Shrinking Civic Space for Young People: A Call to Action

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Civic space and its role in safeguarding democracy

Various waves of democratisation in the past have shown that civil society is an important agent of democratisation and a source of emancipatory social and political change, and that the culture of human rights has spread in formerly oppressive and undemocratic regimes (Kymlicka and Chambers, 2001). Recently, we have seen a rise in anti-democratic tendencies associated with human rights violations and a dramatic decline in social, civic and associational life throughout the democratic world. As a result, affected democratic societies that are losing stability and legitimacy are increasingly described as environments where various gaps (e.g. in governance, empowerment, opportunity) and/or reverse transitions exist (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, providing a platform for dialogue among a multiplicity of voices as well as the free exchange of information among civil society actors. It is "the place that civil society actors occupy in society; the environment and framework in which civil society operates; and the relationships between civil society actors, the state, the private sector and the 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 minorities and other vulnerable groups by raising the visibility of the key issues (and related problems) they may face. Youth civil society organisations that engage youth in civic life are particularly important as these

organisations target youth-specific issues, put issues on the political agenda and seek innovative solutions on the ground. As laboratories of democracy, youth civil society organisations and young people in general are 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 & Krylova: 16).

Debates on the status, value and challenges facing civil societies in both democratic and non-democratic systems emphasise the idea of civil society as a crucial site for the development and pursuit of fundamental liberal values such as individual freedom, social pluralism and democratic citizenship (Kymlicka and Chambers, 2001). There is virtually no disagreement about the centrality of civil society in the panoply of ideals, concepts and principles associated with citizenship as free and equal membership of 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 means of building the trust and reciprocity on which both democratic and market interactions depend" (Clifford, 2011: 210). Civil society organisations are able to mobilise citizens to hold domestic authorities to account, contribute to economic development, expand access to services such as education and health care, and advocate for universal human rights and vulnerable groups. However, in contrast to the large consensus on the role of civil society in a democratic polity in advocacy, service delivery, capacity building, awareness raising, monitoring, etc., its scope, justification and limitations are far from clear, as it can be both enabling and disabling.

A vibrant and open civic space is therefore a crucial component of a stable democracy that protects diversity, promotes tolerance and guarantees respect for human and citizenship rights and liberties. As a virtual or physical space for expression and action, civic space is generally built around freedom of expression, association and assembly, facilitating citizens' ability to discuss and exchange information, organise and act. Civic space represents the main social sphere of shared associational life and is a physical, virtual and legal space that enables citizens to form associations, assemble, speak out on public issues and participate in public decision-making to improve our collective well-being. A robust and protected civic space is therefore the foundation for good democratic governance that is responsive to its citizens (see *Civic Space Watch*[1]).

The trend of shrinking civic space

Despite the central role played by civil society organisations, including youth organisations, in promoting and protecting fundamental human rights and democracy, civil society has been repeatedly silenced in recent years, significantly limiting civil society space. The transformation of civil society has been discussed since the 2010s under the concept of "shrinking civil society", to which both academia and civil society have contributed. The concept primarily refers to the actions of political rulers that threaten freedom of assembly, association and speech, mostly in the name (of discourse) of security. The closure of civil society has been demonstrated with explicit measures and implicit mechanisms.

Explicit measures included legal restrictions (including criminalisation) and financial barriers (use of authorities to intimidate through financial audits) on the independent press; introduction of restrictions, barriers and/or limitations on participation in civil society (CSOs and/or movements) as members and/or volunteers; ignorance of the demands and (civil and political) rights of ethnic, religious or other (e.g. LGBTI communities) minorities; or withdrawal of legal protection for ethnic, religious and/or other minorities. The "withdrawal of legal protection" can be seen as both an explicit and an implicit measure. On the one hand, the demands of certain groups are not heard and/or taken into account either in parliament or in public discourse, while on the other hand, at least in some countries, there is cooperation, if not close dialogue, between right-wing nationalist groups supporting authoritarian tendencies and the ruling actors. The increasing support for nationalist and/or authoritarian tendencies and the groups advocating them has led to certain groups (and individuals) being threatened where state protection is provided under conditions. The increasing threat to

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

certain groups takes various forms, including hate speech and physical violence on the grounds of protecting "national, traditional and/or religious" values.

