

# Human Rights Defenders in Crisis

Changing Space for Human Rights Defenders amid the COVID-19 'Crisis' in  
the Former-Soviet Region

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*A master's thesis*

*MSc. Human Geography: Conflicts, Territories and Identities*



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*Courtesy of respondent 'Anna'.*

## Abstract

COVID-19 has unearthed and exacerbated the underlying flaws of our society. Among many other things, the COVID-19 pandemic has led to increased pressures on civil society actors, including human rights defenders. This research is therefore intended to contribute to a better understanding of the processes of shrinking civil society space and how 'crises', such as the global COVID-19 outbreak, aggravate this phenomenon. Attention is given to the role crisis discourse plays in the measures taken by governments during the pandemic. The stories of human rights defenders from the former-Soviet region, analysed using a grounded theory approach, show that COVID-19 has made the work of defenders more difficult in a direct sense, as well as by serving as a pretext for governments to justify the shrinkage of civil society space. Nevertheless, through the creative implementation of strategies, civil society actors are able to make use of new avenues to achieve positive social change.

## Samenvatting (NL)

COVID-19 heeft de onderliggende tekortkomingen van onze samenleving blootgelegd en verergerd. De COVID-19 pandemie heeft onder andere geleid tot hogere druk op maatschappelijke actoren, waaronder mensenrechtenverdedigers. Dit onderzoek is daarom bedoeld om bij te dragen aan een beter inzicht in de processen van krimpende maatschappelijke ruimte ('*civil society space*') en hoe 'crises', zoals de wereldwijde COVID-19 uitbraak, dit fenomeen verergeren. Er wordt aandacht besteed aan de rol die crisis discours speelt bij de maatregelen die overheden nemen tijdens de pandemie. De verhalen van mensenrechtenverdedigers uit de voormalige Sovjet-Unie zijn geanalyseerd met behulp van een *grounded theory* benadering. De analyse daarvan toont aan dat COVID-19 het werk van verdedigers in directe zin moeilijker heeft gemaakt, maar ook doordat het als voorwendsel gebruikt wordt door regeringen om het inkrimpen van *civil society space* te rechtvaardigen. Desalniettemin kunnen maatschappelijke actoren door de creatieve implementatie van strategieën nieuwe wegen inslaan om positieve sociale verandering teweeg te brengen.

# Preface

## *Acknowledgements*

Finishing this master's thesis is not just concluding the process of the largest research I have ever executed. Finishing this thesis is also finishing my career as a geography student and the start of my career as a human geographer. My time at Radboud University, through the bachelor's in Geography, Planning and Environment, a minor in Conflict Studies, plentiful extra courses, two internships, and now my master's in Human Geography: Conflicts, Territories and Identities have been a wonderful journey. I can proudly say it has given me a broad solid scientific basis and an intrinsic geographical lense to engage with the world and take the next steps forward.

Finishing this journey, (or writing this thesis), could not have been possible on my own. I therefore owe thanks to a lot of people, of which the following have been a particularly great help in this process. First, I need to thank my thesis supervisor, Dr. Olivier Kramsch, for encouraging me to take the extra steps and lift my thesis (and my entire geographical formation) to a higher level, as an inspiring teacher and thoughtful supervisor. Second, I need to thank my geography friends in Nijmegen and throughout Europe, for their encouragement and for being challenging sparring partners throughout the process. Special thanks to Hannah, Frederike for their critical proofreading and Joyce for the same, and her help on the visualisations and the map. Thirdly, I want to thank my respondents who, as inspiring and hard working human rights defenders, gave me their time and effort to answer my questions despite the extraordinary circumstances. Lastly, I need to thank Justice and Peace for being able to work with them the last 5 months, and my colleagues who spared time nor effort to help me on my way to find respondents and finish this research.

## *Research internship*

This research was conducted in the framework of a research internship with Justice & Peace Netherlands (JP), a non-governmental organisation founded in The Hague, Netherlands. JP coordinates Shelter City, a programme where human rights defenders (HRDs) that are threatened because of their work receive temporary shelter in one of the Shelter Cities. The Shelter City network is expanding, with currently 12 Dutch cities participating, along with Shelter Cities in Tbilisi and Batumi (Georgia), Dar Es Salaam (Tanzania), Cotonou (Benin), San José (Costa Rica) and York (United Kingdom) that have joined the network as International Shelter City Hubs.

I have received the opportunity to conduct my research with Justice & Peace and its Shelter City programme. I was kindly offered to use their contacts of HRDs hosted in one of the Shelter Cities in the previous years. Practically, I have assisted the Shelter City team with establishing an alumni network. This alumni network is intended for HRDs to maintain contact, to exchange ideas and continue learning. The alumni network is also intended for JP to offer support, in the form of resources, meetings, lectures and training. This practical task of providing and creating an active alumni network got me in touch with human rights defenders, and helped me see the inspiring and important work they do.

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## List of abbreviations

COVID-19	: Coronavirus Disease 2019
CSO	: Civil Society Organisation
CSS	: Civil Society Space
FSU	: Former-Soviet Union
HRD	: Human Rights Defender
NGO	: Non-Governmental Organisation
SONGO	: State Operated Non-Governmental organisation

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Human rights defenders in 'crisis'

For well over a year, at the time of writing this introduction, the global pandemic of COVID-19 has dominated our world in many ways. COVID-19 affects our economy, preoccupies our global and local politics, and affects many of us in our personal lives. By many accounts, the pandemic appears to aggravate and amplify the challenges to democracy, justice and civil society. Special Representative for Human Rights for the European Union, Eamon Gilmore, warns of a backsliding of the progress made, and a special need for civil society to safeguard Human Rights and democracy (Personal communication, 12-02-2021). Mary Lawlor, UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders, in the same conference, raises her concerns about a sharp increase in human rights violations against human rights defenders since the start of the pandemic.

These two voices echo the essence of what is being said in the many articles and reports by journalists, NGOs and intergovernmental organisations: the COVID-19 pandemic magnifies the challenges to civil society organisations (CSOs) and human rights defenders globally (e.g. CIVICUS, 2020). The problems faced by civil society actors are, unfortunately, not limited to the inconveniences of working from home, wearing masks and travel restrictions - disruptions of daily life which in itself already have major consequences on the work of civil society actors. Instead, many problems civil society is confronted with in this 'crisis' could potentially constitute structural limitations to civil society space (CSO-Meter, 2020; CIVICUS, 2020).

These challenges to civil society are predominantly imposed by governments. Governments globally attempt to systemically silence and repress dissenting voices and 'shrink' civil society space increasingly the past decade (e.g. Brechenmacher, 2017; Buyse, 2018; CIVICUS, 2020; Mollema, Albajeh, Jarrar, Kearney & Power, 2020). Concerns arose since the dawn of the current pandemic that *"Governments are also using the crisis to challenge the kinds of freedoms guaranteed in a democratic society"* (Kaye, 2020, p. 3). Noticeable is the fact that many governments have in a variety of forms imposed emergency measures or in some cases declared a formal state of emergency (CSO-meter, 2020). Doing this, they have often made use of the disproportionate executive powers granted through those emergency measures (Kaye, 2020). It is feared that these emergency powers and their impact on civic space may not be temporary, and may persist beyond the current 'crisis'.

In the misuse of powers, crisis language seems to play a major role. The language of 'crisis' - or 'crisis discourse' - is often actively used to legitimise far-reaching measures and regimes of governance (Lawrence, 2014; Cantat, Thiollet & Pécoud, 2019). This can currently be observed in the COVID-19 pandemic. The word 'crisis' is valuable, as it triggers us to act, creates a sense of urgency, yet it may also blind us (Gilbert, 2019). The current 'crisis' of COVID-19, then, may make us lose sight of our long-term ambitions of positive peace and human rights. Ambitions which we may only be able to realise with the help of the continuous efforts of civil society, given that sufficient civil society space remains.

In this research I will investigate how human rights defenders - civil society actors on the front line trying to realise those ambitions - perceive the effects of 'crisis'-motivated measures on their operating space. The research is aimed to find explanations of the phenomenon in order to help civil society cope with the consequences of this pandemic, and 'crises' to come.



## 1.2 Relevance

### 1.2.1 Societal relevance

As the introduction already exhibits, many vectors point at an ongoing process where civil society space (CSS) is being restricted in a plethora of ways (Van Tuijl, n.d.; Van den Borgh & Terwindt, 2012). This phenomenon is described as ‘shrinking space’ (Mollema et al., 2020). With the shrinking of civil society space, the capacity of civil society actors is lost to curtail states’ power, empower minorities, agendise topics, to keep up and promote human rights and civic freedoms - such as the rights to assembly, association, expression - and to uphold the international human rights protection system itself (Edwards, 2004; Buyse, 2019). Shrinking space means a loss of pathways to find non-violent forms of conflict resolution (Van den Borgh & Terwindt, 2012; Kaldor, 2003). This in itself provides ample imperative to understand this process better and to find strategies to protect or regain civil society space. COVID-19, however, appears to emphasise the need and urgency to do so.

The pandemic’s impact on most aspects of our lives - and on civil society space - is mostly consolidated through government policy. ‘Crisis measures’, touching most spheres of life and society, have namely been installed by most governments (CSO-meter, 2020), sometimes combined with announcing a state of emergency (Venice Commission, 2020). The - perceived - severity of the current pandemic makes it possible for governments to install drastic measures, in the name of managing this ‘crisis’. Arguably, these drastic measures are, to a significant degree, made possible by the widespread use of the language of crisis, or crisis discourse.

This word, ‘crisis’, and the framing of the situation as such, can be powerful. It helps create an urgency to tackle the situation at hand, while simultaneously being defined alarmingly vague (Gilbert, 2019). Largely unaware of this, people tend to think of ‘crisis’ as a rather neutral or objective description. However, this has to be contested (Lawrence, 2014, Gilbert, 2019; Cantat, Thiollet & Pécoud, 2019). Rather, these authors argue that crisis discourse, and the creation of crisis narratives, is deliberate, and actively employed as a technique of government (Lawrence, 2014). This powerful framing might be providing governments with justification for the extreme measures taken in the name of managing the current pandemic. Not in the least, this language allows for opportunism and “*the consolidation of authoritarian power*” (Kaye, 2020). In previous - so-called - ‘crises’, Lawrence (2014) notes, the framing and the measures taken under the powerful banner of ‘crisis’ have long-lasting consequences. To prevent the same happening in the aftermath of the current crisis, the effects of the use of crisis discourse on civil society actors (CSOs) and society has to be understood. The use of crisis language and the implications for civil society space are therefore also taken up in this research.

The extent of the potential effects of the ‘crisis’ on civil society space - and more specifically of crisis discourse and governments’ ‘crisis measures’ - could be boundless. Before the current pandemic, Brechenmacher (2017) already highlighted the need to increase our understanding of the complete range of tactics used by governments to shrink civil society space. The virus, and its wake, underline this necessity. Especially the necessity for understanding the process of shrinking CSS during the current pandemic and through the employment of the language of ‘crisis’. At the same time, the current ‘crisis’ may be a unique opportunity to grasp this process, as underlying structures and flaws in the societal fabric often manifest themselves clearly in crises (Otto, 2011). Therefore, the pandemic may serve as the right moment to learn how to protect and accommodate civil society in a

‘post-pandemic world’ and in future ‘crises’. The global COVID-19 pandemic brings new dimensions to this ongoing process, aggravating existing pressures on civil society, and adding new ones. Besides closing some pathways to further human rights and civil society, it might simultaneously open new avenues (Soja, 2011).

It is imperative we explore and make use of those avenues. This need is visible in all parts of the world. Arguably, this is especially true in the former-Soviet Union (FSU), where human rights and civil society have recently been under increased pressure for an extended period of time. Furthermore, recent political developments (e.g. IPHR, 2020f; Denber, 2021) warrant additional attention for this region in particular. The findings of this research in the former-Soviet region might then be seen as an example for other regions, where similar processes are going on at the moment (Cooley & Schaaf, 2017).

### 1.2.2 Scientific relevance

While the section above accounts for the relevance of this research’s topic for ongoing processes in our society and the novelty of the present situation, there are several gaps in our scientific knowledge that are identified in the literature on crisis discourse and on civil society. Not in the least, a gap remains at the intersection of these two concepts. This intersection forms the theoretical cornerstone of this research

First, it is identified on the basis of thorough literature study by Barendsen (et al., 2020) - consisting mainly of CSOs’ reports - that much of the current work on shrinking civil society space concerns studies on the local and national scale. Anheier, Glasius and Kaldor (2001), who plead to understand civil society as a globally interconnected space, employ the term ‘global civil society’, as a means to overcome the ‘methodological nationalism’ which, according to them, prevails in studies and in common understandings of civil society. This research therefore takes a transnational focus and is aimed at finding recurring patterns across boundaries, upon which conclusions are drawn (see section 3.2).

Secondly, Brechenmacher (2017) finds that our knowledge on the shrinkage of civil society space is not complete. Brechenmacher points out the need to chart the full range of tactics employed by governments, the effects of these on CSOs, and the need to explore how civil society can be supported to defend their operating space. This need is currently emphasised. Therefore, research is required to find whether our knowledge holds true in the new situation during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Thirdly, crisis discourse is a relatively new concept which has not completely found its way into scientific debate. Gilbert argues that “*so much of the current academic attention on ‘crisis’ does not involve social or political theory at all [...]*” (Gilbert, 2019, p.208). He finds that so far, the focus in literature on crisis has been on more practical forms of ‘crisis management’ or ‘crisis communication’.

Fourth, the literature in crisis discourse is largely based on theorisations of different crises, to a large degree economic crises, including the global financial crisis of 2008 (Soja, 1989; Lerner, 2011; Lawrence, 2014; Gilbert, 2019). Cantat (et al., 2019) is unique in exhibiting the influence of crisis language on European migration policy. Although these theorisations are argued to apply to different forms of crisis, the influence of crisis discourse on the consequences of the current ‘crisis’ of COVID-19 is still to be researched. Moreover, the way crisis discourse is currently informing governments’ policy measures, how it is used to justify the shrinkage of civil society space, and how this affects the work of civil society actors, is as of yet undetermined. More specifically, it remains understudied how human rights defenders are impacted by crisis discourse and ‘crisis’-motivated measures in the current pandemic.

Lastly, the transnational space where this research is set is the region of the former-Soviet Union (FSU). Oleinikova (2017) notes the under-researched status of civil society and the limitations to CSOs' operations in post-Soviet countries. This, in combination with the recent developments regarding the human rights situation, exhibits the relevance of research on crisis discourse and civil society, specifically in the FSU.

### 1.3 Objectives and research questions

This research is intended to contribute to a better understanding of the processes of shrinking civil society space and how 'crises', such as the current global COVID-19 outbreak, alter or aggravate this phenomenon. This master's thesis is thus an attempt to arrive at a better understanding of the reality at the crossroads between the concepts of crisis theory and of civil society (see chapter 2). To arrive at this understanding, attention is firstly given to the role crisis discourse plays in the measures taken, and their effects on civil society actors and civil society space. Secondly, this research looks at the responses to the subsequent changing environment and the strategies of CSOs to counteract this.

These processes are researched by looking at the perceptions of human rights defenders (HRDs), who are experiencing the consequences of COVID-19 in their work. A grounded theory approach is employed in order to unearth the mechanisms of shrinking space in crises (see chapter 3). Ultimately, this understanding is intended to help find practical solutions for protecting civil society space, and to alleviate the consequences of 'crises' and crisis discourse on society in general.

Corresponding to these objectives, and addressing the societal and academic needs expressed in the previous section, I formulate my research question as follows:

*How are human rights defenders affected by crisis-motivated measures during the COVID-19 pandemic, and how do they respond to these measures?*

This research question can be further broken down into three sub questions. Each sub question addresses a specific element of the research, needed to answer the main research question:

1. Firstly, *how do human rights defenders perceive the influence of governments' measures taken during the COVID-19 pandemic on their work?*
2. Secondly, attention is given to the question: *What are human rights defenders' perceptions of the role of crisis discourse and its influence on measures taken during the pandemic?*
3. Thirdly, *what strategies are, or could be, employed by human rights defenders in response to the measures and shrinking operating space?*

### 1.4 Thesis outline

This Master's thesis is structured according to the three sub questions mentioned before. Before providing answers to these out of the blue, however, the theoretical concepts and debates at the heart of this thesis will be laid out in the theoretical framework first in the following chapter (chapter 2). After that, the methods used to obtain the data to provide answers to the research questions will be explained in chapter 3.

The explication of data, and thereby the answering of each sub question, happens in four steps. These four steps are primarily based on the topics arising in the interviews, in combination with the theoretical assumptions (in chapter 2). First, in chapter 4, the regional context is sketched, forming the backdrop of this research and the operating space of my respondents. This chapter goes into the human rights situation in the region, important political developments, and inevitably provides a general overview of the COVID-19 outbreak in the region. Second, chapter 5 - 'Crisis discourse and measures' - will move from the context to the discussion of the measures taken during the pandemic, as well as the rationales behind those measures. Third, chapter 6 will then answer the leading question on the actual influence of COVID-19 and the measures on society and HRDs. Fourth, and final of the analysis chapters, I will delve into the responses of HRDs, the strategies they employ and the challenges they face in implementing their strategies (chapter 7).

After the analysis chapters, where the data is laid out and the numerous findings are connected with relevant literature to form preliminary answers, a conclusive chapter is provided: chapter 8. In this conclusion, the findings are summarized and combined with theory in order to give definitive answers to the sub and main questions. Furthermore, chapter 8 offers some limitations that have arisen during the process. Lastly, the conclusion ultimately provides recommendations for future research to overcome those limitations, as well as practical recommendations for policy makers and civil society actors.

## 2. Theoretical framework

To attain answers to the main question, it is necessary to know how this question connects to existing literature and academic debate. As made clear in the introduction, crisis discourse has, conceivably, a large impact on civil society space. In order to embed this research in the two overarching aspects, both theoretical concepts will be discussed in this chapter. This theoretical framework is therefore logically divided into two main sections; one covering civil society space, and one covering the debate on crisis discourse.

### 2.1 Civil society space

#### 2.1.1 Defining civil society space

To define civil society is not a simple task. The concept, although frequently used in policy making, political and social science and everyday speech, is a ‘fuzzy and contested concept’ (Anheier, Glasius & Kaldor, 2001, p.11). They explain that the concept of civil society is not set in stone and no single conventional understanding exists. Edwards (2004) denotes that the concept of civil society is “loaded, vague and potentially powerful”. He explains that the concept in itself is contested theoretically, as well as practically: being applied as a rationale by actors with the most diverse political agendas.

The first commonly found definition is that of civil society as the ‘realm of private association’, based on the early enlightenment ideas of philosopher De Tocqueville, and the liberal idea of freedom of association (Foley & Edwards, 1996). In Buyse’s words (2019), civil society is seen in this paradigm as “the totality of groups associating voluntarily around common goals or interests”. Adherents to this definition emphasise the central role of associational life of citizens in liberal democracies. It is argued that civil society, in this definition, is an essential ingredient in the maintenance of democracies and in spreading democracies (Foley & Edwards, 1996). A notable result of this definition is the idea, in the ‘Tocquevillian’ sense, that civil society works as a mechanism for restraining or offering counterbalance to state power (Anheier, Glasius & Kaldor, 2001).

This narrow definition of civil society has found its way into our daily speech and is inviting because of its simplicity. However, this narrow definition has several shortcomings. It is argued that this conceptualization of civil society as ‘private voluntary association’ is not directly applicable in non-Western contexts, as it is based on a Western liberal-democratic model. According to Ljubownikow, Crotty and Rodgers (2013), who examined the development of the post-Soviet Russian ‘variety’ of civil society, the strict notion of civil society as voluntary association neglects the more informal dimension which might be more dominant elsewhere in the world.

Furthermore, there is a weakness in presenting civil society as a single ‘counterbalance’. This has the disadvantage that it neglects the sharp contradictions and even conflicts within the multitude of groups in civil society (Foley & Edwards, 1996). Apart from misunderstanding civil society as a unison block, the ‘Tocquevillian’ paradigm presents this realm of association as being detached from and opposite to the state. Etzioni explains that such portrayals disregard “*the significant roles that the state plays in enabling networks, voluntary associations, and communities—the civil society—to do what they do best.*” (Etzioni, 2004, p.343). This narrow definition might therefore not be suitable to describe the totality of civil society.

Others have attempted to describe civil society by pointing out what it is not. Civil society is often understood as being the realm which is not the family, not the state, and not the market (Buyse, 2019). While this covers a large part of civil society, including the 'Tocquevillian' realm of association, such definitions fail to notice many other forms of association. The problem with this negative definition is, as explained by Edwards (2004), that aspects of family, market and politics can indeed be part of civil society. As examples of the interwovenness of civil society with both markets and state, Foley and Edwards (1996) note that civil society must include political movements, associations and even political parties. They mention trade unions as another example of associations that exist in both realms simultaneously. In the case of Russian civil society, Ljubownikow, Crotty and Rodgers (2013) note the strong economic dimension of civil society, and the many interconnections with both market and state actors. So it has to be questioned: where, if we were to use this negative definition, the line should be drawn to define what is and what is not civil society in the complex modern world.

In response to the critiques mentioned here, a more practical definition has become more favoured since the start of the 21st century. Anheier, Glasius and Kaldor (2001) explain that this practical definition focuses more on what is achieved, rather than focusing on the type of groups or organisations. In this view

*"civil society refers to active citizenship, to growing self-organisation outside formal political circles, and expanded space in which individual citizens can influence the conditions in which they live both directly through self-organisation and through pressure on the state."* (Anheier, Glasius & Kaldor, 2001, p.7).

Foley and Edwards (1996) see the emergence of civil society defined as a sphere of action. And similarly, in the work of Buyse (2019), it is explained that civil society, which he calls 'civic space', has to be defined as the practical room for collaboration and action for citizens, groups and civil society organisations.

It has been made clear that the concept of civil society is not as straightforward as it is often assumed, because of the many different explanations, applications and realities. Edwards conceived a framework combining the different ways of thinking into a comprehensive explanation. He defined three schools of thought, which according to him must be seen in conjunction in order to properly understand the concept. The three schools of thought explaining civil society are defined by Edwards, respectively:

1. as associational life: a part of society that is distinct from states and markets, which is formed for the purposes of advancing common interests and facilitating collective action;
2. as the 'good' society: a separate realm of society, where morals and service of others - rather than self-interest - are concerned. In other words: 'a' civil society. And lastly;
3. as the public sphere: an arena for public deliberation, rational dialogue and the exercise of 'active citizenship' in pursuit of the common interest, as the 'public sphere'. (Edwards, 2004, p.viii)

To 'rescue' the concept of civil society from losing its usefulness, due to this multitude of explanations and ambiguity, Edwards (2004) combines these three schools of thought on civil society into a framework to understand and utilise the concept. He explains how the concept cannot have one universal interpretation but requires a certain openness, and therefore defines civil society broadly as being simultaneously *"a goal to aim for, a means to achieve it, and a framework for engaging with each other about ends and means"* (Edwards, 2004, p.132).

A broad understanding or definition, like this, is both necessary to talk about the entirety of civil society, as well as constructive. Anheier, Glasius and Kaldor (2001) explain:

*“The fact that these same words are understood in very different ways paradoxically creates a shared terrain on which individuals and representatives of organisations, institutions, and companies can communicate with each other, can engage in a common dialogue.”* (Anheier, Glasius & Kaldor, 2001, p.12) .

### 2.1.2 Shrinking civil society space

Despite this broad interpretation, civil society is shrinking. It has been made apparent in the introduction and relevance section that ample evidence shows the targeting of civil society actors and the shrinking of civil society space (Van der Borgh & Terwindt, 2014; Van Tuijl, n.d.; CIVICUS, 2018; Buyse, 2019; Mollema et al., 2020).

Buyse (2019) argues that the shrinking of civic space is strongly related to limitations of the freedom of assembly, the freedom of association and the freedom of expression. It is these human rights - or more specifically these political and civil rights - that enshrine civil society in international human rights law. Violations of these rights and limitation of people's ability to enjoy and exercise those freedoms thus impede civil society space.

This does not mean that limitations are illegal per se. In fact, limitations to these rights are legal and can be imposed, as long as certain criteria are met (Moeckli, Shah & Sivakumaran, 2014). It is when these criteria are not met, for example when a legal basis is lacking or the limitation is disproportionate to its intent, when limitations - and thus shrinking civil society space - becomes illegal under international law (Moeckli, Shah & Sivakumaran, 2014). One such exemption is the 'state of emergency', where governments are allowed to derogate or temporarily let go of its liability to protect certain human rights. Currently, there is heated debate on whether the installation of an official state of emergency is called for in the situation of a pandemic, and it is asked whether it would make a difference regarding human rights protection (Greene, 2020). Where authors like Greene (2020) think this would benefit the protection of human rights during the pandemic, authors such as Schulmann (2021) argue that the likelihood of violations and repression only increase as a result of those 'states of dubious emergency'. Here, Schulmann's side claims that the state of emergency is prone to be misused as an excuse for violating rights and limiting freedoms.

For a fact, human rights are being violated and civil society is being shrunk. One question that is up for debate, and which literature hardly gives a comprehensive answer to, is why this happens. Political and international relations research has led to some causal explanations and offer some insight into governments' rationale for repression, violating human rights and shrinking civil society space (Schmitz & Sikkink, 2013). They identify two major political explanations. The first is that real or imagined threats to the survival of regimes and their power position motivate leaders to choose repression to deal with those threats. Simply put, the choice for repression, as opposed to other policy options, is based on a cost-benefit decision. The second, Schmitz and Sikkink (2013) explain, is that the power of authorities is not sufficiently restricted (internationally and domestically), which makes the perceived costs of repression lower, compared to the costs of other, peaceful, options. Others provide that non-Western authorities oppose human rights or shrink civil society space as they consider these the imposition of Western liberal norms which threaten leaders' power and positions (Cooley & Schaaf, 2017).

It is being questioned whether civil society space is shrinking on all fronts. In contrast, there are actors which offer counterbalance to repression and defend and expand

civil society space. Some scholars describe or recommend strategies for CSOs to use to deal with shrinking space, or what Van Tuijl calls a “disabled environment” (Van Tuijl, n.d.; Barendsen, Dargiewicz, Buyse & Van der Borgh, 2020). Van den Borgh and Terwindt (2012) point out that CSOs have agency. By developing strategies to avoid and address restrictions they can liberate their operating space.

Sogge (2019) argues that CSS is not simply shrinking, but rather: CSS is being reshaped. As argued in 2.1.1, CSS is not one space, but a complex set of spaces. Sogge’s argument is that only some spaces are being curtailed, while others are protected or even subsidised. Important is that CSOs are able to expand their activities into new realms, and thereby reshape and expand civil society. As I’ll show in relation to crisis discourse below, new avenues can open up and be explored and used for positive (spatial) action (e.g. Soja, 2011).

In the introduction, concerns were raised that civil society space faces increased pressures due to the crisis, and that crisis discourse and crisis-motivated measures aggravate the risks of shrinking civil society space. The following section will go into the notion of crisis discourse in order to see how this might theoretically influence civil society space in the current pandemic.

## 2.2 Crisis discourse

In this section, I provide an explanation of the concept of crisis discourse, borrowing explanations from different authors from very diverse fields of study. This concept is not a fully developed one, and therefore knows different ways of explaining and is applied in different ways. There are multiple terms used surrounding the concept of crisis discourse. It is important to note that there is a distinction between, on the one hand, crisis discourse, crisis narrative or crisis language, and the ‘crisis paradigm’ on the other. The former being loosely interchangeable terms describing the same thing: the use of the concept of ‘crisis’ as a tool to; impose values, provide justification, and call to action. The latter, the crisis paradigm, is explained by Gilbert (2019) as a conceptual paradigm for observing and describing our world. Both the discourse and the paradigm are relevant in this research.

