

Growing Against All Odds: Mapping funding for intersectional organizing in the CEECCNA regions

Global lessons and regional priorities from “**Where is the Money?**” research in Central and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, Central and North Asia (CEECCNA).

Credits

This research was commissioned by Dalan Fund and undertaken by a team of external researchers.

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About Dalan Fund

Dalan Fund emerged in the wake of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine with a grounding truth that people across Central and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, Central and North Asia (CEECCNA) live in compounded and protracted crises. Amid democratic backsliding and the erosion of human rights, regional social justice movements have been at the forefront of responding to the poly-crisis despite being systematically and chronically underfunded.

The Fund is an offering to philanthropic, humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding sectors to strategically channel funding into movement-led resource distribution mechanisms aimed at people-centered systemic transformation in 16 countries of the CEECCNA regions.

This report marks the second anniversary of Dalan Fund, and a year from being formally launched in Tbilisi, Georgia at the Human Rights Funders Network and Ariadne Gatherings in April 2024.

Acknowledgements:

Dalan Fund recognizes the large community that has supported us in this research. First and foremost, our gratitude to the research team who brought feminist, decolonizing, and participatory values to life in every step of this research.

Thank you to our own funders, who have trusted us to create a new model of funding for the CEECCNA regions. We are grateful for the global advisors who have provided input on the design and completion of this research: Hakima Abbas, Cindy Clark, Kellea Miller, Kasia Staszewska, and Gohar Shahnazaryan, as well as Dalan Fund’s Founding Advisory Members, Ganna Dovbakh, Janette Akhilgova, and Boglárka Fedorkó, who ensured the political grounding of the research in the regional contexts. We recognize AWID (Association for Women’s Rights in Development) for its unparalleled methodology and leadership through its Where is the Money? research. Thank you to Human Rights Funders Network (HRFN) for providing regional datasets and helping unpack available data on global funding to the CEECCNA regions.

Most of all, our sincere appreciation for regional activists who shared their time and insights with us for this research. Dalan Fund exists because we know your resistance, creativity, and vision are the change the world needs.

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Table of Contents

Table of Contents	03
Executive Summary	04
Acronyms	09
Introduction	10
Global Context	12
Recognizing Risk	14
Locating the Study	15
Methodology	16
Defining Intersectional Movements	17
Methods & Sample	18
The Funding Landscape	22
Findings I: Realities & Gaps	27
Findings on Intersectional Organizing	30
Funding Trends and Realities	37
Findings II: Funding Deserts and Deserted Islands	50
Labor Rights & Economic Justice	52
LGBTQIA+ Rights	53
Roma Rights: Funding Desert in an Ocean of EU Funding	54
Recommendations: How Funders Can Support CEECCNA Movements	58
Legend	64

01.

Executive Summary

Growing Against All Odds: Mapping funding for intersectional organizing in the CEECCNA regions is the first-ever comprehensive analysis of funding for intersectional organizing across the diverse regions of Central Eastern Europe, Caucasus, and Central and North Asia (CEECCNA). The study is driven by the need for evidence-based advocacy to secure more strategic and substantial funding for intersectional organizers and movements, whose efforts are critical yet often overlooked and underfunded.

This research comes on the heels of unprecedented cuts to foreign aid globally, a bevy of regressive anti-rights laws, and significant changes in the philanthropic landscape. While focused on the CEECCNA regions, the findings also point to the challenges and possibilities of driving funding to movements around the world that are operating amidst crisis, restricted civic space, and attacks on democratic institutions.

The findings draw on organizers' own analysis of the sources of support they have, as well as those they need. By raising their voices, we offer an understanding of regional organizing steeped in the wisdom, experience, and priorities of those leading change.



Key Takeaways:

01. CEECCNA activists and organizations are **under attack** by anti-rights movements and authoritarian governments. Their organizing showcases the full range of resistance strategies – from underground “artivism” to litigation. As one organizer from Central Asia shared, “**The more repressive the governments, the more creative we get in our strategies.**”

02. **Intersectional organizing** is present in all CEECCNA countries. **Gender justice** and **LGBTQIA+** movements show the largest rates of organizing across diverse themes and movements.

03. However, organizers often have to pigeonhole their work into a single silo to receive funding, rather than present the full richness of their organizing to funders. Issues such as **LGBTQIA+ rights, economic justice, sex workers’ rights, and Roma rights** are among the **most underfunded**.

04. Funding is characterized by **boom-bust cycles** and **crises**. Sustained, flexible, multiyear support is extremely limited. According to activists, most of the funding they receive (**71%**) is project-based and for one year or less. This mirrors data from Human Rights Funders Network (HRFN) that finds only **6%** of international human rights grants to the regions is in the form of direct, flexible support.¹

05. The average organizational budget range in the CEECCNA regions is **\$11,000-30,000**, excluding grants to Ukraine.² This range has stayed consistent over the five years of study (2019-2023), but total budgets have steadily dropped over this period.

06. Funding to Ukraine skyrocketed in **2022**, with budgets doubling to an average of **\$100,000-200,000**. However, this started to decline as of 2023 and has not had an add-on effect of increased funding for other countries in the CEECCNA regions.

08. **Women’s and feminist funds** play a critical role. Of the top 10 funding sources, they represent **six**. They also provide the most flexible support according to research participants.

10. Funding for civil society is heavily restricted. The CEECCNA regions are the epicenter of “**foreign agent**” laws tracking all international support. In addition, even a diverse and ostensibly global ecosystem of bilateral/multilateral, private, and public foundations reaching the region will be hard hit by recent **rollbacks in U.S. funding**.

07. By far, the top sources of funding for CEECCNA activists are **international foundations** (public and private) and **foreign assistance** (funding from bilateral and multilateral sources), together constituting **70%** of all funders named by survey respondents. The concentration on two primary types of funding underscores vulnerabilities for sustainable resourcing.

09. Funder priorities are at odds with movements’. Funders focus on **visible actions** and policy wins, which may place movements at greater **risk**. Some grant requirements are also not feasible or possible. Activists share, “**It feels like they are setting us up to fail.**” Better alignment is needed between context-specific organizing and funding streams.

In a moment of increasing authoritarianism and anti-rights agendas around the world, movements are calling on funders to resource strategies of resistance, creativity, and possibility. This report is a direct response.



¹ Thomas, Rachel and Kellea Miller. 2024. [Advancing Human Rights: Annual Review of Global Human Rights Grantmaking, 2020 Findings](#). Human Rights Funders Network (HRFN). Page 4.

² For this research, we present findings in U.S. dollars (USD), except where specifically noted.

Funders committed to social justice and human rights around the world can take lessons from the CEECCNA regions, which stand out as a roadmap of right-wing tactics and, at the same time, a case of longstanding organized resistance.

Acronyms

AWID	Association for Women's Rights in Development
CEECCNA	Central Eastern Europe, Caucasus, Central and North Asia
DEI	Diversity, equity, and inclusion
ERRC	European Roma Rights Centre
EU	European Union
FRA	European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights
GONGO	Government-organized nongovernmental organization
GPP	Global Philanthropy Project
HRFN	Human Rights Funders Network
HRW	Human Rights Watch
ILGA	International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association
INGO	International nongovernmental organization
LGBTQIA+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, and more
NGO	Nongovernmental organization
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OSF	Open Society Foundations
SWAN	Sex Workers and Allies Network
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WITM	Where Is the Money? (AWID's research methodology)

02.

Introduction

In early 2024, tens of thousands of citizens took to the streets of Tbilisi, Georgia, to protest a series of proposed laws that would cut off support for civil society, target LGBTQIA+ communities, and limit women's rights. The world watched as people of all ages and affiliations turned out over weeks and months, building on the previous year's success, blocking similar regressive legislation.

On 14 May 2024, the legislation was passed, labeling many nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) "foreign agents." In August, implementation began, paired with raids, threats, and direct attacks on activists. After years of resistance by social justice movements and everyday Georgians, the far right had captured the state.

Georgia is not alone. Over the past three decades, countries across the diverse regions of Central Eastern Europe, Caucasus, Central and North Asia (CEECCNA) have experienced an active anti-rights agenda, often backed by Russian political and financial support. At the same time, even in the face of great danger, social movements continue to organize powerfully across issues and borders.

Countries in the CEECCNA regions are at once unique — steeped in their own histories, cultures, and Indigenous identities — and emblematic of global trends. We can locate the epicenter of "foreign agents" laws, modeled in Russia and promulgated through the regions and now the world. We can trace the shadow wars of Russian imperialism, such as in Belarus³, and active conflicts, such as in Ukraine, that entangle global powers and have echoes around the globe. Finally, we can chart the ebb and flow of philanthropic attention, with significant retrenchment after the fall of the Soviet Union, interrupted by focused giving, such as in the immediate aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

This first-of-a-kind research aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of funding for intersectional organizing across the CEECCNA regions. This research is driven by the need for evidence-based advocacy to secure more strategic and substantial funding for intersectional organizers and movements, whose efforts are critical yet often overlooked.

At the same time, it is not only about funding in that geography — though worthy of study in its own right. The findings also point to the challenges and possibilities of driving funding to movements around the world that are operating amidst crisis, restricted civic space, and attacks on democratic institutions. Funders committed to social justice and human rights around the world can take lessons from the CEECCNA regions, which stand out as a roadmap of right-wing tactics and, at the same time, a case of longstanding organized resistance.

3 Rad, Pavlo and Iaroslav Chornogor. 2024. ["Ukraine-Belarus Relations: in the Shadow of War."](#) Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies.

In the pages that follow, this report will:



Present the funding trends from 2019 to 2023 for movements within the CEECCNA regions.



Define and uplift what we are calling intersectional organizing, the powerful activism, organizing, and social movement efforts address intersecting forms of oppression and visions for liberation. This includes feminist, LGBTQIA+, and Indigenous groups, among others. (See page 52 for more).



Demystify the CEECCNA regions — really a set of regions — that have often remained out of view and misunderstood in Global North dialogue.



Place funding for intersectional movements in CEECCNA regions into a larger global context, pinpointing lessons and potential funding strategies relevant in a quickly changing global funding landscape.

Most importantly, our findings draw from movements’ own analysis of the sources of support they have, as well as those they need. By raising their voices, we offer an understanding of regional organizing steeped in the wisdom, experience, and priorities of those leading change.

Global Context

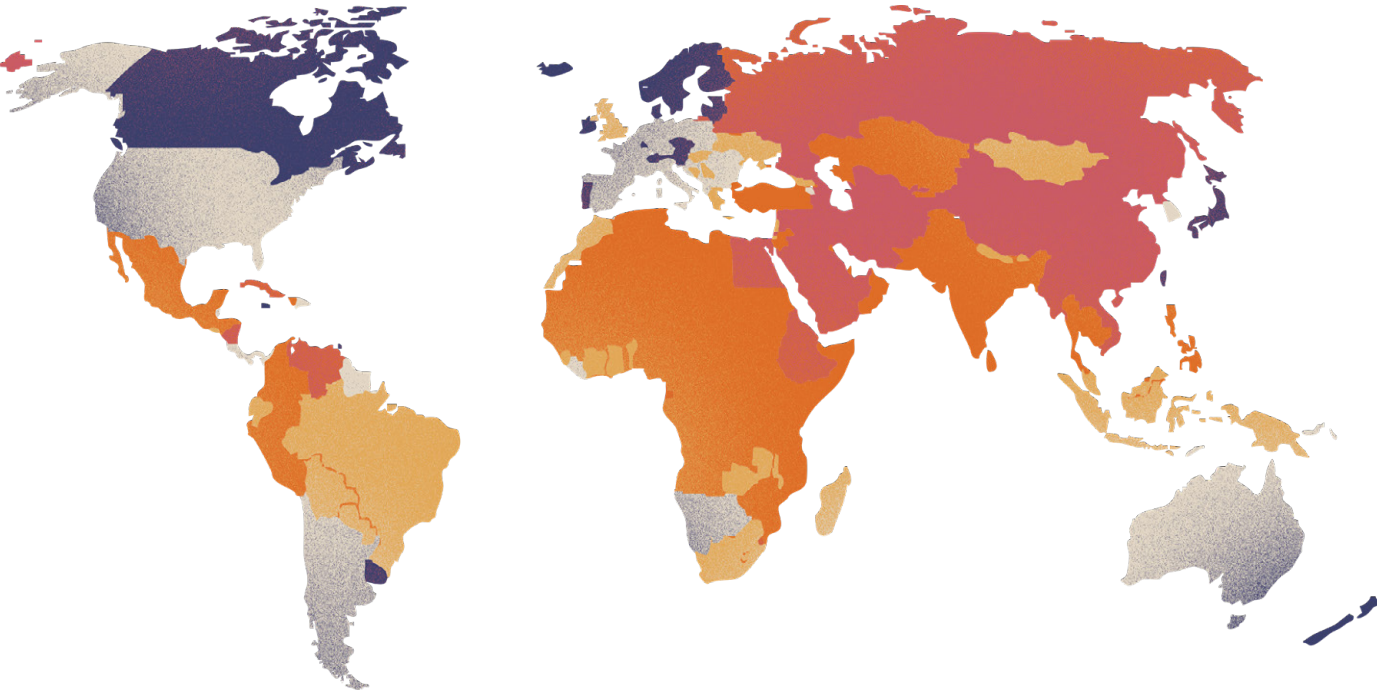
This research comes on the heels of unprecedented cuts to foreign aid globally, a bevy of regressive anti-rights laws, and significant changes in the philanthropic landscape.

The Trump administration in the United States is directly targeting foreign funding, both through cuts to USAID and executive orders impacting philanthropic foundations’ grants related to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). British, Dutch, Norwegian, and Swedish governments have all announced major cuts to their foreign aid budgets and, in several cases, almost entirely stripped funding to issues related to human rights. At the time of this writing, we do not yet know the scale and scope of the damage, but we expect at least a third of global foreign aid to be immediately slashed in 2025 alone. An estimated \$1 billion will leave the human rights funding ecosystem in the same time period.⁴

In addition, laws specifically tracking and limiting funding to social movements in civil society have proliferated since Russia’s 2012 introduction of its foreign agents law. The CEECCNA regions have been dealing with the spread of such legislation longer than any other region. By necessity, movements there have charted many hard-won strategies to operate under such threats.

4 Miller, Kellea. 2025. "As USAID is gutted, here's how philanthropy can stop panicking and start helping." The Chronicle of Philanthropy.

This is both a signal of and a practice to close civic space, as depicted in the map below. According to the CIVICUS Monitor, which tracks civic space across the world, there are five major tactics that governments are using to repress the civic space: intimidation, detaining protestors, censorship, protest disruption, and restrictive laws, all of which are deeply disturbing realities in the regions. CIVICUS further categorizes countries as closed, repressed, obstructed, narrowed, or open.



Source: CIVICUS Monitor. 2025.⁵



Source: People Power Under Attack 2024, CIVICUS Monitor, December 2024⁶

5 CIVICUS Monitor. 2025: National civic space ratings globally include: 40 countries rated as “open,” 42 rated as “narrowed,” 35 “obstructed,” 51 “repressed,” and 30 rated as fully “closed.” Available at: www.monitor.civicus.org
6 [People Power Under Attack 2024, CIVICUS Monitor, December 2024, P. 56.](#)

The lessons and takeaways in the particular moment travel in both directions. On the one hand, the global funding ecosystem directly affects resources for organizing in the CEECCNA regions. As we explore on page 39, funding from foreign assistance (also described as bilateral and multilateral aid) is one of the top sources of support. USAID is the most often cited bilateral funding source for groups in this study. The changes we are all experiencing will undoubtedly impact the movements presented here.

