

## Framework Conditions of Austria's Civil Society

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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Arbeitspapier / working paper

### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Simsa, R., Mayer, F., Muckenhuber, S., & Schweinschwaller, T. (2021). *Framework Conditions of Austria's Civil Society*. (Opuscula, 153). Berlin: Maecenata Institut für Philanthropie und Zivilgesellschaft. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-73928-5>

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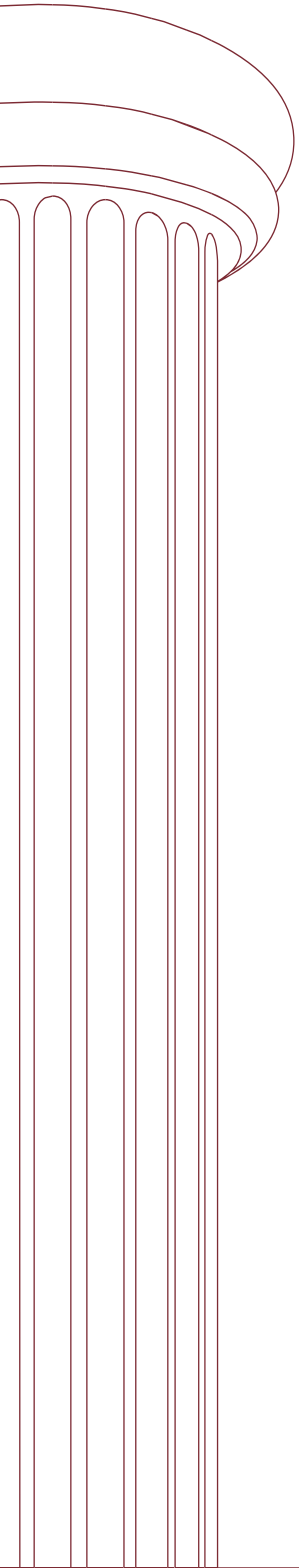
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Ruth Simsa, Fabian Mayer, Sebastian Muckenhuber and  
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## **Framework Conditions of Austria's Civil Society**

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## Impressum

**Published by:**  
MAECENATA Institute  
Rungestraße 17, D- 10179 Berlin, Germany  
Tel.: +49-30-28 38 79 09  
Fax: +49-30-28 38 79 10

E-Mail: [mi@maecenata.eu](mailto:mi@maecenata.eu)  
Website: [www.maecenata.eu](http://www.maecenata.eu)

**Edited by:** Nomin-Erdene Nyamsambu



ISSN (Web) 1868-1840

URN: urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-73928-5

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Maecenata Institute, Berlin 2021

This publication is presented in the scope of the *European Civic Space Observatory* project led by the Maecenata Institute.

## Executive Summary

This survey examines the framework conditions of civil society in Austria. It was conducted at the Institute for Sociology and Empirical Social Research at WU. It builds on two previous surveys on the same topic, a Civil Society Index Rapid Assessment (More-Hollerweger et al., 2014) and an update of this Assessment (Simsa et al., 2019).

In 2014, the development of public and private funding, democratic rights and performance of civil society organisations (CSOs) were particularly important; in 2019, the focus was on the impact on civil society of authoritarian policies. The current survey initially focused on an analysis of the impact of the change to a more civil-society friendly government at the beginning of 2020. In the course of the year, the effects of the Covid-19 crisis came to the fore.

By civil society we refer to the sphere between the state, the economy and the private sphere, in which people collectively represent and try to shape their own concerns (Simsa, 2013). Civil society and its organisations have high benefits for society. In addition to producing services for the common good, they also strengthen diversity, participation and integration. The importance of a pluralistic civil society for democracy is undisputed. Democracy thus needs civil society, but civil society is not necessarily democratic. In the last year in particular, illiberal civil-society endeavours have also gained in importance, especially based on conspiracy-theories. Nevertheless, these were only a marginal topic in the present survey. Rather, in the tradition of previous surveys, the report focuses on those areas of civil society that meet Habermas' requirements of plurality, tolerance and discursivity (Habermas, 1992).

Political framework conditions are decisive for the functioning of civil society in many respects. Apart from general human rights such as freedom of association or freedom of expression, opportunities for participation in legislative procedures, the government's information policy, and the quality of the welfare state and the financial support of civil society organisations by the public sector play an important role. Following on from the 2019 study, the following topics will therefore be analysed:

- *The social climate in relation to civil society*
- *Participation, i.e. political involvement of civil society*
- *Funding of civil society organisations*
- *The human rights situation*

While in 2019 a very homogeneous picture was drawn by respondents, currently the impressions and findings are highly diverse. Some respondents complain about the lack of dialogue with politicians, while others see it as much better and more intense than in 2019. The situation is similar with participation as well as with regard to the financial situation.

It is a clear result that the general climate with regard to civil society has improved. There is hardly any devaluation or defamation on the part of politicians. The pan-demy has also made clear the high importance of services provided by civil society organisations, which are therefore increasingly appreciated. Currently, many respondents also perceive a better discourse with politicians, although there are major differences in the perception of the two governing parties in this respect.

However, the improved climate and the communication that is now partly possible again has shown little effect on the possibilities of political participation. In the health and social sectors as well as in

climate policy, the expertise of CSOs is explicitly requested by politicians and partly taken into account, but according to the respondents there is little participation in other areas. It is interesting that the situation in this regard has changed only slightly since 2019, but that civil society currently seems to accept this more than before. Firstly, this can be attributed to the pandemic. Especially in the first months of the crisis, there was more acceptance of quick, less inclusive and less transparent decisions due to the high level of uncertainty. Furthermore, during this time, organisations in the health or care sector were stretched to the limit in coping with the greatly increased work demands, leaving less time for advocacy or criticism.

Secondly, the participation of the Green Party in government also has an impact on the critical potential. On the one hand, there is a certain “inhibition to bite” on the part of some CSOs due to political or personal proximity, and there is also increased participation in the Green-led ministries. On the other hand, however, the criticism of politics, for example of asylum policy, is more severe because expectations have been disappointed. As the pandemic progressed, however, deficits in participation became clearer and more strongly criticised. The shortening of review periods, for example, which limited the possibility of comments, transparency and trust, could no longer be argued with the urgency of the decisions.

The Covid-19 pandemic is associated with severe restrictions on both fundamental and human rights and civil liberties. Exit restrictions and stand-off rules also affect freedom of assembly. In this respect, there was a difficult situation in 2021. On the one hand, events were restricted at the beginning of the pandemic with reference to the health situation, which was criticised by civil society. On the other hand, however, a series of large demonstrations against the pandemic measures, some of which were banned, took place towards the end of 2020 and in 2021 with the participation of radical right-wing groups, which showed a high degree of willingness to use violence and whose participants in some cases did not comply with the pandemic regulations.

Regarding the financial situation of CSOs the previously seen politically motivated cuts in public funding for critical CSOs were no longer seen. However, the cuts made in 2018/2019 had hardly been reversed. A decisive factor regarding the public funding of CSOs was the Nonprofit-emergency fund of 700 million euros decided in June, which had contributed significantly to providing financial security for many of the CSOs.

In terms of policy content, hopes of civil society were disappointed, especially for improvements in asylum, ecological and social welfare legislation. The last year was dominated by COVID-19 and the handling of the pandemic, leading to the postponement of other agendas important for the future.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the actions of the federal government posed many challenges to civil society and CSOs and caused considerable strain on their actors. It is to be hoped that the projects planned by the government (e.g. initiatives for voluntary work in 2021) will be taken up and that expenditures for absorbing the side effects of the pandemic will not be sacrificed to a new austerity course at the expense of the CSOs. Also, a new awareness of the importance of freedom and assembly rights has grown in many sectors of society. This can lead to an increase in the importance of CSOs in the post-pandemic period, if more people can be mobilised for their causes.

The methodological basis of this survey was firstly a literature and document analysis. Secondly, a total of 27 interviews with representatives of civil society organisations (CSOs) were conducted between December 2020 and February 2021.

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# 1. Context: Developments of the Civil Society in Austria

## Socio-economic and historic framework

Political and social framework conditions are crucial for the functioning of civil society. Specifically important are general human and civil rights such as freedom of association or freedom of expression, opportunities for participation in legislative procedures, the government's information policy, the quality of the welfare state and the public financial support of civil society organisations. An empirical study in eight European countries shows that civil society organisations (CSOs) are significantly more resilient if there are conducive conditions in the respective country and, above all, good cooperation with the state (Pape et al., 2019).

Austria offers a good illustration of the interplay between civil society and politics as has experienced disruptive changes in the political landscape in recent years. After decades of relatively good cooperation of politics with a part of CSOs, especially in the context of welfare state arrangements, as well as a generally high level of civil society participation, a governing coalition assessed as right-wing populist brought about massive changes in the social climate, in the possibilities of civil society participation and in the economic situation of critical organisations within a short period of time. These changes were empirically surveyed and analysed and largely followed the pattern known from countries with authoritarian politics (Simsa, 2020). The present follow-up study was now to ascertain how a change of government to a coalition seen as more “civil society-friendly”, with the participation of the Greens and without the participation of the strongly right-wing populist FPÖ, would affect this situation. However, this question was overshadowed by developments around the Covid pandemic from March 2020 onwards. In the following, we will explore the impact of both the political change and the health crisis on civil society.

### 1.1. Development and significance of civil society in Austria

The socio-economic and historic framework is quite stable. In recent decades, Austria has had a relatively strong economy, a developed welfare system and a stable democracy. Civil society and civil society organisations (CSOs) are a vital part of the country. CSOs are valued in welfare state arrangements – there is a high degree of social stability and quite good relations between government and CSOs (More-Hollerweger et al., 2014).

CSOs in Austria are deeply involved in political decision-making. CSOs have engaged in dialogue and negotiations with the government in many areas and have often been involved in legislative processes. Further, they provide social services and in return, they receive large shares of their funding from public sources. The public sector thus plays an important role for CSOs, influencing their organisational and

financial structures. CSOs are particularly active in social services, health care and education. Furthermore, federalism and self-governance of the nine federal provinces are reflected in civil society and there are both strong local and umbrella organisations at the federal level.

Social movements, particularly workers', women's and environmental movements have long traditions and in the past few decades they have increasingly sought cooperation. This means Austria can be described as a consensus democracy (Dolezal & Hutter, 2007).

### **Economisation and economic insecurities**

Nevertheless, in recent years, conditions for civil society organisations have deteriorated. Relations between the public sector and CSOs have changed in the last two decades. There has been a shift towards more neoliberal ideologies (Zimmer, 2014). Neoliberal policies of deregulation and privatisation of social tasks have been implemented in Austria, although these have been mitigated by a comparatively good welfare state. In a Delphi Study, Austrian experts expected a further decrease in public funding in relation to demand, putting pressure on CSOs to diversify and to engage in new income-generating activities (Neumayr et al., 2017). With the shift towards new public management, CSOs have lost their privileged position in welfare state arrangements. Quasi-markets have increased controlling and accountability mechanisms. Competitive tendering procedures have been opened up to commercial providers and their share of the market has been rising in the last decade.

Alongside these changes there has been a decrease in public funding, especially after the global financial crisis in the late 2000s (Pape et al., 2019). A study of the financial situation of Austrian CSOs in 2015 showed that public funding had become more unstable leading to more challenges for these organisations (Simsa, 2015).

With the pressure to implement austerity policies and to increase competitiveness through wage cuts, flexibilisation of labour markets and the reduction of public (social) expenditure, social inequalities also became increasingly acute in Austria (Fellner & Grisold, 2010; Marterbauer, 2011).

Thus, those CSOs that are financed by public funds faced increased economic pressure. The logic of the economy, market-based structures and competition also gained importance in the nonprofit sector. In more and more areas, the tension between mission and market (Sanders, 2015) seems to be dissolved in favour of the market logic (Maier & Meyer, 2011).

Even though the image of civil society remained high in the eyes of the population and CSOs enjoyed a high level of trust (More-Hollerweger et al., 2014), it seemed that the value of organisations or behaviours that did not conform to economic calculations tended to decline (Liebig, 2005).



## The increase of right-wing populist attitudes and politics

In recent years, there has been some turbulence in politics and civil society in Austria. Civil society involvement increased dramatically in the so-called refugee crisis of 2015/2016. Civil society actors played an important role in maintaining humanitarian standards and in crisis management (Simsa, 2017), against a background of increasing political polarisation around the issue of immigration. The 2017 National Council election led to a coalition between the conservatives (ÖVP) and the right-wing national conservatives (FPÖ), both of which had run a polarising election campaign strongly focused on the refugee issue. Although the country has a strong social-democratic tradition, this is also true for right-wing populism, with the FPÖ party clearly having right-wing extremist roots (Pelinka, 2019). The Social Democratic Party had supported neoliberal policies for decades, but it lost its core electorate as the refugee crisis created a clear shift to right-wing populist parties. This culminated in a coalition of the ÖVP and the FPÖ in 2017. This government presented simple solutions to all kinds of social and economic problems and represented exclusive concepts of solidarity (Hofmann et al., 2019). Further, it also espoused what might be described as “anti-elite rhetoric” (Pelinka, 2019). An analysis of the impact on civil society clearly showed that this government also developed clear authoritarian strategies (Simsa, 2020).

The impact of these changes was visible in the public discourse, where CSOs were faced with attempts to undermine and delegitimise them and also with increased polarisation across society. Furthermore, communication between political actors and CSOs decreased, which limited the possibilities for CSOs to participate in the legislative processes. It also affected access to financial resources, especially for CSOs working in fields that conflicted with the government’s agenda.

The term populism refers to politics that appeal to simple, archaic forms of identification (Mouffe, 2005) and polarization of society between the people and its other, suggesting simplified solutions (Panizza, 2005). Right-wing populism refers to populism that is ethically, religiously or nationally exclusive (Pelinka, 2013). Right-wing populist parties show nationalism and racism (Loch & Norocel, 2015), and combine ethno-nationalist xenophobia with an anti-political-establishment-rhetoric (Rydgren, 2005). They often attempt to destabilize institutions, adopt aggressive narratives, and systematically try to weaken protest and critique. Often, they go along with distinct anti-welfare social policies (Bozóki, 2015).

Right-wing populism is related to authoritarianism. Authoritarianism is defined as anti-democratic, illiberal politics with a decline of core institutional requirements for electoral democracy, with fewer opportunities for opposition (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2018), and with a dominance of the government over society (Bozóki, 2015). Many authors stress the anti-pluralistic character of right-wing populism (Mudde, 2004; Müller, 2017; Urbinati, 2016) and its proximity to autocratic procedures (Weyland, 2018).

Modern forms of authoritarianism try to secure their power by restricting civil society (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2018). They use complex methods to strategically influence, control and incorporate civil society (Froissart, 2014; Gilbert & Mohseni, 2018; Greskovits, 2015), try to usurp the autonomy of the civil sphere (Geró & Kopper, 2013) or to capture it (Kover, 2015).

### **Effects of of right-wing populism on civil society**

During the period of the coalition of ÖVP and FPÖ, between the end of 2017 and May 2019, the conditions for the critical parts of civil society deteriorated. There was a clear polarisation of the discourse, attempts at targeted intimidation, as well as an increasing delegitimisation of civil society activities in the media and by politicians. Delegitimisation of civil society activities took place, for example, through the insinuation of profit interests, devaluation of their work, and also the increase of a generally negative, exclusionary rhetoric.

