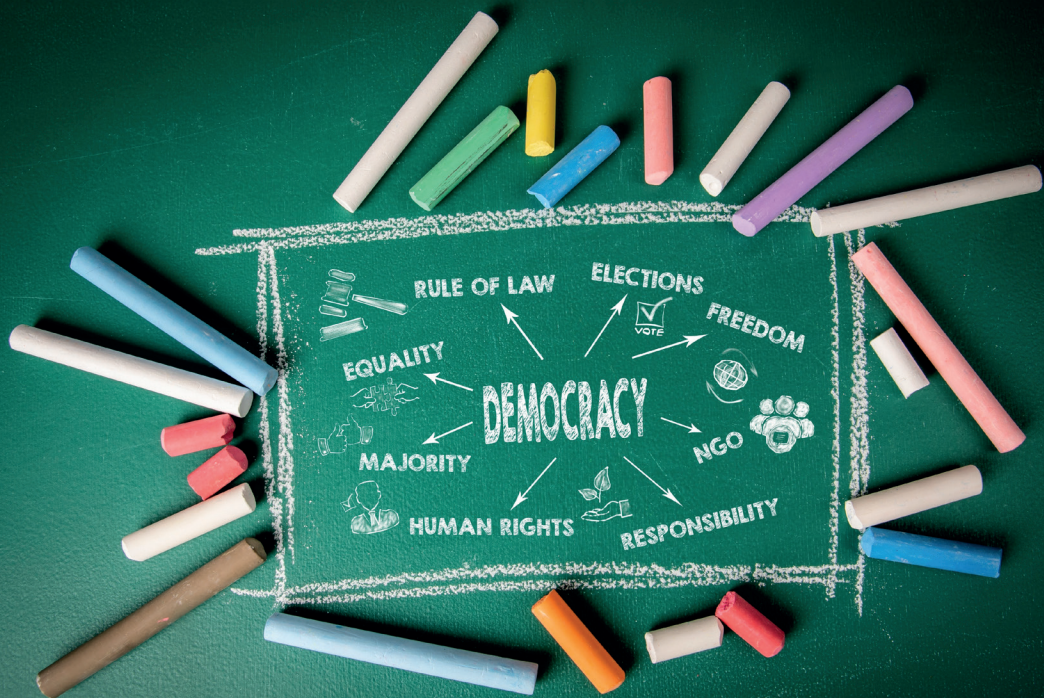


DEMOCRACY AND YOUTH CIVIC SPACE



Youth Partnership

Partnership between the European Commission
and the Council of Europe in the field of Youth



EUROPEAN UNION

COUNCIL OF EUROPE



CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

DEMOCRACY AND YOUTH CIVIC SPACE

Tomaž Deželan,
Gilda Isernia
and Amy Stapleton

Co-ordinated by Lana Pasic

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Executive summary

Civic space – the legal, political, social and digital environment enabling individuals and groups to exercise their rights of association, assembly, expression and participation – is a cornerstone of democratic life. This study follows previous research of the Partnership between the European commission and the Council of Europe in the field of youth (Youth Partnership) exploring the phenomenon of shrinking civic space with a particular focus on the impact on young people and youth organisations in Europe.

The findings of this report, gathered throughout 2024 and 2025, identify a range of restrictions affecting civic space for young people. Compared with the findings of previous reports, they highlight a consistent downward trend in liberties of information, association, assembly and expression for youth organisations in Council of Europe member states. Legal and regulatory measures limit the freedoms of association and assembly. Financial and material barriers, including reduced access to funding and infrastructure undermine the autonomy and sustainability of youth organisations.

The comparison between 2019, 2021 and 2025 also shows a dramatic decrease in the impact of and opportunities for advocacy. Youth organisations not only have less access to decision making, but also less influence over political deliberation and decision making. The erosion of the rule of law in certain contexts leads to increased repression of dissent and heightens polarisation and hate speech, which severely affects the rights of certain groups of young people, notably migrants, people of colour, lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and intersex (LGBTI) groups and students. While the last few years have seen a more structured approach to the development and adoption of youth policies, which mandate funding mechanisms and programmes to sustain youth civil society, among other things – the disappearance from the European region of key funding institutions and philanthropic organisations, as well as the roll-back on national and transnational funding programmes for youth organisations and civil society at large put a significant strain on the social impact sector.

These dynamics have far-reaching consequences. As avenues for collective organisation and expression narrow, young people risk marginalisation from democratic processes. The erosion of youth civic space therefore not only weakens youth participation but it also threatens the resilience of democratic systems as a whole.

The study concludes with a set of recommendations to European institutions, national governments and civil society. Safeguarding youth civic space requires reinforcing legal protections, strengthening education systems, ensuring accessible and independent funding and creating genuine opportunities for co-decision. Supporting youth organisations as key actors in democratic life is essential to the prevention of further backsliding and sustaining pluralistic, participatory democracies in Europe.

Introduction

Civic space can be understood as “the place that civil society actors occupy within society; the environment and framework in which they operate; and the relationships between civil society actors, the state, the private sector and the public” (FRA 2017). Research shows that civic space has been shrinking around Europe and globally (CIVICUS 2023; Deželan et al. 2020). This is a worrying trend insofar as an active and strong civil society is a key indicator of the health of democracies (Malena 2015). Young people are among the groups most impacted by this shrinking, on account of their demographic characteristics and the resources at their disposal (Deželan et al. 2020; Deželan and Yurttagüler 2021; Deželan 2022). This is already reflected in a wider context where young people are less active and represented in formal political spaces such as parliaments and political parties than other age groups (Deželan and Yurttagüler 2021; Yurttagüler and Pultar 2023). This shrinking space trend poses challenges in terms of the current and future health, legitimacy and efficacy of democracies around the world.

Youth civic space therefore can be understood as the physical, social, digital and institutional environments where young people can exercise their rights to freely associate, assemble, express themselves and participate in shaping the decisions that affect their lives and societies. It encompasses formal arenas (such as youth councils, parliaments, school unions or consultation processes) and informal or grassroots spaces (such as online platforms, protest movements or community initiatives).

This study aims to assess the state of civic space for young people in Europe and to explore differences in shrinking within this broad group. The report also seeks to draw up recommendations on how to safeguard and widen access to rights for young people by building an enabling environment for youth civil society.

Methodology

Previous research on the topic of shrinking civic space has deployed both quantitative and qualitative methods. Both have been helpful for investigating different perspectives on youth civic space. Online surveys (see, for instance, Deželan et al. 2020) can provide a broad overview of the state of civic space and the impact of its shrinking from the perspective of youth organisations,

in relation to various dimensions – legal, physical, digital, explicit measures and implicit mechanisms. Interviews (such as Negri and Pazderski 2021) can explain the gaps and provide meaning and in-depth insights. They can especially support context building and build a better understanding of the impact of shrinking civic space on young people as a broad, heterogeneous group. This study deploys a mixed-methods approach in order to complement the evidence from previous research, as well as open up new perspectives on youth civic space.

The online survey conducted in 2024/25 by the Youth Partnership aimed to establish continuity on the topic (following the surveys conducted in 2019 by the European Youth Forum and 2021 by the Youth Partnership) and investigate the current state of youth civic space in Europe (Deželan et al. 2020; Deželan 2022) by looking closely at the operating environment of youth organisations, which has previously been identified as a key factor in terms of representing young people within civic space.

The 2019 survey (Deželan et al. 2020) was based on the Transparency and Accountability Initiative’s framework for improving the measurement of civic space (Malena 2015) and later revised in 2021 and 2024. In our purposive sampling process, we have mapped the most politically and socially relevant youth organisations, regardless of their legal form, by examining the membership figures of the most important European and national youth umbrella organisations and supplementing this list with the relevant youth organisations from the European Commission’s Youth Wiki tool. The survey was carried out between November 2024 and January 2025 and received 129 valid responses, which is more than in the 2019 round and comparable to the 2021 survey round.

The data obtained through the survey was complemented by expert interviews with youth organisations, youth service providers and youth workers, which explored emerging themes and threats for further research on the shrinking civic space for young people. Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis – a qualitative research method used to identify and analyse frequent patterns (themes) within data – provided rich insights into participants’ perspectives. Ten interviews were conducted in January 2025 with participants from nine European countries:¹ Armenia, Bulgaria, France,² Hungary, Italy, Serbia, Slovenia, Spain and the UK. Interview participants came from a range of

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1. While an interview was not possible, written comments were also provided by a member of the Council of Europe Advisory Council on Youth.
 2. Note that the French-based organisations operates at the European-level and the expert interviewed conducted with them represented the European perspective.

youth organisations and youth-focused groups, including but not limited to student councils, national youth councils, youth branches of political parties, and national and European youth organisations with a focus on a range of themes, including the environment and climate change, democracy, youth participation, arts, LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex persons) issues and migration, to name a few.

The first part of the study provides an overview of the relevant academic and grey literature on youth civic space. A second section provides evidence of shrinking civic space as experienced by youth organisations through an analysis of the findings from the survey and the interviews. The section seeks to measure civic space by focusing on three dimensions: civic participation, freedom of information and expression, and freedom of assembly and association. Particular attention is also devoted to the main challenges identified across sections of the report, namely the autonomy of organisations and interference in their work through funding and legislative measures. The conclusions focus on the role of youth in sustaining democracies through civic and political engagement and activism, highlighting the main trends in youth civic space and recommendations to support policies and actions aimed at sustaining and broadening civic space for young people in Europe.

Background

Shrinking civic space and democratic backsliding

Civil society is widely recognised as a fundamental player in democratic societies, acting as a bridge between citizens and the state, defending human rights, enabling accountability of governments and exerting influence over their policies and decisions (EU Council 2023; Council of Europe 2023; Sardoč and Deželan 2025). There is a recorded positive correlation between the state of democracies globally and the presence and capacity of civil society – the state of civil society is used as a major indicator of democratic health by several fundamental human rights monitors and indexes (Malena 2015).

The concept of shrinking civic space gained prominence in the 2010s and refers to the systematic reduction of the operational space (legal, digital, physical) of civil society and civil society organisations (CSOs) in particular. Reduced operational space manifests through legal, political and social restrictions that limit the ability of individuals and organisations to make use of their fundamental civil rights such as the rights to assemble, associate and voice dissent (FRA 2018; Sardoč and Deželan 2025). Shrinking civic space affects countries irrespective of their wealth, democratic maturity or governance structures (UNDP 2022; Deželan et al. 2020). It also affects different demographics in different ways. The youth dimension of shrinking civic space is understood to be particularly relevant for democratic societies, from a rights perspective, value perspective (young people as the architects of future, building the democracies of tomorrow), a pragmatic perspective (young people are some of the most politically active social groups) and a programmatic perspective (how to ensure that interventions aimed at supporting young people can effectively do so) (Council of Europe 2023; Deželan et al. 2025). In the European region, shrinking civic space can be seen as part of the wider trend of democratic backsliding or the gradual decline in the quality of democracy occurring through the erosion of democratic institutions, weakening of checks and balances, and restrictions on civil liberties (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Sardoč and Deželan 2025). Unlike outright authoritarianism, it is better understood as a process, often under governments that maintain a facade of democratic legitimacy while dismantling their core principles (Huq and Ginsburg 2018).

One of the most common explanations for democratic backsliding is that democracies fail to deliver socio-economic benefits to their citizens. Yet concurring explanations claim that backsliding is less a result of democracies failing

to deliver and rather democracies failing to constrain the predatory political ambitions and methods of certain elected leaders (Carothers and Hartnett 2024; Deželan and Yurttagüler 2021). The phenomenon of shrinking, therefore, is contextually defined, and is manifested in the multilayered, multidimensional environment that is civic space. The shrinking of civic space is influenced by concrete actions of a variety of actors, and therefore measurable (Malena 2015; Deželan et al. 2020). Insofar as it is a way to understand one or more aspects of democratic backsliding, and within its many manifestations, the weight, consequence and impact of government control over and interference with civil society is also perceived differently by the different actors involved. This is also partly because the scope, justification, means of mobilisation and the operating environment(s) of civil society are very diverse (Pospieszna and Pietrzyk-Reeves 2022).

General trends in civic space research

Previous research on civic space makes a distinction between implicit and explicit measures that narrow civic space. These include the following.

1. The introduction of various forms of regulation and restrictions on freedom of expression, online and offline.
2. Policies and practices that restrict the right to freedom of assembly and association (such as bans on demonstrations or security laws that impose restrictions on mobilisation).
3. Restrictions on activists moving in public.
4. Use or repressive and intimidating practices to restrict activism in general and on the internet.
5. Intimidation and violent attacks on organisations in the youth field, especially organisations dealing with democratic and human rights, sexual minorities, integrity and corruption.
6. Criminalisation of organisations and individuals in this field (mostly advocacy-oriented) along with other exclusionary practices such as stigmatisation and de-legitimisation, including through government-owned or controlled media.
7. Attempts to deter public and private donors from supporting organisations in this field, with the risk of being portrayed as “critical”, “political” or “a threat to security”.

8. Introduction of domestic laws aimed at (over)regulating the activities and procedures of organisations in the youth field and demanding professionalisation.
9. “Philanthropic protectionism” as a set of state-imposed restrictions that limit the ability of domestic civil society organisations to obtain international funding.
10. Replacement of civil society spaces traditionally occupied by youth civil society organisations by government-organised non-governmental organisations, which also take up significant public funding.
11. Withdrawal of the welfare state from youth work, leading to the introduction of less robust, less sustainable and politically influenced civil society organisations providing new services (Deželan and Yurtagüler 2021).

Explicit measures are often direct attacks on the three fundamental civil liberties of freedom of information, expression and assembly, but can also be systematic attacks on other fundamental rights of certain social groups, such as LGBTI people and ethnic and religious minorities. They can target society as a whole (such as a ban on demonstrations and strikes) or civil society organisations and individual activists (such as the use of violence, unlawful detention, intimidation and persecution).