On the other hand, the experiences in the CEECCNA regions distill major trends shaping global politics today:

- *The rise of far-right leaders.*
- *Deliberate targeting of activists and the funding that supports them.*
- *The ripple effects of oppression that often start with attacks on LGBTQIA+ communities and spread insidiously through an anti-rights agenda.*
- *Uncertainty as global alliances with Russia, the United States, the European Union, and other global powers sit against national sovereignty and self-defined visions for a democratic future.*

In this context, CEECCNA movements — both those working out in the open, and those increasingly organizing underground — have been facing these realities for decades.

By turning to the movements leading change, we see how funders can actively protect intersectional organizing there and around the world.

Recognizing Risk

We are publishing this report at a time of real and persistent threats to activists around the world and particularly in the CEECCNA regions, including those who participated in this study. Even since the time of this research, a number of individuals have experienced attacks on their organizations, been forced into exile, had their bank accounts tracked or frozen, or moved further underground. At every turn, we have sought to protect the security of organizers when writing about them and their work.

As you read the findings, consider the lives behind the data. These are not abstract numbers, but the signal of resistance that has continued to organize in the face of powerful authoritarian regimes.

Locating the Study

The CEECCNA regions bring together a diverse range of countries and communities. We consider three distinct sub-regions: Central Eastern Europe, Caucasus, Central and North Asia. Both distinct and interconnected, many countries are, unfortunately, trending toward increased authoritarianism, with direct implications for movements there.

According to Freedom House, countries in the regions can be divided into three categories: democracies, authoritarian regimes, and hybrids of the two. Since 2022, there has been an alarming decline in democratic protections, with brutal shut downs of peaceful protests (Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan), more restrictive laws placed on civil society, and interference in elections and other and political processes (e.g. Georgia, Hungary), and other marked declines in democratic systems.⁷ Based on the latest report from CIVICUS, People Power Under Attack (2024), the CEECCNA countries are categorized as follows and detailed in the map on page 13:

Many countries across the CEECCNA regions exist in a perpetual crisis of governance and political affinity. Aggression by Russia and other hegemonies, as well as emergencies and crises, have ripple effects beyond individual borders. For example, the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine flowed quickly to other vulnerable areas accross CEECCNA, in the form inflation, food shortages, and a migration crisis (labor migrants from these subregions coming back home from Russia, as well as Russian citizens — mostly men of military age — relocating to escape being drafted to the frontline of the war).⁸

Closed:

Russia, Belarus, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan

Repressed:

Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan

Obstructed:

Georgia, Hungary, Ukraine

Narrowed:

Armenia, Moldova, Poland, Romania, Slovakia

No countries in the regions are considered “open.”

⁷ Freedom House. 2023. Nations in transit 2023: [War deepens regional divide](#).

⁸ [The Ripple Effects of the War in Ukraine](#). 2022. Intereconomies. Volume 57. Number 3.

03.

Methodology



This research draws on the [Where Is the Money? \(WITM\) approach](#) designed by the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID).⁹ Following AWID's well-established practices and its methodological toolkit, we began by building trust, reaffirming a decolonial, feminist, and participatory research approach, and identifying a process that would center activists' own knowledge.

AWID's original WITM methodology focuses on funding trends for feminist and women's rights organizations. This research expands that frame to reflect intersectional organizing. By encompassing this broad spectrum of issues, the research aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the diverse and multifaceted intersectional activism within the CEECCNA regions.

Defining Intersectional Movements

This research is focused on funding for *intersectional movements* in the CEECCNA regions. We define movements as **"an organized set of constituents pursuing a common political agenda of change through collective action"** often emerging in response to inequality, oppression, or unmet civic demands.¹⁰ Our research includes individual activists, as well as members of organizations, collectives, and other organizing models.

We take a broad understanding of the term **"intersectional"** to mean, **"the concept that all oppression is linked and people are often disadvantaged by multiple sources of oppression: their race, class, gender identity, sexual orientation, and religion, just to name a few."**¹¹ Intersectionality emerges from Black feminist theory and practice and is attributed first to the scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw.

Locating intersectional movements in the context of the CEECCNA regions, we include those working to advance gender justice and women's rights, racial justice, decolonization, LGBTQIA+ rights, and Indigenous peoples' rights. Additionally, the study covers movements advocating for the rights of migrants, forcibly displaced people, and refugees, environmental and economic justice initiatives, sexual and reproductive health and rights, children's and youth rights, and peacebuilding and demilitarization. It also extends to organizations working on the rights of religious minorities, people living with HIV, disability justice, sex workers' rights, harm reduction, Romani people's rights, labor justice, and internet and digital rights.

To ensure a focus on intersectional, inclusive organizing, we included screening questions to exclude organizers who only worked on very specific issues, such as women's rights, while being exclusive of other communities. In CEECCNA contexts, this usually shows up as the exclusion of LGBTQIA+ communities. We also exclude government-organized NGOs (GONGOs), which are prevalent in the regions but are funded by and function in alignment with the state.

⁹ AWID. 2021. [Where Is the Money for Women's Rights? AWID's WITM Toolkit](#).

¹⁰ Battilwala, Srilatha. 2012. [Changing their World: Concepts and practices of women's movements](#) 2nd Edition. AWID. Page 3.

¹¹ Intersectionality Research Institute. 2025. <https://intersectionality.gwu.edu/about#>

Research Team:

Since Dalan Fund aims to resource the organizers who participated in the research, we set forward a methodology to limit potential conflicts of interest and allow respondents to speak freely. A team of three independent researchers conducted interviews and focus groups. In addition, eight advisors with expertise in feminist research methodologies, including specifically WITM approaches, were involved in building the framework as well as the instruments of the research. Dalan Fund team members provided feedback throughout, supported outreach, and participated in data analysis.

Sampling Strategy:

Our sampling strategy was based on inclusive representation to ensure a diverse range of participants and contexts. The research includes three sub-regions with sixteen countries, including the Indigenous peoples of the Russian Federation that fit under North Asia and North Caucasus. We also sought participation from a range of existing organizers, categorized by their type (registered/unregistered), strategies, issues covered, and organizational size. This approach aimed to capture a broad spectrum of experiences and perspectives within intersectional movements.

Methods & Sample

The research included methods in three phases:

- 01. Desk review of existing funding data and relevant research;
- 02. Survey of organizers in the CEECCNA regions;
- 03. Interviews and focus groups.

Desk Review & Funding Data:

We conducted a desk review of articles, reports, and books related to organizing and funding the CEECCNA regions. We also used funding data from Human Rights Funders Network (HRFN)’s 2019 [Advancing Human Rights](#) dataset to track global grantmaking by country, amount, issue, and foundations. In addition, we used [open source data](#) on bilateral and multilateral funding provided by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

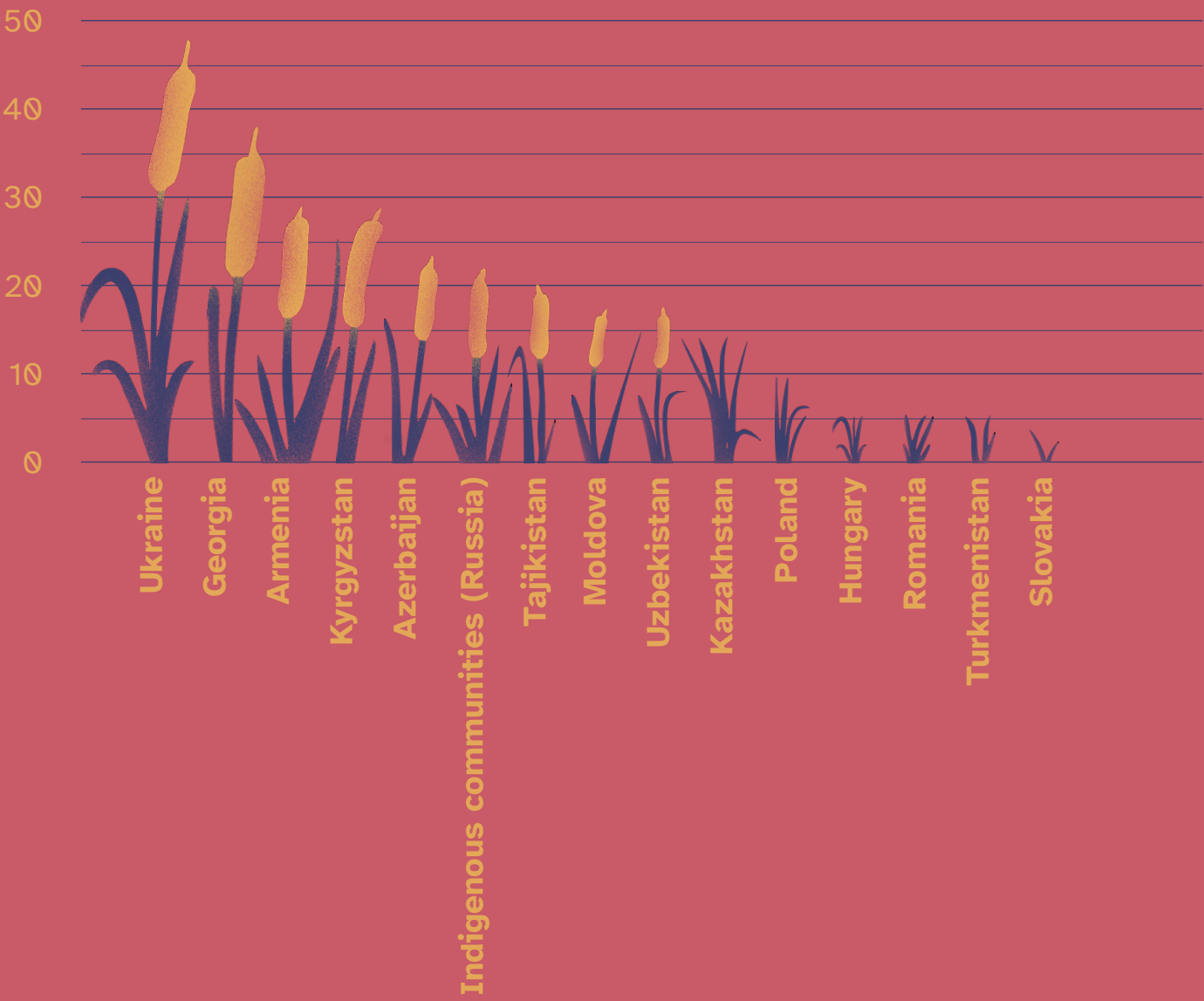
Of note, the datasets that we received from HRFN were limited to 2019. Publicly available OECD data covers only funding from countries and international entities (G7, European Union, etc.) to the countries in question, and it is impossible to determine what part of it reached the organizers and how. Based on this information, we can only speak about general trends of how money moves from Europe and North America to the CEECCNA regions. OECD data does not allow us to trace the human rights funding separately from humanitarian funding, as the latter is very general and includes human rights money as well.

Survey:

Between December 2023 and February 2024, we collected 257 survey responses from organizers in 16 countries of CEECCNA, as well as diasporic and migrant organizers from the regions. These surveys provide invaluable insight into the ways in which organizers themselves assess resourcing in the regions, as well as the specific sources of funding they rely on.

The largest number of responses came from organizers working in Ukraine, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan. At the time of data collection, these countries allowed relatively unrestricted conditions for organizing and foreign funding. In countries where organizing and funding is more restricted, like Belarus, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Russia, and Tajikistan, we received fewer responses. The fewest responses compared to the scope of organizing were received from the EU countries (Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, Poland).

Which of the following regions your activities cover?

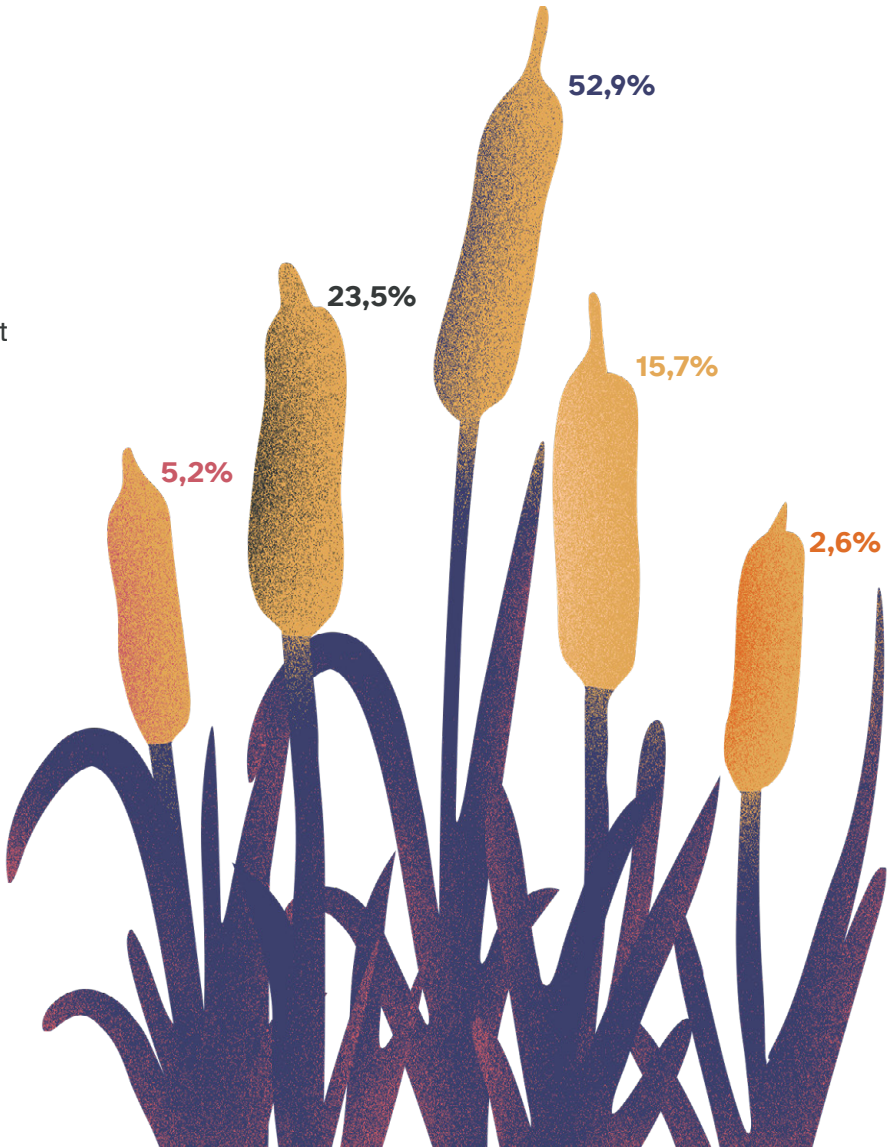


Since the majority of responses came from the contexts where NGOs could, at that time (in December 2023 - January 2024), register and receive funding freely, over half (53%) of respondents were registered non-governmental organizations of smaller size, with under 10 employees. Along with the registered NGOs, there were individual activists (26%), non-registered collectives (16%), and collaborative networks (5%). The majority came from capital cities and small towns, which is also no surprise, as more activism and possibilities are present in urban settings. In terms of the timeframe of organizing, respondents organizing for longer periods over 20 years, as well as those organizing between 2-20 years, were quite evenly represented. Relatively young initiatives (under 2 years) were the least represented (10%).

The majority (78%) were based in the same geography where they worked, while 22% were outside of the region. Considering that many organizers have left the region because of the armed conflicts and political repressions, this percentage is not a surprise. Organizers consistently work on the national level (66%), while also focus on international (23%), regional (27%), or specific city- or village-level (24%) organizing.

