# Digital Tools for Active Citizenship

## Research study

### Author: Veronica STEFAN

The research **Digital Tools for Active Citizens** aims at understanding how Civil Society Organizations in the Black Sea Region are using digital tools to advance their mission, manage their resources (human, financial, etc.) and to outreach to donors and beneficiaries, both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The interest in this topic comes at a time when the use of the Internet and technologies grows exponentially, while social media and digital tools are used to create new forms of participation and claim agency. At the same time, it comes in a moment when globally there is a phenomenon of disengagement with formal politics and traditional ways of participation, as citizens are more likely to feel disillusioned with how the government is listening to their voice in policy debates[1]. Additionally, as far as electoral processes are concerned, data already showed that just 60% of all citizens always vote, the situation being even more concerning among young people - with only 44% of them voting (aged 18-29)[2]. Furthermore, due to the global COVID-19 pandemic, a time when the entire world became dependent on the use of technology and was forced to work and study remotely, the gaps in digital skills and tools became even more visible, forcing Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) to test their resilience in adapting to the new circumstances.

In this context, the present research is looking to fill in some of the existing gaps, supporting the understanding of how CSOs and activists use digital tools to advance their causes, the opportunities and obstacles encountered, before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, with a particular focus on CSOs working in four countries in the Black Sea: Armenia, Georgia, Romania and Ukraine.

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[1] OECD (2019), "Society at a Glance 2019". Retrieved from https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/social-issues-migration-health/society-at-a-glance-2019_soc_glance-2019-en

[2] UN (2016), "Youth Civic Engagement". Retrieved from https://www.un.org/development/desa/youth/wp-content/uploads/sites/21/2018/12/un_world_youth_report_youth_civic_engagement.pdf

# I. Main conclusions and recommendations

**a. Main conclusions** – the section reflects the findings from the entire research conducted through three main instruments: analysis of secondary research, quantitative data obtained through an online survey and qualitative data obtained through focus groups and written interviews. The full analysis of obtained data can be found in detail in *section II. Main findings of the research*.

### *The pandemic as a catalyst for CSOs digitalisation*

The COVID-19 pandemic had an unquestionable impact on the acceleration of digitalisation for the entire society, CSOs being equally impacted by it. There is a large agreement that the pandemic has increased the importance of activism online and digitalisation of political processes, at the same time enabling organisations to discover new resources to advance their cause. Looking towards a post-pandemic society CSO representatives expressed their wish to continue using the new digital tools they have discovered, probably integrated in a hybrid approach, where the online-offline worlds are blended.

### *Social media and productivity platforms*

The Black Sea CSOs have a strong preference for using Facebook (99%) as their main social media platform and Zoom (94%) as their main productivity platform. Other social media platforms that are gaining traction among the CSOs in the region are YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram and Viber. In terms of productivity platforms, the Google and Microsoft solutions are the most used.

### *Usage of social media and digital tools*

CSOs in the region engage actively with various digital tools for three main purposes: organisational management (interacting with members of the organisation, managing the internal activity, organising activities, recruiting new members/volunteers), external outreach (raising awareness initiatives, promoting their activity, coordinating with partners) and social change (contributing to public consultations, interacting with decision makers, signing e-petitions). However, notable challenges can be noticed in using digital platforms for organising or attending a protest, engaging in participatory budgeting, but also in fundraising for their cause. The challenges in using digital platforms for specific purposes could be linked with the relative new experience of Black Sea CSOs with digital tools in general, but possibly also with the lack of relevant tools that allow for a meaningful engagement in the above-mentioned activities.

*Digital skills*

The CSOs in the region recognise as a main obstacle in fully using digital tools the lack of media and digital skills. The challenge was noticed for both CSOs' staff and beneficiaries, forced by the pandemic many CSOs had to upgrade their knowledge and skills related to digital tools in order to be able to continue their activity and adapt to the online realities. The lack of necessary skills and resources, early in the pandemic, created a series of blockages that often forced CSOs to cease their activities or postpone it for longer periods.

Although it can be assumed that one year after the pandemic the situation has improved, based on secondary data, it can be observed there are significant differences between basic digital skills and more advanced ones, the latter being still underdeveloped. At the same time, the participants to the present research have mentioned difficulties in fully taking advantage of the digital opportunities – even if many of them have started using social media to promote their cause, they still face challenges in reaching out to relevant audiences or engaging in effective online advocacy campaigns. From the beneficiaries' perspectives, CSOs have encountered serious problems in engaging citizens (from the elderly to the very young) that had little knowledge about digital tools, with many of them needing assistance from other more experienced users.

*CSOs and development of digital tools*

Based on quantitative and qualitative data, about a third of CSOs mentioned developing digital platforms and only 13% said that have participated in a hackathon. The situation is most likely connected with the level of digital skills among the CSO members and the lack of previous experiences with digital tools. However, the region also benefits of important talent, showcased in various examples when organisations have mobilised to create new digital platforms that support the combatting of the COVID-19 pandemic, facilitate the interaction between citizens and decision makers, overall increase transparency of information, public decisions and access to public services. The present analysis includes a short collection of inspiring practices.

*Access and digital inequalities*

Access to Internet and technology remains a structural challenge in the Black Sea region, even if most countries have a rather good and affordable connection to the Internet (60 to 80 percent of the population living in Armenia, Georgia, Romania and Ukraine is connected to the Internet), a large part of the society is still disconnected, and important differences can be noticed between rural and urban areas, as well as among citizens with different educational and economic backgrounds. The pandemic has brought to light these digital gaps showing how critical such investments are.

*Funding*

Financial support for CSOs remains a major concern in the Black Sea. Adding to the previous shortcomings, the pandemic has forced CSOs to find solutions that required unplanned costs. Whereas digital tools bring important benefits, many of them are not available for free, especially those that are necessary to professional organisations. In this context, CSOs have faced new challenges to ensure their sustainability and sometimes the mere continuity of their activities. Moreover, funding for online activities is still limited as many donors and public institutions prefer funding traditional activities.

*Safety, surveillance and trust*

With increased adoption of digital tools, more and more CSOs and citizens have become of the risks the new environments bring. On the one hand online safety and protection of personal data has become a constant concern for all organisations working with vulnerable groups or with sensitive data. On the other hand, online surveillance, whilst is not a wide practice in the four countries at the core of the research, is still a reality in many of them and the COVID-19 pandemic has amplified it at times. In this context, civic activists identify it as a significant barrier in engaging in democratic activities through digital tools. Last but not least, trust in digital tools is seen as a general challenge – even when CSOs are motivated in deploying new tools they face reluctance from various beneficiaries when it comes to raising funds or resources (eg. a crowdfunding campaign via a social media channel) or even when it comes to accessing social and psychological services.

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*Mental wellbeing*

The pandemic has forced, for the first time, a life where online was the norm, thus, adding an incredible pressure for everyone not fully equipped to use online tools. In this context, CSOs were not an exception and since many of them didn't have in their organisation a digital strategy, they had to improvise and take decisions on the spur of the moment, including by pressuring their staff members to engage in a large number of online activities with which they were not used to. The change in habits brought also a considerable pressure on the mental wellbeing of CSO members and volunteers, many of them mentioning burnout, increased fatigue and difficulties in coping with the new situation.

**b. Recommendation and considerations for future policies**

The section builds on the main conclusions identified and proposes a series of recommendations and considerations for future policies and initiatives. In order to address the challenges that have appeared and take full stock of the digital opportunities, the paper proposes a series of recommendations and

consideration for future policies and initiatives that can be implemented by all interested stakeholder, at all levels – local, national, regional, European or international.

*Capacity building for CSOs*

There is a need to invest in initiatives that increase the digital skills and knowledge of CSOs, supporting them to maximise the impact of digital tools and outreach to relevant target groups, as well as to increase the efficiency of their online advocacy campaigns. Also, specific attention should be put in the development of advanced digital skills (including programming, digital marketing, data visualisation) that would enable the non-governmental sector to create tailored platforms for their causes.

*Digital transformation strategies*

Albeit the new impetus brought by the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a need for a more strategic approach to digital transformation and a better understanding of the mindset that needs to be internalised in order to implement successful digital strategies. Such strategies are needed inside CSOs when they plan their organisational development, but also at societal level.

From the CSOs perspective there is a need to plan in advance what are the necessary digital tools, resources and skills to advance their mission and how to better adapt their methodologies to the online realities – even though in the pandemic many organisations have found ways to continue their activity online, many still need to reassess their processes and ensure everything happens as part of a planned process and not a reaction to external factors (as the pandemic).

From a societal perspective, any public digital strategy needs to take into account CSOs as a distinct sector with specific needs and problems. Moreover, there is a need to accelerate the creation of digital transformation strategies in all countries, by including all groups of the society and proposing tailored solutions to specific contexts (eg. invest in digital skills, Internet infrastructure, develop change teaching methodologies for online learning, support open-source digital platforms, etc.).

*Ensuring sustainability and resilience*

Considering the challenges encountered by the CSOs in adapting their activity to the online world – costs of digital platforms, limited or no availability of funding for online activities, lack of expertise and guidance in transitioning to online work, difficulties for mental wellbeing, online safety issues – it becomes necessary to have national and/or international programmes that support civic actors to further develop their capacities in continuing online activities. Although funding is an ongoing problem for the non-governmental sector, donors and public institutions need to include in their funding schemes new tools/priorities that support the adaptation to the new online realities, even in

the aftermath of the pandemic. A particular attention should be given to CSOs and informal groups that activate in smaller communities where digital practices are still less popular.

## *E-government solutions*

The role of digital public platforms remains one of the most important when we look at the impact of digital tools on the entire society. Whilst the pandemic has also pushed for disruption in the public sector, CSOs expressed their wish to have these changes continued and further developed. With this in mind, there are still important steps to be taken to extend the available digital services in all analysed countries, including by making them more user-friendly and accessible for all age groups and social backgrounds. A particular need has been expressed in developing new e-government tools that could facilitate citizens' engagement in decision making.

