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CIVIC ENGAGEMENT FOR DEMOCRACY FROM ABROAD

Hungarian, Polish, and Romanian Diasporas

ALEXANDRA IOAN

Rethink.CEE Fellowship



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Please direct inquiries to:

The German Marshall Fund of the United States
1744 R Street, NW
Washington, DC 20009
T 1 202 683 2650
F 1 202 265 1662
E info@gmfus.org

This publication can be downloaded for free at <http://www.gmfus.org/listings/research/type/publication>.

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About the Author

Alexandra Ioan works on the development of effective civil society organizations and governance processes. She completed her Ph.D. at the Hertie School of Governance in Berlin in 2018 and leads the Learning and Action Center at Ashoka Germany. Originally from Romania, she has extensive experience in program and organization development in civil society. She holds degrees from the Hertie School of Governance, the University of Bucharest, and the National School of Public Administration and Political Studies in Romania. She has also conducted research at the Stanford Center on Philanthropy and Civil Society, Stanford University.

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Executive Summary

Democratic backsliding in Central and Eastern Europe has been at the forefront of European concerns in recent years. Hungary, Poland, and Romania have experienced significant regress regarding their justice systems as well as narrowing of civil society and press freedoms, while also experiencing some of the highest migration outflows in the EU. The large diasporas from these three countries serve, however, also as a source of pro-European and pro-democratic civic energy that has been consolidating in recent years, and which can play a significant role in the years to come.

This paper looks at new Hungarian, Polish, and Romanian diaspora initiatives and organizations, and the way they engage with the democratic issues of their countries of origin. They have a strong community-building focus and carry out a wide range of activities, from protests to campaigns to public debates and fundraising events. They are actively engaging with civil society organizations in their countries of origin. They interact to a limited extent with parties currently in power in the region but they are in contact with newer opposition parties that have chapters in the region and abroad. The new diaspora initiatives see an alignment of their values with those of the EU, but they have limited capacity for direct interaction with EU-level political actors.

As they are still in the early stages of their development, these diaspora initiatives need support from policymakers and from other civil society organizations that focus on democratic advancement. This support can take the form of appropriate capacity and funding frameworks, the development of collaboration formats between initiatives, and training on engaging with power structures. The diaspora initiatives can at the same time serve as an essential resource for know-how in their countries and the region when it comes to developing transnational policy.

In the years to come these new diaspora initiatives will likely contribute to democratic outcomes in their countries of origin by influencing voting, helping to develop progressive social and political norms, and engaging citizens across EU member states towards a strong democratic Europe.

Civic Engagement for Democracy from Abroad

Hungarian, Polish, and Romanian Diasporas

ALEXANDRA IOAN

The past few years have highlighted more and more clearly the democratic challenges that countries in Central and Eastern Europe face. One by one, pillars of democratic structures such as judicial independence, freedom of expression, and freedom of civil society have been attacked and have undergone changes. This phenomenon has been paralleled by a simultaneous strong migration from the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. This combination is an increasing trend, with repercussions on the democratic development of the region but also of the European project as a whole.

Diasporas have always been particular social structures with specific connections to their countries of origin and their host countries, which have facilitated significant exchanges and developments.¹ During the past years, a new wave of grassroots diaspora initiatives and organizations has emerged with an explicit civic focus connected to the democratic backsliding in countries in Central Eastern Europe. These can act as pro-democratic forces in their countries of origin and, although they are at an early stage of development, the influence they exert can make an important contribution in the region in the years to come.

The cases of Hungary, Poland, and Romania are very telling in this regard. As member states of the European Union, these countries have caused concern regarding their democratic structures. Hungary has experienced significant constitutional changes and regress in judicial independence since the Fidesz party took power in 2010. The government has significantly constrained civil society and press freedom since, with the latest examples being the Open Society Foundations and the Central European University forced to leave the country. The government of Poland under the Law and Justice party (PiS) since 2015 has also carried out changes in

¹ Hockenos, P. (2003). *Homeland calling: Exile patriotism & the Balkan wars*. Cornell University Press.

the justice system that have weakened the separation of state powers, while simultaneously threatening civil society and press freedom. Since 2017, the government of Romania under the coalition of the Social Democratic Party and the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats has made repeated attempts to strengthen political control over the judicial system as well as to limit freedom of assembly and to increase the bureaucratic burdens on civil society organizations. These three countries also have some of the largest diasporas in the EU. This paper first looks at the characteristics of the Polish, Hungarian, and Romanian diasporas, before looking at the work and traits of their new civil society organizations and civic initiatives. The paper concludes by recommending steps that can help these initiatives thrive and have an impact.

Diaspora Characteristics

There have been successive migration waves from Poland, Hungary, and Romania before 1989, in the 1990s, and after their EU accession. Here the focus is on the most recent wave of migration, which can also be more clearly connected to the latest democratic developments in these countries. There are an estimated 3.6 million Romanians, 2.9 million Poles, and 500,000 Hungarians living abroad.² Romania and Poland are the countries with the highest emigration rate in the EU.³ The number of Polish citizens leaving the country has been decreasing since 2009, however, while Romania's emigration rate has been increasing since 2012 and Hungary's since 2009. All three countries have a higher outflow rate of nationals of working age (20–64 year-olds) than the EU average of 0.3 percent: the rate is 1.3 percent for Romania, and 0.5 percent for Poland and

² United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. (2017). *International Migrant Stock 2017*. <http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/data/estimates2/estimatesgraphs.shtml?4g4>

³ Fries-Tersch, E., Tugran, T., Rossi, L. and Bradley, H. (2018). *2017 annual report on intra-EU labour mobility*. https://ec.europa.eu/futurium/en/system/files/ged/2017_report_on_intra-eu_labour_mobility.pdf

Table 1. Top five destination countries for the Hungarian, Polish, and Romanian diaspora in 2013

Country	Top Five	
Hungary	Germany	105,188
	United States	82,590
	Canada	53,206
	United Kingdom	51,198
	Austria	39,743
	TOTAL	331,925
Romania	Italy	1,008,169
	Spain	797,603
	Germany	383,626
	Hungary	232,793
	United States	188,638
	TOTAL	2,610,829
Poland	Germany	1,146,754
	United Kingdom	661,482
	United States	498,087
	Canada	195,712
	Italy	128,158
	TOTAL	2,630,193

Source: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. (2013). Migration profiles – Hungary, Poland, Romania

Hungary according to 2015 data.

In 2013, the top five destination countries for Hungarians were Germany, the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Austria.⁴ For Romanians, they were Italy, Spain, Germany, Hungary, and the United States.⁵ The Polish diaspora was largest in Germany, the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, and Italy.⁶ (See Table 1).

The diasporas from Central and Eastern Europe are very diverse communities that reflect the social strata and challenges in their countries of origin. The reasons for their leaving are diverse, ranging from economic and social issues to institutional and political contexts. While people coming from a lower socio-economic background leave for better economic opportunities, political developments play a bigger role in the decision of more educated professionals to emigrate. In the case of Hungary, especially after the victory of Fidesz in 2010, the political component was added to economic and social reasons for which some left the country.

