

Lorch, Jasmin; Onken, Monika; Sombatpoonsiri, Janjira

**Working Paper**

## Sustaining civic space in times of COVID-19: Global trends

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German  Institute for Global and Area Studies  
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GIGA Research Programme:  
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## **Sustaining Civic Space in Times of COVID-19: Global Trends**

Jasmin Lorch, Monika Onken, and  
Janjira Sombatpoonsiri

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German Institute for Global and Area Studies (GIGA)

Leibniz-Institut für Globale und Regionale Studien

Neuer Jungfernstieg 21

20354 Hamburg

Germany

<[info@giga-hamburg.de](mailto:info@giga-hamburg.de)>

<[www.giga-hamburg.de](http://www.giga-hamburg.de)>

# Sustaining Civic Space in Times of COVID-19: Global Trends

## Abstract

In this paper we challenge the conventional wisdom that COVID-19 and related legal restrictions invariably reinforce a global trend of shrinking civic space. We argue that the legal guarantee of civil liberties is not the sole factor configuring civic space. Instead, civic space is best understood as being configured by three interacting components: 1) the legal guarantee (or restriction) of civil liberties, that is, rights-based space; 2) socio-economic needs that configure needs-induced space; and, 3) civil society activism. During the pandemic needs-induced space for civil society has emerged both from the health crisis and because restrictive government responses have had severe socio-economic side effects on people's livelihoods. These socio-economic conditions, along with civic discontent over restrictions on civil liberties, have driven civil society engagement in the form of both relief and advocacy/protest activism. Along with the structural condition of needs-induced space, this civil society activism has worked to sustain civic space.

Keywords: COVID-19, shrinking space, civic space, civil society, activism

## Dr. Jasmin Lorch

is an Associate at the GIGA Institute for Asian Studies (Research Programme 1: Accountability and Participation, and Research Programme 2: Peace and Security), and an Annemarie Schimmel Scholar at the Willy Brandt School of Public Policy, University of Erfurt, Erfurt, Germany.

<jasmin.lorch@uni-erfurt.de>

<[www.giga-hamburg.de/en/the-giga/team/lorch-jasmin](http://www.giga-hamburg.de/en/the-giga/team/lorch-jasmin)>

**Monika Onken**

is a PhD candidate at Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin, Germany. Her research interests surround protests, bottom-up change, as well as the interplay of violent and nonviolent resistance tactics.

<monikaonken@gmx.de>

**Dr. Janjira Sombatpoonsiri**

is an Associate at the GIGA Institute for Asian Studies (Research Programme 1: Accountability and Participation), and an Assistant Professor at the Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand.

<jsombutpoonsiri@gmail.com>

<www.giga-hamburg.de/en/the-giga/team/sombatpoonsiri-janjira>

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# Sustaining Civic Space in Times of COVID-19: Global Trends

Jasmin Lorch, Monika Onken, and Janjira Sombatpoonsiri

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## 1 Introduction

Since the early 2010s, scholars and international-development practitioners have increasingly worried about shrinking civic space (Carothers and Brechenmacher 2014; Dupuy et al. 2016; Poppe 2018; Poppe and Wolff 2017), broadly understood as growing government restriction on the fundamental liberties that allow civil society to operate within a legally protected space (e.g. CIVICUS 2015). The most commonly known expressions of shrinking civic space are the “NGO laws” that limit the ability of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and other civil society organisations (CSOs) to register and obtain foreign funding. Given that they facilitate

the concentration of executive power and erode checks and balances, legal restrictions on civil liberties are also related to autocratisation – defined as the “substantial de-facto decline of core institutional requirements for electoral democracy” (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019: 1096) that can take place in democratic and non-democratic regimes alike.

Turning to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on civic space, academics and policy-makers generally assess it through the lens of legally guaranteed civil liberties (CIVICUS 2021). Accordingly, the most common assumption has been that lockdowns and other restrictive measures to curb the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus have reinforced a pre-existing global trend of shrinking civil liberties and, hence, civic spaces (e.g. CIVICUS 2020a; Thomson and Ip 2020; V-Dem 2020). At first glance this assumption appears well justified, as autocrats around the world have instrumentalised the pandemic to strengthen their rule by invoking draconian laws aimed at stifling civil society (ICNL 2021; Smith and Cheeseman 2020). The CIVICUS Monitor (2020a) shows that, other than merely limiting physical contact, many regimes have enforced restrictions on public access to information – especially on social media – or detained human rights defenders for allegedly violating COVID-19-related laws.<sup>1</sup>

However, as we have argued elsewhere (Lorch and Sombatpoonsiri 2022), civic space is best understood as being configured by three interacting components, rather than being constituted solely by the presence (or absence) of legally guaranteed civil liberties. These components are: 1) the legal guarantee (or restriction) of civil liberties, or, in other words, *rights-based space*; 2) socio-economic needs, such as access to food, shelter, education, and healthcare, which configure *needs-induced space*; and, 3) *civil society activism* in the forms of welfare and advocacy/protest activism (Ibid.). Our argument as to how these respective determinants interact in the course of shaping civic space is threefold. First, during the pandemic needs-induced space for civil society has emerged both from the health crisis itself and because government responses, such as lockdowns, have had severe socio-economic side effects impacting on the livelihoods of vulnerable groups, such as informal-sector workers, slum dwellers, or women (UN 2020: 1) – especially if no adequate government compensation has been offered. Second, these socio-economic conditions – in conjunction with legal restrictions that are opposed by CSOs and wider sections of the population – drive civil society engagement in the form of both relief and advocacy/protest activism. Third, along with the more structural condition of needs-induced space, this civil society activism works to sustain civic space. Against this backdrop, COVID-19 can offer opportunities for civil society to thrive. In this paper, we elaborate on this proposition by drawing on examples in the five world regions of Asia-Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), non-OECD Europe and the Caucasus, sub-Saharan Africa, and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Our goal is to furnish empirical insights that can inform foreign- and development policy.

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1 Parts of this introduction as well as the theoretical and methodological sections are adapted from Lorch and Sombatpoonsiri (2022).

Our research reveals that civic space in these five world regions did not uniformly shrink, but instead has often been sustained and, at times, expanded and/or transformed during the pandemic. Across the five world regions studied, 123 countries enforced 254 new legal frameworks related to COVID-19. The majority are executive measures that grant governments sweeping powers. Sub-Saharan Africa and non-OECD Europe and the Caucasus enacted most legal measures, ones conducive to restrictions and heightened repression. However, as expected, the emergence of needs-induced space and popular dissatisfaction with restrictive legal measures have prompted civil society's relief and advocacy/protest activism. CSOs worldwide have enhanced their emergency relief, filling gaps left by governments and, where possible, voiced civic demands for better welfare systems. While carrying out relief activism seems to have been easier in the more democratic countries in LAC and Asia-Pacific, CSOs have also delivered aid and advocated for state provision in autocracies too. Similarly, protest has proliferated. Participants in more than 9,000 COVID-19-related protests (ACLED 2021) have voiced their economic grievances and demanded better government responses. Most of these protests occurred in LAC and Asia-Pacific, followed by in the MENA. Along with the more structural condition of needs-induced space, both these forms of civil society activism have sustained civic space even under adverse legal conditions.

In the following section, we present our theoretical definitions; locate our argument about the three components of civic space in the wider literature on that, civil society, and on social movements; and, outline our chosen analytical categories and data used. Specifically, our assessment of right-based civic space draws on a re-coding of the legal restrictions documented by the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law's (INCL) COVID-19 Civic Freedom Tracker. Our analysis of needs-induced space draws on gross domestic product data provided the International Monetary Fund (IMF), categorised and analysed according to the regional grouping (Asia Pacific, LAC, non-OECD Europe and the Caucasus, sub-Saharan Africa, and the MENA) applied in this paper. To explore protest activism against and despite legal restrictions, we re-coded data from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project's (ACLED) Covid Disorder Tracker. Our analysis of relief activities undertaken by CSOs is based on existing surveys (where available), qualitative primary and secondary sources, including grey literature, press reports, and expert interviews – given the absence of a unified, quantitative (or quantifiable) dataset. We then analyse civic space developments from a global perspective, distinguishing between legal measures affecting rights-based space, needs-induced space, relief activism, and protest activism. Subsequently, we discuss regional trends regarding the development of civic space in the five aforementioned world regions, following the same distinction. We conclude by highlighting the relevance of our findings for foreign policy and international-development decision makers and by providing policy recommendations too.



## 2 Civic Space and COVID-19: A Theoretical Embedding

We focus on civic space as the sphere in which civil society can operate *de facto* (Alagappa 2004: 50–52; Alscher et al. 2017: 11). We borrow Kaldor’s definition (2003: 44–47) to identify “civil society” as a set of non-governmental institutions that are self-organising, not-for-profit, and usually independent of the state. Civil society actors are diverse, ranging from formal CSOs to informal community-based organisations (CBOs) and social movements whose mandates can be heterogeneous – including advocacy and service provision (Toepler and Anheier 2020: 8). Furthermore, civil society may not necessarily be democratic (Alagappa 2004) and may entail the involvement of groups that abide by exclusionary and conservative ideologies and/or are tainted with clientelistic practices (e.g. Lorch 2017, 2021; Sombatpoonsiri 2018, 2020). However, our paper focuses on the extent to which civil society activism to address socio-economic needs and/or push back against government restrictions can sustain civic space rather than seeks to tackle civil society’s contributions to the maintenance of democracy *per se*. Relatedly, while we excluded groups that did not conform to the definition outlined above, meticulously probing the ideological orientation of all the CSOs studied was beyond the scope of our work.

We combine the literature on shrinking space with the wider scholarship on civil society and social movements to derive three determinants configuring civic space. The first is legal regulations that guarantee or restrict civil liberties (CIVICUS 2021) – or, in other words, “rights-based space.” We assume that rights-based space erodes when governments use draconian laws, from so-called NGO laws to anti-terror and anti-fake news ones – doing so to brand critical CSOs as foreign agents and security threats, or to justify crackdowns (Carothers and Brechenmacher 2014: 9–10; Dupuy et al. 2016). The pandemic has given many governments a pretext to exercise excessive executive powers and enforce restrictive legal measures, which can facilitate infringements on civil society.

The second component – and here is where we diverge from the conventional focus on civil liberties – is how the existence (or absence) of socio-economic needs can also shape civic space. By “socio-economic needs” we imply the basic requirements for human beings to achieve a decent life, including food and shelter, education, healthcare facilities, and employment (Chiappero-Martinetti 2014). The state’s inability or unwillingness to tackle these issues can create the needs-induced spaces in which many CSOs may be at work, delivering health, food, education, and other welfare services (Lorch 2017: 38–40; Ottaway 2004). This is also true in autocratic regimes, which often grant space to some welfare-oriented CSOs to avoid social unrest or enhance the country’s socio-economic performance. If regimes rely heavily on CSO services, this sometimes allows civil society to expand its scope for political action (Liverani 2008; Lorch 2006). This has the potential to be so in times of COVID-19, too. As various governments have failed to effectively address the detrimental impact of both the pandemic and of related restrictive measures on the livelihoods of vulnerable groups, such as informal-sector workers (UN 2020: 1), civil society groups have performed the function of service delivery on

behalf of governments. As such, while restrictive legal measures may reduce rights-based space (determinant 1), their socio-economic side effects potentially foster needs-induced space.

Our third determinant is civil society activism, broken down into two types in the COVID-19 context: relief and advocacy/protest activism. By “relief activism” we imply the work of formal CSOs, informal CBOs, and social movements providing social services including healthcare and emergency relief to communities in need respectively (EESC 2021; Nixon 2020; Shapovalova 2020; Valvoda 2020). By “advocacy/protest activism” we seek to convey CSOs using institutional (e.g. formal dialogue with government representatives) or extra-institutional (e.g. street protests and strikes) means to convince policymakers or the general public that their agenda is worthy of support (Cinalli and Giugni 2014). Both democracies and autocracies in the Global South have seen protests demanding that governments improve healthcare facilities, compensate for lost income, and address the police’s excessive use of force against violators of COVID-19 regulations. Some of these demands resonate with deeper concerns regarding economic inequality and poor governance (Carothers and Press 2020).

We anticipate that these respective determinants interconnect in at least three ways. First, the pandemic has created needs-induced space for civil society. We base this assumption on Social Movement Studies’ political opportunity theory, which asserts that contexts such as repression and acute economic need can create openings for civil society mobilisation by undermining governments’ legitimacy, fomenting public support for movements that voice popular grievances, and galvanising collective action (Tarrow and Tilly 2009). We argue that the nexus of COVID-19-related legal measures and needs-based space similarly produces political opportunities for civil society activism.

