



THE IMPACT OF THE BLACK SEA NGO FORUM

After 4 editions, 2008-2011

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Black Sea NGO Forum

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TABLE OF CONTENTS:

List of acronyms	4
List of figures and tables	5
Between perception and results, what is the impact of the Black Sea NGO Forum?	6
Methodology	7
1. An overview of the first 4 editions	8
2. Interviews. Presentation of the positive aspects and issues regarding “a feeling of stagnation”	10
2.1. General evaluation	10
2.1.1. Forum presentation from the respondents' perspective	10
2.1.2. Strong points of the Forum	11
2.1.3. Issues to be improved	12
2.1.4. Respondents' expectations before the event	13
2.1.5. Logistics and the format of the Forum	13
2.1.6. Is there the need for other stakeholders to participate in the Forum?	14
2.1.7. Is there the need for other regions to be represented in the Forum?	14
2.1.8. What kind of follow-up should be implemented between the editions?	14
2.1.9. The evolution of the Forum	15
2.2. The Impact of the Black Sea NGO Forum	15
2.2.1. How many concrete projects have been implemented?	15
2.2.2. The networking impact between NGOs and the donors in the region	16
2.2.3. The networking impact between NGOs from the same country of the respondents	16
2.2.4. The impact on daily/current activities (good practices etc)	16
2.2.5. The impact on the perception and knowledge of the region	17
2.3. The Black Sea NGO Forum and the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum	17
3. On-line survey. Beyond perception – a positive and clear impact	18
3.1. A short description of the NGO respondents in the interviews	18
3.2. The format of the Forum	19
3.3. The impact of the Forum	21
3.4. Difficulties faced in fostering regional cooperation	24
The Black Sea NGO Forum at crossroads	26

LIST OF ACRONYMS

ODA – Official Development Assistance

BSF – Black Sea NGO Forum

BST – Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation

EaP – Eastern Partnership

FOND – The Romanian NGDO Platform

MFA – The Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs

NGO – Non- Governmental Organization

NGDO – Non-Governmental Organization for Development

EU – European Union

LIST OF TABLES AND GRAPHS

Table 1. Distribution of the respondents according to the Black Sea NGO editions in the on-line survey

Table 2. Distribution of the respondents according to the represented countries in the on-line survey

Table 3. Number of NGOs participants at each of the Black Sea NGO edition

Table 4. Distribution of the NGOs according to the countries in the Black Sea region

Table 5. For each of the Black Sea NGO edition, number of NGOs participating for the first time and the number of NGOs that participated in at least one edition

Table 6. Budget for the 2012 in USD of the participating NGOs

Table 7. Full time Employee in 2012 of the participating NGOs

Table 8. Number of volunteers in 2012 of the participating NGOs

Table 9. The relevance of the plenary sessions

Table 10. The relevance of the workshops

Table 11. The relevance of the open space

Table 12. The relevance of the field visits

Table 13. The preferences between the thematic and cross-sector workshops

Table 14. Number of bilateral projects

Table 15. Number of regional projects

Table 16. Communication frequency between the participants after the Black Sea NGO Forum

Table 17. The frequency of consulting the web pages belonging to other NGOs participating at the Forum

Table 18. The impact on the knowledge of the Black Sea region

Table 19. The impact on the sense of belonging to the Black Sea region

Table 20. Using the information received at the Forum

Table 21. The main difficulties faced by the participants in regional cooperation

BETWEEN PERCEPTION AND RESULTS, WHICH IS THE IMPACT OF THE BLACK SEA NGO FORUM

This qualitative and quantitative study has a double aim. First, it seeks to find out more about the organizations participating in the first four editions of the Forum, both in terms of capacity (budget, number of permanent staff members etc) and priorities/ challenges that could be encountered when implementing regional cooperation projects. Secondly, the organizers felt the need to have an overview on the achievements and challenges of the Forum, focusing on the impact of the annual event on the NGOs in the Black Sea region, in order to continue improving the format of the Black Sea NGO Forum (BSF)¹.

In addition, the report shows both positive results and points to be improved. The Black Sea region is one of the most complex geopolitical areas of the world. An objective evaluation is an opportunity to improve an event that has already contributed to development of the region and can do much more in the future.

We hope that this report will be read by all the relevant actors, directly or indirectly involved in regional cooperation and that each will analyze how they can contribute further to the improvement of the Forum.

The Black Sea NGO Forum was launched in 2008 by the Romanian NGDO Platform - FOND², in collaboration with civil society organizations from the extended region of the Black Sea and with the support of the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the European Commission's Representation to Romania and of Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation. The common goal for the Black Sea region is to become less a barrier and more a platform which promotes prosperity, stability and security. In this respect, the BSF contributes to strengthening the dialogue and cooperation among NGOs in the Black Sea Region by consolidating their capacity to influence national and regional policies.

We begin this report by explaining the methodology used, and later presenting the general data referring to the participants of the BSF. Thus, we will analyze the findings of 22 interviews we conducted and then we will further explore these first findings by detailing results of the online survey sent to all participants. This combination of qualitative and quantitative data will allow us to get a deeper grasp of the real impact of this Forum.

¹ In the next pages of this report, we will use the acronym BSF for all the references to the Black Sea NGO Forum.

² <http://www.fondromania.org/eng/pagini/index.php>

METHODOLOGY

In terms of methodology, the study focuses only on the Black Sea NGOs participating at the Forum and has both a qualitative and quantitative dimension. This paper takes into consideration the annual reports of the Forum and the premises of the regional cooperation in the area. 14 interviews were conducted with representatives of the NGOs which attended the forum most frequently, upon which the questionnaire was developed for the online survey for all participants. 93 NGOs responded to this survey, representing a response rate of 43% of all emails and websites available. This high rate shows the motivation of an important part of participants to share their opinion, either negative or positive, towards improving BSF. After this stage, a second shorter series (8) of interviews was conducted to understand in depth some unexpected results of the survey.

Regarding the qualitative analysis, we conducted 22 semi-structured interviews with questions grouped around three major directions: **general evaluation of the Forum, Forum impact and comparisons between BSF and the Civil Society Forum of the Eastern Partnership**. These parts will be detailed in the Interviews Chapter.

As far as the online survey is concerned, the two tables below present the distribution of the respondents per year (*Table 1.*) and participating countries (*Table 2.*)

Table 1 Distribution of the on-line survey respondents according to the Black Sea NGO' editions

BSF Edition	Number of respondents	NGOs total number	Response rate
2008	34	100	34%
2009	26	88	30%
2010	32	82	39%
2011	44	105	42%

Table 2 Distribution of the on-line survey according to the represented countries

Country	Number of respondents	Number of NGOs participating at the first 4 editions of the BSF	Response rate
Romania	23	79	29%
Republic of Moldova	13	45	29%
Armenia	12	23	52%
Azerbaijan	10	21	48%
Bulgaria	9	14	64%
Russia	8	18	44%
Georgia	6	17	35%
Turkey	6	17	35%
Ukraine	6	18	33%
Greece	0	2	0%
Belarus	0	4	0%

Chapter 1.

