READ BETWEEN THE LINES

Documenting the experiences of women and human rights’ CSOs, queer collectives and activists in the Black Sea Region amid multiple complexities of overlapping crises – the (post) pandemic consequences of COVID-19 and Russia’s war against Ukraine.

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The project “Read Between the Lines: (Post)pandemic Economic Effects on Women’s Rights CSOs from Bulgaria, Georgia and Ukraine” explores and documents the multiple complexities of the overlapping crises in the Black Sea region – the (post)pandemic economic consequences and those related to the new emergency – Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. It tracks down the experiences of feminist and human rights’ civil society organisations (CSOs) and activists to provide an actual picture of the dynamics in the civil sector beyond the numbers.

Over the course of 10 months (March–December 2022), an international team of researchers conducted 63 interviews with 67 representatives of the civil sector from Azerbaijan, Russia, Belarus, Bulgaria, Georgia, and Ukraine. They analysed the response and resilience models related to the crises and how CSOs influence and harness women and queer communities’ human rights protection and promotion. The current collection of three research papers maps problems, identifies needs and good practices, and proposes recommendations for policy formulations for support of the civil sector and protection of vulnerable groups. It is a helpful tool for establishing an overall picture of the region, yet it brings an understanding of the nature of local problems. The approaches developed in the initiative employ a bottom-up methodology that amplifies women and marginalised groups’ voices to secure their active civil participation. It offers concepts for structural interventions and institutional pressure.

The project also strengthens regional cooperation between the 4 women’s funds that form the partnership – the Bulgarian Fund for Women, the Ukrainian Women’s Fund, the Women’s Fund in Georgia and the TASO Foundation (Georgia) and their grantee partners based in Bulgaria, Ukraine and Georgia. It does so by enriching knowledge about the region and creating a common history and voice. The goal of the collaboration is to foster and protect democratic and European values and to secure sustainability of grassroots organisations and movements, who serve marginalised communities and act as correctives of the states.
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METHODOLOGY

The methodology is inspired by oral history, which is a technique for generating and preserving original, historically interesting information – primary source material – from personal recollections and experiences through planned recorded interviews. This method of interviewing is used to preserve the voices, memories and perspectives of people who are outside of the official historical/political narratives. It employs bottom-up approaches that amplifies women and marginalised groups’ voices who work directly with the consequences of Russia’s war against Ukraine. It includes in-depth interviews, collection of data and documents stories about women’s human rights organisations, queer movements and activists’ experiences of the war, survival strategies, responses to the situation. As a result, the methodology allows for the promotion of gender-sensitive perspectives and furthers the inclusion and significance of marginalised and grassroots groups who are at the periphery of the social and political agenda.

To implement the research objectives, an international team of experts conducted interviews with representatives of women’s human rights organisations, queer movements and activists in Bulgaria, Georgia and Ukraine. The interviews were based on guidance pre-developed by the expert team. It comprised questions that covered topics of the research, from overall experience of the respondents in 2022 to recommendations and key insights.

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1 Smithsonian Institution Archives, [https://siarchives.si.edu/blog/introduction-oral-history#:~:text=Oral%20history%20is%20a%20technique,perspectives%20of%20people%20in%20history](https://siarchives.si.edu/blog/introduction-oral-history#:~:text=Oral%20history%20is%20a%20technique,perspectives%20of%20people%20in%20history).
The present situation offers an opportunity to discuss how civil society in the Black Sea Region relates to policymakers and stakeholders, particularly looking at how we can develop frameworks for facilitating non-institutional innovations to be promoted and sustained within the institutional frameworks at national and regional levels.

The following recommendations are, to different degrees, relevant to all three countries concerned, with an emphasis on the urgency of such support to Ukraine. Specific country-related recommendations could be found at the end of each chapter.

Towards stakeholders and decision-making bodies, international donors, and funding institutions:

- **Rethink the model of one-off funding tied to the emergence of humanitarian crises.** A core funding model needs to be adopted which allows for flexibility in budgetary expenditure and covers administrative and overhead costs, too. Flexible funding is a prerequisite for the sustainability of an organisation and the ability to strategically plan the allocation of resources for any future emergencies to come.

- **Introduce application and reporting systems that are not time-consuming** and allow for better focusing on and serving the target groups.

- **Support national women’s funds in the region, including with state funding.** Women’s funds are uniquely positioned in the feminist and human rights philanthropic ecosystem as they are bridge-builders, work alongside the activist human rights movement, and know best where resources should be invested, so that sustainability is achieved. They reach and support many underserved CSOs across the countries in the region that do frontline work when crises occur, but do not have the capacity to apply for international funding.

- **Work with the media to promote the critical role of the human rights sector in response and prevention efforts** nationally/regionally and to counteract disinformation and the spread of fundamentalist attitudes.

- **Invest in awareness-raising campaigns and data collection** by CSOs on feminist and gender-sensi-
tive topics across the region, especially after the increased concerns over the state of women’s rights during Russia’s war in Ukraine and the post COVID-19 situation. Bring forward the gendered aspects of the armed conflict and displacement and the absence of gender-sensitive policies.

- **Funding must be provided for emotional and physical well-being, self and collective care, and prevention of burn-out** for the activists who are at the forefront of dealing with the consequences of Russia’s war against Ukraine.

- **Develop mechanisms to encourage and support bottom-up actions** (e.g. community organising and mobilising) that can be made sustainable and could allow for **organising without formalising**. To do so, it is necessary for stakeholders to first recognise that civil society is increasingly unstructured, mobile, and very often deliberately not bound to any institutional framework.

- **Preserve and proactively participate in the dialogue between government and civil society sector to work better towards addressing multiple crises.** This includes reaching out to and **involving CSOs in the development and implementation of various policies and national strategies.**

Towards CSOs working to promote and protect vulnerable groups:

- **Build and develop lobbying and advocacy practices based on holistic and intersectional approaches** that entail improved cross-organisation-communication, engagement of different target groups in need and different regional leading decision-makers in order to ensure monitoring and control of legal frameworks on refugee law, policy and sanctions. Developing a plan of actions that is based on the actual needs of the war-affected people should be considered a key goal.

- **Prioritise data collection and analysis regarding the role and participation of women’s human rights organisations and the vulnerable groups they work with** to ensure a gender analysis that informs government actions and responses.

- **Cross-regional collaborations should be further explored, along with fostering activists’ networks and engaging more marginal and newly established women/queer organisations and initiatives in decision-making;** strategic events building on basic target groups’ needs should be planned that might benefit all of the involved players with downstream outcome.

- **Engage in the design and dissemination of intersectional feminist materials, toolkits and resources for analysis that would provide guidance on possible actions that could be taken to reduce the risk of women and human rights’ CSOs who carry out fieldwork and inspire new activists to join the women’s rights movements.**

- **Engage in various national and international efforts to influence philanthropy** and advocate for more and better multi-year flexible core support.
4.1 INTRODUCTION

Since 24 February 2022, the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia led to a massive humanitarian crisis, with millions of people in need, including those who have fled across borders and many more who are on the move inside the country or unable to leave encircled towns and cities. As of the end of 2022, over 6.5 million people are displaced internally and more than 7.8 million refugees from Ukraine have fled to European countries.

The majority of those fleeing Ukraine are women and children. Over 4.3 million refugees from Ukraine have registered for temporary protection or similar national protection schemes in different European countries².

In recent months, the humanitarian situation, which was already dire, has further deteriorated, with the onset of winter and the deliberate and systematic destruction of critical infrastructure by the Russian military. A notable development is a call³ from Ukraine's government for those who have left the country not to return until after winter. Public statements have also recently been made about the possible need to evacuate Kyiv, due to destruction of its energy and water infrastructure. After recent large-scale missile attacks, Ukraine's government reports⁴ that the country has lost 50% of its power output. On 19 November, the CEO of DTEK (Ukraine’s major energy company) stated⁵ that Ukrainians should consider leaving the country for at least 3-4 months to help save energy. With continuing attacks on infrastructure, the situation is likely to deteriorate further.

The Ukrainian crisis has triggered exceptional levels of support and solidarity. Neighbouring governments have mobilised quickly, as have local communities in those countries. In contrast to their approach to refugees from other conflicts, EU countries have been fast to provide temporary protection and access to jobs and services to Ukrainians. The UN humanitarian flash appeal for Ukraine is one of the biggest and most generously funded ever⁶. Public appeals in many European countries have also been very well supported.

Solidarity among Ukrainian people is no less. From the very onset of the full-scale war, communities, individuals, authorities, human rights and women's rights organisations, businesses demonstrated an unprecedented level of support to affected people. However, current activities of most stakeholders are reactive – rather than proactive or transformative. It is fair enough, given the sky-rocketing number of challenges and concerns. Yet it creates the risk of losing the progress achieved in the women’s rights agenda over the past decade, as well as the risk of not engaging women's talents, dedication, professionalism and entrepreneurial skills in peace, security and post-war recovery processes in Ukraine.

Prior to the full-scale invasion, Ukrainian women had made certain gains in terms of rights and the advancement of gender equality. At the same time, there was a strong civil society, including women and minority-led organisations. During the COVID-19 pandemic, these gains were challenged by deeply entrenched gender discrimination (disproportionately affecting the socio-economic status of women), the compounding effects of nine years of conflict including displacement, and the increasing rates of violence against women experienced during the pandemic. Pre-existing gender and intersectional inequalities tend to worsen during a crisis, and any advances made will be further negatively affected by the current war.

Women’s rights organisations have been a strong advocate of women’s rights and gender transformations in Ukraine. However, since February 2022, the environment has also become dramatically tenser for the WROs, women activists and civil society at large. Namely:

1) In the first months, women’s NGOs quickly reached the point of burnout and badly lacked financial resources, as they worked 24/7 to provide support to

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² Ukraine Situation Flash Update #33 (21 October 2022)
⁶ https://cdn.odi.org/media/documents/Navigating_Ukrainian_dilemmas_in_the_Ukraine_crisis.pdf
war-affected women. Eventually they got used to this burden, but humanitarian support is still mostly provided by Ukrainian NGOs and volunteers, yet financially supported by international NGOs and bilateral donors.

2) Therefore, we observe a backlash against women’s rights agenda – strategic gender transformational activities of the women’s NGOs, government and international development partners are put on hold.

3) Moreover, while women’s NGOs are involved in coordination of certain humanitarian and CRSV-related processes, they are basically not part of peace and security processes, even at the community level, let alone in national-level discussions and decision-making. Women’s perspectives remain mostly not recognised in the government’s decision-making on critical sectors.

4) Sub-optimal coordination of efforts between the government and WROs on implementation of the Women, Peace and Security agenda and wider efforts in the humanitarian-recovery nexus. It is gradually improving at the national level, but at the regional and community levels, it remains a challenge.

This environment represents a huge challenge for the Ukrainian WROs – a challenge that may either weaken them or become a source of growth. For the latter to happen, the WROs should be further supported through international coordination and resources to continue doing their job of providing support to conflict-affected people and promoting women’s rights and gender transformations in Ukraine.

4.2 OBJECTIVES

Being immersed in a constantly changing and evolving situation, the Bulgarian Fund for Women together with the Ukrainian Women’s Fund (UWF), the Women’s Fund in Georgia and the TASO Foundation have developed a comparative research project to understand the potential ways of going through the crisis. The project aims to analyse how women and human rights’ CSOs adapt and respond to complex emergencies and how their redirection to humanitarian aid from the past years influenced their long-term sustainable and strategic development.

For the sake of consistency among the three countries within the scope of research (Bulgaria, Georgia, Ukraine), this report covers the following topics:

1) Overall experience of the WROs in 2022.

2) Organisation status and condition at the beginning of the full-scale war.

3) Key triggers and barriers for the immediate response of the WROs.

4) Relationships with the target groups. Addressing the needs of target groups.

5) Relationship with the government and local authorities.

6) Relationship with international organisations, donors.

7) Overall morale in the organisation and ways of dealing with the burnout.

8) Recommendations for Ukrainian WROs.

It is expected that the findings and recommendations resulting from this research will help:

- Guide programmatic activities of the three women’s foundations in response to the war effects in their countries, based on our competitive advantages, institutional experience and networks;

- Inform fundraising activities for the forthcoming programmes and projects;

- Inform partnerships that will help the foundations protect and advance women’s rights in Bulgaria, Georgia and Ukraine in the context of war, displacement and recovery.

4.3 METHODOLOGY

In Ukraine, a total of 23 women’s rights organisations (WROs) were interviewed in September–December 2022. They represent different regions of Ukraine (Western, Eastern, Central, Southern). Most WROs from eastern regions of Ukraine relocated to safer regions in the central and western parts of the country. Three representatives of WROs relocated abroad, but their organisations continue to operate in Ukraine. However, there is no information about what percentage of employees of WROs who actually moved abroad after February 2022, with their WROs having stopped activities. Therefore, the ratio of 3:20 is not representative for the entire sample of Ukrainian WROs in terms of staying in Ukraine or fleeing.

For Ukraine’s part of the research, secondary data analysis was also conducted, including the publications by UN Women: Rapid Assessment: Impact of the War in Ukraine on Women’s Civil Society organisations (April 2022) and Rapid Gender Analysis of Ukraine (May 2022), studies conducted by the UWF for the preparation of its Strategy on Advancing Women’s Movement in Ukraine (2020, 2022) and others.
4.4 OVERALL EXPERIENCE OF WOMEN’S RIGHTS ORGANISATIONS. ORGANISATION STATUS AND CONDITION AT THE BEGINNING OF THE FULL-SCALE WAR

The first Ukrainian women’s rights organisations (WROs) were established in the early 1990s, immediately after Ukraine pronounced its independence. Later on, they got a boost from the 1995 Beijing Conference. Women’s groups were active at key social developments, including the transformative protests of 2004 and 2013-2014. The WROs have regularly contributed to the development of national and regional gender policies and reporting to UN human rights mechanisms. They proved active and effective in responding to the effects of the full-scale invasion in 2022, too.

Although advances have been made, these organisations and initiatives have yet to coalesce into a comprehensive women’s movement. The Ukrainian WRO landscape is diverse, comprising about 1,000 registered organisations (total number of CSOs in Ukraine is about 160,000), some of them originating from the early 1990s. However, not all of these 1,000 are active on a regular basis. According to the UWF and UN Women, their partner networks comprised about 250 and 150 WROs, respectively – these are the organisations that conduct visible activities and engage with the governments, other WROs and international organisations.

New WRO leaders are not actively joining the “established” women’s movement or are creating their own networks. There is no coordination or dialogue among different waves in the movement.

In 2020, the UWF led a self-assessment exercise among Ukrainian WROs to evaluate their overall experience and interaction with each other. Key findings:

- almost 60% of respondents said the movement of WROs had no effective mechanism for decision-making;
- 60% said there were no sufficient opportunities for diverse groups to come together for peer learning and joint planning; and
- 63% felt that there were no clear mechanisms to develop and support new leaders, including next-generation leaders from communities most affected by the issues.

The following are some key governance issues that were identified through UWF’s self-assessment process; they will be defined more thoroughly as part of the mapping exercise and capacity assessments undertaken in the first year of the project:

- WROs are project driven and not strategic;
- the women’s movement is weak, disorganised and not very inclusive;
- there is a lack of cooperation within the movement and with other allied movements;
- the voices of women represented by WROs are not heard by decision-makers;
- WROs rarely participate in policy development and consultations.

WROs are vocal and effectively engage with the governments, especially at the regional level. At the same time, in general, women’s organisations and groups are not a part of any decision-making panels or consultations over the national policies and reforms.

These problems continued into 2022. Since the very first day of the full-scale war, WROs have been playing a key role in the humanitarian response but are not fully involved in decision-making. They are performing vital roles in the immediate humanitarian response in local communities. WROs and women volunteers are mobilising quickly to ensure that their communities and IDPs receive the support they need to access critical services and humanitarian aid.

