

MARIO

MINORITIES | ACCOUNTABILITY | RIGHTS | INDEPENDENCE |
ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Minority
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Group

'One drop of water can make a hole in the stone'

Reflections on the MARIO (Minorities, Accountability, Rights, Independence and Organizational Development) Programme

Judit Ignacz and Nikolett Suha



Acknowledgments

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Minority Rights Group Europe (MRGE) is registered as a not-for-profit company under Hungarian Law. Based in Budapest since 1996, MRGE is the European regional partner of Minority Rights Group International (MRGI), with the aim of promoting and protecting the rights of minorities and indigenous peoples across Europe and Central Asia. MRGE does this through capacity building, international advocacy, media advocacy and networking.

PILnet is a global non-governmental organization that serves as a global network for public interest law. With programs in Europe & Eurasia, Asia, and at the global level, PILnet partners with legal professionals and civil society organizations to protect civic space, address global challenges, and work to build just, equitable and sustainable societies.

About the authors

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Introduction

Every European country has its own unique story of minorities, dating back to ancient Greece and the Roman Empire and continuing through centuries of colonisation and development of the nation-state and democracy. Despite periods of greater or lesser persecution, European minority communities have shown themselves to be resilient, an inextricable part of the fabric of Europe. Nevertheless, marginalization remains.

Our activities are based on a minority rights framework that has guided intergovernmental institutions since the mid-20th Century. This framework was established by the United Nations, affirmed by the Council of Europe and the Organization for the Security and Cooperation in Europe, reinforced and enforced by the European Union, and transposed into national law by all EU Member States as a guarantor of minority communities' present and future. For the past thirty years, Minority Rights Group has stood with individuals and organizations of diverse minority backgrounds to promote an inclusive and democratic Europe and beyond.

In 2023, MRG, together with PILnet, partnered on the Minorities, Accountability, Rights, Independence and Organizational Development (MARIO) programme to strengthen grassroots CSOs defending EU values across Bulgaria, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia, Latvia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Lithuania, Romania and Slovenia. The programme recognised the shrinking civic space, rising harassment and weaponised bureaucracy that impeded grassroots action and reduced access to institutional channels. MARIO addressed persistent gaps in relevant funding, access to EU mechanisms, institutional partnerships and advocacy capacity, enabling many promising organizations to expand their work and engage more effectively in rights protection.

Our joint vision was to advance an inclusive and democratic Europe where minority communities thrive. In this framework, we selected and funded 90 minority led local organizations, built their capacities through tailored support and training, and backed both national and transnational initiatives to increase resilience and advance the protection and awareness of EU fundamental rights. The partners brought complementary expertise, tools, and engagement techniques, drawing on their own lived experience.

Based on this experience, this impact report provides a nuanced snapshot of the current landscape of the state of grassroots minority rights activism in Europe through a survey of our partners and 12 examples of their work, highlighting the existing gaps as well as opportunities for further responses, which will no doubt evolve over time.

We would like to thank our 90 MARIO partners from across Europe, who contributed to this report for their openness, expertise and valuable contributions. We are confident that it is an important step along the journey to celebrate diversity in Europe.

The MARIO Team

2023: Legal, political, economical, social and environmental background

In 2023, minority-led civil society organizations faced an increasingly challenging environment shaped by overlapping geopolitical crises and shifting political priorities. Civic space gradually shrunk and organizations struggled to meet growing community needs while managing limited resources.

The ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine continued to dominate government agendas, with a focus on security, defence and border management. This diverted attention and funding from social inclusion and minority rights. At the same time, civil society organizations were called on to respond to urgent humanitarian needs, particularly for displaced populations, without corresponding increases in support. A fractured, polarised media landscape engendered rising online hate speech, misinformation and extremist echo chambers. Public discourse increasingly centred on migration, security and identity. Polarization heightened while antisemitism and Islamophobia rose. Minorities, women, migrants and LGBTQ+ people continued to face structural inequalities and discrimination.

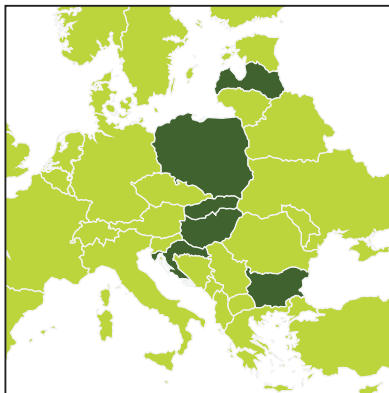
Across Central and Eastern Europe, as elsewhere, populist and nationalist narratives continued to gain ground, challenging minority rights, gender equality and migrant justice. Civil society organizations, particularly those working on human rights, were disparaged as politically biased or externally influenced. Organizations reported increasing barriers to accessing public funding, bureaucratic and reporting requirements and audits. In countries such as Hungary and Slovakia, ongoing debates around the oversight of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and foreign funding reinforced uncertainty and caution within the sector.

Economic conditions further restricted civil society work. Conflicts, an energy crisis and post-pandemic recovery resulted in high inflation, rising costs and financial insecurity for both organizations and the communities they serve. Meanwhile, donor priorities shifted toward humanitarian aid and geopolitical crises, reducing the availability of flexible, long-term funding and intensifying competition for limited resources. The normalisation of hostile narratives intensified the risks associated with advocacy and public engagement.

2023 in numbers

30 partners across **6** countries – five partners each in Slovakia, Poland, Hungary, Latvia, Croatia, Bulgaria.

3,500+ individuals directly impacted and
7,900+ indirectly impacted



Thematic focus across projects



- **7 minority rights protection** projects
- **4 civic participation** projects
- **4 community empowerment** projects
- **3 youth engagement** projects
- **1 anti-discrimination** project
- **1 gender equality** project

Communities in focus across projects



- **11** projects working with **ethnic or religious minorities**
- **5** projects working with **youth**
- **3** projects working with **women and girls**
- **3** projects working with **migrants and refugees**

Activities across projects



- **11 training / capacity building** projects
- **8 community organising** projects
- **4 advocacy campaigns** projects
- **3 research and documentation** projects
- **2 media / communication** projects
- **1 coalition-building** project

Partner survey



What are the main challenges for minority-led civil society organizations?

Funding restrictions: **7**
Hostile political discourse: **5**
Donor priorities shifting: **6**
Online hate speech: **4**
Decreasing civic space: **4**
Security risks: **4**
Legal restrictions: **2**

Responses to 'to what extent did the MARIO grant contribute to achieving your project goals?'

Not at all	0												
Slightly	0												
Moderately	0												
Significantly	0												
Very significantly													11

Responses to 'did the MARIO grant help strengthen your organization's long-term capacity?'

Not at all		2											
Slightly	1												
Moderately				4									
Significantly		2											
Very significantly		2											

Project Story 1: Learning to speak what was always ours

The Latgalian language lives in homes, traditions and in the rhythm of everyday conversations in Latgale, eastern Latvia. It sustains cultural memory, identity and a sense of belonging that stretches across generations.

Unfortunately, use of Latgalian faded in the 20th Century. The state has not officially recognized it as a regional language. Institutions label it a historical variant rather than protect it as a living language. Because of this, it remains largely invisible in schools, media and public life.

For many young people, this creates distance, a barrier to expressing their identities. Families began to worry that what once felt natural: recipes, songs and ways of speaking might slowly disappear. The Society of Latgalian Culture, one of the oldest and most established organizations in the region, saw this erosion happening and decided to act against it.

In 2023, with support from the MARIO programme, they organized Sūpluok / Nearby Together, a seven-day camp that brought together 41 young people aged 14-18 from across Latvia, alongside 70 facilitators, educators, and cultural practitioners. Many spoke different languages, carrying different identities, and all arrived with curiosity.

The camp was about connection between generations, between communities, between youth and their heritage. Through storytelling, cooking, singing, poetry and creative workshops, participants explored their family histories and cultural roots. In just one week, the group collected 48 family stories as audio narratives, capturing memories that, in many cases, had never been told before. Stories of grandmothers baking together, of traditional costumes passed down through generations, of baby names chosen with care and meaning.

These stories began to travel through an exhibition that reached four schools, inviting hundreds of young people to reflect on their own identities. For many, confidence grew, pride deepened and identities became stronger. A youngster even chose to study sociology, focusing on Latgalian language and culture, inspired by their experiences during the project.

For many youth and their families, the experience was a reminder: language and culture are living, changing parts of everyday life. The stories, tools and methodology created at the camp continue to move through homes, schools, communities and cultural spaces, even feeding into wider conversations, including the Latgalian Congress, which will shape the region's future priorities over the next five years.

Süpluok / Nearby Together is a seed planted in the hearts of young people, with the potential to grow into a lifelong connection to culture, language and belonging. Despite all of this, the camp will not take place in 2026. What was built, the trust, the networks, the renewed sense of identity persists, but without continued support, it risks slowly fading, just like the language once did from public life. Cultural preservation needs time, care and a long-term investment of resources and commitment.

Key takeaways

- Cultural identity and language preservation are strengthened by young people actively engaging with their heritage.
- Intergenerational exchange and youth-led storytelling can reconnect communities.
- Participatory methods like oral histories and creative storytelling make heritage accessible and alive.

What works

- Week-long immersive experiences that combine learning, creativity and community
- Participatory, accessible and inclusive methods
- Peer-to-peer learning across generations
- Travelling exhibitions and school-based activities
- Linking grassroots cultural work to broader institutional processes

What is needed

- Stable, multi-year funding that allow cultural initiatives to grow sustainably
 - Recognition of regional and minority languages as integral to European cultural diversity
 - Long-term investment in youth-led cultural spaces
-



' Parents were thankful. One shared: "My child made cookies for the first time." Moments like this matter. They help build identity and strong values. But this kind of impact doesn't happen after just one camp or in a single year. It becomes possible over time, in the long term.'

1

seven-day
camp

48

family stories
collected

4

exhibitions in
local schools

Project Story 2: Improving access for Roma communities to employment in the hospitality industry

Who welcomes you at a hotel reception?

Who serves you in a restaurant?

Who is visible, taking responsibility, moving confidently through a space, and most importantly, who is not there at all?

For Roma youth, absence in the hospitality sector reflects years of limited access, stereotypes and repeated experiences of rejection or exploitation. For Phiren Amenca, working closely with young Roma, this absence had become too visible to ignore, in a sector that is, in principle, open and dynamic, offering multiple entry points and opportunities for growth.

With the support of the MARIO programme and in partnership with the Hilton hotel chain, they created a short but intensive pathway: three training and capacity-building sessions designed to prepare young Roma participants for entering the labour market and especially the hospitality sector. The focus was on employment skills and confidence-building.

