Desktop Study on Online CSO Databases/Registers

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1. Introduction

In the era of **technological innovations**, information sharing and collaboration have become easier. Civil society organizations (CSOs)[1] use new technologies to report on their activities and reach out to their donors, beneficiaries and other stakeholders inexpensively. States also increasingly harness these technologies for the purpose of effective and innovative public services delivery, and develop **accessible and secure online platforms** to share information. Public online databases that provide quick access to data on CSOs operating in the country and are managed by state bodies are one of such means. They serve as official sources of information about individual CSOs that **help to increase the visibility of the overall sector**. Transparency builds trust and confidence in the integrity of CSOs and enables them to **foster better cooperation with state bodies** and businesses.

The present study provides a comparative overview of online systems used by the public authorities in five European Union member states. The study was developed by the European Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ECNL)[2] under the **Civic Space**, a Technical Assistance project funded by the European Union. The project aims to contribute to the development of a conducive environment for civil society in the Turkish Cypriot community. One of its components is to support the creation of an **online public database/register for CSOs**.

The study looks at public databases/registers in Bulgaria, Croatia, England and Wales, Hungary and Slovakia. The countries were selected to **showcase various models and diverse functions**, whose good practices may serve as models for the mechanism to be launched in the northern part of Cyprus. In all of these countries the state operates or is in the process to launch online, freely accessible and up-to-date databases of CSOs. These databases, however, serve different purposes, offer different information on CSOs retrieved from various sources and are maintained by different bodies.

The study starts by providing brief country summaries about the civil society sector that are relevant for the conceptualisation of a CSO database. It is followed by a detailed comparative overview of the key characteristics of the specific databases. The authors examined how the registers function, what information they provide on CSOs, the tools they use for gathering information and the way they are set up operationally. Finally, the study concludes with some recommendations drawing on the good practices of the presented European examples.

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[1] In this paper, the term "civil society organisation" (CSO) is used in the narrow sense to identify any organisation that meets the following criteria: 1) it is a voluntary organisation established by a private instrument (such as a contract or act of establishment) rather than by law; 2) it may be a membership or non-membership organisation; 3) it is not part of the governmental structure; 4) it is established to pursue public or mutual-benefit goals; and 5) it is not for profit. The term may include associations, foundations, private institutions, not-for-profit corporations, and any other organisations meeting the above criteria. While other forms of organisation (for example, political parties, religious organisations, or trade unions) are sometimes included under the rubric "civil society," in this study the focus is on CSOs in the narrow sense only.

[2] ECNL is a leading European resource and research centre in the field of policies and laws affecting civil society. It aims to promote an enabling legal and fiscal environment for civil society in Europe. ECNL has unparalleled expertise in helping to develop and implement laws and policies in key areas affecting the development of civil society. For more information see www.ecnl.org

The paper was developed based on the **desktop review** of the databases and registers operating in the countries selected, relevant laws and secondary resources[3] providing pertinent country information.

The study seeks to provide stakeholders with some food for thought around devising an online CSO database that is tailor-made for the local needs in the northern part of Cyprus.

2. Brief country summaries

The study discusses the public databases/registers in Bulgaria, Croatia, England and Wales, Hungary and Slovakia. This section provides a brief overview of each of these countries, including information on the overall size of the CSO sector, the types of organisations operating, the legal framework for registration and online database, and direct link to the online register kept and run by the relevant public authority.

Bulgaria

There are approximately **41,500** CSOs registered in Bulgaria.[4] Their main legal forms are **foundations and associations**. The key framework legislation on CSOs is the *Law for Legal Entities with Non-profit Purposes (2001)*[5] *("CSO Law")*. The CSO Law regulates the registration and operation of non-profit organisations in Bulgaria as well as the conditions of the special public benefit status. CSOs are registered by the court and online registration is not possible in the country.