According to expert estimates, about 150-200 WROs continue their operations after the full-scale invasion. In addition, a certain number of women’s interest groups have been established throughout 2022, but there is no information on how many of them have been formally registered in 2022.

Interviews conducted with 23 WROs are not representative in this regard. In March 2022, UN Women conducted interviews with 67 WROs to assess the early impact of war on their situation. This survey showed that:

- 93% organisations are legally registered as non-profit organisations;
- In 2022, 42% of WROs work entirely on a volunteer basis (that is, without receiving money from the government, donors or other sources);
- About a half of the WROs cover large geographic areas with their activities;
- About a half of the WROs remained fully functioning even after the full-scale invasion. Only 7% were forced to stop their activities;

WROs cover all regions of Ukraine, but their distribution is uneven. Some regions have a much larger number of WROs, for example, Kyiv, Lviv and Donetsk and Luhansk.
regions. The more dire the security situation in a region, the higher the rate of inactive WROs there.

Most WROs work simultaneously on several topics. The most popular topics are gender equality and women’s empowerment, followed by the Women, Peace, Security agenda, prevention and responding to gender-based violence, and providing social support and inclusion. Every second WRO works in more than 3 thematic areas. WROs work with women who face various cross-cutting barriers and discrimination and focus on internally displaced women (those displaced since 2014), women with disabilities and rural women. Groups of women who are less supported by WROs include female veterans, LBTIQ women, HIV-positive women, and women from ethnic minorities, including Roma.

However, it all changed after 24 February 2022. In the first months after the full-scale invasion, WROs were completely focused on addressing urgent humanitarian problems. They:

Helped the IDPs, found spaces to accommodate them and brought everything – from food and diapers to psychological assistance – to them. Staff were working without payment, just on a voluntary basis, almost around the clock.

From summer and especially autumn 2022, the situation somewhat improved, and the WROs managed to return some part of their efforts to their ‘traditional’ areas of focus and started thinking about their sustainability and advocacy priorities. However, almost all of the 23 surveyed WROs continue to allocate at least a half of their time and resources to supporting people affected by the war and women in the military.

4.5 KEY TRIGGERS AND BARRIERS FOR IMMEDIATE RESPONSE BY WROS

Ukrainian WROs were able to mobilise very quickly and started providing aid to affected people on the first day of the full-scale invasion. Later on, they also managed to focus on advocacy for gender mainstreaming in security and defence processes, as well as in recovery.

However, they have been facing a number of barriers and challenges, including lack of resources – money, staff, time, disrupted operational procedures and supply chains, and security issues.

In particular, partially functioning CSOs suffer much more from staff being displaced or unable to work, as well as from limited access to their offices/equipment. All of the 23 interviewed organisations remained functional, but they know other WROs that were forced to terminate or suspend their activities due to disrupted operational activities, displacement of staff and security challenges. In November–December 2022, factors such as missile attacks and resulting electricity shutdowns also became an issue which slowed down the operation of WROs.

Security issues are common for every WROs interviewed, but their severity is different. For those who were operating in eastern or southern regions of Ukraine, the active hostilities and Russian occupation became the factors that made their operations impossible.

The WROs had to make significant adjustments to their programmes and activities in response to the crisis. It is confirmed by the findings of UN Women Rapid Assessment: “66% of surveyed CSOs are now providing services and activities they did not work on before, 57% are providing remote support to beneficiaries and more than 52% of surveyed CSOs are reallocating funds to new/different priorities.”

First, we badly lacked money to provide support to IDPs, let alone support our strategic activities and take care of our own staff. We quickly realised that we all are on the edge of burnout if not already there, but we had no resources for that. Since we were working with vulnerable groups of women even before the war, we had certain skills that made us able to quickly help people who suffered from the war. But frankly speaking, we had to abandon our pre-war priorities for about half a year.

Yet another important barrier for the WROs from the onset of the crisis has been the lack of access to decision-making, including policies and decisions that concern displacement, support to people affected by the war. The reason is the centralisation of power and the increased role of the military, including military administrations at the local and regional levels. It reduced women’s overall participation. Also, such structures usually de-prioritise social development and gender equality issues. Interviewed WROs agree that their voices are currently not taken into account by the governments when planning and making decisions about humanitarian aid or wider peace processes. Therefore, the policies and programmes of the authorities do not adequately address the needs and priorities of different groups of women and men, including the most vulnerable and marginalised ones.

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8 Ibid
4.6 RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE TARGET GROUPS. ADDRESSING THE NEEDS OF TARGET GROUPS

As noted above, before the full-scale invasion, target groups of WROs were women who faced compound discrimination and barriers, including internally displaced women (those displaced since 2014), women with disabilities and rural women. Certain WROs also targeted their effort at women entrepreneurs, women politicians, and also female veterans, LBTIQ women, HIV-positive women, and women from ethnic minorities, including Roma.

However, the full-scale invasion changed everything, and from the very first days, the WROs re-prioritised their activities and completely focused on women and families affected by the war:

- Internally displaced women and families,
- Women and families living in the areas of hostilities,
- Women serving in the armed forces, police, emergency rescue service, border guard service.

The response priorities for the WROs have been:

- Protection: psychosocial support for women, children, older people and people with disabilities, stress management training sessions,
- Shelter: bed linen, blankets, towels, kitchen sets, jerry cans, buckets for displaced people and host communities,
- Health: provision of primary healthcare services, providing items like trauma kits and first aid kits, as well as supporting healthcare facilities with oxygen compressors and vital pharmaceutical products,
- Food: food assistance, hot meals or using cash transfers like supermarket vouchers,
- Water, sanitation and hygiene: safe drinking water, hygiene information and hygiene kits.

In the initial days after the full-scale invasion, the work of WROs with affected people was somewhat chaotic. The responders were mostly volunteers or voluntary groups, including NGOs, community responders, regular individuals – who quickly ‘self-mobilised’ and began to organise humanitarian aid and communicate with affected people. Indeed, most international NGOs (INGOs) were not present in Ukraine in late February 2022, and affected people did not receive aid from most INGOs until April. So, WROs (and other NGOs) and volunteers, along with the authorities, were the first to provide a response, using their own capacity – available resources and skills.

The needs of affected people far exceeded what could be provided by the responders. In March–April, INGOs started coming and brought more resources. Many of these resources actually came to affected people not directly from INGOs, but through local NGOs, including WROs – they partnered up with INGOs to deliver their programmes, often through grant modalities.

After the initial weeks of somewhat chaotic response, WROs and other organisations started conducting regular needs analysis of affected people. Needs assessment became a more institutionalised practice especially when INGOs came and brought necessary resources for that.

Now the response provided by WROs is two-fold: they both react to direct requests for aid and base their response/programming on the findings of needs analysis.

At first, we focused on humanitarian coordination centres [as a source of information], then we asked the village councils to determine the needs of people. Cooperation with state authorities was useful and helped identify gaps between the needs and capabilities of communities: for example, sometimes communities do not perceive elderly people as those in need. We engaged an MHPSS specialist for reconciliation. Now there is an extensive needs monitoring system, online questionnaires plus data collection through social workers.

The surveyed WROs have expectations for a significant expansion of the humanitarian programmes. Some say that they need 5 times more resources than they have now (from INGOs and UN Agencies) to cover the needs of affected people. Also, they say that they are ready for and would benefit from longer-term programming and from being engaged in response design from the very start (see section Relationship with International Organisations and Donors for more discussion on that).

A separate workstream of WROs is providing war-related support to women serving in the armed forces, police, emergency rescue service, border guard service, as well as doctors and paramedics. Starting from late February, they have been procuring and delivering life vests, helmets, clothes, hygiene products, medicines to female officers/servants.

We must not forget the war is not over. The needs that were there at the beginning continue – medicine, ammunition, etc. – everything must be renewed, there are losses. New people are joining the forces, they have needs. Medicines are not available to everyone either… Our staff continue to help. The war reformatteed and changed our activities. Our duties have also changed. In addition to our work, new functions have been added.

The need for this was particularly acute for two reasons: (i) the need for protective equipment became so huge in the first weeks of the full-scale war that the government...
was not able to cover everything. Support has been also provided to male officers, but the WROs naturally focused on women; (ii) the government started working on the procurement of life vests adapted to women bodies and hygiene items for women even before February 2022, but no significant progress was made at the time of the full-scale invasion, so the WROs came just in time.

Finally, an important issue is the constituency – to what extent the WROs represent the voices of their target groups. Before the full-scale invasion, this issue was actively discussed within the women’s rights movement. Of 23 surveyed WROs, several report having worked closely with their target groups and involving target groups into programme design, so they feel like they did represent the voices of their target groups.

The full-scale war changed everything. Now the target groups of WROs became much more numerous and diverse, and in a more desperate situation. According to the WROs, many affected people are extremely stressed because of displacement, loss of housing and livelihoods, sometimes loss of their family members and friends, air raid sirens, shelling, blackouts and other factors. Therefore, affected people have little capacity and motivation to liaise with the WROs and participate in shaping the programmes targeted at them. As a result, constituency of WROs in terms of ‘new’ target groups naturally became a challenge, and the recipes for strengthening the constituency that were developed before the full-scale war have an extremely limited effect in the current context.

4.7 RELATIONSHIP WITH THE GOVERNMENT AND LOCAL AUTHORITIES

Overall, WROs relationship with the government has long been a challenge, but it has been gradually improving. Two catalytic factors for such improvements are: (i) crises that the government and civil society can only overcome in cooperation, and (ii) WROs have greatly increased their capacity and agency in the last years and became a truly valuable partner for the government.

In 2022, a lot of important developments took place that determined the context of the WRO-government relationship. First, women have increasingly become agents of change at the local and national levels. Women have become more visible in Ukraine’s response to Russia’s aggression at the international, national and community levels. In June 2022, Ukraine acquired the EU candidate status, which may work as a conditionality to promote women’s rights and gender equality agenda at the national and local levels in Ukraine. As an example, several days before receiving this status, Ukraine ratified the Istanbul Convention that it repeatedly tried to ratify since it signed it back in 2011.

In 2022, the new State Strategy (National Action Plan) for Ensuring Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women and Men for the Period Until 2030 was adopted, and the National Action Plan for the Implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 was updated to reflect war-related challenges. These instruments provide for expanded opportunities for the WROs to engage with the government in implementation of gender policy and other sectoral policies. Since spring 2022, the government has been working on the development of the National Recovery Plan – an instrument that will specify key areas, approaches, strategies, policies and specific projects for Ukraine’s recovery from the effects of war until 2032. Representatives of the WROs have been invited to participate in the development of the National Recovery Plan, but in the interviews, they confirmed that this experience was suboptimal, and unless further action is taken, the Recovery Plan will not meaningfully integrate women’s rights and gender equality issues. A strong advocate for a healthy relationship and cooperation between the government and WROs is the Government Commissioner for Gender Policy. Her efforts helped certain government agencies start systematically partnering up with the WROs in implementation of their gender policies, and the full-scale war further intensified such partnerships.

At the same time, generally, many WROs report that they feel “invited but not included” in the coordination mechanisms with the government. Some reasons noted by the interviewed WROs are: (1) heavy coordination mechanisms that are time-consuming and are felt to detract from their regular work and engagement with their target groups; (2) lack of experience of WROs in coordination; (3) WROs are extremely stretched – both in terms of funding, and of human resources.

According to the WROs, the government still takes a formalistic (“to tick the box”) approach to cooperation with women’s rights organisations and to implementation of gender policy and gender issues at large. Also, there is a risk of deprioritising women’s rights topics against the background of the challenges of a full-scale war. Critical barriers to involving WRO representatives in decision-making at the national and regional levels remain. For example, the WROs are neither included, nor consulted with in the policymaking of military-civil administrations – the type of governance which currently is the most influential in Ukraine.

Since the WROs have been very much involved in humanitarian response throughout 2022, it is also important to look at the relationship with government and local authorities in the context of response. The WROs are somewhat involved in the humanitarian coordination and cluster system, and through this with the government, but they report being ready for more tangible involvement and input, especially in decision-making and policy planning. With local authorities, the WROs coordinate much better. The WROs have meetings and interaction with representatives of local authorities, and
they use data and reporting from local authorities for programming their interventions.

The WROs recognized that in the first months after February, they were too much engaged in launching the work and lacked capacity and knowledge to be effective contributors to coordination. Over time, the WROs have become more committed to coordination. However, there is still an attitude of many WROs looking at how coordination can help their organisation rather than how it can contribute to the overall response. According to the WROs, sometimes they feel the lack of coordination, and sometimes they feel it takes too much time. The frequency of meetings was noted as an issue. For example, if cluster meetings are held weekly and if these meetings are very general, and do not provide a lot of useful information, and if a WRO works with 2-3 topics, it means the participation in 2-3 meetings per week – a huge commitment of time, for little perceived value.

It is good that at first, we focused on practical issues and not on coordination. Now we are more prepared for coordination. We are not yet at the stage when Ukraine is oversaturated with humanitarian aid. Avoiding duplication (through coordination) is not a priority right now.

At the local level, coordination should be mandatory. It is about a permit system, security of staff (we can’t access areas of hostilities without permits or advice from the military).

Local coordination centres administered by local authorities were really a good source of information. Information about the affected people and their needs.

The WROs coordinate with local humanitarian headquarters (offices established under local authorities), which speeds up access to affected people, helps learn their needs and prevents overlaps in response.

Another important area is the relationship between the WROs and the security and defence sector institutions. About half of the surveyed WROs have been engaged in interaction with such institutions throughout 2022. As noted above, this interaction includes providing protective equipment, clothes, hygiene items, medicines and other supplies to women who serve in security and defence sector institutions. Also, this interaction includes advocacy for women’s rights in the security and defence sector reform.

In 2020 and 2021 there was a considerable improvement in the relationship between the WROs and security and defence sector institutions, including institutional changes, such as deeper understanding of the importance of gender equality in security and defence sector institutions; regularity of cooperation with the WROs, examples of successful advocacy. Cooperation created the foundations for a comprehensive and deep integration of gender equality in the security and defence sector.

The full-scale invasion made an ambivalent impact on this relationship. On the one hand, it opened new windows of opportunities: the WROs were able to contribute to specific processes, like equipping female officers, helping with evacuation and other types of assistance to affected populations (i.e. helped the rescue service implement its functions). On the other hand, security and defence sector institutions became more closed:

The bodies of the security and defence sector are still fairly open, but cooperation is now more like firefighting than strategic cooperation. Because we were all so vulnerable to the [full-scale] invasion, it affected us greatly. Security and defence bodies accept all our help. But I already notice a return to the old patterns of interaction. This super-openness is gradually ending.

Other problems referred to by the interviewed WROs include insufficient information and awareness-raising (on both sides), lack of systemic interest and genuine understanding of women’s rights and gender policy on the part of security and defence institutions, and – sometimes – lack of expertise in the WROs on security and defence issues. But the WROs recognize that it is important for them to seize the window of opportunities and invest more in cooperation with security and defence sector institutions.

4.8 RELATIONSHIP WITH INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS AND DONORS

The WROs in Ukraine have a long and successful history of cooperation with international organisations, including UN Agencies, other intergovernmental organisations, INGOs, and bilateral donors. International organisations consult with the WROs when designing their programmes and support advocacy of the WROs vis-à-vis Ukraine’s government and international community. Also, international organisations and donors are a critical source of funding for the WROs – they make up about 95% of the total revenue of the WROs.

In 2022, international organisations strengthened even further their roles as partners and a source of resources for the WROs. Because the WROs were not humanitarian actors, the issue of humanitarian principles arose, noting that the principles of impartiality and neutrality could be challenging for some local organisations, mostly with regards to occupied territories. However, Ukrainian authorities and civil society quickly lost any access to the occupied territories and could not provide any assistance to Ukrainian residents there.

