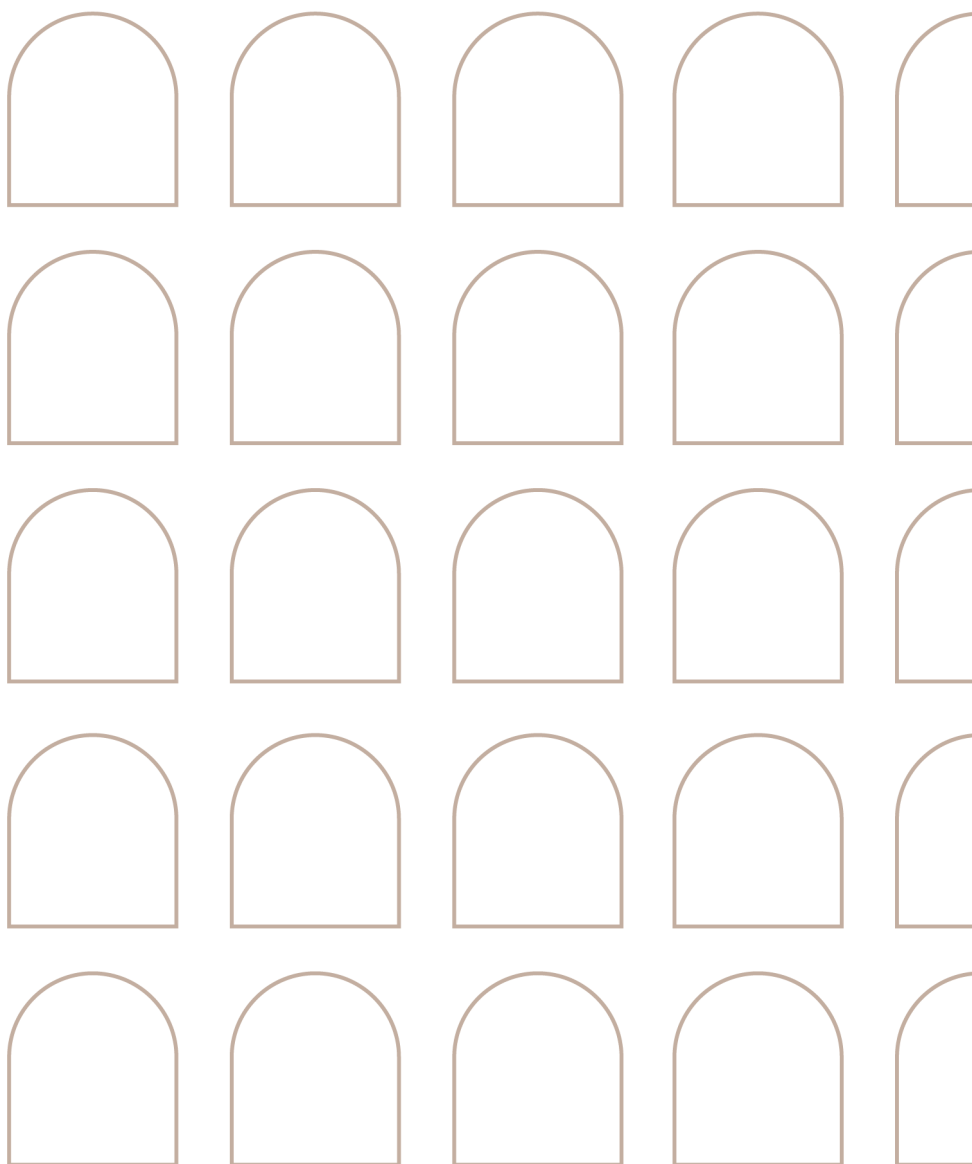


INFORMAL ACTIVISM IN THE EU



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Mapping Informal Social Movements in Poland

Leszek Jazdzewski (Policy Fellow – STG)

Informal Movements- definition.

In my research I concentrated solely on the movements that are either without any legal form of organisation, such as association or foundation, meaning they are not NGO's.

The only exception was in the case when the social movement only recently turned into a formal NGO and in the public view the movement still takes precedence over the organisation as such. Another main reason to classify organisation as informal depends on their main sources of income: if they are from individual donations, not grants that is a strong indicator of informality.

Best example is the Women Strike, which took tens of thousands to the streets in 2016 and then 2020, operating mostly as a Facebook fan-page and a loose federation of local online groups and events but after first wave of protests many “real” groups emerged, even if only for a limited time. However, since I commenced my research couple of months ago the social mobilisation aspect of the Women Strike declined and recent protests brought less than one thousand people in Warsaw alone, organisation professionalised but lost its social impact.

Why informal?

Most informal groups (I could have mentioned my own initiative from 2015 - Secular School, gathering 150 thousand signatures over the law banning public funding of religious classes) operate that way because they are either: 1. created “ad hoc” - often on the social media prior to, if at all, being active in the “real world”; 2. their main focus is on achieving a concrete goal; 3. the cost of formalisation (time devoted to legal and financial issues) is higher than potential benefits; 4. people engaged represent other existing organisation and therefore they don't need to be involved with another one (sometimes they even can't, for the sake of avoiding the risks of conflict of interests); 4. movement's main activities do not require a formalisation (organisation of protests, exchanging and propagating information online); 5. Avoiding power competition and internal struggle in the organisation. Unfortunately, the downside is huge: often it is simply the founders of the fan page/group/website that make all the strategic decisions - movements created that way aren't really democratic at all.

Main benefit of creating a formal organisation around the movement is the improvement in gathering resources (transparent way of mobilising funds, grants, renting space, paying for the necessary work). It is also a question of scale - if movements are expanding in time and space in

the long run they need a formal body to represent them vis-a-vis authorities, sponsors and everyone not engaged on the volunteer terms.

Informal—>> formal

Most of the described groups at the time of the research - did not possess any formal status. As for the exception, the National Women Strike (Ogolnopolski Strajk Kobiet - OSK), started its activities in 2016, turning into a formal foundation in 2019. What is interesting, this was a mass movement, but the founders decided to turn into a foundation, which doesn't allow the membership but offers a tight control over the movement, its messaging and activities. Also, the official statement of the OSK is as follows: "We don't have any central power or the board, just a helpdesk - national committee of support run by the Marta Lempart and Natalia Pancewicz". OSK created a Consultative Council with the aim to develop 13 programme areas, including countering of covid pandemics, education or labour market - which are quite far from its origins - fighting against restrictive anti-abortion law. Between October and December 2020 OSK managed to raise 1,5 million zloty (around 320 000 euro). They received also 25 000 euro from the [EEA](#) and Norway Grants. Marta Lempart in 2020 [claimed](#) that OSK quarterly budget is around 300 000 zloty (64 000 euro).

I also am not aware of any major organisations that transformed into the informal status. From my own experience, usually that is the sign of weakening of the organisation which is sustained on the personal and social level without day-to-day activities, resources and engagement.

Local

Local meaning not active on the national level. Usually, the name of the group indicates where exactly they are located - region, city, town. There are some advantages for such local movements, as the communication and socialisation of members has been much more convenient than in the case of national organisation, where also formalisation sometimes is required as direct meetings of all activists are impossible, so there is a need for the representation. Perhaps the covid pandemics might eradicate those benefits of local engagement.

Politics

Politics is such a swear word in Polish context that any informal or formal groups do their best to avoid such label. ideological and political left-wing groups dress up as "city movements", climate activists "fight for the future/planet", even most of the women right's movements do not want to engage in politics and when they try to do (as OSK did) they pretend not to.

This denial doesn't help to achieve their goals, as politics, either national or local is necessary for those movements to succeed. For most of the groups the real - not declared goal - becomes to express the worldview and emotions of their members/ and especially leaders. There is very little measurement and since they are informal there is little accountability towards either members or supervisory bodies. Informal movements act as "angry citizens", "human rights activists", local ecologists and so on. Almost none of them apply any political or ideological label towards themselves.

Mapping Informal Social Movements in Poland

Abstract:

This case study presents a selective characteristic of some of the social movements that emerged or became visible in the recent time in Poland (mostly during pandemics). Organisations were selected due to their main activities (on climate, covid, social issues), scale of or representativeness (local groups, similar to others). Anti-covid groups were mostly covered together as they would require a separate study due to the large material and limited access to some of the groups.

Introduction

Post 2016 elections Poles became extremely - for their political culture - active in terms of social movements, thanks to the polarisation by the right-wing rule of Law and Justice. Most of the movements sprang to life in the opposition to what was perceived as unconstitutional law-making of the governing party. Since most of this early anti-government movements and protests either evaporated or institutionalised (or both) they are mostly omitted in this analysis.

One of the main conclusions from gathering data on informal social movements present in Poland is that covid-19 amplified existing concerns adding some new, especially in the field of radical right wing/anti-covid movements.

Informal movements are generally radicalising on both sides of ideological spectrum, the Women Strike, against the punitive anti-abortion rule of the Constitutional Tribunal has been very vocal in its opposition, with main theme of the mass protests: "Wypierdalac" - "Fuck off".

Climate activism has been on the rise. Some of it really well organised such as Youth Climate Strike or local and more ephemeral movements, with broader agenda regarding ecology (saving trees in the cities, animal wellbeing and so on).

Digital activism which was very much present during the anti-ACTA movement in 2010 is not really visible. It does not seem that in Poland EU proceeding EU Digital Services Act, which caused a high level of resistance from the Big Tech, resulted in any form of organised movement, either pro or contra.

Main source of information about social movements was internet - groups and profiles of informal movements, media articles and interview with social scientist Anna Mierzyńska about radical anti-covid movements (since their presence on Facebook have been significantly diminished thanks to the new algorithms).

Movements have been divided into several categories by their profile and several metrics such as visibility, radicalism, interconnectedness, professionalism and political stance have been applied.

- **Profile:** What is the main focus of the movement. Social movements have been divided into three main groups: Covid related, climate related and socio-political. This is a very authoritative delineation, since of course, most climate and many covid related movements are also strongly political. But their focus on very particular ideology (global warming and covid restrictions/obligatory vaccinations) make them quite distinct from the rest of the social movements.
- **Visibility:** How they are influential and visible on social and mainstream media. It is a quite subjective metric which can be objectified with the right measurement of their reach in terms of media mentions and social media outreach.
- **Radicalism:** How mainstream/fringe they are. The social discourse is fragmented, and it is hard to claim what is mainstream with little common ground that remained, but still the internet and traditional media could serve as a point of reference.
- **Professionalism:** The quality of activism, how their communication and activity present itself, regardless of the content
- **Interconnectedness:** Do they work alone or are part of larger social network. Also their level of operation (local, regional, national or international).
- **Political stance:** Some social movements are quite outspoken with regard to current government, political ideology, politics in general and occasionally EU/Europe.

Other terms applied to analysis:

- **Characteristics:** general description, main features that differentiate organisation from the others, the scale and range of the movement when known.
- **Self-description** - manifestos/statements/how they see themselves. If possible, the original structure and composition of communication have been preserved.
- **Activity** - Examples of their typical activity: protests, petitions, social media posts, media appearances and so on. If possible, the original structure and composition of communication have been preserved.

1. Młodzieżowy Strajk Klimatyczny (Youth Climate Strike)

Profile: Climate, youth

Visibility: High

Radicalism: Low

Professionalism: High

Interconnectedness: High, national/international - part of Fridays for Future movement

Political stance: None

Characteristics: Youth climate organisation, present in 60 cities, according to their contact details on the website. 47 thousand likes on Facebook, 26,4 thousand followers on Instagram. Their main activity is organising street manifestations, also as a part of global Fridays for Future movement. On everyday basis organisation is a vehicle for media presence for their members and climate education through their social media profiles. Their website surprisingly is not up to date, which quite possibly is the result of mainly social media communication with their target group.

Self-description: We are the social movement which is a part of the global initiative Fridays for Future.

Through our activity we protest against the passivity of politicians in the face of the climate catastrophe. We are not the ecological and climate change experts but the youth conscious of the threats such as climate catastrophe and fighting for the right to their future.

We have started as a group of high school students inspired by the activity of Greta Thunberg, whose activity soon turned into the national movement. Our members are students and high school students, we are learning with the eye on the future which climate crisis puts into

question. That is why we are outspoken on the media, talk with politicians and organise climate education.

Activity: On March 19, the international mobilisation of climate movements took place once again, of which we are also a part. Activists in 13 cities in Poland protested against the inaction of the authorities in the face of the climate crisis. Due to the pandemic, this year's strike took place in a limited fashion.

2. Ogólnopolski Strajk Kobiet (Natiowide Women strike)

Profile: Socio-political

Visibility: Very high

Radicalism: Medium

Professionalism: High

Interconnectedness: High (National, with some international supporters)

Political stance: Strongly anti-government, progressive

Characteristics: Started as a social movement - with protests in hundreds of cities and more than 100 thousand people protesting in Warsaw. Now as it turned into the organisation it lost most of the support and possibility of mobilisation.

Self-description: We are grassroots, independent social movement of pissed off women and supportive rational men - an informal, non-party initiative of women belonging to various women's organizations, as well as non-members, who organized the National Women's Strike: Black Monday on 3 October 2016 in over 600 cities in Poland and for border.

Activity: Street protests. Most visibly in the Polish capital but also in the at least 100 cities in the peak of the protests, immediately after introducing a strict anti-abortion law by the Constitutional Tribunal. Also "black protests" on the internet (women taking pictures in the black outfit with the red lighting - a symbol of the protests pasted in the profile picture)

3. Tęczowi obrońcy (Rainbow Defenders)

Profile: Social - LGBT, local (Warsaw area)

Visibility: Low

Radicalism: Low

Professionalism: High

Interconnectedness: Low

Political stance: None, human rights

Characteristics: Informal group of lawyers committed to LGBT rights, helping people who are detained by the police during street protests

Self-description: Group of lawyers spontaneously organised after protests at August 7 against detention of LGBT activist. Their goal is to legally assist 46 people detained after the protests. They collaborate with the Szpila feminist collective.

Activity: Working with detained activists, writing legal complaints for the police brutality, assistance with legal trials. Together with Szpila collective writing a thorough report on police brutality and protests of August 7.

4. Feministyczny kolektyw Szpila (Feminist collective Bodkin)

Profile: Social - LGBT rights, women rights, refugees. Warsaw based.

Visibility: Low

Radicalism: Medium

Professionalism: Medium

Interconnectedness: Medium

Political stance: Progressive

Characteristics: Activists and lawyers helping protesters with legal intervention. Providing information to the media about detained, monitoring police activity and treatment of the protesters and detainees.

Self-description: We are a feminist anti-repressive collective active from August 2020 in Warsaw. We are coordinating legal help to detained people. Do you need anti-rep at the event? Call us!

Activity: Legal assistance, legal intervention and legal advice. Mostly active during street protests.

Instructions from the Facebook post: What to do in case of detention or fine when accused of taking part in illegal protest. About 2 pages of detailed legal advice, ready made forms and up to date information.

5. Rodzice dla Klimatu (Parents for Climate)

Profile: Climate. Regional (Lodz) with some national outreach.

Visibility: Low

Radicalism: Low

Professionalism: Medium

Interconnectedness: Medium

Political stance: None

Characteristics: Fanpage with 3k observers, website, regional group (in Lodz) organised by parents who are committed to efforts against global warming.

Self-description: We do not inherit the earth from our ancestors; we borrow it from our children (wrongly attributed to Antoine de Saint-Exupéry).

Activity: Educational campaign “Vapours of black gold” - why country needs to abandon dependence on coal. Protest in front of Prime Minister's office with postcards made by kids with #MakeParisReal wishes.

6. Śląski Ruch Klimatyczny (Silesian Climate Movement)

Profile: Climate, regional (Silesia - main mining region in Poland)

Visibility: Medium

Radicalism: Low

Professionalism: Medium

Interconnectedness: Medium

Political stance: None

Characteristics: 2,5 thousand observers on Facebook. Seems more like a medium than movement (spreading information about actions of others).

Self-description: Silesian Climate Movement is non-hierarchical, regional, network of activists, created at the beginning of 2019 after COP24 conference organised in Katowice. SCM was created in order to oppose inaction and denialism of local authorities with regard to climate crisis and since then is acting hand in hand with other organisations, both local and national, convinced that it is high time to create networks and cooperation to gain strength.

Activity: City gardens, local protests against opening of new mines, publishing a manifesto. “We, Silesian Climate Movement” - citizens of Silesia Voivodship (largest administrative unit in Poland, like a state or *landen* but with less sovereignty) - we can’t any longer wait and see the passivity of politicians this is why we are announcing the State of Climate and Environmental Emergency. We are facing the deadly threat: there is a real climate crisis and the next big extinction of species. This is the largest challenge in the history of humankind which presses us for the decisive action!

7. Społeczni opiekunowie drzew (Social caretakers of trees)

Profile: Local movement for trees in the city of Lodz

Visibility: Low

Radicalism: Medium

Professionalism: Low

Interconnectedness: Low

Political stance: None (critical towards local government)

Characteristics: Facebook group with 1800 members. Many exchanges on the group. Small but influential. Also thanks to the social activity of its members (many local influencers).

Self-description: We are uniting citizens of Lodz who care for “the high green” in the city. You can find educational materials, practical advice and the platform for discussion. On the group we will be informing about strolls, trainings and real work for volunteers.

Activity: Protests against cutting down trees, exchange of information, especially about new development projects.

8. Zielona Ostoja (The Green Refugium)

Profile: Very local, fighting for the particular terrain in the northern part of forest in the city of Lodz

Visibility: Low

Radicalism: Medium

Professionalism: Low

Interconnectedness: Low

Political stance: None

Characteristics: Local active group with 1186 likes on Facebook page, trying to preserve a local green area in the most pristine condition.

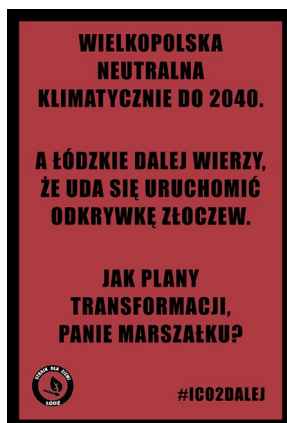
Self-description: Our goals is to maintaining beautiful, large green terrain between the Central and Wycieczkowa street called “Green Refuge”. The area for which we are fighting for is the habitat for many species of birds, mammals, insects and bats.

Activity: Workshops for the local citizens, pressuring authorities, voting in plebiscites - also regarding other “green” issues in Lodz.

9. Strajk dla Ziemi (Earthstrike)

Profile: Climate, national with local branches

Visibility: Medium



Radicalism: Medium

Professionalism: High

Interconnectedness: High (international)

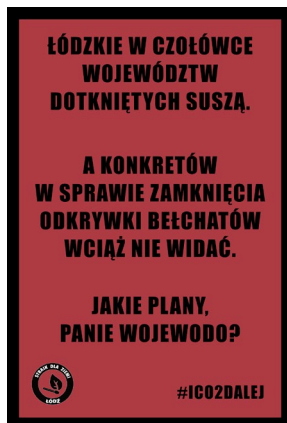
Political stance: None

Characteristics: Organisation Earth Strike Poland is a part of Earth Strike movement, uniting activists demanding action for climate. They demand 1. Global cooperation to halve global CO2 emissions until 2030 and zero emissions until 2050. 2. Announcing binding agreements to protect tropical forests and nature. 3. Global agreements on monitoring CO2 emissions by corporations.

Self-description: Global Earth Strike - January 15 step out and help us save the planet. Polish branch of global initiative #earthstrike

Activity: Cyclical protests against climate inaction - first one January 15, 2019. Promoting “garden guerrilla” (illegal tree planting), promoting climate activity on festivals and on the streets.

Poster 1: Lodzkie [region in Poland] is in the top dry voivodshnips suffering from drought. And there are no details about closing down Belchatow open pit mine [biggest lignite mine in Poland]. What are the plans, Mr voivode?



Poster 2: Wielkopolska [Larger Poland, one of the Poland's regions] climate neutral until 2040. And Lodzkie still believes it can open Zloczew open pit mine. What are the plans for transition, Mr Marshall?

10. Zielony Zgierz (Green Zgierz)

Profile: Climate, local (Zgierz is a satellite town of Lodz)

Visibility: Low

Radicalism: Low

Professionalism:

Interconnectedness:

Political stance: None

Characteristics: Fanpage, 3000+ observers,

Self-description: Promoting ecological activity among citizens of Zgierz town.

Activity: monitoring sewage in the local Bzura river, promoting recycling and trash segregation, monitoring landfills.

11. Wkurzeni przedsiębiorcy (Pissed entrepreneurs).

Profile: Angry libertarian. Anti-mainstream - slightly. Strongly anti-government. Some posts from anti-restrictions protests, some posts supporting nationalistic Konfederacja party.

Visibility: High (in lockdown), now low

Radicalism: Medium

Professionalism: Medium

Interconnectedness: Medium

Political stance: anti-government, economically liberal

Characteristics: Facebook group that started as a pressure for easing covid restrictions in spring when many businesses were suffering from the prolonged lockdown. It turned into real movement and activities in the whole country. Opening economy turned back this movement into online. Posts about difficulties of running business. About bankruptcies. Links to articles on mainstream media about failing government programs. Occasional posts about forcing children to vaccinations. Anti-government content. Criticism of raising taxes. 12 200 members, founded: March 2020

Self-description: How long can we survive? There is three million of us and nobody is listening. Let's show our power because authorities are only understanding power. Say enough to abusing small and medium size companies. As a group we can achieve more. We are planning specific initiatives. Some of them are being currently under realisation. Join us. Let's stay in touch. Let's inspire each other. Let's work together. This is the time when we have to defend each other. Let's show we can work together for the common good.

Activity: Organising and propagating protests against covid restrictions. Posts about restrictions and anti-business legislation.

Protests around 1 of May.

- ☞ 27 kwietnia 2020 (poniedziałek) - 0:00 Morze Bałtyckie, porty (Protest Armatorów, STRAJK PRZEDSIĘBIORCÓW)
- ☞ 30 kwiecień 2020 (czwartek) i 1 maja 2020 (piątek) - Przejścia Graniczne Polski - (Ogólnopolski strajk pracowników Transgranicznych)
- ☞ 1 Maja 2020 (piątek) - 12:00 KATOWICE (Centralny Szpital Psychiatryczny i Stowarzyszenie Przedsiębiorców - 1 maja ŚWIĘTO PRACY WOLNYCH LUDZI)
- ☞ 1 Maja 2020 (piątek) - 12:00 BIAŁYSTOK (DLA RZECZYPOSPOLITEJ - Protest społeczny 1 Maja 2020)
- ☞ 1 Maja 2020 (piątek) - 12:00 POZNAŃ (DLA RZECZYPOSPOLITEJ - Protest społeczny 1 Maja 2020)

- ☞ 1 Maja 2020 (piątek) - 9:00 RYBNIK (DLA RZECZYPOSPOLITEJ - Protest obywatelski 1 Maja 2020)
- ☞ 1 Maja 2020 (piątek) - 12:00 KRAKÓW (Protest w obronie miejsc pracy)
- ☞ 1 Maja 2020 (piątek) - 12:00 OLSZTYN (Protest społeczny 1 Maja 2020)
- ☞ 1 Maja 2020 (piątek) - 12:00 BIELSKO-BIAŁA (Protest społeczny 1 Maja 2020)
- ☞ 1 Maja 2020 (piątek) - 12:00 BYDGOSZCZ (Protest społeczny 1 Maja 2020)



- ☞ 1 Maja 2020 (piątek) - 12:00 GDAŃSK (Protest społeczny 1 Maja 2020)
- ☞ 1 Maja 2020 (piątek) - 12:00 ŁÓDŹ (Protest społeczny 1 Maja 2020)
- ☞ 1 Maja 2020 (piątek) - 12:00 RZESZÓW (Protest społeczny 1 Maja 2020)
- ☞ 1 Maja 2020 (piątek) - 12:00 SZCZECIN (Protest społeczny 1 Maja 2020)
- ☞ 1 Maja 2020 (piątek) - 12:00 KOŁOBRZEG (Inicjatywa Majowa 2020)
- ☞ 1 Maja 2020 (piątek) - 12:00 WROCŁAW (Inicjatywa Majowa 2020)
- ☞ 1 Maja 2020 (piątek) - 12:00 INOWROCŁAW (Inicjatywa Majowa 2020)
- ☞ 1 Maja 2020 (piątek) - 12:00 - 2 Maja 2020 (sobota) - 12:00 WARSZAWA (Protest Obywatelski, Protest W Obronie Miejsc Pracy)
- ☞ 3 Maja 2020 r. - 12.00 CIESZYN (Strajk pracowników Transgranicznych, STRAJK PRZEDSIĘBIORCÓW)
- ☞ 7 Maja 2020 - WARSZAWA - STRAJK GENERALNY (STRAJK PRZEDSIĘBIORCÓW)

12. Polskie Żółte Kamizelki (Polish Yellow Vests)

Profile: Organisation fighting with covid restrictions and protesting against “segregation” of unvaccinated people.

