

Youth Progress Index

Brussels, Belgium
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Youth Progress and Civic Space



Acknowledgements

This report was produced by the European Youth Forum and Social Progress Imperative. It is part of a series accompanying the third edition of the Youth Progress Index. Visit www.youthprogressindex.org.

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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.

About the Social Progress Imperative

The Social Progress Imperative is a US-based nonprofit focused on redefining how the world measures success, putting things that matter to people's lives at the top of the agenda. Established in 2012, the Social Progress Imperative strives to improve the lives of people around the world by fostering research and knowledge sharing on social progress and using data to catalyse action.

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Structure of the Youth Progress Index

Basic Human Needs

Nutrition and Basic Medical care

- Infectious diseases
- Undernourishment
- Maternal mortality
- Child mortality
- Child stunting

Water and Sanitation

- Dissatisfaction with water quality
- Unsafe water, sanitation and hygiene
- Access to improved sanitation
- Access to improved water source

Shelter

- Dissatisfaction with housing affordability
- Household air pollution
- Usage of clean fuels and technology for cooking
- Access to electricity

Personal Safety

- Women not feeling safe to walk alone
- Money stolen
- Transportation related injuries
- Interpersonal violence
- Intimate partner violence

Foundations of Wellbeing

Access to basic Knowledge

- Women with no education
- Secondary school attainment
- Gender parity in secondary attainment
- Equal access to quality education
- Primary school enrollment

Access to Information and Communication

- Internet shutdown
- Access to online governance
- Internet users
- Mobile telephone subscriptions

Health & Wellness

- Depression
- Satisfaction with availability of quality healthcare
- Healthy life expectancy at 30
- Health problems preventing from activities
- Access to essential health services

Environmental Quality

- Lead exposure
- Outdoor air pollution
- Satisfaction with air quality
- Species protection
- Particulate matter pollution

Opportunity

Personal Rights

- Young members of parliament
- Freedom of peaceful assembly
- Freedom of expression
- Access to justice
- Freedom of religion
- Political rights

Personal Freedom & Choice

- Vulnerable employment
- Freedom over life choices
- Early marriage
- Young people not in education, employment or training
- Satisfied demand for contraception
- Perception of corruption

Inclusiveness

- Community safety net
- Openness towards immigrants
- Opportunity to make friends
- Acceptance of gays and lesbians
- Access to public services in urban and rural areas
- Discrimination and violence against minorities

Access to Advanced Education

- Women with advanced education
- Academic freedom
- Quality weighted universities
- Citable documents
- Expected years of tertiary schooling

153

Countries fully ranked

60

Social and Environmental Indicators

12

Years of Youth Progress mapped

The Youth Progress Index (YPI), produced biennially by the European Youth Forum in partnership with Social Progress Imperative, is the most comprehensive measurement of young people's wellbeing around the world. It examines essential aspects of youth wellbeing, such as access to sufficient food, housing, health services, opportunities to exercise socioeconomic and political rights, sense of inclusion, freedom from discrimination and the safeguarding of their future from environmental threats.

The third edition of the Youth Progress Index brings added value, inspiring young activists to embrace data for their advocacy. An interactive online dashboard allows for easy comparisons between countries and tracks progress over 12 years.

The Youth Progress Index fuels young people's impactful engagement.

Visit www.youthprogressindex.org

Set of YPI indicators and components used in the report

Definition

Freedom of Peaceful Assembly	Indicator of the Youth Progress Index. It represents the aggregated evaluation of country experts on the extent to which state authorities respect and protect the right of peaceful assembly
Freedom of Expression ¹	Indicator of the Youth Progress Index. It represents the aggregated evaluation of country experts on the ability of citizens to openly discuss political issues in private homes and in public spaces
Access to Justice	Indicator of the Youth Progress Index. It represents the aggregated evaluation of country experts on citizens' access to a secure and effective justice
Political Rights	Indicator of the Youth Progress Index. It represents evaluation of three subcategories of political rights: electoral process, political pluralism and participation, as well as the functioning of government on a scale from zero (no political rights) to 40 (full political rights). Some countries and territories score below zero on the questions used to compose the indicator.
Personal Rights	Component of the Youth Progress Index: Protection of individual rights and freedoms. The result is an aggregation of the results of its indicators: Freedom of peaceful assembly, Freedom of expression, Access to justice, Freedom of religion, Political rights, Young members of parliament
Inclusiveness	Component of the Youth Progress Index: The ability of a country to ensure inclusivity and equal opportunity for all. The result is an aggregation of the results of its indicators: Access to public services in urban and rural areas, Community safety net, Openness towards immigrants, Opportunity to make friends, Acceptance of gays and lesbians, Discrimination and violence against minorities

