

STATE OF YOUTH CIVIC SPACE

A guided self-reflection tool
for youth organisations



Youth Partnership

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



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Foreword

This tool forms part of the Partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe in the field of youth (Youth Partnership)'s research on democracy and youth civic space. It is intended to serve as a self-assessment instrument for youth organisations and youth groups who wish to reflect on and act upon the impact of shrinking civic space on their organisation, members and operations.

Please note that this tool has been designed to meet the needs of a wide range of youth organisations and groups, and you can adapt it where necessary to suit your own context and needs.

The full study on democracy and the state of youth civic space is available on [Youth Partnership website](#).

What is civic space?




Civic space can be understood as “the place civil society actors occupy within society; the environment and framework in which civil society operates; and the relationships among civil society actors, the State, private sector and the general public” (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2017: 13).

Across Europe and the world, this space is shrinking. Research shows that civil society is facing more limitations and pressure than before (Dezelan, Isernia and Stapleton 2025). This matters because a strong and active civil society is essential for the health of democracies. When civic space shrinks, democracy becomes weaker.





Young people are often hit hardest when civic space shrinks. They already face barriers when trying to join formal politics, with lower representation in parliaments and political parties compared to older generations (Bárta, Boldt and Lavizzari 2021). When civic space shrinks further, it becomes even more difficult for young people to organise, participate and be heard – negatively impacting the state of current and future democracy.

Previous research on civic space argues that there are two kinds of restrictions: ¹

Explicit restrictions are clear and direct limits on basic freedoms:

-  regulation and restriction on freedom of expression online and offline;
-  strict rules or bans on freedom of assembly and association, such as demonstrations or other gatherings;
-  criminalising or labelling organisations and individuals, often those engaged in advocacy issues.

Implicit restrictions are more subtle forms of pressure:

-  gradual complication of rules that make it harder to function as an organisation;
-  funding cuts or blocking independent or international support;
-  negative campaigning to delegitimise civil society groups;
-  replacement of independent civil society organisations with government-controlled organisations (sometimes called GONGOs, government-organised non-governmental organisations).

1. For further information and references, see the study "Democracy and youth civic space" by Dezelan, Isernia and Stapleton (2026).

Guidelines

This tool has been designed to be used as a guided reflection and assessment of civic space for youth organisations. It can be used by organisations active at any level, but it is particularly useful for those working at a national level.

Shrinking civic space is a complex issue. The topics for assessment below are not an exhaustive list of relevant discussion items but should be seen as a suggestion for how to initiate conversations about civic space from a variety of perspectives. You can choose to add or skip sections depending on your organisation's context and interests.

The tool consists of four sections, each containing a number of statements and follow-up reflection questions on different aspects of civic space. The statements represent the two ends of a spectrum. Your task is to situate yourself and your organisation where on the scale you believe is most fitting, according to your experiences. Keep in mind that the scales are intended to open up discussion and therefore do not list any grades or numbers.




It is suggested to work with the tool in a group setting, but it can also be used by individuals. When working in groups, discussions are most suitable for groups of four to six people, meaning larger groups can be divided into smaller teams and later reconvened for a joint reflection session at the end of the exercise.

You can adapt the time for the discussions based on your own availability and interests, but it is suggested to dedicate three hours to half a day for group discussions. You can decide whether to go through the full tool in one meeting or whether to divide the sections to span over multiple occasions.

Suggested approach:




1.

Plan

-  *Set a specific time when your group can dedicate its full attention to going through the exercise.*
-  *Consider which people to invite to ensure an interesting and rich discussion. Maybe you have different experiences in your group that could broaden the scope of reflection?*
-  *Decide whether you want to go through the full tool in one sitting or whether you will divide the sections across multiple occasions.*



2.

Meet

-  *When you meet, explain that the purpose of the discussion is to reflect and assess the civic space for your group.*
-  *If you have additional goals for the discussion, make sure everyone understands what is expected.*
-  *Read the reflection text after these guidelines aloud to start the session.*

3.

Starting up

-  *Select one person to lead the discussions. This person will ensure that you stick to the time, take notes when needed and ensure everyone gets to contribute.*
-  *The discussion lead should read through the material in advance and see if certain questions could be discussed in greater depth based on the specific context, or add any other relevant questions that might be missing for your situation, organisation or group.*

4.