### 2.2.1 Crisis and restructuring

There is no such thing as a theory of crisis discourse. What can be found, however, is a large number of authors who have tried to explain what entails a crisis and what does not. Within this range of authors, some explain crises as important moments where change happens (e.g. Soja, 1989; 2011; Gilbert, 2018), whereas others (e.g. Lawrence, 2014; Cantat et al., 2019) explain that focussing on crisis can be harmful by an overemphasis on change and disregard of the fact that change happens through everyday actions.

Soja (1989) argues that societal restructuring has become buried under the idea that change just ‘seems to happen’, instead, he argues, restructuring is rooted in crisis and in the conflict between the old and the new order. It originates in and responds to shocks in pre-existing social conditions and practices. *“Restructuring takes place when there is a brake, or a break, allowing reconfiguration of social, economic and political life, arising from certain [...] perturbations in established systems of thought and action.”* (Soja, 1989, p.159). In later work, *Beyond Postmetropolis*, Soja states that crises can lead to new geographies, either oppressive or enabling (Soja, 2011). In crises, he is convinced, the room made available for ‘effective social action’ can contribute to spatial justice. It must be noted that



Soja's work was based on theorisations of economic crises, still, his argument is used in many other contexts (Larner, 2011; Gilbert, 2019).

Gilbert (2019) explains that crisis has been a concept through which modernity attained its meaning and is explained. In order to explain our complex social reality, it is deemed necessary to simplify it, for example into simple chains of cause-effect. Gilbert (2019) explains that the crisis paradigm is one important way in which reality is being simplified. It is that simplified narrative of crisis, that is used time and again to mobilise or call to action. Hannah Arendt, according to Gilbert (2019), explained how such language of crisis was deployed by totalitarian regimes at the dawn of WWII. It is argued that throughout the previous century, crisis narratives in times of economic stagnation have led to major (institutional) changes. Gilbert explains that, first, the Great Depression of the 1920's had, through narratives of crisis, led to the institutionalisation of entirely new economic systems based on the Keynesian welfare state. He argues that when in the 1980's new economic recessions hit many countries, neoliberalists used this new 'crisis' to point out the flaws of the welfare state and to legitimise their political agendas. In literature following the global financial crisis of 2008, (such as Larner, 2011; Lawrence, 2014; Gilbert, 2019) the recurring question was whether this 'crisis' was another such political watershed or social shift. Although only time will tell if these years after 2008 will eventually be seen as a distinct era, it can not be denied that many policies have been altered in response to this 'crisis'. Larner stipulates that many of her peers, already at the start of the financial crisis, considered that time marking a paradigm shift "... *that will have significant implications for political and governmental forms*" (Larner, 2011, p. 320).

On the other hand, there is the argument that change happens all the time. Gilbert (2019) asks whether the time pressure and urgency, which are implied in crisis language, should at all be used to justify technocratic decisions - at the expense of normal, democratic, decision making. Similarly, Larner (2011) explains that seeing crises as moments of significant change, as breaking points between era's, is problematic. This *epochal thinking*, she explains, leads to an all or nothing approach, the focus on the difference overshadows any continuities that may be just as important (Larner, 2011).

It is explained that crises come out of other crises and move into different realms (Larner, 2011). Soja explains that current civil unrest, 'crises', arise from the restructuring of society that happened after previous 'crises'. In Soja's words, we moved from 'crisis-generated restructuring' into 'restructuring-generated crises' (Soja, 2011). If we are living through a constant chain of crises or are 'permanently suspended in states of crisis', as some scholars articulate (Otto, 2011; Lawrence, 2014), it has to be questioned whether the term 'crisis' is actually meaningful, and if so-called crises can really be the exceptional moments of change.

### 2.2.2 Crisis opposed to normality and the everyday

In crisis discourse, "*A crisis is commonly portrayed as an extraordinary event, or set of events, leading to instability and danger and affecting a pre-existing normality. In order for a crisis to be named, a course of things accepted as normal, or ordinary, must be seen as disrupted*" (Cantat, et al., 2019, p. 4). Lawrence (2014) puts into question that crises are only 'uncommon' or 'special' events.

Instead, it has been noted time and again by many authors in many disciplines, including geography (Eyles, 1989; Sullivan, 2017), that societal, cultural or political developments and transformation are continuously being shaped and reshaped through interaction between people, in places and routines seen as ordinary or mundane. Marković

(2019) explains how 'the everyday' has been seen as "[...] a key site of artistic, epistemological, and political struggle and transformation [...]". Since the 1920's, scholars have acknowledged the everyday as a domain worth theorizing (Marković, 2019). While the difficulty to do so is emphasized, they recognize the 'marvelousness' buried in everyday interactions (Marković, 2019).

In critical and feminist geography, Dyck (2005) explains, focusing on the local and everyday is critical in developing an 'adequate model' of the environment. The everyday, the taken-for-granted, and the local, are important in explaining shifts in wider cultural and economic processes and power relations (Dyck, 2005). Lefebvre's 1947 *Critique of Everyday Life* can be seen as an early challenge to invert the analytical lens and to start to look at how wider processes emerge from the day-to-day (Marković, 2019). The perpetuated focus on crisis as an explanation for societal change shows, however, that Lefebvre's challenge has not been properly taken up by scholars, and the crisis paradigm persists.

### 2.2.3 Crisis discourse as technique of government

Having discussed the existence of theories arguing for seeing crises as moments of change, we must note that this idea is very much present in crisis language used by government actors. It is argued in the literature that, increasingly, 'crises' are being used as justification for undemocratic decisions and repressive policies and measures by governments. These measures are often referred to as 'crisis management' (Cantat, Thiollet & Pécoud, 2019).

Yet, crisis discourse is more intricate than a simple way to manage crises. Situations or events that are perceived as crises, or rather framed as such, are seen as 'windows of opportunity' to change institutions and are used as a tool to achieve governmental ambitions (Lawrence, 2014). Lawrence calls the employment of crisis discourse or narratives a 'technique of government', which is used to attain (political) goals other than 'managing' the crisis alone.

Based on this, we must remark that 'crises' are not naturally occurring events, but are rather framed as such. Bialasiewicz (2020) explains how this happens in their example of right-populist movements, and explains how such parties have been successful in wielding crisis narratives and especially in locating this crisis spatially. Also, the influence right-populist movements have on mainstream and ruling parties is due to them bringing crisis language into mainstream vocabulary, Bialasiewicz (2020) explains.

Crisis discourse may have myriad implications. The political utilisation of crises "*tends to empower the expert, the short-term, and the top-down, at the expense of the inclusive, the democratic, and the mundane*" (Otto, 2011). This tendency shows once more the potential extent of the consequences of the use of crisis discourse as a technique of government, and the possible backlash it may have for human rights (Greene, 2020) and civil society (Kaye, 2020).

## 2.3 Conceptual model and operationalisation

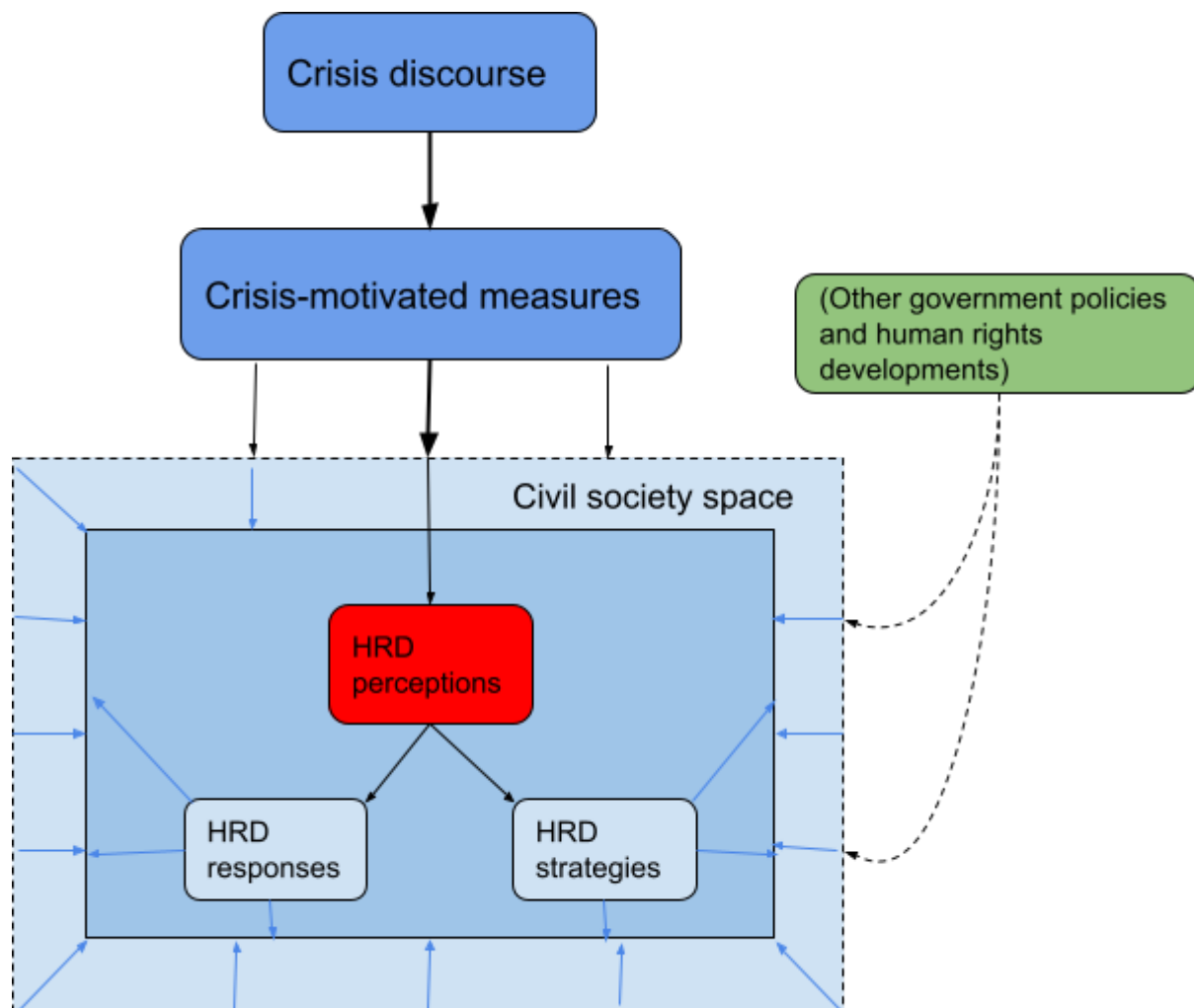


Figure 2.1: Conceptual model

The conceptual model pictured above (figure 1) is an overview of the theoretical concepts discussed in the theoretical framework and are central to this research. Schematically, it presents how the specific elements of the research question fit together according to the theory discussed. Following the explanation of the conceptual model, the concepts central to the research questions are defined and operationalised in order to aid in data collection and explication of data in ways that fit the intent and scope of this master's thesis.

### 2.3.1 Conceptual model

First, the conceptual model shows how *crisis discourse* informs governments' decisions and policy since the start of the current 'crisis'; the *crisis-motivated measures* (dark blue). Schematically, this relation follows from the assumption (based on 3.2) that these measures come about due to, and are shaped by, crisis discourse (or at least in part). This relation is inquired through sub question 2 (see section 1.3) and is taken up in chapter 5.

The arrows flowing downward from *crisis-motivated measures* signify the influence on the light blue field: *Civil society space*. The arrow is lengthened to point at *HRD perspectives* specifically (in red). This assumed influence of crisis-motivated measures on

civil society, and specifically its influence on the perspectives of human rights defenders, is a central point of inquiry in this research, covered in sub question 1 and chapter 6.

Another set of (dotted) vectors with negative influence on civil society space is the variable *other government policies and human rights developments* (green). This variable is added to the scheme to visualise the existence of trends, policies and effects that are unrelated to the current COVID-19 pandemic. This variable represents the context relevant for understanding the shrinkage of civil society space.

The blue field signifies the concept of *civil society space*. The different shades of light blue and the blue arrows, pointing in opposite directions, show the possibility of 'shrinkage' and 'growth' of civil society space. The blue arrows pointing inwards represent the negative effects of the two variables of government measures on CSS. The blue arrows pointing outwards represent resistance to shrinkage or even growth of civil society space. The latter flow from *HRD responses*. In turn, it is assumed these responses, or strategies, are formed on the basis of HRD perceptions of the measures. The HRD responses are covered by sub question 3 and chapter 7, regarding the strategies employed by HRDs.

### 2.3.2 Operationalisation

#### *Crisis discourse:*

Based on the theory and literature described in section 2.2, 'crisis discourse' will in this research be explained as the narrative, portrayal or framing of a certain situation as extraordinary and dangerous to what is conceived as 'normal'. 'Crisis discourse' is seen as entailing a technique of government, serving as justification for far-reaching (policy) measures. To a lesser extent in this research, 'crisis discourse' is seen as a way of thinking about a situation in general as requiring attention and intervention.

#### *Crisis-motivated measures:*

This variable entails measures which are taken by governments as part of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic and are justified by governments using crisis discourse. In this research I will be looking at crisis-motivated measures with a perceived link to civil society. This epidemic formally started at the end of December 2019. Most countries started taking measures during spring 2020 when the WHO declared the coronavirus disease a global pandemic, therefore this research takes into account measures issued or expanded since this period.

#### *Civil society space:*

As explained in section 2.1, civil society space (CSS) refers to the theoretical operating space for civil society actors (CSOs). It is also the space corresponding to where the freedom of expression, freedom of association and freedom of assembly are put into practice. Or, simply put, it is the space in which CSOs do their work. In this research, civil society is understood using the broadest definition, based on Edwards' (2004) framework on civil society as simultaneously "*a goal to aim for, a means to achieve it, and a framework for engaging with each other about ends and means*".

#### *Civil society organisation or actors:*

Civil society actors, or CSOs, entails any actor operating in civil society space. Commonly referring to NGOs, but in the broad definition above also entails (but not limited to) political groups, or economic groups, entities, social movements, as well as human rights defenders.

#### *Human rights defender:*

For the definition of what entails a human rights defender, I refer to the practical definition given and used by Justice and Peace Netherlands:

*“A human rights defender (HRD) is a person who, individually or with others, acts to promote or protect human rights non-violently. Whether they are journalists, lawyers, LGBTI activists, women’s rights activists, environmental defenders, or artists – they stand up for the rights and freedoms of people in their communities.”* (Justice and Peace, n.d.)

In this research, it is assumed that all human rights defenders fall within the category of civil society actors.

#### *HRD perceptions:*

This research focuses on the perceptions of human rights defenders which will be collected through qualitative interviews (see section 3.3). For the purpose of this research and for conducting a grounded theory approach, the perceptions of the respondents are not defined or classified a-priori. The perceptions can range from personal stories to accounts of respondents about their surroundings and the respondents’ reflections on the meaning of civil society and the ‘crisis’.

#### *HRD responses:*

When talking of responses of human rights defenders to crisis-motivated measures, for the aforementioned reasons, the interpretation of what responses mean is left to the respondents. These could thus entail both deliberate strategies employed by HRDs, as well as ad hoc changes to their work to cope with the situation.

### 3. Research methodology

#### 3.1 Approach

To answer the research question, this research is based on a qualitative research design. To remind the reader, this research focuses on the question: *How are human rights defenders perceived to be affected by crisis discourse-motivated measures during the Covid-19 pandemic, and how do they respond to these measures?* As I base my research on the *perceptions* of civil society actors (specifically human rights defenders), I use grounded theory as a method to come to an understanding and explanation of the relation between crisis-measures, the actors' perceptions, and their responses.

The grounded theory approach is well suited to explain a complex process in a complex context from the perspective of the actors involved. The intent of grounded theory, according to Creswell (2007) is not only to describe but to move beyond description and generate an explanation of the phenomenon under study. Mills, Durepos and Wiebe (2010), explain that grounded theory is able to link diverse facts and is able to reveal insights that are previously unrecognised or unknown. This makes the approach valuable in a new analytical context, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, grounded theory is applied to inquire the influence of social structures and processes - such as restrictive measures during COVID-19 - on accomplishments in social interactions - such as those within civil society space (Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007).

By using grounded theory, I approach the question from the bottom up. This means that “[...] *the results are derived from the study of the phenomenon it represents.*” (Mills, Durepos & Wiebe, 2010, p. 430). Grounded theory uses data which is gathered from accounts of actors that have experienced the process (Creswell, 2007) and is “[...] *grounded in the intersubjective reality of the social world*” (Mills, Durepos & Wiebe, 2010, p. 429). To study this phenomenon - the effects of, and response to, crisis-motivated measures - with a grounded theory approach, I therefore use in-depth interviews to acquire qualitative information from respondents who have experienced this phenomenon - human rights defenders in the former-Soviet region (see 3.2; *subjects and sampling*, and 3.3; *interview design*).

#### 3.2 Subjects and sampling

##### 3.2.1 sampling and subject selection strategy

In grounded theory, it is necessary that research participants have had experience with the phenomenon under study (Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007). For this reason, subjects were chosen using purposive sampling (Groenewald, 2004; Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007) and theoretical sampling (Creswell, 2007). This means that subjects were selected on the basis of their experience with the phenomenon. This way, it is made sure that respondents fit the *purpose* of the study, and that they were selected in order to create fruitful grounds for finding *theoretical* explanations.

Purposive and theoretical sampling involves selecting respondents with diverse experiences of the phenomenon, in order to find the different dimensions of the phenomenon (Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007). On the other hand, it is of importance that data collection includes comparable ‘incidents’ (Mills, Durepos & Wiebe, 2010). To accommodate both demands, the subjects in this research have a limited yet sufficient diversity. The broader

population of this research is civil society actors - which entails a broad range of actors, as explained before (section 2.1). For the sake of comparability, this research will focus on the more specific group of human rights defenders (HRDs) working in former-Soviet contexts. Within this group, there is sufficient differentiation in geographical terms within the former-Soviet region and form of human rights protection (see the respondents overview: figure 3.1). Furthermore, it is evident that this group of civil society actors has had sufficient experience with the phenomenon under study. Therefore, taking these human rights defenders as units of observation constitutes a purposeful and theoretically relevant sample. Admittedly, the choice of sampling among human rights defenders makes generalisation of the results to civil society difficult, especially taking into account that different groups within civil society may experience restrictive measures in ways distinct from the experiences of human rights defenders.

In this research, as explained in (sections 1.1 and 1.3), this research focuses on former Soviet states, except for the Baltic states Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. These three countries have followed a trajectory distinct from the rest of the former-Soviet countries (see section 4.1) and are currently regarded as requiring low concern in terms of human rights protection and having a relatively enabling civil society space. Moreover, the Baltic states are part of the European Union, and the Shelter City initiative does not take in HRDs from within the EU. For an overview of the region, see chapter 4 (figure 4.2).

The choice to focus on a transnational group of human rights defenders is informed by Brechenmacher (2017) who identifies the knowledge gap and the need to approach civil society from a transnational or global perspective. Barendsen et al., (2020) states that, so far, recently produced materials on the issue of civic space restriction “consider primarily local, regional, or national cases and their prospects.” Anheier, Glasius, Kaldor (2001), explain the need to overcome ‘methodological nationalism’ in work regarding civil society and plead for a focus on a global civil society. Therefore, this research integrates a boundary crossing sample of human rights defenders spanning different parts of the former-Soviet region.

The size of the sample in grounded theory research is based on several aspects, such as its scope, the nature of the topic and the quality of the data (Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007). As grounded theory is based on the iterative process of theoretical sampling, where sampling continues until theoretical saturation is reached (Creswell, 2007), the sample size cannot be determined in advance. Depending on the aforementioned aspects, the sample size can be sufficiently illustrative from 6 respondents (up until 60). According to Creswell (2007) during the iterative process of data collection and analysis, the emerging theory may call for additional respondents in a later stage. For the purpose and scope of this research (including limitations to time), 10 participants were aimed for. Due to non-response and other factors, a total number of 8 interviews were conducted (see 8.3: limitations).

To find respondents I made use of the Shelter City network which I accessed through my internship organisation, Justice & Peace NL. This network entails human rights defenders from across the globe who have previously been hosted in one of the Shelter Cities. There is a fair number of human rights defenders from former Soviet regions in the Shelter City Netherlands network, as well as a large number of HRDs who followed the programme in the regional Shelter City hub in Georgia. These HRDs have all experienced restrictions to their operating space, which is the main reason for applying and being admitted to the Shelter City programme. Also, the HRDs work in very diverse contexts and methods - be it law, journalism or activism - and thus have diverse experiences with

crisis-motivated restrictions. Therefore, the actors represented in this network constitute the purposive and theoretical sample aimed for in this research.

### 3.2.2 Subject overview

Nr.	Date	Name / pseudonym	Country and (work) region	Work description / Main topics
1	13/04/2021	Nataliia	Russia - North Caucasus; Barentz region	Investigative journalist, Women's and LGBT+-rights activist
2	28/04/2021	Zara*	Russia - Moscow; North Caucasus	Human rights lawyer
3	28/04/2021	Anna*	Belarus	Journalist
4	30/04/2021	Guliam	Kyrgyzstan - Bishkek	Women's rights
5	06/05/2021	Natasha	Russia - St Petersburg - Barentz, Crimea	Minority rights, detention
6	07/05/2021	Svitlana	Georgia - Tbilisi - wider post-Soviet region	Human rights lawyer and researcher
7	20/05/2021	Natalia & Nino	Georgia - Tbilisi	LGBT+ and Women's rights
8	03/06/2021	Aleksei	Russia - St. Petersburg	Activism, LGBT+ rights, minorities, detention

Figure 3.1: Respondent overview. (\*Pseudonyms used for respondents' protection)

### 3.3 Interview design

In line with the grounded theory approach, in-depth interviews have been conducted to acquire detailed accounts of the experiences of the actors. To receive the information necessary to apply a grounded theory analysis, the information had to be detailed, while allowing for a degree of comparison between cases in order to be able to find patterns and potential explanations. I have chosen a semi-structured interview design to accommodate both the required openness, to allow the collection of a diversity of perceptions, as well as comparison (see annex A). A semi-structured interview design also allows flexibility, which was required in the iterative process of grounded theory, as themes identified in early interviews could be explored in later or follow-up interviews (Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007).

In the interviews, questions were asked aimed at finding out how individuals experience the effects of crisis discourse-motivated measures during the covid-19 pandemic. The semi-structured interview design left room for probing questions in order to arrive at the respondents' own understanding of the process. In adherence to Creswell's (2007) suggested scope of interviews, the interview guide was designed to move from this general account into more specific areas of discussion, such as the respondents' views on why the phenomenon occurs (in this case; crisis discourse), what the central issues are (measures)



and what the consequences of the phenomenon are, according to them (effects and challenges). Following these steps, the final part of the interviews logically went into the (potential) strategies of the respondents to cope with the restrictive measures.

It is repeatedly emphasised that in qualitative research, and specifically in grounded theory research, that prior knowledge, biases and theoretical notions of the researcher are set aside during the phases of data collection - and analysis (Groenewald, 2004; Creswell, 2007; Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007). This is necessary for ensuring the accounts of the experiences of respondents are not affected. Groenewald (2004) stresses the need to 'bracket' or phrase interview questions in a way that the researcher's terms and preconceptions do not interfere with the stories.

Lastly, the interviews were conducted mainly through video conference applications. Due to travel restrictions, offline face-to-face interviews were not possible for respondents who have returned to their home countries. However, three respondents were involved in the Shelter City programme at the moment of data collection and some could be held face-to-face. Due to security concerns of the respondents, secure and encrypted digital communications media were in some cases required. There is serious concern for digital vulnerabilities of the respondents, as digital surveillance, cyber-harassment and restrictions to internet access may be part and parcel of some states' restrictive measures (Barendsen et al., 2020). It was warned that the use of digital media for data collection may bias towards respondents with more stable access to the internet, as this is not equally accessible in all geographical contexts. I was prepared for this bias, ultimately it did not appear to be significant during the data collection, however.

## 3.4 Analysis

### 3.4.1 analysis strategy

Prior to analysis of the interviews, the recordings of the conversations had to be transcribed into text. For transcription, I made use of the software Otter. Otter is a programme that generates text output from audio files. While it doesn't provide perfect transcripts in terms of grammar or spelling, this does result in comprehensible and useful transcripts of the interviews, after human review and correction. These transcripts, and potential additional textual documents, were then imported into the software of ATLAS.TI to aid me in the following step; the analysis.

Creswell (2007) devised a process of multiple steps of analysis in order to arrive at an explanatory theory, grounded in the collected data. In Creswell's iterative process of coding, we move from taking literal statements made by respondents from the text, to more and more abstract concepts or categories of concepts, towards a theory, or explanation, of the core concept (Mills, Durepos & Wiebe, 2010). First, *open coding* is where significant parts of the data is selected, focused and simplified. Secondly, *axial coding* is where the open codes are rearranged into comprehensible categories and where relations between the categories themselves and with the central issue are identified. Lastly, there is *selective coding*, where a "story line" is developed by devising propositions or hypotheses about the relationships between the more abstract concepts. The latter is where theory emerges and explanations of the central phenomenon, or 'core category' come into being (Creswell, 2007; Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007; Mills, Durepos & Wiebe, 2010). Important to note is that these steps are necessarily iterative, as through the process of going back and forth in

coding, in writing and rewriting, “[...] *the researcher can distill meaning.*” (Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007, p.1376)

Similar to the creation of questions prior to and during interviews, ‘bracketing’ of the researcher’s biases and pre-existing theoretical understanding was of great importance. This is essential in the analysis, where the theory should derive from the collected data and should not be influenced by pre-existing theory and presumptions (Mills, Durepos & Wiebe, 2010). In a later stage, before formulating definitive conclusions, the emerging grounded theory is compared to and evaluated drawing on relevant pre-existing theories. By doing so, the resulting grounded theory could be judged on its internal coherence and completeness (Mills, Durepos & Wiebe, 2010), as well as its value for our understanding of civil society restrictions during the current ‘crisis’.

### 3.4.2. Execution of analysis

Abiding by the steps described above I set off to analyse my respondents stories in order to form grounds on which to answer my research questions. Here, I will describe the process of the analysis, from axial to selective coding. Because analysis is an iterative process (Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007), the steps cannot be separated strictly in time. This meant, for example, that before the last interviews were held at all, the first interviews had already undergone open (and to some extent axial) coding. This meant that some preliminary categories already arose from the data and some codes were already merged or simplified. Consequently, in the analysis of later interviews, these “simplified” or categorised codes were also used. Therefore, I am unable to provide a chronological deconstruction of the analysis in this section, although a description of the process is still given according to the three steps.

#### *Phase 1: open coding*

After going through the 8 interviews multiple times and coding all relevant sections of each transcript, an extensive list of 252 codes emerged. These codes had different levels of abstraction. Some of these were truly open, and the code names had not been standardised. Other codes were put into preliminary categories. Those code names were thus already given prefixes, such as “Crisis discourse: terminology\_‘crisis’ ”. The codes gathered after the first iteration of coding already provided a good summary of the contents of the interviews, and helped navigate the transcripts in the following steps.