Implicit measures are more subtle and they aim to undermine civil society organisations’ operations by manipulating their environment and/or resources. Evidence-based studies on youth civil society (see, for example, Deželan et al. 2020 for the European Youth Forum, or Deželan 2022) have highlighted that economic restrictions and exclusion from decision-making spaces are most commonly reported by youth organisations. Governments are prominent backers of civil society development, often allocating public funds to their overall budgets. Withdrawal of funds, threat of withdrawal or changing regulations on revenue sources can put pressure on civil society organisations to align with governments’ decisions and policies.

The shrinking space was further impacted by the measures implemented during the Covid-19 pandemic, with a general curtailing of civil rights such as freedom of assembly and association, which severely affected not only young people and youth organisations but also the wider civil society ecosystem. Three years after the lifting of most restrictions in Europe, a consensus is building that Covid-19 was a “step back” in democratic revitalisation across levels of governance and the scale of communities involved, across Europe and much of the world (Bethke and Wolff 2020; CIVICUS 2024; Deželan 2022; *The Economist* 2021; FRA 2023). Whether or not connected to Covid-19, emerging

threats and trends regarding shrinking civic space can be ascribed to two broad categories: democratic backsliding – or the progressive erosion of democratic norms – and digitalisation. The development and use of digital surveillance tools during the Covid-19 pandemic allowed governments unprecedented access to their citizens' private lives and personal information (Freedom House 2021). Furthermore, the rise of fake news and misinformation during this period has been well documented (European Parliament 2025). The swift development of artificial intelligence (AI), as well as its increasing presence and use in all areas of life, represents a little understood but likely influence on civic space.

Youth dimensions of European policy: participation and civic space

In recent years, both the European Union (EU) and the Council of Europe officially adopted a wide range of policy statements and instruments aimed at protecting and promoting civic space, as well as fostering youth participation. Such items build in one way or another on the explicit values and principles of human rights, civic freedoms and the rule of law. There are two main pillars building the understanding that young people have a specific relationship to democracy and participation. The first is the acknowledgement that young people, often at the forefront of human rights defence, face heightened vulnerabilities because of their social status and limited resources (Amnesty International 2017, Deželan et al. 2020). The second is the understanding that young people engage democratically through a wide array of practices, both formal and non-formal, which are recognised as legitimate and valuable, whether they be individual, collective, representative or direct (Council of Europe 2017, 2023; Deželan 2023).

Fostering youth participation in this sense requires a financial investment and a political commitment to widen youth participation in policy making. Regarding the former, the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (European Union 2010) mandates the EU to support youth participation through dedicated funding programmes and sectoral programmes. Similarly, the Council of Europe's European Youth Foundation supports youth co-operation by providing financial support to European activities that promote peace, understanding and co-operation between young people in Europe and around the world, in a spirit of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. Both institutions thus have a dedicated budget to support and strengthen youth participation. In terms of political commitment, both institutions have set up structures and processes to guarantee a degree of youth participation in decision making. The Council of Europe's Joint Council on Youth is an example of co-management

and joint decision making that brings together 30 representatives of youth organisations through the [Advisory Council on Youth \(CCJ\)](#), while representatives of ministries and bodies responsible for youth issues in member states come together in the [European Steering Committee for Youth \(CDEJ\)](#). Furthermore, following the adoption of the Reykjavik Declaration at the 4th Summit of Heads of State and Government (16-17 May 2023), the Council of Europe is also developing standards for working with and for young people, by integrating a youth perspective in the Organisation's intergovernmental and other deliberations, as well as strengthening further youth participation in decision making in democratic life. Adopting a youth perspective will increase effectiveness of public policies and strengthen democratic institutions through open dialogue and the strengthening of the role of young people's civil society networks.

At the EU level, young people have been consulted through the EU Youth Dialogue since 2010, and in the recent years, the establishment of the Commission Youth Check, the EC Youth Stakeholders Group, The Youth Sounding Board (YSB) and the upcoming President's Youth Advisory Board lend the voices of young people to policy making. Furthermore, Youth Policy Dialogues encourage young people to express their views on EU policy initiatives by interacting with Commissioners with the aim of integrating youth views in the EU's political agenda.

Not strictly related to youth but worth mentioning as an effort of bringing EU decision making closer to its citizens is the trend of direct citizen engagement. Initiatives such as the European Citizens' Initiatives (ECI), the European Citizens' Panels (ECP) and the routine public consultations on European law-making allows citizens, civil society and other relevant stakeholders to propose legislation, discuss key European issues and provide input on new laws and policies through a variety of online and offline means. Other similar initiatives of citizen engagement, more often found at the local level, include participatory budgeting and citizens assemblies, which seek to include residents in decision making directly related to authorities' public spending.

There is, however, only a partial overlap between youth participation as it is currently promoted and civic space. In terms of funding programmes, for example, youth participation is concerned with equipping young people with the tools and competences to participate in democratic life. This implies that youth are the main target of participation interventions, through capacity building, coalition building and awareness-raising initiatives. While civic space research acknowledges the important role of education and particularly civic education in safeguarding democratic freedoms, it also suggests a number of (structure-centred) measures to be taken by governments and institutions

to improve their democratic performance. Conversely, other civic rights and freedoms that are the object of sometimes robust policies do not always possess a youth-specific target or needs analysis. This is shown by the fact that out of five institutional documents on the topic of civil society and democratic rights, only two (the EU Council Conclusions on safeguarding and creating civic spaces for young people that facilitate meaningful youth participation (Council, 14429/21, 29 November 2021) and the Joint Council on Youth (CMJ) guidelines on young people's participation (CMJ(2023)34)) make explicit reference to the specificities of youth civic space.³

A more streamlined approach is emerging, as can be seen in the Reykjavik Declaration (Council of Europe 2023) and Recommendation CM/Rec(2024)6 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on young people and climate action, both of which acknowledge and strengthen the connection between youth participation and safeguarding civic space. Such recognition of the youth dimension of shrinking civic space within European institutions, whether in the conceptualisation or in institutional measures, clearly demonstrates the relevance and importance of putting young people's perspectives at the centre of policies aimed at preserving the health and quality of democracies.

3. See, for example, the mismatch and overlaps between the following reports. Non-youth-specific: the EU Council conclusions on the role of the civic space in protecting and promoting fundamental rights in the EU (March 2023) and EU Commission Recommendation (EU) 2023/2836 on civil society participation in public policy-making (December 2023). Youth-specific, but containing no mention of youth civil society: Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe Recommendation CM/Rec(2018)11 on the need to strengthen the protection and promotion of civil society space in Europe.

Youth engagement and advocacy

An overview of young people's participation patterns and changing norms of citizenship has shown that an important aspect of society's efforts to capitalise on young people's potential for participation is to create spaces that encourage rather than hinder participation. Youth organisations provide a platform for dialogue between a variety of voices and the free exchange of information between young people and different stakeholders, and they amplify the voices of at-risk groups by raising the visibility of the key issues they face. Youth organisations that engage young people in civic life are particularly important as these organisations address youth-specific issues, force any problems onto the political agenda and find innovative solutions on the ground. As "laboratories of democracy" (Deželan et al. 2020), youth organisations have been an important catalyst for many social innovations. They also mobilise young citizens to hold domestic authorities accountable, contribute to economic development, expand access to services such as education and healthcare, and advocate universal human rights on behalf of vulnerable groups.

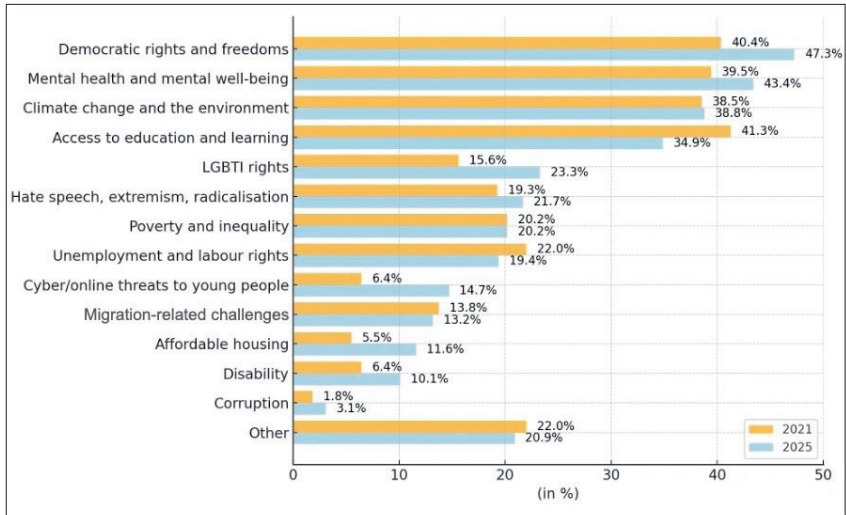
Engaging young people

Engagement of young people is a core element of the work of youth organisations. Engagement can be understood as a multifaceted, multilateral process where values and priorities are identified and acted upon by multiple actors. As such, it includes a "what?" (the topics and subjects around which engagement is created); a "where?" (in terms of time and space); and a "how?" (strategies for engagement). This study approaches all three streams with the aim of understanding the challenges and opportunities for engagement of young people from the perspective of youth organisations. Youth engagement is a good proxy for their participation insofar as it also indirectly investigates the willingness of young people and the incentives and obstacles they face when trying to participate in society.

Contemporary youth engagement is more issue-focused than before and young people's participation is driven by a variety of social, political and other issues. Figure 1 provides a comprehensive overview of the key issues that have generated the greatest engagement of young people in organisational

activities over the past two years. According to the survey, some of the most important issues for youth organisations in 2025 are democratic rights and freedoms (47.3%), mental health and well-being (43.4%) and climate change and the environment (38.8%). These results of the Youth Partnership survey are in line with global youth movements campaigning for climate action, as well as the findings of the latest Youth Survey 2024 (European Parliament 2025), and the strong engagement in this category indicates that climate issues remain a high priority. One of the key issues remains access to education and learning (34.9%), reflecting continued concern about the accessibility and quality of education and other educational opportunities.

Figure 1 – Over the past two years, activities on what issues organised by your organisation/group have attracted most engagement by young people (multiple answers possible)?

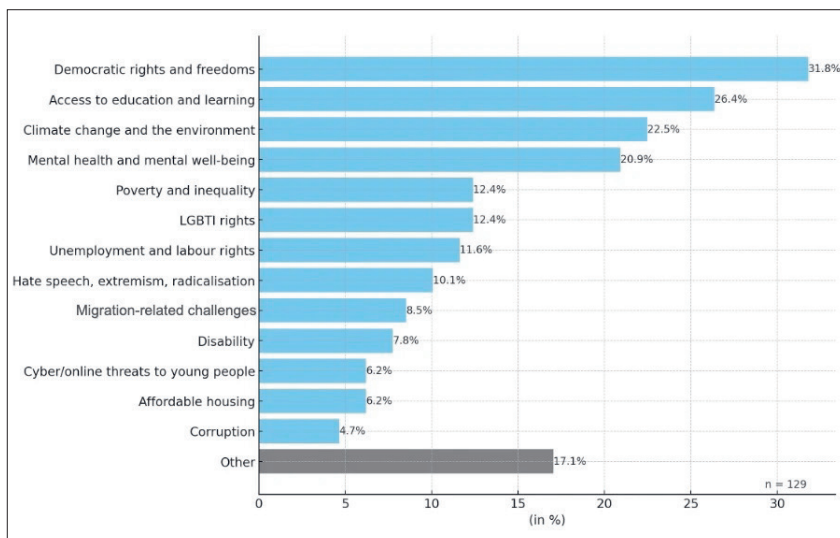


The comparison between surveys conducted in years 2021 and 2025 shows a shift in youth engagement, with some issues receiving more attention while others have diminished in importance. Democratic rights and freedoms received more attention, rising from 40.4% in 2021 to 47.3% in 2025, reflecting increased concern about the overall state of democracy. Mental health and well-being also experienced a visible increase from 39.5% to 43.4%, indicating that awareness of the importance of mental health has increased. There was also a notable increase in concern for LGBTI rights from 15.6% to 23.3%. In contrast, engagement in topics related to climate change and environment remained stable, while youth engagement in terms of access to education and

learning decreased from 41.3% to 34.9%, potentially as a result of the return to in-person schooling following the Covid-19 pandemic. Cyber/online threats are also of greater concern to young people, rising from 6.4% to 14.7%. Other issues that have gained attention include justice, youth participation, gender, safety, volunteering and rural development.

In terms of policy makers' interest in issues that youth organisations engage with (see Figure 2), the most common areas of engagement are democratic rights and freedoms (31.8%), education and learning (26.4%), climate change and the environment (22.5%) and mental health and well-being (20.9%). Issues such as poverty and inequality (12.4%), LGBTI rights (12.4%) and unemployment and labour rights (11.6%) received only moderate attention. The organisations report that policy makers are also interested in youth rights, European elections, security and international conflicts, and digitalisation and rural youth.

Figure 2 – Over the past two years, activities on what issues organised by your organisation/group have attracted most engagement by policy makers (multiple answers possible)?

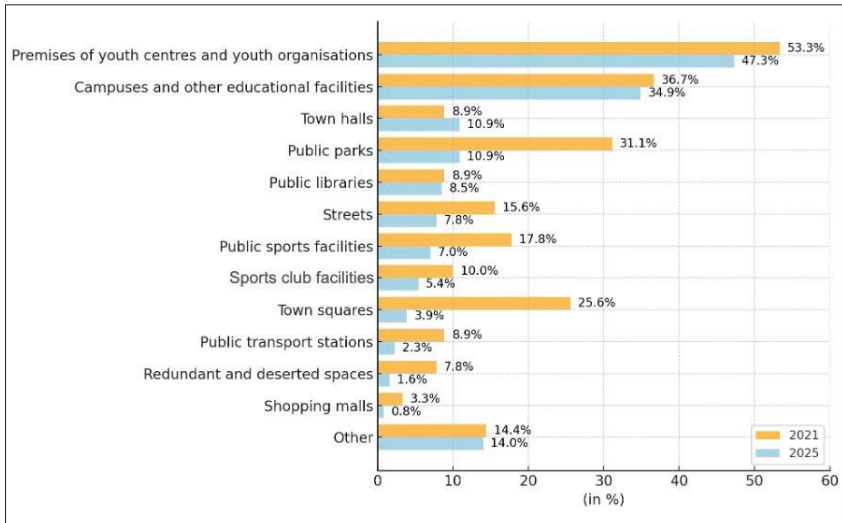


The interview data echo much of the survey results, with interview participants especially highlighting democratic rights and freedoms as a particular domain where young people increasingly face challenges.