Economic restrictions can also be mentioned among the implicit measures. Public funds are reserved for civil society organisations and/or initiatives that follow existing bodies. In other words, civil society organisations that agree with governments or that do not oppose government policies become the main users of public funds. Crises generally provide a convenient opportunity to constrain civil society, generally justified by the need for an urgent response and supported by populist representations of national interest. The desire of governments to gain more power, combined with the "legitimate" interests of the state –primarily in terms of security and various aspects of state sovereignty– has enabled them to gain a better grip on the structures of civil society and the democratic freedoms they advocate. The deliberate misdefinition and indeterminacy of issues of national security and stability has led to the deliberate misinterpretation of challenges to ruling elites as threats to the nation and the labelling of expressions of political dissent as terrorism (Civicus, 2016).

A common feature of the shrinking civic space is that, while it is more focused on the individual, it puts pressure on activists who advocate for rights-based agendas linked to the needs of various disadvantaged groups[2]. The pressure exerted on these individuals consists of a repertoire of different methods used by both state and non-state actors, ranging from stigmatisation, surveillance, harassment, mistreatment, physical violence to prosecution through criminal prosecution[3] (Amnesty International, 2017). In some cases, therefore, the authorities use legal tools to silence the demands, while in other cases the freedom of expression and/or assembly of certain groups (e.g. gay pride) is not protected and they thus become targets of third parties. In many countries, the authorities thus do not take action against 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 carte blanche to make repeated threats and attacks (Amnesty International, 2017: 9). One of the most vulnerable categories of activists are those working on gender-related issues (e.g. reproductive rights, lgbtiq+ demands), as they are subjected to forms of gender-based pressure, physical violence, including sexual violence, threats, harassment and defamation campaigns related to their status as women, gay men, lesbians, etc. They are targeted particularly viciously and perceived as particularly disruptive and harmful actors because they also act against populist patriarchal discourse and challenge deeply entrenched stereotypes (Okech et al, 2017; Amnesty International, 2017; Wassholm, 2018).

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 HRDs in order to delegitimize them and their causes and deter, limit or even prevent their human rights work." (Amnesty International; 2017, p.11).

This broad pattern of shrinking civic space affects countries regardless of their traditional differences, including socio-political context, development of democratic institutions, wealth, human rights record, geographical location, etc. (Youngs & Echagüe, 2017: 5). While it used to be the case that countries in crisis and post-conflict phases put civil societies most at risk, we now see similar threats in a range of development contexts (Martínez-Solimán, 2015). This is repeatedly highlighted by various national reports and international observers (e.g. Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, European Youth Forum, OSCE, Carnegie Europe, CIVICUS), whether through the actions of the "usual suspects" known for violations of human rights and democratic freedoms, or through the shenanigans of respectable 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 police tactics in the UK; see Kreienkamp, 2017: 4). To put it bluntly, the tendency to "control" public space is not limited to authoritarian regimes and also occurs in more established democracies in the name of "public safety" (Hummel et al., 2020).

Leading European international and intergovernmental organisations have therefore also recognised that civil space is under threat. The Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights (2017) reported on measures restricting the activities of civil society organisations inside and outside Europe, and Amnesty International (2018: 46) points out that the space for civil society in Europe continues to shrink. Similarly, the EFC (2016: 2) reports that Hungary's obstruction of the exercise of fundamental freedoms and the UK's surveillance programmes (e.g. Prevent) are among the most pressing issues. Civicus' monitor of civil society space around the world clearly shows that Europe is not an oasis among regions obstructing civil society space, and that European countries are as often on Civicus' special watch list to closely monitor developments as part of efforts to put pressure on governments (see Civicus, 2020). To be precise, out of 35 countries, 6 European countries are so far on this special list of notorious obstructors of civic space.