Participants learned about labour rights and anti-discrimination interventions, hospitality skills, financial planning. They practiced interview situations and explored what it means to enter a workplace where they might not feel expected or welcomed. The training was adjusted to the participants' needs: many arrived with deep insecurity shaped by earlier experiences of being overlooked, underestimated or treated unfairly. For these participants, Phiren Amenca deepened the program by giving more space to practical exercises, to discussion, and to building a sense of safety within the group.

Employers stepped into the process actively, offered presentations, shared expectations and opened up real opportunities. After the first batch of trainings, a small group of participants continued into traineeships across four workplaces. They were not alone there either; they received mentorship and guidance to maximize positive outcomes and confidence.

One of them described her first weeks at work as overwhelming. She made mistakes, hesitated, questioned herself but with support from her supervisor, she began to trust her own abilities and eventually carried out her tasks independently.

While the project was a success, the external barriers did not disappear. Many participants faced financial insecurity, unstable housing or long distances between

where they lived and where opportunities were available. Accepting an internship or a job was not dependent simply on readiness but on many other circumstances.

The knowledge gained and the experience of being seen differently, of succeeding in a space that previously felt closed, stays with the beneficiaries. Whether this can translate into long-term change in people's lives depends on factors that go beyond a single project cycle.

Key takeaways

- Confidence and a sense of belonging are as critical as skills in accessing employment.
- Short, targeted interventions can open doors, but systemic barriers continue to shape outcomes with more impact.

What works

- Combining skills development with confidence-building and rights awareness
- Engaging employers not only as sponsors, but as active participants and gate-openers
- Creating entry points into the labour market through traineeships

What is needed

- Long-term support that allows initial opportunities to develop into sustainable employment pathways
 - Recognition that structural barriers – such as housing and financial insecurity – directly affect access to work
 - Funding approaches that prioritize continuity, not only pilot initiatives
-



Training for Roma youth in Budapest in November 2023



' This issue was especially important in the Hungarian context around 2023, when labour shortages in the hospitality sector were increasing, yet marginalized communities like Roma were still underrepresented in these jobs. This highlighted a clear gap between available opportunities and access to them.'
Staff of Phiren Amenca organization

65

trained
participants

5

completed
internships

3

three-day
trainings

MARIO programme impacts

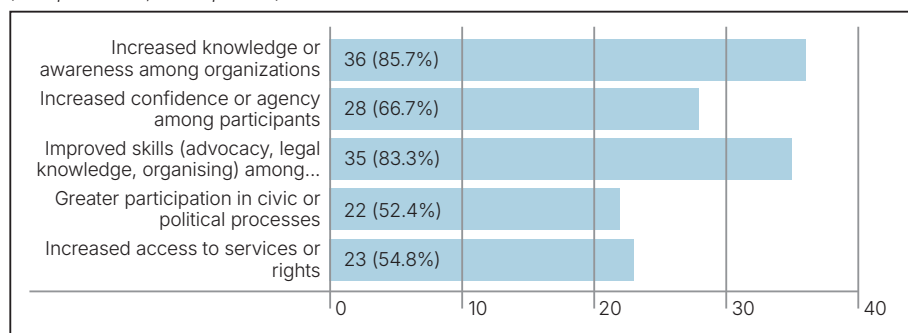
At the **individual and community level**, many partners highlighted a visible increase in empowerment, confidence and active participation, especially among young people, women, and marginalized communities. Participants moved from passive roles to becoming initiators, advocates and leaders, whether through launching their own initiatives, engaging in civic processes, or gaining the confidence to speak up about discrimination and human rights. This was often accompanied by greater awareness of the media and the wider public, trust and cohesion within communities, as well as more open dialogue between different communities.

At the **organizational level**, the projects significantly contributed to capacity building and professionalization. Organizations reported stronger internal skills – ranging from project management and advocacy to safeguarding and working with vulnerable groups – alongside improved structures and strategic thinking. Many also emphasized the importance of new or strengthened partnerships, including with public institutions, other NGOs and community actors, which expanded their reach, credibility and the sustainability of their activities.

At a **broader level**, the projects helped generate tangible impact and systemic changes. This included increased visibility of marginalized communities and stronger recognition from authorities and stakeholders. In several cases, projects led to concrete outcomes such as policy engagement, legal and psychosocial support, improved access to health and social services, or the creation of tools, methodologies and networks that continue beyond the project lifecycle. Overall, partners reported a significant transition from short-term project outputs to longer-term transformation: communities became more empowered, organizations more resilient and capable, and a foundation for structural change and inclusive participation has been built.

‘As an organizational team, we increased our knowledge of advocacy and built our advocacy capacities. We also built new contacts. For example, we partnered with PLLnet, and now we have an legal case with them, which is something we would not have done without the MARIO programme.’

Partner survey: Did the project lead to any changes at local/community level?
(multiple choice, 42 responses)

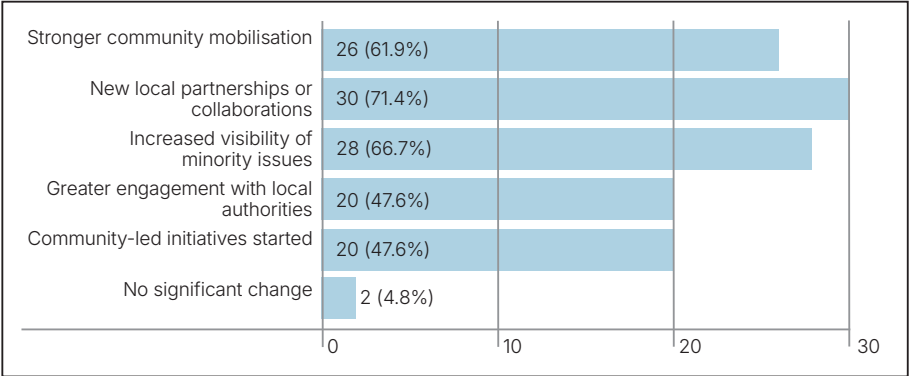


'A young woman, a mother of two children, came to us after experiencing severe psychological and physical domestic violence from her partner and his father. Through the direct services we provide, she received psychological support and legal assistance; we covered the legal expenses for her case and helped her move into independent housing. She later purchased her own apartment. She now works three jobs, is repaying a loan, but she is independent and free.'

'A 14-year-old student joined the Bosnian language school because he struggled to communicate with his grandparents and felt alienated from his roots. Before the project, he avoided using his mother tongue in public due to a fear of stigmatization. Through the project's interactive language and culture lessons, he not only improved his proficiency but also developed a strong sense of pride in his heritage. This transformation was most evident when he gave a presentation at his regular primary school about his bilingualism, proudly sharing his culture with his peers. The project allowed him to view being bilingual as an intellectual asset, which boosted his academic performance and significantly strengthened his family bonds.'

'A refugee participant who joined the project through regular taekwondo training, successfully passed the professional examination and obtained an official taekwondo coaching licence from the European Sports School. He subsequently became involved in coaching younger club members, transforming from a beneficiary into an active contributor to the club's programme.'

Partner survey: Did the project lead to any changes at local/community level?
(multiple choice, 42 responses)

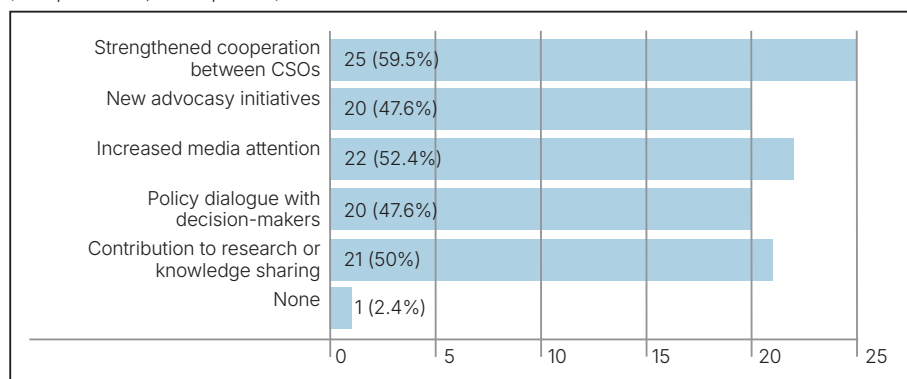


‘We laid the foundation for a lasting collaboration. Thanks to the good results achieved and the experience gained, the young people applied to MARIO with their own initiative and in 2025 successfully implemented it.’

‘The most significant community-level impact was the transformation of the Bosnian language school into a central social and cultural hub. Before the project, families of Bosniak descent in the local area were fragmented, and language learning was confined to the privacy of their homes. The establishment of the school created a strong network of parents and guardians who now provide mutual support regarding integration and parenting. Furthermore, the community became more outward-looking; the school organized “open house” events where neighbours and representatives of local institutions could experience Bosniak culture. This reduced previous social distances and strengthened their sense of belonging, as the Bosniak community is now recognized as an organized and constructive partner in the local environment.’

‘The agreements created a foundation for ongoing collaboration, including participation in joint activities, addressing discrimination cases and supporting Roma women in accessing the labour market. This represents an important shift at the community level, as it brought together Roma women, employers, and institutions to work toward shared solutions and improved inclusion.’

Partner survey: Did the project contribute to any of the following?
(multiple choice, 42 responses)



'The swimming project and our broader activities attracted interest beyond our local community, including coverage from international media outlets. A journalist from Tyrol (Austria) visited our project to document our work and its impact. This visibility helped raise awareness about the challenges faced by Roma communities, as well as the positive outcomes of inclusive, community-based initiatives.'

'We have used the data from our MARIO project to justify the needs of young migrants in Poland and proposed recommendations in other project applications.'

'The project initiated formal dialogue with the Croatian Olympic Committee regarding the IOC Olympic Solidarity Programme, opening a potential national-level institutional pathway for long-term support of refugee athletes – a direct outcome of the visibility and credibility gained through the MARIO-funded activities.'

Project Story 3: Where art builds bridges

In the coastal city of Split, Croatia, a small group of friends noticed something profoundly missing from everyday life: cultural spaces where people of different backgrounds can meet. That observation became the seed for Culture Hub Croatia (CHC), a non-profit organization founded in 2017.

Through its creative hub, called PROSTOR, a gallery, workspace, open studio and artist residency programme, CHC has opened doors for **artists, young people and local residents to come together, create and participate in cultural life**. These spaces became a meeting ground where differences could be explored, stories could be told and creativity could cultivate connection.