#### *Phase 2: axial coding*

On the basis of these preliminary codes, higher order concepts were distilled. In doing so, categories of codes emerged. Those categories served to organise the open codes and fit them under umbrellas around similar topics, further subcategories helped to create a comprehensible internal structure. At the same time, during this phase, codes were merged or removed whenever codes overlapped too much. Still, a lot of codes were too unique to merge, and the codebook therefore remains extensive (see annex B).

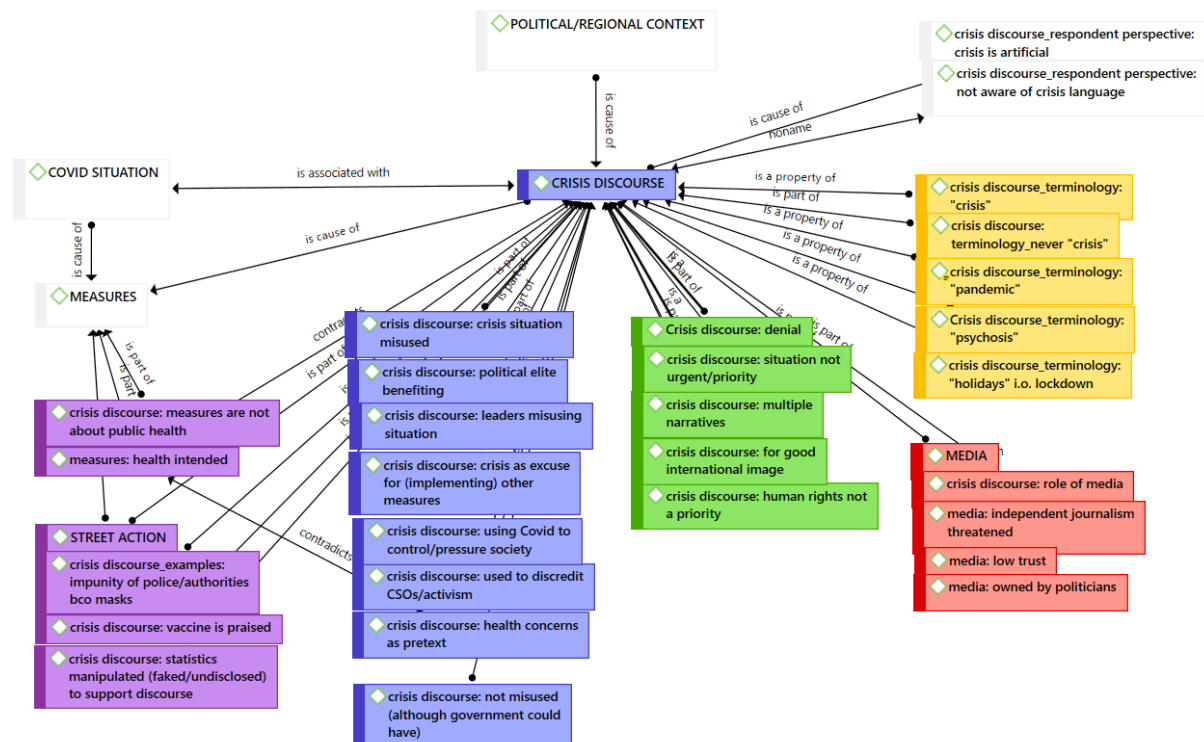


Figure 3.2: Example of category network for 'crisis discourse' codegroup

By creating networks for each category, (or 'codegroup'), it was possible to see how the codes within the categories relate to the main concept and to each other and to other categories. In this example, this method helped to distinguish which codes roughly belong together, creating clusters (represented by the different colours) that were seen as potential subcategories under 'crisis discourse', such as codes providing examples, those to do with terminology, different types of crisis discourse, and ways crisis discourse is misused (see figure 3.3). This step was followed for all larger categories. These groupings of codes were then simplified so as to create a comprehensive network per codegroup, which were ultimately used to provide the internal structure of each chapter and subsection (for instance, see figure 5.2).

### Phase 3: selective coding

The last phase was to distill a theory showing the relations between all parts of the data. As part of this phase, a first draft network was drafted to get a better overview and to visualise the relations between codes (see figure 3.3).

This preliminary model was structured in a way that resembles the conceptual framework (see section 2.3). Notice that, compared to the conceptual model, more concepts were included and more connections were drawn, as these were derived from the data. This step led to the consolidation of the categories and their relations. Through the drafting of these networks, a narrative was uncovered that resulted in the final network (figure 3.4), which was used to form the structure of this thesis.

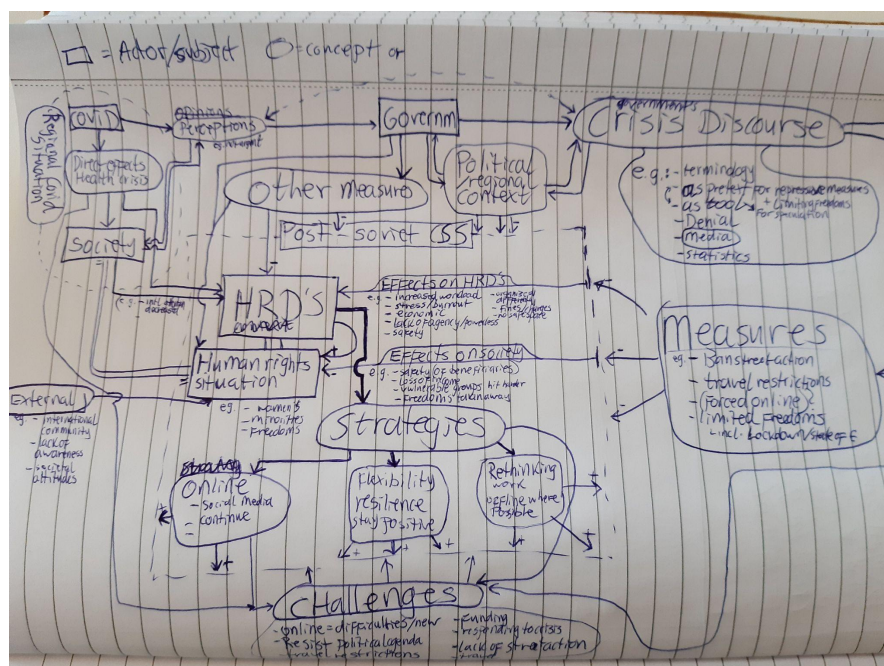


Figure 3.3: Draft of an overview or general network during analysis phase 3

### 3.4.2. Grounded theory analysis output: model of main concepts

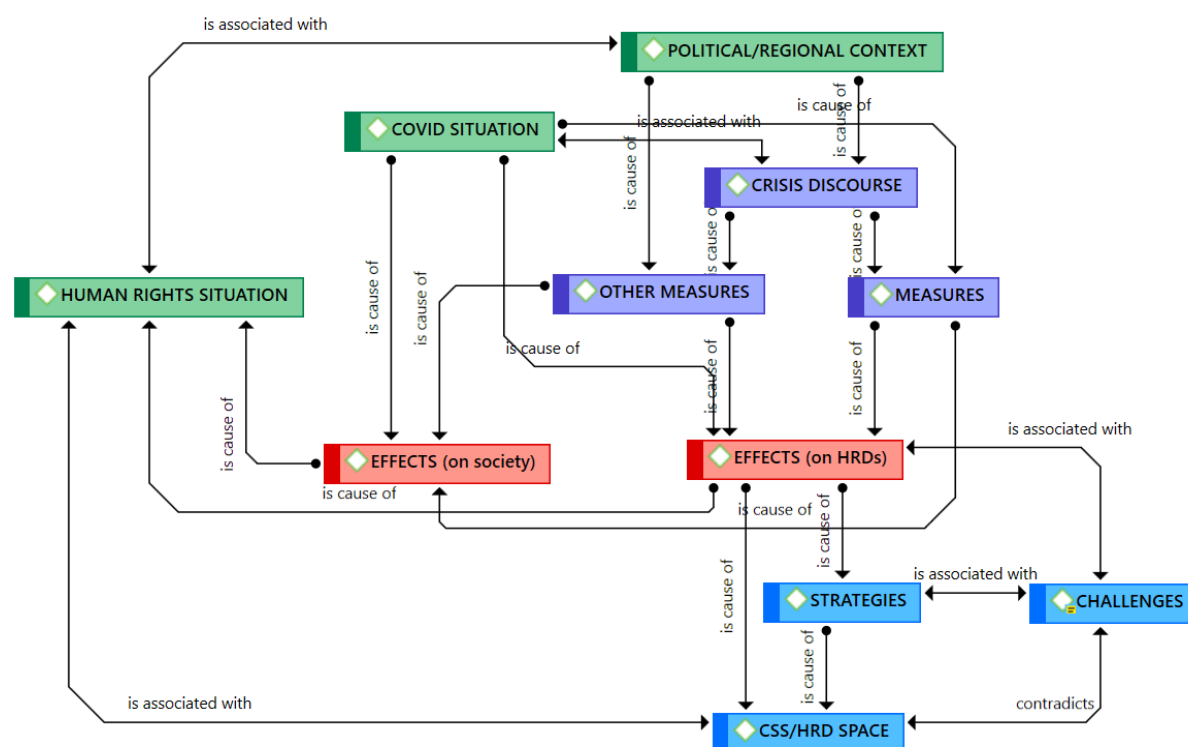


Figure 3.4: Model of main concepts (colours corresponding with chapters 4 to 7)

The three steps of analysis, grounded in the interviews with HRDs, culminated in a relatively complex 'theory' covering all aspects surrounding shrinking civil society space during the

COVID-19 pandemic and how these relate to each other. This is shown in the model shown here (figure 3.4). In the model we can see how the COVID-19 situation, the human rights situation and the regional political context (shown in green at the top-left of the model) affect society and HRDs (which are central to the model; in red). Not only do these affect society and HRDs directly, but specifically also through crisis discourse and the measures taken (dark blue). At the bottom-right we see the responses of HRDs to the effects - their strategies - the challenges to those, and their effect on civil society space (in light blue). This model guides the following chapters by offering structure to the answers to the research questions.

## 4. Former-Soviet region in ‘crisis’

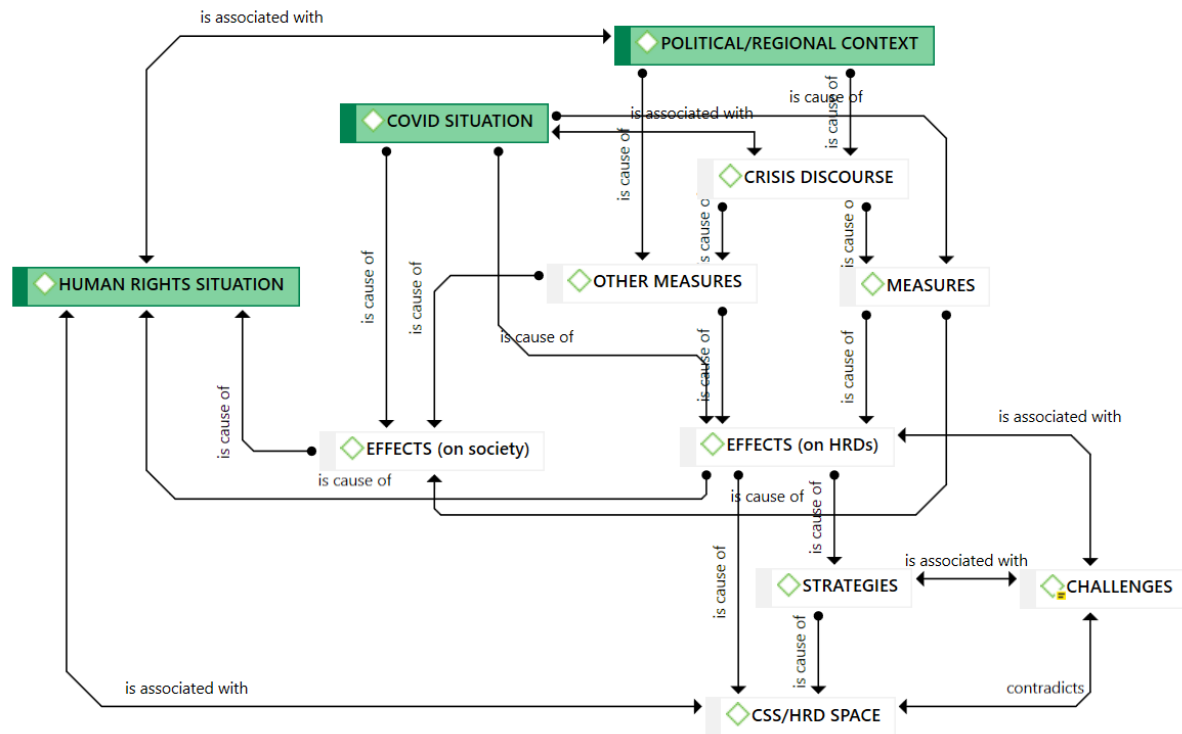


Figure 4.1: Concepts discussed in chapter 4 (highlighted in green)

This chapter is a description of the working context of human rights defenders in the post-Soviet region. The purpose of this chapter is to provide the background against which the answers of the respondents can be interpreted and understood. This context information was asked for in the first sections of all interviews, as well as arose during the conversation. Respondents' answers were combined with information from additional sources to form this background.

The chapter is composed of the three categories arising from the data; 'covid situation', 'political and regional context' and 'human rights situation'. The latter two categories merge in 4.1, as they together stand for the current state of and trends in civil society space in the FSU. The former is shortly discussed in the second part of this chapter. This chapter's title - *Former-Soviet region in 'crisis'* - hints at the two 'crises' at play; the downward trends in the political and human rights realms, and the COVID-19 'crisis'. It is clear from figure 4.1 that these two pieces of context affect the categories that are central to this research and which will be discussed in the following three chapters.

Figure 4.1 shows that 'human rights situation' is not only an independent variable (or context), but is also assumed to be a dependent category. The human rights situation in the region is, as this research argues, dependent on the effects of COVID-19 on society and on human rights defenders, and on the ability of HRDs and CSOs to resist or overcome shrinking civil society space (see sections 6.3 and 7.2). In this chapter, however, only the independent side of this variable is discussed.

## 4.1 Post-Soviet civil society space

### 4.1.1 Theoretical perspectives of CSS in the FSU

It is important to note again that civil society is not a globally homogeneous entity, but knows regional and local particularities. It is therefore important to stress several aspects that are important to understand civil society space in the former-Soviet union. To do so, I need to explain that Eurasian governments have, in the 1990's, ratified most major human rights treaties and joined organisations aimed at promoting democratisation and human rights. Despite committing themselves to observing those treaties, it is clear that major gaps in the honouration of human rights law and protection of human rights violations in the former-Soviet region persist (Cooley & Schaaf, 2017). It has been explained that the trends in human rights are deeply connected to those in civil society space (e.g. Buyse, 2019; see sections 1.2.1 and 2.1.2). Moreover, it is also perceived that the trend in civil society space is indeed worrying in the region (CIVICUS, 2019).

Since the end of the Soviet Union, countries in the FSU have seen a tumultuous development of civil society (Reichmuth, 2017), with small steps forward and some major steps backwards following regime changes, revolutions and mismanagement (Popsoi, 2017; Oleinikova, 2017). Post-Soviet countries and civil society in the region can be considered to have followed a common development path since the turn of the 1990's, Aleksanyan explains, and CSOs have taken up similar roles throughout the region (Aleksanyan, 2020). He sees that Post-Soviet CSOs have come to focus on human rights, rule of law and democratic reform. Others explain that civil society organisations in the region have been characterised by a relatively weak position in terms of organisation, financially and regarding their political influence (Terzyan, 2021). Still, civil society in the region needs to be understood as having a potentially significant role. *"The crucial relationship between civil society and democratization makes civil society and NGOs a critical component of post-communist transformations [...]"* (Oleinikova, 2017).

Currently, in line with the globally observed trends (see section 2.1), post-Soviet civil society is under pressure (CIVICUS, 2019; Aleksanyan, 2020). As civil society is not something that can be developed in a few years, the region's young civil society space has not reached maturity at this moment in time. Therefore, the currently increasing pressures - from increasingly conservative authorities - are shrinking an already small and fragile civil society space (Reichmuth, 2017).

Multiple suggestions are found in literature regarding the reasons for the increased pressure in the FSU. Part of the explanation might be found in the fact that societies have become increasingly conservative, which, Reichmuth (2017) argues, is due to media portrayals in media, but also due to the failure of CSOs to show their successes to members of society - earning them low trust. Another reason for the restriction of CSOs is found in Aleksanyan (2020), who argues that especially the more authoritarian states often regard (progressive) CSOs as a threat to national security and state sovereignty. This reflects the political explanation for repression in section 2.1.2 by Schmitz and Sikking (2013). Cooley and Schaaf (2017) point at the fact that Eurasian leaders regard this as part of their counter tactics against promotion of liberal norms, values and Western democracy, which threaten the leaders' consolidated political and economic positions.

Exemplary of the restriction of civic space throughout the region, as discussed in literature and mentioned extensively by respondents, are laws restricting foreign NGO funding, generally referred to as 'foreign agents' laws - as that is how the pioneering Russian

law is commonly known (Popsoi, 2017; Oleinikova, 2017; interviews 1, 2, 4, 5, 6 and 8). CSOs and HRDs have relied a lot on foreign financial support, as domestic pathways are still underdeveloped. In the last decade new and amended laws changed the region's legal framework around NGOs and donors. Laws like these have created barriers to CSOs' activities and presumably make it impossible to maintain a strong civil society (Oleinikova, 2017). Wherever these foreign agents laws have been implemented, these alone have already been a huge blow to civil society. This is because NGOs have had to conform to government standards, as domestic funding is only available conditionally. This forces CSOs to trade their sensitive 'political activities' for state cooperation. If CSOs do not conform to those conditions of cooperation and financial reporting, they are required to discontinue their foreign funding or their work altogether. This has led underfunded CSOs and movements to decrease their activities or discontinue their work (Oleinikova, 2017; Bederson & Semonov, 2020). This and other legislation relevant to CSS will be further discussed in section 5.3.

Political developments in the region have not stood still during the pandemic. On the contrary, respondents see major political events and changes in most countries, such as referenda and elections (in Russia, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, Georgia), constitutional reform, oppositional demonstrations (notably Russia and Belarus) and regime change (in Kyrgyzstan). During the interviews, most respondents put much emphasis on the political developments in their countries. Some even seem to regard these developments, and those in human rights, as much more relevant to their work than the COVID-19 situation in their countries (e.g. interview 4, Guliaim, 28-04-2021).

#### 4.1.2 Perspectives of HRDs on political and human rights trends

The regional trends in human rights, civil society and politics discussed here are reflected by the accounts provided by the HRDs I spoke with. They too see the negative influence on human rights and civil society of these political and societal pressures. For example, Zara is convinced that the attention and respect for human rights in her country moved back to the level of 30 years ago. She says:

*"And now it's like we are not in 2021 anymore, but we are back in the 1980's or something. Because everything that is happening is not about freedom and human rights. It's about doing whatever they want."* (Zara, interview 2, 28-04-2021).

Political decisions and changes throughout the region have taken a turn for the worse, respondents say. These have been the reason for increased repression of society in general (interview 5, 06-05-2021) or human rights defenders in particular (interview 1, Nataliia, 13-04-2021). To Guliaim, political changes have been a precursor of the perceived human rights trend in Kyrgyzstan. As an example she gives the rewritten constitution which disregards human rights and emphasizes 'traditional family values', meaning a major blow to human rights and emancipation in her country (interview 4, 30-04-2021). This conservative turn in post-Soviet society (interview 7, Nino & Natalia, 20-05-2021) means such 'traditional family values' are increasingly emphasised. So did they find a way into the amendments to the Russian constitution, as discussed by Aleksei (interview 8, 03-06-2021). It is warned that the constitutional amendments have grave effects on the protection of human rights, rule of law, and democracy (ICJ, 2020). Anna (interview 3, 28-04-2021) sees the trends of government repression and trends in human rights worsening due to the criminalisation of journalists, and with it, the impediment of the freedom of speech. Lastly, respondents feel that the political turmoil in the region causes the attention for human rights to diminish



among the public and politicians alike, which has its consequences for the protection of human rights. This is argued by Nino and Nataliia (Interview 7, 20-05-2021) and by Guliaim, who proclaims:

*“When society shakes, human rights lose priority and will be violated. And when law doesn’t work, those without power suffer first; women’s rights and those of children disappear.”* (Guliaim, interview 4, 30-04-2021).

This section made clear the context regarding human rights and the political context of the region. The link between political developments and the human rights situation, and therefore the shrinking of civil society, has been laid out briefly. This section is deliberately not focussed on each country’s specific political background and human rights history, as that would distract from the supranational or borderless processes at the centre of this research (see section 3.2). Specific country examples are given whenever relevant throughout the next three chapters. Hopefully, this can serve as a sufficient description of the political and human rights context nonetheless, and can thus be seen as a reference point for the interpretation of respondents’ answers in the following analysis chapters.

## 4.2 COVID-19 situation in the FSU

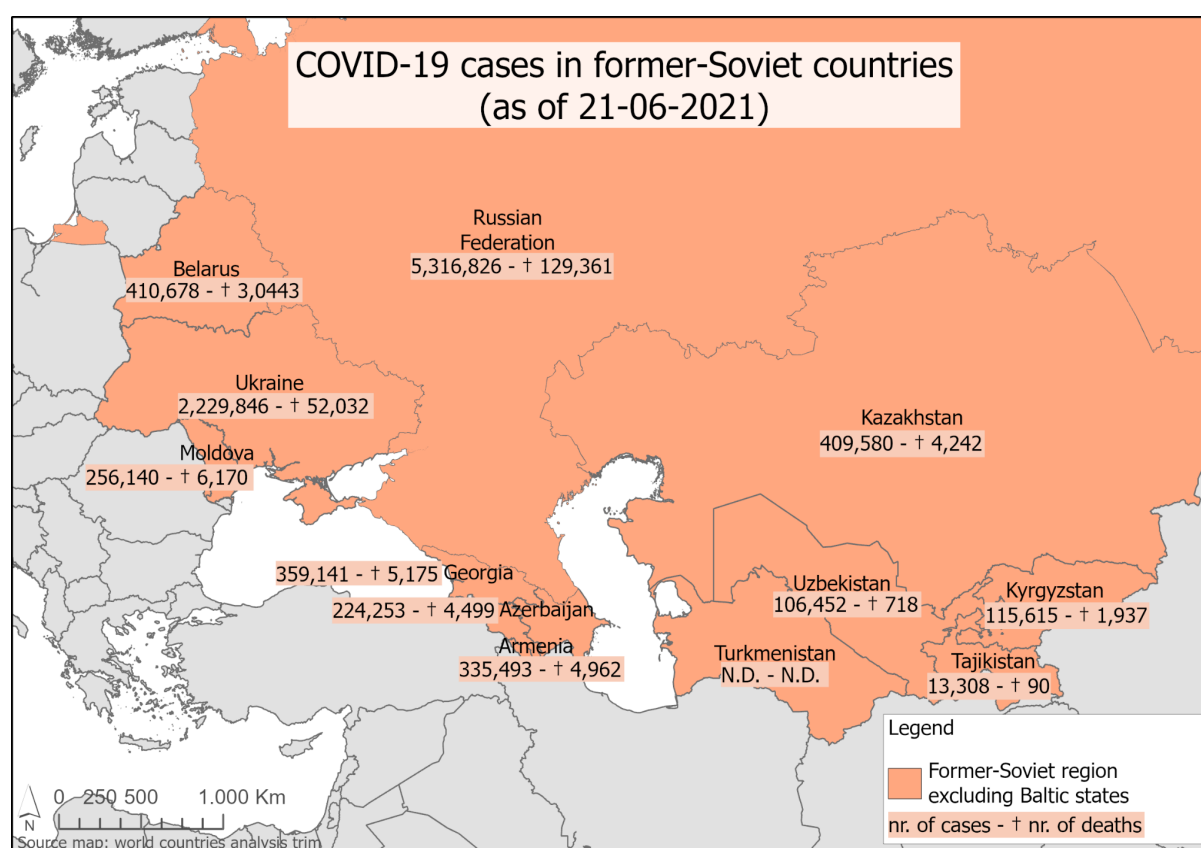


Figure 4.2: COVID-19 cases and deaths in former-Soviet countries. Source data: Worldometers (21-06-2021).

COVID-19 has, since the start of the pandemic in March 2020, dealt a blow to society in the former-Soviet region. To give an idea of the impact, the map (figure 4.2) shows the numbers of cases and deaths in the region from the start (Worldometers, 2021). Note that the

numbers on the map are absolute numbers. For effective comparison, relative numbers are presented per country in figure 4.3 (see below). The graph exhibits, foremost, the large differences existing within the region. Note that the numbers are the official numbers given by government authorities. As will be explained in the following chapter, that means not all numbers are equally reliable. Tajikistan, for example, only recently acknowledged the spread of the virus, while Turkmenistan continues to deny that the outbreak has reached its citizens (see section 5.1.2; IPHR, 2020d).

The differences between the countries, presuming the accurate reporting of these numbers, are still significant. In the analysis it should thus be taken into account that not all respondents have the same experience with the pandemic or sense of the severity. Besides the national differences, also sub-regional differences have often been mentioned by respondents (interview 2, Zara, 28-04-2021; interview 6, Svitlana, 07-05-2021). This could be due to the different government layers that were made responsible for the outbreak management, sometimes leaving the decisions and implementation of measures to regional authorities (e.g. Kapoor, 2020). While it is beyond the scope of this research, and perhaps simply too early to draw conclusions about this, it could be debated that these differences are, among other things, due to the nature and reach of the measures taken by governments in response to the pandemic (presented in chapter 5). Notably, some governments were hesitant to respond to the outbreak at the start of the pandemic, while other governments were quick to install measures (IPHR, 2020a-e). Some governments even chose to install a 'state of emergency' conform to international law standards. Others chose not to do so officially, yet installed a whole range of far-reaching measures anyways. Lastly, the situation, the numbers of cases and the installation, retraction or implementation of measures differed throughout time. Unfortunately, there is no readily available data of cases through time for the entire region, which would have shown the reality of the situation more accurately than figure 4.3 does. Respondents and literature do tend to speak about measures in relation to their 'first' or 'second wave', for instance.

Respondents were generally surprised by the sudden changes in their society and their lives when COVID-19 first hit the region. Nataliia explains how the situation, its abruptness and uncertainty made many people anxious, regarding their health and economic concerns (interview 1, 13-04-2021). Anna explains how society responded in different ways, some ignoring it, others fearing their health and lives and angry about the passive response of their government (interview 3, 28-04-2021). In Georgia, Natalia perceives that a growing number of persons grew impatient with the measures, and organised anti-measures protests and campaigns, which were also reflected in the election results (interview 7, 20-05-2021).

Other general remarks about the COVID-19 situation often refer to healthcare. According to respondents, the healthcare in the region suffered under the fast increasing numbers of cases in each 'wave'. For example, Zara sees hospitals and personnel overwhelmed by the number of COVID-infected patients, while other parts of the healthcare systems halted and medical professionals were sent home (interview 2, 28-04-2021). Nino and Natalia (interview 7, 20-05-2021) saw how governments deliberately sacrificed citizens' health in their response to the outbreak. To name another example, many HRDs see the health situation culminate in unbearable situations in the region's prisons (interview 2, 28-04-2021; interview 3, 28-04-2021; interview 7, 20-05-2021; interview 8, 03-06-2021). Country-specific and regional reports by IPHR (2020a-e) reflect the aforementioned immediate effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. They state, among other things, how governments in the region were failing to protect medical workers and patients against

COVID-19. More generally, the IPHR reports sum up, the pandemic exposed existing weaknesses, such as the healthcare systems' underfunding, domestic violence, prison situations and the bad circumstances of vulnerable groups. More specific responses to the pandemic in society are shown in relation to the effects of the measures in chapter 6.