Second and relatedly, these socio-economic conditions – together with legal restrictions deemed draconian by CSOs and wider society – can propel relief and protest activism. During the pandemic, CSOs and self-help initiatives have delivered essential social services, while popular protests have voiced grievances related to the health and socio-economic crises governments have failed to tackle. These protests have also challenged authorities’ draconian measures that have led to arbitrary arrests and detrimentally affected the livelihoods of vulnerable groups (Pinkney and Rivers 2020; Sombatpoonsiri 2021). Moreover, the COVID-19 context influences these two types of activism and their confluence: politically oriented CSOs such as human rights and pro-democracy advocates have at times incorporated welfare demands into their agendas, while service-providing CSOs have cajoled governments into responding to the population’s pressing needs (e.g. Pleyers 2020).

Third, we assume that civil society activism in the form of both relief and advocacy/protest activism can often sustain civic space. This possibility is due to governments’ dependence on CSOs contributing in the welfare sector, which, in turn, increases the latter’s leverage vis-à-vis the former (Cinalli and Giugni 2014). The proliferation of relief and advocacy/protest activism also allows CSOs to engage with grassroots communities, thereby revitalising their bottom-up legitimacy – crucial for their ability to influence policymakers. More importantly, in cases

where a crossover of advocacy/protest and relief activism emerges, CSOs may challenge existing power structures by advancing visions for long-term socio-economic change.

### 3 Data Collection

This paper extends the case selection in our previous work on Southeast Asia (Lorch and Sombatpoonsiri 2022) to a span of five world regions. For reasons of comparability, we exclude OECD countries as well as ones with a population of less than one million. Our methods of data collection are three-pronged. First, to investigate the impact of COVID-19-related legal measures on rights-based civic space, we re-coded the data on legal measures enforced from March 2020 to February 2021 provided by the ICNL's COVID-19 Civic Freedom Tracker. We apply two criteria to re-code altogether 12 types of legal measures. The first criterion focuses on whether a legal measure was enacted by an executive body (as an order or decree) or by a legislative body (as a law), with the former signalling the concentration of executive power – something the literature associates with the intimidation of critical civil society (Kuehn et al. 2021). Regarding laws, we code both “legislations” and “regulations” – the latter defined as measures that guide the implementation of a given law.

For each of these two categories, we also apply the second criterion – which pertains to six characteristics of the individual legal measures. These are health- and security-oriented emergency measures (two separate items); curfew orders; bans on public gatherings conducive to criminalising public assemblies even if they follow health regulations; control of information; and, “NGO laws” to restrict foreign funding or the registration of an entity. We do not consider purely health-related emergency measures as autocratic encroachment on civic space, because they do not necessarily provide governments with all-encompassing powers to restrict essential civil liberties. By contrast, the other five types of measures violate the freedoms of expression, association, and assembly and allow regimes to criminalise civil society activism (Bethke and Wolff 2020; Poppe and Wolff 2017). In particular, security-oriented emergency measures provide the executive with wartime-like powers and can lead to militarised public-health management and the eroding of checks and balances (Passos and Acácio 2021).

Second, to explore protest activism both against and despite legal restrictions, we rely on protest event data from ACLED's Covid Disorder Tracker. We count the number of protest events with over 100 participants according to their underlying drivers: 1) defiance of COVID-19-related restrictions; 2) economic setbacks; 3) government responses to the health crisis and related economic challenges; 4) corruption allegations related to government public-health management; and, 5) gender-related violence during lockdowns. Thereby, we expect that protests prompted by drivers 2 to 5 signal the rise of needs-induced space and illustrate how socio-economic emergencies related to the pandemic can act as political opportunities for civil society activism and mobilisation (Tarrow and Tilly 2009).

Third, we collected most qualitative evidence from the grey literature and press reports. We also interviewed CSO members and experts to garner insights on whether and how civic space changed due to the intensification of socio-economic needs and welfare activism to address them. Moreover, in June 2020 we organised a behind-closed-doors, online roundtable with 10 members of Asian CSOs, including human rights organisations, development NGOs, and CBOs.

#### 4 COVID-19 and Civic Space: Trends in Five World Regions

##### *Global Trends*

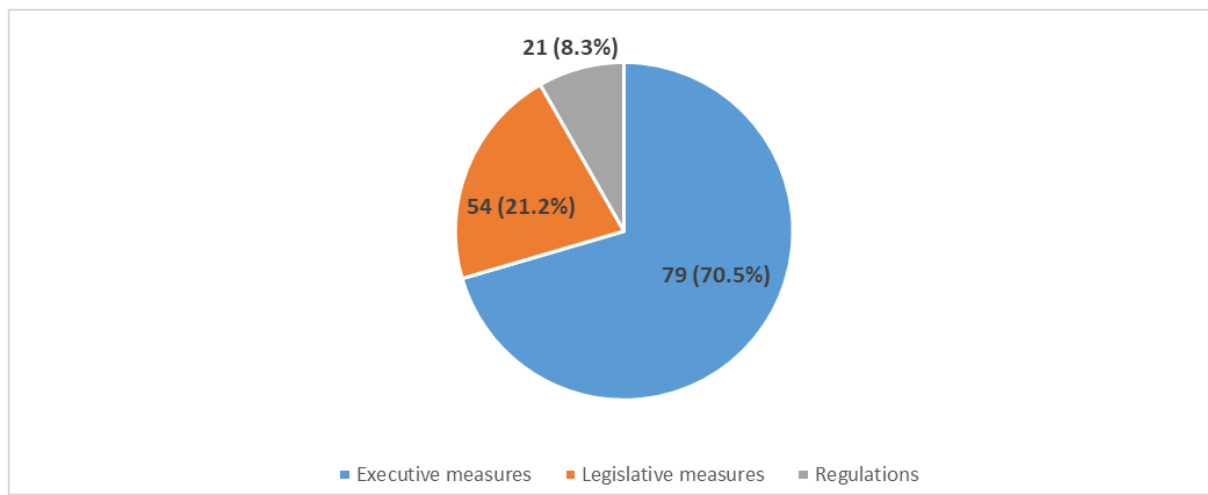
The pandemic has given autocratic and autocratising governments a pretext to restrict civil freedoms and repress critical civil society. However, emerging needs-induced space propelled a rise in CSOs' relief activism, as governments in the Global South and non-OECD Europe and the Caucasus were often overwhelmed by the health- and related socio-economic emergencies. These conditions similarly drove the proliferation of protest in all regions, reflecting people's dissatisfaction with government responses to these crises and with legal restrictions. Through this activism, civil society in all five world regions has sustained and defended civic space against the odds.

Legal Measures: According to V-Dem (2021: 24–25), freedoms of expression, assembly, and association declined significantly in 2020 compared to the previous year. Similarly, CIVICUS (2021) finds that more countries restricted rights relating to civic space in 2020 than 12 months earlier. Our data shows that this development is glaringly apparent especially in autocracies, in which increasing numbers of legal restrictions facilitated “lawfare” – the abuse of laws to criminalise oppositional civil society and generate a chilling effect in pursuit of self-censorship. Between April 2020 and February 2021, 123 countries in the Global South and non-OECD Europe and the Caucasus enacted altogether 254 legal measures. The majority (179 legal measures, or 70.5 per cent) are executive orders or decrees passed without the involvement of parliaments. Of these executive measures, 33.5 per cent are related to health regulations to contain COVID-19, including venue shutdowns and guidelines on disinfection and social distancing. However, approximately 17 per cent originate from wartime-like emergency decrees that associate the pandemic with a national security threat. Consequently, the deployment of security forces as part of law enforcement has intensified, penalties against violators are harsh, and critics of government responses are branded public enemies (CIVICUS 2021).

Relatedly, across the five world regions investigated, executive orders banned public gatherings and imposed curfews. Moreover, many autocratic and autocratising governments weaponised new and existing legal measures to censor information contradicting government narratives and stifle oppositional voices, branding them as spreading “fake news.” In the 91 countries for which information is available, at least 80 legal measures were still active as of

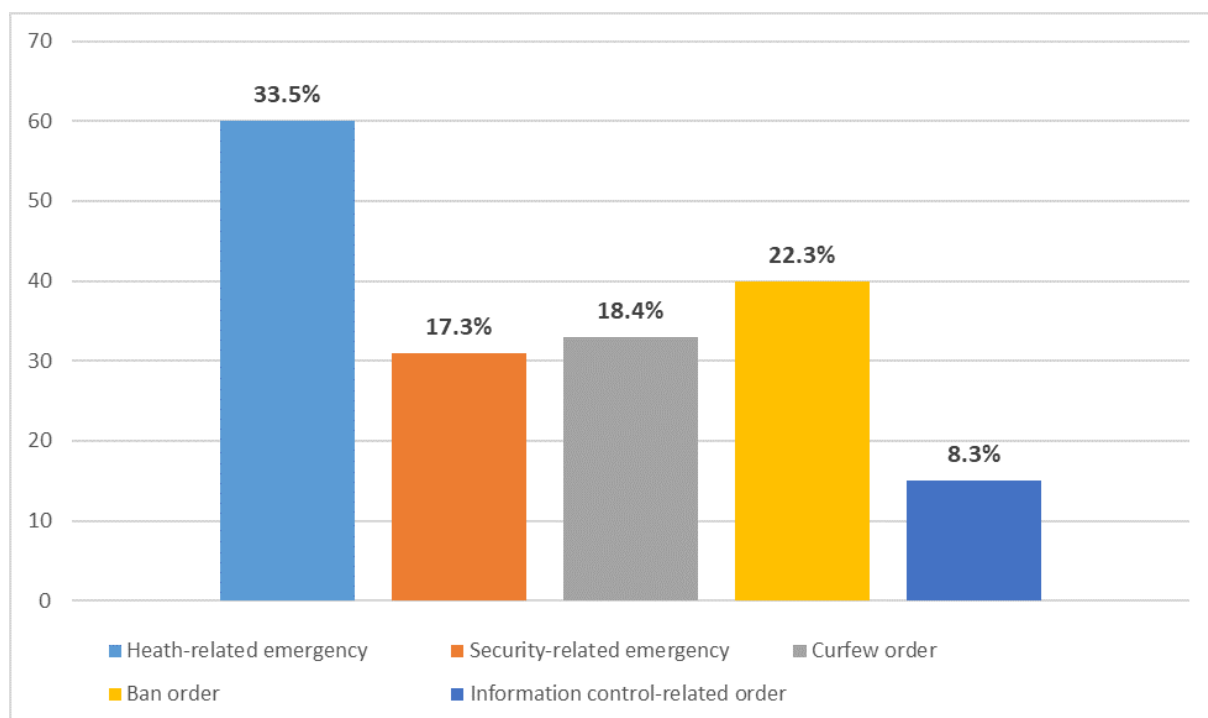
February 2021, with some emergency decrees having been extended several times. Across the five world regions, the ban on public gatherings provided a pretext for heavy-handed police crackdowns on protesters demanding more effective pandemic measures from their governments. Often protesters have faced multiple charges, from violating COVID-19 regulations to criminal wrongdoing.

**Figure 1. COVID-19-Related Legal Measures as per Procedural Characteristics, April 2020–February 2021 (Global South and non-OECD Europe and the Caucasus)**



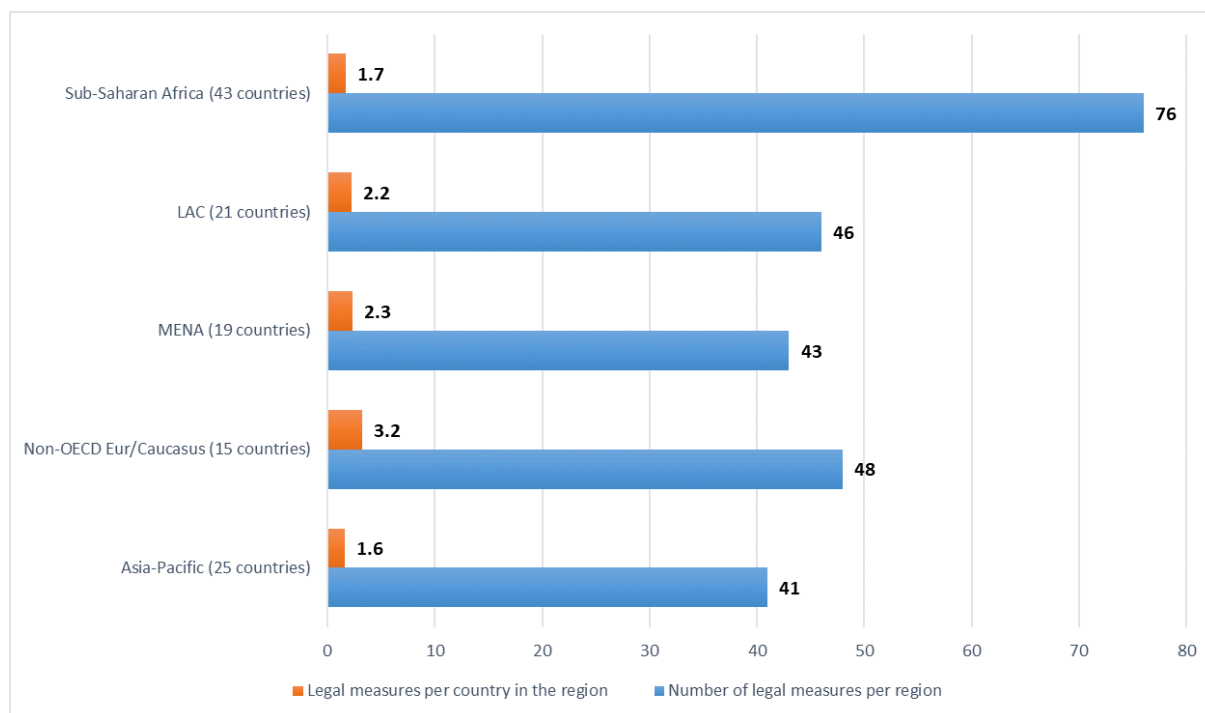
Source: Authors' own compilation, based on ICNL (2021).