## *Multi-stakeholder dialogue and cooperation*

Complementing the recommendations on digital transformation strategies and e-government solutions, the need for a multi-stakeholder dialogue becomes natural for all technology developments. Any discussion about digital solutions needs to take into account the original principles which have been at centre of the Internet – a neutral space, available for all, created with everybody's contribution. Similarly, digital developments, at any level (local, national, international), should benefit of proper spaces where the entire society can contribute (from CSOs, to private companies, technical experts, academia or everyday citizens) – inspiring practices can be taken from the United Nation's Internet Governance Forum[3] and the Open Government Partnership[4].

## *Promoting best practices*

The Black Sea region is characterised by many challenges but also by an incredible amount of talent and innovation. In this framework, a series of best practices deserve to be further promoted and shared, among CSOs but also among public institutions. Examples that proved to be successful include: participatory budgeting - a form of citizens' participation in which citizens are involved in the process of deciding how public money is spent; hackathons - by bringing together civic activists, tech communities, business sector and government representatives to resolve social problems.

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[3] Internet Governance Forums is a UN initiative, a global multistakeholder platform that facilitates the discussion of public policy issues pertaining to the Internet. Source https://www.intgovforum.org/multilingual/

[4] The Open Government Partnership is a multilateral initiative that aims to secure concrete commitments from national and sub-national governments to promote open government, empower citizens, fight corruption, and harness new technologies to strengthen governance. Source https://www.opengovpartnership.org/

The proposed recommendations are meant to be a conversation opener for stakeholders in the entire Black Sea region, they do not represent an exhaustive list of the needs and problems of the CSOs in the region, but rather important steps that build on the lessons learned before and during the pandemic.

## II. Main findings of the research

The methodology of the research included 3 instruments, focused on the main countries involved in the project - Armenia, Georgia, Romania, Ukraine:

1. A desk research – based on secondary analysis, including official data, related studies and other publications, at European and International level, where they exist.
2. A qualitative research - based on focus groups and written interviews with relevant stakeholders in all the participant countries (18 CSO members engaged)
3. A quantitative research - based on an online survey, distributed in all the participant countries, particularly among CSO representatives (162 responses received)

### 1. General Overview based on desk research

This section, based on desk research, offers an overview of the dynamic between Internet, technology and civic participation, trying to convey an image of what is the interplay between civic engagement and the new digital landscape. In order to advance the understanding of digital activism, for the purpose of the present research, this section builds on the description of *digital civic activism* as the "repertoire of practice that falls under 'digital citizenship', and that assumes and requires 'digital literacy' to happen"[5].

The Internet has been a gamechanger for the entire society, growing exponentially from the creation of the World Wide Web in 1990 to connecting 4.1 billion people worldwide in 2019 - 53.6% of the global population[6]. At the same time, a 2017 report[7] highlights the intergenerational differences - with 71% of young people being connected to the internet (significantly more than the overall global population). Adding to this, starting with the early 2000s, social networks have begun to play an essential role in the Internet world as well – as of July 2020, 3.96 billion people use them worldwide[8]. Together with the Internet development, new opportunities and challenges have emerged, on the one hand, a new generation of citizens has been empowered through the new digital tools, on the other

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[5] Youth Civic Engagement, UNICEF 2020, p. 7
[6] International Telecommunications Union (2019). "Measuring digital development: Facts and figures 2019". Retrieved from https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/facts/default.aspx
[7] International Telecommunication Union. (2017). "ICT Facts and Figures". Retrieved from https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/facts/ICTFactsFigures2017.pdf
[8] DataReportal (2020). "Global Social Media Overview". Retrieved from https://datareportal.com/social-media-users

hand, regional and global divides have grown as connectivity had played a significant role and almost half of the population is still not participating to the online world. Due to these new circumstances, experts have analysed in depth the digital divide phenomenon, looking for patterns and solutions that could limit its impact. While one of the most visible dimensions of digital divide is the access to technology and Internet, experts have brought into attention a more complex image, including three different levels of digital divides[9]:

- *first-level divide* – the gaps in terms of access to material technology (relating to the fact that almost half of the world population is not yet connected, the penetration of Internet varies from region to region, the rural-urban differences are still notable)

- *second-level divide* – the gaps in terms of skills and practices (related to how citizens use various functions of technology and Internet – eg. consumers vs. content creators; use of basic software vs. coding; also, digital activists with more advanced skills might understand and use better social media algorithms to gain more exposure of content)

- *third-level divide* – the gaps that come from technology usage (related to the socioeconomic dimension where citizens engage differently with Internet and technology, depending on their level of education, income status - correlating with differences in gender usage).

As noticed above, the readiness to use or develop digital technologies is very much connected to the level of digital skills all citizens have. From this point of view, it is important to be aware that currently there is no unique approach to digital skills/competences, a 2018 UNESCO report identified 47 countries in which specific digital literacy frameworks are adopted. Nevertheless, the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) has provided a general definition of *digital skills* as a continuous process grouped into three levels: basic skills (enable citizens to function at a minimum level in society, including interacting and accessing governmental services), intermediate skills (enable citizens to use technology in a more meaningful way, including by critically producing and analysing content) and advanced skills (those needed by specialists in ICT).

Adding to all the challenges created by the very presence of technology, due to an unprecedented 2020 global health crisis, new opportunities and challenges have emerged about access to the Internet and technology. On the one hand, it came when almost half of the global population was not connected, on the other hand, even in cases where connectivity existed (at least to some extent), the resilience of the working digital services and opportunities was severely tested. Preliminary data, gathered during or immediately after the lockdown measures, imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, indicates that:

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[9] A. Lombana (2017). Retrieved from https://andreslombana.net/blog/2017/07/30/artificial-intelligence-ai-and-the-evolution-of-digital-divides/

- Internet usage had gone up by at least 50%. As counties moved deeper into the pandemic, web browsing increased by 70% and social media engagement by 61% over normal usage rates (Kantar, 2020[10]).
- At the peak of the lockdown about 1.6 billion learners have been impacted - 91.3% of the world's enrolled learners (UNESCO's Global Monitoring of Schools' closure by COVID-19 crisis, 2020[11]).

Based on the UN E-government Survey's addendum on COVID-19 response, there is an overview of how governments mobilised to reach out to citizens, both through official websites and social media. The report highlights examples of public institutions partnering with social media influencers to raise awareness on the COVID-19 phenomenon.

> *"The COVID-19 pandemic has emphasized the importance of technology, but also the pivotal role of an effective, inclusive and accountable government. Government efforts in deploying new technologies should be accompanied by improving data protection and digital inclusion policies as well as strengthening the policy and technical capabilities of public institutions."* (UN E-government Survey 2020)

### *1.1. CSOs, online communities and the power of digital tools*

In the civil society sector the use of Internet, especially social media has been noted in early 2000s, when around the globe many social movements and advocacy organizations have started using platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to promote their message, engage with followers and mobilise supporters.

The Ukrainian Orange Revolution in 2004 is considered by academics one of the first movements in history to be largely organized online. Whilst the entire movement cannot be attributed to online tools, a series of technologies were used at a large scale for a civic action. At that time the Internet and individual SMS were used by citizens to keep in touch and get organised, but also to keep in touch from the election monitoring designated spaces. Before the Revolution and important Ukrainian movement was created around online tools, the Maidan "a real-world group of pro-democracy advocates who used the internet as a tool to support their organization (…) leveraged their online message boards to increase discourse and stay in touch with members (…) ranging from humour to practical advice for activists"[12].

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[10] Kantar (2020). "COVID-19 Barometer: Consumer attitudes, media habits and expectations". Retrieved from https://www.kantar.com/en/Inspiration/Coronavirus/COVID-19-Barometer-Consumer-attitudes-media-habits-and-expectations
[11] UNESCO (2020), "COVID-19 Impact on Education". Retrieved from https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse/
[12] J. Goldstein, Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University (2007), The Role of Digital Networked Technologies in the Ukrainian Orange Revolution. Retrieved from https://cyber.harvard.edu/sites/cyber.law.harvard.edu/files/Goldstein_Ukraine_2007.pdf

Even if Internet offered new tools for CSOs and activists, access to Internet is still far from a universal basic access and, in time, less democratic governments have discovered new tactics of how to limit its power of outreaching, or even using it for their own political purposes. During the past 10 years governments have used their power to restrict access to Internet, either during major demonstrations or in other circumstances when governments considered such decisions "necessary" in order to disconnect citizens from major events (including during COVID-19). Based on the Freedom of the Net 2020 report[13], Internet freedom has declined for the 10th consecutive year. 2020 was a particularly grey time as some political leaders have used the global pandemic as an excuse to impose more Internet restrictions and roll-out new surveillance measures. The report mentions that the top 3 countries in decline from the Internet freedom perspective are Myanmar, Kyrgyzstan and India, on the other spectrum one of the countries in the Black Sea region - Ukraine is mentioned as one of the countries experiencing some of the largest improvements due to decisions such as "removal of telecommunications licensing requirements that have historically been associated with corruption. It largely abandoned the previous practices of administratively blocking websites.".

## 1.2. A regional overview

## a. Connectivity and digital skills

When looking at the overall percentage of individuals using the Internet[14] (Figure 1) – as percent of total population, there are no significant differences across the countries, with all countries having the majority of their population connected to the Internet and social media channels, and overall performing better than the global average.

| Country | Internet users | Active social media users |
|---|---|---|
| Global | 4.54 billion 59% | 3.8 billion 49% |
| Armenia | 1.92 million 65% | 1.50 million 51% |
| Georgia | 2.70 million 68% | 2.70 million 68% |
| Romania | 15.35 million 80% | 11 million 57% |
| Ukraine | 27.46 million 63% | 19 million 43% |

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[13] Freedom House (2020). Freedom of the Net 2020 report. Retrieved from https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2020/pandemics-digital-shadow
[14] Source https://datareportal.com/, Digital 2020 national reports.

