

GONG'S RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF SUSTAINABILITY AND RESILIENCE MODELS FOR CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS



Co-funded by
the European Union



GOVERNMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF CROATIA
Office for Cooperation with NGOs

Financijski
podržava



Nacionalna
zaklada za
razvoj
civilnoga
društva

Funded by the European Union, the Government Office for Cooperation with NGOs and the National Foundation for Civil Society Development. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union, the Government Office for Cooperation with NGOs or the National Foundation for Civil Society Development.

The last few years have been quite difficult for advocacy organizations in Croatia. In its [latest Rule of Law Report on Croatia](#), the European Commission points out that there is literally no progress in drafting a new strategic document, the main purpose of which is to systematically support the development of civil society¹. Seven years have passed since the end of the implementation period of the last strategy. Gong, in its capacity as a Knowledge Center for social development in the field of civic activism and democratic institution building, has established through its own analyses that the planned funding of civil society through the European Social Fund in the period 2014-2020 has [tragically failed](#) in more or less all aspects and that the [political background for such an outcome](#) is clearly visible. [The practises of administrative violence against civil society organisations](#), usually linked to the use of European Social Fund resources, have also been extensively documented. Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that according to the results of the [CSOSI Civil Society Sustainability Index developed by the U.S. Agency for International Development \(USAID\) for the year 2021](#), the overall rating for Croatia is slightly worse than in 2014. Since 2014, Croatia has experienced a particularly significant deterioration in the categories "organisational capacity" and "financial sustainability". It is logical to assume that these negative changes spare no single category of civil society organisation, but, for example, [the tragicomic euthanasia](#) of the once relevant and influential [Council for the Civil Society Development](#) clearly illustrates the context in which organisations whose work is geared towards changes in public policy and the functioning of public administration - in a word, advocacy; operate today. Put simply, the institutional channels of influence are closed and the sources of support for the work of activists and advocates have largely dried up. The current situation can be summed up very well with this quote from the conclusion of the [New Beginning](#) study published by the [Center for Peace Studies](#).

Progressive civil society organisations have fewer and fewer opportunities to exert real influence through the existing institutional mechanisms of interest representation, participation in working groups, bodies and consultations with the interested public. Compared to ten years ago, the European Union is no longer a lever to influence human rights policy and legislation; the influence of right-wing or regressive political actors is growing; in Croatia there is a clear lack of political will and institutional ability to

¹ In order to leave no doubt about the assessment, we also quote the original text: *The preparation of the new National Plan for Creating an Enabling Environment for the Civil Society Development 2021- 2027 has not progressed.*

integrate the ideas of human rights organizations into public policy. At the same time, civil society organisations themselves suffer from an internal lack of capacity due to generational change, increasing bureaucratisation, administrative burdens and a lack of opportunities to fund advocacy and activist initiatives, leaving them locked in their offices and insufficiently connected to the community.

In this document, Gong makes several proposals for the development of a new, more sustainable and resilient model/system for the work of advocacy organisations in Croatia under these new circumstances. In doing so, he draws on the results of existing analyses, but also on best practises that have proven successful in the past.

The state must determine the social role of advocacy organisations

Advocacy organisations are a necessary corrective to government in any democratic political system, just like independent media and the scientific community. The health of democracy is seriously compromised when governments conclude that advocacy organisations are a nuisance or even a threat. This is particularly evident in the recent examples of [Hungary](#) and [Poland](#), countries that had previously achieved a relatively high level of democratic standards. In order to fulfil this key function as a corrective to the government, advocacy organisations need a stable support system that simultaneously strengthens their political autonomy. Such a system is not easy to set up, as Croatian example, but also examples from numerous other countries with a long democratic tradition, show. But that does not mean that it is not necessary just because it is not technically easy or convenient for the political elites.

The [paper that Igor Vidačak has prepared](#) for Gong can help in this regard. In this text, the author proposes 5 policy areas in which he recognises the special public contribution of advocacy civil society organisations. The state should focus its support on these areas and ideally include them in the new strategic-programmatic document for the civil society sector. The areas mentioned are:

1. Strengthen the role of civil society in shaping public policy at national level.
2. Support the participation of civil society in European policymaking and in the promotion and protection of European values.

3. Support greater visibility and good governance in civil society organisations.
4. Support greater horizontal networking of civil society organisations and strategic collaboration with independent media, the academic community and the business sector.
5. Support civil society organisations in effectively addressing the challenges of the digital transformation.

State support in each of the above areas is by no means unconditional. Each of the above areas is accompanied by a comprehensive set of performance indicators to determine the extent to which government interventions strengthen the contribution of advocacy organisations, e.g., in developing societal capacity to address the challenges of digital transformation or improving the quality of public policy at the national level. These areas are of course a matter of political preference, and the indicators can be a matter of debate. But without a clear definition of what the state expects from advocacy organisations, there is no coherent model of their functioning and thus no contribution to the common good.