With regard to democracy and participation, CSOs were largely and systematically excluded from legislative processes. Review periods were shortened to prevent comments, etc. Politics had become more intransparent and hardly communicated with civil society actors. In our empirical study in this period, a large number of feedbacks from civil society revealed a systematic strategy to exclude civil society from political decisions. Most respondents reported that CSOs were rarely given attention anymore, that it was often extremely difficult to maintain a dialogue or get any reactions from politics.

Basic rights are well developed in Austria in international comparison. However, freedom of assembly was restricted in the years before 2019, especially through the extension of the notification period for demonstrations and the establishment of so-called protected areas in which assemblies were not allowed. Increasing bureaucratisation and restrictions on legal certainty in practice had an indirect effect on the exercise of fundamental rights.

Regarding public funding, the total expenditures for CSOs had not much had changed between 2014 and 2019. However, a detailed look shows that there were changes in funding that obviously affected critical CSOs. Especially in the areas of migration, arts, women's, labour market and development policy, these CSOs experienced severe restrictions on public funding. They posed an existential threat to many critical organizations and created general fear in the sector (Simsa, 2020). A representative of CSOs explained: "This is, so to speak, a lever, so how do I take the money from them, how do I cut it, so that I silence these voices (...) either because I cut them completely off or they no longer exist, or because, under threat of cuts, I silence them." (R09, Simsa et al., 2019).

The changes as a whole showed a clear pattern: they corresponded to the processes of the development of authoritarian governments known from the literature (Moder & Pranzl, 2019). Although Austria is a

basically liberal democracy with well-developed human rights, there were clearly observable tendencies to limit the critical potential of civil society as well as its participation in political decision-making processes. Politically motivated funding decisions have always existed, as have different views on desired participation and conflicts over content between politics and civil society. However, the policy of systematically restricting dissent, protest and diversity through a wide variety of interlocking measures contradicts the Austrian tradition. It was an expression of an increasingly authoritarian, right-wing populist policy.

## 1.2. The current political situation – the coalition of ÖVP and the Green Party

After some severe political scandals, the coalition of 2018 was dissolved after a transitional government, a coalition between the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) and the Greens was formed in January 2020. This new federal government was associated with great expectations on the part of civil society representatives. In Austria, there are traditionally good personal contacts and similar political positions between civil society and the Green Party.

On 2 November 2020, Austria was shaken by a terrorist attack that briefly pushed the pandemic into the background and shook many people. Apart from much critique regarding political failures in the fight against terrorism. Apparently, the authorities had information on the assassin but did not use them due to a lack of coordination. Nevertheless, a newly proposed legislative initiative to protect against terrorism has been criticised because of the planned restriction of fundamental rights.<sup>1</sup>

With the beginning of 2021, the political situation became very unstable again. The Minister of Finance was investigated on suspicion of corruption by means of a house search, and motions of no confidence were brought against the Ministers of Finance, the Interior and of the Economy by the entire opposition. In addition to fundamental controversies over policies, this increased tensions in the coalition. The People's Party reacted to the juristical accusations with increased criticism and attacks on legal institutions, especially on the Public Prosecutor's Office for Economic Affairs and Corruption.<sup>2</sup>

Reputable experts in law reacted very critically and alarmed to accusations and derogatory statements by representatives of the federal government against the judiciary. They criticised condemnations of authorities by government representatives, especially the “exaggerated and inappropriate” criticism of the economic and corruption prosecutor by the ÖVP, after the Minister of Finance had become the subject of their investigations. The public prosecutor's office was accused by party spokespersons and the

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000123667845/viele-kritische-stimmen-zum-geplanten-anti-terror-gesetz> (28 January 2021)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000124166802/oevp-und-causa-bluemel-angriff-als-verteidigung> (14 February 2021)

Federal Chancellor of fatal errors, false assumptions and decisions based on “faulty facts”, all accusations that were rejected or refuted by lawyers. On several occasions, experts, such as the former Minister of Justice, have expressed surprise and criticism about the Chancellor's understanding of the rule of law and the organs of the judiciary. These sweeping and mostly untenable attempts to delegitimise a legal authority bear the danger of weakening the population's trust in the rule of law.

Still, satisfaction with democracy is comparatively high in Austria and ranks among the best in an international comparison (European Social Survey 2018).<sup>3</sup> However, since the beginning of the Corona crisis, a decline can be observed. Since March 2020, trust in satisfaction with democracy and trust in the federal government has been declining, with trust in the government declining more than trust in democracy.<sup>4</sup> Trust in democratic institutions, such as parliament or media, has also fallen slightly.<sup>5</sup>

### **Increasing importance of the climate movement**

In the years preceding the spring of 2020, the climate (justice) movement gained importance in Austria. The demonstrations and strikes of the civil society organisation Fridays for Future, which started with Greta Thunberg's school strikes, received specifically high participation and media attention. However, many other actors, such as the Parents for Future, Scientists for Future, and other organisations like Extinction Rebellion and System Change not Climate Change, were also prominent. While in the years before, civil society environmental politics was characterised by institutionalised and well-known CSOs, some of which had emerged from movements of the late 20th century (Pundy, 1995), a multitude of new grassroots initiatives and organisations were now forming. In 2019, a broad alliance of new movement organisations and environmental CSOs formed under the title Klimaprotest.at, which provided networking and protest coordination.

In 2019, the largest climate demonstrations of all times were observed worldwide, and local and supra-regional climate initiatives were founded everywhere. It is therefore possible to speak of a broad social movement. Their goal is a change of course in climate and environmental policy, compliance with the 1.5°C target of the Paris Climate Agreement and global climate justice. There were also regular large demonstrations in Austria, with strikes and protests every Friday for months, partly in the context of global climate strikes. For example, on 27 September 2019, between 65,000 and 150,000 people went

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/> (18 March 2021)

<sup>4</sup> Carolina Plescia, Felix Krejca und Fabian Kalleitner: Die Dynamik der Demokratiezufriedenheit und des Vertrauens in die österreichische Bundesregierung während der Covid-19-Pandemie. Corona-Dynamiken – 09.12.2020. <https://viecer.univie.ac.at/corona-blog/corona-blog-beitraege/corona-dynamiken13/> (20 February 2021)

<sup>5</sup> Oliver Rathkolb und Julian Aichholzer: Demokratische Einstellungen in Österreich: Vor und während der Corona-Krise. <https://viecer.univie.ac.at/corona-blog/corona-blog-beitraege/blog89/> (20 February 2021)

on strike and demonstrated for climate protection throughout Austria. New cooperations in the movement emerged, from selective alliances for specific actions to umbrella organisation structures.

With the Covid 19 measures, the number of actions decreased significantly, despite many efforts to switch to online activities, and the number of activists and their action-oriented groups also decreased. The future of the movement is therefore open.

### 1.3. The Covid-19 Pandemie

Since March 2020, the Corona pandemic has had massive impacts on the social and economic development in Austria. In February, the first case of the disease became known in the country and the health crisis spread rapidly. The pandemic overlapped practically all social areas and topics.

In order to limit the spread of the disease, three lockdowns were decided between March 2020 and February 2021, i.e. restrictions on the movement of the population as well as on economic and cultural life through the closure of large parts of trade, gastronomy, cultural and sports organisations. This had a massive impact on social life and thus also on civil society. Throughout the period, there were restrictions on contact. These varied depending on the phase of the pandemic; in some cases, no people from outside the household were allowed to meet at all, in others this was relaxed, whereby different numbers of people were allowed in each case. Work, club and leisure activities were suspended for long periods or shifted to the virtual world.

The health effects of the pandemic were drastic. By February 2021, there had been over 454,000 cases of illness, and 8,386 people had died from or with the disease. In 2020, the excess mortality rate was around 10%, with men being more affected (plus 13.7%) than women (plus 8.2%). Life expectancy has thus fallen by around half a year in the Corona year 2020 compared to 2019.<sup>6</sup>

The socio-economic effects of the crisis are directly relevant for many of the CSOs, as well as indirectly, through changes in the living conditions of their clients. For example, the daily life of people in residential institutions was massively restricted by measures taken in the wake of the Corona pandemic. CSOs had to adapt their care and support services accordingly.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the measures to contain it caused the biggest global recession since the Second World War.<sup>7</sup> Real gross domestic product was down 7.3% in 2020.<sup>8</sup> This had severe effects on the labor market. In April 2020, more than 570,000 people were unemployed, more than ever before.

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<sup>6</sup> Statistik Austria, Pressemitteilung vom 14.1.2021. [https://www.statistik.at/web\\_de/presse/125167.html](https://www.statistik.at/web_de/presse/125167.html) (22 February 2021)

<sup>7</sup>[https://www.wifo.ac.at/jart/prj3/wifo/resources/person\\_dokument/person\\_dokument.jart?publikation-sid=65916&mime\\_type=application/pdf](https://www.wifo.ac.at/jart/prj3/wifo/resources/person_dokument/person_dokument.jart?publikation-sid=65916&mime_type=application/pdf) (22 February 2021)

<sup>8</sup> <http://wko.at/statistik/prognose/prognose.pdf> (22 February 2021)

The number declined slightly in succession, but remained consistently far above the pre-crisis level and rose again in winter. In January 2021, 535,470 were out of work, the unemployment rate was 11.4%. Compared to the same month of the previous year, this was an increase of 31.8%.<sup>9</sup> In 2020, the average unemployment rate was around 10% (BMSGPK, 2020).

In addition, a high number of employees were on short-time work (June 2020: 1.37 million, beginning of January 2021: 417,000 persons). Short-time work means that employees' working hours are reduced, they receive between 80 and 90% of their income, and the additional costs compared to the actual working hours are covered by the public sector.

The government established a Corona aid fund of 15 billion euros for companies to secure operating subsidies. Many CSOs were massively affected financially, as significant areas of income were lost during the lockdowns, for example due to the cancellation of cultural festivals or fundraising events. This was partially cushioned from June 2020 onwards by a specific emergency fund for non-profit organisations (see Chapter III.4.).

The COVID-19 pandemic is associated with severe restrictions on both fundamental and human rights and civil liberties. As a consequence, not only the attention for social work of CSOs increased strongly, but also their advocacy work for human rights was increasingly valued.

From 2021 onwards, there was also an increase in civil society activities in connection with the pandemic that did not meet the requirements of plurality, tolerance and discursivity. In the context of protests against the measures to contain the pandemic, there was an increase in the significance of exclusive, illiberal, civil-society protests, partly with the participation of right-wing extremist individuals and groups, such as Gottfried Küssel, who was convicted of National Socialist *Wiederbetätigung* in 2011. They spread conspiracy theories and fight against what they perceive as the Corona dictatorship. For Germany, there are findings that the protests against the COVID 19 ordinances were infiltrated or “hijacked” by right-wing groups, which subsequently led to an increasing radicalisation of the movement.<sup>10</sup> It can be assumed that in Austria similar processes were going on.

This relatively new social movement shows a high degree of individual and collective proximity to nationalist, populist and right-wing extremist elites and groups. At the same time, it is characterised by a particularly high heterogeneity of supporters and political positions. They are highly polarising, dividing society into two antagonistic spheres. Alternative beliefs and attitudes, for example with regard to medicine or the perception of authority, play an important role (cf. Nachtwey et al., 2020). Despite the

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<sup>9</sup> <https://de.statista.com/themen/6436/auswirkungen-des-coronavirus-covid-19-auf-die-wirtschaft-in-oesterreich/> (19 March 2021)

<sup>10</sup> Hummel, 2021 p. 10

diversity of individual situations of concern, which are often related to socio-economic causes, there is a unification of the fundamental opposition, which is in principle opposed to liberal democracy. A unifying element is thus the scepticism towards parliamentary democracy, the media and social and political-economic institutions (cf. Nachtwey et al., 2020). Interestingly, apart from these common features, political preferences of activists are very diverse.

Regarding human rights and the question of civic spaces, these protests pose severe challenges. Many of their views are not democratic and often participants did not comply with Covid-measures and thus threatened others. As a consequence, many of the demonstrations were forbidden, but a significant number nevertheless took place (see chapter III.3).

## 2. Methods and definitions

The study is based on two previous projects. In 2014, a Civil Society Index – Rapid Assessment (CSI-RA) of framework conditions for civil society was performed in line with CIVICUS – World Alliance for Citizen Participation, the NPO-Kompetenzzentrum at the university of economics and business and IGO - Interessenvertretung Gemeinnütziger Organisationen (More-Hollerweger et al., 2014). In addition to democratic, especially legal, framework conditions and the perceptibility of civil society impacts, this would involve financial resources, employment and volunteer work, as well as transparency in the awarding of service contracts and funding. Between 2018 and 2019, an update of this study was performed, specifically focusing on effects of the political constellation on civil society (Simsa et al., 2019).

For this study, accompanying research was carried out in scientific literature as well as in the media and social media. Scientific literature from the literature analysis is cited in the text, other sources are noted in footnotes.

The core of the study is a qualitative survey. Between December 2020 and February 2021, a total of 27 interviews were conducted with representatives of CSOs. The interviews were narrative, which allowed for a great deal of openness while taking into account some of the guiding questions (Schütze, 1987). The selection of interview partners followed the criteria of theoretical sampling of the grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 2008), i.e. the aim was to achieve a high degree of heterogeneity in the sample with regard to the fields of activity and size of the CSOs. In the health and social sector 9, in the advocacy sector 10, in the arts and culture sector 3, in the environmental sector 4, in the advocacy sector 2 CSOs were interviewed. Some CSOs are active in other areas, and these were assigned to a priority area. All representatives of the CSOs were managers. 4 interviewees are executives in umbrella organisations and could therefore also give an overview of the entire sector. There were 9 men and 16 women in the sample. 21 interviews were transcribed, 6 interviews were partially transcribed and coded according to

central terms. Three of the interviews were taken from another study in the health and care sector (Schweinschwaller, 2021).

The study focused on the following topics:

- General climate in relation to civil society;
- Participation and Democracy
- Human rights – Fundamental rights, freedom of association and of assembly
- Financial resources and access to public funds

### Definitions

In this report, civil society is defined as the sum of actors and actions that have a minimum degree of autonomy from the market and the state, that are not profit-oriented and are aimed at shaping political processes and/or social living conditions, and that take place within the framework of collective action. It is thus about the sphere between the state, the economy and the private sphere in which people represent and try to shape their own concerns (Simsa, 2013). Similarly, Fioramonti und Thümler see civil society as “[...] an open arena of participation, located beyond the fuzzy boundaries of state and market, in which different types of individuals, groups, and organizations cooperate or compete for visibility and relevance, in the pursuit of collective (though not necessarily shared) political and social goals and animated by a variety of values and interest.” (Vgl. Fioramonti & Thümler, 2013)

Eine gegenwärtig gerade an Bedeutung gewinnende Frage, ist jene nach dem normativen Gehalt des Begriffs der Zivilgesellschaft.

