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# Civil Society Transformation in the Context of Political Radicalism in Eastern Europe

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## Abstract

The article studies the current changes taking place in the civil society sector of Eastern European countries under the impact of intensifying radical action on the political environment. One of the key areas of progress of modern states is a further development of democratic values, which depends largely on the activity of the civil society sector. In this regard, the aim of the study was to examine the main problems and areas of change in the development of the civil society sector during the period of intensification of political radicalism in some Eastern European democracies. Methodologically, they used the empirical results of a survey of citizens of Eastern European countries to determine areas of development and key issues of civil society. In conclusion, a comparative analysis of the level of development of the civil sector and the degree of radicalization in Eastern European countries revealed the correlation between the development of civil society and radical policy frameworks.

**Keywords:** civil society; political activity; democracy; political radicalism; extremism in Eastern Europe.

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## Transformación de la sociedad civil en el contexto del radicalismo político en Europa del Este

### Resumen

El artículo estudia los cambios actuales que se están produciendo en el sector de la sociedad civil de los países de Europa del Este bajo el impacto de la intensificación de la acción radical en el entorno político. Una de las áreas clave del progreso de los estados modernos es un mayor desarrollo de los valores democráticos, que depende en gran medida de la actividad del sector de la sociedad civil. En este sentido, el objetivo del estudio fue examinar los principales problemas y áreas de cambios en el desarrollo del sector de la sociedad civil durante el período de intensificación del radicalismo político en algunas democracias de Europa del Este. Metodológicamente se utilizaron los resultados empíricos de una encuesta a ciudadanos de países de Europa del Este para determinar las áreas de desarrollo y los temas clave de la sociedad civil. En conclusión, un análisis comparativo del nivel de desarrollo del sector civil y el grado de radicalización en los países de Europa del Este reveló la correlación entre el desarrollo de la sociedad civil y los marcos políticos radicales.

**Palabras clave:** sociedad civil; actividad política; democracia; radicalismo político; extremismo en Europa del este.

### Introduction

The countries of Eastern Europe, which have been moving towards democratic values for several decades, are characterized by a noticeable expansion of the radical political environment. The impact of political centrism is weakening, with extremist rhetoric spreading in both right-wing and left-wing ideological lines, thus giving rise to authoritarian and populist approaches to achieving their own goals. There is no doubt that the latter is a matter of concern, as migration-, security- and terrorism-related issues are acute for the European Community.

The role of radicals in public preferences was intensified by broad participation of radical parties, their electoral support, as well as influence on government institutions. Besides, some political frustration with “classical” policy aggravates the need for radical action by different political parties. This is the reason for calls for anti-globalization, dissatisfaction with existing elites, opposition to EU immigration policy. Radicalism is inflated by socio-economic crises, a sharp decline in living standards, totalitarian political regimes, and a ban on pluralism.

Radicalism manifests itself as an extremist and uncompromising propaganda of one's own beliefs, preferences, views, concepts intended for decisive radical changes of existing public institutions. Political radical actions are manifested through the provocation of riots, terrorist acts and other violent actions. Radical representatives of political movements are incited to reject any compromises, negotiations, agreements. The main reason for right-wing radicalism is thrive to completely change the existing system in order to restore the traditional regime. Left-wing radicals support changes and further establishing a fundamentally new order.

In such a situation, civil society, which is actively involved in addressing global, regional and national issues, cannot stay aside. Civil society is required to make appropriate internal and external changes because of the use of authoritarian, xenophobic and other negative sentiments by radical parties with the purpose of enhancing representation in government. These transformations are aimed at protecting basic democratic values, including human rights and freedoms, gender equality, protection of vulnerable groups, and so on based on interaction with local communities and the electorate through collective action.

Radical left-wing parties aggravate the contradictions between the market peculiarities of economic development and public administration, supporting the expansion of social security and advocating for the rights of employed citizens (Kutiyski *et al.*, 2021). Political radicalism relies on a low level of confidence and a negative attitude towards national and European policies. The intensified Euroscepticism is also the result of radical parties' preferences.

Radical political models are significantly different from existing fundamental norms and values that exist in the political, legal and social systems. Determining the values and goals of ideology, which involves violent actions to achieve them in radical cases, remains the key issue. Anti-democracy, authoritarianism and nationalism can be defined the properties of radicalism, while xenophobia, populism and racism are peculiar for the manifestations of the concept (Carter, 2018). There is an opinion that the extremist parties set the agenda, while the centrist parties accept the most important issues on this basis. This role of radical ideology is even stronger in Eastern Europe, because socio-cultural problems are more pressing in post-communist societies (Heinisch *et al.*, 2021).

In essence, civil society is disposed to support democratic values, understanding the importance of social reconciliation, establishing security in society, a tolerant attitude to different cultures, religions and nationalities. The participation of civil society organizations in the political and social spheres is becoming paramount against the background of radical ideology in the Eastern European countries, which have a totalitarian history.