Youth organisations' strategies for youth engagement are based on the use of offline and online spaces. Looking at the offline spaces preferred by organisations active in the youth field, Figure 3 shows that the premises of youth centres

and youth organisations are still the most valuable places for youth engagement (47.3%), followed by campuses and other educational institutions at 34.9%, suggesting that educational environments (still) play a crucial role in youth engagement. Other notable locations include town halls (10.9%), public parks (10.9%) and public libraries (8.5%), showing the importance of keeping public spaces open and available to youth groups. The comparison between 2021 and 2025 shows that the most valuable physical (offline) spaces for engaging young people are shifting. Youth centres and youth organisations remain the most important spaces, as do campuses and educational institutions. However, the most striking change is the sharp decline in outdoor public spaces, with parks falling from 31.1% to 8.5%, city squares from 25.6% to 3.9% and streets from 15.6% to 7%. Arguably, this could be partly explained by the lifting of social-distancing measures in place during the Covid-19 pandemic, which limited the use of indoor spaces. It may also suggest, however, the long-term impact of the restrictions as a “habit in formation” where young people and youth organisations are increasingly less present in the public space.

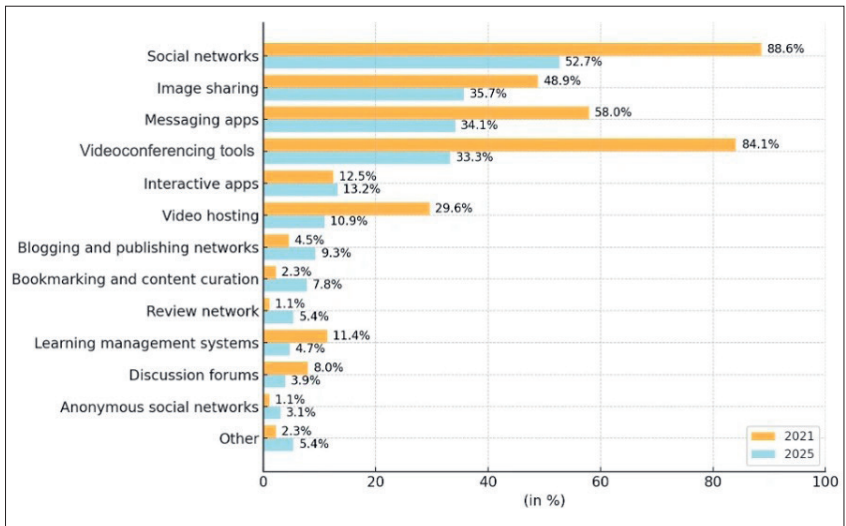
Figure 3 – What type of physical (offline) spaces have proven to be of highest value for your organisation in securing engagement of young people (multiple answers possible)?



When it comes to online spaces, youth engagement mainly takes place through social networks (52.7%). This suggests that platforms such as Facebook, Instagram or TikTok are the most important tools for interaction between organisations and young people. Image-sharing platforms (35.7%), messaging

apps (34.1%) and videoconferencing tools (33.3%) also play an important role, emphasising the importance of visual content and direct, instant communication for engaging young audiences. They reflect the increasing use of virtual meetings, online events and training sessions, particularly in hybrid or remote environments. Interactive apps (13.2%) also contribute to engagement, suggesting that gamification, quizzes and other participatory tools resonate with young users. Other digital spaces are less important but still relevant (see Figure 4). The data show a strong preference for highly interactive, visual and communication-based digital spaces, while traditional forums, blogging platforms and structured learning systems play a lesser role in engaging young people.

Figure 4 – What type of digital (online) spaces have proven to be of highest value for your organisation in securing engagement of young people (multiple answers possible)?



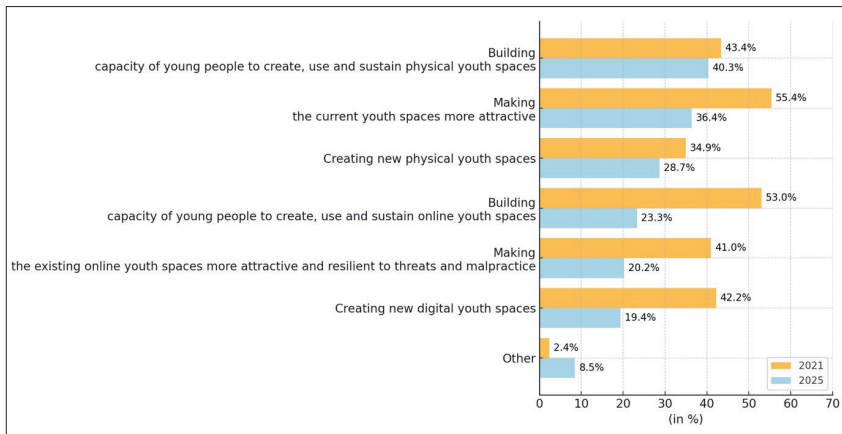
The comparison between the 2021 and 2025 results shows the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on organisations’ engagement strategies. Compared to 2021, most online spaces (like social networks and videoconferencing tools) had decreased in importance.

Interviews with the representatives of youth civil society highlighted the tendency of social media algorithms to lead to echo chambers and social isolation, which could be one of the rationales behind the decreased relevance. In some instances, social media was seen as impacting the efficacy of civil society, being a disincentive, rather than an opportunity for organisations to engage with

each other. In other contexts, social media and online engagement were seen as successful ways to reach young people who are less engaged in physical spaces, thus allowing young people and organisations to directly interact and connect on common issues.

This also demonstrates what strategies organisations have to effectively use youth spaces. The most common approach, chosen by 43.4% of organisations, is building the capacity of young people to create, use and maintain physical youth spaces. This is followed by increasing the attractiveness of existing youth spaces (36.4%), indicating efforts to improve existing infrastructure rather than creating entirely new spaces. The creation of new physical youth spaces (28.7%) is also of great importance and underlines the idea that organisations prioritise personal engagement and special environments for young people. This corresponds with the fact that digital spaces are seen as secondary but still important, particularly for accessibility reasons. For this reason, building young people’s skills to interact with online spaces also appears to be the main priority of organisations in this area.

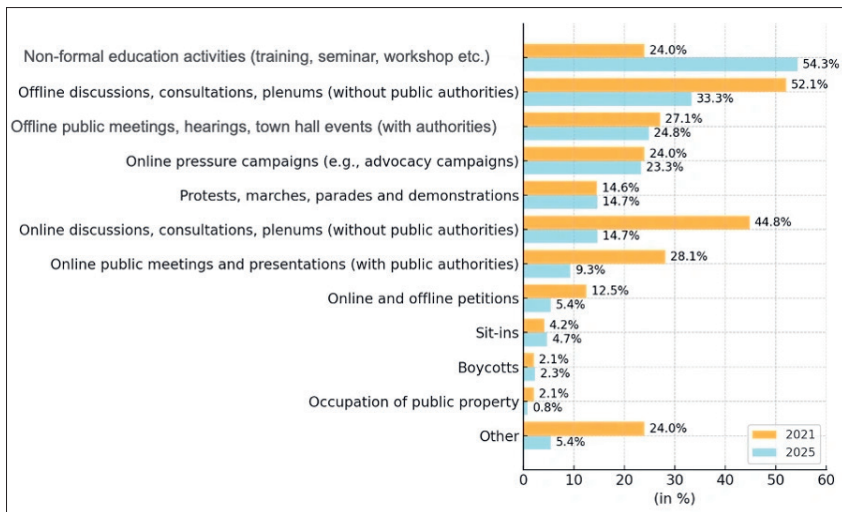
Figure 5 – Having in mind the strong engagement of young people, what would you say is your organisational approach to the use of youth spaces (multiple answers possible)?



The comparison between 2021 and 2025 shows a strategic shift by organisations towards upgrading physical spaces (Figure 5). Organisations continue to prioritise physical youth spaces, while the development of new digital spaces is becoming less important. This suggests that improving the existing infrastructure is more important than creating a new one and that investing in the ability of young people is still the most effective approach.

Youth organisations engage young people not only in specific spaces but also through specific formats or methods. Figure 6 illustrates the effectiveness of different types of engagement in encouraging young people to participate. The most common ways of engagement are non-formal educational activities such as training, seminars and workshops (54.3%), offline discussions, consultations and plenary sessions without authorities (33.3%), suggesting that informal and on-site participation formats are particularly effective, and offline public meetings, hearings and open days with authorities (24.8%). However, it must be said that online pressure campaigns, such as advocacy campaigns, still proved to be very effective and were the most effective online method at 23.3%. Protests, marches, parades and demonstrations and online discussions and consultations without public bodies were less effective at 14.7% each, but still noticeable. The data suggest that youth organisations mainly engage young people through education and discussion-based formats, while more confrontational forms of activism are less common.

Figure 6 – Of the activities organised by your organisation in the past two years, which types proved to be the most successful at engaging young people (multiple answers possible)?



The comparison between 2021 and 2025 indicates that there are clear shifts in the types of activities that have successfully engaged young people. The strongest increase was noted in non-formal education activities such as training, seminars and workshops, which rose from 24% in 2021 to 54.3% in 2025, showing a growing preference for structured learning experiences and

a return to pre-Covid-19 normality. On the other hand, offline discussions, consultations and plenaries without public authorities almost halved from 52.1% to 33.3%. Further evidence is the decline in the effectiveness of online discussions, consultations and plenaries with public authorities, which fell significantly from 44.8% to 14.7%, indicating lower interest in digital interactions with policy makers. In contrast, there was only a slight decline in the reported success of offline meetings with authorities. Similarly, protests, marches and demonstrations remained as effective as before.

Many of these activities were good practices because of their effectiveness in promoting participation, improving learning and creating effective dialogue with policy makers and communities. Several survey respondents emphasised the importance of networking events for bringing youth organisations together: “We have focused on networking events to bring forces of youth organisations together”. Such events enable collaboration and shared learning and strengthen the collective voice of young people. Youth participation is also encouraged through demonstrations and campaigns. Such events “make people feel like they are part of the action and part of the change. It gives them hope to contribute”. This approach encourages active citizenship and agency by making young people feel engaged in societal issues. For example, election observation missions, where young participants gain “first-hand experience” can be considered as best practice. This initiative immerses young people in democratic processes, provides them with practical knowledge and promotes their civic engagement. The impact of offline meetings with decision makers was also considered to be relevant for a sizeable share of survey respondents, which is evidenced by their statements. For example, youth organisations noted that “this is how we establish direct communication between youth groups and public officials, which often leads to breaking unfounded assumptions”. Creative approaches, such as advocacy through art, are also valuable. They advocate rights using personal stories as a powerful tool for social change. Finally, mobilisation efforts, including the various marches (such as those for peace, minority rights or labour rights), show how youth-led actions can bring together “thousands of people” and create a “remarkable network of national and international associations”. This demonstrates the power of collective action in advocacy.

The interview data echoed many of these findings and also outlined several positive methods to engage young people. More formal avenues to participate in civic space such as through consultations and consultative meetings were considered to be important, although young people noted some difficulties in terms of accessing these types of opportunities. For example, many consultative

meetings are held in the morning when young people are unavailable because of education, training or work. There is also a requirement for young people to have significant prior knowledge of how institutions work before taking part. The interviewees felt that this could lead to a risk of them feeling “incompetent in expressing their opinion on such a level”.

Outreach in schools and youth spaces and capacity building were also considered by several interview participants to be key methods for supporting young people to express themselves and become empowered to participate in civic spaces.

Spotlight: AI – An emerging tool for youth organisations?

AI-supported tools are emerging as a tool for youth organisations to engage young people, something which was flagged by about a third of surveyed organisations (34%). In a context of scarcity of human resources, organisations use AI and AI-powered tools to help draft and create communication, content, educational tools and administrative processes, with generally positive results. Its impact on an individual and social level is not necessarily perceived as positive. Some organisations note that AI has reduced young people’s reliance on traditional information centres: “We feel that fewer young people are coming to our centres for information because AI is helping them to find what we hope are the right answers”. Others recognise that AI literacy remains a challenge and they have started to educate young people about the risks and opportunities of AI through campaigns, training and seminars. While the full impact of AI is yet to be fully visible or understood, there is a general consensus that, in a similar way to social media, AI has the potential to shape democracy and youth civic space, with the logic of machine learning having a similar effect to social media algorithms in further individualising content and distorting information.

Access to young people and spaces for engagement

Access is a prerequisite for the engagement of young people by youth organisations. Regardless of their size and reach, youth organisations often need to access young people either physically or digitally to involve them in their activities, especially when it comes to groups that are harder to reach and include.

The ways in which young people engage and their priority issues are changing but so are the means by which organisations access young people (Deželan 2022). Figure 7 illustrates the current level of access of organisations to young

people. The majority of organisations, 58.7%, indicated that their access is not restricted, suggesting that they can effectively reach and engage with young people without major barriers. Some 34.8% of organisations indicated that their access is somewhat restricted, meaning that they can still engage with young people, but that there are some limitations that may prevent full engagement. On the other hand, 6.5% of organisations described their access as very limited, meaning that it is a major challenge for them to reach young audiences.

Figure 7 – What is your organisation’s access to young people like at the moment?