In the first months of the response, the donors were criticised for being too slow in recognising the local context and the fact that local CSOs in Ukraine have the neces-
The surveyed WROs have different experiences. Some WROs have the feeling that they already have good capacity and can manage bigger projects and budgets.

The WROs have plans to involve psychologists to provide support to their staff and volunteers. ‘Daily’ workers, and ‘free hands’ to help with organisation and ways of dealing with burnout.

Support for community initiatives is a real treasure. We are looking for interest groups that propose projects for mini-grants, and we support them. This is more long-term support + shared responsibility + people plan better how to live their lives in the future + increases confidence in themselves and in collective aid. We support everything that we think is important in communities – from cleaning the wells to purchasing medical equipment. We have no restrictions.

Support from international organisations is also important in the WRO cooperation with security and defence sector institutions. In fact, such cooperation takes place either on a volunteer basis (from the side of WROs) or is funded by international technical aid projects. The resources of security and defence institutions are also used, but mostly in-kind – for example, an institution provides their premises for a gender-focused training, a WRO provides experts/trainers, and an international technical aid project covers conference service expenses. While such financial support is critical – indeed, it is impossible to develop sustainable cooperation without the funding – international organisations are also a source of expertise and advocacy support for the WROs in their work on gender mainstreaming in the security and defence sector.

4.9 OVERALL MORALE IN THE ORGANISATION AND WAYS OF DEALING WITH BURNOUT

Since late February, the WROs recognize that they are very close to burnout, sometimes even there. They are extremely stretched with providing support to people affected by war and their other programmatic activities and face significant overload of staff.

The WROs receive certain support from the donors, including trainings on safeguarding, programmes to prevent burnout among the staff, including psychological counselling and meetings for psychological support. However, they are not mandatory, so not everybody attends them. Sometimes – when donor funding is available – they may organise workshops outside Ukraine or in a comfortable environment to help staff get some rest.

Other types of support include trainings on the principles of humanitarian aid (for both staff and volunteers), guided tours, visits to theatres, etc. The WROs mention certain donors that allocate specific budgets that the WROs can use for psychological support and well-being of their staff. But this practice is not widespread.

To decrease the workload on staff, the WROs invite volunteers, ‘daily’ workers, and ‘free hands’ to help with certain procedures such as registration of beneficiaries.

The WROs have plans to involve psychologists to provide support to their staff and volunteers.

However, this offer of support to staff seems to not meet the demand for support. The WROs recognize that their staff are extremely stretched.

Some WROs have increased their staff two- or even four-fold since February 2022. It is an extremely rapid rate of organisational growth. Since the war – and the humanitarian crisis – will most likely last for a long time, it is important to cultivate an environment in which the WROs can grow while continuing to develop their capacity to function well. In the long run, this is necessary for the sake of both WROs and the affected people they serve.
Finally, at the individual level, staff of WROs often neglect to care for themselves.

Supporting the well-being of the staff is very important. Some staff have not yet gone on vacation [as of November] and say that they cannot be at home with their thoughts, especially if they have relatives in the occupied territories. Work distracts them from these thoughts. We have programmes to prevent burn-out, we have meetings for psychological support. Not everyone goes, but those who do, they like them.

As one respondent put it, the staff of her WRO keep asking a question to themselves: “Are we still effective or already exhausted,” understanding that they cannot be both at the same time. The WROs understand that there is room for more support for their staff, and that the balance between addressing the needs of target groups and taking care of themselves has yet to be found.

### 4.10 KEY INSIGHTS:

1. Before the full-scale Russian invasion, Ukrainian WROs were steadily growing in terms of their quantity, activism and capacity. They embraced different areas across the gender equality and women’s empowerment agenda, actively engaged with the target groups, cooperated with the government, security and defence sector institutions and local authorities, and had productive relationships with the international organisations and donors.

2. Before late February 2022, certain limitations for WROs were: limited constituency (representation of voices of target groups); exclusion from policy design and decision-making by the authorities; limited participation in programme design of international organisations and donors.

3. The Russian invasion created new challenges and barriers and completely changed everything for the WROs: key directions of activities, trends of relationships with target groups, authorities, international organisations/donors, the morale and availability of resources. Overall, the WROs are getting stronger and more influential. But it comes at the expense of them being extremely stretched and burned out.

4. Ukrainian WROs (along with other CSOs) were not engaged in humanitarian work before, therefore they lacked knowledge of and experience in humanitarian standards. However, many of them have been dealing with protection, incl. from GBV, providing support to vulnerable groups, etc.

5. The WROs along with other CSOs were the first entities to provide support to affected people, using their own enthusiasm and resources. From the very first day of the full-scale invasion, they were there to offer food, temporary accommodation, clothes, hygiene items, medicines, other essentials, psychological support and protection to internally displaced people and residents of areas of hostilities. Also, they provided life vests, clothes, medicines, etc. to women serving in the armed forces, police and other security and defence institutions.

6. In the first months, response by the WROs was somewhat chaotic and reactive. In the next months, regular needs assessments have been organised that informed the programming, and this practice continues.

7. International organisations, notably humanitarian NGOs that came (or scaled up their activities in rare cases when they were present in Ukraine before 24 February 2022) brought expertise, humanitarian standards, partnerships and resources. The WROs confirm that they benefited from these. In fact, humanitarian aid that comes from INGOs is often distributed to affected people not directly, but through national and local CSOs, including WROs.

8. The WROs extensively engage with affected people who became their primary target group. However, while the needs of affected people are carefully assessed through various methods, affected people are almost not included in the WRO response programmes. Constituency remains extremely low. At the same time, as much as certain WROs continue their pre-war activities, they keep the same level of engagement with the respective target groups.

9. Cooperation with the government and local authorities is gradually improving, but the WROs are still not included in the policy design, decision-making and even meetings of the authorities. When they are included, their voice is mostly not adequately heard. The cooperation mostly takes place by exchange of information about the needs of affected people (usually these are the local authorities that register affected people and thus know statistics).

10. An important particularity of Ukraine is that Ukrainian WROs engage with security and defence sector institutions, but the full-scale invasion made an ambivalent impact on this cooperation. On the one hand, it increases the need for cooperation and thus opens new windows of opportunities. But at the same time, it makes security and defence sector institutions more closed off and less ready for cooperation.

11. International organisations have been an important partner for the WROs and a source of expertise and resources. This dependence on international organisations/donors further increased with the start of the full-scale war. They provide the WROs with training and policies related to humanitarian standards and
no less than 95% of the revenues. At the same time, a significant share of WROs is critical of bureaucracy, protracted decision-making, reporting and visibility requirements and patronising attitudes of international organisations towards the WROs. While it has been gradually improving over 2022, there is still scope for more flexibility and empowerment of the WROs in terms of programme design and managing bigger budgets.

12. A critical issue for Ukrainian WROs is the burnout, as they have been extremely stretched since the very first day of the full-scale invasion. The problem is further exacerbated by the fact that while many WROs have policies and modalities to support self-care and prevention of burnout, at the individual level, staff neglect using them and become more and more exhausted.

13. On a positive side, the WROs are very actively learning (from trainings offered by international partners, from their own experience) and sharing their experience with other WROs. During 2022, the WROs further intensified their collaboration and attempted to coalesce into a unified movement. However, they need more resources to be invested into networking and partnership/movement building, since currently most resources are used to provide aid to affected people.

14. However, a unified movement is a key prerequisite for stronger and more successful advocacy for women’s rights and gender transformations. The WROs need more support so that they can invest in advocacy vis-à-vis the government on making the recovery and security policies more inclusive and gender-transformative.

4.11 KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

4.11.1 For Ukrainian WROs:

1. Continue developing skills, capacity and expertise, notably on:
   - providing humanitarian aid to affected people,
   - public administration and policy making, so that the WROs can better contribute to public policy making at the national and local levels,
   - being more involved with the security and defence sector,
   - constituency building,
   - liaising with the media.

2. Strengthen the systems and practices of learning from own experience, sharing experience with other WROs and CSOs, and seek partnerships and support from international organisations/donors.

3. Develop and implement practices of liaising with affected people and other target groups of WROs for encouraging their participation, collecting feedback from them and constituency building. An example is finding affected people who have certain experience of civic activism, have good networks with other affected people and can act as a kind of intermediary.

4. Strengthen contingency planning by elaborating on different scenarios – from business as usual to deteriorated hostilities and energy crisis, and how the WROs can respond. In contingency planning, consider not only different scenarios related to the affected people and their needs, but also different options for institutional sustainability and development.

5. Offer and conduct training on gender for public administration, police, armed forces and other security and defence sector institutions, the media, businesses, CSOs.

6. Conduct gender analysis of all public policy areas, notably on humanitarian support, post-war reconstruction and recovery (across all 24 directions of the National Recovery Plan), security and defence reform, and develop and submit recommendations/proposals on gender mainstreaming in the legal framework, policies and action plans on all public policy areas.

7. Conduct monitoring and advocacy to ensure integration of these recommendations/proposals in the legal framework, policies and action plans on all public policy areas. To strengthen the advocacy effect, partner up with CSOs and international organisations.

8. Advocate for the inclusion of WRO representatives and gender experts in policy and decision-making by the government and local authorities; and offer themselves as experts to the government and local authorities, CSOs, international organisations and donors in policy/programme design, to ensure that these policies and programmes are gender-sensitive or gender-transformative, and to ensure that they are reflective of women’s voices.

9. Support networking between WROs:
   - establish thematic and regional coalitions,
   - engage women-opinion leaders, activists, women’s initiatives and organisations,
   - organise regular strategic planning and experience sharing events to strengthen coordination and cooperation.

Seek resources from international organisations/donors to strengthen networking.
10. Establish **international coordination platforms** between Ukrainian WROs and WROs in the countries that host Ukrainian migrants to exchange experience and jointly address cross-border humanitarian issues.

11. Conduct advocacy so that the international organisations implementing programmes in Ukraine or for Ukrainian women actively engage WROs in their programme design, consult with WROs and Ukrainian women.

12. Strengthen **organisational policies on preventing burnout** and providing psychological support to staff, seek resources from international organisations/donors to implement such policies.

13. Encourage staff to **take care of themselves** to be able to provide a response in the long-term, because the crisis will continue for long months or maybe even years.

4.11.2 **For Donors, Including UN Agencies, Other International Inter-Governmental Organisations, INGOs and Bilateral Donors:**

1. **Recognize the capacity** of Ukrainian WROs, notably the capacity to plan, and seek a real balance between the priorities of international organisations and priorities of WROs.

2. Regularly **involve** Ukrainian WROs as full-fledged partners and experts in situation analysis and in design, implementation and evaluation of programmes implemented in Ukraine.

3. **Conduct consultations** (directly and through WROs) with various **groups of Ukrainian women** (the elderly and young women, rural and urban women, women staying in Ukraine and abroad, women with disabilities, women from ethnic minorities, LGBTQI, etc.) on their needs, as well as on what are the most convenient ways for them to participate in programme design and share feedback.

4. **Simplify grant procedures** for WROs, while ensuring compliance with the principles of efficiency and integrity. For example, consider using mechanisms for expedited procurement of energy generators for hospitals, schools, IDP accommodation centres and other critical infrastructure facilities, because the need for such generators will remain huge in the coming months.

5. **Simplify reporting** from WROs – notably, make the reporting less detailed and less frequent. The WROs have a strong capacity to design, implement and monitor programmes and demonstrate a high level of integrity and efficiency.

6. **Support the advocacy** of WROs or conduct **joint advocacy** for WRO causes, notably on:

   - inclusion of WRO representatives and gender experts in policy and decision-making by the government and local authorities,
   - mainstreaming gender into the legal framework, policies and action plans on all public policy areas, including humanitarian aid, recovery and reconstruction, and security and defence sector reform.

7. **Allocate targeted budgets** to WROs for:

   - preventing burnout,
   - strengthening WRO organisational capacity,
   - strengthening WRO networking and coalition building.
REDEFINING SAFE SPACES AMIDST THE RUSSIA’S WAR IN UKRAINE*

The lack of resources among these groups, as well as the inequality between newly established, smaller initiatives in the periphery and bigger, older organisations in the capital has become more dramatic in the light of the political and economic crisis caused by the war. Limited economic possibilities and no support from the Georgian government makes a lot of refugees leave for Europe and North America. In addition, safety concerns also contribute to political fugitives seeking refuge in other places.

Overall, the resistance can be described as nationalistic, anti-imperial and anti-authoritarian. Due to the personal consequences of the war in Ukraine, as well as rising authoritarianism and armed conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia, the activists, especially women and queers are dramatically affected. Their mental health and sense of financial and physical safety compromised with not many resources to empower these communities.

As the armed conflicts and humanitarian crisis continues in the region, it has become clear that there is a need for a more holistic vision of security and feminist peace that will transcend nationalistic divides and mobilise resources in more flexible and direct ways. And while the need for intersection and exchange has also become visible in times of crisis, it needs to be approached cautiously and with consideration of the specific gendered and individual context of these communities.

5.1 INTRODUCTION

With the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the wave of violence and shock hit the Eurasian continent. It is painfully experienced in Georgia. The country that itself was at war with Russia in 2008, was economically tied but politically quite detached from it and trying to become a member of the EU, found itself in a complicated position.

On the one hand, massive demonstrations in every city, voluntary military self-mobilisation, raising awareness and charity are just a few major ways Georgian society engaged in the activities to support Ukraine. On the other hand, the Georgian government largely ignored security threats created by the war and played a double game of discursively supporting Ukraine, but constantly criticising its leadership to discredit Georgian opposition parties that are more connected to the Ukrainian government. The governing party Georgian Dream mobilised people’s fear of war to justify their failure of meeting EU integration demands. In the clash of interests between the society and the government, Georgia’s vibrant multinational civil society started to play an important role in dealing with the crises created by the war.

In this text, I analyse capacities for international activist mobilisation and space-making in Georgia from a feminist perspective. I take the developments from 2020, namely, Covid-19 Pandemic, The Second Karabakh War and Political repressions in Belarus and Russia, as a framework to contextualise the current situation and understand the potential of women- and queer-led spaces in Georgia. The primary focus of this study is to look into the possibilities and challenges civil society is facing in the light of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the crisis created by it. More specifically, this research will answer the following questions:

- How do women-led artistic, feminist, queer and politicised spaces operate in Georgia?
- What risks and challenges do the activists, artists and civil society actors face in this process?
- Are there any collaborations and shared visions among activists, collectives, NGOs currently operating in Georgia and what are the main obstacles to them?

The term civil society is often described as an "ensemble of legally protected non-governmental institutions". More specifically, for the purposes of this study by "civil society"

* Acknowledgements: I would like to thank my respondents as well as friends and colleagues who helped me carry out this research.

10 Keane, 2010.
I assume registered non-governmental institutions, informal initiatives, groups, movements and individuals who operate in the domain of care, grassroots politics, activism and social entrepreneurship. Such spaces are also “discursively constructed as feminine”, as opposed to the “institutional politics often described as masculine” and the line is drawn between them. Such portrayal often recognizes only institutional politics as “real” public and political space, while renders civic/effeminate spaces as apolitical.

However, I would like to develop a perspective of the public political sphere as “consisting of multiple ‘publics’”. Semi-public and public spaces of international activism and care have potential for political change. Actors operating in this sphere negotiate their agency with multiple entities: state, international organisations, business, society, specific communities, and finally, with each other. Exactly this interconnection serves as an entry point to my inquiry.

Another key term for this research is “political space”. I would like to define it in the spirit of feminist ethnographic tradition and use my respondents’ words for it: “Space is not the same as simply a place. When I speak about the activist or artistic space, I assume a space of critical thinking and dialogue. There might be a place but no space”. Feminist organisations and initiatives, activists and colleagues I have encountered and collaborated with in the last few years also often stressed the importance of care as a political act. Therefore, even when my respondents did not frame their work as necessarily political, their involvement in care and safe space-making will be considered in relation to political agency.