In view of the urgency of the selected subject matter, the aim of this study is to analyse the existing needs and ways of transforming civil society in the context of political radicalism as a phenomenon in modern democratic Eastern European countries. The aim involved the following objectives:

- Study the current problems of civil society in the context of a European democracy.
- Identify key needs for civil society development.
- Analyse the state of activity and the level of development of the civil sector.
- Study the degree of radicalization in the selected countries and the danger it poses to society
- Suggest ways for developing civil society towards deterring radicalization in Eastern European countries.

### **1. Literature review**

The Covid-19 pandemic has aggravated threats to society related to compliance with the foundations of liberalism and liberal democracy. The crisis reveals the fragility of national constitutions, a contradictory understanding of the rule of law and democracy, thus foregrounding the crucial role of civil society. The public sector must evaluate the actions of the elite, directing social discontent into the public sphere and requiring civic participation.

The illiberal policies of governments in the last decade call these regulatory conceptions of directed development into question. Some active political actors in EU Member States such as Bulgaria, Hungary and Poland are inclined to consider that the civil society participation and oversight of democratic transformation are not necessary. Illiberal ideas (isolationist restrictions, the dominance of individual nations and the alienation of minorities) emerge in contrast to liberal-democratic values (respect for civil society, tolerance). Various legal measures, targeted controls, and indirect transfers of public funding seriously undermine the existence of civil society organizations (CSOs) in Eastern European countries (Wessenauer and Hunyadi, 2016; Human Rights First, 2017). The rejection of civil society is not, however, new in European history.

The concept of civil society has travelled a long and difficult path along with various crises of the liberal narrative. Governments of both the Western and the Eastern countries have tried to ignore the demands of transparency and civil rights, either to strengthen oligarchy without hindrance or to fight terrorism effectively. Civil society research requires more systematic,

cross-sectoral, comparative and transnational views with regard to new challenges caused by illiberal pressures. On the example of the countries of Eastern Europe, this question shows how integrated approaches contribute to the development of modern civil society practices under the influence of both the state and radical politics (Marzec and Neubacher, 2020).

Radicalization that leads to violence can take different forms depending on the context and time period, and can be based on different ideologies. Right-wing extremism is a form of radicalization associated with fascism, racism and ultranationalism. This form of radicalization is characterized by the violent protection of racial, ethnic or pseudo-national identity, and is associated with radical hostility to government, minorities, immigrants and / or left-wing political groups. Left-wing extremism is a form of radicalization that focuses primarily on anti-capitalist demands and calls for the transformation of political systems, that are considered responsible for creating social inequality. This policy may ultimately use violence to meet its own needs (CPRMV, 2022).

In a liberal-democratic regime, radical positions on both sides of the political spectrum combine ideological radicalism with a discourse that contrasts certain social strata against a wide range of political elites (Adams *et al.*, 2006). But ideological views that were once considered marginal or extreme are becoming more widespread, as former marginalized parties may become parliamentary (Polyakova and Shekhovtsov, 2016).

Minkenberg (2015) maintains that traditional and new splits do not structure party competition in a stable way, except for ethnic split. The role of collective identities has been central to understanding party competition in Eastern European countries, and has been the subject of research that analysed transitional events in post-communist countries (Gyárfášová and Mesežnikov, 2015). Sociocultural sources of political controversy still include historical insults and national traumas (Minkenberg, 2015). The delayed European integration has also promoted the emergence of right-wing radical parties, as the major political parties had to protect strict membership conditions imposed on countries joining the Community (Harmsen, 2010). The newly established, mostly right-wing radical parties, began to bridge a Eurosceptic anti-reformist gap.

The diversity of Eastern European countries in terms of ethnic heterogeneity, economic activity and cultural heritage is reflected in Eastern European radical parties. Ethnicity and language strengthen radical policies in some countries (Bulgaria, Estonia, Slovakia, Romania, Latvia). More ethnically homogeneous countries (Poland, Czech Republic) have radical politics focused on anti-Roma rhetoric, as well as on social and religious issues. Despite new forms of radicalism in Eastern Europe, liberal democracy is incompatible with the concept of societies where the titular majority play the only role.

Democracy empowered minorities and politicized the protection of minority rights. In some cases, there was an immediate negative response to diversity and inclusiveness, reflecting the emergence and growth of post-authoritarian policies. After the problems with the establishment of major electoral institutions passed, dissatisfaction with the opportunities offered to minorities with the new liberal-democratic order led to the counter-mobilization of radicals (Bušíková, 2018).

Radical parties in Eastern European countries have unique features that distinguish them from Western European partners (Ronald and Norris, 2016; Mudde, 2016): left-wing positions in the economy, the relationship between identity and political reforms, which leads to the association of minority politics with democratization, the coexistence of radical parties with radicalized major parties.