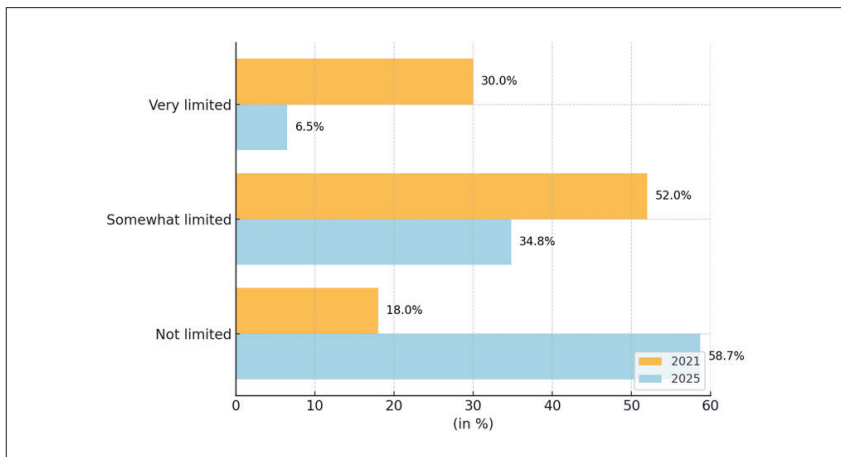


Figure 7 also shows that organisational access to young people has changed significantly between 2021 and 2025. In 2021, a majority (52%) of organisations stated that their access is somewhat limited and 30% very limited. While access was significantly restricted in 2021 due to Covid-19 and social-distancing measures, it is still somewhat or very limited for two out of five organisations, despite improvements. The 2025 survey and interview data shed a light on the reasons behind the limited access, such as government restrictions, lack of human and financial resources, disengagement of young people and structural barriers.

Both survey data and information from the interviews show that government restrictions and political factors play an important role in limiting access. In

some countries, laws such as the Transparency Act or the Foreign Agents Act⁴ have made young people reluctant to engage in activities for fear of being registered in official systems. One respondent noted that “the government restricts our activities and resources, which leads to a restriction of our audience”. Access to schools and universities is also highly regulated, as “schools have strict rules and procedures to control who can enter their premises and interact with students”, making outreach difficult.

Limited organisational capacity and financial constraints further limit engagement. Many organisations struggle with a lack of human and financial resources, which prevents them from carrying out regular activities. “We do not have the capacity to run consistent activities to keep up with engagement.” This issue is particularly evident among organisations working with disenfranchised youth in rural areas, where higher operational costs limit the scope of activities compared to urban initiatives.

Some interviewees also mentioned the constraints and limitations on accessing local municipality spaces. Limited access was caused by a lack of clarity regarding criteria granting access to spaces; to unexpected fees; or to long procedures to request access to spaces, which can represent a challenge especially when there are last-minute changes to activities.

Although research points to the active engagement of young people globally (European Partnership for Democracy 2025), some organisations do observe a sense of apathy and face a challenge when it comes to supporting young people to “feel legitimate” where many experience the “inability to find an entry point to enact change” and as a result do not wish to engage.

Additionally, the survey and the interviews highlighted the issues of inclusion and marginalisation, describing a range of challenges that have emerged in recent years and that have impacted young people in the civic space, and particularly the most vulnerable groups: “Over the last two years, there has been a surge of hostile actions aimed at undermining previously established rights and freedoms of minority groups”. These challenges include polarisation, misinformation, an increasingly hostile environment for certain marginalised groups and social isolation, particularly for young people in rural areas who are often also hard to reach.

4. On such laws, see for example the statements of the European Commissioner on Human Rights: www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/bosnia-and-herzegovina-the-authorities-of-republika-srpska-should-repeal-the-foreign-agent-law; www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/commissioner-is-concerned-about-intrusive-inquiries-into-ngos-that-are-at-odds-with-georgia-s-human-rights-commitments and www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/commissioner-asks-hungary-s-parliament-not-to-adopt-law-that-stifles-civil-society, and the opinion of the European Commission for Democracy through Law of the Council of Europe (Venice Commission): www.coe.int/en/web/venice-commission/-/cdl-ref-2025-027-e.

Furthermore, the survey demonstrates that organisations that rely on social media have problems with platform restrictions. Audiovisual and written content can be wrongfully identified as “political content” by platform moderators and thus can be restricted and not allowed for paid placements such as Facebook and Google ads.

Structural and network-related challenges also limit access. Some organisations operate as umbrella networks and rely on local partners for outreach. One respondent noted, “If we implement an activity through one of our member organisations, the turnout is usually better”. However, as grassroots youth organisations struggle with funding and sustainability, networks are losing their connection to young people. The interviewees and survey respondents emphasised that “the situation for grassroots youth organisations has deteriorated in recent years and with it our chance to reach young people through them”. The organisations are therefore facing complex challenges that require adaptable strategies.

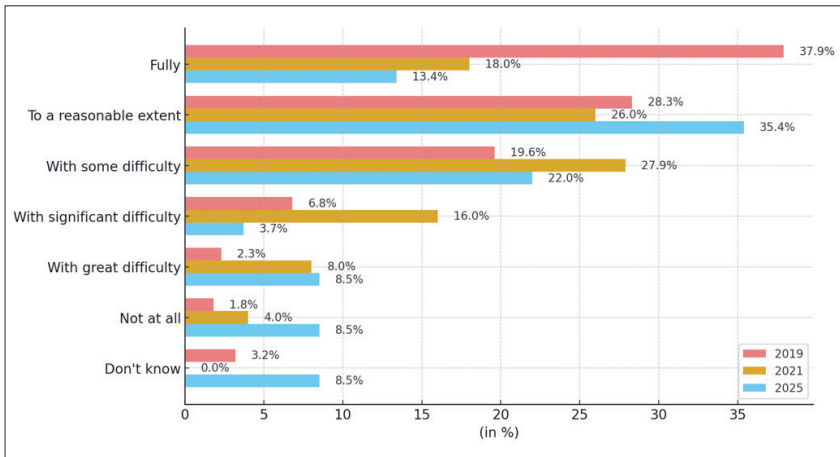
Advocating with and for young people

As part of the wider civil society sector, youth organisations often engage in advocacy activities, bringing the voice of young people to decision makers through a variety of formal and informal means. In this section, we look at the extent to which youth organisations are able to engage in advocacy, how they do it and the way in which they perceive their input to be considered by policy makers. This is an important distinction to make because the ability to participate is an enabling factor for the influence and impact of youth advocacy on decision making, which is considered by many youth organisations as one of their core missions. The distinction is in line with research that shows that requests for input without follow-up or concrete impact can create a negative precedent, which leads to disengagement and diminished trust in decision-making processes (Edwards 2007; Bastedo 2014, Bečević and Dahlstedt 2022).

When asked to what extent the organisations and their members were able to engage without fear of reprisal (see Figure 8), 35.4% of organisations said that they could engage in advocacy “to a reasonable extent” and 13.4% reported that they were able to fully engage in advocacy activities. However, 22% reported that they encountered some difficulties, while 3.7% had significant difficulties and 8.5% faced great difficulties. Some 8.5% stated that they were unable to engage at all. In other words, civic space is restricted for more than a third of organisations when they perform one of their basic functions, and in turn, only 13.4% report full absence of retaliation.

The comparison between 2019, 2021 and 2025 shows that the ability to engage freely and without fear of reprisal is decreasing, with more and more difficulties being reported over time. In 2019, 37.9% of organisations reported that they were able to fully advocate. This percentage dropped dramatically to 18% in 2021 and further to 13.4% in 2025, indicating increasing limitations and challenges in advocacy work.

Figure 8 – Over the past two years, to what extent have your organisation and its members been able to freely engage in advocacy activities without fear of retribution?



The main barriers to advocacy activities that organisations and their members face vary and include political obstacles, media freedom, increasing xenophobia and racism, respect for minority rights, limited financial and human resources, access to policy makers, legislative burdens and security challenges.

Political obstacles are among the most important, and many organisations face government obstruction and fear of retribution, making advocacy difficult. Some organisations face direct threats from the authorities and report “arrests for peaceful protests, cyberbullying for some members and fear of being fired for political activities”. Advocacy on specific political issues has also led to increased scrutiny and intimidation.

Fear of retribution emerged consistently as a barrier to advocacy in the interviews, where civil society activists described a growing fear around repercussions from donors and, in some cases, state authorities, in cases where they wished to engage with certain issues. In already narrow civic spaces, fear of

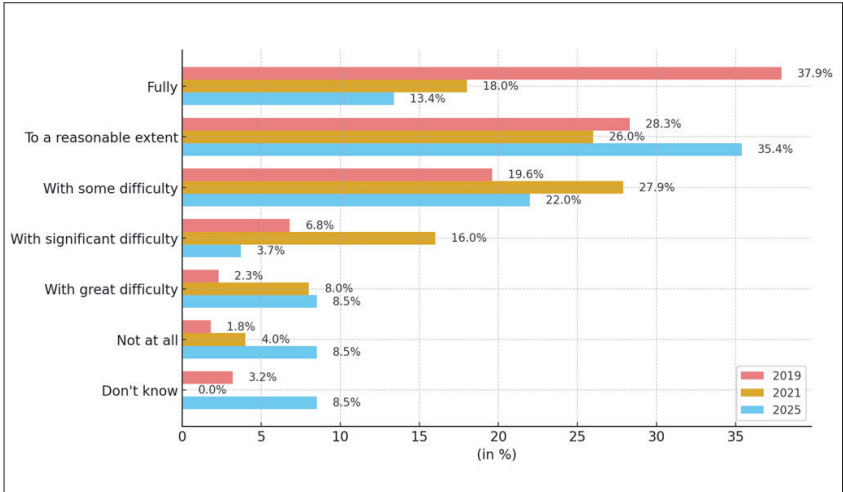
retribution appears to be felt particularly at individual level: fear for one's family, social standing, career and future opportunities. In broader civic spaces, fear of retribution is mostly felt at the associative or organisational level: withdrawal of funding, smear campaigns and legal repercussions related, for example, to defamation lawsuits. Some of the other issues that were identified related to media freedom and control of the media by political parties, surveillance and public scrutiny, and (increasingly) xenophobic, racist and altogether marginalising views towards minority identities. Such deeply ingrained norms and attitudes also lead many people to "fear retaliation at school and in the workplace, as well as in their own families".

Many organisations also reported a struggle with a lack of financial and human resources, which also limits the potential for advocacy, as a lack of resources for staff also leads to less advocacy for youth. Access to policy makers can also be a major challenge. One organisation explained: "The biggest problem for years has been getting the attention of policy makers at local level to put youth issues on the agenda". Others cited as difficulties "the complexity of the legislative process" and "the fact that authorities are not always willing to provide information". During the interviews, youth organisations noted that "government information is transparent, but alienating ... It is the content that is not quite accessible".

In some cases, police and security forces have restricted demonstrations even when they were legally organised. For example, one organisation reports a demonstration in support of workers' rights being banned at the last moment because of an apparent fear of being "misused for the pro-Palestinian cause and possibly turning violent". The organisation stated: "Later, everybody realised that these fears were unfounded, but they restricted our democratic right to protest nonetheless". Some organisations report self-censorship due to funding concerns: "The main issue is a type of 'self-censorship', mainly related to funding and access. We sometimes feel reluctant to say and do as we wish".

These barriers affect organisations in activities that go far beyond traditional advocacy. When we look at the ability of organisations to engage in processes of deliberation and decision-making processes, the results are therefore more challenging. Figure 9 shows that about half of the organisations stated that they were able to participate fully or to a reasonable extent. However, many organisations indicated that they had at least some difficulties with participation – 8.5% of respondents stated that they were unable to participate at all and a further 8.5% had great difficulty.

Figure 9 – Over the past two years, to what extent have your organisation and its members been able to participate in processes of deliberation and decision making on issues that are important to you?



The comparison between 2019, 2021 and 2025 shows a similar downward trend in the ability of organisations to fully participate in decision-making processes as in the case of advocacy activities. The number of organisations that cannot participate at all (“not at all”) more than quadrupled from 2019 to 2025, rising from 1.8% to 8.5%, indicating that more and more organisations do not have access to decision making. The ability to participate fully has decreased from 37.9% in 2019 to 18% in 2021 and further to 13.4% in 2025. Participation “to a reasonable extent” remained relatively stable, increasing slightly from 26% in 2021 to 35.4% in 2025, suggesting that while full participation has decreased, some organisations are still finding ways to engage despite some restrictions.

When asked about the nature of these barriers to consultation and participation in decision making, organisations reported bureaucratic, delayed or unclear communication about consultation opportunities, which also prevents them from properly taking advantage of them. Meetings are often restricted to a few people who are only invited to a limited extent. In addition, public consultations are often held pro forma, as a necessary formality, without the actual intention to consult and without the documentation required for consultation.

Interview data backed up these findings, adding that consultations are often not “youth-friendly”, for example held at times which are unsuitable for young people (during school hours, for example). The survey findings suggest that political instability disrupts the efforts of youth representatives, as frequent changes of government prevent sustained engagement. In contexts of very narrow civic spaces, interview participants described institutional youth participation structures as “captured” with non-transparent rules and procedures as well as a substantial number of youth representatives being directly or indirectly affiliated with the ruling party.

Furthermore, many organisations reported that they are afraid to speak openly because they are financially dependent on the institutions they want to challenge: “The people we have spoken to from the policy side are also the people who decide on our funding”. Many organisations face practical challenges in terms of location, accessibility and funding. The meetings and forums are often held in the cities, so it is costly and time-consuming for rural organisations to attend: “Many meetings are held in the capital, during the day, and are not accessible to us or our representatives”. The concern with access to public meetings at local level was mentioned in the interviews: “the local council is not very youth-friendly. Normally the meetings they hold are during the day, during the week, at 12 o’clock on a Thursday, which if you’re in school or if you’re working you can’t really get to ... which alienates people ... [And the] average age [for local councillors] is over 60”.