In terms of differences between access to Internet and technology in rural and urban areas, data shows there are still significant differences, with urban areas offering more opportunities. The figure below (Figure 2)[15] shows that both Europe and CIS regions perform better than the global average, but also better than all other regions. Despite this overall performance, the differences between the rural-urban areas raise a series of questions related to the means, opportunities and skills to participate for all citizens, as well as the risk to leave behind those who are already at disadvantage, especially in the context of fast-developing technologies.
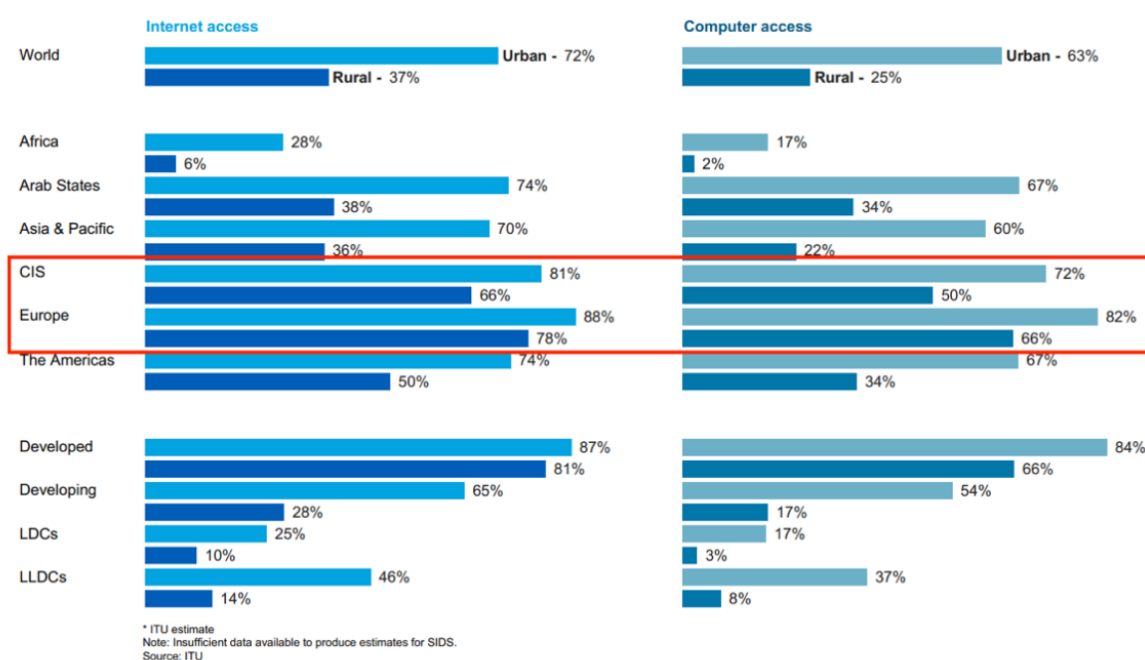


Figure 2.

Percentage of individuals who have access to Internet and computers, by urban and rural criteria.

Source ITU "Measuring digital development: Facts and figures 2020"

With regard to digital skills (Figure 3)[16], Europe and CIS regions are ranking among the top regions with the highest percentages of basic[17] digital skills – Europe over 60%, CIS at 50%, with some more significant differences when looking at standard[18] and advanced[19] skills, as CIS is having lower performances.

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15 ITU (2020). "Measuring digital development: Facts and figures 2020". Retrieved from https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/facts/default.aspx

16 ITU (2018). "Measuring the Information Society Report Volume". Retrieved from https://www.itu.int/pub/D-IND-ICTOI

17 Ibidem. Basic digital skills refer to computer-based activities such as copying or moving a file or folder, using copy and paste tools to duplicate or move information within a document, sending e-mails with attached files, and transferring files between a computer and other devices.

18 Ibidem. Standard digital skills refer to computer-based activities such as using basic arithmetic formula in a spreadsheet; connecting and installing new devices; creating electronic presentations with presentation software; and finding, downloading, installing and configuring software.

19 Ibidem. Advanced digital skills refer to computer-based activities such as writing a computer program using a specialized programming language.
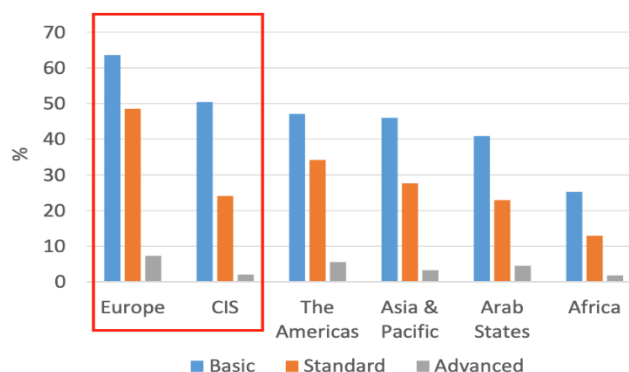
Figure 3. Percentage of individuals with ICT skills (2017). Source ITU "Measuring the Information Society Report Volume"

## b. Internet freedom

Based on the Freedom of the Net 2020 report[20] that analyses three of the four countries mentioned in the present report (Armenia, Georgia, Ukraine) the following conclusions can be drawn:

**Armenia** – with a score of 75 out of 100 is considered to have a free Internet and continuously improving since the Velvet Revolution in 2018. Internet users do not face restrictions on accessing online content, and they don't usually face legal or other punishments for their online activities. There is also no indication that the government has shut down Internet access, and control of Armenia's Internet infrastructure is decentralised.

Nevertheless, in the early days of the COVID-19 outbreak, officials censored some online news media companies and individual social media users – reportedly police have censored online news items containing unofficial information about COVID-19. Another challenge encountered is related to the government's role in collecting some metadata from users' mobile devices for contact tracing purposes, raising alarm among privacy activists - on this note the report also notes that in January 2020, the Parliament passed amendments to the legislation regulating law enforcement and intelligence activities that authorised the police to seek and obtain warrants to wiretap phones for surveillance purposes.

**Georgia** – with a score of 75 out of 100 is considered to have a free Internet and a rather strong digital freedom, without any notable recent improvements. Even if Internet access has grown in the past years, many users have complained about the poor quality of connections, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. In general, online content is not subject to censorship, and government

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[20] Freedom House (2020). Freedom of the Net 2020 report. Retrieved from https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2020/pandemics-digital-shadow

requests to remove online content are rare, an important advantage is given by the fact that Internet networks are decentralised, being owned and operated by private companies.

Albeit the government doesn't interfere in public censorship of online communications, during 2020 there are signs that pro-government and other domestic political actors have attempted to manipulate online content to influence public opinion, especially during political crises – reportedly in April 2020, Facebook removed hundreds of Facebook and Instagram accounts, groups, and pages that appeared to be affiliated with the ruling Georgian Dream party and the opposition United National Movement party. The networks were taken down for engaging in "coordinated inauthentic behaviour"[21].

**Ukraine** – with a score of 61 out of 100 is considered to have a partially free Internet, yet after the 2019 elections positive changes have been noticed in the new government, which, among others, discontinued previous practices of administrative website-blocking and withdrew some draft laws that could have limited free expression online. However, reportedly a new legislative proposal that regulates disinformation has been announced, the initiative would oblige users to share exclusively information they have first verified, at the same time creating a state body with vast powers to remove content.

During COVID-19 the government has largely avoided major online censorship or privacy violations. Nonetheless, Ukrainian Internet users have also experimented some forms of censorship from platforms such as Facebook – as some CSOs have identified that legitimate content was unfairly blocked due to the hard policies that the company has implemented against sponsored political content as part of its efforts to fight disinformation[22].

Overall, there are still some systemic threats to internet freedom that remain in Ukraine, including content manipulation and ongoing legal persecution of users for online speech that may be protected under international human rights standards. A major problem that persists in the Ukrainian landscape is the paid commenters and troll factories that have continuously grown in the online public sphere, activities usually conducted through networks of automated social media accounts or bots. Even if little is known about the operation of these firms, and their actual impact on public discussion and opinion, some investigative reports suggest that many Ukrainian political actors hire public-relations companies and trolling groups to support their reputations or harass their opponents online.

**Romania** – is the only country in the present analysis that is not included in the Freedom of the Net report, nevertheless, as a member of the European Union its digital practices are monitored by the

[21] Civil.ge (2020). "Facebook Removes Hundreds of Inauthentic Pages, Accounts in Georgia". Retrieved from https://civil.ge/archives/350217
22 Privacy International (2019). "Truth exists but you have to find it': Fighting disinformation on Facebook in Ukraine". Retrieved from https://privacyinternational.org/long-read/2822/truth-exists-you-have-find-it-fighting-disinformation-facebook-ukraine

European Commission in various other reports. So far, there is no indication that government's practices are structurally censoring or in any way limiting expression online. Nonetheless, in the early days of the COVID-19 response the government has included among its prerogatives the right to censor any "false information" in media or online related to the COVID-19 virus, reportedly as an effort to combat disinformation[23]. After the legislation was adopted a series of websites were blocked, but due to the fast media and CSOs reactions the measures were withdrawn and no further action has been taken since. Even though in the past there have been initiatives of draft legislations that were proposing some form of censorship, in Romania there is currently no law allowing it, nor other practices that could suggest such activities. In the recent years, Facebook is known to have blocked a series of Romanian accounts – some belonging to a network of politically-affiliated groups, reportedly manipulating public opinion (in March 2019[24]), some others blocked completely random, due to various algorithms that were in place at the time (2017-2018[25]).

## 2. Findings from the quantitative and qualitative research

An online questionnaire was available during the month of March 2021, based on ten main questions, including some demographic details, and made available in English and Russian (see Annex 1). A total of 162 responses were received, out of which 133 were completed at least 70%. The present report is based on analysis of the 133 responses.