The shrinking of civic space thus goes beyond "democracies at risk" and has become a global trend gaining momentum for more than a decade (see Nazarski, 2017), representing a new era of limited freedoms and increased state control that could undermine social, political and economic stability and increase the risk of geopolitical and social conflict (WEF, 2017: 29).

Youth and shrinking civic space

As a "political, legislative, social and economic environment that enables citizens to come together, share their interests and concerns, and act individually and collectively to influence and shape policy", an open civic space offers young people the opportunity to share their experiences and take an active role in community life. The increased interest in civic engagement among young

people is therefore crucial, as young people's social progress depends on the exercise of their core civic freedoms, a tolerant and inclusive environment, and adequate educational opportunities. Civic spaces for young people are therefore environments where young people's participation in civic action is encouraged by providing pathways, structures and tools enabling young people to engage in critical discussions, dialogues and actions. This includes the formal and informal places where young people can engage civically and the ways in which the lived experience of these places contributes to young people's development as civic actors. It extends discussions about the physical places of young people's civic engagement to include the activities, perceptions and interactions in these places (Richards-Schuster and Dobbie, 2011).

It is noted that the closure of civic space has a disproportionately negative impact on the exercise of young people's basic civil rights and their well-being in general, as well as on the functioning of youth civil society organisations. Amnesty International reports (2017: 37) that youth human rights defenders are one of the most vulnerable groups of human rights defenders, as they tend to be at the bottom of many hierarchies and face age-based discrimination that intersects with other forms of oppression. General stereotypes that portray young people as troublemakers, idealistic and/or immature are often used to discredit and silence young activists. Young activists working for gender equality and Igbtqi+ agendas, as mentioned in the previous section, are at additional risk as they stand against deeply rooted patriarchal elements in society. This exposes them to gender-based pressures, physical violence, including sexual violence, threats, harassment and defamation campaigns, mainly from third parties not persecuted by governments (see Amnesty International, 2017). Amnesty International's report on human rights defenders also clearly indicates that youth-led civil society groups and young people are often important agents of change and can make significant contributions to human rights, but remain vulnerable to undue restrictions and persecution.

The expansion of civil society space through ICT innovations has created a number of opportunities to amplify the voice(s) of young people and other vulnerable social groups, as the use of social media and other channels has effectively driven and reshaped activism both within borders and across borders (UN World Youth Report, 2016: 14). Digital space offers democratic and empowering potential in terms of information sharing, mobilisation, awareness raising, etc. (Dahlgren, 2015) and "digital technology encourages participation and debate in ways that support democratic practice" (Bessant, 2012), but at the same time ICTs have been an important area for enforcing surveillance, online censorship, control and criminalisation of dissent. Reports by major INGOs, e.g. HRW's World Report 2016, indicate that monitoring the online activities of civil society organisations has become an important part of both democratic and non-democratic governments' intimidation strategies in the name of national/public security or alleged foreign interference. State censorship of critical or dissenting

voices therefore has a serious negative impact on young people and their exercise of basic civil rights. Many are denied many basic legal rights and civil liberties that come with citizenship and are taken for granted by most others. Most are denied basic rights such as political suffrage (the right to vote) or the right to have a say in decisions that directly affect them (Bessant, 2012: 250-251).

Certainly, access to civil and political rights is the area where civic space is shrinking the most, but young people's participation and their access to available participatory mechanisms is also highly dependent on their socio-economic situation. As social status has consistently been found throughout history to be one of the strongest predictors of political and social engagement (see Tenn 2007; Sloam 2012; Holmes and Manning 2013), including youth engagement (Henn and Foard 2014), it is important not to forget this aspect of individual opportunities to access and shrink civic space. As social status affects young people's autonomy (Yurttagueler, 2014) and self-efficacy –i.e. whether they are able to make a difference and make a difference through participation (Bandura 1977)– the conditions of political pressure and socio-economic barriers affect young people's assessment of their ability to make a difference and consequently have a negative impact on participation. Linked to socio-economic conditions is access to (public) schooling for the economically unprivileged, as schooling also familiarises them with politics and political institutions and builds greater trust and engagement in political processes (see Henn & Foard 2014). As political information is more easily disseminated in educational institutions, schooling increases young people's political self-efficacy and their critical awareness of the socio-political situation around them (Israel, et al., 2019).