Discuss

- * For each item listed below, you are expected to mark a point on a scale to assess the extent to which it reflects the current realities within which your organisation operates. Set a timer for the maximum amount of time you want to dedicate to each item, for example, 10 minutes per item.*
- * Read the full description for each item aloud and clarify any questions.*
- * Participants can conduct individual assessments and compare their reasoning or have an open discussion in a group and complete the assessment together.*
- * Remember that not everyone has the same experience of enjoying their fundamental rights. Some people may be more affected by the discussion than others. Always be mindful of signs of discomfort in the group. Consider allowing participants to take a break if they need one. If conflicts or disagreements arise, take a five-minute break to de-escalate the situation and allow people to return with a clearer head.*

5.

Conclude

- * Discuss together what you thought of the discussion and the results of the assessment, and decide what actions you want to take next.*
- * Consider using these three debriefing questions:*
 - What, in your opinion, are the most important findings from this exercise?*
 - How can we use these findings going forward?*
 - Mention one thing that surprised you, one thing that you were expecting and one thing you would like to learn more about or take action on.*

Starting reflection: shrinking civic space for young people in Europe

Let's imagine a large public park where everyone is free to hang out, play or organise activities. Ideally, the park is wide open – people can move around easily, try new things and invite others to join. Flowers grow, there are many different paths to explore and plenty of open green spaces.

Civic space is the “park” where people and groups – from youth organisations to non-governmental organisations, campaigns, grassroots movements or other community groups – can come together, speak up and take part in society. Open civic space means that individuals or organisations have the freedom to come together, are supported by society to do so and create the conditions to interact with other entities, including the government, businesses or other social groups.

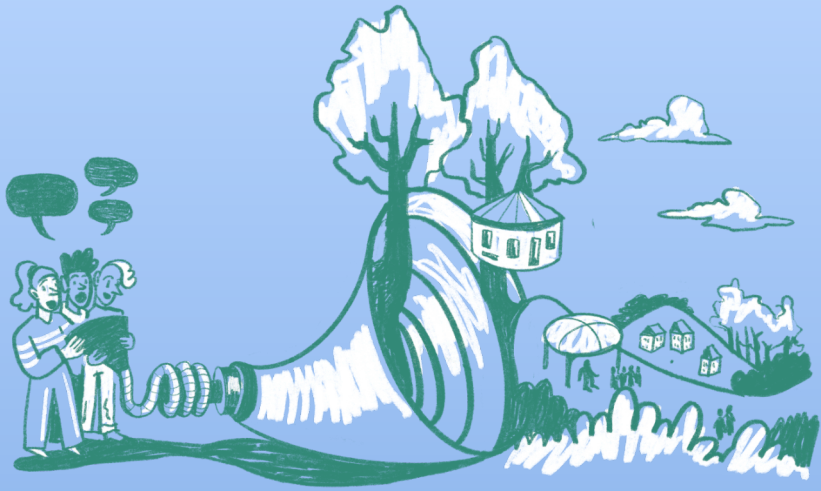
Now, let's imagine fences and gates starting to appear around the park. It might be hard to notice at first, especially if they are small and only block off certain areas of the park. But as the fences get closer together, they take up more space and suddenly there are fewer options to move around freely, less room to do activities and less space to make use of the park.

Across Europe and the world, civic space is showing worrying signs of shrinking. Sometimes it is visible in government cuts to funding or other support for organisations. Sometimes it can be seen in new rules that make it harder to run events or obtain the necessary paperwork to be recognised as a group. Other times, it is more direct, such as restricting the right to protest or attacks on activists. These may seem like small changes one by one, but together they can restrict the space to act and speak up.

Without a strong civic space, democracies weaken: they become less fair, less open and less responsive to people's needs.

Young people are especially affected by shrinking civic space. Youth organisations and youth groups often already have limited resources, such as money, networks or political power. On top of that, young people as a group are less represented in parliaments or political parties compared to older generations. So, when the "park" of civic space gets smaller, young people risk being the first to feel the effects and may struggle to know where to turn for support.

Protecting civic space requires us to come together and stand up for our democratic rights. A first step is to learn how to identify signs of shifts in the democratic landscape and to gain awareness of practical examples of shrinking space. Exercises like this reflection tool can help strengthen our joint understanding and knowledge of what shrinking space can look like, and help identify areas that are particularly relevant for further exploration.



