

Position Paper

Safeguarding civic space for young people in Europe

Introduction

When talking about ‘*civic space*’, we think about places, physical, virtual, and legal, where people exercise their rights to expression, information, association and peaceful assembly, and other related freedoms. By forming associations, speaking out, gathering in online and offline fora, and by participating in public decision-making, individuals and communities use civic space to solve problems and improve lives. The current authoritarian and antidemocratic tendencies however often prevent citizens, among them young people, from being agents of change. Hate speech, fake news, populism that often leads to government repression, as well as other phenomena contribute to the shrinking of civic space, irrespective of a country’s democratic tradition, prevailing social cleavages, wealth, human rights record, or geographical location.¹

To counter such developments, civil society organisations, including youth organisations, perform a number of functions that are necessary for promoting and safeguarding basic human rights, democracy and the rule of law. An open civil society is one of the most important safeguards against tyranny, oppression, and other anti-democratic tendencies. Yet, civil society organisations face serious obstacles in their work, some even experience or fear retribution from their governments when expressing their views.

Youth-led, democratic and grassroots civil society is especially vulnerable to these types of pressure - therefore it needs protection. For example, youth organisations report² that 1/5 of them face difficulties in expressing themselves in public and fear retribution when doing so. Similarly, 1/3 of youth organisations face difficulties when trying to participate in policy deliberation and decision-making processes. These numbers are alarming and paint a picture of the current state of youth civic space that requires action from all relevant stakeholders together. Moreover, it is important not only to stop already harmful practices, but to prevent future ones and to create a democratic environment where youth

organisations can thrive. This is even more crucial as there is a clear correlation³ between young people’s well-being and progress and their full access to their civil and political rights.

The topic has been increasingly on the youth policy agenda⁴, and aside from relying on the day-to-day actions of its member organisations and their experiences, the European Youth Forum also launched two research processes into safeguarding youth civic spaces in Europe in the past years. All of these processes point to significant issues with youth civic space in Europe and identify recommendations to change the current decline.

This policy position details the key problems for youth civic spaces in Europe and highlights the demands of the Youth Forum to address them, in the following **thematic areas**:

- Rights, democracy and the rule of law
- Digitalisation
- Freedom of information and expression
- Freedom of assembly and association
- Funding for youth civil society
- Education and youth work

1 [European Youth Forum \(2020\): Safeguarding Civic Space for Young People in Europe](#)

2 [European Youth Forum \(2020\): Safeguarding Civic Space for Young People in Europe](#)

3 [European Youth Forum \(2021\): Youth Progress Index 2021](#)

4 e.g. EU Council conclusions on safeguarding and creating civic spaces for young people that facilitate meaningful youth participation (2021), Council of Europe: Recommendation on protecting youth civil society and young people, and supporting their participation in democratic processes (2022), UN: If I Disappear. Global Report on Protecting Young People in Civic Space (2021)

1. Rights, democracy and the rule of law

Respect for the rule of law is dependent on the full respect and recognition of human rights, and is interdependent on a thriving democracy. Without democracy and human rights, the legal system cannot operate according to its true objectives and becomes an empty vessel and a tool to be used in order to meet various political goals.

Civil society, including youth organisations, are usually the first to ring the bell in case of problems with rights, democracy or the rule of law, and to suggest solutions to tackle them. Furthermore, the young generation is often the most sensitive to societal issues and speaks out on them, demanding change. A strong civic space for young people, in which youth organisations can operate autonomously and free from any government interference and retribution is therefore essential to uphold the healthy functioning of democratic societies. Too often, however, youth voices in pursuit of safeguarding democracy, human rights and the rule of law are silenced or threatened.

Young people are particularly affected by oppressive actions from governmental systems. The structure of youth organisations is often more fragile as compared to other civil society organisations due to, among other reasons, the high turnover of engaged people, day-to-day functioning based greatly on volunteer work, and the lack of proper funding. Furthermore, young activists on an individual level can face grave challenges. Compared to other activists with already established support systems, young people often lack established careers, financial opportunities and networks, and are thus more vulnerable to threats and retribution.