The survey information was complemented by a set of qualitative data collected through focus groups and written interview from 18 representatives of CSOs in the Black Sea Region, activating in the 4 main countries of the research: Armenia, Georgia, Romania and Ukraine. The participants to the qualitative research are experienced CSO representatives, coming from different geographical regions and different type of organisations (see Annex 2) for the full list of interviewed people).

Note on limitations: as the research took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, a time when the use of digital tools has been forcedly increased but also the challenges in adapting to the new situation have been rather unforeseen, the perceptions of the respondents might have been influenced by recent events. Moreover, the data collected through the survey and interviews provides qualitative insights into the activity of CSOs in the region, nevertheless it doesn't aim to provide a representative sample for either of the countries included, nor for the entire region.

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[23] Law 195/16.03.2020, article 54. Retrieved from http://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliiDocumentAfis/223831
[24] "Facebook removes Romanian accounts that shared partisan news in support of the ruling party" (2019). Retrieved from https://www.romania-insider.com/facebook-removes-accounts-romania
[25] PressOne (2018). "De ce blochează Facebook conturi în România și ce se întâmplă când ești blocat". Retrieved from https://pressone.ro/de-ce-blocheaza-facebook-conturi-in-romania-si-ce-se-intampla-cand-esti-blocat

*Profile of survey's respondents*

*Demographic details*

Country distribution - the survey was open to all countries in the Black Sea, but the majority of respondents came from Georgia (33.08%), Armenia (18.80%), Romania (18.80%) and Ukraine (17.29%). Other smaller percentages were represented by responses from Moldova (7.52%), Azerbaijan (1.50%), Russian Federation (1.50%), Bulgaria (0.75 %) and Turkey (0.75%).

Age distribution - based on the general demographic data the majority of respondents belong to the age group 35-55 years old (42.86%) followed by the age group 25-34 (25.56%), 55+ (17.29%), 18-24 (12.03%), <18 (2.26%).

*Civic profile*

The large majority of the respondents are leaders or founding members of an NGO or social movement (58%). Other roles include: 35% work for an NGO, 21% volunteer for an NGO or social movement, and just 9% identified themselves as individual civic activists (not part of an organised movement). Less than 1% of responses mentioned roles such as researchers, journalists or employees of international organisations. In terms of online communities - 17% of respondents declared that are active in an online community dealing with social/political issues while merely 4% mention coordinating such a community.

When looking at the field of work of the organisations the respondents are active in, the largest share is represented by education (59%), closely followed by human rights and social justice (54%) and activities for youth (52%). The full rank of the topics the respondents mentioned they are engaged in can be seen in Figure 4.

| | |
|---|---|
| 59% | •education |
| 54% | •human rights and social justice |
| 52% | •activities for youth |
| 47% | •democracy |
| 29% | •politics or elections |
| 26% | •gender issues |
| 24% | •environment and climate change |
| 19% | • employment |
| 18% | •minority groups |
| 17% | •international development |
| 16% | •peacebuilding |
| 14% | •poverty<br>•health |
| 5% | •LGBTQI |

Figure 4. Responses to the online survey related to the field of action of the engaged CSOs

Overall, it can be noticed that both respondents to the survey, as well as participants to the focus groups and interviews are experienced members of CSOs, occupying leadership and/or paid positions in their respective organisations. The diversity of fields they work in allows for a good overview of the non-governmental sector in the Black Sea region. At the same time, the low numbers of CSO members who identify themselves as part of an online community show that online and traditional activities are still separated, possibly indicating that online communities are either dealt with by specific members of the organisation or that online communities are created largely around events and not as complementary to the everyday activity.

## 2.1. Social media and digital tools

Based on the quantitative and qualitative data, the report analyses what are the most frequently used social media and productivity platforms, what are the main activities they are used for, including by looking at differences before or during the pandemic, what are the main obstacles and opportunities CSOs identify in the use of such platforms. Finally, the research is reflecting on the impact of the

COVID-19 pandemic and how CSOs perceive the changes in technology use in a post-pandemic society.

**a. Social media platforms**

When looking at what are the most frequently used social media platforms by the CSOs in the Black Sea region, the most often mention platform is by far Facebook, for all age groups, across all countries involved. The Figure 5 offers an overview on the social media usage in the region, as the same platforms have been confirmed in both survey and interviews/focus groups, without major differences. While Facebook is the go-to platform for all audiences, CSOs in the region mention that young people have a stronger preference for other platforms such as Instagram, YouTube or Tik Tok, and even if the use of Tik Tok in the region ranks quite low, some CSOs identify it as a tool they might use more in future initiatives.
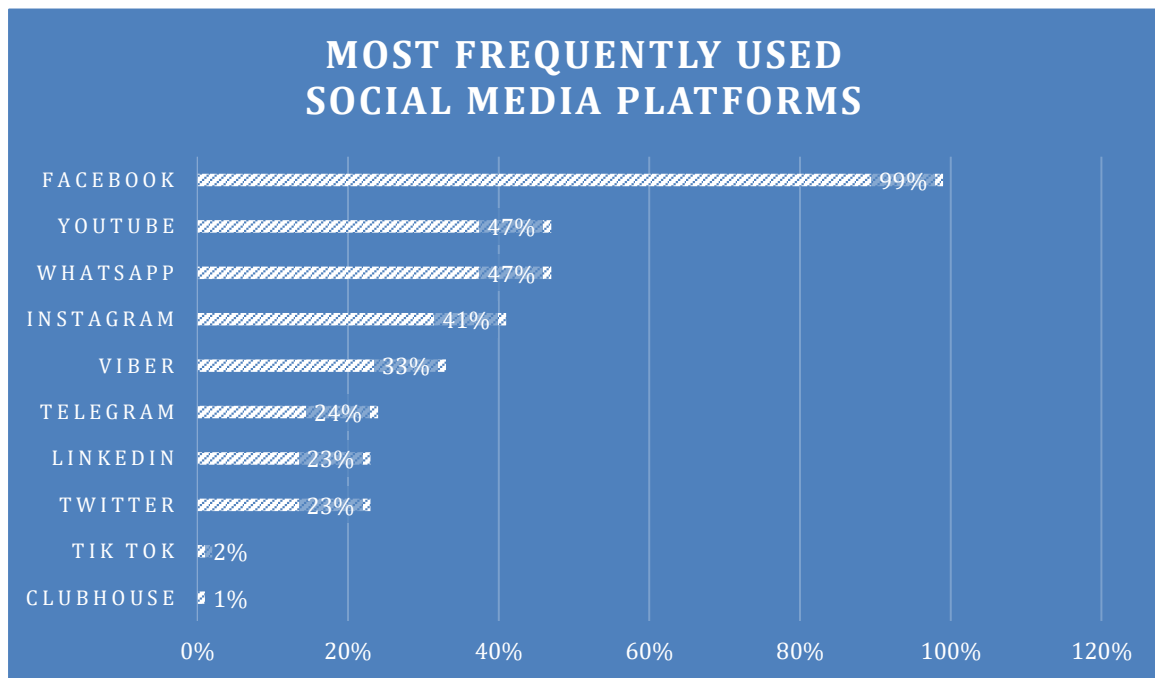


Figure 5. Responses to the online survey related to the most frequently used social media platform(s)

**b. Productivity platforms**

When analysing what are the most frequently used productivity platforms by CSOs, similar results are identified through both quantitative and qualitative data, with a large majority of respondents mentioning Zoom as the most used platform, followed by the Google tools.

The Figure 6 offers an overview of some of the most used productivity platforms in the Black Sea Region. Additionally, some CSOs mention discovering also some other platforms that have been beneficial in their activity, even if not for the daily use:

- Learning and educational platforms: Edmodo, Quizlet, Scratch, Kahoot
- Streaming/videoconferencing platforms: Webex, Streamyard
- Project management tools: Toggle, Asana, Trello
- Design and creativity platforms: Canva, Envato, the Noun Project

Other platforms such as GitHub are used by niche organisations who are usually engaged in developing digital platforms and tools.

**MOST FREQUENTLY USED PRODUCTIVITY PLATFORMS**

| Platform | Percentage |
| --- | --- |
| ZOOM | 94% |
| GOOGLE DOC/MEET | 61% |
| SKYPE | 42% |
| MICROSOFT 365/TEAMS | 23% |
| MENTIMETER | 15% |
| SLACK | 14% |
| TRELLO | 11% |
| SLIDO | 10% |
| DISCORD | 2% |
| OTHERS (GITHUB, TOGGLE, CANVA,…) | 1% |

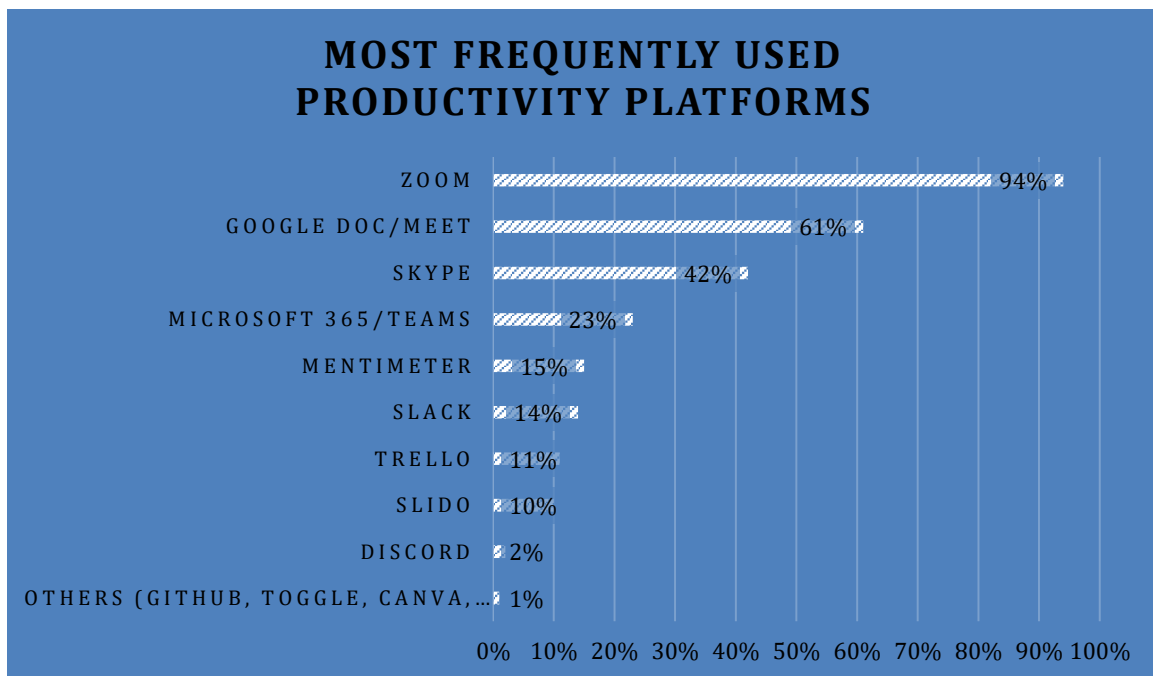Figure 6. Responses to the online survey related to the most frequently used productivity platform(s)