Section 1

Meaningful youth participation

There are many ways to define meaningful youth participation (see Bárta et al. 2021). Here, it is mainly understood in terms of involvement in, impact on, and access to decision making.

1.1 Involvement in external decision making

Youth organisations' involvement in formal decision making can vary greatly across contexts. Here, a distinction can be made between two types of decision making in processes led by external actors (e.g. governmental actors): "structural involvement" (for example, participating in the creation of rules and regulations regarding youth organisations' funding) and "thematic involvement" relating to young people more generally and the issues that matter most to them (for example, climate change, housing or youth employment).

Examples of youth involvement in decision making



Structural decisions – Your organisation is consulted on new funding programmes for young people in your municipality.



Thematic decisions – Your organisation writes a letter to the mayor asking to reject a project to turn the local park into a parking lot.

**Before starting the discussion, define which type of involvement you are referring to. If your organisation does not seek to influence thematic decision making, feel free to focus on how external decision making affects your structures and funding.*

We are fully involved in both structural and thematic decisions that can affect us and our work

We have to adapt our organisation and the way we run it to the structural and thematic decisions others make without our involvement



Further dimensions to explore

Are there decisions that are more accessible for us to take part in than others?

1.2 Quality and impact of involvement in decision making

When discussing the quality and impact of youth organisations' involvement in decision making, it is important to emphasise not only the need to be listened to and actively involved in the process but also the ability to meaningfully shape and influence decisions. For this section, you are asked to assess your organisation's contribution to decision making on topics and issues that matter to you. ²

For the exercise below, each corner of the map represents a type of advocacy behaviour in relation to external decision-making actors.

Begin the exercise by taking a moment individually to situate your organisation on the map based on your experience, and then compare your results with one another.

2. As above, if your organisation does not seek to influence structural or thematic decision making, you can instead focus on how decisions external to your organisation affect your structures and funding.

Strategic disruption

our organisation is not consulted, but when we vocalise our position, our advice is reflected in the decisions made by policy makers

Constructive partnership

our organisation is consulted in decision-making processes, and the decisions made reflect our advice



Closed space

our organisation is not consulted and we struggle to have an impact on decision-making processes

Performative or faulty processes

our organisation is consulted in decision-making processes, but the decisions rarely, if ever, reflect our advice, or they reflect it unsatisfactorily



Further dimensions to explore

Does your influence in decision making differ depending on the issues being discussed?

Reflect on the discussions and topics where your involvement makes a difference.

Can you be part of setting the discussions you are invited to contribute to, or are you only participating in decisions defined by others?

1.3 Access to spaces

Spaces – whether physical or digital – are necessary for people to meet and run different activities. Spaces can be understood in different ways, often differentiated between public and private spaces. Here, two dimensions are explored:

1.3.1 Physical public spaces

Physical public spaces are areas that are accessible to everyone without an entry fee. Examples of physical public spaces include streets, squares, town halls, libraries and youth centres.

Physical public spaces are fully accessible to our organisation, without the need to ask for permission



Public spaces are not available to our organisation or we are systematically denied permission to use them

1.3.2 Digital spaces

Digital spaces are virtual spaces that can be accessed without cost, though they might require some type of registration. Examples of digital spaces include social media platforms, websites, apps and video games.

We can use the internet and online spaces for our organisation's purposes without restrictions



Government restrictions or control of the internet limit our capacity to organise and act

Further dimensions to explore

What other spaces do we have available to meet and organise activities?

Are there spaces where we can meet with youth organisations or youth groups?



Section 2

Dimensions of civic space

The three basic civil liberties at the heart of civic space are: 1) the right to act (freedom of peaceful assembly); 2) the right to debate and exchange information (freedom of expression); and 3) the right to organise (freedom of association).

2.1 Freedom of assembly

Demonstrations are one of the main ways in which people and groups manifest their dissent or express their views on political issues. To protest peacefully is a right, and states have a duty to respect, facilitate and protect this right. Demonstrations are, by definition, disruptive.



Further dimensions to explore

Think of the demonstrations you and your organisation took part in or organised. What was their impact? Did they lead to any political wins, or were they shut down?