Respondents Type

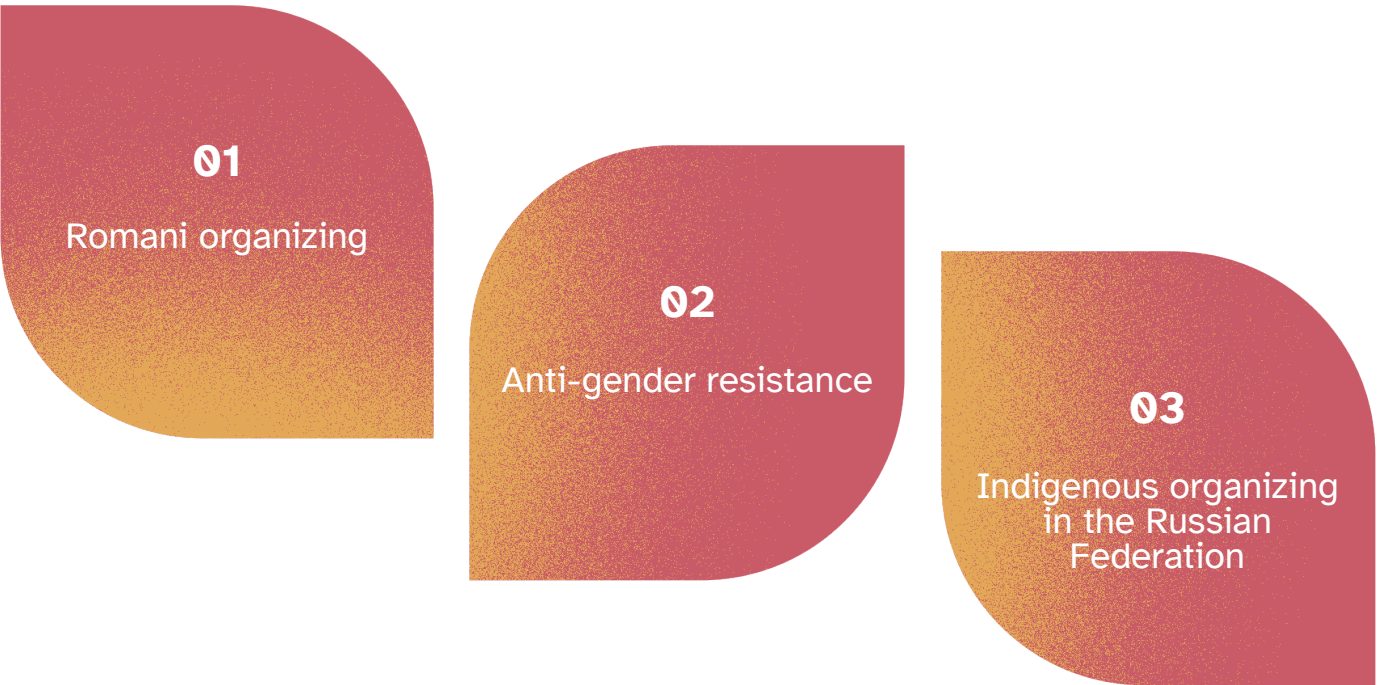
- 52,9% Registered organisation
- 23,5% Individual organiser/activist
- 15,7% Unregistered group of organisers/activists
- 5,2% Collaborative, network, or coalition
- 2,6% Others



Interviews and Focus Groups:

Researchers conducted interviews and focus groups online and in person from February to July 2024. Their main aim was to complement the survey data and to enrich the numbers with the narratives and lived realities behind them. We conducted a total of 28 interviews, including with organizers whose work was underrepresented or identified as underfunded in the surveys. This included youth organizations and informal collectives, which are less likely to have philanthropic funding.

Three focus groups aimed to take a deeper dive into three themes that were **less represented** in the survey:



Limitations:

There are several gaps in this research. Participation in the survey from Belarus, Kazakhstan, Moldova was quite limited. Focus group discussions and interviews as well as secondary sources and ethnographies have partly addressed this gap. In addition, the survey and interviews were in only three languages (English, Georgian, and Russian), so we did not reach those who do not speak these languages. The majority of people were filling in not in their native language.

Finally, the research covers many different groups, however, it is not representative. It is challenging to capture the full scope of organizing in these regions, where many people are forced to operate underground due to security risks.

04.

The Funding Landscape

This research sits against the backdrop of the global attention to Central and Eastern Europe in the aftermath of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Since that time, we have seen record-breaking philanthropic and humanitarian funding move to the country.¹² Governments have delivered an estimated EUR 270 billion in aid over the past three years.¹³ Philanthropy has made over seven thousand grants, totaling \$2.1 billion, related to Ukraine.¹⁴ However, these historic numbers belie four important facets of the funding in the CEECCNA regions more broadly.

Even in times of expanded support, funding for human rights and intersectional movements is extremely low.

Of the foreign assistance for Ukraine, half was earmarked for military assistance, while just 7% was earmarked as humanitarian aid.¹⁵ Even in the unprecedented philanthropic support for Ukraine in 2022, only 11% of funding actually supported groups inside the country, and a mere 1% was focused on human rights.¹⁶ This is consistent with the next regional trend: low rates of direct, flexible funding for human rights and intersectional movements.

Funding for movements in the CEECCNA regions is lower and more restricted than in other regions around the world.

According to research by Human Rights Funders Network (HRFN), funding for the CEECCNA regions has ranged from 2% to 6% of global human rights grantmaking between 2011 and 2020. As of HRFN's latest analysis, a total of \$142 million in over 1,700 grants went to the regions.¹⁷

Only 3% of global human rights philanthropy reached the CEECCNA regions in 2020.

¹² Hayhoe, Isabelle. 2023. "Philanthropy in a crisis: A year of war in Ukraine." Barclays.

¹³ Kiel Institute for World Economy. 2025. "Ukraine support after 3 years of war: Aid flows remain low but steady - Shift towards weapons procurement."

¹⁴ Candid. (2025.) "Philanthropic response to the war in Ukraine." Found at: <https://topics.candid.org/issue-pages/ukraine/>.

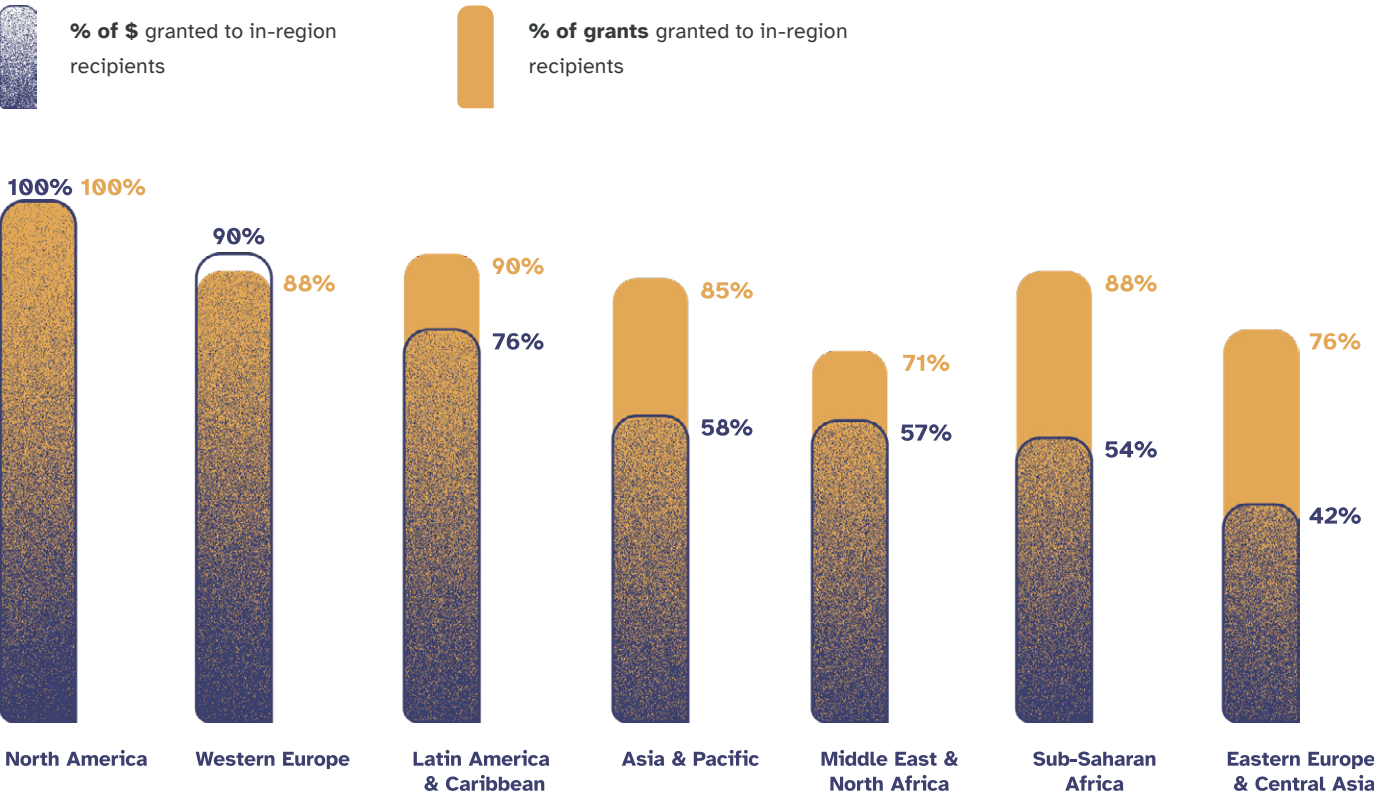
¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Miller, Kellea and Rachel Thomas. (2023.) "Why Ukraine (and other crises) urgently need more human rights funding." The New Humanitarian.

¹⁷ Of note, HRFN uses the regional grouping of "Eastern Europe and Central Asia" in its research reports and "Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and Russia" on its research hub: Advancing Human Rights. Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and Russia grantmaking. Candid & Human Rights Funders Network. <https://humanrightsfunding.org/regions/eastern-europe/>.

In addition, direct funding for human rights (which includes funding for the movements we are focusing on in this report) is the most restricted of any region. This is a combination of two factors. First, funding to the CEECCNA regions is often made through intermediaries, with only **“42% of the funding [dollars] meant to benefit Eastern Europe and Central Asia goes to groups based there.”**¹⁸ Of direct funding, the average human rights grant to the regions is \$50,000, lower than any other region around the world.¹⁹ Second, funding for the regions is often highly restricted, rather than delivered as flexible, core support. Combining these, HRFN finds that only 6% of human rights funding for the regions comes as direct, flexible grants. HRFN notes, **“... a staggering 94% of the funding is earmarked for specific projects or doesn’t directly reach the region at all.”**²⁰

Regional disparities in direct Human Rights Funding (2020)



The funding totals are based on 26,797 human rights grants totalling \$4.4 billion that specify the countries or regions meant to benefit from the funding and include recipient locations. We typically exclude regranting from our analysis to prevent double-counting grant dollars. However, here we have included regranting funds to reflect every grant that is designated for a particular location.

Source: ADVANCING HUMAN RIGHTS | Annual Review of Global Foundation Grantmaking 2020 Key Findings

18 HRFN. 2024. *Advancing Human Rights*. Page 25.
19 Thomas, Rachel and Kellea Miller. 2023. *Trust Gap: The Troubling Lack of Direct, Flexible Funding for Human Rights in the Global South and East*. Human Rights Funders Network (HRFN). Page 33.
20 HRFN. 2024. *Advancing Human Rights* p. 4. This work is made available under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License \(creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

A boom-bust cycle of philanthropic funding in the CEECCNA regions follows geopolitical trends.

Historically, the funding landscape in CEECCNA regions has been characterized by a sporadic and insufficient influx of resources, often mirroring political relationships. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, brief influxes of funding by government agencies entered the regions with a strong neoliberal agenda.²¹ As Western governments made efforts to influence alliances and promote a so-called free market agenda, so too did their bilateral aid. At the same time, a handful of funders entered the regions to support civic space and human rights. With notable examples like the Open Society Institutes (now Foundations) and others across the funding field, social movements began to draw on grants as they formed organizations and collective actions.

Though never sufficient, the philanthropic landscape began to dry up significantly as several countries in the regions became part of the European Union, such as Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia in 2004. As these countries gained access to labor and economic alignment with the European Union, philanthropic funders began to pull away or reduce support for contexts they deemed more economically or socially stable. Even though movements’ needs had not changed significantly -- and in some cases, such as Hungary, soon declined -- the perception set the tone for philanthropy. Simultaneously seen as no longer in need and out of the global attention, a number of funders began to redirect and reprioritize their grantmaking. By 2020, a majority of foundations had exited the regions, leaving only a handful of funders and creating vast funding deserts in areas like Central Asia, North Asia, and more.

In this context, funding for Ukraine has again been another “boom” cycle, with funding pulled from other countries in the region, even where the impacts of the war were acutely felt, and other from crises around the world. There is little expectation or hope that these funds will be replenished or that the significant and indeed unprecedented funding to Ukraine is a sign of greater support for the larger regions.

According to Human Rights Funders Network, only 6% of human rights funding for the CEECCNA Regions is delivered in direct, flexible grants, the lowest rate of any region in the world.

21 Congressional Research Service. 2006. *Russian political, economic, and security issues and U.S. interests*.

Repressive laws across the regions increasingly restrict international funding.

Finally, against this backdrop, authoritarian regimes (Russia, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Belarus) partially or completely restrict the possibility of receiving foreign funding. Other countries are joining that list, like Georgia and Kyrgyzstan in 2024 and Slovakia in 2025²², making the future of external funding into the regions very challenging and requiring creativity and flexibility on the part of the funding community.

These laws are taking root as part of a larger anti-rights agenda funded by a combination of local conservative groups and international organizations, particularly from the United States and Russia. Reports suggest that these groups provide financial support to political actors, think tanks, and media outlets that promote anti-rights rhetoric. The European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual and Reproductive Rights (EPF) has documented how foreign entities channel funds to anti-choice organizations, thereby influencing national policies and public opinion.²³ In addition, the Catholic Church and conservative political actors are substantial sources of local funding and are particularly effective in reaching smaller villages and diverse regions.

As our findings reflect, these foreign agents laws, paired with anti-right narratives, are actively using the guise of Western influence to constrict support for movements across the regions. The false dichotomy between Western influence and external support and authoritarian governments ignores a more vital question: *How do people in the CEECCNA regions define their own future and self-determination?*

In the rest of this report, we bring this picture to life by turning directly to those answering this question: activists, organizers, and movements leading intersectional organizing across the CEECCNA regions.



22 Jochecová, Ketrin. 2025. "Slovakia adopts Russian-style law targeting NGOs." Politico. <https://www.politico.eu/article/slovakia-adopts-russian-bill-targeting-ngos/>
23 Datta, Neil. 2021. *Tip of the iceberg: Religious extremist funders against human rights for sexuality and reproductive health in Europe 2009-2018*. European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual and Reproductive Rights.

05.

Findings I: Realities & Gaps



Despite political repression and a lack of resources, a diverse array of organizing defines movements across the CEECCNA regions. In this section, we draw on surveys from 257 respondents and interviews with 35 organizers to map organizing and funding. Their insights and experiences animate our understanding of the forms of support movements need as they combat intersecting forms of oppression and navigate the full spectrum of authoritarianism.

As we will show, the funding situation of organizers differs across geographies and movements, but reflects a number of overarching trends. In this section, we present findings on intersectional organizing and funding trends. In the next two sections, we take deep dives, first into underrepresented movements (*Findings II: Funding Deserts and Deserted Islands*) and then case studies (*Findings II: Alternatives & Possibilities*).