## c. Usage of social media and digital platforms

The research also looked to see if there are different ways on how CSOs use social media and digital tools in their activity. In this context, based on the survey responses resulted the following list of preferred activities for which CSOs use such platforms (Figure 7):
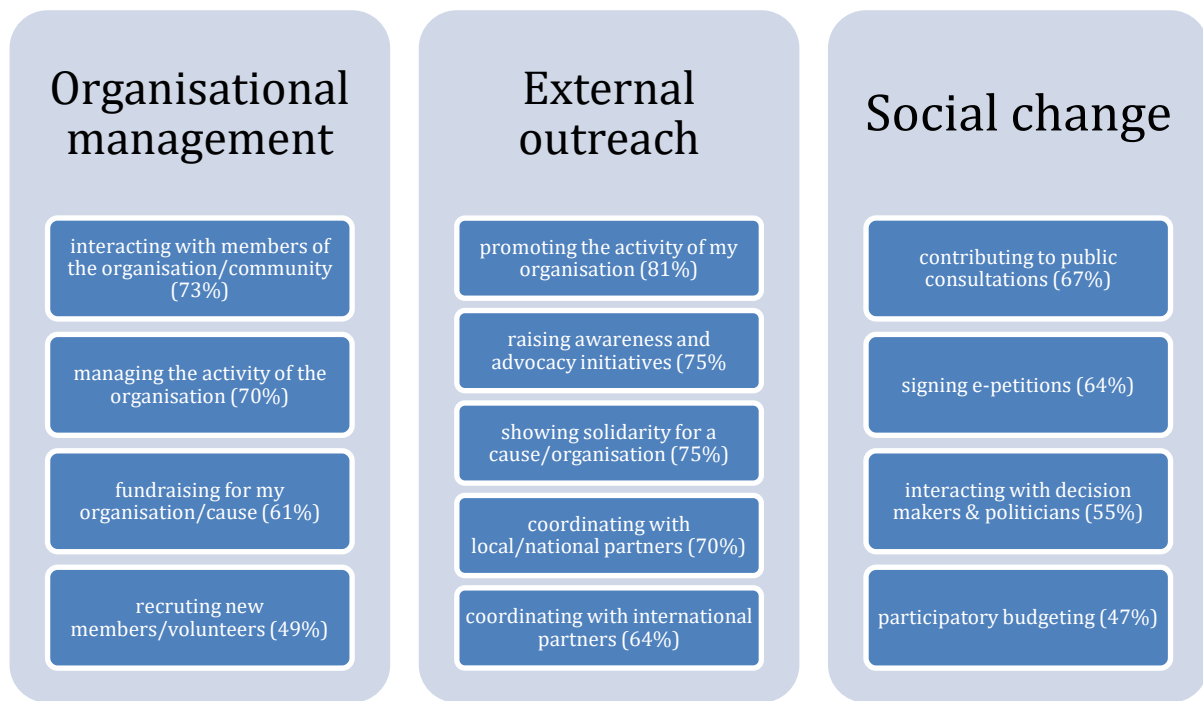
| Organisational management | External outreach | Social change |
|---|---|---|
| interacting with members of the organisation/community (73%) | promoting the activity of my organisation (81%) | contributing to public consultations (67%) |
| managing the activity of the organisation (70%) | raising awareness and advocacy initiatives (75% | signing e-petitions (64%) |
| fundraising for my organisation/cause (61%) | showing solidarity for a cause/organisation (75%) | interacting with decision makers & politicians (55%) |
| recruiting new members/volunteers (49%) | coordinating with local/national partners (70%) | participatory budgeting (47%) |
| | coordinating with international partners (64%) | |

Figure 7. Responses to the online survey related to how CSOs use social media and productivity platforms

***Before and during the pandemic*** – based on the survey responses, there do not seem to be major differences in the use of social media and digital platforms before and during the pandemic, as the large majority of respondents mention using them in both circumstance for a large range of activities from the overall management of the organisation, to contribution to public decisions, coordination with partners or organising events and training courses online. *Lower percentages* can be observed for activities such as recruiting new members (49%) and fundraising for their organisation/cause (46%). Nevertheless, during the focus groups and written interviews, CSO members revealed that the pandemic has forced the adoption of various digital tools not used before or that were only marginally known. Many of them also mention difficulties in adapting to the online activities and a series of other obstacles, as described below in the opportunities and challenges section.

*"We used digital tools and social media platforms, both for the internal workflow, as well as to collect the necessary information and then shared it with the target audience." Akaki Saghinadze, Regional Empowerment for Democracy (Georgia)*

***Never*** - for two specific activities a large number of survey respondents declared never using social media and digital tools: for attending or organising a protest (53%) or for participatory budgeting activities (49%). Other important percentages can be noticed in fundraising for their organisation/cause (35%), recruiting new members/volunteers (25%), interacting with decision makers and politicians (24%) or signing an e-petition (23%). These numbers indicate significant

obstacles of CSOs in using digital tools for more advanced tasks, especially when it comes to ensuring their sustainability through online tools or when engaging in advocacy initiatives.

**d. CSOs experience with developing digital tools**

While many CSOs in the Black Sea use actively a variety of digital tools, very few of them declare actively engaging in developing them – with just 31% mentioning such an experience, additionally, 19% mention developing digital platforms in cooperation with private companies, 17% in cooperation with public institutions and only 13% mention joining a hackathon with an aim of solving a social problem.

The main observation stemming from these numbers suggests that CSOs in the Black Sea region are mostly users of digital tool with a rather limited experience in developing them. Even if no concrete data is available, this information could be also correlated with the lack of advanced digital skills of the sector that implicitly leads to a shortage of innovation. As it will be noticed below, CSO members have already identified digital skills as being the most important obstacle in using digital tools or in maximising their benefits.

However, there are rich examples from the Black Sea organisations that mention developing digital tools – from digital solutions designed to support combating the COVID-19 pandemic, to civic-tech platforms that facilitate citizens civic engagement, interaction between citizens and governments, or platforms that aggregate relevant information and services for CSOs at national level such as:

## Romania

- Code4Romania – is an ogranisation that has developed several platforms in Romania (22 active websites and applications as of March 2021), including a series of platforms supporting Romanian society in times of COVID-19: stirioficiale.ro (official information platform related to COVID-19 news and updates), datelazi.ro (official data about the COVID-19 situation in Romania), cetrebuiesafac.ro (a platform offering advice to all citizens affected by the pandemic), rohelp.ro (a platform allowing citizens and CSOs to mobilise resources for combating COVID-19); but also a series of other platforms such as redirectioneaza.ro, jurnalmedical.ro, diasporahub.ro, votong.ro, votdiaspora.ro, monitorizarevot.ro
- voceata.ctr.ro – is a Romanian platform that supports the structured dialogue between youth organisations and public authorities
- BaniPublici.ro – a Romanian platform explaining the budgetary process that also allows citizens create their own desired public budget.
- Educatiemedia.ro – (in construction) is a Romanian platform for media education designed for teachers and students, including e-learning modules. The platform is created by the Romanian Independent Journalism Centre.
- Tenders.guru - is a website that allows to monitor public procurement processes in Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Spain.

## Armenia

- http://celog.am/ - is an Armenian platform part of the Public Participation in Local Self-Government (COO) a USAID-funded program that aims to increase public involvement in decentralization and local government reform, provide citizens with reliable information, and strengthen civil society through effective, accountable, and participatory local self-government.
- https://hkdepo.am/en/ - is an Armenian platform part of the "CSO DePo: CSO Development Program" fostering sustainable civil society development through strengthening the capacity of CSOs as critical actors to advance and oversee reform, improve services and contribute to the development of more effective governance in the economic, democratic, health and social spheres CSOs
- http://noratus.am - is an Armenian paltform designed to promote transparency and accountability of local governments

## Georgia

- https://disinfoobserver.ge/ - is a Georgian interactive platform which aims to increase awareness in Georgia about inauthentic Facebook pages, their activities and tactics use, and help users verify sources on Facebook. It has been developed by the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy. The platform offers a database of those Facebook pages uncovered as a result of ISFED's social media monitoring, which are engaged in discrediting campaigns, spread disinformation and manipulated information, promote polarization through divisive narratives, resort to inauthentic behaviour or other harmful information operations. The platform categorizes and describes activities of each suspicious Facebook page uncovered by social media monitoring.
- www.e-learning.ge – is a Georgian platform for online studying
- www.csogeorgie.org – is a Georgian platform dedicated to CSOs

## Ukraine

- http://osbb.dniprorada.gov.ua/ - a Ukrainian platform for the development of participatory democracy
- StopFake.org - a Ukrainian platform, launched in 2014 by the Media Reforms Center. It identifies cases of false information about events in Ukraine, but also contributes to international discussions on how to resist the disinformation phenomenon.