Young people need safeguarding of their civil and political rights and the responsibility for providing this falls greatly on public authorities. However, often some of these authorities are precisely the ones curtailing them, or failing to adequately protect those rights from the activities of other actors. Therefore, young people, as any other citizens, need adequate avenues to report on shortcomings of authorities and other actors in society and these complaints have to have a meaningful follow-up and remedy. This often becomes a struggle as a young person because, for example, there is a lack of fostering awareness

and understanding about democratic checks and balances provided by education; some procedures are either non-existent or can be hard to understand due to their technocratic description; there might be a lack of financial means to support the process; or one can often face age-based discrimination about the validity of their story. Moreover, public officials engaging with youth often lack proper training and competences about the realities of young people and how to foster meaningful youth participation, which makes a partnership-based approach difficult to reach. For these reasons, even where mechanisms for the protection of civil and political rights exist, young people specifically may be excluded, and where mechanisms are generally insufficient, young people are doubly affected.

Therefore, the Youth Forum calls for:

- Governments at all levels, from local to national and European level, to design democratic processes in a youth-inclusive way, fostering real participation of young people by involving democratic, representative, youth-led and independent youth organisations.
- Public decision-making processes, and judicial and administrative systems of redress and law enforcement to consider young people's particular social, physical, economic, cultural, and educational realities.
- Public officials engaged in youth policies at all levels of governance to be equipped with relevant competences to engage with young people.
- European and global institutions to strengthen monitoring and research on anti-democratic actions, done by governments, institutions or any other actors in society, including measures that otherwise shrink or limit civic space.
- Governments at all levels to be held accountable for infringements on civic space of their own doing, or where they have failed to comply with a duty to adequately protect civic space from unlawful interference by other actors.
- Youth-specific issues to be addressed in policy tools relating to civic space on European, national and local levels, for example, in the annual Rule of Law report of the European Commission.

- National, regional and local governments and EU and Council of Europe institutions to further create and better enforce legislation that fosters the safeguarding of civic spaces.
- Governments at all levels to support young human rights defenders and ensure their right to political asylum when needed.

2. Digitalisation

Digitalisation has provided unparalleled opportunities for the practice of civil and political rights and at the same time, has created new problems in the practice of democracy and, in some instances, deepened already existing ones.

In terms of political rights, compared to other age groups young people are leading⁵ in using digital systems to engage in political discussions and have been able to mobilise and organise unlike ever before. Channelling their vision and demand for social change into mass movements, young people have taken forward political agendas that previously seemed stuck at an impasse. They have created and fostered collaborative, peer-to-peer learning spaces online to exchange good practices and how to stay in constant communication, as well as alert each other of threats from local to global levels.

On the other hand, it is also important to recognise that young people are not all 'digital natives' - for example, youth from vulnerable backgrounds often cannot access digital spaces the same way as others do, or lack the competences to navigate them fully. Therefore, there is a need to widen awareness about the divide created by digital participation in society and find ways to tackle it. Moreover, digital civic spaces work best when used in combination with physical spaces. As the COVID-19 pandemic especially showed, digital spaces were a lifeline to continue practicing freedom of expression, assembly, and other related freedoms, however, they posed issues in terms of continuity of engagement. Youth activists, although eager to be active and participate, struggled to stay engaged exclusively online over an extended period of time, given the mental health effects of overusing digital spaces for social interaction.

Lastly, online spaces are currently highly unregulated and are often underused by authorities to their full potential, which gives way to behaviors that contribute to harming civic spaces. To truly utilise the positive potential of digital spaces for youth, there needs to be properly designed and implemented systems that enhance young people's participation. Furthermore, youth participation is also impacted by the global decline⁶ in internet freedom. Extensive government surveillance, abuse of data for judiciary procedures, arbitrary shutdowns or partial constraints on communication technologies are unacceptable responses to any democratic action. Young people in some European countries are facing this however, finding themselves struggling to safely practice their civil and political rights online, which can have a direct impact on their well-being, and long-term negative consequences on their sense of democracy.