Visibility: Turned from high to medium

Radicalism: High

Professionalism: High

Interconnectedness: High. Inspired by similar protests internationally: in Italy, Australia. Direct level of connections unknown.

Political stance: Libertarian

Characteristics: Looking for confrontation in public space, aggressive. 9000+ observers on Facebook. Direct action, aggressive protests, one of most visible groups against covid restrictions. Created January 29 2021. Splinter group from Entrepreneurs Strike (next group)

Self-description: United to fight, tired by the system. Free people take initiative to oppose lawlessness of the government and the police. With no divisions and political parties. We are coming for freedom. Join us.

Activity: Attacked a vaccination point in Grodzisk Mazowiecki town. Organising “Freedom Marches” against obligatory vaccinations and sanitary restrictions.

13. POLSKA LIBERALNA STRAJK PRZEDSIĘBIORCÓW WIR #otwieraMY #pracujeMY (Liberal Poland, Entrepreneurs Strike WIR #WeOpen #WeWork)

Profile: Political, probusiness, anti-covid,

Visibility: High

Radicalism: Medium

Professionalism: High

Interconnectedness: Medium

Political stance: Libertarian

Characteristics: Anti-government, anti-restrictions, anti-masks. Founded 15 March 2020, 274 700 members. Organisation created by Pawel Tanajno, former candidate for a president (with marginal support of 0,3%).

Self-description: Economy-political group. Here we are gathering people who love freedom. People who want state to stop intruding into lives of citizens in all aspects. Entrepreneurs who

understood that philosophy “I am disinterested in politics, I do business” leads to losses or loosing business altogether. We are gathering people who are fed up with PO-PiS (two main political parties in Poland) and want that new people outside those clans take over power in Poland.

Activity: Organising first anti-restriction manifestations in May 2021. Demanding faster opening up of economy. Presenting a political manifesto: Radical lowering of taxes, voluntary social security payments, reimbursement by state to business costs of any regulation. Supporting Pawel Tanajno for a president (a minority of activists).

14. Covid sceptics:

There are many fringes and radical anti-covid and anti-vaccination groups. There are quite similar in many aspects and there is little point in differentiation, especially without deeper studies as many of those groups are private or closed for the outsiders. Anna Mierzynska is a social scientist committed to study radical right wing and conspiracy groups on internet. Some information driven from the interview with her and her [article](#) are presented below followed by the joint analysis of anti-covid movements.

- ☞ Bydgoskie Kamracto Rodaków 5000 subscribers - [YouTube](#)
- ☞ Pandemia to ściema – (Pandemics is a wind-up) 46 000 members (established: May 2020)
- ☞ Komisja Śledcza COVID-19 – (Investigative committee Covid-19) 45 000 (July 2020)
- ☞ Stop Przymusowej Szczepionce Na Covid-19 – (Stop obligatory covid vaccination) 26,000 (April 2020)
- ☞ Fałszywa pandemia!!! – (False pandemics!!!) 21,000 (April 2020)
- ☞ Wolni i nieposłuszni – (Free and disobedient) 22,000 (August 2020)
- ☞ Rozliczyć kłamstwo koronawirusowe – (Settle accounts with the coronavirus lie) 9,800 members (August 2020)
- ☞ Polacy przeciw fałszywej pandemii koronawirusa – (Poles against fake pandemics of coronavirus) 9,700 (August 2020)
- ☞ Koronafobia Sklepy – (Coronaphobia - shops) 5,000 (August 2020)
- ☞ Stop plandemii – (Stop plandemics - sic) 3,000 (May 2020)
- ☞ Fałszywa pandemia – odkrywamy prawdę – 2,900 (Fake pandemics - we discover the truth) (August 2020)

☞ Wirus to ściema – (Virus is a wind-up)2,500. (May 2020)

☞ FakePandemia Covid19 – prawdziwe historie (FakePandemia Covid19- True Stories) – 1,600 (May 2020)

Before covid antivaccination movement was quite limited with its outreach— “Stop Nop, National Association of promoting knowledge about vaccines”. They were supported by some politicians and active in parliamentary commissions. They started to raise questions about post-vaccine reactions, raising fear about potential “damage to our kids”. Many parents were looking for information and support found it there and some decided to actively take part in the group.

Various movements with contradictory political and social stances are united by their opposition to vaccines. Now they have a common cause. Most of these groups think that either pandemic is a “fake” or that government response is overreaching/illegal. There are actually many arguments for the latter, as instead of calling a constitutional state of emergency lockdown was introduced through the special legislation that in many aspects is limiting constitutional freedoms. Such legal clumsiness made easier to argue against covid restrictions for quite rational people who became radicalised through their exposure to extreme views on social media and distrust in the mainstream media and official communication.

Anti-pandemic movement joined with existing anti-vaccination groups, sometimes supported by the people of medical profession. Quite unique characteristic of participants of those movement is the fact of their previous inactivity - no engagement in social movements, local groups and so on. They comprise mostly of people without a higher level of education but relatively high income such as personal coaches, fitness trainers, hairdressers, shop owners and others who were forced into lockdown, having lots of time in their hands. Also people who were into New Age, alternative medicine, mysticisms eagerly joined the anti-covid groups as they were already questioning scientific and medical consensus.

There also other, sometimes paramilitary groups, inspired for example by NPTV - proRussian YouTube channel. So called “Kamrat” (Compadre) groups, becoming really influential and able to mobilise people to take part in their events. Some of those groups are moving from Facebook to other means of communication (Telegram).

They were organising protests - numerous, in many places, mostly local with several hundred people, e.g. Slask (Silesia) Freedom March; happenings - for example imitating concentration camps, dressing up as prisoners; silence marches with dramatic music, e.g. in cities of Lodz, and Poznan; also picnics, kayaking and other forms of informal integration.

Some of them were inspired, according to Mierzynska, by covid sceptic German Invest Commission - which started to publish in many languages, also in Poland. They are prone to conspiracy theories.

Is there any way to help them to deal with their emotions? Is there any way of providing them with the feeling of security? Discrediting such fringe groups doesn't seem to help- they are mobilising to defend themselves - "covidians are attacking free people". If pandemics will slow down - they will diminish. But we must prepare they will be here. Perhaps they will switch to something else. And they can still grow in numbers.

Formality and Informality in the Digital Realm: The Case of Trans-communities in YouTube Spain

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Introduction

“The online (de)generation”. “Nor work nor study nor vote”. “Weak youth and weak democracy”, etc... Headlines like those have been common in a part of the public discourse that fails to comprehend the new youth dynamics in relation to the political. Instead of looking down to youth and recriminate their lack of interest for formal and institutional politics, we need to break the cycle of mutual resentment, ignorance and contempt between generations and their different political engagements. This brief contribution will try to add on the new perspective to the ongoing developing of the understand on how young people conceive and engage with the political (Allen & S. Light, 2015). The informal civil society paradigm developed in this book offers various way to understand political engagement that can be useful to discuss new forms of politization. The informality represents a novel form of civil society that resonates better with the current generational environment defined by permanent sense of provision and uncertainty (Lee, 2002). Informal civil society takes stock from the wide de array of literature on social change and generational transformation (see an example in Heimans & Timms, 2018). This specific text and the overall concept aim to deliver various insights to better understand the rise of civic organisations that do not fit the standard NGO model.

Formal and Informal

This new rise of civic organisations is the result for a demand for more open, participatory, and horizontal forms of political actions. Such demand is driven largely by the young generations who urge for more reflexive ways to express interest and political implication. The rise of social media in the last decade has created an ideal space for the youth to shape new identities, explore new ideas, establish online communities, etc... (Allen & S. Light, 2015) It could be argued that such digital sphere has become the main field of political expression to answer the participatory demand. To focus on the political engagement of youth in social media can be useful to counter-argue the pessimistic discourse on the de-politization of youth and shed some light in the novel forms of political engagement, in this case through the lenses of informal civic organisation.

Informal civic organisations could be placed inside of a larger conceptual framework of the informal civic society. Informal civic society may contrast to the more established and traditional forms of civil organisations like trade unions, political parties, or organised interest groups. These more traditional forms of civic participation tend to have a higher degree of institutionalism, professionalism, and hierarchical authority. The formal and traditional model civil actor has performed as the institutional bridge between society and the government. It intended to institutionalise the given societal demands to channel them into the relevant institutions of decision-making. These formal civil actors tend to specialise on a given topic and usually run on a long-term affiliation and loyalty base. In order to maintain their formality, they usually must set exclusivity barriers like membership-fees or at least some sort of control over their membership boundaries.

In the other end of the spectrum, we find the informal civic organisations, which redundantly are more difficult to define precisely because of their informal nature. As seen in the other chapters of the book, they lack formal institutional structures and hence they are not as professionalised. This does not mean that professionals cannot be part of the ICOs, but that such organizations are not as specialised in terms of labour and role distribution. The informal civil organization are more fitted to the definition of *New Power* by Heimans. Those organizations tend to function in a non-hierarchical manner, and their decision-making process is sometimes diffused. They follow networked models of organisations, encompassing opt-in decisions and self-organization principles. Meaning that they are highly flexible and adaptative to the realities they face. They also tend to embrace transparency to function and not as a mere end. The aforementioned lack of formal structure brings about this kind of behaviour.

The rise of social media has diffused the traditional walls between public and private discourses and favours a kind of permanent transparency through its content (Ward, 2011). Contrasting from the exclusive nature and even competitive behaviours of the formal organisations in terms of resource allocation, the new informal organisations are better defined by open-source collaboration, crowd wisdom and principles of sharing (Heimans, *Understanding "New Power"*, 2014). Also, their informality equally applies to their bases which usually do not have to face the exclusivity barriers. The low-cost entry barriers might produce a more short-term participation or even more conditional affiliation schemes. These new practices of participation will make political action more flexible and targeted in a case-by-case format where participants will only choose the instances of engagement that suits them better. This characteristic has been criticised by some authors as a facilitator for slacktivism, a pejorative term associated with online activism that is not engaged nor compromise with a specific cause (see a theoretical discussion on slacktivism in Cabrera et al., 2017).

Taking stock from these pre-eliminatory characteristics and definitions for ICOs, I look at the digital space provided by social media to see if it makes sense to search for such civic informality in sites like Facebook, YouTube, or Instagram. Many researchers before have already looked at the online space searching for “important portions of alternative political activity” (Lance, 2008). It has been shown already that such decentralised and interactive space like the social media platforms facilitates the creation of alternative forms of political engagement (Kellner & Gooyong, 2010). Such opening pushes us to rethink what is accepted as political participation in this new digital environment. These intuitions rightly follow what Allen and Light (2015) have been arguing for the past decade regarding the need to revise what we mean by political engagement. This need clearly emerges out of the broad and deep societal transformations happening in our time, from the digital to the economic realm.

YouTube As the New Politization

The proposal of this chapter is to work on YouTube, the leading video-sharing platform in the world. Even though YouTube was not initially conceived as a platform for collaboration and interaction amongst its members, it has developed into a vibrant social ecosystem in the recent years. For some scholars even it has proven wrong the idea that social media isolates young people online (Chau, 2010). American sociologist Chau argues that YouTube ‘supports the formation of a participatory culture among the members of its community’ through the interaction between and through channels. She also adds that Youtube’s low barriers of entry, algorithmic support for content sharing, informal mentoring of Youtubers and feedback features facilitate the collective feeling and leads to civic engagement (Chau 2010). Usually, these communities emerged around a specific video theme and share a common language.

The Case of The Trans Community

For this piece of analysis, I have chosen to focus on the Spanish transgender community in YouTube, more specifically to analyse the possible role played as (informal) civic actors by the two most prominent trans Youtubers in Spain. To focus on transgender issues in YouTube is pertinent given the example they pose as a marginalised community that has found a valuable public voice in the online space (Tortajada et al., 2019). By producing content related to their trans identity and trans experience they have crafted a sense of community around their channels. The final aim of this short piece is to bring together the preliminary characteristics regarding civic informality described above and the need to define new forms of political engagements in the

digital space. By analysing the civic patterns and political interactions in the two channels I will try to place them into the broader framework of informal civil society. Finally, I will try to demonstrate whether we can consider those same trans related YouTube channels as informal civic organisations.

Political Background

Also, it is worth mentioning that the transgender case is a valuable subject of study for this objective given the recent Spanish political dynamics in relation to LGTBI+ issues. The approval of the normative project popularly known as Ley Trans (Trans Law) has put LGTBI+ rights at the centre of the national public debate for many months. This legislative proposal was approved by the Council of Ministers on June 29th of 2021 after a long legislative process. Such process included tense negotiations between the two ruling parties and the involvement of many civil society actors in both sides of the argument for more than two years. The draft bill represents a substantial extension on LGTBI rights and protections as it moves closer to gender self-identification and formally ends with the transsexuality pathologisation.

The legislative process for what is known today as the “Ley Trans” has lasted almost three years since the first draft legislation was proposed in congress by Unidas Podemos in November of 2019 (Ríos, 2019). At that time, the left-wing party was not part of the government and consensus could not be achieved around that first draft. Almost a year later and after two consecutive general elections, the coalition government formed by UP and the Socialist Party (PSOE) achieved to include a legislative package protecting transgender rights in their coalition agreement (Newtral, 2019). Hence, the legislative momentum for the update of LGTBI rights in Spain accelerated again when the government was formed. This momentum brought the Ministry of Equality, led by UP vice-secretary Irene Montero to announce via Twitter the opening of a digital public consultation regarding a future legislation on transgender rights (Europa Press, 2020). The consultation run from the 30th of October to the 18th of November in 2020 under the name of the “*normative project consisting of a law for the full and effective equality of trans people*”. The consultation was accompanied by a brief text summarising the motivations, objectives and aims for the future law and without explicitly referencing the first draft of 2018. Such public consultation received over 60000 inputs by email in less than a month (Ministerio de Igualdad, 2020). According to the hearings in the Spanish Senate at the end of the consultation more than 96% of the 60000 responses were supportive of the law (Borraz, 2020). But the massive positive response picked by the consultation did not translate into early success in the legislative process. The draft proposal that emerged out of the consultation was locked between the two government

parties for almost a year and brought frustration to the high hopes of the LGTBI community in Spain had in the bill (Mareca, 2020). Such disputes inside the government paralysed the legislative procedure which failed to pass the draft proposal again in congress in May of 2021. The locked situation increased the pressure around the bill by the transgender community which at the same time saw opposition by some feminist groups who were against the gender self-identification. This situation lasted for months and even saw the expulsion of the Feminist Party from the leftist coalition due to its stance against the Trans Law (González, 2020). All in all, the negotiation between the two governing parties came to a close in June with the approval of the draft law by Spanish Government in the Council of Ministers on the 29th of June, exactly one day after the Gay pride (Presidencia del Gobierno, 2021). Even though the draft bill still had to pass through Congress and other consultive bodies this was saw as a relative success by the transgender community in Spain (Robles, 2021). The agreement between the two governing parties finally paved the way for the law to be finally passed by Congress.

This legislative process offers a fitted case to look for politization in other places outside the traditional NGOs because of the high degree of implication by the civil society and its centrality in the public discussion. In parallel to the public and private lobbying carried out by the formal organizations, this paper aims at looking at the side-lines of the tradition civil society. Therefore, I take the three most prominent YouTube channels produced by trans people in Spain as case studies to better understand their role as civic actors under the concept of informal civil society. To do so, I will analyse their content to see how it relates and recalls the legislative process. More specifically I will look at three relevant episodes in the process; firstly, up until the public consultation (up until November 2020), then the failure to pass the bill in Congress (December-May 2021) and finally, the agreement within the government to keep on with the draft law (July 2021- onwards). I will compare the content produced by the trans youtubers to the contend produced by the more traditional NGOs in YouTube around those dates. Such comparison will allow me to understand the differences between them in terms of qualities and quantities; strategies, impact, logics, etc... Also, it will be interesting to see if there is any kind of interaction between the more formal NGOs and the informal youtubers. If such interactions do exist different relation logics can be expected; between them; cooperation, collaboration or even competition. All in all, this comparative exercise is expected to bring a better understanding of the novel and broad concept of the informal civic actors, in our case YouTube Channels.

Content Analysis

To exercise this comparison between formal and informal, the first content that will be analysed is the channels of the traditional and formal NGOs. I have selected a pool of 22 civil organizations that specifically fight for trans rights in Spain (see complete list in Annex 1). All of them form part of the Plataforma Ley Trans (Trans Law Platform), which is a civic platform created to follow the legislative process of the Trans Law. The platform claims to represent 95% of the trans associations in Spain. Out of those 22 associations only seven had a YouTube channel, and two of them were not active for the past year. Hence the sample for formal organizations is down to five YouTube channels (see Annex 1). The five formal NGOs channels have gathered a follower base of 8616 in total, ranging from the largest channel "*Asociación Trans Andalucía*" with 3570 followers to "*Errespetuz*" with 80 followers. In terms of total number of views in the channel we also see a great disparity between the most historically watched channel with 1.811.505 total views and the least historically viewed "*Euforia*". Such disparity in the quantity of content production in the side of the formal NGOs showcase the lack of a standardised social media action pattern for the formal civic actors. Some of them use the platform to amplify the eco of their offline actions by showing their own protest and conferences that happen in the real world and others use it to produce pure digital content like webinars or edited videos that are sustained in a fully digital environment.

In relation to the Trans Law legislative process, we find a lot of content produced by the formal NGOs that references the law and adds to its public discussion. At the first stage of the normative process and we can find videos debating the bases and objectives of the law in mainstream media outlets at the kickstart of the public consultation (*videos 2,3 and 8*). The formal organizations also uploaded more politically symbolic videos to represent the urgency and necessity of such law in the forms of public performance (*video 4*). Alas, those videos tend to do very poorly in terms of audience traction. Lastly, they have also featured some of their protest in their channels (*video 1*). The following stage of the normative process goes from the legislative stand-by to the failure of congress to pass the draft bill due to the disagreement between the coalition parties in government in May 2021. This period was characterized by a high public pressure to the government. In that case the formal NGOs opted to keep the pressure campaign by uploading real testimonies of trans people arguing for the passing of the law (*video 8*). At the same time, we can find uploaded by another organization the recording of the whole congress session to publicly show the failure of the political class to come together for this law (*video 9*). Unfortunately, it is not possible to read the comments of the viewers since the commentary section is deactivated in all the formal NGO's channel. This might be done to protect themselves from online hate speech in their communities. They also participated in more public debates in both mainstream television and digital media (*video 5 and 7*).

The final stage of the legislative process for our content analysis revolves around the approval of the draft bill. We have only found one video uploaded by the ATA association after the approval of the draft. The video showcases a demonstration against the murder of a gay teenager in Spain in July 2021. The trans activist who speaks at the rally does not fully celebrate the passing of the draft bill as it points its flaws and points at the recent murder as an example of the need for a better legislation. She expresses an ambivalent position towards the law. This might explain the lack of videos by the formal organizations acknowledging this legislative victory as they might not stand fully by it.

All in all, the formal associations grouped under the *Plataforma Trans* have produced valuable content in relation to the legislative process. They successfully give voice, defend, and publicly lobby for the passing of the draft legislation. Firstly, by contributing to the public discussion in mainstream and alternative outlets. Secondly by exercising accountability in showcasing the parliamentary debate. And thirdly they have showcased personal trans stories to the wider audience thus adding pressure to the passing of the bill. The main weak point on their social media strategy is their lack of cohesion between them as they barely engage with each other even if they are part of the same platform. Also, their final impact might be a bit disappointing as the number of views gathered by each of the videos mentioned above hardly surpasses the three digits in most cases. Hence providing little public impact. The digital audience seems to not be engaged with its content. The lack of comment section does not help in creating digital communities and thus making the content more attractive.

In the other hand I propose the analysis of the content produced by the trans youtubers in their own channels by comparing them with the more formal organizations. After an organic search in YouTube, I have seemed to find the three largest trans youtubers in Spain (see Annex 2). Even though the three trans youtubers differ between each other in terms of specific content, we can agree that they share the common goal to make visible their transit and their identities in general. They use social media in a very intense and personal way to achieve such thing. To study the cases of youtubers Elsa Ruiz Comica (MTF: male to female, 17.441 subscribers in November 2021, Alejandro P.E. (FTM: female to male, 66.970 subscribers in November 2019,) and Selena Milán (MTF, 389343 subscribers in November 2021) will give us a better understanding of how those identities are constructed and how they relate to the public sphere. I have decided to take these three channels as my case study because of the importance of social media in the politicisation process of marginalised causes. The three of them have stated in various videos that they aim to contribute to the trans normalisation and promote social change in YouTube. In this specific case how, I will try to devise how the trans youtubers relate to the normative process of

the Trans Law in Spain. I will take the lenses of informality described above to better understand the differences between them and the formal NGO counterparts.

The first youtuber is Alejandro P.E., who started to produce videos for his YouTube channel five years ago. Most of his content has followed his transition from female to men. His approachability and sincerity gained him a large audience, becoming one of the largest open trans youtuber in Spain. Unfortunately, he stopped uploading videos to his channel around a year ago, hence his production does not coincide with the Trans Law political cycle. Though in any of his 60 previous videos he mentions the need for a Trans Law in Spain, or he positions himself in the political debate. Hence only focusing on his personal journey and transit and not participating in the wider public debate.

Therefore, we are left only with the two MTF channels, *Selena Milán* and *Emma Ruiz Cómica*. The former one is the largest channel of the sample with 546.000 followers. *Selena Milán* started her channel in January 2016 when she was not open about her transsexuality yet. She publicly came out as trans in a video posted in the 28th of June of 2020, which is the Pride Day and the day that the Spanish government approved the trans draft bill. Even though the time was very politically charged she did not make any comments on the passing of the draft bill on the same day that she was coming out as trans. Neither in that specific video nor all the followings, *Selena Milán* has made any comments advocating for the passing of the bill or anything related to the legislative process. Her content relates mostly to her personal life in general and also experiences as a trans woman, ranging from make-up tips to videoblogs about her travels.

At the end we are left with the channel produced by Emma Ruiz, who is also professional comedian and TV host. Her channel amasses 35.500 followers and 163 videos uploaded since 2013. She appears as the most politically charged channel out of the three cases. By producing a series of 109 videos known as “*Lost in Transit*” for which she shares her views, experiences, and thoughts about trans related topics. She has discussed topics ranging from her experience in the public health system to an assessment of the LGTBIQ+ proposals for every political party in the general elections (Video 11 and 14). We also find an instance of collaboration with a formal trans association in April 2018. Elsa Ruiz posted a video explaining the work of the association Chrysallis and giving them a digital shot out. That specific video as of today has more than 3000 views, which represents a much larger audience to all the followers of Chrysallis (2,500 followers) in they own channel. In relation to the normative process, Elsa Ruiz starts as early as July 2020 commenting about the reasons for the first draft bill to fail and the need for a renewed consensus amongst the progressive parties (Video 15). Then, months later after the public consultation has been carried out and the draft bill has been held in stand-by, Elsa produces a series of videos

advocating for the passing of the draft bill. During those early months of 2021 Elsa Ruiz contributes to the public debate by confronting the radical feminist discourse against the Trans Law in different videos (*Video 18*). She also uses her YouTube channel to give a louder voice to the actions of the more formal trans associations, like the hunger strike carried out by trans activist during February 2021 (*Video 17*). Unfortunately, there are no videos of that series after the approval of the draft bill, so we cannot know her opinion on that matter. Since then, she has slightly changed her content to a lighter entertainment by making video reviews on TV shows or interviewing internet celebrities. All in all, Emma Ruiz's channel stands as the prime example of how YouTube channels can also contribute to advocacy in a more informal way. In the next concluding section, I will proceed to explain why and how it is relevant to the uprising of new forms of civic action.