Bulgaria does not operate an online public database encompassing all non-profit organisations, it has set up a **database specifically for public benefit organisations** (PBOs). The *Central Registry for Public Benefit Organisations* is also regulated by the CSO Law and was established in 2001, and its role was further strengthened with amendments of 2006. It is a centralised registration, oversight and coordination body, hosted within the **Ministry of Justice**.[6] CSOs pursuing public benefit activities have two months following the receipt of their court registration to register at this central database. This comes in addition to their court registration. The procedure will change as of January 2018, when the amendments to the CSO Law come into effect. From then on the *Registry Agency*, a separate state agency operating under the Ministry of Justice, will handle registration of the legal entity and public benefit status

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[3] Including country notes of the European Foundation Center (http://www.efc.be/philanthropy-sector/foundations-in-europe/), Council on Foundations (http://www.cof.org/program-initiative/country-notes) and the USAID 2015 CSO Sustainability Index for Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia:
https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1861/Europe_Eurasia_CSOSIReport_2015_Updat e8-29-16.pdf

[4] USAID 2015 CSO Sustainability Index

[5] *Law for Legal Entities with Non-profit Purposes* (2001), available at:
http://blacksea.bcnl.org/en/articles/40-bulgaria-law-on-nonprofit-legal-entities.html

[6] *ECNL Study on Recent Public and Self-Regulatory Initiatives Improving Transparency and Accountability of Non-Profit Organisations in the European Union (ECNL Accountability Study)*, 2009.
http://ecnl.org/dindocuments/306_ECNL%20Accountability%20Study_published%20on%20DG%20JLS. pdf

BULGARIA	
Online registration for CSOs possible	*No*
State body registering CSOs	*Court*
State body managing online CSO database	*Ministry of Justice*

Croatia

Currently, there are around **52,000** registered CSOs in Croatia.[7] The primary legal forms of CSOs are **associations, foundations and funds**, with the overwhelming majority of CSOs registered as associations. The registration and operation of CSOs and corresponding databases are regulated by the *Law on Associations (2014)[8]* and the *Law on Foundations and Funds (1995).*[9]

Croatia has **devised an elaborate system of online registers of nongovernmental entities and operates separate registers along organisational forms**. That is, it has set up stand-alone databases for associations, foundations[10] as well as political parties[11] and religious entities[12]. All aforementioned **databases are maintained by the Ministry of Administration, which is also responsible for registering the organisations.** Online registration for CSOs is not possible.

The database tracking associations is an elaborate register reflecting the information requested by associations upon registration, as stipulated by the *Law on Associations*. It is available at the following link: https://registri.uprava.hr/#!udruge. The database covering foundations is fairly basic. Users can search for foundations only along limited parameters.[13] The database features merely the main organisational contact information, the purpose of the foundation and name of the person in charge, along the requirements of the outdated law on foundations. Since the database on associations is much more elaborate, and because the predominant organisational form of CSOs in Croatia is associations, in this paper we will focus on the register of associations, as this offers the most value added.

In addition to the register of associations, there is another, unrelated online CSO database that is worth taking note of. Croatian **CSOs that wish to access state funding** at the local or national levels are required to register in the *Registry of Non-Profit Organisations* at the **Ministry of**

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[7] USAID 2015 CSO Sustainability Index

[8] *Law on Associations*, *Official Gazette No. 74/2014*, available at: https://udruge.gov.hr/UserDocsImages/dokumenti/Law%20on%20Associations_%202014_ENG.pdf

[9] *Law on Foundations and Funds*, *Official Gazette No. 36/1995, 64/2001*, available at: http://www.cof.org/sites/default/files/documents/files/Croatia/Croatia%20Law%20on%20Foundations%20and%20Funds.pdf

[10] http://www.appluprava.hr/RegistarZaklada/

[11] https://registri.uprava.hr/#!stranke

[12] http://www.appluprava.hr/RegistarVjerskihZajednica/

[13] The search criteria are the following: name, seat of foundation, county where the foundation was registered.