As opposed to other parties in some political systems, Eastern European radical right-wing parties tend to have left-wing rhetoric about economic policy (Allen, 2017). Their political platforms are protection against market instability, increasing social spending and intensified government control in the economic sphere, which excludes foreign participation in free markets and property ownership. Economic and other socio-demographic features are not reflected on the parties' economic policy platforms.

The reason is the nature of economic risk, which involves a relationship between voting, income levels and occupations; identity-related economic problems (loss of national identity, perceived injustice of the economic system). Changes in the hierarchy of ethnic groups through democratic processes also weaken economic considerations based on ethnic peculiarities of economic issues (Siroky and Cuffe, 2015).

Political radicalism is a set of diverse phenomena that have a common protest and a radical demand for profound changes in society. These are the condemnation of the established social order and the economic, cultural and political elites that support it, the rejection of the institutions underlying the current political system, the belief that social and political structures must be radically transformed (Muxel, 2020).

The culture of political protest has become more generalized, legitimized and more demanding. In this context, the potential for radicalism or greater familiarity with its range of views and actions, especially among the younger generations, has expanded significantly (Muxel, 2019). Significant changes in citizens' political practices are becoming increasingly apparent – from protests in polling stations to radicalism in the streets. Collective forms of mobilization are becoming diverse (flash mobs, online gatherings, boycotts) (Isin and Nielsen, 2008), and are creating a civic vision that includes a radical dimension of what political activity means. In this complex environment, civil society must form a vision for the further development

of the European Union and other political institutions that will promote gradual deradicalization of political and social activities.

## **2. Methods**

1. The research procedure provided several stages. The first stage involved an analysis of the needs and directions of civil sector development in some Eastern European countries in order to identify key trends and issues of civil society. The second stage provided for identification of the main indicators that describe the activity of civil society and the degree of radicalization of society. The final stage involved data processing and drawing the main conclusions. The methods of graphical analysis, scatter plots, comparative analysis and evaluation were used.

The following Eastern European countries were proposed to be used as a sample: Poland (PI), Czech Republic (CZ), Bulgaria (BG), Slovakia (SK), Croatia (HR), Slovenia (SK), Romania (RO), Lithuania (LT), Latvia (LV), Estonia (EE), which can sufficiently reflect the main problems and trends in compliance with the aim, based on the existing available data.

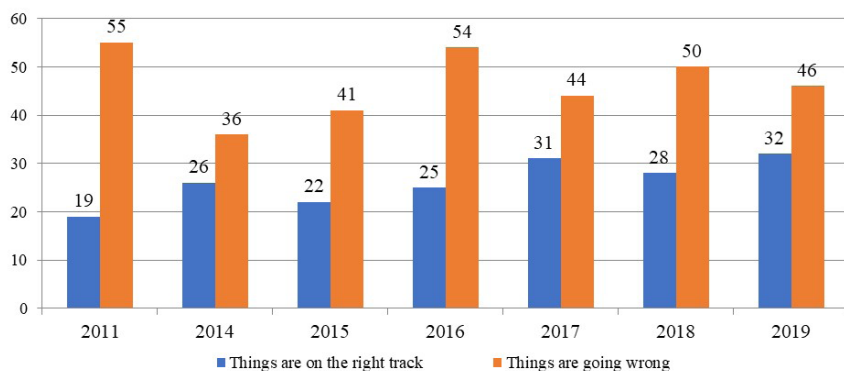
Empirical materials of the 2019 European Union survey from which data for the selected countries were singled out were used as empirical tools. A graphical analysis of the obtained data was conducted based on the survey results (directions of EU development, importance of the electorate's votes, importance of development of political spheres, areas of activity of civil society organizations). The relationship between the importance of the vote in the EU and the degree of favour to the EU allowed grouping the selected countries according to national trends.

The study of civil society development indicators in the context of radical political influences in Eastern European countries in 2020 involved several indicators. The number of civil society organizations, the Democracy Index and the CSOSI (Civil Society Organization Sustainability Index) were taken as the basis of civil society development indicators. The number of radical parties in the country and the Terrorism Index were used as indicators of radicalization in Eastern Europe. The use of the Global Terrorism Index (GTI) allowed to identify the level of terrorist threat in Eastern Europe, which may indicate the degree of radicalization of the country. A comparison of the selected countries was made based on the data obtained, and the key directions of changes in the civil society sector under the influence of the radicalization of the political environment in Eastern Europe were identified.



### 3. Results

More than a decade after the economic and financial crisis of 2008, the European Union has started to move in a positive direction from an economic point of view. Since the 2019 European elections, the positive attitude and support of the EU citizens has remained strong. The level of optimism about the future of the European Union is improving, as is the general sense of satisfaction with democratic changes in Europe. At the same time, most Europeans are also firmly convinced that human rights, freedom of speech and gender equality shall be further maintained. Fewer respondents express the opinion that the EU is on the right track in relation to the proportion of people who believe that things in the EU are going wrong during 2011-2019 (Figure 1).