Diaspora communities are also very different depending on their host countries. For instance, the Romanian community in Spain has a different profile than the ones in London and Brussels, as it encompasses significant numbers of blue-collar workers, whereas the other two have a much more white-collar composition. This influences the capacities of communities to organize as well as their knowledge of and interest in civic engagement. This is reflected also in the Polish case. According to one Polish NGO representative,

Diasporas are usually very hard to coordinate. Everybody went there alone, everybody is fighting for their own economic prosperity or sometimes even economic survival, not being really deeply rooted in the social life there, so it takes some

time and it takes certain occasions to really somehow mobilize and even connect.⁷

The most recent wave of emigration from Hungary also encompasses activists, members of political parties, and professionals who have left and started putting in place organized structures in the diaspora. The range of engagement in the diaspora, therefore, reflects the range of involvement of civil society in the countries of origin.

Voting Behavior

Diasporas have proven to be decisive political players in electoral outcomes in these three countries in previous years.

In Hungary, diaspora votes helped Fidesz secure two-thirds majorities in parliament in the 2014 and 2018 elections. These were cast primarily by the ethnic diaspora in neighboring countries, which voted to the extent of around 90 percent for Fidesz after being granted Hungarian citizenship to be able to do so. The other two important parties that gather diaspora votes are Jobbik (which attracts mostly blue-collar workers) and the new youth party Momentum (which attracts mostly white-collar migrants). Approximately 20 percent of the diaspora voted for Momentum and around 25 percent for Jobbik in the 2018 elections. This shows that many people who left Hungary are very critical of the Fidesz government but that a lot of people in the diaspora also vote for it.

The diaspora has tilted election outcomes away from the ruling parties in Romania. The presidential election of 2014 was decided in favor of Klaus Iohannis by the approximately 400,000 votes cast from abroad in his favor.⁸ The fact that the government has made the voting process extremely difficult for Romanians abroad – with people queuing for up to 12 hours in front of embassies and not being able to vote – drove up the anti-government vote in the country as well. In the 2016 parliamentary elections, the diaspora vote was

4 United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. (2013). Migration profiles – Hungary. <https://esa.un.org/migmgprofiles/indicators/files/Hungary.pdf>

5 United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. (2013). Migration profiles – Romania. <https://esa.un.org/migmgprofiles/indicators/files/Romania.pdf>

6 United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. (2013). Migration profiles – Poland. <https://esa.un.org/migmgprofiles/indicators/files/Poland.pdf>

7 Interview, Polish NGO representative, September 21, 2018, online.

8 Burean, Toma and Popp, Raluca. (2015). Migrant Political Participation and Voting Behavior in Romania. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2652423>.

strongly in favor of the newly formed Uniunea Salvați România party, which gained over 10 percent of votes overall and became the third-largest party in parliament.⁹ Although this was not enough to prevent a coalition government of the Social Democrat Party and the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats, it ensured the presence of a significant opposition party in parliament.

“ *Party members attend public debates, invite diaspora initiatives to consultations, and are always looking to recruit new members.*”

In the 2015 parliamentary elections in Poland, approximately 175,000 people cast a ballot from abroad,¹⁰ almost 88 percent of those registered to vote.¹¹ (There was a rather low voter registration and participation rate by members of the diaspora compared to its size of the diaspora.) Of these 33.61 percent voted for PiS, with the outgoing Civic Platform government winning 18.59 percent and the Kukiz'15 party 15.3 percent. The countries with the biggest voting Polish diaspora were the United Kingdom, the United States, and Germany. PiS gained most votes in countries like Germany (31.24 percent) and France (39.03 percent), while Civic Platform won most in countries like Belgium (27.61 percent) and Spain (28.75 percent).

These results show that diasporas can support either progressive parties or more conservative and populist ones. They form a large electorate that can be swayed in either direction, which makes them an essential stakeholder in the development of these countries. This

9 Cozmei, Victor and Popica, Ovidiu. (2016). Harta Interactiva & Tabel Rezultatele alegerilor parlamentare: Cum arata harta Romaniei politice - Rezultate zdrobitoare pentru PSD in judetele tarii / Unde a castigat PNL, UDMR sau USR. https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-alegeri_parlamentare_2016-21465073-harta-interactiva-rezultatele-alegerilor-parlamentare-cum-arata-harta-romaniei-politice-rezultate-zdrobitoare-pentru-psd-judetele-tarii-vezi-unde-castigat-pnl-udmr-sau-usr.htm

10 Strzałkowski, Patryk. (2015). Triumf Kukiza na wyspach. Jak głosowali Polacy za granicą? [MAPY] <http://wiadomosci.gazeta.pl/wiadomosci/1,143907,19101266,trimf-kukiza-na-wyspach-jak-glosowali-polacy-za-granica.html>

11 TVN24. (2015). Kukiz'15 wygrał w Irlandii, Nowoczesna w Iranie. Tak głosowali Polacy za granicą (Online) Available at: <https://www.tvn24.pl/wiadomosci-z-kraju,3/wybory-parlamentarne-jak-glosowali-polacy-za-granica,589709.html>

is something that parties on all sides of the spectrum look to use in their favor. Fidesz campaigns strongly among ethnic Hungarians in neighboring countries, while PiS addresses the historic Polish diaspora and the Social Democrat Party maintains close ties to sympathizing Romanian diaspora groups.

At the same time, newer liberal parties such as Momentum (Hungary), Razem (Poland), and Uniunea Salvați România (Romania) address the diaspora electorate that is critical towards current governments.

Momentum was started in 2017 due to the realization that “the best chance to change something is through legal means”, according to one member.¹² It focuses primarily on democratic and participatory processes. It is aware that diaspora voters might react better to European topics and messages rather than Hungarian-focused ones; this is why they are in touch with other parties at the European level such as Poland’s Razem or France’s En Marche.

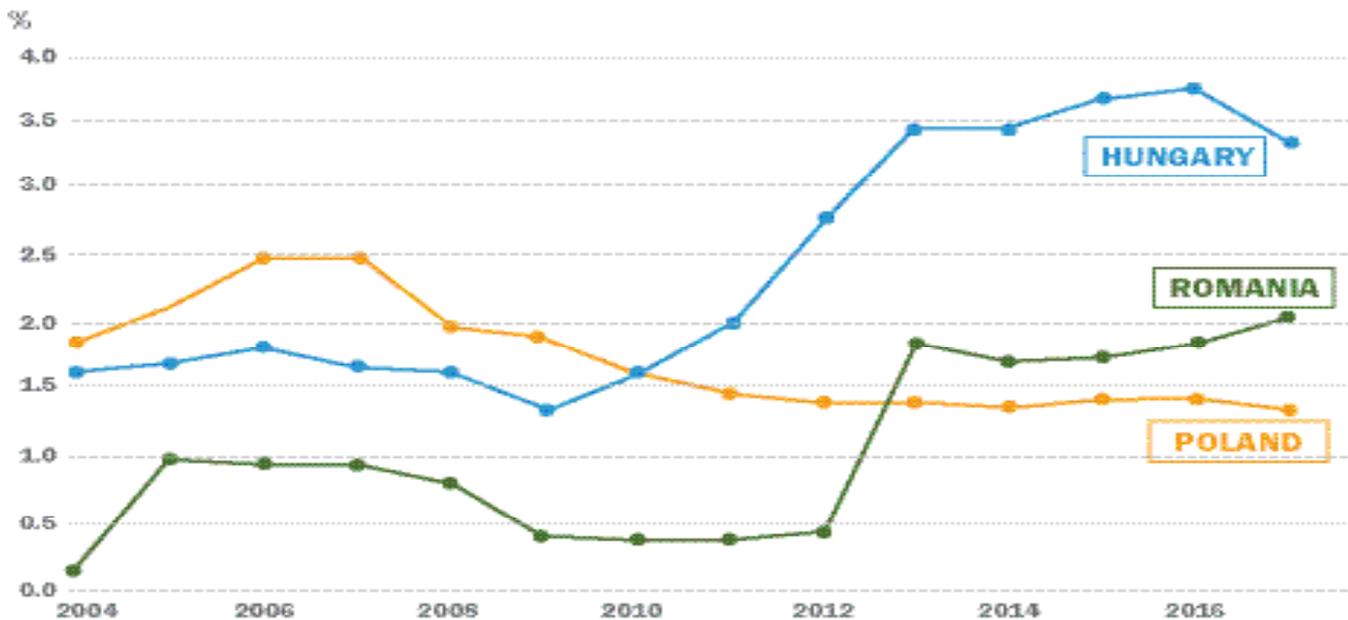
Razem was started in 2015 with a strong left agenda. It has many chapters in Europe as well as party members throughout the world. It campaigns for workers’ rights in Poland and abroad, and wants to bring attention to the issue of EU migrants’ rights. Due to this strong worker-focused agenda, Razem gathers significant support from voters in the diaspora.