## RELATIVE COVID-19 CASES IN FORMER-SOVIET COUNTRIES

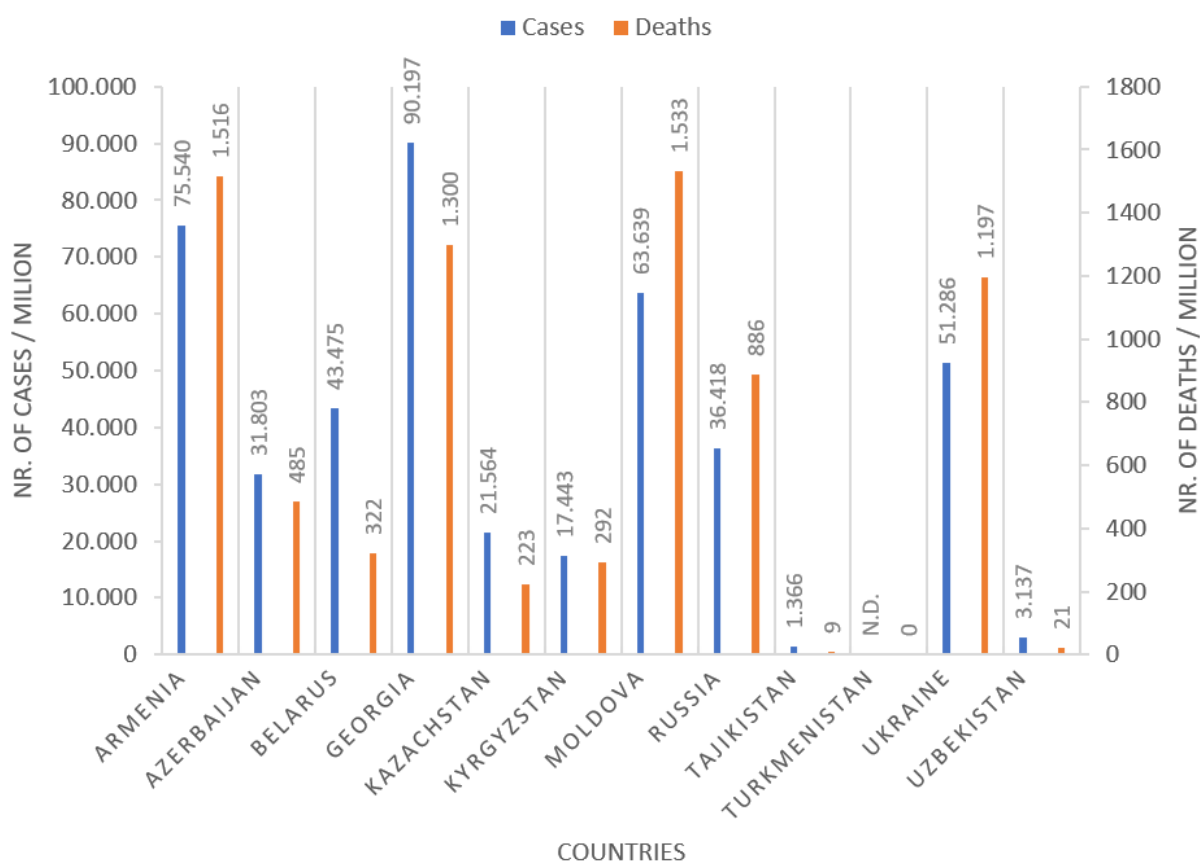


Figure 4.3: Relative COVID-19 cases and deaths in former-Soviet countries. Source: Worldometers (21-06-2021).

## 5. Crisis discourse and measures

This chapter aims to provide an answer to the first sub question, posed in 1.3: *What are human rights defenders' perceptions of the role of crisis discourse and its influence on measures taken during the pandemic?* The answer to this question is provided through the description of the categories 'crisis discourse', 'measures' and 'other measures'. In the last section, the findings in this chapter will be discussed and positioned within the theoretical debate surrounding crisis discourse as explicated in section 2.2.

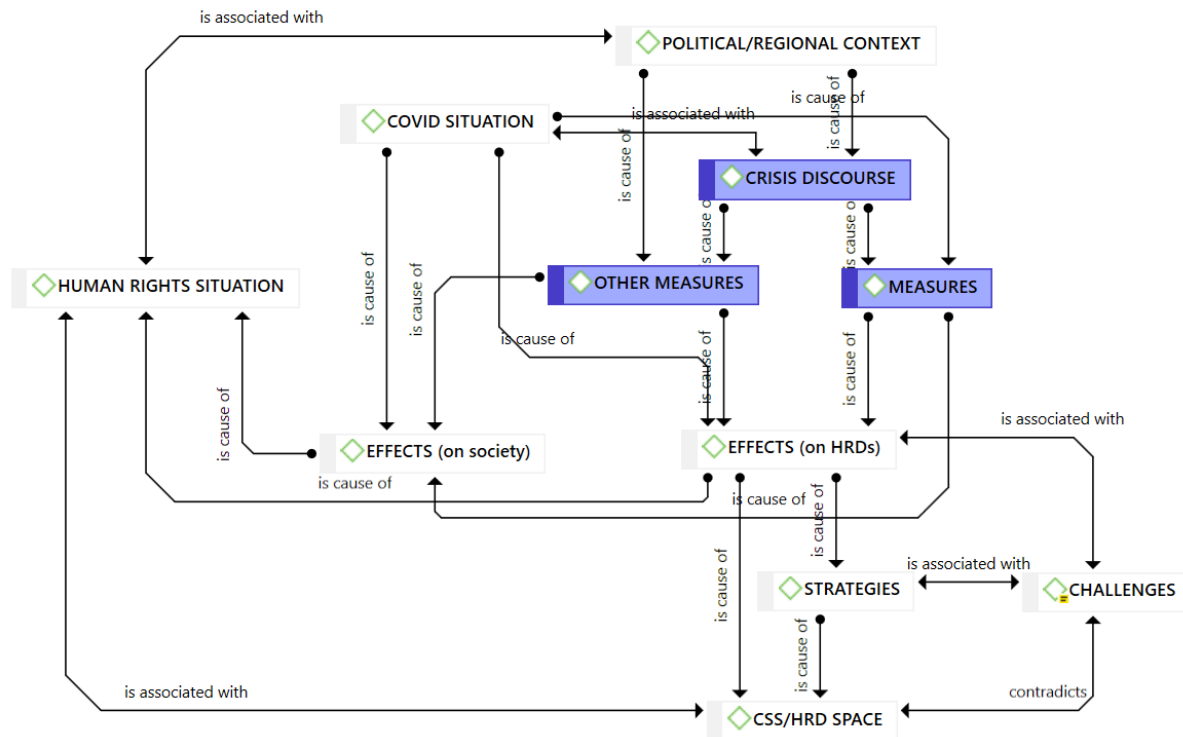


Figure 5.1: Overview: highlighted are the categories discussed in chapter 5

In the overview pictured in figure [...], crisis discourse is identified as an outcome of both the political and regional context in combination with the actual covid situation. Also, the discourse maintained by local, national and regional leaders informs the nature and specifics of the measures taken. This chapter describes what terminology is used as part of crisis discourse in the region, what narratives are present and how these are altered pragmatically. This first section zooms in on the misuse of the situation by governments and other benefactors, an aspect at the heart of this research's relevance (see section 1.2). At the end of the first section, examples of manifestations of crisis discourse and its misuse are given. Among which are the role of media (state-led *and* independent) and statistics in portraying the situation or defending government narratives.

The second and third parts show the measures taken during the COVID-19 pandemic, which can be split down into two categories. The most important of these categories, for this research, are crisis-motivated measures (see section 2.3.2), described by the category “measures”. In section 5.2 it is explained what measures were taken and what the nature of these measures is. The following section (section 5.3) deals with measures that were not crisis motivated, but in many cases have had profound impact and have, arguably, also benefited from the situation or crisis discourse.

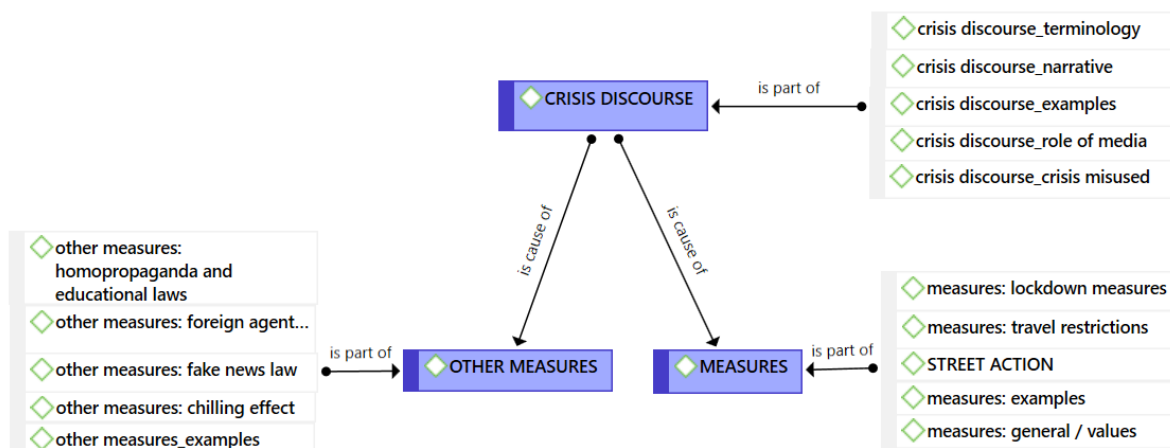


Figure 5.2: Simplified overview of categories central to chapter 5

## 5.1 Crisis discourse

### 5.1.1 Terminology and narratives

The terminology used in crisis discourse is an important signifier for the general attitudes or narratives present in society or maintained by governments. Crisis discourse is an important factor determining the response to the crisis, the nature of measures and whether or not measures are taken in the first place. The specific crisis discourse maintained by governments can be uncovered partly by analysing the terms used by leaders, politicians, media and members of society. Observed, by human rights defenders, is an extensive use of the ‘crisis’ narrative on the one hand, outright denial on the other hand, and (intentional or unintentional) inconsistency or ambiguity forming the large middle ground of the spectrum.

#### *Narratives of crisis*

Although describing the use of the word ‘crisis’, through translation, is difficult, several examples are given by respondents. There are governments that have, at least at one point in time, embraced a narrative of crisis. Generally, those governments are spreading a message of urgency to manage the crisis, sometimes with a heavy hand.

For example, respondents observed a strong narrative of crisis management in Georgia at the start of the pandemic, during the first wave. *“There was a time when it, the crisis, was so emphasized. And there was a big, like, campaign against spreading the virus and the numbers were so emphasized”* (interview 7, Nino, 20-05-2021). This entailed

Guliaim also sees the use of crisis in her society and by government authorities. The announcement of an emergency situation (IPHR 2020a) is a clear signifier of this. Guliaim makes clear, however, that although COVID-19 is presented as a crisis, there are multiple crises present in the Kyrgyz society. Some crises are perceived as more urgent than others. It has to be noted, apart from the two months of emergency regime, the COVID-19 ‘crisis’ was generally not perceived as the most urgent of crises (Interview 4, Guliaim, 30-04-2021).

As already said, the amount of clear examples where narrative of crisis are maintained consistently are scarce. I will argue below why it is hard to give clear examples of countries maintaining a single crisis narrative.

### *Narratives of denial*

In contrast to narratives entailing a clear message of necessity and urgency to act, is the narrative of *denial*. The narrative of denial has to be further deconstructed, as there are countries where denial entails an *outright denial* of the presence of COVID-19 in a country, and those where the virus is not necessarily denied to exist, but where the severity and urgency to act upon it are denied. The prior can be seen in Turkmenistan and in Tajikistan at first (IPHR, 2020d). The latter is exemplified by Belarusian authorities (interview 3, Anna, 28-04-2021; interview 6; Svitlana; 07-05-2021).

Anna explains that Belarusian authorities do not use the word 'crisis' - or any equivalent. Instead the word 'pandemic' is used as it can be interpreted to describe the situation in the world, on the other side of Belarus' borders. This is how the term is used to acknowledge the existence of COVID-19, while leaving the issue of a domestic epidemic unanswered. For this reason, the term 'pandemic' is taken up by (independent) media too. These fear repercussions when using the word 'crisis', because that would deviate from the government narrative (interview 3, Anna, 28-04-2021).

A narrative maintained by government declarations, media and among the general public, is that the COVID-19 situation is a 'mass psychosis'. COVID-19 has been downplayed as being not worse than a common flu, and that it can be solved by consuming alcohol or garlic (interview 3, Anna, 28-04-2021). In this narrative, the responses of foreign (Western) governments and reactions in the general media in other countries are ridiculed, as well as any domestic criticism.

In Russia, a narrative of *denial of the gravity of the problem* is also perceived. Zara (interview 2, 28-04-2021) explains how the president decreed forced 'holidays' and extended these several times in the next months. In these forced 'holidays', non-essential businesses were closed and employers bore the load of paying the full wages. The term used here potentially helped to make this government measure more appealing than the term 'lockdown' would, and helped to make it possible to maintain a narrative denying the seriousness of the health situation. Although later, depending on the region and situation, lockdown measures were taken as well throughout Russia (Kapoor, 2020; interview 1, 13-04-2021; interview 2, 28-04-2021; interview 5, 06-05-2021).

It is observed that besides denial of crisis, there is also a *denial of responsibility*. In Kyrgyzstan, it is impossible to argue that the government denies the presence of COVID-19, as in fact, a state of emergency was declared. However, the government did leave a gap between its response (primarily restricting freedom of movement) and genuinely reducing the number of cases or casualties. As Gulaim explains, the Kyrgyz government does not prioritise the management of the COVID-19 situation and "*fails to do what it should do*" in medical terms, even relying on untrained volunteers for medical care of victims and for arranging equipment (interview 4, 30-04-2021).

### *Inconsistency*

Narratives of outright denial of the danger or the presence of the virus crisis are not seen in many countries. Neither is a complete and unabating embrace of a crisis narrative. Rather, discourses are perceived as inconsistent throughout the region. This inconsistency could be unintended, and a mere result of a changing COVID-19 situation or changing societal attitudes towards the pandemic, or it might be deliberate.

The switching between narratives is observed by HRDs in most countries. This seems to be particularly visible in times surrounding elections. For example, Aleksei (interview 8, 03-06-2021) observes the Russian government switching between narratives

surrounding two events: the constitutional referendum and the street actions organised in opposition to those constitutional changes. Aleksei explains they used the crisis narrative to ban mass gatherings and condemn the street actions, while denying the severity of the crisis to allow people to physically meet in the polling stations during the referendum. Nino and Natalia observe inconsistency with the Georgian government, too. Their government did not have one comprehensive approach throughout the COVID-19 outbreak, and changed its narrative during the year. A serious response to COVID-19 was enforced during the first wave, but this discourse was not upheld longer in the run-up to the elections. Nino explained: “[...] *So we had elections in October, and in September, there was a pretty high number of cases. But in order to keep these votes and not to irritate people, which was very much used also from opposition parties, the government did not announce [a new] lockdown [...]*” (interview 7, Nino and Natalia, 20-05-2021). Furthermore, Guliam claims that the Kyrgyz authorities narrative was inconsistent, as well, when elections were rushed because the unelected president “[...] *wanted to establish himself as president by holding elections*”, despite there previously being strict corona measures in place (interview 3, 30-04-2021).

Anna observes that during police interventions in response to street actions in Belarus, police officers did sometimes shout commands along the lines of “*keep your distance because of the pandemic*”. In Anna’s eyes, this is ridiculous, as the government generally sticks to the narrative of denial. She therefore sees this as proof that authorities “speculate” with the narrative, and use the pandemic as a pretext only when it is convenient to them at a particular moment in time. This peculiar inconsistency between the narrative and practice, can also be seen in the measures Belarus undertakes, such as the closing of borders or the closing of court rooms to press (interview 3, Anna, 28-04-2021)

The inconsistency in narratives can be seen as proof that governments use the narratives pragmatically, as a ‘tool of governance’ (see 2.2.3), when it suits them. It can be observed that crisis narratives are applied differently depending on the time, topic and geographic location. The inconsistency or switching between narratives might well be a result of the tendency of governments to utilise crisis narratives, *and* narratives of denial, as tools of governance.

The inconsistent narratives result in inconsistent measures, too. Especially lockdown measures, (as discussed further in 5.2.1), are fluid as they seem to hinge on political developments. In certain points in time and place this means increasing restrictions, and in others - like HRDs perceive after the first waves in Georgia or Kyrgyzstan - it means the alleviation of measures. There, upcoming elections were the reasoning for politicians to reduce restrictions. In Georgia, politicians seemed to want to attract voters with this strategy (Interview 7, Nino & Natalia, 20-05-2021), while in Kyrgyzstan politicians feared for their credibility if they allowed election campaigns during a lockdown (Interview 4, Guliam, 30-04-2021). In other places, political developments were responsible for increased or renewed lockdown measures, like in Russia when the opposition announced large scale rallies in many regions and cities (interview 2, Zara, 28-04-2021).

### 5.1.2 The role of media and statistics

As said before, the media plays a large role in the spread of (mis)information and is used to aid governments in disseminating their crisis narrative. Meanwhile, social media and independent journalists are targeted in attempts to stop counter-narratives and to silence critics of governments’ responses and narratives.

In Georgia, Nino and Natalia see how most large media are strongly entwined with political parties, and in terms of their representation of COVID-19 follow the direction of

those parties. While this political entanglement is visible in other topics too, they explain how differently the media covers the pandemic and government's measures to battle it, or the anti-measures demonstrations, depending on their political orientation (interview 7, 20-05-2021). Because of this dependence, there is generally a low trust in Georgian media, they explain.

Media plays a role in reinforcing a narrative by creating attention for the topic and a sense of urgency, or the opposite. For example, once the emergency regime was retracted in Kyrgyzstan, media coverage about the pandemic was very low, Guliam explains (interview 4, 30-04-2021). She continues to say that in the following period of low media coverage, people tended to forget that people were still getting ill.

It is clear that state-affiliated media are blatantly used to spread the government's narrative. As a journalist working for one of the last independent media outlets in Belarus, Anna explains that even they are not able to overtly contradict the state's narrative. For example, they are not using the word 'crisis' because they fear being suspected of - and fined, arrested and convicted for - the spread of misinformation. She adds that the authorities' sparse communication of COVID-19 facts and statistics is also insensitive to the scrutiny of independent journalistic investigation, as there is no way for them to access the state's statistics. *"We have to be careful and not express our concerns if we want to continue our work, we can only check and report facts provided by the state"* (interview 3, Anna, 28-04-2021). According to IPHR's reporting, this crackdown on independent media is seen across the region (IPHR, 2020d). Thus, counternarratives or scrutiny of government narratives are becoming scarce.

In Russia, Aleksei explains, the media is complicit in what he calls "coronavirus-washing", where media disperse the artificially low statistics provided by the government. He explains that it is clear that these statistics are manipulated:

*"It's low statistics because, for example, there was a government scientist of our state Statistics Service and he was fired because she said that statistics showed less on two occasions. Because first, when there was a constitution vote, statistics went down, but after that the statistics were suddenly high. [...] The main idea is to pretend there are less problems than claimed by independent media or human rights defenders."* (interview 8, Aleksei, 03-06-2021)

Other cases show that manipulation and deliberate use of statistics happens often to support governments' claims. Anna argues she is wary of the official figures on the scarce occasion when these were made public. She states that the information from the Belarusian Ministry of Health is state propaganda, and there is no way to verify them (interview 3, 28-04-2021). Differently from what Aleksei explains above, Zara sees that the numbers are in other cases increased by campaigns to test as many people as possible, in attempts to show urgency. She also notes, with scepticism, how the mayor of Moscow suddenly announced rising numbers of cases and subsequent reinstatement of lockdown measures, at the exact time when the opposition movement announced rallies in support of Navalny (interview 2, 28-04-2021).

### 5.1.3 Misuse of crisis

As we see above, the narratives serve the important function as argumentation for and justification of measures. The narratives, even when they are inconsistent, help authorities defend their decisions from one day to the next. Most respondents are very clear in this



regard and are convinced that authorities and political leaders actively misuse the crisis to their personal or political advantage, and use crisis narratives to cover up this fact. *“COVID is a preposition, it’s an excuse of forcing pressure from Russian government in Russia.”* (Natasha, interview 5, 06-05-2021). It must be noted, warns Svitlana (interview 6, 07-05-2021), that large differences between countries in the region, notably differences in the level of democracy, mean that misuses of crisis take different forms. This section deals with the many instances where respondents perceived any form of ‘misuse of crisis’.

First, the majority of respondents see that the misuse of the crisis happens with the goal of increasing pressures in general (at least on progressive or anti-government CSOs). Natasha, first of all, is very clear that the Russian government wanted to prohibit all oppositional activities, using the crisis as an excuse, whilst allowing pro-government events. Secondly, she sees the pressure increasing for minority groups. Using the Crimean Tatars and Yehova’s witnesses as an example, she explains that COVID-19 is used to increase the already extraordinary pressure on minorities, for example using COVID-19 to exclude members of these groups in prison, by barring visitors and refusing parcels or even letters (interview 5, 06-05-2021). Anna (interview 3, 28-04-2021) sees similar pressures in prisons due to arbitrary neglect for prisoners’ contact with the outside world, including lawyers. In courts, journalists are barred from entry, especially political sensitive ones, Anna says. Pressures on media, justice and democracy are all increased using COVID-19. *“Coronavirus frees the hands of our authorities to do what they want, and it’s only an excuse or reason for repressions, persecutions and human rights violations.”* (Aleksei, interview 8, 03-06-2021). In a concrete example, Nataliia shows how repression can be increased because of authorities and police wearing facemasks, making it impossible to file complaints about misconduct, let alone find the perpetrator. Thus, facemasks and this impunity might contribute to decreased restraint and increased violence (interview 1, 13-04-2021). COVID-19 is used to control society, and is used as an excuse to ‘tighten the nuts’, says Nataliia.

Secondly, respondents see misuses of crisis occur in and around elections. On the one hand we see that governments use crisis discourse to falsify elections. Before the Russian constitutional referendum, ‘health concerns’ were used to alter the election protocol and to lengthen the polling for a week. Aleksei argues that this made monitoring impossible and the falsification of votes possible. *“because I couldn’t sleep on the floor of the election commission for a week to control these ballots, and [that’s when] they replaced it.”* interview 8, Aleksei, 03-06-2021). In the Belarusian presidential elections, crisis discourse was used to close the borders for foreign independent observers, again making monitoring impossible, therefore allowing falsification (interview 6, Svitlana, 07-05-2021). This is not seen in countries regarded as relatively democratic. In Kyrgyzstan and Georgia, we see that the urgency of restrictions is downplayed in order to have elections as usual. Guliam argues their new government needed the elections to consolidate their newfound power, while in Georgia, Natalia believes, restrictions were removed for government to be able to uphold their reputation as democratic and respecting human rights, and therefore the popularity of the governing politicians (interview 4, 30-04-2021; interview 7, 20-05-2021).

Thirdly, HRDs see misuse of crisis happening for other political goals, besides winning elections. Several different goals are described by Nino and Natalia. They explain how politicians and political parties instrumentalise every issue in order to gather votes, including LGBTQI-issues, demonstrations against COVID-measures, and the COVID-19 response in general, making all of these subject to heated debate and outrage among citizens. For example, Natalia sees politicians and conservatives misusing the pandemic

situation to discredit CSOs. She explains how progressive movements are being shamed on the fact that they did not adhere to COVID-19 measures at certain events or street actions, instead of providing substantive arguments against the progressive movements, and try to take away the legitimacy of these movements by pointing out that they do not all wear masks, (interview 7, 20-05-2021).

Lastly, misuse of crisis appears to exist in order to attain non-political goals or self-enrichment. Svitlana explains that in Ukraine, the political elite, including ministers, benefit financially from the health crisis (interview 6, 07-05-2021), for example through their private businesses benefiting from crisis compensations. Private or semi-private endeavours also appear to benefit from the crisis in other ways. Natalia sees this happening in the case of hydroelectric power projects in Georgia. Ongoing protest against (the ecological impact of) the dams and power plants was interrupted by bans on demonstrations which allowed the construction to be continued immediately (interview 7, 20-05-2021).

Misuse of the 'crisis' situation and the use of crisis discourse, in most of the cases described here, sees 'health concerns' being used as a pretext. My respondents, however, provide numerous arguments to disbelieve this pretext. Most see the discrepancy between the severity of the measures or pressure and the severity of COVID-19 at certain times using statistics (interview 4, 30-04-2021), or see a discrepancy between increasing pressure and other measures being retracted. Respondents saw theaters and bars reopen, for example, while demonstrations and opposition events were struck down with force (interview 8, 03-06-2021). *"Of course it is not about the health of people, its just crazy decision of authorities"*, Anna states confidently (interview 3, 28-04-2021). Zara (interview 2, 28-04-2021) thinks the government is not interested in solving the health situation at all. *"they like the situation"*, she states as the reason for the ineffective management of the health situation in Russia.

This section showed that misuse of crisis, in its different forms and by different groups of actors, is commonplace in the region. The examples given above are given to show that governments and leaders have intentions that are hidden from view when they address the COVID-19 pandemic. The perceived practice of misusing the crisis and the pragmatic application of crisis narratives to justify these malpractices will be explicated further in section 5.4, where they will be placed in the theoretical debate. First, however, I will continue by laying out the measures taken during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## 5.2 Crisis-motivated measures

As discussed in the operationalisation (section 2.3.2), crisis-motivated measures entail measures taken by governments since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic which were justified by governments using crisis discourse. These measures are

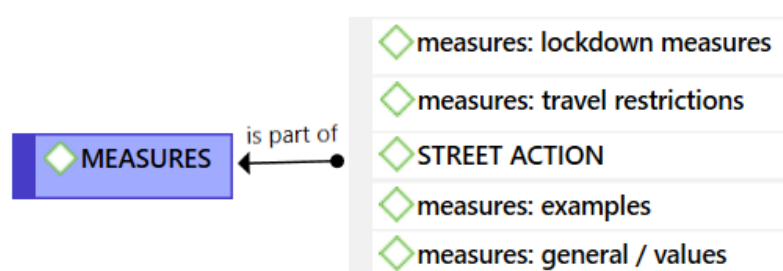


Figure 5.3: Crisis-motivated measures and its subcategories

### 5.2.1 Lockdown measures

When speaking about crisis-motivated measures, many measures, often the most stringent ones, were grouped together by respondents under the term ‘lockdown’. This term generally refers to government-imposed restrictions on movement. Some dictionaries have recently included a new definition of ‘lockdown’ reflecting the new global use of the term in pandemic situations:

*“Lockdown: a temporary condition imposed by governmental authorities (as during the outbreak of an epidemic disease) in which people are required to stay in their homes and refrain from or limit activities outside the home involving public contact (such as dining out or attending large gatherings)” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).*

Noticeable is that the term is being stretched to also include other measures that were taken in conjunction with restrictions to movement, in many cases including measures that are part of or related to emergency regulation packages. This makes it a vague term in colloquial speech. Despite its vagueness, it is also adopted by authorities and global institutions. Besides referring to a broad set of restrictive measures, it seems that in the interviews respondents use the term ‘lockdown’ also to refer to a certain timeframe during the pandemic. In some cases, respondents use it to refer to the pandemic from the point where governments first started to take measures, in other cases it refers to one or more periods where measures were most strict. Despite the new definition recorded in numerous dictionaries, the term ‘lockdown’ should be handled with care as the term is sometimes used interchangeably and uncritically. I will speak of ‘lockdown measures’, in order to specify the multitude of measures that fall or are perceived to fall under this category and to include the different interpretations.

