

SAFEGUARDING  
CIVIC SPACE FOR  
YOUNG PEOPLE  
IN EUROPE



## ABOUT THIS STUDY

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This study was commissioned by the European Youth Forum to inform future policy work. The opinions expressed and policy recommendations made in this publication do not necessarily represent the views or positions of the European Youth Forum and its Member Organisations.

### ABOUT THE EUROPEAN YOUTH FORUM

The European Youth Forum is the platform of youth organisations in Europe. We represent over 100 youth organisations, which bring together tens of millions of young people from all over Europe.

The Youth Forum works to empower young people to participate actively in society to improve their own lives by representing and advocating their needs and interests and those of their organisations. In the current uncertain political and social context that affects young people, they can be powerful catalysts for positive change and contributors of innovative solutions to Europe's challenges.

The European Youth Forum is funded by:

Co-funded by the  
Erasmus+ Programme  
of the European Union



## List of abbreviations

AI (*Amnesty International*)  
CIVICUS (*World Alliance for Citizen Participation*)  
CIVICUS YWG (*CIVICUS Youth Working Group*)  
CoE (*Council of Europe*)  
CONCORD (*European NGO Confederation for Relief and Development*)  
CSA (*Civil Society Actor*)  
CSE (*Civil Society Europe*)  
CSO (*Civil Society Organisation*)  
EESC (*European Economic and Social Committee*)  
EFC (*European Foundation Centre*)  
EC (*European Commission*)  
EP (*European Parliament*)  
YFJ (*European Youth Forum*)  
FRA (*European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights*)  
GONGO (*Government-Organised NGO*)  
HRD (*Human Rights Defenders*)  
HRW (*Human Rights Watch*)  
IHE (*Institutions of Higher Education*)  
ICNL (*International Center for Not-for-Profit Law*)  
IEA ICCS (*IEA International Civic and Citizenship Study*)  
IEA (*International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement*)  
INGO (*International Non-Governmental Organisation*)  
NGO (*Non-Governmental Organisation*)  
OECD (*Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development*)  
OHCHR (*Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights*)  
OSCE (*Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe*)  
OXFAM (*Oxford Committee for Famine*)  
T/AI (*Transparency and Accountability Initiative*)  
TCS (*Transnational Civil Society*)  
UN (*United Nations*)  
UNDP (*United Nations Development Programme*)  
WEF (*World Economic Forum*)

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# FOREWORD

*"freedom to unite for any purpose not involving harm to others"*

J.S.Mill, "On Liberty", 1859

Rooted in fundamental texts such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights or the European Convention of Human Rights and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, freedom of association is an essential and vital component of our modern and democratic societies.

Being able to get together, learn, exchange, build and promote ideas has been embraced by countless generations of young people, which makes the culture of youth organisations in Europe so unique and so empowering.

As the voice of young people, the European Youth Forum has a mission to support independent, democratic, youth and volunteer-led platforms and to work to empower young people to participate actively in society to improve their own lives, by representing and advocating for their rights and interests and those of their organisations.

Over the years, we have unfortunately witnessed a crackdown against civil society, including youth organisations, in various European countries. From subtle obstacles to direct interdictions of activities, public authorities have acted – with a conscious intention or not – against the freedom of association.

With this study we commissioned, the European Youth Forum wanted to put the light on those challenges faced by youth organisations in Europe, while stressing the importance of a vibrant civic space – as well as some of the actions taken by youth organisations to counter those measures.

This study takes a rights-based approach, looking into the different dimensions that are fundamental to a functioning civic space: right to information and expression; right to assembly; right to participate in political life; right to equal treatment; and right to justice, stemming from the rule of law.

The European Youth Forum will use the findings of this study for its advocacy towards the European Union, the Council of Europe and the United Nations, as well as all the relevant arenas in order to, quoting the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet, ensure *the broadest possible civic space in every country*.

With this, we will fight for an enabling environment for youth organisations, where they are a vital part of a healthy democracy and where they can function without any barriers – financially, legally, politically and legitimately.

Join our fight [#ForYouthRights](#)

The European Youth Forum

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In both classical and contemporary political theory, civil society plays a central role in discussions over the associational life of members of a polity (i.e. a politically organised entity) [...]. Civil society organisations, including youth organisations, perform a number of functions that are necessary in promoting and safeguarding basic human rights and democracy. In fact, an open civil society is one of the most important safeguards against tyranny, oppression, and other anti-democratic tendencies.

As a sphere of free and non-coercive association, an open civic space enables civil society actors to pursue a number of roles. Civil society organisations provide a platform for dialogue between a diversity of voices and the free exchange of information between civil society actors and various other stakeholders. 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 face. Youth civil society organisations that engage young people in civic life are particularly important, as these organisations target youth-specific issues, place issues on the policy and political agenda, and identify innovative solutions in the field. In fact, as 'laboratories of democracy', youth civil society organisations have been an important catalyst for many social innovations.

Open and safe civic spaces serve as unique safe havens for young individuals from diverse backgrounds to participate and build the competence they need to fully participate in various realms of public life. These places also facilitate links to decision-makers and other stakeholders.

Nevertheless, despite the centrality of youth organisations in promoting and safeguarding basic human rights and democracy for young people, or particularly because of that, the last few years have witnessed a persistent silencing of these voices – thus narrowing the civic space available to youth. The 'global authoritarian pushback against democracy and human rights', comprising anti-democratic tendencies including hate speech, fake news, populism, conflicting diversity and other phenomena headed under the banner of 'uncivil society', contributes to the shrinking of civic space irrespective of the country's democratic tradition,

prevailing social cleavages, wealth, human rights record, or geographical location. Changes in legal status, funding restrictions, disproportionate reporting requirements, bureaucratic obstacles combined with other administrative regulations, and smear campaigns that aim to undermine reputation or call into question their mission, are just some of the strategies youth and other civil society organisations are facing. As a result of increasingly hostile conditions for civil, political and social engagement across the globe, youth is prevented from being an agent of social change.

Our research reveals that, in their quest to facilitate the above mentioned process – i.e. of youth becoming an agent of social change – youth organisations have to overcome significant challenges. These challenges, primarily imposed by governments, and the strategies to overcome them, can be broadly grouped into four categories:

**Firstly**, those that relate to freedom of information and expression. One in three youth organisations experience difficulties in accessing information from government; two in five have difficulties expressing themselves because of fear of retribution from the government; and one in ten is not even able to freely use the internet.

**Secondly**, challenges in exercising their rights of assembly and association: one in eight youth organisations experienced difficulties in organising or participating in public assemblies; and two in five of them do not feel certain that their organisation of, or participation in, such assemblies will not result in some form of retribution. Furthermore, one in five experienced governmental interference in the functioning of their organisation, while two in five youth organisations do not feel completely free from government interference. One in four also reports undue restrictions, while one third experience barriers to acquiring foreign funding. They also believe the presence of market indicators to evaluate their work is disturbing; one in four to a noticeable degree.

**Thirdly**, in their quest to secure and facilitate citizen participation, one fourth of organisations are not fully capable of engaging in advocacy activities due to their fear of retribution, and experience at least

some difficulties in participating in the processes of deliberation and decision-making. What is more, two out of five organisations believe they are only moderately or to no extent able to influence the outcome of deliberation processes: to be precise, three out of four organisations are never, or very rarely, invited to participate in the formulation of solutions at local level, and three out of six at the national level.

A **Fourth** category relates to human rights and the rule of law: one third of youth organisations believe that human rights and the principles of rule of law are only moderately respected when it comes to youth. This is also shown by the fact that more than two out of five believe that youth is only moderately free from political pressures.

All in all, our study clearly demonstrates that there are serious obstacles to civic space when it comes to young people. This is also shown by the fact that one fifth of youth organisations believe that young people have limited access to civic space, and more than half of them perceive young people as underrepresented in a civic space.

The mission of redressing the trend of a shrinking civic space for young people and their organisations should focus on detecting, and the prevention of, anti-democratic legal and policy manoeuvres by government and other actors. However, to the extent that the definitions, aspirations, and acceptable expressions of democratic activity are determined through cultural and social processes, it has been – and remains – possible to pre-emptively shrink civic spaces by undermining its initial formation within each successive generation of people. To safeguard and expand the democratic project and its constituent civic spaces, it is essential to define shrinking space more broadly to also include early learning of democratic principles, such as in school curricula, and the impact of efforts to change the terms of reference upon which they are established and reproduced.

A credible agenda for safeguarding civic spaces for youth must also include analytical lenses and data that bring the stratification of access and agency across identities, cultures, and communities to the surface; and the strategies for reclaiming the civic

space should thus be customised to the particular circumstances and needs of those affected.

While policy discourse prioritises the identification of pragmatic and technical intervention strategies, the ways in which policy questions are framed – including the semantics, underlying assumptions, and context – all shape what answers are found and what recommendations are made. If we are to protect and even expand civic spaces in which youth can develop and express their civic and citizenship identities meaningfully and productively, then the conceptual and theoretical lenses that guide the analysis and policy craft must be embedded with considerations of youth's particular psychosocial, physical, economic, cultural, and educational needs. Efforts to effectively determine and respond to the challenges, opportunities, needs, and wishes of any demographic group requires overt attention to the identities and cultures prevalent within that group.

In addition to discussions about the importance of disaggregating youth groups, the classification of their civic engagement activities can also be useful in terms of identifying areas of strength or limiting factors within a broader strategic effort to increase targeted engagement opportunities for youth. In order to evaluate the support within such environments, a matrix or analytical framework for conducting an inventory is a useful tool.

*Open and safe civic spaces serve as unique safe havens for young individuals from diverse backgrounds to participate and build the competence they need to fully participate in various realms of public life.*



# CIVIC SPACE AND ITS DEMOCRATIC RELEVANCE

As a sphere of free and non-coercive association, the 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. The civil society space, as outlined in the report *Challenges facing civil society organisations working on human rights in the EU* by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights [hereafter: FRA] is 'the place civil society actors occupy within society; the environment and framework in which civil society operates; and the relationships among civil society actors, the State, private sector and the general public' (2017). An open civil society is therefore one of the most important safeguards against tyranny and oppression as well as other anti-democratic (including totalitarian) tendencies. In particular, civil society organisations [hereafter CSOs], including youth organisations,

play a crucial role in provision of space to safeguard basic human and democratic rights.

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 engaging youth in civic life are particularly important as these organisations target youth-specific issues, place issues on the policy and political agenda as well as seek for 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 & Krylova: 16).

Protecting and effectively guaranteeing a vibrant and open civic space for youth and in general is therefore a crucial component of a stable and flourishing democracy aiming to protect diversity, cultivate tolerance and guarantee respect of basic human rights for all members of a polity. As 'the practical room for action and manoeuvre for citizens' (Buyse, 2018: 4), the civic space is being established by the three basic civil liberties enabling citizens to debate and exchange information [*freedom of expression*], to organise themselves [*freedom of association*] and to act [*freedom of peaceful assembly*].<sup>1</sup>

As an environment where individuals can exercise their basic civil rights, the civic space represents the single most important social sphere of shared associational life. According to the Civic Space Watch, the civic space

*is the place, physical, virtual, and legal, where people exercise their rights to freedom of association, expression, and peaceful assembly. By forming associations, by speaking out on issues of public concern, by gathering together in online and offline fora, and by participating in public decision-making, individuals use civic space to solve problems and improve lives. A robust and protected civic space forms the cornerstone of accountable, responsive democratic governance and stable societies.*

At the empirical level, major social and political changes have occurred during the last two decades that influenced the development of discussions over the status, scope and justification of civil society. On the one hand, the collapse of the Soviet Union and other undemocratic forms of government around the globe have had an inspiring influence on the positive overall impact of civil society as a major agent of democratisation as well as 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). On the other hand, the rise of anti-democratic tendencies (Dobson, 2013) associated with human rights violations together with a dramatic decline in social, civic and associational life in well-established democratic countries (Putnam, 2000) have had a negative effect on the stability and legitimacy of democratic societies. In particular, the following challenges have been most pressing, i.e. the 'governance gap' (OECD, 2018), the 'empowerment gap' (Levinson, 2012), the 'opportunity gap' (Putnam, 2015) etc. In particular, there is a serious concern among politicians and policy makers over the phenomenon of 'reverse transitions', i.e. the 'transitions moving from democracy to a more authoritarian form of government, rather than the other way around' (Buyse, 2018). An open civic space is therefore of vital importance as it provides a platform to confer legitimacy to the government and the political system on a number of issues.

At the theoretical level, debates over the status, value and the many challenges facing civil society in both democratic and non-democratic systems have taken place across a range of academic disciplines including political philosophy (Kymlicka & Chambers, 2002; Rosenblum & Post, 2001), political theory (Cohen & Arato, 1994; Keane, 2003), sociology (Garcia, 2015), jurisprudence (Cichowski, 2011), and other disciplines within the broader field of the social sciences and the humanities. Kymlicka and Chambers (2001) emphasise that,

*The idea of civil society has long been central to the Western liberal-democratic tradition, where it has been seen as a crucial site for the development and pursuit of basic liberal values such as individual freedom, social pluralism, and democratic citizenship.*

An interesting trend is observable in these discussions. On the one hand, there has been little 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. The prominent place of civil society in a democratic polity is basically undisputed and universally accepted as one of the most important functions CSOs perform in the preservation of the common interest, e.g. human rights, environmental protection, sustainable development etc. An 'empowered and resilient civil society', as the authors of EU's *Annual Report on Human Rights and Democracy in the World 2017* have emphasised, [...] 'is a crucial component of any democracy'.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, associational life and the civic space in general are not only a side-effect of democracy but are thought to be, 'a crucial means of creating the trust and reciprocity on which both democratic and market interactions depend' (Clifford, 2011: 210). The authors of the ICNL (2018: 17) report also emphasise,

*CSOs, when permitted to operate freely, have the ability to mobilise citizens within recipient countries to hold domestic authorities accountable, contribute to economic development, expand access to services such as education and healthcare, and advocate on behalf of universal human rights and vulnerable groups.*

On the other hand, despite the convergence of opinion on the importance of civil society in a democratic society (e.g. voice amplification and advocacy, service delivery, legislative drafting and implementation assistance, standards setting, compliance monitoring, consultation on public policy, watchdog activities, training of experts and public officials, networking and policy-exchange, policy-influencing etc.), its scope, its justification and its limits are far from uncontroversial or settled. Despite a social sphere in its own right, the civic space can figure as an autonomous 'agent' providing both positive (e.g. enabling conditions) as well as negative (e.g. non-interference) impulses.

1 These three core civic space rights are part of any modern human rights document, e.g. *the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, *the European Convention of Human Rights* or democratic constitutions.

2 See. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/35383/st09122-en18.pdf>

3 The CoE Commissioner for Human Rights (between 2012–2017) Nils Muižnieks, pointed out in his Human Rights Comment 'The Shrinking Space for Human Rights Organisations' the role of CSOs as 'human rights watchdogs'. See. (<https://www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/the-shrinking-space-for-human-rights-organisations>)



# SHRINKING CIVIC SPACE: ETIOLOGY, TRENDS AND AGENDAS

## II.1 Etiology of the 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. Time and again, some of the major global crises have served as a pretext for curtailing the civil society. Fueled by urgency-based justification and reinforced by national interest rhetorics, governments have endorsed and continue to endorse an implicit equivalence between the state's "legitimate" interest of security, financial independence and sovereignty and the government's agenda at the expense of democratic freedoms and structures that support them. For example, the 'security crisis' and the subsequent 'War on terror' sparked by terrorist attacks on 9/11 in New York has enabled the US government to pass

the *Patriot Act* that had a profound backlash on the work of CSOs and the narrowing down of the civic space in general (ICNL, 2018: 14–15). The Civicus 2016 *State of Civil Society Report* thus emphasises that,

*Involutions of national security and national stability are often being conflated and left ill-defined as part of this restriction. Challenges to ruling elites are wilfully misinterpreted as threats to the nation, and the expression of political dissent labelled as terrorism.*

In contrast to other social problems, shrinkage of the civic space affects countries irrespective of their traditional distinctions, including the sociopolitical context, development of democratic institutions, wealth, human rights record, geographical location etc. (Youngs & Echagüe, 2017: 5). Congruently, Martínez-Solimán (2015) in the UNDP's '*Our Perspective*' blog points out that '[w]hile it was once true that countries in crisis and post-conflict periods

are the ones where civil societies have been most at risk, we now see similar threats spreading across a range of development contexts.' For example, the Global Governance Institute likewise stresses the civic space in the United Kingdom is currently rated "narrowed", given concerns about the impact of counter-extremism policies on associational life and violent policing tactics in the management of public assemblies (Kreienkamp, 2017: 4).<sup>4</sup> At the same time, major INGOs including Human Rights Watch,<sup>5</sup> Amnesty International,<sup>6</sup> the European Youth Forum,<sup>7</sup> OSCE,<sup>8</sup> Carnegie Europe,<sup>9</sup> CIVICUS<sup>10</sup> etc. continuously react primarily to the intended actions of the "usual suspects" with a record of violations of human rights and democratic freedoms (e.g. intention to close down the Central European University in Budapest, 'shrinking of the civic space' related to the LGBT population in North Macedonia etc.).

It has been widely agreed and accepted that shrinkage of civic space is therefore associated not only with 'endangered democracies' but has become a global trend and has been gradually intensifying for over a decade now (e.g. European Economic and Social Committee, 2017; Directorate-General for External Policies, 2017; Nazarski, 2017). World Economic Forum's *Global Risks Report* even stresses that '[a] new era of restricted freedoms and increased governmental control could undermine social, political and economic stability and increase the risk of geopolitical and social conflict' (WEF, 2017: 29).

Leading international and intergovernmental organisations have thus emphasised that the civic space in Europe is also under threat. As has been reported by the CoE Commissioner for Human Rights, 'since 2012, more than 60 countries across the globe have either passed or drafted laws restricting the activities of civil society organisations. Restrictive provisions have been enacted in various parts of Europe as well, posing ever-greater obstacles to the work of NGOs operating in the continent' (2017).<sup>11</sup> For example, in its *World Report*, Amnesty International pointed out that 'space for civil society continued to shrink in Europe [...] (AI, 2018: 46). Furthermore, the European Foundation Centre stresses that the 'shrinking civic space for civil society and reported violations of fundamental and democratic rights are a global phenomenon' (EFC, 2016: 2). In fact, according to EFC's report, Hungary's impediment on the exercise of core civic space freedoms and

the UK's surveillance programmes (e.g. Prevent) are some of the most pressing issues in Europe (EFC, 2016: 2).

When it comes to the impact on youth, Shaw et. al. (2014) remark on the implications of this problem by explaining the link between governance, individual agency of a young person and the link to youth work and services provided by youth organisations:

*Given that the participation of citizens is important in the functioning of a healthy democracy, there is a concern that a disengagement of young people from the political system will negatively impact on the governance of society. Additionally, the potential for youth civic engagement activity to contribute to the personal development of young people, to promote their welfare and to challenge injustice in society also provides an impetus for greater focus on civic engagement as a component of youth work and youth action. (2014: p. 2)*

However, governments' crackdown on civil society and the subsequent shrinkage of the civic space that has become a global phenomenon, caused an upsurge of interest in civil society both among scholars and policy-makers in addition to actors of civil society themselves.