Key Findings on CEECCNA Organizing & Funding: Realities & Gaps

01. Organizing in the CEECCNA regions is deeply **intersectional**

02. Movements are using **multifaceted strategies** to combat authoritarianism, with variability by context

03. **Operational shifts** are required in the face of anti-rights policies

04. Activists' **risks vary** by country, but may not be understood by external partners

05. Across the CEECCNA regions, **global & regional** solidarity bolsters **local** and **national** activism

06. Vast budget ranges reflect global inequalities & **crisis “booms”**

07. Organizing relies heavily on a **shrinking range** of international **funding** sources

08. **Financial precarity** deeply impacts intersectional movements, and it is **getting worse**

09. **Short-term project** support **undermines** sustainable action

10. Organizers' **labor** is **undercompensated** and **precarious**

11. Existing funding and grantmaking processes often **do not match** the movements' needs

12. **Self-generated** resources and **mutual** aid fuel movements

01. Organizing in the CEECCNA regions is deeply intersectional

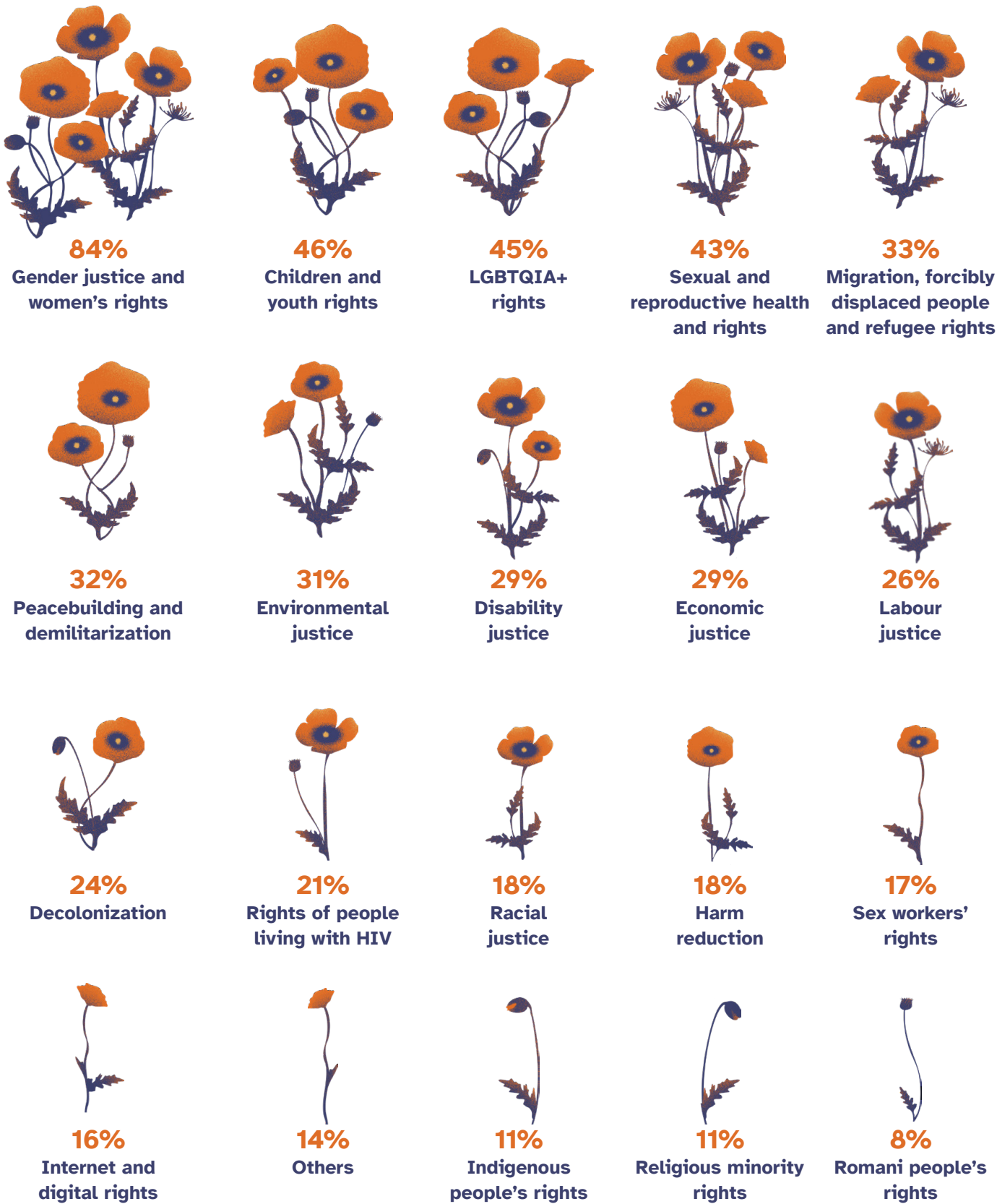
Our research unearthed a picture of rich, intersectional organizing and highlights the nature and scope of this work. Taking shape differently in each country and context, we nonetheless found three significant trends.

First, by design, all respondents focused on at least two key issues, but a concentration between gender justice, sexual and reproductive rights, and LGBTQIA+ organizing shows the highest rates of overlap.



Do you work and organise around any of the following issues?

Since most respondents work intersectionally, there is significant overlap between movements. Each percentage reflects the proportion of respondents who focus on a given thematic area, out of the total respondent pool (100%).



While consistent across the dataset, the largest share of organizers (84%) were organizing around gender justice and women’s rights. This may reflect our sampling, but it also reflects research indicating that feminist movements often organize with an intersectional lens. Of those who organize around gender justice, 49% organize around LGBTQIA+ rights as well, and 55% organize around sexual and reproductive rights.

For LGBTQIA+ organizers, 89% intersect with gender justice, 55% with sexual and reproductive rights, 41% with children and youth rights, 36% with migration and forcibly displaced and refugee rights, 35% with decolonial organizing, and 38% with rights of people living with HIV. Religious minority rights appear to intersect the least with LGBTQIA+ organizing. All of these points out that LGBTQIA+ organizers are some of the most intersectional in working on and leading within various movements and issue areas.

Second, we saw significant contextual differences around the specific forms of intersectionality. For instance, in the areas with long unresolved conflicts, such as in the South Caucasus, peacebuilding and demilitarization were mentioned more often. Additionally, organizers from authoritarian settings (Azerbaijan, Belarus, across Central Asia) mentioned issues such as political prisoners’ rights, the fight against torture, and freedom of speech and media as their priority focus.

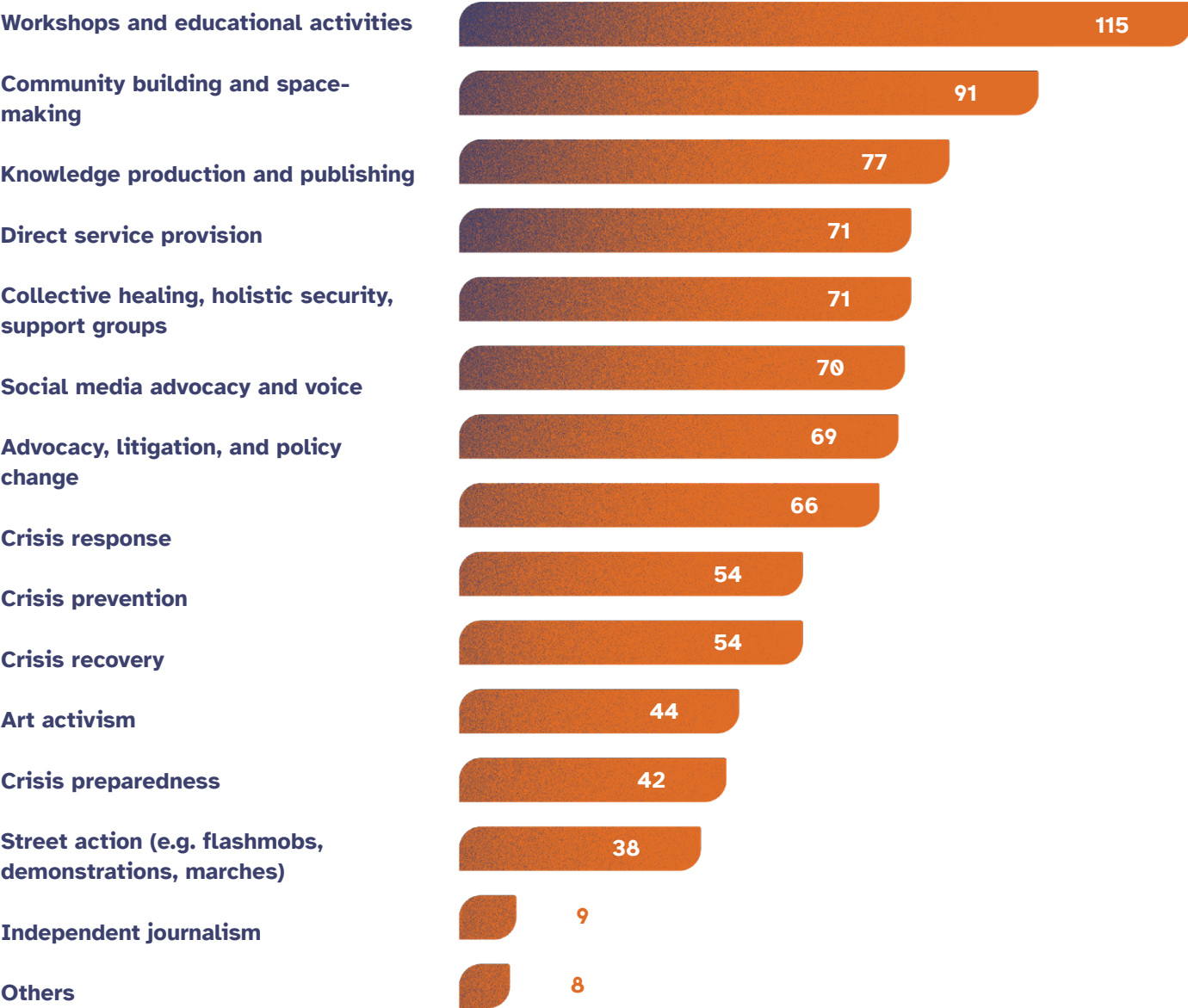
Finally, Indigenous, religious minorities, and Romani people’s rights were least mentioned. While somewhat disheartening, we anticipate this reflects less representation from regions where these groups are more prominent (within the Russian Federation and Central Europe). Recognizing the underrepresentation of these communities, we focus on Romani activism in our case study on page 54.



02. Movements are using multifaceted strategies to combat authoritarianism, with variability by context

In interviews and surveys, activists describe a multifaceted approach to countering the anti-rights agenda and crack down on organizing. As detailed in the chart below, strategies range from street action and art to workshops and education. Educational activities and knowledge production, along with community building, are the main strategies across all types of organizers. Over half of the respondents also mentioned direct service provision among their main strategies. These findings can be explained by the general condition for organizing in the regions: NGOs and collectives often respond to the needs that are neglected by governments, families, and institutions.

Which of the strategies and tactics do you use in your organising?



The specific strategies and risks vary significantly across country contexts and for different movements. As an activist in Poland shared, **“We’ve received threats and harassment from both individuals and organized groups. It’s a constant battle to stay safe and continue our work.”**

In many cases, avenues for strategies like advocacy, litigation, and street action are scarce or impossible. For example, in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, LGBTQIA+ activism cannot be done openly or could result in imprisonment, physical threats, or violence. In less restricted settings, public demonstrations or policy approaches may be possible. For example, in Slovakia, activists have focused on challenging restrictive abortion laws through the courts and raising awareness about the negative impacts of these policies on women’s health and rights. **“We use every legal avenue available to challenge these laws and bring attention to their harmful effects,”** explains a Slovak activist.

Art stands out as a strategy in both closed and more open contexts. 32% of respondents indicated art activism (or “artivism”) as a means to organize in collectives and create safe and creative spaces. These include squats, studios, libraries, and galleries that serve as alternative community centres. In some instances, these spaces and collectives are targeted by governments. For example, the artists’ squat in Chisinau is now being taken from them by the municipality, while in Georgia, the members of the Labor Union of Creative Workers have been blocked from receiving municipal and governmental grants and have been kicked out of all institutions funded by the Ministry of Culture.

Even in the most restricted contexts, the range of strategies by no means translates into the absence of activism and organizing:

“The more repressive the governments, the more creative we get in our strategies

- interview with an organizer from Central Asia.

03. Operational shifts are required in the face of anti-rights policies

Organizers across Central Europe face numerous hurdles, from legal restrictions to social stigma. **“We had to register our organization in France due to the hostile environment [in Hungary],”** shares a Hungarian activist. This sentiment is echoed by others who have seen their operations hampered by deliberately stringent laws and bureaucratic red tape.

These policies intersect with state and local authorities. **“It’s not just the national government; local authorities are also complicit in these policies,”** notes an activist from Poland. There, local governments that declare themselves “LGBT-free zones” receive support from national authorities and conservative groups, creating a hostile environment for LGBTQIA+ activists.

04. Activists’ risks vary by country, but may not be understood by external partners

In the light of multiple threats activists face, forms of organizing vary hugely by context. However, while embracing international support (detailed in the next section), movements also face increased risks because of well-intentioned external ideals of collaboration.

Participants report that, even in repressive contexts like Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Belarus, external organizations, funders, and networks have invited activists into convenings alongside GONGOs and governmental representatives. They have also experienced “outing” as activists and increased threats because partners outside the regions have not fully understood the risk of visibility. An activist from Belarus shared,

we wrote immediately, and they took it down, but such behaviour can result in serious problems.”

While this sounds like an isolated incident, the pressure to be visible and put oneself in life-threatening situations can be described as a systematic problem that the organizers who work underground in more authoritarian countries consistently face. **“I do not know what they [donors] expect, they say we will give you money to work on legislative change, but for that, we have to be visible and out ourselves, if we do that, police can just physically destroy us,”** reported a queer activist from Central Asia. The costs and impact of this mismatch are more pronounced and urgent in more authoritarian settings, which are often geopolitically further from the sources of funding or partnership.