Conclusion

This contribution has intended to showcase how YouTube channels might be considered civic actors under the framework of informality. At the beginning of the text some characteristics of what informality stands for are given to the reader. These proposed characteristics are meant to hold true when applied to the case of the youtubers. They are tested by comparing the content, impact, and strategy of the trans youtubers to the channels produced by the formal trans association. At the end of the analysis, I have only found one YouTube channel produced by a transgender person that answers to the informal civic actor expectations.

The YouTube channel *Emma Ruiz Cómica* showcases a balance between entertainment and advocacy content that captures the idea of intermittence that informality entails. Because of the lack of formal structures in a YouTube channel she decides whenever she wants to post or engage with the audience. The self-organization principles anchored in informality are also present in YouTube as they are the driving force of creativity in the platform. Open-source collaboration and crowd wisdom appear in the case of Emma Ruiz in both the section comments and her collaboration with other youtubers. These networked logics are also thought as a feature of informal civic actors. In the case of the channels, we can see the existence of commentaries in the section as a feature that embraces networking. They are easily identifiable in the workings of a social media platform like YouTube. Transparency is also present in her work as a content producer given the personal exposure, she is held on to as a youtuber. I take transparency as an important value for informality to differ from the more closed-door activities found in the formal organizations. Such closed doors are non-existent in a platform like YouTube in which everyone can participate as a user for free, in that case as viewers or followers.

The differences found in the video content between the youtubers, and the formal associations also reveals new lessons to learn how to pursue better advocacy in the digital space. The largest difference between in terms of impact was the follower base and amounts of views disparity. This might propose that channels produced by individuals are more fitted to the logics of the platforms than the ones produced by more formal organizations. Instances of collaborations like the video produced by Elsa Ruiz Cómica on the Chrisallis's event is taken as the ideal form of informal-formal cooperation. To transport the large follower base of the youtubers to the sites of formal associations appears as a useful way to articulate informality. Much more than the efforts of the formal organizations to appear informal and with less risk for the informal actors to adopt formality. The actions of the formal associations with respect to the legislative process are targeted and well-organized. It is not possible to say the same about the youtubers even though they all have expressed their aim to contribute to the trans cause in some ways. This fact opens different avenues of working between the two and even possible cross collaboration as we have seen. Formal organizations tend to have a hard time gathering online audiences but are better suited and capable to create institutional pressure. As we have seen in the case of the Trans Law in Spain, they are the main actors that are able to mobilise civil society to push for change. Youtubers instead seem not to be so interested in the execution of these desires for change. This can be caused by the commercial logics of the platform or strictly for personal reasons. But at the same time, they are much more able to create large audiences online. It seems like digital audiences appeal more to personal stories and experiences than to legislative processes and informed debated. Hence, a virtuous line of collaboration opens between these two kinds of actors that might be able to get the best of both worlds. Both online/offline and informal/formal. This brief text aims at bringing the example of the trans community in Spain as an example of how those two spheres of civic action are not contradictory to each other but offer virtuous windows of opportunity for cooperation in the digital realm.

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Annexes:

ANNEX 1: List of the formal organization

Name of the organization	Name of the channel	Number of followers	Number of total views	Year of creation	URL
Chrysallis Asociación Familias de Menores Trans	Chrysallis AFMT	2460	822.394	2013	https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCzhnswF8ZDGTYGKK_TADoA
Errespetuz	Errespetuz erre	80	56.078	2021	https://www.youtube.com/user/ErrespetuzTube
Euforia	Euforia FTA	96	2700	2019	https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCtdkQjR0epBRryUH_YLTAFQ
Asociación Trans Andalucía	Ata Sylvia Rivera	3570	1.811.505	2011	https://www.youtube.com/c/ATAsylviaRivera
Naizen Asociación de Famias de Menores Trans	Naizen	2410	960.289	2014	https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCBblhuy0q-qsoFW0-mnx6Vw
Transexualia Asoaciación Española Transexuales		-	-	-	-
4K Rainbow Somos Diversidad		-	-	-	-
Amizando Libertad		-	-	-	-
Visión Trans Aregeta		-	-	-	-
Trans baixPower Roses de Sant Feliu		-	-	-	-

TransGirls Asociación de Mujeres Trans	-	-	-	-
Arelas Asociación de Familias de Menores Trans	ARELAS ASOCIACION	73	4583	2017 https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCRc1YwgVhP7WbAm_84oht5Q
Vaginarium	-	-	-	-
ATC Asociación de Transexuales Cataluña	-	-	-	-
Balears Diversa	-	-	-	-
No binaries España	-	--	-	-

Annex 2: List of youtubers

Informal youtubers	Number of followers	Number of total views	Year of creation	URL
Elsa Ruiz Cómica	35.200	2.216.291	2013	
Alejandro P.E.	64.000	6.057.703	2015	
Selena Milán	546.000	67.864.103	2016	

Annex 3: List of videos analysed

Channel	STAGE 1 (number of views)	STAGE 2 (number of views)	STAGE 3 (number of views)
Euforia	<u>VIDEO 1</u>		
ATA Sylvia Rivera	<u>VIDEO 2</u>		
ATA Sylvia Rivera	<u>VIDEO 3</u>		

ATA Sylvia Rivera	<u>VIDEO 4</u>		
ATA Sylvia Rivera		<u>VIDEO 5</u>	
ATA Sylvia Rivera		<u>VIDEO 6</u>	
ATA Sylvia Rivera		<u>VIDEO 7</u>	
Chrysallis		<u>VIDEO 8</u>	
Errespetuz		<u>VIDEO 9</u>	
ATA Sylvia Rivera			<u>VIDEO 10</u>
Elsa Ruiz Cómica	<u>VIDEO 11</u>		
Elsa Ruiz Cómica	<u>VIDEO 12</u>		
Elsa Ruiz Cómica	<u>VIDEO 13</u>		
Elsa Ruiz Cómica	<u>VIDEO 14</u>		
Elsa Ruiz Cómica	<u>VIDEO 15</u>		
Elsa Ruiz Cómica	<u>VIDEO 16</u>		
Elsa Ruiz Cómica	<u>VIDEO 17</u>		
Elsa Ruiz Cómica	<u>VIDEO 18</u>		

Mapping The Rise of Informal Civic Activism in the EU: Romanian Case Study¹

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1. General Context on Civil Society in Romania

The Romanian civil society has been going through a process of consolidation over the past decades. As with most of the newer democracies in Europe, the way civic engagement was formulated and the self-identification of civil society in more or less formal structures took time to develop. In parallel to the consolidation track of formalised structures such as NGOs, a more diverse form of civic engagement emerged in recent years in a more informal manner.

Civil society in Romania² has gone through several formative waves over the past decades (see Table 1 below). Early on formal organizations started to appear in relation to specific activities (e.g., religious or sports associations), as well as a transnational engagement with democratic consolidation (e.g., Open Society). The initial wave strived explicitly to ensure formalised forms of action (e.g., legal entity, physical headquarter, permanent staff, constant funding) and attempted to engage in formal cooperation with the public sector (even by gaining funding from the state as a public utility NGO). In contrast to this structured, formal approach, the latest wave is marked by a much larger decentralisation, ad-hoc nature of mobilization—usually in relation to a specific issue (see for in-depth analysis of trigger causes Volintiru and Buzasu 2020). Around formalised entities (i.e., registered associations), a “halo” started to emerge within the latest waves of civic engagement in Romania. As more and more people wanted to “bring their contribution to society”³, especially in the context of trigger events (e.g., Rosia Montana environmental problem, Colective nightclub fire, Covid-19), they began to volunteer in existent initiatives, or create ad-hoc initiatives (see Issue Focus Covid-19).

Two pathways emerge for the newer informal activism. Firstly, there is a transformative path, with civil society actors starting off from engaging with each other to provide an ad-hoc solution to a problem (e.g., A Single Cluj aid platform during Covid-19) that evolve into a formal

¹ This case study builds on the empirical evidence that the author has published in a number of previous publications: Volintiru, C. and Gherghina, S. (2021) We Are in This Together: Stakeholder Cooperation during COVID-19 in Romania, European Political Science, upcoming; World Bank (2020) Rapid Assessment of Romanian CSO in the Context of the COVID-19; Volintiru, C., & Buzaşu, C. (2020). SHAPING CIVIC ATTITUDES: PROTESTS AND POLITICS IN ROMANIA. Romanian Journal of Political Science, 20(1).

² This paper uses the acronym Civil Society Organisation (CSO) as a generic term for both registered NGOs and other associative forms, formal or informal.

³ Based on interview with Bogdan Ivel, coordinator of the Code4Romania initiative, May 2020.

organisation subsequently, in the sense of being a registered entity with continuous activity. Secondly, we can see a relational path, where citizens have spikes of engagement with existent associations by volunteering or helping out financially, again in the context of a societal issue (e.g., Home delivery of shopping baskets for elderly and vulnerable population – *Cumparaturi la usa ta*, during the first months of Covid-19). The latter trajectory is emblematic of the compensatory function of civil society as when formal solutions appear, many of these initial informal engagements seize. Other times, a “halo” structure of informal engagement remains suspended around the core activity of formal CSOs. Little examples can be provided in the Romanian case of informal civic initiatives that have a stated purpose of remaining informal as their activity increases and develops. They are sooner forms that gravitate with much less commitment to existent initiatives or civil society networks (e.g., Ashoka Changemakers network). Due to this fact, the present paper is looking at both formal and informal civil society initiatives, with a focus on the CSOs that are able to attract, mobilise and catalyse informal engagement and initiatives from other stakeholders.

For both formal and informal, an important element of territorial concentration remains salient. Funding and human resource capacity remains prevalent in the capital and a few other secondary cities. Still, over the past years, shrinking cities have seen a rise in civic activities, especially in the Jiu Valley, affected by the coal-phase out.

Both the interviews and the survey data revealed some differentiations between organizations based on the profile of the people in the organizations, the funding sources of the organizations, the relationship of CSOs with the state and the social and public problems CSOs address and the way they address them based also on their age. This differentiation leads us to see an emerging typology of CSOs in Romania indicating the development of different generations of organizations in the Romanian civil society that also change the overall role of CSOs in the public sphere (see Table 1).

Any Volunteers?

Generally, Romania has recorded a relatively poor track-record in this regard. According to the Charities Aid Foundation’s 2018 World Giving Index, Romania reported one of the lowest regional values of volunteering, with only 6% of respondents saying they participated in voluntary activities. The CSO Sustainability Report also refers to the data from the European Youth Survey (2018) that confirmed the low rates of volunteerism in Romania: only 8% of respondents participated in the activities of a cultural organization in the last twelve months, 7% in the activities of a local organization aimed at improving the local community, 5% in the activities of

an organization promoting human rights or global development, and 4% in the activities of an organization active in the area of climate change and environmental issues. Representatives from Cluj-Napoca municipality — one of the benchmarks of participatory governance in Romania, mentioned their challenge to get younger people involved in their consultative efforts, and it was not until they included informal groups and larger international projects (i.e., Cluj-Napoca candidacy as the European Youth Capital) that young people gave their input.

Overall, the management of major CSOs in Romania is relatively experienced in the organization, but the ability to attract and keep new personnel is weak. Based on previous survey data there is a very high correlation between the age of the CSO manager and the organization's age (World Bank 2020). Managers in their late 30s, 40s and early 50s cumulatively make for two thirds of all CSO, with only 19% of CSO being led by persons younger than 35.

Financial capacity – no longer an issue?

Funding of Romanian CSOs has undergone changes across time. It has moved from the US and foreign aid in the '90s towards European pre-accession funds and now to corporations, European funds and individual donors. Informal civil society groups have emerged as being untattered by the same financial needs as past generations of CSOs. The financial consolidation through EU funding and private donations has allowed formal groups to consolidate and develop larger capabilities, but also narrowed their scope, making them more project focused rather than mission oriented.

There is a visible trend of CSO consolidation in terms of financial capacity, as the WB Survey data showed that 2 in 3 CSO recorded increases in their annual budgets compared to the previous year. Furthermore, a third of those increased their annual budget by more than 75%. This suggests that successful CSOs have been in fact thriving, not just getting by. These CSO have been mostly established in the last decade. The majority of CSOs that increased their revenues over the course of the past three years are active in the education sector. However, measured against the sectorial density of respondents, better financial performances were recorded in the water and environment sector, where three quarters of the organizations reported budgetary increases, and in the human rights, and culture and civic activities sector, in which half of CSO reported a budgetary increase. In education, urban development, and digital sectors a third of the CSO reported a budgetary increase over the course of the last three years.

In recent years, CSO private funding has become increasingly relevant for the revenue stream of many CSOs. The FDSC CSO Survey in 2016 revealed an increase on all forms of funding from private companies (i.e., cash and in-kind sponsorships). On the donor side, according to the 2017 ARC survey on large companies (turnover over 1 million EUR), 85% of companies

transferred part of the income tax to CSOs, the preferred sectors being education (68% of respondents), health (64%), social services (55%) and culture (41%). At present, Romanian CSOs heavily rely on corporate funding. According to WB Survey data, two thirds of surveyed CSOs named company donations as their primary source of funding. While many companies donate directly to CSOs via sponsorship contracts, some have set up corporate foundations, such as Vodafone Foundation, Orange Foundation, eMAG Foundation and others. Some have opted for joint grant-making funds, such as the Lidl fund with ARC or IKEA and Porsche funds with the Bucharest Community Foundation. A close second source of CSO funding remain individual donations, which are increasingly convenient to make, via SMS and online platforms, as well as by share of transferable fiscal income. European funding is the primary source of revenue for 40% of CSO, followed by grants and other funding from international (32% of CSOs) and national foundations (23% of CSOs). There is no differentiation by the sources of funding if we look only at those CSO that registered budgetary growth over the course of the past three years. The share of public budgets or EEA funding is relatively small.

Table 1. Generational Profile of Civil Society in Romania

	Established CSO	EMERGING CSO	„NEW WAVE” CSO
Profile	Trade unions, professional associations, social dialogue groups	Environment, health, social services, civic and good governance	Civic-tech, emergency services, urban development, social innovators
State engagement	High	Moderate	Weak
Collaborative potential	High – consolidated platforms, networks, common point of view	Weak – fragmented, no inter-institutional engagement, autonomous activity, no platform organizations, diverging point of view	High – platform organizations, capacity enhancers, networking with peers nationally and internationally,
Financing	Own sources/members, public budget	European Funding, public budget, private and individual donations	Private sector, international foundations
Coverage	National	Local/regional	Local/regional
Trigger factors	Interest representation	Service provision	Issue-driven (e.g. post-COLECTIV, COVID-19)

Source: WB 2020

As mentioned before, the Romanian civil society gradually consolidated in the context of the democratization process. Many CSOs were established in the 90s with a specific purpose and organisational structure. Over the past decade however, a new emerging wave of CSOs appeared, in response to various trigger events. Most of these started off as informal groups that transited subsequently either towards formalised civil society organisations, or towards political action (or even both).

Each of these recent trigger events—Roșia Montana, Colectiv and more recently the COVID-19 pandemics have incited different types of civic involvement, with different activities. While between Roșia Montana and Colectiv, the civic initiatives and informal groups were anchored in protest movements against governmental measures, in the case of the COVID-19 pandemics, their approach was much more collaborative, geared towards engagement with various levels of the public sector (e.g., Central Government, Local Governments, Hospitals or Schools).

In all three cases the informal initiatives did gravitate around formal actors, such as existent associations or newly established CSOs. One element that is unclear, is to what extent the volunteers and ad-hoc groups that manifested in the aftermath of the Colectiv night fire were the same as the ones that became engaged in the context of the COVID-19? Interviews with civil society representatives are contradictory in this latter aspect, as some associations point to a „cultural shift towards engagement that is durable and can no longer be reversed”⁴ that was launched in the second wave, while others point to the „wide array of first-time volunteers”⁵ in the context of the pandemics. The context and the process does seem to suggest different profiles of activists, as the case of the pandemics, there was less mobilisation on the same political line such as in the case of Colectiv, and a heavier focus on social outcomes, assisting the vulnerable and providing complementary services in society, that the state could no longer fulfil to the extent of the needs on the ground.

2. From Protest to Formal Civic Engagement

After the fall of communism, many of the protest movements in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) were manifestations organised by trade unions to promote or safeguard some occupational interests (e.g., wages, jobs). More recently however, we witnessed a surge in issue-driven protests, similar to many others across the globe. In a previous study, we focused on the occurrence of issue-driven protests in Romania, developing an in-depth assessment of their causes, triggers,

⁴ Elena Calistru, Funky Citizens, Interview with the author 2020.

⁵ Marian Răduță - Founder Cumpărături la ușa ta, Vice-President Geeks for Democracy Community, interview with the author 2020.

mobilisation mechanisms, as well as long-term effects (Volintiru and Buzasu 2020). We argued that in contrast to former protest movements, the recent issue-driven episodes have much deeper roots in contextual grievances (e.g., corruption, governmental inefficiency), as well as a flexible, yet shallow system of mobilisation and framing. Beyond specific policy outcomes, the protest episodes in Romania have managed to shape a new understanding of the relationship between the citizens and their political representatives. There is significant progress in the instrumental use of legal instruments, at the local, as well as national level (e.g., petitions, citizens' initiatives, advocacy). More importantly, a new political class in Romania enjoys significant electoral shares based on issue-driven mobilisation as opposed to interest-driven mobilisation.

Looking at several large protest episodes in the past decade in Romania, we find an emancipation of the means to protest, the efficiency of mobilization, and the effectiveness of attaining the stated goals of the movement. As such, we see the learning effects that reside in learning how to construct banners, how to react to the police interventions, how to meet in large numbers at a designated place and time, and most importantly how to communicate their message and grievances to larger audiences. We also found that the civic-minded protesters, who are also frequently everyday activists, managed to collaborate and incite a growing circle of participants through the easily accessible Social Networking Sites (especially Facebook). This created a sharp distinction from the previously violent protests that marked the beginning of the Romanian democracy. If for the first round of protests in Romania most of the participants were representative of the Romanian electorate, the second, and third episodes moved markedly towards this new group, whose identity is very much sourced in activist citizenship, but often very little in traditional political participation. "Romania's successive movements have resembled the process of accomplishing the apprenticeship in applied democracy".⁶

Many of the current informal initiatives of the Romanian civil society revolve around existent platforms provided by established CSOs. This platform action in the local community is reflected in the very name of the network of 18 Romanian CSOs called "Community Association (x city)". The Bucharest Community Association is intuitively one of the largest in the country, with programs that channel material and human resources to different projects, causes and initiatives. It is a structure that provides structure for other formal or informal groups willing to engage on various issues for their local community—ranging from social causes to environmental action. Their vision is: "Bucharest is a place where you want to live, where people care about each other, and everybody cares about the city. We believe that no matter how difficult it is to develop or how poorly managed a city is, it can be saved by the stubbornness of informal leaders involved in their

⁶ D.N., civic NGO leader, interview with the author.

community out of conviction. The condition to doing this is that these informal leaders have access to resources and are constantly encouraged not to give up”.⁷ Over the course of the 9 years of their existence, they implemented over 500 projects of total value of 2.1 mil. EUR that was raised from partners and donors. Their goal is to support with resources and make known people whose initiatives can produce positive changes in Bucharest, and whose action can inspire others to become involved, thus increasing the “support community for this city”.⁸

1. Emblematic Quotes on the Informal Civic Initiatives in Romania

Any quotes or statements from informal civic group that capture how they define themselves in relation to formal CSOs and/or political parties etc.

- Quest for meaning, new generations – volunteering instead of employment

“Most of us are professionals in the IT&C sector who engage in volunteering activities in search for meaning – these people no longer seek money as they have comfortable sources of revenue, but rather to bring a contribution to our society” – Code for Romania Founder, Bogdan Ivanel

“We have volunteers from all around the world, being digitally focused, location is not relevant” – Code for Romania Founder, Bogdan Ivanel

- Contentious vs cooperative relationship with the state

“We will take money from the private sector, international donors, embassies... but honestly, any proper watchdog group cannot take money from the state and continue its activity legitimately” – Funky Citizens

“We know each other and know the people in power, and that is why we are effective, because we can give a personal phone call and solve an issue, but this is not the way it should be – public authorities should be open to cooperation irrespective of who you are” – Cumparaturi la usa ta

“We were really focused to deliver solutions in times of crisis, spending many nights and overtime to deliver digital solutions in schools or hospitals all over the country, during the pandemics (...) we worked closely with the state” – manager Vodafone

“No matter how difficult it is to develop or how poorly managed a city is, it can be saved by the stubbornness of informal leaders involved in their community out of conviction. The condition to doing this is that these informal leaders have access to resources and are

⁷ Alina Kasparovschi, Director of Asociatia Comunitara Bucuresti.

⁸ Idem.

constantly encouraged not to give up” – Alina Kasparovschi, Asociatia Comunitara Bucuresti

- “amateurs” vs. “sell-outs”

“Many of the people that come to us, want to support a cause, but do not know the actual way in which you need to engage with the public bodies in order to be effective and push through with petitions or information requests” – Declic platform representative

“We have dozens of volunteers every year for environmental protection actions, but we cannot afford the legal or accountant employees to become a formal organisation – we are about volunteering, not business” - environmental CSO in shrinking city of Braila

“Older CSOs are very bureaucratic, focused more on how their organisation can survive – in terms of finances, rather than on their mission and how they should make an impact in society” – volunteer

“You need to be motivated to engage in an initiative, it is optional, so it takes some time to get it as a natural reflex, just like civicness” – Monica Tudorache, NodSpaceMakers, informal initiative member within the Community Foundation in Bucharest

“Many of the CSOs in Romania lack any organisational skills, with no ability to manage their finances, fill activity reports or fulfil any bureaucratic requirements; with growing bureaucracy in the national legislation, their situation will be even more vulnerable” – FDSC platform representative

3. Issue Focus: COVID-19 and the prevalence of new informal groups in Romania

Table 2. Issue Focus and the Formalisation of Civic Action in Romania

Issue Focus	Climate	Digital	COVID-19
Leading Examples	Roşia Montană	Code for Romania	A Single Cluj
Current Status	Some formalised, others did not	Formalised leadership, but largely informal volunteer and activist composition	Some formalised into registered associations, others did not

Source: the author

There was massive civil mobilisation to help during the pandemic. Some people acted individually, some came together in informal groups, focusing on supporting the medical system or on helping the vulnerable communities. Informal groups supported the medical system by producing locally protective equipment. One of the most visible initiatives was manufacturing and donating personal protection equipment (PPE) such as visor masks, face shields and protective suits for the medical system. PlanB Project, a team of 50 designer and maker volunteers, produced and donated +800 pieces of equipment to hospitals and health workers nationwide. The community of Sibiu makers, including engineers, IT specialists and 30 printing specialists, patented a respirator device eight times less expensive than the existing ones. Viziare.ro reports more than 250,000 visor masks donated to medical staff in more than 1,500 hospitals and institutions, with the help of 2,500 volunteers in 24, including one in the Republic of Moldova.

In addition to many products donated directly by retail companies to hospitals, several restaurants, and Romanian chefs whose businesses were shut down during the state of emergency, self-organised and started cooking and delivering free meals and coffees to hospitals. Activ Social, founded by Chef Adi Hadean, delivered 35,000 meals for the medical staff and vulnerable people just in the first month of activity. Kane-New Romanian Cuisine; delivered 36,300 meals, computing 60 tons of food products, in 50 days of volunteer activity.

Among the most vulnerable categories to the pandemic were the elders and people with chronic diseases. In order to contain the spread of the virus and keep them safe from the hospitals, they were strongly advised to stay at home or limit as much as possible their trips outside. Many of them had little or no help with purchasing basic necessities, so informal groups of volunteers swiftly appeared to assist them. It started with young people posting their phone number around the block, in case elderly or alone neighbours needed groceries and medicine. It grew into coordinated and well-managed networks of hundreds of volunteers, first in major cities such as Bucharest and Cluj and then rapidly spreading. Below there are two such initiatives that have in common the fact that they raised money from donations and helped other CSOs and humanitarian initiatives with their extended network of volunteers.

