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Shrinking democratic civic space for youth

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Civic space and its role in safeguarding democracy

Different waves of democratisation in the past (see Huntington 1991) revealed civil society as a major agent of democratisation as well as a source of emancipatory social and political changes, together with the spread of the culture of human rights in formerly oppressive and undemocratic regimes (Kymlicka and Opalski 2002). However, lately we are witnessing a rise of anti-democratic tendencies (Dobson 2013) associated with human rights violations and dramatic decline in social, civic and associational life across what is considered a democratic world. As a result, these democratic societies are losing their stability and legitimacy, and are increasingly described as environments experiencing various gaps (e.g. governance, empowerment, opportunity) and/or reverse transitions (Buyse 2018).

As a sphere of free and non-coercive association, civil society plays a central role in the associational life of members of a polity as it provides a platform for dialogue between a diversity of voices as well as the free exchange of information between civil society actors. It is a "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" (FRA 2017). An open civil society is therefore one of the most important safeguards against tyranny and oppression. At the same time, civil society organisations also amplify the voices of minority and other at-risk groups by raising the visibility of the key issues (and related problems) they may confront. Youth CSOs which are engaging young people in civic life are particularly important, as these organisations target youth-specific issues, place issues on the policy and political agenda, and seek to find innovative solutions in the field. In fact, as laboratories of democracy, youth CSOs and young people in general have been an important catalyst for various social innovations. To be precise, "young people are at the forefront of many global cause-oriented movements. They engage politically in different, unconventional ways that are often not captured by the traditional political system" (Lisney and Krylova 2018: 16).

Debates over the status, value and challenges civil societies face in both democratic and non-democratic systems emphasise the idea of civil society as a crucial site for the development and pursuit of basic liberal values such as individual freedom, social pluralism, and democratic citizenship (Kymlicka and Chambers 2001). There is virtually no disagreement over the centrality of civil society in the panoply of ideals, concepts and principles associated with citizenship as free and equal membership in a polity and its importance in a democratic society. An "empowered and resilient civil society … is a crucial component of any democracy" (Annual Report on Human Rights and Democracy in the World 2017) and the civic space in general is "a crucial mean of creating the trust and reciprocity on which both democratic and market interactions depend" (Clifford 2011: 210). CSOs have the ability to mobilise citizens to hold domestic authorities accountable, contribute to economic development, expand access to services such as education and health care, and advocate on behalf of universal human rights and vulnerable groups. However, contrary to high consensus on the advocacy, service delivery, capacity building, awareness raising, watchdog etc. role of civil society in a democratic polity, its *scope*, *justification* and *limits* are far from settled as it can act as an enabling as well as disabling agent.

Vibrant and open civic space is thus a crucial component of a stable democracy protecting diversity, cultivating tolerance and guaranteeing respect of human and citizenship rights and liberties. As a virtual or physical room for expression and action, the civic space is generally constituted around freedoms of expression, association and assembly and thus facilitates the ability of citizens to debate and exchange information, to organise and to act. The civic space represents the single most important social sphere of shared associational life and is a physical, virtual and legal place that allows citizens to form associations, to gather, to speak out on public issues and to participate in public decision making with an aim of improvement of our collective well-being. A robust and safeguarded civic space therefore forms the basis of accountable democratic governance responsive to its citizens (see Civic Space Watch[1]).

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1. https://civicspacewatch.eu/what-is-civic-space/

The trend of shrinking civic space

Despite the centrality of civil society organisations, youth organisations included, in promoting and safeguarding basic human rights and democracy, the last few years have witnessed a persistent silencing of civil society that narrowed down the civic space significantly. The change in civil society was discussed under the conceptualisation of "shrinking civil society" beginning with the 2010s with the contribution of both academia and civil society fields. The conceptualisation primarily refers to the actions of the political power holders which endangers freedom of assembly, association and speech, mostly, in the name (discourse) of security. Closing of civil society was demonstrated with explicit measures and implicit mechanisms.