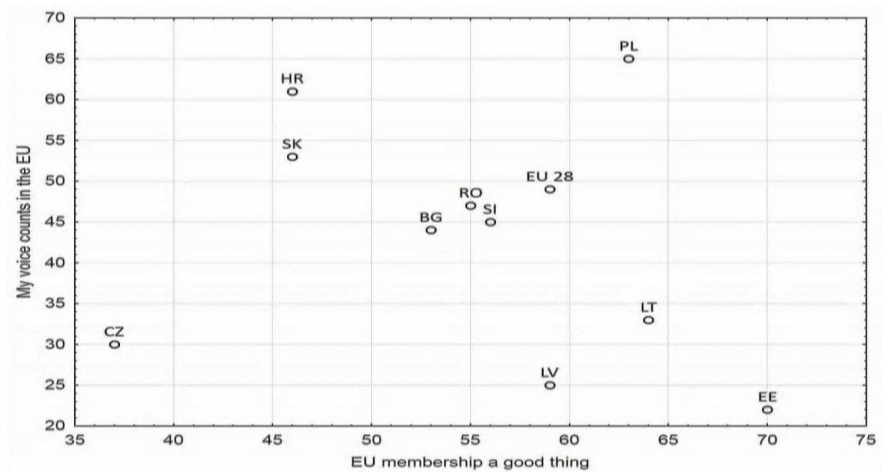


**Figure 1. Respondents' perception of the appropriateness of EU development directions, %.**

At the same time, the 2019 European elections and the active participation of citizens in the latter had a positive impact on the increased satisfaction with democratic development in the European Union. Respondents rated free and fair elections (75%), freedom of speech (74%), and respect for fundamental rights (73%), with clear improvements in the fight against disinformation in the media (48%) and anti-corruption (43%). There were 52% of Europeans who approved democratic changes in the European Union, and 56% share this view regarding their own country. Poland shows the highest level of satisfaction (73%), Romania — 34%, Croatia — 33%. It is also worth noting that in some countries, the overall degree of satisfaction with European democracy is higher than satisfaction with national democracy. These differences are particularly noticeable

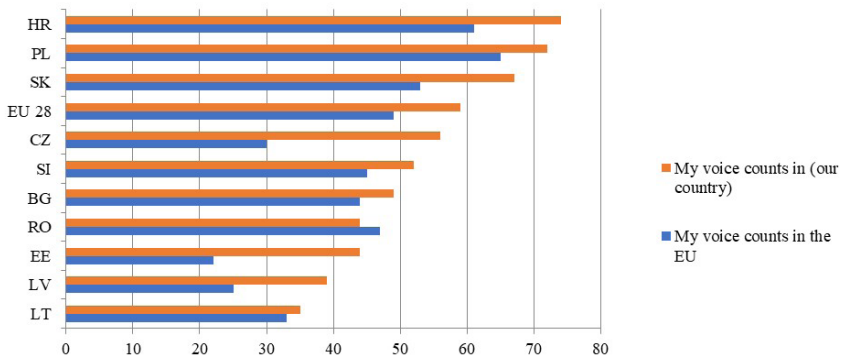
in Croatia, Latvia, Lithuania, Bulgaria, Poland and Romania. As regards national changes, Poland and the Czech Republic have shown the highest increase in support for EU democracy since spring 2019 (+13 pp, +11 pp, respectively) (Schulmeister *et al.*, 2019).

A scatter plot (Figure 2) provides some national examples of public opinion trends. For example, the general feeling that the vote is important in the EU is quite strong in Croatia and Slovakia (upper left quadrant), while the level of support to EU membership in the same countries remains relatively low. For comparison, the lower right quadrant includes those countries where overall positive views of the EU are not reflected in the same positive perceptions of citizens that their voice matters in Europe.



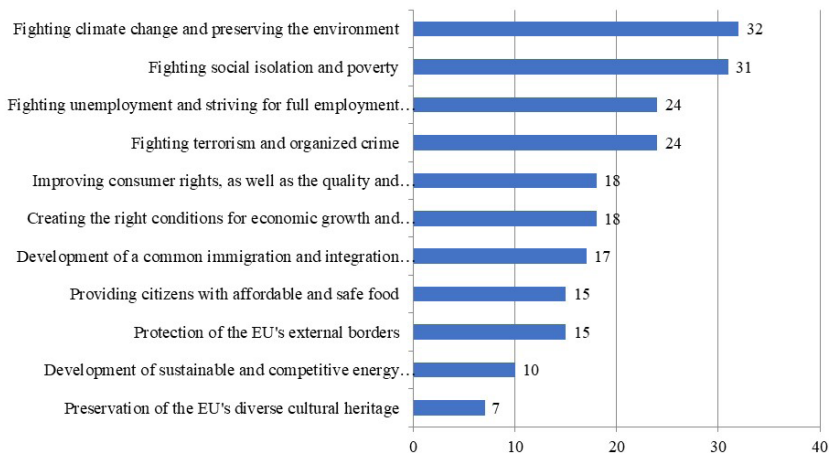
**Figure 2. Correlation between the importance of the vote in the EU and the level of support to the EU.**