The term civil society usually is related with ideas of participation, democracy and social justice (Zimmer & Priller, 2007). Thus, civil society actors are expected to act with tolerance, fairness and non-violently (vgl. Gosewinkel, 2003). Habermas names the requirements of plurality, tolerance and discursivity (Habermas, 1992). Further, democratic civility is important (vgl. Chambers & Kopstein, 2001), important values and ethical norms such as human rights or solidarity thus are not only shared within the group but within all members of society (vgl. Waghmore & Gorringer, 2021). In spite of these normative views on civil society also nationalistic, fundamentalist or even right wing radicalist groups act within civil society – which is then called »bad civil society« (Chambers & Kopstein, 2001).

Although the normative positive attributions, such as working for a good, democratic, just society, largely correspond to the self-descriptions of civil society actors, it makes sense not to include these normative aspects in definitions. Who should be able to determine the existence of tolerance or fairness beyond doubt?



Based on the most common international definition (Meyer & Simsa, 2013b; Salamon & Anheier, 1992) we define CSOs or NPOs as private, non-governmental organisations, with a minimum of formal organization, self-administration and voluntariness that do not distribute profits to owners or members.

These organisations are often referred to synonymously as NPOs (non-profit organisations), NGOs (non-governmental organisations) or CSOs (civil society organisations). This study uses the term CSO. When referring to literature or statements in interviews that use the terminology NPO or NGO, we use these terms.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. General climate in relation to civil society

##### **Improvements regarding the climate due to political changes and the pandemic**

Traditionally, civil society and its organisations have been held in high esteem in Austria. This basic consensus that CSOs do important work and have high significance for society threatened to erode after 2015, a development that became particularly clear in the 2019 analysis. CSOs were often discredited or antagonised, not only by the media but also by the government. The results of the 2019 survey showed a clear polarisation of the discourse concerning the general climate. Intimidation and delegitimisation of civil society activities could be observed in the media and on the part of politicians. The delegitimisation of civil society activities took place through the insinuation of profit interests, the devaluation of work, and also the increase in a generally negative, exclusionary rhetoric.

At present, the general climate regarding civil society has clearly improved. Therefore, defamation, which was still common in 2019 on the part of the governing parties, is hardly present anymore. This systematic discrediting of civil society is also no longer found in the media or in other arenas of public discourse. Overall, a positive change in the public discussion and a higher appreciation of the work of CSOs are perceived, the interviewees largely agree on this:

The climate has clearly improved. So at least these direct attacks have stopped. | 16

(...) what is no longer the case in comparison to the previous government is definitely that these direct attacks no longer exist. So this delegitimisation, this criminalisation of civil society. | 4

On the one hand, this is associated with the Covid crisis. Social assistance and social services are again increasingly seen as important. Poverty and the risk of poverty have moved more into the centre of society's attention.

Well, we have had the impression that the issue of poverty has become much more central to society. Whereas in the past, topics such as minimum security and social assistance were more important for disadvantaged groups or perhaps the long-term unemployed or people with a migration background, what one generally calls marginalised groups in society. Suddenly, these have become issues that affect an average Austrian citizen, a single-person business, which has lost orders from one day to the next and now has no access to minimum income. I think this has also once again raised awareness of how important this social network is. I 23

On the other hand, the better climate is also attributed to a change in political conditions, i.e. the participation of the Greens in government, who are basically positive towards democratic-civil society activities and organisations. In addition, there are also many personal contacts and acquaintances. Many members of the Greens have worked in civil society organisations or have been active in various movements.

This access and the ability of dialogue with the government, I think that is already here again. Especially, I would say, with the Green-led ministerial posts or cabinets. I 4

However, it was mentioned that particularly the services provided by CSOs are appreciated, while their political work is rather less perceived.

The improved climate has also tended to benefit the large service organisations, which are considered as particularly relevant to the system.

Because critical infrastructure are primarily those who always operate facilities, who operate some kind of service. That's what I mean. And these tend to be the big ones. I 5

Nevertheless, some of the increased appreciation also goes beyond social service CSOs and includes advocacy organisations as well.

What I already hear from organisations (...) that are not considered critical infrastructure (...), is that they nevertheless notice that they are perceived differently again. Because then the whole sector is perceived differently. I 5

In general, it is difficult to attribute experienced changes to specific causes since the pandemic and the change of government had taken place almost at the same time.

### 3.1.1. Framework conditions in selected areas of activity

While the general climate and the funding of many CSOs in the context of Covid emergency aid are consistently described by the interviewees as positive developments, the framework conditions in the respective activities of the CSOs are sometimes seen very critically. In general, these are of course dependent on the respective area, but the basic tenor is that Covid overshadows everything, that there are strong deficits in the substantive policy and that in general expectations towards the Greens had been higher.

Overall, there is also great concern regarding social and economic policy. At present, emergency financial packages are in place. However, their sustainability is not assured, and there are fears that major cuts or austerity packages will be enacted in the future, leading to even greater social inequalities.

(...) that one million-to-billion-euro package after the other is being paid out. Consequently no one is clear about how this will actually be financed in the future. That's why there is still a real fear of the next austerity package or cutback package. But at the moment, money is being shelled out as fast as it can (...). So all of a sudden money is being redistributed. That is a new dimension. | 21

#### Asylum sector

With regard to the asylum sector, there are different statements. Some interviewees speak of clear improvements since the Greens came to power, others are less positive and recognize the fact that at least little further deterioration of the framework conditions has taken place.

Yes, I can report few positive things, the only positive thing is that there are no more legislative proposals that drift in an even more insane direction, as they were constantly produced before. So there is no such thing, the Greens have obviously made it clear that there is no such thing with them. | 10

Other respondents sharply criticise the policy. In terms of content, not much has changed in the government programme.

The majority is completely the same. The previous policy of the collation between the People's Party and the Freedom Party are being continued and now elaborated and carried out. | 6

However, this opinion is not shared by all respondents. In particular, the importance of civil society in the current government programme was considered very positively by some.

(...) on a positive note, I would like to mention that civil society is also included very positively in the government programme and that there really is a programme at all. I 12

In practice, further cuts are seen in some cases. For example, the nationalisation of legal counselling in asylum procedures, formerly carried out by CSOs, is criticised.

They all actually said: Well, that's not possible. The state cannot do that at the same time under the (...) same ministry, give legal advice and before that issue the negative decisions and then fight itself or its own decisions. And that is also unique in Europe. I 10

They also criticise the fact that the resettlement policy has not changed compared to the previous government, which was heavily criticised for its harsh asylum policy, and the poor living conditions for asylum seekers (for example, due to the lack of valorisation of the basic daily allowance). With the nationalisation of legal counselling, a previous field of activity of CSOs has completely disappeared. I 22

With a focus on refugee work and asylum policy there has been surprisingly little change. Well, everything has actually continued unabated. The government programme in the chapter on asylum and migration is a complete disaster. I 10

Looking at the statements as a whole, improvements in this area mainly related to the general climate and communication with politicians. CSOs are less attacked for their commitment to refugees and asylum seekers than they were a few years ago. At the same time, however, the restrictive asylum policy is experienced as frustrating, especially by volunteers. There again, the Corona pandemic overshadows almost everything else. I 12

On this issue, the different strengths of the two coalition partners become particularly clear. The Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) is particularly tough on asylum policy.

We hoped that the Greens would contribute to a different perception of these things, but I think it was clear relatively soon that the ÖVP would not let the issue of migration, asylum and integration out of its hands and would take a very clear and hard line. I 23

### **Human rights work**

On the one hand, there have been massive positive changes in human rights work due to the Green participation in government.

(...) they are open when we get in touch. That is already positive. I 12

In terms of content, the topic was strongly influenced by measures to prevent the pandemic. Many of these have direct or indirect effects on human rights, such as the many direct restrictions on freedom of movement and assembly. Indirect effects are economic or social consequences of the measures, which could violate economic or social rights.

The work of CSOs in this area is influenced by two aspects. Firstly, additional, new work is created through the observation and analysis of measures and their consequences at home and abroad. Secondly, however, more support for the issue is perceived, as more people are now affected by potential restrictions on their human rights.

### **Social services and health sector**

The pandemic had a particularly high impact on CSOs in the health and social sectors. In addition to financial constraints and additional costs, there were also challenges in terms of human resources. Millner and colleagues observe that restrictions due to Covid-19 lead to an increased demand for specific social services, which had to be adapted accordingly by the respective CSOs. These organisations also reacted to changes caused by the pandemic through the development of new, digital services and the utilisation of public funds (Millner et al., 2020). The majority of the social sector was negatively affected. Considerable additional costs were incurred for protective measures, which primarily affected smaller organisations.

Now, in the area of care for the homeless, for example, the winter quarters, which are normally only open at night, were also opened during the day at very short notice. They had to quickly make arrangements with a maximum number of people in rooms, with distances and with masks. | 23

A worrying phenomenon is being observed in social work. Here, in addition to known groups, new target groups such as artists, students or small self-employed people reported precarious situations.

In the counselling centres, after an initial lull, the number of new contacts, especially initial contacts, i.e. people who dock at a social counselling centre for the first time, has risen very strongly. | 23

One of the reasons why the work of social organisations is more appreciated lies in the need among groups that were rather atypical before. Poverty and the risk of poverty have become more central to society.

I do believe that this has become more visible, also because it has not always affected only the marginalised groups, but also people who normally do not come to a social counselling centre. | 23

However, the increase in demand has, among other effects of the Corona pandemic, led to an increased workload for the staff of social service organisations as well as those in the health sector (see chapter 5.2.).

Many organisations also switched their work to more digital offerings as a result of the Corona-related policy measures. Respondents criticised the fact that people with disabilities, for example, were given little attention in the corresponding public debate. For them and other socially disadvantaged people, these changes meant enormous adjustments that were difficult to understand, especially for people with learning difficulties.

There is a tendency for people with disabilities (...) to be neglected in public coverage and in legislation. So, unless they are typical disability laws, they tend not to be considered. | 8

### **Environmental policy**

Environmental policy is described critically. Although the climate issue receives some attention despite Covid, problems of the health and economic system tend to push environmental issues into the background.

We have drawn a very bitter balance of the first year. From the point of view of the environmental protection organisation, what has been achieved so far in climate, pesticide and other areas from an initially ambitious government programme is, unfortunately, relatively small. | 16

In any case, climate policy has experienced an increase in attention since the movement around Greta Thunberg. This topic has also been pushed into the background, but it is one of the few that still receives regular attention alongside the pandemic.

It is been taken up much more. Young people who are now involved in the Fridays for Future association are quoted much more often. | 9

However, as with other issues, environmental CSOs were able to create digital forms of exchange that dominated the dialogue in the Covid pandemic (see section 2.4.).

## Labour market policy

In labour market policy, some immediate problems have been absorbed by the emergency fund or by short-time work. For CSOs in the sector, it is extremely uncertain, given the high unemployment, how the framework conditions will continue to develop after the emergency measures expire.

It is already clear that the demand is exploding, especially in the context of projects with young people furthest removed from the labour market. | 23

## Arts and culture sector

Between the CSOs in the cultural sector and civil society, there was an occasional rapprochement in order to stand up together against the coalition government between the Austrian People's Party and the Austrian Freedom Party (ÖVP and FPÖ). The period of the transitional government is described by the cultural sector as a standstill, however, a new form of participation was already beginning in the government negotiations in autumn 2019, which is characterised by better contacts with politicians:

So, all of a sudden, the network has really moved into politics with a direct line and has, of course, enabled completely different channels of conversation and opened new doors than was the case before. | 18

Certain topics of cultural workers, such as Action Fairness – an action against the precarity of cultural workers – found a place in the government agreement as a result of these talks.

Even though the atmosphere between civil society and the government is described as much better than under the previous coalition, and some of the CSOs' demands are reflected in the government programme, burdensome measures of the ÖVP-FPÖ government, such as the halving of the funding period, are being continued by the new government and not reversed.

The Corona crisis leads to a sobering picture. With 150,000 jobs and a value added of € 9.8 billion, the culture and arts sector is a relevant economic factor, but is particularly badly hit by economic slumps because it was the first to be affected by the closures and has been for a very long time. Pitlik and colleagues express their concern that the entire arts and culture sector will lose a fourth of their added value because of the pandemic (Pitlik et al., 2020).

Classified as “not systemically relevant”, representatives of the sector felt insufficiently taken into account at the beginning of the pandemic and their displeasure also caused a member of the government to resign. The replacement with an expert in cultural management and public administration reassured many in the cultural sector. After this change, there was an increase in Corona aid for artists. The many different funds are seen as quite confusing and the funding guidelines as reinforcing inequality:

We still have our hands full with advising where to go if one needs support. But what we can see very clearly is that, in my opinion, there is a divide between those who had a reasonably regular income before the crisis, from which they could support themselves, and those who have always been very precarious. The crisis does not balance this, but exacerbates these inequalities. (...). | 18

Through the increased media coverage of insecure working conditions in the cultural sector, other insights beyond star coverage are becoming visible:

We have definitely never had so much media attention, which also shows how work is done in the sector. And that there are now not only the stars and well-known names, but many more who work invisibly in the sector and find working conditions that would not be considered acceptable in many other areas. So, there is certainly more sensitivity now and more attention has been paid to this in the short term. | 18

This media attention in turn has an effect on the cultural sector and leads to new solidarity initiatives, after a certain desolidarisation effect was noticed at the beginning of the Corona pandemic, which also has to do with the high heterogeneity of the field. Although large cultural institutions and small cultural projects are equally affected by the closures, their effects are different.

(...) because in addition to a very commercially oriented, creative economic context, you have large, quasi-publicly owned institutions, such as the large federal theatres and federal museums or the same at the provincial level. And then you have the independent sector with a lot of lone fighters and steep organisations that fight for the preservation of the basic structure in the first place. | 18

However, the duration of the crisis reveals an already well-known side of the cultural sector: a few, mainly large cultural organisations have easier access to resources. It is easier for established cultural organisations to get resources than for the independent arts scene.

Likewise, as a result of the Corona crisis, it is feared that subsidies, especially for the independent scene, will be reduced and thus, after the crisis, precarity, unpaid engagement and migration from the creative sector will increase considerably.

### **3.1.2. The civil society in the media**

The media landscape in Austria has some special features: Media corporations are concentrated in the hands of comparatively few owners. The tabloid plays an above-average role in an Austrian comparison.



The “Kronen Zeitung” has a nationwide reach of 28%, the free paper “Heute” of slightly more than 12%.<sup>11</sup> The public broadcaster (ORF) still dominates due to a late market opening.

The “Corona Special Media Subsidy” is a one-off aid to cushion the economic impact of the COVID-19 crisis situation on the revenue situation in the print media sector. It was created by the so-called 4th COVID-19 Act<sup>12</sup> as an extraordinary support measure for owners of newspapers, magazines and private broadcasting. Austrian media companies were thus supported with more than 30 million euros. Criticism was voiced that print media were favoured in relation to online media and that ÖVP-affiliated media tended to receive more than critical quality newspapers. Two magazines of the ÖVP farmers' association each receive more additional funding than the weekly newspaper “Falter”. The party newspaper of the ÖVP Upper Austria, the “OÖ Volksblatt”, receives more than three times as much as the weekly and nationwide newspaper “Profil”.<sup>13</sup>

Not surprisingly, individual respondents perceive that it has become more difficult to be heard in the media with critical views.