On the other hand, autonomy is closely linked to the family and also has an important impact on young people's participation. When young people's livelihoods depend on their families, their political participation is very much dependent on the understanding and acceptance of these families. Even if growing up with political discussions in more or less affluent households leads to more articulated political views (see Pilkington & Pollock, 2015), young people are silenced and/or forced to follow the political actions and views of their families to a greater extent when their autonomy is limited. Thus, when young people's needs are increasingly placed in the hands of their families, they also become highly dependent on them for political processes. As social rights are one of the most important components that enable young people to actively participate in the political process and in society in general, welfare systems should be discussed in parallel with the civil and political dimensions of shrinking civic space. More specifically, curtailing young people's access to schooling and other socio-economic opportunities directly shrinks their ability to access civic space.

The interplay of social exclusion, unemployment and changing patterns of participation in both "offline" and "online" spaces (e.g. social media) makes young people the most vulnerable social group when it comes to closing the gap between

"open" and "unfree" space. That being said, it would be problematic to assume that young people's experiences are homogeneous –even if they live in the same country– as they simultaneously have multiple interlinked affiliations, resulting in an experience of interconnected and intersecting systems of discrimination or disadvantage based on gender, sexual orientation, ethnic, cultural, religious identity, etc. (see Crenshaw, 1991). For example, a young woman with disabilities from a minority background may face incomparably greater barriers to engaging in public processes than a young man from a dominant community with an affluent background (see e.g. Salih, Welchman and Zambelli, 2017). It is therefore important to emphasise that even though cross-national comparisons highlight the difficult situations young people find themselves in certain settings, it is absolutely crucial to be aware not only of the similarities but also the differences between young people in their access to opportunities in order to provide them with the appropriate tools for empowerment and full participation in public life.

Precisely because of the enormous importance of democratic youth spaces for the overall well-being of young people and the health of democracies in general, the protection of youth spaces should be high on the agenda of researchers, activists and policy makers.

The importance of changes in youth work for the shrinking civic space for young people

Youth work is one of the most important mechanisms for youth empowerment when it comes to their participation in decision-making and policy-making processes (see Williamson, 2017), which is recognised and promoted both at European level, e.g. by the Council of Europe and the European Union, and at national level (EC, 2009). Youth work varies widely across Europe in terms of the opportunities, support, structures, recognition and realities in which it takes place and which can be provided by state institutions, civil society and, in most cases, both (see Schild et al., 2017; Dunne et al., 2014).

In cases where youth work is considered a social service in its own right for the empowerment and participation of young people, particularly where it is provided by public sector organisations that are separate from education, sport or other welfare services, legislation may provide a framework for the quality of services provided, usually covering funding, content, responsible bodies and requirements. Where there is no such framework, the sustainability, quality and recognition of youth work are at risk for political, social and/or economic reasons and mainly concern the issues of target groups, the content of youth work and, of course, the financial means to support youth work. Although the importance of "access to youth work" and "quality of youth work" is undeniable and well addressed in the (academic and professional) literature, there is generally a lack of adequate specification and stability of the scale and distribution of resources (both human and financial) allocated to youth work (Dunne et al., 2014). According to the report by EC. (ibid.), the financial resources allocated from national budgets decreased on average by 30 % after the last economic crisis, which started in 2008, and this decrease took place mainly in countries where there was no adequate budget for youth work.