The perception of the importance of the vote is influenced by additional factors, which are formed by national socio-political contexts. There is a vision of the importance of the vote in one's own country rather than in the EU. The only exception is Romania, where 47% of respondents believe that their vote counts in the EU, and 44% share this view with regard to their country. Respondents in Estonia (22%) are the least likely to agree that their vote counts in the EU (Figure 3).



**Figure 3. Perception of the importance of the electorate's vote in their own country and in the EU, %.**

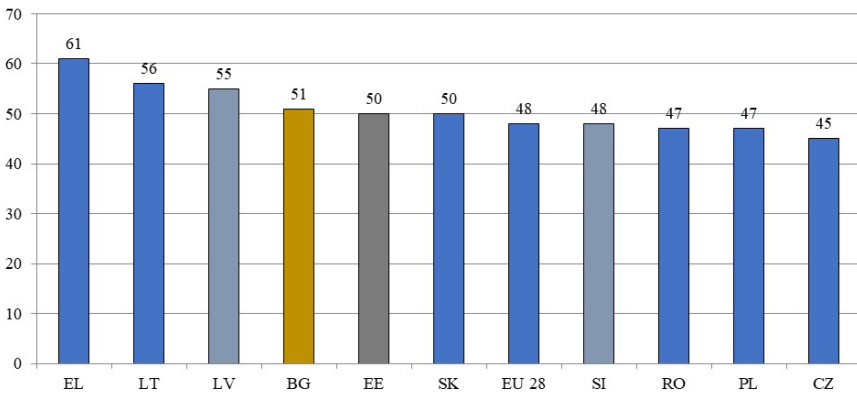
The ranking of priority issues for European citizens over the last year shows an increased relevance of the fight against climate change compared to the decreased importance of the migration problem (Figure 4).



**Figure 4. The importance of developing certain policy areas**

In 2019, the issue of environmental protection is a predominant political priority for the future activities of the European Parliament. The fight against social exclusion and poverty ranks second (31%), the fight

against terrorism and organized crime (24%), as well as the fight against youth unemployment and the pursuit of full employment across the EU (24%). Romania (17%), Latvia (15%) and Bulgaria (14%) are the countries with the lowest level of interest in environmental protection (Schulmeister *et al.*, 2019). According to the selected Eastern European countries, the protection of human rights worldwide is the most important issue in most countries (Figure 5). Blue colour in Figure 5 shows protection of human rights around the world, green — freedom of speech, purple — solidarity between the EU and the poor countries.



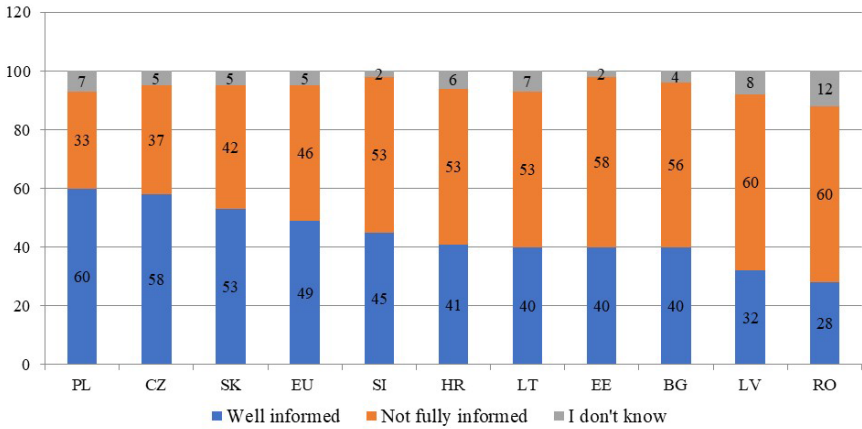
**Figure 5. Determining the values to be primarily protected by the European Parliament, %.**

Civil society surveys (EU, 2020) show that less than half of the population actively interacts with civil society organizations (CSOs), but CSO communication activities have a wider impact. Nearly eight out of ten talks about activities they have seen over the past two years that have influenced their behaviour. Referring to public dialogue, almost half say that there have been public communications in their field in the last 12 months, although in fact less than one in five has been involved.

Less than a quarter said they participated in public communications last year. Nearly three-quarters of those who know about public consultations in their area say it has been helpful. The main reasons are that public communications are a way to give citizens information about local politics, inform about various problems, get the results of measures taken by local authorities.