Cumparaturi la Usa Ta (Shopping to your door) grew from taking shopping orders on their Facebook page, to a professional call centre and 900 volunteers. In 86 days, more than 2,000 beneficiaries were served, and more than EUR 20,000 were raised. Another host of initiatives sought to bring relief especially during the lock-down included mental health volunteering. Some were addressed to the general population, some to the elderly, some to categories with pre-

existing conditions and in need of constant monitoring and therapy, many to the medical staff and forefront fighters against the pandemic: Dare2Care, Va Vedem din Sibiu, Autism Voce Line.

The public-private cooperation was illustrated by the Association for Community Relations relationship with the Ministry of Health and the Department for Emergency Situations. This association mobilized its network of donors, organizations, and partner local authorities to identify and assist in solving urgent needs—from providing medical supplies to hospitals, to establishing a testing facility at the border in a context of massive population return from abroad following restrictions across Europe. It provided over 14 million € in the first several months of the pandemics to assist vulnerable groups across the country.⁹

The Department for Emergency Situations built long-standing relationships with specific civil society organizations in preparation for a disaster such as a major earthquake and based on capacity, resources, or knowhow these associations were designated official partners of the Department¹⁰. For example, the Department for Emergency Situations built on a long-standing partnership with the Romanian Red Cross Foundation. This partnership is reflected in the Romanian legislation: in case of a disaster the Red Cross can coordinate the national response and relief efforts. For example, at local level, in Suceava which was amongst the worst hit cities in Romania in the first quarter of the pandemics, over 1 million € were raised by local entrepreneurs in a fortnight and used through the local branch of the Red Cross for medical and protective equipment for medical units in Suceava (World Bank 2020: 70).

The COVID-19 crisis led to a new wave of civic involvement in Romania, which included formal and informal groups motivated by the crisis context. This web of support networks included civil society organizations, private companies with existent corporate social responsibility (CSR) track-record (e.g., Vodafone Foundation), private individuals willing to offer their time as volunteers or financial resources in donations, and public bodies from local governments to national entities. A key element of this multi-stakeholder cooperation proved to be the ability of all parties to communicate with each other, as hospital staff or public authorities identified needs, and civil society organizations or private companies stepped up to help.

The civil society organizations have brought over time significant improvements to the public healthcare system. For example, Daruieste Viata (Offer Life) is a leading Romanian civil society organization established in 2012 with the mission “to reform the Romanian medical system, convince authorities to respect the right to life and treatment, implement large-scale projects so that cancer patients receive proper treatment and support in Romania”. It has set up

⁹ Interview with Alina Kasparovschi, Head of the Association for Community Relations, 2020.

¹⁰ Interview with George Manea, Department of Emergency Situations, 2020.

the Elias 1 Modular Hospital to ensure treatment conditions for patients with COVID-19. It also rebuilt the Piatra Neamt Modular Hospital for COVID-19 patients after a fire. Similarly, following pre-existent projects related to hospital renovation and modernization, companies such as Vodafone or Kaufland supported the Piatra Neamt Modular Hospital.

Sometimes, due to the traditionally poor relationship between civil society and state authorities, several civil society organizations collaborated directly with medical personnel to identify the required support actions. They developed coordinated actions amongst themselves for fundraising from private donations. To use the same example, Daruieste Viata communicated directly with the medical staff via an online platform regarding necessary equipment and supplies and donated 17 tons of equipment to 180 hospitals in Romania just in the first quarter of the pandemics (World Bank 2020: 71).

The limited resources of some hospitals were boosted ad-hoc by donations from private companies. We cover in this article two of the most visible actors with specific forms of engagement. Vodafone Romania is a phone company that has long established a distinctive Foundation, which over the past two decades has financed over 1,132 programs with 730 local civil society partners in the fields of health, education, and social services. Some of its leading programs with a relevant impact during the COVID-19 crisis included delivering tablets and laptops to schools, kids, and teachers, thus mediating the sudden shift to online learning in Romania. Vodafone responded very quickly to requests of digital support in medical facilities as well, all throughout the crisis, having established round-the-clock crisis management units within its organization¹¹. It collaborated with local associations to create testing facilities at the Romanian border and continued to provide 1 million € grants for the renovation of maternity wards across Romania.

Kaufland Romania is a supermarket franchise that partnered with an established civil society platform in Romania over the past years, as it implemented with the Foundation for the Development of the Civil Society a program called “Stare de bine!” (Wellness State) offering over 1 million € in grants to local civil society organizations for projects related to cultural activities, sports, or healthy lifestyle (Website Wellness State. 2021). Kaufland Romania was ranked as the leading company in Romania in terms of sustainability: a total of 7.7 1 million € invested in projects of corporate social responsibility with 2.41 million beneficiaries (Romania CSR Index 2020).

¹¹ Interview with Ioana Tinca, Manager Vodafone, 2021.

The mutual engagement between citizens and the local government in Cluj meant that there was a very strong basis for cooperation from the very early onset of the COVID-19 crisis. Civil servants in Cluj city hall recognize this mutual engagement relationship as a resource, not as a burden—„many of our citizens have lived abroad for several years, and bring back new ideas, new ways of organizing public spaces and daily activities”¹². Participatory budgeting for example was developed in Cluj-Napoca at the initiative of the local civil society and perfected through technical assistance programme with the World Bank and collaborative projects with NGOs. The Covid19 crisis presented the local community in Cluj with a new challenge, and public authorities, the private sector and local CSOs came together in an informal coalition called „A single Cluj” to help authorities procure medical equipment more swiftly. Cristian Hordila¹³, the founder of „A Single Cluj” coalition credits its quick and efficient reaction to the fact that the local government had a long history of collaborating with the local creative industries and private sector donors. Another large company with its base of activities in Cluj, is Banca Transilvania—one of the largest Romanian companies, brought its long-standing CSR campaign of promoting local producers to a new level during the pandemics, with the #CumparaDeLangaTine Challenge—a campaign to support local businesses.

4. Transnational Links and Peer Collaborations – Networking (And) Capital

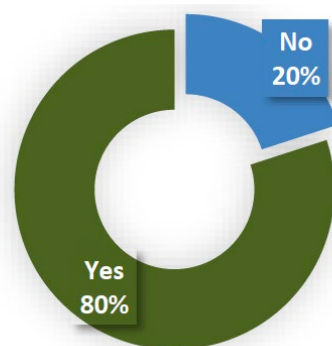
Platforms, hubs, incubators, or networks are all very sought after by emerging and new civil society organisations in Romania. While this socialisation process tends to relate to the development of formalised organisations, there are increasingly more individuals and informal groups that access such capacity-building structured. For example, the Declic platform in Romania, aids people who want to submit petitions or engage in other formal interactions with the public sector, but do not pose the necessary knowledge. Furthermore, beyond the narrow unit of the formally employed personnel in such collaborative CSOs, there is a large ecosystem or network of volunteers, donors and interested parties that engage informally with the formal unit. Therefore, although the mapping of existent CSOs that have transnational linkages can mostly be done on existed formal groups, we must see them as proxies for informal networks of activists that tend to gravitate in these loose ecosystems.

¹² Interview with Cluj City Hall representative, 2020.

¹³ Director of Transilvania International Film Festival (TIFF)

The vast majority of CSOs that participated in the WB CSO Capacity Mapping survey last year declared they belong to a broader transnational network (see figure below). This means that they have access to peer-to-peer learning, know-how transfer and best practice and other information exchanges. It also means they have some sort of support in terms of networking capital and possibly even access to funds. Almost all the respondents had implemented projects with other national or international CSOs in the past, and more than two thirds have also implemented collaborative projects with the state or private companies. While this data suggests there is a high level of collaboration with peers, in-depth interviews suggest that these collaborations tend to be within established international networks, and not necessarily with domestic peers. Previous studies on CSO in Romania have shown that network participation is one of the strongest correlators of CSO capacity, but there is not a high concentration of CSO that possess both the capacity and the interest to get involved and efficiently engage with third parties (e.g., state, peers).

Figure x. CSOs that are part of a broader network



Good governance and democracy watchdog CSO have a strong transnational network capacity. Many have benefitted from funding from international donors early on, gaining not only financial capacity but also regional and international connectivity. Those that have achieved transnational connectivity prefer to apply in international consortiums for grants from the European Commission (e.g., DG HOME or DG JUSTICE project calls) and other international bodies (e.g., GMF, Open Society Foundation). Consequently, many such CSO become engaged in original research activities, nurture their international contacts, and participate in international conferences for the purpose of networking with peer organizations (e.g., Open Government Summit, International Anticorruption Conference, Personal Democracy Forum CEE, Point Sarajevo). These developments suggest an evolution from pure activism to a more sophisticated think tank approach.

Peer-to-peer cooperation emerged as one of the most effective ways in which the civil society in Romania can enhance its capabilities, either in the case of existent CSOs, or in the case of emerging, informal initiatives. Some leading CSO actors self-identify themselves as platforms, incubators, or capacity-building organisations. These are entities that supply the civil society actors, with both knowledge and funding. They often centralise certain sources of funding (e.g., EEA funds, private foundations) and are responsible for financing various civic initiatives. However, if they engage civil society actors by providing funding, not just facilitating actions

through knowledge and information, then these usually involve some form of registered juridical entity, and as such transit from the realm of informal to formal activism.

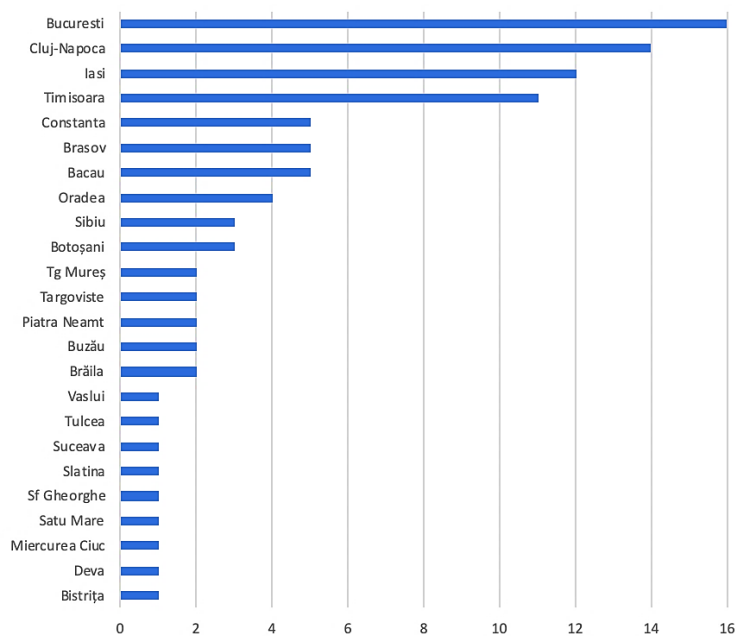
Within our CSO survey from 2020, a total of 37 CSO in the WB survey self-identified themselves as being specialized in capacity development for other CSO, incubators or platforms, ten of which are community foundations. They cover 24 of the leading municipalities in Romania and some of their surrounding areas. Most of these capacity enhancing organizations have been established within the past decade, and rely primarily on private donations from companies, individual donors, or international foundations. Some CSO that aim to serve as platforms for peers have developed their own CSO listings either based on community consultations (e.g., Ashoka Romania), or project implementation track record (e.g., FDSC, Swiss-Romanian Cooperation Program Photo Album). An effective mapping of CSO leaders must build on all these disparate efforts at identifying and promoting good practices.

Apart from the community foundations, such peer-to-peer capacity enhancing CSO are mainly based in Bucharest, with a few based in other large secondary cities such as Cluj- Napoca, Iași, Brașov or Constanța (figure below). In contrast, local CSO from smaller municipalities (e.g., Braila) or rural areas cite capacity limitations to engage in larger projects (i.e., human, and financial resources, know-how) despite their better knowledge of local issues. Therefore, extending the territorial coverage of capacity development CSO and creating mentoring partnerships between platform and local CSO could boost the latter's own capacity and ability to engage in larger or more sophisticated projects in the future. This would be a catalyst for informal action, as presented in this paper, the vast majority of informal groups start off or end up by gravitating around formal structures, especially network platforms. This offers both the autonomy and the support that informal groups generally require.

Platform CSOs are the key to understanding the activity of informal civic initiatives in Romania. It is through these peer-to-peer platforms that ideas and resources are shared, and a community of practice is gradually formed. For example, the Bucharest Community Foundation, together with ING Bank Romania, has launched a call for funding for projects that improve air quality and green spaces in Bucharest. In the first round of financing, the Environmental Platform for Bucharest will support three existing projects in the community, developed by non-profit organizations or initiative groups, on issues related to air quality, increasing the quality of green spaces, green networks, and green infrastructure. Another program of the Bucharest Community Foundation is financed in partnership with Banca Transilvania (a Romanian commercial bank) and addresses initiatives at neighbourhood level. It is called "Inclusive in the Neighbourhood" and aims to support with 50,000 EUR 3-5 projects or ideas that solve neighbourhood issues related to

education, environment, or social affairs. In partnership with Decathlon, it implemented a financing program for community initiatives in the sports area, and many other such support schemes for informal initiatives.

Figure x. Peer to Peer Capacity Development



Source: 2020 WB CSO Survey

Mapping the Rise of Informal Civic Activism in the EU: The Case Study of Germany

Melina Nitschker – MA Student STG

1. Introduction

Civil society serves as a vital component of the Federal Republic of Germany. The German Volunteer Survey (Deutscher Freiwilligensurvey – FWS) indicates in their newest publication that 39.7% of people aged 14 and older were civically engaged in 2019, a jump of nearly ten percent from 20 years earlier.¹⁴ At the same time, satisfaction with German democracy is relatively high among citizens, measuring out to 71% among those involved and 63.3% among those not involved in volunteer activities. Similar trends can be found in societal trust in institutions and judiciary.¹⁵

There is a distinction made between formal and informal civic activism. The FWS distinguishes particularly between registered non-profit associations, religious associations, state or municipal institutions, other formally organized institutions, and individually organized groups (e.g., initiatives, projects, or self-organized groups).¹⁶ Informal initiatives include community service in neighbourhoods. They form a central basis for social interaction and can serve a vital role in times of crisis, such as the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

This article will make the argument that registered non-profit associations can qualify as informal civic activism, which puts them in a grey area. To this end, I will first analyse the German concept of civil society on which I will then build a conceptual framework for informal civic activism. Furthermore, I will discuss various forms of informal activism and what political implications and what Political implications they have.

2. A Semantic Classification of the Concept of Civil Society

¹⁴ Simonson, Julia, Nadiya Kelle, Corinna Kausmann, and Clemens Tesch-Römer. "Freiwilliges Engagement in Deutschland: Der Deutsche Freiwilligensurvey 2019." Deutsches Zentrum für Altersfragen (2021): p. 51. https://www.dza.de/fileadmin/dza/Dokumente/Forschung/Publicationen/Forschung/Freiwilliges_Engagement_in_Deutschland_-_der_Deutsche_Freiwilligensurvey_2019.pdf.

¹⁵ Simonson, Julia, Nadiya Kelle, Corinna Kausmann, and Clemens Tesch-Römer. "Freiwilliges Engagement in Deutschland: Der Deutsche Freiwilligensurvey 2019." Deutsches Zentrum für Altersfragen (2021): p.252. https://www.dza.de/fileadmin/dza/Dokumente/Forschung/Publicationen/Forschung/Freiwilliges_Engagement_in_Deutschland_-_der_Deutsche_Freiwilligensurvey_2019.pdf.

¹⁶ Kausmann, Corinna, Luise Burkhardt, Boris Rump, Nadiya Kelle, Julia Simonson, and Clemens Tesch-Römer, "Zivilgesellschaftliches Engagement." in Datenreport Zivilgesellschaft, ed. Holger Krimmer (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2019), 55-91, doi: 10.1007/978-3-658-22958-0.

The problem with defining civic activism in German begins with semantics. In German usage, a distinction is made between *Zivilgesellschaft* (civil society) and *Bürgergesellschaft* (civil “citizen” society), a difference that does not necessarily exist in English. *Zivil-* and *Bürgergesellschaft* are mostly used synonymously, as a clear distinction does not seem so apparent at first glance. According to historian Ansgar Klein, this confusion stems from the fact that both terms were back-translated from English into German, where, however, the introduced term *bürgerliche Gesellschaft* (civil society) already existed and was used by Hegel, among others.¹⁷ Klein argues that the terms can be used synonymously and that he favors the use of the neologism *Zivilgesellschaft* because the word “zivil” in German means nonviolent action in opposition to the military and implies modern civilization, distinct from barbarism.¹⁸

Marc Arenhövel made an attempt to distinguish between the two variants and came to the conclusion that the terms have grown historically. The word *Zivilgesellschaft* has been used especially since the second half of the 20th century. It was used to refer to citizen rights movements in Central Eastern European countries, where it served as a term of resistance against authoritarian systems and for Western democratization processes. Although they can be used synonymously today, the word *Zivilgesellschaft* is more descriptive, static in nature, and already fulfilled in Western industrialized nations. It denotes a collective consciousness among the population that counteracts the uncertainties that accompany modernization with a sense of tradition and nationhood. The normative concept of *Bürgergesellschaft*, on the other hand, is a dynamic variant that strives for further democratization and includes “untried possibilities of participation and assumption of responsibility by citizens.”¹⁹ This normative usage seems appropriate in light of social media and new forms of civic activism.

However, both terms also have a modern ideological distinction. Libertarian and conservative authors, parties, and organizations mostly prefer the term *Bürgergesellschaft* because it has a historical reference to *bürgerliche Gesellschaft*, while left-wing actors use the term *Zivilgesellschaft* in distinction to a conservative concept of citizenship.²⁰ Other approaches to the distinction can be found in writings by Herfried Münkler, Thomas Olk and Ralf Dahrendorf, among others.²¹

¹⁷ Klein, Ansgar. *Der Diskurs der Zivilgesellschaft: Politische Kontexte und demokratietheoretische Bezüge der neueren Begriffsverwendung*. Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien, 2001, p. 19.

¹⁸ Klein, Ansgar. *Der Diskurs der Zivilgesellschaft: Politische Kontexte und demokratietheoretische Bezüge der neueren Begriffsverwendung*. Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien, 2001, p. 21-22.

¹⁹ Arenhövel, Mark. “Zivilgesellschaft. Bürgergesellschaft.” *Wochenschau II*, no. 2, March 2000, p. 55. http://egora.uni-muenster.de/pbnetz/bindata/pbnetz_zivil.pdf.

²⁰ Gohl, Christopher. “Bürgergesellschaft als politische Zielperspektive.” *Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung*. May 26, 2002. <https://www.bpb.de/apuz/26472/buergergesellschaft-als-politische-zielperspektive?p=all>.

²¹ Münkler, Herfried. “Bürgerschaftliches Engagement in der Zivilgesellschaft.” p. 29–36. Or: Olk, Thomas. “Bürgerengagement und aktivierender Staat – zwei Seiten einer Medaille?” p. 83–97.

3. Conceptual Framework: Informal Civic Activism

Other blurred uses include the terms *bürgerschaftliches Engagement* and *zivilgesellschaftliches Engagement* (both of which refer to civic engagement). The Enquête Commission on the “Future of Civic Engagement” of the German Bundestag opts for a synonymous use of the terms, even though it acknowledges the different usages outlined in the previous chapter. According to the Commission’s report, civic engagement is voluntary, oriented toward the common good, and not aimed at material gain. This engagement includes: activities in associations, churches, and nonprofit organizations; work in self-help groups or neighborhood initiatives; and work in political parties and trade unions and the activities of companies and foundations with a charitable purpose. This voluntary involvement of citizens creates “social capital,” i.e., solidarity, belonging and mutual trust in society.²² The report speaks of a pluralization of engagement that allows ever newer possibilities for participation. What is also interesting about this approach to civic engagement is that engagement is seen as something cooperative, something done in a community; engagement as an individual is virtually absent.

There seems to be a consensus that civic engagement is generally oriented towards public welfare, emancipatory, and democratizing. Edgar Grande, however, challenges this view and argues that civil society associations can also be used by those who seek to abolish democracy. One must therefore limit normative presuppositions in civil society research, he argues.²³

There are both permanent forms of engagement and short-term, project-based forms of engagement, neither of which are limited to participation in the aforementioned groups and institutions, but may also include demonstrations of civic courage, financial assistance in the form of donations, and protest actions in the context of citizens' initiatives and social movements.²⁴

Another relevant word in German, *Bürgerbeteiligung* (civic activism/participation), encompasses co-determination, the contribution of knowledge or preferences, and (in-)direct influence on political decision-making processes. The term can be divided into formal and informal *Bürgerbeteiligung*. Here, there is a very important distinction to civic activism: the

²² Enquete-Kommission zur Zukunft des Bürgerschaftlichen Engagements. “Bürgerschaftliches Engagement: auf dem Weg in eine zukunftsfähige Bürgergesellschaft.” Deutscher Bundestag – 14. Wahlperiode. Printed Matter 14/8900. Berlin: 2002, p. 2.

²³ Grande, Edgar. “Wie wichtig ist die Zivilgesellschaft? Einführende Bemerkungen.” In *Zivilgesellschaft in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland: Aufbrüche, Umbrüche, Ausblicke*, edited by Brigitte Grande, Edgar Grande, and Udo Hahn, 15. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2021.

²⁴ Enquete-Kommission zur Zukunft des Bürgerschaftlichen Engagements. “Bürgerschaftliches Engagement: auf dem Weg in eine zukunftsfähige Bürgergesellschaft.” Deutscher Bundestag – 14. Wahlperiode. Printed Matter 14/8900. Berlin: 2002, p. 6.

Bertelsmann Stiftung distinguishes between mandatory civic activism, which is prescribed by law (formal) and includes, for example, approval procedures or state and regional planning,²⁵ and voluntary civic activism (informal), which includes dialogue-oriented methods, such as consensus conferences/citizens' conferences.²⁶

The division between formal and informal activism is not clear-cut and varies between sources. In the 2019 Volunteer Survey (FWS), informal groupings made up an increasingly important role in volunteer engagement. They classify as informal: self-help groups, neighborhood help, initiatives or projects, and other self-organized groups, as well as engagement carried out alone.²⁷ They cite better opportunities to have a say, flat hierarchies, and flexible organizational structures as positive aspects of why informal structures are chosen more frequently. This form is particularly appealing to female and younger volunteers, as the voluntary activity can be carried out at short notice or with varying amounts of time, as well as offers better framework conditions to be integrated into the everyday life of the volunteers.²⁸ Informal activism is more common in social or family-related issues, where proportionately more women are engaged. According to the 2019 FWS, Individually Organized Groups have increased from a 10.3% share of all registered groups in 1999 to 17.2% in 2019. After engagement in clubs or associations (57.2% in 1999 decreased to 51.7% in 2019), informal engagement now ranks second in Germany.

Payment is often cited as the biggest difference between formal and informal engagement. Accordingly, informal engagement is unpaid engagement that is often packaged as spontaneous assistance and support for neighbours. This form of engagement is the most efficient, especially in times of crisis where quick, unbureaucratic help is needed. Formal engagement is distinct in this capacity by a fixed number of hours that one must work each week, as well as, for example, training that one receives from the engagement coordinator before beginning the activity.²⁹

²⁵ Paust, Andreas. "Grundlagen der Bürgerbeteiligung: Materialsammlung für die Allianz Vielfältige Demokratie," Bertelsmann Stiftung. 2018. https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/fileadmin/files/Projekte/Vielfaeltige_Demokratie_gestalten/Materialsammlung_Buergerbeteiligung.pdf.

²⁶ "Informelle Verfahren der Bürgerbeteiligung." Heinrich Böll Stiftung KommunalWiki. January 10, 2018. https://kommunalwiki.boell.de/index.php/Informelle_Verfahren_der_B%c3%bcrgerbeteiligung.

²⁷ Simonson, Julia, Nadiya Kelle, Corinna Kausmann, and Clemens Tesch-Römer. "Freiwilliges Engagement in Deutschland: Der Deutsche Freiwilligensurvey 2019." Deutsches Zentrum für Altersfragen. 2021, p. 161. https://www.dza.de/fileadmin/dza/Dokumente/Forschung/Publicationen/Forschung/Freiwilliges_Engagement_in_Deutschland_-_der_Deutsche_Freiwilligensurvey_2019.pdf.

²⁸ Simonson, Julia, Nadiya Kelle, Corinna Kausmann, and Clemens Tesch-Römer. "Freiwilliges Engagement in Deutschland: Der Deutsche Freiwilligensurvey 2019." Deutsches Zentrum für Altersfragen. 2021, p. 174. https://www.dza.de/fileadmin/dza/Dokumente/Forschung/Publicationen/Forschung/Freiwilliges_Engagement_in_Deutschland_-_der_Deutsche_Freiwilligensurvey_2019.pdf.