Finance. This database, which shares key financial data about CSOs, is available here: https://banovac.mfin.hr/rnoprt/Pretraga.aspx[14]

CROATIA	
Online registration for CSOs possible	*No*
State body registering CSOs	*Ministry of Administration*
State body managing online CSO database	*Ministry of Administration*
	Ministry of Finance

England and Wales

There are around **167,000 charities** registered in England and Wales.[15] There are **four main types of legal structures** charities can choose when setting up a new entity: charitable incorporated organisation (CIO), charitable company (limited by guarantee), unincorporated association and trust. The key laws on the registration and operation of charities are the *Charities Act (2011*),[16] the *Charities (Protection and Social Investment) Act (2016)*[17] and the *Companies Act (2006*).[18] Charities must register with the independent regulator of charities, the **Charity Commission**, and the registration procedure is fully electronic.

There are many unregistered charities in England and Wales, but by law charities must register with the Charity Commission, if they have over GBP 5,000 (approx. EUR 5,800) income per year. Charities that have a corporate structure have to register regardless of their income. Also, certain types of charities do not have to register if their income is below a particular threshold.[19] Registered charities are displayed in an online, searchable database. The charity register is a vital data source for information about charities and their activities, and is based on data gathered as part of the Charity Commission's regulatory activities, as regulated by the *Charities Act (2011).* It is available at:

http://apps.charitycommission.gov.uk/showcharity/registerofcharities/RegisterHomePage.aspx

ENGLAND AND WALES	
Online registration for CSOs possible	*Yes*
State body registering CSOs	*Charity Commission*
State body managing online CSO database	*Charity Commission*

[14] According to the USAID 2015 CSO Sustainability Index, in November 2015, the number of associations registered in this database was 32,305, and this number may better reflect the number of active organisations in the sector. Additionally, 221 foundations and twelve funds are registered in Croatia.

[15] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/charity-register-statistics/recent-charity-register-statistics-charity-commission

[16] *Charities Act 2011 (consolidating the 1993 Act and 2006 Act)*, available at: http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2011/25/pdfs/ukpga_20110025_en.pdf

[17] *Charities (Protection and Social Investment) Act 2016, available* at: http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2016/4/pdfs/ukpga_20160004_en.pdf

[18] *Companies Act 2006*, available at: http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2006/46/pdfs/ukpga_20060046_en.pdf

[19] It is currently GBP 100,000 (EUR 117,000) a year. Types of charities include churches and chapels of some Christian denominations, charitable funds of the armed forces, scout groups, dependent local branch of a larger charity.

Hungary

Currently there are around **62,000 CSOs** operating in Hungary,[20] a relatively steady figure for almost a decade. Around 88% can be classified as **foundations or associations**, which are the traditional civil law forms of nongovernmental, not-for-profit organisations.[21] The rest of the organisations are non-profit companies, civil groups, and public chambers.

The key laws on the registration and operation of CSOs are the *Civil Code (2013);*[22] the *Act on the Freedom of Association, Public Benefit Status and the Operation and Support of CSOs (2011);*[23] the *Act on Public Company Information, Company Registration, and Winding-up Proceedings (2006);*[24] and the *Act on the Court Registration of CSOs and the Relative Procedural Rules (2011).*[25] CSOs are registered by the court, online registration is possible.

Hungary launched the online public database in the spring of 2008. The database lists CSOs and other organisations that do not qualify as companies, such as public bodies, private pension funds or professional sport federations. The database is run and managed by the **Hungarian court** and available at: http://birosag.hu/allampolgaroknak/civil-szervezetek/civil-szervezetek-nevjegyzeke-kereses

HUNGARY	
Online registration for CSOs possible	*Yes*
State body registering CSOs	*Court*
State body managing online CSO database	*Court*

Slovakia

According to the Ministry of Interior's registry data, the number of CSOs in Slovakia is around **45,000**, most of which are **civic associations** (around 90% of all CSOs). Other forms include non-profit organisations providing public benefit services, non-investment funds, organisations with an international element and foundations. Approximately ten new CSOs are founded every