4 In the 2017 HRW's World Report, Letta Tayler emphasises that new global counterterrorism measures (including travel bans, citizenship revocations, expanded police and intelligence powers etc.) jeopardise rights (p. 27-38). See also <http://stafewatch.org/news/2016/apr/un-special-rapporteur-uk-shrinking-space-civil-society-4-16.pdf>

5 See, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/02/19/we-stand-solidarity-civil-society-hungary>

6 See, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2018/02/in-solidarity-with-civil-society-in-hungary/>

7 See, <https://www.youthforum.org/urgent-resolution-shrinking-civic-space-hungary>

8 See, <https://www.osce.org/odihr/339316?download=true>

9 See, <http://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/74581>

10 From 2011 onwards, CIVICUS produced its annual State of Civil Society Report which provides 'an assessment of the operating environments for NGOs, global governance and legislative trends affecting civil liberties'. For the overview of its 2018 report, see <https://www.civicus.org/index.php/state-of-civil-society-report-2018>

11 See, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/the-shrinking-space-for-human-rights-organisations>

## II.2

### Shrinking civic space: a typology of governments' interference

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 CSOs. Furthermore, laws and other administrative regulations constraining freedom of association and peaceful assembly as well as freedom of expression and information together with phenomena as diverse as populism [on both 'left' and right' of the political spectrum],<sup>12</sup> hate speech, fake news [including its various 'alternatives', e.g. misinformation, distorted facts etc.], sensationalism, extremist political movements, the 'moral panic', polarising narratives and conflicting diversity [e.g. radicalisation and violent extremism] etc. are part of the 'global authoritarian pushback against democracy and human rights' that is associated with a global phenomenon of 'reverse transitions' (Buyse, 2018).

The most definitive 'typology' of the trends that encompass the shrinking civic space phenomena and discourse was put forward by Transnational Institute (hereinafter TNI) in their framing paper named *On 'shrinking space'* (2017). They define the shrinking civic space as a concept or framework looking to depict the dynamic relationship between 'repressive methods and political struggle, including the ways in which political struggle responds to these methods to reclaim space, and the impact this response has upon how political struggles relate to one another'. According to the report, there are at least nine interrelated trends that constrain and curtail the space in which CSOs operate. The framework thus provides the lenses to see through trends of repression, i.e.:

- (i) 'philanthropic protectionism' is the first trend pointed out. According to the framework, the trend entails a raft of government-imposed constraints that curtail the ability of domestic CSOs to receive international funding;

- (ii) domestic laws that aim to regulate activities of CSOs and other non-profit organisations (e.g. onerous registration procedures, burdening bureaucracy, etc.);
- (iii) policies and practices that limit or restrict the rights to freedom of assembly and association (e.g. banning demonstrations, security laws impose restrictions on mobilisation, etc.);
- (iv) the criminalisation of human-rights defenders and refugees' solidarity along with other practices of exclusion such as stigmatisation and de-legitimisation;
- (v) various forms of regulating and restricting of freedom of expression, both online and in general;
- (vi) intimidations and even violent attacks towards CSOs and human rights defenders by different actors (e.g. Far-Right movements, non-state actors, etc.);
- (vii) ever decreasing space for activism both in general and online due to the repression and intimidation practices;
- (viii) both public and private donors to CSOs averse risk and securitisation, which results in withdrawal of the funding in the worst case scenario;
- (ix) civic spaces traditionally occupied by CSOs are now being replaced by private interest groups, lobbies and government-oriented NGOs (GONGOs). (TNI, 2017)

In particular, funding restrictions, reporting requirements, administrative regulations and other bureaucratic obstacles advanced primarily in the name of increasing transparency and accountability have had a twofold negative effect on the narrowing down of the civic space. On the one hand, these restrictions have negatively influenced the provision of the 'enabling environment' for the functioning of CSOs [*general negative effect*]. On the other hand, some of these restrictions have a discriminating effect between the different CSAs [*particular negative effect*]. In particular, specific administrative rules and other regulations, e.g. the licensing of CSOs may create a disruption of the civic space creating internal conflicts between different CSAs [*discriminating negative effect*]. At the same time, the shrinking civic space has also wider 'implications for business'.<sup>13</sup> As has been emphasised in WEF's 2017 *Global Risks Report*, [New regulations and restrictions [...] potentially

threaten the existence of an open and free society and the stability of the environment in which businesses invest and operate' (WEF, 2017: 29).

Furthermore, alongside the 'standard' arguments for curtailing the civic space, e.g. undermining the stability and national security, foreign agents etc., the justification why governments [as well as non-state actors] exert pressure on civil society includes also considerably more complex [and controversial] cases. Three of them are to be pointed out here, i.e. [i] the 'moral panic' argument (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 2009) in the case of migrants and asylum seekers; [ii] the scapegoating argument (Douglas, 1995) in the case of radicalisation and violent extremism and [iii] 'conspiracy theories' as in the controversy over the Central European University.

Due to their 'soft power' strategies, CSOs have been targets of tactics whose main strategy has been to negatively affect public perceptions and therefore to call into question their reputation and to undermine the legitimacy of their overall mission. Amnesty International (2017: 14) report on human rights defenders stresses that 'stigmatisation and smear campaigns are commonly used to delegitimise HRDs and undermine their work'. For example, in its 2017 *World Report*, Human Rights Watch emphasised the critical role performed by the media in reaffirming the importance of human rights values:

*Media outlets should help to highlight the dangerous trends underway, tempering their coverage of today's statements and conduct with analysis of the longer term ramifications. They should also make a special effort to expose and rebut the propaganda and "fake news" that certain partisans generate. (2017: 13).*

Nevertheless, governmental measures to restrict the work of CSOs that in general have a negative effect on shrinking civic space can turn out to have 'unintended' positive consequences that may run against governments' agendas. For example, the attempted imposition of new constraints on the regulation of NGOs in Australia has also had an

*Due to their 'soft power' strategies, CSOs have been targets of tactics whose main strategy has been to negatively affect public perceptions*

'ironic effect of expanding the realm of civil society activity by galvanizing the sector (Goodman, 2018: 64). Similarly, 'Civil Society Under Pressure' report (2018: pp. 19–27) has listed a set of actions initiated by CSOs as an answer to the 'shrinking operational space' ranging from 'reactive' to 'proactive' response strategies. In fact, this unintended side-effect of governments' crackdown on CSOs can be viewed as a version of the doctrine of double effect (Wodward, 2001).

As data from international surveys clearly shows, financial resources for civil society is the single most pressing issue facing CSOs (CIVICUS, 2016: 7). Interestingly enough, Goodman's (2018) echoing WEF's 2017 *Global Risks Report* reveals the 'global double standards' related to financing from abroad is hypocritical at best. Foreign investment (at least in democratic and capitalist countries) is being encouraged as it is usually taken as positive for business. In contrast, CSOs receiving funding from abroad (either in the form of donations, grants etc.) are targets of legal and other administrative regulations that are most likely to discriminate against them. Furthermore, these donations or grants are equated with foreign influence or outright interference, with political donations (in particular during elections) or both.

12 In its 2017 World Report, HRW points out that the 'rising tide of populism' is crippling civil society groups and is a threat for human rights in general (p. 8).

13 See also the Business and Human Rights Resource Centre article <https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/nationalism-xenophobia-and-authoritarianism-how-should-business-respond-to-these-rising-trends>

14 Section 2.2. of WEF's 2017 Global Risks Report is devoted to declining civic freedoms and civic space at risk. See, [http://www3.weforum.org/docs/GRR17\\_Report\\_web.pdf](http://www3.weforum.org/docs/GRR17_Report_web.pdf)

15 For the complete report, see <https://oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/5-trends-that-explain-why-civil-society-space-is-under-assault-around-the-world/>

Yet, shrinking of the civic space represents a 'symptom' of much larger and important changes in democratic global governance and the associated 'accountability gap' (Scholte, 2013). Over the last decade, violations of the civic space have taken many forms and have been well-documented. Alongside some of the 'standard' trends in shrinking civic space, e.g. (Green, 2015),<sup>15</sup> the impediment on the exercise of the core civic space freedoms needs to be understood alongside a major shift of emphasis over 'civic agency' (Fowler, 2010) in global governance (Scholte, 2013) that is part of the 'neoliberal revolution' and its technocratic agenda (Duggan, 2003). It is marked not only by the measurement of effectiveness and efficiency primarily (or even exclusively) through the indicators associated with economic growth but in a number of major shifts in governance including

- (i) an oversimplified understanding of the relationship between government, the civil society and other social spheres (e.g. the market),<sup>16</sup>
- (ii) its exclusively instrumentalist view of the civil society and its role in a democratic society,<sup>17</sup>
- (iii) a proceduralist conception of democracy and its institutional framework,<sup>18</sup>
- (iv) a reductionist understanding of civic equality,
- (v) a distorted image of effectiveness and efficiency as central elements of the neoliberal global governance toolkit.<sup>19</sup>

Two main interpretations on the etiology of the shrinking civic space can be identified here. On the first (and the most prevalent), civil society is viewed as a *threat* to governments. In this respect, governments' actions are primarily oriented towards the hampering of those CSA that are critical of government and its policies. On the other, civil society is becoming *redundant* as a partner in governance and is gradually being replaced by other social spheres, e.g. the market and its associated derivatives. This does not mean that the market is likely to take over the role of civil society but only those functions that serve the purpose of either economic growth or governance. Despite the 'broad consensus that good governance requires both a strong state and a strong civil society' (Malena, 2010), this shift of emphasis in both status and function of civil society as an element of global

governance (Steffek et al., 2008) goes against the grain of the pre-emptive that 'civil society action is thought to be a prerequisite for good governance, as well as an indicator for it' (Roy, 2008: 677).

## II.3 Youth and shrinking civic spaces

The IEA ICCS 2016 *International Report* stresses the importance of the acquisition of civic knowledge for expected civic engagement in the future (Schultz, 2016: 202).<sup>20</sup> It also reveals inverted correlation showing that students with higher levels of civic knowledge tended to be less likely to expect conventional involvement in politics' (Schultz, 2016: xv, 202). This finding demonstrates the importance of activities performed by (youth) CSOs, particularly in the absence of systemic mechanisms promoting democratic citizenship, and can be attributed to the distrust of both political parties and political leaders. This is consistent with OECD's report on the engagement and empowerment of youth in OECD countries. The report titled *Engaging and Empowering Youth in OECD Countries – How to Bridge the 'Governance Gap* (Allam & Ader, 2018: 5) emphasise

*OECD evidence shows that in 17 out of 35 OECD Member countries, youth express less trust in government than their parents (50+). The trust crisis and disengagement with traditional forms of participation signals frustration with the available channels to make their voices heard. The risk of a significant share of politically disengaged youth is vital as around 25% of 15-29 year-olds in OECD countries stress that they are "not at all interested" in politics – a statement that is also reaffirmed in the low voter turnout among youth in national and local elections.*

Given the fact that young people's conventional involvement in politics and civic participation in general is decreasing as well as changing, the shrinking civic space has both a direct and an indirect impact on youth civic engagement. Furthermore, the expansion of the civic space with information and communication technology has provided broader opportunities to amplify the voice(s) of young people and other at-risk social groups. The UN *World Youth Report on Youth Civic Engagement* points out the use of new information and communications technology (ICT) and social

media have been used to drive and effectively reshape activism both within and across borders (2016: 14). Nevertheless, compensation of 'online' opportunities with the shrinking of 'standard' offline civic spaces may not be the right approach as offline and online civic spaces are not equivalent.

Despite the democratic and empowerment potential of the digital space (e.g. the social media) in information sharing, mobilising, awareness raising etc. (Dahlgren, 2015)<sup>21</sup> as well as the fact that 'digital technology promotes participation and debate in ways that sustain democratic practice' (Bessant, 2012), the standard offline civic space remains an important factor for young people's civic participation. However, a number of questions linked to the relationship between offline and online civic-related activities as well as between traditional and alternative forms of youth civic engagement in general arise here, i.e. are they complementary, compensatory, in tension (or even in conflict) etc.?

At the same time, ICT has been an important means in 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, e.g. the UK government surveillance in the name of national security or India's legislative and other administrative regulations in the name of foreign interference. Government censorship of critical or discordant voices has therefore a critically negative impact on young people and their exercise of basic civil rights.

In her study on new media and new politics Judith Bessant (2012: 250-251) emphasises that young people

*are denied many 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. Age-based laws mean they are denied rights to participate in decisions about which they have a direct interest, to have political representation, to speak and assemble freely [...].*

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, as the authors of the UN *World Youth Report on Youth Civic Engagement* have emphasised, 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. Richards-Schuster and Dobbie stress that youth civic spaces,

*are 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. The concept of youth civic space 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.*

16 An important part of 'The Spindle' (an 'innovation lab') is also to explore how 'people within civil society organisations (CSOs) and people within the private sector start a dialogue to increase civic space'. See, <http://thespindle.org/project/the-business-case-of-civic-space/>.

17 The relationship between a democratic political system and a multidimensional civic culture as Peter Dahlgren emphasises is one of 'mutual dependence' (Dahlgren, 2000).

18 For an example of a reductionist understanding of democracy, see a comment by Hungary's prime minister Viktor Orbán <https://budapestbeacon.com/full-text-of-viktor-orbans-speech-at-baile-tusnad-tusnadfurdo-of-26-july-2014/>

19 OECD's report *Together for Better Public Services: Partnering with Citizens and Civil Society* emphasises that CSOs are also an important partner the innovation and delivery of improved public service outcomes. See, [https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/governance/together-for-better-public-services-partnering-with-citizens-and-civil-society\\_9789264118843-en](https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/governance/together-for-better-public-services-partnering-with-citizens-and-civil-society_9789264118843-en)

20 For a detailed presentation of the IEA ICCS study (including the results from the past cycles and major publications (e.g. the ICCS 2016 International Report), see <https://www.iea.nl/iccs>

21 For a comprehensive presentation of the internet as a civic space, see Dahlgren (2015).

A shrinking youth civic space, as evidenced by reports, evaluations and other surveys produced by some of the leading INGOs therefore raises a number of governance-related challenges associated with youth civic participation as it negatively affects their economic, political and community engagement and subsequently the very stability of our societies. In particular, the intersectionality of young people's vulnerability in terms of social exclusion, 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.

This is why actions, awareness raising campaigns and other initiatives by major European and global stakeholders have also been aimed towards the direction of emphasising the need for an open civic space, e.g. the CoE programme 'Fight Back!: Youth Civil Society in Endangered Democracies',<sup>22</sup> the CIVICUS Youth Working Group etc.<sup>23</sup> At the same time, the UN's 2018 International Youth Day theme was 'Safe Spaces for Youth' with its main aim 'to promote youth engagement and empowerment by exploring the role of safe spaces in contributing to freedom of expression, mutual respect and constructive dialogue' as well as to ensure safe civic spaces that 'enable youth to engage in governance issues'.

While there have been a number of initiatives by the EU, the Council of Europe as well various other key CSO stakeholders to reverse the trend in the closing of the civic space in order to maintain an 'inclusive dialogue' with CSOs in general,<sup>25</sup> very few initiatives, programmes or other activities have been designed to improve the conditions of youth CSOs. At the same time, it has to be noted, the closing of the 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. As has been pointed out by Amnesty International (2017: 37) in its human rights defenders report, youth defenders represent one of the most at-risk groups of human rights defenders as

*It tends to be at the bottom of many hierarchies and face age-based discrimination intersecting with other forms of oppression. As a result, and a general stereotype that young people are troublemakers, idealistic and/or*

*immature, many young HRDs are discredited and silenced. 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.*

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.

## II.4 The relevance of shrinking academic spaces

The higher education sector serves a substantial role in the development, protection, and practice of civic and democratic knowledge, skills, and dispositions among youth. In addition to preparing successive generations of students to take active and beneficial action as engaged professionals and citizens, institutions of higher education (IHE) also engage with other sectors (e.g. government, business, NGOs, primary schools, etc.) to conduct and disseminate research, inform policy-making, and other stewardship functions essential to civil society. Indeed, IHEs and their activities are often invoked as exemplars of democratic principles, which is perhaps why they and their constituents are often targeted for regulation, harassment and aggression by those seeking to undermine expressive and associational freedoms.

For example, a recent report issued by the Scholars at Risk Network's (SAR) Academic Freedom Monitoring Project examined 294 reported attacks on higher education institutions and faculty across 47 countries between September 1, 2017 and August 31, 2018. These range from acts of violence such as suicide attacks to bureaucratic tactics such as travel restrictions and prosecutions of scholars. The report cites 104 instances of detentions, arrests, investigations, and warrants issued against university students and scholars. Stereotypical assumptions might suggest such incidents are mainly a concern in non-European and non-Western contexts, and it is certainly the case that the most violent acts and government aggression have taken place with IHEs in such places as China, Pakistan, Russia, the Middle East, and

Central America. However, the situation of Central European University mentioned earlier, involving Hungary's new law on foreign universities that has resulted in that institution being forced to move its operations to Vienna, is not the only one taking place in EU countries. For the first time ever, a university is forced out of an EU member state. To be precise, Hungary only joined a growing group of countries that shut down independent universities, including Belarus (European Humanities University), Russia (European University at St. Petersburg) and Turkey (multiple universities) (The Guardian, 2018).

Another example is Denmark, where the rules for work permits held by foreign academics have been criticized for being unwieldy and confusing, and have led to aggressive prosecutions against those accused of violating their terms ("Denmark's Foreign Academics Face Prosecution," 2017). One such example involves Professor Jimmy Martinez-Correa, who worked and was prosecuted "teaching illegally" until he was acquitted by the Danish High Court. International and institutional mobility and collaboration are fundamental elements of academic life for students and scholars, as are teaching and researching potentially controversial or provocative issues. However, the imposition of onerous and complicated rules pertaining to visas and funding mechanisms, and limits or bans placed on scholars and/or disciplinary topics (e.g. women's studies) are additional ways in which civic spaces are threatened both within and beyond universities. Such incidents can be visible to the public, and given the role of universities in civic life, these situations can be symbolically threatening to people – perhaps especially youth – even when they are not directly connected to a university.

As SAR's Advocacy Director, Clare Robinson, notes in the press release accompanying the *Free to Think* 2018 report:

*While there have been a number of initiatives by the EU, the Council of Europe as well various other key CSO stakeholders to reverse the trend in the closing of the civic space in order to maintain an 'inclusive dialogue' with CSOs in general*

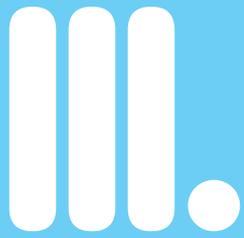
*Healthy universities are open places, where ideas can be exchanged freely. This openness makes them especially vulnerable to the kinds of attacks in the report. And the impacts of these attacks permeate at multiple levels. They not only harm the immediate victims, they can intimidate entire communities, and undermine academic freedom at the national and even global level.*

22 See, <https://jefeu/workplan/fight-back-youth-civil-society-in-endangered-democracies/>

23 See, <https://www.civicus.org/index.php/what-we-do/strengthen/civicus-youth>

24 For a detailed presentation of the International Youth Day background, events, resources together with the Youth Day 2018 toolkit etc., see <https://www.un.org/en/events/youthday/>

25 See, for example, the *EU Country Roadmaps for Engagement with Civil Society*. Available at, [https://concordeurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/roadmap\\_brochure\\_web.pdf?43b376](https://concordeurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/roadmap_brochure_web.pdf?43b376)



# MEASURING SHRINKING CIVIC SPACE

## III.1

### Methodological and data-related challenges

While violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms have been well-documented, the interconnection of widespread anti-democratic tendencies combined with lack of data and research (including comparative and conceptual studies as well as policy reviews and practical surveys) make shrinking of the civic space a particularly salient issue. Initiatives aiming to bring a more sophisticated approach to the discussion over the closing civic space (in particular youth civic space) therefore face two important challenges, i.e.

(i) data-related challenge and

(ii) methodological/conceptual challenge.