Uniunea Salvați România won 28 percent of the votes in the diaspora in 2016, much more than the established Liberal Party or the Social Democratic Party.¹³ Its diaspora chapter is the third-largest with over 400 members, and the party maintains constant contact with engaged citizens and civic organizations in the diaspora. Party members attend public debates, invite diaspora initiatives to consultations, and are always looking to recruit new members.

12 Interview, Momentum Member, August 30, 2018, Berlin, Germany.

13 Digi24. (2016). Rezultate finale. PSD - 221 de mandate, PNL - 99 de mandate. <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/politica/alegeri-parlamentare-2016/rezultate-finale-psd-221-de-mandate-pnl-99-de-mandate-632969>

Figure 1. Personal remittances as percentage of GDP for Hungary, Poland, and Romania, 2004–17



Source: World Bank. (2018). Personal remittances received (% of GDP)

Connection to Countries of Origin

Voting is not the only means through which diasporas can influence their countries of origin; their economic impact is also very important. From 2004 to 2017, remittances increased from 1.6 to 3.3 percent of GDP in Hungary and from 0.2 percent to 2 percent of GDP in Romania, while in Poland they decreased from 1.9 percent to 1.3 percent.¹⁴ (See Figure 1)

Diaspora communities are also connected to their countries of origin through the social relations that they maintain there. There is an underlying wish among Romanian, Hungarian, and Polish citizens in the diasporas to remain engaged with that is happening there.

At the most basic level, this has to do with the personal connections that they still have – family members and friends who are directly affected by the socio-political changes in the country. On a broader level, this has to do

¹⁴ World Bank. (2018). Personal remittances, received (% of GDP). https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.DT.GD.ZS?end=2017&locations=HU&name_desc=false&start=2004

with the possibility of coming back. For example, many diaspora families that have been living and working abroad for years build houses in their countries of origin. The wish to return is an important driver of the diaspora wanting to contribute to changes in their countries of origin. One Romanian citizen describes the feeling of “remaining always a bit suspended between the two worlds”.¹⁵ A GRASP London representative says of the prospect of return for Romanian migrants:

As exciting as life is in the UK and Germany, I think that there will come a moment for enough people when they will become more interested to come to Romania. Because Romania progresses, because it's hard to be a first-generation immigrant in Germany. And if you left from a position where you had an OK job and a home and a position, and you were somebody, and you went somewhere where you started from scratch, it's fine for a while but questions arise [...] do you want for it to take one or two generations until you get to be upper-middle-class or upper-

¹⁵ Interview, Romanian citizen, August 31, 2018, online.

class again in the respective country?¹⁶

The phenomenon of circular migration deserves attention and appropriate policies on the part of governments in order to capitalize on the attachment and interest of diasporas for their countries of origin. There is a need to develop appropriate circular migration policies that can embed diasporas in the long-term development of these countries.

Due to this strong connection to their countries of origin, diaspora groups also find different organizing formats and civic engagement opportunities in order to participate in their development.

New Diaspora Civic Initiatives

The Hungarian, Polish, and Romanian diasporas in Europe are not the tight-knit communities that one might see in the case of those from other countries. Their members do not have so much close contact to one another on a regular basis and look for connections in their host countries outside of their ethnic group. “There’s not so much solidarity between Hungarians”, according to a Momentum representative. Similar feelings were expressed by Romanian and Polish interviewees too. The focus here is on the more recent diaspora initiatives and organizations that are not affiliated to political parties and that are also not the cultural or representation associations which are more characteristic of the historical diasporas of Central and Eastern Europe. These are organizations such as Freie Ungarische Botschaft, Women’s Congress, Femini Berlin Polska, Diaspora Civică Berlin, Rezist Zürich, and Cercul Donatorilor Bruxelles. Other civil society organizations such as Citizen Participation University, N-Ost, and Declic that collaborate with the diaspora groups are included here for a better overview of the dynamics between different civil society groups in different locations. An overview of all the diaspora initiatives and organizations looked at for this paper can be found in Table 2.

At the root of the emergence of these new civic initiatives in the diasporas lie social events and encounters that

¹⁶ Interview, GRASP London representative, September 13, 2018, telephone.

facilitate interactions between people who then decide to create more stable, long-term efforts. In most cases, the founders of these initiatives did not know each other before and met either at social and cultural gatherings, at protests, or online, and they realized they had common interests and the wish to engage more consistently on issues related to the state of democracy in their countries of origin.

Most people engaged in building these newer organizations and initiatives are young professionals, students, and those coming from a higher socio-economic background. They are very diverse in their occupations, migration trajectory, and interests but they all express a connection at a value level with the other members of the initiatives. Activities have brought together people with a similar mindset and who want to get engaged but did not know how, and this offered them a platform to do so. For example, initiatives such as Cercul Donatorilor Bruxelles (Brussels Donor Circle) allow people to support organizations and projects in Romania, and through their screening and selection processes, they respond to the need for expertise, information, and guidance for the engagements of the diaspora.

As a representative of the Hungarian Freie Ungarische Botschaft in Berlin puts it,

In Hungary in these activist groups more people were really similar in how they see the world [...] and they were very capitalist-critical; for example, they wouldn’t work for a multinational company or for profit. They were much more similar, they were also not religious. But here in this group, we have very different people who share this active citizenship interest. It’s really interesting. We have younger people and older people, some still at university, some working, or some even older, and also some of them are Christians and others not. [...] I find it fascinating after the Hungarian experience.¹⁷

All these groups are looking to reach out to a diversity

¹⁷ Interview, Freie Ungarische Botschaft representative, August 14, 2018, Berlin, Germany.

Table 2. Hungarian, Polish, and Romanian diaspora initiatives and civil society organizations.