An overview of the first 4 editions

Out of the 258 organizations in the Black Sea region which attended the first four editions of the BSF, 225 were NGOs and 33 formal or informal networks. The NGO networks were well represented³ and later on became one of the priorities of the **Forum for the Romanian NGDO Platform – FOND**. Moreover, FOND intends to further support this type of regional initiatives.

Table 3 shows the total number of NGOs in the Black Sea region which attended every edition of the Forum. Other 82 stakeholders (Ministries, Development Agencies etc) and 35 NGOs from other regions (Western Europe, USA etc) also participated at the BSF.

Table 3. The number of NGOs present at every edition of the Black Sea NGO Forum

Edition	2008	2009	2010	2011
Number of NGOs	100	88	82	105

Table 4 shows the number and percentage of NGOs per participating country from the Black Sea region at the first four editions.

Table 4. The repartition of NGOs per participating country from the Black Sea Region

Country	Number of NGOs	Percentage
Romania	79	30,6%
Republic of Moldova	45	17,4%
Armenia	23	8,9%
Azerbaijan	21	8,1%
Ukraine	18	7%
Russia	18	7%
Georgia	17	6,6%
Turkey	17	6,6%
Bulgaria	14	5,4%
Belarus	4	1,6%
Greece	2	0,8%

The presence of a high number of NGOs is explained by the fact that the Forum was held every year in Romania. The second position is occupied by the Republic of Moldova and this is also not surprising. As a matter of fact, the Republic

³ From this point on, whenever we use the term NGO, we will refer both to NGOs per se and to NGO networks.

of Moldova represents one of Romania's main priority countries for development cooperation . In addition, taking into consideration the proximity of the two countries, the participation costs were considerably reduced for the Moldavian NGOs. The other countries follow with a close percentage. Bulgaria occupies a lower position in the rank, whereas Belarus and Greece could not be better represented precisely because the funding opportunities for their participation are much lower.

The organizing team intended to have approximately 2/3 of the total number of participant NGOs every year to be newcomers and 1/3 to be NGOs that managed to attend at least one edition. As shown in *table* no. 5, this rate was not achieved.

Table 5. For every edition, the number of NGOs participating for the first time and the number of NGOs which have attended at least one edition

Edition	The no. of NGOs participating for the first time	The no. of NGOs which have already participated
2009	51	37
2010	54	28
2011	56	49

To sum up this first chapter, we can say that the general statistics related to the participants at the BSF meet the expectations of the organizing team, except for the rate of newcomers which has to be further monitored in the future.

The following part of the report is represented by the analysis of the interviews results.

Chapter 2. Interviews. Presentation of the positive aspects and issues regarding “a feeling of stagnation”

The interviews were organized taking into consideration 3 main categories:

(2.1.) A general evaluation through which the interviewed persons:

- (2.1.1.) presented their points of view on the Black Sea NGO Forum;
- (2.1.2.) highlighted both the strong points of the forum and those which need improvement;
- (2.1.3.) expressed the expectations they had before the event;
- (2.1.4.) shared their opinion on the organization and format of the forum, especially regarding the existing opportunities or lack thereof to involve other relevant actors and regarding the possibility of involving other regions in the debate;
- (2.1.5.) mentioned if a follow-up process was necessary between two editions and the format it should take;
- (2.1.6.) discussed the evolution of the forum based on prior editions to which they have participated;

(2.2.) The impact of the BSF in terms of:

- (2.2.1.) projects initiated/developed as a result of the participation to the forum;
- (2.2.2.) networking with the NGOs and the regional donors;
- (2.2.3.) networking with the NGOs from the countries represented by the interviewed persons
- (2.2.4.) changes in the current activity (good practices transfer)
- (2.2.5.) perception and information regarding the Black Sea region

(2.3.) The differences between the Black Sea NGO Forum and the Civil Society Forum, part of the Eastern Partnership

2.1. General evaluation

2.1.1. Forum presentation from the respondents' perspective

Generally speaking, BSF is perceived as a welcomed and necessary event given the fact that it is the first conference dedicated to the NGOs from the Black Sea region. The Forum is seen as a place for networking which makes possible the creation of new partnerships and offers the opportunity to meet the donors. Moreover, the Forum is a place where the common problems of civil society in the region can be discussed. This presentation of the Forum offered by the participants is consistent with the objective established by the organizing team.

It is worth mentioning also the fact that the respondents have highlighted another two aspects:

Firstly, several participants felt that the BSF *„is not restricted to projects, funding opportunities and good practices, but it also addresses multiculturalism and cultural diplomacy”*. Apart from the measurable impact in terms of developed projects in the aftermath of the forum, one has to take into consideration also the impact in terms of public diplomacy, a dimension which should not be neglected especially in a region as complex as the Black Sea.

Secondly, several respondents highlighted the fact that the networking itself is not the most important factor, but the possibility of meeting trustworthy partners. Even if nowadays partnerships can be concluded online, a space where trust can be created is less accessible and the BSF represents precisely one of those spaces. However, its format needs to be thought in a way that maximizes this trust climate. In this respect, the workshops and the open spaces seem more suitable than the plenary sessions.

2.1.2. Strong points of the Forum

The respondents are aware of the difficulties of organizing such an event even more so in a region like the Black Sea and appreciate the efforts carried out by the organizing team with the support of the Romanian state. Moreover, they appreciate the fact that the Forum represents a meeting point for NGOs, donors and the political world, even though the presence of the last one was less important for other countries. All the people interviewed highlighted the excellent organization with an agreeable atmosphere and the solid structure that the BSF enjoys at the moment. At the same time, there is a unanimous opinion related to the usefulness of the two components adjacent to the Forum: **The Black Sea NGO Prize** (www.blackseango.org/forum/prizes/content/prizes) and the **Black Sea NGO Fellowship** (www.blackseango.org/forum/home/articles/the-black-sea-ngo-fellowship-2012), the latter being administrated by the Civil Society Development Foundation.

The smaller organizations believe that one of the strong points of the BSF is the fact that they had the opportunity to meet the donors with this occasion, which is generally a more difficult thing for them to achieve. The bigger NGOs and/or more experienced consider an added value of the Forum the possibility of promoting their new projects and of presenting the NGO and its activities in the plenary sessions so as to enhance their visibility.

As regards the diversity of the NGOs present, the respondents did not see eye to eye. Whereas some of them consider this diversity and the level of the participants to be sufficient, the majority do not share this opinion. We will develop this later on when we will present the aspects proposed to be improved.

The main strong point of the BSF consists of its impact on the projects of the NGOs in the region. We will present the quantitative evaluation later on in the study, but before that we will refer to the qualitative dimension. In this report, we conducted a series of specific interviews focused on the projects implemented by the NGOs participant to the BSF in order to better understand the way in which the Forum influenced or not these initiatives.