On the one hand, as Kreienkamp (2017: 5) emphasised in her article 'Responding to the Global Crackdown on Civil Society', there has been 'limited availability of comprehensive empirical data'. In order to fully comprehend the dynamics of shrinking civic spaces, both data on the etiology (what are the factors contributing to the shrinkage of civic spaces) and the typology of shrinking civic spaces (what forms are part of governments' toolbox to confront CSOs) are required.

On the other hand, the quantification of shrinking civic space is bound to encounter several methodological and conceptual problems (Green, 2015). For example, what criteria are to be used in order to distinguish between 'legitimate' and 'illegitimate' infringements from governments? Are all governments' infringements (including minor and major violations) equally harmful? Furthermore, what is the relationship between the civil society and government (e.g. are they complementary, compensatory, in tension or in outright conflict)? These and other questions are both complex as well as underexplored so as to take these (and many other) challenges seriously enough.

The insufficiency of empirical evidence combined with the inadequacy of 'standard' mechanisms to measure societal progress is particularly salient with young people. As the authors of the *Youth Progress Index* have emphasised,

*There is still a lack of reliable international comparative data on the well-being of young people, and this affects not only young people themselves, but also youth practitioners and others who work in support of young people's development. (p. 15)*

To fully understand and effectively respond to the ways in which these trends specifically affect young people as one of the key groups of citizenry, one must consider:

*...the disparate ways in which youth embrace, reject and transform particular figures of citizenship, or models of personhood that are*

*implicated in citizenship discourses, as they forge connections between various scales and frames of discourse—between the everyday, the playful, and the official.*

*...precisely because the workings of institutional control are never wholly top-down, and individuals and communities often negotiate their place within hegemonic categories, definitions, and values (Isin et al., 2008).*

Additionally, in her 2007 study of urban and minority youth civic identity development, Rubin (2007: 450) explains:

*As youth develop, they create meaning, identity, and a sense of themselves in the world by using a variety of sources, including existing constructions of ethnicity, race, gender, and social class. Yet studies of young people's development of civic identity frequently overlook the meaning youth, and urban youth in particular, make of their daily experiences with civic institutions and their agents (e.g., teachers, police, social workers) amid the cultural practices and structural inequalities that surround them.*

When examining questions related to youth and shrinking civic spaces, it is imperative to also consider variations in perceptions and lived experiences of people from varying social identities and cultures. Social inequality, marginalisation, or privilege meaningfully impact the relative spaciousness or smallness of civic spaces and agency available to youth based on factors such as race, ethnicity, national origin, visa status, religion, able-bodiedness, socioeconomic status, among others.

## III.2 Applied methodology in this study

In an attempt to at least partially address the issues related to research endeavours connected to shrinking civic spaces, with a special focus on youth in particular, we adopted and revised a Transparency and Accountability Initiative's framework on improving the measurement of civic space (see Malena, 2015). This Open Society Foundation initiative's framework, aimed to support and advocate for protection and enablement of civic space, seeks to measure civic space according to a

core set of principles, building on a traditional triad of civic space (*freedom of expression, freedom of association and freedom of peaceful assembly*), and at the same time to allow for detailed and country-specific narratives (Malena, 2015: 7). In line with this framework, we examined the following five dimensions of civic spaces:

- 1 Freedoms of information and expression**
- 2 Rights of assembly and association**
- 3 Citizen participation**
- 4 Non-discrimination and inclusion**
- 5 Human rights and the rule of law**

In the context of the first dimension, we examined the ability to access information (including financial information) from government sources; the ability for free expression in public without fear of retribution; and the ability to freely use the internet (to both access information and communicate). For the second dimension, we looked at the ability to organise/participate in public assemblies or demonstrations without fear of retribution; the ability to function independently and free of government interference; the support of public authorities; the imposition of restrictions by public authorities; the barriers to access foreign funding (e.g. EU, funding from other international organisations, foundations); and the degree of being assessed by "market" indicators (e.g. the amount of private funds acquired; basic quantitative indicators etc.). In the context of citizen participation dimension (third dimension), we examined the ability to freely engage in advocacy activities without fear of retribution; the ability to participate in processes of deliberation and decision-making on issues that are important (for example, through public consultations, joint committees, processes of participatory planning or policy-making, etc.); the ability to influence the outcome of processes of political deliberation and decision-making; the level of control of public authorities over youth organisations; the frequency of invitations by public authorities to participate in formulation of solutions addressing the problems in the relevant field of activity; the level of willingness of public authorities to collaborate with youth organisations; and the level of willingness of public authorities to acknowledge the opinion of youth organisations. For the fourth dimension (non-

discrimination and inclusion), we examined the extent to which young people have equal access to civic space; the extent to which women have equal access to civic space; the extent to which members of economically disadvantaged social groups have equal access to civic space; and the extent to which ethnic/sexual/religious/cultural minorities have equal access to civic space. The final dimension (human rights and the rule of law) was examined by the extent to which human rights are respected in a country, the extent to which the country is free from political pressures and the extent to which there is an effective rule of law, particularly when having in mind young people. For a more detailed description of the variables see the research instrument in the appendix.

In our study, we oriented ourselves on key agents securing youth civic spaces – youth organisations. As these organisations are set up to serve young people and have young people in charge of their organisational structure, our primary focus was put on them as they importantly advocate for and represent youth interest as well as deliver services most appropriately designed to address the needs of youth. In addition to the civic and political socialisational roles of these organisations, these organisations serve as most genuine laboratories of democracy and democratic innovation revealing new repertoires of political action and closest to different political imaginary and citizenship of youth. That being said, these organisations also require most care and support due to their structural idiosyncrasies marked by the youth sector (i.e., high level of staff turnover, low level of professionalisation, financial instability etc.). As such, these organisations serve as the best possible detection mechanism for identification of the way youth civic space is shrinking.

In our purposive sampling procedure, we mapped the most politically and socially relevant youth organisations, regardless of their legal form, by examining the membership of key European and national youth umbrella organisations and complementing this list with identified relevant youth organisations from the European Commission's Youth Wiki tool. With this procedure we identified 1.105 relevant youth organisations across Europe. These organisations were contacted through their official e-mails, with a clear instruction about the person or group of persons who should fill out the survey, and invited to complete a web-based survey questionnaire developed on the basis of an operationalised framework for detecting shrinking

of civic spaces. We sent out four rounds of invitations between 28 September and 30 October 2018 and received 322 valid responses. The survey was open between 28 September and 28 December 2018. Out of responding youth organisations 53 per cent declared a more service providing function while 47 per cent of them perceived themselves to be more expressive organisations advocating for the interests of youth.



*When examining questions related to youth and shrinking civic spaces, it is imperative to also consider variations in perceptions and lived experiences of people from varying social identities and cultures*

# IV.

## EVIDENCE OF THE SHRINKING YOUTH CIVIC SPACE: STUDY OF THE POSITION OF YOUTH ORGANISATIONS

The empirical results of the study are structured in line with the adopted analytical framework, according to five dimensions of a civic space (freedoms of information and expression, rights of assembly and association, citizen participation, non-discrimination and inclusion, human rights and the rule of law). We observed these dimensions for three broad groups of European countries, according to their status of membership in the European union, European Economic Area or

participation in the Single market (Switzerland) and their period of entrance. This resulted in three more or less equally distributed groups of countries – EU15 and EEA (including Switzerland); EU 13 (countries entering the European Union with 2004 enlargement or later) and the Rest of Europe (European countries outside EU, EEA or Single market).

## IV.1

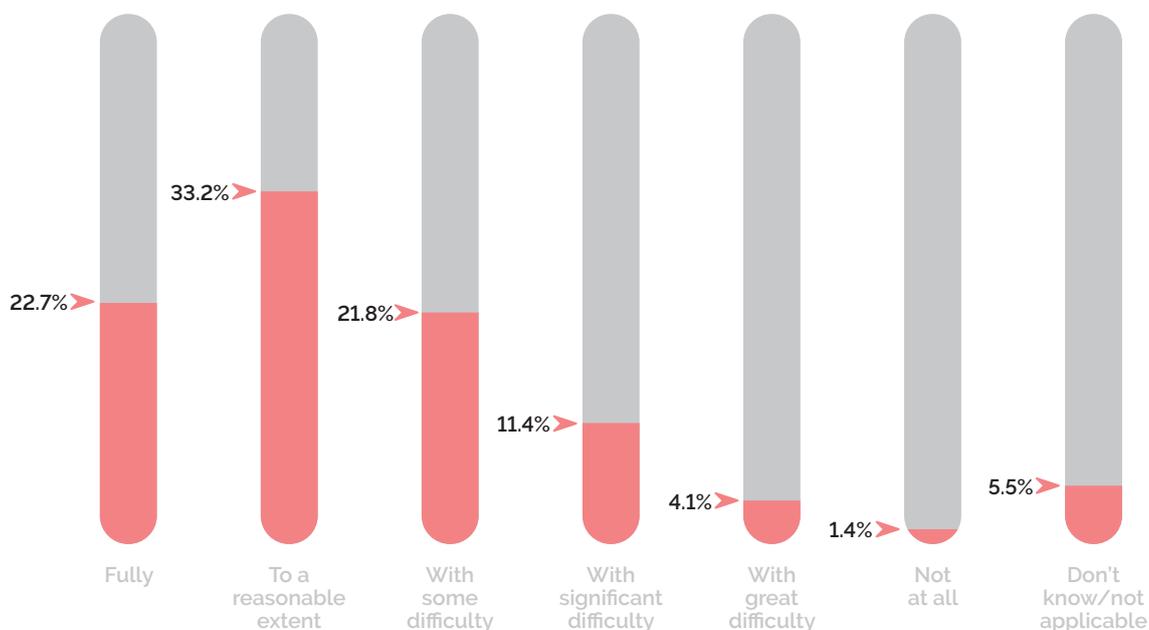
### Freedom of information and expression

Under the freedom of information and expression dimension, we first examined the ability of organisations to access the information they are trying to obtain from governmental sources, including financial information about e.g., government spending, distribution of state budget etc. We may observe that only 22.7 per cent of surveyed organisations report they were fully able to obtain these information. On the other hand, 38.7 per cent of youth organisations report they obtained these information with some difficulty, with significant difficulty, with great difficulty or not at all. It is important to note that more than 15 per

cent of organisations reported significant difficulties or more when trying to obtain information which is vital for their ability to perform their role in the sector. When looking at the regional differences, we have to stress that there are important differences between regions in the access to information. For example, almost a third of organisations in EU15 and EEA countries managed to access information without any difficulties while 18 per cent of the EU13 and only 10.9 per cent of organisations from the rest of Europe managed to do so. On the contrary, 32.7 per cent of organisations from the rest of Europe and 23 per cent of organisations from EU13 countries experienced significant difficulties in their efforts to access public information while only 7.1 per cent of their EU15 and EEA area organisations experiences that.

**Table 1:** To what extent are you able to access the information you seek (including financial information) from government sources?

		Fully	To a reasonable extent	With some difficulty	With significant difficulty	With great difficulty	Not at all	Don't know/not applicable	Total
Region in Europe	EU15 and EEA	30.1%	41.6%	17.7%	3.5%	18%	18%	3.5%	100.0%
	EU13	18.0%	27.9%	26.2%	19.7%	3.3%		4.9%	100.0%
	Rest of Europe	10.9%	19.6%	26.1%	19.6%	10.9%	2.2%	10.9%	100.0%
<b>Total</b>		<b>22.7%</b>	<b>33.2%</b>	<b>21.8%</b>	<b>11.4%</b>	<b>4.1%</b>	<b>1.4%</b>	<b>5.5%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

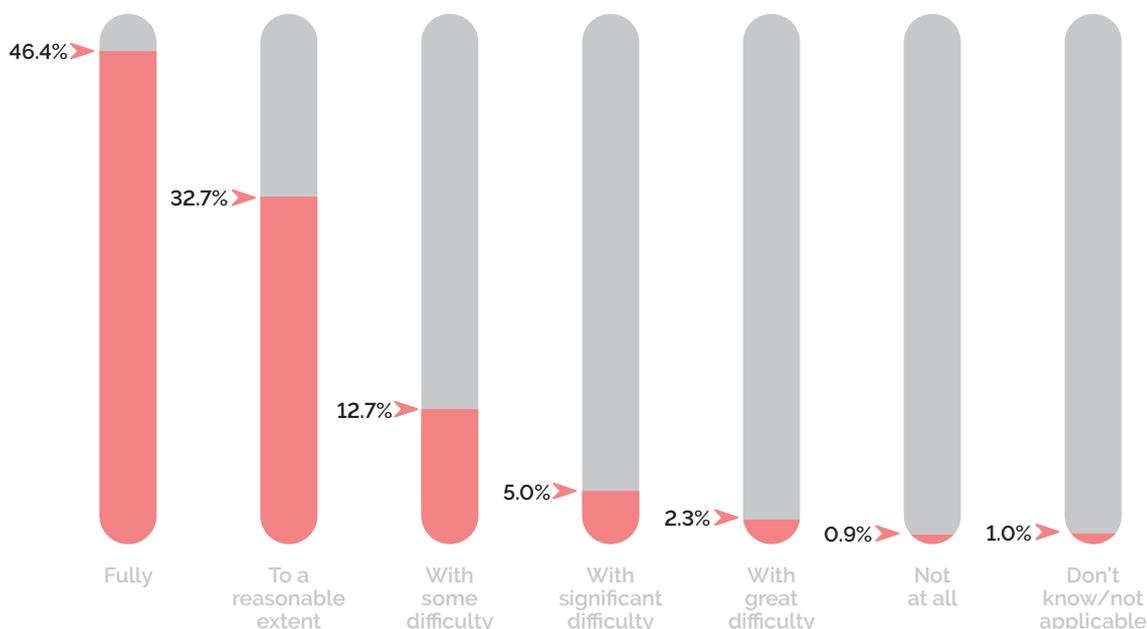


Another important aspect of the freedom of information and expression is the ability to freely express yourself in public without fear of retribution. Representatives of youth organisations across Europe reported that 46.4 per cent of organisations are able to fully express themselves in public without any fear of retribution. However, one fifth of youth organisations across Europe (20.9 per cent) face difficulties in expressing themselves in public and fear retribution as a response to their public expression. There are significant differences between countries, though. 60.7 per cent of organisations in EU15 and EEA countries report full ability to freely express themselves in public

without any fear of retribution, while this is true only for 26.1 per cent of organisations from the non-EU or EEA member states, with EU13 countries being in between the two extremes with 35.5 per cent. Likewise, 7.2 per cent of organisations from EU15 and EEA countries experience some difficulties in their public expression and fear retribution, while this is true for 45.6 per cent of youth organisations from the non-EU countries and 27.4 per cent from EU13 countries. Particularly disturbing is the information that 4.3 per cent of youth organisations from non-EU countries cannot publicly express themselves without consequent retribution.

**Table 2:** To what extent are you able to freely express yourself in public without fear of retribution?

		Fully	To a reasonable extent	With some difficulty	With significant difficulty	With great difficulty	Not at all	Don't know/not applicable	Total
Region in Europe	EU15 and EEA	60.7%	32.1%	5.4%	0.9%	0.9%			100.0%
	EU13	35.5%	37.1%	17.7%	8.1%	16%			100.0%
	Rest of Europe	26.1%	28.3%	23.9%	10.9%	6.5%	4.3%		100.0%
<b>Total</b>		<b>46.4%</b>	<b>32.7%</b>	<b>12.7%</b>	<b>5.0%</b>	<b>2.3%</b>	<b>0.9%</b>	<b>1.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>



The third aspect of the freedom of information and expression dimension is the ability to freely use the internet for access to information as well as communication. Compared to the access to information from government sources and ability to publicly express yourself without any fear of retribution, this dimension appears to be less

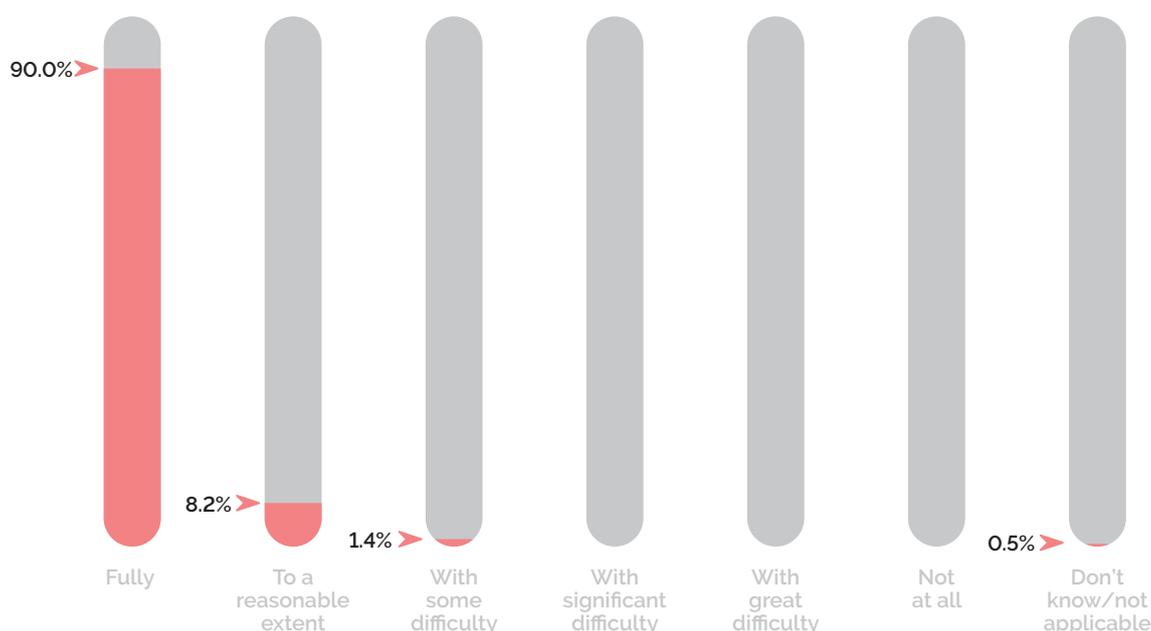
worrying, partly also because of the limited role of the State in regulation and control of the internet. Thus, 90 per cent of youth organisations across Europe report ability to fully use the internet to both access information and communicate free of any obstacles. Furthermore, less than two per cent of organisations report some difficulties in their ability to freely use

the internet. In addition, this aspect of the freedom of information and expression dimension reflects virtually identical results regardless of the region youth organisations operate in. To be precise, 97.3

per cent of organisations in EU15 and EEA countries report full or reasonable ability to freely use the internet, while for EU13 and non-EU countries this percentage is 100 per cent and 97.9 per cent.

**Table 3:** To what extent are you able to freely use the internet (to both access information and communicate)?

		Fully	To a reasonable extent	With some difficulty	With significant difficulty	With great difficulty	Not at all	Don't know/not applicable	Total
Region in Europe	EU15 and EEA	92.0%	5.3%	18%				0.9%	100.0%
	EU13	88.5%	11.5%						100.0%
	Rest of Europe	87.0%	10.9%	2.2%					100.0%
<b>Total</b>		<b>90.0%</b>	<b>8.2%</b>	<b>1.4%</b>				<b>0.5%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>



Overall, representatives of youth organisations revealed that when it comes to the freedom of information and expression, the least problematic appears to be the internet and its free use for access to information and communication. Contrary to this, as it aligns more with their powers, countries appear to be importantly more restrictive in the amount of information they share with their citizens and civil society organisations. To be precise, only about one fifth of organisations were fully able to obtain information from government sources. This is particularly challenging in non-EU countries, where more than one third of organisations experience difficulties in their efforts to access public information. That being said, the most distressing results reveal obstacles to the ability to public expression as around one tenth of

youth organisations from EU13 countries and one fifth of non-EU countries expressed significant fear of retribution if they decide to publicly speak out. Such conditions create a culture of fear and importantly shrink public space available to youth.