In the region, lockdown measures generally included the closing of public buildings. During one of the lockdowns in Russia *“all services, even hospitals, and most businesses closed”* (interview 2, Zara, 28-04-2021), in many places schools were closed for extended periods (interviews 1 and 4, Natalia, 13-04-2021; Guliam, 30-04-2021). In Georgia, Nino and Natalia explain: *“we had Lockdown for two months in the beginning. Which was very effective [at first], with cases under 100 or 50 per day”* (interview 7, 20-05-2021).

The lockdown measures are not always called this by authorities. In Russia at first, in late March 2020, president Vladimir Putin decreed a forced and fully paid (by employers) “holiday” (interview 5, Natasha, 06-05-2021). This holiday was extended time and again. At the same time, federal authorities instated a “high alert” regime, authorizing regional and local governments to implement emergency measures at their discretion (IPHR, 2020a). These ‘holidays’, however, seemed to be a lockdown measure in disguise, says Zara (interview 2, 28-04-2021). Natalia (interview 1, 13-04-2021) explains that multiple iterations of lockdown measures, or several stricter periods, affected her. She also points out that regional differences in Russia were big due to the decision being made on a regional level. Zara experienced the differences herself and sees the enormous differences in response between the larger cities, like St. Petersburg and Moscow (both suffering from relatively high numbers of cases (IPHR, 2020c)) and her region of origin in the North Caucasus, where lockdown measures were less strict and not enforced like in the capital (interview 2, Zara, 28-04-2021).

Guliam (interview 4, 30-04-2021) refers to the period of increased measures in Kyrgyzstan as the “quarantine”. The “lockdown” regime in Kyrgyzstan was in some ways distinct from the response in other countries. As Guliam explains, “*we had total quarantine for two months*”, installed from the moment that the first cases were recorded in late March. The kyrgyz emergency measures were different as it entailed the declaration of a formal state of emergency under international human rights law, something few other countries in the region did (IPHR, 2020b; 2020e). This meant that formally, the measures could go further in their response as this temporarily allowed states to derogate from certain human rights. While this state of emergency was in force, restriction of movement was severe, as military and police presence was present in large numbers and road blockades at the entrance and exit routes of Bishkek and other regions were installed, Guliam explains.

Looking at the occurrence of lockdown measures, correlation is visible with the nature of crisis narratives in the region. The use of the term ‘lockdown’ seems to coincide with the narrative in the country. In Belarus, Anna (interview 3, 28-04-2021) doesn’t use or perceive the word ‘lockdown’, and no efforts are made to install lockdown measures for reasons of COVID-19 (although restrictions to freedom of movement were in place under different pretexts). In the case of Russia, as an example of , where multiple narratives exist in parallel, lockdown measures are mentioned often by the HRDs, although the lockdown measures are presented using different terms, depending on the region and point in time.

### 5.2.2 Travel restrictions

Most HRDs depend on (international) travel for their work or for having breaks from their work, therefore my respondents found out at an early stage in the pandemic that travelling was restricted to and from most places and their jobs were made hard. While measures limiting travel and closing borders were installed in all countries, including those maintaining narratives of denial, travelling was still possible in some exceptional cases. This section shows, using observations and experiences of the respondents, how this group of measures manifested as noteworthy restrictions.

Foremost and most evident was the closing of international borders, which most states did in an effort to prevent COVID-19 cases within their borders. Zara sees that the Russian government first refused, but later closed international borders to please the international community, as most other countries already did so (interview 2, 28-04-2021). It was clear that borders were, and still are, closed selectively. Nataliia explains how she was free to visit some countries, but not others (interview 1, 13-04-2021). She adds that travelling to Europe was the most difficult, as European countries maintained strict requirements for crossing the borders. Aleksei too argues that EU countries’ borders were airtight (interview 8, 03-06-2021). Most respondents experienced these restrictions first hand trying to do fieldwork, meet with beneficiaries or partners abroad, or take part in temporary relocation programmes (for instance Shelter City in the Netherlands and Georgia, or similar programmes) (interview 1, Nataliia, 13-04-2021; interview 8, Aleksei, 03-06-2021).

Belarusian authorities too have installed ambiguous border policies, despite its general narrative of denial, Anna explains (personal communication, 08-07-2021). According to her, authorities have used COVID-19 as a narrative to close land borders for Belarusians moving out of the country, but not for people returning to Belarus. This did not count for air travel at first, but the events in May 2021 of the hijacking of Ryanair flight and subsequent arrest of Raman Pratasevich (Denber, 2021) meant the end of most international travel to and from Belarus.

As stated, borders were closed selectively, depending on the situation of origin and destination, the reasons for travel, etc. The different standards used in each country made it possible to travel using indirect routes, Nataliia explains: *“we could visit Turkey, Armenia and Georgia, and some other countries, where the rules are not as strict as [when travelling to] Europe.”* (interview 1, Nataliia, 13-04-2021). However, these loopholes were not reliable, changed over time, and did not help all HRDs equally, for instance Svitlana, (interview 6, 07-05-2021), who was unable to reach her home and office in Tbilisi for several months.

The requirements for travelling across borders were often large, and often included mandatory testing, quarantine upon arrival, and providing information to authorities; such as stating the reasons for travelling. The latter is observed, again by Nataliia, as a measure that can be explicitly harmful for HRDs. She explains how Russian authorities demand a large number of documents to be uploaded upon arrival. She explains this information can be used to target HRDs (interview 1, Nataliia, 13-04-2021).

Furthermore, not only international borders were locked, but also internal borders were locked and subnational travel was put under pressure. Beside the restrictions on individuals' movement, there were cases where internal borders were enforced. Zara explains how the response to COVID-19 was, to a great extent, left to regional authorities who were therefore authorised to close their borders at will. Although Nataliia felt that she was able to travel quite freely throughout Russia (interview 1, 13-04-2021), Zara exemplifies how Chechnya closed its borders for non-Chechen inhabitants for a significant period (interview 2, 28-04-2021). Autonomous regions in Georgia, for instance Abkhazia, were similarly closed off from the rest of the country, explains Svitlana (interview 6, 07-05-2021), which meant medical services were unattainable. In Kyrgyzstan, under the emergency regime, entire cities and regions were quarantined (IPHR, 2020a; interview 4, Guliam, 30-04-2021), making new and temporary de facto borders, penetrable only with specific authorisation.

Although the selective closing of borders is seen throughout the region, the travel restrictions are mostly felt when travelling to or from the region. Aleksei (interview 8, 03-06-2021) even feels that the Iron Curtain came back, now in the form of a 'COVID-19 curtain'.

### 5.2.3 Prohibition of street action

This group of measures is frequently mentioned by the respondents, who generally explain these measures as significantly hindering their activism, which is often a large part of their work. There is not one single measure taken throughout the region. Instead, a whole range of measures have led to an extensive limitation to the freedom of assembly. In fact, large differences are perceived between parts of the region in the extent to which crisis discourse was used to justify these measures. In a lot of cases, however, street action or assembly is banned with explicit mention of COVID-19 concerns. Emergency laws and the installment of lockdown included the limitation of assembly, for instance by restricting public events and freedom of movement.

According to Zara, lockdown measures were primarily installed to prevent the rallies surrounding Navalny, giving authorities a new justification to arrest, detain and or fine organisers and participants of the demonstration. As argumentation for her suspicions, she explains that she saw this happening again in Moscow, where, as new demonstrations were announced by the opposition, the mayor announced more restrictive lockdown measures, contrary to trends of COVID-19 cases in the area (interview 2, Zara, 28-04-2021).

In Kyrgyzstan restrictions were part of the emergency regime as well, Guliaim explains. However, before any cases of COVID-19 were known, Kyrgyz authorities attempted to bar opposition street actions using COVID-19 as reasoning (interview 4, Guliaim, 30-04-2021). This was before the installation of the emergency regime, and the march was therefore not prohibitable according to law. After the two months of emergency ended, protests surrounding the contested elections were again possible. Guliaim explains they were unable to ban street actions at that time *“because when they need to [arrange] a referendum, they cannot say that there [cannot be protests] because of COVID, because they say that last week there was a referendum.”* (interview 4, Guliaim, 30-04-2021).

In Georgia, Svitlana (interview 6, 07-05-2021), Nino and Natalia see that lockdown measures also included the ban on large public events, and therefore also a ban on street actions. While at first the ban on street actions was enforced, they perceived that the government decided not to do so at a later stage: *“when it was actually needed, before the elections, the government decided not to use this method”* (interview 7, 20-05-2021). After enforcement of the restrictions ceded, street actions reappeared - including political, ecological as well as anti-COVID-19 measures demonstrations.

Natasha sees that measures that discourage street action are not intended to battle COVID-19. She argues when even single pickets, a form of street action with just one activist physically present, are also broken off by authorities using these lockdown limitations, they are not genuinely concerned for peoples' health. Following that reasoning, she asks, *“logically, all types of events have to be prohibited. But in Russia, pro-government events - for example, marches and concerts - are allowed. [Does this] mean that only oppositional opposition and activists are the reason for rising COVID numbers?”* (interview 4, 06-05-2021). Aleksei elaborates that using these measures to limit street actions, including single pickets, is unreasonable. Especially as at the same time *“[...] you can go to the theaters, but cannot be demonstrating in the streets alone”* (interview 8, Aleksei, 03-06-2021). Later in the interview, he again sees the hypocrisy in the governments' use of crisis legislation. All actions and events were banned on the grounds of COVID-19 management, but they had no problem with organising a constitutional referendum, which Aleksei witnessed first hand (interview 8, 03-06-2021).

Nataliia sees that Russian authorities only use COVID-19 as a means to break up or discourage street action only in part of the cases. *“As I know, they use another law. When a person stops moving cars on the road, it isn't legal in Russia. And our government used this [law] a lot to pressure activists who came out to the streets to support Navalny. But maybe, I remembered that in some cases, the government did use a law against COVID.”* (Interview 1, Nataliia, 13-04-2021).

In other places, street action was not prohibited using COVID-19 as a pretext at all. In Belarus, street actions were broken up by authorities in a violent manner, resulting in the unlawful arrest and detaining of large numbers of activists. According to Anna, punishments were said to be provided on the accusation of participation in “non-legalised” demonstrations (interview 3, 28-04-2021). This is not quite surprising if we consider the discourse of denial maintained by Belarusian authorities.

The measures taken in response to the pandemic described here - lockdown measures, travel restrictions and prohibition of street actions, are the three most mentioned sets of measures having their effects on respondents and HRDs in general. Looking back on the measures, most HRDs see the major pitfalls in their governments' responses to the COVID-19 situation. Some exceptions exist, for example Natalia and Nino who explain that,

at first, the response and lockdown measures were quite effective in suppressing spread of the virus (interview 7, 20-05-2021). However, when governments switched to narratives of denial, for instance surrounding the elections in Kyrgyzstan and Georgia or the referendum in Russia, governments forfeited their responsibility to ensure citizens' health. Zara sees how governments sacrificed people's lives. For instance when lockdown measures meant that hospitals only admitted people showing symptoms of COVID-19, in fact sacrificing people suffering other health issues. Guliaim (interview 4, 30-04-2021) shows that whenever her governments' approach was lacking, society - including her own organisation - stepped up and took its own measures as well as they could.

### 5.3 Other measures

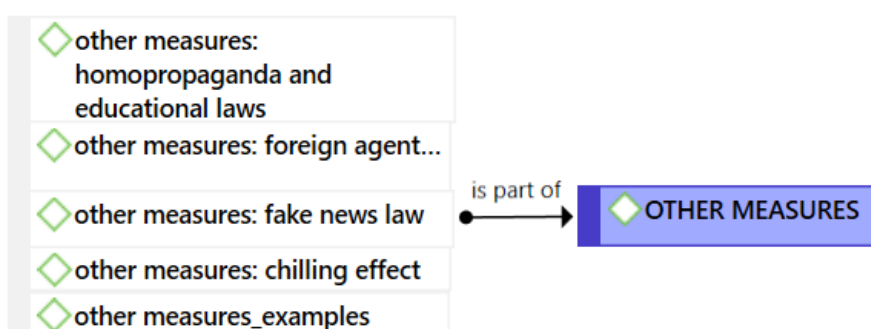


Figure 5.4: Overview of codes and code groups in the category 'other measures'

While this research aimed to find out how crisis-motivated measures affect human rights defenders, it appeared during the interviews and analysis that it is difficult to distinguish the types of measures. Importantly, HRDs often feel that these measures are interrelated and their effects converge. Moreover, it is hard to argue whether one measure is strictly taken in response to COVID-19, or if a seemingly unrelated measure taken in the midst of the pandemic is not influenced by the situation to a certain extent. This section therefore places 'other measures', or 'non-crisis-motivated measures' if you will, in context of crisis discourse. First, three main groups of measures or legislation are discussed that have been observed in (part of) the region and were significant to HRDs.

#### 5.3.1 Homophobic laws and educational restrictions

The first of the larger "other" measures implemented or tightened during the pandemic, and which have been perceived to impact HRD work, are measures related to education. Among these is the much contested homopropaganda law, which has been implemented in Russia and is seen being copied across the region. In place in Russia since 2013, the law has impeded any possibility to educate youth about sexuality and gender (HRW, 2018), something that used to be addressed by civil society. Similar laws have been drawn up across the region (HRW, 2018) and in general, homophobic attitudes are commonplace in society and the political arena. Furthermore, constitutional changes of 2020 in Russia and Kyrgyzstan meant that 'traditional family values', including a ban on same-sex marriage, are since enshrined in the Russian federal constitution (HRW, 2021).

Aleksei explains that the gay propaganda law is firmly in place and has often been used to prevent any event or action to get a permit. This year, however, he sees that COVID-19 is used more often to ban these events (interview 8, 03-06-2021). In Kyrgyzstan, laws against the spread of homopropaganda are also in place, says Guliaim. More generally,

however, their organisation is harmed by smear campaigns using homophobia to discredit progressive movements and NGOs, including Guliaim's organisation which is clearly promoting women's rights. Calling their women's march a 'gay pride' in disguise, politicians gather more and more support among the conservative society for banning the event (interview 4, 30-04-2021).

Apart from Kyrgyzstan and Russia where legislation is most explicit, Georgia, for example, faces the instrumentalisation of homophobia, especially in its current political crisis. Although it does not go as far as the anti-homopropaganda laws in Russia and other places, Natalia explains, this instrumentalisation still negatively affects their work in trying to help LGBT community through the COVID-19 pandemic (interview 7, 20-05-2021).

The laws against the LGBT+-community are only one type of laws impacting education of progressive ideas in the region. There have been other restrictions on non-governmental educational projects. Nataliia explains there is a new law about education under development, taking effect from June 2021, which makes the work of non-governmental actors more challenging as they limit their ability to educate the people on subjects deemed controversial by authorities (interview 1, 13-04-2021). About this Russian law, Aleksei shows why it is consequential for HRDs: *"We will need to send all the programmes and for example the lectures, seminars and other activities to the ministry. Essentially, your educational programme will need to agree with the Minister of Justice."* Natasha (interview 5, 06-05-2021) explains that her projects focus mainly on education to reach their goals, making laws like these detrimental.

### 5.3.2 Foreign agents law

After this law was formally implemented in Russia already in 2012, this law was amended in December 2020. Other countries in the region have taken up similar legislation recently, or at least have seen attempts to take up the law. The rewritten law is in full effect in Russia and drafts are in progress in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan (IPHR, 2020f). In Belarus and Ukraine similar restrictions have increased pressures on civil society since 2011 and meant a decrease in the number of NGOs in the region (Oleinikova, 2017). Before COVID-19, similar laws and restrictions aimed to limit foreign funding to CSOs have been developed and implemented in the region (IPHR, 2020d) this trend has seemingly continued in the midst of COVID-19.

The amendments meant that from December 2020, not only organisations, but also individuals can be classified as 'foreign agents'. This law requires organisations to register or enables authorities to classify organisations and individuals as a 'foreign agent' in case they receive any funding from abroad and engage in vaguely defined "political activity" (Digges, 2021). The law requires CSOs to give full disclosure of where foreign funding comes from and what it will be used for. There is no way to know whether you are placed on the list of foreign agents or if they are watching you in an attempt to put you on it. This makes finding funding for human rights work extremely difficult, Nataliia and Aleksei explain (interview 1, 13-04-2021; interview 8, 03-06-2021). Notable is the vague definitions and intransparency, there are no complaint procedures in place and no way to know when one is categorised as a foreign agent, says Nataliia. Zara explains that this year, many of her clients face charges for violating these foreign agent measures (interview 2, 28-04-2021).

Again, this is not a Russian only law and it is copied elsewhere. In Kyrgyzstan, for instance, a draft was already on the table for some years, and was considered again when the new government took seat (interview 4, Guliaim, 30-04-2021). The law was then rushed through parliament while COVID-19 regulations were still in place (IPHRd).



### 5.3.3 'Fake news' laws

The last major group of laws that impact HRDs' work and have become especially stringent during the pandemic are the many variations on 'fake news' laws. These are often phrased along the lines of being "against spread of misinformation about covid", and use broad and vaguely defined terminology. These have in some cases been on the agenda before COVID-pandemic, while other countries have implemented them only since the outbreak of COVID-19.

To start with the same metaphorical elephant in the room again, Russia amended its criminal code as early as 31 March 2020 (Amnesty International, 2020), to include a law against the spread of 'fake news' about the current coronavirus, upon which, Aleksei explains, criminal fines of 300 thousand rubles or even a prison sentence rest (interview 8, 03-06-2021). This law is feared to be used arbitrarily against any dissenting voices. *"I think my colleagues who raise topics about medical care or vaccination will be at risk because of this new restriction. I think the government uses this law to threaten independent journalists"*. (interview 1, Nataliia, 13-04-2021). *"It was about censorship"*, Aleksei argues (interview 8, 03-06-2021).

According to IPHR (2020f), authorities in the region have stifled access to information and silenced traditional and online media presenting facts or critique of the governments' responses to the pandemic. Often claiming to combat the spread of misinformation while often failing to transparently disclose factual information about the pandemic. Anna (interview 3, 28-04-2021) explains how she and her colleagues attempted to cover the state of the pandemic in Belarus, yet authorities blamed them for spurring panic or hysteria. They were told off for spreading misinformation about the pandemic. Independent media are also afraid to deviate too much from the government narrative, meaning also they will not use the word crisis, and instead will use more neutral language, such as 'pandemic' - which could also refer to the global pandemic and not the outbreak in Belarus.

Censorship is achieved in other ways, too. Kyrgyz authorities have used lockdown measures to stop employees of non-state news outlets from coming to office and waiving press accreditations in the capital, besides having installed laws on 'dissemination of fake news' and 'manipulation of information' in the first half of 2020 (IPHR, 2020a). Anna explains journalism, and the freedom of speech in general, are stifled by Belarusian authorities using other grounds as well, for instance charging independent journalists for partaking in or organising unauthorized demonstrations, even though they are there just to report the events (interview 3, Anna, 28-04-2021).

### 5.3.4 'Chilling' intent

In line with the general trend of diminishing space for civil society and increasing pressure, as described in chapter 4, respondents provide ample examples from their environment and their work, on top of those mentioned under the three major groups of laws. Firstly, we can see Nataliia who experienced being surveilled physically on several occasions. For example she suspected being shadowed while travelling for work together with a colleague, which made her suspect she is now on the radar of the Russian government (interview 1, Nataliia, 13-04-2021). Another form of pressure is seen by Gulaim, who experienced physical attacks by men, which she suspects were agents of the Kyrgyz authorities. She is convinced that the attack on the feminists' march was also a way for the government to scare other CSOs and discourage their efforts (interview 4, 30-04-2021).

As these additional examples show, measures continue to be taken and are perhaps even reinforced during the pandemic. According to some respondents, these interventions, and perhaps all measures mentioned in section 5.3, should be seen as being intended to have a chilling effect on human rights defenders and civil society. Aleksei explains how the prison sentence assigned to a journalist working for the independent 'Radio Liberty - Radio Free Europe' on the grounds of the 'fake news' law has a cooling effect (interview 8, 03-06-2021). According to him, all these repressive measures are designed to spread fear and silence civil society actors.

Whether these 'other measures' would have been taken regardless of the COVID-19 situation or their installment was enhanced by crisis discourse is something I will discuss in the following section.

## 5.4 Discussion

This chapter is aimed to answer *how human rights defenders' perceive the role of crisis discourse and its influence on measures taken during the pandemic*. The analysis provided in this chapter firstly showed how different forms of crisis discourse are used by authorities and how these are exploited to the advantage of authorities. The second and third section provided the multiple different (categories of) crisis-motivated measures taken in the region as well as several categories of 'other' measures. At this point remains only the core of the sub-question: the relationship between the discourses and the measures. In this section I will discuss this relationship and how this fits in the theoretical debate.

### 5.4.1 Discourse and measures

The question how exactly measures are made possible by crisis discourse is difficult to answer generally, as it depends on many factors. These factors include - yet are not limited to - geographical location, particular history, domestic political contexts, authorities' intentions towards civil society and their regard for human rights protection. The regional and sub-national differences, in numbers of cases, crisis response and political order - the differences between authoritarian regimes and relatively stable democracies like Georgia - make it hard to give a generalised answer (interview 6, Svitlana, 07-05-2021). Furthermore, this relation is shaped by factors such as perceptions of the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic, the perceived urgency, and previously installed measures. Still, a strong correlation between measures and the prevalent narratives is shown in sections 5.2 and 5.3. In the first section (5.1) it is shown how narratives are more often than not rather inconsistent, which is reflected in the formulation and implementation of measures shown in the later sections. It is therefore logical, and backed by plentiful evidence in 5.2, to say that crisis discourse is the source and justification of most measures taken in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Harder still is arguing whether 'other' measures stem from, or are made possible by, crisis discourse. What I did find is whether respondents believe these measures have been implemented with more ease because of crisis discourse and the pandemic situation. Admittedly, respondents are not always invested in the reasoning or the process behind certain measures (as admits Nataliia, interview 1, 13-04-2021), and are rather occupied with responding to the practical implications of the measures. From the conversations it becomes clear that at least interrelation between political agendas, crisis discourse and other measures is present. Reflecting on the entire situation, Nataliia told me that *"the new laws and, and closing of LGBT communities in social media, and the pressure of journalists and*

*human rights defenders and LGBT activists; I can't see the pandemic without all these processes, all these events*" (interview 1, 13-04-2021). For these reasons it remains impossible for me to say with certainty that crisis discourse is being used to install these 'other' measures, although some arguments do point in that direction.

One such proof, pointing in the direction that other measures have been made possible at least in part because of the COVID-19 pandemic and/or crisis discourse, is also given by the IPHR report on Kyrgyzstan (IPHR, 2020d). Here, it is explained that the law on restriction of foreign funding for CSOs was rushed through parliament without much scrutiny, as NGOs were barred from attending the parliamentary readings due to COVID-19 limitations prescribing a low number of visitors. This made it impossible for the non-profit sector to adequately present their arguments against this law, which may have been the reason for the swift approval of this legislation.

This indirect effect, via the path of reduced possibilities for resisting or advocating against the measures, is seen throughout the interviews. The implementation of non-crisis-motivated measures could therefore be said to have been possible thanks to shrinking civil society space. The same could be said for other political developments such as constitutional changes or the falsification of election outcomes (interview 3, 28-04-2021; interview 4, 30-04-2021; interview 8, 03-06-2021), or about Nino and Natalia's example of hydroelectric developments continuing when action against these temporarily halted (interview 7, 20-05-2021).

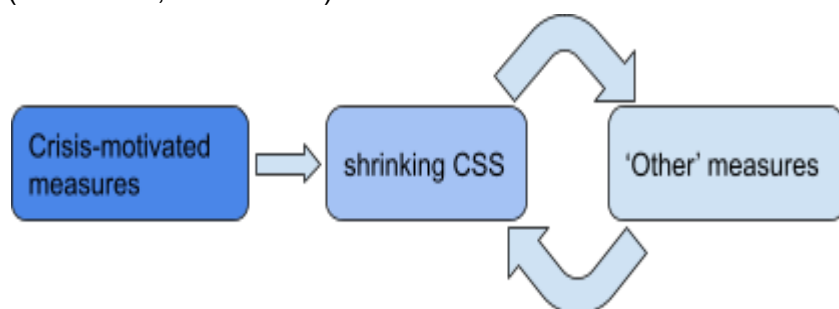


Figure 5.5: Feedback loop in justification of 'other' measures

Nataliia portrays the general view of respondents when asked whether 'other measures' were influenced by discourse: *"I don't know what our government and president were thinking when they signed the law [...] but I believe they understood that, with the pandemic rising, it was a good time to sign this law. [...] defenders at the time had no way to go abroad - to Europe - and European experts had no way to go to Russia, too."* (interview 1, 13-04-2021). Here, Nataliia does provide one more example and argues how the fake news legislation in her opinion benefited from the distraction of COVID-19 and travel measures that helped authorities create a 'window of opportunity', as hypothesised in 2.2.3 (Lawrence, 2014).

#### 5.4.2 Place in theoretical debate

Crisis discourse is constructed by those in power, but can, as is shown in this chapter, be deconstructed and changed easily and at will of the same. We see this reflected in the inconsistency in the narratives and the discrepancy often observed between the general narrative and the measures taken. I will explain in this section how the data fits the theory and how this explains the role of crisis discourse and the influence on measures.

The reality of crisis discourses, its narratives, and its corresponding measures in the former Soviet region, reflects the discussions in theoretical debate around crisis discourse.

We see that the 'crisis' is taken up by several governments and members of society as an urgent topic. Here we see proof that this language of crisis is important in eliciting a strong response and urgency to manage or control the situation, as predicted by Gilbert (2019). However, this sense of crisis and sense of urgency can - as described and warned for by Kaye (2020) and Schulmann (2021) and as we see confirmed in this chapter - also be exploited to fulfill other agendas. Agendas such as pushing forward other laws or constitutional amendments, rushing or organising elections without proper protocol or independent monitoring, silencing opposition or independent media, and so on (see 5.1.3).

As it became clear in the analysis that narratives of denial are perhaps at least as common as crisis narratives during the COVID-19 pandemic in the FSU, a contradiction appears. It must be asked whether narratives of denial should be seen as forms of crisis discourse, or as the opposite of a crisis narrative. The literature discussed in chapter 2 does not give straight answers to this issue. I could argue that narratives of denial fit the perspective of the other camp of the theoretical debate, where normality or the everyday is being emphasized instead of the abnormalcy of crisis - as argued by some authors (Lawrence, 2014; Cantat et al., 2019; Markovic, 2019). However, it is questionable to argue that states recognize the need to emphasize the 'everyday', as the opposite argument might be made just as well: that authorities believe that crises could trigger societal change, and are afraid to lose their power position. The latter corresponds with literature about civil society in the FSU (e.g. Schmitz & Sikkink, 2013; Aleksanyan, 2020; section 4.1.1). This might explain why governments go to great lengths to spread a narrative of denial, manipulate data and silence critics, making the crisis *paradigm* - or way of thinking about the history of our world as a sequence of crises (Gilbert, 2019) - still applicable to explain narratives of denial in the former-Soviet region.

