



From net-based to value-based networking

BlueLink's Strategy for 2021 - 2023

The 2021 - 2023 strategy builds up upon BlueLink's strategic plan for the previous period of 2018 - 2020 and the principle purposes of the BlueLink Foundation, defined by Article 11 of its Charter as follows:

- TO BE INSTRUMENTAL IN PROTECTING AND PRESERVING THE ENVIRONMENT;
- TO SUPPORT THE DEVELOPMENT OF DEMOCRACY AND CIVIL SOCIETY;
- TO WORK FOR THE RECOGNITION OF THE NORMS AND VALUES OF UNITED EUROPE IN BULGARIA;
- TO ENCOURAGE THE DEVELOPMENT, EFFECTIVENESS AND UNITY OF ACTION OF THE NON-GOVERNMENTAL AND NON-PROFIT SECTORS;
- TO CREATE AN INDEPENDENT FORUM FOR FREE EXCHANGE OF INFORMATION RELATED TO THE FOUNDATION'S OBJECTIVES;
- TO FACILITATE THE CONNECTION INTO AN ELECTRONIC NETWORK OF NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS AND OTHER PARTICIPANTS IN THE PUBLIC PROCESSES.

The vision for this strategy was approved by BlueLink's Council of Founders in May 2020. The final wording was presented and reviewed by the Council in May 2021.

Context as of May 2020

- Dominant unsustainable economic and social models based in commercialism, mass consumption and greed persist and weaken society's tissue and damage the natural environment and global climate. Acceleration of conservative propaganda against democratic, environmental and human rights values, and against the EU and other international entities and organisations, aiming to uphold them - in Bulgaria and internationally.
- Advance of political leaders and parties on national level with anti-democratic, anti-European, anti-environmentalist and anti-human/social rights agendas to power in Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland and other CEE countries, but also in countries such as the UK and USA. Democratic reflexes are eroded further by kleptocratic regimes.
- Increasing pressure against democratic institutions from the so called 'counter movements' in fields such as gender/women rights, minority and children's rights and nature protection. This trend culminated in the rejection of the CoE's Istanbul Convention against gender-based violence by Bulgaria in 2018 - 2019.
- Systematic undermining of environmental and human/minority/gender rights defenders' participation in government decision making, discontinuing existing partnerships between institutions and pro-EU CSOs, limiting funding or otherwise pressuring them - e.g. in Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, applying Kremlin-style approaches and rhetorics.
- Social networking on the internet has deepened divisions and brought about confrontation and mistrust, often purposefully undermining the possibility for identifying common ground between opposing extreme opinions, perspectives and action scenarios. Manipulation, innuendo, propaganda and hate-speech prevail, damaging societies' ability to reach consensus over common interests, preventing tolerance and reasonable fact/science-based discussion on essential issues, including climate and social justice, migration, environment and health.
- Worsening state of independent watchdog journalism in public interest, resulting in increasing attacks against the credibility of environment and rights defenders by mainstream media.
- Emerging COVID-19 pandemics pose further threat on trust in institutional responses to defend common interest and are used for further attacks against the EU and other international consensus-based entities such as WHO - a traditional partner and donor of BlueLink. At the same time COVID-19 gives impetus to public health awareness, solidarity and trust for law and science.
- Democratic institutions in Bulgaria and other CEE, SEE and ECCA countries are marred by bad governance, favouritism, nepotism, and corruption, suffocating rule of law and free market mechanisms. Watchdogs - where they exist - are captured, paralysed or abused by aligned political and economic power.

- Civil society organisations and activists sharing BlueLink’s core values are ideologically non-homogenous. While a certain level of co-operation exists, there is little cohesion between environment defenders on one side, and human and social rights defenders. Grassroot groups and informal movements are sometimes suspicious of established professional NGOs, whose funding is often perceived as non-transparent. Such cleavages are used opportunistically by pro-status-quo players to inflict further divisions and animosity, and undermine trust.