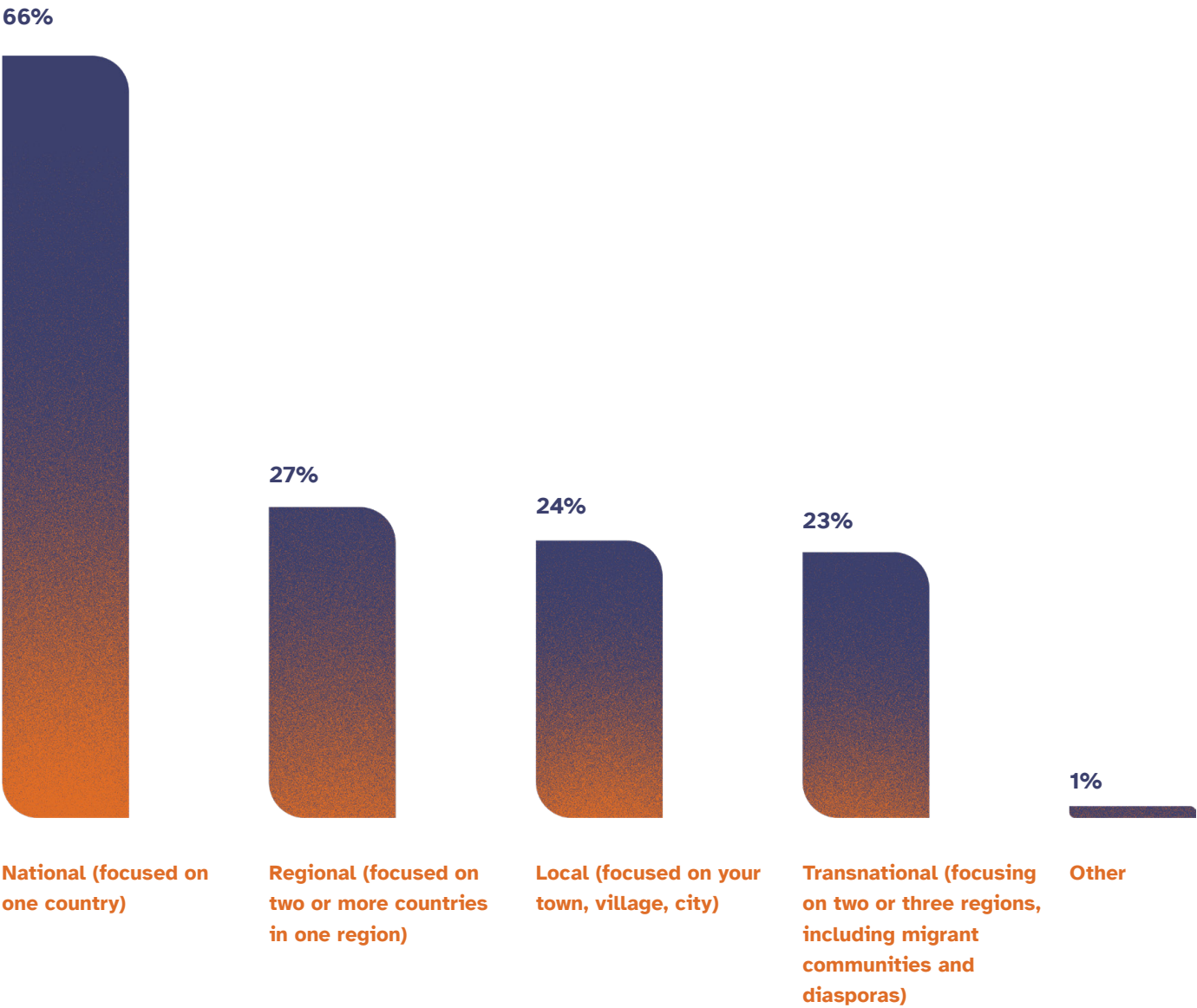
“Our funder posted our picture and tagged us on Facebook,

05. Across the CEECCNA regions, global & regional solidarity bolsters local and national activism

Even while transnational collaboration may be complex, international solidarity and support play a crucial role in sustaining these efforts. Many activists rely on support from international human rights organizations and European institutions to amplify their voices and secure funding. **“The support from international organizations is vital. It provides us with resources and a platform to bring attention to our issues on a larger stage,”** notes a Romanian activist.

This is also reflected in how movements themselves organize. While **66%** of respondents say their scope is national, a quarter also do work regionally and over a fifth do international or transnational organizing.

What is the geographical scope of your work?



Diaspora and internal displacement also play a factor. A number of organizers reflected on leaving their communities or even countries, often for security reasons. **20%** of survey respondents are based outside the regions where their activities take place.

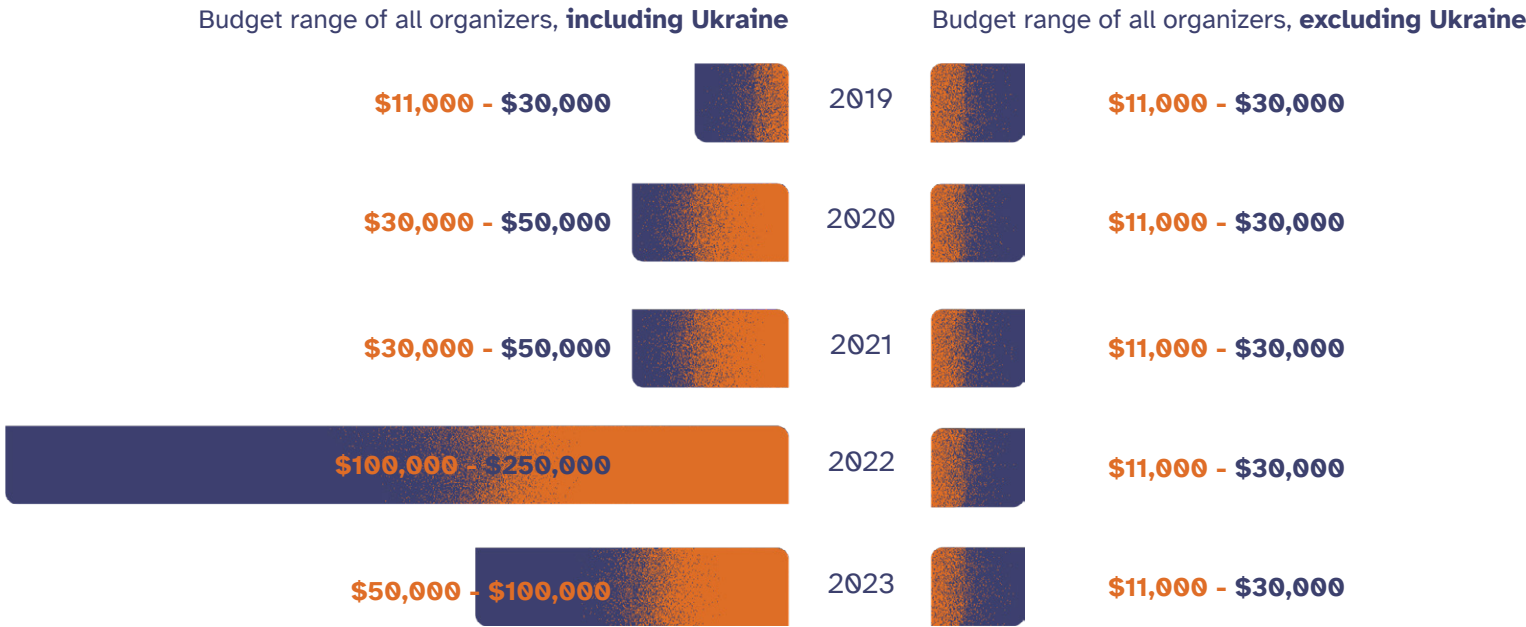
Funding Trends and Realities

For far too long, the movements across the regions have been **“running on empty,”** exhausted from lack of funding, ongoing internal scrutiny and crackdowns, and tensions within organizing. These findings provide concrete data to illustrate the current state of funding in the CEECCNA regions.

06. Budget ranges reflect regional inequalities & crisis “booms”

Despite many differences among organizers, their situation in terms of access to resources is relatively consistent, with the exception of Ukraine, which far outstripped other countries in terms of funding. For our analysis, we disaggregate funding to Ukraine in a number of key instances.

Average budgets for CEECCNA organizations (by year)



As the table shows, for all organizations outside of Ukraine, the average budget consistently remained between \$11,000 and \$30,000 between 2019 and 2023. These findings are also consistent with research from the Association for Women’s Rights in Development that shows more than half of feminist organizations worldwide operate on budgets under \$30,000.²⁴ They are also relatively consistent with HRFN’s research, showing that direct grants to the regions average \$50,000, including Ukraine.²⁵ Though higher than the self-reported survey data, HRFN’s grants track international philanthropic grants funding and may underrepresent smaller grant amounts or funding from outside formal foundations.

24 Dolker, Tenzin. 2020. “Where is the money for feminist organizing? New analysis finds that the answer is alarming.” AWID.
25 HRFN. 2023. Trust Gap.

Average budget size 2019-2023: \$11,000-\$30,000 for organizations in the CEECCNA regions, excluding Ukraine.

Of note, within the subset, we see a divide between registered and unregistered groups. The latter operates on an average budget of less than \$10,000. Research also underscores the lack of access to international funding for these groups due to many funders' requirements. **In countries where legal registration may place organizers at risk of government surveillance, violence, and sanctioned attacks, the gap in funding represents a paradox for movements resisting authoritarianism.**

Funding for Ukraine:

Ukraine is the largest democratic country among the regions and has historically received the most funding. However, the total grants and grant sizes increased dramatically after the 2022 Russian full-scale invasion. The median budget for Ukrainian organizers doubled after the 2022 invasion and ranged between \$100,000 and \$200,000. As of the time of this research, we have begun to see decreased funding starting in 2023, following the “boom-bust” response to crisis we have noted throughout this report.

The increased need for support in Ukraine was compensated by funders redirecting their resources from other communities and countries of the CEECCNA regions to Ukraine. As an organizer in Central Asia reports, **“We applied for digital security support to one fund, and they reduced the amount dramatically and took that funding to Ukraine instead. We cannot tell our community that their needs do not matter.”**

COVID-19 Crisis Funding:

The cycle of crisis funding was also evident, but on a smaller scale, during the COVID-19 pandemic, which increased humanitarian needs and demand for emergency funding around the world. However, the emergency funding for COVID was not typically the top priority among organizers, reflecting the reality of the CEECCNA regions, where the majority (59%) of respondents who received emergency funding were also coping with armed conflicts and their consequences. While organizers cite a small uptick in regional support, consistent with HRFN’s data, the boom of crisis funding again did not meet the needs of intersectional movements in the regions.

Overall budget stagnancy in other regions also affirms that funding for Ukraine did not have an add-on effect of increased resources for the greater regions.

Country-level differences:

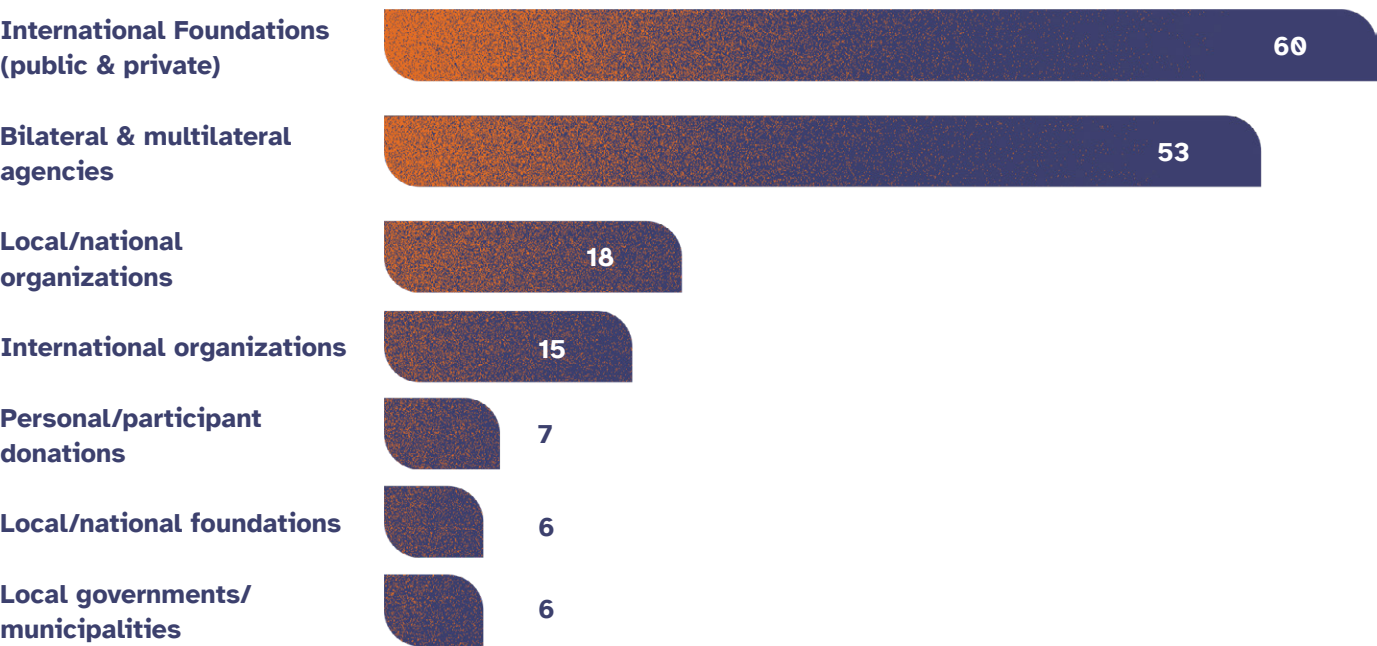
When disaggregated, we see a noticeable trend of budget increases among organizers in the South Caucasus, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia. This is evidenced by the decreasing percentage of respondents with zero budgets and the increasing number of respondents in higher budget categories.

At the same time, most money flows to the EU and countries closer to the EU. As a peacebuilding feminist from South Caucasus notes, **“If you’re a local organization, it means that you will have a huge competitor, which is basically based in a white country with privilege, and will take an enormous amount of funding to pay an enormous amount to European, mostly white, employees.”** This is most evident for organizers from Asian parts of the CEECCNA regions, which receive less on average, even if or when local authorities do not restrict foreign funding.

07. Organizing relies heavily on a shrinking range of international funding sources

Survey participants named major funders that supported them throughout 2020-2023. Overall, **160** funders were mentioned, ranging from private to bilateral and multilateral funders, intermediaries, and local funds. By far, the top sources of funding for CEECCNA activists are international foundations and foreign assistance, together constituting **70%** of all funders named. Indeed, **60** were international foundations (including 17 private foundations, 13 feminist funds, and a range of public, intermediary, and community foundations), and **53** were multilateral or bilateral institutions (24 EU agencies or embassies, 24 UN agencies, 3 US agencies, and 2 Canadian agencies). While the number of mentioned funders is encouraging, the concentration on two primary types of funding underscores vulnerabilities for sustainable resourcing.

Type of Funders Named



Taking a deeper look at the top funders, three findings stand out. First, outside of UN agencies, USAID is the top source of foreign assistance, named seven times. As we know, the dramatic cuts to USAID budgets, as well as other bilateral funders, is having a ripple effect throughout the entire funding ecosystem.

Second, we recognize that U.S.-based funding plays a larger role than may be visible in this list. Many public and intermediary funds are based in the United States, even if their work is global, and are often funded by government agencies or private foundations also in the United States.

In some cases, we may be double-counting the same original source of funding is highly likely. Most importantly,

in the current context of funding cuts and restrictions under the Trump administration, even a diverse and ostensibly global ecosystem of bilateral/multilateral, private, and public foundations will be hard-hit by rollbacks in U.S. funding.

Funder Name	Based in	Funding Scope	Mentioned by
UN Agencies (combined)	Varies	Global	24
Urgent Action Fund	United States	Global	15
Global Fund for Women	United States	Global	13
Women's Fund in Georgia	Georgia	National	12
FRIDA Young Feminist Fund	Canada	Global	8
Personal/participant donations	Varies	Varies	7
USAID	United States	Global	7
Mama Cash	Netherlands	Global	6
Prague Civil Society Centre	Czech Republic	Regional	6
Kvinna Till Kvinna	Stockholm	Global	5

Finally, 6 of the top 10 funders named are women's/feminist funds, including global funds like (e.g. FRIDA Young Feminist Fund and Global Fund for Women), and local, national funds. While the grant sizes from these organizations may not be as large as other sources, their flexible, direct support is cited as a vital form of funding for intersectional movements. Some striking features were later confirmed during interviews: Urgent Action Fund, the second-most named funder, provides rapid-response grants. Interviews affirmed that there is a disproportionate reliance on emergency funding. Women's Fund in Georgia was fourth on the lists and is clearly a top funder for Georgia (mentioned by almost half the organizers from Georgia), showcasing the prominence of the country in the overall organizing landscape. It is also a chilling reminder of the effect of foreign agents laws, which has quickly limited international funders' ability to support Women's Fund in Georgia over the past year.