Set of external indicators used in the report

Engagement in independent political associations	The proportion of the population actively involved in independent political associations, such as environmental, animal rights or LGBTQI+ rights groups.
Political Violence	The use of physical force by individuals or entities outside the formal state structure to achieve political objectives, excluding profit-driven, crime-related violence. Politically oriented militias would be included here, although they might potentially be informally affiliated with the ruling party or the state. Political violence against persons excludes psychological and symbolic violence (such as destruction of objects).
Online Media Perspectives	The extent to which the major domestic online media outlets represent a wide range of political perspectives

¹ For the purpose of the current report, the indicator 'Freedom of Expression' refers to the calculations on the basis of the levels of 'Freedom of Discussion' globally as collected by Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem), Dataset Version 13.

Introduction

Civic space, whether online or offline, is the vital arena where individuals and organisations exercise their fundamental freedoms, such as those of association, expression, information or peaceful assembly. It refers to the environmental prerequisites for discussing pressing issues and actively engaging in public decision-making. The presence of a healthy civic space is essential to the flourishing of democracies and inclusive societies. In addition, an open civil society is an essential safeguard against the dangers of tyranny and oppression, and acts as a watchdog when rights, democracy or the rule of law are under threat.

Civil society organisations play a critical role in amplifying the voices of marginalised and vulnerable groups, highlighting the key challenges they face and ensuring that their concerns reach diverse audiences. Among these organisations, youth civil society plays a specific and much-needed role in the democratic fabric of society, as they advocate for youth rights, address issues specific to young people and empower them as catalysts for change and social progress.

However, recent years have been marked by a disturbing trend of shrinking civic spaces, including those of youth organisations. Research shows a worrying trend of global authoritarian backlash against civil society and human rights defenders, characterised by phenomena such as threats and attacks, protests, disruption, funding and administrative restrictions and censorship or intimidation.²

Youth organisations face numerous obstacles, including changes in legal status, funding restrictions, disproportionate reporting requirements and smear campaigns. Increasingly hostile conditions around the world for civil, political and social engagement hinder the ability of youth organisations to participate freely in political processes and prevent them from performing their role representing the views and needs of young people and safeguarding their rights towards decision-makers.

The present report utilises the data of the Youth Progress Index from 2011-2022, and illustrates - with figures - the development and decrease of youth civic spaces around the world, as well as the correlation between specific civic freedom enablers, civic space deterrents and access to rights of young people.

2 CIVICUS - [CIVICUS Monitor](#) (2023)

Evolution of Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Freedom of Expression 2011-2022

One of the main enablers of a healthy democracy is **freedom of assembly**. Freedom of assembly refers to the fundamental right of individuals to hold meetings, strikes, protests and - since the introduction of digital tools - online assemblies and actions with the purpose of mobilising the population to express grievances or positions.

The right to peacefully gather, protest and express their opinions in public without fear of retribution is essential for young people and youth organisations. It enables them to advocate for social change and raise awareness

on certain topics in public without fear of retribution by state or corporate actors. Protests and gatherings aim to exert influence on public policymaking processes, which ultimately strengthens democracy and promotes citizen participation as well as governmental accountability. Despite their positive social benefits, research shows that civil society organisations experience significant obstacles at the time of organising public assemblies or demonstrations. What is more, those civil society organisations representing discriminated groups - including young people - face further barriers.³