**Figure 2. Breakdown of Executive Measures, April 2020–February 2021 (Global South and non-OECD Europe and the Caucasus)**



Source: Authors' own compilation, based on ICNL (2021).

**Figure 3. Numbers of Legal Measures per Region, April 2020–February 2021 (Global South and non-OECD Europe and the Caucasus)**

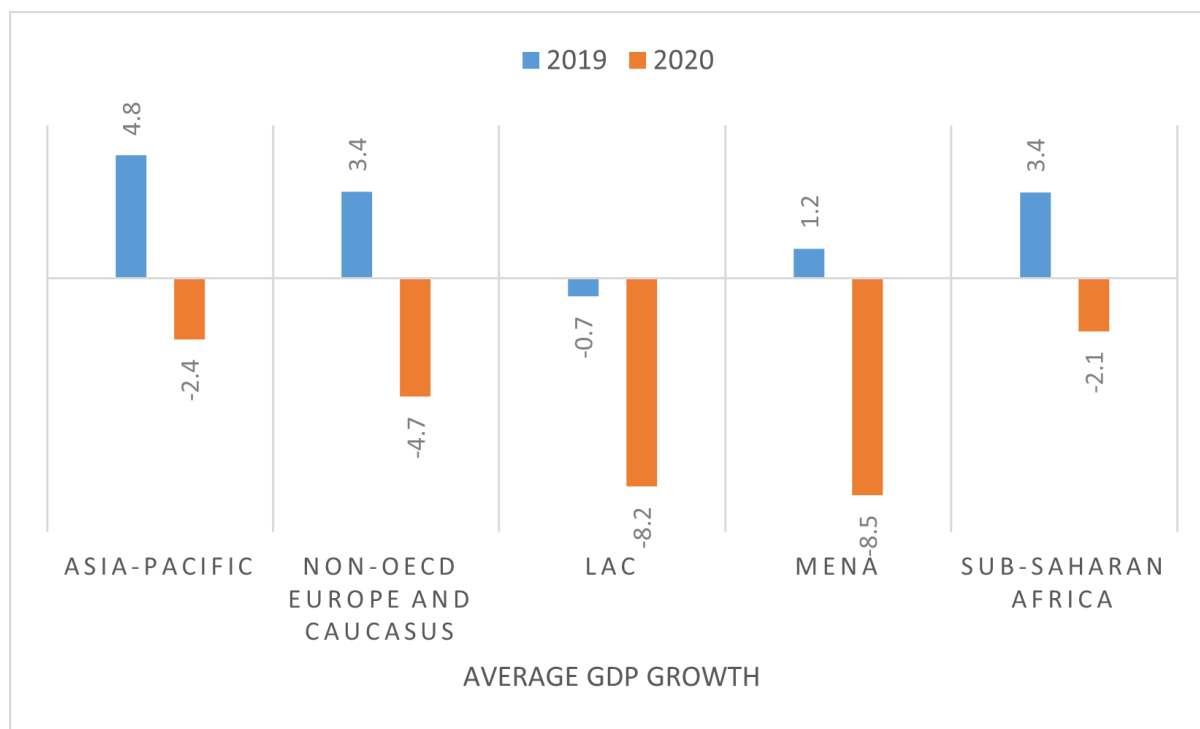


Source: Authors' own compilation, based on ICNL (2021).

**Needs-Induced Space:** According to GDP data from the IMF Data Mapper (2021), all five world regions experienced a massive rise in socio-economic needs due to COVID-19 and the economic side effects of lockdowns between 2019 and 2020. On average, countries in the Asia-Pacific region experienced a decline in real GDP growth by 7.2 percentage points. In non-OECD countries in Europe and the Caucasus, real GDP growth declined by an average of 8.1 percentage points, while LAC countries on average witnessed a 7.5 percentage point drop. In MENA countries, real GDP growth on average declined by 9.7 percentage points. Sub-Saharan African countries on average lost 5.5 percentage points. However, there were marked differences within each of the five world regions, which is reflected in high standard deviations (see Table 1 below).

According to World Bank (2021a) estimates, the number of extreme poor globally increased from 644.7 million in 2019 to 737.6 million in 2020. Much of this increase happened in sub-Saharan Africa, where 474.8 million people lived in extreme poverty in 2020, up from 439.8 million in the previous year. The Asia-Pacific region, LAC, and MENA also witnessed substantial rises in the number of extreme poor. Moreover, around the world COVID-19 and the economic consequences of lockdowns have deepened existing socio-economic inequalities, with marginalised groups such as slum dwellers and informal sector workers being disproportionately affected. This emergence of needs-induced space has both enhanced relief activism by civil society and driven civic protest.

**Figure 4. Average Real GDP Growth in the Global South and non-OECD Europe and the Caucasus in 2019 and 2020 per Region (in %)**



**Table 1. Average Real GDP Growth in the Global South and Non-OECD Europe and the Caucasus in 2019 and 2020 per Region, Standard Deviations (in %)**

	2019	2020
Asia-Pacific	1.95	3.95
Non-OECD Europe and Caucasus	1.44	2.18
LAC	8.15	6.21
MENA	4.24	13.77
Sub-Saharan Africa	3.42	3.86

Relief Activism: As needs-induced space emerged and governments failed to sufficiently address the nexus of the health- and related socio-economic crises, civil society actors as varied as registered NGOs, informal CBOs, and local self-help initiatives stepped in to provide fundamental support services. Such relief efforts are hard to quantify due to their diverse and oftentimes highly informal and localised nature. However, qualitative research and international donors, including United Nations (UN) agencies and international NGOs, concur that in all five world regions civil society actors have played key roles in providing COVID-19 relief (e.g. Nixon 2020; UNDEF 2022; UN Women 2021; Youngs 2020). Specifically, civil society groups have set up basic health facilities, distributed masks and sanitisers, educated citizens about the spread of the virus, and provided food packs and financial support to vulnerable groups. CBOs in particular have been instrumental in reaching marginalised social groups, owing to their flexibility and ties to local communities.

Civil society's relief activism has been influenced by various factors, including state capacity, the openness of the political system, and the willingness of governments to accommodate civil society. Accordingly, such activism seems to have been easier in relatively democratic countries in LAC and Asia-Pacific, such as Argentina and Indonesia, where social movements and CSOs have sometimes cooperated with governments and complemented official relief efforts (Abers et al. 2021; Pujiono et al. 2020). Conversely, autocracies with relatively strong state capacity, such as China, Vietnam, and the Gulf countries, have mostly sidelined or co-opted civil society-based initiatives or worked with (and through) government-organised NGOs (GONGOs) (VWU 2021; Yousef 2020; Zhao and Wu 2020). Civil society-based relief initiatives have often faced government repression in Russia and other non-OECD countries in Europe and the Caucasus (AI 2020a). In sub-Saharan Africa, CSOs' relief and advocacy efforts have remained strong, addressing the gaps often left by autocratic but nevertheless weak states (EPIC-Africa 2020).

By engaging in relief activism, CSOs in all five world regions have sustained and defended civic space against the odds. Specifically, civil society actors have often combined the delivery of social services with advocacy for strong welfare states and with the monitoring of government responses to COVID-19. Similarly, human rights and other advocacy CSOs have engaged in relief activism, potentially politicising formerly apolitical spaces in welfare delivery and strengthening their legitimacy among local communities.

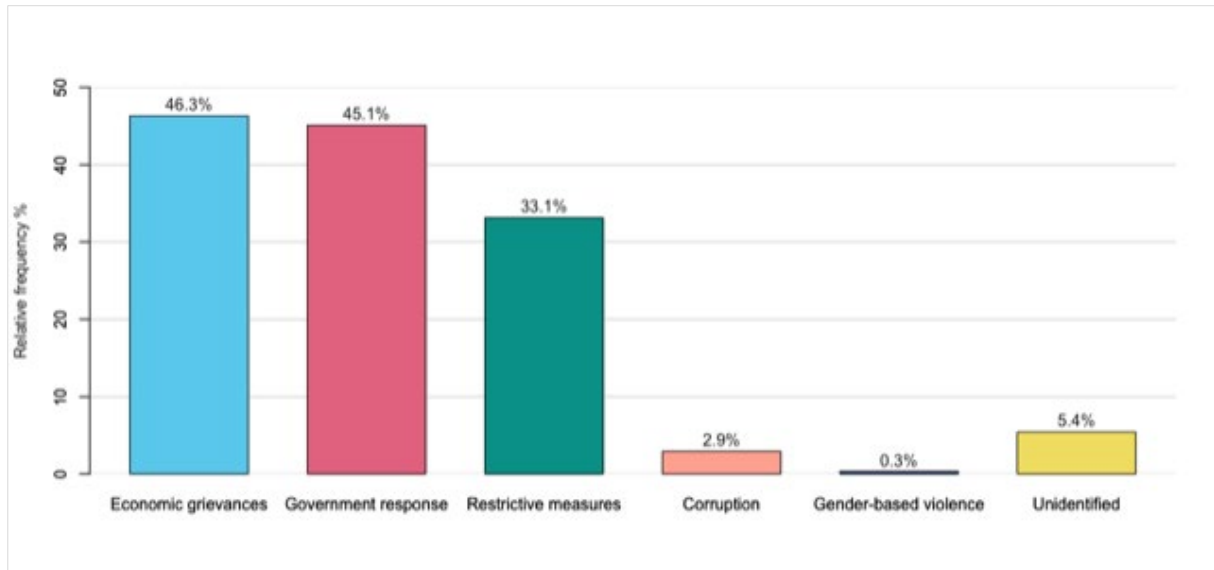
Protest Activism: Amplified socio-economic needs also set the stage for protest activism across the five world regions. From this perspective, civic space did not shrink as expected. Instead of stepping back or backing down, civil society has expressed its concerns and made demands through mass mobilisation. According to the COVID-19 Disorder Tracker, this resulted in over 9,000 COVID-related protests in the five world regions investigated. In addition, there were even larger numbers of non-COVID-19-related protests.

The massive number of pandemic-related protests is mainly due to governments' mismanagement thereof, which has exacerbated the existing health- and socio-economic crises. A few



examples of the burdens carried by civil society are flawed healthcare facilities, lost income, and looming poverty. Economic grievances and underwhelming government responses to them were the two main drivers behind COVID-19-related protests. The third most important protest driver was government-imposed restrictions. Only approximately 3 per cent of all protests would be demonstrations against corruption and gender-based violence.