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[20] 2015 data from the Hungarian Central Statistical Office:
http://www.ksh.hu/docs/hun/xstadat/xstadat_eves/i_qpg003.html
[21]   http://www.ksh.hu/docs/hun/xftp/stattukor/nonprofitadomanyozas.pdf
[22] *Act V/2013 on the Civil Code,* section on associations and foundations available at:
https://www.google.hu/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=3&ved=0ahUKEwjK4ZPClq3RAhX
KXhoKHfgHBuAQFgg0MAI&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.legislationline.org%2Fdocuments%2Fid%2F199
22&usg=AFQjCNERFmXTDgFzWVGv275K0i86tw3MgA&cad=rja
[23] *Act CLXXV/2011 on the Freedom of Association, Public Benefit Status and the Operation and Support of CSOs,* available in Hungarian at*: http://net.jogtar.hu/jr/gen/hjegy_doc.cgi?docid=A1100175.TV*
[24] *Act V/2006 on Public Company Information,* available at:
https://hirkozpont.magyarorszag.hu/srv/letolt?id=943203&lang=hu
[25] *Act CLXXXI/2011 on the Court Registration of CSOs and the Relative Procedural Rules,* available in Hungarian at: http://net.jogtar.hu/jr/gen/hjegy_doc.cgi?docid=a1100181.tv

day.[26] CSOs are registered by the Ministry of Interior and in very specific cases online registration is possible.[27]

The key laws on the registration and operation of CSOs are the *Act on Citizens Associations (1990);*[28] the *Act on Foundations and on the Change of Civil Code (2002);*[29] the *Act on Non-Investment Funds (1997);*[30] and the *Act on Non-Profit Organisations Providing Generally Beneficial Services (1997).*[31]

During 2015, the *Office of the Plenipotentiary of the Government for the Development of Civil Society* worked to develop a law on registration of CSOs. At the time of writing this research, the law has not yet entered the legislative process, and thus the **register is not yet operational**. However, the mechanism has been **fully designed** and therefore may serve as a good example for the purposes of this study.

The law seeks to create **two databases**: (1) the **official central registry** of all non-profit organisations, which will serve as constitutive registry. This will be similar to the register of commercial organisations and will be mandatory. Users will have reading access, but data will be editable only by the public administration. (2) In addition, an "**extra superstructure" IT system** will also be set up above the official central registry of all CSOs. This will connect or get information on CSOs from various public administration´s IT registers as well as from CSOs themselves. Consequently, verified access to edit some data will be given to CSOs and other public agencies, too. CSOs are expected to provide these data on a voluntary basis through self-reporting.

SLOVAKIA	
Online registration for CSOs possible	*Yes*
State body registering CSOs	*Ministry of Interior*
State body to be managing online CSO database	*Ministry of Interior*

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[26] USAID 2015 CSO Sustainability Index

[27] Online registration is possible using the qualified electronic signature, which requires all three founders (in case of civic association) as physical persons to have IDs with the qualified electronic signature capability, have their IDs activated, and submit the required documentation for registration (for example for civic association). While theoretically the possibility of online registration is provided, in practice the public administration is not fully equipped to handle electronic submission for registration. For example, there is no information provided on this type of submission on the official web page of the Ministry of Interior that describes the procedure for the civic association registration.

[28] *Act No. 83/1990 on Associating of Citizens,* available at: http://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/docs/ELECTRONIC/99932/119583/F-255803203/SVK99932%20Eng.pdf

[29] *Act No. 34/2002 on Foundations and on the Change of Civil Code,* available at: http://www.icnl.org/research/library/files/Slovakia/actfound.pdf

[30] *Act No. 147/1997 on Non-Investment Funds,* available at: http://www.icnl.org/research/library/files/Slovakia/non.pdf

[31] *Act No. 213/1997 on Non-Profit Organisations Providing Generally Beneficial Service,* available at: http://www.icnl.org/research/library/files/Slovakia/lawbenef.pdf

3. Online public CSO databases in practice

The present section addresses key issues on public databases and registers in a comparative way. It explores the purpose databases serve and the scope of information they cover about CSOs in the countries reviewed. It also examines the means through which they gather information as well as looks at their operation and maintenance in greater detail.