The explicit measures included legal limitations (including criminalisation) and financial obstacles (using public authorities to intimidate with financial auditing) to independent press; introduction of restrictions, obstacles and/or limitations in the participation in civil society (CSOs and/or movements) as members and/or volunteers; ignoring the demands and (civil and political) rights of ethnic, religious or other minorities (e.g. LGBTI communities); or withdrawal of the legal protection from ethnic, religious and/or other minorities. "Withdrawal of legal protection" can be considered as both an explicit and implicit measure. On the one hand, governing bodies do not hear and/or take into consideration the demands of certain groups either in the parliament or in the public discourse, while on the other, at least in some countries, there is a co-operation, if not close dialogue, between the right-wing nationalist groups supporting authoritarian tendencies and the governing actors. The increasing approval of nationalist and/or authoritarian tendencies and groups pressing for them left certain groups (and individuals) at risk where state protection is provided under conditions. Increasing threat towards certain groups takes various forms, including hate speech and physical violence with the reasoning of "protecting national, traditional and/or religious" values.

Economic restrictions, particularly, can also be stated under the implicit measures. Public funding is reserved for the civil society organisations and/or initiatives which are following the steps of existing governing bodies. In other words, CSOs which are in alignment with the

governments or which are not against the policies of government become the prominent users of public funding. Crises generally serve as a convenient opportunity for curtailing the civil society which is generally justified with the need for urgent response and supported by populist narrative about the national interest. Governments' agendas to secure more power conflated with the "legitimate" state interests – primarily related to security and various aspects of state sovereignty – has allowed them to get a better hold of civil society structures and the democratic freedoms they advocate for. Intentional ill-definition and vagueness of national security and stability issues thus allowed for the challenges to ruling elites to be wilfully misinterpreted as threats to the nation, and the expression of political dissent labelled as terrorism (Civicus 2016).

A common feature of the shrinking civic space pattern, although more individual-oriented, is putting pressure on the activists advocating for rights-based agendas connected to the needs of various disadvantaged groups.[2] The pressure applied on those individuals is made up of a repertoire of various methods conducted by both state and non-state actors and range from stigmatisation, surveillance, harassment, ill-treatment and physical violence to persecution through prosecution[3] (Amnesty International 2017). In some cases authorities thus use legal instruments to silence the demands while in others freedom of expression and/or assembly of certain groups (e.g. gay pride) is not to be protected, thus making them a target of third parties. In many countries authorities, thus, do not investigate or prosecute such threats and violence, and rarely respond appropriately when an individual defender is killed or seriously injured. This inaction creates conditions of impunity, thereby giving perpetrators a licence for repeated threats and attacks (Amnesty International 2017: 9). One of the most vulnerable categories of activists are the ones advocating for gender-related topics (e.g. reproductive rights, LGBTIQ+ demands) as they face forms of gender-based pressure, physical violence, including sexual, threats, harassment and defamation campaigns linked to their status as women, gays, lesbians etc. They are particularly viciously targeted and perceived as especially disturbing and harmful agents because they also

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2. Rights-based advocacy implies protection of civil, political, cultural and social rights in a diverse set of areas, including gender equality, climate justice, minority rights (such as Roma rights), urban transformation (e.g. gentrification) etc.
3. "Persecution through prosecution" is defined by Amnesty International as "misusing criminal, civil and administrative laws to target and harass human rights defenders in order to delegitimize them and their causes and deter, limit or even prevent their human rights work." (Amnesty International 2017, p. 11)

operate against the populist patriarchal discourse and challenge deeply rooted stereotypes (Okech et al. 2017; Amnesty International 2017; Wassholm 2018).

This broad pattern of shrinkage of the civic space affects countries irrespective of their traditional distinctions, including the socio-political context, development of democratic institutions, wealth, human rights record, geographical location etc. (Youngs and Echagüe 2017: 5). While it was once true that countries in crisis and post-conflict periods were the ones where civil societies are most at risk, we now see similar threats spreading across a range of development contexts (Martínez-Solimán 2015). This is repeatedly demonstrated by various national reports as well as international monitors (e.g. Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, the European Youth Forum, OSCE, Carnegie Europe, CIVICUS), through actions of the "usual suspects" with a record of violations of human rights and democratic freedoms or the questionable activities of reputable countries when it comes to democratic tradition, civil rights and the rule of law (e.g. the impact of counter-extremism policies on associational life and violent policing tactics in UK; see Kreienkamp 2017: 4). The tendency to "control" the public sphere is not limited to authoritarian regimes and it also occurs in more established democracies in the name of "public security" (Hummel et al. 2020).