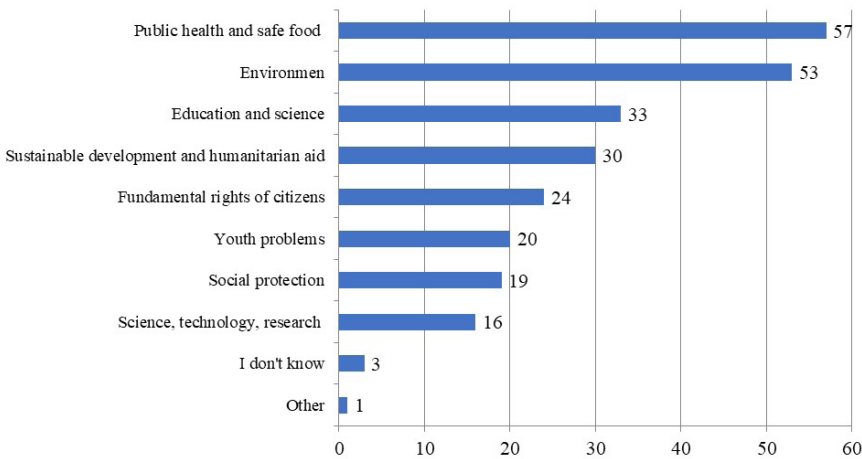
Country-specific information was obtained when asked about the degree of awareness of public organizations on issues important to them. The

highest percentage was found in Poland, the lowest — in Romania (Figure 6).



**Figure 6. Awareness of public organizations about important issues for citizens, %**

The range of issues of CSO activity in the selected countries formed the following priorities (Figure 7).



**Figure 7. Priority areas of activity of civil society organizations in the EU, %.**

The distribution of key CSO topics is presented in Table 1. As for other important areas, sustainable development and humanitarian aid are least frequently mentioned in Lithuania and Estonia (11%). There are countries where at least three out of ten respondents say that fundamental and civil rights should be a priority for CSOs in their country: the Czech Republic (31%) and Poland (30%). This is the opinion of 13% in Estonia and 14% in Lithuania. The share of respondents who believe that social protection should be a priority for their country's CSOs ranges from 40% in Slovenia, 36% in Latvia and 30% in Estonia to 9% in Romania (EU, 2020).

If we compare the priorities of respondents who are already involved with CSOs with those who do not cooperate with CSOs, they see the environment (59% vs. 48%), sustainable development and humanitarian aid (38% vs. 24%), or fundamental rights of citizens (27% vs. 21%) as priority areas. There were 47% of respondents who said that they cooperate with public sector organizations in their country. Donation is one the most common ways (27%). CSO donations are mentioned by 4% of respondents in Romania and 8% in Bulgaria. There were 16% of respondents who encouraged other people to cooperate with CSOs; 15% took part in demonstrations or similar events organized by CSOs; there were 15% of volunteers who regularly participated in various events of CSOs; while 14% interacted with CSOs online or on social networks; 51% said they did not cooperate with CSOs (EU, 2020).

**Table 1. Priority areas for civil society organizations in their own country**

|                     | Public health and safe food, % | Environment, % | Education and science, % |
|---------------------|--------------------------------|----------------|--------------------------|
| Poland (PL)         | 59                             | 49             | 25                       |
| Czech Republic (CZ) | 51                             | 53             | 34                       |
| Slovakia (SK)       | 57                             | 58             | 25                       |
| EU                  | 57                             | 53             | 33                       |
| Slovenia (SI)       | 71                             | 57             | 18                       |
| Croatia (HR)        | 59                             | 44             | 29                       |
| Lithuania (LT)      | 52                             | 48             | 37                       |
| Estonia (EE)        | 54                             | 52             | 38                       |
| Bulgaria (BG)       | 69                             | 48             | 40                       |
| Latvia (LV)         | 65                             | 42             | 34                       |
| Romania (RO)        | 69                             | 33             | 41                       |

Source: EU, 2020.

There were 5% of respondents in Estonia who said they actively encourage others to participate in CSOs. The share of respondents who took part in demonstrations or similar events organized by CSOs ranges from 20% in the Czech Republic and 18% in Poland to 4% in Hungary and 5% in Romania and Estonia. Respondents in Slovenia (19%) say they regularly volunteer for CSOs, while this figure is only 3% in Romania. There were 5% of respondents in Romania and Hungary who said that they cooperate with CSOs mainly online or on social media (EU, 2020).

A comprehensive study of the state of civil society organizations in Eastern European countries, it will be appropriate to determine the number of NGOs, their opportunities for existence and development, the general state of the environment conducive to democratic values, and radical environment, provided the following results (Table 2). Considering the data in Table 2, it can be noted that the largest number of civil society organizations in relation to the population of the country is established in Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia and Slovenia. This indicates a certain civic activity. Bulgaria, Poland and Romania showed the lowest results.