(...) what is almost general political knowledge is that it is no longer very easy to get heard with positions critical of the government in many media. I 14

With regard to civil society's relations with the media, one positive side of the FPÖ's government participation in 2018/2019 is generally highlighted. A common image of the enemy between civil society and many journalists has promoted cooperation with the media.

But I do believe that the good thing about the time with the FPÖ was that we had a common enemy with a large part of the journalists. And because of that, we were in the media and they were happy to carry you on their hands. The media environment was easier for us when you have an enemy out there. I 5

The reporting on civil society is nevertheless experienced more positively across the board. The achievements of CSOs tend to be seen and appreciated more in the view of the respondents.

In fact, the change of government was a turning point for us, as there was suddenly a lot more media resonance to be able to put forward our positions, and Corona has given the whole thing another massive boost. I 18

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.media-analyse.at/table/3067> (1 March 2019).

<sup>12</sup> Federal Law Gazette I No. 24/2020

<sup>13</sup> <https://kontrast.at/medienfoerderung-pressefoerderung-corona-oesterreich/> (1 March 2019).

The Covid crisis generally led to a more positive perception and higher media visibility of certain areas of civil society, especially in the field of care, but also in the health sector, homeless assistance, and other social issues. I 14

Aid organisations are certainly more appreciated. And they also appear more often in the media because they simply support people or SOS Children's Villages, for example, with advice on the wire, who are now particularly affected by the Corona crisis. And one also sees the necessity for charitable commitment. I 14

So in this Corona period, the media had no stories, because economic life was shut down. That also helped us to regain a bit of importance. Because they were happy when they could tell stories. I 5

However, in addition to increased attention in reporting, respondents also noted an improvement in cooperation with the media.

At the same time, however, the quality and trust in In part, it is also a cooperation of a quality, to an extent that we did not know before, yes. I 18

However, one interviewee also expressed criticism in this context because public service media in particular were taking less time for certain reports. Long reports on civil society issues are therefore no longer in demand. I 19

### **3.1.3. The public's perception of civil society: the new importance of helping others**

Because of the high visibility of new social problems and the vulnerability of otherwise well-protected groups due to the Covid crisis, the public perception of civil society changed. Restrictions on freedom of movement due to Covid regulations brought the human rights issue more into focus, the economic crisis situation brought the risk of social hardship more into the centre of society and health risks highlighted the value of social services.

In 2019, many respondents noted that the importance of civil society was rather less appreciated. In this context, many mentioned the so-called refugee crisis of autumn 2015 as a turning point. While a wave of helpfulness and solidarity was still observable in the first months (Simsa et al., 2016), the mood had quickly changed.

For a long time, there was a basic consensus that we need this civil society. It is an important corrective. I no longer see this basic consensus in the same form. I 29, interview from 2019

So the climate is changing. Helping is no longer “in” at all. I 17, interview from 2019

With the Covid-19 crisis this basic mood tended to change again. Moreover, it was no longer primarily marginalised groups that needed help, but support in solidarity acquired the connotation of “system maintenance”. Social and physical vulnerability became clearer to many people, and with it the great importance of a social network.

Those organisations that were present during the crisis were clearly appreciated.

XX has benefited from its high visibility in the last year due to the lack of other coverage. The perception as a system-preserving organisation (keyword: care institutions) has given it a lot of popularity at the moment. I 5

We also did a survey, which is very recent, I don't have the exact figures now, but that there is already a strong perception in society that the XX was present and helped in the crisis. I do believe that this has become more visible, also because it has not always, so to speak, affected only the marginalised groups, but also really, yes, people who normally do not come to a social counselling centre. I 23

Individual respondents, however, also perceive contrary trends, with personal concern also limiting the willingness to help.

Oh well, now we are all so affected ourselves and have so much to do with ourselves and now we are supposed to take care of others? That's there too, of course. So I don't think the situation makes it any easier. I 10

## **3.2. Democracy and Participation**

Traditionally, Austria has tended to have a good relationship between civil society and politics (Pennerstorfer et al., 2013). CSOs were in dialogue with the government in many areas and they were often involved in legislative processes. Under the ÖVP-FPÖ coalition, this relationship had clearly deteriorated, so that great hopes were placed in the change of government.

### **3.2.1. The general relationship between politics and civil society**

According to the CSO representatives interviewed, cooperation with politicians has in fact tended to improve since the change of government in 2020.

While in 2019 many of the interviewees still described negative rhetoric from government members towards civil society and its effects on the social climate, these explicit devaluations or attempts at intimidation no longer exist.

The interviewees largely agree that communication between politics and civil society has improved significantly in the last year. In general, the collapse of the ÖVP-FPÖ coalition was perceived by many as a “great relief” (I 20). As a result, the relationship between politics and civil society has improved for many respondents, the tone of communication has changed and with the ÖVP-Green government there has been a clear improvement in communication.

Well, it has changed insofar as conversations simply take place. That didn't happen before at that time. (...) So you can communicate. And then, of course, you also find out more quickly about the limits. (...) It is somehow more democratic. I 6

Relations have improved, especially with those positions held by the Green government partner.

(...) we have a good relationship with some government officials of the Green Party, even with the Vice-Chancellor's Office. You are called back well, you are contacted independently, we also noticed it in some processes we were involved in. I 3

(...) there are also differences along party borders. If I speak openly, it is much easier with ministries governed by the Green Party or with Green ministries than with ministries controlled by the Peoples Party. The Ministry of Justice, for example, is inclusive, and the Ministry of Social Affairs has had good experiences, even with statements, in contrast to the Ministry of the Interior, for example. I 12

With the current government it is completely different. (...) There is simply a basis for discussion with the Green Party. That is the difference. But it doesn't really help much either. (...) we as NGOs are also contacted, yes. Or invited, yes. Which was not the case before. (...) even from the ÖVP side (...) I recently got an invitation. For a conversation. There's a change in general with the whole government. (...) this has an effect (...) first and foremost on the basis for discussion. I 6

Many respondents have problems with representatives of the ÖVP (the People's Party).

(...) there are still many people in the Peoples Party, who do not want to have anything to do with civil society. They actually think: “We don't need them. They are a nuisance.” I 5

In general, human rights and especially anti-discrimination, equality, inclusion: We have less contact with politics, with federal ministries and are also less involved. I 19

Nevertheless, they are also experiencing that civil society is needed in times of crisis and therefore dialogue is improving:

Still, I believe that they have realised that they need a sympathy offensive and that is where civil society was simply used to some extent. I 5

In connection with Covid-19, there were strong and media-effective cooperations between public institutions and the larger CSOs in the social sector. A much-discussed topic in this context is the possible appropriation of civil society by politics. Like “greenwashing”, there are attempts at “social washing”.

(...) concerning the Austrian vaccination campaign (...) All this time they never needed us. Now all of a sudden, they want everyone to join in. Yes, sure, we will support vaccination. But I will not be responsible for their bad performance, (...) I think that there is definitely an attempt of appropriation, because they see that they are not doing so well in the media. Then they realised that civil society is also quite popular and has quite good values. And then they try to utilise this for their own benefit. I 5

The Red Cross was particularly prominent in its cooperation with the government. The organisation had developed an app for tracking the virus early on, which was also called the Red Cross app. A representative of the Red Cross was very actively involved in many of the government's press conferences. There is scepticism concerning this development from other sides of civil society, especially the fear of being misused.

(...) I think the Red Cross campaign is a good example of this. This excessive presentation of the Red Cross. At every press conference, xxx stands happily by. When we talk about appropriation, I say that I don't know if that's good for us in the long run. I 5

Nevertheless, there are also very critical voices regarding the relationship between politics and civil society.

(...) I believe that the previous government acted in a massively repressive way against this more progressive social civil society. I believe that this has not been prolonged and accelerated by the fact that the Green Party is now in government and is sending out different signals. Nevertheless, I believe (...) that there was and still is the attempt to identify civil society as the

enemy. (...) this cannot be attributed to just one government; I rather think that this process really goes back decades. I 22

### 3.2.2. Possibility of participation in political decisions

However, the improvement of relations between politics and civil society does not always lead to more participation. Some interviewees see a clear improvement compared to the time of the ÖVP-FPÖ coalition. Many examples of involvement in the political process are mentioned, such as the development of the so-called NPO fund or measures in the care sector.

There it was the case that, in terms of participation, ways were suddenly closed that had previously been open. And that has now changed again. (...) Now we are much more involved again. (...) So, there are many examples where we are involved again. I 5

Nevertheless, there is clear criticism of the limited opportunities for participation and of the content of certain political decisions. Some respondents are very disappointed.

We used to sit in evaluation groups on laws. We gave opinions on draft evaluations. We were also asked how the individual statement was meant or whether we could formulate it more precisely and such. I no longer experience anything like that. I 19

The submission of own-initiative motions where no statements can be brought forward is still frequently used, as are procedures with a very short review period.

Very often initiative treaties are introduced into parliament, (...) which eliminates the review procedures. That there are very short review periods. These are things that are not entirely new. (...) But this is simply being continued. I 19

The participation of the Green Party in the government makes things easier, but also leads to disappointments.

(...) that due to the Green participation in government, (...) we are not seen as an enemy, but rather as an organisation that is recognised and valued by them (...) that is of course (...) positive. But the negative thing is that we have the impression that we don't really get any influence and the dialogue [is] much less developed (...) than I thought. Of course, you can excuse a lot, because we are in a pandemic. (...) and yet it seems to me, at least from our expectations, that there is too little dialogue work and (...) the effect, where we bring in expertise, is a long time coming. I 22

It is this Janus-facedness that puts one in a very difficult position. A colleague often speaks of frenemies. On the one hand, we now have a counterpart in individual areas who not only has an open ear, but who also has a certain closeness and understanding of the civil society sector. In other areas for example the asylum policy we see a continuation of what was there before, which actually leads to a very ambivalent relationship as to how this can somehow work in the overall structure. I 18

In some areas, apparent participation is criticised because of legal requirements.

(...) the requirements for participation processes come from the EU level and have to be implemented by the states. (...) This is also strongly felt in the process. This is not the intrinsic motivation of the Ministry of Agriculture (...) but they also have requirements that they have to meet. And then it is implemented poorly. And the frustration of all those involved, with whom I have spoken to, is enormous. (...) No matter what you say, they do as they please. I 21

Nevertheless, for some respondents the dialogue with politicians is currently “better than ever” (I 20). Representatives of CSOs feel heard, there is a perceived genuine interest on the part of politicians as well as appreciation of the expertise of civil society.

The perceived closeness to the Green Party leads to mixed experiences, between relief, disappointment and reluctance to criticise.

I: With the entry of the Green Party into government, have the possibilities of participation changed for civil society?

B: To be honest, no. I don't see that there are any big exchange platforms now, that there are citizens' councils or anything else like that. And we are only a small section of organised civil society. We continue to do what we have been doing for ten years. I don't see that there would be any radical leaps forward now. I 16

In those areas where there are major discrepancies between the decisions of politicians and the expectations of civil society (such as asylum, poverty, and human rights), the perceived closeness to the Green Party in terms of content also brings open criticism.

(...) (that it) has become a bit more difficult for us to communicate that way. That the issues are actually the same. And that nothing has been solved. And that there is not even a solution in the government program. (...) And to communicate this drama and this situation is much

more difficult with the Green Party in the government. (...) because we have a different relationship with the Green Party. | 6

The core message of many statements is that political involvement only takes place to a very limited degree. On the one hand, this is attributed to the COVID-19 crisis, but on the other hand also to fundamental structures.

The negative thing is that we have the impression that we don't really get any influence and that the dialogue is much less developed, in purely quantitative terms, than I thought it would be. | 22

I think that in a crisis, a lot of decisions are made top down. (...) That is the nature of things. (...) I am actually surprised at how few attempts have been made to consciously integrate this in the second phase. (...) I think that if you listen to the criticism of the opposition, which strongly suggests that the processes are much too short, that the deadlines are too short and so on. I must honestly say that either the Green Party are so clumsy, or they care so little. | 5

There are ongoing exchanges. I don't see that there is any form of structured involvement of civil society at the moment. | 16

It depends heavily on which ministry and which issues are involved.

I don't have the feeling that it's excessive. But of course, you notice with the Green Party that they always have approaches where they already try. (...) And the Green Party is trying to integrate people in a good way. | 5

We work a lot with the administration of the Climate Ministry. And they have always been supporters of the youth delegate programme for years. So, they make sure that we can go to the climate conference, for example. | 9

Concerning human rights in general and especially anti-discrimination, equality, inclusion: we have less contact with politics, with federal ministries and are also less involved. | 19

When the ÖVP is involved, it is sometimes judged with scepticism.

With the Peoples Party, you rather have the feeling that they have a bit of a competition about who acts as the more well-behaved integrator. And I think they also recognise the value that civil society can have for them. And you can see that most prominently in the campaign they



did with the Red Cross. And now they want everyone involved in the Austrian vaccination campaign. | 5

Another problem was the online exchange with politicians. This was experienced as rather forced and often unproductive. One limitation of the CSOs' communication with politics, mentioned by several interviewees, was the administrations slow transition to online communication.

The online transition limited the expression and exchange of opinions in so far that it was slow and sometimes no meaningful input could be given, or discourse could not take place sufficiently. | 7

There is too little involvement of civil society in environmental legislation, care regulations, in addition to pandemic containment regulations. Another example is the current establishment of an authority concerning complaints about police brutality. This was included in the current government programme after long advocacy work by CSOs but is currently being processed entirely without civil society involvement.

A fundamental problem of participation in Austria, in contrast to other European countries (such as Germany, Norway, Spain, Ireland), is that there is no established framework that ensures, regulates, and supports continuous, structured and mandatory interaction with existing platforms of civil society agents. Exceptions are the involvement of traditional social partners and the organisation of some specific topics such as volunteering or inclusion of people with disabilities. While financial support measures for CSOs were taken in 2020, there were no corresponding regulations regarding participation.

Regrettably, virtually nothing is planned to increase the participation of citizens and organised civil society in policymaking. Therefore, it will be the task of civil society agents and their platforms to continue to press the government and parliament to introduce such legally binding measures. | 24

I don't have the impression that something structured has been established in any form. If you have contacts in the government now it's because you know people or have always been lobbying anyway (...). | 5

The extent of involvement is also described as depending on the topic and the agents. In the climate sector, for example, it is mainly the younger organisations that are heard, especially Fridays for Future.

Colleagues from Fridays are saying they are continuously invited to meetings with politicians and that is nice to hear. (...) But that doesn't mean that they (the politicians, note) take it

seriously, because other NGOs, that have been trying to do this for 30 years don't get appointments. And I think that many politicians simply use it as publicity and say: "Yes, we are now meeting with the young people." | 9

The extent to which these contacts and discussions make a difference in terms of content is also in doubt.

Well, I wouldn't say that all youth climate organisations benefit from it. It's true that everyone wants to talk to young people because it's great. (...) It just looks good on the photo. | 9

### **Citizens' Councils**

The Austrian federal government has defined standards for participation for many years and there are also many positive examples of citizen participation. Compared to the actual practice in France, Ireland or England and other countries, however, little of this has been implemented in Austria.