**Figure 5. Drivers of COVID-Related Protest Events**



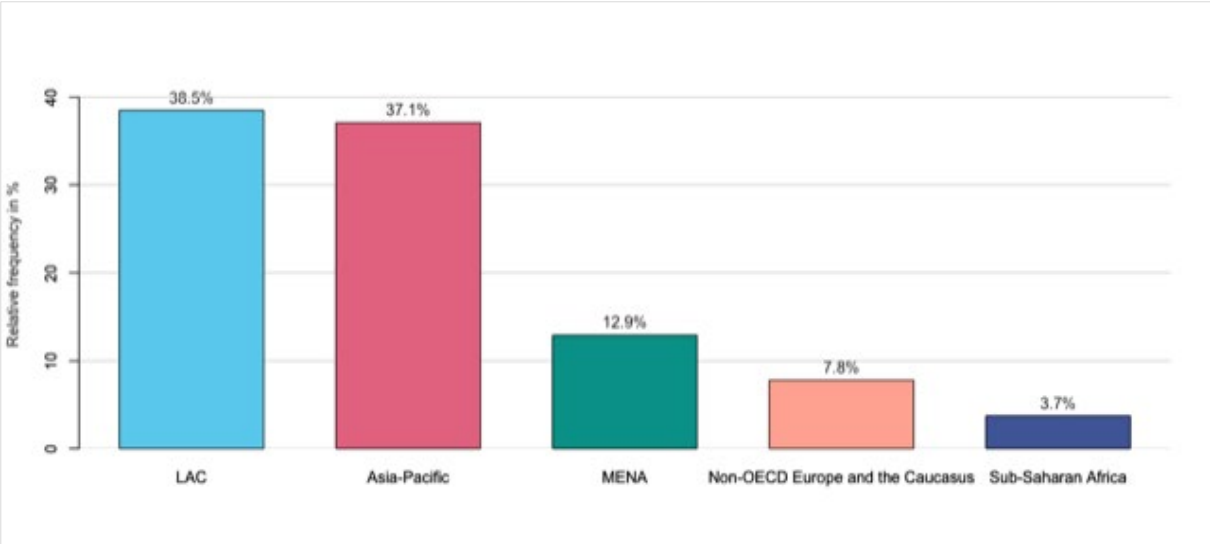
Source: Authors' own compilation, based on ACLED (2021).

Although every region saw protest activism, looking at the frequency of protest events reveals large both regional and national discrepancies. Citizens in the Asia-Pacific and LAC regions have been most active and successful in mobilising protests partly because of remaining rights-based space in countries such as India and Brazil. Over three-quarters of all protests took place in these two regions, with India featuring most prominently. The latter hosted as many as 1,976 such events, while Pakistan saw 505 as the second most protest-active country in Asia-Pacific. In LAC, Brazil (853), Mexico (672), and Argentina (663) had the largest number of protests respectively. The remaining quarter is divided among the MENA, non-OECD Europe and the Caucasus, and sub-Saharan Africa.

Health risks and restrictive measures compelled civil society to adjust their protest methods (Kowaleski 2021; Pinckney and Rivers 2020). Among other activities, movements broadened their tactics to encompass stay-at-home options such as shouting from balconies, banging on pots and pans, or engaging in digital activism (Kowaleski 2021). Also, they mobilised smaller, dispersed protests to comply with health measures (Pinckney and Rivers 2020). Consequently, the majority of protests (78 per cent) had just above 100 participants per event. In addition, many protests with less than 100 participants, such as one-person or very small gatherings, also occurred. While these are not accounted for in this study, they likewise underline the trend of protests persevering – albeit with adjusted repertoires. At times, these new forms

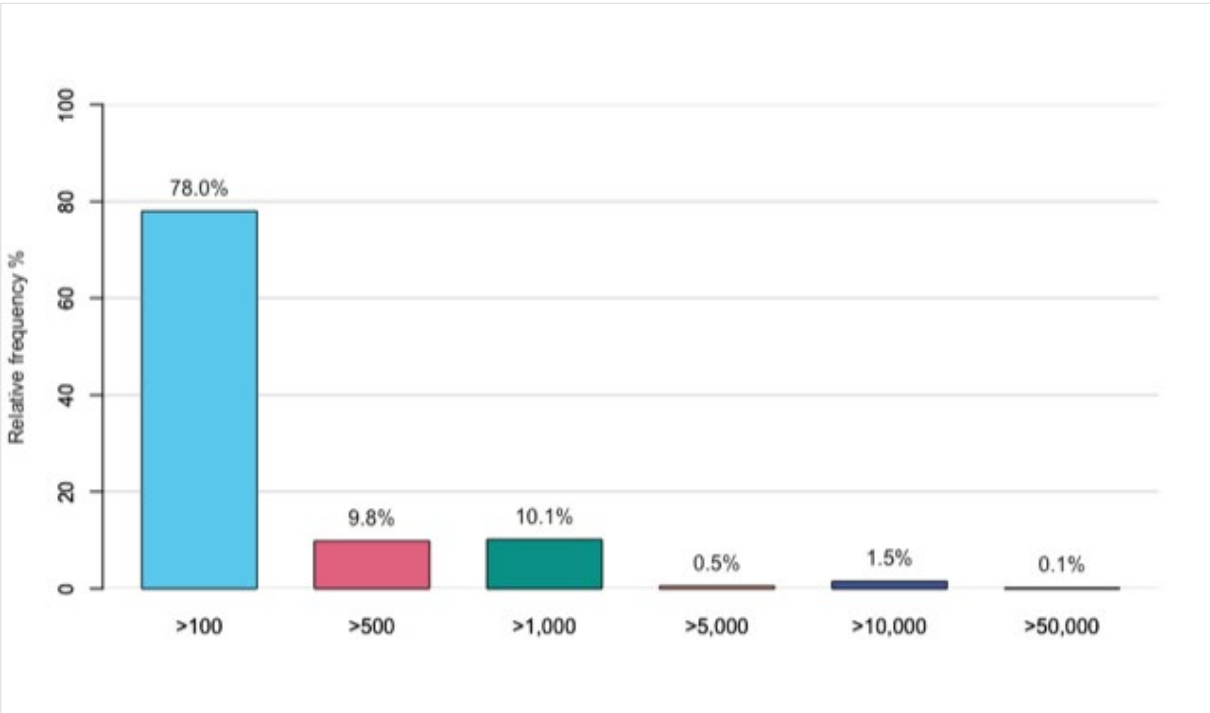
of resistance were, however, accompanied by traditional large-scale marches with 5,000, 10,000, or even 50,000 participants. These took place despite the risks of infection and legal repercussions; among other places, these occurred in situations where the economic pressure and government mistreatment became unbearable.

**Figure 6. Protest Events per World Region, April 2020–February 2021 (Global South and non-OECD Europe and the Caucasus)**



Source: Authors’ own compilation, based on ACLED (2021).

**Figure 7. Participation Numbers in COVID-19-Related Protest Events**



Source: Authors’ own compilation, based on ACLED (2021).

Informal and ad hoc groups that were economically affected by lockdowns and insufficient healthcare systems organised most of the protests seen. These groups included taxi or lorry drivers, networks of students, school pupils, or restaurant and hotel employees, with the latter groups mostly picketing in front of their workplaces. However, traditional CSOs such as labour unions, women's groups, and medical as well as teacher associations also engaged in this form of activism. This signals how CSOs have extended their activities from filling the gaps left by governments in service provision to organising protests enabling citizens to voice their demands and concerns.

## *Regional Trends*

### *Asia-Pacific*

Despite the region's heightened use of legal repression that diminished legally guaranteed civil liberties, the emergence of needs-induced space gave rise to relief and protest activism. CSOs filled welfare gaps left by governments and voiced socio-economic demands on the streets. In relatively democratic countries, such as Indonesia, CSOs cooperated with government agencies on their crisis response.

Legal Measures: An overall trend in Asia-Pacific is the contrast between small numbers of new legal measures and the intensification of repression against civil society. Twenty-five countries in the region enacted only 41 laws and decrees, making for the least number of legal measures per country (1.6 on average). The Philippines and Papua New Guinea introduced most legal measures (four each). Executive measures declaring a state of emergency constitute a dominant trend in Asia-Pacific. While 11 measures, such as Indonesia's Presidential Decree No. 11 or Timor Leste's Presidential Emergency Decree, focus on public health, seven executive measures stem from wartime-like states of emergency that tended to be extended repeatedly even when infection rates remained controllable with regular laws. A case in point is Thailand, where the emergency decree has been extended 16 times (as of 23 February 2022) despite the low rate of infections in 2020 and late 2021. Where laws were passed by parliament, there has been no guarantee that parliamentary oversight of the executive is robust enough to counter abuse by the latter. A good example is the Philippines' Act No. 11469 for the Nation to Heal As One (shorthand, "Heal as One Act"), which was passed by President Rodrigo Duterte's loyalists in Congress. The Act frames the coronavirus as an existential threat, an "unseen enemy." Accordingly, it endows the president with powers to deploy the armed forces against violators of restrictions, and penalises the dissemination of what the government brands as "fake news" (Hapal 2021).

The region is home to many electoral autocracies, with 15 countries identified as such. Five countries in the region are classified as consolidated autocracies and a further five as electoral democracies (V-Dem 2021). Concurrently, civil liberties in Asia-Pacific significantly eroded in

2020, as 13 of the region's 25 countries were identified as not free and 10 as partly free (Freedom House 2021). Regime type and the degree (or lack) of civil liberties correlate with how legal measures imposed to deal with COVID-19 are instead weaponised against civil society. In Cambodia (HRW 2020a), Thailand (HRW 2020b), Indonesia (HRW 2020c), and Kazakhstan (HRW 2020d), governments used emergency orders or decrees to arrest journalists, bloggers, and health workers for allegedly spreading "fake news" – mostly information that contradicted government claims regarding the pandemic or criticised official health responses. Meanwhile, emergency measures and related laws prompted police crackdowns on protesters on the basis of them violating social-distancing regulations as well as bans on public gathering. In Sri Lanka, for instance, the Frontline Socialist Party led protests in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement. The police responded with excessive force, arguing that this was necessary to prevent the virus from spreading (Kumarasinghe 2020).

In many countries, the lack of new legal measures does not imply the absence of repression, as governments could rely on existing legal tools to quell critics. The Chinese government re-detained opposition figures upon their release from prison, on the pretext of quarantining them. During the so-called quarantines, some detainees were interrogated and kept incommunicado. In Bangladesh, the Awami League-led government abused the Digital Security Act of 2018 to arrest government-critical journalists, censor media, and consolidate government surveillance on the pretext of curbing COVID-19-related rumours. Similar existing cyber-, computer-, or telecommunications-related laws were also instrumentalised against citizens in Vietnam (Hutt 2020) and Singapore (HRW 2021). Despite these downward trends regarding rights-based space, the emergence of needs-induced space spurred new kinds of civil society activism.

Needs-Induced Space: In Asia-Pacific, real GDP growth on average declined by 7.2 percentage points between 2019 and 2020. However, there were marked differences within the region. For instance, while China's real GDP growth dropped by only 3.5 percentage points, from 5.8 per cent in 2019 to 2.3 per cent a year later, India's declined by 12 percentage points, from 4 per cent to -8 per cent in the same time period (IMF Data Mapper 2021). Similarly, government responses to the health- and related socio-economic crises differed significantly across countries, depending on various factors including, in particular, the democratic or autocratic nature of their political regimes and the capacity of state institutions (see also, Geer et al. 2020). For instance, while the one-party communist regimes of China and Vietnam used the pandemic to further enhance the repression of critics, their concerted state-led approaches were technically highly effective in quelling the first wave of the virus (Geer et al. 2020: 1414; Willoughby 2021). Conversely, the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in India reacted in an erratic fashion and the harsh lockdown it imposed served to further aggravate the health crisis, while throwing millions of poor internal migrant workers into economic desperation (e.g. Roy 2020). Overall, state responses were far too weak and uncoordinated to adequately address these respective crises (MJ 2020).

The pandemic has deepened existing socio-economic inequalities in the region, with vulnerable groups such as informal workers and women being disproportionately affected. In both South and Southeast Asia public-health infrastructure is often insufficient to cope with the impact of the pandemic, while the decline in remittances has severely affected many poor and lower-middle income households (Malay and Baisakh 2022). In South Asian countries, massive job losses increased incidences of hunger (Ibid.: 5). In the Philippines, populist president Duterte publicly accused health workers who lamented the lack of ventilators of trying to instigate a revolution, while the livelihoods of many ordinary people deteriorated significantly under the government's harsh and prolonged lockdown (See 2021).

Relief Activism: Civil society often stepped in to fill the gaps left by state institutions. In India, CSOs played a key role in providing health- and socio-economic support, while actively criticising government onslaughts on oppositional civil society under the pretext of pandemic control. In a context where Modi instrumentalised COVID-19 to tighten his grip on power, the government's Policy Commission ultimately had to thank civil society for its contributions to fighting the pandemic, acknowledging that many more people would have died without the support provided by CSOs (MJ 2020). Across the Indonesian archipelago, CSO networks participated in the national crisis response, while cooperating and holding dialogue with the state ministers and officials in charge of pandemic control (Pujiono et al. 2020). In autocratic countries, CSO engagement in emergency relief has even, at times, improved civil society–government relations. In Malaysia, the government first prohibited CSOs from delivering aid to migrant and refugee communities. They, however, ignored these restrictions and ultimately managed to develop partnerships with the government in this field (Nixon 2020).