**Table 2. Indicators of civil society development in the context of radical political influences in Eastern Europe, 2020.**

|                | Number of CSOs | Population (million people) | CSO Sustainability Index | Democracy Index Freedom House/The Economist Intelligence Unit | Number of radical parties | Terrorism Index |
|----------------|----------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------|---|---------------------------|-----------------|
| Poland         | 143,000        | 38.19                       | 2.9                      | 4.93/6.85   | 5                         | 0.239           |
| Czech Republic | 135,465        | 10.7                        | 2.6                      | 5.64/7.67   | 6                         | 0.315           |
| Bulgaria       | 20,000         | 6.91                        | 3.5                      | 4.54/6.71   | 2                         | 0.172           |
| Slovakia       | 59,844         | 5.44                        | 3.0                      | 5.29/6.97   | 3                         | 0.029           |
| Croatia        | 38,980         | 4.21                        | 3.4                      | 4.25/6.50   | 2                         | 0               |
| Slovenia       | 27,986         | 2.1                         | 3.0                      | 5.93/7.54   | 1                         | 0               |
| Romania        | 117,510        | 21.23                       | 3.7                      | 4.43/6.40   | 3                         | 0               |
| Lithuania      | 40,500         | 2.71                        | 2.5                      | 5.64/7.13   | 4                         | 0.229           |
| Latvia         | 24,849         | 1.86                        | 2.6                      | 5.79/7.24   | 2                         | 0.115           |
| Estonia        | 22,574         | 1.22                        | 2.1                      | 6.07/7.84   | 1                         | 0.057           |

Source: Composed on the basis of (USAID, 2021; Freedom House, 2020; EI, 2021; Bustikova, 2019; Nordsieck, 2020; Parties and Elections in Europe, 2021; Institute for Economics & Peace, 2021).

The CSOSI reports on the state of civil society sectors. It addresses: legal environment, organizational capacity, financial viability, advocacy, service delivery, infrastructure and public image. Estimates for each area range from 1 (highest level of sustainability) to 7 (highest barriers) (USAID, 2021). According to this assessment, Estonia (2.1), Lithuania, Latvia and the Czech Republic had the highest rates among the selected countries, while Romania (3.7), Bulgaria and Croatia had the lowest rates.

For greater objectivity, the Democracy Index was further determined by data provided by international institutions (Freedom House and The Economist Intelligence Unit). Accordingly, the development of a democratic environment is observed in Estonia (6.07 / 7.84), Slovenia, the Czech Republic. The group of countries with the lowest indicators of the Democracy Index included Croatia (4.25/6.5), Romania, Bulgaria.

The largest number of radical parties is registered in the Czech Republic (6), Poland and Lithuania, while Slovenia and Estonia have the lowest results (1 each). According to the Terrorism Index, the highest risks are identified in the Czech Republic (0.315), Poland and Lithuania. The rate of terrorist threat in Croatia, Slovenia and Romania is 0 according to own methodology.

#### **4. Discussion**

The study expands the analysis of the changes that have taken place in the civil society system, given the significant influence of the ideology of political programmes of radical major parties in Eastern European countries. The question arises: is the impact of the development of democratic institutions on the agenda of radical parties noticeable.

Unfortunately, the study did not include all Eastern European countries, given the full set of data, but the available range of countries showed different levels of civil society development and features of a radical political environment. This allowed to obtain representative results. Regarding the general methodological approach, the number of indicators describing the level of development of the civil sector and political radicalization should be expanded.

Theories that describe democracy emphasize the importance of an active civil society and citizen participation in order for democratic norms to work. But the emergence of radical parties proves that a weak civil society reinforces anti-democratic extremism and leads to the success of undemocratic forces (Buzogány, 2021). The study confirms the findings (Berning and Ziller, 2017), which show that high-level social trust reduces the benefits of radical parties in the Netherlands. At the same time,



comparative studies of voting in Western Europe have found no clear evidence that participation in NGOs will reduce the share of votes of radical political parties (Rydgren, 2009).

In case of change of the liberal-democratic government in Eastern Europe, a large radicalized main party that could make a difference in the country's political space could be a probable initiator. The question is the role of the right-wing radical party in these changes based on the development of topical issues and ideas or, conversely, blocking the democratic departure, based on an alternative channel for protest. Most studies in Eastern Europe considered right-wing parties as the Western equivalent of the radical movement. But such an approach is considered insufficiently justified, if right-wing radical parties contribute to the dismantling of democratic rule by undermining constitutional systems of checks and balances (Bušíková, 2018).

Therefore, the analysis of surveys of citizens on problematic issues in Eastern European countries revealed some pessimism about the appropriateness of the EU policies. At the same time, there is a significant commitment to freedom of speech, guarantee of fundamental human rights, and others. Satisfaction with European democracy is higher than satisfaction with national democracies. The impact of the votes in the European and national political system remains important.