The first example is the Forum's impact on the project “*Strengthening cooperation in the field of youth policy in the Black Sea region*” developed by the National Youth Council of the Republic of Moldova (CNTM) and financed by GMF – Black Sea Trust⁴, The Ministry of Youth and Sports of the Republic of Moldova and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)⁵.

This NGO (CNTM), as well as other national networks active in the youth domain from 7 countries – The Republic of Moldova, Ukraine, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Belarus and Russia – developed a project from 2005 to 2009 with the support of the National Council of Swedish Youth Organisations (LSU)⁶, which aimed at strengthening the capacity of the youth councils in the region.

CNTM and an important part of its partners wished to continue developing their common activities. It is here where the importance of the BSF makes its way: the Forum worked as a discussion framework permitting them to identify opportunities and continue their partnership which led to the above-mentioned project, “*Strengthening cooperation [...]*”. For CNTM, for example, this enabled them to make contact with Turkish or Bulgarian NGOs and to consolidate their already existing ties with Romanian NGOs and with one of the donors. Following the exchanges made with the occasion of a workshop dedicated to young people at the 2010 edition of the Forum, several organizations became aware of their common goals concerning the Black Sea region and launched a new project in 2011. This initiative led to the development of an unprecedented study which evaluated the youth sector in the Black Sea region. The project was finalized in 2012 and the partners elaborated, as a follow-up of this document, ideas of potential activities which could be implemented in order to improve the current situation of this sector.

Therefore, as we can see from the case we just presented, the BSF offers participants the possibility of developing already existing contacts with the purpose of extending the cooperation area in the Black Sea region.

The second example presents the considerable impact that the Forum had on the initiative “*Regional Coalition for Child Protection in the Wider Black Sea Area (Child Pact)*”⁷. As before, the idea of a coalition has existed prior to the Forum. However, the initiative was still incipient. It was the BSF that offered the potential partners a space where to meet and discuss more in-depth this project. At the same time, the Forum gave this initiative legitimacy. Thus, the idea of a regional coalition composed of national coalitions was born during an event which reunited a representative

⁴ German Marshal Fund – Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation – www.gmf.org/grants-fellowships/grantmaking-programs/black-sea-trust

⁵ www.unfpa.org

⁶ www.lsu.se/english/

⁷ www.childpact.org

number of NGOs in the region. From this point of view, the differences between a panel held during the Forum and a panel organized as part of a smaller gathering are significant. Given this legitimacy, the Forum contributes also to facilitating the connections with the political environment of the countries in the region. It is worth mentioning that *Child Pact* managed to influence political representatives outside of the Forum, but it is still a fact that the BSF helped the concerned NGOs to consolidate their connections and represented an official framework for mediation. In addition, the fact that the BSF treats numerous other subjects than child protection represented an advantage for the initial structure of the initiative in cause: every member in the project had the possibility to meet actors already involved in regional initiatives which proved to be a useful resource.

In this case we can conclude that the Forum played an essential role in the systematization and legitimization of the initiative. Thus, Child Pact considers beneficial the participation of every BSF edition in order to continue the development of the network in other directions.

Finally, we should mention that the interviewed people pointed out to the utility of the present report and its potential to contribute to reshape certain elements of the Forum.

2.1.3. Issues to be improved

As far as the diversity of the NGOs is concerned, some of the respondents mentioned the lack of representatives of domains such as culture, humanitarian assistance, supervising of elections, gender and environment. It is worth mentioning that, as far as the last domain is concerned, the problem was not related to the number of the participants but to the fact that they were not representative. Several of the persons interviewed expressed their desire of having more Romanian NGOs present since Romania is the host country of the event.

Part of the people interviewed pleaded for a bigger turnover meaning more new participants with every new edition organized. On the contrary, others wished for the same core of NGOs to be invited so a real community could be formed. While it is impossible to meet everyone's expectations given their diversity and divergence, we feel that it is essential for the organizing team to elaborate a clearer and more dynamic strategy and methodology of selecting the participants. This aspect is even more important taking into consideration the fact that the frustration of the rejected applicants should be avoided. We will have the opportunity to address this aspect later on in the study.

When it comes to the selection of the participants per se, a suggestion coming from the respondents is to invite members of the diplomatic staff that are preferably competent in the non-governmental sector. In this way, the NGOs would know whom to contact if their projects require collaborating with the embassies.

A drawback of the Forum, as perceived by the respondents, is the fact that there is an apparent lack of a regional objective. According to one of the persons interviewed *"many participants come to the BSF to express their own problems, but this is not significant at a regional level. In this respect, the organizing team did not succeed in building a common view"*. Moreover, the need to put an emphasis on the coalitions/networks is also highlighted, a thing which the organizing team has been doing for the past two editions.

In the same respect, the need to have a clear framework was advanced. This would make setting medium-term objectives possible, which in turn would help the BSF to better follow its own priorities. Part of the participants felt the lack of a clear strategic framework. This was not observed when talking about the first two editions of the Forum since they represented more of an initial contact. However, for the other editions it became an important critique. What is more, it was mentioned that the Eastern Partnership, imperfect as it may be, proposes a much better defined framework, as we will see in the section of the report dedicated to the comparison of the two events.

Finally, we underline the fact that an important part of the people interviewed drew the attention to the need to see the concrete results of the BSF. This criticism could seem bizarre. After all, from 22 interviewed organizations, 10 have launched / developed bilateral or regional projects and 2 have applied for funding with a common project. Regarding the number of activities, there is a total of 12 regional projects, 3 bilateral projects and 8 attempts to develop a project. At first sight, one could suppose that this positive rate could be explained by the fact that the sample used was not a representative one, as it is composed of NGOs that have participated several times at the BSF. However, the rate was later confirmed by the online survey.

This surprising paradox could also be explained by several factors that have already been underlined in the report and others that will be mentioned in the following chapters. The absence of a clear framework concerning the medium-term objectives does not motivate the participants to put the projects into perspective, linking them to what has already been done and what is yet to be achieved. Thus, the results remain *"isolated"* and they are not included in a matrix of the Black Sea NGO Forum. The participants admit that the projects have had an impact on their own projects, but the lack of a unified view set by the organizing team in terms

of concrete objectives determines the participants to consider that they can find solution also outside of the Forum, despite the increased difficulty. Moreover, a big part of the respondents believe that the benefit-cost ratio of the event has decreased with time, as we will see in the chapter dedicated to the evolution of the BSF.