²⁹ Lagfa Bayern e.V. "Infoblatt: Informelles & Formelles Engagement." Landesarbeitsgemeinschaft der Freiwilligenagenturen Bayern. May 2020. <https://lagfa-bayern.de/downloads/informelles-und-formelles-engagement/download-file/>.

Richard Youngs argues in his work that informal forms of engagement, in particular, link various issue-based networks to form a "countervailing power" with shared social values rather than to achieve specific goals. What strongly distinguishes informal engagement from the formal is regularity, referring to individual civic actors who get involved when they do not like certain government policy decisions and then withdraw. Moreover, civic participation is characterized by the constant emergence of new initiatives, which are distinct from organized social movements.³⁰

As noted in this chapter, there are some differences in the definitions of informal civic activism that have to do with semantics on one hand and the fuzzy concept of informal engagement on the other. Where scholars tend to agree is that informal engagement is voluntary and unpaid, generally involves flat hierarchies and flexible organizational structures, includes informal commitments, and often pertains to social issues, or issues of care. They also all agree that individually organized and informal commitments are on the rise.

The following chapter will highlight the differences between the citizens' initiatives mentioned by Youngs and registered associations in Germany, in order to shed more light on the gray area of informal activism.

4. A Gray Area of Informal Activism: (Non-profit) Registered Associations

Looking at registered associations in Germany, considered the bedrock of German civil society and democracy, is inevitable when exploring civic engagement. As mentioned earlier, initiatives are often counted among informal activisms. However, it is common to find overlaps between registered associations and initiatives in Germany.

What Are Registered Associations?

When people talk about associations in Germany, they mostly mean *eingetragene Vereine* (registered associations), or e.V., which are entered in the register of associations and among the most common forms of groups in Germany. In 2016, there were 603,886 registered associations in Germany.³¹ Registered associations have an *ideell* (ideational) purpose, which means they are not allowed to pursue economic purposes by default. To do so, they must apply to the tax office for non-profit status to secure tax exemption. Tax benefits are granted to associations whose

³⁰ Youngs, Richard. *Civic Activism Unleashed: New hope or false dawn for democracy?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p.11. DOI:10.1093/oso/9780190931704.001.0001.

³¹ Krimmer, Holger. "Summary: Zivilgesellschaft im Überblick." In *Datenreport Zivilgesellschaft*, edited by Holger Krimmer, 5-6. Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2019.

activities are aimed at: selflessly promoting the general public in a charitable manner in the material, spiritual, or moral spheres; supporting persons in need or with low incomes; or selflessly promoting religious communities under public law with ecclesiastical activities.³²

The reasons for – and advantages of – registration vary. Apart from tax benefits, one of the most common reasons is protection against liability, because people acting on behalf of an unregistered association are held liable for legal transactions, i.e., any person who appears in any form on behalf of the association. This is not the case for registered associations because the e.V. is a legal entity.³³ Other reasons can be the underlining of the seriousness of the cause or the official character of the association to encourage the members to a longer-term commitment.

To be registered as an association, seven members are needed, as well as other requirements like the creation of a statute and the election of a board of directors, which acts as the representative body of the association. The articles of association also specify on contributions to be made to the association and how often general meetings are to be held. The association is deprived of legal capacity if the association has fewer than three members.³⁴

The vast majority of associations do not employ paid staff.³⁵ Consequently, it is foreseeable that while registered associations in Germany have the legal status of a traditional nonprofit organization (NPO), they do not necessarily represent a formal form of engagement. Registration may serve as an opportunity to secure legal standing, but it need not imply a large number of members or a flow of funds.

Citizens' Initiatives and Registered Associations

One example is that of citizens' initiatives, which are interest groups that are often spontaneous, temporary, and organizationally rather loose associations of individual citizens. According to Youngs, these citizens' initiatives often represent an informal form of civic activism. The motivation for formal registration of an initiative can have different backgrounds. Citizens' initiatives that take longer to implement their plans, for example, are frequently registered in the register of associations in Germany. Tax exemptions are another factor that is often considered.

³² Bundesministerium der Justiz und für Verbraucherschutz. "Leitfaden zum Vereinsrecht." bmjv.de. September 2016, p. 60. https://www.bmjv.de/SharedDocs/Publikationen/DE/Leitfaden_Vereinsrecht.pdf.

³³ Bundesministerium der Justiz und für Verbraucherschutz. "Leitfaden zum Vereinsrecht." bmjv.de. September 2016, p. 13. https://www.bmjv.de/SharedDocs/Publikationen/DE/Leitfaden_Vereinsrecht.pdf.

³⁴ Bundesministerium der Justiz und für Verbraucherschutz. "Leitfaden zum Vereinsrecht." bmjv.de. September 2016, p. 53. https://www.bmjv.de/SharedDocs/Publikationen/DE/Leitfaden_Vereinsrecht.pdf.

³⁵ Priemer, Jana, Holger Krimmer, and Anaël Labigne. "Vielfalt verstehen. Zusammenhalt stärken." ZiviZ im Stifterverband (2017): p. 5. <https://www.ziviz.de/download/file/fid/276>.

Mostly, initiatives start with a loose structure and eventually get registered to avert risks of liability.

Thus, the line between formal and informal activism is not drawn at the time of legal registration. Informality can be maintained through either an informal mode of operation or in the work itself (such as neighbourhood watch groups or self-help groups). Many new organizations and associations organize themselves, for example, in flat hierarchies and so-called local groups, which independently carry out protests or other informal actions such as social media campaigns and petitions throughout Germany (and Europe). This is often true for student initiatives and university groups, though these do not necessarily have to be active at universities to have local groups.

An example of this is Seebrücke (the German word for ‘sealift’), which originated in 2018 as an informal civic activist group, eventually morphing into a registered association.³⁶ However, to this day they self-describe as a political movement, drawing their support primarily from individuals in civil society.³⁷ They count among their ranks 180 local groups, supra-regional working groups, and coordination circles, as well as an office complete with a staff on payroll.

Much of the work Seebrücke performs today occurs primarily at the regional and city-wide level, as the organization attempts to declare certain municipalities “safe harbors” for refugees. They currently count over 250 in Germany alone. They were early fighters of policies that restricted sea rescue ships from being able to dock at ports, as evidenced by large-scale demonstrations that protested against the criminalization of Mediterranean maritime rescue and called for safe routes to be established. These demonstrations included over 12,000 participants.³⁸

The work performed by Seebrücke has continued well into the present. Following a fire that destroyed the Moria refugee camp in Greece, aid groups continued to form, protesting for the evacuation of the camp and the integration of refugees.³⁹ These aid groups were generally supported and organized by increasingly influential registered associations, among them Seebrücke, as well as Campact, #LeaveNoOneBehind, and others.

³⁶ “Wir bauen eine Brücke zu Sicheren Häfen,” Seebrücke, accessed September 10, 2021. <https://seebruecke.org/ueber-uns>.

³⁷ “Wir bauen eine Brücke zu Sicheren Häfen,” Seebrücke, accessed September 10, 2021. <https://seebruecke.org/ueber-uns>.

³⁸ Felix Keß, “Zivilgesellschaftliche Initiativen für sichere Fluchtwege – ein Überblick,” Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, last modified August 30, 2019, <https://www.bpb.de/gesellschaft/migration/kurzdossiers/295985/zivilgesellschaftliche-initiativen-fuer-sichere-fluchtwege-ein-ueberblick>.

³⁹ “In mehreren Großstädten: Tausende Demonstranten fordern Aufnahme der Moria-Flüchtlinge,” Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, September 9, 2020, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/inland/in-mehreren-grossstaedten-demonstrationen-fordern-aufnahme-der-moria-fluechtlinge-16946159.html>.

Given the multifaceted international effects of the original crisis on the European Union, the transnational links connecting many of these aid groups and associations should come as no surprise. For example, the Europe Must Act campaign, which describes itself as a social movement which “began as a call for change from grassroots NGOs working in Greece,” organized the protest that followed the Moria fire – with Seebrücke – in 27 cities all over Europe.⁴⁰

There is also naturally a heavy component of social media in the civic responses to the refugee crisis, as each of these aforementioned organisations have utilized their high following on social media networks to garner a massive representation across the European Union, in an effort to engage and mobilize their supporters.

Another striking feature of this is the cooperation of influential registered associations, one that will be seen in the next chapter as well.

5. Alternative Pathways

Of course, one can also choose another legal form, such as the foundation. But many initiatives also decide to remain informal (or simply: not registered) in terms of the legal form. Before, it made sense to carry out volunteer work in a registered association, because the majority of associations also took out private liability and accident insurance for volunteers. This provided coverage for accidents and other damages that occurred during the activities of the commitment. However, many German states now offer insurance coverage for volunteers in initiatives and unregistered associations to support them in their activities.⁴¹

One of the largest unregistered movements in Germany is Fridays For Future (FFF). It is organized as an association of persons without legal capacity and sees itself as a democratic grassroots movement without a board or spokesperson.⁴² Their most important instrument involves so-called school strikes, where students skip school on Fridays to protest. The German chapter of Fridays For Future is organized into local groups, where most communication takes place via messenger services. Prominent figures of the FFF Germany movement, such as Luisa Neubauer,⁴³ are included in TV talk shows, general meetings of big companies, political debates,

⁴⁰ “Protests in 27 European cities defending the human rights of refugees after Moria fire,” Europe Must Act, September 21, 2020, <https://www.europemustact.org/post/moria-fire-protests-in-27-cities>.

⁴¹ Bundesministerium für Arbeit und Soziales. “Zu Ihrer Sicherheit: Unfallversichert im freiwilligen Engagement.” Referat Information, Monitoring. Oktober 2018, p. 12. <https://www.bmas.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/DE/Publikationen/a329-unfallversichert-im-engagement.pdf>.

⁴² “Warum Fridays for Future nur eine Zukunft hat, wenn sie sich auf den Marsch in die Institutionen begeben,” PPR Hamburg, accessed October 1, 2021, <https://www.ppr-hamburg.com/news-artikel/id-569.html>.

⁴³ Luisa Neubauer (@Luisamneubauer), “Ich war heute Abend bei #Lanz und wollte das hier dringend loswerden;,” Twitter, September 21, 2021, <https://twitter.com/Luisamneubauer/status/1440441325661274112>.

and other outlets. As many public disputes have shown, FFF members or supporters categorically reject a spokesperson and hierarchy. They make a point that they are organized decentrally, that they are non-partisan, and independent. The German chapter has coordinated with other national chapters around the European Union and the world.

This example shows that informal groups often consciously choose to keep a movement, initiative, or alliance independent and informal. This is especially due to the fact that they reject hierarchies, and the registration of associations requires the election of a board of directors, which would give the movement a *de facto* hierarchy.

Another example is the anti-coal movement. The Hambach Forest is a case that has received a lot of media attention because it was bought by the RWE AG, Germany's largest energy company, and since then has been cleared to mine lignite (brown coal) to generate electricity. Since November 2012, activists occupied the forest in so-called protest camps. They built tree houses and were supported over time (and still are) by many initiatives.⁴⁴⁴⁵ Logistical matters made it very difficult for the police to take preventive measures. The squatters often prevailed against eviction attempts and they were eventually supported by a broad protest movement outside the forest. The federal government decided in 2020 to preserve the forest. This type of activism can be described as horizontal, decentralized, and oriented towards direct action.⁴⁶ Interesting about this movement was also that the protestors carried out informal activism while also being supported by a broad protest movement consisting of formal NGOs and associations.

Another type of informal civic activism has emerged in the emergence of political influencers in Germany. The most well-known example of a political influencer is Rezo, a YouTuber and columnist who, in the lead-up to the 2019 European elections, shared an hour-long video called “Die Zerstörung der CDU”⁴⁷ (German for “The Destruction of the CDU”), together with a list of sources compiled in a Google doc, in which he criticized the Christian Democratic Union and the ruling grand coalition for what he perceived as the destruction they wrought in Germany and the EU at large. The video was well-researched but employed an accessible vernacular, leading to it being viewed nearly 20 million times. Rezo received a film and television award for his work. In the run-up to the 2021 German federal election, he published a three-part series in which he exposes what he perceives as the incompetency of national politicians and the

⁴⁴ “Unsere Ziele,” Initiative Buirer für Buir, accessed September 10, 2021. <https://www.buirerfuerbuir.de/index.php/wir-ueber-uns/unsere-ziele>.

⁴⁵ “Background,” Ende Gelände 2021, accessed September 10, 2021. <https://www.ende-gelaende.org/en/background/>.

⁴⁶ Ricardo Kaufer and Paula Lein, “Widerstand im Hambacher Forst: Analyse einer anarchistischen Waldbesetzung,” *Forschungsjournal Soziale Bewegungen* 31, no. 4 (2018): 10-11, doi: 10.1515/fjsb-2018-0096.

⁴⁷ Rezo, “Die Zerstörung der CDU,” May 18, 2019, video, 54:57, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Y1lZQsyuSQ>.

amplification of, for example, the climate catastrophe through corruption. These videos have received more than ten million views within less than a month.⁴⁸⁴⁹⁵⁰

Prominent figures from the Querdenken movement may also fall into this category, spreading conspiracy theories via Telegram and building a large following. Some of these can be classified as democratic, given their desires to maintain appropriate rights of assembly and ensure that the federal government does not overstep. However, some are rather more illiberal in nature. Informal civic engagement also acts as a bridge between voluntary engagement and forms of political participation. As the FWS shows, those who volunteer tend to also be more politically engaged.⁵¹ For political participation, the FWS differentiates between an individual's involvement in political organizations, in protests, in signature campaigns, in contacting politicians, or in the boycotting of products. With these methods in mind, roughly half of the German population participates politically.⁵²

Likewise, other types of political activism have an impact on politics and society. For example, the impact of vegan activism and product boycotting, themselves classified as informal civic activism, cannot be overstated. Within the past year, the number of vegetarians in Germany has doubled from five to ten percent, and the market for substitute products is growing rapidly.⁵³ According to a survey by the market research institute Forsa, just under one in three Germans "often" buys plant-based alternatives to animal products. In the 14-to-29 age group, 17% eat such products every day. If the market continues to grow at this rate, by 2034 the market for meat substitutes will be larger than that for animal products.⁵⁴ In the political context, this points to a more progressive society, something demonstrably reflected by the electoral rise of the Greens.

⁴⁸ Rezo, "Zerstörung Teil 1: Inkompetenz," August 21, 2021, video, 28:15, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rIj3qskDAZM>.

⁴⁹ Rezo, "Zerstörung Teil 2: Klima-Katastrophe," September 4, 2021, video, 32:59, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ljcz4tA101U>.

⁵⁰ Rezo, "Zerstörung FINALE: Korruption," September 18, 2021, video, 43:07, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Ya7pEDndgE>.

⁵¹ Julia Simonson, Nadiya Kelle, Corinna Kausmann, and Clemens Tesch-Römer, "Freiwilliges Engagement in Deutschland: Der Deutsche Freiwilligensurvey 2019," Deutsches Zentrum für Altersfragen (2021): p. 230. [https://www.dza.de/fileadmin/dza/Dokumente/Forschung/PublikationenForschung/Freiwilliges Engagement in D](https://www.dza.de/fileadmin/dza/Dokumente/Forschung/PublikationenForschung/Freiwilliges_Engagement_in_Deutschland_-_der_Deutsche_Freiwilligensurvey_2019.pdf)

[eutschland - der Deutsche Freiwilligensurvey 2019.pdf](https://www.dza.de/fileadmin/dza/Dokumente/Forschung/PublikationenForschung/Freiwilliges_Engagement_in_Deutschland_-_der_Deutsche_Freiwilligensurvey_2019.pdf).

⁵² Julia Simonson, Nadiya Kelle, Corinna Kausmann, and Clemens Tesch-Römer, "Freiwilliges Engagement in Deutschland: Der Deutsche Freiwilligensurvey 2019," Deutsches Zentrum für Altersfragen (2021): p. 230. [https://www.dza.de/fileadmin/dza/Dokumente/Forschung/PublikationenForschung/Freiwilliges Engagement in D](https://www.dza.de/fileadmin/dza/Dokumente/Forschung/PublikationenForschung/Freiwilliges_Engagement_in_Deutschland_-_der_Deutsche_Freiwilligensurvey_2019.pdf)

[eutschland - der Deutsche Freiwilligensurvey 2019.pdf](https://www.dza.de/fileadmin/dza/Dokumente/Forschung/PublikationenForschung/Freiwilliges_Engagement_in_Deutschland_-_der_Deutsche_Freiwilligensurvey_2019.pdf).

⁵³ Stefanie Diemand, Svea Junge, and Julia Löhr, "Ernährungsreport: Doppelt so viele Vegetarier," Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, last modified May 19, 2021. <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/wirtschaft/ernaehrungsreport-doppelt-so-viele-vegetarier-17348877.html>.

⁵⁴ Stefanie Diemand, Svea Junge, and Julia Löhr, "Ernährungsreport: Doppelt so viele Vegetarier," Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, last modified May 19, 2021. <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/wirtschaft/ernaehrungsreport-doppelt-so-viele-vegetarier-17348877.html>

In addition to the aforementioned informal political groups, there are many different types of economic environmental activism. There are community activities, such as so-called “transition towns” or “urban gardening,” as well as repair cafés, citizens' cooperatives, zero waste shops, solidarity farms, common good economy companies, housing projects, and eco-villages.⁵⁵ All of these show an innovative approach towards environmentalism and sustainability on the part of civil society.

In general, it is harder to grasp the magnitude of informal civic activism because there is no official register and thus, no concrete numbers. There are unofficial lists of specific initiatives, such as the compilation by the Tagesschau that includes over 7000 projects in the sphere of refugee integration.⁵⁶ However, civic activism does not only comprise group and organizations but also individual activists who are oftentimes neglected in the study of civic activism.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, some criteria for the study of informal activism could be highlighted in this article, however, informal activism remains a highly ambiguous term that needs further research. The criteria include flat hierarchies, flexible organizational structures, unpaid work, and ephemeral engagement.

Furthermore, it was pointed out that in addition to the emerging informal forms of activism, modified forms of formally registered associations can also be counted as informal activism.

The landscape of civic activism in Germany is changing toward a more digital and youth-led future. Political informal groups tend to group together with others, working on a common goal and often establishing a supranational organization at the EU level. Compounding these trends has been the emergence of influencers in the activist and political sphere, such as Greta Thunberg, Luisa Neubauer, Rezo, etc. These influencers reach young people, bringing politics to a younger generation with all of the dangers and benefits held therein. The influence of activism on the political scene in Germany is apparent, as it has translated to voting outcomes such as the Berlin referendum and the Greens emerging as the country's third-largest party.

⁵⁵ Ansgar Klein, Lilian Schwalb, Charlotte Ruhbaum, Caroline Fricke and Lars Grotewold, “Klimaschutz als Gestaltungsaufgabe für die Zivilgesellschaft,” *Forschungsjournal Soziale Bewegungen* 33, no. 1 (2020): 73, doi: 10.1515/fjsb-2020-0007.

⁵⁶ “Integration von Flüchtlingen - Gute Ideen bundesweit,” Tagesschau, accessed September 9, 2021, <https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/hilfe-fuer-fluechtlinge-101.html>.

As a result, informal activism continues to grow as a trend in Germany, in contrast to the declining weight of registered associations, and the coming years will better demonstrate the impact this increasing activism has on the country's national politics.

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- Allgemeine Bevölkerungsumfrage der Sozialwissenschaften (ALLBUS) (engl: German General Social Survey – GGSS) → data up until 2018
- Bundesnetzwerk Bürgerschaftliches Engagement (engl: National Network for Civil Society)
 - Engagement macht stark! (engl: “Involvement makes you strong!” campaign)
- Bundestag: Unterausschuss „Bürgerschaftliches Engagement“ (engl: “Subcommittee on Civic Engagement”) → committee of the 18th legislative period (2013-2017)
- Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung, Volltextsuche: „Bürgerschaftliches Engagement“ (engl: Federal Agency for Civic Education; full-text search „civic engagement“)
- Deutscher Freiwilligensurvey (FWS) (engl: German Survey on Volunteering) → Data on both, formal and informal volunteering
- European Social Survey → data up until 2018
- Forschungsjournal Soziale Bewegungen (engl: Research Journal Social Movements)
- Göttinger Institut für Demokratieforschung (engl: Göttingen Institute for Democracy Research) → protest research in particular
- Institut für Demokratie und Zivilgesellschaft (engl: Institute for Democracy and Civil Society)
- Institut für Protest und Bewegungsforschung (ipb) (engl: Institute for the Study of Protest and Social Movements) – with 11 different working groups (RIOTS, gender movements, media, economy and work, migration (working title), post-structuralist perspectives, rights protest mobilizations, social movements in Africa, social movements and police, city/ space, environment and protest) More resources
- Institut für soziale Bewegungen (ISB) (engl: Institute for Social Movements)
- International Society for Third-Sector Research
 - List of journals that include research on nonprofits and civil society
- Sozio-oekonomisches Panel (SOEP) (engl: Socio economic panel) → registered NGOs only

- Statistisches Bundesamt (engl: Federal Office of Statistics) → including only the Federal Volunteers Service (German: *Bundesfreiwilligendienst*), foundations, and pastoral care of the Protestant and Catholic churches
- Wegweiser Bürgergesellschaft (engl: “Guide to civil society”) → Project of the foundation Cooperation of the Federal Ministry of the Interior
- Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung (WZB) (engl: Berlin Social Science Center)
 - “PRODAT – Dokumentation und Analyse von Protestereignissen in der Bundesrepublik (engl: Documentation and analysis of protest events in the Federal Republic) → project from 1993-2011
 - Protest-Monitoring on three levels of analysis – events, discourses, and actors → Project from 2019-2024
- Zentrum für Zivilgesellschaftsforschung (engl: Center for Civil Society Research)
- Zivilgesellschaft in Zahlen (ZiviZ) (“civil society in numbers”)
 - Forum Zivilgesellschaftsdaten (FZD)

Informal Activism: The Case of Italy

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This essay concerns itself with potentially new forms of informal civic and political activism and engagement in the context of Italy, as a case study, in the past two decades especially. It will seek to identify signs of new trends and/or patterns when it comes to the way citizens interact with their society at large and with the government/the state, taking into account the whole spectrum of political views and particular issues/causes, and with a particular focus on the use of new technologies.

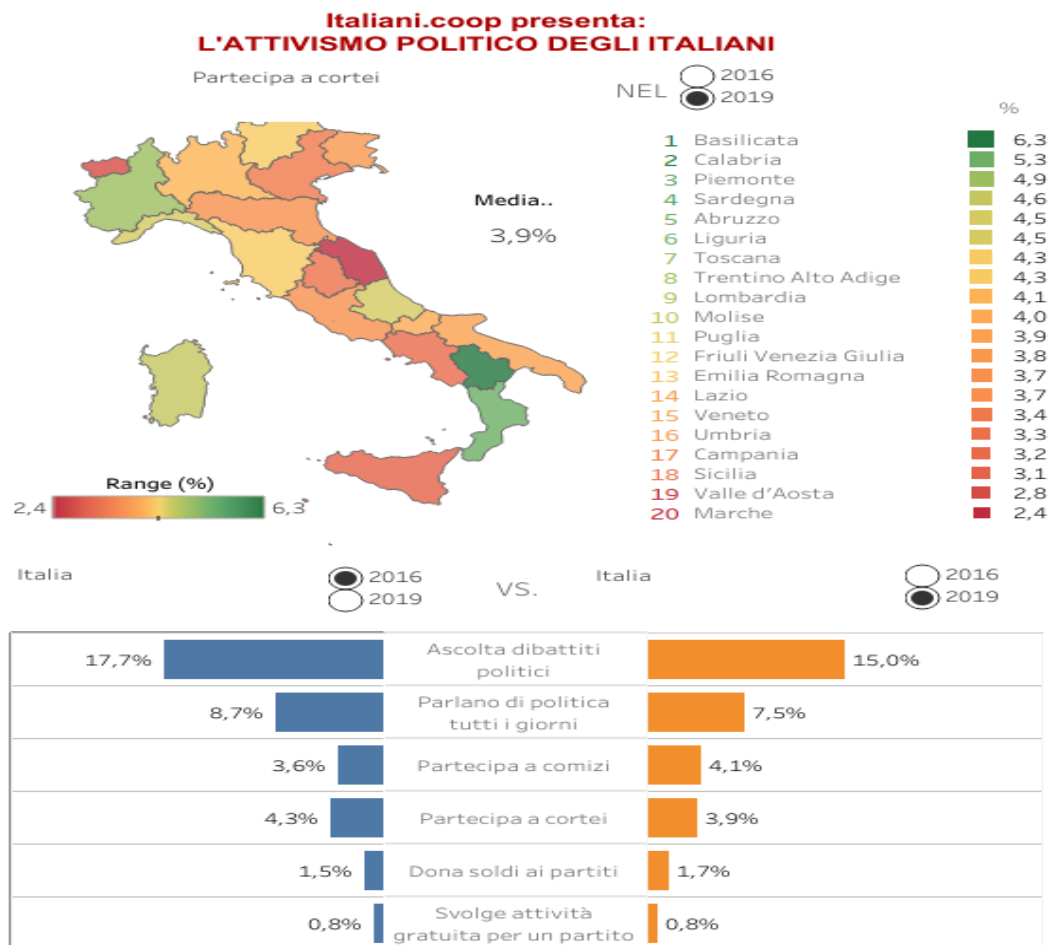
Defining different forms of engagement/participation in the vast realm of the public sphere is no straightforward task. As all things human, ways of acting do not develop in order to fit well-determined concepts, it is the other way around, and hence, overlaps and grey areas are bound to exist, making distinctions between formal and informal activism, for instance, rather blurry at their ends.