How the databases are used

Aim of public databases

The national-level electronic databases promote **transparency and visibility of the CSO sector** by offering a **register of CSOs, which is accessible without the registration of users and on a continuous base,** apart from regularly scheduled system maintenance. The registers offer up-to-date information on CSOs' organisational data, structure, representatives, objectives and sometimes also activities.

Some public databases **cover all types of CSOs** in the country (Hungary, England and Wales, Slovakia), while others **focus on specific legal forms** (register of associations in Croatia) or a specific **subset** of CSOs (public benefit organisations in Bulgaria).

Connection between CSO registration and the public database

In some countries the central online databases **mirror the data maintained by the specific body handling CSO registration**, with certain limitations on the breadth of data published due to right to privacy (see section below on *Organisational data*). For example, in Hungary, where CSOs are registered by the courts, and the online database offers a **certified public record of court registry data**. In Croatia the registration of associations happens at the county level. Information supplied by CSOs at the time of registration then gets channelled in to the Ministry of Administration automatically, which manages the online database and publishes sections of the data online.

In most of the countries **the mandatory registration of CSOs entails that they are automatically entered in the public CSO database** (Hungary, Croatia, Slovakia, England and Wales). In other cases, being registered in the CSO database may come as a **precondition for CSOs to enjoy state resources or benefits.** For example in Croatia, if CSOs want to access state funds, they have to register separately in the online database maintained by the Ministry of Finance. Being registered here vouches for the transparency and financial accountability of the organisations handling public funds. Similarly, in Bulgaria, the national public registration system is for a privileged group of CSOs, which through their public benefit status wish to access state benefits. The central registry issues a certificate, which not only verifies the existence of the respective PBO in the database, but is also a prerequisite for using tax and other incentives for PBOs stipulated by the law. It means that without registration in the central registry the

organisation may be able to pursue its public goals but cannot enjoy some preferences related to the status of PBO. [32]

Benefits of online registration

Allowing CSOs to register online can be considered a good practice. The OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR) and the Venice Commission in its Joint Guidelines on Freedom of Association recommends that

> *"Regulations should remain flexible so that any **registration or reporting requirements can be conducted online,** and public administration should have in place the necessary infrastructure to facilitate this, thus simplifying the establishment and conduct of business and operations of association."[33]*

If a country allows businesses to register online, there is a strong argument that the same should be considered for CSOs, as well. When comparing states' treatment of businesses and associations, Maina Kiai, the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association has called upon states:

> *"To **ensure that businesses and associations are treated equitably by laws and practices regulating, inter alia, registration,** dissolution, taxes, political activity and contributions, auditing and reporting, access to resources, including foreign financial resources, and peaceful assembly."[34]*

The possibility of online registration of CSOs facilitates the setting up and operation of an online CSO database, too**.** Data already available on the organisations by the bodies handling the registration procedure can **be easily and in an automated manner linked** to an electronic database – also managed by the same public entity.

CSOs can apply for registration online in England and Wales, Hungary and Slovakia. In England and Wales the registration procedure is fully electronic. In Hungary, some of the CSOs are obligated by law to register electronically, others have the option to choose between online and offline, paper-based procedure.[35] In Slovakia, there is also an option to register a CSO online, provided that the founders fulfil certain required conditions (such as using qualified electronic

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[32] *Achieving Accountability through Public and Self-Regulation Initiatives, Bulgaria: PBO Database*. Ralitsa Velichkova from BCNL, ICNL/ECNL 2011.
http://www.icnl.org/programs/global/gf2011/materials/Central%20Registry%20of%20the%20public%20benefit%20organizations%20in%20Bulgaria.pdf

[33] Paragraph 262. of the OSCE/ODIHR-Venice Commission Joint Guidelines on Freedom of Association, 2015. http://www.osce.org/odihr/132371?download=true