Does the issue over which the demonstration is organised (for example, climate, austerity measures, democratic rights) influence the reaction and attitude of authorities towards protesters?

2.2 Freedom of expression

Freedom of expression is the fundamental right to hold opinions and to seek, receive and spread information and ideas without interference. Expression can, for example, be understood as speech, open dialogue or artistic performances. This assessment focuses on your ability to speak openly about what matters to you.

We speak freely about the things that matter to our organisation

We regularly have to consider how what we say could lead to repercussions for our organisation or our members



Further dimensions to explore

Have you been censored or silenced by others?

Are you expressing yourselves as a group in ways other than through speech or your voices, for example, through artistic expression?

Can you differentiate between your organisation's experiences in online and offline spaces regarding freedom of expression?

Do you feel the need to self-censor in certain situations or when meeting certain stakeholders?

2.3 Freedom of association

To be recognised as a youth organisation, groups must register and undergo several administrative procedures. Barriers and complications in the registration process can hinder young people's right to associate freely.



Further dimensions to explore

Can you identify any legal or administrative barriers that could prevent young people from becoming members of your organisation?


2.4 Access to information


Access to information from government sources is a fundamental dimension of civic space, as it enables citizens and organisations to monitor the work of the government and its agencies.



What is the difference between access and accessibility?

While these two words share the same roots, they carry different nuances of meaning.

 **Access to information** means that, in principle, there is a public space (whether an archive, a library or a website) where information on the activities of the government is published. It is an objective criterion: the information is either available or it is not.

 **Accessibility of information**, on the other hand, refers to how information is made available and whether it enables citizens to understand it. It is a more subjective criterion. This can include the user-friendliness of a website (such as the effectiveness of its search engine), the format and language of documents (whether they are suitable for people with visual impairments, for example), or whether they are filled with jargon and excessive pages, creating significant barriers to understanding.



Further dimensions to explore

How do we typically find government information that is of interest to us as an organisation?

Are some sources easier to navigate and understand than others?



Section 3

Safety, autonomy and interference

Autonomy, or the lack thereof, is an important factor influencing the operations of a youth organisation. Interference in an organisation's activities can manifest in many ways: legal instruments, funding restrictions, and in the form of direct and indirect threats.

3.1 Ability to perform work

The ability of an organisation to make use of what it has – its people, skills and resources – reflects its capacity to perform work. This section focuses on the ability to run everyday practical activities, such as outreach in schools, events, campaigns and trainings.

We can freely carry out the activities that matter to us



We regularly have to consider how or if our activities could lead to repercussions

We carry out our work and run our activities without interference or fear of interference



We have experienced interference or strong external limitations while running our activities or carrying out our work

Further dimensions to explore

How easy or difficult is it to adapt your planned activities to changing external circumstances?

3.2 Safety of youth civil society

Safety is a broad term that can be understood in many ways. Here, the focus is on the sense of safety associated with being part of an organisation.

Being a member of our organisation feels completely safe



We have had multiple incidents where individual members have felt unsafe, for example, due to being targets of hate speech or online/offline threats

Further dimensions to explore

How do you actively ensure a sense of security and safety at your activities?

Are there any concerns or obstacles that prevent your organisation from affiliating with or collaborating with other civil society organisations, such as larger coalitions or umbrella organisations?

3.3 Hate speech

Hate speech refers to offensive behaviour targeting a group or individual based on inherent characteristics such as race, religion or gender. Hate speech can lead to extreme discomfort and a sense of unsafety.



Our organisation is treated with respect by state officials and other actors in our surroundings

Members and staff of our organisation have repeatedly been targeted by threats or hate speech due to their affiliation with our organisation



Further dimensions to explore

Can you differentiate between your organisation's experiences of hate speech in online and offline spaces?

Fear of retribution or repercussions for speaking out can be experienced at different levels.

Take a moment to individually mark all descriptions below that apply to you and your organisation. Then, take stock of the totals for each description and compare them with your peers.

Individual level
(for specific actions)

Organisation level, specific
(for speaking or dealing with a specific topic)

Collective level
(as part of a specific group of people, such as an ethnic, linguistic or sexual minority)

Organisation level, existential (directly related to the mission and core activities of the organisation)

3.4 Surveillance

Surveillance refers to the close observation of someone suspected of a crime. With the rise of digital tracking and location tools in the digital age, it also signifies the increasing ability of governments or other actors to access people’s private lives and personal information.