## IV.2 Rights of assembly and association

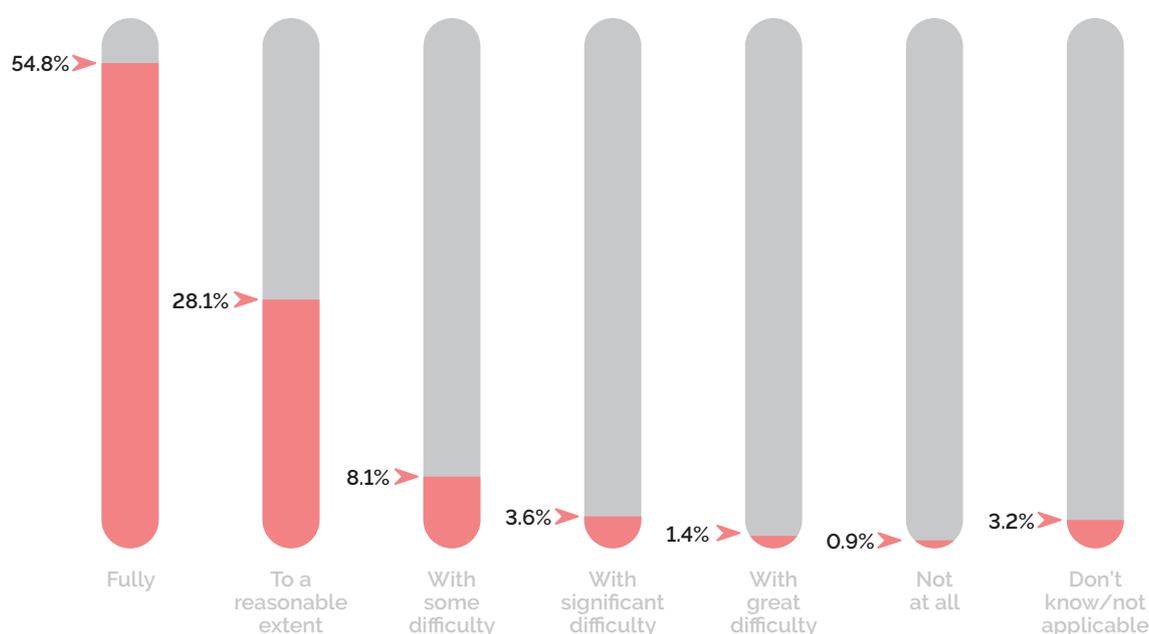
The second dimension of our shrinking youth civic space framework we examined is rights of assembly and association. This dimension explored reduction of civic spaces from the angles of ability to organise and participate in public assemblies and demonstrations, ability to function independently and the extent of evaluation by market indicators.

When it comes to the ability to organise/participate in public assemblies or demonstrations without fear of retribution, the representatives of youth organisations reveal that 54.8 per cent of organisations across Europe are able to organise or participate in public assemblies without such fear. On the other hand, 14 per cent of youth organisations do experience significant difficulties in organising or participating in public assemblies or demonstrations that would not lead to retribution. There are significant differences between countries. 92 per cent of youth organisations in EU15 and EEA

countries are fully or to a reasonable extent able to organise or participate in public assembly or demonstration without fearing retribution, while this percentage is much lower for non-EU countries at 60.1 per cent and EU13 countries with 82.2 per cent. In line with these results, more than one third (36.9 per cent) of organisations from non-EU countries reported some, significant, great difficulties or complete inability to organise such assemblies or demonstrations without retribution while for the EU13 countries this share is at about one tenth and for EU15 and EEA at about one twentieth.

**Table 4:** To what extent are you able to organise/participate in public assemblies or demonstrations without fear of retribution?

Region in Europe		Fully	To a reasonable extent	With some difficulty	With significant difficulty	With great difficulty	Not at all	Don't know/not applicable	Total
EU15 and EEA		64.6%	27.4%	3.5%	1.8%			2.7%	100.0%
EU13		51.6%	30.6%	8.1%	3.2%	1.6%		4.8%	100.0%
Rest of Europe		34.8%	26.1%	19.6%	8.7%	4.3%	4.3%	2.2%	100.0%
<b>Total</b>		<b>54.8%</b>	<b>28.1%</b>	<b>8.1%</b>	<b>3.6%</b>	<b>1.4%</b>	<b>0.9%</b>	<b>3.2%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>



The second aspect of the rights of assembly and association dimension is the ability to function independently and free from government interference. We may observe more or less a mirror image of the results related to organisation and participation in public assemblies and demonstrations as 81.5 per cent of youth organisations across Europe are able to fully or to a

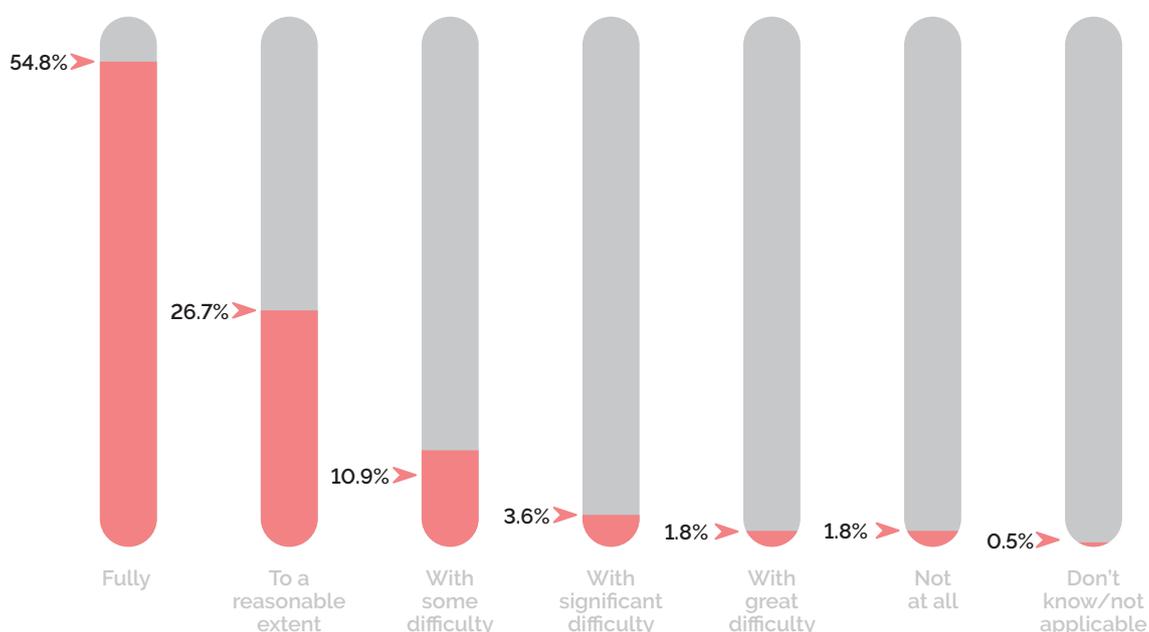
reasonable extent function independently and free from government interference. On the other hand, 7.2 per cent of organisations experience significant or great difficulties or are even not able at all to function independently and without government interference. Again, the reported situation in EU15 and EEA countries is better than for the other two groups as around one tenth of organisations

experience some difficulties while the share for EU13 is one fifth and about one quarter for non-EU countries. Furthermore, we should stress that 13 per cent of organisations in non-EU countries (and

1.6 per cent in EU13) face great difficulties or are completely unable to function independently and free from government interference.

**Table 5:** To what extent is your organisation able to function independently and free from government interference?

		Fully	To a reasonable extent	With some difficulty	With significant difficulty	With great difficulty	Not at all	Don't know/not applicable	Total
Region in Europe	EU15 and EEA	65.5%	22.1%	8.0%	3.5%	0.9%			100.0%
	EU13	45.2%	30.6%	16.1%	4.8%		1.6%	1.6%	100.0%
	Rest of Europe	41.3%	32.6%	10.9%	2.2%	6.5%	6.5%		100.0%
<b>Total</b>		<b>54.8%</b>	<b>26.7%</b>	<b>10.9%</b>	<b>3.6%</b>	<b>1.8%</b>	<b>1.8%</b>	<b>0.5%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

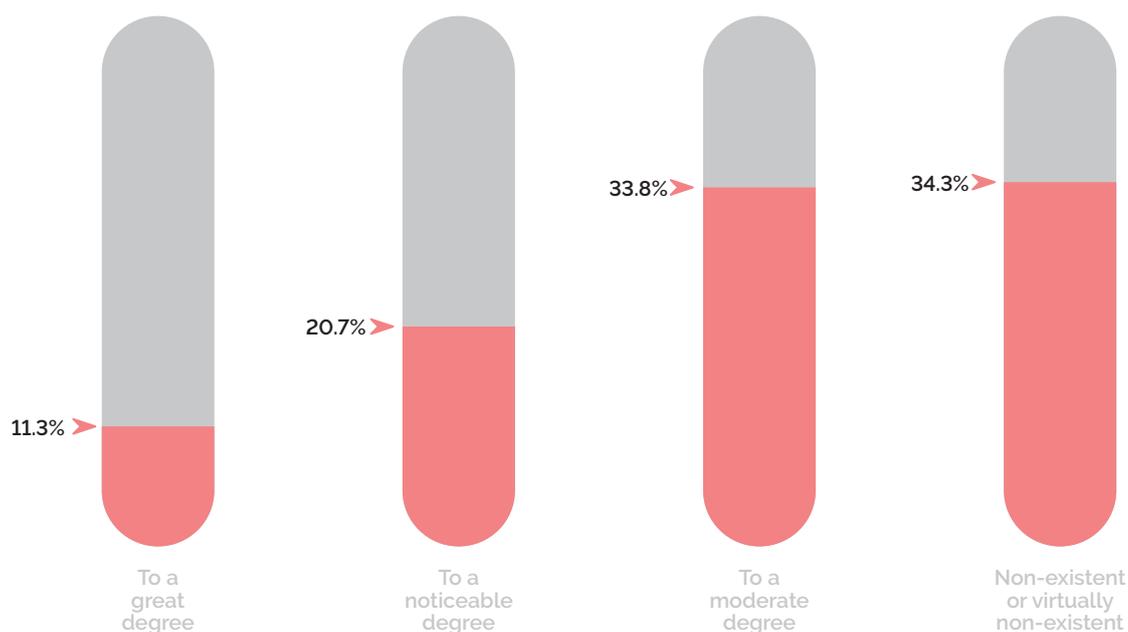


As was mentioned in the conceptual part of this report, emerging effectiveness and efficiency demands conflated with demanding administrative reporting exercises mark the neoliberal revolution and its technocratic agenda youth and other civil society organisations are facing. Marked by excessive measurement of effectiveness and efficiency through growth indicators, this process has serious consequences for the way these organisations operate, for their overall civic potential and for the way they are seen by other stakeholders. Having that in mind, representatives of surveyed youth organisations report that when competing for public funding or being evaluated for activities performed, they do face requirements to report according to some market indicators (e.g. diversified financial profile, donor diversity, amount

of acquired private funds, nation-wide impact measured by quantitative indicators) with 11.3 per cent of organisations perceiving they face these requirements to a great degree and another fifth of them (20.7 per cent) to a noticeable degree. About one fifth of organisations report they do not or virtually do not face such requirements. This image is virtually the same for all examined groups of countries (EU15 and EEA, EU13, non-EU) as around one third of organisations in general are greatly or noticeably assessed by market indicators. As a result, we may stress that about two thirds of youth organisations across Europe feel the consequences of this neoliberal technocratic agenda, with one fifth of them being noticeably and one tenth of them greatly affected by it.

**Table 6:** When competing for public funding or being evaluated for activities performed, to what degree are youth organisations assessed by "market" indicators (e.g. the amount of private funds acquired; basic quantitative indicators etc.)?

		To a great degree	To a noticeable degree	To a moderate degree	Non-existent or virtually non-existent	Total
Region in Europe	EU15 and EEA	9.8%	21.4%	37.5%	31.3%	100.0%
	EU13	14.3%	14.3%	35.7%	35.7%	100.0%
	Rest of Europe	11.1%	26.7%	22.2%	40.0%	100.0%
<b>Total</b>		<b>11.3%</b>	<b>20.7%</b>	<b>33.8%</b>	<b>34.3%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>



In terms of providing space for assembly and association (second dimension), youth organisations in Europe are limited in their function which affects their performance. To a large degree they are assessed by market indicators when reporting about activities they performed or when competing for public funds, which instrumentalises their roles as well as affects their performance, particularly in the context of limited professionalisation of human resources. Thus affected, they also experience difficulties in their ability to function independently or without government interference, particularly in the non-EU countries. Furthermore, in those countries a noticeable number of organisations (13 per cent) are unable to function independently and free from government interference, which paints a disturbing image of the state of (youth) civil society in those areas. Being market assessed and limited in their ability to function free from government interference, has consequences to their capacity

to organise or participate in public assemblies or demonstrations as 14 per cent overall and more than one third of organisations from non-EU countries reported some, significant, great difficulties or complete inability to organise such assemblies or demonstrations without retribution. As a result, we may conclude that rights of assembly and association are not sufficiently safeguarded, which additionally reduced civic space offered to young Europeans.

### IV.3 Citizen participation

The third dimension – citizen participation – examines to what degree individuals and organisations representing them are allowed to contribute to and influence public policy processes. To be precise, the non-electoral component of citizen participation, of being able to participate in

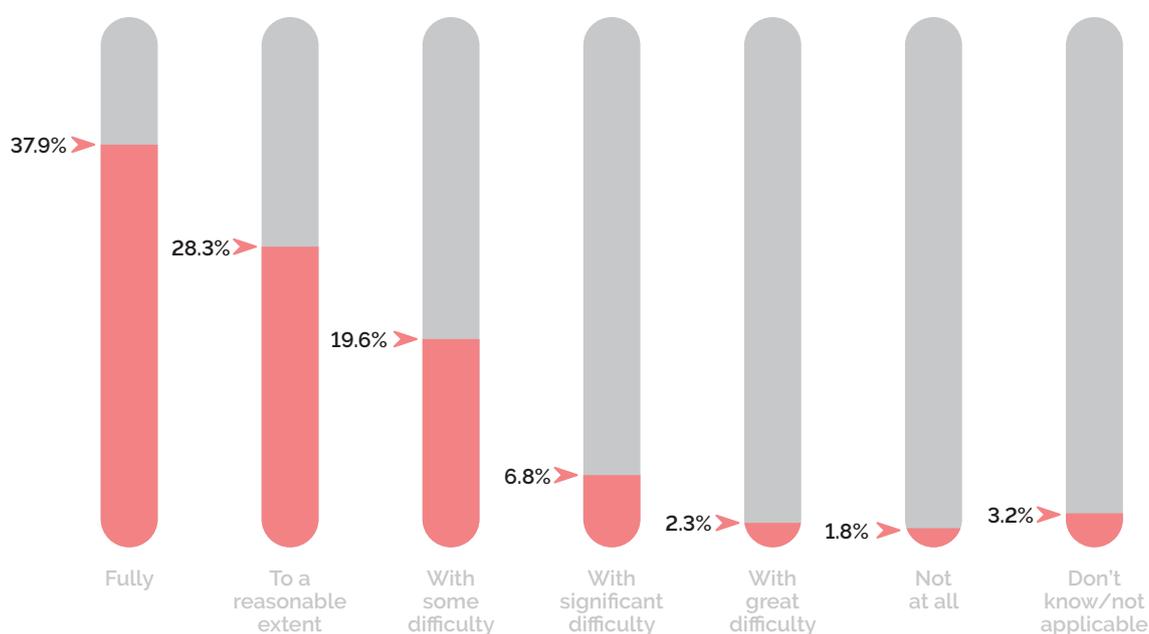
and influence the policy-making processes reveals the way governments facilitate participation of citizens and other actors (e.g. youth organisations) in the processes of public deliberation and decision-making (Malena, 2015: 30). In addition to invited participation, which can also be instrumentalised and abused, individuals and organisations also seek to influence public policies through independent advocacies, lobbying and various watchdog activities (ibid.). The role of government is thus also to allow these activities and take them into account when designing policies as this builds legitimacy, fosters ownership of implemented policies and elevates implementation capacity (see Deželan, 2015; 2018).

In terms of citizen participation, we initially examined to what extent are organisations and their representatives individually able to participate in processes of deliberation and decision-making on issues important to the surveyed youth organisations. Results reveal that in general, more than a third of organisations and

their representatives are able to participate in the policy processes relevant to them, with about another third of them being able to participate to a reasonable extent. That being said, it is important to acknowledge that 30.5 per cent 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. Taking into account that some of the most excluded youth subgroups are represented or provided services by only a few organisations, this sort of exclusion may additionally contribute to exclusion of those groups from the policy processes and basically result in illegitimate polity and policies. EU15 and EEA and EU13 countries demonstrate higher levels of full inclusion of organisations into policy processes than non-EU countries since only one fifth compared to more than two fifths of youth organisations report full inclusion. On the other hand, all three groups of countries still demonstrate about a third of youth organisations facing difficulties in their participation.

**Table 7:** To what extent are you able to participate in processes of deliberation and decision-making on issues that are important to you?

		Fully	To a reasonable extent	With some difficulty	With significant difficulty	With great difficulty	Not at all	Don't know/not applicable	Total
Region in Europe	EU15 and EEA	42.3%	29.7%	17.1%	4.5%	1.8%	0.9%	3.6%	100.0%
	EU13	43.5%	21.0%	24.2%	6.5%	3.2%		1.6%	100.0%
	Rest of Europe	19.6%	34.8%	19.6%	13.0%	2.2%	6.5%	4.3%	100.0%
<b>Total</b>		<b>37.9%</b>	<b>28.3%</b>	<b>19.6%</b>	<b>6.8%</b>	<b>2.3%</b>	<b>1.8%</b>	<b>3.2%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

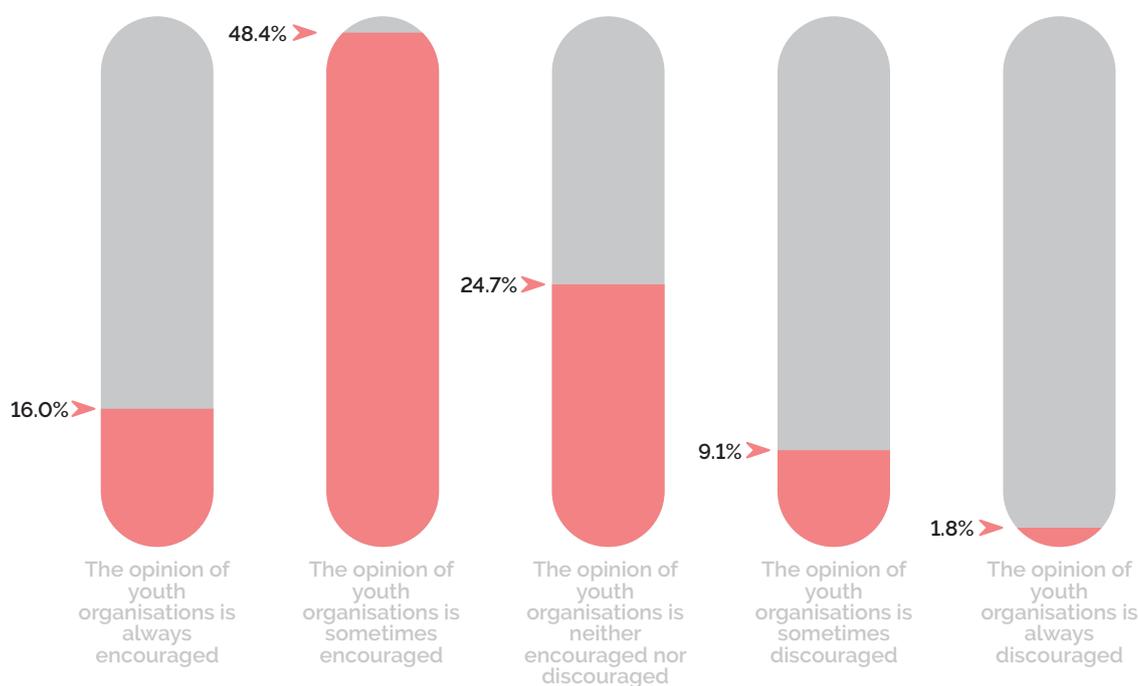


When being asked to describe collaboration with public authorities, whether their opinion is encouraged or discouraged, youth organisations and their representatives revealed that 16 per cent of them are always encouraged to provide opinion. Almost a half of them are sometimes encouraged, which already indicates that public authorities are selectively inviting organisations to participate in the policy processes as well as limiting the number of issues on which they seek opinion from youth organisations. It is important to stress that there are

no significant differences between different groups of states when it comes to supporting organisational participation apart from the fact that EU13 countries reveal twice as higher rate of discouragement of organisational participation than EU15 and EEA as well as non-EU countries (20 per cent compared to less than 10 per cent in both other cases). This not only indicates legitimacy hazards but rather reveals authoritarian patterns where alternative opinion is rather prevented than insincerely sought after.

