engaged in solving community challenges.
- Improve fiscal rules to foster generosity and incentivise citizens to invest private resources in solving community challenges.
- Prioritise, design, and implement spaces for community actors - youth centres, libraries, offices for NGOs, hubs, incubators, sports centres, and other facilities.
- Explore establishing endowment funds to enable independence of the civil society sector, in particular for organisations working on democracy-related topics.

Recommendations for local communities

- Transform the core approach towards local communities by incentivising citizens to contribute to the development of local communities. Support local community members through specific mechanisms to

fulfil their potential, implement their vision, and develop the community as they envision it.

- Partner with civil society organisations to develop bold and impactful programmes in local communities.
- Invest in community spaces that are accessible, well designed, well equipped, and that support members of the local community to work on their ideas for a better community.
- Implement granting schemes for civil society organisations. Use independent juries for making grant making decisions.

Recommendations for donors and funders

- Assess the sustainability of the civil society sector at regular intervals. Explore sustainability challenges and adapt grant making practices so they are not a liability for the sector.
- Transform grant making into genuine partnerships based on an equal power base. Acknowledge the added value in terms of impact on local communities brought by NGOs and design types of partnerships that are not negatively affecting NGOs.
- Support sabbaticals for civil society professionals.
- Consider establishing endowment funds that stimulate generosity and community engagement to enable citizens and organisations to contribute more towards local communities.

Recommendations for NGOs

- Develop the NGO business models to achieve sustainability.
- Support employees to develop career paths that enable them to be more motivated and impactful. Support organisational and individual learning processes as a part of an open organisational culture. Care for the psychological wellbeing of employees and volunteers.
- Develop relationships with donors and funders so that they can understand grassroots realities and adapt their funding mechanisms.
- Invest in inter-sector partnerships. Develop consistent relationships with public institutions to achieve functional regulations for the civil society sector and other sectors.
- Build partnerships that enable long-

term sustainability for the organisation.

- Develop research skills among staff to be better prepared to understand beneficiaries and demonstrate impact.

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