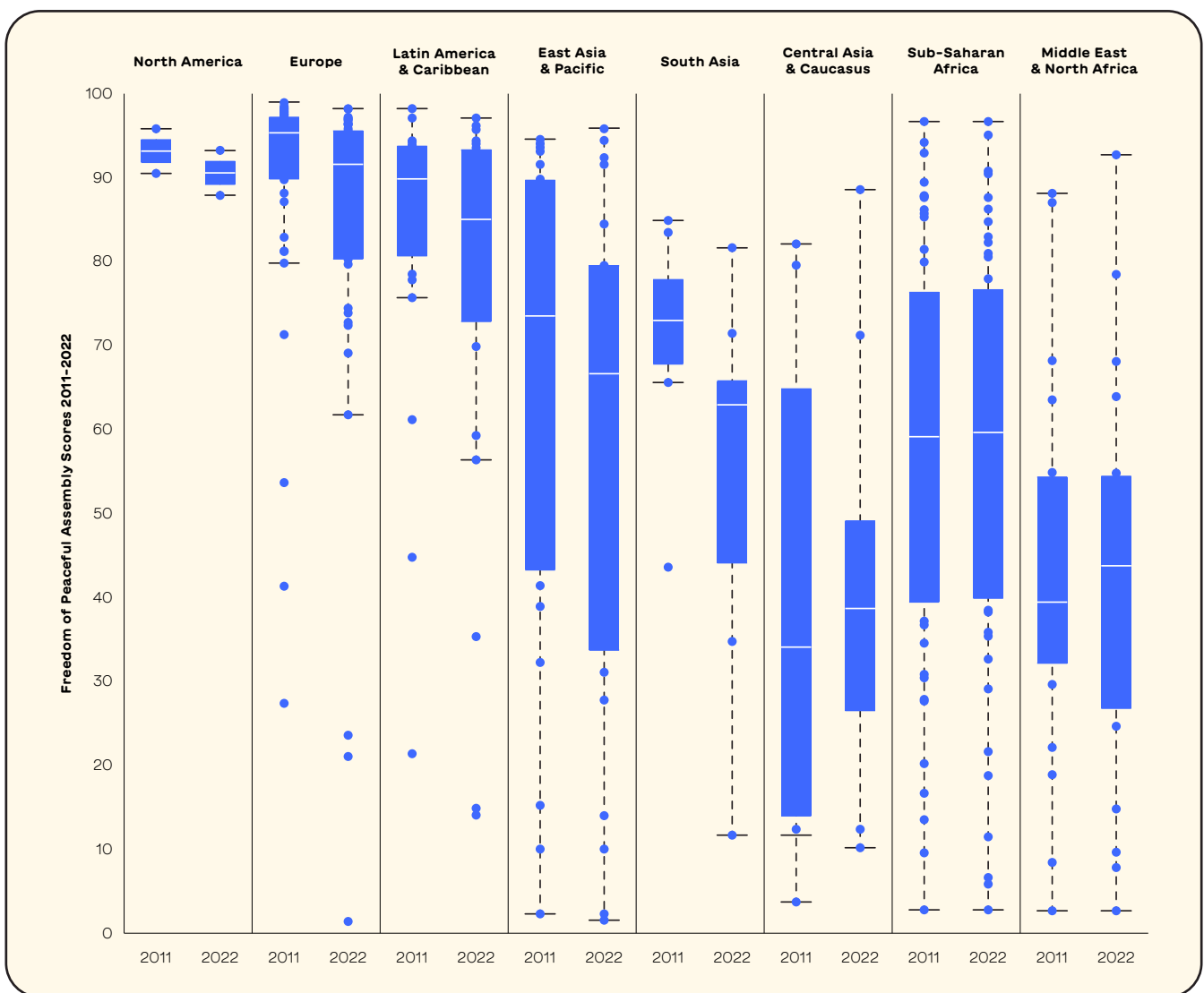


Figure 1: Freedom of peaceful assembly scores by region in 2011-2022

3 UN (2014) - Report of the Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association (with a focus on most-at-risk and discriminated groups)

Across the world, the extent to which freedom of assembly is respected varies significantly among regions, as is seen in Figure 1. In 2022, North America⁴ maintained a high median score of 90.6 and the standard deviation remained low (2.73), indicating a consistently high level of freedom of peaceful assembly with minimal variation. Europe and Central Asia had a median score of 87.5 - lower than the 91.6 of 2011 - and a slightly higher standard deviation of 26.7, suggesting some variability in the region's performance compared to 2011. Latin America and the Caribbean have a median score of 85.0 and a standard deviation of 23.1, indicating a relatively stable performance with moderate variation. The Middle East and North Africa region have a median score of 43.8 - the only region where the degree to which freedom of peaceful assembly increased when compared with 2011 - and a standard deviation of 26.0, implying continuing regional disparities and challenges.