Marginalised communities also struggle to be recognised in decision-making processes. Some of the barriers identified through the survey relate to racism, Islamophobia or sexual orientation. LGBTI organisations reported frequent exclusion from policy discussions: “A big obstacle for us is that we are excluded from important policy consultative forums”. Certain policy areas face greater resistance and marginalisation, making participation in consultations and decision making even more difficult. Research findings suggest that “it’s usually very hard to reach policy makers and get them to take an interest in these things [minority rights]”. Discussions on sexual and reproductive health are also hindered by politics, as is the lack of recognition of non-formal education (and its providers) in decision making.

Class issues and “elitism” were also highlighted as impacting on certain young people’s ability to participate in decision-making arenas and share their perspectives in the civic space, with significant barriers to engaging with opportunities to get involved when decision-making opportunities are available. Class issues were understood as key barriers, with elitist spaces described as unwelcoming, competitive and costly. These barriers often match an internal

feeling of inadequacy, where the less privileged “feel kind of out of place ... It is off-putting to people who don’t come from that background”. Additionally, young people with disabilities face challenges of accessibility due to “architectural barriers in the city”, which limit participation and “become a form of indirect discrimination”.

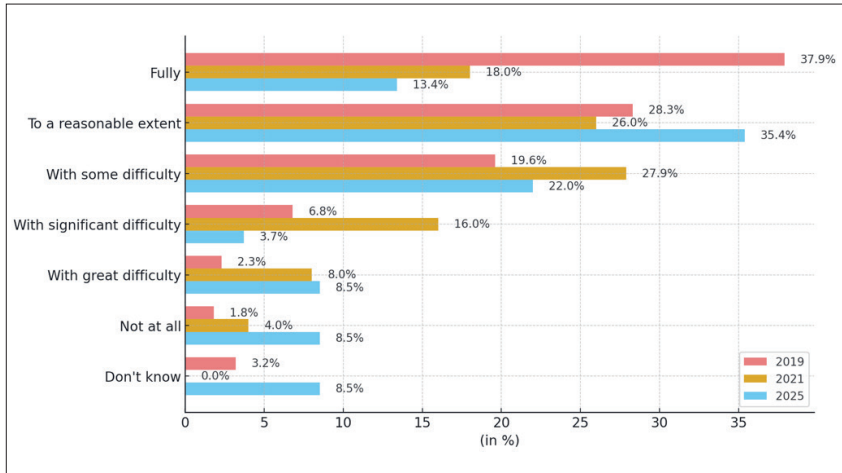
Interview data support these findings, demonstrating that marginalised groups face particular challenges and barriers to participating in decision making. Marginalised groups mentioned by interviewees in this regard included migrant groups, LGBTI youth, young people with disabilities, Roma youth, young people in rural areas and in some cases young women. A contributing factor might be the perceived scarcity of youth-led groups representing marginalised youth, which is ascribable to the struggles that these groups face in self-organising, despite their attempts and wishes to participate in society and civic space. Youth organisations find it challenging to reach out to under-represented and marginalised youth.

Spotlight: marginalisation and exclusion within the youth civic space

According to the surveyed youth organisations and their experience of inhabiting civic spaces, migrants/refugees (31%) face the most restrictions to accessing the civic space, followed by young people with disabilities (21.7%), LGBTI young people (20.9%) and racialised people/BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Colour) (20.9%). Among the common challenges they identified were issues of representation, especially within wider youth groups, as well as freedom of expression, freedom from violence and respect for fundamental rights. Interviewees noted that levels of polarisation, inequality and hate speech are on the rise and currently exacerbating the barriers and challenges that these groups face.

Another side of the same coin, as already mentioned, is the actual influence that organisations have on the outcomes of the policy process. Figure 10 shows the extent to which the organisations and their members were able to influence political deliberation and decision making. Only 13.4% of organisations felt they were able to fully influence the outcomes of political deliberation. A third of organisations said they had no or almost no influence on public policy, with 16% experiencing significant difficulty, 8.5% great difficult, and 8.5% feeling they were not at all able to influence decision making.

Figure 10 – Over the past two years, to what extent have your organisation and its members been able to influence the outcome of processes of political deliberation and decision making?



The comparison between 2019, 2021 and 2025 shows a decreasing trend in the ability of organisations to influence political deliberation and decision making, with fewer organisations reporting significant influence and more organisations reporting minimal or no impact. In 2019, a higher proportion of organisations reported having significant or great influence, suggesting that decision-making spaces were more accessible and receptive. However, in 2021, influence was already starting to decline, with a clear shift towards moderate or limited influence.

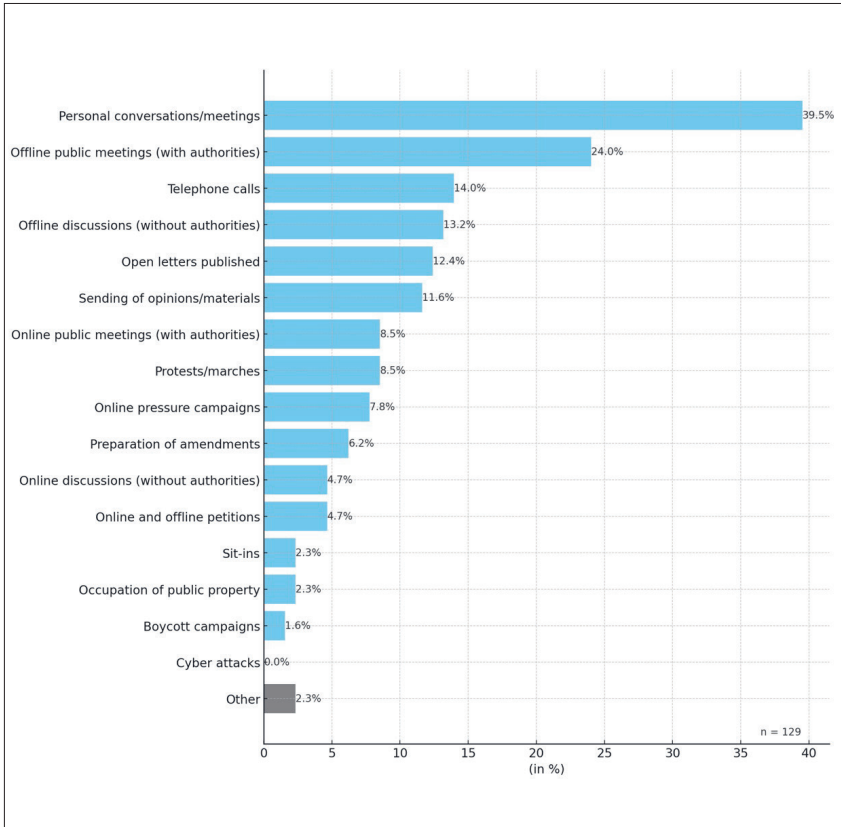
Many organisations report that they face significant obstacles in influencing policy considerations and decisions, despite being involved in consultation and advocacy efforts. A major problem faced by youth organisations is the fact that lobbying does not lead to decision-making power, as decisions are in the hands of policy makers: “Advocacy is one thing, decision making is another, still in the hands of decision makers”. Some describe being part of government working groups that are virtually powerless because of a lack of resources. Others face exclusion from key consultative forums, limiting their ability to participate in discussions that directly affect them: “Political deliberation and decision-making processes are still out of reach for many young people. They only seem to be accessible to a few organisations, most

of which are based in Brussels". Organisations also struggle to influence decision making on politically sensitive issues, especially in areas where there is strong lobbying or ideological opposition. In housing policy, for example, organisations report that they are unable to counteract the influence of property owners' lobbying: "On some issues, such as the housing crisis, we are unable to affect policy changes due to the strong lobbying of property owners". Keeping in mind the impact of these intersectional and cross-policy issues, the institutional work on youth mainstreaming and youth perspective in all policy areas is even more significant.

Limited resources further weaken the ability of organisations to influence decision making. Many groups emphasise how difficult it is to mobilise young people to lobby and to lobby without sufficient funding. Some report that government funding rules and compliance regulations restrict their activities and make effective lobbying difficult: "Funding and compliance are a hindrance, and youth have fallen significantly behind despite the rhetoric on the political agenda".

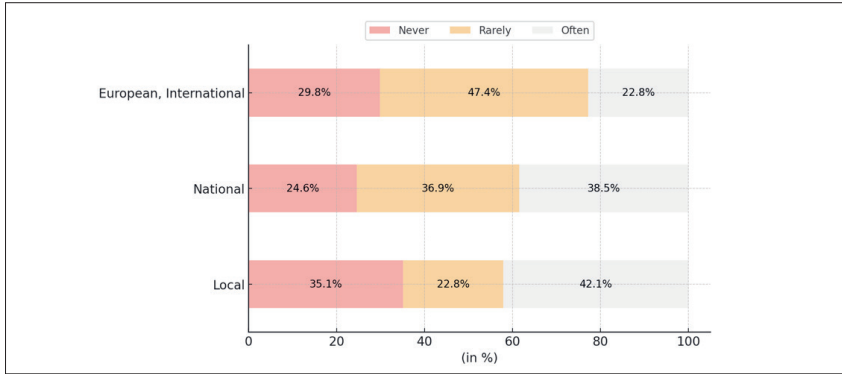
However, certain techniques for influencing processes of deliberation and decision-making processes are more effective. Organisations report that the most effective techniques for influencing deliberative and decision-making processes involve direct engagement with decision makers rather than confrontational methods (see Figure 11). Face-to-face discussions and meetings (39.5%) are by far the most effective technique, with offline public meetings with authorities (24%) in second place, followed by telephone calls (14%) and offline discussions without authorities (13.2%). This reflects the importance of relationship building and direct advocacy in shaping policy. Online public meetings (8.5%) and protests/marches (8.5%) ranked at the bottom of the list, suggesting that these tactics are used but may not be as effective as direct engagement. Online pressure campaigns (7.8%) and drafting amendments (6.2%) suggest that digital lobbying and formal policy proposals play a small but important role in influencing decisions. In the interviews, the role of the press was sometimes highlighted as an enabler and supporter of digital lobbying, contributing to the visibility of issues that matter to youth organisations. This however remains difficult due to the specific competences needed to carry out strategic campaign actions.

Figure 11 – Over the past two years, what would you say have been the most effective techniques for influencing processes of deliberation and decision making (lobbying, advocacy activities, etc.) for your organisation?



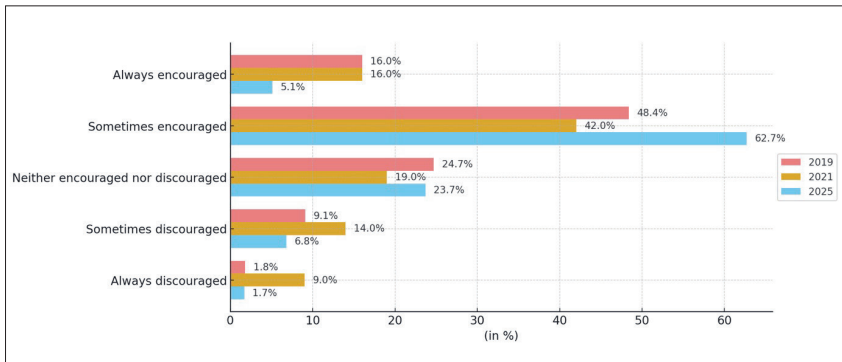
The barriers to accessing the decision-making sphere vary at different levels of public authority (see Figure 12). At the local level, 42.1% of responding organisations indicated that they are frequently invited, suggesting that local authorities are relatively open to involving organisations in problem solving and decision making. However, 35.1% also stated that they were never invited. Participation is most limited at the European/international level. Only 22.8% said they were frequently invited, while almost 30% said they were never invited and 47.4% were rarely invited. This suggests that access to policy making is more exclusive at European or international level.

Figure 12 – Over the past two years, how often have you been invited by public authorities to participate in the formulation of solutions addressing the problems relevant for your field of activity (consultations, etc.)?



If we look more closely, we can see differences at the level of forming an opinion and recognising this opinion. In case of the former (willingness to seek opinion), the majority of respondents (62.7%) stated that the authorities sometimes encourage them to give their opinion. This suggests that while there are opportunities for collaboration, these are not uniform and that engagement depends on specific contexts and possibly policy areas. The proportion of organisations that are always encouraged is only 5.1%. This shows that only a limited number of organisations are regularly and actively asked for their input by the authorities.

Figure 13 – When you think of the past two years, how would you describe the collaboration of your organisation with public authorities? (Willingness to seek opinion)



The comparison between 2019, 2021 and 2025 shows that the willingness of public authorities to seek the views of organisations has remained stable, with fewer organisations consistently reporting that their views are always encouraged (a decrease from 16% in 2019 and 2021 to just 5.1% in 2025), which may indicate a decreasing commitment to structured engagement. Overall, while opportunities for engagement exist, they appear to have become more conditional and selective, making it more difficult for organisations to consistently influence policy.

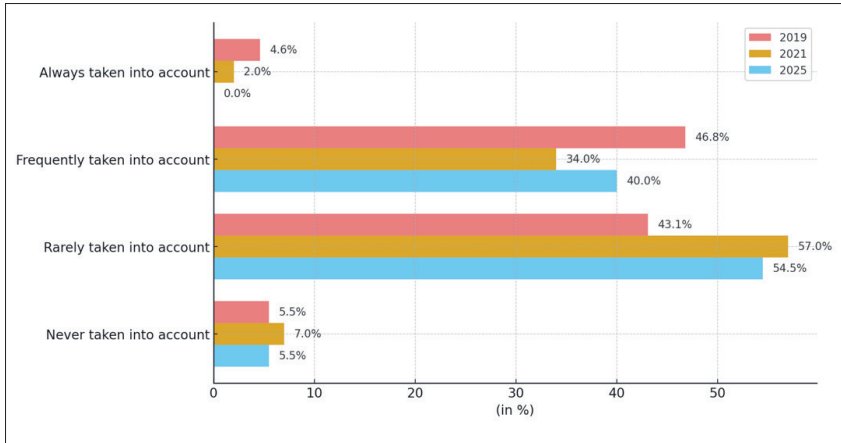
Organisations report that encouragement from the authorities often takes the form of invitations to events, consultations and advisory forums, but many organisations perceive that these efforts are more symbolic than meaningful. Indeed, despite being composed of young people, youth structures' agenda items are often prescribed or externally imposed, diminishing the potential for "structural, impactful changes" and for truly youth-owned platforms. Some describe the engagement as tokenistic, as one representative of a youth organisation notes: "They want youth to be there to say they are involving youth, but rarely is youth participation or their voice truly involved". In some cases, organisations are positively encouraged by the mobilisation of networks and involvement in consultations, but the bureaucratic process and lack of follow-up make participation frustrating, as many never see their recommendations reflected in final policy.

