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A missed opportunity? Civil society organisations in Greece and North Macedonia after the 2015 refugee crisis

Policy Recommendations

1. The EU should increase the funds in support of the resilience of civil society organisations (e.g., core expenses) and earmark funds exclusively for their capacity building.
2. Civil society organisations from the two countries should invest in the growth of their human resources, and establish more links with international civil society organisations and transnational advocacy networks.
3. Civil society organisations should consider the formation of a platform where non-profits from the two countries may exchange ideas and best practises (e.g., know-how on grants from philanthropic foundations), and explore the possibility of formalising agreements for volunteer and staff exchanges.

Abstract

When the 2015 refugee crisis broke out, civil societies in Greece and North Macedonia were featuring similar structural weaknesses, such as a lack of professionalism and weak organisational capabilities. In both countries, civil society organisations have benefitted since then from the availability of funding and the interaction and collab-

oration with international non-profits and donors. Yet, they have failed so far to capitalise on these developments in order to substantially enhance their resilience and sustainability. Nevertheless, prospects for cooperation and joint endeavours do exist and should be investigated further in the future.

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Introduction

In 2015, Greece and North Macedonia went in parallel through serious political crises. In Greece's case, the SYRIZA-led government followed a collision course with international creditors that brought the country one step before the escarpment of bankruptcy and an exit from the Eurozone. In North Macedonia, the revelation of the wiretapping scandal caused social unrest and a wave of protests that demanded the resignation of the Gruevski government. While both countries were absorbed with those problems, the refugee crisis broke out. From January 2015 until February 2016, over one million refugees and migrants arrived in Greece from its sea borders with Turkey (Sakellis et al., 2016: 1). Most of those people sought to continue their trip to Central Europe, transiting through North Macedonia. Indicatively, 102,753 people were permitted to cross North Macedonia in just three months, from June 2015 to September 2015. Gevgelija and Tabanovce were the transit centres at that time, where medical assistance was provided to around 800 people per day.¹ The magnitude of the refugee crisis caught the administrations of both states, which maintained limited capacities, off guard. As a result, civil society organisations (CSOs) came in to fill a critical void in the delivery of humanitarian relief.

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The structural weaknesses of the organised civil societies of Greece and North Macedonia

When the refugee crisis broke out, civil societies in Greece and North Macedonia featured similar structural weaknesses. In Greece, a chronic vulnerability of the third sector has been its dependence on the state. While EU funding has stimulated the emergence of many new non-profits in Greece, the channelling of European Union (EU) funds through state institutions (that set eligibility criteria) has created pitfalls in the third sector's development. Over time, many Greek CSOs successfully expanded their activities to meet emerging needs. However, they neglected to consolidate their internal structures. The lack of organisational capabilities and management skills has been quite apparent for decades and has been underlined as one of the major weaknesses of the third sector in the country (Huliaras, 2014; Valvis et al., 2021).

1 https://reliefweb.int/report/former-yugoslav-republic-macedonia/macedonia-october-1-2015-refugee-crisis-europe?gclid=EAlalQobChMIgaHio8KQ_QIVRfJ3Ch0VCA-taEAAYASAAEgIEZvD_BwE



The economic crisis that erupted in 2009 presented Greek CSOs with an opportunity to play a greater role in the country. It activated new initiatives of collective action, marking the beginning of a new era of solidarity and revival for Greek social capital. In many respects, the inability of state welfare institutions to provide adequate social services urged other social actors, such as traditional institutions of the family, philanthropic organisations, private initiatives, the church, civil society organisations, and informal solidarity networks, to take over and fill in the void (Huliaras, 2015). The diminution of state funding pressed CSOs to get reorganised, compete in a more demanding milieu, and increase their autonomy (Tzifakis et al., 2017). However, it is questionable whether this was enough to cause the transformation of Greek CSOs.