By 2023, as discrimination and hate speech against immigrants and LGBTQ+ communities increased across Croatia, CHC launched Spaces of Tolerance, **an eight month programme, which offered a shared creative space for Syrian, Ukrainian, and Croatian artists to meet, co-create art, tell their stories** and respond to these challenges. 20 participants told their stories through open studios, public art installations, storytelling and participatory workshops.

For many locals, these stories were their first real encounter with the lives of immigrants or LGBTQ+ people. The shift was meaningful: **people began to see each other as neighbours**.

Collaboration was at the heart of the project. **Local minority organizations, including queer artist collectives and human rights groups working with refugees** were actively involved in shaping the process. This created stronger, more intersectional networks and ensured that the work remained **grounded in community needs**.

Spaces of Tolerance shows that social change grows where people meet, listen and create together. In the moments when communities begin to connect.



Open studio for artists, young people and local residents to come together and participate in cultural life in Zagreb.

Key takeaways

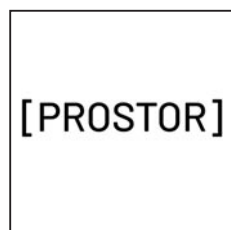
- Creative spaces can open pathways to reduce intolerance
- Collaboration between cultural and human rights actors strengthens impact

What works

- Storytelling, participatory workshops and public art as tools for engagement
- Co-creation processes that give participants ownership
- Safe, inclusive spaces that encourage dialogue across differences
- Holistic approaches that combine art, advocacy and community-building

What is needed

- Capacity-building and human rights training for cultural practitioners
- Long-term mechanisms for supporting participatory cultural projects
- Recognition of cultural spaces as essential infrastructure for social cohesion and democracy



' We wanted to respond to the rising discrimination and violence affecting different minority groups, including LGBTQIA+ people, and we aimed to use art and culture to share stories, engage people and encourage dialogue in meaningful ways.'
Staff of Culture Hub Croatia

20

stories told

50+

people reached

Project Story 4: Roma Legal Incubator

Since 2006, the Equal Opportunities Initiatives Association in Bulgaria has been working to respond to a structural question: what does it take for people to know, claim and defend their rights in a system that has long excluded them?

They began working in Sofia, but due to demand, by 2012, their work extended to the whole country. At the core of their activities is legal counselling and capacity-building for Roma communities facing ethnic discrimination. Their team helps people recognize they have been victims of discrimination, by giving language to experiences so normalized they are dismissed or not even recognized – empowerment is not only about defending rights, but also about building capacity within communities to claim them.

Through a network of lawyers and paralegals, the organization provides free legal advice. At the same time, they engage in advocacy to change the structures that produce these inequalities over and over again. Their participation in amending the Registration Act, for example, contributed to simplifying access to identity documents for people living in informal settlements; it was an administrative step with profound consequences for access to public services and social inclusion of Roma communities in Bulgaria.

In 2020, the organization launched a Legal Incubator program. Its development was slow at first, impacted by the constraints of the pandemic, but by the time it received support from the MARIO programme, it had already taken root. In 2023, five Roma law students and early-career lawyers joined.

For them this was more than a professional opportunity. They were not only first-generation lawyers, but mostly the first in their families to graduate at all. Entering the legal profession without networks, mentors or financial backing, they faced significant structural barriers and prejudices.

The lawyers deepened their knowledge on human rights issues such as housing, education and healthcare rights, racial profiling and hate speech, while also gaining practical experience by providing legal counselling to community members who would otherwise not be able to afford it. They receive support from the Incubator while supporting their community.

Graduates become part of an alumni network, where they stay connected, support new participants through peer-to-peer learning and begin to shape their own initiatives. One group of former participants has in early 2026 established an independent organization focused on protecting the rights of vulnerable communities.

The model itself builds on an earlier initiative developed in New York, but its adaptation in Bulgaria – being the first of its kind in Eastern Europe – shows how ideas can evolve in new contexts. The work continues in the Legal Incubator. The organization has secured additional funding, allowing the lab to grow beyond its initial phase.

Key takeaways

- Professionals with lived experience of human rights violations are trusted and committed.
- Sustainable change happens when service provision and capacity-building reinforce each other.

What works

- Combining legal education with practical experience.
- Linking community needs with professional needs, ensuring mutual benefit and relevance.
- Adapting initiatives across regions, while respecting local realities.

What is needed

- Long-term support mechanisms for first-generation legal professionals, including mentorship, networks and financial stability.
 - Recognition of community-based legal programmes as drivers of change.
 - Continued investment in models that build agency.
-



Young lawyers visiting minority communities



' People are so used to discrimination in the labour market they do not see it as a violation.'

5

Roma law students and early career lawyers involved

3

communities provided with legal counselling and human rights trainings

1

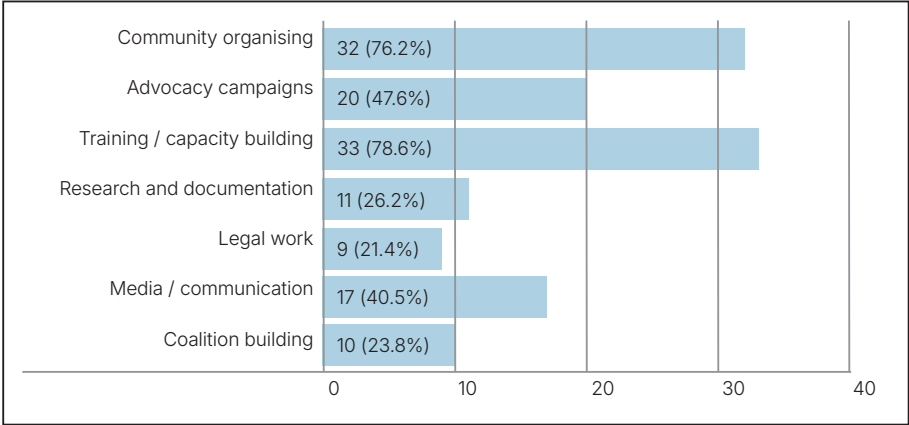
groundbreaking incubator programme in Eastern Europe

How far can 15,000 euros go?



A grant of €15,000 may not change systems overnight, but for small grassroots organizations, it can be transformative in the communities they serve. Across 42 surveyed projects, the impact was overwhelmingly positive: organizations reported moderate, **strong**, and **sometimes even transformative results**.

Partner survey: Which types of activities did the grant mainly support?
(multiple choice, 42 responses)



'The funding allowed us to pilot a new community program that we could not have launched with our regular budget. It enabled us to hire temporary staff, purchase essential materials, and organize workshops, which significantly increased our outreach and impact. Without this support, these activities would not have been possible.'

Across projects, the activities that generated the greatest impact were:

- Training and capacity-building: Practical skills in employment, human rights, advocacy or leadership which benefited participants long after the project ended.
- Direct services: Legal aid, psychosocial support and healthcare provided immediate and tangible benefits, particularly for highly vulnerable groups.
- Community-based activities: Workshops, cultural events, discussions, and outreach built trust and reached people often excluded from formal interventions.
- Youth-focused projects: Camps, creative workshops, and arts activities boosted confidence, belonging and social inclusion. Multi-day intensive programmes were especially transformative.
- Advocacy, networking and research: Amplifying community voices, building partnerships and influencing policies, laws and processes contributed to structural change.

What could additional funding have achieved?

'We would have tailored our program even more to local needs. We would have taken the training to other communities where the demand is huge.'

Regardless of the implemented project, CSOs agree that €15,000 is enough to start meaningful change, but certainly not enough to sustain or scale it. Additional funding would have significantly expanded their reach, deepened their impact, and made their results more sustainable. With more resources, organizations could:

- Reach more locations and more people, especially those most excluded
- Improve the depth of the work or offer more tailored support (such as individual legal advice, counselling, or smaller, more focused training groups)

- Lengthen project timelines and ensure proper follow-up
- Build sustainability, such as via long-term community structures, local NGO coalitions, strengthened leadership and organizational capacity
- Strengthen advocacy and visibility, such as through stronger partnerships with institutions

Where small grants fall short

‘They are ineffective because the small budget may not be enough to achieve a broader or long-term impact. But if there is no plan to continue the activities after the funding ends, the effect may be short-lived.’

‘Their impact can be limited when there is insufficient time or lack of follow-up support to ensure sustainability.’

‘They are less effective if the application process is overly complex, reporting requirements are too burdensome, or the grant amount is insufficient to achieve meaningful results.’

‘Our work demands time and continuous work, 11 months were of course not enough for us to achieve all the goals (even though we did implement all planned activities).’

Despite their value, small grants face limitations:

- Short-term focus: Projects often end before real results can take root or systemic change can be achieved
- Limited scale: Funding is not enough to reach all those in need.
- Operational gaps: Staff salaries and core needs mostly go unfunded.
- Reporting burden: Administrative requirements can outweigh grant size.
- Knowledge loss: Without follow-up, lessons learnt and networks built risk fading.

What makes small grants irreplaceable

'Small grants reach directly to local organizations and initiatives that best know the needs of people. Small grants are suitable for testing new approaches that can be scaled up.'

'When used thoughtfully, small grants can create meaningful change and reach those who need support the most.'

'They are flexible, accessible, and allow grassroots organizations to respond quickly to real community needs. They empower local actors and encourage innovation.'

'It enabled us to devote part of our working time to the activities, which we would otherwise, in much more limited scope, have to do pro bono when some of us would find time.'

Small grants are powerful because they:

- Reach grassroots organizations directly, including informal groups that can't access larger funding.
- Are flexible and responsive, adapting to emerging community needs and urgent situations.
- Support experimentation and innovation, testing ideas that can later scale.
- Serve as a catalyst, helping organizations build confidence, partnerships, and a track record for future funding.
- Pay for otherwise unpaid working hours and additional efforts of the personnel or fund temporary positions, consulting help.

2024: legal, political, economical, social and environmental background

The trends of 2023 continued into 2024, intensifying the pressures on civil society. Organizations in Eastern Europe faced elections, growing populist narratives, economic uncertainty, and ongoing challenges to civic space, human rights and democratic institutions.

In many countries, civil society actors reported reduced access to decision-making and increasing difficulty fulfilling their role as independent defenders of human rights. Bureaucratic hurdles and compliance obligations, especially for organizations working with international funding or on politically sensitive issues became more burdensome. New or proposed measures regulating NGOs created further uncertainty and limited operational flexibility.

Ongoing wars in Ukraine and Gaza alongside the change in US leadership generated additional instability regarding international funding for human rights, migration, democracy and gender topics.