I don't see that there are any big exchange platforms, that there are citizens' councils or anything else like that. | 16

Citizens' assemblies enable citizens, who are selected at random, to participate in a political decision-making process by jointly answering a question assigned by the public authorities. They are a complement to representative democracy and advise policy beyond party membership or affiliation to an advocacy group (Farell et al., 2019).

This involvement of citizens is seen as an opportunity to strengthen representative democracy and to provide good quality advice on complex decisions (Crouch, 2008).

Citizens' assemblies are a prominent method of deliberative democracy which enjoy increasing interest. A standardised selection process of citizens chosen by lot allows for the best possible representation of society in terms of age, gender, social class, and regional distribution. Furthermore, the citizens' assemblies are moderated and accompanied by experts. The proposals are evaluated and handed over to the parliamentary representatives. The participants' satisfaction with the consultation process and the results is very high (Farell et al., 2019). New social movements such as Extinction Rebellion are also using this method to get politicians to act against the climate crisis.

### **Restrictions on participation – The pandemic as a participation killer?**

The pandemic has limited political participation by civil society in several aspects.

First, the strong thematic focus on Covid is described as a major obstacle to participation. One of the key tools of civil society influence is public attention. However, apart from climate, which is also experiencing a (relative) thematic boom, it is very difficult to get attention with other issues.

That was quite fierce competition for topics, of course. Especially in the initial phase of the lockdown, the first lockdown of the first Corona crisis. (...) Corona and the crisis are the dominant themes. | 16

It is rather difficult to make public statements and assessments now, because there was simply a lot of focus on Corona and these were not necessarily always areas that affected us at the moment. In some cases, yes, but otherwise many developments have come to a standstill. | 23

For us it's more of a visibility problem now that other issues are in the spotlight. | 19

Secondly, some programs were shortened due to the pandemic. General planning uncertainties and the need to react quickly to pressing developments further limited opportunities for participation.

(...) we also had the impression that the deadlines were shortened, and that people had less time to take a stand, even on complex issues. And now, during the Corona period, it was of course very prominent (...) was that due to the urgency, in the general chaos or (...) where did that come from? | 23

The access to the ministry is better, the communication is better, but these democratic processes are still very shortened. Very quickly, with very little time to give feedback. Now especially everything that has to do with the COVID crisis and the COVID measures around it. | 5

However, the high speed in issuing various measures, which was presumably necessary at the beginning, was maintained in the further course of the pandemic without any objective necessity. For the update of the regulations in March 2021, after one year of the pandemic, the deadline for inspection and comment was set at about 4 days.

It has to be fast (...) and that of course massively affects the quality of this process. And I think you could say now: Okay, with the first lockdown you can still somehow understand that, because that was a new situation, nobody had a clue. But I think with the second phase now, one could have expected something different, also a different form of involving others, that didn't happen. | 5

Thirdly, there was a lot of reticence on the part of the CSOs, especially at the beginning of the pandemic. During this time, the pandemic put criticism into perspective, protests were limited and many CSOs voluntarily put their concerns on the back burner.

Apart from that, I think the strong impression of a health risk led to people saying at the beginning, “Let’s swallow everything and maybe not criticise too loudly. It’s difficult for everyone.” That people were a bit (...) more cautious about how critically they judged certain things, which then changed later on. I 7

In some areas of activity, there was a strong increase in participation in the form of contributing expertise due to new kinds of content-related questions. Here, new, complex challenges may have led to more involvement of civil society.

(...) we, as providers of care facilities, facilities for people with disabilities and so on, have been contacted again and again about where we perceive problems and so on. The Ministry of Social Affairs is also very interested in the perceptions of civil society. I 23

### **3.2.3. Policy communication with civil society and transparency**

Many interviewees mentioned that the transparency of political processes is in need of improvement (I 14). In some cases, representatives of CSOs receive information through acquaintance with government politicians, i.e., an indirect and exclusive form of transparency.

There is, of course, much easier access to the cabinets for us. In the Ministry of Health as well as in the Ministry of Climate Change. But I would also attribute this to overlapping personnel. I 21

Other respondents see a higher transparency of politics, which they attribute to the participation of the Green Party in government.

I think it also helps that the Green Party is in government, because they place great emphasis on transparency. They have been criticised for being less transparent than they originally promised, but I think they are more transparent than the previous government. And there was a consultation process on the Energy Expansion Act. I 9

However, there is no structural safeguarding of transparent and participatory processes.

(...) There is also a kind of coordination office in Germany (...). It is very much about transparency, participation, visibility of organised civil society, for example with this famous “satellite

account”, which we would also like to have. (...) We have a lot of catching up to do, and Corona has not improved our structural integration that much. I 24

there are definitely contacts with the government (...) So there is an ongoing exchange. But i don't see that there is any form of structured involvement of civil society at the moment. I 16

The pandemic makes informal contacts at conferences or other meetings more difficult, which before could compensate for non-transparent structures to a certain extent.

(...) that this is also true for Austria, but up to the EU level, I believe that Corona has simply made many processes much less transparent. (...) Because you are in a zoom conference, (...) you aren't standing together over a cup of coffee while chatting about this and that (...) that is totally missing. I 4

### 3.2.4. Digital participation

Due to the aforementioned restrictions in the Covid pandemic, civil society participation in its traditional forms was hindered or in many cases impossible. This had an impact on the actions of CSOs, which have increasingly shifted to the digital space.

Regarding internal networking and the recruitment of new activists or members, social networks were mentioned by respondents as an essential form of participation during this time. Some, however, criticise the fact that accessibility through this medium is limited.

And everything is shifted to (...) social media (...). Where a lot is happening anyway. But I think that to many people this isn't visible at all. (...) Only the people who have an affinity to social media know about it or are involved in it. I 6

(...) and now it can be observed that these online exchange possibilities are not used to the extent that would actually be desirable. I 7

The need to reduce physical contact led to the reorganisation of internal processes and thus also complicated many things.

(...) this is something we have to deal with internally. That we are constantly planning things, cancelling them, planning them again, cancelling them again. That we no longer manage to create places where members can meet and exchange ideas. Online formats are only suitable to a limited extent. That simply has to be said. (...) We had to cancel our general meeting in spring and then we did it online. That also led to some disagreements within the organisation.

We just had to cancel it again in February, (one always has; note) a certain worry: How good is the internal cohesion to be able to act? That is actually what weakens it the most. | 21

However, one positive aspect of the use of online media was the possibility of transnational exchange, which is easier and cheaper with digital means.

That has already changed a lot, that one suddenly does not (...) only have to invite people from Vienna, but can also invite the one person from Berlin for 10 minutes, who could provide the best input. This change has already happened a lot and I think it is irreversible for the future. | 7

In addition to the continuation of existing services through other channels, the need for digitalisation has also led to the implementation of new services, which have also created new opportunities for participation.

We have created digital volunteer programmes. Simply because we said, we have to pick this up somewhere. The willingness to show solidarity was definitely there. And a lot of people really got involved. We founded a platform that now includes, I think, 14,000 people who participate. (...) It's not just getting a newsletter, but people who are really committed. | 5

In general, this form of participation works very well. Initially there were teething problems, but now especially the better-known CSOs are registering a high number of visitors, a lot of interest and a willingness to get involved. In this context, some respondents reported a higher level of participation and more enquiries (| 9) than in the period before the pandemic.

However, other CSOs, including large and well-known ones, point to a limited mobilisation strength, as they can only rely on online mobilisation. | 16

In terms of advocacy and protest, it depends a lot on visibility in the digital space. There was a need to adapt the form of these activities as well.

For me, this means that I always ask myself how visible civil society is now in the digital space. For example, new forms of protest actions are emerging. There are more activities on Instagram and Facebook, and our student groups, for example, are flourishing. Because they can use these tools better and they use social media to start great actions in the digital space. | 12

In the context of online protests, people experimented with new forms of presence.

Well, for example (...) there was always a single person (...) standing in front of the Federal Chancellery at that time, also with reference to Moria, and they always photographed themselves individually there, but then practically strung their photos together and then played them on Instagram and Facebook. (...) To show “I am personally affected, and I show my face”. You don't have to have all 50 of them there together, but you can experiment with the possibilities. | 12

In general, however, the effectiveness of advocacy suffers from the distance required during the pandemic.

A limiting factor is that the potential of digital work can only be realised by those CSOs that have a good digital infrastructure. Not surprisingly, associations whose target groups or members tend to be older point to difficulties with online operations. (I 15) In general, advocacy work suffers from distance, as face-to-face events create a better sense of responsibility as well as a better forum for networking. (I 17)

However, it seems that younger climate organisations also had difficulties in maintaining their activities during the pandemic to the same extent as before. Their structures were not yet as consolidated as those of more traditional CSOs, and the shift of many meetings to online spaces tended to reduce participation.

(...) the biggest limitation is (...) that we (...) can only mobilise online. Especially the civil society youth movement Fridays for Future, as well as the whole climate protests, are suffering from this in particular. We managed to hold a climate protest in September. In compliance with all the Corona requirements, which was incredibly complicated. It also got a lot of media attention. But of course, a fraction (...) I think 8,000 or 10,000 people, compared to the 80,000 the year before, because of course it restricts the whole public life so massively. | 16

### 3.3. Human rights

Basic rights in Austria are well developed in international comparison. However, freedom of assembly has been restricted in recent years, especially through the extension of the notification period for assemblies and the establishment of so-called protected areas. Increasing bureaucratisation and a lack of legal certainty in practice have an indirect effect on the exercise of fundamental rights. The pandemic has posed severe challenges for securing human rights.

Fundamental rights in Austria are guaranteed in the Constitution. Human and civil rights are generally protected (More-Hollerweger et al., 2014). Against the background of this situation, the following focuses on changes since 2019.

In its report “Human Rights Challenges Persist”, Amnesty International criticises the human rights policy of the Austrian government. The recommendations of the United Nations have hardly been implemented. Amnesty International therefore calls on the government in Austria to consistently implement progress for people and their rights.<sup>14</sup>

Our study shows that in connection with the pandemic, there have been a number of measures with questionable effects on human rights. Otherwise, there were hardly any further deteriorations compared to the ÖVP-FPÖ coalition, but the restrictions introduced in this period were not taken back either.

Many things that happened in the previous government period have not been taken back. (...) For example, the zones between demonstrations have become larger. That you have to register two days in advance, not 24 hours in advance. (...) And this can also be used tactically to undermine certain demonstration freedoms. | 21

### 3.3.1. Human rights and the Covid-19 Pandemic

Developments in human rights since 2019 have been influenced mainly by the Covid-19 crisis. There have been measures affecting various aspects of human rights, such as curfews and other restrictions of movement. They affected the freedom of religion, of assembly, of access to education and employment, the rights of immigrants and others.

In general, the state is obliged to contain the pandemic; it must protect the right to life and health. Measures to this end must be necessary and appropriate. In order to protect human rights in the process, the measures must be clearly regulated by law, i.e. they must not – as has happened in some cases – be imposed by decree (Amnesty International, 2020). Particularly sensitive were exit restrictions, whose legal coverage was doubted by constitutional and human rights experts.<sup>15</sup>

According to a report by Amnesty International Austria, drastic measures at the beginning of the pandemic were justified due to a lack of information, but later decrees restricting freedom of movement and contact are often described as non-transparent. Some of them could not be upheld by the Constitutional Court, and some were formulated in a way that was misleading, so that there was insufficient legal certainty. The high discretionary powers of the police in this context were also criticised.

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.amnesty.at/presse/upr-amnesty-fordert-konsequenterere-menschenrechtspolitik-in-oesterreich/> (22 February 2021)

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000116320262/was-genau-ist-nun-erlaubt?ref=article> (7 April 2020)



In fact, many measures and specifications to restrict the pandemic were overturned by the Constitutional Court. Some were therefore too vague<sup>16</sup> or for other reasons unlawful.<sup>17</sup>

### 3.3.2. Freedom of association

There have been no significant changes with regard to freedom of association. It is well established in law and implemented in practice. A bureaucratic but neither obstructive nor restrictive legal framework exists.

With regard to the legal protection of political freedoms and political participation, §278 of the Penal Code, the so-called terrorism paragraph, is still questionable. The offence of a criminal (terrorist) organisation is formulated too broadly. Further, it is worrying that members of organisations designated as criminal can also be investigated preventively.<sup>18</sup>

### 3.3.3. Freedom of assembly

Freedom of assembly in Austria is well regulated by law. In 2017, however, some changes led to restrictions. The legal framework for spontaneous assemblies and counter-assemblies has deteriorated. The notification period for assemblies was increased from 24 to 48 hours. In addition, the possibility of prohibiting assemblies that serve other countries has been extended. There is a lot of room for interpretation here, which increases the possibility of arbitrary state action.<sup>19</sup>

Further, protected areas for parallel assemblies have been identified. Amnesty International Austria suggested in its statement to refrain from a general minimum protection area and to establish protection areas only if necessary. Otherwise, assemblies could be prevented by the reporting of sham assemblies.<sup>20</sup>

### Demonstrations and bans on demonstrations in times of pandemic

A sensitive issue in the face of contact restrictions due to Covid regulations are demonstrations. On the one hand, it is important that people can express their opinions or protest publicly. On the other hand, large gatherings of people can pose risks of infection.

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<sup>16</sup> <https://richtervereinigung.at/novelle-epidemiegesetz-covid-19-massnahmengesetz/> (9 January 2021)

<sup>17</sup> [https://www.vfgh.gv.at/rechtsprechung/Ausgewaehlte\\_Entscheidungen.de.html](https://www.vfgh.gv.at/rechtsprechung/Ausgewaehlte_Entscheidungen.de.html) (10 March 2021)

<sup>18</sup> [http://www.amnesty.at/service\\_links/presse/pressemitteilungen/amnesty\\_international\\_und\\_greenpeace\\_fordern\\_reform\\_des\\_mafiaparagraphen\\_278a/](http://www.amnesty.at/service_links/presse/pressemitteilungen/amnesty_international_und_greenpeace_fordern_reform_des_mafiaparagraphen_278a/) (6 May 2014)

<sup>19</sup> [https://www.parlament.gv.at/PAKT/VHG/XXV/SN/SN\\_00481/imfname\\_628592.pdf](https://www.parlament.gv.at/PAKT/VHG/XXV/SN/SN_00481/imfname_628592.pdf) (11 January 2019)

<sup>20</sup> [https://www.parlament.gv.at/PAKT/VHG/XXV/SN/SN\\_00481/imfname\\_628592.pdf](https://www.parlament.gv.at/PAKT/VHG/XXV/SN/SN_00481/imfname_628592.pdf) (11 January 2019)

The handling of demonstrations during the pandemic in Austria was very multi-faceted and also strongly criticised. During the pandemic, several demonstrations were banned, but in some cases they did take place without permission.

Amnesty International Austria criticized that it was not always comprehensible why some demonstrations were banned or restricted and others not. Thus, every intervention in the freedom of assembly needs a differentiated and transparent justification in each individual case. This must be clearly communicated in advance.<sup>21</sup>

In some cases, very restrictive measures were taken: In April 2020, for example, a demonstration by the Austrian Students' Union with four people was banned, although they had agreed to keep a minimum distance of two metres and to wear mouth and nose protection. The organisers argued in a press release that this action was to be understood as a direct violation of fundamental democratic rights. While work continued to take place in confined spaces such as factories, it thus was incomprehensible why basic rights, such as a right to assemble, were dismissed.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, as the pandemic progressed, this highly restrictive approach was lifted again and assemblies were permitted.