We never have to worry about being watched, followed or documented, photographed or filmed for what our organisation does

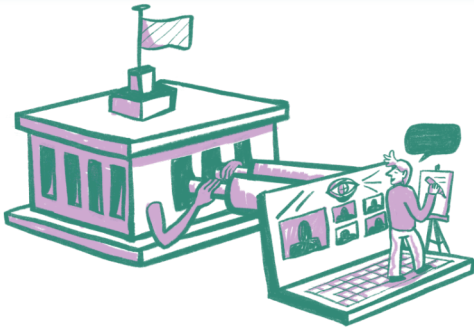


We have repeatedly experienced our members and activities being followed or documented by people not affiliated with us



Further dimensions to explore

Are some of your activities or work more vulnerable to surveillance than others?





Section 4

Funding restrictions and legislative barriers

Youth organisations are often subject to tighter controls when accessing financial resources or experience legislative barriers, such as complex or excessive legal and administrative procedures.

4.1 Funding sources

Many youth organisations are financially dependent, either partly or fully, on external grants (public or private donations). This dependence can lead to donors interfering with or controlling the activities of a youth organisation. For these reasons, funding is often considered a major factor in the shrinking of civic space for youth organisations.

This matrix is designed to help you map your organisation's funding sources and assess the level of financial dependency you experience.



Can your organisation rely on a variety of funding sources, or does it depend mostly on one donor?

Are there any ethical guidelines in your organisation regarding donor entities or institutions?

4.2 Use of funds

Youth organisations do not have full autonomy over their finances when funding is earmarked for specific causes. These restrictions can significantly limit the scope of activities that youth organisations can carry out.

We can spend money on all the activities and topics that our organisation works on



Funding is conditional, tied to moral and political values, and can be withdrawn at any time

We plan and conduct our activities based fully on what we want to do and achieve (the mission and vision of our organisation)



We must choose which activities we can undertake based on what our funders or the government allow us to do



Further dimensions to explore

While reporting our funding, do we have to refer to quantitative market indicators?



Quantitative market indicators are one of the primary ways in which donors measure the impact of the civil society organisations they fund. These indicators are countable and can include, for example, the number of volunteers involved in activities, the number of participants in each event, the number of events in a project, and so on.

4.3 Funding and fear of retribution

Fear of retribution refers to the anxiety or worry of facing negative consequences for one's actions or words. It can influence people and organisations to remain silent, withdraw from situations or avoid confronting others. Fear of retribution is considered an important factor in the shrinking of civic space.

We can be fully transparent about the nature of our activities in communication with our funders



We need to rephrase our activities to please our funders



Further dimensions to explore

Are there specific activities or topics where this fear of retribution is felt more strongly?

Have there been situations where your organisation's funding was uncertain or under review because of your actions or words?

4.4 Justice and accountability

Justice refers to applying the law fairly and ensuring that people who are harmed receive help or restitution for the harm done. Accountability in a legal system means that individuals and organisations can report problems or violations of the law and bring their cases to courts or other legal bodies to have the issue addressed.

We know how to seek justice if we have been wrongfully treated



We do not know what to do, or where to turn for help, to seek justice



Further dimensions to explore

What factors can you identify that influence your access (or lack thereof) to justice and accountability? For example, internal resources or capacity, the effectiveness and functioning of the judiciary, etc.



4.5 Use of legal instruments

Laws can either limit or protect people's rights and freedoms. When laws are used to restrict rights instead of protecting them, civic space shrinks and democracy weakens. This also undermines the rule of law, because laws stop being applied fairly to everyone.

Our organisation's rights and freedoms are well-protected by the legal system



The legal system actively limits or erases our organisation's rights and freedoms



Further dimensions to explore

In what ways does the legal system limit our organisation's rights and freedoms?

Take a moment to individually mark the descriptions below that you feel apply to you and your organisation. Then take stock of the total and compare with your peers.

Development of specific legislation to limit our organisations' rights and freedoms (for example, foreign agents' laws)

Use of already existing legislation to limit our organisations' rights and freedoms (for example, anti-terrorism laws)

Direct legal action by third parties, for example strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs), defamation lawsuits, etc.

References



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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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