Leading European international and intergovernmental organisations have also recognised that civic space is under threat. Council of Europe's Commissioner for Human Rights (2017) reported on actions restricting the activities of civil society organisations within and outside Europe and Amnesty International (2018: 46), pointed out that space for civil society continues to shrink in Europe. Likewise, EFC (2016: 2) reports Hungary's impediments on the exercise of core freedoms and the UK's surveillance programmes (e.g. Prevent) may be considered some of the most pressing issues. Civicus monitor, tracking civic space across the globe, clearly indicates that European countries are also often featured on its special watch list dedicated to closely tracking developments as part of efforts to put pressure on governments (see Civicus 2020). To be precise, out of 35 countries, six European countries have so far featured in this special list of obstructers of civic space.

Shrinking civic space has transcended "endangered democracies" and become a global trend, gaining momentum for a more than a decade (see Nazarski 2017). It presents a new era of restricted freedoms and increased governmental control that could undermine social, political and economic stability and increase the risk of geopolitical and social conflict (WEF 2017: 29).

When it comes to the impact of shrinking civic space on youth, many dimensions of a healthy democratic society are at risk. In terms of legitimacy, the disengagement of young people from the political system can have a detrimental impact on the governance of society and on the health of democracy. Furthermore, civic engagement of a young person contributes to his or her personal development, promotion of welfare and fight against injustice as well as providing greater attention to youth work and youth action as generators of this engagement (see Shaw 2014: 2).

Expansion of civil society as a form of its narrowing or closure

While the discussions on the implications of explicit and implicit measures on closing of civil society proceed, some researchers point to the simultaneous "expansion" of civil society on a national, European and global level. According to monitoring organisations, civil society in some countries is getting "repressed" (e.g. CIVICUS 2018a) since civil society is losing its space/autonomy, members and funding. However, the modality of this repression is surprisingly linked with a growing number of CSOs in a country. This phenomenon rests on the issue of qualitative and quantitative views of expansion of civil society. It is true that the growth in a number of CSOs in a country could be considered as a development of civil society, also contributing to more pluralist representation, active civic participation and a dynamic public sphere (see Putnam 1993). Yet, the nature of these developments in some countries demands additional examination.

First, actors who feel that they are not sufficiently heard in the existing representative democratic system through political institutions, elections, parliamentarians or local level representatives have a tendency to establish civil initiatives and CSOs in order to voice their

dissent and opposition. A number of countries (e.g. Turkey, Russia, Serbia and Croatia) demonstrate a significant increase in the number of pro-government CSOs (e.g. Yabanci 2019). These newly established CSOs, also commonly referred to as GONGOs (government-organised non-governmental organisations), have close relations with governments, hardly match the criteria of voicing dissent and opposition, and are dependent on the funding of governments and their policies. Pro-government CSOs allow such governments (particularly in authoritarian regimes) to circulate official discourse and legitimise government's policies at the societal level. Moreover, they serve to strengthen the legitimacy of the regime, receive societal consent and are situated in opposition to the civil initiatives critical of the policies of the government in place. These organisations frequently operate in the fields of youth, education, poverty and women (Hummel et al. 2020), where – due to their notoriously unfavourable position in institutional politics – the voices of dissent are particularly critical and important since this form of representing the interests of these groups is frequently the only one available.

Second, parallel to the above-mentioned growth of CSOs, we are witnessing an increase in alternative voices of civil society that grows louder, expands its areas of interest, and primarily takes more loose forms of organising that do not necessary imply any legal structure (e.g. #metoo movement, Fridays for Future). This corresponds with the changes in citizenship of younger generations to more engaged forms of participation, which are more project and topic-oriented, non-hierarchical, less institutionalised and closely connected to the lived experience of young people (see Norris 2002; Dalton 2009; Loader et al. 2014; O'Toole, Marsh and Jones 2003; Pickard 2019). This kind of civil society organising is also different from traditional organising in previous decades, since young people have a tendency to establish and/or associate in loose forms. They prefer this to participation in a more strongly structured CSO and hold no deep loyalty to the established organisations. This type of organising in non-hierarchical, problem-/solution-oriented structures takes the form of groups, initiatives, platforms and/or loose movements, which rarely function as legal entities. However, this increasingly prevailing form of civil society organising of youth is mostly left out of the funding schemes available to civil society organisations, frequently even out of the youth-oriented programmes (e.g. Erasmus +: Youth in Action). Lack of appropriate recognition and support for these groups is a result of:

a) either the bureaucratic tendency for efficient management of public programmes, mostly based on simple, cross-programme, content-neutral quantitative performance indicators; or

b) an agenda of silencing critical voices of youth and the organised forms representing their interest. Young people's most widely accepted and suitable form of engagement rests on unsystematic survival/guerrilla strategies, which disable any sustained and coherent defence of their interest.