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In North Macedonia, civil society struggled with its own, not so different, problems. CSOs were in constant effort to achieve institutional stability, ensure continuous and stable funding, and address the challenges posed by a non-supportive constituency (Vandor et al., 2017: 216). Traditionally, many non-profits in North Macedonia have operated in a setting where access to funding is not determined by technical criteria but by the political orientation of CSOs (Ordanoski, 2017: 225). According to a CSO representative from North Macedonia, the problem of corruption is diffused across the political system and the public administration, challenging the operation of non-profits (online interview, 10/04/23). Moreover, since 2009, democratic backsliding has presented an additional challenge to the resilience of politically impartial CSOs in the country (Vandor et al., 2017: 220). The Gruevski-led government restricted freedom of speech and obstructed activities that could threaten the regime's rule. At that time, CSOs became the target of government-led intimidation activities (Ordanoski, 2014). For instance, members of civil society have been recurrently interrogated by the police to give information about their activities.² CSOs also faced a smear campaign that was orchestrated by the then governing regime. Non-profits were accused of being allegedly funded by George Soros or other foreign governments.³ Nevertheless, the political crisis in North Macedonia also presented an opportunity for the rejuvenation of the third sector. Civic engagement showed clear improvement during these years, rendering CSOs resistant to a not so stimulating political and legal framework (Ognenovska, 2015: 90). Indeed, participants from several movements that had been triggered by individual events (e.g., high pollution in Tetovo, an education law reform, and the President's decision to acquit politicians who were accused of corruption) joined forces and struggled collectively against Gruevski's regime (Dražko et al., 2020: 209). Eventually, the 'Colourful Revolution' was crucial in toppling Gruevski as, in the 2016 elections, it convinced many undecided citizens to vote for opposition parties, and it contributed through its campaign to increasing voter turnout by 4% (Rizankoska & Trajkoska, 2019: 22).

Nevertheless, the political crisis in North Macedonia also presented an opportunity for the rejuvenation of the third sector.

2 <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/skopje-authorities-instigating-climate-of-fear-leaked-us-cables/>

3 <https://www.balkancred.net/macedonias-ruling-party-is-draining-civil-society-groups-time-and-money/>



Apart from the externalities already mentioned, CSOs in North Macedonia have also had to deal with their own structural deficiencies. As in the Greek case, CSOs in North Macedonia faced significant organisational challenges. Despite the large sums of EU funds that have been channelled to the country aiming at improving CSOs' operation and effectiveness, low organisational capacity along with limited professionalisation have remained an issue. Although reports back in 2016 indicated that "organizational capacity continued to grow, primarily as a result of the growth in grassroots mobilization", CSOs had limited resources and were unable to make long-term strategies or improve their monitoring and evaluating mechanisms (USAID, 2017: 149).

The refugee crisis as an opportunity

In Greece, the availability of funding that came with the refugee crisis led some small- and medium-sized CSOs to shift their priorities (Valvis et al., 2021). Nevertheless, this trend was not widespread. A few non-profits readjusted their mission, downscaling their support to other vulnerable groups aiming to focus on migrants and refugees. In that context, the presence in the field of international CSOs (e.g., International Rescue Committee, Danish Refugee Council, Oxfam) and their interaction with Greek non-profits were crucial. The training and consulting provided by international CSO officers to their Greek counterparts and their joint efforts to obtain grants from international donors helped Greek non-profits increase their professionalism. However, these transnational partnerships were rather ephemeral, and Greek CSOs did not use the opportunity to strengthen their resilience and organisational capacity. This trend has been registered by an evaluation initiative, named "Thales: Evaluation of Greek NGOs", that was held in two different periods, in 2015 and in 2020. The evaluation, which was carried out by a research team of the University of the Peloponnese, was sectoral (i.e., across different types of CSO activity), and focused on three criteria: efficiency, organisational structure, and transparency.⁴ According to Thales, the organisational capacity of CSOs that were involved in the management of the migration crisis improved slightly during the period under examination. On a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 is the lowest and 10 corresponds to the highest possible score, the organisational capacity of CSOs increased from 5.9 to 6.46 from 2015 to 2020 (see Figure 1). As a member of the Thales research team told us, "we indeed recorded an amelioration of organisational capabilities of CSOs, due to a number of reasons, including the necessity to correspond to formal procedures imposed by international funders and international CSOs. Nevertheless, the significant increase of those CSOs' workload did not allow for more tangible benefits towards that end, with many enhancements staying partially superficial or on just top level management procedures" (in-person interview with Asst. Prof. Sotiris Petropoulos, Director of HIGGS, 18.05.2023).

However, these transnational partnerships were rather ephemeral, and Greek CSOs did not use the opportunity to strengthen their resilience and organisational capacity.