The data collected as part of the implementation monitoring and evaluation must be incorporated into the further development of the model/system

It is necessary either to reaffirm the existing deliberative forums such as the Council for Civil Society Development or to create new spaces for an informed and structured discussion of the collected data and assessment results. The results of these discussions must meaningfully influence future public policy decisions. As in the previous analysis, which builds on the high quality but in practise systematically ignored [evaluation of the Operational Programme "Effective Human Resources" in the priority axis "Good Governance"](#), the absolute minimum is a statement from the responsible bodies clearly indicating: i) which recommendations they will accept; ii) in what timeframe they will implement them; iii) which they will not accept and why, and iv) whether they will offer alternatives to the proposed recommendations that solve the problems identified in the analysis. In this way, the further development of the model can be discussed objectively and constructively. At the same time, civil society advocacy organisations in Croatia

should be made aware that the results of such evaluations can be a valuable basis for the further/future development of activities and campaigns.

Of course, this recommendation also applies to a much broader public policy framework than the system of support for civil society organisations.

Establishment of a mechanism to ensure the liquidity of civil society organisations

The problem of liquidity in the administration of civil society organisations, which is analysed in more detail in [one of Gong's publications](#), does not only affect advocacy-oriented organisations. However, it is logical to assume that they are disproportionately affected due to the limited financial support available to them. In this sense, the reintroduction of the inter-financing mechanism, comparable to the former Europe Plus programme, would be of great help to them. We would like to remind that this is a successful programme which, over many years, has greatly facilitated the activities of organisations and in particular the implementation of projects financed by EU funds and other international sources. It was abolished without convincing justification after the budget of the National Foundation for Civil Society Development was cut in 2016 and (to a lesser extent) in 2017. Therefore, Gong believes that it is necessary to re-establish this proven and successful mechanism in an appropriate format. Should this not be possible for any reason, the nearest acceptable alternative can be tried, for example in the form of an agreement between government institutions and one or more commercial banks. In one of the possible variants, the Government Office for Cooperation with NGOs or the National Foundation for Civil Society Development could provide professional support in processing loan applications and cover the costs of concluding contracts and interest. Such an arrangement would lead to conditions that are relatively favourable from the point of view of public expenditure, which in turn would represent an extremely useful social investment given the benefits of the civil organisations' projects.

Establishment of an independent fund to support the advocacy work of civil society organisations, with financial participation from the state

Finally, a complete model or support system would be completed by the establishment of a "pooled fund" to finance the advocacy work of civil society organisations. According to the original idea presented in the [paper by Igor Vidačak](#), such a fund would bring together various international and domestic donors from the public and private sectors in support of predetermined common thematic priorities and objectives. It is certain that the representatives of the government authorities/institutions involved in the management of the fund would be in a good position to influence the thematic orientation of the fund. In return, however, the state administrative bodies and the public organisations set up by the state **should be completely relieved of the task of selecting specific grants and monitoring and supporting their implementation. This task should be entrusted to one or a consortium of private foundations that enjoy the trust of civil society organisations.** State representatives should be systematically informed about the realisation of the fund's macro-indicators and regularly involved in the programming processes, over which they should have a significant, although not dominant, influence. On the one hand, this would protect public investments so that the objectives and priorities of the funding reflect those anchored in the national programme strategy document, while at the same time ensuring the autonomy of the work of the advocacy organisations using the relevant grants.

In terms of implementation, it is important that the reference consortium consults advocacy organizations in the definition of administrative rules and practises and develops an approach that is adapted to the reality of their work processes. It must be recognised that some good advocacy projects have medium- and long-term impacts. It must also be accepted that more often than in projects that provide direct assistance and services, tangible results and impacts fail to materialise, not because of flawed intervention logic or problems in implementation, but because of external circumstances beyond the control of advocacy organisations. Finally, it would be worth considering simpler models for awarding grants to smaller organisations or those just starting out in advocacy. For example, it would be conceivable to develop a project idea as a pilot project, which would be presented to a panel of established experts, after which a

simple application would be drawn up. Such grants could be accompanied by a system of support and mentoring at all stages of the project cycle.

Strengthening the capacity to diversify organisational financing

Securing funding from as many sources as possible is the gold standard for the sustainability of civil society organisations in general, but in the case of advocacy organisations it is important for another reason: it represents probably the most important mechanism for protecting their political autonomy and ensuring the successful fulfilment of the advocacy mission. And more than others, advocacy organisations need to develop the important management skill of maintaining good relationships with a variety of funders and being prepared to adapt quickly when some funding lines are called into question, either because they have been abolished/reduced or because funding priorities or relationships with funders have become incompatible with the advocacy function. Advocacy organisations must always keep in mind that, as difficult as it may be, it is easier to repair the damage caused by the loss of an important source of funding than to repair the damage to reputation that can result from continuing to accept financial support that jeopardises the foundations of the organisation's mission. A systematic and consistent fundraising strategy can also ensure that such situations, although usually painful, can be overcome without damage that would jeopardise the proper functioning or even survival of the organisation.

Translation from Croatian: [Maherica Ltd.](#)

Original available at: <https://gong.hr/publikacije/>