**Table 8:** How would you describe the collaboration of youth organisations with public authorities? (seeking opinion)

		The opinion of youth organisations is always encouraged	The opinion of youth organisations is sometimes encouraged	The opinion of youth organisations is neither encouraged nor discouraged	The opinion of youth organisations is sometimes discouraged	The opinion of youth organisations is always discouraged	Total
Region in Europe	EU15 and EEA	16.8%	55.8%	20.4%	6.2%	0.9%	100.0%
	EU13	10.0%	43.3%	26.7%	16.7%	3.3%	100.0%
	Rest of Europe	21.7%	37.0%	32.6%	6.5%	2.2%	100.0%
<b>Total</b>		<b>16.0%</b>	<b>48.4%</b>	<b>24.7%</b>	<b>9.1%</b>	<b>1.8%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

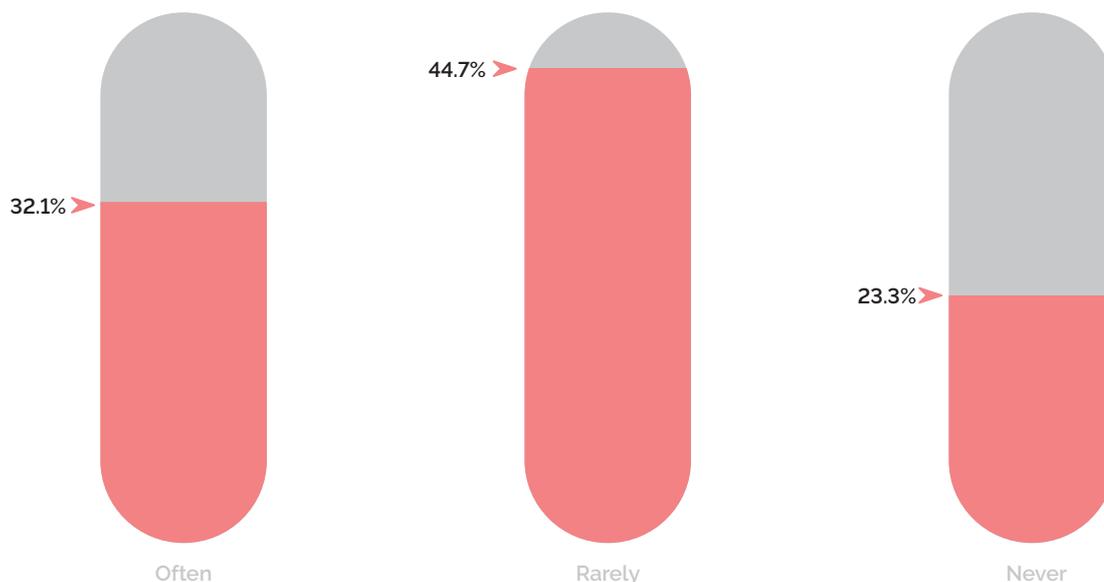


In addition to examining the general extent of facilitation of organisational participation by public authorities, we also mapped the differences in the promotion of participation by public authorities at different levels (Tables 9-11). When it comes to public authorities at local level – the closest to the issues on the ground and also organisations trying to address them – we can observe that about a third of organisations are often invited to participate in the formulation of solutions addressing the problems relevant for their field of activity. About a half of them are rarely invited and about one fifth never, which indicates that about

two thirds of all organisations across Europe are ill-consulted when it comes to issues they know best. Particularly problematic are EU13 countries, where almost a third of organisations are never invited to participate. This reveals a serious public policy hazard as one function of participation – provision of vital information about the problem and ways of solving it (in addition to creating legitimacy, facilitating control of the government, creating ownership, etc.) – is significantly weakened which increases chances of bad policy design or/and malfunctioning implementation.

**Table 9:** How often are you invited by local authorities to participate in formulation of solutions addressing the problems relevant for your field of activity (consultations, etc.)?

Region in Europe		Often	Rarely	Never	Total
Region in Europe	EU15 and EEA	34.2%	45.0%	20.7%	100.0%
	EU13	31.7%	40.0%	28.3%	100.0%
	Rest of Europe	27.3%	50.0%	22.7%	100.0%
<b>Total</b>		<b>32.1%</b>	<b>44.7%</b>	<b>23.3%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

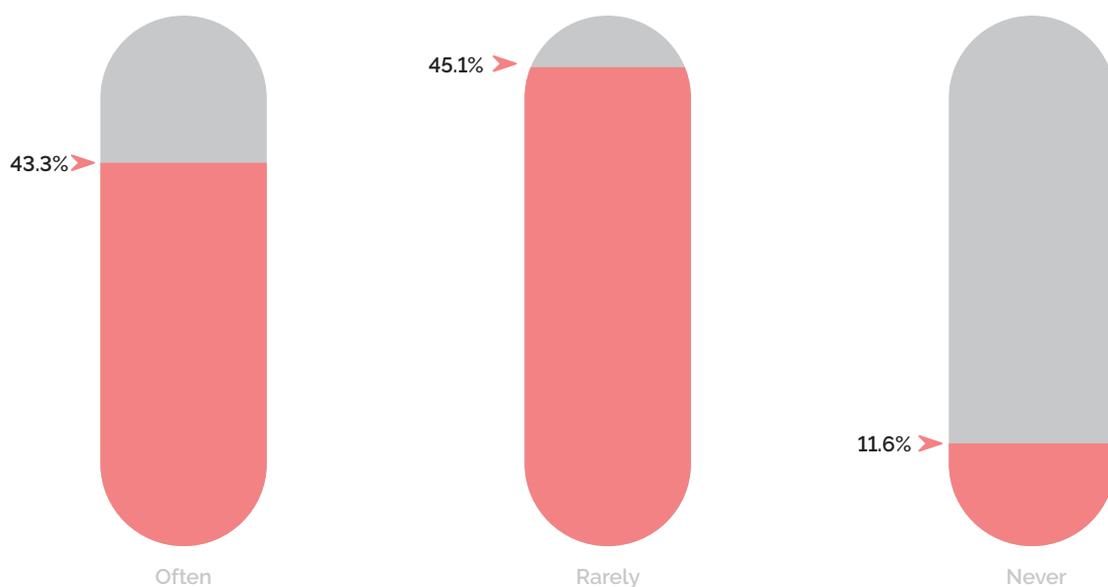


Results for the national level authorities, on the other hand, reveal a bit better results, with particularly lower share of organisations that are never invited to participate in formulation of solutions addressing the problems relevant to their field of activity. Nevertheless, 8 per cent of organisations in EU15 and EEA countries and twice as much in EU13 countries and non-EU countries still reveal that they are never invited to participate in those

processes. At the same time, more organisations are reporting often invitations by national authorities to participate, with non-EU countries topping the three groups with almost a half of organisations. Interestingly, EU13 countries again appear to be the least performing group of countries with the lowest rate of organisations that are often invited and the highest rate of rarely or never invited.

**Table 10:** How often are you invited by national authorities to participate in formulation of solutions addressing the problems relevant for your field of activity (consultations, etc.)?

		Often	Rarely	Never	Total
Region in Europe	EU15 and EEA	44.6%	47.3%	8.0%	100.0%
	EU13	37.9%	46.6%	15.5%	100.0%
	Rest of Europe	46.7%	37.8%	15.6%	100.0%
<b>Total</b>		<b>43.3%</b>	<b>45.1%</b>	<b>11.6%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

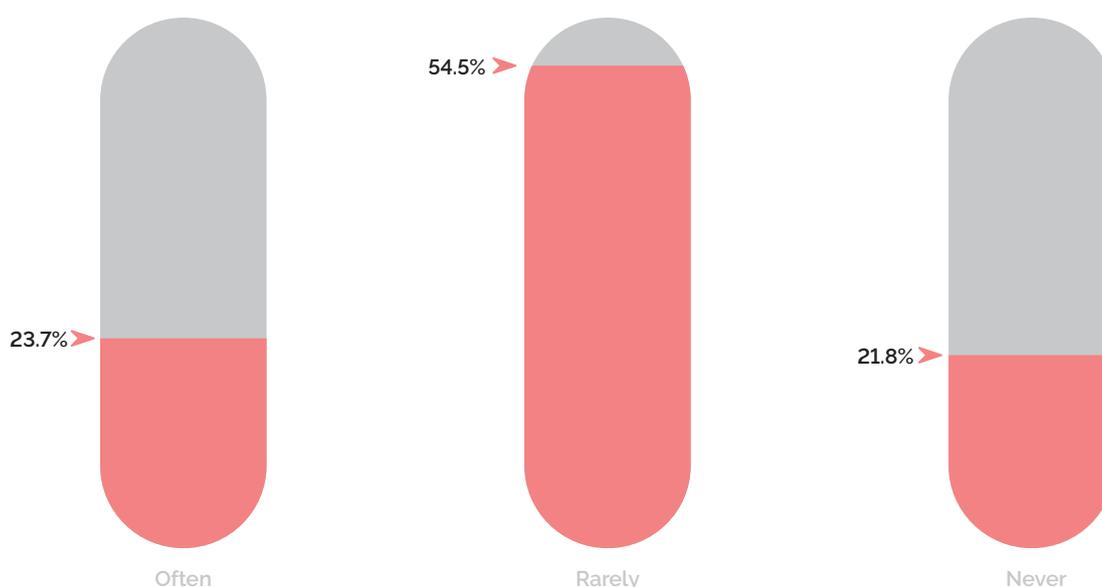


Despite the fact that European institutions and international organisations are the most distant structures to youth organisations operating in their local and national environments, significant amount of organisations –also because of the EU programmes, particularly Erasmus +, which present a lifeline to many of those organisations – are still included in the policy processes above the national level and report invitations to participate

in these policy processes. About one quarter of organisations are often invited, with another good half of youth organisations that are rarely invited, which is only a bit worse compared to the invitation rates for public authorities at the local level. To be precise, particularly organisations from the EU13 countries reveal that European institutions and international organisations prove to be more inclusive to them than their local authorities.

**Table 11:** How often are you invited by European institutions and international organisations to participate in formulation of solutions addressing the problems relevant for your field of activity (consultations, etc.)?

		Often	Rarely	Never	Total
Region in Europe	EU15 and EEA	22.7%	53.6%	23.6%	100.0%
	EU13	27.6%	56.9%	15.5%	100.0%
	Rest of Europe	20.9%	53.5%	25.6%	100.0%
<b>Total</b>		<b>23.7%</b>	<b>54.5%</b>	<b>21.8%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>



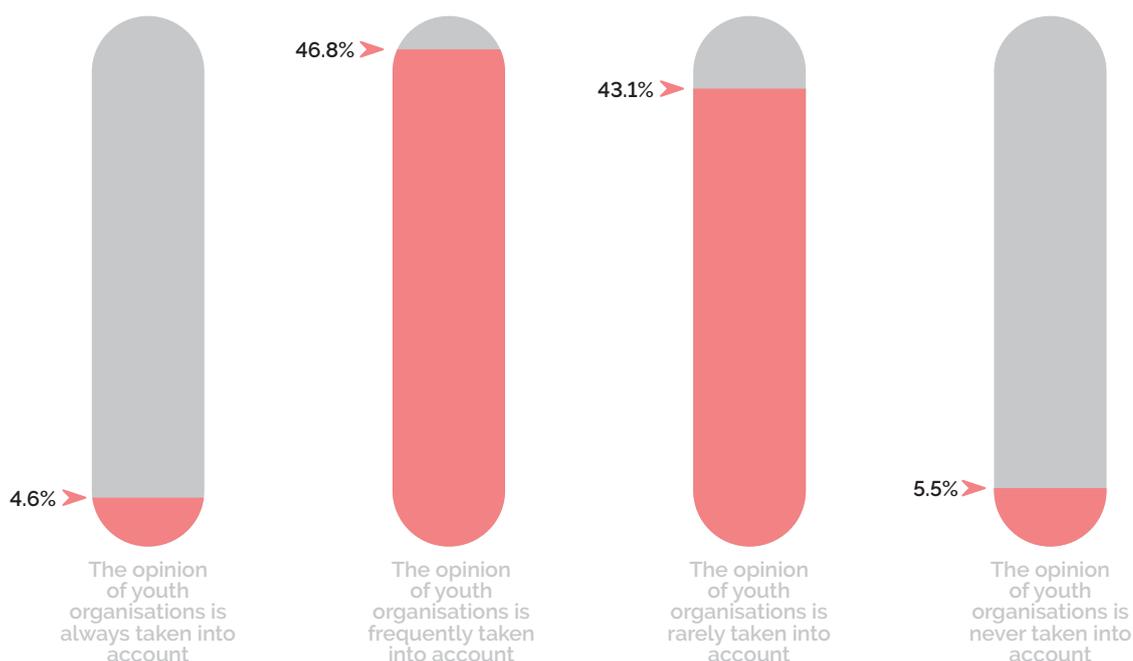
Contrary to expectations, we thus surprisingly learn that local authorities despite their structural advantages are not the level closest to youth organisations. Also due to intense international interaction allowing for policy dissemination and policy transfer, national authorities prove to be the most open to participation of youth organisations in the policy processes. Despite the fact that a large portion of surveyed organisations are locally oriented, we have to acknowledge surprisingly high levels of inclusion in the processes of European institutions and international organisations.

The other side of the participation coin is the degree to which participation actually makes a difference. If invitation from public authorities to youth organisations to participate is insincere and does not result in the actual impact on the final

outcomes of the policy process, then this may have even worse consequences than prevention of this sort of participation in institutional politics as organisations fail to fulfil their function and may lose legitimacy in the eyes of those whom they represent. Results from the survey reveal that the rates in which participation was meaningful are only slightly worse than rates for invitation to participate. To be precise, it is true that only around 5 per cent of organisations report that their opinion is always taken into account, however, almost a half of them say that their opinion is frequently taken into account. At the same time, the percentage of the organisations whose opinion is rarely or never acknowledged is at 43 per cent for the EU15 and EEA countries, 52.2 per cent for the non-EU countries and 58.3 per cent for EU13 countries, which is still a recipe for bad policies and illegitimate polity.

**Table 12:** How would you describe the collaboration of youth organisations with public authorities?  
(willingness to acknowledge opinion)

Region in Europe		The opinion of youth organisations is always taken into account	The opinion of youth organisations is frequently taken into account	The opinion of youth organisations is rarely taken into account	The opinion of youth organisations is never taken into account	Total
Region in Europe	EU15 and EEA	3.6%	54.5%	37.5%	4.5%	100.0%
	EU13	5.0%	36.7%	48.3%	10.0%	100.0%
	Rest of Europe	6.5%	41.3%	50.0%	2.2%	100.0%
<b>Total</b>		<b>4.6%</b>	<b>46.8%</b>	<b>43.1%</b>	<b>5.5%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

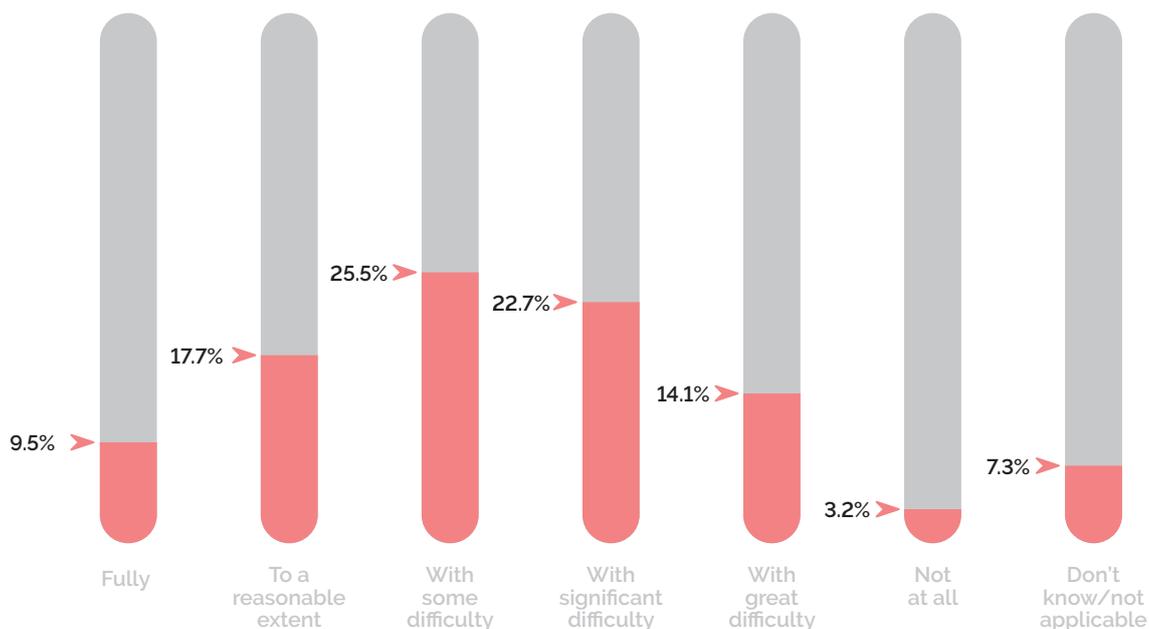


At a closer look at the perception of influence on the outcomes of policy processes, youth organisations have revealed that participating organisations nevertheless do influence the outcomes of policy processes, thus making participation meaningful and acknowledged opinion relevant. About one tenth of organisations report full influence on the outcomes of the processes of political deliberation and decision-making and with about one fifth of organisations reporting reasonable influence on those processes. On the other hand, about two

fifths of organisations report significant difficulties to influence or no influence at all on the outcomes of policy processes. This indicates that a large chunk of youth organisations have little influence or perceive to have little influence on policies affecting them and the individuals they represent the most. Such conditions of low political efficacy may lead to serious dissatisfaction with policy making and create cynicism and/or alienation from these processes.

**Table 13:** To what extent are you able to influence the outcome of processes of political deliberation and decision-making?