4 <https://www.greekngosnavigator.org/>

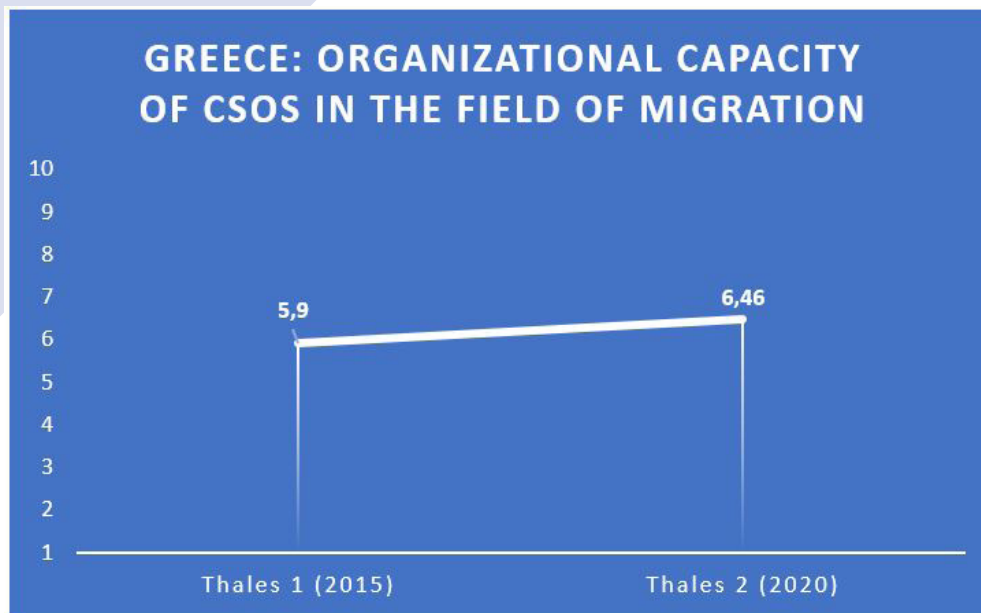


Figure 1: Organizational Capacity of Greek CSOs

In addition, a noteworthy movement of volunteers has been recorded, while several new grassroots organisations have popped up (Boura et al., 2022: 139-140). Although many of the latter were short-lived, a great number of volunteers were absorbed by the CSO sector, increasing the ability of organisations to carry out their work in fields such as human rights advocacy.

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In North Macedonia, the refugee crisis has had a similar effect on the CSO ecosystem. International CSOs came to the country and joined forces with local organisations to provide immediate assistance. Moreover, grassroots movements emerged, such as the initiative 'Help the Refugees in Macedonia',⁵ which started as a Facebook group with no institutional structure and was in due time supported by the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR). Other CSOs like Legis, the Macedonian Young Lawyers Association (MYLA), La Strada-Open Gate, and Hera were also active in providing various on-site services to the refugees. MYLA was one of the CSOs that gained considerable press coverage, increasing its impact as an advocate of human rights.

However, the interaction of local non-profits in North Macedonia with EU institutions, international organisations, and international CSOs during the refugee crisis did not have a lasting effect on its ecosystem of CSOs. This is evident through a comparative review of the CSO Sustainability Index in the country for the last six years. An insignificant improvement was recorded from 2016 to 2021. On a scale from 1 to 7, where 1 is the highest possible score and 7 corresponds to the lowest level of sustainability, North Macedonia's Sustainability Index improved from 3.9 to 3.6 from 2016 to 2021 (see Figure 2).