In a 2020 [article](#) published on the journal Social Indicators Research, Riniolo and Ortensi make the following useful distinctions:

1. Political engagement (discussing politics, seeking information on Italian politics, listening to political debate);
2. Conventional political participation (volunteering for a political party; taking part in political meetings, giving money to a political party);
3. Non-conventional political participation (taking part in political demonstrations, participation to a political association/organisation).

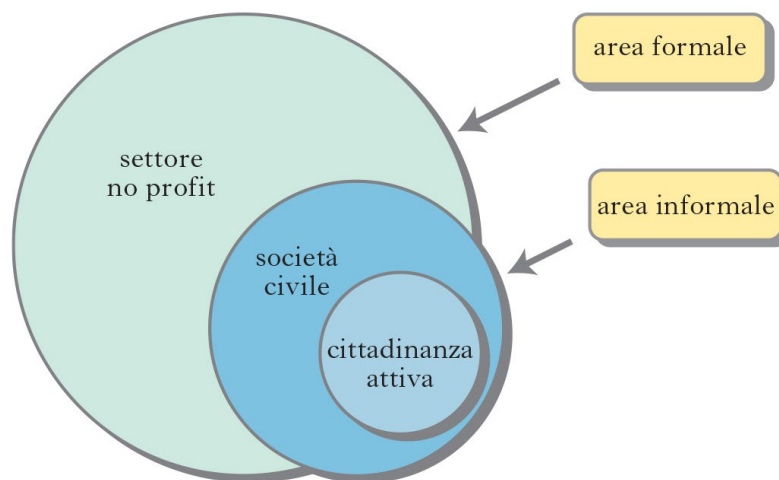
Based on empirical data on these forms of engagement/participation from the Italian national statistics institute (Istituto Nazionale di Statistica - ISTAT), whose original report can be found in full [here](#), the Ufficio Studi, that is, the research department, of the 'Coop' association created the

following interactive [graph](#). It shows the level of political engagement/participation of Italians by region, making a comparison between the data for the years 2016 and 2019.



Elaborazione Italiani.Coop su fonte Istat

When it comes to the concept of activism, Oxford Languages provides the following definition: activism is “the policy or action of using vigorous campaigning to bring about political or social change.” In a step to identify the constitutive and distinctive elements of civic activism, Moro provides the following, more detailed, definition: “a practice of citizenship that consists of a multiplicity of organisational forms and collective actions aimed at implementing rights, taking care of common goods and/or supporting subjects in conditions of weakness through the exercise of influence and responsibilities in policy making” (2013, p. 28). Moreover, as regards the identification of this phenomenon in relation to larger groups, it may be useful to visualise the relationship between the so-called non-profit sector, civil society and civic activism:



An element that undoubtedly characterises the phenomenon of civic activism is its plural nature. Consumer associations, social movements, environmental groups, grassroots movements, local committees, self-help groups, cooperatives and social enterprises, voluntary organisations, international cooperation organisations, civic initiatives on the Internet, groups for urban gardens and public parks, movements of users of public services, centres of advice and support for citizens, movements for the rights of women or migrants, canteens for the poor are just some of the forms that the civic activism assumes, while the common character of these civic activism organisations is their being actors in the public sphere.

Historical Continuity or Transformation?

In Italy, the idea is quite widespread that civic activism is in continuity with the forms of organised solidarity that took place in the country starting from the second half of the nineteenth century and that have mainly materialised, on the one hand, in initiatives of charity and mutualism promoted by the church and the Catholic movement, and, on the other, by the workers' movement (The third sector in united Italy, 2011). Cooperatives, charitable institutions, brotherhoods and associative forms aimed at supporting weak subjects in their primary needs are the examples that are given in this regard. In short, the dominant interpretation of Italian civic activism situates this phenomenon roughly together with the creation of the unitary state. Furthermore, it alludes to an Italian specificity that is based precisely on these roots. Yet, affirming such a line of continuity does not take into consideration two elements that are instead of the highest heuristic relevance

in the treatment of this phenomenon, in the sense that they make a difference and establish a demarcation, a 'before' and an 'after'.

The first element is constituted by the fact that, between the foundation of the unitary state and contemporaneity, the establishment and development of welfare systems throughout Europe takes place, that is to say the set of measures aimed at supporting citizens in their basic needs, as well as assisting them in the face of life events, such as illnesses, accidents at work, conditions of non self-sufficiency. This means that, on the one hand, education, health, assistance, social security, etc. have become a public responsibility - that of the state - and no longer just the expression of altruism, generosity and solidarity of social subjects; on the other hand and above all, that these matters have acquired the status of rights, more precisely of social rights, that is, of standards of quality of life recognised to all individuals as the founding content of citizenship in contemporary Europe. As Moro (2015) stresses, that all this, in Italy and elsewhere, is challenged both by material constraints and by ideological assumptions, does not eliminate this fact, nor does it authorise it to be underestimated as a crucial factor of discontinuity.

The second element to recall is that the last quarter of the 20th century has seen the transition to a new phase of modernity, or reflective modernity. It is a question, to use the thematisation of the most authoritative scholar of the subject (Beck 1986), of the transformation of the operational environment of the nation-states and of the societies designed on them due to the increase in the risks generated by progress, which at the same time increases the tasks of the state and questions their foundations. A process of individualisation of lifestyles arises, which entails greater demands for involvement and new forms of citizen participation outside the formal political system and globalisation (of markets, technologies, security risks, ecological problems and cultural belonging). Although this second element may seem less linked to the phenomenon of civic activism, it is nevertheless the context in which the latter emerged and takes on meaning, because these changes have at their centre the definition of citizenship, its modifications and expansions. One can hence point to the emergence and manifestation in Italian public life of a new type of subject with elements of differentiation greater and more important than those of continuity.

The phenomenon in question, however, not only presents discontinuities with respect to the past, but also some anomalies with respect to traditional socio-political habits and theories. As Moro (2015) points out, of these anomalies, three stand out. A first aspect concerns the fact that, in the constitutional systems of contemporary Europe, the forms of association of citizens relevant in the public arena are that of parties, which contribute to the definition of the general guidelines of national politics, and that of associations of producers, professionals and workers, such as trade

unions, business associations, and professional orders, which are aimed at protecting specific economic interests of well-defined categories of subjects. The other forms of association are classified under the general principle of freedom of association: a principle which, beyond its origins as a constitutional matter, presupposes a sort of 'division of labour' between public and private action. Freedom of association guarantees citizens the possibility of associating within the limits of legality, assuming that they do so to cultivate common interests of a private nature. Civic organisations, on the other hand, are entities that deal with public issues, and they do so not to defend specific economic interests, but to deal with matters that have to do with the general interest. Furthermore, unlike parties and traditional political associations, they do not operate in politics, but rather in policy, where programs aimed at addressing concrete issues are formulated, implemented and evaluated. We are therefore faced with a new kind of organisation.

A second anomaly can be found in the autonomy of their origins and their mission. While the literature on social movements and that on interest groups (Della Porta 2002; Mattina 2010) - in which this type of organisation is usually included - presuppose a dependence of civic initiatives on the political system and on the state, the phenomenon we are putting in focus, on the other hand, is structurally autonomous. This means that it does not take place in dependence or in connection, even in the form of opposition, with political and administrative power, but in relation to problems, situations, needs of reality. The fact that one of the lines of development of this phenomenon starting from the early 2000s is that of a growing relationship with public administrations, especially in welfare, does not eliminate this character of autonomy which concerns the reasons for the emergence of such experiences. Civic activism, that is, is formed not by opposition to political power, but to face public problems that are not recognised or managed in a bureaucratic way, that is, abandoned to the mechanisms of the market, where rights, common goods and the destiny of subjects are at stake.

A third anomaly to point out is that this organisational phenomenon is the bearer of a new paradigm in the Italian public scene. We can define it as a paradigm of results (Cotturri 2013), as opposed to the two traditional paradigms of forms and purposes, with which it is usual to identify the experiences of associations born in civil society. In other words, these organisations are oriented towards doing more than saying, more towards action than discourse in the public sphere, where instead the initiatives of citizens are usually reduced to expressive roles. This is visible in particular in the gap between these experiences and the participatory democracy programs promoted by public institutions at all levels, including the regional one, for at least a decade, in which participation essentially concerns the discussion on the production of administrative acts, while in the experience of civic activism the goal is to produce effects in reality, that is the outcome (Moro, 2015).

Technology and New Forms of Activism

Needless to say, the advent of the internet and of digital platforms and social media dramatically changed the way people consume information, communicate with others, and engage with society and the world. Invariably, it also provided new means to protest against government policies and to take action in order to draw attention to given issues and ultimately bring about change. A few of these new ways to act through the internet which emerged, give or take, in the past two decades and which were employed by Italian activists are the following:

Netstrike

This online form of protest, conceived by Italian Tommaso Tozzi, was first enacted in 1995 by the Florentine group Strano Network against the French government in opposition to France's nuclear tests in Mururoa. A netstrike, also called a virtual sit-in, in allusion to the popular sit-in protests of the US civil rights movement in the 1960s, is a form of electronic civil disobedience (ECD), also known as cyber civil disobedience, or simply cyber disobedience, which consists of the simultaneous and repetitive accessing of a specific target website by a large number of people, so that the system ultimately collapses and becomes inaccessible to the public. The two last famous netstrikes in Italy occurred in 2001 and in 2008, both having the then-Ministry of Public Education's website as target. It is hence fair to state that netstrike did not prevail as a common

new form of protest, and was substituted, among others, by the following two other forms of



activism.

Mailbombing

In the past few years, the Italian Coastal Guard has been the target of recurrent acts of mailbombing, that is, when often anonymous calls for action spread quickly throughout social media asking people to send often the very same message to a specific email address en masse, resulting in enormous amounts of messages flooding the recipient's email inbox. In the case of the guardia costiera, the content of these messages were urgent appeals to rescue or resume rescuing efforts in the Mediterranean of migrant boats in distress. This happened, for instance, in [2018](#), in [2019](#), leading up to a more comprehensive mailbombing effort in 2020 against the Italy-Libya migration deal, aimed directly at the Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte. This [campaign](#) was created by the initiative "[Io accolgo](#)" (I welcome), comprised of hundreds of civic society entities: "The 'I welcome' campaign was born, on the initiative of a broad front of civil society organizations, bodies and trade unions, to give a strong and unified response to the increasingly restrictive policies adopted by the Italian government and parliament towards asylum seekers and migrants (the 'closure of ports', the 'Security decree' etc.), who violate the principles affirmed

by our Constitution and international conventions and produce negative consequences on the entire Italian society.”

In 2020, Fridays for Future Italia also carried out a large [mailbombing](#) campaign. According to the group, more than 675,000 emails were sent to over 1000 members of the Italian and of the European parliament’s demanding concrete actions towards clean energy, environmental protection, and a more sustainable future.

Hactivism

When it comes to the interplay between activism and hacking, the obscure group Anonymous, active in Italy as Anonymous Italia, may come to mind. According to a 2020 report by the Italian secret services, the association was single-handedly responsible for the largest number of hacker attacks/instances of hactivism in Italy. The groups’ actions target a vast spectrum of institutions and organisations, both governmental and private, working on various fields. Anonymous Italy has so far hacked systems of, for instance, the Italian Ministry of Defense, the Italian Coastal Guard, of the office of the Italian prime minister, of the Bank of Italy, of the Enel energy group, Trenitalia, and of the LUISS Guido Carli university in Rome, among others, always subsequently claiming authorship of the hacks.

Several months ago, on August 1st, unidentified hackers carried out a comprehensive [cyber-attack](#) on the health authority’s systems in the Lazio region (Rome and surroundings), effectively shutting down, among others, the vaccination appointment booking website. Lazio’s health manager, Alessio D’Amato, stated that “it is a very powerful hacker attack, very serious... everything is out. The whole regional CED [database] is under attack.” This came not long after the Italian government announced that proof of vaccination/immunity, or the “green pass”, would be required for people to have access to a series of establishments and activities.

According to Clusit, the Italian association for cybersecurity (Associazione Italiana per la Sicurezza Informatica), in their 2021 report published this past March, and hence before the above-mentioned event, attacks on health-related organisations worldwide have increased considerably in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, amounting to 11,5% of all cyber-attacks in the year 2020, and with almost their entirety (10,5%) being directly related to Covid-19.

Overall, acts of hactivism per se towards healthcare organisations have been sparse, amounting to only 1% of the incidents in the healthcare sphere. The vast majority of them were classified as cyber-crime (94%) and cyber espionage (5%), which affected a vast array of

activities, from the production of personal protective equipment (PPE), such as masks, to vaccine research.

At a conceptual level, however, one might want to challenge the classification of cyber-attacks involving, for instance, ransomware, as a purely profit-seeking criminal activity disassociated from political views or goals, as both are most definitely not mutually exclusive, and in fact, ransomware attacks, when successful, translate into a funding source for further activist undertakings.

Final Remarks

Forms of civic and political activism are not only changing considerably but also growing fast in recent years, with tens of thousands of new civic organisations, initiatives and movements created in Italy after 2010, and traditional concepts such as “non-profit” being challenged and/or rethought. These new expressions of activism are mainly engaged in interventions to support weak or at-risk subjects, in education activities, in the protection of the territory and environment, in the collection and distribution of primary goods, etc., but also in the attempt to represent, by giving them a voice, the subjects most affected by crises and to promote proposals and interventions for public policies appropriate to the situation. Certainly, as seen above, actions are also taken for less noble purposes, but these too are new forms of activism, the other side of the coin.

The creation and expansion of more and larger social media platforms not only facilitated communication beyond borders dramatically, it also gave people access to other realities across the globe, effectively rendering the ‘local’ global. What is more, it enhanced the awareness of issues and causes which are not territory-bound but shared by humanity as a whole to considerable degrees, such as environmental protection and the climate crisis, justice, equality, and non-discrimination, the fight against poverty, etc. This enabled the establishment of truly transnational networks and associations, whether their national, regional, or local groups share a common name, such as is the case with Anonymous, Fridays for Future, and so many others, or not. The sharing, or copying, of ideas and tactics has become a distinctive and increasing feature of activism in its various forms in recent times, and so does international solidarity and support across borders, whether it takes place in form of so-called hashtags or via more concrete actions, such as fundraising over skills sharing all the way to hacktivism. Coordinated action, such a worldwide protest held on the same date, have also increased in recent years, a feature which solidifies the transnational nature of contemporary activism.

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Civic Organisation in Europe: A Study of Ireland

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Introduction

For much of its post-colonial existence, it has been said that there was three great pillars of the 26-county Irish State which could be found in every village in every corner of the country—the Catholic Church, Fianna Fáil, and the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA). Although in the Ireland of 2021, this can no longer be said to still be the case. With the exception of the GAA, which largely still thrives across the island, these hegemonic pillars of Irish society have seen a rapid retreat in their reach and power: a Catholic Church repeatedly rocked by scandals has led the Irish population to reckon with its role in society and, after 61 non-consecutive years at the helm of the State, Fianna Fáil has yet to recover from its unprecedented electoral collapse in support at the 2011 general election.

With the retreat of these hegemonic organisations, Irish civil society has seen a transformation—with both formal organisations and informal groupings emerging in their place. This short paper seeks to provide a snapshot and overview of informal civil society acting within and shaping contemporary Irish civil society in 2021, based upon existing data and literature.

Civil Society in Ireland

Hard facts and figures related to citizenship participation in civil society are somewhat irregularly taken and sparse in Ireland. The country boasts a relatively large non-profit sector, with 32,841 registered organisations in 2020 employing 165,075 individuals.⁵⁷ Although this large number does cover a wide range of organisations including large multinational charities, housing organisations, political parties, religious organisations, and—for reasons of their legal status and governance structures—3,948 primary and secondary schools.⁵⁸ As one can gather from the list of organisations included in these statistics, this sector is hardly what one would characterise as ‘informal’. While not exactly analogous or representative of engagement with (informal) civil society or activism, in its most recent survey on the topic, the Central Statistics Office found that 28.4 per cent of Irish adults volunteered, 65 per cent of which were over the age of 45.⁵⁹ In

⁵⁷ ‘Ireland’s nonprofit sector 2020’ (Benefacts, 2021) <<https://www.benefacts.ie/insights/reports/2020/irelands-third-sector/>> accessed 22 October 2021.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ CSO, QNHS Volunteering and Wellbeing Q3 2013 <<https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/q-vwb/qnhsvolunteeringandwellbeingq32013/>> accessed 11 August 2021.

contrast to electoral politics and public office in Ireland, where women have historically been under-represented, women are over-represented in civil society and community activism.⁶⁰

Although alongside this formal civil society sector, there are many informal groupings and movements that are active throughout the island of Ireland. Many of these informal groups come together to oppose or support specific politically salient issues of the day and regularly disperse after the matter has been adequately addressed or a natural loss of energy amongst activists. Further, many young people and those at the peripheries of Irish society—groups ostensibly more likely to partake in informal civil society and social movements—emigrate in large numbers, reducing the pool of possible recruits for sustaining a movement or campaign.⁶¹ Although, there are several cases where these informal groups continue activities, form more structured organisations, or join already established organisations.

Ireland has a long historic relationship with civil society, nurtured during the waning days of British colonialism on the island of the 19th century.⁶² Informal forms of civil society can be traced back far into Irish history and, arguably, it was largely responsible for the achievement of the State's independence.⁶³ Most notably, informal civil society during the Land War originated the term 'boycott', after a campaign of social ostracization of Charles Boycott was organised by the Irish Land League in response to the eviction of eleven tenant farmers after a bad harvest. Cox highlights the centrality of 'historical struggles over class and land, state and ethnicity, gender and sexuality to Irish politics, the extent to which both states are shaped by movement struggles and their ebb and flow'.⁶⁴

Although, for simplicity's sake, one can say contemporary Irish informal civil society and movements largely fit the mould of new social movements that emerged in the context of the late 1960s. Dunphy provides a long list of informal civil society movements that emerged alongside similar new social movements in other territories between the late 1960s and the 1980s on a diverse range of political issues such as anti-nuclear power, anti-racism, anti-war, the protection of the Irish language, and unemployment.⁶⁵ Specific groups of note from this era include

⁶⁰ Richard Dunphy, 'Beyond Nationalism? The Anti-Austerity Social Movement in Ireland: Between Domestic Constraints and Lessons from Abroad' (2017) 13 (3) *Journal of Civil Society* 267, p 269.

⁶¹ Frank O'Connor, 'The Presence and Absence of Protest in Austerity Ireland' in Donatella della Porta, Massimiliano Andretta, Tiago Fernandes, Eduardo Romanos, Francis O'Connor, and Markos Vogiatzoglou (eds.), *Late Neoliberalism and its Discontents in the Economic Crisis Comparing Social Movements in the European Periphery* (Palgrave Macmillan 2017), p 79.

⁶² For further reading, see: Peadar Kirby, 'Civil society, social movements and the Irish state' (2010) 18 (2) *Irish Journal of Sociology* 1.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ Laurence Cox, 'The Irish water charges movement: Theorising "the social movement in general"' (2017) 9 (1) *Interface: A Journal for and about Social Movements* 161, p 171.

⁶⁵ Dunphy (n 3), p 269.

Concerned Parents Against Drugs, the Dublin Housing Action Committee, the Irish Gay Rights Movement, the Irish Women's Liberation Movement, and the Northern Irish Civil Rights Association.

As civil society grew in the late 20th century, the State pushed for social partnerships with civil society organisations and class cooperation. This brought formalisation and professionalisation into Ireland's third sector but brought a certain level of demobilisation and fragmentation.⁶⁶ In this way, the State updated its corporatist structures that had been ingrained in Ireland since the enactment of the 1937 Constitution and made them fit for the emerging neoliberal age and Celtic Tiger boom. To this end, the government of the day launched a framework of social partnership in 1987.⁶⁷ This form of partnership cooperation and funding legitimised certain civil society actors while conversely inhibiting others who refused participation in partnerships or formed outside the overtone window through specific public image formation in the media.⁶⁸ Further, during this period, Daly noted that 'inadequate structures of internal governance' were a major obstacle for civil society actors to access funding and thus, this form of State-civil society cooperation created a pull towards formalisation and professionalisation.⁶⁹ Depending on one's outlook, this may be characterised as Ireland's civil society being infected with the scourge of bureaucratisation or the blessing of professionalism. Several groups, such as a number of migrant-rights groups, reported a feeling of marginalisation in the partnership structure.⁷⁰ This, together with tension with State policies, led several groups to reject the 'illusion of consensus' narrative that characterised this form of State-civil society cooperation and lead to a resurgence of informal civil society—partially in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crash.

Informal civil society—e.g., those actors independent from and not reliant on the State—has effectively been in a position 'to foster and engage in public debate about why, how and to whom they should be accountable, debate which has largely been absent in the Irish context'.⁷¹ This has allowed civil society groups to act as agents of societal transformation by creating and fermenting public debate on a wide scale of social issues many years before they reach mainstream political debate. Groups have led the way on a range of issues such as access to

⁶⁶ Cox (n 8), p 173.

⁶⁷ O'Connor (n 3), p 75.

⁶⁸ Tamara Steger and Ariel Dreihobl, 'The Anti-Fracking Movement in Ireland: Perspectives from the Media and Activists' (2018) 12 (3) *Environmental Communication* 344, p 344; Gary T. Marx, 'External Efforts to Damage or Facilitate Social Movements', in Mayer N. Zald and John D. McCarthy (ed.), *The Dynamics of Social Movements: Resource Mobilization, Social Control, and Tactics* (Winthrop Publishers 1979).

⁶⁹ Siobhan Daly, 'Mapping civil society in the Republic of Ireland' (2008) 43 (2) *Community Development Journal* 157, p 164.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, p 169.

⁷¹ *Ibid*, p 164.

contraception and abortion, the decriminalisation of homosexuality, and the legalisation of divorce and same-sex marriage many years before these issues were legislated for or passed through a referendum.

Dunphy highlighted the tendency towards localism in Irish politics.⁷² This phenomenon also extends to civil society in Ireland. These informal civil movements focus campaigns on a single issue at local levels and are predominantly aimed at city or county councils, the lowest level of governance in Ireland. Although quite a significant number of campaigns can be observed voicing grievances of urbanisation policies implemented or planned by local authorities such as pedestrianisation, cycle paths, and plans for traffic re-rerouting. While many of these movements originate out of existing community organisations, these campaigns regularly draw in citizens who were previously not engaged in these existing organisations. These movements constantly emerge and dissipate as issues and proposals arise from local authorities although there are cases of these community organisations developing sustained, long-term engagement in their communities. Some of these sustained organisations develop into formalised civil society coalitions or organisations while others remain loose networks of activists and engaged citizens.