Third, expansion of civil society is also a consequence of the growth of organisations operating in the area of service provision. Regardless of the regime's characteristics, the number of service-providing CSOs is increasing steadily and working on differentiating areas of interest from poverty, education, health and migration to youth policy. These organisations are taking over the areas of service which used to be provided by the social welfare state. Although the increasing number of CSOs seems promising for the polarity of the civil sphere, their role eventually causes loss or even eradication of social rights for the citizens since they are performing their activities as a part of charity or humanitarian work. Also, service-providing CSOs are more dependent on public funding compared to advocacy-based CSOs due to the high cost of their projects, making them inherently more vulnerable to the influence of governments. Hence, their dependence on public funds causes difficulty in developing a critical perspective towards governments. Additionally, an important part of service-providing CSOs openly take pro-government stands (whether in relation or in co-operation) and operate in alignment with government policies, including in the youth field.

As a result, many (e.g. Hummel et al. 2020) describe these paradoxical changes in civil society today as "contested spaces" rather than "shrinking spaces". Nevertheless, the message is clear, "while there is an ongoing expansion and change [in civil society]; in some countries, 'narrowing' or 'closing space' might in fact be [an] appropriate" account of these processes.

Youth and shrinking civic spaces

As the "political, legislative, social and economic environment which enables citizens to come together, share their interests and concerns and act individually and collectively to influence and shape their policy-making", an open civic space provides an opportunity for young people to share their experiences as well as to take an active role in community life. The heightened interest in youth civic engagement is therefore of crucial importance as young people's social progress is dependent on the exercise of their core civic space freedoms, a tolerant and inclusive environment as well as adequate educational opportunities. Youth civic spaces are therefore environments in which youth participation in civic action is fostered – the pathways, structures, and vehicles that provide opportunities for young people to engage in critical discussion, dialogue and action. This includes the formal and informal places in which youth civic engagement can occur and how the lived experience of those places contributes to young people's development as civic actors. It extends discussions regarding the physical locations of youth civic engagement to include the activities, perceptions and interactions within them (Richards-Schuster and Dobbie 2011).

It has to be noted that the closing of civic space has had a disproportionately negative impact on young people's exercise of their basic civil rights and their well-being in general as well as the functioning of youth CSOs. Amnesty International reports (2017: 37) that youth defenders represent one of the most at-risk groups of human rights defenders as they tend to be at the bottom of many hierarchies and face age-based discrimination intersecting with other forms of oppression. General stereotypes portraying young people as troublemakers, idealistic and/or immature are frequently used in attempts to discredit and silence young activists. Young activists pushing for gender equality and LGBTIQ+ agendas demonstrate additional vulnerability – as noted in the previous section – due to their stand against deeply rooted patriarchal elements in society which exposes them to gender-based pressure, physical violence, including sexual, threats, harassment and defamation campaigns mainly from the third parties not persecuted by governments (see Amnesty International 2017). Amnesty International's human rights defenders' report also clearly points out that youth-led civil society groups and young people are often key agents of

change and can make a significant contribution to human rights but remain susceptible to undue restrictions and persecution.

The expansion of the civic space with ICT innovations has provided a broader set of opportunities to amplify the voice(s) of young people and other at-risk social groups since the use of social media and other outlets have effectively driven and reshaped activism both within and across borders (UN World Youth Report 2016: 14). The digital space presents a democratic and empowerment potential in terms of information sharing, mobilising, awareness raising etc. (Dahlgren 2015) and "digital technology promotes participation and debate in ways that sustain democratic practice" (Bessant 2012). However, ICT has at the same time been an important area of enforcing surveillance, online censorship, control and criminalisation of dissent. Reports by major INGOs, e.g. HRW's *2016 World Report* point out that the surveillance of CSOs' online activities has become an important part of intimidation strategies of both democratic and non-democratic governments in the name of national/public security or alleged foreign interference. Government censorship of critical or discordant voices has thus a seriously negative impact on young people and their exercise of basic civil rights. Many are denied basic legal entitlements and civic rights associated with citizenship taken for granted by most others. Most are denied fundamental rights like political enfranchisement (the vote) or to have a say in decisions that directly affect them (Bessant 2012: 250-51).