At the beginning of the first lockdown, it was not at all clear how the police would deal with assemblies. This was only debated in the course of the summer that the right of assembly must at least be weighed against the public good. | 7

With COVID, we have of course experienced that freedom of assembly is once again restricted, for understandable reasons. But there are also examples that we have heard that cannot be justified by COVID. So there was a ban on a demonstration, on a procession in Linz, they said that they were allowed to stand where they wanted, but they were not allowed to walk, (...) that is not in line with the law, if you simply relate it to COVID. | 12

In spring, one could get the impression that the police were prohibiting any form of demonstration (...) then it became increasingly clear that the freedom of assembly was not completely suspended. | 7

In general, there were high hurdles to organising pandemic-compliant assemblies.

Taking to the streets with thousands of people has become extremely difficult. | 16

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<sup>21</sup> <https://www.amnesty.at/presse/amnesty-fordert-klare-kriterien-und-einzelfallentscheidung-bei-demo-verboten/> (22 February 2021)

<sup>22</sup> [https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS\\_20200409\\_OTS0018/oeh-uni-wien-wirtschaftsinteressen-nicht-vorgrundrechte-stellen](https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20200409_OTS0018/oeh-uni-wien-wirtschaftsinteressen-nicht-vorgrundrechte-stellen) (11 January 2019)

Later, a number of assemblies took place, initially usually without major problems. Examples were the solidarity action with Black Lives Matter, environmental rallies or demonstrations for the right to asylum or the evacuation of asylum camps on the Greek islands. They all took place in strict compliance with Covid measures.

I think that the Fridays really do behave extremely exemplary (...). They only demonstrate with masks. And they are also very, very careful about what they call for. | 21

In contrast, many of the so-called anti-Corona demonstrations deliberately did not consistently adhere to the measures against the spread of the pandemic, leading to discussions about the scope of freedom of assembly.

Now that the opponents of the Corona measures are committing such massive administrative offences at rallies (...) for the first time there is a real consideration to actually prohibit and dissolve rallies. | 7

In the spring of 2021, there were many large demonstrations against the government's measures. Many of them had been banned for health reasons, but nevertheless took place, with several thousand participants. Right-wing radicals and hooligans were also present, many participants violated the obligation to wear masks and keep their distance, and there were frequent violent riots.

(...) where the demonstrations were actually prolonged and carried out in an undirected, uncontrolled manner until late in the evening, due to the ban and the evasion in the direction of a walk. | 22

Since the end of December 2020, a total of 673 Corona-related assemblies have been registered across Austria, according to statistics from the Ministry of the Interior. Of these, 113 were not registered, 75 were prohibited. During the demonstrations, 7,175 charges were filed under administrative law. In total, around 85,000 people took part.<sup>23</sup>

In March, for example, about 10,000 people demonstrated in Vienna despite a ban on the event. The atmosphere was described as aggressive, with conspiracy theorists and right-wing extremists taking part, including identitarians and even the convicted neo-Nazi Gottfried Küssel. In addition to anti-Semitic slogans, the propaganda of the "fake news press" was also denounced.<sup>24</sup> Despite travel

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<sup>23</sup> <https://kurier.at/chronik/oesterreich/corona-demos-in-wien-gestartet/401209981> (6 March 2021)

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.diepresse.com/5947325/anti-corona-demos-in-wien-anzeigen-aggressive-stimmung-rechtsextrememitmarschierer> (22 March 2021)

restrictions, demonstrators had been brought in coaches from other federal states. Further, distance rules and the obligation to wear masks were often not respected.

The impression that demonstrations of different political provenance were treated differently by the police was widely shared. According to this, demonstrations by the left were generally dealt with more harshly.

There was widespread criticism that the police acted with too much restraint during the violent demonstrations of the Corona deniers. According to video sequences published on Twitter, police officers allegedly let the sometimes aggressive demonstrators go ahead and right-wing extremists marched side by side with the police<sup>25</sup>

During the same period, for example, a demonstration against deportations of asylum seekers took place, where the police had been disproportionately harsh against peaceful demonstrators, serious allegations of violations of the protesters' fundamental and human rights accumulated, through tear gas, detentions without the possibility of telephone calls and the right to contact lawyers. Demonstrators had to undress in front of – not always same-sex – officers.<sup>26</sup>

And at the same time, when we experienced Innsbruck, (that the) executive intervenes and specifically encircles a part and then proceeds with brutality and pepper spray against the demonstrators (...) the difference between what happened in Vienna and what happened in Innsbruck (...) is worrying. | 22

The police's harsh handling of protests by students against the deportation of two Georgian girls who had grown up in Austria was also criticised. The police used dogs and sharp weapons.

The impression was widely shared that double standards were applied here, among others by the Secretary General of Amnesty International Austria.<sup>27</sup>

The cancellations of the demonstrations of the so-called Corona deniers also affect other demonstrations, as demonstrations that accept the measures were also regularly banned.

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<sup>25</sup> <https://www.salzburg24.at/news/oesterreich/wien-umstrittener-polizeieinsatz-bei-corona-demo-evaluiert-98565853> (20 January 2021); <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000124163685/rund-1-600-anzeigen-nach-corona-demo-am-samstag-in> (14 February 2021)

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000123858624/schwere-vorwuerfe-nach-polizeieinsatz-bei-innsbrucker-demo> (24 February 2021)

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.diepresse.com/5931847/corona-demo-am-sonntag-unschoner-eindruck-der-polizei> (5 February 2021)

(...) it is frightening how the right to demonstrate is now being dealt with (...) they have forbidden us (...) because of (...) these Corona deniers' demonstrations. (...) Now, of course, it's pandemic, we have to be careful, at the same time it's a deep cut into freedom of assembly. | 22

### 3.3.4. Freedom of expression

In the context of civic spaces, it is also interesting to note that in January 2021, the government announced multiple and general charges against those persons who accused the Minister of Finance of accepting donations or corruption.

One example that became prominent was the announcement that the Ministry of the Interior was considering legal action against a private person because of a tweet insulting the police. This was notable not only because the announcement was published on the ministry's official website, but also because the person was named there by full name. Legal experts assured that the citizen's statement in question had no relevance under criminal or administrative law. It was argued that it was a clear political intimidation attempt, which could have “chilling effects”, namely that people start to censor themselves out of fear.<sup>28</sup> Article 10 of the Human Rights Convention on freedom of expression explicitly states that statements can also offend, shock or disturb. Amnesty International Austria accordingly described the announcement in a tweet as an attempt of intimidation. Apart from that, no restrictions on the right to freedom of expression were reported.

### 3.3.5. Restriction of the rights of residents of nursing homes and care facilities and self-advocacy

As a representative example of other areas where restrictions on general rights have been imposed for health reasons, the following section discusses restrictions on residents of nursing homes and care facilities.

Due to the fear of infection, fundamental rights are restricted to a particularly high degree in this area, such as the right to free movement and visitation.<sup>29</sup> Dealing with the pandemic poses considerable challenges for care organisations and their staff because of the heterogeneous needs and opinions of the residents.

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<sup>28</sup> <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000124378457/politaktivist-fussi-legt-beschwerde-gegen-nehammer-und-ministerium-ein> (22 February 2021)

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Provincial Law Gazette for Vienna (2020). 18. Ordinance on the prohibition of entry by visitors to hospitals, residential and nursing homes and nursing wards. [https://www.ris.bka.gv.at/Dokumente/LgblAuth/LGBLA\\_WI\\_20200414\\_18/LGBLA\\_WI\\_20200414\\_18.html](https://www.ris.bka.gv.at/Dokumente/LgblAuth/LGBLA_WI_20200414_18/LGBLA_WI_20200414_18.html) (22 February 2021); BUNDESGESETZBLATT FÜR DIE REPUBLIK ÖSTERREICH (2020). 463rd Covid-19 Protective Measures Ordinance – COVID-19-SchuMaV, 1.11.2020. [https://www.ris.bka.gv.at/Dokumente/BgblAuth/BGBLA\\_2020\\_II\\_463/BGBLA\\_2020\\_II\\_463.html](https://www.ris.bka.gv.at/Dokumente/BgblAuth/BGBLA_2020_II_463/BGBLA_2020_II_463.html) (4 March 2021)

Representatives of the providers were surprised at the cooperation and efforts of the clients to cope with the situation in spring 2020, as the statement of a representative of a disability organisation shows:

What was extremely impressive for me was the behaviour of the clients, the people with disabilities. (...) they make such an effort to adhere to the COVID rules. I 25

However, the legal requirements also lead unintentionally and over the course of the year to considerable side effects, such as the reduction of direct contacts.

That makes a difference, the loss of a social network, that the relatives no longer visit or visit very, very little. I 26

The bans on visits lead to an increase in loneliness and isolation for many residents and for some also to the loss of stabilising structures. The experience of how quickly the rights of freedom were restricted, caused some representatives to reflect:

(...) that one has definitely dealt with the personal rights of people, whether it is okay to lock these people away and has also perhaps thought about it in a broader framework: What is happening there? I 27

The scientific board of the evaluation report on the National Action Plan on Disability also concludes that the participation of persons with disabilities decreased significantly in 2020 and that exclusion phenomena occurred. The authors express the fear: that the measures to contain the COVID-19 pandemic isolate many people with disabilities and thus also have a negative impact on efforts towards inclusion. The crisis thus risks invalidating developments of recent years (BMSG, 2020).

### **Self-advocacy**

Further, self-representation is relevant with regard to persons with disabilities. The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities<sup>30</sup>, ratified by Austria, increases the pressure to expand independent advocacy. It obligates public authorities to develop and implement legislation and policies that enable the close consultation and active involvement of persons with disabilities, including children with disabilities, through their representative organizations (BMSG, 2020).

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<sup>30</sup> Federal Law Gazette for the Republic of Austria (2016). 105th Announcement: Correction of the German-language translation of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. [https://www.monitoringausschuss.at/download/grundlagen/un-konvention/BGBl\\_III\\_105\\_2016.pdf](https://www.monitoringausschuss.at/download/grundlagen/un-konvention/BGBl_III_105_2016.pdf) (4 March 2021)

While some interest groups<sup>31</sup> have already been active for years in some federal provinces and there is already lived practice of political participation, other federal provinces still have a need for action. There are certainly positive examples of successful political participation that can be understood as prototypes for further processes, such as the approach taken in drafting the Adult Protection Act. At the same time, the report published by the Monitoring Committee in December 2020 shows many failures by the public authorities.<sup>32</sup>

It is remarkable that, despite the pandemic, Fonds Soziales Wien is pursuing an innovative process of electing self-advocates on its own behalf and thus meeting the demand for a deepening of political participation by establishing an FSW client council<sup>33</sup>:

This has just been established these days, after a very good election procedure, very participatory and low-threshold, with broad participation. So, if you look at it from this point of view, the development in the last two years is quite positive. So, self-advocates are not only heard, but they also really get a role, they can participate. I mean, whether they really have a say remains to be seen, but they now have a body and they have a voice. | 8

At the same time, however, it is also criticised that a differentiated understanding of different types of disability cannot be captured by only one self-representation body in its full heterogeneity.

### 3.4. Financial resources

When it comes to funding, CSOs are very different from for-profit organisations. CSOs pursue non-profit objectives and are not entitled to distribute generated surpluses to owners. In general, CSOs in Austria have good access to financing, but there are difficulties in raising external capital. Another limitation concerns liquidity and the investment of financial resources. Especially CSOs financed by donations are subject to certain limits, as risky forms of investment can hardly be justified to donors. In Austria, the public sector plays a decisive role in the financing of CSOs. In the long-term development of funding, slightly more than half of the total income of non-profit organisations has always been provided by the federal government, the provinces or the municipalities (Pennerstorfer et al., 2013).

Basically, there are two different ways in which the public sector acts as a buyer of services (Anastasiadis et al., 2003):

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<sup>31</sup> An example of this is the Association of Interest Groups of People with Disabilities in Upper Austria, which has a long tradition of participation in the creation of equal opportunities programmes (<https://www.ivooe.at/>).

<sup>32</sup> Shadow report of the monitoring bodies of Austria on the List of Issues on the occasion of the upcoming State Review by the UN Committee of Experts (2020). <https://www.monitoringausschuss.at/menschen-mit-behinderungen-aktueller-schattenbericht-zeigt-dringenden-handlungsbedarf/> (4 March 2021)

<sup>33</sup> <https://kundinnenrat.fsw.at/fsw-kundinnen-rat/> (3 March 2021)

1. Service contracts<sup>34</sup>: clearly defined services are commissioned here. The legal basis for this is public procurement law.
2. Subsidies<sup>35</sup>: Subjects of subsidies can be projects, infrastructure costs, etc. The level of detail of what is funded varies greatly. There are subsidies through official decisions (sovereign administration) and subsidy contracts (private sector administration). The legal basis for this is administrative law, budgetary law, civil law and EU funding directives.

For years, performance contracts have increasingly been awarded in order to strengthen competition within the framework of allocation procedures (Meyer & Simsa, 2013a).

### 3.4.1. Development of public funding for non-profit organisations

In the last report on changes in civil society framework conditions, the influence of the then ÖVP-FPÖ government on public funding could be clearly observed in Austria. Certain areas of activity experienced politically motivated cuts that often threatened the existence of CSOs (Simsa et al. 2019). In this regard, in 2020 some improvements were observed among respondents. In particular, surprising cuts during the funding period have no longer occurred.

The last time [note: under the ÖVP-FPÖ government] it was the case that there were really, for example, massive cuts at the funding level. In the middle of the year we found out that our informally promised funding for the current year would be cut by 50 percent. So, we are not experiencing such things now. I 19

And this situation, where associations are now threatened in their existence due to unexpected cuts in public funding, is something I would not have heard about in the last two years. I 14

In some cases, this was also explained by better contacts of the CSOs and corresponding interest groups to the respective ministries, especially those held by the Greens. In general, funding concerns of civil society would again meet with more resonance among politicians. However, the majority of respondents emphasised that despite a more secure funding period, hardly any absolute increase in funding could be observed. Contrary developments could only be noted in one case at the state level. In addition, many areas of civil society were still underfunded (e.g. women's sector). However, interviewees did not identify any political strategy to “starve” specific areas of funding (I 4).

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<sup>34</sup> The term performance contract is not clearly defined – Neumayr (2010) for example, refers to grants with a high level of detail as performance contracts as well.

<sup>35</sup> The term promotion is not clearly defined and there are many other terms, such as aid and subsidies (Neumayr, 2010).



(...) women's organisations in particular urgently need (...) support, not only for their internal business, but also for the umbrella organisations of women's organisations, which need massive amounts of money. In order to work structurally. To work systemically with the public sector, with administration and government. That is far too little. I 24

Many respondents also criticised the fact that funding commitments in 2020 were still only issued in the middle or second half of the year, which had a negative impact on planning security. Accordingly, the planning perspective and financial security had not improved under the current government.