[34] GA 70th 04/08/2015 A/70/266: UN Special Rapporteur report comparing states' treatment of businesses and associations worldwide. http://freeassembly.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/A_70_266_ENG.pdf

[35] The *Act on the Court Registration of CSOs and the Relative Procedural Rules (2011)* stipulates that the specific types of organisations that must use electronic submission: private pension funds, voluntary mutual insurance funds, voluntary deposit insurance and institutional funds of credit institutions, public bodies, mutual insurance associations, wine communities, political parties, national sports federations and associations. In addition, CSOs must use electronic submission if they have a legal representative acting on their behalf, if they request simplified registration process. Importantly, PBOs and organisations applying for PBO status also have to use electronic submission.

signature). In Bulgaria and Croatia CSO registration is de-centralised and online registration is not possible. In Bulgaria, the Central Registry has recently created the possibility to submit electronically the PBO annual reports – an annual obligation that all PBOs have. However, initial registration is not possible online. In Croatia, data from the registration papers is then processed by the Ministry of Administration and published online in the database. As there are currently over 52,000 entries in the online database, transferring the offline registration data in the online register requires considerable resources from the part of the public administration.

Information covered by public databases

Organisational data

The level of information the databases provide vary. All of the databases reviewed present the **core organisational data of CSOs**, such as the name, abbreviation, address, registration or tax numbers of the organisation, date of establishment, names of authorised representatives. However, it is not sufficient to list merely the basic data of CSOs. In order for users to have a comprehensive view of organisations, databases reviewed also provide **short summaries on the profile of the organisations**, briefly describing their objectives and activities. For instance, the central PBO registry in Bulgaria offers narrative briefs on the organisations' objectives, resources and activities. Most of the registers (Croatia, England and Wales, Hungary) also **classify CSOs along their mission areas** so that users can filter results along organisations' profiles. Users can typically search for CSOs using more of these parameters simultaneously, which is an important feature of a user-friendly register.

At the same time, the scope of information presented online and indeed, the transparency of CSOs is not unlimited. Importantly, it must **respect confidentiality and the rights of beneficiaries and staff to privacy**. For example, while the names of authorised representatives of CSOs are featured in the central electronic databases, no further information is available on them for the public, although personal data (such as the mother's maiden name or address) must be submitted to the authorities upon registering the given CSO.

Most of the countries (Hungary, Bulgaria, England and Wales) make **annual financial and activity reports** available in the database for download. The reports are also available for previous years, not just the last one, which ensures continuity and promotes a better understanding of how the CSO have evolved over the years. In Croatia, the general database for associations does not feature this information; however, the separate, finance-focused database run by the Ministry of Finance for CSOs wishing to access state funds does require CSOs to publish their annual financial reports on its platform. In fact, this database is very technical and features detailed financial data about the organisations' assets, revenues, expenses and investments. In Slovakia, annual reports will not be part of the mandatory registry. Rather, they are featured in the extra superstructure system and can be submitted by CSOs on a voluntary basis through self-reporting along with other information, such as evaluations, photos, videos, international memberships, list of employees, expertise, projects implemented, supporters, and additional financial data.

In some of the databases, as in Croatia or Bulgaria, either the **statutes of CSOs or other internal organisational documents**, such as the rules and procedures for performing public benefit activities, are also made available for the public.

The database in Hungary offers information also on **whether there are ongoing insurance or criminal law measures, enforcement proceedings against the given CSO**. Similar information is planned to be made available in Slovakia through the extra superstructure IT system, which will connect and get information from various public administration´s IT registers. It will feature social insurance, healthcare insurance company and tax office confirmations about having no debt on relevant fees paid. This information can then be used for administrative control of authorised recipients of public money. Furthermore, the extra superstructure will be able to collect additional online information on CSOs from other public administration IT systems, too (accreditations, licences, authorisations). All this open data will be available for downloading and is foreseen to be used for further qualitative evaluation of the CSO sector, including rankings and ratings by private agencies.