In several countries, the engagement of political activists and advocacy CSOs in COVID-19-related relief politicised formerly apolitical spaces in welfare delivery. In Thailand, student activists who protested against military rule in 2020 provided aid to slum dwellers and other marginalised groups (Chuipracha 2020). Similarly, the fact that the pandemic has implacably exposed long-standing socio-economic inequalities has provided CSOs with an unprecedented opportunity to mobilise marginalised constituencies and push for strong welfare states. As one Philippine CSO activist stated: "The identities of ordinary people [became] very important as workers, as commuters, as consumers for health services. And these are important opportunities [for civil society activists] for having more conversations with them" (CSO roundtable, 1 June 2021). A CSO representative from India elaborated that "state systems" were required to ensure the "level of service delivery" necessary to fulfil citizens' needs. "It would be a mistake," she added, "to think that that can happen without us [civil society] pressuring the state to put the resources where [they're] needed." As the activist also stressed, the advocacy component of her organisation's work had increased during the pandemic as it had increasingly engaged in providing legal aid to poor people charged with violating lockdown rules (CSO roundtable, 1 June 2021).

In some cases, restrictions on movement somewhat paradoxically seem to have contributed to empowering local communities. For instance, an NGO representative from Myanmar said that a “positive chang[e] [...] for civil society” was that “the role of [...] local actor[s]” had increased. As many NGOs faced travel restrictions and hence were unable to conduct any direct activities in their local target communities, they instead provided technical support and resources to “the local actors who have already been in the community.” Consequently, “many CSOs [decided to] make collaboration and now [...] work [with] the local actors [...]. So, in the pandemic, [...] these [local] organisations [...] come off as [having] a vital role [...] to deliver the service and activities” (CSO roundtable, 1 June 2021). The representative of a Mongolian CSO that provides voter education for people with disabilities pointed to the digital empowerment of local target communities. As COVID-19-related restrictions made it “challenging to reach [...] the marginalised communit[ies],” she said, “a project team built up with persons with disabilities [formed]; they became like leaders and experts.” The group, she elaborated, acquired the technical skills necessary to contribute to the production of a video with sign language translation, large subtitles, and audio, as customised for persons with disabilities (CSO roundtable, 1 June 2021).

**Protest Activism:** Parallel to the increased volume of relief activism in the region, protest activism was on the rise despite – and at times because of – ineffective government responses to the crises and restrictive measures. India’s 1,976 protest events made it the most protest-ridden country in the Global South. Its civil society was at the forefront of openly expressing discontent with dire economic situations and underwhelming government responses. Migrant workers are a fitting example of how hard lockdowns and their socio-economic repercussions, combined with government neglect, brought vulnerable groups into life-threatening situations.

With the extended lockdowns closing factories and borders, migrant workers in cities were neither able to return home nor earn an income while staying put. Over 1,000 workers gathered at Bandra railways in early April (Mengle 2020), demanding that they be allowed to return to their families living across international or national borders. In May 2020, 10 trade unions called for a national strike against the suspension of labour rights, which put formal and informal staff as well as migrant workers at risk. Due to this suspension, employers could extend working hours seemingly endlessly, keeping many low wage and migrant workers in precarious job conditions and without adequate safety equipment (BHRRC 2020). These cases are not exceptional. Many countries with weak governance and limited welfare saw their most vulnerable members of society enter hopeless situations.

Protesters in Bangladesh, Thailand, and the Philippines tell a similar story. In all three countries, unemployed and low-income workers marched through the streets demanding government aid to soften the pandemic’s economic repercussions. The same demand was made by garment workers forced to leave their factories due to lockdowns. In Bangladesh, not only economic grievances but also unsafe working conditions were the main reasons for protest.

Working in crowded factories amidst the pandemic put lives at risk, one that only increased when basic safety equipment like masks and disinfectants were insufficiently provided. In these situations, with neither governments nor employers assuming responsibility, many CSOs provided relief to workers, while also mobilising them to pressure governments and employers (ACLEED 2021). In the Philippines, a small group of urban poor people affected by the Duterte government's harsh lockdown protested in Manila to demand livelihood support. They were soon arrested, with Duterte calling on law enforcers to "shoot them dead" if they caused any "trouble" (Tomacruz 2020). However, CSOs such as the leftist Bukluran ng Manggagawang Pilipino were quick to condemn the arrests (Talabong 2020). Many rights groups and ordinary citizens also twittered their criticism under hashtags such as #DUTERTERESIGN and #OUSTDUTERTENOW (Billing 2020). In Thailand, 100 people, most of them informal-sector workers, gathered in front of the Finance Ministry building to demand the cash relief the government had promised to give them, but did not live up to its promise (Khaosod 2020). Expressing anger towards such government ineffectiveness and lack of solidarity with the urban poor, hundreds of thousands of Thais retweeted hashtags such as #lousygovernment and #OneStupidLeaderIsGOingToKillUsAll (Beattie 2020).

#### *Latin America and the Caribbean*

Although the region saw growing legal restrictions, pre-existing inequalities and the remaining rights-based space drove CSOs to play an active role in relief and protest activism. In democratic countries, such as Argentina, civil society was even able to contribute to shaping progressive policies to reform national socio-economic structures.

Legal Measures: In LAC, relatively high numbers of restrictive COVID-19-related measures correspond with the repression of civil society. But pushbacks by the latter against these measures were also palpable. The 21 LAC countries included in our dataset imposed 46 legal measures from April 2020 to February 2021, amounting to 2.2 legal measures per country on average. Bolivia enforced the most (five), followed by Brazil, El Salvador, and Jamaica (four each). A closer look into the specific types of measures imposed shows that executive decrees or orders focusing on health emergencies were most common (15 out of 46). However, the second most frequent type was security-oriented emergency decrees that set the stage for militarising executive responses to COVID-19. In Bolivia, interim president Jeanine Áñez declared Supreme Decree No. 4200 together with a state of health emergency. The former harshly penalised violators of the nationwide lockdown, while granting comprehensive powers to the armed forces – including in the maintenance of public order and law enforcement (Blofield et al. 2020: 2; Macias-Herrera and Croissant 2022: 7). Similarly, in El Salvador President Nayib Bukele imposed Executive Decree No. 12 authorising the military's involvement in maintaining public order and enforcing quarantine measures. This led to the excessive use of force against and arbitrary detention of protesters accused of violating COVID-19-related measures (Macias-Herrera and Croissant 2022: 10–11). In Cuba, this abuse of pandemic-inspired legal

measures for suppressing peaceful dissent was also evident. When protests broke out in June 2020, the Cuban authorities harassed and detained protesters – accusing them of “spreading the pandemic” (France 24 2021).

The region also saw governments’ growing restriction of digital information, which could result in censorship in countries with a weak rule of law. The Brazilian parliament considered passing an anti-fake news bill in response to an “infodemic” – the spread of disinformation about the virus and related vaccines. However, despite some merits in countering President Jair Bolsonaro’s downplaying of COVID-19, the draft bill risked violating user privacy by forcing Internet service providers to retain users’ data (Alimonti 2021) – a tactic of digital surveillance common in many autocratising regimes (Sombatpoonsiri 2022). Accordingly, the bill generated widespread criticism, delaying its passage into law. In Bolivia, the government opted for a shortcut by declaring an executive order, Supreme Decree 4200, to criminalise the spreading of disinformation vis-à-vis COVID-19. Together with increasingly militarised pandemic responses, this measure further eroded civil society’s freedom of expression (*The Economist* 2021). The Nicaraguan government, in October 2020, imposed the Cybercrime Law to punish those spreading what the government determined as “fake news.” This move raised concerns regarding potential censorship of oppositional civil society (Rodriguez and Pisanu 2020).

Despite this downwards trend of restricting civil liberties, LAC remains a stronghold for democracies whose vibrant civil society is at the forefront of pushing back against shrinking space. Of the 21 countries, 13 are electoral democracies, two liberal democracies, five electoral autocracies, and one a consolidated autocracy (Cuba) (V-Dem 2021). The region’s liberty score is still relatively high, with seven countries ranked as free, 11 as partly free, and only three as not free (Freedom House 2021). Existing democratic infrastructures guarantee civil society participation in decision-making, including in the domain of public health (Abers et al. 2021). These have also enabled civil society mobilisation in the face of governments’ encroachment on civic space and underwhelming responses to the health crisis, as seen in Brazil, Chile, and Colombia (Daniels 2021; Rossi and von Bülow 2020).

Needs-Induced Space: On average, LAC countries witnessed a decline of 7.5 percentage points in GDP growth between 2019 and 2020. These figures, however, include the outlier of Venezuela, whose real GDP shrank by 35 per cent in 2019 and by another 30 per cent in 2020 (IMF Data Mapper 2021). According to the World Bank (2021a), the pandemic made around 4.7 million middle-class people poor or vulnerable to poverty in 2020 alone, threatening gains in social security made in previous years. Moreover, COVID-19 has reinforced existing inequalities, with disadvantaged families suffering higher levels of food insecurity and having significantly less access to quality healthcare and education (World Bank 2021b). This is noteworthy because protests related to social inequality and socio-economic marginalisation had run high in many LAC countries, including Bolivia, Mexico, and Peru, even before the pandemic hit (Rossi and von Bülow 2020: 65–66). In Bolivia, those in the informal sector such as



street workers, who could not practise physical distancing and lived in overcrowded spaces, have been disproportionately affected by the health- and socio-economic impacts of COVID-19. Similarly, excess mortality has been much higher in poorer than in wealthier departments (Hummel et al. 2021: 579). In Colombia, socio-economic disadvantage likewise correlates with COVID-19 mortality rates (Cifuentes et al. 2021). In Mexico, COVID-19-related grievances have often intertwined with humanitarian needs created by endemic poverty, with migrant and refugee populations particularly affected (Berkley Center 2020).

Throughout the region, social safety nets have often been weak and while some governments implemented emergency programmes, the latter were mostly insufficient to provide relief to vulnerable groups. In addition, government responses to the pandemic have differed significantly throughout the region. For instance, the Bolsonaro government in Brazil has downplayed it, while Bolivia and Chile would adopt market-based approaches without significant compensatory social policies (Rossi and von Bülow 2020: 65–66). Contrariwise, the centre-left government of President Alberto Fernández in Argentina imposed strict and prolonged lockdowns, while also working with civil society to alleviate the latter's socio-economic burdens on poor people (Abers et al. 2021: 341).

**Relief Activism:** Civil society relief activism has differed according to regime type and the willingness of LAC governments to work with CSOs. In countries such as Brazil, Bolivia and Chile, CSOs often tried to fill gaps state institutions left in emergency relief, while pressuring governments to acknowledge the severity of the health crisis (Rossi and von Bülow 2020: 65–66). In Chile, civil society networks such as #ChileShares and Movidos x Chile collected donations and enlisted businesses' support to provide vulnerable groups – families living in makeshift homes, for example – with food, medical goods, and shelter (Movidos 2022; #ChileComparte 2021). In Bolivia, where the government largely refrained from working with civil society (Hummels et al. 2021), 21 CSOs issued a joint communiqué that called attention to the needs of vulnerable groups such as indigenous and homeless people; demanded safety measures for health workers and other occupational groups exposed to the virus; and, offered themselves as “valid interlocutors” who could participate in the national crisis response (ANF 2020). Moreover, online initiatives such as #CitizenResponseBolivia disseminated information about the virus and sought to counter “fake news” (#RepuestaCiudadanaBolivia 2021). In Brazil, diverse civil society actors united to provide emergency relief to marginalised groups. Moreover, social movements conducted awareness campaigns on- and offline to counter the Bolsonaro government's misinformation that downplayed the threat of the virus. They also pushed local and national government entities to enhance their crisis responses and successfully lobbied the National Congress to pass an emergency-aid programme for informal workers (Abers et al. 2021).

Argentina, where activists hold positions in the government, saw concerted action by government and civil society. Specifically, groups such as the Confederación de Trabajadores de la Economía Popular (CTEP) and other members of the *piquetero* movement of unemployed

and informally employed people participated in a policymaking process to initiate programmes for informal-sector workers and poor people laid off during the pandemic. Self-help programmes run by social movements frequently received state support (Abers et al. 2021: 340–344). Moreover, as Abers et al. note: “Groups like CTEP interpreted the crisis as an opportunity to modify Argentina’s development model and to implement a more progressive long-term agenda” (2021: 343). Progressive social movements succeeded in lobbying the government to adopt a USD 3.2 billion “Creole Marshall Plan,” financed through a transaction levy and a one-off tax on the richest. Land occupations staged by CSOs transformed into larger campaigns that criticised land concentration and the lack of agrarian reform (Abers et al. 2021: 342).

In Mexico, CSOs reacted swiftly to address the needs of refugee and migrant populations around the country’s border areas, with teamwork among different civil society initiatives being facilitated by coordination mechanisms established already prior to COVID-19. In an online exchange organised by the Berkley Center (2020), civil society activists and experts stressed that the pandemic has highlighted the potential of teamwork and creative leadership as well as the need to build resilience. For instance, one civil society representative stated that “the world is pregnant with opportunity” and that COVID-19 has also made people think about the possibilities of reimagining the “system of systems” (Auron, cited by Berkley Center 2020).