Name	Country of Origin	Created	Location	Link
Freie Ungarische Botschaft	Hungary	2017	Berlin, Germany	www.facebook.com/FreieUngarischeBotschaft/
Women's Congress/ Kongres Kobiet	Poland	2009	Berlin, Germany	www.kongreskobiet.pl www.facebook.com/KongresKobiet
Femini Berlin Polska	Poland	2016	Berlin, Germany	www.facebook.com/FeminiBerlinPolska/
Dziewuchy Berlin	Poland	2016	Berlin, Germany	www.dziewuchyberlin.wordpress.com www.facebook.com/DziewuchyBerlin
Cercul Donatorilor Bruxelles	Romania	2017	Brussels, Belgium	www.facebook.com/cerculdonatorilorbruxelles/
GRASP Bruxelles	Romania	2014	Brussels, Belgium	www.mygrasp.org/where-we-are/brussels/ www.facebook.com/GraspBrussels
GRASP London	Romania	2008	London, UK	www.mygrasp.org/where-we-are/london/ www.facebook.com/MyGRASPLondon
Diaspora Civică Berlin	Romania	2017	Berlin, Germany	www.diasporacivica.com www.facebook.com/diasporacivicaberlin/
Rezist Madrid	Romania	2017	Madrid, Spain	www.facebook.com/MiscareaRezistMadrid/
Europuls	Romania	2010	Brussels, Belgium	www.europuls.ro
Rezist Zürich	Romania	2017	Zürich, Switzerland	www.rezistzurich.com www.facebook.com/RezistZurich/

of migrants from their countries of origin through their events, gatherings, and projects but the extent to which this is possible is rather limited and depends on the interest from the broader diaspora communities.

Another noticeable characteristic of these initiatives is their gender composition. The civic involvement of and coordination by women stands out, especially in the case of Polish groups but this is an aspect also visible in other initiatives where women are a majority and where they lead.

All these initiatives work on a voluntary basis, their members are not necessarily professional activists and experts in political processes. They gather people interested in getting engaged based on their time and possibilities. A representative of the Freie Ungarische Botschaft explains:

I see myself more as an active citizen, not as an activist. I think ‘activist’ has many understandings also in different countries maybe, and also for different social groups and for individuals, so it’s not clearly defined. For me, an activist is a person from Greenpeace, who would sit in front of the trains [...]. So much more confrontational in a way [...] and also a person who would sacrifice his or her life. But that’s exactly what we with Freie Ungarische Botschaft don’t do. And that’s also an interesting thing, I think. How can you be an active citizen without just focusing on the issue and forgetting about life and everything? And it is possible and it is also refreshing to see how well it can work.¹⁸

Those in the new diaspora initiatives explain their motivation as a common desire to remain involved in their countries of origin’s issues and contributing to their long-term progress. Some organizations such as Diaspora Civică Berlin, Freie Ungarische Botschaft, Dziewuchy Berlin, Rezist Madrid, and Rezist Zürich started their activities with a very strong civic and political engagement focus, while others such as Cercul

¹⁸ Interview, Freie Ungarische Botschaft representative, August 14, 2018, Berlin, Germany.

Donatorilor Bruxelles, GRASP Bruxelles, GRASP London, Europuls, and Women’s Congress have focused on developing local projects or advocating for particular topics that also incorporate a strong civic focus. Some organizations explicitly embrace the role of contestors of the current political regimes in their countries of origin. Others have elaborated manifestos or agendas that focus on the long-term transfer of know-how and on increasing civic engagement of the diaspora more broadly. A lot of these initiatives are not looking to push people in a certain political direction but to rather contribute to building critical thinking and an awareness of the political situation and its implications in their countries of origin. What they all find necessary and what they all strive for is to keep people active and engaged in social and political developments. As a representative of Cercul Donatorilor Bruxelles puts it,

I personally think that it’s important to maintain this spirit active. I mean, after all, this civic muscle is a muscle; that means you need to train it because if you don’t train it, in a year we might get to say ‘this hurts but I don’t know what to do’. And no matter how small the thing that we’re doing is, wherever we are [...] I find it really important to maintain this relationship in an active way.¹⁹

Organizing Formats

On average, the new diaspora initiatives consist of a core team of 10–12 people and a wider circle of followers and supporters. These teams of organizers are constantly in flux as people come and go, move away, or do not have the capacity to engage anymore. They have regular meetings and also organize longer retreats to strategize and plan, as in the case of Freie Ungarische Botschaft and Diaspora Civică Berlin. They are organized in project and thematic groups.

The initiatives are also locally rooted. With the notable exception of GRASP, which operates through several local chapters, they have not yet expanded outside of one city. Their activities are strongly dependent on the

¹⁹ Interview, Cercul Donatorilor Bruxelles representative, August 13, 2018, online.

local situation, the local diaspora community, and the interests of the local core group of organizers, which is the case even for GRASP.

The fact that members of the initiatives are volunteers leads to constraints in terms of capacity and time to develop activities. Most of them say that they have a lot of ideas for projects but limited capacity to think strategically and implement them, which limits the pace of work and the capacity to have influence. At the same time, the events and projects that the organizations develop have a high degree of professionalism and this is appreciated in their communities. For many of the organizations, maintaining this degree of professionalism and the quality of events means limiting the amount of activities.

“ *Besides financial support, the initiatives incentivize people to back them through very targeted engagement.*”

Not all organizations are legally registered in their host country or in their country of origin but they either collaborate with registered organizations, which is the case of Cercul Donatorilor Bruxelles and GRASP Bruxelles or plan to register, as in the case of Diaspora Civică Berlin.

Most of the financial resources of the organizations come from donations from their communities. In the cases of longer-established ones, such as GRASP or Europuls, funding comes also through corporate partnerships, grants, and donations for particular projects, and their budgets are significantly higher than those of smaller initiatives. Freie Ungarische Botschaft has also started receiving funding for informal groups from support platforms such as the Citizen Participation University.²⁰ Membership fees are also a source of funding, regardless of the organizations being formally

20 The Citizen Participation University is an initiative founded by the Central and Eastern European Citizens Network that focuses on a participatory education space for grassroots organizations with the purpose of strengthening European democracy.

registered or not. These range from €5 a month (e.g. Diaspora Civică Berlin) to €10 a month (e.g. Cercul Donatorilor Bruxelles). The budgets that these initiatives and organizations work with are around a few thousand euros and they generally try to get some buffer funding from one project to the other. Besides financial support, the initiatives incentivize people to back them through very targeted engagement or through in-kind donations for particular events and projects.

Types of Activity

The work of the initiatives is very diverse. While some, such as the Freie Ungarische Botschaft, focus on the diaspora communities, others, such as Women's Congress, Dziewuchy Berlin, and Cercul Donatorilor Bruxelles, focus on collaborating and strengthening organizations in their countries of origin. Some, such as Diaspora Civică Berlin and GRASP London, do both. A representative of Freie Ungarische Botschaft explains:

I think what we basically agreed on, of course, is that we want to influence and strengthen democracy in Hungary from abroad [...] and also that we would use the advantages of being in Berlin, [...] one of the really important cities of the EU. So, instead of trying to do things that the Hungarians in Hungary should do, try to find the things that they can't do because they live in Hungary but that we can maybe reach from abroad.²¹

The most visible manifestations of the diaspora initiatives are public protests. These have been ongoing reactions of Polish, Hungarian, and Romanian civil society in the past years, and they have been constantly supported by protests organized abroad. The latter have taken place in front of embassies and have included marches to raise awareness of democracy issues in the three countries. In some cases, such as the one of the Romanian community in Madrid, protests were organized on a daily basis as a form of solidarity for the anti-corruption protests in

21 Interview, Freie Ungarische Botschaft representative, August 14, 2018, Berlin, Germany.

the country. Hungarians have organized demonstrations against changes in the judicial system and in support of the Central European University. Poles have marched for women's rights and against judicial reforms. However, across the initiatives, there has been a realization that protests can only achieve so much, especially from abroad. This is why participants decided to develop also more long-term activities to accompany these actions.