Agency is a highly contested term in feminist scholarship and activism. It is often defined in relation to resistance against existing power structures such as repressive state, military establishment, oppressive cultural practices (e.g. control of female sexuality) etc. However, agency poses many questions in the contexts that go beyond our “usual” understanding of doing (everyday) politics and activism. For example, how do we conceptualise women supporting oppressive structures such as military establishment? Or women embracing pre-given cultural norms of womanhood to secure their physical, emotional safety, social status, etc. In this regard, I would like to approach agency in relation to intention and desire of the subject to proactively engage in care, politics, movements, power structures, so on, and will not limit it to acts of resistance against only oppressive institutions, actors, systems. It is a process/practice, something constantly in flux and should be understood in the context based on the analysis of existing power relations.

With such a broad definition of political space and agency it was quite hard to narrow down the interest groups and fields for ethnographic data collection. In order to capture the diverse undercurrents of activism in Georgia, I based my sampling method on the specific consequences of the war that queer, feminist and anti-war activists had to deal with. Main target groups and spaces that I identified will be reviewed in the following section about methodology.

5.2 METHODOLOGY

Georgia is directly influenced by the consequences of the war and its security, and its economic and political situation is likely to become more precarious. However, it is still a relatively safe country with diverse groups of civil society, who are already, in one way or another, trying to overcome the challenges created by the invasion.

As I am writing this research, the war still goes on with no end in sight, this is why it remains to be the most detrimental condition in which I try to understand the regional activist mobilisation and space-making in the country. However, I would like to go a bit farther in the developments of the past two years to contextualise the situation activists and NGOs in post-soviet countries ended up in. Apart from the war, four major pre-conditions can be outlined: (1) the Global Covid-19 pandemic; (2) the Civil uprising in Belarus in 2020 and consequent repressions from the Lukashenko government; (3) the Navalny rallies of 2021 and repressions in Russia; (4) the Second Karabakh war in 2020 between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Obviously, one could name other important events such as unrest in Kazakhstan (AKA January Tragedy) in 2022. Yet, the consequences of the uprising and subsequent purges by the Kazakhstani government did not have direct influence on the civil society mobilisation in Georgia; therefore, I will concentrate only on the factors that brought these activists and spaces to the country. The participants in the research were interviewed considering these pre-conditions.

First of all, most of the participants in the study were women and queer people. The reason for this is twofold: women and queers were the ones engaged in civil society activism more often. Secondly, the humanitarian and economic crisis created by the Russian invasion of Ukraine disproportionately affects vulnerable groups and disadvantaged groups in general.

It was important to map and look into spaces that provided care and carried political and social significance for displaced people from Ukraine. This gains further significance considering the scarcity of support the Georgian state provided for Ukrainian refugees. Through snowballing and proactive participant observation, I found activists and journalists from Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Russia, Belarus, who were actively engaged in space-making, political and humanitarian causes.

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12 Ibid, pp 748.
13 Interview with Giorgi, Founder of Untitled Gallery in Tbilisi.
14 Malmström, Marianne. “Gender, agency, and embodiment theories in relation to space in Gender, cities and local governance.” (2011) https://journals.openedition.org/ema/2985
Overall, I conducted 20 in-depth interviews with 23 people. All of my respondents were 22-50 years old. Apart from the interviews, I also talked to several activists, visited over 10 different spaces, where the respondents socialise and work – these were offices, co-working spaces, galleries, cafes, community bars, public spaces, feminist camps. All of the interviews were non-formal and it was easy for me to gain the trust of my respondents as I myself am involved both in feminist and peace activism in the region. The possibility of connecting people with each other also presented itself already throughout the research. I am especially grateful for this because it illustrated the practical need for such initiatives as well.

In addition to contributing to the practical aims such as international collaboration and activism in Georgia, this study also plays a part in the decolonial activism in the post-Soviet space. I use the term decolonial instead of imper-sonalisation of the liberation of occupied territories in Georgia. While the Russian imperial power played and is still playing a detrimental role in these conflicts, its interference goes beyond taking territories by brute force. Moreover, as in different areas like for example in Belarus, Armenia, Abkhazia, South Ossetia it acts like an ally or patron-state, thus complicating the relations across the conflict divides.

The term colonialism and imperialism are rarely used in the public discourse of Georgia and were rarely mentioned by my respondents; however, it was often implied when they spoke about the non-material consequences of Russian dominance. One of the participants in the study from Belarus said they feel like their country is occupied by Russia through Lukashenko as well. In this case they meant not physical occupation but stripping the people of agency to decide the fate of their society. Such framing also drives attention to the violence beyond nationalistic divides because the actors and spaces in question are thriving in online spaces, places of exchange and care, bearing consequences of different kinds of imperial and authoritarian powers.

Moreover, telling the stories from the perspective of the displaced people and marginalised communities further contributes to writing social history beyond the narratives of nation-states and their official leaders.

Despite its ambitious stand, this research is still limited to a relatively small part of international post-Soviet (even activist) society and cannot be generalised even across the communities operating in Georgia. However, it provides us with a good starting point for further inquiry into international mobilisation in the post-Soviet region, which we consider as a diverse political space with shared history and interconnected present. In the next chapter I will explain how the current reality was moulded by past events.

5.3 CONTEXT – HOW DID WE GET HERE?

While the Russian invasion of Ukraine remains a detrimental condition in understanding the international civil society in Georgia, its current configuration is primarily rooted in the 2020-2021 events.

The beginning of Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 set various kinds of political processes in action. Different countries in the post-Soviet spaces opted for different ways of dealing (or not dealing) with it. Strict lockdowns were introduced in Georgia, with limited support from the government the vulnerable groups of society were put at highest risk. Research indicates that the socio-economic situation of queer community worsened dramatically, in addition to the already existing poverty and lack of proper housing, displaced women also bore the costs of pandemic. The year also saw a rise in gender-based domestic abuse. These problems were more dramatic in the periphery of the country where access to healthcare, police protection and job and income security are already scarce.

Feminist and queer organisations largely concentrated on humanitarian aid provision. They describe it as very hard times when nothing was clear, they had to readjust to the new reality, move their services and activities online, perform work that they did not account for. The emotional and integrated safety of the activists and NGO workers was largely compromised. “When Russia invaded Ukraine, we had just opened up a bit, and we were back in the regime of fear for people’s lives. Once again, we had to work, readjust. It was emotionally very hard”, says an activist from Marneuli.

At this stage, there already were several activists from Russia and Belarus, who have come to Georgia since 2020. The reason for such influx were repressions in these countries.

In Russia, repressions and attacks on civil society and opposition had non-systematic character in the past 10 years. Starting from 2013, introduction of so-called gay propaganda law and legislation forcing non-governmental organisations register as foreign agents signalled a shift towards harsher state control and policies against civil society. Yet there still were both activists, journalists and artists who worked on issues of gender and sexuality. In January 2021, there were large rallies in support of the imprisoned opposition leader Alexei Navalny.


Public Defender’s Office in Georgia, 2021, Annual Report on The Situation in Human Rights and Freedoms in Georgia 2020
Navalny. The Putin government crushed these protests. Consequently, Georgia became a sanctuary for many activists and artists who fled the regime. While these repressions brought all kinds of politically active people, there were a lot of queers and feminists among them. The reason for choosing Georgia was easy access to the country – unlike EU countries, Georgia let in people with Sputnik vaccine, offered visa-free stay for a year and was relatively cheap.

Similarly, several waves of repressions targeting civil society as well as any participant of the 2020 protests in Belarus took place between 2020-2022. Uprising was a response to falsified elections and overall discontent that was building up in the society. Apart from elections, the way Aleksandr Lukashenko’s government neglected Covid played an important role. As a result, these protests attracted a very large and diverse part of society – activists, artists, medical workers, teachers, etc.

Even before 2020, the Lukashenko government was restricting the activities of civil society organisations, especially the ones working on human rights, freedom of speech and media, political changes. However, some spheres like the environmental sector were relatively free of control. After the uprising, the situation worsened dramatically, as not only politically active people but anyone who participated in the protests became a target. Protests were accompanied with arrests, new laws, surveillance, imprisonments and torture. Eventually, they faded out but the crackdowns on civil society continued in 2021, leading to mass migration from Belarusians to Lithuania, Poland, Ukraine and Georgia.

This process had a gendered dimension. In Belarusian protests, women became faces of the uprising – they not only constituted the leadership but symbolised peaceful resistance to the regime that used disproportionate force against demonstrators. However, the blind force did not discriminate what gender or age the participants were or how actively they engaged with politics. It would not be right to say that the protests or participants had any feminist or women-oriented agenda, either. Hence the people who were in some way targeted by the government and came to Georgia were not necessarily feminists, or even activists before the demonstrations. Yet, many of those who became politicised during the demonstrations were still involved in some kind of political actions at the point of fieldwork.

All the NGO workers I interviewed had their NGOs eliminated in Belarus. Some had experience of arrest, most had police raid their offices or homes, but survived because they were not personally there. “The police came to the apartment where we were registered, the neighbours told us and we left. We did not want to wait until they found us. Eventually, they found our house and searched it, but we were already gone,” said an activist from Belarus. Main destinations for the fugitives were Tbilisi and Batumi. Direct flights from Minsk to Batumi especially during the pandemic were a relief for those who had to leave in a hurry. The ones who were not targeted directly because they were in relatively free fields like environmental activism could not go back because it meant they would have to stop their work. Also, there were some activists who fled to Ukraine and had to leave because of the war.

With the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, 2022 witnessed a further inflow of Russians and Belarusians into Georgia. This time the reasons were twofold: repressions, avoidance of sanctions, and later, military mobilisation. In Russia the laws about “gay propaganda” and foreign agents tightened even more. Some new harsh punishments were introduced for any kind of anti-war activist and in practice more and more people became targets for the regime.

“Police or FSB guys came to my mother’s apartment and tried to convince her that I am part of an extremist group, which doesn’t even exist. Now probably I should not go back, because I am openly active in anti-war activism,” a Russian journalist living in Tbilisi. Some, especially the ones who came before the full-scale invasion, were arrested and had cases against them in court. Not everyone who came was directly targeted but they did not feel safe, either. Another activist who is a social scientist said in an interview: “I migrated because of censorship, not police violence.”

Unlike Belarusian and Russian political fugitives, Azerbaijanish journalists and activists sought shelter in Georgia since the crackdowns of the civil society, which started there in 2014. Since then, Heydar Aliyev’s government was using more and more violence against any kind of activists, resulting in most politically active people fleeing the country to Europe and Georgia. Once again, the reason was that they do not need a visa to Georgia and it is the only place where they can flee to in time of emergency. However, the safety of these fugitives was compromised when in 2017 Azerbaijani journalist Afgan Mukhtarli was kidnapped from the apartment in Tbilisi and handed to the Azerbaijani government. There is still an ongoing investigation, and a lot of evidence indicates that this kidnapping was collaborated by Georgian authorities. Since then, most of Azeri fugitives have left. However, some remained or new ones kept coming during the pandemic.

After the second Karabakh War in 2020, the Azerbaijani government became even harsher. They acquired Pegasus software which allows surveillance on the phones by just a phone number. A lot of politically active women

18 Mazepus and others, 2021.

were already under threat, as the government often uses sex-tapes to blackmail and discredit female journalists and activists. With the new software it was no wonder that the majority of feminists and human rights activists ended up on the government’s lists. Those who were targeted had less time to prepare and the gendered dimension of violence imposed by the government was more pronounced. It was hard for them to adjust to living in Georgia, because they had to move on a very short notice with no community to support them.

Almost everyone described coming to Georgia as the only option they had at that time. For a transgender woman from Azerbaijan expectations about the country were very low because she was aware from the news and her friends that it is not a safe country for trans and gender non-conforming people. However, her experiences were positive, she got help from Georgian and Azeri activists and artists. Another Azeri trans artist experienced abuse, threats and discrimination after moving to Georgia and had problems finding an apartment because of transphobic landlords.

For many fugitives, refugees and migrants, Georgia serves as an intermediate space. But the reasons for that are various: for Azeris it is because of the Afghan Mukhtarli case, which makes them cautious about their own safety in Georgia. For most, it is the lack of economic possibilities, for some it is the hope that they will be able to go back home. The gendered dimension of living in Georgia was very obvious in economic sense as well – trans women (from anywhere, despite their educational and work backgrounds) struggled to find work and had to rely on specific queer NGOs, activists, friends and artistic spaces to survive in the country.

In this research I concentrated only on the political fugitives from Azerbaijan, Belarus and Russia, feminist activists from Georgia and Ukrainian refugees from the Crimean occupation and the full-scale invasion. Since the European Union imposed sanctions on Russia and Belarus, citizens of these countries largely moved to Tbilisi, Batumi and Yerevan. This time, it was not necessarily people who fled the regime, but also those who were avoiding sanctions by registering their businesses in Georgia, buying property, or simply enjoying vacations. Later, with the partial military mobilisation in Russia, a huge number of men and their families lined up at the Northern border of Georgia. As a result, the prices for rent went up dramatically. House-owners started kicking people out to let Russians with more money in. Several NGOs and activists, as well as Ukrainian refugees were to suffer the consequences. In addition to the war, this socio-economic aspect also deepened anger and discontent with the Russians in the country. The economic crisis caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine resulted in increased prices of any kind of goods, which made life harder, especially for those in already precarious conditions. In the following section I will go into details of how, in the conditions of a crisis, several activist groups and NGOs started to operate.

5.4 SPACE-MAKING AND ACTIVISM

The first days of the full-scale invasion were described as shock and chaos by the participants of the study. And as I am writing this research, the physical, material and emotional toll the Russia’s war in Ukraine took on us still keeps increasing. Deterioration of mental health was
very much pronounced in activist circles and beyond. “Georgians are afraid for their own safety, and it makes sense, they take it [Russian invasion of Ukraine] personally, because of the common enemy”, said Azerbaijani peace-builder activist in an interview. The presence of war, fear and solidarity to Ukraine was felt everywhere.

The new reality of war brought forward several old and new challenges that required rapid response. First of all, there were thousands of Ukrainian refugees, mostly women and children, who came to Georgia. The majority of them either had no other option because of their location at the time of the invasion (Eastern coast of Ukraine or Russia), or had some relatives, friends, personal contacts who could support them in Georgia. The government provided housing and food for most of them till the end of July, but after that they had to leave the hotels on a very short notice with minimal support from the government that was not enough to cover basic necessities or rent. A lot of them left for Europe and North America where there were more opportunities for them, and some stayed. As the war continues, people keep coming and going.

From the very first day of the invasion certain initiatives came into being which started collecting information about the needs of the refugees and helping them out with housing, food, basic necessities. Such initiatives were operating in Batumi and Tbilisi. They collected all the donations and sent some to Ukraine, and distributed them, and some stayed. As the war continues, people keep coming and going.

In the absence of coherent plans from the government, civil society and businesses took over the responsibility of providing aid. Overall, the whole process lacked coordination among the actors involved and the government was not open and clear about the available resources and their limits. The donation collection and support for Ukrainian refugees in Georgia was more or less based on primary needs assessment. However, there was less knowledge about what aid needed to be sent to Ukraine. In private conversations, feminists who are still operating in Ukraine, said that in general there was a lot of unnecessary clothes and medication accumulated there, while vital needs were not met because the donors, supporters, volunteers were following some blueprint of humanitarian aid provision without considering their needs and lacking the coherent crisis response strategies.

Georgian initiatives, and Ukrainian and Russian activists and journalists who moved to Georgia before or right after the beginning of the full-scale invasion relied on crowdfunding while carrying out their activities.