Access to civil and political rights is the area where most of the civic space shrinkage occurs; however, participation of young people and their access to available participatory mechanisms is also very dependent on their socio-economic conditions. As social status perpetuates as one of the strongest predictors of political and societal engagement throughout history (see Tenn 2007; Sloam 2012; Holmes and Manning 2013), youth engagement included (Henn and Foard 2014), it is important not to forget addressing this aspect of an individual's ability to access civic space and the way it is shrinking. As social status has an impact on the autonomy of young people (Yurttagüler 2014) and their self-efficacy – that is, whether they are being able to make a change and have an impact through participation (Bandura 1977) – the conditions of political pressures and socio-economic obstacles influence a young person's judgment about his or her capacity to make

an impact and consequently have a damaging effect on participation. Linked to the socio-economic conditions is the access to (public) schooling of economically unprivileged youth, as schooling also familiarises them with politics and political institutions and creates more confidence and higher engagement with political processes (see Henn and Foard 2014). Since political information is more easily spread within educational institutions, schooling elevates young people's political self-efficacy and critical awareness of the socio-political situation around them (Israel et al. 2019).

On the other hand, autonomy is closely linked to family and has likewise an important impact on participation of young people. Where the livelihood of young people is dependent on their families, their political participation is very much limited to the understanding and acceptance of these families. Even though growing up with political discussions results in more articulated political views in more and less affluent households (see Pilkington and Pollock 2015), young people are silenced and/or coerced to follow the political acts and views of their families to a greater degree if their autonomy is limited. Thus, if young people's needs will progressively be left to the hands of their families, then they will become strongly dependent on them also in terms of the political processes. Since social rights are one of the main components for enabling young people to be active in the political process and society in general, the welfare regimes should be discussed in parallel to the civil and political dimensions of the shrinking civic space. To be precise, cutting young people's ability to access, for example, schooling and other socio-economic opportunities thus directly shrinks their ability to access civic space.

The interplay of young people's vulnerability in terms of social exclusion and unemployment rate as well as the changing participation patterns in both "offline" and "online" civic spaces (e.g. social media) makes them the single most vulnerable social group related to the closing of the gap between "open" and "non-free" civic space. That being said, it would be problematic to assume that there is a homogeneity of experiences among young people – even if they live in the same country – since they carry several interconnected belongings at the same time which creates an experience of an interconnected and overlapping systems of discrimination or disadvantage based on gender, sexual orientation, ethnic, cultural, religious identities and so on (see Crenshaw 1991). For example, a young woman with

disability, with minority background can face incomparably greater barriers to engagement in public processes compared to dominant community young man with an affluent background (see, for example, Salih, Welchman and Zambelli 2017). It is thus important to stress that even though cross-country comparisons reveal the difficult situations young people in certain environments found themselves in, it is absolutely crucial to be aware of not only the similarities but also the differences among young individuals in their access to opportunities in order to provide them with corresponding tools for empowerment and full participation in public life.

It is precisely because of the tremendous importance of democratic youth civic spaces to young people's overall well-being and health of democracies in general that safeguarding youth civic spaces should remain high on the agenda of researchers, activists and policy makers.

The relevance of changes in youth work to shrinking civic space for young people

Youth work is one of the important mechanisms for the empowerment of young people when it comes to their participation in the decision-making and policy-making processes (see Williamson 2017), which is recognised and promoted both at the European level, by the Council of Europe and the European Union, and at the national level (EC 2009). Across Europe, youth work displays huge differences with regard to opportunities, support, structures, recognition, and the realities in which it takes place and may be provided by state institutions, by civil society and in most cases by both of them (see Schild et al. 2017; Dunne et al. 2014).

In cases where youth work is considered as a separate social service for the empowerment and participation of young people, particularly if provided by public sector organisations, separated from education, sport or other welfare services, legislative settings may provide a framework for the quality of provided services usually encompassing the areas of funding, content, responsible bodies and requirements. Where there is no such framework in place, sustainability, quality and recognition of youth work are at risk due to the political, social and/or economic reasons and mainly affect the questions of target groups, the content of

youth work, and of course financial means to support youth work. Although the importance of "access to youth work" and "quality of youth work" is undeniable and well covered in literature (academic and professional), the size and distribution of resources (both human and financial) allocated to youth work generally lack proper specification and stability (Dunne et al. 2014). According to Dunne et al. (2014, 99-104), the financial resources allocated from the national budgets on average decreased by 30% after the last economic crisis that began in 2008 and the decrease mainly happened in countries without a properly specified budget for youth work.