5 <https://www.facebook.com/groups/help.mk.refugees/>

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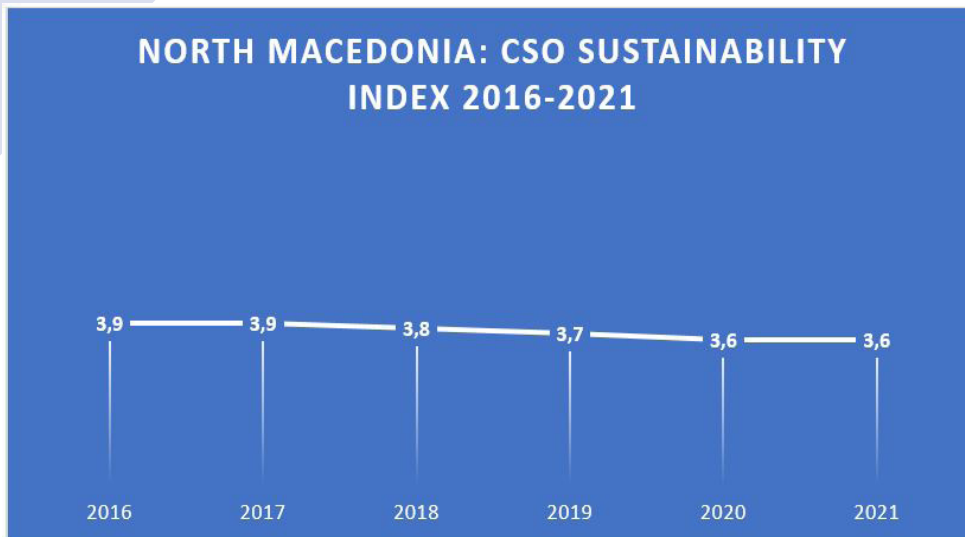


Figure 2: CSO Sustainability Index in North Macedonia 2016-2021.

The methodologies (and scales) of the CSO Sustainability Index and the Thales evaluations are different. Yet both indices pay particular attention to the organisational capacity of CSOs. According to the CSO Sustainability Index reports, the organisational capacity of CSOs in North Macedonia has almost been unchanged, improving slightly from 3.7 to 3.6 from 2016 to 2021 (see Figure 3). However, this anaemic progress cannot be solely attributed to the positive impact of the refugee crisis. It is rather an outcome of various developments in North Macedonia. For instance, the legal environment governing the sector has been refined in 2021 thanks to the adoption of new strategy documents, such as the ‘Strategy for Cooperation with and Development of Civil Society’, as well as the drafting of legislative changes (e.g., in the Criminal Code, see USAID, 2022: 2). Interestingly, the 2022 Report is also critical of the international donor community, mentioning their “limited support for institutional and strategic development, such as financing the drafting of strategic documents, facilitating long-term strategic planning, or targeted staff training” (USAID, 2022: 3).

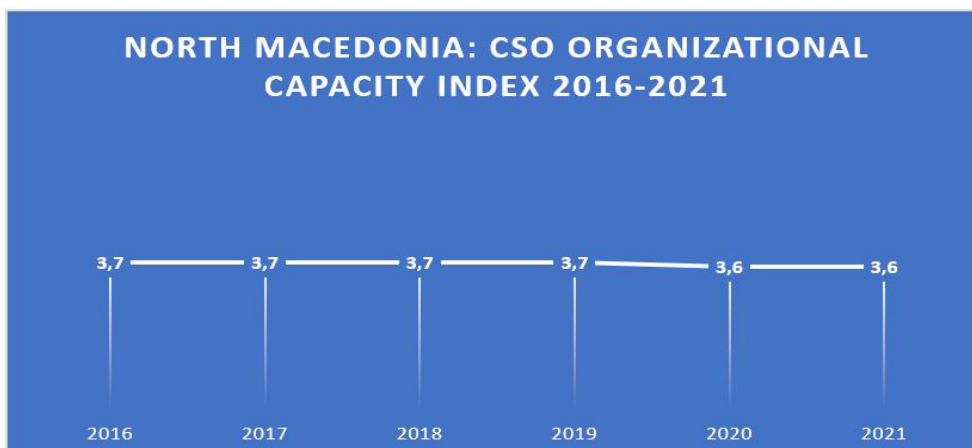


Figure 3: CSO Organizational Index in North Macedonia 2016-2021.



The precarious financial viability of CSOs in both countries impacts the implementation of their strategic goals. Indeed, it is commonly accepted that financial limitations shift CSOs' focus away from implementing long-term strategies and investing in their capacities. CSOs remain entrapped in chasing donor-driven projects, which very often are not even close to their scope and mandate. For instance, in the Greek case, although CSOs like Iliaktida and Praxis lacked expertise in providing accommodation services to refugees, they applied and received funding from international donors for such a purpose (Valvis et al., 2021: 107). While the situation in both countries did not deteriorate because of the refugee crisis, it did not substantially improve either.