Protest Activism: Despite COVID-19-related restrictions, people mobilised on a grand scale, making LAC the second-most protest-prone region in the Global South after Asia-Pacific. Most protests were driven by economic grievances, including unemployment, the stopping of cross-border trade, and the lack of compensation for lost income. Deepened by existing inequalities and institutional weaknesses, popular discontent towards governments and entrenched elites built on earlier social unrest (Segovia et al. 2021).

Protest activism featured most prominently in Brazil, followed by in Mexico and Argentina. In Brazil, the deep political divide between left- and right-wing parties fuelled two opposing strands of protest. On the one hand, Bolsonaro’s right-wing supporters did not take the pandemic seriously, supported laws censoring information, and even called for militarising the state. On the other, left-wing activists and politicians made enormous efforts to inform and lobby the public to take the pandemic seriously, calling for quick relief for citizens under socio-economic distress and for comprehensive COVID-19 responses. Despite this polarisation between right and left, many government actors defied Bolsonaro and ultimately pushed for lockdowns to be put in place (Abers et al. 2021). Citizens still managed to protest by banging pots and pans from their balconies to voice their resentment against Bolsonaro’s dismissiveness regarding COVID-19, as shaping the government’s chronic mishandling of the pandemic (Abers et al. 2021; Phillips 2020).

Argentinian CSOs opted for two-pronged activism: they relied on protest but also engaged with the government to create more progressive pandemic responses (Abers et al. 2021). Accordingly, Argentina saw 663 protests during the observation period, which still made it one of the most protest-prone countries in the Global South. Across the country, unions mobilised formal and informal workers to express their concerns regarding lockdowns, the lack of government support, and the COVID-19-induced economic setbacks experienced. On 30 April 2020, simultaneous protests took place in Buenos Aires, Cordoba, and Rosario (Santa Fe). Driven by poverty and famine, the Network of Precarious and Informal Workers mobilised the masses to bring public attention to their suffering. Many people had lost their jobs, and without the government's "Emergency Family Income" promised but not implemented, they had also lost their livelihoods and hope of feeding their families too. Despite growing police violence, many of the protesters' demands were heard and some even resulted in new policies, such as a new law on labour rights (Abers et al. 2021).

In Mexico, the economic hardship caused by the pandemic and ineffective government responses propelled 388 out of 672 protest events. Dissent by street vendors illustrates the intense impact of the pandemic's economic fallout. With markets closed and stalls forbidden, restrictive legal measures worsened the livelihoods of many informal workers who lacked a stable income. Around 1,000 street vendors marched in Cuernavaca, Morelos, in June 2020, pressuring the government to help them out of their misery and to allow them to reopen their stalls. A similar protest took place in Acapulco de Juárez, Guerrero. Here, street vendors demanded food subsidies – which they had been promised but never actually received. In both cases, people's economic desperation overrode any fear of the consequences emanating from restrictive legal measures and encouraged them to demand responsiveness from leftist president Andrés Manuel López Obrador (Navarro and Santillán 2020).

#### *Non-OECD Europe and the Caucasus*

Non-OECD Europe and the Caucasus saw a significant rise in legal restrictions, with many of them curtailing the free flow of information. However, even in highly autocratic countries many CSOs were at the forefront of relief efforts, deeming the crisis an opportunity to effect more profound social and economic change. Contrary to other world regions, protests often targeted pandemic-related restrictions and governments themselves.

Legal Measures: Non-OECD Europe and the Caucasus were second to sub-Saharan Africa in imposing new legal measures (48 decrees and legislations, or 18.9 per cent of the total 254 legal measures imposed in the 123 countries investigated). However, considering the number of legal measures imposed per country, the region was the biggest law enforcer, with an average of 3.2 legal measures per country. Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), and Moldova imposed the most (five each). Unlike in Asia-Pacific and LAC, the most common type of legal measure was an executive order or decree banning public gatherings. Legal restrictions on information prominently featured, accompanying a worrying trend of massive arrests of

journalists and activists. When combining executive and legislative measures focusing on information, the overall number was as high as 10 measures. By amending existing information laws, Azerbaijan alone enforced three measures regarding information distribution: namely, Laws 27-VIQD, 28-VIQD, and 30-VIQD addressing the “place[ment] of false information on information-telecommunication networks by users and adding a criminal offence to the Criminal Code regarding the violation of epidemic-related measures” (Law Library of Congress 2020: 5). Similarly, Russia amended existing criminal codes and laws on information to increase penalties and prison sentences for spreading purportedly false information about the virus. Countries such as Armenia, BiH (Republika Srpska), Moldova, and Serbia enacted executive decrees exclusively allowing the authorities to penalise purveyors of “fake news.” While Belarus did not enact new legal measures, its government has relied on existing laws, including the 2008 Media Law, to block content branded as false and punish those sharing it (Law Library of Congress 2020: 38).

These information-related laws have, in conjunction with lockdown measures, led to widespread crackdowns on journalists and activists who contradict official information about COVID-19 and criticise government responses to it. Dozens of journalist bloggers were arrested for interviewing opposition politicians or ordinary people about the effects of the pandemic on their livelihoods (Wiseman 2020). In Azerbaijan, at least six activists critical of government quarantine facilities and inadequate responses to economic setbacks were charged with breaking lockdown rules (HRW 2020e). In Armenia, journalists and filmmakers were forced to delete their blogs and social media posts, as police threatened them with prison sentences for creating “public panic” (Balasanya 2020). Journalists in Belarus and Serbia were similarly detained or fined for “causing panic and disorder” (Belsat 2020; IPI 2020a). In Russia, opposition-leaning press outlets were harassed and protesters against the allegedly rigged constitutional referendum in July 2020 faced police violence. The authorities cited “the epidemiological situation” as the grounds for denying permission for protests to go ahead (Aitkhozhina 2020).

Non-OECD Europe and the Caucasus are home primarily to electoral democracies (nine countries), with five electoral autocracies and one liberal democracy (Cyprus). Four countries are identified as free, eight as partly free, and only three as not free (V-Dem 2021). Our data shows that the trend towards the increasing constriction of rights-based civic space concentrates in five electoral autocracies – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Russia, and Serbia – where the weaponisation of information-related laws against civil society features most prominently. Despite this tendency, civil society provided relief for the domestic population, demonstrating resilience in the face of restrictions.

Needs-Induced Space: In non-OECD Europe and the Caucasus, real GDP growth declined by an average of 8.1 percentage points between 2019 and 2020. In addition, COVID-19 and related restrictive measures increased poverty and deepened existing socio-economic inequalities. In Russia, the economic impact of lockdown measures in 2020 combined with the then-

decline of the oil price and an increasing devaluation of the rouble (Volkov 2020, in Harriman Institute 2020). The national poverty rate stood at 12.65 per cent in the first and at 13.2 per cent in the second quarter of 2020 respectively. Migrant workers from Central Asia were particularly affected (Layden 2020), while labour conflicts also intensified (Volkov 2020, in Harriman Institute 2020). In Georgia, the quick and rigorous 2020 lockdown was relatively effective in curbing transmissions of the coronavirus (Panchulidze and Tsitsikashvili 2020). But, poverty increased by an estimated 5.4 per cent, and the country saw massive job losses and a growing fiscal deficit (World Bank 2021c). In Belarus, COVID-19-related infections and deaths seem to be underreported, as the second quarter of 2020 apparently saw mortality increase by 18.5 per cent. Concurrently, the country's economy in 2020 continued to suffer from dropping oil and potassium prices and from inflation (FES 2020: 4). Azerbaijan, which in 2020 also suffered from a combination of COVID-19-related shocks and a declining oil price, likewise saw growing unemployment and drops in material well-being (Ismayilzada 2021). In Serbia and other non-OECD countries of the Balkans, COVID-19 and related restrictions particularly hit hard the most vulnerable such as homeless people and members of the Roma community (Ćurčić 2020).

**Relief Activism:** Throughout the region, civil society played an important role in providing COVID-19-related relief. In Georgia, CSOs cooperated with state institutions to curb the spread of the virus and support vulnerable groups. In addition, they effectively monitored both the proportionality of COVID-19-related restrictions and government spending during the pandemic (Panchulidze and Tsitsikashvili 2020). In Serbia, CSOs advocated for protection measures for vulnerable groups, while also lobbying the government to incorporate political, social, and economic rights into its crisis response and wider policies of socio-economic reform. For instance, one activist stated that:

We believe that this crisis can [be] an opportunity to produce real change, and that new perspectives and ideas can improve the bleak situation [...]. [W]e are trying to form a movement against the continued erosion of the social roles of the state, that will include other activists, CSOs, trade unions and academia, and all the progressive individuals and groups that will stand against the ongoing changes and the management of the crisis. (Ćurčić 2020)

Even in autocratic Azerbaijan, Belarus, and Russia, where CSOs have faced long-standing repression, civil society showed enormous resilience, stepping in to provide relief where state agencies failed (Orlosky 2020). CSOs in Russia reacted swiftly to the pandemic, building on the diversified organisational and funding structures, interorganisational networks, and linkages with local communities they had established prior to the pandemic (Smenov 2020, in Harriman Institute 2020). For instance, the organisation *Chto delat'* ("What is to be done?") collected around USD 2.8 million (almost RUB 200 million) in donations to support health personnel, while *Razvitie migratsii* ("Migrant Development") delivered significant amounts of aid to migrant workers, leading experts to argue that "civil society organizations filled the

void created by the failures of Russia's autocratic regime" (Semenov and Bederson 2020). In the first half of 2020, several CSO activists saw the pandemic as an opportunity to grow in professionalism and extend their roles and visibility, given the increasing demand for their services (Lindemann-Komorova 2020, in Harriman Institute 2020). In April and May 2020, the government of President Vladimir Putin reacted with subsidies and promises of tax deductions for welfare-oriented CSOs, moves that some considered as significant successes for civil society at the time (e.g. Rozhanovskaya 2020). However, the Kremlin also used selective financial support to co-opt and divide civil society, while critical CSOs were often suppressed (Semenov and Bederson 2020). For instance, the Russian authorities detained Anastasia Vasilyeva, the head of a medical union who had publicly criticised the government's COVID-19 response (AI 2020). Similarly, they also prevented the independent CSO Alyans vrachey ("Alliance of Medics") from providing support to a number of hospitals and communities (Semenov and Bederson 2020).

Even in highly repressive Belarus, CSOs and informal civil society groups engaged in relief- and crowdfunding activities and launched awareness campaigns to counter the Aleksandr Lukashenko government's narrative that denied the lethality of the virus (ForumCiv. 2020). Volunteer campaigns and corporate social responsibility initiatives established to make up for insufficient state responses strengthened grassroots networks and ties between civil society activists and local communities (FES 2020: 6). In a survey conducted by the international non-profit organisation Pact (2020: 10), 60 per cent of the respondent Belarussian CSOs described the pandemic as an opportunity to better integrate online communication technologies into their work, while 30 per cent saw it as a chance to reinforce collaboration with other CSOs. In Azerbaijan, CSOs such as the Qaranquş Aid Fund provided food and other essentials to elderly people who were obliged to stay inside but were not provided with adequate state support. With the government being slow to inform the public about COVID-19, independent journalists and citizens' initiatives quickly disseminated information about the virus and related hygiene measures (Orlosky 2020). In all three countries, engagement in COVID-19-related relief strengthened ties between service and advocacy CSOs, while reinforcing public support for civil society initiatives. Accordingly, civil society responses to the pandemic raised hopes for new types of "public-private partnerships, where civic groups become accepted as a fully capable and complementary part of society" (Orlosky 2020).

Protest Activism: Unlike in other regions, COVID-19-induced economic setbacks only played a minor role in spurring protests in non-OECD Europe and the Caucasus. Instead, pushbacks against governments' practices – including censorship, propaganda, and autocratic propensities – as well as general mistrust in political institutions drove many protests. In Albania, Bulgaria, Romania, and Serbia, where pro-government media spread disinformation about COVID-19 and new information-control laws hindered independent journalists from counteracting such narratives, citizens organised protests to criticise governments and pro-government journalists. Particularly in Serbia, tensions between citizens, journalists, and the

government came to the fore. Government-affiliated journalists were physically attacked by anti-government protesters for spreading propaganda, while independent journalists were detained for unauthorised reports on the pandemic (IPI 2020b).