In all cases, however, the examples provided in this chapter show that crisis discourse can be seen as being employed as a 'technique of government', exactly as described in the theoretical framework, especially by Lawrence (2014). The examples provided in this chapter demonstrate this use of crisis as a technique of government, to create and exploit 'windows of opportunity', as well as the tendency of governments to trade off inclusivity and democratic processes for top-down, short term and 'expert' interventions, as described by Otto (2011). Besides reflecting (parts of) the theory, the findings also seem to fit the political and human rights trends described in chapter 4.

## 6. The influence of measures

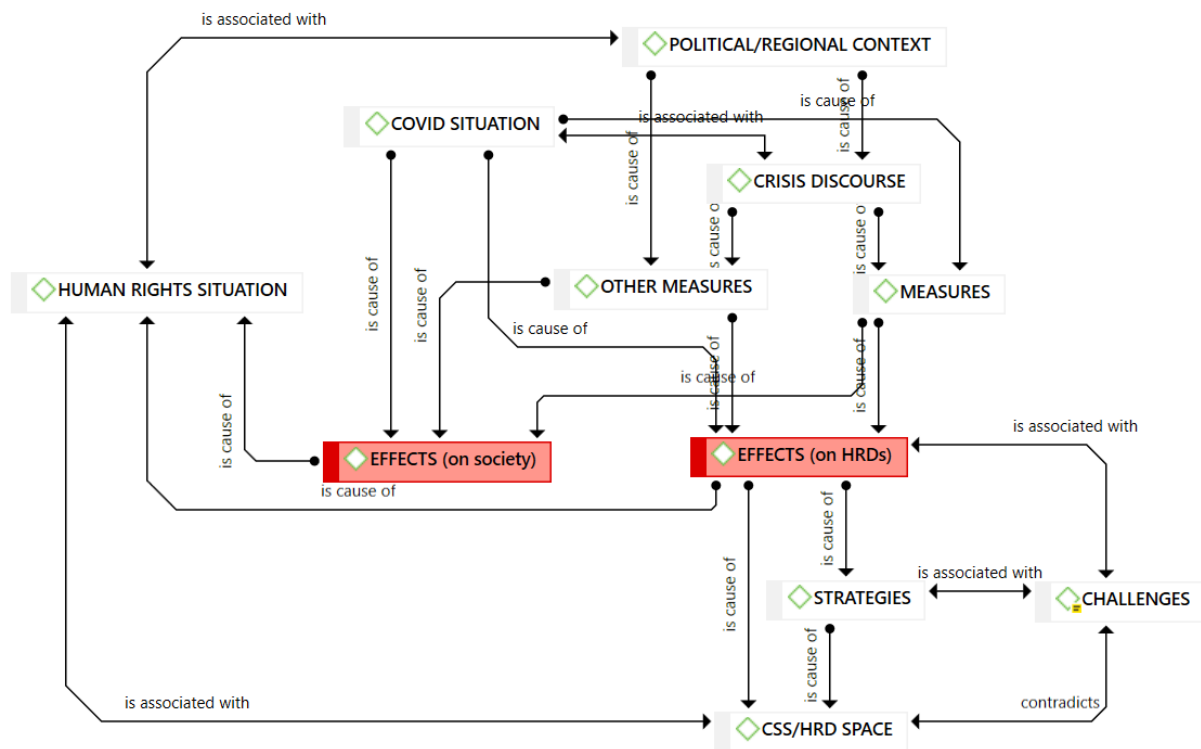


Figure 6.1: Overview: highlighted are the concepts that are discussed in chapter 6

This chapter deals primarily with the perception of HRDs of the influence of measures on their work. Strongly entangled with the category ‘effects on HRDs’ is the codegroup ‘effects on society’. These two categories are therefore taken up together in this chapter. Both categories are related to the measures described in section 5. These combined effects, in turn, have their consequences for the human rights in the region, affect civil society space, provoke HRDs to adopt strategies, and pose challenges to implement those strategies.

### 6.1 Effects on HRDs

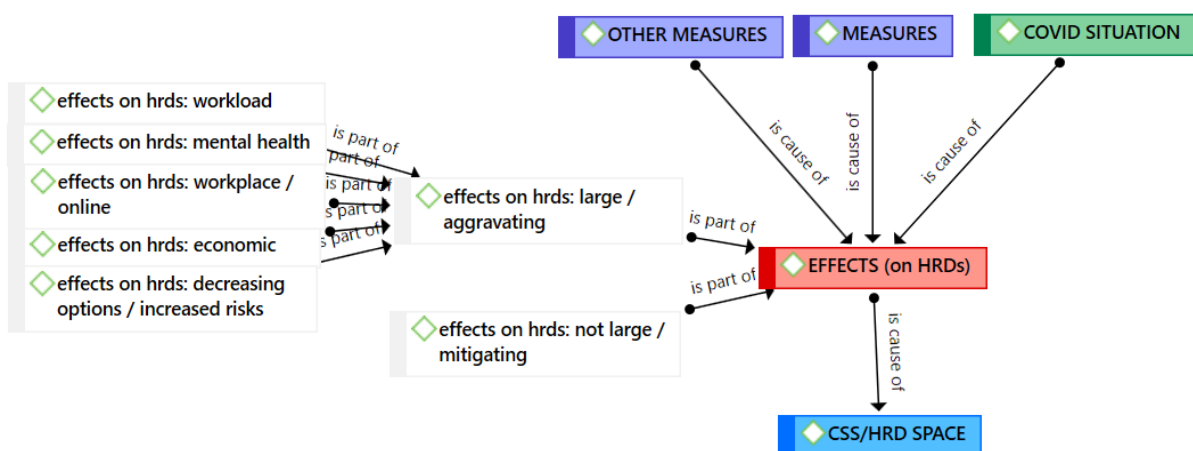


Figure 6.2: Effects on HRDs and subcategories

Looking closely at the category 'effects on HRDs', I found that the answers (and thus the codes) fall roughly into two groups; negative and positive, or formulated more nuanced; aggravating and mitigating. The group of 'aggravating' codes contains the largest number of codes as answers of respondents generally paint a fairly grim picture, and more examples were given. This section ends by discussing the (smaller) group of mitigating codes in order to shine a light on the fact that COVID-19 and measures have not only had negative impacts.

#### 6.1.1 Workload

The first subcategory of effects exemplified by the respondents have to do with how, in general, the measures and the changing environment increased the workload for the HRDs. This workload arises from responding to the pandemic and measures with great urgency, creatively changing their work, on top of ongoing or long-term activities. Moreover, there is also workload arising from increased pressure on civil society and human rights.

Zara argues that the pandemic and the increased repression during, and possibly after, the pandemic have rewound human rights by decades. Decreased respect for and observation of human rights law have meant increased human rights violation, explains Zara. For her, and other human rights lawyers, this simply means there are more cases to fight for, and more work to do (interview 2, 28-04-2021). Similarly, Guliaim explains how she, as a women's rights defender, has more and more work to do. The state of emergency in Kyrgyzstan, its harsh and unreasonable measures and military enforcement were the reasons for many human rights violations. On top of that, she mentions the many arbitrary arrests and incorrect court procedures for political prisoners following the political coup in her country. This all means that HRDs have more work to do. She explains:

*"When society shakes, human rights lose priority and will be violated. And when law doesn't work, those without power suffer first; women's rights and those of children disappear."* (interview 4, Guliaim, 30-04-2021).

Nino explains how long term obligations towards their donors meant they were required to continue their scheduled plans this year. They had to adapt the activities and reorganize everything to ensure people's safety, on top of increased stress as a result of the COVID-19 situation. Furthermore, their organisation stood ready for the immediate effects of the pandemic on their beneficiaries. Nino explains how they, for instance, had to arrange accommodation for LGBTQI persons that lost their homes in the pandemic (interview 7, 20-05-2021). Guliaim tells how her organisation had to do extra work as well. They wanted to help out in the COVID-19 response, as she saw the government leaving large gaps - especially where the needs of women and girls were concerned. Their organisation provided sanitary products, as well as online material for women to deal with the lockdown. Lastly, she explains how decreased attention for human and women's rights during the pandemic simply meant that she has to be even more vocal in order to raise awareness (interview 4, 30-04-2021).

#### 6.1.2 Mental health

As another effect of the COVID-19 situation, and partly resulting from the increased workload, HRDs mention tiredness, lack of motivation, depression, and (fear of) getting a burn-out.

*“We have to think about our emotional security because professional burnout is also a risk. Secondary traumatic stress happens frequently in our work, as the conditions and problems our beneficiaries face are also reflected on us.”* (Nino, interview 7, 20-05-2021).

What Nino says here is that the risks of HRD work on mental health are always present. As the conditions for their beneficiaries worsen, those risks increase.

Nataliia explains how the threat of a burn-out for activists is increased because of the constant tension. For her and Aleksei, an important factor is not being able to leave the country to temporarily escape the pressure (interview 1, 13-04-2021; interview 8, 03-06-2021). Natasha suffers from a burn out. She explains how the constant tension, as well as constant worrying about funding, which we see in 6.1.5 has become harder during the pandemic (interview 5, 06-05-2021). Finally, Zara saw herself fall into depression and saw other HR lawyers suffer from this too. As a direct result of lockdown measures and not being able to see their colleagues, she senses demotivation: *“I really lose the feeling that we are working in a team”* (interview 2, 28-04-2021).

#### 6.1.3 Workplace and working online

Lockdown measures had a clear message for nearly all respondents; It was impossible to work in an office, work live with colleagues or meet and personally help beneficiaries. While a partial solution was to work from home (see 7.1 “strategies”), this situation had a lot of disadvantages.

In the section above, I already said why meeting colleagues in real life is important. Besides that, meeting live with beneficiaries is important to HRDs in order to help them. To do so, it is important to have a safe space available. Nataliia explains that lockdown measures meant they couldn’t arrange coffee meetings in some safe or neutral place. Home situations are often not a safe place to talk about sensitive issues over phone or online. Furthermore, talking about sensitive subjects over the internet raises digital privacy concerns. This makes it very difficult to arrange a meeting with respondents for her projects, virtual or live. (interview 1, Nataliia, 13-04-2021). Similarly, Nino explains her beneficiaries often do not have a safe space at home. Closing their office meant they could not offer a safe space either (interview 7, Nino and Natalia, 20-05-2021).

The emergency regime meant that Gulaim couldn’t visit their office for two months at all during the quarantine. This had a large impact on Gulaim’s work, not being able to access their offline materials, for instance, their computers and files (interview 4, 30-04-2021). The impact of these quarantine measures had a large impact on productivity. This is even more evident to Svitlana, who was unable to enter Georgia at all, let alone reach her belongings at the office and at home (interview 6, 07-05-2021).

#### 6.1.4 Economic effects on HRDs

In 6.2 the economic effects will be discussed more broadly. However, that is not to say that HRDs work isn’t impacted heavily through the economic effects of COVID-19. Besides having an effect on society at large, HRDs experience financial problems too, limiting their capacity.

Natasha explains how her human rights work has always been on a voluntary basis, and that she worked as an engineer to finance the volunteer work until the Russian president

announced the holidays. These ‘forced holidays’ in the first phase of the lockdown meant her employer was forced to pay the full wages, which cost Natasha her job. Since then, Natasha is struggling to fund her HR work (interview 5, 06-05-2021). The same goes for Aleksei, who was fired from different part-time jobs for his activism (interview 8, 03-06-2021). He explains that there is pressure from the authorities on employers, which means a lot of HRDs are in unstable financial positions.

Natalia explains how in Georgia, some anti-crisis plans existed to support businesses and organisations financially. However, she argues, those plans are only aimed at the formal sector (interview 7, 20-05-2021). In Russia, clear evidence points out that state-organised NGOs did receive such support, as well as tax relief and privileges over other NGOs (Benderson & Semonov, 2020). This means that many HRDs have been excluded from receiving such support, and are therefore much more vulnerable to economic setbacks.

Besides private and national funds, most HRDs and their organisations are reliant on international funding. COVID-19 often meant a setback for those funds, too. Therefore, Aleksei explains, many funds aimed at HRDs were temporarily closed or restructured. For example, two funds he previously worked with closed their grant applications this year (interview 8, 03-06-2021). On top of that come the restrictions of ‘foreign agent’ laws or similar legislation installed throughout the region, making it harder or nearly impossible to receive international funding in the first place. As seen in 5.3.2 and explained by the respondents, especially now individuals can be targeted by the law in Russia, HRDs are left with little means to counteract these risks. Adding insult to this injury, Natalia (interview 1, 13-04-2021) sees that travel restrictions take away one of their last funding opportunities, as I will explain in the next section.

#### 6.1.5 Effects of travel restrictions

The decrease in options to mitigate risks (see section 6.1.7) are in part due to the travel restrictions. Travel restrictions are measures deserving a separate section as travelling is such an important part of human rights defenders. Traveling is said to be a way to find a break from suppression, rest, get funding, meet partners, report and talk openly about violations, harmful legislation and misleadership, among other things. Examples of the effects of travel restrictions are given below.

Firstly, Aleksei and Natalia argue that travel restrictions and the inability to temporarily escape the tensions at home impede their ability to avoid the stresses of the situation, and this makes it harder to continue to work effectively (interview 1, 13-04-2021; interview 8, 03-06-2021). *“If there was three trips in a year [for HRDs] that was an opportunity to decrease your burn-out. But this and last year were without any of those trips.”* Aleksei exemplifies (interview 8, 03-06-2021). Natasha, too, would like to escape the constant risks of working in Russia, and without travel restrictions would have been able to partake in temporary relocation and relieve the stress (interview 5, 06-05-2021).

Secondly, the closing of international borders meant the isolation of human rights defenders. According to Anna, the Belarusian measures concerning the selective closing of borders meant that CSOs, including HRDs and journalists, are currently trapped inside the country and left to the authorities’ arbitrariness (personal communication, 08-07-2021). Vice versa, around the elections, the same selectiveness meant that international observers were unable to get into the country to monitor the situation (interview 1, Natalia, 13-04-2021; interview 6, Svitlana, 07-05-2021).

Thirdly, travel bans have their economic implications, too. Natalia explains how traveling is a way to secure the much needed foreign funds from international organisations,



which are often based in Europe. During the pandemic, it became hard to receive money for two reasons. One being the 'foreign agents law', which impedes electronic money transfer, and the other being the impossibility to travel and acquire funding in cash (interview 1, Nataliia, 13-04-2021).

Fourth, internationally closed borders also caused difficulties in ensuring beneficiaries' safety, Zara explains. In different times, her beneficiaries are often relocated abroad during ongoing lawsuits. The severity of this can be clearly seen in one of her examples where a beneficiary was relocated within Russia, and was visited by her former husband and other men (interview 2, Zara, 28-04-2021).

Lastly, the closing of internal borders had its impact on HRDs' work, too. In some cases, it was impossible for HRDs to conduct their tasks, or to respond adequately to the demands of the pandemic. Guliaim and her organisation were, for example, unable to help women in other parts of the country, even those living just on the other side of the border, and were only able to offer their help online (interview 4, 30-04-2021). Zara sees her colleagues struggling with their usual work due to the closing of Chechnya's borders, meaning her colleagues couldn't visit clients or attend court hearings taking place in other regions (interview 2, 28-04-2021).

#### 6.1.6 Effects of street action bans

The effects of COVID-19 and the measures taken are visible in human rights work involving expression and assembly, such as in activism. The measures banning street action are therefore an important disruption of my respondents' work. In section 5.2.3 I already discussed what these measures look like. Here I will show in what ways the measures impact the work of my respondents.

The organisation of street actions, marches, demonstrations and the like, is a core activity of several HRDs and in other cases a smaller but vital part of their work. Aleksei, for example, has been arrested multiple times, in spite of his press card, and was investigated about his accusation of organising some of those rallies. A house raid after one demonstration has cost him his electronics, needed for his work, and the subsequent trials have cost him much time and effort (interview 8, 03-06-2021). These events have made Aleksei more cautious in his work. Anna, sees her colleagues and friends, who attended the anti-government protests in Belarus to report the events, visibly wearing clothes marked with 'press', are being arrested, investigated and accused of taking part in or organising unauthorised protests (interview 3, 28-04-2021), a risk she is not exempt from.

To Nataliia, Guliaim and Natasha, events - including on public streets - are an important part of their work as well (interviews 1, 4 and 5). For them, it is perhaps the most important way to get across their message to a broader audience. Measures and interventions of authorities against street actions have thus blocked them from executing their core tasks.

#### 6.1.7 Increasing risks / decreasing options

A large portion of the effects on human rights defenders has to do with the increasing risks of simply being an HRD. While these risks arguably increased during the pandemic, the range of approaches to cope with those risks simultaneously decreased. These include the restrictions on travel and street action (as discussed above and in section 5.2), among other measures. Here I will exemplify how my respondents felt that the risks of their work were increasing and their options decreasing.

That the risks of being a human rights defender have been aggravated due to COVID-19 was made apparent by multiple respondents. For instance, the educational laws installed in Russia have made most aspects of Natasha's work nearly impossible, as the bulk of her work is either organising events or offering educational programmes in general (interview 5, 06-05-2021). To give another example, Nataliia explains how measures such as the 'foreign agents' law have gotten a strong basis in federal law, thanks to the referendum, meaning it is easier to convict HRDs and impose harsher penalties. Moreover, the enshrining of these laws made the work not only more risky, but also made it harder to assess those risks (interview 1, 13-04-2021). Lastly, as mentioned in section 5.3.4, "other measures", in general, were mostly imposed with the intent of chilling CSOs efforts. In an attempt to stifle HRDs, these were thus intended to increase their risks.

The combination of increasing risks and decreasing options means that my respondents are being forced to make some important decisions. Anna, for example, explains that in order to continue her work, she is required to accept the risks. She knows the austerity of the risks, but the only way to avoid those is to stop her HR work entirely, because there are not many options to mitigate those risks (Interview 3, Anna, 28-04-2021). Zara, although sometimes fantasising a normal life, is determined to continue as a human rights lawyer and, despite the continued risks and exhaustion, still follows her vocation to fight for human rights (interview 2, 28-04-2021). Finally, Guliaim admits that the situation has gotten worse for her work and women's rights in her country, and also feels that the future could be worse (interview 4, 30-04-2021).

#### 6.1.8 Mitigating factors

The many examples above provide a staggering account of the negative impacts of the measures taken because of and/or during the COVID-19 pandemic in HRDs' work. It goes without saying that it has made the work of my respondents much more challenging, to say the least.

However, my respondents all prove to be able to continue to make a difference through their work, regardless of the negative impacts they faced since the start of the pandemic. In fact, some respondents provided examples of positive sides to the situation, or aspects that at least mitigated part of the negative effects. Some respondents even look back at the entire period to see some great achievements.

Some respondents said that they felt that the main aspects and goals of their work did not change much. Despite increasing risks and decreasing options to deal with those risks, Nataliia for instance says she was able to continue her work (interview 1, 13-04-2021). Guliaim argues that, looking back, the pandemic's effects were not large for herself and her family, nor for her society. Apart from the time when the emergency regime was at its most stringent, life goes on. *"People don't sit at home [...] everybody needs to work, needs to do something to survive"* (interview 4, Guliaim, 30-04-2021). Svitlana explains that life goes on for HRDs as well as the programmes they are involved in. Shelter City Tbilisi, Svitlana exemplifies, continued its programme despite the COVID-19 outbreak, as the need for their services did not suddenly stop. Thus, the programme continued as planned as far as this was possible under the measures (interview 6, 07-05-2021).

Nino explains their responsibilities to their beneficiaries and donors meant that they had to continue most of their activities as scheduled. They managed to keep the office open and therefore worked hybridly, both online as offline, making the work feel quite normal. She explains that they adapted to the COVID-19 "lifestyle" and made the most of it. Plus, Nino explains, their organisation was already experienced with dealing with instability, because of

the wars in the recent past and political instability. “we actually have the skills of being adaptive to new situations and new challenges, and maybe we are not that vulnerable [because of this]” (interview 7, Nino and Natalia, 20-05-2021). Others were ready for a changing environment, too. Working online, for example, was not an issue for Natalia, who used to work online before, as she was travelling a lot and did not have a physical office (interview 1, 13-04-2021). Gulaiam (interview 4, 30-04-2021) was prepared to step up their social media efforts, as they had already been using and expanding their social media networks.

Zara feels that, at the end of the day, the impacts on her work were not that large. “We managed [to do] all the things, and I don’t feel like it has a bad experience on our work.” (interview 2, Zara, 28-04-2021). Besides having to work online, she explains that they did their work as before, with just some small adjustments or postponing some activities until measures eased. “We did great work during this COVID” she explains, as they had a lot of positive decisions from the European Court of Human Rights.

Unfortunately, the positive examples given here do not make up for the negative effects, and it is a fact that other HRDs, the 4 respondents unmentioned in this section, do not see any improvements to their environment. Nevertheless, this last section does show the resilience of human rights defenders, who, even with their lives turned upside down, are able to find ways to keep making a difference. Those ways, or strategies to adapt to the changing civil society space, will be discussed in chapter 7.

## 6.2 Effects on society

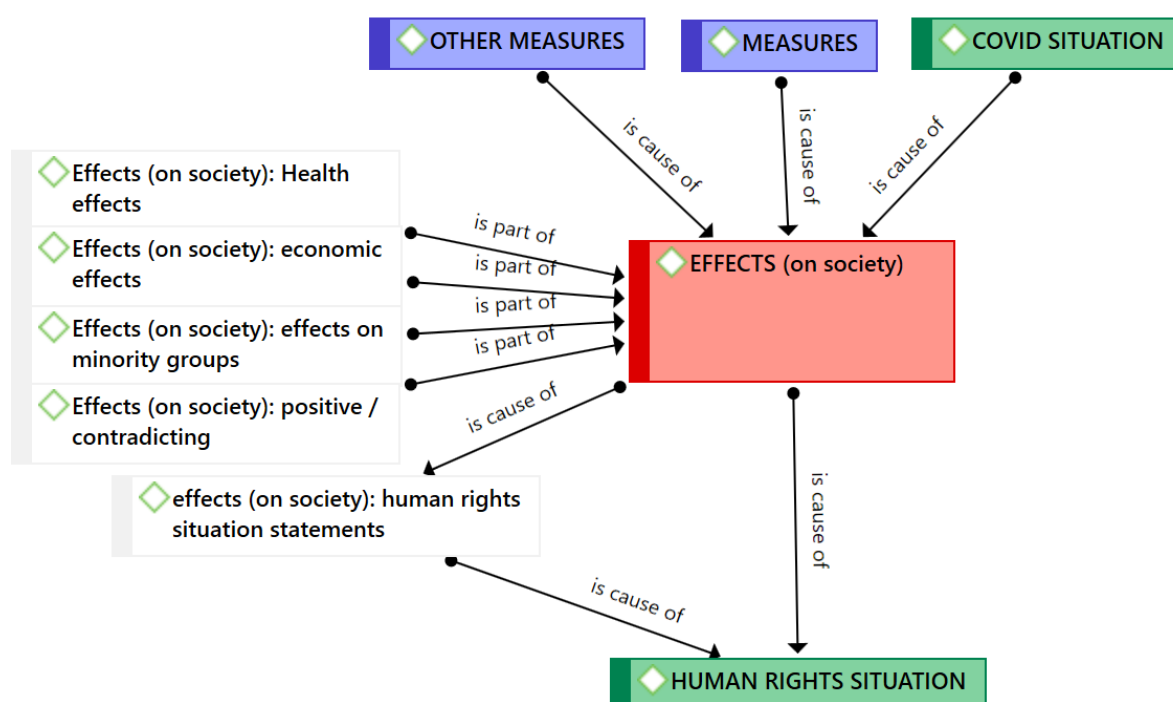


Figure 6.3: Effects on Society and subcategories

The figure shows the place of the category ‘Effects on society’ within the larger network as well as the subcategories of codes discussed in this section. ‘Human rights situation statements’ entails a group of codes that describe linkages between these effects of

measures on human rights situation; these linkages will be discussed in section 6.3. For the purposes of this chapter 'Human rights situation' is shown in this figure as a dependent variable, while it is simultaneously an independent variable, as we see in the general overview (figure 6.1) and chapter 2.

### 6.2.1 Health effects

The outbreak of COVID-19 often came with exponentially increasing cases, often flooding underprepared healthcare systems. Despite regional differences, the impact on healthcare was immense throughout the region (interview 2, 28-04-2021; interview 4, 30-04-2021; interview 6, 07-05-2021). Zara adds that while overfull COVID wards were very demanding of the healthcare system, other fields of medicine came to a halt due to lockdown measures. She explains how many more have suffered and even died from the lack of regular healthcare. Natalia (interview 7, 20-05-2021) explains how leaders knowingly sacrificed the health and lives of citizens in favour of the narrative and political choices, including the retraction of lockdown measures around the Georgian elections.

Measures taken in response to the pandemic have had an effect on mental health. Not only on that of HRDs, as described in 6.1, but also on other members of society, Zara explains. People fear the disease and are not able to trust the government to protect them, people suffer from additional stress of lockdown measures and feel the increasing repression (interview 2, Zara, 28-04-2021).

The impact on people's health arose from another direction, too. Generally, lockdown measures meant literal hunger for a large number of people. Zara explains how in some regions, and for poorer people in rich regions too, lockdown measures meant that people were unable to earn money and buy food (interview 2, 28-04-2021). Nino sees people losing income, shelter and food due to lockdown measures in Georgia. In Kyrgyzstan, emergency measures and hermetically closed cities meant people, with already little to spend and no savings, were dependent on volunteers and donations for their groceries (interview 4, Guliam, 30-04-2021).

### 6.2.2 Economic effects on society

Issues such as hunger could also be seen as a seemingly extreme exponent of the economic effects which the pandemic and crisis-motivated measures have on the region's economy and on the financial situation of many individuals in society.

Svitlana argues that most countries' economies suffered from economic stagnation due to lockdown measures (interview 6, 07-05-2021). Natalia explains that the Georgian economy was already weak, which was a reason why the government could not provide sufficient help to save many local or smaller businesses (interview 7, 20-05-2021). The same has been said about other economies in the region by most respondents, as they experienced themselves (see section 6.1.4). According to respondents, the closing of businesses during the quarantine period was detrimental for the service or tourism oriented economies in the region, and meant a lot of people lost their jobs (interview 2, 28-04-2021; interview 4, 30-04-2021).

Anti-crisis plans, or monetary compensations installed by governments were often considered lacking and "*gender-blind*" (interview 7, 20-05-2021) and large regional differences meant it was even worse in poorer countries or sub-regions (interview 2, 28-04-2021). One example of this is Kyrgyzstan: *"I think now, the people and the government could not afford another quarantine. It could not give people any money or even*

*something to eat [...].*” (interview 4, Guliam, 30-04-2021). Lastly, such monetary compensations, even where governments were able to afford them, were not effective as they often only reached the region’s formal sector (interview 7, 20-05-2021), which is problematic since many individuals in the region depend on informal and temporary work.

### 6.2.3 Effects for minority groups

Respondents generally argue that the effects of COVID-19 and crisis response do not hit everyone equally, but instead have a disproportionate effect on their beneficiaries, who are often part of minority groups. Crisis measures, often drafted and implemented swiftly as a result of the high sense of urgency, turn out to be inconsiderate of minority groups or have unequal effects on them.

First, it goes without saying that persons with weaker health are more vulnerable to the disease, and are less able than others to continue their lives and work. Zara sees her older clients struggling and living in more fear than usual (interview 2, 28-04-2021). For them, the risks on COVID-19 infections they might face in prison are disproportionate, and the situation in prisons in the region is often said to be dire because of COVID-19 outbreaks (interview 8, Aleksei, 03-06-2021; IPHR, 2020b).