Some regions have a consistently high level of freedom with little variation among countries, while others experience greater fluctuation and a wider range of scores, indicating ongoing challenges and potential disparities within these regions. Most regions, however, reflect a general decrease in the freedom of peaceful assembly score as compared to 2011. If we look specifically at the OSCE participating States, the average has decreased by 8.77 in the last 11 years. Only 10 countries reported improvements in their results, whereas 34 countries suffered a decline. The remaining eight, within the country sample available to the Youth Progress Index⁵, stalled. A similar trend is visible among the Council of Europe Member States, decreasing on average by 9.21 points.

4 In the methodology of the YPI, North America is defined as consisting of only two countries: The United States of America and Canada.

5 The source of the dataset does not include Andorra, Holy See, Liechtenstein, Monaco and San Marino.

Top increases and decreases in Peaceful Assembly scores (Council of Europe Members) 2011 to 2022

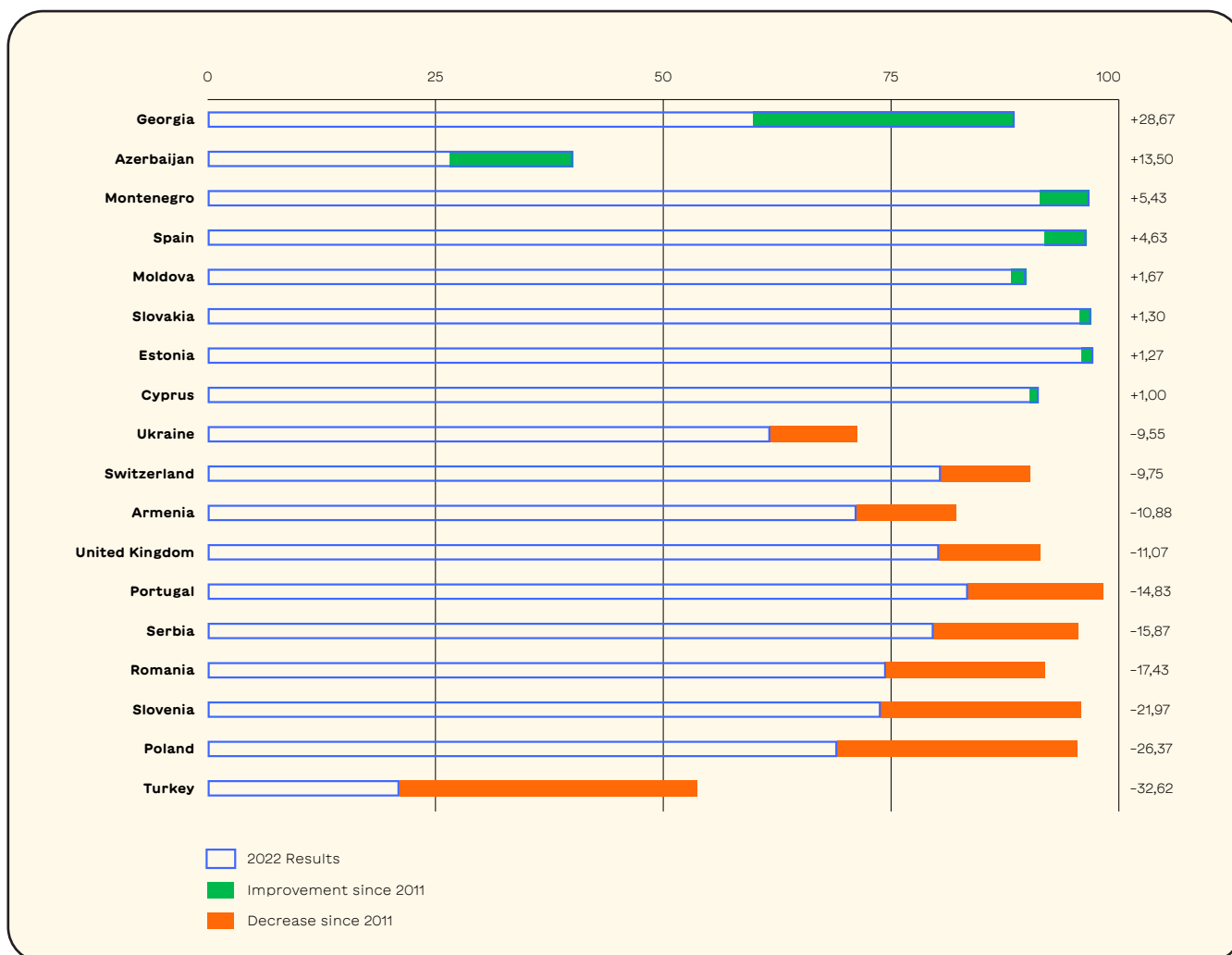


Figure 2 illustrates the changes in Peaceful Assembly scores among Council of Europe Member States from 2011 to 2022. The graph focuses on the 8 only countries that showed improvement and the 10 countries with the most significant declines in scores during this period

This highlights the need for focused efforts to address specific issues and ensure the protection of this important right in all regions, as well as the need for a coordinated approach by global strategic actors such as international organisations like the European Union or United Nations.

Similar to the freedom of assembly, **freedom of expression** is a cornerstone of social and political freedoms and fundamental rights; the degree to which citizens enjoy this right is an accurate indicator of an enabling environment for youth organisations. A successful safeguard of civic spaces by definition requires that all people are able to express themselves freely in public, including when it

comes to criticising governmental policies and actions, as well as holding government actors to account without fear of repercussions.⁶

However, freedom of expression is hindered by state actors worldwide through, for example, the application of surveillance mechanisms or retribution and threats against certain narratives unaligned with theirs. Furthermore, the widespread use of social media generates an environment that also poses threats to the practice of civic and political freedoms of young people; youth being one of the most active users of social media.⁷ Furthermore, the lack of regulation of social media is generating

6 OECD (2022) - *The Protection and Promotion of Civic Space. Strengthening Alignment with International Standards and Guidance*

7 UNICEF (2020) - *Digital civic engagement by young people*

an environment where disinformation on any issue or any person can easily become widespread, while algorithms developed by commercial actors often keep us in our echo chambers. Where social media companies have tried to create their own content moderation rules, freedom of

expression can also be harmed by the erroneous removal of respectful content. This creates a tension between different groups of society, leading to the brutalisation of public debate and political polarisation.