Another implication of the decrease in the allocation of resources to youth work is the growing presence and role of CSOs in the youth work field (see Stewart 2013; Petrivska 2017; Ord et al. 2018). This is not a recent trend as youth work has historically been supported and provided by a mixed scheme state/government actors, local government actors and civil society organisations. However, the size and changing form of public funding of youth work increasingly results in a field claimed by the CSOs. As in some other sectors and services, state actors started to withdraw from their service-providing roles and are thus increasingly appropriating the role of funding providers. As a result, the space and importance of the CSOs in the youth field have increased and in some countries they turned to main actors in the field. This causes concerns already explained in the section on risks of expansion of service-providing CSOs and the withdrawal of the welfare state. Furthermore, CSOs in many countries also perform other important functions due to the lack of capacity of state bodies (see Petrivska 2017), which additionally limits the potential of civil society as well as youth work in a country.

These developments additionally caused either: a) total dependence of organisations providing youth work on public funding, which also creates instabilities with every change in existing state power structure; or b) forced fundraising in other sectors (e.g. private funding) where competition for resources is different, less stable and functions on the basis of different rules and criteria. In addition to youth work's dependence on sustainability of CSOs, the access and availability of youth work is subjected to limited capacity of CSOs to raise funds outside traditional channels.

Another problem is related to the content of the youth work. Since it "encompasses a broad range of activities and measures, from those that offer leisure activities, support for inclusion and work to youth civic engagement and many diverse actions in-between" (Dunne et al. 2014), youth work can empower young people in engagement in economic, social and political life with various tools, processes and methods according to their learning needs. However, "how youth work performs reflects the social, cultural, political and economic context, and the value systems, in which it takes place" (Schild et al. 2017). In the cases where youth work is provided as a service by public institutions and/or in partnership with public institutions, the quality of youth work (including the quality of youth workers, the content, the methods, the approach) is – at least in principle – open to public scrutiny since it is structured as a part of the public service. However, in the cases where youth work is provided solely by the CSOs, the quality of youth work is very much limited to the capability of the CSOs and their understanding of quality. Moreover, the quality and the content of youth work in such cases is based on the CSO's willingness and ability to be aligned with international values and standards (such as those promoted by the Council of Europe).

Overall, lack of regulation, withdrawal of the welfare state, transition to the service-providing civil society organisations and the cuts in resources provided for youth work cause a lack of youth work services, at least those of high quality, and consequently limits access of young people to them. Since youth work fosters self-actualisation of young people and/or their empowerment in participation, the inability to secure the creation of a safe and supportive (symbolic) space for young people presents an unacceptable cost for the future of democratic societies as well as generations destined to live in them, particularly for the ones already living with disadvantages that will be robbed of opportunities for self-expression only youth work can offer.

Evidence of the shrinking youth civic space: study of the position of youth organisations
One of the rare international comparative examinations of the shrinking civic space for youth was prepared by Deželan, Sardoč and Laker (2020) and commissioned by the

European Youth Forum.[4] This study provided valuable insights into the state of civic space for youth across Europe.

When it comes to the general perception of discrimination and inclusion of youth, 55.6% of managers of organisations, based on their experience, believe that youth is either present, but under-represented, has limited access to civic space, or is largely or completely marginalised, and this pattern is evident across Europe. Furthermore, when asked whether government adequately performs its duties to prevent human rights violations and ensure respect for these rights and freedoms – i.e. whether basic human rights and fundamental freedoms are guaranteed by law and respected in practice – managers report that, in their view, human rights and fundamental freedoms for young people and their representatives are not always respected. To be precise, one eighth of them deem that human rights are respected to a limited extent or not at all. Further examination of freedom of political pressures revealed that only 28.1% of representatives of youth organisations report full freedom from political pressures and a staggering 18.6% of representatives from non-EU countries view their countries as completely unfree from political pressures. Organisations also report that 7.2% of them experience significant or great difficulties or are even not able at all to function independently and without government interference. It has to be stressed that 13% of organisations in non-EU countries face great difficulties or are completely unable to function independently and free from government interference.