Discussion rounds and workshops are at the core of the activities of the initiatives. Organized around topics connected to the political situation back home or more broadly to the development of the countries, these offer a platform to share ideas and information as well as to generate critical discussions. Debates are usually organized around guest speakers who are either activists or politicians, as in the case of the town hall debate with Romanian members of parliament or the debates with renowned Romanian artists organized by Diaspora Civică Berlin.

Several initiatives focus on awareness campaigns. Freie Ungarische Botschaft organized a campaign around increasing voter participation for the 2018 parliamentary elections in Hungary. GRASP had projects on introducing electronic voting in Romania in 2012. The initiatives also focus on informing people about voting procedures, and they provide support and information about voter registration and participation. The Polish Women's Congress focuses on women with dual citizenship as a niche audience and on encouraging them to vote. It also organizes workshops and information sessions on how women can vote more broadly. These activities have a strong civic-education component around the importance of elections, the structure of the democratic state, and the influence of citizens through voting.

All initiatives stress that they organize such campaigns not to support a certain party but to increase voter

mobilization. Despite their political sympathies, they remain independent from specific political groups. The activities they conduct also compensate for lacking or limited civic education around the democratic system in the three countries.

The diaspora organizations and initiatives also serve as platforms for people to develop their own projects and campaigns. People who want to be more politically engaged can approach the community with their ideas and projects without the organizations necessarily positioning themselves on the side of those political initiatives. For instance, Romanian citizens have gathered signatures for petitions and citizen initiatives at events organized by GRASP London, GRASP Bruxelles, and Diaspora Civică Berlin, while Polish activists from Women's Congress started other initiatives such as Femini Berlin Polska.

Several organizations support financially or in-kind different organizations and initiatives in the countries of origin. Whether it is the mentorship programs of GRASP Bruxelles for high-school youth or the financial support that Cercul Donatorilor Bruxelles or GRASP London provide to NGOs focusing on issues such as civic engagement, sexual education, and domestic violence, the aim is to strengthen civil society organizations back home. Diaspora groups also try to organize such support activities strategically, based on what is not already available to organizations in the three countries and what serves their progressive purposes. As a representative of Cercul Donatorilor Bruxelles argues,

We try not to tell them what to do with the money but obviously, we have some preferences of fields that we would like to support and we always say we would like to bring those organizations for which it is more difficult to raise money in Romania. Because everything that means civic engagement, journalism – I'm not saying those things aren't happening in Romania – I'm just saying that from a diaspora audience from which – although it sounds bad – you have other expectations maybe it's easier to sell these kinds of causes that don't necessarily

“ *Diaspora groups also look to make use of their varied expertise and know-how.* ”

have an immediate impact [...]. So, we make a bit of a difference between charity and somewhat more strategic projects.²²

Diaspora groups also look to make use of their varied expertise and know-how depending on where they are based and what their communities focus on. For instance, organizations like Europuls focus on organizing events in Brussels, such as Eurosfat, and writing articles and informative pieces about European affairs that they have expertise on Brussels. GRASP London wants to develop a project around knowledge transfer between professionals in the finance sector based in the United Kingdom and institutions in this field in Romania.

Diaspora groups have also actively engaged with politicians from their countries of origin and from abroad. The Women's Congress brings Polish politicians to Berlin to raise awareness among the German public and media around abortion issues and broader democracy and human-rights issues in Poland. The Freie Ungarische Botschaft targets German members of parliament who are responsible for issues related to Hungary in order to influence German political responses to what happens in the country. Romanians from Rezist Zürich actively communicate and have meetings with Swiss parliamentarians, explaining to them the situation in Romania and lobbying for certain positions towards the current government. They also use these meetings to generate news and to keep the traditional media informed and attentive to Romanian matters by constantly preparing press briefings and materials. This is a way for them to exert pressure on Romania's government through international media.

All the new diaspora initiatives are aware that their work needs to be sustained over the long term. They have various ideas and plans for how to develop their work further. Diaspora Civică Berlin would like to serve as a spin-off platform for civic projects, to develop more support programs for the Romanian diaspora, and to represent the diaspora appropriately in the national and international media by producing original content. Rezist Zürich is thinking about cultural-diplomacy

²² Interview, Cercul Donatorilor Bruxelles representative, August 13, 2018, online.

events and developing a study center around Eastern Europe. GRASP Bruxelles wants to organize workshops around the Romanian constitution. Europuls wants to monitor the Romanian presidency of the EU in 2019 and to create campaigns around the coming European Parliament elections. Freie Ungarische Botschaft wants to focus more on corruption issues in connection to EU funds in Hungary and increase awareness of this abroad, as well as engaging in the protection of NGOs in Hungary that are now explicitly targeted by the government. Rezist Madrid wants to register as a formal organization and to invest strongly into voter education ahead of the elections in 2019 and 2020 in Romania.

The Impact of Activities

It is difficult to measure the current impact of the new diaspora initiatives, especially since their work is still at an early stage. They are themselves very concerned with the question. Their clearest impact so far is through the community building and social capital that they generate. According to one Hungarian political scientist,

If the organizations of the diaspora would only remain at a political level, then it would be completely unsuccessful. The basic layer would be to organize really a strong fabric, and I think only if this strong fabric is there as more of a common soil for any later political mobilization and activism that could be the second layer of political mobilization.²³

Another level of impact is the electoral one, which initiatives are very much aware of. As one Europuls representative notes,

I think the diaspora clearly stated its role in the presidential elections. I think that's where it all started because there were big difficulties in some voting stations, difficulties that I personally faced, and I think that's what led to greater involvement at national level. I think the diaspora was an important catalyst in that

²³ Interview, Hungarian political scientist, September 28, 2018, online.

moment.²⁴

Impact is also related to the capacity of diaspora initiatives to bridge different spaces. The individual level is emphasized and connected to people's approaches to each other and influencing each other's values, especially in the case of returning to their countries of origin. As one civil society activist from the region explains:

I feel like some of the most important organizing happens in places where you have people who have a foot in more than one world. [...] But those are people who are sort of bridge-people and they are incredibly powerful change agents. [...] People who can bridge different places and still go back home and connect to people, but that have also been exposed to other ways of viewing the world – that is a tremendously potent energy that can drive domestic movements if it can be directed and harnessed.²⁵

Small success stories are visible: the protests in Poland blocking the changes in abortion rights, the Romanian government taking up the policy recommendations for the EU presidency elaborated by Europuls, Swiss parliamentarians and media actively responding to the awareness campaigns of Resist Zürich, and European institutions increasing scrutiny over developments in Central and Eastern Europe and basing their assessments on the experience of civil society abroad.

These are small wins, however, and diaspora groups and experts are also very aware of the need for more collaboration and exchange for their efforts to be fruitful. This is necessary among the initiatives abroad and with the ones in the countries of origin. As one Romanian sociologist notes,

The idea that you have the diaspora that changes Romania is a bit utopian. You actually have the diaspora-type connection from social transnationalism that functions. [...] I belong

²⁴ Interview, Europuls representative, September 29, 2018, online.

²⁵ Interview, Citizen Participation University representative, August 16, 2018, online.

to the ones who think that Romania is now modernizing through diaspora communities, there is an Italian modernization of Romania in Moldova, an Austrian-German modernization in Banat, et cetera. Practically, diaspora communities have replaced the old empires in changing and modernizing Romania.²⁶

At the moment, however, there is limited coordination and alignment between the various initiatives. This limits what they can achieve and is also directly related to their limited capacity.