Therefore, the Youth Forum calls for:

- Governments at all levels to commit to a free, open and neutral internet and stop utilising information and communication technologies for shrinking civic spaces.
- Governments at all levels to ensure that all young people, regardless of their background, place of residence, abilities or other characteristics, have full access to information and communications technologies, tools and high quality internet.
- Governments at all levels and all stakeholders in education and learning to foster digital competences, including knowledge about individual, civil and political rights.
- Fostering democratic processes, both digitally and physically, while understanding that digital spaces are complementary and cannot fully replace certain processes, especially in the area of freedom of assembly, association and expression.
- Governments at all levels to promote the complementary use of digital technologies - e.g. e-voting, online surveys, etc. - for deliberation and other democratic processes, and ensuring public authorities are ready to use them.

5 [UNICEF Office of Global Insight and Policy \(2020\): Digital civic engagement by young people](#)

6 [Freedom House \(2018\): Freedom on the Net 2018](#)

3. Freedom of information and expression

The practice of freedom of information and expression are some of the key pillars for effectively engaging in civic spaces. However, young people are often faced with restrictive or inadequate government sources, unwanted surveillance and retribution and an overload of disinformation in society.

In terms of accessing information from governmental sources, 38.7% of youth organisations encounter some difficulty, significant difficulty or great difficulty⁷. Many governments do not invest in creating transparent ways of sharing information or they omit details activists often find relevant for their work. Even if governments are doing fairly well in sharing information, for young people, it is often still difficult to understand the technocratic language of the information, which leads to unnecessary gate-keeping about issues that concern them.

In certain cases, governments apply wide-spread surveillance mechanisms that hinder freedom of expression even further, spread fear and may lead to some form of retribution on youth organisations and activists. As a technique of intimidation and fishing for proof of illegitimate actions, many young activists and youth organisations who speak out have their online and physical activities tracked, are turned down from job opportunities as they are viewed as a threat or even face police raids and legal procedures. This in effect curtails the free practice of freedom of expression and information.

When it comes to freedom of expression, while it also brings about new and positive possibilities, the widespread use of social media creates an environment that also poses threats to the practice of civic and political rights. Spreading disinformation about any issue or any person has never been easier and the use of algorithms developed by commercial actors often keep us in our eco-chambers. This creates a tension between different groups of society, leading to brutalisation of public debate and political polarisation.

Meanwhile, young journalists, who try to deliver clear and unbiased information, are facing imminent risks for doing so, often at an early moment of their career and without proper support mechanisms in place. The wide-spread use of strategic lawsuits against public participation⁸ (SLAPPs) also has a particularly chilling effect on journalists, as well as on civil society actors, including young activists and youth organisations. Currently in Europe, this area is being discussed, but rather unregulated, leaving activists and journalists more vulnerable. Overall, tackling the effect of repressive government action, disinformation, polarisation and hate crime that hinders civic space will require both legal and political steps from those in decision-making positions, as well as the development of competences of the citizenry to deal with this effect, especially young people.

Therefore, the Youth Forum calls for:

- Governments at all levels to be held accountable where freedom of media or expression is threatened or repressed.
- Governments at all levels to safeguard journalists and activists from harm by establishing, preserving and promoting legal avenues of protection, and promoting media freedom, with tailored support for young journalists regarding any specific challenges they face.
- Public institutions at all levels to ensure the right of freedom of information by implementing transparent, effective and non-technocratic systems of sharing information.
- Public institutions at all levels to create and further enforce policies addressing discriminatory actions and hate speech online and offline.

7 European Youth Forum (2020): Safeguarding Civic Space for Young People in Europe

8 These litigation procedures are not meant to be won by the accuser - they are simply designed to threaten journalists and activists, resulting in their lesser participation in the public debate

4. Freedom of assembly and association

As two other fundamental freedoms related to civic space, freedom of assembly and association are a bedrock for strong democracies. They provide a necessary minimum for ensuring that citizens are able to organise themselves around issues that impact their or other people's lives, identify problems, and come up with solutions where possible. Young people showcase a diverse range of engagement in this area: from online and offline informal communities, to hybrid mass movements and registered youth organisations, young people constantly seek to actively practice these rights.