And I think it can't get much worse than getting funding commitments in the middle of the year or in the second half of the year. Because that simply makes continuous operation very difficult. I 19

From personal experience, it has become more difficult. But that was a result of the ÖVP-FPÖ government, when our funding period was halved. This means that the planning perspective and financial security have been reduced accordingly, with much more effort and expense, always with regard to new calculations and uncertainties for all those who are involved. This has not changed under the People's Party-Green government. So this has been taken over and continued. I 18

Others, however, say that under the new government, commitments were made earlier and liquidity problems could thus be avoided.

Some representatives of the CSOs expressed increased uncertainty about the current funding situation. The fear relates to the effects of the COVID-19 situation on the future allocation of funding.

The general fear, however, is very much that we are now in a situation where we say, well, last year fewer funds were needed because of Corona. We assume that, given the situation (...) de facto cuts will happen. I18

It is not clear to anyone how this will actually be financed in the future. That's why there is still a real fear of the next austerity package or cutback package. I 21

### **Nationalisation of legal advice**

For many respondents, the establishment of the Federal Agency for Care and Support Services (BBU) also brought significant financial cuts. Since 1 January 2021, the BBU has been responsible for legal counselling and return counselling for asylum seekers, and since 1 December 2020, for basic services at the federal level (Menschenwürde Österreich 2021). As a state legal counselling service, it takes over

tasks that were previously carried out by some CSOs, which is why a large part of the public funding for these organisations has now ceased.

(...) the legal counselling (...) and this whole counselling issue has moved away from us. In this respect it [note: the public funding] is actually less. (...) not because the government is giving us less money now. But because a service has simply ceased to exist as part of our tasks. 15

Reactions to this varied among the interviewees. On the one hand, the discontinuation of these services meant that state funding was no longer necessary, on the other hand, some regarded this nationalisation as a “red line” (I22) that had been crossed, since both the decrease on which the counselling was based and the legal counselling itself were now carried out by the same ministry.

### 3.4.2. NPO support fund

Probably the biggest change in funding policy for most NPOs in 2020 was the establishment of the “Non-Profit Organisation Support Fund”, which amounts to 700 million euros. The aim of the funding is to enable NPOs to continue their work in civil society despite the current Corona crisis and the accompanying uncertainty of funding. As of the writing of this report, 19 000 applications have been accepted, with a total of 341 million euros distributed. In each case, the income of the corresponding quarter from the previous year was taken into account. The relevant monetary losses due to the pandemic regulations were compensated by the fund. According to the law (§1 para 2 of the Federal Law on the Establishment of an NPO Support Fund), the following organisations are entitled to receive money from the fund:

- If charitable, benevolent or ecclesiastical purposes are pursued.
- When tasks are performed that would otherwise be the responsibility of the fire brigade.
- State-recognised religious communities and churches.

Political parties, organisations that are at least half owned by the federal government, the provinces or the municipalities and actors in the financial sector, as well as generally profit-oriented companies, were exempt from the above-mentioned requirements. In order to receive support, an application must be submitted to the Federal Ministry of Arts, Culture, Civil Service and Sport (BMK/OES). The support fund has been extended again and includes a so-called “NPO lockdown grant” which is intended to support non-profit associations that are additionally burdened by the lockdown measures (e.g. hospitality industry and accommodation, closure of sports facilities) (BMLRT, 2020).

### Reception within the organised civil society:

The establishment of the relief fund was viewed very positively by most respondents. This was a clear step in a promising direction. There has been closer cooperation between politics and CSOs, as they have been involved in the planning of the fund itself (I 24). In particular, the Interessenvertretung Gemeinnütziger Organisationen (IGO) and the Bündnis für Gemeinnützigkeit, an alliance of Austria-wide associations and networks of civil society, were strongly involved in the negotiations. There has also been great interest from other countries in how the fund is structured and how the allocation of funds works. This shows that a certain pioneering role is being taken here, which meets with international recognition.

(...) that it was set up, that's extraordinary. So that, to a certain extent, we are pioneers (...) I 14

It would probably have been a (...) bad year if we hadn't had this NPO support fund. I 21

Most of the criticism was directed at the bureaucracy associated with the fund. For example, an almost unmanageable amount of payment receipts had to be submitted (I 3), which made the general act of applying very time-consuming and lengthy. However, most of the grants were paid out afterwards without any further problems (I 21).

A veritable jungle has emerged. Not only through the various funds, but also through the many revisions and re-creations of the guidelines that were the subject of the individual funding pools. So we still have our hands full with advising where one could go at all, if one needs support. I 18

These bureaucratic hurdles have already been communicated in public statements. Among respondents the predominantly positive feedback was underlined, however, especially for larger NPOs, the accounting necessary for the application states exhaustive requirements. In addition, the serious situation of non-profit organisations that are not eligible and thus cannot compensate for their crisis-related problems is also complained about. It is imperative that improvements are made. (Neunteufel 2020)

Another point of criticism, which was not often mentioned, but which has serious consequences for the arts and culture sector, is the funding of small artists. Among this group of people, those who were already living in a precarious situation before the pandemic were particularly threatened.

The crisis does not compensate for this, but actually exacerbates these inequalities. A very striking example is that in the quasi, which one do you take now, in the fund that is meant for artists, you get at least a thousand euros a month if you can live on it, yes? However, those who were already precarious receive no less than three hundred euros a month. And it's

obvious that you can't live on that. And then you hear cynical remarks from politicians, saying that no one should get rich from the crisis. They already had very little before. | 18

The difference in treatment here is usually between actors who are structured as classic, commercial organisations and those who are non-profit oriented. In the case of the latter, it is probably assumed from the outset that they are mainly supported by volunteers anyway, which means that (additional) funding is not necessary (| 18).

### 3.4.3. Donations

The report of the Fundraising Verband Austria (Austrian Fundraising Association) for the year 2020 shows significant developments in national donations. In 2020, the country's donations amounted to about € 750 million and thus showed an increase of € 25 million (about 3.5%) compared to the previous year (Fundraising\_Verband\_Austria, 2020). The increase in donations follows the trend of recent years, with universities and federal museums in particular among the winners.

Especially the introduction of donation deductibility in 2009, the steady growth of fundraising organisations and the professionalisation of fundraising in various NPOs are seen as causes for this increase (Fundraising\_Verband\_Austria, 2020). In an international comparison, the stability of Austrian donation participation and the increase in the average donation per donor is remarkable, which runs counter to the global trend. In 2020, donations in the form of wills in Austria increased by 17% compared to the previous year and are thus in line with the international trend (Fundraising\_Verband\_Austria, 2020). An increase can also be observed in the area of charitable foundation donations, which are considered an indication of the internationalisation of the NPO sector (Fundraising\_Verband\_Austria, 2020).

Furthermore, a change in the most important donation purposes during the pandemic could be observed. Above all, organisations and initiatives from the health, care and social sectors were supported, followed by animal welfare and international aid campaigns (Meyer & Terzieva, 2020).

Last year, the number of donors aged 16 and over in Austria rose by 9%, reaching 73% of the population. Not only did the number of donors and the total volume of donations reach record levels, but for the first time the average donation of women (125 €) exceeded that of men (123 €). The age group of 35 to 59-year-olds recorded the highest average value (144 €). The provinces with the highest donations were Salzburg, Tyrol and Vorarlberg with an average of 146 € per donor. Styria and Carinthia brought up the rear in the comparison of the federal states. A significant development over the last 20 years has been the continuous increase in the number of Austrians who donate a fixed amount to charity. In contrast, the number of situational donors has decreased (currently about 50%). On the other hand, in Vienna,

Carinthia and Styria, donations are made frequently for specific occasions (Fundraising\_Verband\_Austria, 2020).

### **Changes in donation behaviour due to COVID-19**

The outbreak of the Corona pandemic was a decisive influencing factor in the general development of donation behaviour in 2020. A recent survey conducted from July to August 2020 concluded that the donation behaviour of a large part of the population (71%) has not changed as a result of the crisis (Meyer & Terzieva, 2020). Accordingly, this group either continued not to donate or did not change the extent and/or their frequency of giving. 10% of respondents said they donated less than in the previous year and 9% said they would donate more now (Meyer & Terzieva, 2020). Accordingly, despite initial difficulties due to lockdown and “physical distancing”, donation behaviour has remained largely unchanged. This observation from the data was mostly confirmed by the interview partners. Thus, the initially feared collapse of donations and funding did not occur. The loyalty of donors and new forms of digital fundraising were emphasised by many.

And now it is stable. And that's why I also said we have very loyal supporters. | 6

People see that the work we do is meaningful and are willing to support it financially. So we don't see any effects at all at the moment. | 16

This contrasts with the results of another study (n=99) by Millner and colleagues (2020), who asked the CSOs themselves about their donations from the beginning of the crisis until August 2020. Here, a somewhat different picture emerges, as 39% of the social organisations surveyed state that the crisis has had a negative impact on donations (Millner et al., 2020). Although the majority (55%) of the organisations surveyed state that donations received have not changed as a result of the pandemic (Millner et al., 2020), there is a certain discrepancy here with the observations of the donors themselves and the findings of the fundraising association. These differences could be explained, among other things, by the fact that the main survey by Milner and colleagues took place at the beginning of the crisis, when people had not yet switched to other forms of giving. For this reason, we will refer to the data of the Fundraising Association in our discussion, as these are the most up-to-date and are based on the largest data base. Furthermore, it can be stated that about 33% of Austrians have donated since the outbreak of COVID-19, which at first glance seems to be a decrease compared to the 46% of the previous year (Meyer & Terzieva, 2020). There may be different reasons for this. Many people donate via standing order, which is debited at the beginning of the year for most donation subscriptions. It could therefore be that these

donors did not donate again after the outbreak of the pandemic. Of course, the current economic situation may also play a role in this change, as many people are now in a precarious financial situation.

However, some respondents also reported a greater willingness to donate and an increased sense of social responsibility among private individuals, but also companies.

But this “Shit, something really big has happened now. Where a lot of people can really be affected by it.” I think that has occurred to a lot of people. And we see that both in the donations, where we see that the willingness to donate is very high among those we can pick up. At the moment we are collecting more donations than we normally do. But it has to be said that at the same time certain donation channels have closed this year. | 5

Well, we have also seen that many companies have become aware of their social responsibility to a certain extent. It was really exciting to see that companies argued and said that we were lucky. We have come through the crisis well. We are just the ones who are not so affected. And that's why we now want to do this and that. | 5

An interesting development perceived by one of the interviewees is that after the publication of the so-called “Ibiza video” (resulting in the end of the coalition between Austria’s People’s Party and the Freedom Party), there was a clearer drop in donations than due to the pandemic. This development was attributed to the fact that for some donors, the dismissal of the last government was equated with an improvement in the civil society situation, making possible donations superfluous.

(...) there is a break to Ibiza. And the donations have decreased (...) because the danger has been averted, so to speak. (...) So until then there was a peak and then it just clearly went down. | 6

Furthermore, the survey by Meyer and Terzieva (2020) found that women's donations were lower during the pandemic (Meyer & Terzieva, 2020). However, this observation could not be confirmed by the results of the fundraising association. Such a development could, however, be due to the increased social inequality caused by the Corona crisis.<sup>36</sup>

The literature shows that the amount of donations is strongly related to the financial situation of the donors, as well as to lifestyle and education, the latter in turn correlating with financial capital (Neumayr & Schober, 2012). This was also evident in the donation behaviour during the pandemic. People who

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<sup>36</sup> <https://www.zeit.de/wirtschaft/2020-12/soziale-ungerechtigkeit-pandemie-coronavirus-arbeit-gesundheitssystem-hilfsprogramm> (30 December 2020)

stated that they were better off professionally as a result of the pandemic or the lockdown showed an increased willingness to donate (Meyer & Terzieva, 2020).

However, donations are only one of many ways to behave in solidarity for the common good and civil society. In general, a higher level of prosocial behaviour can be observed among people from lower income strata than among those from higher strata (Piff et al., 2010). It can therefore be assumed that they have practiced different prosocial behaviour during the pandemic, such as helping elderly people from the neighbourhood with their shopping or doing voluntary work.

However, not only financial aspects are relevant for the willingness to donate. It is evident that more people donated who felt that the outbreak of COVID-19 had a negative impact on their health and general personal situation, or who perceived the outbreak of the Corona crisis as (very) threatening (Meyer & Terzieva, 2020) The assumption here is that these people have seen through their own experiences how important an appropriate civil society support network is. This could be described by the “mortality salience” effect, which states that people who become aware of their own mortality tend to act more prosocially (Roberts & Maxfield, 2019).

This concept was originally developed to explain the lower donation participation of younger people (Roberts & Maxfield, 2019) and can also have an application in this meaning for the current willingness to donate, as the survey by Meyer and Terzieva likewise found that there has been a decline in donations among people aged 31 to 45 (Meyer & Terzieva, 2020). As already noted in the “General developments”, this age category is a particularly important donor group. The change could possibly be related to the fact that older people tend to have more severe courses of disease with Covid-19 and younger people therefore saw less risk in the current pandemic.

Many NPOs have switched to digital fundraising tools during the pandemic. This development was well received by donors. 37% have changed their remittances to online payments in the time since the outbreak (Fundraising\_Verband\_Austria, 2020). The increasing popularity of online giving has been accelerated by the current developments and it seems that this form of giving will become the most popular donation method in the future. Interestingly, average online payments are higher than those made offline (Fundraising\_Verband\_Austria, 2020). However, with the discontinuation of street fundraising, this shift towards digital tools was foreseeable for many of the respondents.

(...) because I am mainly financed by donations. And through Corona, after a short slump at the beginning of the Corona period, we have also been able to make a name for ourselves because we sent out topics that had been prepared for a long time and then didn't fit at all. That was a bit awkward at the beginning. Then it turned completely positive immediately

afterwards. So it was much better than before. In the first lockdown, people were totally willing to donate because of the solidarity effect. And now it's at the same level as planned, and therefore also as in the other years. I 8

(...) So the decline was in fundraising on the street, for example, we could no longer advertise on the street and (from) door to door. But we did much better digitally. So last year we had already put our money on it, yes, on online and were in the starting blocks and COVID practically gave us a boost. Just at the right time. So I think those who were able to ride this wave, there were some, I think, who benefited from it. I 12

The overall increase in donations (Fundraising\_Verband\_Austria, 2020) during a crisis is a surprising turn of events in a year that is more likely to be remembered for negative events. Some of the interviewees also perceived an increase in donations as a surprising and positive expression of solidarity from donors, despite an initially feared slump.

### **3.5. Impact on civil society and strategies**

#### **3.5.1. Cooperation within civil society**

An important development during the ÖVP-FPÖ government was the increasing cooperation of various CSOs across various sectors. This resulted from the need for mutual support in a situation that was experienced as extremely difficult, as well as from the shared perception of the government as an enemy. Interestingly, many respondents report that this cooperation has not become less under the new government.

What was actually positive under the ÖVP-FPÖ government at that time was the coming together of civil society. What I experienced very, very positively back then (...). It has become a bit looser again, but nevertheless the contacts from back then have remained and are very positive. So I think that the efforts to finally put this alliance, this representation of the interests of civil society, on a well-structured and, above all, well-financed footing, is about time and highly necessary. I 12

So it's not just, okay, we do a strike and then it's dead silence again, but they really network all the time. (...) The fact that youth organisations are now also part of it is already ongoing during the year, I think that's really cool. I 9

There are many more joint appearances with civil society organisations. I 5



Thus, cooperation has been maintained or even expanded. A major achievement of a coordinated, concerted approach was the inclusion of NPOs in the government's Corona Emergency Fund. For the first time ever, NPOs were officially defined as a relevant social actor or statistical group.

