

Towards a Stronger & More Sustainable Civil Society Cooperation at the Black Sea

- Position Paper on the Black Sea Synergy Review –

This position paper aims to highlight the importance of civil society cooperation in the Black Sea Region and put forward a series of recommendations for the Black Sea Synergy policy in terms of thematic priorities and regional mechanisms to enable civil society to cooperate more effectively and sustainably. These recommendations are based on the input gathered from over 110 participants to the XIth edition of the Black Sea NGO Forum (12th-14th of November 2018, Brussels), coming from 10 countries covered by the Synergy (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bulgaria, Georgia, Republic of Moldova, Romania, Russia, Turkey, Ukraine), as well as the findings of the 2017 Evaluation Report “The Black Sea NGO Forum a decade on. Evaluation, impact and perspectives”.

I. THE IMPORTANCE OF CIVIL SOCIETY REGIONAL COOPERATION AT THE BLACK SEA

All around the world we have witnessed recent developments reducing the space for civil society action, including within the Black Sea Region and the European Union. According to the 2018 State of Civil Society Report and the data provided in the CIVICUS Monitor, in 7 out of the 11 countries within the Black Sea Region, the space for civil society action is either restricted or obstructed by: attacks on human rights and freedoms, restrictive legal frameworks and administrative burdens affecting civil society, limited participation in decision-making processes and restricted access to funding sources. Yet civil society is key to democratisation, rule of law, good governance and the respect for human rights, as well as to development in general. Therefore, having sustainable civil society sectors is crucial in order to have sustainable democracies within the Black Sea countries.

Key point #1: Civil society space is shrinking all around the world, including the Black Sea Region, yet having sustainable civil society sectors is crucial in order to have sustainable democracies.

In a complex and interdependent region, such as the Black Sea, civil society cooperation is needed more than ever for transformative and sustainable changes that address the needs of the most vulnerable. This can be done by sharing experiences and best practices, building capacity, learning from one another and building solidarity through the creation of networks and coalitions.

Key point #2: Civil society cooperation is needed for transformative & sustainable changes within the Black Sea Region.

The 2007 Communication on the Black Sea Synergy, reiterated in the 2015 Joint Staff Working Document on the Review of the Synergy, highlighted the importance of promoting civil society dialogue at regional level, as well as the importance of civil society cooperation for building confidence and fostering political dialogue. The merits of civil society go beyond the field of democracy, human rights and good governance, its important role being highlighted also in other cooperation areas such as: environment, employment and social affairs, research and education, youth and culture. All of these are key elements of

Key point #3: Civil society has a crucial role in the success of regional cooperation processes and is key for making societies more resilient.

making the societies in the Black Sea countries more resilient, thus contributing also to the implementation of *The EU Global Strategy for Foreign and Security Policy*.

Moreover, at global level, civil society is recognised as a development actor in its own right, essential for achieving the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development¹. In this sense, civil society cooperation in the Black Sea Region could be key for achieving several thematic Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) from quality education (SDG 4) to decent work & economic growth (SDG 8) and climate action (SDG 13), as well as delivering effective multi-stakeholder partnerships to achieve sustainable development (SDG 17)².

The Black Sea NGO Forum is a regional event under the framework of the Black Sea Synergy, initiated in 2008 by the Romanian NGDO Platform – FOND and currently supported by the European Commission and the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Forum is officially considered as one of the main success stories of the Black Sea Synergy in the field of “Democracy, Civil Society & Youth”, according to the 2015 review of the Synergy. One concrete result is the creation of *ChildPact*, a regional network of national NGO coalitions dedicated to child protection gathering 600 child-focused NGOs from 10 different countries. The space and opportunities offered by the Forum (e.g. meet regularly, create partnerships etc) were essential in the creation of ChildPact and this example of best practice can be further multiplied in the case of other thematic priorities. In this sense, a comprehensive support mechanism is needed to support regional thematic networks become fully functional and sustainable.

Key point #4: The Black Sea NGO Forum is one of the main success stories of the Black Sea Synergy in the field of “Democracy, Civil Society & Youth”.

In 2015, the Black Sea NGO Forum participants endorsed the *Strategic Framework for Civil Society Cooperation in the Black Sea Region*, which promotes enabling environment for civil society in the Black Sea Region and supports formal and informal thematic networks on specific thematic cooperation areas, such as: anti-corruption; citizen participation & volunteering; youth; education and culture, sustainable development; YouthBank; human rights; networking; and media and communication.

Key point #5: The Black Sea NGO Forum facilitates the creation of thematic networks and raises awareness on the environment in which civil society organisations (CSOs) operate.

II. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A MORE EFFICIENT AND SUSTAINABLE CIVIL SOCIETY COOPERATION WITHIN THE BLACK SEA SYNERGY POLICY

Despite the achievements of the Black Sea NGO Forum, there is still space for improvement to make civil society cooperation effective and sustainable. Based on the input of the participants at the Black Sea NGO Forum, XIth edition and the findings of the *2017 Evaluation Report - The Black Sea NGO Forum a decade on. Evaluation, impact and perspectives*, we are putting forward the following general recommendations for a more efficient and sustainable civil society cooperation within the Black Sea Synergy policy:

¹ http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/70/1&Lang=E

² <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdgs>

THEMATIC PRIORITIES where civil society from the Black Sea Region could bring an added value with their expertise



SUPPORT MECHANISMS for a more efficient and sustainable civil society cooperation within the Black Sea Synergy policy

1. A **concrete flexible regional funding mechanism** should be included in the Black Sea Synergy to support regional initiatives, including but not limited to: sub-granting schemes for regional networks, support for grassroots organisations, regional meetings, networking events, incubators, accelerators, partnership events etc. This mechanism should be independent and substantively endowed as to ensure its continuity. It should also foresee **core funding** to support CSOs' organizational development and sustainability, as well as **seed funding** to support emerging regional initiatives and promising start-up projects, to enable innovative and dynamic solutions to identified challenges.
2. Strengthen the CSO sector through **mentoring, training and fellowship programmes to build the capacity** of civil society organisations and their leaders. Many Black Sea Region CSOs have low financial and human resources and, therefore, strategic organisational development is often lacking. Moreover, there is a perceived lack of visionary leaders with the required skills, know-how, time and experience to drive regional cooperation initiatives forwards.
3. Create **mobility funds to support best practices exchange** within the region, as well as between the region and EU member states, on thematic and cross-cutting issues (e.g. enabling environment for civil society in terms of legal frameworks, fiscal regulations to incentivise donations etc.).
4. Create an **interactive platform** for sharing knowledge and best practices, discuss and address common problems, deliver trainings and workshops/webinars, ask for funding, present stories (storytelling) from the projects implemented.
5. Support the creation of a **regional resource centre for CSOs** in the Black Sea Region.

6. Support **sectoral multi-stakeholder partnerships** (that include CSOs, media, private sector, public administration, academia, think-tanks etc.) by: encouraging joint projects, creating a platform of discussions between CSOs and other actors, designing competitions and awards for journalists on thematic issues of interest for the Black Sea Synergy etc.
7. **Invest in research in the Black Sea Region** in specific thematic fields in order to create projects that respond to needs on the ground and carry out evidence-based advocacy, as well as on the state of civil society as a cross-cutting priority.
8. **Raise awareness on and promote the identity of the Black Sea Region** through including a regional dimension in formal education in school subjects like geography or history; supporting cooperation between cultural institutes in the region; improve higher education exchange programs; and invest in building trust between the countries in the region through education and cultural exchange.
9. Create **support mechanisms for societal resilience** with a civil society component.

COORDINATION WITH OTHER INITIATIVES relevant for the Black Sea Region in order to increase coherence and impact of civil society cooperation

1. The Black Sea Synergy should support **sharing examples of successful CSO regional projects and initiatives developed in other maritime regions** (e.g. Baltic Sea, Mediterranean Sea).
2. **Continue to coordinate with other relevant EU policies** (e.g. the macro-regional EU Strategy for the Danube Region) in order to have an integrated strategic approach for the Black Sea Region, **as well as organise coordination meetings between EU institutions** to foster complementarity, and build synergies between programs and funding dedicated to the Black Sea Region, including the Eastern Partnership.
3. **Encourage CSO participation in all structures/ processes related to the Black Sea Region**, either connected with EU policies (such as the Common Maritime Agenda) or with the cooperation with other regional / international organisations (such as BSEC – Organisation of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation).
4. Ensure coordination between the Black Sea Synergy policy and **Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development**. In this sense, the main themes covered by the Black Sea Synergy have correspondence into the Sustainable Development Goals (e.g. quality education (SDG 4), affordable & clean energy (SDG 7), decent work & economic growth (SDG 8), climate action (SDG 13), life below water (SDG 14), peace, justice & strong institutions (SDG 16). Moreover, one of the characteristics of the Synergy is to promote the engagement of all stakeholders in regional cooperation, which could contribute to delivering effective multi-stakeholder partnerships to achieve sustainable development (SDG 17).
5. Create a **donor coordination forum** in the Black Sea Region, which includes all donors active in this region, in order to build cohesion and increase impact of funding programmes, including channelling other funds into the region (e.g. international development cooperation funds).
6. Encourage **multi-stakeholder dialogue** in order to create a common, shared vision of the Black Sea Region and the Black Sea Synergy, as well as to build trust and change attitudes towards civil society within the region.