2.1.4. Respondents' expectations before the event

We will regroup the respondents' expectations in 8 categories:

- Networking to find partners
- Networking to discover new funding opportunities and meet donors
- Sharing project ideas, good practices
- Enhancing the visibility of the NGO one's representing
- Extending one's knowledge of the Black Sea Region (current situation, interests etc)
- Being up-to-date with the European debates regarding the region (a rarely mentioned expectation)
- Meeting political officials (a rarely mentioned expectation)
- Learning new concepts (a rarely mentioned expectation)

It is worth mentioned that the participants' motivation is linked to the interest of the donors in the region. Several respondents mentioned the fact that they wished to participate to the BSF because they had sensed an increasing tendency of the donors to be more involved in the region. Thus, we can conclude that, for participating NGOs it is essential to have a financial and political environment favorable to their involvement in the region.

In this respect, the BSF needs a favorable environment to have a maximum impact. In some cases we will see that the Forum can be a real multiplier and a genuine ideas incubator. In our opinion, the organizing team must elaborate a very well-thought advocacy plan to convince as many donors as possible that the BSF is an efficient investment.

2.1.5. Logistics and the format of the Forum

There was a consensus amongst the respondents concerning the excellent level of organization, which contributes in turn to a good image of Romania in the region. However, the discussion is more complex when it comes to the format. There are there big dilemmas concerning this aspect.

Firstly, should the Forum be "*general*" /global (with important plenary sessions and cross-sector workshops) or more "*specialized*" (with more time allocated to thematic workshops and to the open space)? It is a delicate question since the majority of the participating donors and stakeholders wish to have enough time for plenary sessions to communicate/present their priorities. This also applies to those NGOs that perceive the BSF as a space where they can bring forward arguments for the visibility of their organizations. However, the majority of the participants prefer the plenary sessions to be reduced in favor of the thematic workshops and the open space with the purpose of facilitating the networking. Despite an apparent contradiction, these two points of view can be integrated in a harmonious manner.

A first suggestion can be to organize the presentations relating to the situation in every country in the region in a common framework. This would allow the participants to compare much more easily the changes that had intervened in every country. Moreover, it would be wise to send part of the information communicated during the Forum to the participants one or two weeks prior to the event. This would help, for example, to have more time allocated to the Q&A section of the plenary sessions as well as to reduce the general presentations, all in favor of maximizing the networking.

As regards the workshops, it is clear that the 2 options (thematic and cross-sector) should be maintained. However, the cross-sector workshops could be significantly improved. Many respondents suggested that the speakers present a synthesis of the good practices which could be replicated in the region. Even if this would mean an extra effort from the part of the organizing team and the speakers, it would make way for an eloquent debate in a concrete and relevant framework. In a thematic workshop, the organizing theme can rely on the "*natural*" dynamic of the participants. However, this is not the case when it comes to a cross-sector workshop, which needs a more developed framework. We highlight the fact that almost all the people interviewed asked for the traditional sessions with the donors to be more interactive. Starting with the 2012 edition of the BSF this suggestion has been addressed and, in our opinion, it should be developed even further so as to allow NGOs to present their project ideas directly to the donors.

Secondly, should the Forum be a *high level* event (with representatives from NGOs, donors, high level political and administrative representatives) or an *inclusive* event (allowing also for the less experienced NGOs to participate)? The responses were divergent. We believe that it is possible to articulate both aspects but, for this to be possible, a clearer, more strategic and transparent methodology of selecting the participants is needed.

For example, it is possible, in our opinion, to render this selection more dynamic if every NGO that wishes to participate at the BSF

recommends other interested NGOs and justifies their motivation. In this way, the organizing team would effectively select NGOs that already share project ideas and want to meet and work in order to materialize them. Another improvement which could be made at the participant NGOs' level is to ask the applicants to send a presentation of their mission, their objectives regarding the participation to the BSF and the profile of the person/persons they wish to send to the Forum as representatives. This description could be sent to all the participants before the Forum so as to enable them to prepare a more efficient networking strategy. In addition, this presentation could also be used by the organizers to select the most motivated NGOs.

Establishing more transparent selection criteria is also recommended as a means to avoid frustration from the part of the rejected applicants. The organizing team should obviously have minimum leverage regarding this aspect but we feel that a public list of selection criteria would be most beneficial to the image of the BSF.

2.1.6. Is there the need for other stakeholders to participate in the Forum?

As far as the participation of other stakeholders is concerned, a remark would be that all types of NGOs have their own preferences. Think-tanks, for example, are more in favor of including on the participants' list representatives of the academic environment, social NGOs wish for the presence of trade unions, advocacy NGOs want public officers to be present etc. However, the respondents are generally satisfied with the proposed formula at this moment. An improvement idea could be targeted invitation of other stakeholders, taking into consideration the theme of the workshops, a strategy which has already been applied for other editions of the Forum.

2.1.7. Is there the need for other regions to be represented in the Forum?

Regarding the inclusion of other regions as a discussion topic at the BSF, there is a consensus amongst the respondents that it would be interesting to “invite” other regions related to the Black Sea, depending on the “global” agenda. This was the case, for example, in 2011 with the Arab Spring.

Moreover, a small part of the people interviewed proposed to include countries from the Balkan region on the participants' list of the Forum. However, this step could backfire since the European Union could become more interested on this region rather than on the Black Sea. This could happen easily taking into consideration that the former is included in the “*extension of the UE*” category, as opposed to the latter that is part of the “*neighboring area of the EU*”. As a result of this strategic prioritization of the EU, its efforts could be diverted from the regional cooperation at the Black Sea to the extension of the EU in the Balkan region.

2.1.8. What kind of follow-up should be implemented between the editions?

The follow-up is another aspect that needs improvement. This is an essential activity in order to “*keep the flame alive*”, as the participants expressed themselves.

Firstly, the follow-up can take the form of a post-event report. This has been done by FOND from the first editions of the Forum. However, part of the participants wishes this to be not so much a summary of discussions, as an active way of presenting the Forum's goals, representing also an instrument of policy and advocacy itself.

Secondly, the internet website is more and more used as a dissemination instrument. Being aware of this fact, FOND has launched a new format for the website www.blackseango.org. Nonetheless, it still lacks an essential element: a search engine that would allow participants to find partners more easily through the existence of an up-to-date public database. The elaboration of such an instrument is a recurrent request amongst the participants. The information posted on this website could also contain news from cultural events in the participating countries to the current socio-political context and the situation of NGO sector there. Moreover, the site could be improved by adding online discussion groups with the same moderators as the ones during the actual Forum.

Thirdly, there is a need for a monthly newsletter besides the internet website. While this had existed at the beginning of the BSF, there is a strong opinion that it should be re-launched as soon as possible. It could be the main follow-up instrument between editions as it is the least costly and the easiest to implement. In addition, classic information such as funding opportunities could be backed up with the presentation of success projects as a means to inspire other NGOs and to show that there is sustained activity in the Black Sea region.

Fourthly, FOND could become an assistance center for the NGOs participating at the Black Sea Forum. For example, if an NGO is having difficulties finding a partner on the internet, FOND could support or facilitate this endeavor. But

most of all, FOND could develop a policy and advocacy strategy for the non-governmental cooperation in the Black Sea region. Of course, FOND should not be the only active actor in this, but such an initiative could contribute greatly to the growth of the Forum.