Secondly, Guliam explains how women are harmed especially by lockdown measures for several reasons. Her organisation called out the increased cases of domestic violence, as women and girls are stuck in one house and restrictions of movement prevent them from finding a safe place. Adding to the injury is the fact that the (minimal) aid provided by the government did not keep in mind gender differences, which urged Guliam’s organisation to provide women’s sanitary kits for instance (interview 4, 30-04-2021). Nino and Natalia (interview 7, 20-05-2021) explain how the LGBTQI community is impacted disproportionately, too. Most noticeably economically, as most members have informal jobs which did not provide them with any security or social guarantees.

Natasha (interview 5, 06-05-2021) explains how in principle all minority groups are facing the same crisis-motivated measures as a result of indiscriminate lockdown measures. They face the same restrictions as other citizens, however, for minorities these restrictions are added to an already long list of repression aimed against them.

### 6.2.4 Positive (or mitigating) effects

During the interviews, I have tried to ask whether any positive sides can be identified during the pandemic. Not many examples were found, but there have been at least some positive effects to society, or mitigating factors, according to the respondents. Firstly, Zara mentions, the medical sector has finally gotten the respect they deserve. She sees that some medical professionals have seen their salary increase during the pandemic and she hopes that this is a permanent effect of COVID-19 (interview 2, 28-04-2021). Guliam argues that a positive effect is that, in Kyrgyzstan at least, people learnt to mobilize themselves. According to her, society proved not to be entirely dependent on the government. For instance, the Kyrgyz government’s response was, despite the stringent emergency measures, insufficient to handle the medical care. People mobilized themselves to help provide medical care, provide and distribute food, and gathered funding to purchase oxygen concentrators (interview 4, Guliam, 30-04-2021).

A mitigating aspect might be that the effects of COVID-19 and governments’ responses knew large regional differences (interview 6, 07-05-2021). The effects described in this section are therefore perhaps not as bad in all countries and subregions. Zara

explains how the inequality between regions meant that some poorer regions within Russia took less intrusive measures than Moscow or St. Petersburg for example, as regional leaders recognised their citizens would not be able to afford them (interview 2, 28-04-2021). Unfortunately, respondents did not mention more positive effects on society, and instead focused largely on the negative effects they observe on human rights in the region, which will be discussed in the following section.

### 6.3 Discussion: consequences for human rights situation and CSS

COVID-19 and the measures taken during the pandemic appear to have significant effects on HRDs and society, as evidence in this chapter provides. There is a lot of differentiation between one human rights defender to the next, as well as between the perceived impacts of the measures on their work. Most respondents, although not all, have been able to pursue their work. Sometimes they even found the chance to advance human rights, despite the increasing pressures and risks. Societies, too, proved to be resilient. Generally speaking, however, negative impacts on HRDs and society, in turn, seem to have a negative impact on human rights situation and civil society space in the region. Below, I will explain how, by connecting the findings to the theoretical debate.

The effects of COVID-19 and of measures taken in response to the 'crisis', are often seen to add to pre-existing pressures. By adding insult to injury, the human rights situation worsens. Nino explains that in case of the LGBTQI community, developments were already becoming critical, like the rise of homophobic attitudes and discrimination. For the community, the COVID-19 situation was just "[...] *one additional crisis situation*." (interview 7, 20-05-2021). To the Kyrgyz society, too, the pandemic was just one of many crises going on in their lives, apart from the first months of the emergency regime (interview 4, Guliam, 30-04-2021). This finding, that the COVID-19 often feels like 'one crisis upon many other crises', corresponds with the argument that underlying societal flaws become more apparent during crisis situations, as argued by Otto (2011). One crisis may, thus, exacerbate the underlying problems or 'crises', or at least make them more tangible.

Furthermore, we saw in this chapter how measures led to violations to core human rights and the neglect of universal freedoms. As predicted (see relevance) and as theory suggests (see chapter 2), the limitations installed in response to COVID-19 affect fundamental freedoms and often lead to human rights violations. As we saw earlier, few countries in the region filed official declarations of emergency, which would have granted states permission to temporarily derogate from protecting some human rights, such as the freedom of movement (Greene, 2020). That being said, all states installed measures, often to great extent (as explained in 5.2), and have therefore consciously violated human rights or forfeited their responsibility to protect those rights.

A clear example of how crisis measures lead to derogation can be found in Guliam's example (interview 4, 30-04-2021), where women's rights were insufficiently protected during the lockdown measures and militarily enforced restriction of movement in Kyrgyzstan. Other governments forfeited the protection of universal freedoms too, when limiting press freedom in Belarus for example (interview 3, Anna, 28-04-2021), when limiting the freedom of movement with lockdown measures (see 5.2.1), or when limiting the freedoms of expression, assembly and association by banning street actions (see sections 5.2.3 and 6.1.6). The latter three freedoms being at the basis of civil society space (Buyse, 2019).

Additionally, these violations were not properly addressed within the international community. A consequence of COVID-19 on human rights in the region, according to Svitlana, was that attention from the international community diminished. As the management of COVID-19 was prioritised by governments and organisations globally, there was arguably less attention for human rights. As an example, Svitlana explains how all conferences were done online. According to her, this resulted in hollow statements, no real agreements, and no real dedication to prevent or denounce human rights violations during the pandemic (interview 6, 07-05-2021). The lack of international concern for the protection of human rights, at this crucial time, might thus also have contributed to the worsening of the human rights situation. This fits the idea that the pandemic provides governments with a smokescreen, blinding the international community (Gilbert, 2019) for the misuses committed by governments, which in turn decreases the perceived costs of violations making governments more likely to violate human rights (Schmitz & Sikkink, 2013).

Through their effects on the human rights situation, the effects of crisis measures on HRDs and society appear to culminate in the shrinking of civil society space. First of all, 'other' measures have been installed purposefully to reduce criticism and effectively reduce civil society space, as previously argued (section 5.4). It is more difficult to argue whether crisis-motivated measures are likewise intended to shrink CSS or to have a chilling effect on CSOs. Notwithstanding, respondents have explained that these measures too, in effect, impede the operating space for human rights defenders. This influence is portrayed most evidently in section 6.1.5. There, it is explained that crisis-motivated measures greatly limit HRDs options to respond to the changing environment and protect their operating space.

The findings presented in this chapter appear to prove that the many effects of COVID-19 indeed constitute limitations to civil society space. This was the effect hypothesised in the introduction (CIVICUS, 2020; Kaye, 2020) and warned for in the literature discussed in chapter 2 (e.g. Van der Borgh & Terwindt, 2014; Sogge, 2019). The limitation of the fundamental freedoms that form the basis of civil society (Buyse, 2019), accompanied by the increased risks facing HRDs (as mentioned by the respondents), together contribute to a clearly shrinking civil society space in the FSU.

## 7. Defending civil society space

In this chapter, I present the findings regarding the last of this research's three sub questions: *What strategies are, or could be, employed by human rights defenders in response to the measures and shrinking civil society space?* The first section therefore delves into the strategies mentioned by the respondents to deal with a changing environment and with the direct effects of measures taken by governments. It then presents some challenges to implementing those strategies. In the second section the potential of these strategies to maintain, reshape or expand civil society space is discussed, again by holding the findings up to the light of the theoretical framework.

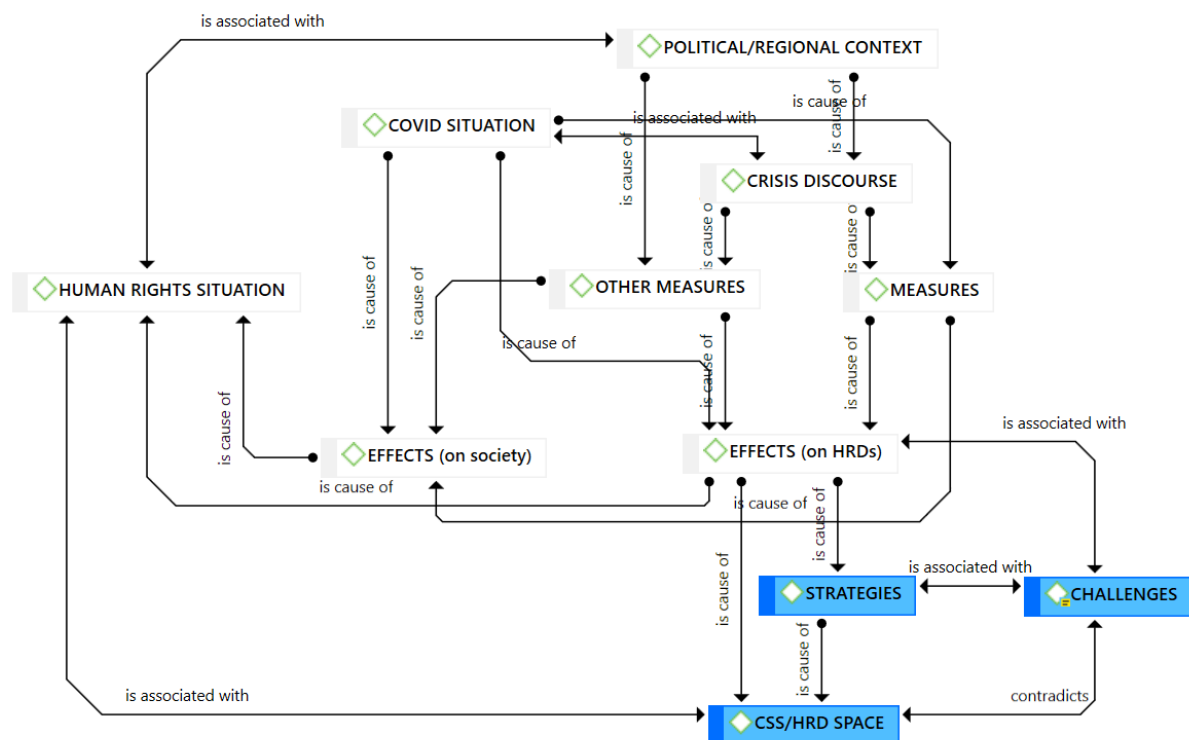


Figure 7.1: Chapter overview. Highlighted (light blue); the categories discussed in chapter 7

The overview above shows how human rights defenders respond to the effect of measures and the COVID-19 situation by taking up diverse strategies. It makes clear, as assumed in the theoretical framework and shown in the conceptual model (figure 2.1), that these strategies are aimed to maintain or even expand civil society space. The code groups of 'strategies', 'challenges', 'effects on HRDs' and 'CSS/HRD space' are highly interwoven. Most notably 'challenges' and 'effects on HRDs' are hard to split apart, still, this chapter's focus is on factors that challenge the implementation of the strategies specifically, as the more general effects on HRDs have already been discussed in chapter 6.



## 7.1 Strategies to defend CSS in times of crisis

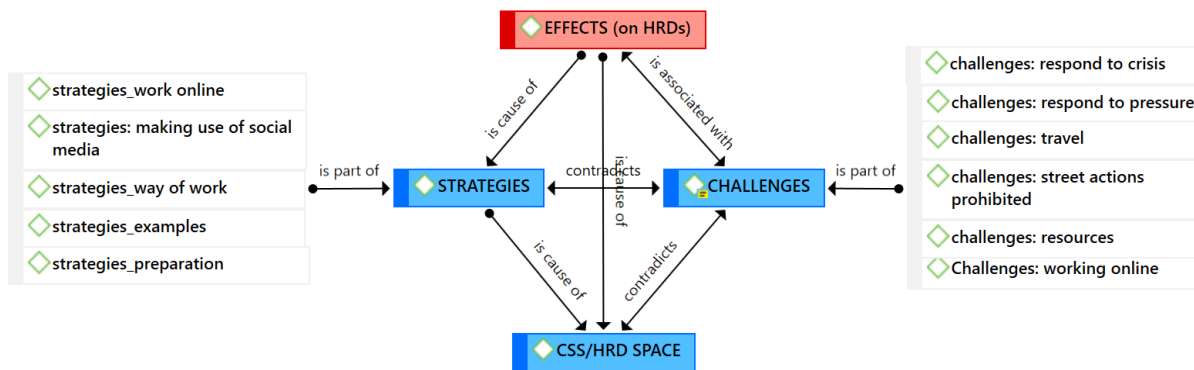


Figure 7.2: Strategies, challenges and sub-categories / codes

This first section goes over the examples discussed with respondents under the sub-categories under 'strategies'. A list is provided of all strategies used by the respondents. Figures 7.1, and 7.2 again, show the strong link between strategies and effects on HRDs, and their strong effect on CSS. The latter hopefully being a positive relation, despite the challenges mentioned in 7.1.4. That will be discussed in the second part of this chapter.

### 7.1.1 Working online and using social media

Most respondents have started to do much or all of their work online. Measures such as the closing of businesses, schools, but also cafes and the like, have meant that alternatives had to be sought in order for HRDs to keep operating effectively and safely. Although it could be argued that moving activities online was forced by the measures, many respondents proactively embraced this change. Therefore this is presented as part of the set of strategies employed by human rights defenders to remain effective and maintain their operating space. Additionally, social media offered a range of possibilities, too, which many HRDs welcomed during and after lockdown.

The first of many positive aspects of working online is that it basically helped to continue human rights work, as most physical locations were closed at some point, and travelling to those locations was prohibited at the height of lockdown measures, too. Online work made organising events possible, in spite of measures prohibiting the assembly of larger groups of people. Nataliia, Zara, Gulaim, Natasha and Svitlana all explicitly mention the benefits of attending and organising online events. In some cases, the availability of online events meant respondents were able to attend events, such as trainings, they wouldn't normally spend time or resources on (interview 6, 07-06-2021). Natasha explains how online events have been a good placeholder now street actions were prohibited due to crisis measures (interview 5, 06-06-2021). Where the freedom of speech is being restricted, online platforms offer a place for free communication. As of yet, those online platforms are not monitored and curtailed as much as other media (interview 4, Gulaim, 30-04-2021). For these reasons, some hope that working online and online events will be part of their work in the future (e.g. interview 1, Nataliia, 13-04-2021).

Secondly, it is argued that working online might save money and time which is normally spent on travel expenses and entry fees (interview 6, Svitlana, 07-04-2021). Svitlana also argues that it is advantageous for raising funds as transnational organisations can be reached quicker and easier. Mind, however, that there are many arguments made

against the advantages of working online (see 7.1.4). Still, in general, the positive aspects make this strategy attractive beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, and many respondents are eager to find a balance between on- and offline activity, now and in the future (interview 1, 13-04-2021; interview 4, 30-04-2021; interview 7, 20-05-2021).

Besides continuing their regular work in an online environment, respondents indicated to make good use out of the possibilities offered by online platforms and social media. Most respondents explain that they employed social media techniques in their work before the pandemic (interview 4, Guliaim, 30-04-2021; interview 5, Natasha; interview 7, Nino and Natalia, 20-05-2021; interview 8, Aleksei, 03-06-2021). Yet, they often explained how the pandemic required and motivated them to make more effective use of them. Aleksei explains how they already used to promote their actions and disseminate reports through the internet to reach their audience, *“but”*, he says: *“[...] now freedom of media is becoming less, but young people don’t want to watch TV, they use Youtube or TikTok. We [started to make] more effective use of these strategies of communication so we can reach [more] people.”* (interview 8, 03-06-2021). Guliaim knows their outreach has increased much since they started using social media. As an organisation of only a few individuals, they have the possibility, through social media, to reach women and girls from all over the country, far beyond the capital (interview 4, 30-04-2021). Lastly, some respondents explain they want to make more extensive use of social media in the future. Nataliaia explains she plans to educate herself to make the most out of online communication (interview 1, 13-04-2021).

### 7.1.2 Diverse strategies

During the interviews, a lot of attention was given to the topic of working online. Still, other strategies through which they dealt with the situation were also given by respondents. To help themselves and their colleagues, respondents suggested, tried and successfully employed diverse tactics.

The first is something that seems obvious, is hard to do, yet is important to adhere to in order to carry out the tasks during demanding times. This strategy is essentially: staying positive. As explained in chapter 6, mental issues like fatigue, burn-out and depression are constant threats to the work of HRDs. Despite all negativity, including the COVID-19 situation, it is important to try to stay positive, says Natasha (interview 5, 06-05-2021). Nino (interview 7, 20-05-2021) explains secondary stress is common in their field of work, working with people whose rights are being violated, and therefore thinking about emotional security is important, although not unavoidable. Natasha explains she tries to maintain positivity through sports, for instance.

The second strategy or approach mentioned is self-mobilisation. Guliaim explains how it is important, as a society and as a social movement, to act proactively and not wait on governments to respond. She explains how, in Kyrgyzstan, the self-mobilisation of members of society prevented a larger toll on people’s health and lives because they stepped up to help with medical care, collect funding for medical appliances and provide food for others, tasks which the government was unwilling or unable to fulfil (interview 4, 30-04-2021). Similarly, her organisation self-mobilised to help women and girls, whom the government would never have considered.

Wherever freedom of speech is at stake, one strategy provided by Anna, is to check facts as much as possible. To avoid being targeted by authorities as a critical journalist, one might choose to avoid making political statements or show an opinion, and fact-checking might be the safest way to continue to work (interview 3, Anna, 28-04-2021). She continues to add that for this strategy to work, one must accept that there are still risks, simply for

doing human rights work. Knowing and accepting the risks is therefore also part of the set of strategies.

Collaboration is also heard as a way to remain effective in protecting human rights and spreading the message. Nino and Nataliia argue that to resist the political agenda and maintain their ideological values, their organisation can best collaborate with other groups that are marginalised or targeted by that political agenda (interview 7, 20-05-2021).

In times of high uncertainty and unpredictability of the situation, as measures change under the arbitrariness of authorities, flexibility and resilience are much heard strategies. Respondents explain, in order to stay on track and reach their long-term goals despite those changes, they have to adapt quickly and creatively (interviews 2, 4, 6, 7 and 8). Sometimes, Nino says, this resilience is simply required because of standing responsibilities towards donors (interview 7, 20-05-2021).

Nataliia explains how this pandemic has shown the importance of being prepared for sudden changes (interview 1, 13-04-2021). She points out the importance of having a proper internet connection (in case new crises demand working online again) and to save money (in case fundraising becomes impossible or you lose your income). Personally, Nataliia thinks having documents ready to get a visa would help her in order to avoid stress and new pressures in the future.

### 7.1.3 Rethinking and changing way of work

The last cluster of answers, which could be seen as one strategy, is about using the break from the usual everyday life and work to rethink human rights work. Aleksei explains how the current pandemic has been problematic for many HRDs to continue their work as usual, and forced them to change their work (interview 8, 03-06-2021). For Natasha it was evident they had to change their advocacy work, as physical events and actions - her core business - were cancelled (interview 5, 06-05-2021). Nataliia notes that many of these changes will be lasting, for example the way they organise meetings and demonstrations in the future (interview 1, 13-04-2021). Aleksei explains that COVID-19 might signify a historical point. *"It's the end of the previous period. A lot of previous methods cannot be used anymore as they form a lot of danger."* (interview 8, 03-06-2021).

Additionally, besides stressing the need for changes, the situation has simply given Aleksei more time to finally think about their tactics, the activities they do, their priorities and to think about their security plans. Topics which are normally forgotten or postponed because of all ongoing activities (interview 8, 03-06-2021). Svitlana (interview 6, 07-05-2021) also sees the pandemic as a window of opportunity for this reason. Comparably, Guliam (interview 4, 30-04-2021) believes it might be a suitable time to think about the direction their organisation is moving in. Nino and Nataliia (interview 7, 20-05-2021) explain how they are now thinking about their organisation's image and long term vision.

The strategies discussed in this section are diverse and hard to fit under one or several categories. Nonetheless, these strategies are all examples of good practice, and can at least serve as inspiration for others. Together, these strategies could be seen as a (non-exhaustive) repertoire of tactics for human rights defenders, and CSOs in a broader sense, to employ in response to attempts at shrinking civil society space. It must be noted, however, that the effectiveness of these depends on many factors, including the actor's field of work, location specifics, and the nature of the threat or 'crisis' at hand. The effectiveness is further subject to the challenges in play (see next section).

Using online possibilities and social media	Resilience and flexibility
Staying positive and ensuring mental security	Conducting fact checking
Knowing and accept risks	Preparing for future crises
Self-mobilisation	Rethinking ways of working
Collaboration	

Figure 7.3: List of (potential) strategies mentioned

#### 7.1.4 Challenges to defend CSS in times of crisis

After discussing the strategies, it is important to mention the different factors that stymie the implementation of the strategies mentioned above. There is an overlap between many of the factors discussed here and effects discussed in the previous chapters, the difference being that the following examples are specifically mentioned by respondents in relation to the aforementioned strategies.

First off all there are much heard concerns about working online. One fact is that it is unmotivating to work online, often from home, and not being able to see colleagues, partners or beneficiaries in person. This might even lead to mental health concerns (see 6.1.2; interview 1, Nataliia, 13-04-2021). This concern is aggravated when respondents do not have a suitable workplace (interview 2, Zara, 28-04-2021, interview 6, Svitlana, 07-05-2021). Concerns about working online also count for beneficiaries, who might have no safe space to be able to talk online, or in other cases simply do not have reliable internet connections (interview 1, 13-04-2021). Another argument made is that offline work is more productive (interview 7, Nino and Natalia, 20-05-2021). It is for these challenges that most respondents feel the need to balance on- and offline work.

Secondly, the strategy of employing social media is challenged, too. Social media is arguably being increasingly monitored and curtailed by states. For example we see how freedom of expression is limited on social media platforms. Critics of governments or their measures on social media platforms have been sentenced for dissent or the dissemination of fake news in the region (IPHR, 2020f). Guliaim said that she is keen on using social media, as it is currently still a sphere left alone by the Kyrgyz authorities, although she does expect that her state can start restricting online space in the future (interview 4, 30-04-2021).

Thirdly, respondents mention challenges that have to do with adapting to the situation, rearranging or rethinking their work, and their resilience and flexibility. Nino and Natalia explain how responding to the situation created a managerial challenge. They were overwhelmed by the amount of requests for help, while they had limited capacity and grants available to help all who were left without incomes, food or homes. This led to a challenge for them to balance their long term responsibilities and the new work, such as emergency support to their beneficiaries (interview 7, 20-05-2021).

Nino and Natalia continue their list of challenges with some facing their strategies of collaborating and rethinking their way of work. They explain that these strategies are pragmatic tools, and they might have to make decisions that do not make them popular amongst their constituents and collaborating partners whenever this is better for their organisation. *“Our aim is to bring real societal changes, and not to play other people’s games”* (Nino, interview 7, 20-05-2021). The strategies shouldn’t distract from their core

values, and they have to resist the stress to compromise while maintaining their agency (interview 7, 20-05-2021).

Fourth, the strategy of fact-checking is challenged by an increased crackdown on independent media and ‘fake news’ laws. Anna explains that fact checking can be an effective measure, up to the point where truth does not seem to matter to the authorities. Checking and disseminating facts, which do not correspond with the ‘facts’ maintained by the government, can be used as a premise to arrest and detain journalists and HRDs (interview 3, Anna, 28-04-2021).

Lastly, additional challenges to implementing strategies could be described as summarized in chapter 6, section 6.1.7 on ‘increasing risks / decreasing options’. In response to my question regarding the challenges to implement their strategies, respondents often referred to, or repeated, the effects of the measures in regard to increasing their risks and restricting their options to work effectively. For instance, respondents mention how travel restrictions (e.g. interview 1, Nataliia, 13-04-2021), the ban on street actions (e.g. interview 4, Guliam, 30-04-2021) or a lack of resources (interview 5, Natasha, 06-05-2021; interview 8, Aleksei, 03-06-2021) all impede their ability to respond to the situation. These factors thus form both restrictive effects on HRDs, as well as challenges to implement their strategies.

Some respondents observe that these challenges can in some cases indeed obstruct the implementation of strategies. Zara feels that, even when she and her colleagues do everything they can and use all the tools or strategies within reach, it just doesn’t always work out as planned. This is disheartening, and yet another cause of the stress and depression they face (interview 2, 28-04-2021). To adapt and resist the pressure is not a possibility in all cases, it thus seems to some HRDs. Anna sees no room for positive change, and feels that at this point, hoping and waiting for opportunities is the only option. She explains that, at this moment: *“if you just try to change something - to say [any]thing against the official position - that is your ticket to prison.”* (interview 3, 28-04-2021). The strategies discussed in this section might thus fall short in some cases of repression in the region.

## 7.2 Discussion: maintaining and expanding CSS

The strategies provided in this chapter are attempts of HRDs to continue their work, attain their goals and fight for their values. These are all, in a way, attempts to make use of their rights to freedom of expression, assembly and association, rights which are greatly affected by the measures and the situation (see section 6.3). These rights are at the basis of civil society space (Buyse, 2019). Thus, all strategies can be said to be aimed at expanding, or at least maintaining, HRDs’ operating space or CSS. By laying out the HRDs’ strategies, this chapter essentially exhibits the attempts of HRDs to protect CSS.

As mentioned, the examples in 7.1 make up a small selection of ‘good practices’ provided by my respondents, and may not form an exhaustive list of possible strategies. At least, this does give an insight into how the respondents have tried to deal with the impact of the measures and the situation in general.

The strategies arising from my respondents’ stories seem to fit the assumptions arising from the literature. In fact, the list of strategies compiled above (figure 7.3) links with, or shows resemblance to, the descriptions and recommendations of strategies in civil society literature. Van Tuijl (n.d.) provided strategies for NGOs to deal with what he calls a *“disabled environment”*. On the one hand, his strategy of ‘creative interpretation of the regulatory framework’ can be seen among HRDs, who show flexibility, self-mobilise outside the formal routes, and creatively rethink their ways of working. On the other hand, Van Tuijl’s

recommendation of ‘cooperation and alliance building’ is also mirrored in section 7.1, where collaboration with other CSOs, media and even political actors is mentioned.

In the literature, another set of strategies for CSOs to maintain or expand civil society space is given. Their success *“depends on regaining legitimacy of CSOs, sustaining momentum, transforming emergency response into political reform, and collaboration.”* (Barendsen, et al., 2020). Each of these is also seen in this chapter. Maintaining ‘legitimacy’ can be seen in HRDs’ struggle to stay true to their values, ‘sustaining momentum’ can be seen in the fact that all respondents moved their activities online, and also ‘collaboration’ is mentioned overtly as an important strategy. Only ‘transforming emergency response into political reform’ is not mentioned explicitly in the data. However, this may well be a long term plan for some HRDs, given that many respondents are ‘rethinking’ their work.

Rethinking the way of work, then, also fits the theoretical framework. More specifically, it fits the idea that the ‘break or brake’ provided by crises (Soja, 1989) opens up avenues for ‘effective social action’ (Soja, 2011). While Soja uses these terms to describe broader societal reconstruction processes, we may argue that these strategies show these happening on the personal and/or organisational scale.

It is also clearly reflected in the respondents’ strategies that new spaces or arenas are sought to work in, in favour of the old pathways and old arena’s which are already targeted by authorities. Sogge’s (2019) stance that civil society space is changing, rather than shrinking, is seen to be reflected here, most clearly in the move towards online work or social media.