Examples of Civic Action

Romania: The Diaspora Protest

One of most visible manifestations of diaspora civic engagement in 2018 was the protest organized on August 10 in Bucharest. It is estimated that over 100,000 people participated, half from the diaspora and half citizens living in the country. Their ten demands ranged from the resignation of the government to the increase in the number of representatives for the diaspora in parliament. There was, however, no clear follow-up regarding these demands, as the organizations formulating them did not develop clear additional actions after the protest to ensure their fulfillment.

The organization of the protest was surrounded by confusion and questionable steps. What apparently started as the idea of a Romanian living in the United Kingdom was rapidly taken over from an organizational perspective by a new and small political party, PACT, which also formulated the demands for the protest. There were a lot of mixed messages around the authorization of the protest by the authorities, probably in an attempt to demobilize people. New diaspora organizations and federations (such as the Federation of Romanians Everywhere) appeared overnight to claim ownership of the protest and then distancing themselves from any demonstration two days before the due date.

²⁶ Interview, Romanian sociologist, September 27, 2018, Bucharest, Romania.

The impression is that these were created in order to divert attention from the real organizers and to allow for some sort of government control of the protest. The older diaspora associations and federations were not particularly involved in organizing or endorsing the protest. Some of the more recent initiatives, such as Rezist Zürich and Rezist Madrid, supported it and promoted participation.

This lack of clarity and accountability probably incentivized Romanians to take part in the protest in an attempt to maintain its civic spirit and avoid political manipulations of the message and actions. The protest thus generated a strong sense of solidarity between people abroad and in the country. It also raised questions of political affiliation and manipulation among diaspora organizations, and it highlighted their fragmentation.

Some organizations used the protest as an opportunity to generate debates and more long-term action regarding the diaspora. Rezist Zürich wanted to communicate the wishes of the diaspora in a Romanian media environment that talks a lot about the diaspora but does not include its actual representatives in the conversation. Declic, an online civic platform in Romania running campaigns and petitions, organized a workshop that discussed postal voting and strategies to promote it among Romanians abroad with the purpose of creating connections and more long-term campaigns around this issue.

The protest was met with violence, with riot police using tear gas and brutality against the peaceful participants. As a result, several civic groups have contacted the European Human Rights Court regarding the treatment of the protesters. The violent reaction of the government showed the extent of its disinterest in discussing and hearing out the demands of a significant category of the Romania population which is the diaspora.

Hungary: Collaborative International Approach

The international perspective has been from the beginning an important component of the work of the Freie Ungarische Botschaft in Berlin. Its first event was a discussion regarding political engagement from abroad, which was met with great enthusiasm and interest from

members of the diaspora in Poland, Russia, the United Kingdom, Ukraine, Romania, and the United States. To accommodate the unexpectedly high number of participants and the great interest, the initiative had to find a bigger location for the public debate, which shows the intense interest around this issue from citizens from a variety of backgrounds.

This approach continues as the organization, with the Polish Dziewuchy Berlin and the Romanian Diaspora Civică Berlin organizes a collaborative activist camp in which civic groups can develop concrete partnership plans together and continue their work at the regional level.

This interest in cross-country collaborative efforts comes from the awareness of the similarities of issues that democracies in Europe and worldwide face, and it is a core component of the work of the Freie Ungarische Botschaft activists. As one of its members says,

I believe it is more the people that are in Hungary who can influence the situation there. On the other side, you have almost no possibilities because of this two-thirds majority of the party. [...] What I believe is that maybe we can get more international attention, make people more aware, which Hungarians in Hungary cannot do. Maybe this would be a special ability and also I see a way really to unite with the other European diasporas. [...] Because obviously, it's not just Hungary, it's a phenomenon, and it's not just Europe, Eastern Europe, etc. [...] That's why I believe that to unite with others and fight in common might be more powerful.²⁷

This approach differentiates this group, as it has from the beginning incorporated a strong pan-European component in its activities and it has not focused only on the Hungarian community.

²⁷ Interview, Freie Ungarische Botschaft representative, August 14, 2018, Berlin, Germany.

Poland: The European Values Instrument

The campaign for a European Values Instrument is an initiative of an informal coalition of Polish NGOs that also extended to civil societies organizations in other countries. The initiative started after noticing the similarities between what is happening in Poland, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria, as well as in Austria, France, and the United States in terms of democratic developments.

The idea was “to face the fact that democratic values are not really deeply grounded in the way that states, the public institutions but also the societies function in the European Union”, as one Polish NGO representative explains.²⁸ She continues by stressing the realization that “at least at the moment of Poland joining the union we were living in the illusion that constitutional democracy is guaranteed forever, which apparently was never true and wherever you go you have evidence that it’s not true”.²⁹

This understanding is also accompanied by the observation that the EU invests significant funds in promoting and strengthening democracy in non-member countries, while not providing the same amount of support for new forms of democracy and citizen participation within the union.

The proposal that a coalition of 75 NGOs from all over Europe took to the EU institutions and various members of the European Parliament was focused on opening new funding streams and instruments for organizations within the EU that work towards achieving democratic goals and values. The consortium also incorporated individuals and organizations from the Polish, Romanian, and Russian diasporas as well as pan-European organizations and networks. They all contributed with expertise in terms of content and needs of civil society, as well as in terms of handling the negotiation process with the EU institutions. This cross-country approach also facilitated developing such an instrument for organizations that operate and have

²⁸ Interview, Polish NGO representative, September 21, 2018, online.

²⁹ Interview, Polish NGO representative, September 21, 2018, online.

target groups in several European countries.

The initial response of the European Parliament was not satisfactory for the organizations because it focused mostly on reshuffling old funding structures rather than incorporating new ones. A Polish NGO representative notes that

This is very unsatisfactory because it’s more like regrouping the old categories without allowing more financial means and more initiatives to be encompassed. That’s not something that we really need and what anyone was expecting. So now there’s another initiative to write to the European Parliament and the commission to try to influence the final wording and the final scope and the final shape of this program which probably should be at least twice as big as it is now.³⁰

In November 2018, the European Parliament voted to increase the budget for the Rights and Values Program from €642 million to €1.834 billion but the proposal still has to be accepted by the council. The coalition of civil society organizations will continue to be involved in the final shaping of the program, as well as in developing its implementation framework, which is essential.

Collaborations

The issue of collaboration is important for strong civil society initiatives. The Hungarian, Polish, and Romanian diaspora groups and organizations looked at here work with other civil society organizations in the three countries, and they are in contact with other diaspora bodies too. However, these collaborations are rather limited and more project-based than systematic, coordinated, and strategic.

In general diaspora groups are aware of each other but common projects and activities are limited, whether between organizations from a particular country or cross-country. Contacts are often based on personal

³⁰ Interview, Polish NGO representative, September 21, 2018, online.

interactions between people involved in several groups simultaneously or connected with others involved in similar initiatives. The diaspora groups say that they would need dedicated staff and resources that are currently not available for their collaborations to be more complex and systematic. There is no talk of them joining the historical or classical diaspora associations and federations but rather of forming new structures that are clearly dedicated to civic and political engagement and are not in any way affiliated with political parties. Open conflicts between older diaspora associations and the newer initiatives have not been reported. However, there is very limited interaction between the two types of organizations, which have very different styles of working and goals, and which attract different types of people.