If such a “center” proves difficult to be established, it would be most interesting for FOND to stay in contact with the NGOs that have already succeeded in developing regional projects. This would have a double impact: on the one hand, FOND could encourage and support them and, on the other, FOND could be up-to-date with the positive outcomes of the BSF.

Fifthly, it would be ideal to organize small meetings throughout the year with the purpose of extending the discussions that took place during the BSF and of preparing the next edition. Whichever may be the case, FOND would need supplementary funds to be able to play the role of an assistance center. If this type of funding were to be found, the translation of the internet website and of the newsletter in Russian would definitely be an added value.

Finally, the media partnerships at regional level (such as Radio Europa Liberă, Vocea Rusiei, Radio France International etc) should be taken into consideration. These media structures could issue, for example, monthly reportages on the political, social and economical situation at the Black Sea, as well as on civil society projects in the region, which in turn would enhance the visibility and positive effects of the regional cooperation at the Black Sea.

2.1.9. The evolution of the Forum

According to the people interviewed, the 2008 and 2009 editions were the most appreciated ones. These have brought a breath of fresh air in the regional NGO sector and the added value for participating at this event was clear for everybody.

Nevertheless, the 2010 edition was the most criticized edition. Even though the organization was perceived to be excellent as usual, regarding other aspects the participants voiced a number of criticisms that can be synthesized in two big categories as follows.

In the first place, the interviewed persons estimated that the participation level was particularly low in 2010. In this respect, they were referring to both to the reduced number of participants and to their reduced quality since many NGOs sent *entry-level* representatives at the Forum. This created a blockage in the process of establishing partnerships as the properly represented NGOs were lacking an equal interlocutor, which in turn led to a certain frustration of the top level representatives. In the second place, almost all the respondents highlighted the need to have more networking space so as to interact in a more consistent manner with the donors.

As regards the 2011 edition, the participants identified improvements in comparison with 2010 and generally appreciated it more. The debates were considered to have been of a better quality. As for the plenary sessions, the majority of the interviewed people thought they were too long in the detriment on the workshops and the open-space whereas FOND believes that the added value of the plenary sessions justifies the allocated time.

On the whole, the respondents remain satisfied with the BSF. Nonetheless, part of them believe the BSF is going through a period of stagnation. This proves that the Forum finds itself at crossroads, in a moment when the organizing team has to make choices if they wish the BSF to remain an event with an added value for the participants.

It is also worth mentioning that it would be better for the BSF to be organized in other countries too, besides Romania. This would increase the closeness between the various countries in the region contributing to a more substantial knowledge of one another and, moreover, it would highlight the idea that the BSF is truly a Forum of the whole region.

2.2. The Impact of the Black Sea NGO Forum

2.2.1. How many concrete projects have been implemented?

From the 22 NGOs interviewed, we identified 12 regional projects, 3 bilateral projects and 8 attempts to develop a project, which involve 12 different NGOs. The positive impact of the BSF is, therefore, obvious, a conclusion which will be reinforced by the results of our online survey.

2.2.2. The networking impact between NGOs and the donors in the region

First of all, a distinction needs to be made among 3 types of networking for NGOs. The first one, the networking with the new NGOs, contributes to the discovery of new directions of action. The second type of networking is related to the consolidation of the existing relationships between one or more NGOs. Finally, the third type of networking refers to the consolidation of an existing coalition, either formal or informal.

If we take donors into consideration, two types of networking are possible. On the one hand, there is the type of networking that aims at presenting projects and obtaining information that would lead to a potential financing. On the other hand, there is another type of networking that facilitates the meeting between NGOs and their current donors during the Forum, thus leading to the consolidation of a trustful and sustainable relationship.

According to the results of the interviews, we can sustain that the BSF allowed the participants to make use of these 5 types of networking during the Forum. However, what needs to be improved is maintaining contact after the event. In this respect, the respondents mentioned again the need of a **follow-up mechanism** composed of a **database** included on the BSF's website, a monthly **newsletter** and **online discussion groups**.

We underline the fact that the respondents believe it is difficult to establish a partnership with the Romanian NGOs, especially because of the financial problems they confront with since the accession to the EU. The organizing team is not responsible in this case, but it would be worthy to start thinking strategically about the position of Romanian NGOs both as actors in the international development cooperation and as organizations functioning in a crisis situation at home.

Finally, the organization of the Forum in Bucharest seemed to be a better choice than in other cities of Romania, especially due to the proximity of the airport. At the same time, this alternative has its disadvantages: the representatives of the Romanian NGOs based in Bucharest have the tendency of leaving the Forum as soon as the sessions have ended. In this respect, it would be interesting to come up with a strategy to convince them to stay for another hour or two after the "official discussions" have ended so as to interact with the foreign NGOs.

2.2.3. The networking impact between NGOs from the same country of the respondents

Even though achieving such an impact was not an objective of the BSF, almost all the people interviewed confirmed that they met with NGOs from their own countries which were known to them only by name (in the case of NGOs having the same area of expertise) or not know at all (in the case of NGOs having a different background). Although the main purpose of the BSF remains regional cooperation, this type of networking is an aspect that should not be underestimated when it comes to measuring up the impact of the Forum.

2.2.4. The impact on daily/current activities (good practices etc)

This is the most reduced of all types of impact. While it is true that numerous good practices were presented during the Forum both in terms of project of success and policy/advocacy activities, there is a lack of a clear methodology to render them concrete in other contexts.

In the case of networking, if the participants are well chosen, it is enough to leave them together in a common space and the process could carry on by itself.

For exchanging good practices, however, the intervention coming from the organizing team has to be more important. Even though the initiative should belong to the participants, they should have a proper framework to help them "translate" their own activities in a different context. For example, if the organizers know that a certain NGO wants to present a successful project during a workshop, it would be most useful to send a brief summary to the other participants before the Forum. In this way, the participants would have the necessary time to think about how to implement a certain experience in their own domain of activity and in their country and then to bring forward a list of specific questions.

A second improvement suggested by several respondents was to enhance the importance of regional platforms and the various good practices they could change. According to them, the focus of the Forum on "regional cooperation" could be even more developed.

Moreover, the impact on current daily activities is greater if the NGOs have already initiated a common project following the Forum.

When the impact on current activities is reduced (beyond common projects), the people interviewed feel this is not a problem given the fact that their participation at the BSF is based on other motivations.

2.2.5. The impact on the perception and knowledge of the region

There is a clearly positive impact on the perception and knowledge of the region. The majority of those interviewed felt that the information about the region received during the Forum was relevant, believing that the BSF helped them broaden their horizons. Those oriented to the Occident have turned their attention to the East and vice versa. Even for the NGOs that were already aware of the situation in the region, the BSF represented an opportunity to be up-to-date with the last minute trends.