The degree of success of HRDs to implement their strategies dictates the protection of civil society space from within civil society. The challenges shown in this chapter severely limit the HRDs in their capacity to implement their strategies and therefore add to the shrinkage of civil society space. Some of the challenges have also been described in literature. For example, the challenges to the move online and towards more extensive use of social media have been warned for in literature. Barendsen, Dargiewicz, Buyse and Van der Borgh (2020) see online censorship, including (partial) internet shutdowns and the fight over access to information as important and growing variables in shrinking civil society space. Moreover, the last paragraph of the previous section shows that, unfortunately, not all HRDs are currently in a position to implement strategies themselves.

This discussion, after laying out the observed strategies and evaluating these on the basis of the theoretical framework, shows how civil society actors, including human rights defenders, would benefit greatly from the successful implementation of strategies. Those strategies would either improve any or multiple civil freedoms or allow HRDs to find new ways to advocate human rights, and thus help them protect, expand or reshape civil society space.

## 8. Human rights defenders in crisis?

The stories of human rights defenders presented in this research show how protecting human rights in the former-Soviet region has become nearly Sisyphean. Trends towards less freedom, more risks, less tolerance and less respect for human rights appear to endanger human rights defenders. Now, COVID-19 has aggravated these trends and has made the work of defenders more difficult in a direct sense, as well as by serving as a pretext for governments to justify repression, human rights violations and the deliberate shrinking of civil society space. This research is focused on why and how crisis discourse affects measures, how measures affect society and human rights defenders, and how this - in turn - affects civil society space.

To remind the reader, this master's thesis is centered around the main question: *how are human rights defenders affected by crisis-motivated measures during the COVID-19 pandemic, and how do they respond to these measures?*

To answer this question, this thesis has focused on three sub questions which have been answered at the end of each of the analysis chapters (chapters 5, 6 and 7). In this final chapter, the answers to each sub question will be summarized before providing an answer to the main question by making the connections between the sub questions and the two theoretical concepts at the base of this thesis; civil society space and crisis discourse.

The second and third part of this chapter translate the findings of this research into recommendations while also taking into account the limitations of this research. These include suggestions destined for further research, as well as for practitioners - civil society actors, including human rights defenders - and recommendations for policy makers.

### 8.1 Conclusions

#### Impact on human rights defenders

This first sub conclusion provides an answer to the question *how human rights defenders perceive the influence of governments' measures taken during the COVID-19 pandemic on their work.*

The analysis shows that crisis, crisis discourse, and measures have grave effects on human rights defenders, as well as on society as a whole. Through increasing the workload, increasing the risk of fatigue or burn-out, forcing people to work at home, preventing travelling abroad, and economic effects, HRDs are hindered in executing their important work. Further increasing risks and decreasing options emerging, from these measures, form a great challenge to HRDs. Effects to society as a whole, as far as this research was able to uncover, include those on health, the economy, and had grave effects on minority groups.

This, in turn, has great consequences on the human rights situation in the region and on civil society space. This happens through several paths. First, it adds to existing pressures or reveals underlying flaws in society. The pandemic and the problems in its wake are often considered as being one crisis upon many other crises. Secondly, crisis-motivated measures lead to human rights violations as they limit the civil rights of freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, and freedom of association disproportionately. These rights are at the basis of civil society space, and limitation of these thus restrict CSS - intended or not. Lastly, 'other' measures are clearly seen to deliberately increase the risks of HRDs' work, target HRDs, and shrink civil society space.

## Crisis discourse and measures

After looking at the effects on human rights defenders, chapter 5 looked at the causes of those by describing the crisis narratives in the FSU and by looking into how crisis discourse made the measures possible. It provided an answer to the question: *what are human rights defenders' perceptions of the role of crisis discourse and its influence on measures taken during the pandemic?*

It is observed that few governments in the region maintain a narrative of crisis at all times, nor do most governments adhere to a narrative of outright denial. Most governments, however, are inconsistent or ambiguous in their crisis narratives. This is reflected in the measures taken during the pandemic. These measures correlate with the narratives. Crisis-motivated measures, as the term suggests, are implemented because of the COVID-19 pandemic, and justified using the crisis narrative or discourse. It is more difficult to explain whether 'other' measures - those measures or legislation implemented during the pandemic, but not in response to the situation - are made possible by crisis discourse.

Generally, however, 'other' measures appear to have been implemented more easily because of the pandemic and crisis discourse. This is made possible through an indirect effect of the pandemic, crisis discourse and crisis-motivated measures: because of reduced possibilities to speak out, report, and advocate against political decisions and legislation. These reduced possibilities are part of shrinking CSS. Crisis discourse thus eases the implementation of legislation by limiting civil society space. In turn, this legislation is, as shown in chapter 6, intended to shrink civil society space, creating a potential feedback loop (figure 5.5). Furthermore, 'other' measures seem to benefit from the distraction presented by the COVID-19 situation. This, in combination with the clever use of crisis narratives, provided governments with a 'window of opportunity' to implement the legislation and step up their repression in general.

Lastly, this inquiry resulted in data that supports the trends laid out in chapter 4, as well as the theoretical assumptions (see ch. 2). On the one hand, the results seem to prove that crisis discourse is being used as a 'technique of governance' (Lawrence, 2014). This can be found in the way narratives and measures are inconsistently yet pragmatically altered whenever authorities see fit. On the other hand, the many examples provided in the findings support the theory explaining that authorities restrict CSS out of a fear of losing their position of power. Ultimately, this fear for the potential political effects of the crisis shows that the crisis paradigm remains prevalent (e.g. Soja, 1989; Gilbert, 2019), and crises are still believed to mark major turning points or the end of eras.

## Strategies of human rights defenders

Having discussed both the sources of crisis measures and its effects on HRDs and CSS, an answer is provided for the last of three sub questions: *What strategies are, or could be, employed by human rights defenders in response to the measures and shrinking operating space?*

The interviews with human rights defenders reveal their stories, including their professional responses to the situation, the measures and to shrinking civil society space. In chapter 7, respondents' accounts result in a collection of good practices which can be used as examples for other civil society actors to respond to the current 'crisis', similar situations in the future, and shrinking civil society space in and outside the former-Soviet region. These good practices include the following strategies: using online possibilities and social media; resilience and flexibility; staying positive and ensuring mental security; conducting



fact-checking; knowing and accepting risks; preparing for future crises; self-mobilisation; rethinking ways of working, and; collaboration.

These good practices cover a large range of different aspects of human rights work. This is presumably due to the large differences between respondents in terms of activities, expertise and their local or national contexts. Still, there are parallels visible between the good practices and the strategies proposed in literature. Notably, the responses fit the idea that civil society can shift into new arenas to expand their operating space (Sogge, 2019). Moreover, Soja's notion that crises reveal new paths for effective social action is reflected in the much employed 'strategy' of rethinking ways of working (2011). It can be argued that all the strategies seen among the respondents are efforts of human rights defenders to protect, maintain, or expand civil society space. Successful implementation of these strategies would benefit HRDs and civil society greatly.

This research reveals that the warning signs presented in the introduction of this thesis were no hollow statements. To answer the main question, the analysis shows that the pandemic and the measures taken during this period profoundly impact human rights defenders in the former-Soviet region. It can be concluded that limitations to fundamental rights and freedoms culminate in a clearly shrinking civil society space. Moreover, it has become clear that crisis discourse plays an important role in this through its narratives and through the justification of hurtful and far-reaching measures.

It is evident that the work of HRDs has become even more challenging. Nevertheless, my respondents have managed to keep making a difference. The respondents show that there is a silver lining to the COVID-19 'crisis'. Through their creative implementation of strategies, civil society actors are able to make use of new avenues to achieve positive change.

## 8.2 Limitations

The conclusions above were drawn on the basis of the data collected through the interviews and a grounded theory analysis of that data. The methods, in combination with the circumstances in which this thesis has been written, offer some limitations which ought to be taken into account in the interpretation of the data and conclusions.

Firstly, the scope of this research was intentionally wide. To provide a transnational rather than national or local perspective, the (non-EU) former-Soviet countries were chosen as the region and scope of this research (see chapter 3). This could be a limitation because of the large regional differences, including differences in the domestic political context. This in itself would not form a problem as it allows for finding patterns across countries. However, this in combination with an unintentionally small number of respondents did pose some challenges. It was hard to provide a complete picture of the regional processes and context on the basis of eight interviews, although they each offered an elaborate picture of the situation in their country and region. Furthermore, the respondents did not represent all countries in the region, and were unequally distributed, overemphasizing Russia. Also, not all disciplines of human rights work were represented, with a majority of respondents working on women's and LGBTIQ rights, and only two journalists for example. These challenges to the sample size and distribution were due to several factors: the contact data used from Justice and Peace NL contained fewer potential respondents from the FSU than expected, non-response from ex-Shelter City guests in the Netherlands was high, as well as a low number of available English speaking (ex-) guests in Shelter City Tbilisi. Still, the

sample allowed sufficient stories to be gathered from a diverse group, and provided the grounds to understand the processes at hand.

Secondly, language differences and translation stood in the way to zoom in on crisis language during the interviews as well as the analysis. All interviews were conducted in English, which is not the first language of any of the respondents. One interview even made use of an interpreter (interview 5, Natasha, 06-05-2021). Terms like 'crisis' or 'narratives' could for example be interpreted differently than intended. As a geographer, I was not trained to recognise those linguistic nuances during the interviews or analysis. For example, one way in which language limited the collection of data was the inability to ask for examples of crisis language in the respondents' countries. This could have benefited the analysis in finding an answer to the role of crisis discourse for instance. Nonetheless, the answers to this sub question could be sought in the entirety of the interviews, between the lines of respondents' more general accounts, and for instance in cases where respondents spoke of political developments or the COVID-19 situation in their countries.

Thirdly and finally, time pressure during the interviews meant that less attention was given to HRDs' strategies, the challenges to implement them, and the efficacy of those strategies. Strategies were often described in more general terms and not explained in detail. For example, the much heard strategy of 'rethinking ways of working' were not concretised during the interviews, presumably because respondents were in the middle of the process of rethinking at the time. Despite the fact that respondents were still busy adapting to the situation and in the middle of devising strategies, they exhibited their rationales and provided practical examples of their responses; enough to be able to learn from them.

## 8.3 Recommendations

Keeping in mind the limitations, or perhaps also owing to the limitations (for future research in particular), some recommendations can be provided on the basis of this master's thesis research.

### 8.3.1 Recommendations for future research

This research has provided an attempt to describe the processes at the meeting point of crisis discourse and civil society. However, more research is needed to be able to explain those processes in depth. Furthermore, more stories of civil society actors need to be collected and analyzed through academic research, in order to understand the effects on, and needs of, the multitude of CSOs and HRDs across the world. Therefore, I recommend future research on this topic to take the following into account:

- A larger sample size would benefit future research. This makes it possible to draw conclusions about the large spectrum of human rights defenders, and makes it possible to describe the entire region, in spite of differences between countries and sub regions.
- Future research on crisis discourse would benefit from a detailed description of crisis language, preferably in that country's language.
- Future research could emphasize CSOs' strategies, the challenges to implement those, and their efficacy. This could help understand where and in what parts of the process interventions can be of greatest benefit to CSOs.
- Research on other regions, or research using transnational comparative methods could be able to find patterns between contexts and civil society spaces that are

distinctly different, giving us a better understanding of the processes at play globally, and in different regional contexts.

### 8.3.2 Recommendations for practitioners

The findings of this research, including manifold examples of the effects of crises and crisis discourse on HRDs, as well as their responses, offer some grounds to provide recommendations to CSOs, and human rights defenders in particular. The stories presented in this thesis provide good practices that could be employed by others. On these, I base the following recommendations:

- To protect one's own operating space and civil society space in general, it is imperative that civil society actors exchange experiences and knowledge. This way, everyone can explore the possibility to employ the good practices offered by others.
- Linked to this, CSOs can take into account the good practices or strategies found in this research (see chapter 7):
  - using online possibilities and social media;
  - resilience and flexibility;
  - staying positive and ensuring mental security;
  - conducting fact checking;
  - knowing and accepting risks;
  - preparing for future crises;
  - self-mobilisation;
  - rethinking ways of working, and;
  - collaboration
- New realms and avenues should be actively explored to ensure the continuation of positive social action, including effective human rights protection.

### 8.3.3 Recommendations for policy makers

As is seen in the challenges to the implementation of strategies (section 7.1.4), it is clear that human rights defenders are not able to use their strategies to adapt to 'crisis' situations, resist or circumvent risks, or protect civil society space when all options are taken away. Governments, supranational and transnational organisations could therefore support HRDs and CSOs by taking into account the following:

- It is crucial that HRDs and CSOs are given room to operate. For this, they should be granted at least their basic freedoms of expression, association and assembly. This can be reached in the first place by holding governments accountable for human rights violations and targeting CSOs and HRDs.
- In (future) 'crisis' situations, it is imperative that attention to governments' respect for human rights does not weaken. Governments should remain vigilant of universal human rights, and should only derogate if all other options are exhausted.
- The installation of crisis measures should be kept to a minimum. If necessary, however, crisis measures should be conditional on proper monitoring, providing end dates, considering minorities, and considering long-term effects.
- The use of crisis language and crisis narratives should be curbed and only used cautiously, as they tend to increase the risk of abuse of power, and impede open critical debate and democratic processes, which are crucial for an open civil society space.

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# Appendix

## Annex A) Interview guide HRD's in Covid-19 Crisis

### Introduction:

I am researching how the work of Human Rights Defenders has changed since the start of the Covid-19 Pandemic.

In particular, I want to find out how you - from your personal perspective as HRD - see the impact of government measures taken because of the pandemic on your work. Secondly, I'd like to hear how you deal with those measures. The last goal of my research is to find out how you see the role of the Language of crisis in the pandemic.

I have three topics which I'd like to talk about with you. 1) Covid, **the measures** and their effects, 2) **crisis language** and justification of measures and 3) **your strategies**.

- [clause on okay with recording + using name/pseudonym]

### General questions

0.1 Can you tell me who you are and what work you do?

- Where do you work?
- What Human Rights-work do you do?
- Who are the people you advocate for? (How do you help these groups)

0.2 What was the situation like before the pandemic?

- For you, and other HRDs in your area?
- For Human Rights?

### Topic 1: Covid; measures & effects

1.1 Can you describe the Covid-19 situation in your country?

- In the beginning
- Now

1.2 What does the pandemic mean for [the rights of/freedom of] the people you advocate for?

- Compared to the situation before the pandemic, what has substantially changed for them? (risks, abuses, vulnerability, media attention, ...)

*Explainer: -In my research I am looking at crisis-inspired government measures, these are measures that are created in light of the pandemic, or using the pandemic as an explanation/excuse for the measure(s).*

1.3 In what ways do crisis-inspired measures change how you can do your Human Rights-work?

- What measures have the largest impact on your work?
- How do these measures impact your work?
- Do you see a similar impact on colleagues in your field?

1.4 Do you think there are measures that will have a long term effect (on your work)?

- Which specifically?



- In what ways?

## **Topic 2: Crisis Language**

Explanation:

-During the pandemic, I hear people, media, and leaders talk about the situation saying for example: “Corona Crisis”, “managing the crisis”, “getting things back to ‘normal’”, or “fighting the virus”. I call this ‘crisis language’.

-The language which is used may have large consequences. Calling the Covid situation a Crisis probably has large consequences too, I assume. This is important, because in the past, crisis language has been used to justify ‘emergency measures’, laws or even complete political change.

-I am interested in finding out what effects crisis language has in the current COVID-19 pandemic.

2.1 Do you see crisis language being used in your country?

- Can you name examples of crisis language in your country?
- How would you describe the language (hostile, careless, casual/nonchalant)?

2.2 How do you think the response to Covid-19 in your region/country is influenced by crisis language?

2.3 Do you think this crisis language has effects on other things?

- What do you think is the effect of crisis language on the [rights/freedoms] of your group of interest (the shrinking of) civil society?

2.4 How do you think the language of crisis influences your HR-work?

- Short term effects?
- Long term effects?

2.5 Do you see positive sides to, or possibilities for, crisis language?

## **Topic 3: Crisis Strategies**

3.1 How do you continue to make a difference through your [HR-]work, despite the measures?

- Is it hard to continue? Why exactly?
- point out responses to specific measures
- what methods/strategies?

3.2 Are there any positive changes due to Covid?

- Can you make use of these in your work?

3.3 Beside continuing your work; Do you think it's possible for you to expand your influence?

- If so, how? / Why not?
- Short term? (during pandemic)
- Long term? (after current pandemic )

## Annex B) Codebook

Document Group	Code
CHALLENGES	<p>challenge: future crises_more challenges to come</p> <p>challenge: HRD high risk</p> <p>CHALLENGES</p> <p>challenges: a lot of factors are challenge to HRD work</p> <p>challenges: resources</p> <p>challenges: respond to crisis</p> <p>challenges: respond to pressure</p> <p>challenges: street actions prohibited</p> <p>challenges: travel</p> <p>Challenges: working online</p> <p>digital pressure increasing</p> <p>EFFECTS (on HRDs)</p> <p>measures: travel restrictions</p> <p>STRATEGIES</p> <p>STREET ACTION</p> <p>work online: negative_boring</p> <p>work online: negative_no suitable workspace</p> <p>work online: negative_offline more efficient</p> <p>work online_negative</p> <p>working online: digital security concerns</p> <p>working online: no/bad internet access</p>
COVID SITUATION	<p>COVID SITUATION</p> <p>covid situation: anti-measures street actions/campaign</p> <p>covid situation: changed suddenly due to covid</p> <p>covid situation: people don't care about pandemic.</p> <p>covid situation: people insecure</p> <p>covid situation: people panicked / were anxious</p> <p>covid situation: regional differences</p> <p>MEASURES</p> <p>measures_general description: health/people sacrificed</p> <p>things will not return to normal</p>

CRISIS DISCOURSE	CRISIS DISCOURSE crisis discourse: leaders misusing situation crisis discourse: terminology_never "crisis" crisis discourse__crisis misused: crisis as excuse for (implementing) other measures crisis discourse_crisis misused crisis discourse_crisis misused: crisis situation misused crisis discourse_crisis misused: health concerns as pretext crisis discourse_crisis misused: not misused (although government could have) crisis discourse_crisis misused: political elite benefiting crisis discourse_crisis misused: used to discredit CSOs/activism crisis discourse_crisis misused: using Covid to control/pressure society crisis discourse_example: vaccine is praised crisis discourse_examples crisis discourse_examples: impunity of police/authorities bco masks crisis discourse_examples: measures are not about public health crisis discourse_examples: statistics manipulated (faked/undisclosed) to support discourse crisis discourse_narrative Crisis discourse_narrative: denial
CRISIS DISCOURSE (2)	crisis discourse_narrative: for good international image crisis discourse_narrative: human rights not a priority crisis discourse_narrative: multiple narratives crisis discourse_narrative: situation not urgent/priority crisis discourse_respondent perspective: crisis is artificial crisis discourse_respondent perspective: not aware of crisis language crisis discourse_role of media crisis discourse_terminology crisis discourse_terminology: "crisis" crisis discourse_terminology: "holidays" i.o. lockdown crisis discourse_terminology: "pandemic" Crisis discourse_terminology: "psychosis" measures: travel restrictions measures_examples: health intended measures_street actions: measures to ban street actions MEDIA STREET ACTION

CSS/HRD SPACE	<p>competition between HR organisations</p> <p>crisis discourse_crisis misused: used to discredit CSOs/activism</p> <p>crisis upon crisis</p> <p>CSOs framed as homogeneous group, gay</p> <p>CSOs instrumentalised</p> <p>CSS/HRD SPACE</p> <p>EFFECTS (on HRDs)</p> <p>Freedom of assembly/demonstrations</p> <p>Freedom of movement</p> <p>freedom of press</p> <p>Freedom of speech</p> <p>human rights situation: international attention decreased</p> <p>measures_general description: law used to threaten journalists / free speech</p> <p>MEDIA</p> <p>other measures: chilling effect</p> <p>shrinking space for CSOs/HRDs</p>
EFFECTS (on HRDs)	<p>CHALLENGES</p> <p>CSS/HRD SPACE</p> <p>EFFECTS (on HRDs)</p> <p>effects on hrds: decreasing options / increased risks</p> <p>effects on hrds: economic</p> <p>effects on hrds: impact on work (not large)</p> <p>effects on hrds: large / aggravating</p> <p>effects on hrds: mental health</p> <p>effects on hrds: not large / mitigating</p> <p>effects on hrds: workload</p> <p>effects on hrds: workplace / online</p> <p>effects on hrds_mitigating: adapted to covid</p> <p>effects on hrds_mitigating: Already used to work online</p> <p>effects on hrds_mitigating: flexibility_covid meant courts were flexible</p> <p>measure_travel: visa denied_unable to escape risky situation</p> <p>measures: travel restrictions</p>

EFFECTS (on society)

crisis upon crisis  
doesn't know how covid impacts human rights  
EFFECTS (on society)  
effects (on society) prisons high risk of covid  
effects (on society): depression  
effects (on society): depression\*  
Effects (on society): economic effects  
Effects (on society): effects on minority groups  
Effects (on society): Health effects  
effects (on society): human rights situation statements  
effects (on society): human rights violated  
effects (on society): hunger  
effects (on society): impacts vulnerable groups more  
effects (on society): large for LGBT/trans community  
effects (on society): older people more risk  
Effects (on society): positive / contradicting  
effects (on society): positive\_increased respect for medical professionals  
effects (on society): regional differences  
effects (on society): regular healthcare suffered  
effects (on society): the same for minorities  
effects (on society): women-specific challenges  
effects (on society)\_economic: businesses bankrupt  
effects on society: reveals/increases underlying issues  
losing hope in a better future  
MEASURES  
measures: economic\_aid only helps formal sector  
measures\_general description: health/people sacrificed

HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION

crisis discourse\_narrative: human rights not a priority  
EFFECTS  
HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION  
Human rights situation: changed, not bco covid  
human rights situation: international attention decreased  
human rights situation: lack of awareness  
human rights situation: LGBT rights  
human rights situation: minority rights  
human rights situation: not related to pandemic  
human rights situation: repression by government  
human rights situation: societal attitudes  
human rights situation: women's rights  
human rights situation\_risks HRDs: house search  
human rights situation\_risks HRDs: not under auspices of authorities  
Political/regional context: unrelated to covid  
political/regional context: homophobia instrumentalised/politicised

MEASURES	<p>COVID SITUATION</p> <p>CRISIS DISCOURSE</p> <p>crisis discourse_examples: measures are not about public health</p> <p>MEASURES</p> <p>measures unclear / not clearly communicated</p> <p>measures: basis in federal law</p> <p>measures: economic_aid only helps formal sector</p> <p>measures: effective</p> <p>measures: examples</p> <p>measures: general / values</p> <p>measures: ineffective government response</p> <p>measures: installed to hinder street action</p> <p>Measures: installed to pretend to care</p> <p>measures: lockdown measures</p> <p>measures: no end date</p> <p>measures: not strict</p> <p>measures: reduced_for political reasons/elections</p> <p>measures: state of emergency</p> <p>measures: strict</p>
MEASURES (2)	<p>measures: travel restrictions</p> <p>measures_examples: awareness campaign</p> <p>measures_examples: closing of schools</p> <p>measures_examples: courts allowed less people</p> <p>Measures_examples: forced holidays</p> <p>measures_examples: health intended</p> <p>measures_examples: masks</p> <p>measures_examples: prisons closed off</p> <p>Measures_examples: testing</p> <p>measures_general description: gender blind / uninclusive</p> <p>measures_general description: health/people sacrificed</p> <p>measures_general description: law used to threaten journalists / free speech</p> <p>measures_higher order</p> <p>measures_higher order: military</p> <p>measures_street actions: measures to ban street actions</p> <p>STREET ACTION</p>
MEDIA	<p>crisis discourse_role of media</p> <p>MEDIA</p> <p>media: independent journalism threatened</p> <p>media: low trust</p> <p>media: owned by politicians</p> <p>strategies: training in media</p>

OTHER MEASURES	<p>crisis discourse__crisis misused: crisis as excuse for (implementing) other measures</p> <p>measures_travel: travel info used against HRDs</p> <p>OTHER MEASURES</p> <p>other measures: cancel resident permit of HRD/HRIlawyer</p> <p>other measures: chilling effect</p> <p>other measures: fake news law</p> <p>other measures: foreign agents law</p> <p>other measures: homopropaganda and educational laws</p> <p>other measures: intimidation</p> <p>other measures: measure changed during pandemic</p> <p>other measures: surveillance</p> <p>other measures_examples</p> <p>other measures_major laws</p> <p>other measures_related to discourse</p>
POLITICAL/REGIONAL CONTEXT	<p>covid situation: regional differences</p> <p>media: independent journalism threatened</p> <p>POLITICAL/REGIONAL CONTEXT</p> <p>Political/regional context: unrelated to covid</p> <p>political/regional context: covid (effects) interrelated with other processes</p> <p>political/regional context: discrimination</p> <p>political/regional context: fake elections.</p> <p>political/regional context: gap execution - legislation</p> <p>political/regional context: homophobia</p> <p>political/regional context: homophobia instrumentalised/politicised</p> <p>political/regional context: Kazakhstan_COVID situation is bad</p> <p>political/regional context: low trust in government</p> <p>political/regional context: related to covid</p> <p>political/regional context: split society</p>
RESPONDENT CONTEXT	<p>organisational context</p> <p>personal context</p> <p>personal context: health concerns</p>
TRAVEL	<p>measures: travel restrictions</p> <p>measures_travel: closed borders hinders beneficiaries' safety</p> <p>measures_travel: internal borders hindered</p> <p>measures_travel: limited possibilities to travel abroad</p> <p>measures_travel: possible to travel domestically</p> <p>measures_travel: travel ban for HRDs</p> <p>measures_travel: travelling is hard</p> <p>measures_travel: upload documents explaining purpose of travel</p>

STRATEGIES	<p>CHALLENGES</p> <p>effects on hrds_mitigating: adapted to covid</p> <p>effects on hrds_mitigating: Already used to work online</p> <p>internet helps us</p> <p>STRATEGIES</p> <p>strategies: arranging offline event when possible</p> <p>strategies: balancing on and offline</p> <p>strategies: changing way of work</p> <p>strategies: collaborate</p> <p>strategies: ensure good internet</p> <p>strategies: ensuring a safe space</p> <p>strategies: facts (checking) less opinion</p> <p>strategies: flexibility</p> <p>strategies: making use of social media</p> <p>strategies: new approach_social</p> <p>strategies: preparation_save money</p> <p>strategies: resilience (organisational, personal)</p> <p>strategies: rethink HR work_change activism because street action dangerous</p> <p>strategies: rethinking HR work (before covid / now)</p> <p>strategies: self-mobilisation_people learn to mobilise themselves</p> <p>strategies: stay positive</p> <p>strategies: training in media</p> <p>strategies: visa</p>
STRATEGIES (2)	<p>strategies: willing to take risks</p> <p>strategies_examples</p> <p>strategies_preparation</p> <p>strategies_way of work</p> <p>strategies_work online</p> <p>things will not return to normal</p> <p>work online: positive</p> <p>work online: positive_saves money</p> <p>work online: take part in more (online) activities</p> <p>work online: will continue in the future</p> <p>working online: helped continue work</p> <p>work online: learn to make use of digital tools</p>
STREET ACTION	<p>covid situation: anti-measures street actions/campaign</p> <p>measures_street actions: measures to ban street actions</p> <p>other measures: blocking streets illegal</p> <p>STREET ACTION</p> <p>street action prohibited</p> <p>street action: activists/organisers arrested</p> <p>street action: alternative ways to organise</p> <p>street action: before covid</p> <p>street actions: 1 person</p> <p>Street actions: Navalny</p>