		Fully	To a reasonable extent	With some difficulty	With significant difficulty	With great difficulty	Not at all	Don't know/not applicable	Total
Region in Europe	EU15 and EEA	10.7%	17.0%	29.5%	25.9%	10.7%	0.9%	5.4%	100.0%
	EU13	11.3%	19.4%	17.7%	21.0%	19.4%	1.6%	9.7%	100.0%
	Rest of Europe	4.3%	17.4%	26.1%	17.4%	15.2%	10.9%	8.7%	100.0%
<b>Total</b>		<b>9.5%</b>	<b>17.7%</b>	<b>25.5%</b>	<b>22.7%</b>	<b>14.1%</b>	<b>3.2%</b>	<b>7.3%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

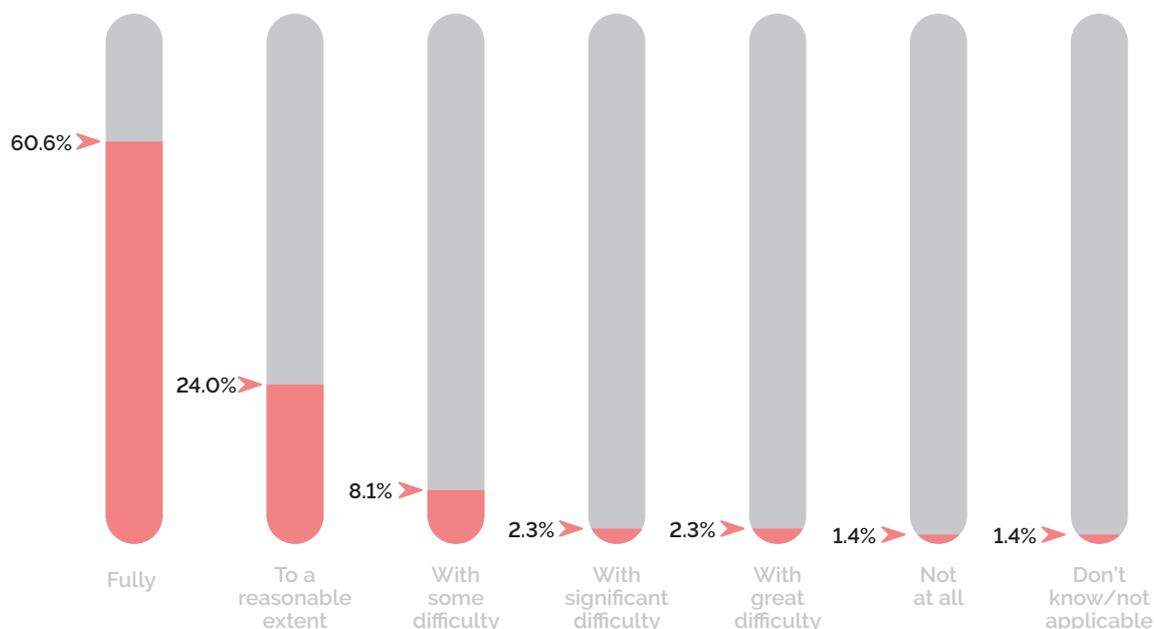


As mentioned earlier, advocacy activities present an area of activities of youth organisations which is particularly important for representation of youth's interest, particularly when invited participation or participation in invited spaces is insincere, instrumentalised and tokenistic. Youth organisations report they are able to freely engage in advocacy activities to a fairly good extent, 60.6 per cent of them fully and another 24 per cent of them to a reasonable extent. At the same time we have to point out that 14.1 per cent of organisations

across Europe fear retribution when deciding to engage in advocacy activities which is completely unacceptable. To be precise, 26 per cent of organisations in non-EU countries and 19.3 per cent of organisations in EU13 countries find it difficult to engage in advocacy activities without facing retribution, with 4.3 per cent of organisations in non-EU countries not being able to advocate for the youth interests they represent without retribution. This indicates a serious reduction of civic space creating conditions of fear and alienation.

**Table 14:** To what extent are you able to freely engage in advocacy activities without fear of retribution?

		Fully	To a reasonable extent	With some difficulty	With significant difficulty	With great difficulty	Not at all	Don't know/not applicable	Total
Region in Europe	EU15 and EEA	73.5%	19.5%	2.7%		2.7%	0.9%	0.9%	100.0%
	EU13	50.0%	27.4%	16.1%	3.2%			3.2%	100.0%
	Rest of Europe	43.5%	30.4%	10.9%	6.5%	4.3%	4.3%		100.0%
<b>Total</b>		<b>60.6%</b>	<b>24.0%</b>	<b>8.1%</b>	<b>2.3%</b>	<b>2.3%</b>	<b>1.4%</b>	<b>1.4%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>



In general citizen participation across Europe does indicate positive examples, however, it also reveals large spots of undemocratic and in some cases also authoritarian patterns. We cannot turn a blind eye to the fact that about a third of organisations across Europe 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. Likewise, we cannot accept the fact that one tenth (EU15 and EEA countries, non-EU countries) and one fifth (EU13 countries) of youth organisations are discouraged from participating in policy processes and that EU level participation is only slightly lower than participation at the local level at which most of the organisations operate and mostly care about. Likewise, facts that opinions of about a half of (most relevant) youth organisations in Europe are rarely or never acknowledged and that about two fifths of organisations report significant difficulties to influence or no influence at all on the outcomes of policy processes should trigger red alerts, particularly when we take into account

that significant groups of organisations (14.1 per cent) cannot engage in advocacy activities without substantial fear of retribution.

## IV.4 Non-discrimination and inclusion

Apart from certain group-differentiated rights (see Kymlicka, 1995; e.g. rights of indigenous people), for which there are clear reasons that contribute to the democratic character of the system and are also clearly framed in key international documents, democratic systems should promote and ensure human and citizenship rights without any kind of discrimination. This dimension of the civic space framework examines the extent to which a level playing field is secured for all individuals and groups in a country. To be precise, even if certain rights and liberties are provided for in a country, it is vital that these rights and liberties are universally guaranteed and do not create additional exclusions

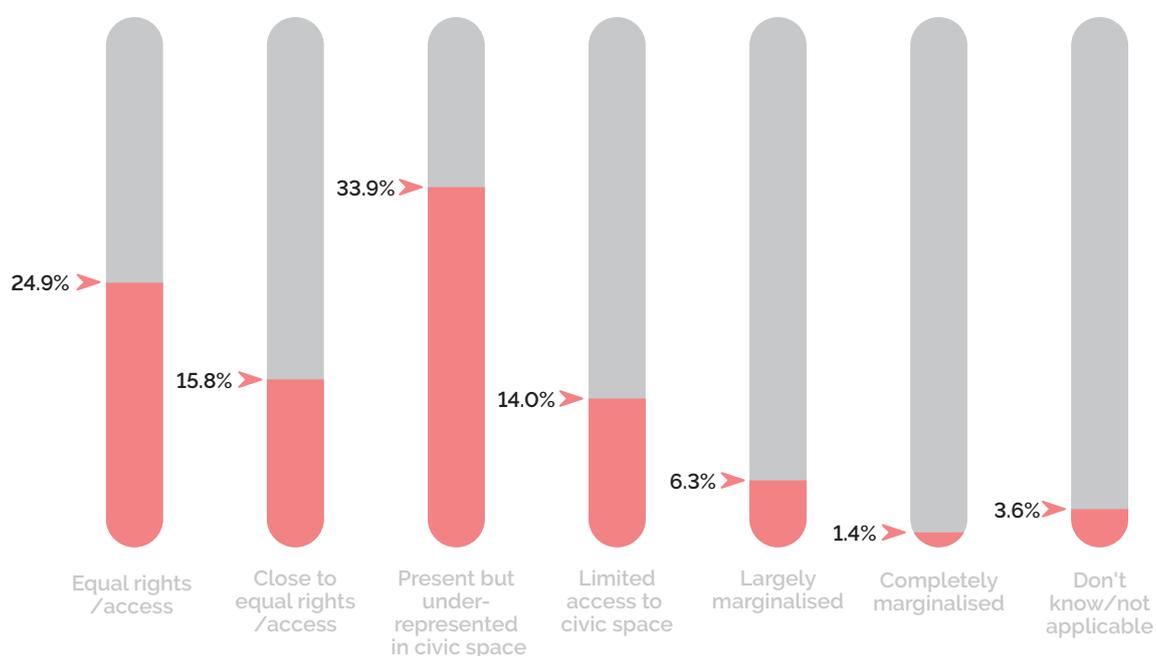
and deprivation. In the survey, we examined whether youth as an age group are in equal position compared to some other age groups as well as which youth subgroups tend to face discrimination.

When it comes to youth in general, the responses of representatives of youth organisations speak volumes. It is true that 24.9 per cent of them report that according to their experience youth has equal access to civic space and additional 15.8 per cent believe youth has close to equal access to civic space. However, 55.6 per cent of representatives

of youth 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. This pattern is evident across Europe, however, the position of youth appears to be worse in EU13 countries and non-EU countries. To be precise, more than a quarter of representatives of youth organisations coming from these two groups of countries report youth has either limited access to civic space or is largely or completely marginalised.

**Table 15:** In your experience, to what extent do young people have equal access to civic space?

Region in Europe		Equal rights/ access	Close to equal rights/ access	Present but under-represented in civic space	Limited access to civic space	Largely marginalised	Completely marginalised	Don't know/not applicable	Total
Region in Europe	EU15 and EEA	27.4%	16.8%	38.1%	11.5%	3.5%		2.7%	100.0%
	EU13	27.4%	12.9%	30.6%	14.5%	11.3%	1.6%	1.6%	100.0%
	Rest of Europe	15.2%	17.4%	28.3%	19.6%	6.5%	4.3%	8.7%	100.0%
<b>Total</b>		<b>24.9%</b>	<b>15.8%</b>	<b>33.9%</b>	<b>14.0%</b>	<b>6.3%</b>	<b>1.4%</b>	<b>3.6%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>



An additional insight to the level of youth access to civic space is provided by information about the access of other marginalised groups to civic space. This is particularly important in cases of intersection – when young individuals experience multiple exclusions/marginalisations due to their age, ethnicity, race, religious denomination, sexual

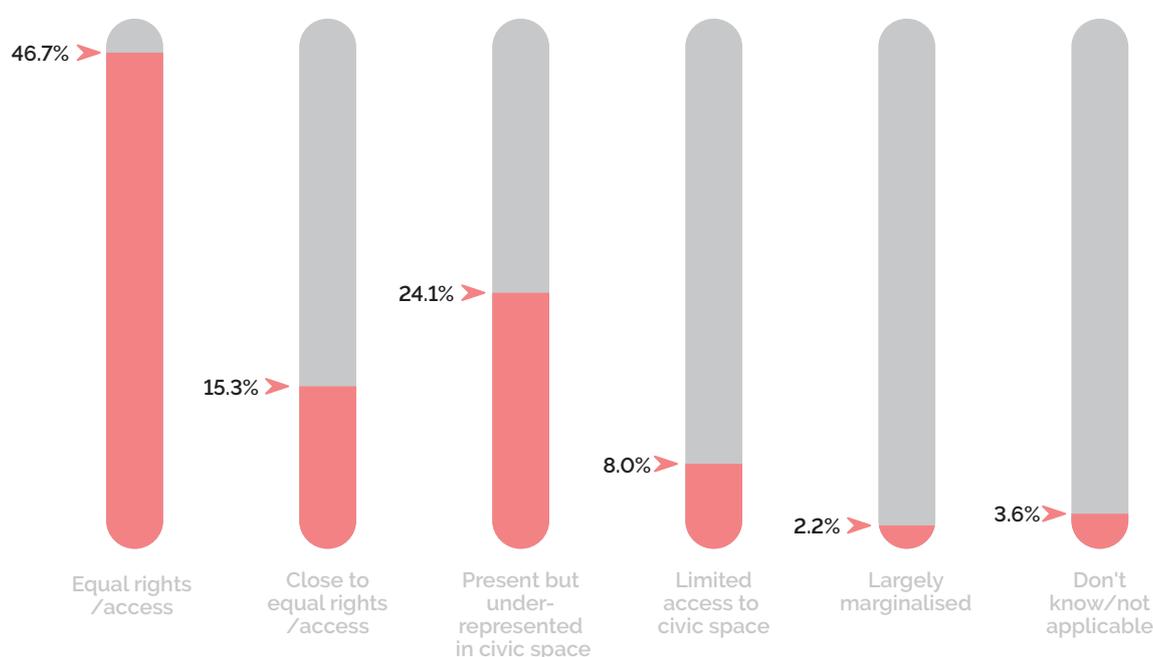
orientation etc. – since indication of the exclusion of various groups indicates also the level of exclusion of particular youth subgroups (e.g., young national minority members, young women, young lesbians and homosexuals etc.). The results indicate that representatives of youth organisations perceive women to have better access to civic space,

however, we still have to acknowledge the fact that based on their experience more than one third of them believe that women are underrepresented, have limited access to civic space or are largely marginalised, particularly when it comes to

protection of rights and representation. This situation does not differ significantly across different groups of state thus indicating that discrimination and exclusion on the basis of gender is universal.

**Table 16:** In your experience, to what extent do women have equal access to civic space?

		Equal rights/ access	Close to equal rights/ access	Present but under- represented in civic space	Limited access to civic space	Largely marginalised	Don't know/not applicable	Total
Region in Europe	EU15 and EEA	44.1%	19.1%	26.5%	4.4%	2.9%	2.9%	100.0%
	EU13	51.1%	13.3%	17.8%	13.3%	2.2%	2.2%	100.0%
	Rest of Europe	45.8%	8.3%	29.2%	8.3%		8.3%	100.0%
<b>Total</b>		<b>46.7%</b>	<b>15.3%</b>	<b>24.1%</b>	<b>8.0%</b>	<b>2.2%</b>	<b>3.6%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

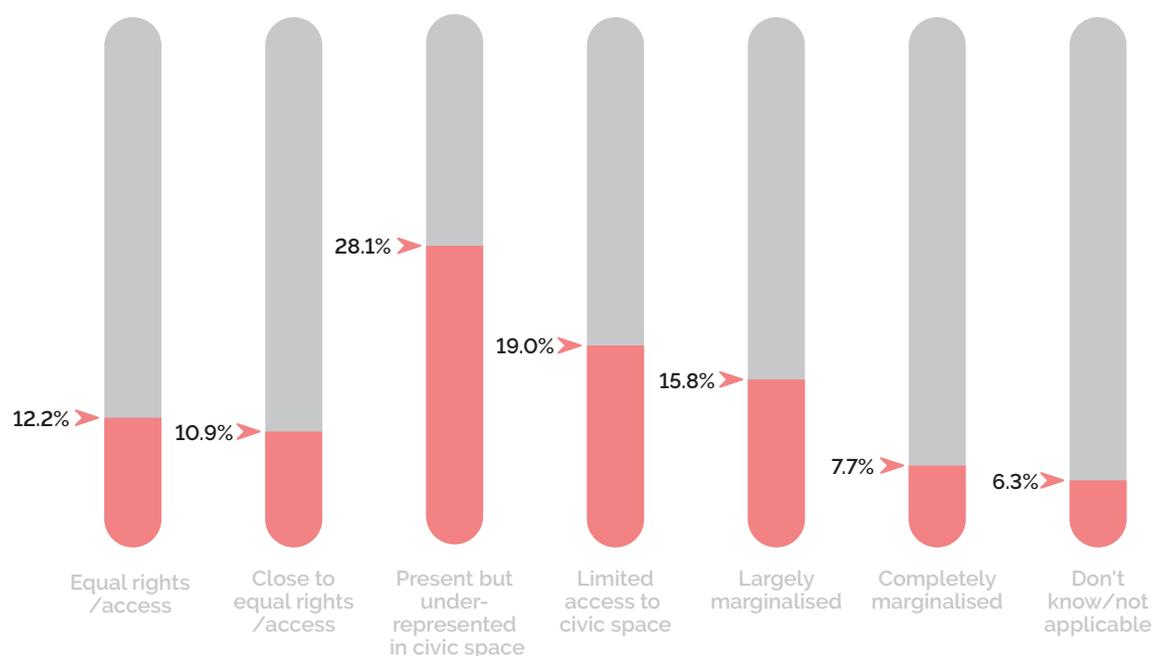


In case of economic deprivation, the access to civic space, according to the experience of representatives of youth organisations, appears significantly more limited. It is perceived by the surveyed respondents that only 23.1 per cent of economically deprived individuals or members of economically disadvantaged social groups have equal access or close to equal access to civic space. On the other hand, more than 70 per cent of surveyed representatives believe economically deprived individuals are under-represented in civic

space or worse. To be precise, 23.5 per cent of them believe economically deprived individuals are largely or completely marginalised from civic space. Again, when it comes to economic deprivation, marginalisation and limited access to civic space is universal regardless of the country. Nevertheless, it appears that economically deprived individuals in EU13 and non-EU countries face greater exclusion from civic space than their colleagues in EU15 and EEA countries.

**Table 17:** In your experience, to what extent do poorer/economically disadvantaged social groups have equal access to civic space?

		Equal rights/ access	Close to equal rights/ access	Present but under-represented in civic space	Limited access to civic space	Largely marginalised	Completely marginalised	Don't know/not applicable	Total
Region in Europe	EU15 and EEA	11.5%	11.5%	38.1%	19.5%	11.5%	3.5%	4.4%	100.0%
	EU13	12.9%	8.1%	21.0%	17.7%	22.6%	9.7%	8.1%	100.0%
	Rest of Europe	13.0%	13.0%	13.0%	19.6%	17.4%	15.2%	8.7%	100.0%
<b>Total</b>		<b>12.2%</b>	<b>10.9%</b>	<b>28.1%</b>	<b>19.0%</b>	<b>15.8%</b>	<b>7.7%</b>	<b>6.3%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

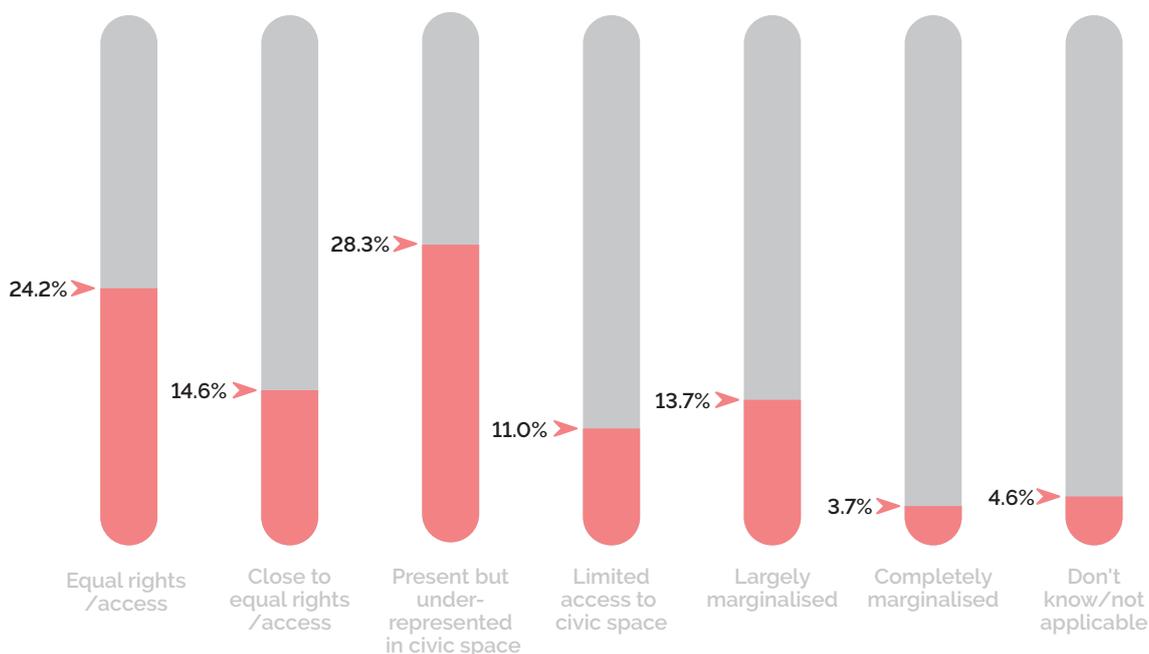


A similarly negative position was demonstrated for members of various minority groups (ethnic, sexual, religious and cultural). Based on their experience, representatives of surveyed youth organisations identified a high level of marginalisation of these minority members from civic space as 17.4 per

cent of them perceive members of ethnic, sexual, religious and cultural minorities are largely or completely marginalised from civic space. In cases of EU 13 countries and non-EU countries, more than one quarter of them are either largely or completely marginalised.