The Forum could increase its impact even further if it paid more attention to the regions marked by frozen conflicts, allowing NGOs from these areas to participate at the event. This initiative has already been put into action by FOND and, in our opinion, it should be systematically implemented with every edition.

All in all, the participants confirmed that the BSF succeeded in attaining their objectives regarding the dissemination of information concerning the region. For some of them, the Forum became an alternative source of information next to the mass-media from their own countries. Almost all participants admitted being more interested in the region after their participation to the BSF.

2.3. The Black Sea NGO Forum and the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum

Almost all respondents were able to tell the difference between the two forums. According to them, the BSF is dedicated to the cooperation in the Black Sea region whereas the Eastern Partnership's (EaP)⁸ mission is to facilitate the cooperation between EU and the other countries part of the Partnership. The persons interviewed are aware of the fact that the EaP does not have the Black Sea region as a priority like the BSF does. Some of them even noticed that the organizers of the BSF have begun to pay special attention to regional platforms since two years ago.

The respondents believe that the Civil Society Forum part of the Eastern Partnership (CSF-EaP)⁹ represents a priority for them for a number of reasons. Firstly, the European Union is more involved in this forum and, secondly, it offers more activities and funding opportunities than the BSF. Moreover, it offers a more clear medium and long term view, although things are far from perfect in this case also. These advantages could be resumed in one phrase as one of the participants has expressed himself: *„the decisions made during the CSF-EaP have a bigger authority than those made during the BSF”*. Nevertheless, one should bear in mind that the BSF does not have the same means and political framework as the CSF-EaP.

In spite of this, the respondents appreciate the BSF and consider its existence necessary given its comparative advantages. First of all, they appreciate the accent put on the regional cooperation especially that the Black Sea region is considered to be an entity in itself. Secondly, they feel that the absence of a European perspective could actually represent an asset. As the EaP does not propose a clear view regarding the European integration, the BSF could take charge and bring forward concrete objectives which could have common benefits for all countries in the region. In addition, the danger of BSF disappointing the participants when it comes to European integration is virtually non-existent, given the fact that the purpose of the Forum is regional cooperation.

Nevertheless, we insist again on the necessity for the BSF to develop a medium and long term objectives framework for each sector in order to be able to evaluate what has been achieved and to integrate the actions of the participants in a context that makes sense.

The biggest difference between the two events is without doubt the political and financial environment favorable to the EaP. This is why the organizers of the BSF and all the relevant actors who support the initiative should work together to consolidate the framework in which the BSF operates. Moreover, thinking about the two Forums in a complementary manner will only increase their impact.

In the next chapter, we will correlate the conclusions drawn from the interviews with the results of the online survey.

⁸ Eastern Partnership (EaP) – www.easternpartnership.org

⁹ Civil Society Forum - Eastern Partnership (CSF-EaP) - <http://www.eap-csf.eu/>

Chapter 3.

The on-line survey. Beyond perception – a positive and clear impact

The questions of the online survey can be regrouped in four major dimensions that we will analyze successively:

(3.1) Short description of the NGOs which responded to the interview

(3.2.) Format of the Forum

(3.3.) Impact of the Forum

(3.4.) Difficulties faced in fostering regional cooperation

3.1. Short description of the NGO respondents in the interviews

Tables 6, 7 and 8 show the main characteristics of the NGOs which responded to the online survey: budget, number of full time equivalent employees – FTE and number of volunteers (throughout the entire year of 2012).

Table 6. The 2012 Budget in USD (\$)

Budget	Number of respondents	Percentage
Less than 10.000 (including)	13	14%
Between 10.001 and 50.000	20	21,5%
Between 50.001 and 100.000	15	16,1%
Between 100.001 and 500.000	29	31,2%
Between 500.001 and 1.000.000	8	8,6%
More than 1.000.000	8	8,6%

Table 7. The number of full time equivalent employees-FTE in 2012

Number of FTE	Number of respondents	Percentage
Less than 5 (including)	33	35,5%
Between 6 and 15	39	41,9%
Between 16 and 50	14	15,1%
More than 50	7	7,5%

Table 8. The number of volunteers in 2012

Number of volunteers	Number of respondents	Percentage
None	6	6,4%
Less than 5 (including)	25	26,9%
Between 6 and 15	25	26,9%
Between 16 and 50	22	23,7%
More than 50	15	16,1%

By looking at the numbers, one can observe that approximately 21% of the NGOs which provided feed-back work with an annual budget between 10,000 and 50,000 and approximately 31% with a budget between 100,000 and 500,000 \$. Moreover, approximately 35% have less than 5 permanent employees and almost 41%, between 6 and 15. Finally, the repartition of the number of volunteers is divided equally between “6 and 15” and “16 and 50” with 23-26% for each category. Thus, it seems that the majority of the NGOs which responded to this survey are small to medium organizations, a result that is consistent with the reality of the Black Sea region.

3.2. The Format of the Forum

We have evaluated the format of the Forum by asking the respondents to note, first of all, the level of relevance of each type of session (table 9, 10, 11 and 12) and then to mention their preferences between the thematic workshops (child protection, human rights etc) and the cross-sector ones (advocacy, fundraising etc) (table 13).

Table 9. The relevance of the plenary sessions

The level of relevance	The number of respondents	Percentage
Irrelevant	1	1,1%
Why not	15	16,1%
Relevant	57	61,3%
Very relevant	20	21,5%

Table 10. The relevance of the workshops

The level of relevance	The number of respondents	Percentage
Irrelevant	1	1,1%
Why not	8	8,6%
Relevant	44	47,3%
Very relevant	40	43%

Table 11. The relevance of the open space

The level of relevance	The number of respondents	Percentage
Irrelevant	2	2,2%
Why not	7	7,5%
Relevant	48	51,6%
Very relevant	36	38,7%

In this case, the interpretation of the results should be made by taking into consideration all 3 tables presented above as well as the interviews. We have mentioned earlier that one of the criticisms related to the format of the Forum was that the plenary sessions occupy too much time. On the contrary, table 9 demonstrates that more than 61% of the respondents consider them to be relevant and over 21% *very relevant*, giving a total of more than 80% of positive feedback in this respect. What is more, the same category “*relevant*”/“*very relevant*” was chosen by 90% of the respondents in the case of the workshops and the open space. The interviews cast light on this apparently puzzling result: a big part of those interviewed support the idea of having plenary sessions, but they want them to have a different format giving two main suggestions.

First of all, their duration should be shortened in favor of the workshops and the open space. This could be achieved by transmitting part of the information communicated verbally in the form of written documents several weeks before the Forum.

Secondly, the usual presentations related to the evolution of the situation in each country should be organized by the same principal. In this way, one would be able to have a much clearer panoramic view on the event that could serve as a framework for the following discussions.

Table 12 shows local NGOs have divergent opinions when it comes to the relevance of the field visits to Romanian NGOs. However, their overall feedback is a positive one.