Another consequence of the decrease in allocations to youth work and the sector that provides it is the growing presence and role of civil society organisations in the field of youth work (see Stewart, 2013; Petrivska, 2017; Ord et al., 2018). This is not a new trend, as youth work has historically been supported and provided by a mixed system of state/government actors, local government actors and civil society organisations. However, with the scope and changing shape of public funding for youth work, there is increasingly a field claimed by civil society organisations. As in some other sectors and services, state actors in youth work have begun to withdraw from the role of service provider and thus increasingly appropriate the role of funder. As a result, the space and importance of civil society organisations in the youth field has increased and in some countries they have become the main actors in the field. This raises concerns already explained in the section on the risks of expansion of service-providing CSOs and the retreat of the welfare state. Moreover, in many countries CSOs also perform other important functions due

to the lack of capacity of state agencies (see Petrivska, 2017), which further limits the potential of civil society and youth work in a country.

These developments have had the additional effect of either a) making organisations providing youth work totally dependent on public funding, which leads to instability whenever the existing state power structure changes, or b) forcing fundraising into other sectors (e.g. private funding) where competition for resources is different and less stable, and operates on the basis of different rules and criteria. In addition to the dependence of youth work on the sustainability of CSOs, the access and availability of youth work has been made dependent on the limited capacity of CSOs to raise funds outside traditional channels.

Another problem is related to the content of youth work. As it "encompasses a wide range of activities and interventions, from those that provide recreational activities, inclusion support and employment to youth civic engagement and many different actions in between" (Dunne et al., 2014), youth work can empower young people to engage in economic, social and political life through different tools, processes and methods depending on their learning needs. However, "the way youth work is delivered reflects the social, cultural, political and economic context and value systems in which it takes place" (Schild et al., 2017). In 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, content, methods and approach) is –at least in principle– open to public scrutiny, as it is structured as part of the public service. However, in cases where youth work is provided exclusively by CSOs, the quality of youth work is very much limited to the skills of the CSOs and their understanding of quality. Furthermore, the quality and content of youth work in such cases depends on the willingness and ability of CSOs to align themselves with international values and standards (e.g. Council of Europe).

Overall, the lack of regulation, the withdrawal of the welfare state, the transition to service-providing civil society organisations and the reduction of funds allocated to youth work lead to a lack of youth work services, at least of high quality, and consequently to limited access of young people to these services. As youth work promotes young people's self-actualisation and/or their empowerment to participate, the inability to ensure the creation of safe and supportive (symbolic) space for young people is an unacceptable cost to the future of democratic societies as well as to the generations that are meant to live in them, especially those who already live with disadvantages and are deprived of the opportunities for self-expression that only youth work can provide.

Final remarks and call to action

This text shows that it is becoming increasingly difficult for young people and organisations representing their interests to practise civic engagement and thus

become agents of social change. These challenges, which are primarily imposed by governments and their representatives, should be addressed by taking into account a number of principles. First, it is important to define civic space broadly to include early childhood education and various aspects of youth work, because the definitions, aspirations and acceptable expressions of the democratic process are determined by cultural and social processes. Second, the framework for determining the current state and future direction of civil society space for young people must be established through a transparent and inclusive consultative process. Third, the protection and promotion of civil society space for young people must be done with analytical methods and data that allow for target group-differentiated monitoring of access across identities, cultures and communities. Fourth, the conceptual lenses guiding policies to protect and expand democratic civil society space for young people must take into account the evolving patterns of citizenship of today's youth, as well as the particular psychosocial, physical, economic, cultural and educational needs of youth.

Taking into account the above principles, the civic space must be protected and promoted through the following measures:

- the special situation of young people and the unique position of organisations that support their interests must be recognised, respected and promoted;
- robust resources for the basic functioning of organisations representing young people's interests must be available, and young people's less formalised forms of organisation must be taken into account;
- detection and prevention mechanisms that counteract anti-democratic legal and political manoeuvres by governments and their representatives, especially from a youth perspective, must be put in place and supported;
- definitions and acceptable expressions of democratic action by and in collaboration with young people need to be introduced, thus promoting a more inclusive and youth-friendly definition of civic spaces;
- participation and support mechanisms must take into account the specific characteristics of youth (the sector) and be framed in youth-friendly language;
- systematic monitoring of countries' performance on relevant dimensions of civic space for young people needs to be put in place.

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