## Russia

- https://vdmk.org/ru - "Your" dumka is a Russian platform for consultations between local authorities with residents about the decisions made. In addition, consultations were held at the ministerial level in both offline formats (at events) as well as online (via Google forms and Zoom events).

## Regional

- http://reality2020.tilda.ws – the online platform aims at providing psychological assistance to vulnerable groups such as: pregnant women and women in difficult life situations; women with children under 7 years old; parents of schoolchildren and teachers. The platform is open for citizens living in 7 regions of the North Caucasus Federal District: Dagestan, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachay-Cherkessia, North Ossetia-Alania, Stavropol Territory and the Chechen Republic.

## 2.2. Opportunities and challenges

The online world has brought numerous benefits but also a series of constraints, all of them being amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic. Even if survey respondents have mentioned that most of the online activities have been carried before and during the pandemic, the interviews and focus groups have revealed different reactions in relation to the various opportunities and challenges created by the transition to the online work. Based on this, it can be assumed that any discussion about CSOs and the use of digital tools has to be connected with the COVID-19 pandemic, its impact cannot be seen as marginal and measurements about previous digital behaviours can essentially be based on previous reports, while current research on the topic is evidently influenced by recent events.

### a. Opportunities

**Outreach to beneficiaries and other stakeholder groups -** a unanimous agreement among CSO members was that digital tools have increased their outreach and visibility, supporting their internal development, as well as outreach to new groups of beneficiaries and stakeholders. Therefore, CSOs have mentioned concrete opportunities for:

- Recruiting for new staff or volunteers

*"When we have an open position, we advertise it by relying on our organic reach on social networks. We usually attract around 100 applicants, out of which we can find a good fit." Cosmin Pojoranu, Funky Citizens Romania*

- Promoting their cause and advocacy initiatives

*"We have been advocating for a youth pillar for the National Resilience and Recovery Fund via online and we managed to draw attention to our cause." Maria Francesca Cristea, Romanian Youth Council*

- Organising online activities with various audiences

*"Instead of offline meetings of voters with Members of the Parliament, as part of a project to strengthen communication, in the spring of 2020, we held a number of online - live meetings with the opportunity to ask questions. We also conducted a number of online trainings for members of election commissions, an online game for students about electoral law (instead of the planned offline events)." Evgeniya Genova, Odessa regional organisation of the All-Ukrainian public organization "Committee of Voters of Ukraine"*

**Work and flexibility –** most CSOs mention that online tools offer a greater flexibility to their everyday work, often making it much faster and efficient. Also, all of them mention that they would continue using productivity tools for managing their organisation's activity and that a hybrid approach (blending face-to-face work with the use of online tools) will be used after the pandemic is over.

*"We were not limited to a specific area and could be involved in the planning or implementation of many activities from abroad. On specific platforms, such as Google Drive, several people could even work together, so that this work process was visible to everyone." Avtandil Machtidze – Education Development and Employment Center, Georgia*

**Digital services and e-government –** the benefits of digital tools have been noticed also in the interaction between citizens and governments. During the years more and more public authorities have increased the number of their public digital services, a situation even more accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The interviewed CSOs have identified various moments when their interaction with public institutions has been facilitated by digital tools, such as: contributing to public consultations and draft proposals, requesting public information, accessing public registries and databases, applying for grants. While the situation differs from country to country, or even from one municipality to another, most CSOs agree that they have saved resources (financial, human) due to the advantages brought by digital tools.

**Fundraising** – even if the practice is still limited among CSOs in Black Sea region, many of them saying that online tools haven't been very efficient in their fundraising activities (either due to lack of skills or trust of citizens in digital tools), there have been some examples that identified online fundraising as an important benefit brought by digital tools.

*"We have experimented with PayPal, Patreon and the now obsolete Generosity, but also local tools like sprijina.ro. We plan to implement card payments via MobilPay on our custom domains, for punctual and recurrent donations, but also for product purchases in a potential future democracy store. We have created an account on bursabinelui.ro and are looking forward to launching our first crowdfunding campaign. We have our own page on redirectioneaza.ro - to make it easier for our constituency to support us via redirecting a percentage of their income tax." Cosmin Pojoranu, Funky Citizens Romania*

**b. Challenges**

**Skills -** when asked about the most pressing obstacles in using digital tools, CSO representatives mention among the most important ones the insufficient media and digital skills, for both staff and beneficiaries. Digital skills are a central issue when it comes to the use or development of any digital tool, while these tools bring various benefits, learning how maximise their impact is still an issue for CSOs (eg. promoting messages via a social media channel might seem easy, but knowing how to ensure a targeted outreach to relevant beneficiaries and stakeholders is still a challenge).

> *"An additional challenge was the knowledge about the very skills necessary to move activities fully online. To do this, we even trained staff to master all the platforms that we would need to use when working online. (...) Beneficiaries had difficulty communicating by e-mail, although they were able to send messages with the help of other people." Darine Saldadze, Georgian Young Lawyer's Association*

**Digital inequality -** access to Internet and technology remains one of the most significant obstacles for CSOs. The pandemic has brought to light structural issues to access but also to the quality of the Internet, as the entire world depended on online communication the resilience of networks proved to be challenging in many countries in the Black Sea region. The differences between rural and urban areas are also present, limiting access to online opportunities and services to the communities that needed it the most. In this case addressing the various digital divides through systematic approaches needs to become a national and regional priority (differences in access depend on geographic limitations but also on the educational and economic background of citizens).

**Funding online activities** – the lack of resources and funding for online civic activities is the second biggest obstacle identified by the respondents to the online survey. This challenge became evident since the early days of the pandemic, as most donors and public institutions were used to fund for the most part face-to-face activities, many events had to be cancelled or postponed until traditional meetings were feasible again. While CSOs have adapted their activities to the online formats many still struggle to find adequate funding to support their work.

**Other financial barriers** – even though online tools are seen as indispensable after the COVID-19 pandemic, having access to relevant tools came with a major challenge – the unforeseen cost of purchasing them. Currently, there are several platforms with free or at least partially free access (eg. using a conferencing platform for 45 minutes or for only a small number of participants without paying), nevertheless, many productivity platforms still needed to be purchased, especially for CSOs that provide professional services and need the full functionality of those platforms. For this challenge

recommendations have been put forward in order to increase the available funding to purchase such tools but also to increase awareness on the tools that are available (including those with free versions).

**Getting one's message through** – a challenge closely connected with the level of digital skills but also with the possibilities offered by digital tools. Various CSOs in the region have mentioned that face-to-face meetings/activities are much more effective, as communication can be easily established with the listener and the quality of the interaction can be better. Particular challenges have been observed in preparing educational activities, engaging in advocacy initiatives or providing social services where interaction with the audience needs more advanced skills and, at times, techniques that usually work exclusively in offline settings.

**Safety online and data privacy concerns** – exposure to online environments has brought also awareness on the risks to which users are exposed to. In this context many Black Sea CSOs have identified important vulnerabilities related the security of their cloud stored documents and information, as well as other issues such as the misuse of their personal data, including in surveillance contexts (potentially by governments or other ill-intended users).

**Trust in online tools** – an element closely linked with the level of education but also to the many risks that users become aware of when dealing with online environments. The use of digital tools for a variety of purposes is very much linked to the level of trust users have in them, thus, the pandemic has revealed how reluctant citizens can be when it comes to using online tools for online payments, interacting with governments and more.

> *"In order to organise an online fundraising we created automatic sending emails inviting a potential donor to make a money transfer but the problem is that (...) not everyone trusts online platforms (...) especially due to the sharp increase in online fraud, extortion and theft."*
> *Arman Marukhyan, director of Community Charitable Trust for Nor Bayazet Development - Armenia*

Other obstacles noticed by CSOs are related with various Internet restrictions, imposed either by governments or private platforms – overall, such events are rather limited and they do not impact all CSOs in the region, more details can be explored in the brief country reviews section. Also, the full rank of obstacles encountered by CSOs (based on the survey) is available in Figure 8.
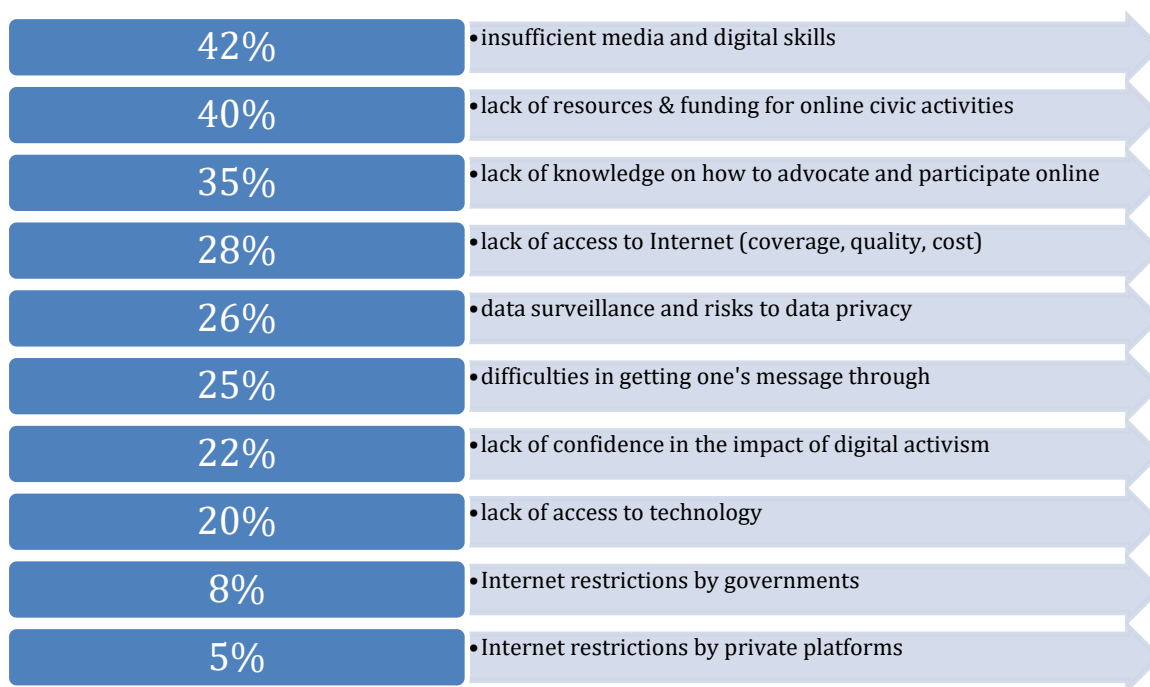
| | |
|---|---|
| 42% | • insufficient media and digital skills |
| 40% | • lack of resources & funding for online civic activities |
| 35% | • lack of knowledge on how to advocate and participate online |
| 28% | • lack of access to Internet (coverage, quality, cost) |
| 26% | • data surveillance and risks to data privacy |
| 25% | • difficulties in getting one's message through |
| 22% | • lack of confidence in the impact of digital activism |
| 20% | • lack of access to technology |
| 8% | • Internet restrictions by governments |
| 5% | • Internet restrictions by private platforms |