Discouragement often occurs in subtle but effective ways, such as limited access to relevant information, lack of transparency and mistrust of youth voices. A major challenge is that while structures for participation exist, they often serve as ways to share information rather than as true decision-making platforms. Organisations report that decision makers ignore expert opinions, do not allocate budgets to the most problematic issues and do not act even after commitments have been made, thus making them feel that their participation did not have any effect. At European level, youth policy discussions seem to be better structured and there is an interest in involving young people, particularly through existing structures such as the Council of Europe's Joint Council on Youth and the EU Youth Dialogue and EU Youth Check. However, at national and local level, participation is often perceived by organisations as more performative and often depends on individual policy makers rather than a systemic approach.

If we look at the willingness of policy makers to recognise the opinion of organisations (willingness to acknowledge opinion), the picture is even bleaker (see Figure 14). The majority (54.5%) of respondents say that their views are rarely considered, suggesting that while organisations are consulted, their input does not have a significant impact on decisions. While no organisation

indicated that their views are always taken into account, 40% of organisations indicated that their views are often considered, suggesting that some authorities recognise and incorporate external input, even if engagement is inconsistent.

Figure 14 – When you think of the past two years, how would you describe the collaboration of your organisation with public authorities? (Willingness to acknowledge opinion)



The comparison between 2019, 2021 and 2025 indicates a slight decrease in approval, particularly when comparing 2019 to 2025. The trends indicate a decrease in strong recognition of contributions, with more organisations feeling that their voices are rarely or never considered. The decline in the “always considered” and “often considered” categories suggests that decision makers have become less receptive to external input.

Dimensions of civic space

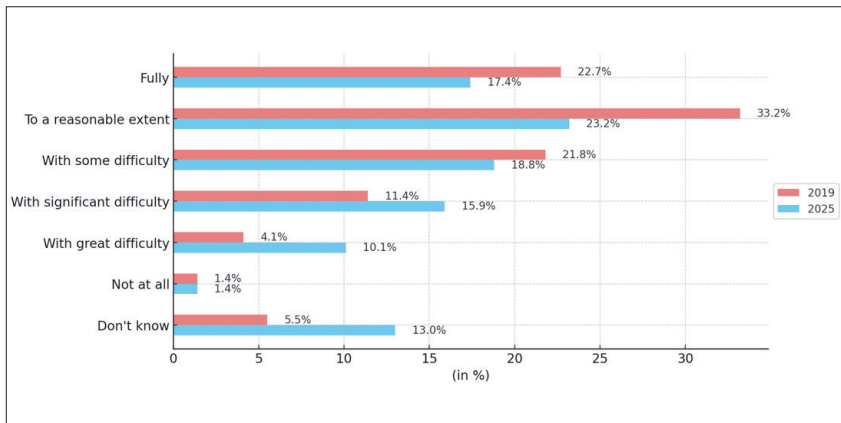
As “the practical room for action and manoeuvre for citizens” (Buyse 2018: 4), the civic space is established by the three basic civil liberties enabling citizens to debate and exchange information (freedom of expression), to organise themselves (freedom of association) and to act (freedom of peaceful assembly). These three core civic space rights are part of any modern human rights document, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the European Convention on Human Rights or democratic constitutions. In the context of backsliding democracy, the three key liberties and the agency of youth organisations can be restricted through various actions and tools of the governments.

Access to information

Access to information from government sources is one of the fundamental dimensions of civic space, as it allows citizens and organisations to monitor the work of the government and its agencies. One of the key areas to monitor is government spending and budget (re)allocation, as it shows a government's priorities.

Figure 15 shows the extent to which organisations were able to access the information they wanted from government sources, including financial data. In 2025, the largest proportion of respondents, 23.2%, indicated that they had reasonable access to information, and 17.4% indicated that they had full access to information. However, a significant number of organisations faced challenges. Some 18.8% reported some difficulty in accessing the information they wanted, 15.9% reported considerable difficulty and 10.1% of organisations had great difficulty. Only 1.4% of them could not access the information at all. Comparing the results from 2019 and 2025, it is clear that organisations are experiencing increasing difficulties in accessing information from government sources. While in 2019 56% of organisations reported reasonable to full access, in 2025 this proportion was 40%.

Figure 15 – Over the past two years, to what extent has your organisation been able to access information (including financial information) from government sources?



Overall, the access to information from government sources was considered to be possible, but the organisations also identified a number of challenges.

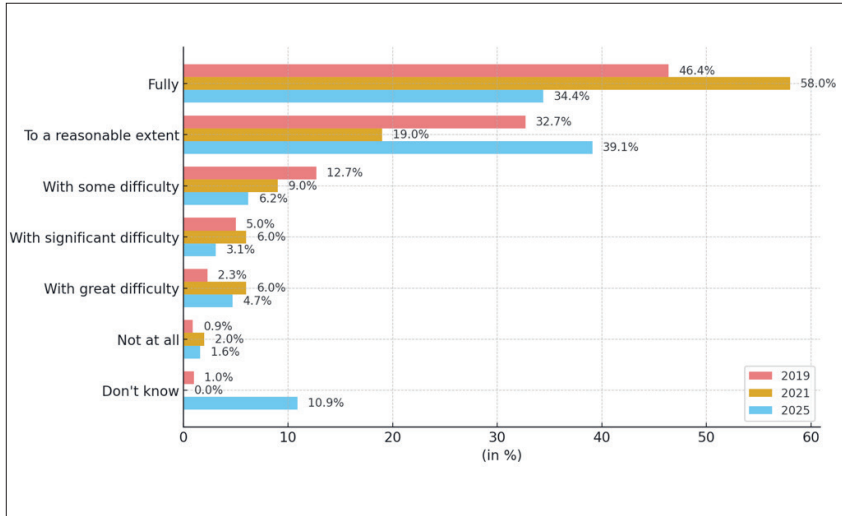
They pointed to delays in responding to questions resulting from staff turnover within departments and a general lack of continuity in communication, reflected in the following observation: “Staff turnover in [government] departments affects relationships and leads to a lack of continuity of knowledge”. Complex and unclear procedures led to additional difficulties in obtaining the desired information, with some pointing out that they had to make parliamentary requests just to gain access to budget documents. They also highlighted a general lack of transparency, pointing out that contradictory and incomplete information is published online and that documents are not published at all. Language barriers also appeared to present obstacles, as technocratic terminology and the lack of translations into minority languages posed a major challenge for less professionalised organisations, especially for minority youth. Political restrictions were also reported by organisations who were trying to access information but who did not adhere to government agendas. For example, one organisation reported: “If your activities are not in line with the government’s ideas, you will face restrictions”.

Finally, the freedom of the media, the “capture” of state media outlets and manipulation of the overall media environment, with the creation of seemingly non-partisan websites and news that reinforce government narratives, were identified as problematic. In slightly more open civic spaces, while the media was generally deemed to be balanced and trusted, the occasional suppression of information was flagged, particularly in relation to corruption.

Freedom of expression

Another very important dimension of civic space is the ability to express oneself freely in public without fear of reprisals from the government or its representatives. Figure 16 shows the extent to which the organisations are able to do this. The majority of organisations report a fairly positive message: 39.1% say they are able to express themselves to a reasonable extent and 34.4% say they are able to do so fully. However, a small but still relevant group of organisations faced barriers to freedom of expression – 6.2% were able to express themselves with some difficulty, 3.1% and 4.7% faced significant and great difficulties respectively, with 1.6% being completely prevented from doing so. Apart from 2021, when the Covid-19 pandemic visibly impacted the situation on the ground, the data points to a decline in opportunities for freedom of expression in public, particularly as fewer organisations are able to make full use of civic space.

Figure 16 – Over the past two years, to what extent has your organisation been able to freely express itself in public without restrictions or fear of retribution?



The organisations identified several obstacles in terms of freedom of expression. Some organisations reported backlash from the authorities, such as funding cuts or the loss of partnerships, when they criticised government measures or policies or took a stand on divisive or politically sensitive issues. Advocacy around divisive issues is often accompanied by the threat of indirect penalties or negative repercussions at national and international level, particularly for European organisations operating in multiple states, which also impacts advocacy at the European level. Members of youth organisations also experienced online harassment, as increasing hate speech and targeted harassment on digital platforms “creates a fear of speaking up on their own behalf”.

Interviews highlighted that there are instances of state-controlled media “publicly vilifying” certain youth activists, which leads to fear and can have far-reaching implications, such as expulsion from school. Hate speech, furthermore, was deemed not to be limited to the targeting of individuals and activists. A number of interview participants considered that mass media in their countries was being used to manipulate public opinion on different topics. Migration and LGBTI issues in particular were described as sensationalised, used as “mass

distraction” and “scapegoating” for social issues such as unemployment and the housing crisis. Organisations interviewed also raised concerns about how increasing polarisation, inequality, hate speech and the rise of the far right in several contexts have exacerbated the barriers and challenges that these groups face.

In some contexts, interview data suggested that youth as a social group was the target of misinformation, fake news and hate speech, with peaceful youth mobilisations being constructed as “violent” and “irresponsible”. Such practices severely undermine youth voices and act as strong deterrents to young people engaging in more direct actions such as peaceful protests and boycotts.

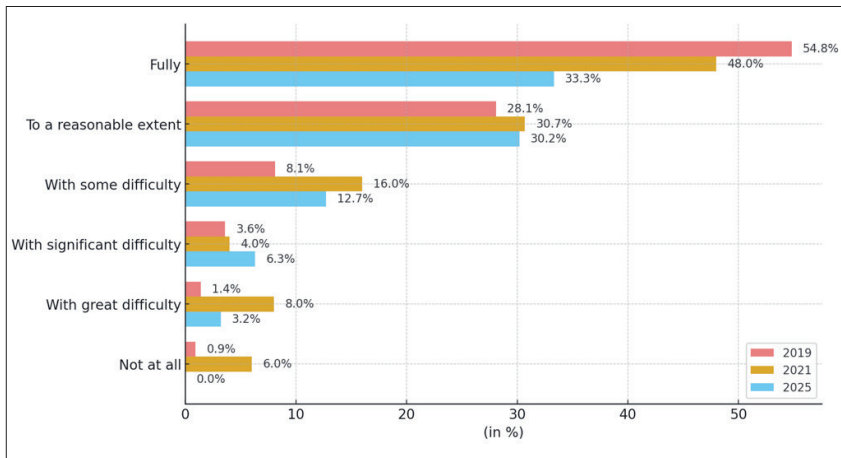
Social media was identified as increasingly central to news sharing, dialogue, collaboration and coalition building for civil society. As such, it plays a fundamental role in either enabling or hindering freedom of expression. While most interviewees recognised their advantages in terms of reach, they reiterated that social media channels are “not built to be spaces for dialogue” and that often they contribute to polarisation, especially among young people. In some contexts, expressing opinions on social media has been legally persecuted. “There is criminalisation of social media posts and what you are saying online. It can be considered a declaration of intent to commit a crime”.

Different young activists across several contexts, for example students, protesters, climate activists and marginalised groups, were also understood to face difficulties related to cyber and online threats, such as surveillance and fear of reprisals for speaking out online.

Freedom of assembly

When it comes to the ability to organise or participate in public meetings and demonstrations without restrictions or fear of reprisals, the situation is, as expected, more difficult for organisations (see Figure 17). While 33.3% of organisations reported that they are able to organise or participate in public meetings and demonstrations without restrictions and 30.2% reported that they are able to do so to a reasonable extent, more than a fifth of organisations reported that they had at least some difficulties in participating in and organising public demonstrations and meetings. Compared to 2019 and 2021, the trend is negative and organisations report that they are less and less able to exercise these rights fully and without reprisals.

Figure 17 – Over the past two years, to what extent have your organisation and its members been able to organise and/or participate in public assemblies and demonstrations without restrictions or fear of retribution?



A noticeable number of organisations highlighted challenges related to LGBTI rights⁵ and the rights of marginalised groups. In some instances, far-right groups were frequently cited as a source of harassment and violence, particularly at LGBTI parades, Pride events and migrant solidarity marches. For example, one respondent noted that “at least two thirds of Pride events in their country in 2024 were targeted for harassment either on site or online”. Some organisations also reported vandalism at their facilities, such as “broken door windows and anti-LGBTI graffiti”. In some countries in particular, authorities also denied access to public halls or did not attend scheduled meetings. Survey respondents also reported fear of arrest, restrictions on fair trials and unfair competition rules if they engaged in political activism or challenged the government’s narrative.

In the interviews, restrictions on protests and peaceful demonstrations were reported across the board, highlighting a normalisation of repression in the public space across Europe. In civic spaces where the right of assembly was not guaranteed, interviewees reported a high risk of police violence, intimidation and severe legal action. In some cases, the high risk of violence determined a shift in young people’s advocacy strategies towards less direct forms of action.

5. See also the speech of the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights of 20 May 2025 on attacks against the human rights of LGBTI people: www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/attacks-against-the-human-rights-of-lgbti-people-are-assaults-on-the-rule-of-law-it-is-time-to-push-back.