Table 12 The relevance of the field visits

Level of relevance	Number of respondents	Percentage
Irrelevance	8	8,6%
Why not	21	22,6%
Relevant	35	37,6%
Very relevant	29	31,2%

The same thing was mentioned during the interviews which highlighted the wish of the participants to continue offering the possibility of these visits with an optional participation.

Lastly, when it comes to the preferences of the respondents between thematic and cross-sector workshops it is very difficult to achieve a consensus, with approximately 53% of them voting for the *thematic* workshops and nearly 46% for the *cross-sector ones*. In spite of this interesting result, we could not identify a single factor that could explain the NGOs position. However, we could tell from the interviews that the more experienced NGOs seemed to prefer the thematic workshops in order to be able to concentrate on their activity area, whereas the “younger” NGOs were more interested in various techniques to improve their fundraising capacity, communication etc.

Table 13. Preferences between thematic and cross-sector workshops

Type of workshop	Number of respondents	Percentage
Thematic	50	53,8%
Cross-sector	43	46,2%

Despite the criticisms mentioned earlier and the change of needs that has been brought into our attention, we can say that the respondents were generally satisfied with the format of the Forum since the “*irrelevant*” category remained at under 3% for all types of sessions (except for the visits). In addition, all the respondents insisted during the interviews on the exceptional quality of the organization.

3.3. The Impact of the Forum

The most appropriate way to evaluate this impact was to look at the number of projects initiated or developed as a result of the BSF, as we can see in *table 14 and 15*.

Table 14. Number of bilateral projects

Number of projects	Number of respondents	Percentage
None	66	71%
Attempts	4	4,3%
Concrete plans	2	2,2%
Unspecified	3	3,2%
One	14	15,1%
Two	1	1%
More than two	3	4,2%

We observe that a total of 21 NGOs from the sample of 93¹⁰ NGOs have started or developed at least one bilateral project following the Forum.

Table 15. The number of regional projects (which involve NGOs from more than two different countries)

Number of projects	Number of respondents	Percentage
None	67	72%
Attempts	2	2,2%
Concrete plans	4	4,3%
Unspecified	1	1%
One	13	14%
Two	4	4,3%
More than two	2	3,2%

Out of the 93 NGOs forming our sample, a total of 20 NGOs have started or developed at least one regional project following the Forum.

By summing up the two types of project, we arrive at a total of 42 NGOs. From this number we have to first eliminate the NGOs that appear in both categories so as to avoid presenting an artificial statistical increase. Nonetheless, only one NGO is in this situation.

As a remark, even though the participants have developed projects as a result of the BSF, they are either bilateral or regional, very rarely both at the same time. However, this means that 41 different NGOs have developed projects following the Forum, representing 44% of the total. Moreover, to this result we have to add 5 different NGOs that have the intention of starting a bilateral/regional project in the near future. Therefore, the impact of the BSF is excellent regarding the criterion “number of projects” which is, without doubt, one of the most important criteria of evaluation. The impact can be established also by taking into consideration other elements as presented in the following.

¹⁰ The category „unspecified” is composed of NGOs that mentioned they had already developed projects without specifying the exact number

Table 16. The frequency of communication between the BSF participants

Frequency of communication	The number of respondents	Percentage
No	19	20,4%
Sometimes	48	51,6%
Monthly	8	8,6%
Several times a month	15	16,1%
Weekly	2	2,2%
Daily	1	1,1%

One can notice the high number of respondents that continued to communicate with the other participants following the BSF. This communication is, nonetheless, rare (approximately 51% answered “sometimes”), even though 27% declared to be in contact with other participants at least once a month.

Table 17. The frequency with which the respondents access the internet websites of other NGOs represented at the Forum

Frequency	Number of respondents	Percentage
No	6	6,4%
Sometimes	50	53,8%
Monthly	17	18,3%
Several times a month	13	14%
Weekly	6	6,4%
Daily	1	1,1%

The figures look noticeably better in the case of website consultation with only 6% of the respondents declaring that they have never accessed the website of other BSF participants, in comparison with approximately 20% of them not communicating with another BSF participant. The “monthly category” has registered the biggest progresses. This discrepancy between the results shown in the *table 16* and *table 17* are somewhat logical, given the fact that it is easier to access a website than to communicate through e-mail or telephone.

Furthermore, the table below shows us if the respondents became more aware of the situation of the Black Sea region following their participation to the Forum. The responses are given on a scale from 1 (weakest impact) to 4 (strongest impact).

Table 18. The Impact on the awareness of the Black Sea region

Level of impact	Number of respondents	Percentage
1 (minimum impact)	3	3,2%
2	23	24,7%
3	48	51,6%
4 (maximum impact)	19	20,5%

A big part of the people interviewed considers that the BSF had a strong impact on their knowledge concerning the Black Sea region, 70% of them choosing category 3 and 4.

Table 19 presents the impact on the feeling of belonging to the Black Sea region. The responses choices were the same as in the previous table.

Table 19. The Impact on the feeling of belonging to the Black Sea region

Level of impact	Number of respondents	Percentage
1 (minimum impact)	6	6,4%
2	25	26,9%
3	34	36,6%
4 (maximum impact)	28	30,1%

Even though the responses remain positive (approximately 66% chose the categories 3 and 4), the opinions are divergent in this case because one third of the respondents declare that they no longer feel part of the region. This question related to regional identity is a delicate one and this has come up several times during the Forum. However, the objective of the BSF is not to create a certain identity, but to raise the awareness on this region as a separate entity, with its common features and diversity. In this respect, we can definitely say that the Forum has achieved its goal.

Finally, in the table below we present the way in which the respondents made use of the information gathered during the BSF.

Table 20. The participants' use of gathered information

Type of information use	Nombre de répondants	Pourcentage
None/Not answer	35	37,6%
To start/develop partnerships/projects	29	31,2%
To better understand NGOs' situation in Black Sea region and in own country	13	14%
To find fundraising opportunities, to understand donor's priorities and to improve relation with them	8	8,6%
To improve daily work by learning good practices and model of cooperation	6	6,4%
To have new members in our network	1	1,1%
To explore career opportunities	1	1,1%

To begin with, we should underline the fact that this table summarizes the responses given to an open question in the online questionnaire. This question referred to the way in which the participants made use of the information gathered during the BSF. Therefore, the categories presented here were built post-survey.

Approximately 37% of the respondents declare that they did not use the information received during the BSF or they did not answer the question. This could have several causes. Firstly, the information delivered was not relevant. Secondly, the participants did not have a favorable context to use this information. And thirdly, the participants did not apply the information for several other reasons. While the BSF cannot do much about the last cause, it could, however, improve the situation in the case of the first two, as we have already explained in the chapter dedicated to the interviews.

Moreover, regarding the frequent use of information, it is related to projects. More than 31% of the respondents have used information received during the Forum in order to start or develop projects and partnerships. Approximately 8%

have used the information to find sources of funding for already existing project ideas, as well as to improve their relationships with donors. By adding the percentages of the two categories, we have a total of almost 39%, meaning almost 44% of NGOs which have initiated/developed bilateral/regional projects (according to *tables 15 and 16*).