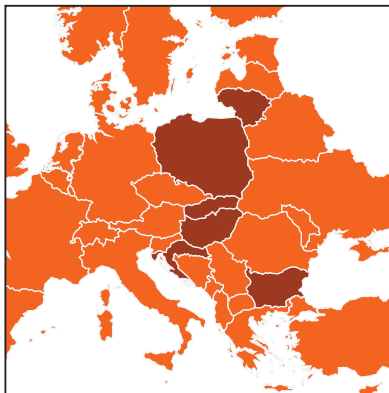
The 2024 European Parliament elections, elections in Croatia and Slovakia, and political developments in Lithuania influenced political priorities, public discourse and civic space; civil society actors, particularly those working on minority rights and human rights found themselves increasingly scrutinized and contested.

Persistent polarization and the visibility of xenophobic, nationalist or exclusionary rhetoric mainly targeted Roma, migrant, refugee and LGBTQ+ individuals. Online hate speech and disinformation increased social tensions. This directly affected the relationships between CSOs and the communities they served, making outreach, trust-building and advocacy more complex and fragile.

2024 in numbers

30 partners across **6** countries – five partners each in Slovakia, Poland, Hungary, Lithuania, Croatia, Bulgaria.

8,800+ individuals directly impacted and
3,400+ indirectly impacted



Thematic focus across projects



- **8 minority rights protection** projects
- **5 community empowerment** projects
- **4 civic participation** projects
- **4 youth engagement** projects
- **3 anti-discrimination** projects
- **3 gender equality / women's rights** projects
- **3 legal advocacy** projects
- **2 disability rights** projects

Communities in focus across projects



- **11 projects** working with **ethnic or religious minorities**
- **5 projects** working with **youth**
- **3 projects** working with **women and girls**
- **3 projects** working with **migrants / refugees**
- **2 projects** working with **persons with disabilities**
- **2 projects** working with **LGBTQ+ communities**

Activities across projects



- **10 community organising** projects
- **7 training and capacity building** projects
- **7 media and communication** projects
- **5 coalition building** projects
- **4 advocacy and campaigning** projects
- **3 research or documentation** projects
- **1 legal work** project

Partner survey



What are the main challenges for minority-led civil society organizations?

Funding restrictions: **7**
 Hostile political discourse: **5**
 Donor priorities shifting: **6**
 Online hate speech: **4**
 Decreasing civic space: **4**
 Security risks: **4**
 Legal restrictions: **2**

Responses to 'to what extent did the MARIO grant contribute to achieving your project goals?'

Not at all	0																			
Slightly	0																			
Moderately	0																			
Significantly	1																			
Very significantly																			10	

Responses to 'did the MARIO grant help strengthen your organization's long-term capacity?'

Not at all	0																			
Slightly	0																			
Moderately		2																		
Significantly								6												
Very significantly			3																	

Project Story 5: Supporting survivors of sexual violence in conflict in Poland

For the past 15 years, the Polish Center for Torture Survivors (PCTS) has worked with survivors of war-related torture and sexual violence. In Poland, psychologists are not systematically trained to work with survivors of conflict-related sexual violence. The knowledge exists internationally but it is not part of their standard training. The system does not proactively reach survivors with the necessary support.

With the escalation of war in Ukraine, PCTS decided to intervene at this point with a special and layered project.

With the support of the MARIO funding, they designed a full-day training for psychologists, focusing specifically on working with survivors of sexual violence in conflict. Fourteen specialists participated, gathering at the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees premises in Warsaw.

The PCTS Foundation understood that the lack of trained professionals is only one part of the problem. Even when specialists exist, they are simply difficult to find. Survivors, and the organizations supporting them, do not know where to turn. So alongside the training, a database was created of psychologists trained to work with these cases.

The organization identified the Polish Border Police as one of the key actors in first contact with survivors fleeing war. They observe and question survivors in the moments after they arrive in Poland, with only a short timeframe to decide how to act around them.

Twelve officers participated in a 'train-the-trainers' programme where they learned about the signs of trauma and how to conduct trauma-informed interviews. One officer reflected on how behaviours previously interpreted as aggression or resistance began to make sense when seen through the lens of trauma. Having already recognized the impact, the Border Police have asked for a second round of training.

The PCTS's work extends far beyond the above activities: they have been busy conducting research, providing legal assistance for survivors with accessing social services, and contributing to improving prosecution processes. The work at PCTS continues, even between funding cycles. They know that for those arriving with trauma, waiting is not an option.

Key takeaways

- Expertise in sexual violence in conflict exists in Poland but is not institutionalized.
- Early contact points, such as border authorities, play a critical role in shaping long-term outcomes.

What works

- Targeted, practice-oriented training
- Bridging sectors and working holistically; psychologists, legal experts, and border authorities should collaborate around a shared understanding.
- Creating tools such as databases that make specialized support visible and accessible.

What is needed

- Integration of trauma-informed approaches into standard training curricula for relevant professions.
- Continued investment in scaling initiatives that have already demonstrated impact.
- Recognition that supporting survivors requires coordination across systems, and avoiding isolated interventions.
- Long-term commitment to ensuring that dignity and care should be proactively provided for those in need.



'Nobody was thinking that this [was] a huge case, even the bigger organizations like UNHCR [weren't] thinking of how to provide help and advocate [for] the subject, so we did this in coalition with other organizations. In Polish we say "one drop of water can make a hole in the stone." Our work is like this.'



Training in Warsaw for psychologists, focusing specifically on working with survivors of sexual violence in conflict in Ukraine



14

psychologists and
12 Border Police
officers trained in
trauma-informed
assistance

1

pilot case of
trauma-informed
state prosecution
hearing introduced

1

coalition of 5
CSOs formed

Project Story 6: Susipažinkime – Mes Romuva

In Lithuania, some of Europe's oldest beliefs are reclaiming their place in public life. The country was the last in Europe to be Christianized, though its original pagan beliefs survived in covert forms or by blending with Christian tradition. Romuva, which is rooted in nature, ancestral knowledge and seasonal rituals, revives and reclaims this ancestral spirituality.

The Lithuanian Romuva Union brings together young people searching for identity with elders preserving rituals passed down through families and many generations. In 2024, with support from the MARIO programme, the Union launched the 'Susipažinkime – Mes Romuva' ('Let's get to know each other - we are Romuva') project. At a critical moment in the community's fight for state recognition, the project aimed to present Romuva as living and evolving, promoting dialogue with the wider public and policymakers.

A national seminar held at the Lithuanian Parliament brought together policymakers, academics, and representatives of religious minorities to discuss freedom of belief and equal recognition. For many, it was their first time encountering Romuva. At a five-day summer camp participants lived the tradition through rituals, songs, crafts, and shared meals. They celebrated seasonal festivals connected to the rhythms of nature, and rediscovered everyday cultural practices. A long-standing Romuva magazine was also revived, giving space for voices within the community. Alongside this, a series of eight public lectures and professional video materials made this ancient Baltic worldview accessible to wider audiences across Lithuania. Together, all these efforts combined knowledge, experience, and storytelling to bridge gaps in understanding.

Volunteers, many of whom had contributed years of unpaid work, saw their efforts recognized. Community members became more active, more connected, and more confident in representing their beliefs. Dialogue with institutions strengthened, and public awareness began to grow.

After years of persistent advocacy, in the face of significant Catholic opposition, Romuva has finally achieved state recognition as a 'non-traditional' religious community, a milestone that grants legal recognition of marriages, social protections for religious leaders, and certain financial and administrative benefits. However, it does not grant the full rights that religions legally recognized as 'traditional' enjoy, which highlights the continued hierarchy within Lithuania's religious framework.

What this tells us

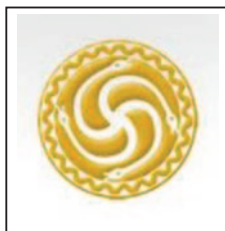
- Experiential learning, through camps, rituals, and shared practices creates emotional connection and deeper understanding.
- Combining rituals with media, lectures and public events makes heritage more accessible and engaging.

What works

- Linking cultural revival to concrete advocacy goals strengthens legitimacy and public impact.
- Direct dialogue with policymakers and the broader community builds trust and visibility.

What is needed

- More equitable and transparent legal frameworks for minority religious recognition.
- Continued investment in visibility, education and public dialogue to maintain momentum and protect minority rights.



The Lithuanian Romuva Union brings together young people searching for identity with elders preserving rituals passed down through families and many generations.



' The project created opportunities for an active and meaningful year, rich in events, gatherings, and shared cultural and spiritual experiences. It strengthened internal cohesion and encouraged greater participation among community members.'

5

days summer camp

8

public lectures

Sustainability - Did the project thrive or survive?

While the MARIO programme strengthened organizational capacity, several structural and operational challenges remain that affect sustainability. Understanding these challenges is crucial for donors who wish to maximize impact and ensure long-term benefits.

'We face challenges in accessing institutional support and public resources, which limits our capacity to scale our programmes. Ongoing discrimination and social barriers affecting the communities we work with also create additional difficulties in implementation.'

'Another key challenge is the inability to employ full-time staff due to a lack of stable, long-term funding. Our workforce depends heavily on project-based financing, which makes continuity and strategic development difficult.'

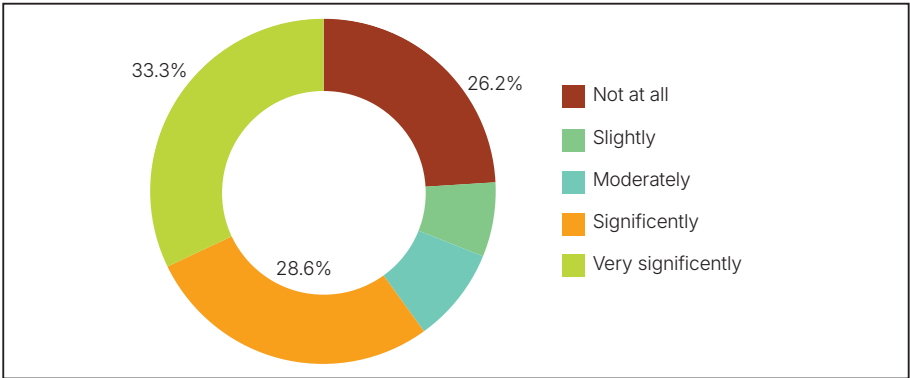
Organizations that leveraged partnerships, maintained volunteer engagement, and secured follow-up funding were able to thrive: expanding projects, deepening community engagement, and sustaining advocacy work. Those without access to consistent resources only survived, continuing essential activities but struggling to scale or institutionalize their work.

For those aiming to shift from project-based survival to long-term sustainability, the priority is securing stable, long-term support. Funding that combines operational stability with capacity-building produces long-term returns, enabling organizations to move from surviving to thriving.