Overall and consistently with previous civic space literature, restrictions can be applied in roughly three forms:

1. direct legislative action banning protests and putting limitations on freedom of assembly;^{6 7}
2. one-off denials of authorisation to conduct protests (this is mostly observable again for specific demographics and topics, notably Pride and other LGBTI mobilisations,⁸ demonstrations in support of Palestine⁹ and action on climate and democracy);¹⁰
3. the disproportionate use of force, either by law enforcement attacking peaceful protesters without any apparent reason or by lack of intervention when there is violence between protesters and third parties.^{11 12}

Participation in protests can also be a way to persecute individual activists, thanks to the development of surveillance tools such as drones and face recognition software. Persecution for non-nationals participating in protests can be enacted in the form of deportation or forced extradition.¹³

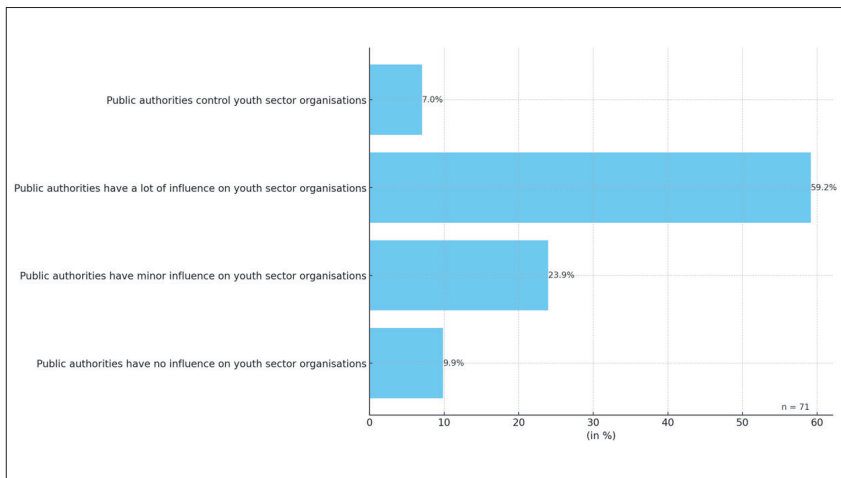
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6. On upholding the rights to freedom of assembly in the context of protests, see the statement of the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights of 24 March 2025: www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/turkish-authorities-should-uphold-the-right-to-freedom-of-assembly-and-expression-in-the-context-of-ongoing-protests.
 7. On crackdown on political dissent, see Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe monitoring, 13 June 2025: <https://pace.coe.int/en/news/9926/pace-monitors-express-their-deep-concern-at-continuing-crackdown-on-political-dissent-in-georgia>.
 8. On upholding the human rights of LGBTI people, see the statement of the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights of 27 June 2025: www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/commissioner-calls-on-hungary-to-uphold-the-human-rights-of-lgbti-people-and-reverse-clampdowns-on-civic-space.
 9. On upholding freedom of expression in the context of the conflict in Gaza, see the statement of the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights of 19 June 2025: www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/the-commissioner-asks-the-german-authorities-to-uphold-freedom-of-expression-and-peaceful-assembly-in-the-context-of-the-conflict-in-gaza.
 10. On crackdowns on environmental protests, see the article by the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights of 2 June 2023: www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/crackdowns-on-peaceful-environmental-protests-should-stop-and-give-way-to-more-social-dialogue.
 11. On the excessive use of force and arbitrary arrests, see the statements of the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights of 4 July 2025: www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/serbia-the-authorities-should-refrain-from-excessive-use-of-force-and-arbitrary-arrests.
 12. On the protection of freedoms of expression and assembly against all forms of violence, see the statements of the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights of 24 March 2023: www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/manifestations-en-france-les-libert%C3%A9s-d-expression-et-de-r%C3%A9union-doivent-%C3%AAtre-prot%C3%A9g%C3%A9es-contre-toute-forme-de-violence.
 13. On the expulsion of foreign nationals on grounds of national security, see the statements of the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights of 28 April 2025: www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/serbia-authorities-should-ensure-safety-of-demonstrators-and-improve-working-environment-for-civil-society-and-human-rights-defenders.

Autonomy and interference

The lack of autonomy is an important element affecting the potential of organisations to fulfil their mission. Overall, autonomy and interference impacting youth organisations and youth civic space are ascribable to two main measures: funding restrictions and the use of legal instruments. These often overlap and have the overall effect of constraining the activities of youth organisations while shrinking civic space and impacting some demographics more than others within youth.

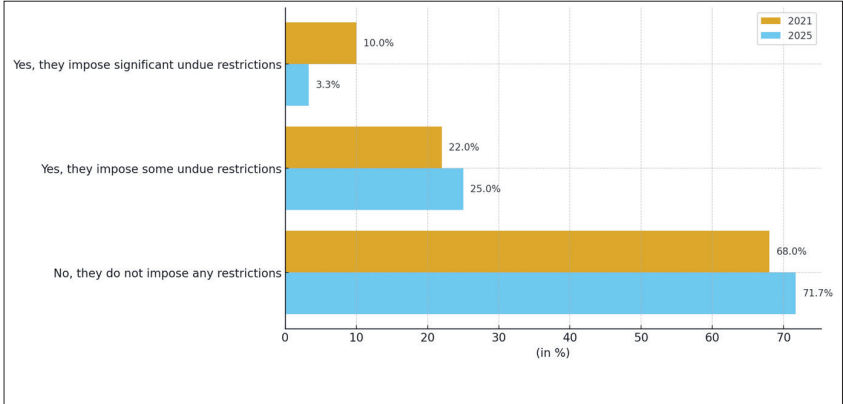
The majority (59.2%) of respondents believe that the authorities have a great deal of influence over organisations in the youth field, which indicates that although these organisations act independently, the authorities still influence their activities and strategies. And 7% of the organisations even believe that the authorities control the NGOs in the youth field. A smaller but notable proportion (23.9%) of organisations believe that the authorities have little influence and a minority (9.9%) stated that they believe the authorities have no influence. Although youth-sector organisations have a degree of independence, the responses suggest that public authorities play an important role in shaping the work of the sector.

Figure 18 – How would you describe the level of control of public authorities over youth-sector organisations (organisations of and for youth) in your country at this present moment?



Looking at the restrictions imposed by governments on organisations, the situation has remained stable over the last five-year period. However, almost 30% of organisations indicated that at least some undue restrictions were imposed on them. These restrictions included funding-related restrictions, including clauses in funding contracts that prohibit organisations from being publicly critical of the funder or its services. Some organisations also faced strict eligibility criteria that limit the groups they can support and the ways in which they support them. Organisations also reported excessive taxation and scrutiny, for example authorities not recognising VAT-exempt status or imposing on the organisations excessive audits, new oversight mechanisms and increased administrative burdens.

Figure 19 – Over the past two years, have public authorities imposed any restrictions on your organisation?



Funding

Many organisations are dependent on public subsidies, grants or state financial support for their functioning, and therefore access to funds is crucial for their survival. Youth organisations experience significant difficulties when it comes to obtaining public funding, either due to specific financial regulations or administrative barriers.

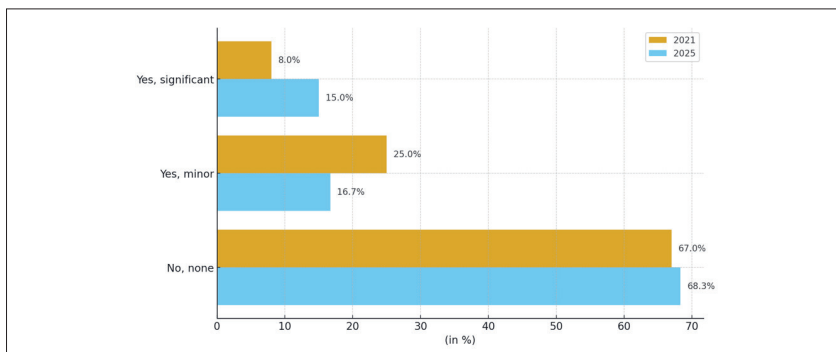
In some cases, the restrictions relate to the organisational capacity to apply for funds or donor classification of youth organisations, which labels many organisations as “non-eligible” despite having significant projects with and for young people.

“The problem is the nature of the association, meaning that we don’t provide any sort of service ... we are not eligible for funds ... we can apply for specific projects but the applications are really complicated. We don’t have the capacity to carry them forward.”

In other cases, the requirement to form partnerships with local authorities can limit the autonomy of organisations and increase the administrative burden, or they may experience ideological barriers if they work in sectors such as sexual and reproductive health rights.

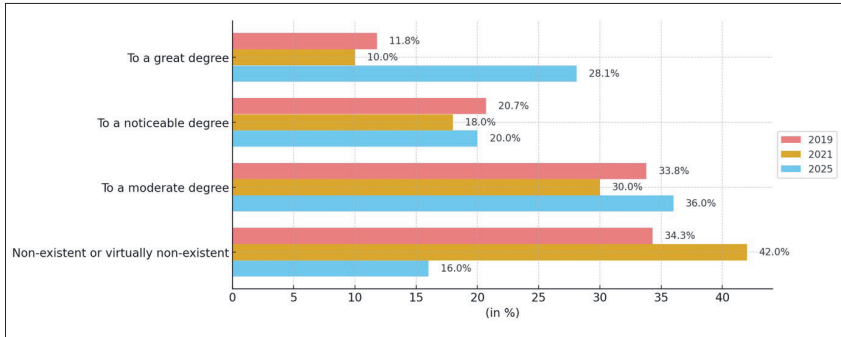
Some youth organisations depend on foreign funding, yet access to those funds is often restricted in the contexts of shrinking democratic space. These may come in the form of legal or administrative obstacles from the state, in the form of foreign agent laws, or the process itself can be overly bureaucratised, time-consuming and resource intensive. Around a third of surveyed organisations reported experiencing such barriers (see Figure 20).

Figure 20 – Over the past two years, has your organisation experienced barriers to accessing foreign funding (for example, from the EU or funding from other international organisations or foundations)?



Organisations can also experience difficulties when applying for public funding based on the market indicators. Figure 21 shows the extent to which organisations in the youth field are assessed against market indicators, with 28.1% of organisations stating that market indicators play a major role, while 20% and 36% believed that they are considered to a noticeable or moderate extent. Only 16%, on the other hand, stated that such indicators are not or almost not present. Over time, we can observe a noticeable increase in market indicators, which should be of great concern, also because these indicators particularly concern less professionalised and less institutionalised organisations with a high staff turnover.

Figure 21 – When competing for public funding or being evaluated on the activities performed, to what degree are youth organisations assessed by “market” indicators (the amount of private funds acquired, basic quantitative indicators, etc.)?



The indicators used to evaluate organisations in the youth field are primarily quantitative and focus on measurable immediate outcomes rather than long-term social impact. These indicators often include the number of participants, regardless of the size of the target group, audience reach and financial metrics such as the cost per recipient of the service, the amount of private funding raised or the proportion of co-financing. Other indicators focus on the sustainability and replicability of projects, as well as the public recognition and professionalism of the organisation when applying for grants, often favouring larger or more established organisations over youth-led organisations. While these metrics emphasise efficiency, effectiveness and measurable impact, they tend to overlook qualitative, immediate outcomes and the long-term impact on individuals, but more importantly on the sector and society.

When applying for funding, organisations also struggle with inconsistent and short-term funding mechanisms and delayed and slow processing. Slow and poorly managed funding processes may “lead youth organisations to close down”. This may be because of difficulties related to high competition for projects with delayed notification of approval or rejection, which leaves organisations “dry” for six months or more: “A lot of organisations closed because of these processes”. Similar issues with unpredictability of funding were found in more open civic space. This is because the national-level programme has “no fixed dates, so [we] wait and hope a call [comes]. The deadline is then after three weeks. [The funding calls often specify] May and September implementation, which doesn’t suit the availability of young people and youth organisations. The focus is on administration, not results”. The interviewees highlighted that some organisations went bankrupt in 2017 because the two final instalments of the grant were sent extremely late, over a year after the final report.

Despite challenges with the bureaucratic and heavy administrative burden on EU funding, several interview participants described being funded and positively impacted by these schemes. The “importance of the Erasmus+ programme” was highlighted, which they considered very useful for their organisation and “very supportive for those doing quality work”. However, they also noted concerns for the future related to the current state of democracy and global civic space and the potential resulting budget cuts that they feared would arise because of changing priorities.

While the majority of youth policies mandate the establishment of specific funding programmes to support young people as well as the association catering for them in various ways (Bacalso, Barta and Moxon 2023) the last few years have seen a steady decrease of funding allocated to youth civil society. This is, in some instances, part of a wider trend: notable examples are the Open Society Foundation’s limiting its activities in the EU (Reuters 2023), and the recent cuts to civil society in some states or the early effects of the overnight dismantling of USAID (Coi and Parulava 2025). Interviewees highlighted that the cut in funding from the United States is a “big issue for a lot of organisations”, which have found themselves, often mid-programme, having no further access to their prior funding streams.

Sometimes, cuts specifically target youth organisations and youth civil society. The European Youth Forum’s latest report on EU youth programmes, for instance, concludes that:

there has been a general shift in the Erasmus+ Programme budgets away from KA2 grants which are designed to support longer term organisational partnerships, and towards KA1 projects which focus on mobility of individuals. As a result, despite the overall Erasmus+ budget increase no notable increases are seen in the amount of KA2 grants awarded to youth related civil society and youth organisations. (Bacalso, Barta and Moxon 2025)

Funding, however, is not only understood to shrink in financial terms but also in terms of other types of support, such as limited access to venues or the lack of budgets to guarantee equal opportunities. This makes rights such as freedom of assembly possible in theory but difficult in practice. Access to public spaces is often challenging because of complex procedures, little guarantee of success and unclear regulations for granting access. Good practices, such as the European Youth Foundation funding schemes supporting small-scale creative actions for widening civic spaces were described as useful in tackling some of these issues.