Civil society in any state has an array of tactics to choose from for their actions and campaigns. Although this choice is largely dictated by the structure of the movement or organisation in question. This is due to the professional or legal relations that actors have entered into over the course of their operations. Largely, groups are bound by the legal rules in place in Ireland, unless a breach of these rules is seen as being sufficiently necessary for their cause or if an organisation has explicit provisions and structures in place to support members who do breach the law.⁷³ Those that do choose to breach the law are, generally, informal and radical groups that are not as constrained as formalised organisations in the third sector with donors, reputations, and stakeholders who they would not wish to unsettle.⁷⁴

Civil society grew and was gaining traction even before the crash of 2008. During the Celtic Tiger years, the seemingly inequitable distribution of the national dividends of Ireland's booming economy led certain citizens to question the societal consensus via civil society participation. Further, the retreat of the scandal-ridden Catholic Church—which deeply permeated society and provided many services within communities—as well as several highly-published corruption scandals led citizens to engage with civil society. This citizen participation was taken to a whole

⁷² Dunphy (n 3), p 268.

⁷³ Lorna Gold, 'The Changing Faces of the Climate Movement in Ireland' in David Robbins, Diarmuid Torney, Pat Brereton (eds.), *Ireland and the Climate Crisis* (Palgrave Macmillan 2020), ps 272-273.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

other level in the years following the financial crisis when Ireland found herself in the company of Greece in the 'League of Misery'.⁷⁵

Informal Civil Society and The Fight for Economic and Social Rights

Despite relatively active citizenship engagement with and participation in civil society before the 2008 financial crash, the crisis of 2008 accelerated the development of civil society. As noted by della Porta, Ireland was initially an outlier among the debtor nations pejoratively known as the PIIGS in how its population responded to the austerity and punitive economic policies implemented at the insistence of the Troika.⁷⁶ While this does not necessarily perfectly sum up the post-2008 Irish experience, it is indeed true that mass social movements encompassing formalised civil society largely did not occur, as outlined by Hearne: 'the majority of Irish community NGOs and charities did not engage in resistance due to the dominance of corporatist and partnership political strategies'.⁷⁷ As such, those wishing to push back against austerity and the degradation of their material and social conditions were required to look beyond the formal and institutionalized actors within Irish civil society to more informal groupings.

Effective opposition was thus found in informal civil society involving radical and dedicated community activists. The major event in these years was the campaign against the introduction of water charges in 2014. Small pockets of resistance organised in communities within Dublin organically and spread to all corners of the State. The initial community-organised movements predominantly took direct action against authorities by blocking and obstructing the installation of water meters. As this became a widespread phenomenon, demonstrations and marches developed. At the height of the movement, over 100,000 individuals marched the streets of Dublin but also, coordinated locally organised simultaneous protests across the country in up to 106 different locations.⁷⁸ This was paired with principled non-payment of water charges and fines incurred from non-payment until 2018, the government suspended the scheme in 2016. These events ended up becoming, by proportion to Ireland's population, the largest anti-austerity movement in post-2008 Europe.⁷⁹ These informal civil society movements linked with opposition

⁷⁵ Takis S. Pappas and Eoin O'Malley, 'Civil Compliance and "Political Luddism": Explaining Variance in Social Unrest During Crisis in Ireland and Greece' (2014) 58 (12) *American Behavioral Scientist* 1592, p 1592.

⁷⁶ Donatella della Porta, 'Late Neoliberalism and Its Discontents: An Introduction' in Donatella della Porta, Massimiliano Andretta, Tiago Fernandes, Eduardo Romanos, Francis O'Connor, and Markos Vogiatzoglou (eds.), *Late Neoliberalism and its Discontents in the Economic Crisis Comparing Social Movements in the European Periphery* (Palgrave Macmillan 2017), p 31.

⁷⁷ Rory Hearne, 'Achieving a Right to the City in Practice: Reflections on Community Struggles in Dublin' (2014) 7 (3) *Human Geography* 14, p 21.

⁷⁸ Cox (n 8), p 182.

⁷⁹ Della Porta (n 20), p 31.

left-wing political parties, trade unions to form the Right2Water and later the Right2Change alliance which sought to sustain the movement's energy and spread it into other aspects of Irish political life—a goal which largely did not materialise.

While small-scale and dispersed informal civil activism took place in the wake of the 2008 financial crash, housing has since arguably become the single most politically salient issue within Irish society and fertile soil for informal activism. Many groups have emerged in this context employing a variety of tactics from blocking evictions, street protests, and squatting. Dublin has experienced widescale financialization in the real estate market. The city has seen institutional investment in real estate rise from €0.4 billion in 2017 to €2.4 billion in 2019.⁸⁰ In the same period, the average standardised rent in the capital rose from €1,668 per month in Dublin during the first quarter of 2017 to €2,052 per month in the final quarter of 2019.⁸¹ Homelessness in the city also rose during that period from 5,293 (2,046 of which were children) to 6,821 (2,553 of which were children).⁸²

Against this backdrop, several informal housing action groups have sprung up. Lima notes that amongst these housing activists, many have increased levels of political awareness, particularly amongst those connected or once involved in the aforementioned anti-water charges movement.⁸³ These groups engaged in housing action pursue several strategies and echo demands for the right to the city. The majority of these largely focus on direct action via building occupations, protests of ongoing evictions, and street demonstrations. Other groups use social media networks, as well as established media outlets, to promote and spread their messages. These movements aim their advocacy work towards both the local and national authorities, as well as the general public to raise awareness, as both have specific competencies over different areas of housing and planning policy.

Informal Civil Society and The Climate

⁸⁰ Lois Kapila, 'Mapping Dublin's Growing Constellation of Company Landlords' (28 April 2021, Dublin Inquirer) <<https://www.dublininquirer.com/2021/04/28/mapping-dublin-s-growing-constellation-of-company-landlords>> accessed 12 August 2021.

⁸¹ Ronan Lyons, 'The Daft.ie Rental Price Report – Q1' (Daft.ie) <https://ww1.daft.ie/report/2017-Q1-rental-daft-report.pdf?d_rd=1> accessed 13 August 2021; Ronan Lyons, 'The Daft.ie Rental Price Report – Q4' (Daft.ie) <https://ww1.daft.ie/report/2019-Q4-rental-daftreport.pdf?d_rd=1> accessed 13 August 2021.

⁸² Department of Housing, Planning, Community & Local Government, 'Homelessness Report January 2017' <<https://assets.gov.ie/109285/eb36ffe2-45dc-4a03-8b71-293be7ca5cec.pdf>> accessed 12 August 2021; Department of Housing, Planning & Local Government, 'Homelessness Report December 2019' <<https://assets.gov.ie/108963/3fd25c2d-4fe8-4a34-8c8d-04fe91448ad9.pdf>> accessed 12 August 2021.

⁸³ Valesca Lima, 'Urban austerity and activism: direct action against neoliberal housing policies' (2019) 36 (2) Housing Studies 258, p 266.

As the consequences and impending dangers of largescale climate change have become increasingly apparent, climate-related issues have garnered ever more media attention and mobilised increasing numbers of individuals into climate movements. The climate and environmental movement in Ireland formed largely around anti-nuclear power action in the 1970s.⁸⁴ One major step in the development of the Irish climate movement was the foundation of the Stop Climate Chaos in 2006 which represented the first coalition of its kind in Ireland, bringing together 30 organisations. In Gold's assessment, the coalition adopted an 'insider-outside approach' to climate activism.⁸⁵ On the 'inside', the coalition lobbied the Irish government, providing scientific advice during numerous legislative processes, and contributed to wider debates in the European Union. At the same time, in an 'outsider' role, the coalition would regularly attempt to stimulate debate with media appearances and publicity stunts.⁸⁶

Although those from several corners of the climate movement were somewhat dismayed with the lack of progress achieved by SCC. The years since its foundation has seen the entrenchment of the Irish government with a lack of action and elite climate politics, resulting in Ireland remaining one of the worst-performing EU Member States in terms of cutting emissions.⁸⁷ In a similar vein, these climate-focused and environmental movements do not always have such an excellent relationship with the Green Party of Ireland, which is supportive of gradual reforms and has a relatively centrist political orientation.⁸⁸ Many have harshly criticised their role in the current government and the lack of ambition in Ireland's recent landmark Climate Act which has set the country's path towards climate neutrality by 2050 and eventual decarbonisation. Further, many have scorned the Green Party for their leadership's support of the EU-Canada Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA), which they see as counterproductive for Ireland's climate commitments. The apparent failure of the insider-outsider approach and lack of robust climate action on the part of the Irish government has provided a fertile ground for informal groups and movements to emerge demanding more transformative change.

Localised climate movements have emerged in Ireland to fill this space. These local movements regularly link with national organisations, effectively embedding local issues in national climate debates and vice-versa.⁸⁹ Anti-fracking and fossil fuel divestment groups have

⁸⁴ Gold (n 17), p 274.

⁸⁵ Ibid, p 275.

⁸⁶ Ibid, p 275.

⁸⁷ Louise Michelle Fitzgerald, Paul Tobin, Charlotte Burns, and Peter Eckersley, 'The 'Stifling' of New Climate Politics in Ireland' (2021) 9 (2) Politics and Governance 41, p 41.

⁸⁸ Ryan Bakker, Liesbet Hooghe, Seth Jolly, Gary Marks, Jonathan Polk, Jan Rovny, Marco Steenbergen, and Milada Anna Vachudova, '2019 Chapel Hill Expert Survey' <<https://www.chesdata.eu/2019-chapel-hill-expert-survey>> accessed 19 September 2021.

⁸⁹ Gold (n 17), p 281.

emerged throughout the country, but particularly in rural areas—particularly significant for the Irish movement, which has for so long been restricted to Dublin and other urban areas.⁹⁰ In response to the Irish government's grant of licences for the development of sites for the extraction of shale gas via hydraulic fracking, an anti-fracking movement has also emerged in Ireland. By 2015, 16 anti-fracking organisations had been founded across the island of Ireland.⁹¹

Against this backdrop of elite climate politics, which was unaligned with prevailing scientific consensus, Friends of the Irish Environment initiated a case against the Irish government before the Courts to induce the machinery of State into action. This case proved successful, with the High Court requiring the State to do more and increase its commitments. This has given hope for similar future actions if the government once again fails to act. This mirrors similar instances of strategic climate litigation in other jurisdictions such as Germany and the Netherlands.

Gold posited that 2018 marked a significant shift in the Irish climate movement.⁹² This shift was largely inspired by events abroad—specifically that of Greta Thunberg's school strike which began in August 2018 and Extinction Rebellion's first actions in London in October 2018. The Fridays for Future movement spread to Ireland with a single student going on a school strike in Cork City in January 2019.⁹³ Alongside this student-led movement, the Schools Climate Action Network (SCAN) was also founded in order to provide school and teacher support for the student-led climate movement.⁹⁴ Teachers within SCAN have played a central role in the organisation of the protests and have effectively linked, through their membership of teachers' unions, with the Irish Congress of Trade Unions for logistical support with the school strikes and student-led climate protests in urban centres.⁹⁵ These student movements have subsequently grown to a level where they can regularly bring thousands of children and adolescents in Ireland's streets and has held events where activists can engage the Leader of the Green Party and Minister of the Environment, Eamon Ryan. Fitzgerald, Tobin, Burns, and Eckersley argue that the emerging calls for radical change from the Irish climate movement, together with the governance backdrop, has the potential for enacting transformative change.⁹⁶

⁹⁰ Ibid, p 276.

⁹¹ Steger and Dreihobl (n 12), p 345.

⁹² Gold (n 17), p 278.

⁹³ Kevin O'Sullivan, 'School students lay out climate demands in Leinster House' (7 March 2019, The Irish Times) <<https://www.irishtimes.com/news/environment/school-students-lay-out-climate-demands-in-leinster-house-1.3817673>> accessed 03 September 2021.

⁹⁴ Gold (n 17), p 279.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Fitzgerald, Tobin, Burns, and Eckersley (n 31), p 46.

Informal Civil Society and the COVID-19 Pandemic

Like everywhere, COVID-19 has had its impacts on Irish civil society. With restricted access to public spaces, groups have had to adjust their methods of action accordingly. Many increased their social media presence and there are examples of socially distanced protests occurring during the pandemic while others have faced extreme difficulties in continuing their operations.

Throughout the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, movements formed by those opposed to lockdowns and vaccine sceptics have emerged. Although these have not gathered the same traction as those in other European states and have remained relatively disparate. This is arguably due to the lack of far-right populist movements and parties in Ireland. As Arklow notes, Ireland theoretically displays many conditions—e.g., increased immigration, a proposal electoral system, and rapid socio-economic change—that would allow for the growth of far-right populist movements although this has largely not occurred.⁹⁷ Observers have posited two main reasons for this. First, the hegemonic nature of the two dominant conservative parties, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, who from time to time play into and harness anti-immigrant sentiment.⁹⁸ Second, researchers have pointed toward the progressive nature of Irish nationalism, as embodied in Sinn Féin and other republican movements who base their ideology on the struggle against imperialism, oppression, and prejudice.⁹⁹ Ireland is firmly anchored in the Anglo-American cultural sphere and those who found themselves opposed to government-imposed lockdowns and sceptical of the merits of vaccines took to the internet and social media, inspired by alt-right politics and tactics pursued by those in other Anglosphere states. Neumayer, Pfaff and Plümper recorded a total of 52 actions that took place against COVID-19 related measures in Ireland between March 2020 to January 2021.¹⁰⁰ The largest of these, attracting several hundred individuals, took place in central Dublin.¹⁰¹ This specific protest was organised by Yellow Vest Ireland, ideological comrades of the Gilets Jaunes across the Celtic Sea, and supported by fringe internet personalities and extra-parliamentary far-right political parties. More recently, groups have been organising protests against pandemic-related restrictions, vaccinations, and green passes at the houses of several government ministers via social media. Despite this, it must be

⁹⁷ Jonathan Arklow, 'Antifa without fascism: the reasons behind the anti-fascist movement in Ireland' (2020) 35 (1) Irish Political Studies 115, p 119.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Eric Neumayer Katharina Pfaff Thomas Plümper, 'Protest Against COVID-19 Containment Policies in European Countries' (2021) <https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3844989> accessed 24 September 2021, p 34.

¹⁰¹ For example: Adam Daly, 'Protest in Dublin city centre against vaccines and new Covid Certs' (The Journal, 24 July 2021) <<https://www.thejournal.ie/dublin-protest-anti-restriction-anti-vaccine-5504842-Jul2021/>> accessed 23 October 2021; Jennifer Cosgrove, Conor Lally, and Sarah Burns, 'Four arrested in clashes at anti-facemask protest in Dublin' (The Irish Times, 22 August 2020) <<https://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/four-arrested-in-clashes-at-anti-facemask-protest-in-dublin-1.4336794>> accessed 23 October 2021.

noted that Ireland has one of the largest vaccine take-up rates in the world and that these groups are little more than a loud minority.

The COVID-19 pandemic affected civil society in other ways, beyond precipitating in reactionary anti-lockdown and anti-vaccine groups. One such group that has undertaken drastic actions has been asylum seekers who have claimed international protection in Ireland. While this fight for rights is not a new occurrence, the situation of asylum seekers has been greatly affected and worsened during the pandemic. In Ireland, asylum seekers are housed in centres scattered around the State as part of a system known as Direct Provision. This is a system consisting of caravan parks, former hostels, and hotels which has been over-capacity for several of the past years.¹⁰² While in theory entry into Direct Provision is not mandatory, if an asylum seeker refuses, they lose all access and entitlement to support from the State. This system has been widely condemned by international observers due to the lack of autonomy of residents, scarcity of amenities, overcrowded living quarters, and limited access to social services.¹⁰³ COVID-19 has had several impacts on individuals within the Direct Provision system. The rooms in centres are shared with several people, with a reported 1,700 of the approximately 7,000 individuals in Direct Provision sharing a room with one or two non-family members in May 2020.¹⁰⁴ This clearly limited the ability for individuals in the centres to social distance or self-isolate, with 55 per cent of respondents to a survey conducted by the Irish Refugee Council feeling unsafe during the pandemic and 50 per cent not being physically able to socially distance in their residence.¹⁰⁵ In response, over 600 asylum seekers were moved from the most overcrowded direct provision centres in Dublin in May 2020 to ensure social distancing could be observed.¹⁰⁶ As Gusciute highlights, 105 Direct Provision residents were moved to a new centre rural County Kerry, in the extreme southwest of the island.¹⁰⁷ 25 per cent of the residents who had been relocated to that Direct Provision in County Kerry centre subsequently tested positive for the COVID-19 virus. In

¹⁰² Shannon Donnelly, 'Direct Provision Is Failing Asylum Seekers In Ireland' (Human Rights Pulse, 9 August 2020) <<https://www.humanrightspulse.com/mastercontentblog/direct-provision-is-failing-asylum-seekers-in-ireland>> accessed 18 October 2021.

¹⁰³ For example: 'ICCL/ICHR submission to Oireachtas Justice Committee Consultation on Direct Provision' (Irish Council for Civil Liberties, 4 June 2019) <<https://www.iccl.ie/news/iccl-ichr-submission-to-oireachtas-justice-committee-consultation-on-direct-provision/>> accessed 19 October 2021; 'Reflections on 21 Years of Direct Provision' (Doras, 12 April 2021) <<https://doras.org/reflections-on-21-years-of-direct-provision/>> accessed 19 October 2021; 'End Direct Provision' (Amnesty International Ireland) <<https://www.amnesty.ie/end-direct-provision/>> accessed 19 October 2021.

¹⁰⁴ Aisling Kenny, 'Concern over numbers sharing bedrooms in direct provision' (RTÉ News, 5 May 2020) <<https://www.rte.ie/news/coronavirus/2020/0505/1136471-coronavirus-direct-provision/>> accessed 19 October 2021.

¹⁰⁵ "'Powerless' Experiences of Direct Provision During the Covid-19 Pandemic' (Irish Refugee Council, August 2020), ps 9-10.

¹⁰⁶ Egle Gusciute, 'Leaving the most vulnerable behind: Reflection on the Covid-19 pandemic and Direct Provision in Ireland' (2020) 28 (2) Irish Journal of Sociology 237, p 238.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

response to their situation, individuals in the centres protested their move and organised themselves—ultimately declaring a hunger strike. This was a significant move due to the long history and symbolism of hunger strikes in Ireland’s history.¹⁰⁸ This hunger strike in Kerry was then followed by similar actions in Direct Provision centres in County Cork and County Meath. The experiences of Direct Provision residents during the pandemic led to intensified acts of solidarity from those outside the centres, including protests and online campaigns.¹⁰⁹ These experiences successfully led to the political parties which entered into a governmental coalition in June 2020 to commit to the end of Direct Provision and a subsequent white paper outlining the government’s plan to end the system.

Conclusion

Informal civil society in Ireland remains an understudied important issue. As Ireland has undergone a metamorphosis in recent years, its civil society has mirrored this process of transformation. This is particularly marked after the 2008 financial crisis and subsequent bout of austerity. This change has continued in the decade after the crisis and has possibly been compounded by the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic—the results of which are yet to be fully realised. Informal civil society in Ireland is active in both battles over the contested past and the future direction of the country. It has flourished in several sectors but, specifically, social issues and matters related to the climate crisis have emerged as politically salient issues and have had precipitated the growth of informal civil society in the State. A clear tendency of groups to formalise has been observed in Irish civil society although there remains a resistance to this, and tensions exist between formal and informal civil society groups.

There are several specific issues that could not be addressed in this paper that are extremely active in Ireland such as the peace movement, contested battles over the narrative of Ireland’s past, and the wider movement for migrant rights. Further, the phenomenon of referenda in Ireland has not been addressed in this paper, which in itself has received much scholarly attention and is a topic too vast for such a limited overview of Irish civil society.

¹⁰⁸ George Sweeney, ‘Irish Hunger Strikes and the Cult of Self-Sacrifice’ (1993) 28 (3) *Journal of Contemporary History* 421.

¹⁰⁹ Fiona Murphy, ‘Direct Provision, Rights and Everyday Life for Asylum Seekers in Ireland during COVID-19’ (2021) 10 *Social Sciences* 140, ps 148-149.

Mapping Informal Civic Activism in Bulgaria

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In the Bulgarian context civic activism is associated with the involvement of individuals or groups in broadly speaking the life of the community, often in response to a particular issue, as a reaction to the lack of institutional engagement, mainly on the local or national level. While ‘formal’ civic activism happens under the umbrella of organized civil society (i.e., CSOs), informal civic activism denotes the self-initiated coming together of citizens in response to a certain issue. Thus, informal civic activism often corresponds to practicing democracy from below.

This is important to examine in the case of Bulgaria, a country described as a ‘semi-consolidated democracy’ by the Freedom House’s Nations in Transit 2020 Report. Its democracy score dropped to 59/100 in 2020.¹¹⁰ In addition to this, Bulgaria has been shaken by a variety of issues recently:

- Protests against the now former GERB¹¹¹ led government, the Prosecutor General and the endemic corruption.
- Governmental crisis with 3 elections in one year and an inability to form a government (2021).
- Environmental concerns (air pollution), healthcare crisis (exacerbated by the pandemic and the emigration of healthcare workers) and energy crisis to mention only a few.

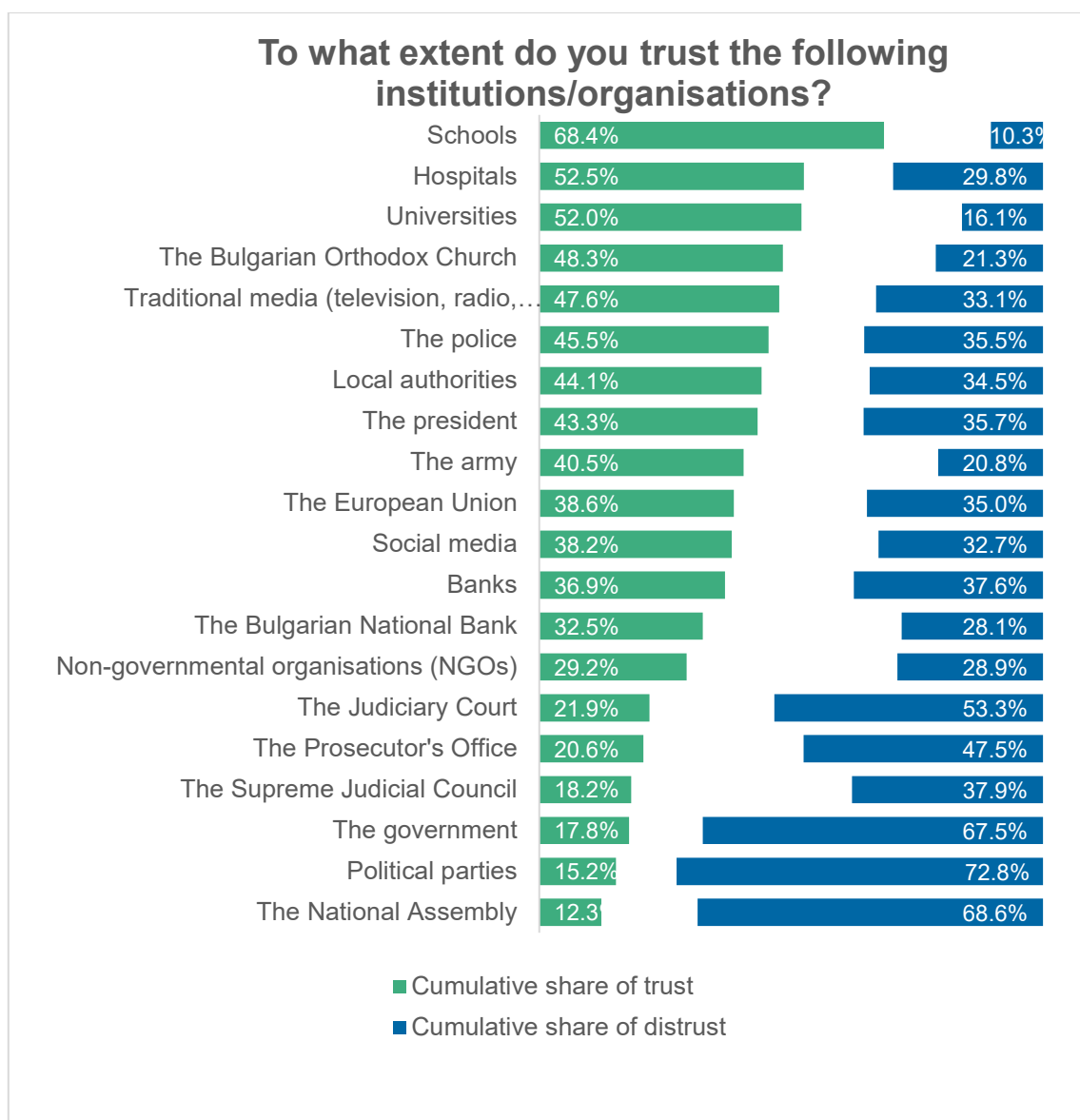
The response of the various institutions to this plethora of crisis was unsatisfactory, which is manifested in the low levels of trust Bulgarians feel especially towards representative political institutions¹¹². State authorities such as the Judiciary, the Prosecutor General, the Supreme Court, the Government, Political Parties and the National Assembly have the lowest score of trust out of 20 bodies listed (Graph 1), with a strongly defined negative balance. Levels of trust are between 12.3% and 21.9% and levels of distrust between 37% and 72.8%. The levels of distrust either reinforce or foster a perception among citizens that their opinions are not taken into consideration by institutions: 44%. Within these 44%, more people have not made any

¹¹⁰ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/bulgaria/nations-transit/2020> accessed on 12.08.2021

¹¹¹ GERB is a conservative political party of former PM Boyko Borissov.