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The absence of financial viability and security also works as an inhibitory factor in attracting highly skilled staff or retaining the most experienced officers. This was obvious in North Macedonia (USAID, 2021), but even in Greece, the situation was not very different since only well-established CSOs have managed to keep professionals with advanced skills and experience in their teams. The lack of personnel with adequate skills creates an asymmetry in the performance of CSOs. Just a few of their members are able to carry out demanding tasks, and, thus, the workload in these organisations is not distributed evenly. This, in turn, creates more challenges in the internal structures and management of the organisations. In addition, in contrast to large CSOs, small non-profits are not well-placed to gain access to long-term funding support.

The lack of personnel with adequate skills creates an asymmetry in the performance of CSOs.

EU and UNHCR funding for the management of the migration and refugee crises has been widely available for non-profits from both countries since 2015. However, specific requirements accompanying the various calls for proposals have deterred many CSOs (especially the smaller and less organised ones) from applying. The general EU practise of allocating most of its funds to specific actions and projects instead of covering the core expenses (e.g., salaries of permanent staff) of the applicant CSOs has prompted many non-profits to hire external service providers instead of investing in the growth of their own staff. In addition, the short duration of projects financed by the EU and the UNHCR (usually, renewed every six months) complicated the overall operational programming of CSOs (in-person interview with Asst. Prof. Sotiris Petropoulos, Director of HIGGS, 18.05.2023).

These difficulties compel CSOs to place certain demands on the donor community. Generally, non-profits would prefer that donors designate more flexible funding frameworks that would permit the inclusion of core expenses in budget lines as well as transfers of amounts among different budget categories according to emerging needs without excessive justification and time-consuming processes. CSOs also want a continuous flow of information about the level of commitment (in terms of resources and duration) of the donor community to certain humanitarian crises and other contingencies. Lastly, CSOs consider their capacity building and networking as two crucial fields in which the donor community should invest further in the future (in-person interview with Asst. Prof. Sotiris Petropoulos, Director of HIGGS, 26.06.2023).



Interestingly, a step forward for the organised civil society of both states and the establishment of stronger cooperation channels has been made with the “Cooperation for Common Future”⁶ Programme. It concerns an initiative aiming at the growth of cooperation linkages between the youth of the two countries. It has capitalised on the 2018 Prespa Agreement, and it is supported by the US Embassy in Skopje and the Stability Pact for Southeastern Europe. However, there is a lot of room for improvement given that the political interest, particularly from the side of Greece, to support the initiative has been limited so far.

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Conclusions and policy recommendations

The 2015 refugee crisis led to the reinvigoration of civic activism in both countries. An increase in public support to the activities of non-profits and some improvements in the professionalism of CSOs have been documented. However, it is quite questionable whether these changes have had a lasting impact on the empowerment of CSOs. Non-profits are criticised for having become more funding-driven than value-oriented actors. While CSOs in Greece and North Macedonia benefited from the availability of greater amounts of funds to manage the refugee crisis, they failed to capitalise on this context to increase their resilience and improve their organisational capacity.

However, some positive signs in the organised civil societies of both countries do exist. These, among others, include a successful advocacy campaign in North Macedonia about the prevention of changes to the Electoral Code that could hamper independent civic lists and the pressure by Greek environmental CSOs on the Greek government to pursue more ambitious goals. Another step forward is the establishment of stronger collaboration between CSOs from the two countries, starting with the “Cooperation for Common Future” programme, which supports the growth of cooperation linkages between the youth of the two countries. Yet, the role of CSOs in the public sphere in both countries could improve. To this end:

The EU should:

- Increase the funds in support of the resilience of CSOs (e.g., core expenses) and earmark funds exclusively for CSO capacity building.
- Support transnational civil society links and exchanges between Greek and North Macedonian CSOs to encourage the multiplication of collaboration initiatives among the two sides.

Greece and North Macedonia should:

- Improve the legal framework to stimulate the growth of their respective organised civil societies.

6 <https://www.c4cf.org/>



- Systematically involve CSOs in consultation processes on institutional reforms.

CSOs from these countries should:

- Become less funding-driven and pursue their own priorities.
- Adopt long-term strategies and invest in the growth of their human resources.
- Establish more links with international CSOs and transnational advocacy networks.
- Consider the formation of a civil society platform where non-profits from the two countries may exchange ideas and best practises (e.g., know-how on grants from philanthropic foundations), and explore the possibility of formalising agreements for volunteer and staff exchanges.

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