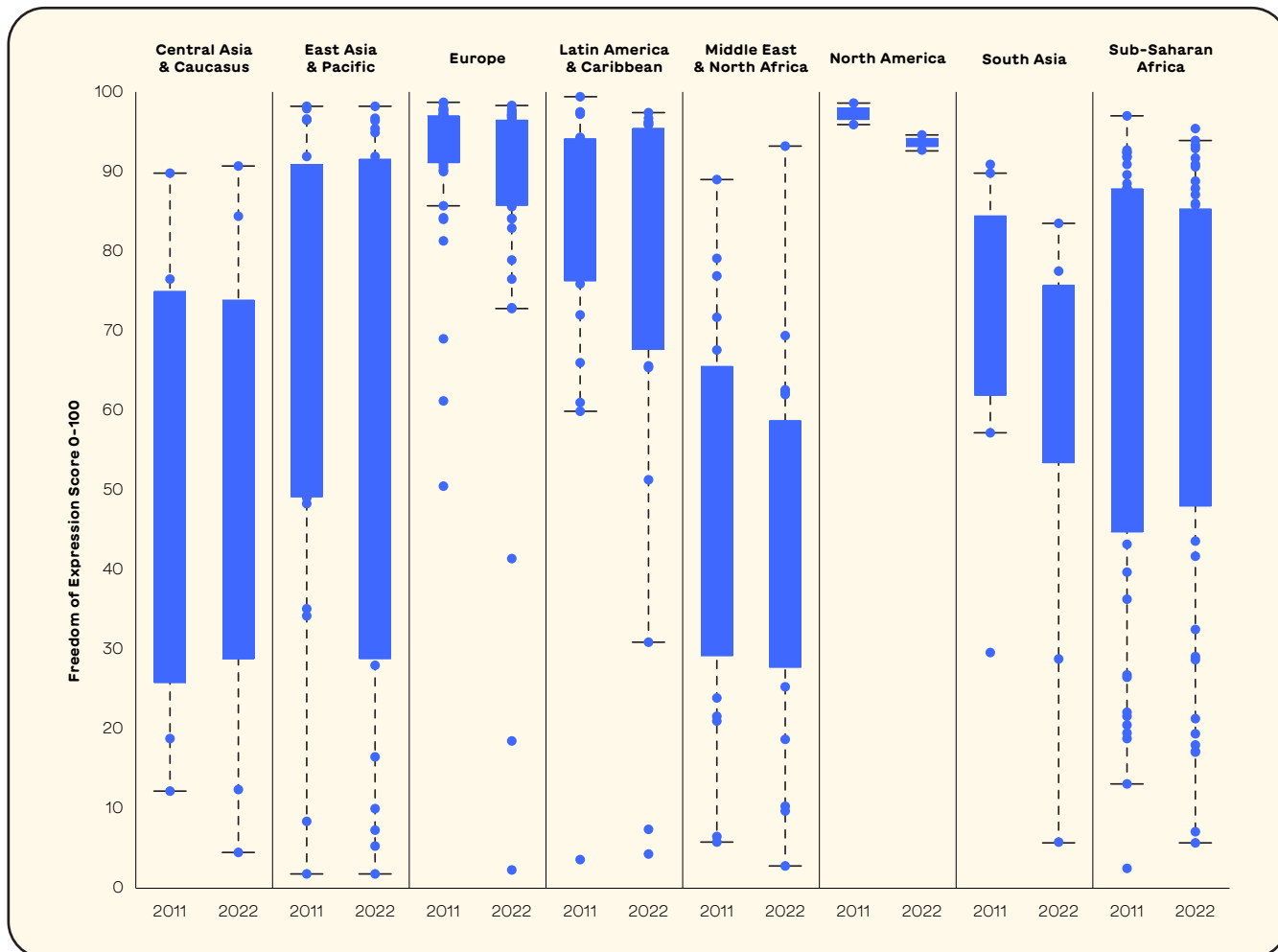


Figure 3: Freedom of Expression scores by region in 2011 and 2022

Figure 3 shows that freedom of expression is not fully guaranteed throughout the regions of the world. Between 2011-2022, the extent to which young people enjoy this freedom has, to varying degrees, steadily decreased almost everywhere, with the exclusion of Central Asia and Latin America - albeit with concerning national exceptions. Specifically among the OSCE-participating States, the average freedom of expression scores have seen a decline of more than 8 points during the last 12 years, decreasing from 86.92 in 2011 to 78.41 in 2022.

Union Agency for Fundamental Rights has reported that “new provisions in some countries criminalise political speech or speech that is normally protected by the right to freedom of expression”. Moreover, the prior years saw states worldwide capitalising on the pandemic in order to enforce unwarranted limitations on the freedom of expression. This has involved imposing censorship on individuals and civil society critical of certain governments, passing laws that enable the suppression of dissent and neglecting incidents of attacks on journalists and activists due to their opinions.⁸

To further illustrate this, in its latest report *Europe’s Civil Society: Still Under Pressure* (2022), the European

8 CIVICUS (2021) - COVID-19 and freedom of expression: A global snapshot of restrictions

Despite differences between regions in how much young people can enjoy freedom of assembly and expression, all regions of the globe - to varying degrees - experienced a decline in freedom of expression between 2011-2022. More importantly, this provides tangible evidence of the shrinking civic space of young people in Europe and the world. Furthermore, it suggests that the decrease in

an enabling environment for civil society - and particularly for young people - to exercise their rights and freedoms is influenced by broader trends extending beyond just national or domestic contexts.⁹ As such, this requires not just adequate policy responses from local and national governments, but also a common response from regional actors and international organisations.