¹¹² The following data is gathered as part of the Civic Health Index Bulgaria in 2021 and will be published on www.sofiaplatform.org

suggestions or recommendations ever to institutions on how to improve policies, than within the 56% who think that institutions consider citizens' opinion to a large or to some extent.



Graph 1. Citizens' level of trust/distrust in institutions and organisations in Bulgaria, 2021, Civic Health Index Bulgaria

This goes to show the limited ways in which Bulgarians practice citizenship. 80% think that participating in elections is effective, followed by attracting media attention (66%), doing volunteer work (53%), taking part in protests (47.9%) and signing petitions (40%). Only 31% think that boycotting certain products is effective. This was the case with the newspaper chain store Lafka a few years ago, being owned by the media mogul Delyan Peevski, sanctioned in 2021 under the Magnitsky act for corruption. Similarly, citizens increased consumption at a popular toy store 'Hypoland' in support of the store's endorsement of the anti-corruption protest in 2020 and

2021 that brought an end to the over 10-year rule of GERB PM Boyko Borissov. Yet, when asked about having participated in various forms of civic activism in the past twelve months 66.7% said they have not participated in any of the listed forms (Table 1), followed by 14% who have donated to charity and 8.1% who have given money to those in need. 5% shopped at a store whose ethical policy they supported and 2% boycotted a business. The numbers let suggest that civic activism is embraced by a very small number of Bulgarian citizens, predominantly residing in the capital.

Have you participated in one of the following activities in the last 12 months?	
Donation for charity	14,0%
Donation to people in need	8,1%
Participation in protest activities	5,1%
Participation in petitions for a certain cause	4,9%
Participation in elections as election observer	4,8%
Attending election campaign events	4,8%
Volunteering	4,5%
Buying/ using products/ services from people you want to help or from companies/ organisations whose position on public and political topics you support/ sympathize with	4,5%
Signing a petition	3,9%
Working for a political party	3,8%
Raising funds to help people in need	3,3%
Contacting a public official at national/ regional/ local level	3,3%
Participation in elections as an advocate	2,9%
Supporting an election campaign	2,7%
Filing complaints to institutions	2,5%

Boycotting a certain business/ company by not shopping from them	2,3%
Participation in trade union activities	2,2%
Submitting proposals to the municipal/ state administration	2,0%
Seeking assistance from/ communicating with an elected official	2,0%
Participation in public political discussions	1,4%
Participation in public demonstrations	1,3%
Speaking Infront of/ contacting the media	1,3%
Participation in strikes	1,2%
Contacting a politician	1,2%
Writing a letter/ filing a complaint to the Ombudsman	1,0%
Attending reception days of elected officials	1,0%
Expressing to public authorities (written) positions and recommendations on topics of public interest	0,9%
Participation in a discussion/ sharing an opinion on a topic at the invitation of a government agency	0,4%
Participation in public consultations, discussions, meetings of representatives of institutions	0,3%
Participation in pressure groups	0,1%
None of the above	66,7%

Table 1. Level of citizens' participation in different types of civil activities

Within the group who said they participated in community actions, 50% were organisers or leaders of these actions themselves. 33.3% said that they were successful, 58.3% said they gained partial success and 8.3% none. More than half say that after the event, they did not keep in contact

with the other citizens involved, only about a quarter keep in touch. Only 16.7% are still pursuing their missions. Notably, none of them registered as an NGO.

There is a prevalent sentiment that people do not know how to participate in civic life, stated by 58% of the respondents in the Civic Health Index Bulgaria 2021 study. 19.2% said that they would not know what to do if they were unhappy with the government and 17.7% said they would not do anything. These percentages are only superseded by 43.7% who said they would vote in elections if unhappy with the government. The majority of people think that it is necessary to increase citizens' civic literacy.

This is also the case when it comes to knowledge of the civil society sector. While NGOs score low when it comes to citizens' trust in these organisations (the NGO sector comes 14th with 29.2%, see Graph 1) it also scores comparatively low when it comes to distrust (28.9%). This is indicative of the fact that the majority of citizens in Bulgaria are not familiar with the work of CSOs in Bulgaria. 41.9% cannot assess the work of the sector in Bulgaria because they are not familiar with it, only 1% would look for help from an NGO, 21.1% would never join a CSO. Only 2% participate in an NGO and 3% in an informal civic activist group.

Contrastingly, Bulgarians feel a strong sense of trust when it comes to their family (98.6%) and their extended family (86%). They also trust their neighbours (60,8%), or colleagues (59,8). Bulgarians trust less so their local authorities (44.1%) and are most likely to participate in local elections - 79% stated they voted in the last mayor elections and 83.6% consider these to be very important. Bulgarian also feel the strongest sense of belonging when it comes to geographical localities - be it their country, their neighbourhood, the settlement they were born in or where they live now. They feel significantly less connected to their workplace (23.9%), their work community (12.2%), a sports team they support (5.2%), a party or an organisation they are a member of (1.4%).

Thus, this hints at a comparably higher level of a sense of belonging locally. Consequently, there is also a correlation between the types of activism in different localities as well as issues that concern them. In villages or little towns main topics of concern are more practical and local - they have to do with social services, environment, access to healthcare and education. Conversely, the citizens in bigger cities and the capital are more concerned with issues that have to do with human rights, various national policies and international events, rule of law, democratic standards, institutions, and corruption. While this may not be surprising it also points at a disconnect or rather gap when it comes to taking local concerns to the national level or integrating local knowledge in national level policy making.

Forms Of Informal Civil Society & Civic Activism

As described in the findings from the Civic Health Index Bulgaria 2021, civic engagement is not very popular among Bulgarians, even less so informal civic activism. While it is difficult to establish what is cause and what is effect, a combination of factors such as the passive attitude to citizenship inherited from communism, the disappointment and failed promises from the years of transition and the lack of accountability of the elites and institutions, offer some explanations for the lack of engagement.

The examples that follow are based on qualitative observations and case studies, mapped in the Civic Health Index Bulgaria 2021 as well as within the program Civic Europe (2019 – 2021).

The differences in the way citizens relate to their civic realities locally and in the capital (national level) offer a useful framework to describe the different forms of informal activism. They differ not only in their topics and outreach but also point to structural discrepancies in the capacities for activism locally, and in the capital and other urban centres. That being said, it is important to remind that Bulgaria is the fastest shrinking nation on earth and if demographic projections turn right 69% of the country will be a demographic desert by 2040, with life playing out mainly around the capital and a few more urban centres.¹¹³

The Beginnings

The bleak picture of civic activism and lack of organized civic engagement today could easily fool one in believing that Bulgaria has no traditions in participation. Two examples stand out in its recent history that prove the opposite – the rescue of the Jewish community during World War II, an act driven initially by ordinary citizens, as well as the various protest actions and early civil society platforms of the 1980s that contributed to the fall of the communist regime. These examples stand out as examples of mobilization and engagement both in the capital and in other cities and towns across the country. As Deyan Kyuranov, political scientist and activist from the 80s and 90s notes, democracy in the 1980s was born in the countryside, not in the capital of Bulgaria.¹¹⁴ This however quickly changes in the 1990s and beyond, following the centralization of institutions, resources and people in the capital of the country.

¹¹³ <https://bnr.bg/radiobulgaria/post/101484237/balgarskite-sela-se-prevrashatat-v-demografski-pustini>, accessed on 27.12.2021

¹¹⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tcnGYSTG9Yo>, accessed on 27.12.2021

National Or Capital-Based Activism

Respectively and even though civic activism started already under communism with the brave actions of the “Women of Ruse” who protested against the air pollution caused by a chemical factory in Giurgiu, Romania, on the other side of the Danube River, or with the protests and opposition against the forceful change of names of the Turkish minority¹¹⁵ in different Bulgarian towns, all massive protest waves since the early 1990s have been either entirely organized in the capital or mainly happening in Sofia.

Protests in front of the main political institutions have been a key instrument to criticize but also to contribute to political change by causing resignations and early elections. But protests haven’t had only the function of changing governments. The green-minded community has been taking to the streets on numerous occasions over the past decades, not necessarily on climate change matters, the way we think of the Fridays for Future movement, but rather related to local environmental concerns like protection of the forests, protection of the nature reserves, of the mountains and seacoast and explosion of corruption. An organized action related to the latter was in the core of the last anti-governmental protests. The leader of the political party coalition “Yes, Bulgaria” tried to access a public beach in the area of Rossenets, Black Sea coast, where the honorary leader of the Bulgarian Turkish Minority party Ahmed Dogan has a private mansion, and he could do so only by sea.¹¹⁶

Some of the protest waves have seen the emergence of political movements and parties, others have seen the emergence of protest networks that have supported existing political projects. This process seems logical as far as protest energy fades with time and unmet demands sustain the piled frustration that either a new political project or formal civic platforms often come to fill.

Recent years see a growing number of protest actions around questions of domestic violence, which the Covid-19 pandemic has additionally fueled. While Bulgaria didn’t join the Istanbul convention amidst debates over the word “gender” and misunderstandings about the objectives of the convention, the national legislation is still lagging on prevention and protection of domestic violence.

¹¹⁵ <https://www.dw.com/en/recalling-the-fate-of-bulgarias-turkish-minority/a-18149416>, accessed on 27.12.2021

¹¹⁶ <https://www.clubz.bg/101026-hristo-ivanov-akostira-v-imenieto-na-dogan-v-rosenec-video>, accessed on 27.12.2021

Just like there are protests and awareness raising campaigns in public, there are also anti-protests in Bulgaria, at least since the early 2010s, when the anti-governmental protests of 2013 and 2014 met staged anti-protests of the protests. Investigative materials uncovered schemes of paid protesters as well as hiring walk-ons/ extras for the anti-protests.¹¹⁷ The latter, just like any other ingenuine form of civic activism further discourages citizens from engaging. A popular question from relatives from the countryside to their families in the capital during protests is “How much do they pay you?”, or “Oh, you are a fool if you are not getting paid.”

Another prominent example of informal activism of the last years is the incredible work of the Friends of refugees’ platform amidst the migration crisis in 2013 that began as a Facebook group of activists, journalists, civil society representatives and citizens, all in personal capacity and mainly residing in Sofia. Especially in the first days and months when there was lack of organized support by the authorities and by the local offices of international organizations like IOM, UNHCR, Caritas, CVS, etc., they were crucial in raising funds, organizing volunteers, planning and delivering relief, as well as pointing to gaps in policies and failures or wrongdoings of the respective institutions. Sadly, this example was matched by counteractivities of self-organized “defense” groups, who patrolled the Bulgarian-Turkish border and assaulted asylum-seekers.

Public space actions have also gained popularity in the past decade. A prominent example is the monument to the Soviet army, which is a piece of communist propaganda built in the 1950s, portraying a Russian soldier who is symbolizing the Soviet liberation of Bulgaria in 1945. Bulgaria has been occupied, not liberated by the Soviet army at the end of World War II, but this misconception, supported by communist historiography and monuments like this one, persists among Bulgarians. This is how the monument is often the target of guerilla art whereby the sculptures of the monument have been repainted either in the colors of the Ukrainian flag to remind of the annexation of Crimea, or in pink to apologize for the Bulgarian involvement in crashing the Prague spring. Similarly, the monument commemorating the victims of communism is often a target of – in this case – vandalism.

Among the most popular public space and online visual activists are 321emircA¹¹⁸ and Stanislav Belovski (called the Bulgarian Banksy – visual artist), whose work is focused on the contemporary politics and society and is very famous in the capital and on platform’s like Instagram.

¹¹⁷ <https://offnews.bg/bulgaria/ivan-kolev-zlatnia-naemat-se-statisti-i-za-mitingi-i-za-izbori-no-n-218098.html>, accessed 27.12.2021

¹¹⁸ <https://www.instagram.com/321emirca/?hl=en>, accessed on 27.12.2021

Every now and then there are public actions of solidarity with international movements and events like #BlackLiveMatters or in support of the protests in Belarus, but these are rarely more than one-off events with little consequences.

Lastly, the Covid-19 crisis brought with it a number of informal activities in the big cities as well. The bigger cities, especially Sofia, were hit a lot worse by the pandemic and the number of cases compared to smaller towns and villages that suffered from the lack of commerce, but not from overcrowded hospitals. Local mayors claim that young people arriving from abroad were very responsible when it came to isolation and quarantine. In Bulgaria, as initially there were very few people who had had the virus, hospitals lacked staff with antibodies. Thus, hospitals invited people who have had the virus to come in and volunteer with the Covid-19 wards, which was the case with a number of citizens. In big supermarkets people had the option to buy food and leave it in food banks right after the cashier desks. Furthermore, many people put up signs in their own buildings that they are willing to shop for food and medicines for elderly people who are not capable of looking after themselves and are mainly at risk from Covid. Citizens volunteered with the police as well. Furthermore, there were Facebook groups where people posted different initiatives - charitable bazaars, calls for deliveries of food and medicines, calls to help evacuate cities. This is the idea behind the group [shtesespravimzaedno.com](https://www.facebook.com/groups/2704132926352259/) ("Together we can do this"). The purpose of the group, as it says in the description, is precisely this - having a platform where people can ask for help during the pandemic crisis.¹¹⁹

With the exception maybe of the initiatives around the Covid-19 pandemic and a few more examples (i.e., the protest by the Disabled Children's Mothers), capital-based activism is rarely aiming at a change that has a direct or an immediate impact on the lives of those who participate in it. Informal activism outside the capital on the other side is often tangible and requires immediate action.

Local Informal Activism

Local activism is very often related to a tangible problem faced by the respective community. Sometimes there is one active citizen who takes the lead and organizes other affected citizens (or interest groups) around solving that problem. It can be and often is evolving around the quality of air, access to healthcare and schooling, preservation and development of local infrastructure, access to water or preservation of sites of cultural and spiritual life.

¹¹⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/2704132926352259/>.

In recent years some Bulgarian villages and small towns have struggled with access to water, with some towns having been cut off completely. Thus, local citizens in Samoranovo or Krustevich have organised protests against the bad conditions of water delivery in their villages. They also organised and signed petitions to the local authorities.¹²⁰ People are also protesting against the contamination of the air as a result of illegal burning of biomass or the destruction of the Danube coast for resources.¹²¹ They also focus on raising funds for the preservation of their cultural or spiritual life, crucial for the social life and fabric of the villages,¹²² as well as for the improvement of their physical infrastructure.¹²³

Local activism is sparked by the energy of one person (the local enthusiast or sometimes wittingly called the crazy person of the village) or a small group, which doesn't involve institutions or if it does, it is because of personal relations, not out of acknowledgement for their role. Often local authorities are considered an impediment, rather than an enabler. Similarly, institutions react with the same lack of trust to civic action as they are not used to seeing much initiative.

Among the problems local civic activists are facing are the lack of capacities when it comes to mobilizing others, communicating with and identifying interest groups, raising awareness and funds, motivating volunteers and managing them. Very often local active citizens are very lonely as their enthusiasm is met with little to no support and understanding, on the contrary, they are met with distrust. In addition, they lack the institutional and policy knowledge to take those local issues to the national level. And as the data from the Civic Health Index Bulgaria 2021 suggests informal activism is not very successful, neither is it sustainable, as it is not followed by formalization of Civic Structures or because it is issues-based and as soon as the issue is resolved, the group of citizens engaged disperses. Based on a mapping among local civic actors in Bulgaria in 2018, Sofia Platform designed and implemented Civic Europe – a program dedicated to informal local civic activists, i.e., individuals who are not part of a formal civil society entity. What the mapping discovered is that while there is no lack of civic energy locally, usually what prevents local activists from engaging is the reasons described above that can be summed up as follows:

¹²⁰See: <https://bnr.bg/post/101503093/jiteli-na-krustevich-gotvat-protest-zaradi-rejim-na-vodata> and <https://bnr.bg/blagoevgrad/post/101482300>.

¹²¹ See: https://btvnovinite.bg/predavanja/tazi-sutrin/protest-v-pernik-gorjat-li-se-nezakonno-bokluci-v-mestnija-tec.html?fbclid=IwAR3mA8aWa8JY00qpDljAQvi3VLkQcet_fbWb0gspTcH5gSsleXGouM9o0M ; <https://bntnews.bg/bg/a/zhiteli-na-ryahovo-sabirah-podpiska-sresh-tu-unish-tozhavane-na-dunavskiya-bryag-753518>.

¹²²See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K8e66s4B8bU>; <https://bntnews.bg/bg/a/417781-s-ba-rzitsa>; <https://bnt.bg/news/zhitelite-na-selo-samovodene-sabirat-sredstva-za-remont-na-chitalishteto-si-v291117-292490news.html>; <https://offnews.bg/obshtestvo/zhiteli-na-chirpansko-selo-sabirat-sredstva-za-da-postroiat-hram-699748.html>

¹²³<https://bntnews.bg/news/zhiteli-na-dve-sela-sabirat-dareniya-za-da-asfaltirat-mezhdugradski-pat-1099253news.html>

lack of capacities, lack of networks of likeminded citizens, lack of resources and lack of opportunities to exchange with and learn from others in other towns or countries. The above-described premises were confirmed during the capacity building program that was organized within Civic Europe Bulgaria with almost 50 individuals from across the country and ways to act upon them were identified so that now the majority of those individuals, 2 years later, have found ways to continue their local interventions or to build on them. However, compared to citizens from the capital, they still lack the capacities to transfer their experience and knowledge on the systemic level (i.e. national) and their impact remains local.¹²⁴

Harbingers of Hope

On a positive note, the awareness about the discrepancy between national and local activism when it comes to capacities and competences is growing and so is the dedication to look for ways to support actors on the local level (both within programs by the European commission as well as by private foundations such as the Mercator Foundation, which supported Civic Europe). The pandemic amplified the trend of educated, urban, middle class young people returning to their home country and settling in Bulgarian small towns and villages.

In March 2020 many young people working and studying abroad returned to Bulgaria: “while in 2019 only 5,300 more people remained than left, in 2020 it was more than 80,000”.¹²⁵ Studies suggest that people who have lived abroad for longer than six months have a better understanding of democracy and have better civic competences,¹²⁶ thus the influx of young Bulgarians coming back from the Netherlands, France, Germany and the UK for example is expected to have an impact on formal and informal civic activism if these young people decide to stay. Many people have started buying houses in villages which have connections to bigger towns, because they have good access to internet that allows for remote working as well as to start a business there, i.e. in organic agriculture.¹²⁷ Examples of such permanent reallocation is usually accompanied with civic actions like cleaning up communal spaces, fixing old houses, improving

¹²⁴ Doychinov, Nikolay (2021): What will the neighbours think?. English version available at: <http://sofiaplatform.org/what-will-the-neighbors-think/>. Originally published in German language in the digital magazine “AufRuhr”: <https://www.aufuhr-magazin.de/europa/die-quelle-der-teilhabe/>.

¹²⁵ Georgiev, Ognyan (2021): Bulgaria’s battle for brains. CEPA, Available at: https://cepa.org/bulgarias-battle-for-brains/?fbclid=IwAR24WiO02u4WPGcc3d4cnKKWjCxf660zaUIftFFOc0IKVSoBFVadl_McB5U.

¹²⁶ Lavrič, Miran; Tomanović, Smiljka and Jusić, Mirna (2019): Youth Study Southeast Europe 2018/2019. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, p.73.

¹²⁷ Desant (2020): Българи се завръщат от чужбина и се заселват по селата. 26 November 2020, only in Bulgarian, Available at: <http://www.desant.net/show-news/54832>.

the local infrastructure and improving the quality of and access to education and healthcare. Such is the case of Miroslav and Silvia - a young couple who moved to the village of Vetrinzi in 2015. While this was a while ago their case represents a trend that is still going on and that was accelerated by the pandemic. In Vetrinzi they met other international couples like Dave from the Netherlands or Sandy from the UK. Together they took the initiatives to clean up the yard of the local church, to clean up the park and together with the director of the local chitalishte (the local cultural centre) they have been organising public festivities and cultural events.¹²⁸ Their most recent project from May 2021 is the creation of an eco-garden in the yard of the chitalishte.¹²⁹ They also have a Facebook group where they post any activities they will be undertaking soon and invite others to join - such as the painting and cleaning up of their library.¹³⁰ The cooperation with the local chitalishte (part of a traditional, 100 plus years old large network of community centres) presents an important example of how these centres, albeit formal structures, become an important point of contact for informal civic activism locally. An example of such a cooperation is the revival of the local theater in the village of Tatarevo by the newly nominated Minister of Culture Atanas Atanasov, who joined by friends from the US and supported by the locals of Tatarevo, brought life to the abandoned cultural institution.¹³¹

Even sceptical local authorities recognize the added brought in by newly returned citizens because they bring a different mentality and often open new possibilities for the community. After having worked abroad even for a couple of months, these people start expecting better opportunities at home - better infrastructure, cleaner neighbourhoods. In fact, some of these people are seasonal workers from Roma origins. Thus, their return creates certain tensions between Bulgarians and Roma people. There is a strong sense of Romaphobia in Bulgaria and thus Romas who are better off than Bulgarians creates tensions but may also help to bridge the social divide between the two groups. However, while some analysts are optimistic and think that these people have returned to Bulgaria for good, others claim that the newly returned are in fact already looking for new job opportunities. This is the case in Sandanski and Vidin for instance.¹³²

¹²⁸Boliarinews (2020): Младите заселници във Ветринци: „Всички искаме и работим за това селото да се развива”. News article, only in Bulgarian, Available at:

<https://boliarinews.bg/2020/07/22/%D0%BC%D0%BB%D0%B0%D0%B4%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B5-%D0%B7%D0%B0%D1%81%D0%B5%D0%BB%D0%BD%D0%B8%D1%86%D0%B8-%D0%B2%D1%8A%D0%B2-%D0%B2%D0%B5%D1%82%D1%80%D0%B8%D0%BD%D1%86%D0%B8-%D0%B2%D1%81%D0%B8%D1%87/>.

¹²⁹ BNT (2021): Селска идиллия сред природата на Ветринци, TV report, 03.05.2021, only in Bulgarian, Available at: <https://bntnews.bg/news/selska-idiliya-sred-prirodата-na-vetrinci-1105003news.html>.

¹³⁰ <https://m.facebook.com/groups/812961032201801/?rdr>.

¹³¹ <https://new.fox-24.com/news/54767.html>

¹³² Stoilova, Zornitza (2021): Възвръщеници от всички страни. Kapital, 8 January 2021, only in Bulgarian, Available at: https://www.capital.bg/politika_i_ikonomika/bulgaria/2021/01/08/4160832_vuzvrushtenci_ot_vsichki_strani/

It is worthwhile following closely these developments because centralization – of activism included – further exacerbates the already wide-spread perception of powerlessness and disenchantment. Supporting local activism, even against the bleak demographic projections, is a worthy cause, because as recent research shows civic deserts¹³³ are not deserted only because of structural and economic vulnerabilities, they lack civic life because of deficient civic competences and civic infrastructure.

¹³³ <https://www.facebook.com/SofiaPlatform/videos/286267123529710>