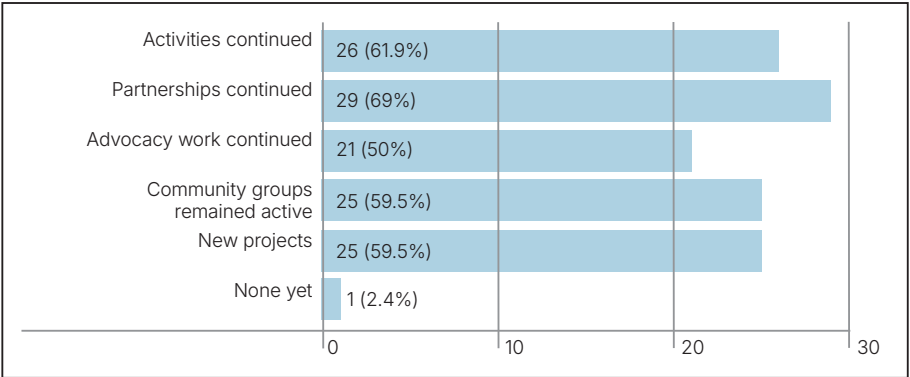
Much of the work for the programmes MARIO supported depends on volunteers, unpaid labor, pro-bono contributions or people balancing multiple jobs. This is not sustainable and can quickly lead to burnout. Rather than relying on goodwill, compensation for work, time and expertise is essential.

The MARIO programme has clearly strengthened the capacity of participating organizations, facilitated lasting partnerships, and inspired new initiatives. Yet, sustainability remains a challenge due to funding instability, volunteer dependency, and structural barriers.

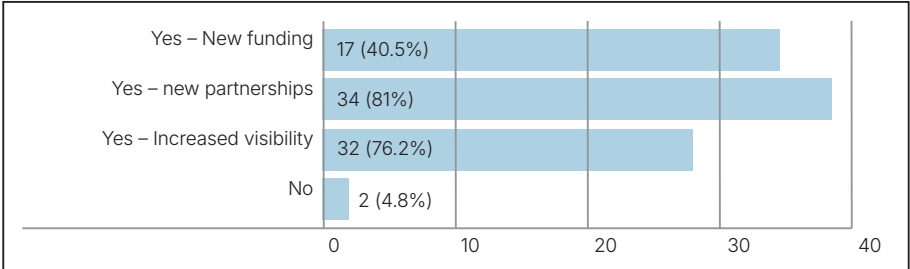
Partner survey: Did the MARIO grant help strengthen your organization's long term capacity?



Partner survey: Which of the following continued after the project ended?



Partner survey: Did the project help your organization access new opportunities?
(42 responses, multiple choice)



Project Story 7: From invisibility to recognition

In Slovakia, in segregated Romani settlements, there are people whose lives remain almost completely invisible to wider society. Svet Ticha, a small grassroots organization started to work on changing this without strategies or institutional backing, with just one person knocking on doors.

For the founder, Tomáš Dunko, a Romani man himself living with hearing impairment, this work is deeply personal. He has spent his life navigating systems that were never built for him, having first-hand experienced significant barriers to accessing information, communication and public services.

During one of his visits to a Romani settlement, he met a young Romani man with impaired hearing who had never attended school, was not registered in any formal system, did not speak Slovak or use standard sign language. He communicated only through a language created within his family. He was excluded from society, but also from the community of sign language users.

In 2024, the MARIO programme became the first major NGO to support Svet Ticha, enabling them to scale their work for the first time. They focused on the urgent question: how many Romani people with hearing impairment are there, and what is happening to them? Tomáš and his volunteers aimed to ensure that these individuals are recognized, included and able to access language, education, services, and above all, dignity.

In multiple locations, Svet Ticha identified that Roma with hearing impairments were absent from public systems and lived in extreme social isolation. They faced 4 overlapping layers of stigma tied to ethnicity, disability, poverty, and language exclusion.

Through fieldwork and collaboration with Romani health mediators, Svet Ticha reached 280 locations, identified over 500 Romani individuals with hearing impairments, and organized 20 workshops for frontline professionals, social workers, teachers, and health mediators. Many learned, for the first time, how to recognize hearing impairment, what support exists, and that hearing impairments are not the same as having an intellectual disability.

Families, for the first time, received support that had always existed, but had never truly reached them. Step by step, Roma individuals with hearing impairments gained access to education, information, language, and basic services, including hearing aids and a hope for a better quality of life. People who had lived in isolation their entire lives were finally heard.

Together with the community, Svet Ticha created a new sign for 'Roma' in Slovak Sign Language, rooted in Romani Sign Language and inspired by the Romani flag held close to the heart, replaced an offensive sign associated with harmful stereotypes of being stinky or playing the violin. Today, the new sign is used not only within the community, but also by interpreters and other professionals across Slovakia and increasingly at the EU level. It's a significant landmark in the recognition of Roma dignity.

Tomáš and the organization became recognized voices in Slovakia, invited into expert groups, and institutions, and brought lived experience into spaces where decisions are made. Despite this recognition, many institutions at national and EU level still hesitate to fully engage, support, or invest in their work. Many children still struggle to attend school regularly due to structural challenges. This is why Svet Ticha is dreaming big: to create a school tailored to the needs of Romani children with hearing impairments. Svet Ticha needs more capacity, more people, and sustained support.



Tomáš and the organization became recognized voices in Slovakia

' Our work is about ensuring that deaf Roma individuals are no longer "lost between worlds" between the Roma community, the deaf community, and the majority society, but are recognized, included, and provided with real access to language, education, services, and dignity.'

What this tells us

- Disability, ethnicity, poverty, and linguistic exclusion reinforce each other.
- Without data, entire communities remain invisible to policy and services.
- Grassroots, trust-based work reveals realities institutions do not see.
- Linguistic justice is not just communication, it is dignity and access to other rights.

What works

- Long-term, community-based fieldwork built on trust and needs
- Combining data collection with advocacy and awareness raising activities.
- Training frontline professionals (teachers, mediators, social workers)
- Community-led solutions that restore autonomy

What is needed

- Long-term, flexible funding to sustain grassroots organizations.
 - Systemic recognition of intersectional vulnerabilities in policy frameworks.
 - Accessible services in sign language, as a guaranteed right, not an exception.
 - Investment in education models tailored to deaf Roma children.
 - Stronger inclusion of grassroots expertise in national and EU-level decision-making.
-



280+

locations reached
for data collection

500+

Romani people with
hearing impairment
identified

20

workshops run
for frontline
workers

2025: legal, political, economical, social and environmental background

By 2025, many minority-led civil society organizations were still working in environments that felt difficult, uncertain, and discouraging. What comes through clearly from the survey is a shared experience of: shrinking civic space, political polarization, restricted institutional support and growing demands on CSOs to address complex human rights issues.

In the programme countries, public discourse and attitudes around minorities, particularly Roma, women, migrants and LGBTQ+ people, has become more hostile in several countries. These challenges were intensified by global developments including international conflicts, far-right influence and hate, economic pressures and a tightening funding landscape.

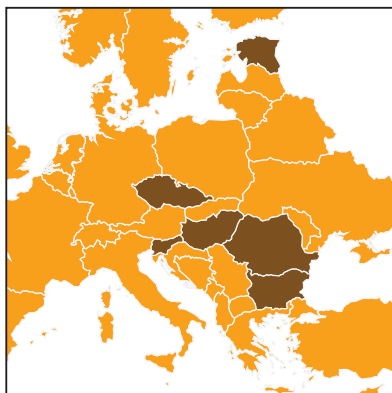
National elections in Poland, Romania, and the Czech Republic shaped government priorities and some increased hostile public discourse around minority rights, potentially affecting policies that support civil society. Several organizations continued reporting government monitoring and intervention, increased reporting, oversight requirements and additional administrative burdens as a serious concern, particularly those receiving foreign funding.

Changes in international donor priorities, including cuts and reallocations linked to USAID, increased competition for limited resources. For many minority-led organizations, this made access to funding even more difficult. In this environment, the MARIO programme support stands out. Organizations consistently described it as flexible, accessible, and grounded in trust – attributes missing from larger funding schemes and critical for grassroots organizations.

2025 in numbers

30 partners – **5** each in Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, Estonia and Slovenia and Bulgaria.

11,000+ individuals directly impacted and
5,600+ indirectly impacted



Thematic focus across projects



- **16 minority rights protection** projects
- **12 anti-discrimination** projects
- **14 civic participation** projects
- **8 youth engagement** projects
- **7 gender equality / women's rights** projects
- **13 community empowerment** projects
- **8 legal advocacy** projects
- **1 disability rights** projects

Communities in focus across projects



- **25** projects working with **ethnic or religious minorities**
- **13** projects working with **women and girls**
- **8** projects working with **youth**
- **7** projects working with **migrants and refugees**
- **3** projects working with **persons with disabilities**
- **3** projects working with **LGBTQ+ communities**

Activities across projects



- **14 community organizing** projects
- **12 advocacy campaigns** projects
- **14 training and capacity-building** projects
- **8 media and communication** projects
- **4 coalition building** projects
- **5 research or documentation** projects
- **8 legal work** projects

Partner survey



What are the main challenges for minority-led civil society organizations? *(multiple response, 20 responses)*

- Online hate speech: **13**
- Funding restrictions: **10**
- Donor priorities shifting: **11**
- Hostile political discourse: **10**
- Decreasing civic space: **9**
- Security risks: **5**
- Legal restrictions: **5**

Responses to ‘Did the MARIO grant help strengthen your organization’s long-term capacity?’

Not at all	0													
Slightly		2												
Moderately							6							
Significantly						5								
Very significantly								7						

Responses to ‘To what extent did the MARIO grant contribute to achieving your project goals?’

Not at all	0													
Slightly	0													
Moderately	0													
Significantly					4									
Very significantly														16

Project Story 8: Reclaiming the Narrative

In the Czech media landscape, Romani people are mostly just talked about, rarely listened to. Public narratives simplify their lives into stereotypes: they report poverty, criminality or Roma as a social burden. These portrayals misrepresent reality, reinforcing hate and discrimination against Roma communities in everyday life.

For over six years, Tuke TV, an online audiovisual and community media platform, has been working to change that. With a small but dedicated team, they create high-quality content and build spaces where Romani people across generations can tell their story, be creative and be seen beyond stereotypes.

In 2025, supported by the MARIO programme, through the ‘Dumb Questions II’ project, 8 Romani people, 4 women and men, young and older from different cities in the Czech Republic and Slovakia came together to tell their stories, challenge stereotypes and speak to the public. Altogether, 12 videos were launched on 8 April, International Roma Day, addressing sensitive and often uncomfortable topics, such as the use of terms ‘Roma’ instead of ‘Gypsy’ and reflections on online hate speech, reaching more than 577,000 views.