The encroachment on civil liberties accompanied governments' mismanagement of the pandemic, exemplified by the arbitrary lifting and imposition of lockdowns and curfews, which only further fuelled popular resentment. In July 2020, massive – partially violent – protests broke out in front of the Serbian parliament over the government's decision to renew the curfew order. This decision was taken despite President Aleksandar Vučić dropping all other legal measures just in time for his re-election on 21 June 2020, a move many deemed as opportunistic. Thousands of Serbian citizens staged protests in Belgrade, Novi Sad, Nis, Kragujevac, and Smederevo. What had started as a protest against the renewed curfew quickly turned into full-blown anti-government riots. Outraged citizens accused the government of corruption, a rigged election, and the spread of disinformation, clashing with the police. After two days, the government lifted the curfew order (Dragojlo 2020; Pantelic 2020).

Where COVID-19 and/or lockdowns made physical protest difficult or impossible, civil society showed its creativity and resilience by changing tactics. In Russia, people demonstrated virtually to express their discontent with the government. They live-streamed themselves via YouTube and met virtually on online maps or met for seemingly apolitical walks rather than political marches (DW 2020). Faced with strict isolation rules, Armenians staged very small protests of fewer than five people or even smaller one-person protests (HRW 2020i). Azerbaijani human rights defender Gulnara Mehdiyeva and popular graffiti activist Giyas Ibrahimov similarly staged creative single-person protests, one of them on a rooftop. Both protests were stopped by security forces (HRHF and HRH 2020).

### *The Middle East and North Africa*

Gravely affected by COVID-19 and its socio-economic repercussions, the region witnessed civil society resilience in the areas of service delivery and political advocacy. As in Asia-Pacific, this was against the odds given autocratic regimes' harsh crackdowns on and co-optation of civil society actors. The latter's activism, however, was not strong enough to push back against autocratic restrictions.

Legal Measures: Compared to other regions, the number of new legal measures enforced in the 19 MENA countries is moderate, with 43 measures imposed – or 2.3 per country. Nevertheless, regime restrictions on rights-based civic space remained intense, concurrent with crackdowns on civil society actors – including medical workers. Jordan imposed the largest number of legal measures (seven) regionally – and, in fact, worldwide. Second regionally is Iraq (four). The most common type of legal measure in the region is an executive order enabling curfews that limit the number of hours spent in public spaces. Executive measures that stipulate health-emergency responses and banning public gatherings are the second most prevalent measure.

As the region is dominated by autocracies, COVID-19-related legal measures have frequently been weaponised against regime challengers. Twelve countries (mostly the Gulf states) are classified as consolidated autocracies, while six (including Egypt and Turkey) are identified as electoral autocracies. The only electoral democracy was Tunisia (as of 2020, before the July 2021 civilian coup by President Kais Saied) (V-Dem 2021). The entrenchment of autocracy coincides with low freedom scores, with most MENA countries (15) considered not free. Three are identified as partly free, and one as free (Tunisia, before July 2021) (Freedom House 2021). Accordingly, COVID-19-related legal restrictions gave autocratic regimes added ammunition with which to attack civil society further. Governments from Egypt and Turkey to Jordan and the United Arab Emirates instrumentalised states of emergency to censor and arrest journalists accused of “spreading fake news” and “causing panic” (Michaelson 2020; HRW 2020f). As medical workers became disillusioned with their governments’ underwhelming responses to the health crisis and publicly aired their criticisms, regimes in Egypt, Iran, and Turkey moved to charge and detain doctors (Center for Human Rights in Iran 2020; HRW 2020g). Bans on public gatherings supposed to prohibit religious activities in public sites were used in fact to suppress protests that have been a source of regime destabilisation ever since the Arab Spring. A telling case is Algeria, where the anti-government protests first emerging in 2019 resurged in early 2021 despite the ban on public assembly. The police responded heavy-handedly, citing protesters’ violation of the ban (AI 2021a). In Iraq, dissidents who exposed a “crumbling institutional structure amid the health crisis,” faced life-threatening circumstances not only from the government but also from non-state armed groups (Cherif et al. 2020). A number of activists and public intellectuals have been murdered since mid-2020, sparking a fresh round of protests that had first started in 2019 (Ibid.).

Needs-Induced Space: In the MENA countries, real GDP growth declined by 9.7 percentage points between 2019 and 2020 on average. However, this calculation is somewhat distorted by Libya, whose growth declined by 72.9 percentage points, from 13.2 per cent in 2019 to -59.7 per cent a year later (IMF Data Mapper 2021). According to World Bank estimates, poverty rose significantly in 2020, with countries such as Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon – where the socio-economic harm inflicted by COVID-19 compounded long-standing economic problems – being particularly affected (Lopez-Acevedo and Hoogeveen 2021). Autocratically governed Iran was especially hard-hit and, despite limited testing capacity, by mid-April 2020 accounted for the ninth-highest number of cases and the seventh-highest number of deaths worldwide (John Hopkins University 2020, cited in Alavi et al. 2021: 1). In Algeria, the economic fallout from lockdowns combined with declining incomes from hydrocarbons served to enhance deprivation in sectors such as education and health (Lopez-Acevedo and Hoogeveen 2021; World Bank 2021d).

Throughout the region, COVID-19 has exposed and reinforced the massive pre-existing inequalities. In telephone surveys conducted by the World Bank in 2021, around half of the Egyptian and Tunisian households interviewed reported that their living standards had



dropped compared to 2019, with the poorest 40 per cent of the population suffering most (Lopez-Acevedo and Hoogeveen 2021). In Turkey, COVID-19 and related lockdown measures possibly pushed up to an additional 1.6 million people into poverty. Informal-sector, lower-skilled, and female workers were most likely to be laid off, while people in the top 10 per cent of high-income jobs even gained new employment opportunities (Baez and Demigüç-Kunt 2021). In all MENA countries, minority populations, migrant workers, and refugee communities living in camps were the most vulnerable to infection and, concurrently, also had the most inadequate access to healthcare and social safety nets. In several countries, including Egypt, Morocco, Syria, and Tunisia, health workers were not provided with sufficient protective gear. In Egypt, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, the authorities used the refusal of access to healthcare as a means to punish prisoners (AI 2021b).

Relief Activism: In the MENA as well, the precise forms of civil society relief activism usually depended on regime type, state capacity, government preparedness to address COVID-19, and the readiness of incumbents to work with CSOs. In Tunisia before the civilian coup of Saied, CSOs engaged in manifold relief activities, including the provision of food and medical goods, awareness-raising, the monitoring of physical distancing in public places, and the provision of support to hospitals and public-health administrations. Tunisia's then democratic government generally accepted such initiatives and, at times, even worked with CSOs that had traditionally held anti-government stances. Collaboration between CSOs and state institutions was especially pronounced at the local level (Cherif et al. 2020). For instance, the Red Crescent and Scout groups worked with municipal governments to improve health coverage and assist in the implementation of hygiene measures (Reiffenstuehl 2020). On the contrary, CSO-government relations in Turkey often reflected the country's increasing autocratisation and political polarisation. While the government of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan sought to quell protests and critical civil society activism, CSOs continued to provide emergency relief – for instance, by organising the quick provision of aid to precarious workers affected by lockdowns. In doing so, CSOs often worked alongside or in cooperation with municipal governments. When the Erdoğan government curtailed the relief activities of municipalities controlled by the political opposition, civil society-based emergency relief became even more crucial for vulnerable groups (Cherif et al. 2020). The rich and rather strong Gulf states, for their part, often seem to have co-opted volunteerism. In Bahrain, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia, for instance, young volunteers registered to work in government health and testing centres, while influencers created awareness of official guidelines for pandemic control (Yousef 2020).

In Algeria, CSOs and spontaneous solidarity initiatives stepped in to provide food aid and emergency supplies that the increasingly militarised regime installed after the fall of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika failed to deliver. Initiatives such as Solidarité Populaire (“Popular Solidarity”) delivered food packages to families depending on precarious incomes, while online-based initiatives such as Net3awno (“Let's help each other!”) coordinated volunteer support

and requests for aid. This led Bessadi to conclude that: “Civil society thrives during the pandemic” (2020). Autocratic Iran, likewise, saw numerous civil society initiatives to address the health and socio-economic crises unfolding. For instance, CSO members initiated a COVID-19 Prevention and Control Working Group to coordinate efforts by public and private actors to prevent transmission among drug users. The group also directly supported drug-using communities, bridging gaps in state provision (Alavi et al. 2021: 2). For Working Group members, the engagement in COVID-19 relief created “much-needed space” to engage in innovative forms of cooperation among different stakeholders and develop inclusive and participatory approaches to harm reduction in drug abuse. Building on its COVID-19-related relief work, the group developed digital platforms to facilitate advocacy and “people-centred education” (Alavi et al. 2021: 4) in remote areas.

Protest Activism: Increasing government restrictions contrasted with the flourishing protests citizens staged to express their grievances regarding pandemic-induced economic regression and failing state institutions, factors driving major protest already before the pandemic’s onset (Wilson Center 2020). A fitting example is Turkey, where CSOs and informal civil society groups had been active in organising pro-democracy activism since the 2013 Gezi Park protests. Civic groups contributed to organising, sustaining, and supporting almost all of the 94 protests seen in Turkey. The Erdoğan government’s attempts to ban CSO activity even strengthened resolve to protest against the misuse of the state of emergency. Similarly, in 2019, Algeria, Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon had experienced large waves of protest that sought to generate a second Arab Spring (Diwan Carnegie Middle East Center 2022). With citizens’ concerns having often remained unaddressed, many people took to the streets to reiterate their earlier demands (FES and DIE 2020). Arab youth in particular joined protests related to ingrained corruption, bad governance, a lack of quality jobs, and social injustice (Statista 2021). When the pandemic began in early 2020, lockdowns temporarily quelled these protests – but soon after restrictions were eased, protests re-emerged given that the above-mentioned persisted. Instead of relying on mass gatherings, people dispersed into smaller protests – with them taking place in strategically relevant places, like in front of parliaments or banks (Wilson Center 2020).

In Algeria and Lebanon, most gatherings were organised by ordinary citizens and leaderless movements, bringing together hundreds of thousands of people. In Algeria, protests by the Hirak movement in 2019 had removed the autocrat Bouteflika (Pyka 2020). Ultimately, however, the overall political and socio-economic situation did not improve after his fall from power, further eroding public trust in state institutions (FES and DIE 2020). Regime repression and the onset of COVID-19 dealt a blow to the Hirak Movement, which in early 2021 decided to temporarily suspend its protests to avoid infections (Nouri 2021, Zoubir 2021). Nevertheless, people upheld different forms of public dissent (Ghanem 2020). Students, their parents, and teachers persistently gathered to criticise the government’s lack of imposed measures against the spread of COVID-19 and insufficient sanitary supplies in schools and universities.

In November 2020, primary school teachers gathered across 11 different schools to demand the authorities protect citizens from the pandemic. Instead of large gatherings, people organised in small groups and focused on strategic places, such as schools and universities (Wilson Center 2020).

Informal efforts to organise protests featured prominently in Lebanon as well. The 2019 uprisings had ignited hopes for economic and political change, as they had successfully removed Prime Minister Saad Al-Hariri from office. However, old patterns remained in place under the leadership of his successor Hassan Diab, while economic decay and government neglect of citizens also continued. In the two first months of the pandemic, protests were hampered by social-isolation directives and military crackdowns on protesters and people failing to comply with the lockdown. Yet, civil society found alternatives by engaging in online activism, staging protests by car and spray-painting walls. After the lockdown, protesters took back the streets: protests against authoritarian encroachment on civic space surged (Schoorel et al. 2020).

### *Sub-Saharan Africa*

As the region most affected by the socio-economic fallout from lockdowns, sub-Saharan Africa saw CSOs taking a hit from shortages of resources. While this development, in conjunction with growing legal restrictions, possibly hampered civil society's relief activism to a certain extent, CSOs nevertheless made important contributions to bridging the gaps left by states in service provision. Moreover, the advocacy dimension of CSOs' work remained pronounced. With the exception of South Africa, legal restrictions along with a focus on making ends meet might account for the relatively low number of people partaking in civic protest.

Legal Measures: In sub-Saharan Africa, legal restrictions on rights closely intertwined with state fragility and ingrained inequality in worsening people's socio-economic needs. On the surface, sub-Saharan Africa enacted the greatest number of decrees and legislations (76 measures, or 29.9 per cent of the total 254 legal measures imposed in the Global South and non-OECD Europe and the Caucasus). However, the number of legal measures per country stands at only 1.7 on average, the second-lowest number after Asia-Pacific (1.6). Zimbabwe and Ethiopia imposed the most legal measures in the region (six and five respectively). The Central African Republic did not enact any new legal measures at all, possibly due to ongoing civil war, resulting in a long-term humanitarian crisis and fragile state infrastructures. Executive decrees regarding health emergencies are the dominant type of legal measure seen in the region. Compared to other regions where information control shapes legal restrictions on civic space, sub-Saharan Africa saw the most modest enforcement of such measures. Two regulations implemented by South Africa concern data management related to contract-tracing.