Inclusiveness vs Fundamental Freedoms & Political Violence

Contemporary comparisons of the correlation between fundamental freedoms and other indicators also provide evidence of the need to tackle a wide range of policy areas

in order to pave the way towards a fully enabling environment in which youth organisations can thrive.

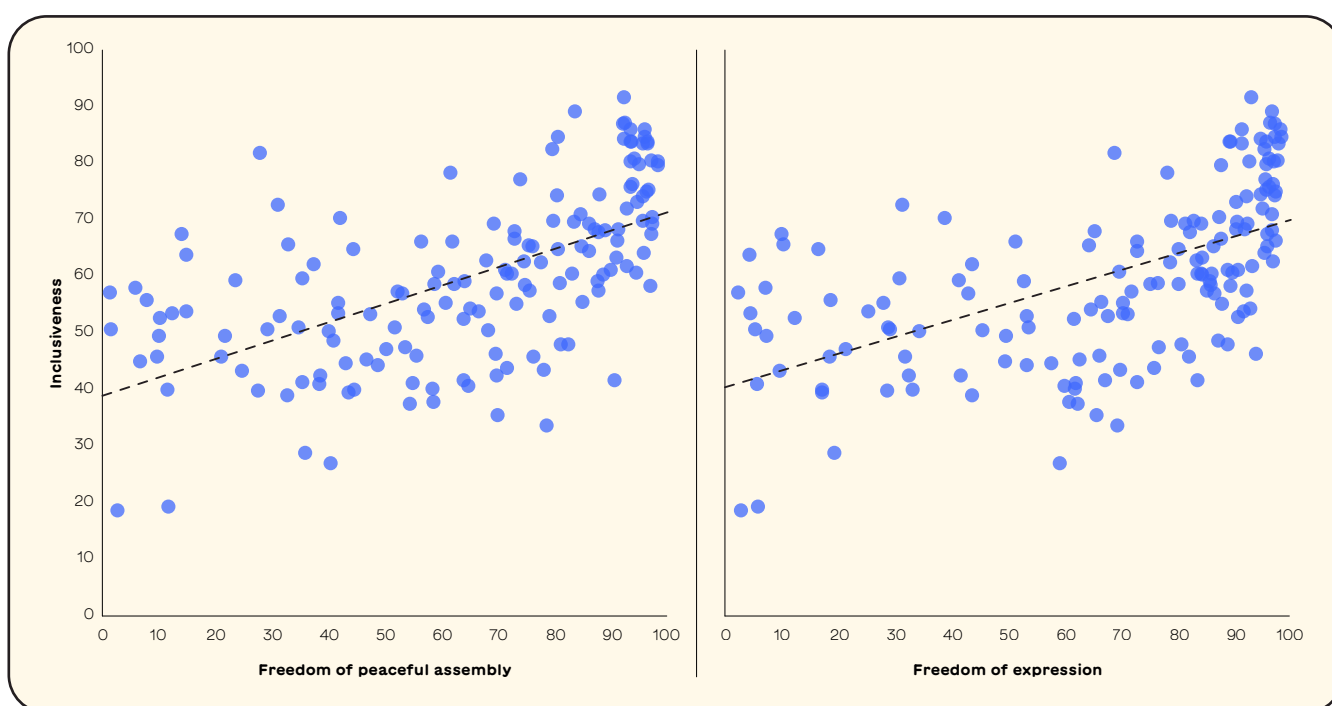


Figure 4 Inclusiveness score in 2022 vs Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Freedom of Expression in 2022

More specifically, our research points out that **higher rates of freedom of expression are associated with higher rates of inclusiveness**, defined as the possibility for all young individuals, in their diversity, to be a contributing part of society (Figure 4).¹⁰ This clearly showcases that jeopardising public debate directly impacts the degree of young people's acceptance of diversity and heterogeneity. When the right of youth to freely express themselves is curtailed, rates of inclusiveness drop and fertile ground for hate speech and discrimination arises. At the same time,

when there is greater freedom for people to exercise their right to gather peacefully, there is also greater openness from young people, for example towards the LGBTQI+ community or immigrants, facilitating the process for all young people to be adequately included in society.