Figure 8. Responses to the online survey related to the most important obstacles in using digital tools

**c. Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic** – after one year in the pandemic, CSOs recognise the strong role of digital tools for CSOs and activists but also some additional challenges:

*Opportunities* - based on the online survey CSOs agree that the pandemic has:
- increased the importance of activism online and digitalisation of political processes (80%)
- emphasised the role of digital tools as essential for civic participation (69%)
- enabled them to discover new resources for promoting their organisation/cause (46%)
- resulted in governments using more digital tools (35%)
- inspired them to network with likeminded groups and communities (29%).

Additional benefits included the possibility to join events and debates without the physical constraints or costs, as well as new working routines and habits that proved to offer more flexibility to CSOs staff and volunteers. Furthermore, digital tools have offered clear opportunities to mobilise resources for combating the COVID-19 pandemic – some CSOs have run online fundraising campaigns to bring food and medicine to vulnerable groups, partnered with online influencers to bring awareness to their cause, supported pupils to join online school (offering Internet data packages and access to digital platforms)

*Challenges* – at the other spectrum a series of challenges have been observed, such as: widening digital inequality and the digital participation gap (37%), created barriers for traditional civic activists who work offline (36%), or that it made civic actors feel more detached and powerless (19%). Nevertheless, various CSO representatives mention that the adjustment to the online world has

happened slowly, at times blocking their activity completely - access to technology and Internet were part of the problem, but also cuts in funding. Additionally, even if the use of digital tools has increased, not in all circumstance it proved to be efficient (eg. some governments created additional bureaucratic steps), whilst some other activities cannot be fully adapted to online formats (eg. especially those requiring psychological and emotional support).

The pandemic has also revealed new financial costs for organisations, as some organisations that had to continue their physical activity also had to furnish their offices in accordance with new hygiene rules – providing masks and disinfectants, purchasing thermometers, but also purchasing the right of streaming online platforms as they are mainly paid services. Some organisations had to depend on the generosity of donors or other CSOs that allowed them to use their digital accounts – since the situation was solved slow and sometimes just temporarily, it forced some CSOs to cease their activity, at least for one or two months.

Many representatives of CSOs have also mentioned burnout and the fatigue generated by the extensive and, at times, less structured online routines. On the one hand, due to the pressure created by the pandemic, on the other hand due to the forced change in behaviour (offline vs online). The need to learn everything on fast-forward and improvising through a time when they were dealing with a shortage of resources has brought challenges for the mental well-being of people working in CSOs. Even if the issue has been merely marginally explored in the present research, it deserves an extensive analysis in future research, also from the digital tools' perspective – such analysis could potentially help CSOs identify which digital practices to continue or discontinue, which specific digital tools to include and how to deal with the entire digital transformation strategy in their organisation.

**Final Conclusions**

The research study offers a panoramic view on the situation of how civil society actors in the Black Sea region engage with digital tools, with a particular focus on the four countries Armenia, Georgia, Ukraine and Romania. Albeit, the report does not offer an exhaustive account of all practices in the region, it offers qualitative data on the realities and trends in the region, filling in some of the research gaps. At the same time, the present report should be seen as a conversation opener, inviting CSOs but also other private and public stakeholders to look in-depth into their own practices, assess the situation and look for new avenues to explore and improve the current use of digital tools. As the report clearly states, the COVID-19 pandemic has been an accelerator for the transition to the digital world, bringing equally opportunities and obstacles, but has also left behind important parts of the society – in many occasions those that were already disconnected from the digital environments.

In this context, the present research proposes some open topics that could be addressed by future initiatives:

**Research** – more research is needed in order to understand the full impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the new digital behaviours of CSOs – were they beneficial and if so which ones, if not what can be avoided in the aftermath of the pandemic.

**Digital forever** – the interest in digital topics is evidently increased by the pandemic, nevertheless, there is still an open question about how much of all that has happened during this time will remain and how much will be dispensable as soon as the everyday activities will show signs of recovery. The "new normal" to which the society has adjusted has included at times too much digital, and those parts should be reconsidered. Simultaneously, it has brought new adjustments that might still deserve to be preserved – flexibility of work, new digital opportunities and platforms – these practices might need to be continued and integrated into what many call hybrid activities.

**Digital between crisis response and strategic planning** - as the society is focused on the new digital discoveries brought together with the pandemic, future initiatives could take into account a more strategic approach to digital developments, considering more advanced planning for new digital solutions and activities. Digital practices need to be based on a specific methodology and mindset that is different from many solutions that have been developed in the first year of the pandemic, most of them in extraordinary circumstances and specifically as a crisis response. For example, whereas using videoconferencing platforms for meetings, educational initiatives or dialogue with various stakeholders can be beneficial at times, it cannot be the main digital platform for all digital activities – many of them actually needing different tools and more complex approaches, without mentioning the fatigue that it is brought by such tools when used excessively.

**Tailored solutions** - as the research showcased very few organisations have hands on experience in developing digital platforms, thus, many of them end up being solely users of commercial platforms, many times not tailored for their specific needs or activities. In this context, there is a need to support CSOs to increase their cooperation with other stakeholders in order to find proper solutions or even to invest in their own technical skills.

# ANNEX 1

**Online survey questions**

**"Digital Tools for Active Citizenship"**

1.Age

- \>18
- 18-25
- 25-35
- 35-55
- 55+

2.      I live in (country)
        ……..drop down button
        Armenia
        Azerbaijan
        Belarus
        Bulgaria
        Georgia
        Greece
        Republic of Moldova
        Romania
        Russian Federation
        Turkey
        Ukraine
        Other...

*3.*      The following describes me: *(Please choose all that apply)*
- I am a leader or founding member of an NGO/social movement
- I am a volunteer/member of an NGO/social movement
- I work for an NGO
- I am an individual civic activist (not part of an NGO or organised movement)
- I am active in an online community dealing with social/political issues
- I coordinate an online community dealing with social/political issues
- *Other, please mention*

4.   My   organization   works   with   the   following   topics/issues   *(Please   choose   all   that   apply)*

- a.      Education
- b.      Employment
- c.      International development
- d.      Environment and climate change
- e.      Democracy
- f.      Politics or elections
- g.      Peacebuilding
- h.      Human Rights and social justice
- i.      Activities for youth
- j.      Health
- k.      Poverty
- l.      Minority groups
- m.      Gender issues
- n.      LGBTQI+

o.     *Other,*                                      *please*                              *mention*

5. I have used social media and digital tools for… *(Please choose the situation that applies to you)*

| | Before the pandemic | During the pandemic | Both | Never |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Promoting the activity of my organization<br>Raising awareness and advocacy initiatives<br>Interacting with members of my organization/community<br>Managing the activity of my organization<br>Recruiting new members/volunteers<br>Fundraising for my organization/cause<br>Signing e-petitions<br>Participatory budgeting<br>Interacting with decision makers and politicians<br>Attending/organizing a protest<br>Contributing to public consultations<br>Coordinating with local/national partners<br>Coordinating with international partners<br>Showing solidarity for  another cause/organization | | | | |

- *Others, please mention briefly*

6. Which social media platform(s) you use most frequently for the activities at point 4? *(Please choose all that apply)*

- Facebook
- Twitter
- Instagram
- YouTube
- TikTok
- Snapchat
- WhatsApp
- LinkedIn
- Triller
- Telegram
- Viber
- Reddit
- Clubhouse
- *Other, please mention*

7. Which productivity platform(s) you use most frequently for the activities at point 4? *(Please choose all that apply)*
- Zoom
- Google Docs/Meet
- Skype
- Microsoft 365/Teams
- Slack
- Discord
- Trello
- Menti
- Slido
- *Other,                                 please                                 mention*

8. My organization/social movement *(Please choose all that apply)*
- Has experience in developing digital tools/platforms for a civic/social cause
- Has organized/joined hackathons to solve a social problem
- Has cooperated with private companies to develop digital tools/platforms

- Has cooperated with public institutions to develop digital tools/platforms
- None of the above
- *In case you have selected any of the points above please include here the **link to the platform** and mention briefly what is/was its purpose*

9. Thinking of possible obstacles in using digital tools in your activity, please choose, the most relevant for your context

- Lack of access to Internet (coverage, quality, cost)
- Lack of access to technology (computer/laptop, cost)
- Internet restrictions (by private platforms. eg your social media posts have been blocked)
- Internet restrictions ( by governments)
- Lack of resources and funding for online civic activities
- Data surveillance and risks to data privacy
- Online harassment of civic actors
- Difficulties in getting one's message through to the wider audience (online visibility of NGOs)
- Lack of confidence in the impact of digital activism
- Lack of knowledge on how to advocate and participate online
- Insufficient                          media                          and                          digital                          skills

*Please                indicate                any                other                obstacles                not                mentioned*

10. The global COVID-19 pandemic has...
- Increased the importance of activism online and digitalisation of political/social processes
- Inspired me to network with new like minded groups and communities
- Created barriers for traditional civic activists who work **offline**
- Created barriers for civic activists who work **online**
- Widened digital inequality and the digital participation gap
- Made civic actors feel more detached and powerless to bring about desired change
- Resulted in governments using more digital tools for interacting with citizens
- Emphasised the role of digital tools as essential for civic participation
- Enabled me to discover new resources for mobilizing/promoting my cause
- Changed nothing when it comes to civic activism in my organization

Please give us some details on the opportunities or obstacles that you have identified during the global pandemic, in your civic activities….