Nonetheless, like in Asia-Pacific, scant new legal measures did not mean that repression was low, as governments used both existing and new legal tools – not to mention blunt force –

to crack down on CSOs. In Ethiopia, a journalist and producer of a political television programme was charged under the 2019 Proclamation to Prevent the Spread of Hate Speech and False Information (HRW 2020h). A state of emergency would grant the Ethiopian government sweeping powers to arbitrarily arrest journalists and human rights lawyers allegedly spreading “fake news” about COVID-19. Similarly, in Nigeria the police filed lawsuits against journalists who reported the collapse of a COVID-19 isolation centre for violating the 2015 Cyber-crime Act (CPJ 2020). Beyond existing cyber- or information-related laws, the authorities, at times, opted for criminal codes. In Uganda, journalists who published information about the possible origins of COVID-19 were charged for their “disobedience of lawful orders” (Global Diaspora News 2020). Meanwhile in Niger, doctors and activists faced defamation charges for mentioning the virus in interviews or on social media platforms (Bah and Phaneuf 2020). Security forces often used COVID-19 as a pretext to unleash violence against civil society. In Cameroon, Côte d’Ivoire, Guinea, Nigeria, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe, the authorities cited bans on gatherings and emergency decrees as the grounds for forcibly dispersing and arresting protesters, resulting in deaths and injuries (AI 2021d).

Unlike in the MENA, where intensifying repression corresponds with widespread autocracy, sub-Saharan African regimes are mixed between electoral democracies (14) and electoral autocracies (24), with one liberal democracy and four consolidated autocracies (V-Dem 2021). Eighteen countries are classified as not free, 20 as partly free, and five as free (Freedom House 2021). A worrying trend is that some electoral democracies, such as Guinea, Niger, and Nigeria, have increasingly restricted rights-based space. This can erode these countries’ democratic qualities in times to come.

Needs-Induced Space: Countries in sub-Saharan Africa on average lost 5.5 percentage points in real GDP growth between 2019 and 2020, which is significant because many of them already had very low real GDPs when the pandemic hit. According to World Bank estimates, extreme poverty increased tremendously. As of 2020, the number of extreme poor reached 474.8 million, up from 439.8 million a year earlier (World Bank 2021d). In terms of infections and deaths, South Africa – which is marked by the highest income inequality worldwide – was by far the most affected country (Lakemann et al. 2020: 2; Leininger et al. 2021: 16, 37). Food insecurity, which impacted an estimated 20 per cent of all South African families before the coronavirus outbreak, has increased further (Adelle and Haywood 2021). While most other sub-Saharan African countries escaped high mortality rates during the observation period, their populations were hard-hit by the economic fallout of containment measures. Many governments imposed lockdowns, closed schools, and cut off travel routes but largely failed to provide citizens with safety nets and compensation for lost income. Moreover, even in countries where some measure of social protection existed, vulnerable groups such as urban informal-sector workers were left out (Lakemann et al. 2020). One example is Ethiopia, where the government’s lockdown further increased unemployment among urban youth, which had already stood at over 20 per cent before the pandemic, and interrupted supply chains, making

many families vulnerable to hunger (Gebremichael 2020). In Zimbabwe, poverty intensified as the government failed to implement support measures and leading political figures abused health procurements for personal financial gain (Kademaunga and Saki 2020).

Relief Activism: CSOs have often sought to fill the gaps that states have left in health and service delivery. In South Africa, they played a key role in providing food to vulnerable groups, as school feeding programmes were suspended during school shutdowns and state agencies failed to reach people in need (Adelle and Haywood 2021; Seekings 2020). In Ethiopia, the non-profit group Love in Action Ethiopia (LIAE) educated citizens about the virus and related hygiene measures; provided protective materials, such as masks and sanitizers; built up Community-Based COVID-19 Task Forces on its project sites; and, mobilised grassroots volunteers (Gebremichael 2020). CSOs in Zimbabwe have addressed community needs by providing masks in densely populated suburbs, among other places (Kademaunga and Saki 2020). In Ghana, NETRIGHT, a national civil society network for women's rights, collected funds to support government programmes for homeless children and for women, which were implemented by the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection (Akakpo 2020). However, CSOs have also themselves been affected by the health- and related socio-economic crises. In a survey of 1,039 CSOs from 46 African countries conducted by EIPC-Africa (2021),<sup>2</sup> 68.1 per cent of the organizations interviewed reported a drop in funding since the onset of the pandemic. Moreover, 87.1 per cent indicated rising levels of stress and anxiety among their staff, while 7.6 per cent reported that one or more of their staff members had died from COVID-19 (EIPC-Africa 2021: 19).

The survey also highlights the complexity of the impacts that the pandemic, related restrictions, the loss of funding, and enhanced socio-economic needs have all had on sub-Saharan African CSOs. While 56.1 per cent of the CSOs interviewed said that they had scaled down or ceased certain operations since the outbreak of the virus, 83.4 per cent noted that they had started new programme activities to counter the pandemic (Ibid.: 6). Interestingly, most of these new activities (51.6 per cent) were related to advocacy, followed by emergency response (50.8 per cent), information dissemination (42.5 per cent), then capacity-building and training (18.7 per cent) (EIPC-Africa 2021: 26). When asked about the general nature of their work, the vast majority described it as advocacy (69.3 per cent) and/or capacity-building and training (68.5 per cent); one-third cited organising and mobilising (30.4 per cent); less than a third mentioned service delivery meanwhile (26.4 per cent) (EIPC-Africa 2021: 9). Further contradicting dominant assumptions of a pervasive reorientation from advocacy to service delivery, only 34 per cent of the surveyed CSOs stated that they had shifted to dealing with COVID-19 responses from other fields of work (EIPC-Africa 2021: 16).

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2 The survey sample also includes 24 CSOs from North Africa and, therefore, does not exactly coincide with our sample of sub-Saharan African countries. However, as the share of North African countries in the EIPC-Africa sample is very small (2.3 per cent) (EIPC-Africa 2021: 7), we nevertheless consider the survey indicative when investigating the fate of civic space in sub-Saharan Africa.

In several countries, CSOs have advocated for better welfare systems and more equitable and inclusive government responses to COVID-19 and the related socio-economic crises. For instance, in Ghana CSOs lobbied for transparency and accountability in the workings of the National Fund established to fight COVID-19, while NETRIGHT publicly urged the government to ensure that pandemic-related programmes were responsive to the special needs of vulnerable groups such as women and the poor (Akakpo 2020). In Zimbabwe, CSOs, journalists, and artists lobbied the autocratic government to ensure better job conditions for health workers and monitored public-health management to curb corruption (Kademaunga and Saki 2020).

Protest Activism: Sub-Saharan Africa witnessed the smallest number of protests, with the latter often occurring against the backdrop of violent crackdowns. Possible explanations include: civil war (e.g. in the Central African Republic, Chad, and Somalia); widespread poverty, which may have led many citizens to focus on survival; and, new and old draconian laws conducive to the use of excessive force in autocracies in particular. In August 2020, Ethiopians marched for three consecutive days against the arrest of many local leaders, who were detained for allegedly contracting the virus. In response, the authorities opened fire on protesters – killing a number of people and injuring many more besides (AI 2020b). This three-day demonstration was the only protest activity in the country.

Citizens in Zimbabwe also saw a high degree of repression. President Emmerson Mnangagwa, who in 2017 had seized power through a military coup, used the pandemic as a pretext to attack civil society and opposition parties' members and leaders (Moyo and Phulu 2021). Police often intervened in peaceful protests, as people in isolation centres demanded to be released due to poor living conditions. Moreover, the security forces arrested doctors and nurses despite them being desperately needed for upholding the country's healthcare system. The government indiscriminately targeted protesters, journalists, and those opposition members who criticised official responses to the pandemic and attempts to stifle civil liberties (Mutekwe and Vanyoro 2021). The authorities claimed that "tough measures" were needed to ensure public compliance with COVID-19-related measures, but, ultimately, these measures often restricted critical civil society members' freedoms of expression and assembly. Journalists were often harassed; government critics went missing and were tortured; and, 100,000 people were arrested during the first four months of the pandemic, with at least 10 casualties during a 2020 crackdown by security forces (AI 2020c).

South Africa is the only exception to the trend of minimal protest. With the country being especially hard-hit by the pandemic, nurses, doctors, and other healthcare workers were pushed to the limit in understaffed and underprotected COVID-19 treatment centres (Chersich et al. 2020). Consequently, many took to the streets demanding increased government support (Mavis Mulaudzi et al. 2021). Medical centres and hospitals in rural areas suffered greatly, as they had been understaffed and overcrowded even before the pandemic's onset. The spread of the virus endangered the lives of staff, with many falling sick and others refusing to go back

to work for fear of infection (Chersich et al. 2020). Consequently, thousands of medical workers marched on the National Health Laboratory Services in Johannesburg to demand more personnel. South Africans also organised many marches demanding the government alleviate their plight. When the latter failed to address these demands, popular frustration and rage were ubiquitous, contributing to the July 2021 riots that followed the conviction of former president Jacob Zuma for corruption (Steinhauser 2021).

## 5 Concluding Remarks and Policy Recommendations

Despite growing legal restrictions, civil society actors have engaged in significant relief and advocacy/protest activism during the COVID-19 pandemic in Asia-Pacific, LAC, non-OECD Europe and the Caucasus, sub-Saharan Africa, and the MENA alike. European foreign- and development policy makers seeking to support civil society and post-COVID-19 recovery in these world regions should bear in mind that rather than being solely constituted by the presence (or absence) of legally guaranteed civil liberties, civic space is shaped also by the interplay of *rights-based*, *needs-induced* space and *civil society activism*. Civic space is not static; rather, it is a dynamic configuration that can simultaneously grow and contract in different ways (see also, Alagappa 2004). In the pandemic context, the confluence of health-, socio-economic-, and governance crises has given many CSOs an opportunity to engage with vulnerable communities, forge coalitions to oppose restrictive legal measures, and to advocate for long-term policy changes. We argue that these dynamics signal a sustenance of civic space. This perspective can render policy interventions impactful and adaptive.

Regarding legal restrictions, German and European policymakers, political foundations, international NGOs, and regional civil society networks should advocate for the prevention or rescinding of draconian laws and executive orders encroaching on civil liberties and civic space under the pretext of pandemic control. These efforts can build on emerging insights regarding civil society pushbacks against NGOs laws, a legal landmark of shrinking civic space (e.g. Berger-Kern et al. 2021). In addition, European policymakers should themselves keep demonstrating that COVID-19-related as well as other health- and non-health related emergencies can be dealt with democratically by subjecting all legal measures to parliamentary oversight, civil society scrutiny, and the rule of law.

But, as we have shown, civic space in the Global South and non-OECD Europe and the Caucasus has often remained vibrant even despite the restrictions on rights-based space due to civil society activism, especially so CSOs' service delivery – with it having addressed people's acute socio-economic needs in the face of weak governments. German and European donor organisations can help to sustain and invigorate needs-induced space in these world regions by fostering civil society relief initiatives through the granting of financial support and nurturing of capacity-building. In this regard, donors should, in particular, increase their financial support not only to typical relief-oriented or humanitarian CSOs but also to human

rights- and advocacy groups. The latter frequently combine their programmes in the field of COVID-19-related relief with political advocacy for more equitable and inclusive welfare and development models. Relatedly, donors should also develop more flexible ways of supporting self-help initiatives and informal CBOs. While these are usually unregistered and therefore unable to conform to formal donor requirements, they play a crucial role in reaching and mobilising marginalised communities regardless.

Lastly, European foreign- and development policy makers should enhance their capacities to monitor and analyse COVID-19-related and other protests in the Global South and in non-OECD Europe and the Caucasus. As our study has suggested, these protests sometimes have significant potential to challenge autocratisation. While various international organisations have expressed concerns about CSOs' constricted space, hindering democratic pushbacks against autocratisation, the pandemic has offered new opportunities (and necessities) for CSOs to mobilise against autocratising regimes. Citizens under socio-economic distress have taken to the streets to call for better governance and ultimately challenge the legitimacy of non-democratic incumbents. Repressive responses to these protests under the pretext of pandemic control have, at times, not only failed to curb popular dissent but even fuelled further mobilisation against autocratic regimes. However, mass mobilisation driven by socio-economic dissatisfaction can also morph into violent political unrest, a trend that European policymakers and development agencies should closely observe to be able to design timely de-escalation measures. Ultimately, such monitoring efforts would benefit from improved context analysis and the consideration of new development models and visions for state–society relations, as advanced by civil society actors in the context of COVID-19 and post-pandemic recovery. This may help German and European decision-makers to devise more equitable and participatory development approaches that better fit local contexts and needs.



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