Through workshops, participants gained practical media skills in filming, scripting, editing and public speaking. They exchanged strategies for responding to microaggressions and online hate, skills many had never formally developed, despite facing discrimination in their daily lives. Most importantly, they gained something harder to measure: confidence in their own voice.

Alongside strong positive feedback, the videos attracted hate, much of it targeting young Romani women in sexualized ways or expressing homophobia. In response, Tuke TV created safer digital spaces by moderating reactions, limiting comments and setting clear ethical boundaries to protect the creators.

The project moved from the online space into real-life conversations. Through six discussions in schools and community centres, dozens of non-Roma students and their teachers engaged directly with the creators. Many students, encountering authentic Romani perspectives for the first time, were open and curious. At the same time, some resistance from some teachers revealed a deeper structural reality: young people are ready for change, but institutions are not always willing to follow.

The impact extended even further; the Museum of Romani Culture in Brno incorporated the videos into its educational programmes, ensuring that the stories and perspectives continue to reach new audiences beyond the project itself.

'Dumb Questions II' demonstrated what is possible when Romani voices are centred, supported and trusted. It created overarching, genuine connections between creators, audiences, institutions and communities.

What this tells us

- Disability, ethnicity, poverty, and linguistic exclusion reinforce each other.
- Without data, entire communities remain invisible to policy and services.
- Grassroots, trust-based work reveals realities institutions do not see.
- Linguistic justice is not just communication, it is dignity and access to other rights.

What works

- Long-term, community-based fieldwork built on trust and needs
- Combining data collection with advocacy and awareness raising activities.
- Training frontline professionals (teachers, mediators, social workers)
- Community-led solutions that restore autonomy

What is needed

- Long-term, flexible funding to sustain grassroots organizations.
 - Systemic recognition of intersectional vulnerabilities in policy frameworks.
 - Accessible services in sign language, as a guaranteed right, not an exception.
 - Investment in education models tailored to deaf Roma children.
 - Stronger inclusion of grassroots expertise in national and EU-level decision-making.
-



12 videos were launched on 8 April, International Roma Day, addressing sensitive and often uncomfortable topics of Roma rights protection



'Romani people are often portrayed in the media as vulnerable groups, or criminals. There's almost no visibility of Romani experts, professionals, middle-class voices or the everyday lives and contributions of Romani people.'

12

videos
created

577,847

times the videos have
been viewed

68+

students and
their teachers
engaged

Project Story 9: Reclaiming spaces where you are not welcome

In January 2021, several Roma families lost their homes in a fire in a segregated settlement in Csíksomlyó, Romania. After a short period of emergency support came prolonged uncertainty, with families living together in a sports hall under conditions that were never meant for everyday life. It was in this situation that Orsolya Csata, a TV journalist, connected with the children. There was no formal project at the beginning, only time spent together, conversations, reading books and a growing sense that the children needed more than waiting and adapting to life in the sports hall.

At some point in 2023, a simple idea emerged: to learn how to swim, as neither Orsolya nor the children knew how. Finding someone willing to teach them was not easy. Several trainers refused the job before one person agreed. Thanks to MARIO funding, the swimming practice got more organized and the children started attending weekly lessons in 2025. All 40 enrolled kids and Orsolya successfully learnt how to swim.

At the swimming pool, even after years of visits, the group could only enter through the back door and use a separate changing room. Nothing was openly forbidden to them, but nothing was fully offered either.

This did not stop the children from returning.

Over time the group formed its own rhythm, its own internal sense of belonging. Learning to swim became more than just crossing the pool or dreams of one day becoming lifeguards, it meant being in an unwelcoming place, and staying there anyway.

Some of the older children began to go on their own, in small groups. In spite of the possibility of physical threat, whispers, unexplained restrictions, or just the sense that their presence had to be justified again and again. Orsolya would remain nearby, visible through the window, making sure that if something happened, someone was there.

Before this, many of the children had already learnt that public spaces like cinemas, theatres and pools were not for them. Now, they know they can at least enter. The funding made this possible. It covered the swimming lessons, which were otherwise inaccessible, and supported additional activities that created space for expression and connection: PhotoVoice sessions, where children explored themes of friendship and love through participatory photography; Forum Theatre, where situations of exclusion could be played out and reimagined; and a sewing room, which continues to function as a shared space for both children and adults.

For a grassroots initiative like this, the funding was significant as it allowed the work to exist without being supported entirely by personal resources. At the same time, it remained limited in relation to the scale of need. When the swimming sessions ended, the children began asking, almost daily, when they could start again.

Eventually, Orsolya formalised her initiatives and founded an organization, ASOCIATIA RIGHT- RIGHT EGYESÜLET, to formalize the work. This is often how grassroots work develops: people respond first and the structure follows later. Yet funding systems rarely meet initiatives at this stage. This raises a difficult question: how much effort can be expected from those who are already excluded? Who needs to take the first step, and who needs to move further? For how long can a one-sided effort be sustained?

What this tells us

- Access without acceptance creates partial inclusion: presence is possible but belonging remains uncertain.
- Children can build confidence and resilience, but structural exclusion continues to reduce their possibilities.
- Grassroots responses often emerge where systems fail, addressing needs that otherwise go unmet.

What works

- Starting from relationships and shared experiences, rather than predefined top-down interventions
- Activities like swimming that combine skill-building with emotional and social development
- Creating additional spaces where expression and community can grow more freely

What is needed

- Funding that supports initiatives at early, informal stages
 - Clear responsibility from public institutions to ensure equal and dignified access to services
 - A shift from allowing entry to actively creating conditions of belonging
-



In Csíksomlyó, Romania the organization covered the swimming lessons, which were otherwise inaccessible for Roma kids



' Even children who now know how to navigate the swimming pool, would not go there unaccompanied. Because they know they are not truly welcome. And that is not something they can change on their own.'

8

permanent
volunteers
engaged

50+

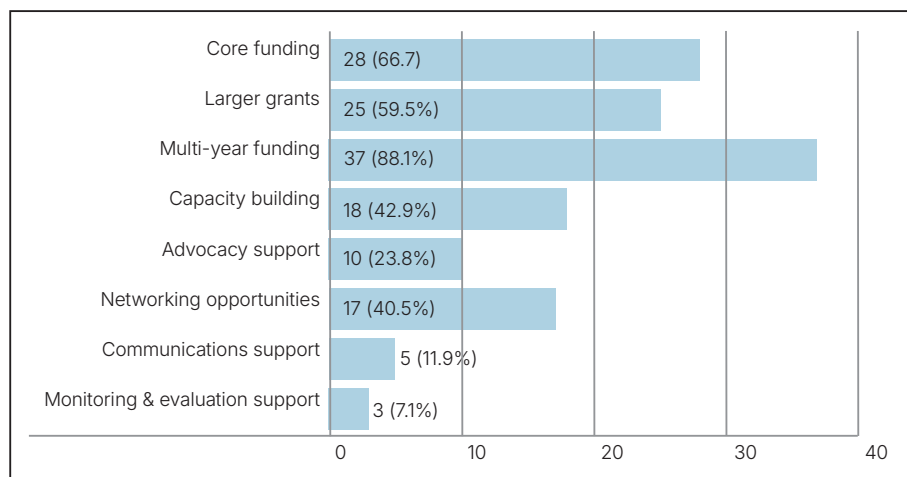
swimming
classes held

40

children have
access to
community
services

How CSOs could be better supported

Partner survey: What types of support would help your organization most in the future?
(42 responses, up to 3 selections allowed)



The following recommendations emerged from the survey:

Larger NGOs and funders must stop:

- Overloading small, grassroots CSOs with complex administrative requirements: many organizations highlighted that current reporting and application processes consume more energy than the value of the grants themselves.
- Forcing CSOs to rely on short-term project funding: short cycles limit the ability of organizations to build sustainable programmes, retain staff and achieve meaningful long-term impact.

Larger NGOs and funders must start:

- Providing **multi-year and flexible funding**. This allows CSOs to plan strategically, retain staff, and respond to evolving community needs. Suggested cycles are 2–5 years.
- Increasing grant amounts to support at least one full-time position and cover indirect and core operational costs. This helps grassroots CSOs move from ‘survival mode’ to professionalization.

- Differentiating funding calls for small grassroots CSOs versus large organizations or consortia to avoid unfair competition.
- Offering targeted **capacity-building support**, including training, mentoring from more experienced organizations, knowledge exchange, networking, and advocacy guidance.
- Facilitating stronger collaboration with public institutions and national authorities, helping organizations navigate policy changes and engage in evidence-based advocacy.
- Actively funding advocacy work, particularly for unrecognized or marginalized communities that need resources to claim their rights at the national level.

They must continue:

- Combining **financial support with expert mentorship, guidance, practical tools and networking opportunities**, which adds significant value to programmes.
- Successful practices like MARIO-style calls, which reduce competition pressure between large and small CSOs and allow more equitable access to grants.
- Supporting flexibility for urgent or community-specific needs, including adaptable funding and smaller grants where appropriate.

'MRG and EU funding could better support grassroots CSOs by providing more sustainable and predictable financing mechanisms, including multi year and flexible grants. This would enable organizations to build and retain stable staff capacity, which is essential when working with vulnerable communities.'

Project Story 10: Advocating for Justice for the Erased

In 1991, when Yugoslavia broke apart, new borders and new states redefined nationality overnight. People who had lived their whole lives in one place suddenly found themselves in another, leaving them in a legal void. In Slovenia, the government required such individuals to apply for citizenship or register as ‘foreigners’. About 25,000 people did neither, mostly because they were unaware of the rules or their consequences. In 1992 the state decided to erase them administratively from the registry of permanent residents, depriving them of their legal status.

Many years later, Slovenia acknowledged the injustice and in 2010, around 10,000 people had their legal status restored and received some form of compensation. But by then, many had already left the country, some had died, others had disappeared from public records. What remained was not only a legal gap, but a long shadow carried by those who stayed and by their children.

Today, a small number of adults and children are still known to be living in this unresolved situation. The law has changed, but not in a way that fully works for them. The process of restoring status or citizenship remains complex, demanding and inaccessible. Without legal guidance, it is nearly impossible to navigate.

What does it mean to live like this?

- To be born and raised in an EU country, but not recognized by it.
- To hesitate before seeking healthcare, education beyond primary school, formal employment or social support.
- To explain oneself repeatedly at institutions, at borders, in everyday life.
- To carry legal uncertainty and a serious stigma.

The Peace Institute (Mirovni inštitut) has supported these communities since 1991. It works in the slow lane of human rights change. The activities they carry out, including legal advocacy, counselling, and psychosocial support in more than 20 individual cases, took long months or even years to show tangible results. Draft amendments to status laws pass slowly (if at all) through the legislative process, individual cases may take years to resolve, and the mental and social impact of support is often hard to measure.