Preservation of the environment is a key political priority (32%). Counter-terrorism (24%), immigration policy (17%) and the preservation of diverse cultural heritage (7%) are of much less concern. The main problem for the selected countries is the protection of human rights worldwide (except Bulgaria and Estonia). Voters are concerned about the implications of European legislation for their own country and the EU's activities at regional and local level.

Awareness of CSOs about important issues exceeds 50% in only three countries (Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland). Health and food safety (57%), environment (53%) and education, skills and training are the main directions of CSOs. Cooperation with CSOs is realized at the level of participation in events, volunteering and donations. Cooperation also takes place online or on social networks.

A comparison of data on Eastern European countries shows some dependencies. Increased CSOSIs demonstrate that reducing barriers to the development of the civil society sector increases society's activity and allows establishing more civil society organizations and involving more people in civic activities. The indicator of the development of democratic principles in the country — the Democracy Index determined through different methodological approaches correlates with this thesis. The higher value of the index confirms the increased opportunities for the development of civil society organizations (Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, the Czech Republic).

The degree of political radicalization in Eastern European countries is as follows. First, the countries with the largest number of radical parties (6 to 4) are identified as problematic in terms of terrorist threat (although these indices (0.315 to 0.229) are relatively low for Europe). Second, there are a small number of radical parties in those countries that have high activity of civil society organizations and high values of the Democracy Index. The exception is Lithuania, where 4 radical parties are registered.

It can be noted that despite the growing trend of radicalization in politics, voters and the civil society sector do not consider issues related to the impact of radicalism on society as one of the key issues. This follows both from the analysis of socio-political needs and from the current development of democracy in Eastern Europe. The same can be stated about the political environment, where the main problems of society are foregrounded by classical parties. An analysis of the study (Heinisch *et al.*, 2021) revealed that right-wing radical parties did not really affect the relevance of problems among major political parties, as there was no link between their policy agendas.

Studies of party behaviour in Eastern Europe revealed different reactions from major parties to their radical rivals: adaptation, partial cooperation with isolation, and a lack of noticeable response (Heinisch *et al.*, 2021). This may indicate some gaps that can be filled by civil society organizations that promote democratic values and shape social demands for further socio-economic development.

The complex relationship between the growing number of radical parties in Eastern Europe and the impact of the recent economic crisis in Europe and the change in labour relations in the region was clarified. Other studies suggest that support for radical parties is inflated by overt or covert xenophobia, low levels of trust in the national political elite, and dissatisfaction with the complexity of democratic processes (Minkenberg, 2019; Mudde, 2017).

Unfortunately, radicalization sometimes converts into terrorist acts, which is an unacceptable approach to a well-established understanding of political, legal and social activities. But judgments about radicalization can be based on processes that arise as a result of social conflicts and are marked by intergroup activities. This includes the search for identity, prejudice, ideology, antisocial attitudes and behaviour (Beelmann, 2020; Timbro authoritarian populism index, 2021).

In this case, we see that the gradual overcoming of the post-communist past, the active development of democratic values and the transformations taking place in the civil society sector allow making statements about shifting emphasis. The issues of environmental protection, public health and the economy are becoming important for the societies of Eastern

Europe. In this context, the opportunities of civil society organizations should ensure the socialization of certain segments of the population through educational programmes, grants, cultural exchanges, which will reduce immigration issues, expand the penetration of democratic values, strengthen Europeanization.

## Conclusion

An important objective of civil society is to control the positions of radical forces, because their impact on the electorate, as well as their potential and real power can directly or indirectly shape modern politics. This sets out key challenges for key political players and political institutions at both national and EU level. As radical parties that have the support of a certain part of society direct their actions to certain reforms in their own country, it is important for civil society to support the pro-European position. Despite the intensified rhetoric of the right-wing parties of the European Parliament in 2019, radical political forces have their own support. Political players who implement illiberal methods weaken the democratic values of the socio-political systems of both their own country and the EU.

Political decisions that strengthen democratic achievements become the main approach to the partial deradicalization of society. Civil society is one of the elements in this model, which must communicate with voters, while solving problems caused by radical right-wing parties. The development of civic initiatives largely determines overcoming the contradictions associated with radical approaches in politics, which are the consequences of both the subjective nature of the political environment and the existing problems in the economy, culture, social protection. The study proves the correlation between the development of civil society and democratic institutions to reduce radicalism in the political environment in Eastern European countries.

This is in line with the concept of broader voter information on the EU's agenda, country's security, domestic policy, immigration, economic development and minimizing radical policies. Based on the introduction of democratic values and principles, human rights through the active functioning and state support of civil society, this approach will reformat the key issues in Eastern European countries that contribute to the spread of political radicalism. The obtained results can be used in shaping the policy of further development of civil society in countries facing radical political manifestations. Further research may provide for the search for the main factors that intensify the activity of civil society, as well as the analysis of those factors.

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