However, depending on their context, they can face a long list of obstacles. According to our study, 1/8 of youth organisations experience difficulties in organising or participating in public assemblies; and 2/5 of them do not feel certain that their organisation of, or participation in, such assemblies will not result in some form of retribution. Furthermore, 1/5 experience governmental interference in the functioning of their organisation, while 2/5 of youth organisations do not feel completely free from government interference.⁹ Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic was also used in certain countries to put in place curtailing measures on freedom of assembly that were disproportionate and were upheld for longer than necessary.

Currently in Europe, there are countries where governments do not provide conditions to be able to officially register NGOs and/or use this requirement as an essential criteria for funding or legality, arbitrarily dissolve organisations that do not serve their interests or otherwise interfere with an organisation's legal right of existence. Organisations and informal groups of young people who represent specific groups facing multiple forms of discrimination often feel the effect of this even more. In addition, governments with repressive tendencies often create and uphold smear-campaigns about civil society. As a young person, many have to face the tough decision in these circumstances about the long-term stigma it brings if one openly associates themselves with a certain cause, organisation or even civic engagement in general. They are put under pres-

sure to stop their operations by formal educational institutions they are attending or by police forces - sometimes even through the threatening of their families - and have to deal with the consequence of not getting hired for jobs because of their activism. This causes significant harm both to the individual and to the democratic fabric of society; if citizens at a young age are already discouraged from practising their freedom of assembly and association, their level of participation later on in democratic processes is likely to be impeded as well.

Seemingly in contrast, as young people's participation in democratic processes becomes more politically mainstream, so does the practice of *youth-washing*,¹⁰. A part of this trend is the arbitrary creation of top-down structures of youth participation to showcase a symbolic involvement of youth. Often, these structures are created in parallel to already existing, representative youth organisations - such as National Youth Councils - with the purpose of silencing them, impeding their work, making them irrelevant, creating an alternative youth body that is less critical. Youth consultative bodies established by public institutions by default are not an issue, in fact they are a much welcome focus on youth participation. They are, however, problematic when governments hand-pick young people according to their political views or with the purpose of eschewing consultation with independent, youth-led civil society organisations. Such approaches are a tool for youth-washing and further impede youth civic spaces at any level of governance whilst creating the false appearance of youth consultation.

Therefore, the Youth Forum calls for:

- EU institutions to establish an inter-institutional agreement on civil dialogue, with respect to Article 11 of TEU, thereby recognising the key role of civil society organisations, including youth organisations, in our democratic system.
- Governments at all levels to create the conditions for registering and running civil society organisations, including youth organisations, without any unnecessary burden or fear of retribution.

9 European Youth Forum (2020): Safeguarding Civic Space for Young People in Europe

10 *Youth-washing* is the process of using young people's involvement in decision-making spaces in a tokenistic way, especially where they are recognised as key stakeholders (e.g. climate crisis). This usually involves young people being showcased in highly visible places but being kept away from real decision-making power.

- European and global institutions and governments at all levels to respect the self-autonomy and independent organising of young people by recognising the structures they build themselves as legitimate actors.
- State actors at all levels to avoid deliberate discrimination towards any youth organisation due to the group they represent - e.g. religious or ethnic groups - by ensuring that any curtailing measure is carried out in a transparent manner with the right to appeal, and is backed by very specific reasoning.
- All relevant stakeholders to work against the stigmatisation of NGOs used for political gain and reinstate the positive image of civil society serving human rights, democracy and the rule of law.
- Governments at all levels to respect all legal frameworks - national and European - when overseeing freedom of assembly and association.