In 2025, funding from the MARIO programme allowed the organization to continue its critical work. It strengthened their ability to reach institutions, raise awareness, ensuring that the long-term consequences of the erasure remain visible and

challenged. Among the activities supported, one beneficiary shared a personal testimony, 'Erased in the Country Where I Was Born', published on the Peace Institute's website. First-person stories like this bring the consequences of administrative invisibility into sharp relief for the public and policymakers.

The financial support influenced the organization in an unexpectedly positive way too: the EU funding gave The Peace Institution more credibility and legitimacy, enabling dialogue with entities that might otherwise have overlooked the problem or the CSO's efforts. Even beyond the funded period, the organization continues its work. The staff plans to reduce their hours or salary, but will not stop advocating for equal treatment.

Key takeaways

- Legal and psychosocial support is cumulative. The impact may not be immediate, but together they address long-term exclusion and social marginalization.
- Recognition and legitimacy through EU funding can open doors that otherwise remain closed.

What works

- Combining legal advocacy with psychosocial support addresses both human rights and personal perceptions of dignity.
- Storytelling raises awareness and humanizes statistics.
- EU endorsement of projects increases credibility, institutional access, and sustainability of advocacy.

What is needed

- Multi-year, flexible funding for long-term advocacy and support.
- Recognition of the hidden labour required to sustain human rights interventions.
- Continued public awareness campaigns to challenge stigma and enforce accountability at national and EU levels.





' Maybe in 10 or so years the number of impacted individuals will be large enough, and the EU will open its eyes, recognize them, and finance projects targeted at people without status.'

11

advocacy meetings
with journalists,
political, human
rights and
governmental
organizations

6

personal
stories
shared

70,000+

views on their social
media campaign

Project Story 11: Small Funds, Lasting Cohesion

In Estonia, where more than 200 minorities live (around 31 per cent of the population), creating meaningful opportunities for intercultural exchange is both essential and challenging. Many communities coexist without structured and safe spaces to connect, share experiences and build relationships across cultural or political divides.

For over a decade, one civil society organization has addressed this gap through its annual Ethno-Fair and Estonian National Forum, long-standing initiatives dedicated to celebrating cultural diversity and promoting dialogue. However, sustaining these initiatives requires significant and continuous fundraising, placing a heavy burden on the organization each year.

With the support of the MARIO grant, covering approximately 40 per cent of total costs, the Estonian Union of National Minorities (Eestimaa Rahvuste Ühendus) was able to deliver the 15th Ethno-Fair and the 37th Estonian National Forum in 2025. The events required the coordinated work of about 140 contributors, including a large number of volunteers, and welcomed more than 10,000 visitors.

A total of 33 minority communities participated, presenting their heritage through concerts, masterclasses and open community activities. These formats created inclusive and accessible spaces for interaction across generations and backgrounds.

Importantly, the events enabled individuals from countries affected by war and long-standing political conflicts to meet and spend time together in a peaceful setting. This reflects the organization's core mission: to preserve and promote human connection beyond political tensions and short-term economic interests.

Participants reported stronger emotional connections to, increased openness to and more positive perceptions of other communities. The initiative also engaged over 30 young leaders in the planning and implementation, building organizational capacity for the future. At the same time, the project highlights ongoing structural challenges. The initiative depends on multiple funding sources each year, requiring considerable administrative effort and creating uncertainty around its continuity.

Key takeaways

- Small funding does not mean small impact
- Intercultural tensions can be softened through contact
- This kind of impact is difficult to measure and easy to overlook. But it is foundational for how societies hold together

What works

- Letting communities represent themselves, in their own way
- Involving younger generations in real responsibility and ownership

What is needed

- **Multi-year, flexible funding mechanisms** for community-based initiatives
 - Recognition of cultural and social cohesion initiatives as a key component of **democratic resilience**
 - Simplified administrative requirements for small and volunteer-driven CSOs
 - Support for **capacity building and intergenerational leadership**
-



Estonian Union of National Minorities (Eestimaa Rahvuste Ühendus) organised an Ethno-Fair in 2025 with 33 minority communities participation in Tallin.



'It can be a great motivation for other EU countries to see how a small organization can organize such a huge and successful event every year.'

33

minorities
represented

14,000

individuals
participated

30+

young leaders
engaged

Project Story 12: Womxn to Womxn

In Slovenia, migrant and refugee women from the SWANA region (Southwest Asia and North Africa) navigate daily life through a maze of bureaucratic barriers, limited information and language challenges. Basic rights and needs, like housing, healthcare or social support are often out of reach and access. They are othered, their complex stories and lives reduced to stereotypes tied to religion, migration or culture.

Muslim women wearing headscarves face Islamophobia in public and institutional spaces. Queer and trans women confront exclusion both within their communities and in wider society. Since 2021 the requirement to pass a language exam to stay in the social welfare system added further obstacles, particularly for women who are illiterate, raising children or recovering from trauma.

Reka Si is an organization led by migrant and refugee women working at the intersection of feminism, migration, and community organising. Their everyday practice centres on community-led approaches, building trust, sharing knowledge, and creating spaces where migrant and refugee women can support one another, generate knowledge, and document their experiences.

In 2025, with support from the MARIO programme, Reka Si launched 'Womxn to Womxn: Intercultural Forces' in which 15 Arabic-speaking immigrant and refugee women, including Muslim women and queer women, came together for three seminars and multiple reflection sessions to conduct participatory research on access to housing, healthcare, protection from gender-based violence, bullying in schools, and broader inclusion systems. They produced Arabic-language videos, booklets, a zine, and a survey for women who are illiterate, ensuring that knowledge is accessible to everyone. These are continuously reused, adapted, and shared with new groups. They brought their experiences into a real-life, futuristic theatre performance presented in Maribor, opening a space for dialogue between immigrant communities and local audiences.

The impact was profound.

A woman, after losing state-provided housing, secured safe accommodation, enrolled in language courses despite being illiterate, and found her first paid job.

A trans refugee woman started the process of legally changing her deadname.

Another woman who had been told she was too old to study, successfully enrolled in a language course.

A young woman, after learning about different forms of gender-based violence, came forward to report abuse and moved into safe housing.

Women created their first CV and applied for jobs.

A mother who felt powerless in the face of her children's being bullied found the confidence to act, collecting evidence, meeting school staff and stopping the bullying.

Women accessed healthcare for the first time after years without care.

Reka Si was invited to consult with the Government Office for the Support of the Integration of Migrants and Asylum Seekers, contributed to a national manifesto on migration and integration in the 2025 elections and participated in shaping the Slovenian Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security. The methods, materials, and relationships developed continue to be adapted and shared to support other organizations, multiplying the impact.

The project connected individuals with institutions, strengthening both access to rights and collective agency. Women are no longer navigating systems alone, they are doing it together, with knowledge, confidence, and support.

What this tells us

- Intersectionality is critical in practice: policies that ignore gender, race, migration status, and sexuality fail the most vulnerable.
- Small, targeted funding can create multi-level impact, from individual life changes to policy engagement.

What works

- Recognizing immigrant and refugee women as knowledge producers and advocates.
- Bottom-up, participatory, community-led, peer-to-peer approaches build ownership and trust.
- Intersectional feminist frameworks that reflect diverse lived realities.
- Combining research, storytelling and art to engage communities and the wider society.
- Producing accessible materials (videos, multilingual content).

What is needed

- Stronger consultation mechanisms between CSOs and policymakers.
 - Legal and institutional protection for minority-led organizations.
 - Continued EU support, which strengthens legitimacy and access to policy spaces
-



Futuristic theatre performance in Maribor, Slovenia opening a space for dialogue between immigrant communities and local audiences



'We built a community that linked individuals with institutions. This community contributes to systemic and institutional change by empowering immigrant and refugee women as actors and advocates.'

15

migrant and
refugee women
participated

3

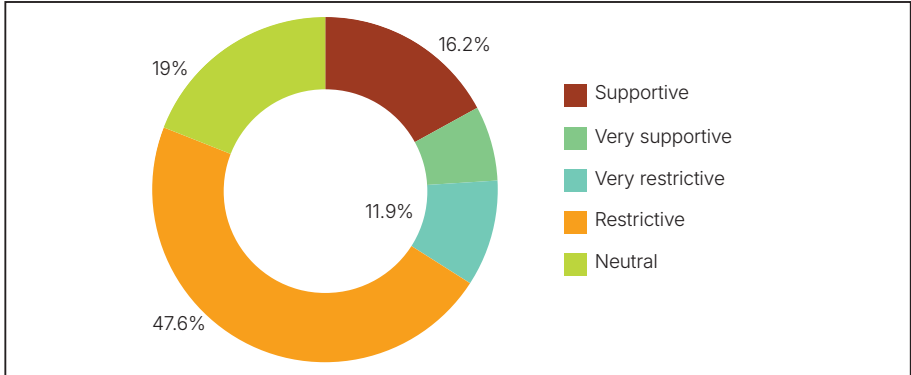
seminars
held

1

theatre piece
performed

The environment CSOs need

Partner survey: How would you describe the current environment for civil society in your country? (42 responses)



Between 2023 and 2025, minority-led civil society organizations were navigating constant pressure, uncertainty, and, in many cases, open hostility. In the programme countries, organizations consistently described a landscape shaped by shrinking civic space, political uncertainty and structural inequalities and working in an environment where doing meaningful, community-based work often meant pushing against structural barriers, which directly affected their ability to plan, sustain, and scale their work.

Challenges in the last 3-5 years:

- Funding restrictions and instability, with a heavy reliance on short-term, project-based grants limiting stability, increasing administrative burdens and undermining continuity of services and community trust. Many organizations described operating in ‘survival mode.’
- Hostile political discourse, including rising far-right movements, populism, racism, and xenophobia lead to reduced openness from institutions, shrinking opportunities for advocacy and, in some cases, direct hostility.
- Decreasing civic space, including increased legal and administrative pressures on NGOs means disproportionate burdens on smaller, grassroots CSOs often run by volunteers or very small teams.