Despite successful collaborations, the ubiquity of the pandemic in the public discourse also meant limitations in for the initiatives' effectiveness.

Well, I have the feeling that we have set a lot in motion with Lesbos. Especially with our trip with Katharina Stemberger and the Courage Initiative. I mean, we have never had such a broad alliance, from all the Christian churches, so many mayors, even black ones and so on, so the protest has already become very, very broad. I have the impression that if COVID didn't exist, we would have achieved something. | 10

The pandemic also had an indirectly limiting effect on the cooperation of civil society organisations, as many were strongly challenged in their internal organisation but also in relation to their field of activity, for example in labour market policy. However, some organisations took the opportunity caused by the Covid-19 restrictions specifically for internal organisational development.

(...) we are also dealing a lot with ourselves at the moment, because we are also asking ourselves the question: So, what is our role now? What is the next step? | 5

Even though the pandemic has made cooperation more difficult in some cases, it is considered highly necessary.

We need the alliances. Only then can we appear strong or be taken seriously at all. | 8

### **3.5.2. Situation of workers and organisations under Covid-19 – The cost of resilience**

This section is about how staff and managers deal with the pandemic, what patterns of success become visible and what organisations can learn for the time after. One focus is the social and health sector.

In summary, the employees and also the organisations showed a high level of adaptive resilience. Adaptive resilience is the ability of people, teams and organisations to cope well with adverse circumstances (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001). This is illustrated below using three different phases of the pandemic.

#### **Start of the pandemic in spring 2020 – “We want to make it work”.**

With the first lockdown, procedures and processes in the organisations were adapted to the policy requirements. The introduction of home offices, changes in team constellations and the adaptation of direct services for clients meant considerable interventions in the organisation and design of work in a

very short time. Some services were also discontinued or severely restricted in favour of hygiene measures.

Well, I have never experienced such hard working hours. I like to work a lot, but it was too much for me, especially (...) because everything was new in the spring and everything was constantly changing. Everything had to be approached three times (...). That didn't only affect me, it also affected my environment, of course, and it also affected everyone in the administration very strongly or even more strongly, because of short-time work stories and so on. (I 25)

These adjustments were made possible by the staff's high degree of flexibility, independence, improvisational skills under uncertain conditions and willingness to cooperate with each other.

In most cases, a high presence of managers was emphasised, which was experienced as crucial and supportive. Through this presence, managers gave their employees support and orientation by providing relevant information and ensuring decisions were made. It is interesting that it was almost irrelevant whether this presence was physical or merely meant virtual availability and responsiveness to the concerns of the employees.

An important factor was mutual trust and cooperation.

It was madness. It was unbelievable how the people stuck together in the crisis situation and how natural it was for 99.5% of the staff to give everything. (I 25)

In the first phase, there was also a high level of understanding for the measures, as well as a high level of willingness on the part of the customers to support the measures.

Dealing with emotions and expectations proved to be a particular challenge for all those involved. Staff and managers were not only extremely challenged on a professional level, but also personally and emotionally. They had to deal with the fear of illness or the possibility of transmission or infection.

In this situation of great uncertainty, a high level of emotional competence was necessary in order to be there for the fears and concerns of the clients despite their own consternation. The situation was aggravated by the fact that fear was deliberately stirred up by politicians at the beginning of the pandemic. This in turn caused additional work in hospitals and nursing homes, from calming patients to treating panic attacks.

Furthermore, staff members are continuously required to manage expectations in order to deal with the sometimes different or ambiguous expectations. Apart from their own expectations of themselves, they had to balance the demands of colleagues, professional standards, the private environment, clients and

their relatives, health authorities, donors and politicians. This caused a lot of stress, especially in the exceptional situation of the pandemic.

Another aspect was the partial organisation of work via home office. For those companies that were not prepared, this was challenging. Many organisations went through a massive and rapid learning process in the spring, reorganising themselves and finding a way to deal with the technology. Positive experiences with home office therefore predominated until the autumn.

In the spring review, the majority felt positive and proud of the way the pandemic had been handled so far. Many were amazed at what had been possible in the spring.

Because the burden was enormous, (...) those involved in the company really tried to do their best and that was mostly right. And the customers as stakeholders have contributed an incredible share to the fact that the employees can also do it, that we can do it. That, which was so surprising for me (...) “proud” is the wrong expression, but I am totally pleased. | 25

These positive feelings and the joint effort to get through a crisis are known from disaster research (Kuntz, 2020). Success in adaptation thus supports the feeling of self-efficacy, which is a resource in dealing with uncertain situations.

### **Rest in summer – Different ways of preparing for the further course of the crisis**

After the successful fight against the first wave, about half of the organisations investigated consciously made preparations for the autumn. Based on the experiences of the spring, evaluations were carried out, prototypes for new offers, such as digital counselling formats, were developed, or new rules and procedures were drafted, for example, how to react to suspicious health cases or arrange visits, etc. The organisations then came through the next phase strengthened.

Other organisations lacked the necessary resources for these projects. For example, due to staff shortages, the crisis team in one care organisation was abolished in the summer and there was no time for feedback loops or the development of new strategies.

### **Peak load in autumn/winter 2020**

In autumn, the number of cases and thus the workload in social and health care institutions increased drastically. Whereas in the spring many people still had the feeling that they had to run a short distance race, the burdens now took on the character of a marathon.

The side effects of the pandemic measures became increasingly burdensome for clients and staff as well as for their family environment. In care facilities, for example, isolation, loneliness and suffering from the loss of daily structures, such as communal events, eating together, etc., increased. For many, they

triggered feelings of helplessness, powerlessness and other negative emotions. The suffering of the clients meant an additional burden for the staff. For many, the impression of “COVID above all” was reinforced.

Employees miss face-to-face meetings and digital meetings are increasingly experienced as exhausting. In the opinion of many they lack social and informal elements. Self-management is also less successful.

Shortly before Christmas, many stressful moments became visible and a not inconsiderable number of employees are on sick leave for a longer period of time (...). We are now in a phase where things are very tight in a few areas and where many employees are a bit tired and this high energy level that was there in the spring cannot be maintained at the moment. I 25

The aid workers on the ground also experienced the further tightening of hygiene measures as increasingly strenuous. In addition, the lines of conflict regarding Covid-19 became clearer in teams.

Yes, I do believe that we have experienced a degree of alienation (...), where there was already closer cooperation before, there was also more contact at a distance than with the other colleagues. (...) So where I usually go, I now perhaps prefer to go much more and where there is less, I seek even less personal contact. I 27

A stressful moment was reached when feelings of guilt and fear were given vent to: In autumn, when suspicions arose, more and more staff members asked themselves whether they had brought the virus into the organisation.

Suddenly she was positive during the daily test, she was very young, she was still very inexperienced, she had no experience of crises, she really took it to heart and believed that she had done something wrong in there! I 26

In residential institutions – unlike in society – death is not a taboo but a reality. The staff have developed various forms and rituals to deal with the death of people they have cared for, sometimes for years. However, when there are many deaths at the same time, there is not enough time to adequately organise farewells.

(...) and the staff member had to struggle with that when suddenly out of 30 residents (...) 15 who were still sitting outside (...) then died and that was often the case, too many in a row and coping with grief often went very badly because we were so stuck in the mode, we have to, we, we have Corona. I 26

The formation of infection clusters in different facilities posed immense challenges for the nursing staff. Respondents reported psychological strain on staff and increasing staff turnover as negative consequences.

(...) What irritated me was that many newcomers to the nursing profession stopped working after the pandemic in Northern Italy because they said they couldn't take it since it was so stressful and difficult for them. And what I am experiencing now is that there is a double burden, on the one hand in organisations for the disabled or in care organisations or in hospitals, because all the people have already lost colleagues. | 2

In nursing and care homes, the strains accumulated in autumn. The already long duration of the crisis, the increasing number of cases and the particularly high public perception (“we have to protect the nursing homes”) led to increasing stress for staff and managers. Many got into a maelstrom and neglected their own emotion and expectation management, which led to exhaustion.

Somehow with Corona you fall into a hamster wheel, (...) where you just kind of, like, function. | 26

In view of these great burdens, the concern is formulated that the feelings of guilt, the confrontation with the negative effects for clients and the experience of many losses could lead to traumatisation with considerable long-term consequences. A study of nurses in Northern Italy points to the danger of secondary traumatisation in the nursing sector (Arpacioglu et al., 2020). The already existing staff shortage increases this danger.

So there is an urgent need for support measures to deal with the overload of the pandemic in an appropriate organisational and personal way (Tomlin et al., 2020).

(...) that there is an urgent need for people to be supported now, because otherwise we will have the very big waves of exhaustion in about half a year! | 26

Furthermore, measures are needed to increase the number of staff in the health and care sector. The Austrian Health and Nursing Association is also sounding the alarm about the chronic shortage of nursing staff and the strain on nursing staff.<sup>37</sup>

There was a tendency for staff in those organisations that did not have time for reflection and conscious learning loops to prepare for the further course of the pandemic during the quieter period to be more stressed. It thus became clear that certain buffers of resources (organisational slack) are necessary to

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<sup>37</sup> [https://www.oegkv.at/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Aktuell/ICN\\_Uebersetzung\\_Fact\\_sheet\\_2.pdf](https://www.oegkv.at/fileadmin/user_upload/Aktuell/ICN_Uebersetzung_Fact_sheet_2.pdf) (5 March 2020)

deal with crises. Minute-by-minute planning of care work, detailed documentation requirements and too tight cost planning make it impossible to keep these necessary resources for unforeseen events and for peak loads.

The pandemic acts as a burning glass and highlights what was already positive or negative. On the one hand, it shows that the social and health care organisations were able to deal with the pandemic flexibly and that the staff showed a high level of commitment. On the other hand, it shows that a lack of resources can only be compensated to a limited extent by increased commitment and in the long run leads to considerable costs for the staff. Applause and praise (the well-known clapping from the balconies) – although meant appreciatively – is not enough in the long run!

### 3.5.3. Development of volunteering

Many of civil society's proposals are reflected in the current government programme. This programme also dedicates a separate subchapter to voluntary work and civil society engagement. Projects include the creation of a seal of approval for voluntary work, the establishment of a service centre for volunteers and volunteer organisations, the evaluation of the Volunteer Act, recognition of non-profit status in the awarding of public contracts and an improvement in the provision of services for the common good (p. 31).<sup>38</sup>

These plans meet with the approval of many non-profit organisations. Many hope that more resources will be made available for voluntary organisations. It is expected that the Greens will change the image that is widespread among the government partner that there are no costs involved in voluntary work.

This starts with the assumption that where it is non-profit, everything is done on a voluntary basis anyway. This simply ignores the fact that there is just as much professional work going on, but personnel costs are still not recognised anywhere in the non-profit sector. | 18

However, due to the pandemic, this issue was also pushed into the background. The implementation of the government's plans regarding volunteering was postponed.

So there are many things in there that would be good and important, but they simply don't have priority at the moment, because, yes, in the Ministry of Social Affairs [note: Ministry of Social Affairs, Health, Care and Consumer Protection] they have other things to do than to try to (...) promote [note: voluntary work], but now it's about dealing with the crisis. | 14

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<sup>38</sup>Government Programme 2020-2024. [https://www.bmeia.gv.at/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Vertretungen/Bern/Dokumente/Regierungsbereinkommen\\_Kurzfassung.pdf](https://www.bmeia.gv.at/fileadmin/user_upload/Vertretungen/Bern/Dokumente/Regierungsbereinkommen_Kurzfassung.pdf) (7 March 2021)

The pandemic also had a strong impact on the extent and types of volunteering carried out. A distinction is made between formal and informal volunteering. Informal volunteering is primarily understood as neighbourhood help. Formal volunteering refers to engagement within the framework of a civil society organisation.

The pandemic leads to an increase in solidarity with creative initiatives at the beginning of the year and thus to more informal volunteering. Neighbourly help in the form of shopping activities for vulnerable people, shopping services in communities lacking supplies or even volunteer telephone hotlines were widespread. Ramos, Andrews and Stamm (2021)<sup>39</sup> show in their representative survey on the Corona crisis that informal volunteering increased by the middle of the pandemic year.

Formal volunteering decreased until the middle of the year compared to the previous year (Ramos et.al. 2021). In total, about half of the Austrians volunteered during the pandemic, but half only once. 10% of the volunteers gave their time several times a week. Other surveys also show a slight decline in formal volunteering (Meyer et.al. 2021).

In our sample, CSOs were affected very differently by developments in volunteering. The closures of cultural and recreational institutions, which are strongly supported by volunteer work, led to a reduction of volunteer work in the affected CSOs. The organisations shifted their activities to the digital space.

This means that everything that concerns personal commitment or work with volunteers (...) has almost come to a standstill. For example, (...) the information stands that we have or the vigils were not possible at all in the beginning and are only possible to a very, very limited extent now. | 12

Some respondents fear that participation through volunteering will be more difficult in the future, as many volunteers have been lost due to the Corona pandemic.

(...) that there, of course, where a lot happens with volunteers in the common sense, who (...) support and help, this has completely broken down. That with Corona there was hardly any possibility to be active in this context (...). And at the moment there is the fear that we have lost the volunteers in the long run and that it will take a lot of energy to bring them back (...). |

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<sup>39</sup> Romualdo Ramos, Margaret Renn Andrews and Tanja Stamm (2020). Physical but not socially distanced: Volunteering in times of COVID-19. <https://viecer.univie.ac.at/corona-blog/corona-blog-beitraege/blog72/> (7 March 2021)

At the same time, interest in volunteering increased in other organisations at the beginning of the pandemic, so that these CSOs were even able to recruit new volunteers.

(...) because a lot of people really came forward who wanted to do something. I mean, it was also the time. People were sitting around, not knowing what they could do. And there was the onslaught, so to speak, so we always have people who contact us, who want to volunteer, but the onslaught was almost unmanageable in some cases. Because then even we created digital volunteer programmes. | 5

Quantitative surveys show a tendency for society to become less solidaristic as the pandemic progresses. “This finding is accompanied by increasing crisis fatigue, dissatisfaction with government measures, rising disenchantment with democracy and increasing psychological stress (...).”<sup>40</sup> This, as well as other data on the development of solidarity<sup>41</sup>, suggests a trend towards a reduction in volunteering as the pandemic progresses.

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<sup>40</sup> Kittel, Bernhard (2020). The Desolidarisation of Society: From the First to the Second Lockdown. <https://viecer.univie.ac.at/en/projects-and-cooperations/austrian-corona-panel-project/corona-blog/corona-blog-beitraege/corona-dynamiken11/> (7 March 2021)

<sup>41</sup> Julian Aichholzer and Patrick Rohs (2021). How far does solidarity go in the Corona crisis?, <https://viecer.univie.ac.at/corona-blog/corona-blog-beitraege/blog101/> (7 March 2021)



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