Freedom of information and expression

Examination of the state of civic space within various key dimensions revealed additional interesting results. The ability of organisations to access the information from government sources, including financial information about government spending, distribution of state budget etc., revealed that more than one third of organisations report they obtained this information with some difficulty, with significant difficulty, with great difficulty or not at all.

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4. This study focused on youth sector organisations (youth(-led) organisations and organisations "for youth", including organisations (public and private) providing youth work. With their purposive sampling procedure, they mapped the most politically and socially relevant organisations in the sector and identified 1 105 across Europe. With self-administered web questionnaires they obtained 322 valid responses (29% turnout).

The ability to freely express yourself in public without fear of retribution is also under threat as one fifth of organisations (20.9%) fear retribution as a response to their public expression. There are significant differences between countries and particularly a difficult situation is reported in non-EU countries, where 4.3% of organisations report certain retribution as a consequence of their public expression.

Rights of assembly and association

In the case of rights of assembly and association, a similarly worrying pattern has been identified. When looking at the ability to organise/participate in public assemblies or demonstrations without fear of retribution, 14% of organisations reported significant difficulties in organising or participating in public assemblies or demonstrations that would not lead to government retribution. Again, the situation proved to be most troubling in non-EU countries, where more than one third of organisations reported some, significant or great difficulties or an complete inability to organise such assemblies or demonstrations without retribution. In the case of advocacy activities – a particularly important activity for representation of young people's interest – 14.1% of organisations report fear of retribution when performing advocacy and this is particularly the case for organisations working in non-EU countries (26%) and post-2004 EU member states (19.3%).

Participation of citizens and organisations representing them

In case of citizen participation – i.e., to what degree individuals and organisations representing them are allowed to contribute to and influence public policy processes – examination of the ability to participate in processes of deliberation and decision making on issues important to the surveyed organisations revealed that 30.5% of organisations face difficulties when trying to participate in policy deliberation and decision-making processes, with about one tenth of them being on the verge of exclusion from those processes. Also worth noting is the fact that this barrier to participate does not vary considerably across Europe. In addition, about one tenth of organisations – one fifth in the case of post-2004 EU member states – reported that their opinion is at least sometimes if not always discouraged. Important exclusion is also identified in the case of formulation of solutions addressing the

problems relevant to their field of activity as more than two thirds of organisations are rarely or never invited to participate at local level, 56.7% at national level and three quarters of them at the European/transnational level. When the degree to which participation actually makes a difference was observed – willingness to acknowledge opinion – half of the organisations report their opinion is rarely or never taken into account and this does not vary significantly across Europe. This is supported by the fact that about two fifths of organisations report either significant difficulties in influencing or inability to influence decision-making processes, which is a major sign of youth disempowerment.

Market indicators as an obstruction of civic space for young people

Alongside some of the traditional dimensions of observing changes in civic space is the dimension indicating a major shift of emphasis from civic agency to market effectiveness and efficiency as part of the "neoliberal revolution" and its technocratic agenda (see Duggan 2003; Fowler 2010). In addition to its measurement of effectiveness and efficiency through the indicators associated with economic growth, it also indicates an oversimplified understanding of the relationship between government, the civil society and the market, an exclusively instrumentalist view of the civil society and its role in a democratic society, a reductionist understanding of civic equality and a distorted image of effectiveness and efficiency as central elements of the neoliberal governance toolkit. These processes have serious consequences for the way these organisations operate and their overall civic potential. Organisations, for example, more and more often have to report about their diversified financial profiles, donor diversity, amount of acquired private funds, nationwide impact etc. To be precise, about one third of organisations report assessment along these lines to a noticeable degree and the situation is virtually the same across Europe. Overall, it has to be stressed that about two thirds of organisations across Europe feel the consequences of this technocratic agenda and find it troubling.

How do governments interfere into the youth field?

Changes in CSOs' legal status (in particular those that exert a direct criticism of a government), funding restrictions, reporting requirements, bureaucratic obstacles,

combined with other administrative regulations as well as smear campaigns that aim to undermine CSOs' reputation or call into question their mission by creating a public backlash against them, are just some of the strategies that undermine the democratic and emancipatory capacity of youth and organisations representing them. In line with the typology of shrinking space phenomena put forward by Transnational Institute (2017), a closer examination of the youth field revealed the following interventions of governments to constrain and curtail the space in which youth and organisations supporting them operate:

1. introduction of various forms of regulating and restricting of freedom of expression, both online and offline;