**Table 18:** In your experience, to what extent do ethnic/sexual/religious/cultural minorities have equal access to civic space?

Region in Europe		Equal rights/ access	Close to equal rights/ access	Present but under-represented in civic space	Limited access to civic space	Largely marginalised	Completely marginalised	Don't know/not applicable	Total
Region in Europe	EU15 and EEA	25.2%	13.5%	34.2%	15.3%	9.0%		2.7%	100.0%
	EU13	21.0%	12.9%	24.2%	8.1%	17.7%	8.1%	8.1%	100.0%
	Rest of Europe	26.1%	19.6%	19.6%	4.3%	19.6%	6.5%	4.3%	100.0%
<b>Total</b>		<b>24.2%</b>	<b>14.6%</b>	<b>28.3%</b>	<b>11.0%</b>	<b>13.7%</b>	<b>3.7%</b>	<b>4.6%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>



Overall, we may identify several patterns in access to civic space. The first is that age or belonging to the youth age group creates a significant reduction in access to civic space as 55.6 per cent of representatives of youth 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. In addition, gender proves to be a universal factor of limitation of access to civic space, however, it appears that it does not cause severe marginalisation. Contrary to this, members of ethnic, sexual, religious and cultural minority groups are seen to be the most marginalised from civic space even though the individuals with the least granted equal access to civic space are perceived to be the economically deprived individuals. Groups of young individuals experiencing multiple exclusions or intersections (e.g. young poor minority women) are the groups that are particularly excluded from

civic space and especially suffer from additional shrinkage of civic space as their spaces are already scarce, fragile and frequently missed by general programmes and measures.

## IV.5 Human rights and the rule of law

The existence of a democratic and truly meaningful civic space rests on acceptance and safeguarding of certain minimal democratic standards and human rights (Malena, 2015: 32). If these standards are not met, preconditions for a democratic civic space do not exist and a wide array of individual and group rights rest unsecure or redundant. This broader enabling environment that rests on the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms and

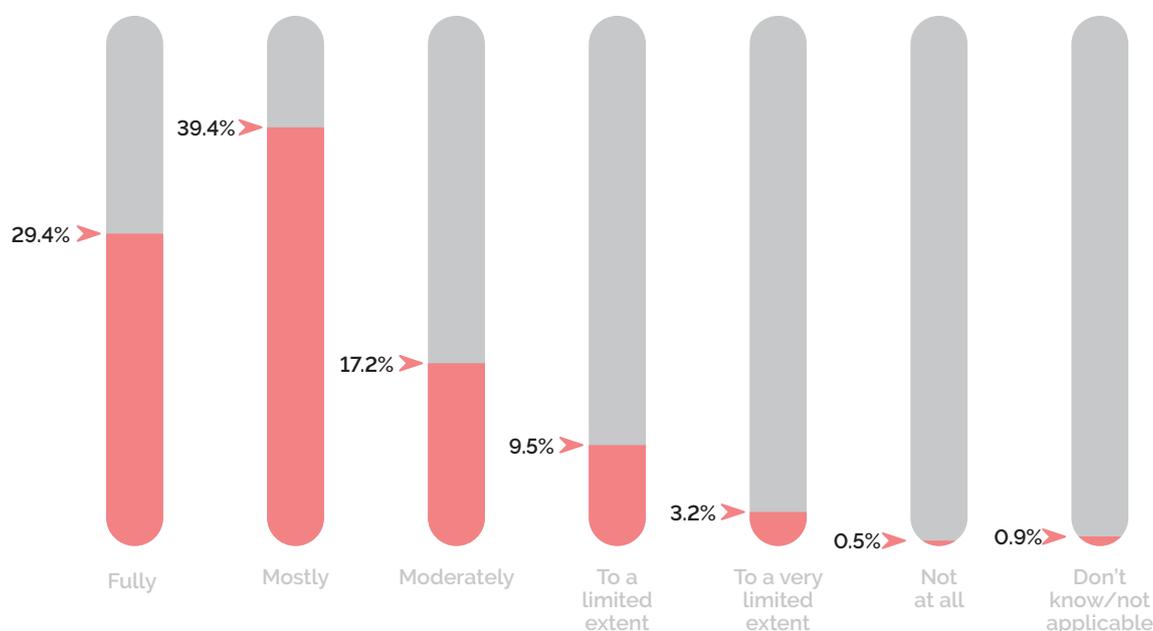
the rule of law thus serves as a precondition of other dimensions of civic space. This dimension thus examines whether governments adequately perform their duties to prevent human rights violations and ensure respect for these rights and freedoms. In essence, it is observed whether basic human rights and fundamental freedoms are guaranteed by law and respected in practice as well as whether the rule of law is effective, i.e. the impunity is not widespread, particularly when it comes to the human rights violations and abuses against civil society actors (ibid.).

The representatives of youth organisations report that in their view, particularly when having in mind young people and their representatives, human

rights and fundamental freedoms are not always respected. To be precise, only 29.4 per cent of respondents believe human rights are fully respected with another 39.4 per cent estimating human rights are mostly respected. Disturbingly, almost a third of them believe human rights are only moderately respected when it comes to youth, with about one eighth of them deeming human rights are respected to a limited extent or not at all. It has to be said, though, that most disturbing figures are revealed for non-EU countries, where a third of representatives perceive human rights to be respected to a limited extent when it comes to youth, and EU13 countries, where this percentage is at 17.7.

**Table 19:** In your view, particularly when having in mind young people, to what extent are human rights respected in your country?

		Fully	Mostly	Moderately	To a limited extent	To a very limited extent	Not at all	Don't know/not applicable	Total
Region in Europe	EU15 and EEA	38.1%	43.4%	15.9%	0.9%	0.9%		0.9%	100.0%
	EU13	25.8%	40.3%	16.1%	14.5%	3.2%			100.0%
	Rest of Europe	13.0%	28.3%	21.7%	23.9%	8.7%	2.2%	2.2%	100.0%
<b>Total</b>		<b>29.4%</b>	<b>39.4%</b>	<b>17.2%</b>	<b>9.5%</b>	<b>3.2%</b>	<b>0.5%</b>	<b>0.9%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>



Particularly when it comes to ensuring a wide range of legislated personal and group rights, the gap between what is guaranteed by law and respected in practice emerges. Disrespect of rights and freedoms guaranteed by law frequently originates from the abuse of power for individual

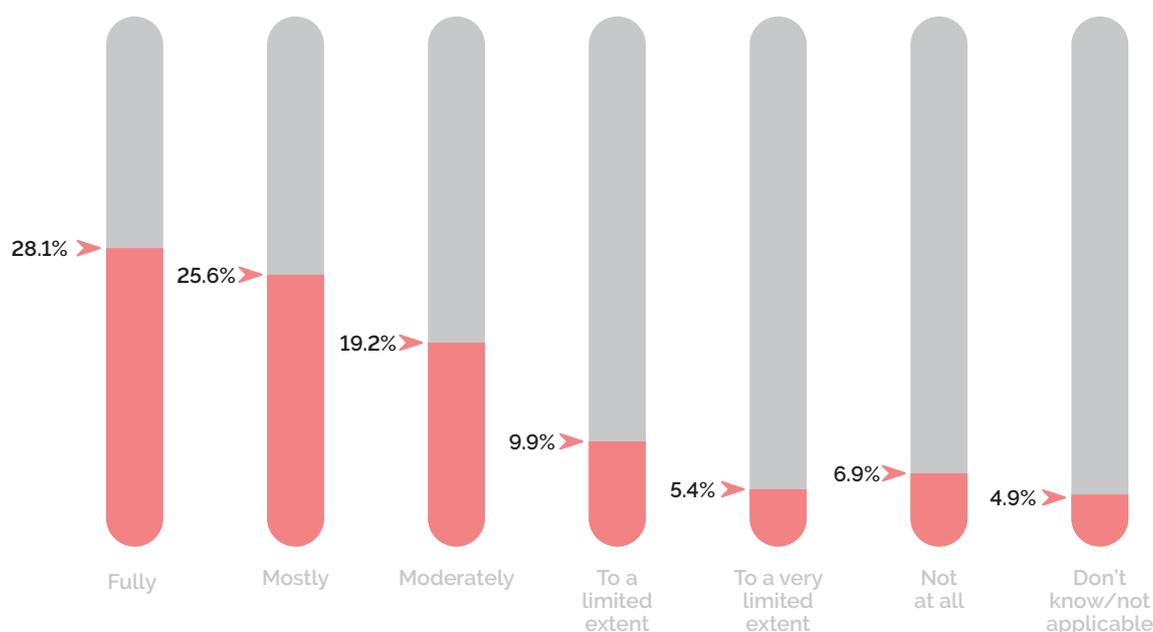
or group purposes. We examined the degree to which political pressures as a form of abuse of power exist in a country, particularly when having in mind young people. The results show that citizens and organisations across Europe are not free from political pressures as only 28.1 per cent

of representatives of youth organisations report full freedom from political pressures. On the other hand, 41.4 per cent of them report the country is only moderately free from political pressures or worse. To be precise, this situation is particularly worrying in EU13 and non-EU countries since 28.1 per cent of EU13 representatives believe their country is free from political pressures only to a

limited extent or worse and 46.5 per cent in case of non-EU countries. Even more, 18.6 per cent of representatives from non-EU countries see their countries as completely unfree from political pressures, which indicates serious prevention of basic preconditions for effective and meaningful civic space.

**Table 20:** In your view, particularly when having in mind young people, to what extent is your country free from political pressures?

Region in Europe		Fully	Mostly	Moderately	To a limited extent	To a very limited extent	Not at all	Don't know/not applicable	Total
Region in Europe	EU15 and EEA	41.7%	30.1%	15.5%	5.8%	1.0%	1.9%	3.9%	100.0%
	EU13	14.0%	22.8%	29.8%	12.3%	8.8%	7.0%	5.3%	100.0%
	Rest of Europe	14.0%	18.6%	14.0%	16.3%	11.6%	18.6%	7.0%	100.0%
<b>Total</b>		<b>28.1%</b>	<b>25.6%</b>	<b>19.2%</b>	<b>9.9%</b>	<b>5.4%</b>	<b>6.9%</b>	<b>4.9%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>



Overall, the examination of preconditions for effective and meaningful civic space – respect of human rights and freedoms, effective rule of law and freedom from political pressures – reveals that the basics are far from secured. This is particularly the case for non-EU countries as well as EU13 countries, where certain preconditions exist and

most of the required legislation is in place, however, the political abuse of power and general inability to secure these rights and freedoms in practice prevents them from meeting these basic and crucial minimal standards. Thus the enabling environment for youth civic space in those countries is currently rather disabling.

*The representatives of youth organisations report that in their view, particularly when having in mind young people and their representatives, human rights and fundamental freedoms are not always respected.*

# V.

## THE GOVERNMENTS' MEASURES AND OTHER BARRIERS SHRINKING CIVIC SPACE FOR YOUTH

The mission of redressing the trend of a shrinking civic space for young people and their organisations should focus on detection and prevention of anti-democratic legal and policy manoeuvres by government and other actors. As it was already demonstrated, these manoeuvres range from protectionism, or better, prevention from receiving foreign funding and evaluation practices to smearing campaigns, intimidation, criminalisation and repression.

### V.1 Access to information

When youth organisations attempted to access information, including information of financial nature, from government sources we were able to identify some common patterns. There is a

general pattern of youth unfriendly language full of technocratic jargon that prevents access or demands high level of professionalisation from youth organisations. Such an example is presented in a response of one organisation:

*"Our organisation is run by volunteers, most of them aged around 20 years (thus still during their school/university age). The increasing amount of laws is making funding from certain sources (except maybe Erasmus+) quite un-accessible. This is so even due to many laws that require voluntary organisations to become almost professional organisations. This puts us at a disadvantage vis-a-vis those organisations that are converting youth work to business!"*

Youth organisations also reported general transparency issues related to lack of any or at least lack of clear information about the public authorities' spending, performance, activities, etc. This included lack of vital information in the process of applying for funding or projects, such as missing deadlines, eligibility criteria, etc. In some cases this information was hidden and available upon request, in other cases such information was revealed at the last-minute. One organisation reported:

*"Sometimes there is no official information published at all. It is available upon request. Other times we are just being informed about some decisions, again upon request."*

There is also a widespread lack of information indicating governments' performance – in some areas clearly intentional (e.g., gender, minorities)–, with no or very basic assessment exercises virtually preventing any proper evaluation of actions performed by authorities. In some cases also rationales behind measures, programmes and governments' actions in general are missing or purely speculative, with no evidence backing them. One organisation thus stated:

*"The state budget is not entirely transparent. The decisions made by the government are often not accessible due to their "closed nature". The ministries often don't provide substantive information on implementation of the strategies."*

What youth organisations also experience is vital information scattered across different sources and data formats, different procedures of information acquisition that differ from agency to agency, unresponsiveness of public authorities frequently imposing intentional delays and unwillingness to meet or interact in any way. In addition, there is still a widespread pattern of information provision inaccessible to visually impaired as well as identified unwillingness to share information with minority and/or religious organisations based on prejudice and suspicion. Exemplary organisation provided the following experience:

*"We experience prejudice and suspicion towards us as a Muslim-based organisation. A lot of civil servants fear the media and the media can come with unfounded allegations, insinuations, etc. that makes civil servants fearful."*

## V.2 Ability of public expression and assembly

Ability of free public expression without any fear of retribution is hampered in many ways and the governments' measures range from very direct and open restriction of this right to more subtle variation of having the same or at least similar effect. In line with the former, one organisation reports:

*"We live under the dictatorship regime. Also we have illegal status, as because of our activity we cannot get registration."*

Apart from the possibility of being banned because of performed activities, smearing

campaigns against organisations or their visible representatives performed by political parties, politicians, other organisations and individuals and "independent" media are quite common. In such campaigns statements get taken out of context and get twisted due to or with the help of biased media thus causing youth organisations to become a target of hate speech, verbal abuse and discrimination. These campaigns often escalate to threats of or actual physical abuse. One organisation thus illustrated:

*"As one of the most prominent watchdog organisations and public advocates of rights of the disadvantaged groups, we are often faced with political pressure, police pressure, monitoring of different kinds, as well as with the public pressure including death threats, written threats and physical attacks."*

Retribution of politicians or public authorities for publicly expressed grievances by youth organisations and their representatives also ends in "marking" and loss of funding on one side or the existence of extra governmental funds available to the "behaving" organisations. This binary logic is perceived to be an important barrier to free public expression as organisations widely report the inability to be perceived as politically unbiased due to high levels of polarisation. In some cases, such widespread polarisation in which political parties claim ownership of certain positions and critiques – even though they may be "abducted" from civil society or other actors – can even be supported by legislation. The following example clearly illustrates this:

*"You are not always able to protest. The law applies to party politics but many protests are against government policy and therefore supported by the opposition. Joining these protests could lead to a loss in funding and status if we're not careful."*

Acquiring a label of "political" or biased in favour of certain political actors proved to be an important barrier to organise or participate in public assemblies, demonstrations or advocacy activities in general. As organisations report, acquisition of such labels implicitly introduces questioning and inquiries by donors, partners and/or relevant stakeholders and ultimately harms the ability of the organisation to acquire funding and retain trust.

*"Charities can have difficulty in advocating for particular issues deemed "political". This can have a chilling effect on organisations not wishing to pursue certain actions. Also, as state aid makes up a large percentage of our funding, this has the potential to influence decisions that we as an organisation make contrary to government policy."*

Otherwise organisations reported inability to organise or participate in demonstrations and public gatherings because they were unable to get the approval with no clear justification or due to safety reasons (e.g., Pride parades) or due to obstacles related to expression of identity (forbidden use of languages, names etc.). If demonstrations and gatherings do happen, the common pattern of retribution – in addition to the modalities explained above (loss of funding, smearing campaigns, trolling, threats etc.) – could be counter-demonstrations, violent break-ups of demonstrations by other groups accompanied by poor police protection and even reduced labour market opportunities for visible members of such organisations.

### V.3 Ability to function independently, perform advocacy and participate in policy-making processes

The ability of youth organisations to function independently hugely revolves around funding, which is in Europe predominantly reduced to financial resources from public budgets. As a result, youth organisations hugely rely on the decency of public authorities to distribute funds fairly and not politically motivated. In some situations even this basic (formal) step is not assured thus making youth organisations to work with the following conditionality:

*"If we want the support, we have to be "likable".  
or "The government is trying to attach strings to funding it provides."*

More sophisticated techniques of attaching strings to budgetary resources by public authorities constitute mechanisms supported by legislative changes that introduce additional check-ups (e.g., provision of data about the organisation and membership) as well as create additional administrative burden. These instruments also include various introductions of special statuses,

labels etc. (e.g. national youth organisations) that may be portrayed as safeguards to defend specific interests, such as youth, minorities, but in fact function as exclusionary prerequisites for organisations to access vital resources. Regardless of the fact whether the consequences of these additional requirements are intentional or unintentional, changes in reporting standards, budgetary lines, interpretations of rules have devastating effects on less professionalised organisations with a limited capacity to address these requirements. Hence organisations report grievances such as:

*"Public authorities impose much of the same restrictions like other non-governmental donors do. These are mostly connected to the nature of the programme via which they provide financial support and could for instance include very specific and burdening administration of grant agreements that is not always in line with the positive legal basis."*

When we combine this unnecessary "red tape" with the excessive use of market indicators to assess the performance of youth organisations, attention is frequently oriented more on key performance indicators than their core mission. As a result, organisations demonstrate grievances about excessive attention to acquired amounts of private funds, donor diversity, self-financing conditions, existence of organisational assets, collaboration with private companies etc. The non-financial aspect of this is the increased attention to project scalability, sustainability and measuring impact. Taking into account that measuring impact of particular interventions into social environments is extremely methodologically difficult and time- as well as asset-consuming, charging youth organisations with highly professionalised and challenging tasks oriented on efficiency, efficacy and outreach, may create even greater damage than simply withdrawing public resources for the sector as it incapacitates it to operate on the basis of other funding opportunities. A vivid explanation of a situation in which organisations may find themselves into provides the following example:

*"The amount awarded needed to be topped up by a certain percentage of private funds – the ratio changed in the middle of the contract duration – and numerous quantitative indicators were in place, really*

*countless (for example, number of press releases sent, number of newsletters sent, number of meetings with relevant actors in the field of whatever, number of meetings attended in certain area of activity...).*"

Inability of engagement in advocacy activities without implicit fear of retribution furthermore demonstrates the nature of civic space shrinkage for youth. Most of the barriers organisations experience in their roles as advocates of particular interest or ideals match the already explained governments' toolkit and taps into the pressures or conditionality related to funding, excessive use of powers of financial audit and police control, utilisation of online and offline media outlets to conduct smearing campaigns and stigmatisation of organisations and their visible representatives as well as damaging property. At the individual level, representatives of organisations reported physical and mental abuse as well as reduced career opportunities. What organisations also exposed were language barriers, primarily on the basis of legislation regulating the names of organisations, that seriously impeded their mission by preventing them from expressing their identity. As a result, these organisations cannot appear under their original names indicating their national identity as the legislation forbids names of organisations in a foreign language.