11. We would like to map digital platforms/tools that have been developed during the COVID-19 pandemic by NGOs. Please include here the link and a short description.
*Examples could include information websites, platforms for monitoring or visualizing covid-19 cases, gathering resources for the pandemic (educational, protection supplies, food), supporting other NGOs, supporting vulnerable groups, combating disinformation/fake news etc.*

**Online вопросы анкеты**

**«Цифровые инструменты для активного гражданства»**

*Спасибо за ваш интерес исследования "Цифровые инструменты для активного гражданства". Прежде чем начать опрос, прочитайте следующую информацию.*

*Наша исследовательская цель понять, как организации гражданского общества в Армении, Грузии, Украине и Румынии используют цифровые инструменты для продвижения своей миссии, управления своими ресурсами (человеческими, финансовыми и т. Д.), а также для работы с донорами и бенефициарами как до, так и во время COVID-19 пандемии.*
*Опрос проводится в рамках схемы суб-грантов проекта «Форум НПО в регионе Черного Моря: продвижение потенциала НПО для регионального сотрудничества в Черноморском регионе», реализуемого румынской платформой NGDO - FOND при финансовой поддержке Европейского союза. Опрос является частью проекта «Цифровые инструменты для активной гражданской позиции», осуществляемого в партнерстве Центром гражданских ресурсов - Румыния, Институтом мира, демократии и развития «Открытые границы» - Армения,*

*Агентством местной демократии, Армения, Агентство местной демократии, Грузия, Агентство местной демократии Днепропетровск, Украина.*

*Ваше участие является анонимным и добровольным, и для защиты ваших прав требуется как минимум личная информация. В конце опроса у вас есть возможность предоставить свои личные данные, но только с вашим согласием.*

**Пожалуйста, подтвердите следующее:**

Я понимаю, что вся предоставленная мной информация будет храниться в тайне и не будет передана третьим лицам.

Я прочитал и понял информацию и даю согласие на участие в этом опросе.

1.Возраст

- \> 18
- 18-25
- 25-35
- 35-55
- 55+

2.      Я живу в (стране)
Армения
Азербайджан
Беларусь
Болгария
Грузия
Греция
Республика Молдова
Румыния
Российская Федерация
Турция
Украина
Другое ...

3.      Я являюсь: (Пожалуйста, выберите все подходящие варианты)
- Лидером или основателем НПО / общественного движения
- волонтером / член НПО / общественного движения
- работающим в НПО
- индивидуальным гражданским активистом (не являюсь членом НПО или организованное движение)
- активным в онлайн-сообществе, занимающимся социальными / политическими вопросами.
- координатором работы онлайн-сообщества, занимающимся социальными / политическими проблемами.
- Другое, пожалуйста, укажите

4. Моя организация работает со следующими темами / проблемами *(выберите все подходящие)*

    a.      Образование
    b.      Занятость
    c.      Международное развитие
    d.      Окружающая среда и изменение климата
    e.      Демократия
    f.      Политика или выборы

g. Поддержание международного **мира** и безопасности
h. Права человека и социальная справедливость
i. Мероприятия для молодежи
j. Здоровье
k. Борьба с бедностью
l. Группы меньшинств
m. Гендерные вопросы
n. ЛГБТ +
o. *Другое,                              пожалуйста,                              укажите*

5. Я пользовался социальными сетями и цифровыми технологиями инструменты для… *(Пожалуйста, выберите ситуацию, которая применима к вам)*

| | До пандемии | Во время пандемии | Оба | Никогда Не Использовал |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| • Продвижения деятельности моей организации | | | | |
| • Повышения осведомленности и против пропагандистских инициатив | | | | |
| • Взаимодействия с членами моей организации / сообщества | | | | |
| • Управления деятельностью моей организации | | | | |
| • Набора новых членов / волонтеров | | | | |
| • Сбора средств для моей организации / деятельности | | | | |
| • Подписание электронных петиций | | | | |
| • Составления бюджета с участием заинтересованных сторон | | | | |
| • Взаимодействия с лицами, принимающими решения, и политиками | | | | |
| • Посещения / организации протеста | | | | |
| • Участия в общественных консультациях | | | | |
| • Координация с местными / национальными партнерами | | | | |
| • Координация с международными партнерами | | | | |
| • Проявления солидарности с другой организацией | | | | |
| • *Другое, просьба кратко указать* | | | | |

6. Какие социальные сети вы используете чаще всего для действий выше ? *(Пожалуйста, выберите все* подходящие                                                                                        *варианты)*

- Facebook
- Twitter
- Instagram
- YouTube
- TikTok
- Snapchat
- WhatsApp
- LinkedIn
- Triller
- Telegram
- Viber
- Reddit

- Clubhouse
- *Другое, укажите*

7. Какие платформы для повышения производительности вы чаще всего используете для действий в пункте 4?
*(Пожалуйста, выберите все подходящие варианты)*
- Zoom
- Google Docs / Meet
- Skype
- Microsoft 365 / Teams
- Slack
- Discord
- Trello
- Menti
- Slido
- *Другое,*                                                                                          *укажите*

8. Моя организация / общественное движение *(выберите все)*
- Имеет опыт разработки цифровых инструментов / платформ для гражданского / социального действия
- Организовала / присоединилась к хакатонам для решения социальной проблемы
- Сотрудничала с частными компаниями для разработки цифровых инструментов / платформ
- Сотрудничала с государственными учреждениями для разработки цифровых инструментов / платформ
- Ничего из вышеперечисленного
- Если вы выбрали любой из вышеуказанных пунктов, пожалуйста, включите здесь ссылку на платформу и кратко укажите, какова была цель ее использования.

9. Подумайте о возможных препятствиях при использовании цифровых инструментов в вашей деятельности, выберите, пожалуйста, наиболее подходящие для вашего контекста.

- Отсутствие доступа к Интернету (охват, качество, стоимость)
- Отсутствие доступа к технологиям (компьютер / ноутбук, стоимость)
- Ограничения в Интернете (со стороны частных платформ, например, ваши сообщения в социальных сетях были заблокированы)
- Ограничения в Интернете (со стороны правительства x)
- Нехватка ресурсов и финансовых средств для интернета общественных мероприятий
- Надзор над персональными данными и риски для безопасности данных
- Интернет преследование гражданских активистов
- Трудности в отправлении сообщений через для широкой аудитории (онлайн видимость НПО)
- Отсутствие доверия к воздействию цифрового активизма
- Отсутствие знания о том, как продвигать действия и участвовать в Интернет пространстве
- Недостаточные медиа и цифровые навыки.
- Укажите любые другие препятствия, не упомянутые выше

10. Глобальная пандемия COVID-19 ...
>  Повысила важность онлайн-активности и цифровизация политических / социальных процессов
>  Вдохновила на общение с новые единомышленниками групп и общин
>  Создала барьеры для традиционных гражданских активистов которые работают онлайн форумах
>  Создала барьеры для гражданских активистов которые работают Интернете
>  Выделила цифровое неравенство и разрыв цифрового участия
>  Сделала гражданских актеры чувствовать себя более нужными и сильнее для достижения желаемых изменений
>  Создала условия для правительства использовать более активно цифровые инструменты для взаимодействия с гражданами
>  Подчеркнула роль Цифровых инструментов как необходимость для гражданского участия
>  Позволила мне открыть новые ресурсы для мобилизации / продвижения моего дела
>  Ничего не изменилось, когда дело доходит до гражданской активности в моей организации

Пожалуйста, сообщите нам некоторые подробности о возможностях или препятствиях, которые вы выявили во время глобальной пандемии, в вашей общественной деятельности….

11. Мы хотели бы отобразить цифровые платформы / инструменты, которые были разработаны НПО во время пандемии COVID-19. Пожалуйста, укажите здесь ссылку и краткое описание.
*Примеры могут включать информационные веб-сайты, платформы для мониторинга и визуализации случаев коронавируса, сбор ресурсов для пандемии (образование, средства защиты, продукты питания), поддержку других НПО, поддержку уязвимых групп, борьбу с дезинформацией / фальшивыми новостями и т. Д.*

**ANNEX 2**

**List of CSOs that participated to focus groups and written interviews**

- "Territorial Business Center" NGO - Armenia
- "Dignified Generation" NGO - Armenia
- "Blejan" Ecological, Sociological NGO - Armenia
- "Free Flight" Socio-Economic Development Fund - Armenia
- "Community Charitable Trust for Nor Bayazet Development" - Armenia
- Youth initiative group financed by the Jinishian Memorial Foundation – Armenia
- Kutaisi Women Club - Georgia
- Georgian young lawyer's association (GYLA) - Georgia
- Regional Empowerment for Democracy) - Georgia
- Tkibuli Development Fund) - Georgia
- Progress House) - Georgia
- Education Development and Employment Center (EDEC) ) - Georgia
- Association of Virtuoso Circles) - Georgia
- Association "Atinati" ) - Georgia
- Imereti Development Center) - Georgia
- Odessa regional organisation of the All-Ukrainian public organization "Committee of Voters of Ukraine" - Ukraine
- Funky Citizens – Romania
- Romanian Youth Council - Romania