There is a tendency on the part of the new diaspora groups to evaluate closely the initiatives and organizations that they associate with. This comes from the wish not to lose their focus, as well as from an awareness of the importance of maintaining their reputation. A Reizist Zürich representative stress: “Our capital is this reputation of an association that works as professionally as possible and with a pretty clear strategy.”³¹

The issue of organizing and coordinating across initiatives is highlighted also in contrast to the organization of the far-right movement across Europe and worldwide. For liberal progressives to make a difference, they need to be better coordinated and to have more solidarity in order to transform their work into election victories for pro-democratic and pro-European parties. They see their role in mobilizing voters and increasing voter participation overall while at the same time promoting an agenda that connects to that of pro-European parties – but without them becoming officially affiliated with these parties. (See further below.)

One other issue that hinders collaboration is conflicts or dislikes between different people and initiatives. Some of their members blame some particular Polish, Romanian, or Hungarian way of being and thinking

³¹ Interview, Reizist Zürich representative, August 31, 2018, online.

that prevents their peers from showing solidarity or from collaborating. According to a GRASP Bruxelles representative,

We Romanians don't understand collaboration. In general, what I've seen with other organizations here but also in Romania, there are few organizations that collaborate, that do things together. [...] I don't know if it's an individualism thing, to mind your own business. I don't know if it's a communist thing like we keep saying. [...] I see very often that if people don't have an interest behind something, they don't support it, they don't care. Because a lot of them don't see the bigger picture.³²

Still, since this assertion is common to initiatives coming from all three countries, the question that arises is if this is truly a matter of cultural characteristics or rather of a lack of coordination ability and know-how that prevents initiatives from engaging more with each other.

There are also cases of people furthering their own political interests through the initiatives. This raises the issue of self-appointed leaders and the need for critical assessment on behalf of the initiatives in the way they associate. This aspect was highlighted in the Polish and Romanian cases, with people taking advantage of their positions, which generated a lack of trust and falling-outs with groups.

There is generally also a very limited engagement by the new diaspora initiatives with organizations in the host countries. The fact that not all are formally registered makes it difficult for other local civil society organizations in the host country and the countries of origin to know who to contact and how to engage. There is, however, an awareness that stronger alliances of initiatives can better represent the perspectives of the diaspora in their countries of origin, where there is currently no coordinated communication from the diaspora. As a Reizist Zürich representative notes,

In the public sphere in Romania, the diaspora is

³² Interview, GRASP Bruxelles representative, August 15, 2018, online.

completely nonexistent and this is very dangerous. There's a big void there. There's space there to make things up, to stain, to manipulate a lot because there's nobody to contradict you.³³

Relationships with Governments

The diaspora groups all have contacts at a personal or organizational level with the embassies of their country of origin, but they do not generally collaborate with them. The same goes for the ministries in Romania, Hungary, and Poland that are in charge of diaspora issues. The embassies and ministries are focused primarily on cultural promotion through the Polish, Hungarian, and Romanian communities, and the civic initiatives do not see meaningful ways in which they could engage.

The Polish and Hungarian governments are said to invest in research into diaspora communities and their characteristics and to base their actions on the findings, whereas the Romanian government has very limited interest in discussing and engaging directly with diaspora issues in a significant manner. The best example of this was the reaction of the government to the August 2018 protest. A Romanian sociologist states that “at the moment the Romanian government is conducting migration policies through gassing in Victoria Square.”³⁴ The Hungarian and Polish governments have not been violent towards protesters and contesters yet and they have relied on demonstrations dying out by themselves. The Romanian government has, however, developed a few entrepreneurship programs to encourage diaspora members to set up businesses in the country. Programs such as Reviro and Ro-Win provide diaspora start-ups with seed funding.

All three countries have in common the political approach that the governing parties have towards the diaspora, with the ultimate goal of building up their electorate in these groups. The Polish and Hungarian governments explicitly address diaspora groups that are in favor of their policies, while not engaging with critical groups. The most telling illustration is the Hungarian government's efforts to facilitate voting by the historic diaspora in neighboring

countries as well as that in Western Europe and North and South America that was established mostly after World War II and the Revolution of 1956 – all the while maintaining administrative obstacles for other more recent diaspora groups. In the case of Romania, the difficulty the diaspora experienced in voting in the 2014 elections shows not only the lack of interest of the government in facilitating the voting process but also it actively impeding voting from abroad because this would not be strongly in its favor.

The three governments also have a negative approach in the media regarding the diasporas. The Hungarian government implemented a new media strategy in 2011 in which any negative reports about Hungary had to be reacted to with counteractions. The government's rather hostile and negative attitude to the diaspora initiatives in the national media is based on the argument that people who live abroad come back or get engaged in political issues as a way of taking over and imposing their points of view over the majority living in the country.

Engaging with New Political Parties

All the diaspora initiatives studied here stress their lack of affiliation with political parties and the importance of this for their work as legitimate civil society actors. They aim to maintain contact with parties across the political spectrum without endorsing particular ones, despite their individual sympathies towards various parties. These sympathies are directed mostly towards newer political parties that have emerged in Hungary, Poland, and Romania in recent years as a result of the election results and social movements accompanying them. The electoral victories of PiS, Fidesz, and the Social Democratic Party followed by their policies once in office have triggered social mobilization to counteract the influence of these parties. This social mobilization has then evolved into political mobilization in new parties such as Momentum in Hungary, Razem in Poland, and Uniunea Salvați România and Mișcarea România Împreună in Romania (now called the PLUS part). These new opposition parties sometimes exert more pressure than more established ones, and they are also strongly represented in and connected to the

³³ Interview, Rezist Zürich representative, August 31, 2018, online.

³⁴ Interview, Romanian sociologist, September 27, 2018, Bucharest, Romania.

diasporas, which are an important electorate for them.

Members of the Romanian diaspora initiatives, for example, say that even if they have contact with members of Uniunea Salvați România, they do not officially collaborate as organizations as this would interfere with their political neutrality. A GRASP Bruxelles representative notes,

When there were the protests, it's a no-brainer, it's not about politics, it's about justice and rule of law. We mobilized there. But at the same, we try not to post a lot on the Facebook page because we want to stay a bit away from it. Especially since other Romanian associations have contact with other political groups. We've always stayed away and whenever there was a proposal for a political event, we didn't do it. We said OK, maybe we lose, but long-term we win.³⁵

The attitude of the civic initiatives towards Hungary's Momentum and Poland's Razem is similar. Despite individual sympathies and support, they stay away from any formal collaboration and engagement.

These new parties are still relatively small but they attract great enthusiasm from people supporting democratic structures in the three countries. Even though the new civic initiatives do not associate with political parties, some of their members have joined them and are directly engaged in politics in the party chapters from abroad. This is a direct way for diaspora citizens to engage with political processes apart from voting and building community structures. The contact of these parties with diaspora communities does therefore to some extent also translate into increasing their voter base.

Connection to the European Institutions

The new diaspora initiatives would generally like to see stronger reactions from the European institutions with regard to the democratic backsliding in Hungary, Poland, and Romania. At the same time, they acknowledge that there is only so much the EU and foreign governments can

³⁵ Interview, GRASP Bruxelles representative, August 15, 2018, online.

do. They stress the importance of local resistance and of addressing the situation directly by citizens in each country. As one of the members of Freie Ungarische Botschaft says, "it's bad to believe the EU will save us."³⁶

The diaspora initiatives engage at the European level but to a much more limited extent than they do at the national level. The Polish Women's Congress, for instance, is in touch with MEPs who support their initiatives and facilitate the dialogue between civil society and the European Parliament. Romanian initiatives are in contact with various politicians in Brussels and also approach the institutions to present the situation in Romania. Their interaction is however limited and remains at this information-providing level.