A good understanding of the situation in the region and their own country occupies the third category of answers in terms of frequency (14%). Only approximately 6% declared they have used the information to improve their daily activities which is consistent with the results of the interviews.

Finally, one respondent (an NGO network) said it used the information to increase their membership and another one to explore professional opportunities.

3.4. Difficulties faced in fostering regional cooperation

The last table in this report is probably one of the most interesting because it presents the difficulties found by the participants in implementing projects in the Black Sea region.

Table 21. The main difficulties encountered by the participants in regional cooperation

Types of difficulties	Number of respondents	Percentage
Lack of a permanent online platform and permanent structure	12	17,4%
To identify trusted partners in your field	11	15,9%
To elaborate a common vision and to find applicable common solutions	10	14,5%
Low donors interest	10	14,5%
No significant difficulties	9	13%
Linguistic difficulties	6	8,7%
Lack of information about NGOs activity in other BS countries	4	5,8%
Logistic difficulties	2	2,9%
Difference of organizational capacity between partners	2	2,9%
National legislative framework not friendly for regional cooperation	2	2,9%
Low level of cooperation between states	1	1,5%

No answer: 24

Table 22 shows answers that have been categorized after the online survey took place. These present the main difficulties encountered by the participants in regional cooperation.

As we have already underlined, there is a need for the BSF to have a more solid political and financial environment. However, the lack of interest coming from the donors occupies only the fourth position in the terms of encountered difficulties (14%)¹¹. At the same time it is true that the first category concentrates approximately 17% of the answers: the difference between the first and the fourth category is, therefore, of little significance. Nevertheless, we can clearly state that the lack of interest coming from the donors is not the main problem cited by the respondents, but only one of them.

¹¹ As far as the table 22 is concerned, we decided not integrate the 24 NGOs that did not answer to this question. We thought that integrating them in the category "No significant difficulties" was risky, as it is an assumption that does necessarily reflect the true reason behind the lack of response.

From a political point of view, the low level of cooperation between the states in the region occupies the last position, gathering nearly 1% of the responses. This means that, despite the less solid political and financial support in comparison with the *CSF-EaP*, the BSF can have a series of advantages, especially through offering solutions to the above-mentioned difficulties.

First of all, the lack of an online platform and of a permanent structure to link two BSF editions represents the first difficulty (approximately 17% of the people interviewed). This is followed by the identification of trustworthy partners (nearly 15.9%) and the need to have a common view and methods to replicated good practices in other contexts (approximately 14%).

All of these problems have been pointed out and discussed when we analyzed the interviews. Therefore, we will not mention these elements again, but we will insist once again on the benefits that the BSF could have if they addressed these difficulties more efficiently.

Moreover, we need to highlight the fact that a significant number of participants (13%) did not encounter any major difficulties.

All in all, we can say that the percentages of the first five categories (*“The lack of an online platform and a permanent structure”*; *“Identifying the trustworthy partners”*; *“Building a common view and finding common solutions”*; *“Low interest coming from the donors”*; and *“No significant difficulties”*) are tight, between 17% and 13%.

The next two categories are: *“Linguistic difficulties”* (approximately 8%) and *“Lack of information about NGOs' activity in other BS countries”* (approximately 5%). The language problem applies when it comes to the communication between ex-soviet countries and the other countries. The participants do not have a good command of the English and Russian languages (depending on the case) in order to maintain a sustain collaboration.

The third group of answers is composed of the following categories: *“Logistical difficulties”*; *“Organizational capacity difficulties”*; *“National legislative framework not friendly for regional cooperation”*; and *“Low level of cooperation between states”* and covers 3% to 1% of the respondents.

The final chapter is dedicated to the conclusion of this report.

THE BLACK SEA NGO FORUM AT CROSSROADS

The impact of the BSF is a clear one, given that out of the 22 interviewed NGOs we have identified 12 regional projects, 3 bilateral projects and 8 initiatives to start a project, all of these involving 12 different NGOs. This excellent rate was confirmed by the online survey in which 41 organizations from the sample of 93 NGOs (approximately 44%) said that these bilateral/regional projects were developed as a result of the participation to the Forum.

As regards the quality of the Forum, the interviewed participants consider the BSF to be a place that facilitates the formation of networks. Despite the fact that a number of virtual spaces are dedicated to this goal, the added value of the Forum is represented by the sense of trust it gives to the participants soon to be partners, an essential ingredient to all successful collaborations. Moreover, in the eyes of the respondents, the Forum is also a space that encourages the discussion of common problems for the civil society in the region. The impact in terms of cultural diplomacy should also not be underestimated, especially in a complex region such as the Black Sea. In this respect, 70% of the respondents believed that the BSF had a strong impact on their knowledge and understanding of the region.

The Forum has offered the participants the possibility to develop their already existing relationships with the purpose of extending the area of cooperation in the Black Sea region through the implementation of new projects. Moreover, the BSF played an essential role in the crystallization of common initiatives (for example, *Child Pact*).

Despite all these positive points, to which we can add the excellent level of organization, there was also present a feeling of dissatisfaction. Thus, as far as the format of the Forum is concerned, the presentations during the plenary sessions should be organized in a common structure. Part of the information transmitted during the Forum could be disseminated several days before the event. This could allow the organizers to allocate more time to networking and open space sessions. It is also worth mentioning that the organizing team should establish a more rigorous, strategic and transparent selection methodology.

Following the evaluation we made, we uncovered a feeling of stagnation between the first editions of the Forum and the last two. In our opinion, this feeling is based on two factors. Firstly, while it is true that the BSF enjoys the merit of laying the foundations for the regional cooperation, it should go further and create a more consistent follow-up between editions. After all, the goal of “*keeping the flame alive*” should be a priority. Improving the website, re-launching the monthly newsletter, establishing media partnerships and creating an assistance center for NGOs are all instruments that could contribute to the maintaining the relationship between participants active throughout the year.

Furthermore, even if approximately 44% of the respondents initiated/developed projects as a result of participating to the Forum, the interviews that we conducted show that the integration of these projects in the BSF was not sufficient. It is highly important that the Forum offers a common direction to these projects that otherwise risk remaining isolated one from the other. Organizing the earlier mentioned follow-up might generate the much needed link between different editions.

The respondents who contacted us were very motivated to become involved in such a research. The good rate of response to the online survey (43%) confirms the fidelity of the participants and their desire to contribute to the improvement of the Forum. However, the BSF finds itself at crossroads: despite the noted positive results (almost 44% respondents initiated/developed projects after the BSF), there is a need to develop the BSF in the above-mentioned directions. Now is the time for the BSF to take it to the next level by redefining itself. It is not just an annual event that is at stake, but the prosperity, stability and security of an entire region.



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