- Online hate speech and disinformation, targeting both communities and organizations, disseminating targeted harassment, racist narratives, and coordinated campaigns discrediting activists and their work, particularly against those working with Romani communities.
- Shifting donor priorities, making access to funding more competitive and unpredictable due to the multiplicative impacts of global issues from war to economic instability

Pressing needs for the next 3–5 years:

Despite differences among national contexts, there is strong consensus in what minority-led CSOs identify as their most urgent needs:

- **Long-term and flexible funding** – that covers not only activities but also salaries, infrastructure, and operational costs. Without it, organizations remain trapped in short cycles of project delivery, unable to build stability or scale impact.
- **Organizational capacity and professionalization.** CSOs operate with minimal staff or rely heavily on volunteers. To move from survival mode to strengthened long-term impact, they need strong investment in human resources, staff, skills and systems, including management, communication, strategic planning, advocacy and monitoring and evaluation.
- **Stronger institutional partnerships and participation.** Frequent political changes and weak consultation mechanisms mean that minority-led CSOs are often excluded from decision-making. They need stable channels to engage with public institutions, not as temporary service providers, but as long-term partners shaping policies that affect their communities.
- **Protection and enabling environment.** CSOs are working in increasingly hostile contexts, facing legal uncertainty, and online attacks. Stronger legal protections, enforcement mechanisms, and public support for civil society are essential to ensure they can operate safely and independently.
- **Networking, visibility, and access to information.** Many organizations highlighted the importance of cross-sector and cross-country cooperation, access to knowledge, and platforms that amplify their work. Visibility directly affects funding opportunities, partnerships and influence.

- **Well-being and sustainability of people.** Behind every organization are individuals, many overworked, underpaid or volunteering their time. Burnout, mental health challenges and staff turnover are real risks. Supporting CSOs also means supporting the people who sustain them, through realistic expectations and long-term investment.

These responses tell a consistent story: minority-led CSOs are doing essential, high-impact work in difficult conditions, **without the structural support needed to sustain it**. There is no lack of innovative ideas, commitment, or community engagement. What is missing is **stability, trust, and long-term investment**. Without addressing these systemic gaps, the risks are manifold: organizational burnout, the loss of critical knowledge, relationships and spaces that hold communities together.



'The most urgent needs of minority-led civil society organizations relate to securing sustainable and predictable funding that would allow them to build and maintain stable staff capacity and engage in long-term planning.'

'[The] key need is the strengthening of institutional partnerships. Support for advocacy, networking, and regional cooperation would help ensure a more sustainable and lasting impact.'

Liaison officer testimonials

The MARIO programme, six national Liaison Officers supported and monitored the projects throughout their project cycles and formed vital bridges between MRG and the programme countries.

Viktor Teru

MARIO Liaison Officer for Slovakia and Czech Republic

Serving as a liaison officer in the MARIO programme over the past three years has been a really meaningful and transformative experience to me. In this role, I worked closely with 15 grassroots organizations: 10 in Slovakia and 5 in the Czech Republic. Most of them Roma-led, alongside organizations representing Hungarian and Muslim communities in Slovakia.



For many of these organizations, this was their first experience with a European grant, and a project implemented in English. This posed significant challenges in the administrative requirements and in the communication, reporting process, and in the overall project management. As a result, my role required intensive, often daily support, bridging coordination, networking, communication, and the organization of activities and events.

This close collaboration was demanding, but highly impactful. The programme strengthened the capacities of grassroots organizations, increased their confidence to engage at the international level, and created meaningful opportunities for cross-border cooperation. I also benefitted greatly from the collaboration: it significantly enhanced my own professional skills, particularly in navigating diverse thematic areas and supporting organizations operating in complex environments.

A particularly strong example of impact is the organization Svet Ticha, led by Dr. Tomáš Dunko. It represents one of the most prominent cases of how the MARIO programme enabled a grassroots organization to establish itself and move towards scaling its activities, with national, and gradually expanding international reach. The organization introduced a new, non-stereotypical sign for the word 'Roma', which is

now being used in mainstream media and at international conferences. It has also produced some of the first relevant field-based data and publications on deaf Roma living in marginalized communities.

I can attest that other organizations achieved important progress as well. Several of them established strong international partnerships through programme meetings in Budapest and Brussels and have since jointly implemented new projects – creating new partnerships and strengthening existing work via connections with more experienced NGOs.

Beyond the professional dimension, this journey was also deeply personal. I had the opportunity to meet inspiring leaders and build lasting relationships that continue beyond the duration of the programme.

MARIO clearly demonstrated that when grassroots organizations are given trust, support, and space, they are able to generate meaningful and lasting impact. It also highlighted the importance of long-term, trust-based engagement as a foundation for sustainable change.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the Minority Rights Group for the opportunity to be part of this journey. I had the privilege of working with an exceptionally professional and genuinely compassionate team, whose support over the past three years has been invaluable to me both professionally and personally. I strongly believe in the potential for continued collaboration in the future.



Nejra Kadić Meški

MARIO Liaison Officer for Croatia and Slovenia

As a Liaison Officer I was responsible for facilitating effective cooperation between the MARIO Network and CSOs in Croatia and Slovenia. I ensured consistent communication, supported CSOs' active engagement in project activities, and contributed to strengthening partnerships with other organizations working on minority rights. My scope of work included

monitoring developments affecting civic space, collecting relevant data from the field and supporting advocacy efforts aimed at addressing challenges faced by minorities.

A major success of the organizations implementing projects in Slovenia and Croatia was their ability to effectively engage minority communities and achieve tangible project results. The organizations were generally very enthusiastic about this fund because it gave them the opportunity to learn about the project cycle while implementing projects. They greatly appreciated the fact that they received funding for smaller projects for which, until then, they could not find a suitable call.

The challenges I observed included that, for some organizations, the funds were not sufficient because they wanted to enrich their projects with additional activities or extend the duration of the project and support. In a few cases, another challenge was the use of English for communication among senior organization leaders. On the other hand, this also had an advantage, as it created space for more intensive participation of younger members of the organizations who became engaged in minority rights work.

Grassroots organizations are essential because they operate closest to communities and are therefore best positioned to understand and respond to real, everyday needs, particularly those of marginalized and minority groups. They give a voice to individuals who are underrepresented in formal decision-making processes and ensure that policies are informed by lived experiences rather than top-down assumptions. They build trust within communities, mobilize local participation, and respond quickly and flexibly to emerging challenges. Grassroots organizations act as a bridge between communities and institutions, ensuring that no group is left unheard and that societal development is more inclusive and equitable.

The funding went beyond simple financial support and directly strengthened grassroots organizations to become more professional, confident and strategically oriented, maintaining operations even in difficult environments.

Despite strong positive effects, systemic barriers remain. These include short funding durations (typically around 11 months) and dependence on project-based funding. Organizations still lack core, multi-year operational support. What MARIO accomplished in this regard was to strengthen associations in identifying potential donors and preparing them for grant applications, and to connect associations both within the same country and across different countries, ensuring their collaboration as partners in potential consortia when applying for national and EU funding.



Supported projects per year – MARIO programme

2023

Bulgaria

- Roma-Lom Foundation
- Equal Opportunities Initiative Association
- Association for Civic Enterprises in Bulgaria – KLIN
- Human Rights-Step by Step Association
- Areté Youth Foundation Bulgaria

Croatia

- ALEM – Association for Nurturing and Promoting the Culture, Musical and Spiritual Traditions of Bosniaks
- Sevdah Zagreb
- 'Culture Hub Croatia' Platform for Education, Creativity and Development through Culture
- Centre for Peace Studies (CPS)
- International women's business network

Latvia

- Communities cooperation network 'Selonian islands'
- Society of Latgalian Culture
- Zemgale NGO Centre
- Association of LGBT and their friends 'Mozaika'
- Association SPIIKIIZI

Poland

- Association Jududoro
- Foundation for Somalia
- Jewish Culture Festival Society
- Kitchen of Conflicts Foundation
- NGO Unity

Slovakia

- Community Center of Minority
- Roma advocacy and research centre
- eduRoma – Roma Education Project
- MINORITY SK
- EDUSOC, o.z.

Hungary

- Hiszako Indie Production Non/Profit Ltd.
- Partners Hungary Foundation
- Romaversitas Foundation
- Phiren Amencia International Network
- Bringing Light Foundation

2024

Hungary

- Somnakuno Drom Roma Women's Civic Association
- Roma Parliament – Civil Rights Movement
- Oltalom Sport Association
- Jövőkép – Educational and Cultural Diversity Association and International Network
- Diverse Youth Network Association (DYN)

Slovakia

- The Islamic Foundation in Slovakia
- BAFF SA
- Roma for future – Chance on better life
- A World of Silence (Association for the social integration of health impaired citizens and marginalized groups)
- Compromise

Poland

- Muslim Religious Union in Poland Muslim Community in Białystok
- The Polish Center for Torture Survivors
- Egala Association
- Kaleidoscope of Cultures
- Jewish Gymnastic and Sports Association Makabi Warszawa

Lithuania

- Baltic Region Roma Women Association
- Lithuanian Kazakh Community Nursaulė
- Heritage and Education
- Lithuanian Ramuva Union
- Rykantai post

Croatia

- Living Atelier Dajht Kralj
- Taekwondo klub Jastrebo
- Civic Initiative 'My Town – Sisak'

Perspective

- Centre for Theatre of the Oppressed POKAZ

Bulgaria

- Regional Youth Centre – Breznik (RYC)
- Rodpchana Woman Club
- National Association for Social Cooperation and Partnership – NSSSP
- Foundation 'For Hope'
- 'Fund IGA' Foundation

2025

Slovenia

- Reka Si institute for sustainable living
- Peace Institute – Institute for Contemporary Social and Political Studies
- Bosniak Cultural Union Of Slovenia
- The Averroes Cultural and Educational Institute Ljubljana
- The Albanian Cultural Association Lirija Velenje

Romania

- Right Association
- Association of the Civic Union of Young Roma from Romania (UCTRR)
- Association Roma Cultural Center 'O Del Amenca'
- Customs-Education-Culture-Gaujani Association
- DANROM Făurei Association

Hungary

- UCCU Roma Informal Education Foundation
- Romes For Development Civil Association
- Polgár Foundation for Equity
- Legal Empowerment Association for Legal Awareness

- Amrita Education Orientation Association

Estonia

- Estonian Union of National Minorities
- The Council of Elders of the Congress of the Võro people
- NGO Ukrainian Center
- European Roma Forum in Estonia NGO
- Estonian-Mordva Society

Czech Republic

- Tuke TV
- Romodrom
- Romani Hub
- Awen Amenca
- ATTENTION, ART

Bulgaria

- Young Improvers For Youth Development
- Bulgarian Family Planning and Sexual Health Association (BFPA)
- Association Amala – Friends
- Association non-profit 'Zakrilnits'
- Pulse Foundation

europa

working to secure the rights of
minorities and indigenous peoples

Minority
Rights
Group

MARI

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for grassroots minority

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Budapest Hungary. Website www.minorityrights.org



The report is published in contribution to public understanding.
Copies of this study are available online at www.minorityrights.org