08. Financial precarity deeply impacts intersectional movements — and it is getting worse

Funding that reaches organizers has a similar pattern across CEECCNA regions: grants are short-term, project-oriented, and do not cover basic salaries and work benefits.

2023

Funding for 2023 was barely or absolutely **not enough** for organizers.

63%

of initiatives will last **less than 6 months** without additional funding.

Over the last five years, organizers in Ukraine and Georgia have shown the least dramatic decline as a percentage of their budgets. Organizers in Central Asia have shown the most.

54%

of respondents **lost funding in 2023** from the year before, mostly from international organizations and intergovernmental agencies.

With funds locked up in specific projects and overall income decreasing, most organizers have **no savings**, land, or multi-year core support to compensate for the losses.

79%

of activists and organizations do not own any land or savings. The purchase of space was named as one of the hardest to find funding for.

70%

The funding for 2023 was barely or absolutely not enough for 70% of organisers

28%

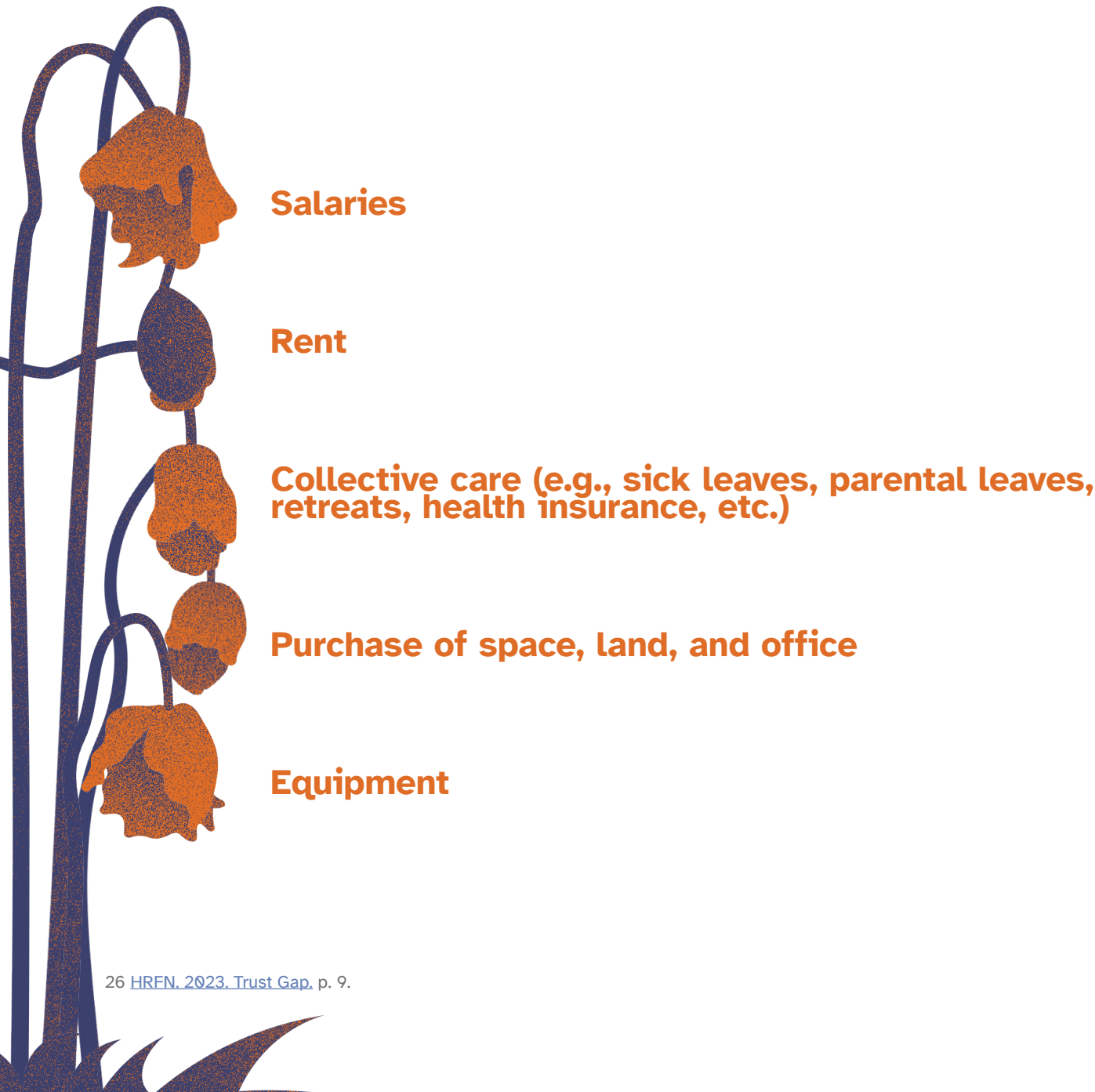
As of 2023, respondents had not secured any part of their budget for 2024

09. Short-term project support undermines sustainable action

Access to flexible, core support is extremely limited for the organizers from the CEECCNA region. According to HRFN, **“only one in 10 grant dollars for Eastern Europe and Central Asia is granted directly to groups based in these regions as flexible support.”**²⁶ Our survey and interviews further affirm this finding. Most respondents struggle to secure multi-year flexible funding and operate on short-term grants, and they must reapply after deadlines. Indeed, 71% of the funding reported by organizers was for project funding under one year.

“Short-term project-based funding creates instability. We need sustained support to make real, lasting changes,” emphasizes an activist from Poland. This sentiment is echoed by others who call for more trust and collaboration between funders and local organizations.

Funding for core work remains challenging. In response to the question, **“What is the hardest part of your work to find funding for?”** organizers mentioned activities (e.g., research, campaigning), and issues (e.g., Romani organizing). However, of over 100 responses, the top five were consistent across the CEECCNA regions:



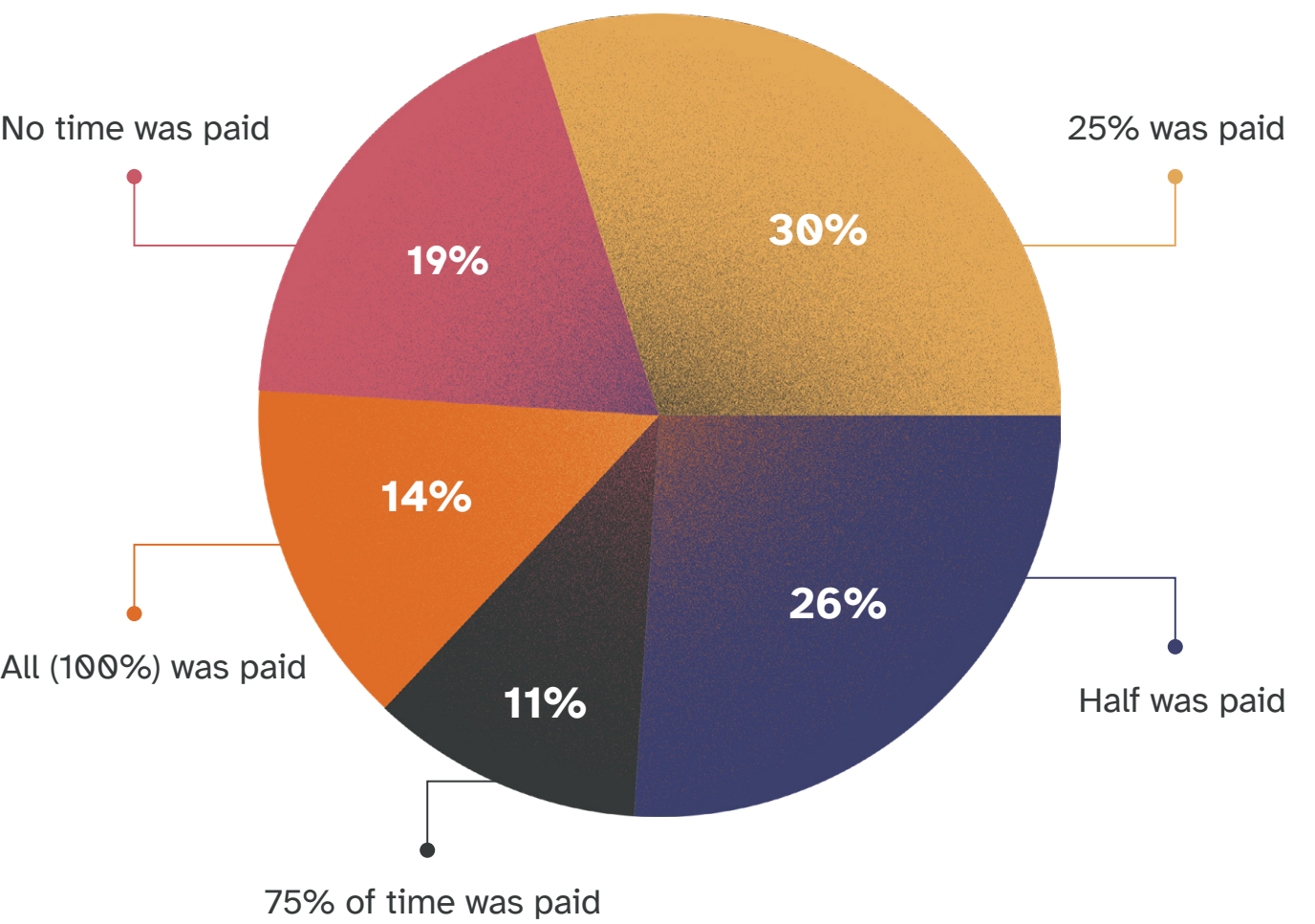
26 HRFN, 2023, Trust Gap, p. 9.

10. Organizers’ labor is undercompensated and precarious

The lack of core funding has a direct impact on the labor conditions for organizations. Half of the organizers who filled in the survey said that salaries were the most difficult area to find funding to cover. In addition, only 9% of respondents said they have access to health insurance, sick leave, and other benefits through their organization.

This precarity also translates into substantial unpaid and undercompensated labor. Looking at 2023, only 14% of respondents said their time was fully paid for. 11% said three-quarters of their work was covered, while the majority (over 75%) were compensated for half their time or less. Indeed, an organizer in the CEECCNA regions is over twice as likely to receive pay for just ¼ of their time as they are to receive a full wage. 19% received no compensation at all.

What part of your/your colleagues’ work was unpaid in 2023?



Funders play a direct role in creating these conditions:

“Some funders do not allow you to allocate more than 25% to salaries, and at the same time, they expect you to hire an accountant with a total of a \$5000 grant”, — Interviewee.

“The honoraria for our collective are the least of our expenditures, and we can’t cover health insurance and sick leave. The duration of the grants is mostly 6 months and half of the year, the collective does preparatory work for the project without funding,” — Survey participant

The lack of flexible funding, restrictions on salaries (even where staff activities represent the majority of the work), and short-term project-based funding (a high source of income in the regions) are all facets of funding that can be addressed. Movements and funding allies around the world have called for flexible funding for many years. The CEECCNA regions underscore the stakes.

11. Existing funding and grantmaking processes do not match the needs of organizers, and may put them at risk

Unfortunately, according to the organizers, funders do not always support their preferred strategies. Advocacy and visible actions are prioritized, while grassroots movement and community capacity-building are less often funded.

“Funders stopped giving us money, said we did not bring any change because we do not work on the legal level. So we had to stop services. They expect us to work with the government, which is impossible”, — interview with LGBTQIA+ activist from Central Asia.

Even when resources are available, donors’ priorities do not often reflect the needs and contexts of the organizers. The decision-making processes around funding are not transparent for organizers. From report to report, from one interview to another, organizers articulated the mismatch between their needs and donor priorities. This discrepancy was univocally mentioned by organizers, especially those from Central Asia and Indigenous peoples from the Russian Federation. **“Donors have their priorities and ideas about what we need, and then we are forced to persuade them whether we really need it or not,”** said a survey participant.

For example, finding resources for art and activist spaces is also a limitation, despite cultural production at the center of organizing. Artists often gather and lead in collective or informal ways, rather than in formal organizations. Creative work is also not so easy to evaluate with the predefined criteria that work with typical NGO activities, such as policy research or service provision. Certain funding mechanisms do exist, like Artist at Risk, that provide residencies for artists who are in political exile because of their creative work.

Another significant challenge is the bureaucratic burden imposed by some funders. **“The administrative requirements are overwhelming. We spend more time on paperwork than on actual advocacy,”** says an activist from Hungary. Many activists report negative experiences with donors who impose unrealistic expectations and do not understand the local context: **“We’ve had funders impose conditions that are not feasible for us to meet, especially given our limited resources. It feels like they are setting us up to fail,”** shares an activist from Slovakia. This often leads to a strained relationship, with activists feeling pressured to compromise their mission to meet funding criteria. This highlights the need for funders to streamline processes and reduce administrative burdens to allow activists to focus on their core work.

Finally, while international support is crucial, the relationship between local activists and funders can be fraught with challenges. A Global North-Global South is not only reflected in the content but also in the work relationships between funders and grantees. At gatherings, in the survey and interviews, organizers from all across the regions brought forward discussions about the hierarchical relations between funders and organizers. Organizers expressed their grievances about the lack of understanding from the funders, especially large donors and multilateral funders. **“Be more partners than donors and treat your grantees with respect, especially sharing financial risk,”** suggested one of the survey participants. The need for more equal partner relations instead of a top-down extractive approach to the organizers has been voiced in the interviews and focus groups alike, especially by organizers with fewer possibilities to receive funding.

Several respondents (from Georgia, Armenia) said that because of this attitude and lack of transparency, they only take grants from funders that are aligned with their values and consider their context and needs. All interview respondents named local and international feminist and women’s funds as examples of more participatory, transparent, and supportive grantmaking. The existence and success of participatory grantmaking and reporting practices (e.g., FRIDA, Mama Cash) prove that such approaches are possible and efficient, yet, unfortunately, very rare.