Presenting the data

The Charity Commission's database is unique in the **visualisation of data**. Not only does it feature key information on overview pages, but it also extracts financial data and provides summaries in visual graphic charts. It also gives a snapshot of where a given charity is working, with geographic locations visually marked on a world map.

Tools and means of information gathering

Information featured in the online database is either **gathered by the public authorities or provided by CSOs**, who are then responsible for the authenticity and validity of data published by them.

In Hungary, the records of the court registry **appear simultaneously and in an automated manner in the online database**, as updates. In the case of the Croatian association register, it is the Ministry of Administration that handles the data and **CSOs do not need to submit extra information** in order to be featured in the database. However, as mentioned above, in the case of the database handled by the Croatian Ministry of Finance for CSOs accessing state funds, organisations have to send information separately, which is then processed and put online.

In England and Wales charities are required to **report changes to their details** (such as name, governing document, contact and address details, bank account details, legal structure, operations) and **submit their annual return** to the Charity Commission. They are able to administer these changes themselves directly, and edit their profile pages online using the Commission's web platform. In Bulgaria, it is also the PBOs that must provide organisational details to the central registry on their management, structure, goals, as well as internal rules as to how grants are given and how public benefit services are performed. This is publicly available

and any interested party can verify this information on a PBO.[36] PBOs are also obliged to update the information every time there is a change in their court-registered data. An organisation that does not provide required information for more than two consecutive years can be deleted from the database.

Slovakia will use a **mixture of this approach** and in the case of the extra superstructure IT system **the information will come both from public administration agencies and CSOs themselves**. Information supplied by state resources will be marked as "use for legal action", while data submitted by CSOs voluntarily will be labelled as "self-reported - do not use for legal action". In order for CSOs to be able to edit data, they will be provided verified access to the website.

Operational set-up and maintenance

Countries have chosen different models for the running and maintenance of the online CSO database.

In Hungary the **National Office for the Judiciary**, the central administrative head of the court is responsible for the running of the database on the central internet page of the courts. It is the responsibility of this office that data are available on a continuous basis, and that technology needed is accessible, too. Due to the increase in the number of CSOs and related administrative matters, the IT system of the database has been refined and modified over the years, so that users can search the database more efficiently.

In many countries, the central electronic databases are run and maintained by **ministries**. In Bulgaria the central registry is part of the administrative structure of the Ministry of Justice, and is structured as a special division under one of the directorate of the Ministry. In Croatia, two ministries are engaged in maintaining online databases: the Ministry of Administration handles the database of associations, and the Ministry of Finance the database of CSOs accessing state funds. In Slovakia it is the Ministry of Internal Affairs that will run both databases.

In England and Wales, the **independent regulator of the sector** is responsible for the running and maintenance of the database. Indeed, the Charity Commission has been investing in **refining the charity database based on users' feedback**. The register has been recently re-designed to allow for the use of filters narrowing the search, the download of filtered searches as a CSV file and for the website to work in a responsive manner on mobile devices. In addition, the Charity Commission has also launched a new customer survey about its digital services[37] to understand better users' preferences when interacting with the Commission and contribute to shaping future services.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

As the variety of examples has clearly indicated, countries have adopted different approaches in terms of the way databases are used and maintained, the scope of information they cover and

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[36] *Achieving Accountability through Public and Self-Regulation Initiatives, Bulgaria: PBO Database*. Ralitsa Velichkova from BCNL, ICNL/ECNL 2011.
[37] https://vovici.com/wsb.dll/s/122beg59037

the way data is gathered. The cases presented are influenced by country traditions and solutions are tailor-made to local environments. However, based on the cases reviewed, the following good practices may be generally considered when setting up and launching an online public database of CSOs.

