My name is Piotr Sadowski and I am the Secretary General of Volonteurope.

We are an international network promoting volunteering, active citizenship, and social justice, which was established in the Netherlands in 1981 and today comprises nearly 40 members and works with many other partner organisations, across Europe and beyond. We are registered as a non-profit network in Belgium and have held the participatory status in the Council of Europe INGO Conference since 1992.

1) Based on your experience, could you present some concrete impacts of the restrictive measures under state of emergency on CSO and NGO' activities

The pandemic has shown that many of those who were most at risk of social exclusion, have been some of the hardest hit. COVID-19 magnified the problems in our societies, however, there has been a unifier too, in the recent months. What has unified us as people has been the outpouring of empathy and active citizenship, manifesting itself in the hundreds of thousands of volunteers who have expressed their willingness to help others.

Probably the biggest and most concrete impact on the volunteering NGOs has been the sheer increase of readily-available people, willing to give the gift of their time to support others, looking out for the most vulnerable in their communities. Many people volunteered informally, supporting their neighbours, but many also needed to be managed through organised and more formal volunteering, and so the sector had to be very agile, flexible and adjust its operations, to fit within the health and physical restrictions imposed due to the pandemic, while at the same time to co-ordinate the new resources of volunteers and direct them to meaningful, but safe, volunteering opportunities.

Thus, overall, voluntary sectors' NGOs and volunteers' response to COVID-19 crisis has reinforced the truth that volunteers are Europe's greatest source of renewable energy, but volunteer management and coordination is not free. Now it is time to take the road to recovery with a change of gear in volunteering policies, leading to truly recognising, supporting and valuing volunteering in Europe.

2) Regarding the various expertise present in the public debates during pandemic and post pandemic time, how CSOs and NGOs can reinforce their advocacy in order to make the public debate more diverse and in order to bring their perspective and evidence-based advocacy?

Firstly, civic space must be developed, protected and enhanced in civil dialogue in European governance and decision-making processes, and promote a strong voice for people. Respect for human rights and dignity of all is paramount. Diversity should not be just recognised; it must be actively appreciated.

Just last week, on Wednesday, passed the fourth anniversary of the murder of Jo Cox MP in the UK, by a perpetrator who saw her as "one of the collaborators and traitors to white people. Jo was a passionate defender of European unity, European institutions, and immigration, and in her maiden speech to the UK Parliament, she said that "We are far more united than the things that divide us."

The appreciation of this unity and dignity of all people is of paramount importance in public debate, and civil society organisations must be able to freely speak out on behalf of those who are discriminated against and publicly ostracised. This is particularly important when, unfortunately, even in this time of pandemic recovery, when solidarity should abound, we are faced with abhorrent examples of politicians in the highest positions in Europe, who publicly target and challenge specific

groups of people, such as the LGBTI community or migrants. In my native country of Poland, ahead of the presidential elections on 28 June, the country's ruling party and the incumbent President are openly seeking political mileage in attacking gay people.

Therefore, we need to work towards reinforced democratic systems and public debates which are representative and underpinned by social and civil dialogue, and so civil society organisations and NGOs must be able to claim their right to be part of the solutions to challenge inequalities, hate speech in political and other agendas, socio-economic and environmental injustice.

Why do CSOs and NGOs have the right to claim this space? It is because they have an enormous knowledge-based about the people who are their target groups, to whom they are accountable to, whose needs they know and understand. But very often, those CSOs and NGOs lack the seat at the table, and, if you are not at the table, you are on the menu. As long as there are governments across Europe which continue to actively undermine and curtail the role of organised civil society, and legislate to shrink civic space, we need to pull together and have a strong voice to remind politicians that they are servants of the people, and not their masters.

And specifically, in the context of the volunteering sector CSOs and NGOs, time and again, volunteers and the voluntary sector have always been critical to the response in tragic events. This was evidenced, for example, by the Grenfell disaster and the Manchester bombings in the UK in the recent years, or volunteers' readiness to help after natural disasters in Europe. At times of need and high demand, volunteers and the voluntary sector are front and centre of the response.

That has also been the case with COVID-19. As we move into the recovery phase of this pandemic, the ongoing role of the voluntary sector, volunteers and how it complements the government's response will be a test of the collaboration and relationships formed in times of crisis. But it is a challenge we must rise to and it is imperative for this momentum to continue. Volunteers must not be overlooked. They must be appreciated. European nations must synergise civic networks that promote the fundamental societal value of future volunteers, who are very often represented and supported by organised civil society.