The activities like demonstrations concentrated more on Georgia’s failed attempt at EU-integration and stopped after the beginning of July. This is why when refugees from Ukraine had to leave the hotels because the state aid was cut the public outcry was relatively small. In the light of doubled and tripled prices for rent, the country witnessed a housing crisis that still goes on. For this reason, some initiatives opened shelters. The already existing shelter for queers in Tbilisi was also open for queer Ukrainian refugees. However, the problem of housing is still one of the biggest challenges for everyone. With this problem in mind, I will describe the situation in Tbilisi and Batumi – the two most affected cities in the country.

5.5 THE TALE OF TWO CITIES

5.5.1 Batumi

Along with humanitarian initiatives, some activists got involved in more direct anti-war actions. Tbilisi and Batumi became epicentres of all humanitarian, cultural and activist initiatives. Located in Adjara with a population of just over 170,000, Batumi is a seaside town of Georgia that has historically been the hometown of people with different ethnicities and religions. The city saw rapid infrastructural developments in the past 20 years. The new buildings, casinos and hotels have been criticised and objected by the local population due to its deteriorating results on the local ecosystem. Slums and poor neighbourhoods behind the new shiny buildings stand as proof for the constantly growing social inequality looming over the city. Yet, protests are not such a common occurrence in the city. Batumi dwellers mostly depend on the income from the port and tourism. The social and cultural life of the city is very much connected to the latter. In the last two years, the city witnessed massive immigration from Russia, Belarus and Ukraine. Even though most local and immigrant spaces are largely depoliticised, the city has been politically revitalised in some ways.

To keep the invasion in the spotlight, Ukrainians living in Batumi started daily demonstrations called “Euromaidan Batumi” on the main square of the city. Before that, some Belarusian political fugitives used to organise weekly protests in Batumi to attract public attention to Belarus. After the full-scale invasion, they joined Euromaidan Batumi and refocused on Ukraine, as one of them highlighted: “We are trying to follow news and support countries that need help. Now we are more concentrated on Ukraine and a little bit on ourselves as well.”

The mobilisation was quite spontaneous and happened through Telegram chats and on the streets. In the be-
For me it is important that the Ukrainian flag was seen. The Russian blue and white flag is considered by some activists to be a flag of resistance, but the flag does not have much history of such use and it was appropriated by the Russian government as the flag of occupied Kherson. Refugees from Kherson who were part of the Euromaidan Batumi initiative felt very triggered by this flag but Russians refused to give it up. After that conflict, those Russian activists left and some core of the group was formed, who till today gather on Europe’s square in Batumi.

Now the Euromaidan Batumi is a woman-led initiative which unites activists – feminists and people who do not identify as such. The meetings are held daily with about 20 people working in a core group. Ukrainian military and national songs and anthem, as well as Georgian anthem and Belarus resistance songs are played and flags of Georgia, Ukraine and Belarus resistance are present at these demonstrations. While having explicitly anti-Russian and nationalistic connotations, the format of the meetings as well as the talks with participants demonstrates that they envision their political stance in (nation-based) unity. For this reason, it can be framed as decolonial nationalistic resistance.

“For me it is important that the Ukrainian flag was seen and the hymn of Ukraine was sung. I would do it alone, it does not matter how many people will join,” says the founder of the initiative. This statement carried political importance to her in the light of the large number of Russian tourists and migrants in the city. She said that at some point they started to gather money for medication that they could send to Ukraine.

Hence, later these demonstrations acquired the function of fundraising and became space for socialisation and community building as well. Participants of the Euromaidan Batumi group also pointed out the social importance of these gatherings that made them feel like a “family”. “We have a lot to talk about. But most importantly we trust each other… I even found a job at the cafe that people from Mariupol opened in Batumi through these demonstrations,” says a political fugitive from Belarus.

Apart from the Euromaidan Batumi initiative, spaces in Batumi do not have such explicit public and political action against war, and are more oriented on community building, awareness raising, education and entertainment. The growth of the number of bars and community spaces was most prominent in Batumi. There are now several co-working spaces that cater for remote workers, mostly from Belarus and Russia. A community cafe that hosts educational activities, language clubs and meetings for women is mostly oriented towards a Russian-speaking audience. Some cafes and bars also host exhibitions and talks.

There are more explicitly feminist queer organisations that act as spaces of socialisation for queers, provide services and educational activities. Another community organisation that is founded by a Muslim community of Adjara collaborates with them and tries to promote feminist and intersectional approach. According to the representatives of these initiatives, people in Batumi are not politically active. The spaces are largely commercialised and dependent on tourism. Even the environmental problems that are very much pronounced do not get much attention from the public. “No one protests the fact that the green areas of the city were turned into concrete jungles”, refers one of the respondents to the accelerated constructions in Batumi.

At the same time, at this point there are several environmental activists from Belarus in Batumi who have expressed their willingness to collaborate, to get involved in local eco-activism and to build networks. It looks like there are more established connections between environmental activists of Ukraine and Belarus who investigate and write about the ecological consequences of the war and energy colonialism, which could further be connected to the South Caucasus. Considering that most people who operate these spaces are women, they could benefit from further integration of gender topics into eco-activism.

While Georgia is very much centralised, with most activities and political activism happening in Tbilisi, it was pointed out that the Adjara region is also further centralised with Batumi being the epicentre of the region’s economic, political and social life. Despite the growth of politicised communities in Batumi, Tbilisi still remains the only space with possibilities of relatively free gender expression, political activism and activist mobilisation.

5.5.2 Tbilisi

At this point the capital hosts several artistic, commercial and non-governmental spaces that provide services, education, entertainment and support for women and queers. Officially 1.2 million people live in the city, however, due to the lack of economic possibilities outside of the capital there is huge migration within the country. Apart from the better prospects of finding a job (mainly in the services sector), queer people migrate to Tbilisi for possibilities of living a relatively safe life and get a community which has grown dramatically over the past 10 years. Most NGOs, queer, feminist and artistic initiatives are based in Tbilisi and provide services, work on lobbying and advocacy of queer, women’s and human rights’ issues.

Along with NGOs, galleries and artistic spaces, various nightclubs and bars offer drag shows, queer events and provide safe spaces for queer people and women. Many queers are employed in the services sector as well. So, the community mainly gathers around clubs, bars, gal-
leries and other commercial and non-commercial spaces of entertainment and art. With the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns and the economic crisis, these spaces suffered most. A lot of people lost jobs, had to move back to their (often abusive) families, and ended up being physically even more marginalised. Both old and new queer and feminist initiatives and NGOs moved their work and activities online. LGBTQI+ organisations were providing much needed humanitarian support to the community in Tbilisi and sending some resources in other towns (Kutaisi, Batumi, Zugdidi) as well. The response was a bit belated, so the community itself started helping each other out.

One of the most prominent problems for queers that became even more urgent during the pandemic was the lack of housing. This is why the very first shelter for queers was opened by non-governmental organisations. “It was very hard, especially during curfew, we did not have resources to hire personnel and did not know how to operate the shelter. However, we learned a lot from this experience and later during the invasion felt more prepared for the housing crisis,” said one of the community workers in an interview.

The organisations also figured out how to provide services remotely. These practices and knowledge further became useful as well. New initiatives that came to being during the lockdown developed creative methodologies to provide social and educational activities for women online. The move to digital space allowed them to involve women from outside of the cities. However, according to them, with the end of lockdown the interest in such events declined and they moved to offline spaces more.

Feminist and queer organisations and groups in Georgia are very much interrelated. There are several non-profit non-governmental organisations who usually concentrate on lobbying issues of gender and sexuality with the government, conduct awareness-raising campaigns and educational activities for students, the general public and professional groups such as police and healthcare professionals. However, queer and feminist organisations in Tbilisi do not engage queer community so much – neither of them is membership-based and the activities and services they provide for the community are more educational and fragmented. The mobilisation of the community is mostly connected to digital spaces (mainly Facebook groups) and spaces of entertainment and art (clubs, bars, galleries, festivals).

The spaces for socialisation for those who do not like nightlife, drinking and dancing are scarcer. “I do not like bars and drinking. Since I came here, I have been asking around about where I can socialise, but could not find anything”, says a transgender woman from Azerbaijan. The need for alcohol-free social spaces has been one of the challenges that the queer women’s community has been facing and only very few feminist and queer initiatives address this problem. The reason for this is the lack of both human and financial resources.

The spaces operated by Russian and Belarus activists are more diverse. Along with bars and cafes, there also are co-working spaces, community centres, book shops, Telegram groups and channels. However, these spaces usually concentrate on Russian speakers, providing no translation in English or Georgian. One of the reasons for such self-isolation is that activists (especially Russians after the invasion) moved to Tbilisi and Batumi in big groups, which made them more reliant on inner networks and posed less need for integration. Moreover, some of them had enough financial resources to open up spaces, which creates a further divide between Georgian initiatives that struggle in the light of rising prices and those who are perceived to have more capital (human, financial, etc.) to operate such spaces. Russians were assumed as having the most resources. Yet, this assumption might be only true about the ones involved in the commercial sector rather than artists and activists.

The scarcity of space in Tbilisi has more or less affected everyone. The initiatives that do not have offices and cannot afford to open one, use already available infrastructure. The activities in the regions of Georgia have long been practising this approach and using libraries, community centres, offices of local NGOs, schools and parks. Yet, it should be noted that for the topics related to sexuality and gender it is harder to find friendly space outside of Tbilisi.

The capital itself is further centralised as most social, political and cultural activities take place in the central parts of the city (on the right bank of the river Mtkvari). In their efforts to decentralise Tbilisi, several clubs, galleries, offices have started to pop up on the left bank and then further to the more peripheral parts of the city. Some of them act as meeting points for the artists and activists from the post-Soviet region and often host feminist and queer and anti-war initiatives as well. The main challenge for these initiatives is the problem of transportation, because the city is not so well connected. But fortunately, the question of safety seems less prominent. According to one of the gallery owners in the remote part of the city, the space really is part of the neighbourhood: “As one of our first projects we involved neighbours in the process as well. We made an exhibition of their family albums”.

The move from the centre to periphery is connected to the political project of decentralisation and at the same time it is motivated by the lack of resources. The increased price of rent remains a big challenge for smaller and/or newly established organisations/initiatives/creative spaces. This difference was very obvious when comparing them with bigger and older NGOs who have better fundraising capacities and a larger network of do-
The access to resources is one of the biggest inequalities among the activist groups and individuals. In the light of the full-scale invasion, some resources were redirected to the aid of Ukrainian refugees. People who were doing the regional activities, providing shelters or residencies, refocused more easily. For others it was harder to find funding or their role in the cause.

Centralisation was univocally named as one of the main causes for inequality within the Georgian feminist, queer and activist spaces. Whether it is media attention, support from donors and organisations, possibilities to build networks or direct access to knowledge and money, it is harder for feminists living outside of Tbilisi to benefit from the available resources in the capital. It was also mentioned that it is very hard to sustain small initiatives, especially in the art sector. People who politicise art and do not depend on pre-existing capital, often find it hard to find resources for salaries (e.g. for accountant), as they say it is still perceived as more of a hobby, that an artist is expected to work voluntarily and often artists might not have skills and knowledge to do fundraising, manage bureaucratic aspects of the project and find money for someone to do it for them.

Commercialisation and lack of knowledge was also named as obstacles to politicisation of art. “In places like Azerbaijan and Abkhazia there is more community spirit in artistic spaces because it is not so capitalistic”, says one of the respondents. Stereotypes were also mentioned as a problem in queer art. “Georgian artistic space is still stuck in association of queer with naked bodies. There is a certain directive from the donors who fund such initiatives”, comments Lasha21. The same sentiment was articulated by different queer artists in personal and public talks as well.

The newly established initiatives that were more donation-based suffered as well. An Ukrainian activist who together with Russian volunteers is organising a day-care centre for Ukrainian children, said that at some point they had to cut the salaries for people involved. From the very start this initiative relied on voluntary work, but Ukrainians involved in the project were getting some honorariums. “The activities like picnics, crafting require materials and products that we were no longer able to provide, so we started to spend all our money on them to carry on our activities.”22 The people who have less money now choose initiatives which they find more important and in general the war and its devastating consequences started to get less and less attention, this is why the initiatives started to search for new ways of funding.

Those initiatives and NGOs that were more local and operating in the periphery started having financial problems because of the skyrocketing rent prices. It also demanded more human resources from them to participate in the initiatives supporting Ukraine and at the same time to continue their own activities. However, at the time of the fieldwork the first shock of war had faded. Unlike the first weeks, when respondents said to be constantly scrolling news and being unable to concentrate on anything, now some of them had already found ways in which to be involved in anti-war activism, others went on working on other issues and supporting mostly verbally or symbolically.

Overall, the mental health of activists was affected dramatically. Those who engaged in direct actions against the war were indicating the signs of burnout, yet they rarely used this word during interviews. Others had expressed more fear and sadness about the situation. Some resources are already allocated to the mental health and integrated security at queer and feminist organisations, e.g. queer and feminist organisations in Tbilisi provide free sessions with psychologist and psychiatrist for queer people, for women who are survivors of domestic abuse, some initiatives also involved provision of art therapy with Ukrainian refugees. Yet, still there is a lack of sufficient mental health services as well as awareness about those in the general public and in vulnerable communities. The service provision is fragmented as there is no strategy and social services are largely underfunded in Georgia. Hence, the organisations take over the functions of the State. Moreover, apart from Ukrainian refugees, most healthcare services are only available for Georgian citizens.

Apart from mental health, other services related to reproductive and sexual health are more easily attainable for queers, who come from Ukraine, Belarus, Azerbaijan or Russia. Queer organisations both in Tbilisi and Batumi can provide free condoms, lubricants, HIV and Hepatitis testing for them. However, not everyone has knowledge about the existence of these resources and the HIV and substance abuse problems are largely neglected in migrant communities. Some Russian initiatives have started providing harm-reduction in the Russian-speaking community, yet these activities are very detached from the local initiatives and lack HIV treatment services, that once again are only available for citizens. This poses a risk of possible HIV pandemic in gay and trans communities.

Along with material, mental and human resources, there was also a constant indication towards safety and trauma caused by the feeling of unsafety among political fugitives, especially ones from Azerbaijan.

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21 Name is changed.
22 Interview with a volunteer from Ukraine.
5.7 SAFETY AND SECURITY

All interviewed people spoke of safety concerns but mostly in relation to their country of origin rather than with the Georgian government. Only among the Azeri community there is more awareness about the threats from the latter. “If you’re targeted, you’re safe nowhere. There are people being killed in France and Germany constantly. It’s not like Georgia is a special case. But it is easier to have surveillance here”, said a peacebuilder from Azerbaijan.

“We often joke that among three Russians one is an agent”, said one Russian journalist in an interview. Her comment demonstrates a problem political fugitives from Russia are very much aware of. Activists and representatives of NGOs from Belarus did not express any safety concerns and everyone I interviewed was planning to stay in Georgia, learning Georgian language and expressed willingness to integrate in the local community.

Neither of the groups sought official status of a refugee. For Ukrainians it is because there is no support from the government and for that reason a lot of them have to leave Georgia and move to Europe or back to Ukraine. Only those who came before the full-scale invasion or had some connections here wanted to stay. For everybody else it was the bureaucratic procedure that required them to stay in the country for 2 years. The country’s legislation is very flexible about staying in the country with no visa, but it also is more adjusted to the freelancers rather than people who have to flee their countries of origin because of the armed conflict, trans- and homophobic violence or political repressions.

Among fugitives who came to Georgia, only Russians indicated the risk of Russian invasion of Georgia. Georgian respondents were way more concerned about it. However, at later stages of the war (and interviews), it was mentioned less and less. In their evaluation of security Georgian respondents brought up the safety risks they face as women activists and queers more often. For Georgian queers and ethnic minorities alt-right groups constitute the most explicit and direct threat. This concern is based on actual attacks in the recent past.