The diaspora groups wish that the EU would send stronger signals regarding the commitment to the values of the union that are broken by the three governments and not just look at economic interests in these countries. This is particularly so in the case of Hungary with significant criticism regarding the double standards of the European People's Party (EPP), EU member states such as Germany, and the European institutions, which condemn what is happening in the country but fail to act properly.

The EU has also had different approaches to the situations in the three countries.³⁷ Hungary formally complied with EU rules without really upholding them for a long time, but a reaction came very late through the triggering of the Article 7 process after significant attacks against democratic structures by the government. One of the reasons for this was the relationship that Prime Minister Viktor Orbán maintained with the EU institutions and the EPP. Another reason was limited coordination between the institutions, with the European Parliament highlighting the situation but the European Commission and Council not taking measures. After 2015, when a new government was elected in Poland, there was also no real opportunity for the EU to sanction either country because the two governments protected each other. The delay in the EU reaction was also caused by

³⁶ Interview, Freie Ungarische Botschaft representative, August 14, 2018, Berlin, Germany.

³⁷ Interview, Hungarian political scientist, September 28, 2018, online.

the urgency of other issues at the European level and the imperfect toolkit for action available to the institutions. Other member states also did not react strongly as they did not take the situation seriously or think that the situation could change so abruptly. The fact that Hungary has also strong economic ties with Germany also contributed to the lack of a strong German reaction.

The relationship between the EU and the Polish government under PiS has been different as the latter did not engage with the European institutions, which led to a much earlier triggering of Article 7 than in the case of Hungary. Since the Polish government openly broke EU rules from the beginning there was a more immediate reaction from the union.

In the case of Romania, the European institutions reacted to the situation in the country through hearings in the European Parliament following the judicial reforms introduced during the past two years by the governing coalition, as well as the significant protests in the country and the violent actions against them. Diaspora groups have mixed reactions towards this as they feel the EU would not truly intervene if the situation gets as serious as in Hungary and Poland, while on the other hand, they acknowledge the prompter reaction in the case of Romania. The fact that Romania holds the EU presidency in the first half of 2019 also brings more attention towards the situation in the country.

The governments in all three countries have also used the issue of the EU to increase polarization and to emphasize an external enemy, which strengthens their discourse nationally. This is happening despite the fact that all three have some of the highest pro-EU attitudes in the union.³⁸ The diaspora, especially within the EU, acts as a strengthening factor for these pro-EU attitudes and at the same time becomes a target itself in the negative public discourse regarding external influences in the countries.

³⁸ European Commission Directorate-General for Communication. (2018). Standard Eurobarometer 89 Spring 2018. <http://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/ResultDoc/download/DocumentKy/83548>

Conclusions and Recommendations

There is similarity across Central and Eastern Europe in terms of democratic backsliding but also differences in how this manifests itself and in the modus operandi of different governments. The changes that the Romanian, Hungarian, and Polish governments have made have different degrees of severity and of reversibility in the near future. Reacting to them, a range of diaspora initiatives and organizations try to contribute to pro-democratic forces in the region. Although this is in the early stages of development, their impact can increase in the coming years while the situation in the three countries evolves.

For these initiatives to thrive and increase their influence, there are steps that they and national and European policymakers who focus on advancing and strengthening democratic developments in Central and Eastern Europe can take.

The diaspora civic initiatives should continue their development and activities in the following areas:

Developing projects and programs that speak directly to the needs and profiles of their local diaspora communities. The particularities of each community should be taken into account in order to be able to address people in the most relevant ways for them.

Investing time and resources into collaborative efforts. Despite the limitations of each of the initiatives, the attempts to coordinate with other diaspora groups and other civil society organizations at the country and international levels can increase the influence of these groups through structured and targeted action.

Focusing on interventions through formal democratic, electoral, and legal processes. The most important component of this is transforming civic engagement into electoral participation. Focusing on improving the election results of pro-democratic and pro-European parties in the next election cycles is the first step that civic initiatives should continue to invest resources in. Additionally, engaging in formal legal processes regarding developments in the three home countries can also contribute to slowing down and potentially blocking

further democratic backsliding. Even though diaspora groups might not have the capacity to pursue these formal processes, they should support national civil society in their efforts to do so.

Embedding civic components in the variety of activities and topics that the initiatives are developing. Diaspora initiatives that contribute with expertise, raise funds, or focus on more specific issues such as women's rights can continue promoting democratic values through their activities. They can use their strong value orientation rather than strong political affiliation to mobilize voters in support of pro-democratic political actors.

Policymakers and other support organizations that are working towards stopping and reversing the democratic backsliding in Hungary, Poland and Romania can also contribute to advancing the work of the diaspora groups. These decision-makers from international non-profit organizations, European institutions, multinational companies, advocacy groups, think-tanks and academia, opposition parties, etc. can contribute by doing the following.

Developing appropriate funding, capacity building, and expertise for groups that operate in different ways than traditional civil society organizations. This can potentially contribute to professionalizing diaspora groups and to ensuring their longer-term survival. This type of support has a direct impact on the community-building aspect of diaspora activity, which is essential for mobilizing people in elections. This support can also serve as a form of protection from potential government backlashes or from constraints of the work of diaspora groups.

Facilitating cross-national collaboration between groups through exchange programs, funding schemes, and even dedicated organizations and projects that can coordinate and encourage systematic joint engagement.

Develop more in-depth knowledge around diasporas from Central and Eastern Europe, their needs, and

especially their political engagement. Large-scale studies are a particularly pressing necessity. Building upon existing migration studies, these can help civil society actors and policymakers working towards democratic advancement in the three countries to have more targeted interactions with different diaspora groups.

Facilitating the influence and engagement of diaspora initiatives with political power structures. There is a need to support these initiatives in engaging more with parties and governments without compromising their civil-society status. As most citizens who are part of these initiatives are not professional activists, they require support in terms of expertise on how to engage with or support most effectively other organizations that engage with power structures.

EU institutions and stakeholders in member states should engage diaspora groups directly in elaborating responses to challenges in Central and Eastern Europe. As a result of their transnational experiences, these groups can act as important sources of information and interpretation of the ongoing developments in the three countries, and thus facilitate institutional understandings and action at the European level.

In the years to come the new wave of pro-democratic, non-affiliated civic groups and organizations in the Hungarian, Polish, and Romanian diasporas will likely contribute to democratic outcomes in the home countries by influencing voting, helping to develop progressive social and political norms, and engaging citizens across member states towards a strong democratic Europe through their transnational characteristics.

The state of democracy in Central and Eastern Europe, and in Europe as a whole, is still very dynamic. As multiple influences will continue to shape it, pro-democratic institutions and actors should continue to rally as much support as possible and coordinate even the smallest energies in this direction for long-term action. The new diaspora initiatives and organizations definitely belong to these efforts.

Annex

This paper is based on primary qualitative data collected between July and December 2018. This included 20 interviews with activists, members of civic initiatives and civil society organizations, sociologists, political scientists, journalists, and party representatives, as well as direct observation at events, protests, and gatherings of different groups. Media and academic articles have also been consulted. This paper captures only a limited amount of insights regarding the current and future perspectives of the new diaspora initiatives. It also covers a limited geographic spectrum, as a result of limited capacity and response rates. Further research would be needed around their longer-term development, their political interactions, and their connection with historical diaspora groups. The access to data from political and government actors has been very limited and this would also be an avenue for further research. Finally, the specific role of women in these civic movements deserves closer attention.

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