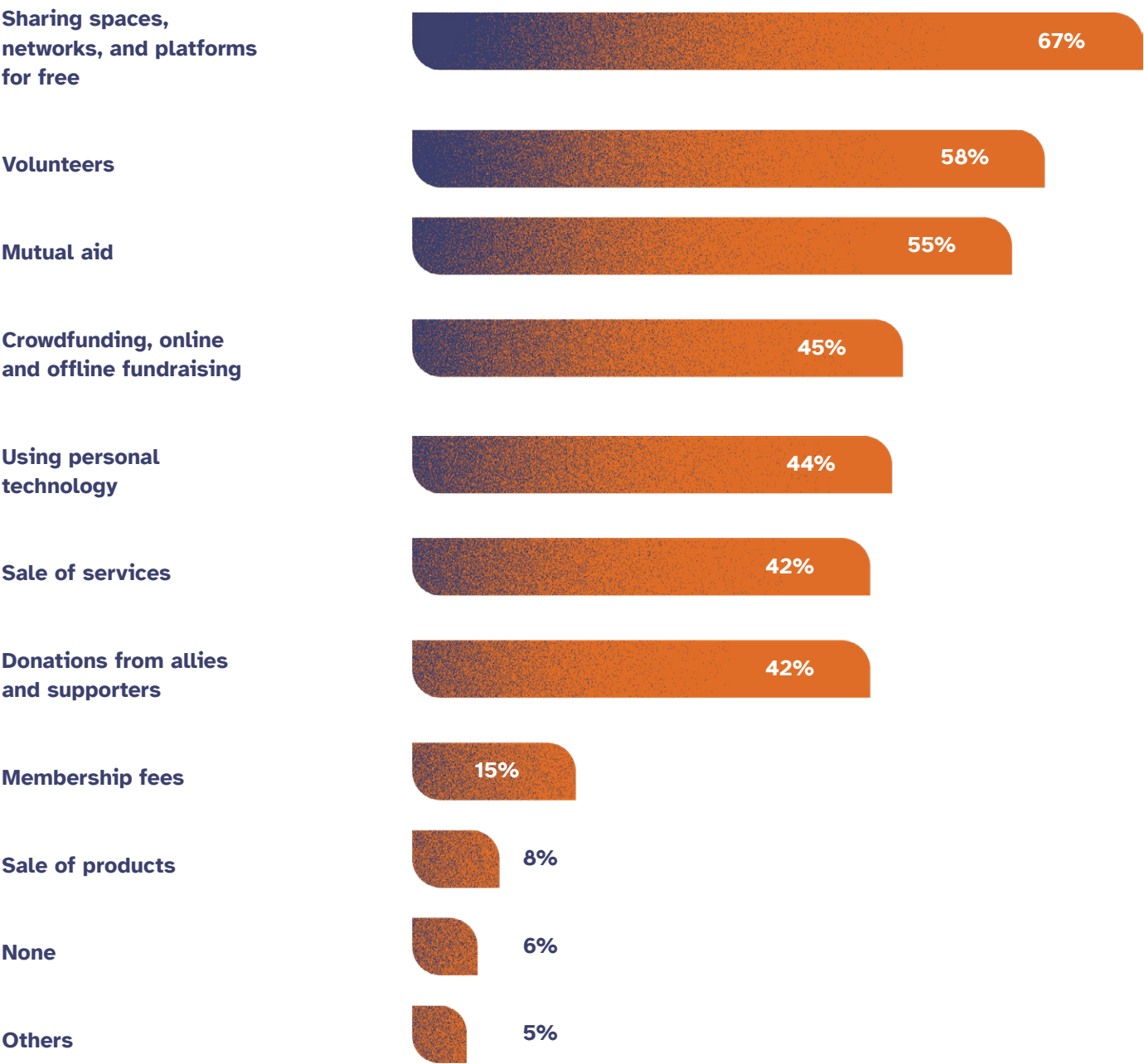
It feels like they are setting us up to fail.

Many activists report negative experiences with donors who impose unrealistic expectations or don’t understand the local context.

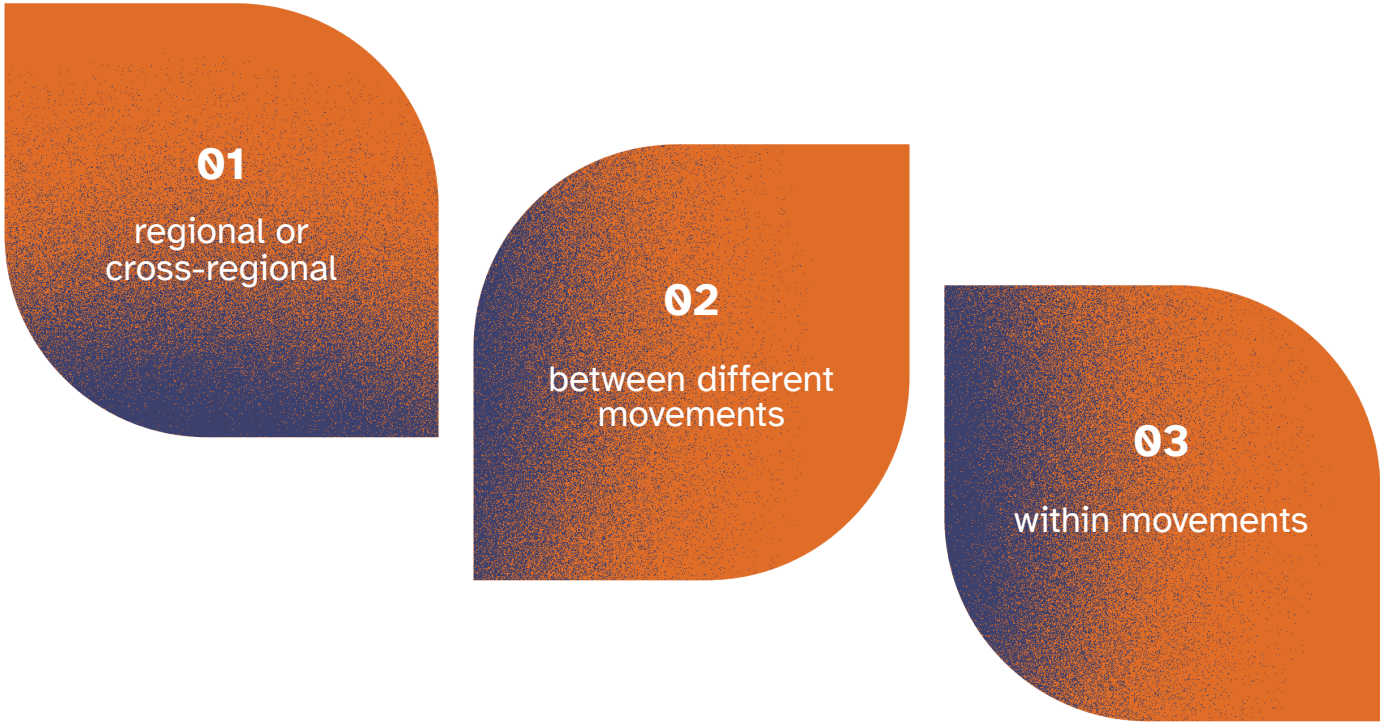
12. Self-generated resources and mutual aid fuel movements

Organizers across CEECCNA regions have developed various resource-sharing practices and self-generated income streams outside of external funding. According to the survey, unpaid work by organizers is the most common and unrecognized resource in CEECCNA. In addition, mutual aid and collaboration is key. For example, **67%** of organizers “*share spaces, networks and platforms for free*”.

What resources beyond grants, do you rely on in your work?



Through interviews and focus groups, we further identified three different ways in which self-generated and mutual aid resources are exchanged:



Among all CEECCNA regions, regional ties for movements appeared to be the strongest in the region of Central Asia. In the countries where receiving funding was unrestricted²⁷ (e.g. Kyrgyzstan) non-governmental organizations acted as fiscal sponsors for their partners and fellow activists from the countries with repressive laws on foreign funding and non-governmental organizations. Submitting shared regional reports, holding self-organized gatherings, and fundraising together are also common.

Instances of different kinds of solidarity also exist in the South Caucasus as well. Organizers across the region signed a common petition to end the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war and have fundraised and created spaces such as the (in)visible Caucasus Festival for healing, critical reflection, and exchange. However, here collaboration is more ad hoc and less systematic than in Central Asia.

This does not mean there are no connections within and between the regions. However, it is often donor- and INGO-initiated projects, like peacebuilding projects, international conferences, such as ILGA Europe, and convenings by feminist funds or academia. Organizers shared that these gatherings are often based on the political interests of the institutions and countries that fund them and tend to have short-term goals and approaches that are not regionally specific. In contrast, global feminist funds tend to support more collaboration initiatives in which organizers have space to meet, exchange resources, and define their own priorities. Initiatives that provide more autonomy and resources were strongly favored by intersectional organizers.

27 As of the writing of this report the situation in Kyrgyzstan is dramatically changing with restrictions on organizing.

06.

Findings II: Funding Deserts and Deserted Islands

While it is absolutely evident from this research that all of the CEECCNA regions and communities within them are deeply under-resourced, there are several issues, geographies, and communities that are particularly deprived of resources and attention. Clearly evident in our survey, reflected in HRFN data, and expanded in interviews, we turn to what we are calling ***“Funding Deserts and Deserted Islands”***:

01

Labor Rights

02

LGBTQIA+
rights and
communities

03

Sex Workers
Rights

04

HIV
prevention

05

Roma Rights

These ***“deserts”*** illustrate the general funding trends detailed in Findings I: funding and labor precarity, decreasing budgets, high levels of risk, and a mismatch between funder priorities and movement realities. They also show the compounding effects for groups that are often most at risk. In this chapter, we aim to elevate their stories and realities, demonstrate the impact of underfunding, and inspire the funding community to advance pathways for resourcing movements under threat.

Labor Rights & Economic Justice

Labor rights remain one of the most underfunded and underrepresented areas in both our survey and in HRFN's global funding data. The number of labor and socio-economic rights organizers in the geographies in question is very small. In most contexts, they include labor unions, and labor and socio-economic efforts are more connected to the public sector and legislative change. For instance, though organizers do name issues like improving labor laws, access to healthcare, education, and housing, but primarily seen as part of service provision.

However, part of the lack of labor rights organizing is directly linked to the challenge of advancing systemic change in authoritarian regimes. Legal gains and state-level advocacy are restricted in most CEECCNA countries. There is also a significant gap between legal protection and lived reality. According to the Labour Rights Index (2024), all countries in the regions rank as **"approaching decent work,"** and some EU countries, like Slovakia and Hungary, are ranked as highest in their formal conditions for **"decent work."**²⁸ While the legal situation might seem decent, activists name corruption, lack of the rule of law, poverty, and absence of grassroots movements around labor and socio-economic issues as significant barriers to truly decent work conditions.

Most funders who resource these issues do not prioritize labor and socio-economic grassroots movements. Unlike gender equality and environmental justice, which often fall under the priorities of EU institutions, for example, labor and socio-economic issues are rarely among the priorities of funders. When they are, funding rarely reaches grassroots and intersectional organizers.

To support socio-economic issues, large multilateral institutions often direct money to the governments as part of the development programs, and often in the context of other issues, such as gender justice. An organizer from Central Asia states, **"The funders, like the World Bank, give money to the governments to increase women's economic capacity. There is a long list of professions that are banned for women; reducing this list is a precondition for receiving money."**

Organizers specifically mentioned German foundations such as Rosa Luxemburg Foundation and Friedrich Ebert Foundation as among the few funders who resource labor movements. However, these funds are decreasing. One survey respondent wrote, **"We worked with Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung in Ukraine (applying each year with the project), but their funding capacities are becoming lower each year, so we are searching for other opportunities from different sources to implement our activities in full."** Labor and socio-economic organizers also mentioned cases when they intentionally refused to take money from funders and sought alternative funding sources, such as membership fees.

LGBTQIA+ Rights

LGBTQIA+ is one of the most restricted and challenging areas of organizing in most countries in the CEECCNA regions. In Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, consensual sex between adults of the same sex is criminalized. In the Russian Federation, the so-called LGBT propaganda law makes it impossible to operate openly and formally. In Kyrgyzstan (2023) and in Georgia (2024), similar propaganda laws are going into effect. Even in EU countries like Poland and Hungary, constant attempts to limit LGBTQIA+ activism raise the risk. In countries such as Kazakhstan, where LGBTQIA+ work is not legally restricted in practice, organizations still struggle to register. Through the regions, LGBTQIA+ communities are targeted by governments, police, and conservative social factions.

Despite the restrictions, LGBTQIA+ organizers provide services, do international advocacy, and challenge the mainstream homophobic and transphobic narratives. The growth in LGBTQIA+ organizing has seen funding growth in the CEECCNA regions over the last four years. According to the Global Philanthropy Project's Global Resource Report, support for LGBTQIA+ work in the regions rose to \$40 million in 2021-2022.²⁹ However, the increase can be attributed to the growing number of organizations and activists among the younger generation. The median grant size is \$11,901, which in most cities of the region could easily be an office rent for one year.³⁰

Apart from scarce funding, funders' focus on visibility and policy action (described in Findings I) is compounded for LGBTQIA+ communities. In interviews, activists emphasized that the funding either does not reach them or leaves soon because they cannot do their work openly and work on legislative changes. The invisible work of community care and movement building is not on many donors' radars, especially by bilateral funders like embassies that do not want to fund issues that are not favored or illegal in the country.

28 Labour Rights Index. 2024. The WageIndicator Foundation and the Centre for Labour Research. https://labourrightsindex.org/2024/2024-the-index-in-text-explanation/labour-rights-index-2024-full-text_

29 Global Philanthropy Project. 2024. [Global Resources Report 2021-2022 Global Resources Report: Government & Philanthropic Support for LGBTI Communities](#).
30 Ibid.

Roma Rights: Funding Desert in an Ocean of EU Funding

Given the complex and often deteriorating situation of Roma rights across Central and Eastern Europe, there is an urgent need for a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by Romani communities and the strategies employed by the organizers to bring more and better resources to fuel their work.

To this end, we conducted a focus group study with Romani activists and community leaders from Poland, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia. This analysis aims to amplify the voices of Romani individuals, shed light on the nuanced experiences and obstacles they encounter daily, and highlight the innovative approaches being developed to stop discrimination and promote inclusion. By examining these firsthand accounts and centering Romani perspectives, we hope to contribute to more effective, culturally sensitive, and Roma-led policies, funding, and interventions for advancing Roma rights in the region.

Here are the key themes that came out of the focus group discussion and our additional analysis:

Anti-Roma Racism at all levels:

All activists we talked to shared various levels of discrimination experienced by them as individuals being Roma in CEE, from structural to institutional to interpersonal, and all of their work is related to resisting and shifting these discriminations against all Romani people. As one participant states, **“Europe was built on Racism”**.

In Poland, Romani individuals continue to face formidable barriers in education, employment, and housing. The government’s half-hearted attempts at Roma inclusion often lack adequate funding and effective implementation, perpetuating a cycle of marginalization.³¹ Hungary’s record is equally troubling, with the European Court of Human Rights condemning the country for racial segregation of Romani children in schools, a stark reminder of the deep-rooted educational disparities.³² Romania and Slovakia, despite implementing various Roma inclusion programs, struggle to achieve meaningful progress. In Romania, countless Roma continue to live in abject poverty, facing insurmountable barriers to education and employment.³³ Slovakia’s efforts, while commendable, have failed to eradicate discrimination in education, housing, and employment.³⁴

Across these nations, Romani individuals face not only institutional discrimination but also pervasive societal prejudice. In Hungary, far-right groups have brazenly organized protests in Romani neighborhoods, further terrorizing these already vulnerable communities.³⁵ Poland and Romania continue to report distressing incidents of hate crimes and discrimination against Roma, underscoring the urgent need for more robust and inclusive policies.³⁶ The media portrayal of Roma often reinforces negative stereotypes, making it difficult for Romani organizations to garner public support and empathy. **“The media rarely covers our successes or the positive contributions of Romani people. Instead, they focus on negative stereotypes, which fuel discrimination and exclusion,”** said an organizer from Romania.

31 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA). 2022. [Roma and Travellers in six countries](#).

32 European Roma Rights Centre [ERRC]. 2018. [Barriers to Roma inclusion in Hungary](#).

33 FRA. 2022.

34 Ibid

35 Human Rights Watch (HRW). 2023. [World Report 2023: Events of 2023](#).

36 Ibid.

Addressing Racism is not a Roma Issue:

Addressing institutional and structural racism is not about training Roma on why they need to go to school, which, according to one focus group participant, **“is the racist approach.”** It is about training, advocating, and educating governments and institutional structures that are racist and perpetuate discrimination against Roma. This is also not to say there is no need for trainings for Romani communities, but the approach is important, and the focus on systemic racism is vital.