On 5 July 2021, small groups of men mobilised by alt-right leaders attacked Tbilisi Pride and Shame Movement offices, beat up over 50 journalists and prevented a pride march in Tbilisi. The leaders of these violent acts were never punished. One of them, Alt-Info explicitly pro-Russian ultra-right initiative, is even registered as a party and still runs a television.

The alt-right groups and their supporters still remain one of the major threats to the Georgian queers and Ukrainians, as well as ethnic minorities. Despite several petitions and calls for justice from the civil society to arrest the leaders who violently attacked Pride and to cancel the party status of the Alt-Info party, there has been no active measures taken by the government. After the full-scale invasion began, most alt-right groups, e.g. Georgian March and parties like Alliance of Patriots, took explicit pro-Russian stance by sending a letter to Vladimir Putin. These entities have always been targeting queers and feminists, as well as ethnic and religious minorities, thus gaining popularity among conservative members of society. However, after the invasion began, all of them, except for Alt-Info, went silent. And even Alt-Info’s offices in the regions of Georgia were raided by locals, in some towns they were refused to rent an office altogether. This by no means indicates the decline of homophobia and transphobia in the country, but it provides an opportunity to discredit these hate groups among the general public.

It is obvious that there is very pronounced popular support of Ukraine among Georgian society. At the same time, after the full-scale invasion began, she painted the Ukrainian and EU flags on the office of Alt-Info. She was targeted and received threats. It was so dangerous for her to stay in Marneuli that she moved to Tbilisi and had police protection. However, the case was never investigated. According to her, belonging to the ethnic minority definitely was one of the reasons why she was so openly targeted.

Queer organisations and activists also felt threatened by the alt-right hate groups as well as homophobic people motivated by them. One of them mentioned how hard it is to constantly update safety protocols. For bigger community NGOs it is connected to resources and knowledge they do not always possess and require external experts for training and development and update of safety strategies. It is especially important for queer organisations to maintain a safe environment in the times of attacks like on the 5th of July 2021, or the 17th of May (IDAHOT) of previous years. They also have different approaches towards office space – some keep it open to let people hide in case they need it during those days, others close it and do not go themselves to the office to ensure their and others safety. Even the small and newly established initiatives mentioned that they have attended some training about digital safety and had certain guidelines on how to treat and store information and how to ensure the safety of off-line events, e.g. pre-checks of the participants, not sharing location before the participants are verified, having a separate email for communication, etc.
time the government is either inactive in the struggle against pro-Russian and alt-right forces or even supportive of them by letting their violent actions go unpunished. Yet, the civil society lacks a collective vision on how to act against hate groups. “They [alt-right] are against any minority... But civil society is very weak in their actions against them. There are some projects but that is it. They release statements and no one cares what happened to the people targeted by them,” says one of the respondents in the interview. Similar sentiment was articulated by other participants. Since these groups do not yet constitute any threat to white Russians or Belarussians, and the latter also do not know so much about their existence, it was mostly Azeri and Georgian activists who referred to them.

At the same time, hate-groups are not limited to the alt-right. The Euromaidan group in Batumi remembered a few instances when drunk Russian tourists harassed them during demonstrations; however, they immediately got support from the passers-by. Overall, Ukrainians expressed gratitude and feeling of solidarity towards Georgian society and were reluctant to mention any negative experiences. "We are thankful to the people of Sakartvelo23, the only thing we want from your government is not to help Russia avoid sanctions”. Yet, they also added that they do not get involved in the inner political affairs of the country and while they support Georgians, its citizens (Georgians) should negotiate politics with the government.

Apart from direct physical or emotional threats, I was asking people about their experiences as women in Georgia. All Belarusian, Azeri, Russian and Ukrainian women were speaking positively about their lives here. However, I learned that a number of Ukrainian women have been sexually harassed by their hosts, by people who offered help and even by officials. The scope of the problem requires further inquiry. Displaced women and transgender people are at a higher risk of sexual abuse, especially considering how precarious they are because of the limited help from the government. Women also might not have awareness or are afraid to speak about these instances, they also might not know the local legislation or are neglected by the police.

While some initiatives take the gendered dimension of the problem seriously, in most cases the communities are divided and united along nationalistic lines. In the next chapter I will discuss the (im)possibilities of solidarity and collaboration.

5.8 SOLIDARITY AND COLLABORATION

One of the most explicit features of the space-making in Georgia is its separatist character. Most activist groups seem to operate only in their small circles. Some initiatives are run by Ukrainians and Belarussians or by Ukrainian and Russian activists and volunteers and they are way less connected to the Georgians and Azeris. The respondents mentioned several reasons for such isolationist dynamics.

One of them was language. Almost all Belarusian and Russian respondents said they were learning Georgian but found it very hard. People who spoke Russian connected to each other easier despite their nationality. By contrast, young Georgians either do not speak or prefer not to speak Russian because of anti-colonial reasons, which creates a direct barrier for communication. There are a lot of spaces that position as political and express interest in making shared space for Georgians as well, yet all their events are in Russian, with no Georgian or English translation, which from the start excludes anyone who cannot or does not want to speak Russian.

Georgians had pointed out colonial attitudes of Russian activists towards the locals. "I was literally told by Russian artists that now they would teach me how to do queer activism", says a Georgian transgender artist. After the full-scale invasion began, the presence of Russians at any meeting also became problematic. "Now we have trigger warnings that there will be Russians at our movie screenings", said a Belarusian feminist living in Tbilisi. Whether to engage with Russian activists and artists was quite a disputed subject and everyone had their own approach – some collaborated with the political fugitives, saying that the main aims were more important than nationalities, others demanded more self-reflection from Russian activists and artists. Georgian activists were most reluctant to collaborate or even engage with Russians.

Russian respondents also pointed out the imperialistic tendencies among the Russian community in Georgia. So, the scepticism towards Russians is not coming from simply nationalistic sentiments or triggers but is also backed by the experience of the activists. Yet there still is collaboration between different groups.

One of the Ukrainian volunteers said in an interview that it was hard for her to work with Russians in the beginning. "We are working together not because we want to work together like Russians and Ukrainians, but more like we are working for some cause and for the result."

Another reason why Russians and Belarussians stay in their “bubbles” is their pattern of migration – most of them came to Georgia in groups and families, so they already had social networks and with the invasion these networks only grew bigger. Many of them also had financial resources to open bars, cafes, co-working spaces. As a result, there is also a certain social division created by the unequal access to resources.

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23 Sakartvelo is a Georgian word for Georgia.
The economic disparity, colonial attitudes and the language barrier still do not explain the lack of collaboration between Ukrainians, Azeri and Georgians. In general, the joint trans-Caucasus projects are more related to journalism and peacebuilding. There are no regional feminist networks and people mostly rely on personal contacts and friendships. In general, there is a lack of seeing oneself as part of larger international society, especially among Georgian civil society that mostly considers Europe rather than post-Soviet space as their reference point.

Azeri women did not even have their community for different reasons – most activists left after Afgan Mukhtarli’s kidnapping. Those who remained said that they had felt very isolated during Covid lockdowns. According to one journalist, even the professional success she had achieved before and her self-esteem were compromised by the trauma she experienced from the government surveillance and later displacement to Georgia. She received some aid from the local NGO that helped her get back on her feet again, but financial opportunities for a single mother in exile remain slim in Georgia. She expressed her willingness to meet Georgian feminists and activists and collaborate with them.

In general, Azeri activists and journalists were the least organised group, they had some friendships and connections within the community, but overall, there was a lot of mistrust as well, which is understandable considering the surveillance and structural violence all politically active people have to go through in Azerbaijan and beyond.

Most people I interviewed could speak English and expressed willingness to socialise with Georgians more than Georgian respondents. The lack of knowledge about how to connect to local activists was mentioned by most respondents. “One has to find their access points to this society... I don’t want to seem like I am teaching something to others”, said one NGO worker from Belarus.

Friendship and personal relationships were often named as the pillars of activism, trust and community building. Shared values and aims rather than ideologies were also mentioned as the points of unity.

Technologies allow for mobilisation across borders and have played a role in the political activities of the respondents, hence digital space is also a place of meeting and solidarity, yet there are two problems about it: (1) safety, which could be compromised and requires more in-depth training and knowledge exchange between the groups, considering that Belarusian activists have vast experience of mobilising through safe channels and Azeri activists have been practising digital safety for quite a while; (2) according to one of the respondents another problem is that there often is the possibility that solidarity will only remain in digital space and not move to physical spaces, which is also a valid point because activities and demonstrations in Georgia usually attract way more people online than in real life. Despite these challenges, the potential for more online and off-line ties between these groups is largely underrated.

Another uniting point for these groups is the trauma of the wars and repressions. Yet it is experienced very differently by various groups as well as within them. People from authoritarian regimes (Belarus, Azerbaijan, Russia) often highlight the importance of trust. The problem of mistrust has a very explicit gendered dimension for the Azeri women who are under threat of personal life violations.

Introducing feminist agenda within the civil society as well as promoting collaboration and exchange between the existing women’s queer and women-led groups remains a challenge because of the inability to talk about militarism in the light of the full-scale invasion and imperialist war. Neither of the respondents raised the question of growing militarism and how it affects women and queers. Among feminists from post-Soviet space, it was an elephant in the room that everyone struggled to address. The question still stands: how to support Ukraine without acknowledging the threat of militarist profit-driven establishment? After all, most of the calls for peace were mostly ignorant to the fact that Ukraine is defending itself and has no other option to do it without military means. Some feminists in this regard have a more straightforward answer: disarm Russia and damage its military establishment and propaganda machine through direct actions. Further investigation of arms deals and how the whole system works in favour of international military projects as well as concentrating on economic aspects like energy trade between Russia and Europe is to some extent part of the anti-war resistance, but it is largely underrepresented in the activities or message boxes of the activists.

The resistance against the nuclear threat that Russian aggression poses to the region and the planet at large is also never brought to discussion.

As for the media and the digital war that goes on along with direct aggression from Russia, there is a clearer vision of how to deal with it. Yet, the gendered dimension of it was not mentioned by respondents. One of the aspects could be that agency of Ukrainian women as actors in the process rather than passive victims of the war.

Overall, the ties between the different groups and activists residing in Georgia are quite weak. There is the willingness and openness to collaborate and learn about each other. Yet, this desire does not translate into action. Sceptical attitudes to Russian activists because of the colonial relationship with the locals still remains an unresolved issue making it harder for the local feminist and
queer communities to understand which groups they can collaborate with and which not. The queer community in Tbilisi can be described as one of the most open groups to dialogue and support; however, there is no strategy or vision on how to establish ties with displaced activists operating in Georgia in a more professional way.

5.9 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Russian invasion of Ukraine can be discussed from multiple perspectives, and its consequences in the post-Soviet space are getting bigger and bigger. In this research, along with the Georgian activists, I focused on displaced people from Ukraine and political activists from Azerbaijan, Russia and Belarus, which gives us a more complicated picture of anti-war activism and female-led space-making in the context of Russian invasion. In general, everyone agreed that this war was taking a tremendous emotional and economic toll on them. As the war goes on, it is getting harder to mobilise resources for humanitarian action and other political activities through fundraising. In the absence of governmental support, people from Ukraine mostly leave the country. Political fugitives who do not have more choices stay in Georgia, but the lack of economic opportunities and safety concerns makes them seek ways to leave as well. As a result, only those with pre-existing resources manage to stay, and commercial spaces run by Russians and to a lesser degree by Belarusians are the ones that thrive. In the light of the housing crisis, all other initiatives, especially ones that are smaller and operate in the periphery, struggle.

This imagined or existing inequality in resources and general discontent of Georgians with Russians and Russian language translates into fragmentation of the civil society along nationalistic lines. Often valid mistrust of Russians because of their imperial stances does not explain the separatist approach towards all groups. While all communities in question express their willingness to collaborate and have further exchange, very minimal effort is made to do so. The resistance to war in Ukraine is not sufficient grounds for unity in the region, which is torn by political turbulence and conflicts, therefore more cautious and systematic steps are required to build a shared vision of activism.

Based on the narratives of the activists and groups operating in Georgia, it is hard to generalise their problems and visions of action. However, there are several recommendations that could be beneficial for the feminist, queer and women-led activist mobilisation and space-making in Georgia.

- More gender-sensitive research and support for Ukrainian refugees;
- More support and gender-sensitive collaboration or support projects for the Azerbaijani political fugitives;
- Considering needs connected to maternity in the research and support to mothers who fled the war or repressive regimes;
- Promotion of digital and integrated safety;
- More involvement of organisations working on the rights of asylum seekers in data collection, information provision to the people in need of their services;
- More flexible approach from donors and organisations to the non-formal groups which cannot register as journalists or NGOs because of political reasons;
- More research on mental health and safety of the fugitives that fled war, were tortured, experienced sexual and physical violence;
- More strategic vision and activities to fight the alt-right groups, disinformation they share and consequences of their violent actions online and off-line;
- More funding to cross-regional projects in the post-Soviet space.

In terms of how to frame feminist resistance against Russian invasion in Ukraine as well as overall colonialism of post-Soviet countries:

- More knowledge production and research-based awareness raising about the colonialism in the post-Soviet space;
- More emphasis on regional and cross-regional collaborations (e.g. South Caucasus-Central Asia-East Europe);
- Research and exposure as well as insistence on disarmament of Russia and its military structures;
- Framing Ukrainian women’s agency and providing them with tools and resources for independent and sustainable living and work;
- Feminist awareness raising among activist groups operating in Georgia;
- Cross-sector collaboration between scholars, journalists, activists and artists on feminism, anti-war resistance and environmental issues;
- Promoting discussions about feminist peace and holistic security.
READ BETWEEN THE LINES: BULGARIA

FACING A CRISIS UPON CRISIS

6.1 INTRODUCTION

The war in Ukraine has caused the biggest humanitarian crisis in Europe since the Second World War. Overnight, the lives of Ukrainians were completely disrupted, their democracy attacked, and millions of people were suddenly displaced. Currently the ongoing attacks by the Russian military continue to make the situation worse and create new challenges and unseen consequences, as well as deepen existing ones – from political and geo-political, to economic and humanitarian crises. Almost immediately, civil society organisations all over the world began to activate a response.

This overall situation should be considered and thought of within the context of the moment while people across the world were still trying to estimate the economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and its repercussions and influence on women’s and human rights’ organisations. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine devastating the Ukrainian people and economy and sending shockwaves throughout the region and the globe endangered our societies and led them into another catastrophe shortly after the previous one.

These complex emergencies are reshaping the Black Sea Region’s dynamics and have brought forward new challenges for human rights protection and promotion. The lack of economic sustainability, the deepening gender inequalities, the rise of militarism, and governments’ lack of capacity to reach and serve the most vulnerable, combined with a shrinking space for the civil society, the rise of religious fundamentalism and the far right, further established the new role of the CSOs in conflict resolution and in handling the increased demand for help.

As a neighbouring country in the Black Sea Region that is not bordering Ukraine by land, Bulgaria has been directly affected by a significant migration wave and suffered from major economic repercussions. The closed borders and disrupted supply chains, the dependence on Russian gas and oil, as well as the sanctions have been causing negative consequences for the country’s economy. The lack of gas for the industry has had a serious hit on the national economy and Bulgaria has been among the most severely affected by the sanctions and deterioration of relations with Moscow24, together with countries from the Baltic Region, Greece, Poland, Finland. Another distressing element is that despite different attempts at diversifying supplies, Bulgaria was almost completely dependent on gas supplies from Russia’s state company Gazprom, while its only oil refinery, owned by Russia’s LUKOIL, provides around 60% of the fuel used in the country25.

Such conditions, combined with the urgent need for action towards the Bulgarian minority in Ukraine, exposed the country to unprecedented challenges. More than half a million Ukrainian refugees have crossed the border into Bulgaria alone, with some staying and others passing through.