Strategic Approaches

To respond effectively to the existing challenges during 2021 - 2023 BlueLink will adhere to the following horizontal strategic approaches:

- **Trust based on shared values.** In the context of deepening mistrust and confrontation, trust and respect have become decisive for identifying common problems, solutions for them, and for taking joint action. BlueLink is well suited to avoid the failures of commercial social networks by strictly tying its activities to the set of shared values, which connect the variety of participants, partners, institutions and donors to BlueLink’s network.
- **Challenging siloization.** We seek, uphold and build the ‘middle ground’ where opposite perspectives, opinions and views can form a constructive base for mutually acceptable solutions. Fragmentation, denial of differences and extremism are the menace to our mission.
- **From national to local and international engagement.** The geographic focus of BlueLink’s work will further extend from national level and Bulgaria, in two directions: 1. internationally across CEE and the EU, but also in relevant regions such as SEE, ECCA, Turkey and the Global South; and 2. locally, to tailored solutions for local and sub-regional communities - reaching out for global partnerships. For the former we shall further and expand participation and membership in international networks, campaigns and projects, while for the latter we shall deepen available expertise and knowledge and channel it through specialised subsidiary/sister organisation AZURE.
- **Critical and innovative.** We question *dogmata*, prefabricated concepts, black-and-white perspectives. We probe into the underlying reasons and factors for what’s happening, while always being open to experiment and try new, non-traditional approaches and solutions (including technological).

Key Action Areas

During 2020 - 2023 BlueLink will operate in the following Action Areas to address the challenges and pursue the opportunities described above:

1. **Bridging information networking to journalism.** As part of these two traditional BlueLink activities will be further developed and integrated:
 - a. supporting the exchange and spreading of messages, content and information by civil society organisations and groups;
 - b. independent journalism in public interest.

Drawing upon its existing networking resources and virtual newsroom practice. BlueLink will move to creating an innovative online medium of knowledge, expert analysis, and stories, concerning democratic civil society organisations and grassroots movements that support democracy and European values as well as environmental protection. We shall explore new interactive, video and multimedia formats for this purpose. Content will target both civil society users and the general public. We shall continue offering expert support and training to both civil society communicators and independent journalists, willing to work in public interest.

2. **Targeted support for democratic civil society networking, public participation and advocacy.** Traditional conceptualising and development of E-communication solutions, platforms and tools will be matched by analytical and operational support for selected movements, sectors and coalitions whose purposes correspond to BlueLink's mission and goals. Supported vectors of intervention include: nature protection and climate; green economic and social policies; public participation; anti-corruption and corporate meddling with democracy and public interest (e.g. by extractive, energy or tobacco industries); free media and independent journalism; responsible internet; and further resistance against legislative, institutional and media pressure against progressive democratic civil society. Includes fostering strategic networking and partnerships between different sectors of progressive democratic civil society, social movements, active citizens, supportive institutions, and businesses.
3. **Practical research and analysis.** To be able to adequately identify and understand trends and problems, develop and calibrate proper solutions, and continue providing conceptual leadership in the field of civil society e-networking, BlueLink will pursue research and analysis in its broad field of operation.

Organisational Development

The following principles will apply on BlueLink's institutional development, structure and operational systems:

- Maintaining established good practices of governance and operation, including: transparent decision-making, clear responsibilities and subsidiarity of decision making, full compliance with high standards of transparency, reporting and operations.
- Systematic resistance against malpractices within the nonprofit sector, including volatile employment, over-bureaucratization, “projectisation” and donor-driven priority setting.
- Small is beautiful: BlueLink will raise resources and maintain capacity, including staff, necessary to pursue this strategy - expanding or shrinking gradually when necessary, avoiding sudden opportunistic development and maintaining slim, flexible and operational size.
- Strong collective spirit and shared values. BlueLink was created by like-minded individuals and organisations and will preserve a climate of trust and solidarity within its team and Executive Board.
- Model operations: where possible, BlueLink’s organisational culture, structure and systems will serve as sources of analysis, lessons learned and practices for the improvement of nonprofit organisations management and implementation of its mission goals in practice.