5. Funding for youth civil society

Youth organisations are carrying out extremely valuable work for upholding and strengthening democracy, and their structures are often built and run by volunteers. While still respecting and promoting the value of dedicating one's time freely for advocating for young people's rights, there is a need to recognise that organisations require funding to function on a daily basis - paying staff, renting offices, buying equipment, organising trainings, or applying effective communication campaigns, among other things.

Youth-led, democratic and grassroots-based organisations, such as the membership of the European Youth Forum, are hubs for meaningful youth participation which ensure that young people can defend and promote their own rights. Having the necessary conditions for the functioning of these organisations is vital for keeping a prosperous active citizenship in Europe and builds the basis to practice civic and political rights from early on.

11 *Red-taping* means the use of excessive procedure (e.g in terms of administrative tasks, length, etc.) to delay certain actions or make them difficult to attempt.

12 See as a positive example, [Programming Committee on Youth of the Council of Europe](#)

In many cases, youth organisations face restrictions on accessing funding, both from public and private sources. Public bodies often either provide only project-based or short-term funding to youth organisations, leaving them out of accessing sources completely or failing to create opportunities that are tailored to the diversity of the focus and scope of youth organisations. Governments can also actively block organisations from accessing funding from certain private or philanthropic sources, claiming there is a political agenda behind the given funding. Moreover, organisations often need to answer to overly bureaucratic measures to report on their functioning, which makes their work slower and unnecessarily difficult, drawing precious resources from working on their actual objectives.

Therefore, the Youth Forum calls for:

- European and global institutions and governments at all levels to ensure that there is structural funding available for youth organisations for their day-to-day functioning and further improve already existing mechanisms, especially to also reach smaller organisations.
- European institutions to ensure direct funding for youth organisations especially in countries where they are not supported by the government.
- Governments and funding stakeholders to ensure that youth organisations can access funding from private and out-of-country sources, without fear of government repression.
- All funding stakeholders to provide flexibility around co-funding requirements in order to support volunteer-led and smaller organisations.
- All funding stakeholders to avoid *red-taping*¹¹ and overburdening youth organisations with bureaucracy connected to funding.
- European and global institutions and governments at all levels to create more participatory budgeting schemes where youth and other civil society organisations truly co-manage grant schemes that concern them through a representative system.¹²

- European institutions to specifically recognise the different realities of youth organisations, and ensure proper administrative management for each, including the recognition of Europe-wide organisations as their own category in the Erasmus+, the European Solidarity Corps programmes and beyond.

6. Education and youth work

Last but not least, achieving a thriving civic space would be impossible without empowering young people to be actors of their own and equipping them with the competences that are needed to successfully engage socially and politically. This happens through citizenship education that has to tackle multiple angles in our societies nowadays in order to be of quality, including political literacy, critical thinking, media literacy and digital skills.

This is most successful if there is a collaboration between the different spheres of learning - formal, non-formal and informal¹³. Together, schools and universities, youth and other civil society organisations and informal communities shape possibilities for young people to engage meaningfully with issues they care about in society. Young people often meet with citizenship education first through youth work¹⁴, done either by volunteer or paid youth workers, peers or others, and learn critical thinking about the structures they live in.

While the end goal of course is to create and maintain societies with open and thriving civic spaces, it is also important to recognise that currently in Europe and the world, significant harm has already been made to these spaces. Developing competences of active citizenship will help tackle the impact of shrinking civic spaces and polarisation in society, as well as create new strategies on preventing future decline.

Therefore, the Youth Forum calls for:

- Youth work to be strengthened through better recognition and funding structures in order to educate young people about democratic processes and provide space for them to actively

engage in and influence society through these processes from a young age.

- Policy stakeholders to give a wider and stronger recognition of the transformative influence of youth organisations and their positive impact on society, especially when it comes to young people from underrepresented and vulnerable groups.
- All educational stakeholders to focus on the provision of quality citizenship education, across educational sectors and learning spheres (formal, non-formal and informal).

¹³ [European Youth Forum \(2013\): Policy Paper on Citizenship Education](#)

¹⁴ [European Youth Forum \(2014\): Policy Paper on Youth work in the European Youth Forum and youth organisations](#)