2. policies and practices that limit or restrict the rights to freedom of assembly and association (e.g. banning demonstrations, security laws that impose restrictions on mobilisation, etc.);

3. restrictions on activism both in general and online due to the repression and intimidation practices;

4. intimidations and violent attacks towards organisations in the youth field, particularly those focusing on human rights, sexual minorities, integrity and corruption;

5. criminalisation of organisations and individuals in the field (mostly advocacy oriented) along with other practices of exclusion such as stigmatisation and de-legitimisation, also with the help of government-owned or controlled media;

6. attempts to deter public and private donors to organisations in the field with the risk of being portrayed as "critical", "political", "threat to security" etc.;

7. introduction of domestic laws that aim to (over-)regulate activities and procedures for the organisations in the youth field and impose demands for professionalisation (e.g. onerous registration procedures, burdening bureaucracy, etc.);

8. "philanthropic protectionism" as a raft of government-imposed constraints that curtail the ability of domestic CSOs to receive international funding (e.g. foreign agents' acts);

9. civic spaces traditionally occupied by youth CSOs now being replaced by GONGOs also taking a significant amount of public funds;

10. withdrawal of the welfare state in case of youth work and consequent imposition of less robust, less sustainable and politically influenced service-providing CSOs new in the field.

Concluding remarks and call for action

Our mapping reveals that youth and organisations representing their interests find it increasingly hard to practise civic agency and thus become agents of social change. These challenges, primarily imposed by governments and their agents, should be addressed while acknowledging a set of principles. First, it is essential to define civic space in a broad manner in order to include early learning and various aspects of youth work because the definitions, aspirations, and acceptable expressions of the democratic process are determined through cultural and social processes. Second, terms of reference for determining the present state and future directions of civic space for young people need to be set in a transparent and inclusive process of deliberation. Third, protection and promotion of civic space for young people need to have analytical lenses and data that enable target-group differentiated monitoring of access agency across identities, cultures and communities. Fourth, the conceptual lenses that guide a policy of safeguarding and expansion of democratic civic space for young people must accommodate emerging patterns of citizenship of contemporary youth as well as youth's psychosocial, physical, economic, cultural and educational needs.

Taking into account the above-mentioned principles, the civic space needs to be safeguarded and promoted through the following sets of action:
- a specific situation of young people and the unique position of organisations supporting their interests need to be recognised, respected and promoted;
- robust resources for the basic functioning of organisations representing young people's interests have to be available and the less formalised forms of organisation of young people need to be taken into account;

- detection and prevention mechanisms countering anti-democratic legal and policy manoeuvres of governments and their agents, particularly from a youth perspective, have to be introduced and supported;
- definitions and acceptable expressions of democratic activity by and in collaboration with young people need to be introduced, thus promoting a more expansive and youth-oriented definition of civic spaces;
- participation and support mechanisms need to take into account specific features of youth (sector) and be designed in a youth-friendly language;
- systematic monitoring of countries' performance concerning relevant dimensions of civic space for young people needs to be introduced.

At the level of individual rights and freedoms or field of action, the following actions should be considered:
- push for stronger legislative effort for greater transparency of governmental actions and actions of other beneficiaries of public money;
- 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 to access all desired public information;
- improve data management on a systemic level and coverage of gaps in information/knowledge about the performance of certain public or publicly funded programmes/projects/policies and the well-being of young people;
- design incentives for public officials to interact in an open, sincere and prompt manner;
- design and implement capacity-building programmes elevating competence of information providers as well as information seekers to prepare, deliver, search for, access and process data in a proficient and responsible manner;
- secure robust and long-term funding for watchdog and other organisations advocating youth issues;
- introduce transparent, inclusive and low-threshold rules concerning the organisation of and participation at public assemblies, events and demonstrations;

- eliminate all age restrictions to participate in processes of public consultation and deliberation;

- support awareness-raising campaigns performed by various public and non-public actors explaining the relevance of freedom of expression, supported by a wide range of formal and non-formal civic education elevating the agency of youth;

- support programmes aimed at: a) higher levels of professionalisation and organisational capacity; or b) provision of professional support to organisations in the youth field;

- provide means to secure safe public assemblies, events and demonstrations;

- support innovative programmes and initiatives encouraging and sustaining participation and deliberation of young people in public affairs;

- introduce trainings and programmes elevating the capacity of organisations in the youth field to acquire funding outside their main source;

- removal of all thresholds excluding weak 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.

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