Deeply Intersectional Lives and Organizing:

Romani organizing is deeply intersectional, addressing the needs and challenges of the Romani communities across structural, cultural, and individual aspects. Funding, however, is quite siloed, and narrowing what Romani organizing should look and be like is often quite harmful. As one activist shared in the focus group: **“One day we have an issue related to us being queer. The next day, we have an issue related to our mental health. Another day, we face structural discrimination for being Roma.”**

We are doing the job of the state:

Activists are clear: **“From education to services to advocacy, we are doing it all, and we need to be working on a continuum and need support in that way.”**

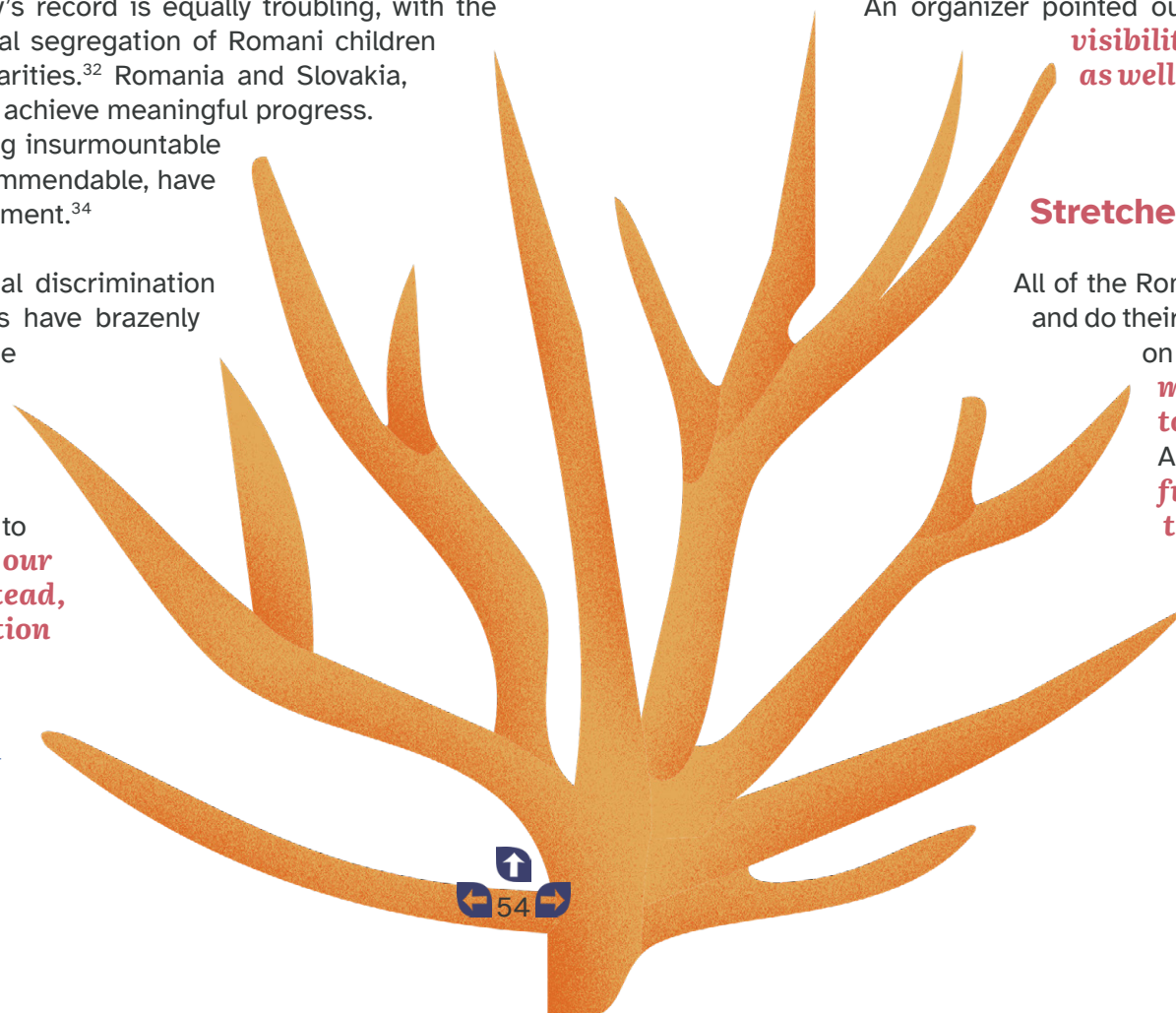
Romani organizing is excluded from broader human rights organizing:

Romani organizations and the issues they advocate for are often invisible in broader social justice movements. This invisibility perpetuates stereotypes and ignorance about the challenges faced by Romani communities. It also deprives the movement of valuable insights and leadership from those most affected by these issues.

An organizer pointed out, **“Our issues are not seen as a priority. We are fighting for visibility not just in the funding world but in the public consciousness as well.”**

Stretched Thin and Exhausted:

All of the Romani organizers we talked to have full-time jobs that pay for their lives and do their activism in the evenings. This significantly limits their capacity to focus on their organizational work. **“I work two other jobs just to support my family. It’s exhausting, but I can’t rely on the organization to provide a stable income,”** shared an organizer from Romania. Another activist echoed this sentiment, stating, **“The lack of stable funding means that we can’t dedicate as much time as we need to our projects. We’re constantly stretched thin.”**



Funding Overview:

The primary funding sources include the European Union, international NGOs, and private foundations. However, the amounts allocated are often insufficient to meet the extensive needs of the Romani communities, and the politics surrounding these funds tend to prioritize bureaucratic efficiency over genuine community impact.

Funding is predominantly project-based and short-term and comes with restrictive requirements, making it difficult for Romani organizations to secure long-term, sustainable support. Prominent funders in the CEECCNA region include the Open Society Foundations, the European Commission, and various UN agencies. These funders typically aim to promote human rights, social inclusion, and anti-discrimination efforts, with strategies funded including education, healthcare access, and anti-discrimination campaigns. However, critical issues such as anti-Gypsyism, empowerment of Romani women, and broader human rights activism often receive less attention and funding.

EU Funding not for Roma:

Despite substantial EU funds earmarked for social inclusion, much of the funding fails to reach Romani organizations directly. Instead, funds are frequently funnelled through non-Romani intermediaries, perpetuating a cycle of exclusion. A Romani organizer noted,

“There are funds allocated for Roma issues, but the information about these funds often doesn’t reach Romani organizations. Even when it does, the criteria are set in such a way that Romani organizations are effectively excluded.”

Administrative Burdens and Unrealistic Expectations:

Systemic exclusion is further exacerbated by the administrative burdens and bureaucratic hurdles that Romani organizations face when applying for funding. The complexity of the application processes and the stringent reporting requirements are often insurmountable barriers for smaller Roma-led NGOs, which typically operate with limited resources and staff: **“We have to navigate a maze of paperwork and reporting requirements, which takes away from the actual work we are trying to do in our communities,”** said an organizer from Hungary.

Not Included in Funding Decision-Making Processes:

Romani activists often feel that they are not adequately represented in decision-making processes related to funding. **“We are not in those positions of power where decisions about funding are made. This exclusion means that our needs and perspectives are often overlooked,”** noted a Romani organizer from Hungary.

07.

Recommendations: How Funders Can Support CEECCNA Movements

Over the pages of this report, we have detailed the critical role that intersectional movements play in resisting authoritarianism and envisioning a new, self-defined future. These findings speak to the specific needs of movements in the CEECCNA regions and illuminate the ways funders can operate in closing civic space around the world. Likewise, the recommendations for funders are at once context-specific and globally applicable.



01.

Provide flexible, core, multiyear grants to sustain movements under threat

The number one ask from participants of this research is resounding and clear: flexible core funding that organizers can use as they see fit in the rapidly shifting regional and global political contexts. Organizers unequivocally agree that they need flexible core funding that is multi-year and **“allows them to take a breath”** (survey respondent). Salaries, long-term activities, and infrastructure rely on more than just project support.

Funding advocates around the globe have called for core, flexible, and direct support for decades. However, as more CEECCNA regions’ governments implement foreign agents laws, the need extends beyond sustainability, and underlines the importance of agility, and movement’s ability to move nimbly in face of unfolding human rights crises.

Moving money and providing long-term, core support grants can be a lifeline when regressive and repressive laws attempt to starve civil society of support.

02.

Take risk seriously: Do not reward visibility over safety

Our findings indicate that philanthropy favors funding activism that is visible, emphasizes policy change (and works with governments to achieve it), or has political support from Global North countries and entities. However, the reality and lived experience for many communities — from LGBTQIA+ to sex workers to migrants and Indigenous rights activists — and in many countries in the CEECCNA regions, visibility can lead to attacks, imprisonment, or death. Critical organizing happens underground, and is not visible for funders' radars.

Reconsider metrics for change: recognize the impact of holding the line against rollbacks of human rights; do not prioritize policy change and visibility in contexts where these increase partners' risks; and place value on the often invisible work of safeguarding democracy.

03.

Set context-specific funding priorities with CEECCNA movements

In this report, we've detailed the rich and varied history of the CEECCNA regions and intersectional movements within them. We've also seen a mismatch between funders' priorities and the needs articulated by CEECCNA movements. For better, context-specific alignment, funders can:

- *Invest in continued learning and refute oversimplified geopolitical narratives to move resources where most needed and underfunded, such as to Belarusian, Central Asian, and North Caucasian activists.*
- *Trust people closest to the problems to define their solutions. For example, support Romani communities directly, rather than non-Romani groups working on "Roma issues."*
- *Uplift alternative forms of resourcing and support infrastructure that can have add-on effects when mobilized for mutual aid or self-generated resourcing.*

Most of all, funders should base their priorities on visions for justice, intersectional action, and democratic futures as defined by CEECCNA movements themselves.

04.

Reduce bureaucracy, increase trust

Movements across CEECCNA regions have unanimously named the rigidity of donor requirements as one of the key elements they would love to see changed. They cite a lack of trust and relationship building, hierarchical power dynamics, and requirements that fail to keep pace with changing priorities and conditions (for instance requiring financial audits from groups currently in bomb shelters). As noted by one survey respondent, **"Donors are lagging behind in a fast-changing world."**

Recommendations include:

- *Requirements audit: Consider doing an audit of application and reporting requirements and checking for "must keep" vs. "not essential."*
- *Simplified and accessible application process: Funders are invited to simplify application processes, consider language justice and the time it takes to fill in grant applications, and explore creating common applications among several funders.*
- *Simplified reporting: Consider what information you really need to know for the renewal or completion of the grant. Ask only for that.*

05. Fund unregistered groups and individuals

One of the specific characteristics of CEECCNA regions is that, despite robust movement organizations, restrictive regimes mean they cannot always formally register. Even countries such as Georgia and Kyrgyzstan have passed restrictive laws for receiving funding, which means that they can no longer act as fiscal hosts for the organizers from other regions or countries. Resourcing unregistered groups and individuals is vital for the survival of social justice organizing across CEECCNA regions. We invite funders to come together in collaborative learning circles to craft new ways to support unregistered groups as a key tactic for resourcing resistance to authoritarianism.

06. Prioritize support to historically excluded communities and organizers

Organizers in CEECCNA regions come from a range of ethnic, cultural, and political backgrounds, often national belonging. Many of them are displaced because of the wars, political repressions and do activism in exile. Democratic change will be bolstered by supporting grassroots, decolonial projects and non-white initiatives in the regions. Sex-worker rights, harm reduction, Romani organizing, and labor organizing are among the underfunded issues in grassroots and intersectional organizing. Refer to the Funding Deserts chapter for more inspiration on what to fund across CEECCNA regions. Redirect resources from oppressive governments to the organizers. Recognizing and addressing the unique challenges these groups face is essential for promoting inclusivity and diversity in funding allocations.

07. Fund in the CEECCNA regions as a strategy for regional and global justice

In a set of regions characterized by a boom-bust cycle of crisis-driven funding and increasing and targeted attacks on international funding, the temptation to leave the CEECCNA regions is already constricting funding.

Despite — and even because of — these challenges, funding intersectional movements in the CEECCNA regions is bigger than one grant or organization. As the epicenter of foreign agents laws and other right-wing restrictions reverberating around the globe, so too are the CEECCNA regions a locus of creativity, collaboration, and organizing. To invest in a democratic future, funders should not shy away from funding and should, instead, learn what it takes to resource movements in crisis.

08. Act in solidarity

Across the board, CEECCNA organizers invite true allyship from funders. Building genuine relationships and shifting power requires valuing the wisdom and partnership of grantees and recognizing the interdependence of funders and movements are all steps.

Particularly as funders based in the Global North experience increased restrictions themselves, movements in the CEECCNA regions offer a window into the kind of tactics and strategies they might call on. In a rapidly-transforming landscape for social justice and human rights, global solidarity is itself an act of resistance.

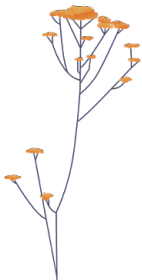
Legend



Snowdrop

Galanthus

A cherished early harbinger of spring, the snowdrop symbolizes hope and renewal in folklore across Central and Eastern Europe and the Caucasus, often blooming through snow as a sign of resilience. It is believed to have magical properties and also plays a role in modern medicine: galantamine, used to treat Alzheimer’s symptoms, was first extracted from snowdrops.



Handelia

Handelia trichophylla

Native to the high mountains of Central Asia, Handelia is a rare and medicinally significant plant that reflects the rich biodiversity of alpine ecosystems. Its existence is increasingly threatened by climate change and habitat degradation in fragile upland environments.



Bulrush

Scirpus

Common in wetlands across Central and Eastern Europe, bulrushes purify water, prevent erosion, and support traditional rural crafts and livelihoods. They are remarkably resilient, with seeds that can survive prolonged droughts or floods in buried form.



Common Poppy

Papaver rhoeas

The poppy thrives in disturbed soils and carries deep symbolic meaning across the region, often representing remembrance, resilience, and renewal. Its seeds are a staple in Central and Eastern European cuisines, used in sweet pastes for pastries and festive dishes.



Dandelion

Taraxacum

Widespread from Central Europe to Central Asia, the dandelion is valued in traditional medicine and symbolizes hope, abundance, and new beginnings. It thrives in changing climates, supports pollinators, and its wind-borne seeds have inspired passive flight research.



Syrian bean-caper

Zygophyllum fabago

Thriving in arid soils across Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Eastern Europe, this hardy plant is used in traditional medicine and helps stabilize degraded land. Its flower buds have been used as a substitute for capers, and it often grows in colonies in dry, gravelly areas where little else survives.



Norway spruce

Picea excelsa

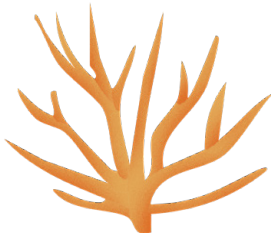
A dominant conifer in Central and Eastern Europe and the Caucasus, the Norway spruce is vital for timber production, water regulation, and mountain biodiversity. Culturally, it symbolizes resilience, protection, and continuity across generations.



Water Lily

Nymphaea alba

Native to calm lakes and ponds from Central Europe to the Caucasus, the water lily supports aquatic biodiversity and healthy freshwater ecosystems. It is a symbol of beauty, renewal, and dignity, often linked to peace and inner harmony in regional mythology.



White Saxaul

Haloxylon persicum

This drought-resistant tree is crucial in Central Asia for fighting desertification, storing moisture, and preventing erosion in arid regions. It also provides fuel, shade, and habitat for desert-adapted species in extreme environments.



Hawthorn

Crataegus monogyna

A vital hedgerow plant across Central and Eastern Europe, hawthorn provides food and shelter for wildlife and serves as a natural fence in rural areas. Culturally, it represents protection, healing, and the enduring bond between people and the land.

Dalan Fund 2025.
Growing Against All Odds: Mapping funding for
intersectional organizing in the CEECCNA regions.