1. **Consider the complementary role of online registration and public databases for CSOs.**

When countries decide to set up a central online database for CSOs, they typically integrate already existing registration data into a central, publicly available register. In countries, where online registration of CSOs is possible (Hungary, Slovakia, England and Wales), this can be solved through a cost-effective, automated system, which also allows for keeping the data up-to-date. Therefore we recommend that the administration considers introducing the possibility for online registration for CSOs as well, which will simplify the registration process and the maintenance of a public database for both CSOs and state officials.

2. **Ensure coordination between other branches of the public administration.**

The CSO database can build on already existing state registers and rely on information gathered by them, as it will be the case in Slovakia once the extra superstructure IT system will be launched and fully operational. Similarly, the database may directly provide data to other state public bodies (such as the national statistical office or the tax authority), thus increasing its role in coordinating their functions in terms of oversight and support of the CSO sector. Therefore we recommend considering what existing state resources and mechanisms are already in place, and how state authorities can cooperate in sharing available information about the CSO sector.

3. **Ensure transparency by providing detailed and relevant information on CSOs.**

A database listing only the core functional data of the organisation does not live up to the society's expectations and does not fulfil its mission entirely. Ideally, it includes details regarding the organisational structure, mission and activities, resources and other information (such as statutes) which all contribute to a better understanding of the organisation's work and may serve as a basis for qualitative evaluation of the CSO sector. As information to be featured in the database can be extracted from registration documents, it does not necessarily place an extra burden on either the CSOs or the public body managing the database. At the same time, it is important that information made available in the public database is not unlimited and it must respect the rights of beneficiaries and staff to privacy. Therefore we recommend that beyond basic information, the database shares details through which users can gain a comprehensive view on the actual work of organisations. Information published should be relevant and respect the right to privacy.

4. **Ensure the database is user-friendly.**

It is important that the profile of an organisation is easy to be searched for. For instance, users of the Hungarian CSO register can search for organisations along several criteria, including their organisational form or purpose. The Charity Commission also offers more ways to search for a

charity: by name or registration number, but also through an advanced search option where charities can be looked up by where they operate, what they do, who they help and how they work. The option to filter search results also makes user experience more pleasant, and so is the possibility to download information in separate files, as it is the practice in Croatia. It is important to note that the information is open source, meaning that users can extract information in such a format that will allow them to further analyse the information on their own. Additionally, the database may also offer 'notes for the users'. These help visitors with additional, detailed explanation of categories, possibly opened in a new window. Accordingly, we recommend that the database has an easy-to-navigate surface that allows users to retrieve data in a simple way.

5. **Allow for refinement after receiving feedback from the users.**

Customer feedback is important, as it provides public authorities managing the database system with actionable insight that they can use to improve the service and overall user experience. For instance, the system in Bulgaria took time to develop and refine: following a survey after 5 years it was launched,[38] the registry improved the way it works with PBOs. The Charity Commission's database is currently working in a beta function, allowing for public user testing and feedback. Therefore we recommend that the administrative body managing the CSO database plans the mechanism it will use to receive comments on the usability, functionality, user experience, and overall design of the register once it is launched.

6. **Consider using visual tools to extract statistics about the civil society sector.**

In an automated system, the data also allows for creating useful visual overviews tools about the whole non-profit sector. For example, an added value of the Charity Commission's database is the statistical charts drawn up on the number and types of charities in the country, including their income type and size. Therefore we recommend considering the use of graphs, charts and other tools that offer a sectoral overview for users.

7. **Consider tasking the public body responsible for registering CSOs to operate the CSO database.**

The body handling registration of CSOs already has all the data that is partially featured in the online public database. Out of the countries reviewed, it is only in Bulgaria that the registration of CSOs and the operation of the online public database is currently handled by two bodies (the court and the Ministry of Justice, respectively). However, as of January 2018 this will change also in this country and the two tasks will be performed by a single agency, making the registration procedure more streamlined. Therefore we recommend that the administration considers tasking the registration authority with the running of a public CSO register in the northern part of Cyprus.

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[38] The survey covered over 200 CSOs and was conducted by the Bulgarian Center for Not-for-Profit Law (BCNL) in 2006.