A recurrent theme in the interviews was the challenge with funding in relation to freedom of expression, as well as the politicisation of certain themes

and subjects, describing fears and risks of potential funding sanctions from donors and regulatory bodies:

Well, this is quite a contingent question [the question of whether they felt they or their organisation were allowed freedom of expression], because we are getting public funds. So sometimes you have to measure your voice ... sometimes when expressing your views, because your funding is public. So sometimes you have to be, let's say ... politically correct.

Such instances of self-censorship were more acute for certain politicised subjects: "It is hard to know if you should express yourself or not ... There are funding implications ... potential sanctions on organisations. Also, for individual situations, it can have a potential negative impact on their lives". Some organisations related tales of backtracking over advocacy demands and initiatives: "a petition was cancelled in their own organisation as it was too risky and received a lot of negative backlash from donors and institutions. They feared being exposed to the donors".

Self-censorship on sensitive issues for fear of potential repercussions is identified as a crucial early warning sign of shrinking civic space, which becomes the norm over time as civic space becomes more narrow (Malena 2015).

Legislation and actions narrowing civic space

Youth policy is not the only policy area that impacts youth civic space. Strategies or measures that effectively narrow civic space are strongly connected to bureaucratic procedures and legislative and judicial frameworks, as well as the curtailing of specific rights, misuse of laws and imposition of specific restrictions on youth organisations.

In some countries, registering an NGO is a complex and cumbersome task with excessive bureaucracy, which might discourage some youth groups from registering an organisation. This in turn also impacts on their access to public funds. Furthermore, administrative and reporting requirements place further burdens on the functioning of organisations, which limits their activity in the civic space.

Certain legislation that limits the organisations' operations also curtails civic freedoms in Europe. For example, as highlighted in the sections above, the introduction of a foreign agent law^{14 15} poses significant challenges to youth

14. On such laws, see for example, the letter of the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights of 3 May 2017: www.coe.int/hr/web/commissioner/-/commissioner-calls-on-hungary-s-national-assembly-to-reject-law-on-foreign-funded-ngos.

15. See also the statements of the Council of Europe Commissioner on Human Rights: www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/commissioner-is-concerned-about-intrusive-inquiries-into-ngos-that-are-at-odds-with-georgia-s-human-rights-commitments.

organisations' access to funding over the last 10 years. Foreign agent laws place additional transparency demands on civil society organisations that receive foreign funding. They thus become monitoring mechanisms whose bureaucratic burden mostly falls on the shoulders of already overloaded civil society organisations, with catastrophic impacts on operations. In some cases, funding received from abroad can automatically restrict or fully halt a civil society organisation's operations.

Laws hindering the right to protest and bans on demonstrations have also been recorded in at least six European countries in the last five years, four of them being EU member states (CIVICUS 2024). The restrictive laws either grant more powers to the police, curtail the right to demonstrate in specific instances or seek to further criminalise protesters for their actions.¹⁶

Less systemic yet notable violations have been documented in some instances. Specific groups across borders, such as environmental activists, are also a target in some countries, where they are subject to arrests, repressive measures and intensified police action (CIVICUS 2024). Furthermore, the arrests of youth activists as one of the tactics for silencing democracy have been highlighted by European bodies.¹⁷

Restrictions have been imposed on mass protests in solidarity with Palestine and the ongoing conflict in Gaza in at least 12 EU countries (European Civic Forum 2024).

Interviewees confirmed their concern about these and other legislative restrictions and "gag laws", which have also been highlighted by the European institutions.¹⁸

Such findings are consistent with non-youth-specific civic space literature and they highlight the progressive normalisation of the erosion of the rule of law even in those civic spaces that have been reported as more "open", as well as a global trend towards the repression of direct action and dissent.

16. On this topic, see for instance the letter of the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights of 20 December 2024: www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/the-commissioner-asks-the-italian-senate-to-amend-the-security-bill-to-safeguard-human-rights.

17. See for example the statement of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe from 5 September 2025: www.coe.int/en/web/congress/-/silencing-youth-is-silencing-democracy-council-of-europe-congress-statement-following-fact-finding-visit-to-ankara.

18. See for example the European Parliament: www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-8-2015-006729_EN.html.

Conclusions: a global, interconnected shrinking civic space

The findings of this report demonstrate that the last three years have seen a worrying deterioration in terms of the health and openness of civic space for young people and youth organisations in Europe. Access to young people remains limited for over a third of surveyed organisations, despite the lifting of Covid-19 restrictions. The comparison between 2019, 2021 and 2025 shows a dramatic decrease in the impact of and opportunities for advocacy. Youth organisations not only have less access to decision making but also less influence over political deliberation and decision making, with fewer organisations reporting significant influence and more organisations reporting minimal or no impact. Organisations report that they face significant obstacles to influencing policy considerations and decisions, despite being involved in consultation and advocacy efforts. This situation is complicated by the perception that expressing oneself comes at a cost: only one in five organisations is able to engage freely and without fear of reprisal, a dramatic drop of 43% from 2019.

The trend of overall shrinking of civic space is felt also in terms of the three civic freedoms of information, association and assembly. While in 2019 the majority of organisations reported moderate to full access to information, by 2025 more organisations report greater difficulty or uncertainty in obtaining necessary information. Organisations also report a decline in opportunities for freedom of expression in public, with more than a fifth of organisations reporting that they had at least some difficulties in participating in and organising public demonstrations and meetings and had seen an increase in legislation seeking to reduce the right of peaceful assembly. Finally, a majority of respondents believe that the authorities have a great deal of influence over organisations in the youth field, and over a third of organisations believe that authorities impose undue restrictions on their activities. Interviews complement the survey data in two ways. First, they expand on the high personal and organisational cost active young people pay as they stand up for human rights and fundamental freedoms. Second, they highlight an important dimension of resilience in a social and political global environment where the erosion of fundamental rights and freedoms is more normalised.

The drivers of the shrinking space are many and interconnected, fulfilling almost all of the measures highlighted by the previous literature on civic space. Funding remains a major challenge, affecting the youth civil society sector across borders – impacting financial sustainability, operations, service provision and the ability to mobilise fundamental civic rights of expression and association. Marginalisation, violence and exclusion within youth civic space appear to be on the rise. Both are exacerbated by two factors. Externally, conflicts in Europe and neighbouring regions and the subsequent impact on the economy put pressure on governments to reduce or cut aid and social spending, and also allows governments to justify doing so. Internally, the erosion of the rule of law in certain contexts determines an increasing repression of dissent and heightens polarisation and hate speech, which severely affects the rights of certain groups of young people, notably migrants,¹⁹ Roma and Travelers,²⁰ people of colour, LGBTI groups and students. While the last few years have seen a more structured approach to the creation and adoption of youth policies – which, among other things, mandate funding mechanisms and programmes to sustain youth civil society – the disappearance from the European region of key funding institutions and philanthropic organisations, such as the Open Society Foundation (OSF), and the roll-back on national and transnational funding programmes for youth organisations and civil society at large put a significant strain on the social impact sector.

Within the context of global conflict and democratic backsliding, the evidence gathered in this report highlights the challenges and restrictions young people and youth civic space experience. As youth organisations increasingly engage young people on issues of democratic rights and freedoms, urgent measures are needed to contain this trend and facilitate their active role in safeguarding democracy across Europe.

19. On attacks on the Human Rights of migrants, see for example Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights statement of 16 June 2025: www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/attacks-on-the-hr-of-migrants-put-all-our-rights-at-risk.

20. On upholding the human rights of Roma and Travellers, see for example Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights Memorandum of 25 February 2025: www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/commissioner-of-flaherty-recommends-stronger-action-to-uphold-the-human-rights-of-roma-and-travellers-in-finland-ireland-and-slovakia.

Recommendations

Taking into account principles of institutional action for youth highlighted in the first part of this report, and in line with previous recommendations (Council of the European Union 2021; Deželan et al. 2020; Deželan 2021; Deželan 2022), youth civic space needs to be safeguarded and promoted by taking the following measures.

- ▶ Introduce transparent, inclusive and low-threshold rules concerning the organisation of and participation in public assemblies, events and demonstrations.
- ▶ Provide means to secure safe public assemblies, events and demonstrations.
- ▶ Safeguard and expand civic spaces for all young people, by putting in place additional measures to ensure that young people who are under-represented and marginalised within civic space can access and participate.
- ▶ Eliminate all age restrictions to participation in public consultation and deliberation processes.
- ▶ Reduce unnecessary bureaucratic burdens draining the already limited professional capacity of youth organisations (financial accounting, legal, organisational), provide these services to youth organisations free of charge and pool already available official data from other sources rather than requiring organisations to report.
- ▶ Remove all thresholds excluding small youth organisations and non-formal youth groups to acquire funding and other support.
- ▶ Assess organisational performance on the basis of qualitative indicators and peer review.
- ▶ Continue to support and improve mechanisms such as the EU Youth Dialogue and the Young European Ambassadors programme, taking into account the feedback provided by beneficiaries of such mechanisms.
- ▶ Support innovative programmes and initiatives encouraging and sustaining the participation of young people in public affairs.

- ▶ Address concerns linked to processes and instruments that cause a shortage of free and accessible public spaces or that impose substantial barriers on young people seeking to access and participate in civic spaces, namely commercial tools that use algorithms to deliver personalised marketing, gentrification, rural migration and increased commercialisation of physical and online spaces.
- ▶ Address concerns linked to the privacy and safety of young people exercising their civic rights and freedoms in order to ensure their personal safety and ensure respect for the individual's rights, which should be promoted in accessible language, and give them control over their data, above all through secure and lawful processing of all data that belong to them or is about them as defined in the EU General Data Protection Regulation and the Digital Services Act.
- ▶ Commit to and support, where applicable, co-designed and co-managed interactions or communication channels between public authorities and young people through civic spaces, including those supported and maintained by organisations active in the field of youth and non-formal groups of young people, so as to facilitate a meaningful and wide representation of young people's voices and make a tangible impact on the development, implementation and follow-up of policies that are relevant to young people.
- ▶ Continuously monitor and assess the state of civic spaces for young people across Europe, and at national, regional and local level, by gathering data and evidence on the shrinking space phenomenon at local, national and European levels, including the challenges and threats they face, and evaluate the participation of young people in civic spaces.
- ▶ Consider setting up a youth-led, independent youth civil society observatory to allow youth civil society to flag violations of their rights and monitor developments on young people's terms. Such research should focus on:
 - introducing and supporting detection and prevention mechanisms countering anti-democratic legal and policy manoeuvres of governments and their agents, particularly from a youth perspective;
 - introducing systematic monitoring of countries' performance concerning the relevant dimensions of civic space for young people; preferably, these monitoring mechanisms should be youth-led and rooted in the expertise and perspective of youth civil society;
 - introducing measures encouraging countries to safeguard these spaces;

- improving data management on a systemic level and coverage of gaps in information or knowledge about the performance of certain public or publicly funded programmes/projects/policies and about the well-being of young people as a whole and some of the most vulnerable youth subgroups (such as young women, young people from a minority background and young migrants).
- ▶ Examine, where relevant, the effects that commercial tools that use algorithms to deliver personalised marketing have on civic spaces for young people.
- ▶ Support initiatives aiming to promote fact checking and cross-checking of information sources in order to address the problem of fake news and biased representation of facts.
- ▶ Establish unrestricted access to complete, true and up-to-date information from public authorities.
- ▶ Introduce a uniform set of rules and procedures for accessing public information with preferably a single-entry point for accessing all required public information; specifically for young people, information should be drafted in youth-friendly language and in accordance with the European Youth Information Charter,²¹ to encourage transparency and increase the trust of young people in political institutions.
- ▶ Ensure that the authorities and other relevant stakeholders commit to zero-tolerance policies on hate speech and crime supported by better legislation that addresses the problem, and strive for more effective street-level implementation of this regulation.
- ▶ Secure robust and long-term funding for watchdogs and other organisations advocating youth issues.
- ▶ Strive to safeguard and expand a range of different civic spaces for young people at all levels through sustainable structural funding and, where appropriate, consider project-based funding for organisations active in the field of youth and non-formal groups of young people.
- ▶ Push for stronger legislative efforts for greater transparency of governmental action and of any measures taken by other beneficiaries of public money.
- ▶ Provide robust and long-term support to youth organisations facilitating freedom of expression and the participation of young people in public affairs on the basis of an independent and non-partisan peer review

21. The European Youth Information Charter is a set of professional principles and guidelines for youth information and counselling work.

performed by internationally credible bodies. Support should be direct and focus especially on the exercise of their freedom of expression, association and assembly.

- ▶ Support organisations active in the field of youth and non-formal groups of young people combating hate speech and other threats to their activities.

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This study explores the phenomenon of shrinking civic space with a particular focus on the impact on young people and youth organisations in Europe. It identifies a range of restrictions affecting youth civic space and highlights a consistent downward trend in liberties of information, association, assembly and expression for youth organisations, as well as legal and regulatory measures that limit these freedoms, and the financial and material barriers which undermine the autonomy and sustainability of youth organisations.

The comparison of findings between 2019, 2021 and 2025 shows a dramatic decrease in the impact of and opportunities for advocacy and participation in decision making. These dynamics have far-reaching consequences. As avenues for collective organisation and expression narrow, young people risk marginalisation from democratic processes. The erosion of youth civic space therefore not only weakens youth participation, but it also threatens the resilience of democratic systems as a whole.

The study concludes with a set of recommendations to European institutions, national governments and civil society. Safeguarding youth civic space requires reinforcing legal protections, strengthening education systems, ensuring accessible and independent funding and creating genuine opportunities for co-decision. Supporting youth organisations as key actors in democratic life is essential to the prevention of further backsliding and sustaining pluralistic, participatory democracies in Europe.

The member states of the European Union have decided to link together their know-how, resources and destinies. Together, they have built a zone of stability, democracy and sustainable development whilst maintaining cultural diversity, tolerance and individual freedoms. The European Union is committed to sharing its achievements and its values with countries and peoples beyond its borders.

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