The devastating humanitarian and economic consequences from the war spread fast and far, to neighbouring territories and beyond, hitting hardest the most vulnerable people and shifting the focus away from the COVID-19 pandemic. Apart from personal loss and deprivation, these hardships have economic dimensions that appear to last and worsen.

What we are witnessing is a crisis upon a crisis that has clear gender dimensions26 – millions of women and children are internally displaced or fleeing to neighbouring countries, women activists have been at the forefront of tackling humanitarian crises and advocating for improvement of legislation against violence against women. At the same time, women’s voices have been left unheard and human rights issues have been put at the periphery of social and political interest. For example, the Bulgarian Ministry of Justice announced in 2021 and 2022 calls for projects for up to 5 months to counter domestic violence and provide help to the victims. For the rest of the year, the women’s human rights sector was expected to deal on their own, facing an increase in domestic violence and requests for crisis accommodation. At the same time, no specific measures for state support to the CSOs were introduced to recuperate easily from COVID-19 economic downturn. CSOs may have applied for the general state support scheme if they met certain conditions; howev-
er, these conditions left many CSOs ineligible to apply. In addition, the National Recovery and Resilience Plan, which aimed to facilitate economic and social recovery from the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, not only did not involve CSOs for input but it failed to allocate any financial support to the civil sector.

And while the focus shifted and resources became unstable, women and human rights NGOs responded with resolve and determination by means of full resource mobilisation in terms of (fundraising) campaigns, volunteer activities, humanitarian aid. Thus, they have remained active in critical areas of concern like domestic violence support, mental health issues, and support to migrants fleeing the military zones, ethnic or LGBTQ+ communities. All this, however, deepened another pandemic in the sector – the burnout and the mental health of the human rights defenders.

In parallel, the new reality saw public institutions unprepared and with low capacity to react, which led to inadequate measures to handle migration waves. For example, the Bulgarian Parliament adopted financial support of 20 EUR per day for businesses, especially hotels, to accommodate refugees. Such inadequate support left people with disabilities/chronic conditions in need of medical help incapable of staying in the country and forced them to seek refuge and relocate yet again. Those eligible for this funding were tourist operators: hotels and guest houses that needed to prove that they are accommodating people coming from the war zones in Ukraine. And those affected by the conflict needed to go through a long and arduous procedure to be included in the healthcare and employment system in the country. In addition, anti-Ukrainian propaganda has permeated online and via national media, dividing the society and increasing disinformation. Bulgaria has become a fruitful soil for false narratives and conspiracy theories, designed to bolster support for the war initiated by Putin and illustrates how such disinformation continues to proliferate largely unchecked inside the European Union.

While the focus shifted, and resources became even more scarce, women and human rights CSOs in the country had to adapt once more. Being on the frontline, they had to quickly jump from pandemic resilience to armed conflict response and humanitarian aid, often replacing public institutions in critical areas of concern, like the set-up of coordination centres for the displaced, being the only ones to first welcome Ukrainian refugees, providing medical support and accommodation, care for the elderly and children, support with mental health issues and to ethnic or LGBTQ+ communities escaping the war. In March 2022, the Bulgarian Fund for Women launched the only available at the time Urgent Fund for Support of Women and Children Affected by the War in Ukraine which (still) supports CSOs with rapid response grants to address the needs of migrants coming in Bulgaria. Right after the beginning of the war, 18 requests for funding were received, proving that CSOs were actively redirecting their efforts to respond to the needs of vulnerable groups in large numbers. Based on internal observations and data, the CSOs were working with 40 to 70 persons daily which outlines another challenge – the increased demand. It might be concluded that such a re-focus of the CSOs, from strategic, sustainable development in promoting women’s rights to responding to urgent challenges and humanitarian crises, brings forth new actors (like ordinary citizens, especially public figures, prompted by moral outrage, who spontaneously self-organise and register a CSO) in the human rights sphere and new, unusual models of response.

However, these implications have the potential to deepen another issue in the non-governmental sector in Bulgaria – the burnout and the need for mental health support of human rights defenders. While CSOs cannot be expected to solve all the problems associated with humanitarian crises, the new environment in which the organisations operate, in a constant crisis mode, suggests the establishment of the following new fundamental roles:

- early warning functions (preventive functions) to avert (future) complex emergencies as CSOs are in close involvement with local communities;
- human rights monitoring (watchdog function) to analyse and inform international communities about the situation and to gather support from the outside to react to the conflict for human rights protection;
- relief and rehabilitation – to support urgent/daily needs of the migrant/refugee women and children, including organising language classes, art therapy workshops, vacation for Ukrainian children, addressing conflict-related trauma and PTSD;
- conflict resolution activities – relying on grassroots and mid-level approaches (like, community organising and mobilising, volunteering, etc.) that sustain the process of peacebuilding through the use of local resources and technologies, rather than the traditional top-down policy of providing humanitarian aid.

Having in mind this context and keeping an eye on the shifted role of CSOs towards becoming important actors in complex emergencies, by managing conflict and taking on certain functions of the government, there arise a couple of questions that require additional investigation and understanding:

- To what degree are CSOs equipped to handle all the dimensions of complex emergencies, including violent conflict?

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29 Bulgarian Fund for Women’s Urgent Fund for Support Women and Children Victims from the War in Ukraine - [https://bgfundforwomen.org/en/2022/03/01/urgent-fund-ukraine-en/](https://bgfundforwomen.org/en/2022/03/01/urgent-fund-ukraine-en/)
To answer the project objectives, the implemented sociological research project encompassed two methodologies: secondary desk research and in-depth interviews.

A key criterion in choosing the respondents for the in-depth interviews was their involvement in the refugee crisis and their work through a gender lens. At the end, 23 organisations were contacted, out of which 19 responded and agreed to participate. The profile of the respondents is as follows:

- 4 big organisations specialised and directly engaged in immigration law and human rights protection (Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, Council of Refugee Women in Bulgaria Association, Mission Wings Foundation and Centre for Legal Aid Voice in Bulgaria Foundation).
- 2 are founded in response to the Ukrainian crisis (Za Dobroto Foundation, Open Doors Situational Centre).
- 6 Women rights organisations: PULSE Foundation, Women’s Club Rodopchanka Association, Dignita Foundation, Ekaterina Karavelova Foundation, Center Dinamika Association, Bulgarian Platform of the European Women’s Lobby (a national network).
- 2 LGBTIQ+ / queer organisations: Resource Centre Bilitis+ and Bibliofem Association.
- 3 children’s rights organisations: Right to Childhood Foundation, Social Teahouse Association, National Network for Children.
- 1 organisation for entrepreneurship: Startup Factory Association.

The interviews were conducted in the period of August-November 2022 with the following structure:

1) Overall experience of the organisation.
2) Organisation status and condition in the beginning of the war.
3) Key triggers and barriers for immediate response of CSOs.
4) Relationships with target groups.
5) Relationship with the State.
6) Relationship with the local community.
7) Current projects and initiatives.
8) Unmet needs of the organisation and biggest change experienced during 2022.
9) Overall morale in the organisation and ways of dealing with the increased turnover.

6.3 KEY DEFINITIONS

For the purposes of this research, two key definitions will be considered and used:

- Crisis management: according to Timothy Combs in his article “State of Crisis Communication: Evidence and the Bleeding Edge” the crisis management is a response mechanism allowing effective measures to prevent and dissolve the public crisis and has an aim to restore social order and its reproduction, giving enough tools to restore and promote social stability and development.

For example, in theory the United Nations might be defined as CSO, referring to the civil organisation profit at the local, national or international level organised, non-voluntary organisations. Wolch criticises the Salamon belief that a CSO has the characteristics of an organisation with private, non-profit, autonomous, voluntary attributes. Looking into the case of Bulgarian organisations supporting the Ukrainian refugees in 2022, we can find evidence of constructed mechanisms for providing humanitarian support and protection.

Thus, if we are looking for a definition from a governance theory perspective, there is a theoretical basis for CSOs participating in crisis management. The global governance association holds the view that governance is the sum of individuals and institutions in charge of the official and
private management of their common affairs. In Bulgaria’s case, considering the reactions and lessons learned from the current war situation, representatives of various conflicting interests have found a way to come together by seizing opportunities and finding ways to cooperate. In other words, this is a continuous process, which can be either opposite or different from adjusting the interests of the public players in the process, also by taking cooperative action. It not only includes formal institutions and systems to ensure people take heed of experts and follow established rules and procedures, but also informal arrangements where people agree with one another or accept the other’s interests.

To have a better understanding of the main characteristics of governance theory, the development of a self-regulating manner; a variety of factors; interactive processes; the leading role of the nation, should also be considered. To achieve good governance, key public actors need to maximise the benefits of public social management processes, which mainly refers to good governance that can gain performance. As such, these processes are reflected in the governance of political effect, management effectiveness, economic and social effects, and aspects. Looking at the Bulgarian context and activity development, it illustrates the key directions in which an emerging situation should be managed and coordinated.

- Capacity building, leading to behavioural/organisational change:

The connotation of the terms is very broad, and, for the purposes of this research, we use capacity building in the meaning of a “participatory process, which seeks to improve a non-governmental organisation’s (NGO) ability to accomplish its mission”31. It considers the quality of the CSO’s performance, the achievement of concrete results over time and the responsible use of scarce resources. While there is general agreement among international development practitioners that capacity building is necessary to foster the growth and maturity of CSOs, exactly what it entails is subject to many interpretations.

According to LaFond and Brown’s article, A Guide to Monitoring and Evaluation of Capacity-Building Interventions in the Health Sector in Developing Countries32:

- Capacity is the “stock of resources available to an organisation, as well as the actions that transform these resources into performance”;
- Capacity building is “a process that improves the ability of an organisation to meet objectives and perform better”;
- Performance is “the set of results that represent productivity and competence related to an established objective”.

6.4 OVERALL COUNTRY BACKGROUND AFTER THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND INCLUSION OF CSOS IN THE COUNTRY RESPONSE TO UKRAINIAN WAR

When discussing the current overall Bulgarian social and economic development, we should consider a couple of important facts defining it. Following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as around 5 years before, a couple of major trends have influenced the overall development of the civil sector in Bulgaria and are marking a significant shift in the public sphere in Bulgaria. A major event that marked the above-mentioned processes is the Government refusal of acceptance of the Council of Europe Convention No. 210 on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (the so-called “Istanbul Convention” due to the city in which it was held).

1. During this period, after 2018, civil society organisations have experienced numerous attacks and the sector is subject to a worsened public image caused by attacks from political figures and parties and purposeful slander campaigns by different media. Moreover, on one hand, the country is part of the overall Eastern European trend of democratic backsliding, while civil society is witnessing a rise of right-wing nationalism, populism, religious fundamentalism, and a backlash towards the fight for human rights. And on the other hand, there are deep processes that harm the overall civil society development which function in the country such as raising the influence of nationalistic political parties as well as the state
abandoning its role in the presumed as essential for the functioning of the democracy relationship with the non-governmental sector. This whole situation has negatively affected the overall work of CSOs.

2. Looking back at the times before the war in Ukraine and the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak we can see that these developments have impacted civic activism in Bulgaria crucially. And while the effects of the pandemic will be further explored in the next couple of years, the initial glance suggests that it has evoked a reconfiguration of volunteerism, civil acts, and citizens’ self-organisation. In the above-described public environment during the whole summer of 2020 there emerged massive anti-government protests against corruption.

3. In the moment of the war outbreak in February 2022, Bulgaria was led by a complex multi-coalition government formed by progressive liberal parties and the socialist party (ex-communist), following a 12-year rule of the centre-right political party GERB. Since then, the COVID-19 crisis, large-scale protests in 2021, as well as three consecutive elections have followed\(^{34}\), so that the National Assembly can achieve a stable majority and form a government. The whole period can be characterised by major societal repercussions and tensions as the economic consequences from the COVID-19 crisis started to emerge, while societal opinion remained unstable and alienated. On top of that, the institutions and public administration in an unstable democracy such as the Bulgarian, need to be understood as requiring additional input and push from outside actors, such as the CSOs, to be able to maintain their key functions and systems.

In such an environment, the Ukrainian war came as an external event that caused additional turbulence in the overall unstable democratic situation. The Bulgarian President, known in the media as harbouring pro-Russian sentiments, maintained an oscillating point of view towards the Russian aggression, while some of the main players in the government required an immediate response from the Bulgarian National Assembly regarding the approval to send military aid to Ukraine. Since then, the COVID-19 crisis, large-scale protests in 2021, and three consecutive elections have followed\(^{34}\), so that the National Assembly can achieve a stable majority and form a government. The whole period can be characterised by major societal repercussions and tensions as the economic consequences from the COVID-19 crisis started to emerge, while societal opinion remained unstable and alienated. On top of that, the institutions and public administration in an unstable democracy such as the Bulgarian, need to be understood as requiring additional input and push from outside actors, such as the CSOs, to be able to maintain their key functions and systems.

To wrap up, in such a complex environment, the CSOs had to redefine and reorder their core functions and activities to ensure an adequate response not only to the local conditions they are working in, but also to the new external crisis that reshuffled the geopolitical situation.

6.5 THE INITIAL SHOCK

In the beginning of the conflict in February 2022, after the initial shock of the declared war and changed situation, the organisations demonstrated high motivation to help and participate actively in the support actions towards refugees:

“\textbf{We weren’t prepared and started reacting ad hoc: everyone with whatever they can do}” (Bulgarian Platform of the European Women’s Lobby)

“\textbf{In the beginning, when they came, we handled absolutely everything: accommodation, paying rent, taking them to a doctor.”} (Situational Center Open Doors)

“We immediately got acquainted with a Ukrainian community that lives in Rakovski (…) where they came and lived in two monasteries. We offered them training in Bulgarian because most of them immediately looked for a job after they came and they needed to enrich their knowledge of the Bulgarian language, to invest time in it seriously, they did not know Bulgarian.” (Indi Roma – 97 Social Foundation)

“We met an extraordinary civil and volunteer activism and participation – people were wondering where to go and what to donate. They wanted to help but they were also looking for, let’s put it this way: a legal way to make it happen” (Right for Childhood Foundation)

This was the situation with the first wave of the Ukrainian refugees who arrived in Bulgaria. According to the above-mentioned government decision, in the beginning they were accommodated in hotels on the Black Sea coast, while later were transferred to various state hotels in the country, some of which happen to be in migration camps. In general, there was no clear settlement approach, and no directions were given to the people who escaped from the war. The guidance from official institutions was not clear and the communication was inconsistent and misleading. Some of the organisations happened to be in a situation where they could readily organise different initiatives to support, but without knowing how to handle the situation in its entirety. The circumstances in the country happened to be that none of the State actors were able to form and manage an answer to the crisis while the CSO activists on the field were too busy to organise the volunteers’ efforts of creating safe spaces for the people escaping the war.

“\textbf{At a moment when we were very hopeful to move things forward, we wrote a project and were waiting for funding, we had planned things. And suddenly all the plans collapsed. In fact, our biggest problem was that it took months for the institutions to react to this war.”} (Council of Refugee Women in Bulgaria Association)

In addition, the key obstacle for the Ukrainian refugees appears to be the language barrier, so most of the organisations started taking care of organising and facilitating such activities for them. There was no centralised effort coming from the government in order to help them with quicker integration and as a result they could

\^{34} By the time of publishing the Read between the Lines report, two other elections followed, amounting to overall five parliamentary elections for the period of three years.
not learn Bulgarian and thus faced a lot of difficulties applying for jobs and receiving healthcare services. In such conditions the CSOs need to react and ensure any kind of help and care to the Ukrainian refugees and start being effective:

"At the moment when you adjust to one crisis, there happens to be another one and you need to reorganise again, inform the donors that the projects will be delayed and work with the new circumstances." (Bilits Resource Center Foundation)

However, all the respondents claim that they were emotionally touched by the war’s consequences, and everyone had as a first thought the idea to help and to ensure support. Across all the organisations, the immediate reaction is of compassion, empathy and looking for different ways to participate in the creation of a new life for the refugees, providing everything needed to settle in their new place of living.