When narrowing down these advocacy activities to participation in processes of deliberation and decision-making, additional barriers appear. Some directly relate to language issues as the language of discussion and documentation frequently appears in the language of the dominant group, even in cases of several official languages and minority groups as important stakeholders. Again, language is reported to be an issue also because of its youth-unfriendly nature and utilisation of highly professionalised terminology and the use of bureaucratic jargon. This exposes the lack of resources, primarily lack of professionalised personnel, as another prevalent barrier among youth organisations to fully participate in public deliberation processes. Thus organisations frequently complain in line with the following comment:

*"We are already overworked and find it difficult to participate in these processes which can be complex and can require skill, knowledge and time we do not have."*

However, it is not merely the agency of youth organisations that presents significant barriers to full participation in deliberation and decision-making processes. The frameworks of cooperation visibly cause problems as organisations extensively put forward grave limitations of the consultation and deliberation processes. They put forward lack of information about the process of debates, consultations as well as their final outcomes. Events related to these processes are frequently poorly communicated, if at all, thus causing difficulties for some organisations to promptly acquire relevant information. The following remarks are thus no exceptions:

*"Sometimes invitations just don't reach us, although they do reach other similar stakeholders."*

Problematic nature of such intentional or unintentional "selective consultation" is further aggravated by reported sporadic use of consultation mechanisms, their limited nature and additional barriers preventing youth voices to be heard. To be precise, certain processes impose age barriers on participation in certain events and boards, time and period allowed for public discussion tends to be limited, representatives of youth's interests struggle to get the message across due to highly supported and professionalised competing interests (private companies, numerous and powerful social groups, etc.), as well as certain fields with immense impact on youth are not recognised as "youth-relevant" thus causing youth organisations to be inherently banned from accessing these policy fields as relevant stakeholders.

Overall, we could say that there are some opportunities for youth organisations to participate in the processes of deliberation and policy making. However, limited timeframes, modalities and support for meaningful participation leads to a general impression that these processes are widely instrumentalised and manipulated by the public authorities with a clear rationale of justifying their activity or inactivity in a certain policy field. Consequently, bitterness about the process like the following rather reduces than improves the democratic character of policies:

*"There are many opportunities for this type of participation. However, in most cases it is about formal and cosmetic participation."*

# VI.

## ORGANISATIONAL RESPONSES TO COUNTER GOVERNMENTS' INTENTIONS TO SHRINK CIVIC SPACE FOR YOUTH

Strategies of youth organisations to neutralise a wide set of instruments aimed at shrinking civic space employed by public authorities and their agents, as in the case of barriers themselves, vary according to time and space. Regardless of contextual boundedness of actions causing and curbing civic space shrinkage, we can identify common strategies of youth organisations when facing these challenges.

In the context of attempting to access information, but by no means limited to this area of activity, organisations first and foremost put forward **persistence and organisational resilience**. Linked to this is also ingenuity in data collection and data aggregation as frequently the complete or at least best possible image of the observed phenomenon comes from **triangulation of multiple** public as well as less public **information sources**. There is a general perception that defence of youth interests is a long-distance race and you have to be prepared for it. This is done by constantly "knocking on the

door" and discussing the issues in person rather than utilising impersonal and instrumentalised channels of communication. By performing such **networking activities** organisations build **long-term (cooperative) relations** with individuals and units on the "other side" that are generally more time-resilient and founded on reciprocity compared to mandate-driven teams that may come and go after each electoral race. This often leads to **forming bonds with insiders** who understand the mission and challenges of youth organisations as well as understand benefits of genuine cooperation with stakeholders.

The other side of the same coin is a more dissident approach, which should not be considered as an alternative but rather as complementary approach to cooperation explained above, particularly when genuine direct communication and consequent cooperation proves impossible. The usual tools in this toolbox are **public exposure of the persons responsible** for the problem or the one preventing

adequate response to it. To effectively conduct such operations, organisations need to engage into a **broad** process of **coalition-/alliance-building and information sharing** in order to gain coverage, relevance, legitimacy and leverage. A strong coalition can then conduct comprehensive **online and offline public campaigns**, where a wide coalition of supporters with a critical mass of "muscles and brain". In addition to mass support (the former), professional expertise proves necessary to address civic space shrinkage. **Hired or pro bono professionals** (lawyers, media specialists, field-/policy-specific experts) supporting organisations and their campaigns thus appear to be a mandatory recipe for success. Sometimes by challenging authorities on the basis of professional arguments and in other times by providing a mirror to government actions by **tracking conducted activity** and reporting it in various forms of **shadow reporting**.

As already explained, most of the abovementioned strategies apply to various dimensions of fighting against shrinking civic space for youth including efforts to promote public expression and assembly. Even though direct contact, coalition-building, preference of resolution of problems behind closed doors rather than going public remain popular strategies, diplomacy gains relevance. Youth organisations point out the importance of skills needed to criticise, but remain cooperative, diplomatic and constructive. **Constructive feedback/criticism** and avoidance of or, if needed, **watchful and gradual selection of public shaming mechanisms** demands capacity organisations gain with experience as well as proper training (in communication, strategic thinking, leadership).

Another vital strategy of safeguarding free public expression is **provision or invention of safe spaces** where individuals can freely and safely express themselves. With the intention of keeping the activists and supporters safe, organisations point out the immense importance of **staying within the borders of legality**, even if fighting against illegitimate policies or actors. Some organisations also point to the strategy of **participating in events** that are publicly considered **within the remit of youth organisations** and avoiding contested policy areas with no or limited gratification for youth. **Selective attendance of public events and demonstrations** therefore indicates organisational tendency to work in coalition, reduce unnecessary risks that comes with events organised by others as well as maintaining focus on organisations' core

mission. A sign of **prioritising safety of activists and supporters** is demonstrated also by the tendency of youth organisations to explore alternatives to public assemblies or demonstrations (e.g. online campaigns or debates) if offline events present a significant safety concern.

Overall, many youth organisations point out that a **greater reliance on volunteering** and a more **dispersed funding portfolio** improves the agency of organisations and reduces the influence of governments and other actors. Somewhat contradictory to this from a budgetary point of view, but at the same time sensible, is their tendency to **professionalise existing staff** rather than relying on the expertise of others. **Pooling of resources** between partner organisations to finance professional services (e.g., lawyers, media specialists, other experts) allows this strategy to also be financially sustainable, improves sharing of information as well as creates stronger organisational bonds. At the same time, **investing in training and educational campaigns** elevating capacity of staff and supporters proves to pay dividends, particularly since the fluctuation of personnel in youth organisations is inherently high. This allows youth organisations to act professionally, **based on evidence**, on the basis of **thought-through campaigns and distances from political parties** and their agents.

It is such organisations that are able to adequately follow the policy making process and participate in it. A set of actions organisations employ in order to cover the processes of deliberation and decision-making is – in addition to the above mentioned strategies related to information acquisition, public action and general advocacy – **tracking and initiating public discussions, participating in official hearings, preparing written inputs, statements and policy papers on the basis of evidence, preparing public statements and organising public online and offline campaigns** to build pressure. As this engagement takes a lot of resources, organisations indicate the importance of **prioritising topics and maintaining focus** as one of the key factors of success. Unfortunately, in the case of not so few countries, some organisations simply cannot function without permanent fear and government intervention. For those, as organisations point out, the solution is **formal relocation to another country** and continuation of their activities from abroad through less formal alliances and networks.

# VII.

## GENERAL CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

### VII.1

#### Key messages from the study

Despite the centrality of youth organisations in promoting and safeguarding basic human rights and democracy for young people, the last few years have witnessed a persistent trend of silencing of these voices, thus narrowing the civic space available to youth. The global trend of authoritarian-like pushbacks against democracy and human rights contributes to the shrinking of civic space irrespective of the country's democratic tradition, prevailing social cleavages, wealth, human rights record, or geographical location. Changes in legal status, funding restrictions, disproportionate reporting requirements, bureaucratic obstacles combined with other administrative regulations, and smear campaigns that aim to undermine reputation or call into question their mission, are just some of the strategies youth and other civil society organisations are facing in some countries. As a result of increasingly hostile conditions for civil, political and social engagement across the globe, youth is prevented from being an agent of social change.

Our research reveals that, in their quest to facilitate the above mentioned process – i.e. of youth becoming an agent of social change – youth organisations have to overcome significant challenges. These challenges, primarily imposed by governments or their agents, and the strategies to overcome them, can be broadly grouped into four categories:

**Firstly**, those that relate to freedom of information and expression. One in three youth organisations experience difficulties in accessing information from government; almost a half of them have difficulties expressing themselves because of fear of retribution from the government; and one in ten is not even able to freely use the internet.

**Secondly**, challenges in exercising their rights of assembly and association: one in eight youth organisations experienced difficulties in organising or participating in public assemblies; and two in five of them do not feel certain that their organisation of, or participation in, such assemblies will not result in some form of retribution. Furthermore, one in five experienced governmental interference in the functioning of their organisation, while two in five youth organisations do not feel completely free from government interference. One in four also reports undue restrictions, while one third experience barriers to acquiring foreign funding. They also believe the presence of market indicators to evaluate their work is disturbing; one in four to a noticeable degree.

**Thirdly**, in their quest to secure and facilitate citizen participation, one fourth of organisations are not fully

capable of engaging in advocacy activities due to their fear of retribution, and experience at least some difficulties in participating in the processes of deliberation and decision-making. What is more, two out of five organisations believe they are only moderately or to no extent able to influence the outcome of deliberation processes: to be precise, three out of four organisations are never, or very rarely, invited to participate in the formulation of solutions at local level, and three out of six at the national level.

A **fourth** category relates to human rights and the rule of law: one third of youth organisations believe that human rights and the principles of rule of law are only moderately respected when it comes to youth. This is also shown by the fact that more than two out of five believe that youth is only moderately free from political pressures. Our study clearly demonstrates that there are serious obstacles to civic space when it comes to young people. This is also shown by the fact that one fifth of youth organisations believe that young people have limited access to civic space, and more than half of them perceive young people as underrepresented in a civic space.

## VII.2 Guidance for future tracking and addressing the problem

The process of addressing the problem of shrinking civic spaces for youth is equally crucial as is identifying the shrinkage and constitutes the next step in the wider course of overcoming the malaise of our civic communities when it comes to inclusion of young people. In order for this process to be successful, owned by and tailored to the needs of younger generations, the following conditions have to be met:

### *Transparent and inclusive deliberative processes addressing shrinking civic space for youth*

In order to arrive at a shared vocabulary and terms of reference for determining the present state and future directions of civic spaces, **transparency and inclusive** deliberative processes are essential. **Youth leaders** as well as the rank and file must be included, or ideally be supported to lead discussions and negotiations to arrive at—or at least move toward—consensus about the needs and supporting factors enabling full democratic participation. The colloquial expression, *people support what they help create*, is an especially

salient truism with regard to democracy, civic engagement, and freedoms of expression and association. Related, exclusion or subordination of youth generally, and of minoritised youth especially, from discourses and decision-making processes associated with legal, political, and social conventions erode trust as well as participation. Such dynamics are hospitable to reverse transitions that shrink civic spaces, undermining social cohesion and exacerbating conflicts and divisions.

### *Broad definition of shrinking civic space*

The mission of redressing the trend of a shrinking civic space for young people and their organisations should focus on detecting, and the prevention of, anti-democratic legal and policy manoeuvres by government and other actors. It needs to be said, though, to the extent that the definitions, aspirations, and acceptable expressions of democratic activity are **determined through cultural and social processes**, it has been—and remains—**possible to pre-emptively shrink civic spaces** by undermining its initial formation within each successive generation of people. To safeguard and expand the democratic project and its constituent civic spaces, it is essential to **define shrinking space more broadly** to also include early learning of democratic principles, such as in school curricula, and the impact of efforts to change the terms of reference upon which they are established and reproduced.

### *Equitable assessment and promotion of civic spaces*

A credible agenda for safeguarding civic spaces for youth must also **include analytical lenses and data** that bring the **stratification of access and agency across identities, cultures, and communities** to the surface; and the strategies for reclaiming the civic space should thus be customised to the particular circumstances and needs of those affected. In addition to discussions about the importance of disaggregating youth groups, the classification of their civic engagement activities can also be useful in terms of identifying areas of strength or limiting factors within a broader strategic effort to increase targeted engagement opportunities for youth.

### *Nuanced approach to citizenship of young people*

While policy discourse prioritises the identification of pragmatic and technical intervention strategies,

the ways in which policy questions are framed—including the semantics, underlying assumptions, and context—all shape what answers are found and what recommendations are made. If we are to protect and even expand civic spaces in which youth can develop and express their civic and citizenship identities meaningfully and productively, then the **conceptual and theoretical lenses** that guide the analysis and policy craft must be **embedded with considerations of youth's particular psychosocial, physical, economic, cultural, and educational realities**. Efforts to effectively determine and respond to the challenges, opportunities, needs, and wishes of any demographic group requires overt attention to the identities and cultures prevalent within that group.

#### *Avoidance of reductionist perceptions of youth*

**Reductionist notions** embedded within considerations and debates about **youth**, regarding them as monolithic, precious, and vulnerable objects, **undermine** the prospect of leveraging and building capacity in **their intellectual and creative capabilities**. Rhetorical framing has a role in increasing or alleviating the problem of shrinking civic spaces, and so the terms of reference and engagement should be critically reviewed as part of any effort to explain and address it.

## VII.3

### Recommendations for action<sup>26</sup>

Acknowledging the above mentioned features of the process of addressing the problem of shrinking civic spaces for young people, the results of this study indicate the necessity of immediate action by different stakeholders. This action has to be a coordinated and thought-through effort consisting of general as well as field-specific steps.

In terms of **general actions** to be taken, it is essential for all relevant stakeholders (public authorities, media, academia and civil society) to:

- ▶ recognise a **specific situation** – infused by a series of unique challenges – young people are living in, and the unique **position of youth organisations** in the process of addressing these challenges;
- ▶ thus also to **provide resources for the basic functioning** of youth organisations (e.g., electricity, premises, equipment) instead of the usual activity-based funding;
- ▶ devote greater attention and support to **informal youth groups/initiatives of young people** acting

outside youth organisations and addressing the same issues youth organisations do;

- ▶ **invest** in the **capacity** of young people and youth organisations as this proves to be a recipe of countering structural challenges and surging democratic contractions across the globe;
- ▶ strengthen the **detection and prevention mechanisms** countering anti-democratic legal and policy manoeuvres of governments and their agents, **particularly from a youth perspective**;
- ▶ introduce **definitions and acceptable expressions** of democratic activity by and in collaboration **with young people** as these are culturally and periodically bound;
- ▶ **define shrinking spaces more expansively** to include early learning of democratic principles and the idiosyncratic political imaginary of young people;
- ▶ support participation of young people in public affairs by utilising **youth-friendly non-technocratic language** as well as target group's **native language**;
- ▶ conduct **systematic monitoring of countries' performance** concerning relevant dimensions of civic spaces for young people as well as **introduce measures encouraging countries** to safeguard these spaces;
- ▶ include **analytical lenses and data** concerning shrinking civic spaces of young people that surfaces stratification of access and agency **across identities, cultures, and communities**.

To address more **specific areas** and concerns of ailing civic spaces, all relevant stakeholders at all levels should make required efforts to secure:

### Access to information

- ▶ stronger legislative effort pushing for **greater transparency** of governmental actions and actions of other beneficiaries of public money;
- ▶ stronger (executive) effort to **implement information transparency provisions** in national and transnational legal acts thus curbing severe implementation deficit;
- ▶ unrestricted access to **complete, true** and up-to-date information from public authorities;
- ▶ availability of information in **several formats** (e.g., CSV, xls, pdf) and in a user-friendly manner;
- ▶ **uniform set of rules and procedures** for accessing public information with preferably single entry point to access all desired public information;
- ▶ **improved 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 about **wellbeing** of young people as a whole and certain most vulnerable youth subgroups (e.g., young women, young people with minority background, young migrants etc.);

- ▶ **willingness** of responsible public officials to **interact in open, sincere and prompt manner**, supported by systematic, repetitive and unambiguous messages of commitment to such interaction by top governmental representatives;
- ▶ design and implementation of **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;
- ▶ **robust and long-term funding** for watchdog organisations and organisations facilitating access to and processing of information about actions of public authorities.

## Free public expression and participation in public affairs

- ▶ **transparent, inclusive and low-threshold rules** concerning organisation of and participation at public assemblies, events and demonstrations;
- ▶ elimination of all age restrictions to participate in processes of public consultation and deliberation;
- ▶ funding and other kinds of support for **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** activities elevating individual and community capacity to engage in democratic public expression and deliberation;
- ▶ open **discussion** of all relevant stakeholders **about the barriers** to freedom of expression and ways of addressing these barriers;
- ▶ support to the initiatives aiming to **promote fact-checking and cross-checking of information sources** in order to address the problem of fake news and biased representation of facts;
- ▶ robust and long-term **support to youth organisations facilitating freedom of expression and participation of young people in public affairs** on the basis of independent and non-partisan peer-review performed by internationally credible bodies;
- ▶ **support to programmes** aiming at **higher levels of professionalisation** and organisational capacity of youth organisations to promote, support and deliver public expression of young people;
- ▶ organisation of **safe public assemblies, events**

**and demonstration** by securing protection of all individuals taking part in these activities;

- ▶ **support to innovative programmes and initiatives** encouraging and sustaining participation and deliberation of young people in public affairs;
- ▶ strengthen mechanisms of **monitoring and evaluation of young people's participation in consultation and deliberation** processes as well as provide feedback about the impact of these processes to all relevant actors;
- ▶ commitment of authorities and other relevant stakeholders to **zero-tolerance policies on hate speech and crime** supported by better legislation addressing the problem and more effective street-level implementation of this regulation.

## Autonomy of youth organisations

- ▶ smaller reliance on public funding and **expanding the income portfolio** of organisations outside public sector;
- ▶ trainings and programmes **elevating capacity** of youth organisations to **acquire funding outside their main source** (funding diversification, crowdfunding);
- ▶ **reduction** of unnecessary **bureaucratic burdens** draining already limited professional capacity of youth organisations (financial-accounting, legal, organisational), **provision of these services** to youth organisations **free of charge** as well as **pooling of already available official data** from other sources rather than requiring from organisations to report that;
- ▶ **removal of all thresholds** excluding less resourced youth organisations and non-formal youth groups **to acquire funding** (e.g., special legal statuses, mandatory private funding, necessity to demonstrate "unnatural" cross-sectoral ties; co-funding provisions, professional expertise related to impact assessment, advanced project management skills, demanding and constantly changing financial accounting procedures etc.);
- ▶ **assessment** of organisational performance **on the basis of qualitative indicators** thus moving from mere quantitative indicators measuring the number of participants, organisations, events to more impact-oriented indicators performed **on the basis of peer-review**.

And most of all, **having more trust in youth organisations** and giving them **appropriate credit** for giving a voice to young people and addressing their issues.

26 These recommendations are gathered from the surveyed youth organisation and do not necessarily represent the views of the European Youth Forum and/or of its Member Organisations.

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The Shrinking Youth Civic Spaces survey questionnaire is available upon request – contact [youthforum@youthforum.org](mailto:youthforum@youthforum.org)