6.6 AD-HOC BASED INITIATIVES

Depending on the location and resources of the CSOs, their first step was to organise different activities for the target group. As a first step, the organisations developed various ad-hoc initiatives that included initial aid through the provision of basic Bulgarian lessons, provision of psychological and legal counselling:

“For the study of Bulgarian, we found a teacher from a neighbouring village who even became too attached to them. And until the end of September there were these classes – we only had 50 hours – but they “blackmailed” her, and she continues to go and give them lessons for free. The legal consultations as far as I remember were about travel topics in case their documents were taken out, as well as money transfers.” (Indi Roma – 97 Social Foundation).

“We just comply with their wishes, and we did outdoor painting at a time with one artist we hired, we did outdoor painting. In general, we buy materials and actually busy them in the little free time they have left – we make things, jewellery, jewellery boxes. The most common things we can think of, that’s how the classes go.” (Indi Roma – 97 Social Foundation)

“Our organisation was one of the first to be included in the database of the Ukrainian government website, which opened for this as well. Then we were one of the first to act, perhaps on the 24th and 25th or 26th of February and submitted the first application for protection, directly in the [migration] centre of Ovcha Kupel.” (Center for Legal Aid Voice in Bulgaria Foundation)

The rising humanitarian crisis required CSOs to address the usual challenges, but at a more intense pace. The majority of the respondents reveal that in such conditions their core occupation related to women’s rights was neglected and the actual projects that they have been involved in were delayed. In a similar manner, the LGBTQ+ organisation needed to quickly activate their network of contacts and help a couple to be accommodated in Bulgaria shortly after the beginning of the war:

“We are part of an international LGBT network that organised a system for accommodation in Eastern Europe. We became the local coordinator and people came to register with us. We had to deal with two girls – a couple and we offered them psychological and legal support.” (Bilits Resource Center Foundation)

However, since nearly all of the refugees that arrived in Bulgaria were women with children, it could be concluded that during this period CSOs did not start working with a new and unfamiliar target group, rather their activities and projects were refocused.

There are a couple of organisations that are more experienced than the others and are popular in the field of migration law. As a result, they are the first ones towards which the other, less experienced ones are looking for support while developing their own activities, and while being engaged with providing immediate support to the refugees. The main reason is their requirement for a specialised knowledge on the topic and the fact that the current Bulgarian migration legislation is lacking settlement on dealing with various cases (including immigrants from European origin).

“Our contacts spread very quickly in these circles (in need) in Sofia and most of them came out of the context of refugee-migration law and so it is against the background of coercion issues such as civil, family, labour and economic, which is why we already needed additional expertise from colleagues to be accepted, either volunteers or purely human, to include.” (Center for Legal Aid Voice in Bulgaria Foundation)

“We are the biggest humanitarian organisation in Bulgaria and everyone knows that we will react. We couldn’t leave the whole process unattended.” (Bulgarian Helsinki Committee)

During the interviews, many of the respondents refer to this initial period as “chaotic”, disorganised. They also recall that it was all happening while some of them had not yet adjusted their ways of working with the post-COVID-19 situation, and others were facing logistical inconveniences, such as moving to different offices or working at home. Within such conditions, the CSOs experienced their major work hurdle in the lack of appropriate communication from and with the State, as it holds primary responsibility for taking the most urgent and necessary actions regarding the settlement of people arriving from Ukraine.

6.7 BARRIERS AND UNMET ORGANISATIONAL NEEDS

Communication with the State was outlined as a key barrier during this period. CSOs note that institutions and the State remained silent and did not provide any guidance to the organisations. On multiple occasions, on calls and requests for coordination, the main stake-
holders did not react and did not provide organisational support throughout the whole process. The respondents claim that such ways of working are not new, and they report that they are used to such an unsatisfactory level of communication and collaborative work. However, in a situation of war they needed to find different ways to get organised and coordinated:

“In a moment when we should react and organise something meaningful for these people, the State organised a meeting and delivered a presentation on the situation in Ukraine. And what is this for me? Tell me what can I do when these people come to the door? Where should I accommodate them, where should I consult them, what should I do?” (Council of Refugee Women in Bulgaria)

The current problem is not new and is only growing bigger after there has not been any resolution to it for many years:

“It’s just that institutions should start fulfilling their role. Because I [the institution] say ‘I do not have a problem’, or ‘these are individual cases’, but at the same time they talk a lot about what is happening within the system. Yesterday I asked one of the centres in Sofia if they have diapers. Apparently, they ran out of diapers for children. They replied: we can’t provide you with such information. Why can’t you, I ask? Because we have no [appointed] person who is accountable for providing such information. However, I can’t understand when someone goes on leave, isn’t there someone else to replace them?” (Za Dobroto Foundation)

This is the moment when crisis management should make visible the whole sphere of administration. The impression of activists is that the government refused and is not able to undertake a leading role and could not encourage and support CSO participation in public affairs and crisis management, as well as provide effective channels of participation and make available public resources.

“And since we don’t have a dialogue between the DAB [State Agency for Refugees (SAR)] and the CSOs, and the CSOs are put in the position of ‘they only create intrigues, they only create problems’, then it’s super hard, we’re exhausted, not because of the difficult cases we work with. Because I also work on specific cases, but when you see a case you have solved positively, your soul warms. You say to yourself that it makes sense to do it, to live. However, communication with the State and institutions is very difficult. Extremely laborious.” (Council of Refugee Women in Bulgaria Association)

The National Coordination Council, led by the Deputy Prime Minister until the resignation of the government in July 2022, is seen as a positive example and a step in the right direction. The organisations “finally had a place where they can talk and discuss with the State” and “our voices were heard”. However, this initiative did not last long and currently there is “no one to turn to” and the “administration returned to its usual mode of chaos”.

Alongside this issue and working in the field, CSOs face another barrier: the growing propaganda influencing the Bulgarians’ attitude towards the refugees. In relation to the overall negative image of non-governmental organisations in the public sphere, activists dealt with a vast amount of propaganda against providing help to the ones in need: ‘they [the refugees] hear many things about themselves and are really desperate because they perceive this as the opinion of all the people in the country’. As a result, they are facing additional obstacles that need to be overcome and a barrier towards their efforts. The State seems to rely on the actions of the organisations without ensuring tangible support and without doing much to systematically and overtly challenge this propaganda.

“You work, you catch up with something and another crisis is coming up. And all the time there is someone who is pro-Putin and anti-liberal democracy and ergo against gay rights. We are used to this mechanism of working.” (Bilitis Resource Center Foundation)

6.8 ESTABLISHING PARTNERSHIPS

A recognized response and key for better coordination, network influence, problem solving and being able to manage issues as they come are the established partnerships among different organisations:

“Almost unnoticed we started working with one other organisation from Ruse and were able to move all other activities together. We are now even preparing a Christmas celebration for the kids.” (Right for Childhood Foundation)

“In this line of thought, I would give an example of the integration centre that the Za Dobroto Foundation opened – they did this literally in three days and showed that when a person wants and thinks and wants to do something for people, they can do it. And when a group of people get together, one of the most important things in my opinion is that our country has an adequate policy and adequate people to implement that policy.” (Pulse Foundation)

While working together some of them discovered a source of huge support from people working in the same field. In addition, the lack of direction and chaotic actions that came from the State increased the feeling of losing the path. And in such circumstances communication and collaboration with BFW which provided resources via its established Urgent Fund for organisations working with women and children from Ukraine were perceived as extremely positive:

“Thanks to the emergency campaign that the BFW did, we have and continue to have the resources that cover two of the spaces of our organisation that we reorganised around Covid – extra, if I may say so, spaces – we are currently housing Ukrainian refugees. And in fact, thanks to the Bulgarian Fund for Women, we manage to cover all the overhead costs related to the space, including in one of the apartments we changed the furniture because it was quite old.” (Pulse Foundation)

The inconsistent processes and lack of stability which followed the difficult communication with the State, the
financial resources made available by BFW led to a better focus and action planning for the CSOs which took part in the funding call. The funding appeared at the right moment, as the unexpected war and humanitarian crisis was creating delays and insecurities. Dealing with crisis upon a crisis and needing to shift their priorities, the organisations report major difficulties caused by the insecure and unstable environment. Being able to rely on the Urgent Fund from BFW is considered as a “helpful”, “needed” support that eases the repercussions of the problematic situation.

“It gave us space to think and organise our activities.” (Za Dobroto Foundation)

“We were able to focus on more important things, as the usual donors were absent and no money was on the horizon.” (Dinamika Center Association)

6.9 MAIN LEARNINGS FOR THE ORGANISATIONS

Looking back and evaluating the process they have been through, the main outcome reported by all of the interviewed organisations is that the crises they have experienced in the past three years helped them to increase the number of their partnerships. Together with the newly established contacts, another positive outcome has been the capabilities and capacities that have also been built up during the crisis (Pulse Foundation, Mission Wings, Bulgarian Helsinki Committee): infrastructure, equipping individuals with skills, understanding, knowledge. This comes with organisational development, the elaboration of management structures, processes and procedures, not only within organisations, but also including the management of relationships between different organisations and sectors. The National Co-ordination Centre eventually resumed its activities, but by then it was evident that the organisations relied on internal efforts to compensate for the lack of support and crisis management coming from the State. By creating and strengthening partnerships, many of them continue to work in this manner and can ensure the services that they can provide endure:

“One of the rare good things that happened during 2022 was the initiated effort of making contact with the organisations. However, it lasted too short to have any results. But it was definitely a means to establish a channel for coordination and support.” (Za Dobroto Foundation)

Organisations see the potential for further collaboration and for more opportunities based on what was achieved throughout the year. Despite the fact that conditions were not favourable throughout, CSOs also admit that this has helped them to grow in many directions and opened many doors:

“We have developed a lot in the last 3-4 years, at the expense of other things, the team came together when there was a crisis. Otherwise, there is always someone pushing to get something done. But when a crisis comes, colleagues understand. That it shouldn’t happen. There is a difference.” (Council for Refugee Women Bulgaria Association)

“The war is a very bad thing, but it gave new horizons to our organisation. We work with great motivation – we see that it makes sense and things happen in the best possible way. So this has had a very beneficial effect on us, so to speak, we have a lot of work, a lot of new goals ahead of us.” (Dignita Foundation)

It is also very important to note that once working with those in need CSOs form a special social connection that is mutually beneficial for the organisations and their target groups. They report obtaining close personal ties and building relationships that will grow in the future. Thus, the general outcome is considered positive – no matter the difficulties, there are significant results.

“In general, people got used to such tension, they became more open, a little more careful about how to react to any information, they think a little more analytically. And I think that it [the support from Bulgarian CSOs] had a rather positive effect on the Ukrainians. Even now, we have appointed quite a few Ukrainians, they work for us.

“I’m definitely seeing them open up, they even go to make rakia with refugees. Rather, I see positives in this situation. But I don’t know if we are ready for the next crisis, hopefully time will show.” (Mission Wings Foundation)

6.10 KEY INSIGHTS

1. The Russian invasion met Bulgarian CSOs in unstable conditions, yet they have also adapted their resources to the post-COVID-19 pandemic situation.

2. Working in the field and being responsible for their core human rights initiatives, the CSOs and activists began re-active actions towards the Ukrainian crisis without necessarily following any strategy or a plan;

3. Hence, the engagement with and the support provided to refugees are based predominantly on the perceived organisational cause for the humanitarian organisation and activist, rather than a predefined action plan. This leads to a lack of organised actions and very often to burnout, as the capabilities and resources needed to take such actions are not planned and supported well enough;

4. Bulgarian CSOs are equipped to cope with the newly emerged public crisis: the barrier for them happens to be the unbalanced and unsynchronised state approach towards those in need;

5. Immediately after the beginning of the war, the activists dealt with huge non-governmental and citizen support that needed to be managed and organised to achieve sustainable results. A vast majority of them are non-funded and rely on voluntary actions from different sources: friends, allies, private donors.
6. Throughout the year, developing relations with the people in need, the organisations became the only point of contact for key social services such as education, social security and healthcare;

7. The State remained absent and acted chaotically in its strategic planning and did not ensure enough support for the organisations’ immediate needs;

8. Currently, the State is solely taking care of the accommodation of refugees and does not make any progress with the provision of help for their integration in society.

9. The State and the main public stakeholders lack any planning and directions on how to react and how to communicate with the people in need. “We are in a situation where we are doing the State’s job.” However, the two fields remain independent and there is no common ground about where the CSOs take over the State’s job and vice versa. Thus, their common field of work remains fragmented and unstable.

10. The most successful examples of CSO activities are those that are focused on a concrete purpose and aim: e.g. organising labour market integration campaigns, school inclusion activities, education in the Bulgarian language, etc.

11. The current focus of the majority of the organisations is on strengthening integrational ties with the Bulgarian society and looking for institutional support for the everyday needs of their target groups, such as school integration of children, healthcare and judicial services, labour market integration, etc.

12. In such an emergent situation, the lack of core funding and ready availability of resources for the CSOs are causing difficulties and they are looking for more flexible and easy-to-access financial sources.

13. Women rights/Human rights: within the broader connotation of being human rights activists, the organisations shifted their focus from their core activities, which is very problematic when trying to achieve social change and justice. The situation required immediate action and being exposed to a humanitarian crisis and needing to take care of an immense group of people they neglected their main work and activities. However, their target groups are mostly women with children in need and as such the core activity is not neglected but rather perceived as pre-defined for the purposes of the current situation.

14. Legislation update: current Bulgarian migration law needs urgent adaptation as it is lacking procedures and capacities across institutions on how and what steps are needed for the administration.

15. It is worth exploring further how the increased humanitarian international and national in some cases financial support to CSOs, connected with crises such as pandemics and the war, will affect civil society and organisations in the long run, if and/or when it is gone.

6.11 KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Utilise the newly established contacts and partnerships from the most recent crisis and develop new skills and capacity.

2. Establish a proactive approach towards the State in regard to the humanitarian crisis, such as collaborating and coordinating to address the economic consequences of the war expected in the near future.

3. Work to establish a specific distinction in the duties of the government and CSOs during times of extraordinary circumstances.

4. Advocate to amend the migration law and improve the conditions in which asylum seekers and refugees receive support.

5. In relation to the above, a supervised mutual responsibility mechanism between the two key players needs to be considered.

6. Advocate and influence governments and philanthropy for more and flexible, multi-year core support.

7. Advocate for better communication and easy access to decision-making channels in order to eliminate the lack of coordination and disruption of the most urgent tasks – not just during emergencies, but in general. The National Co-ordination Centre led by the former government is evaluated as a positive step in managing the different types of crises the society is facing.

8. Practise frequent communication within the team regarding any upcoming changes, as well as work towards a more balanced and targeted organisation, focusing on retaining skills and resources needed for the problems they need to work on.

9. Partnerships and collaboration with different organisations should be seen as a positive sign and an important tool to maintain the overall motivation of the organisations. Activation of such partnerships and potential coalitions should be further explored and tested in advocacy building activities and planning.

10. Shared knowledge and trainings across the organisations might also be considered as a means to further capacity building.

11. Flexible and easy-to-use funding appears to be much needed in the CSO field. CSOs should also consider participating in the establishment of a shared emergency fund (pooled funding) that could be used to provide support to different organisations and campaigns.
READ BETWEEN THE LINES

Documenting the experiences of women and human rights' CSOs, queer collectives and activists in the Black Sea Region amid multiple complexities of overlapping crises – the (post) pandemic consequences of COVID-19 and Russia’s war against Ukraine.

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