Higher scores of **freedom of assembly also showcase a correlation with higher inclusiveness scores**. This hints at freedom of assembly being conducive to an inclusive society where different groups can coexist, engage in

9 European Youth Forum (2022) - [Position Paper on Safeguarding Civic Space for Young People in Europe](#)

10 'Inclusiveness' in this report refers to the aggregate of the 2022 Youth Progress Index scores of: Access to public services in urban and rural areas, Community safety net, Openness towards immigrants, Opportunity to make friends, Acceptance of gays and lesbians, Discrimination and violence against minorities.

constructive dialogue and find common ground. The right to peacefully gather and protest allows marginalised and at-risk groups to come together, express their concerns and participate in public discourse. In addition, it facilitates society making aware of their existence and concerns, leading to wider recognition and understanding of diverse perspectives. When countries prioritise and protect the freedom of assembly, they also provide young people with a space to actively participate in public discourse and advocate for their rights.¹¹

deterrents against political violence, and ultimately to fostering an inclusive environment that encourages youth engagement and empowers young people to become agents of progress, promoting innovation, social justice, inclusion and sustainable development.

Recognising this relationship enables policy makers, civil society organisations and stakeholders to prioritise inclusiveness as a key driver of progress. By adopting policies and measures that protect fundamental freedoms and youth rights - while actively working to prevent and combat political violence - governments tap into the potential of their young population, in all its diversity. This fosters an environment where young people are able to participate actively in society without fear of retribution.

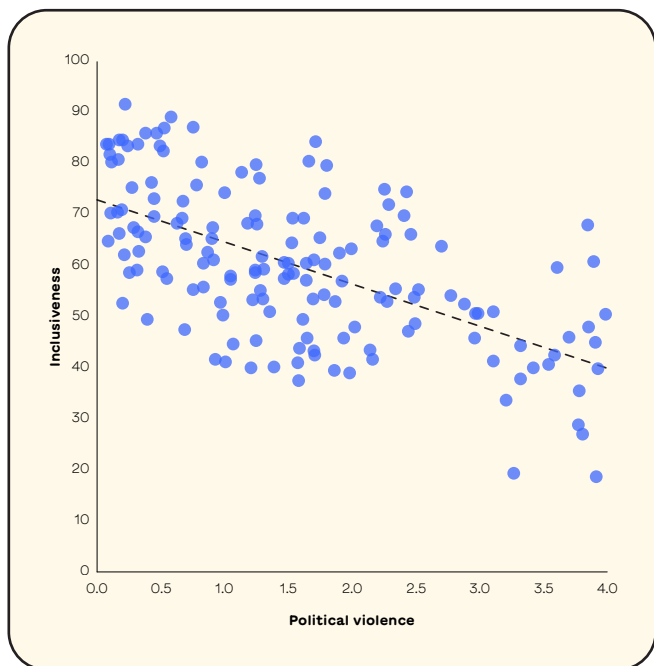


Figure 5: Relationship between Inclusiveness score and Political violence scores in 2022

In contrast, Figure 5 reveals that **high rates of political violence are negatively associated with youth inclusiveness**. Political violence, in the framework of the present report, refers to the use of force, coercion or intimidation by non-state actors to achieve political goals. When political violence is widespread in a society, it creates an atmosphere of fear, instability and exclusion. This violence undermines the democratic process, stifles dissent and discourages the meaningful participation of young people in decision-making processes.

Our report suggests a correlation between higher rates of the use of violence as a tool for political purposes by non-state actors and lower acceptance among young people of diverse, minority and discriminated groups. This underscores the importance of establishing adequate

11 United Nations Office of the Secretary General's Envoy on Youth (2021) - 'If I Disappear': Global Report on Protecting Young People in Civic Space

The relation between political rights of young people and an enabling rule of law environment

Respect for the rule of law is fundamental to the effective protection of youth rights and for the safeguarding of a thriving space for civil society organisations to perform their functions in society. Access to secure and effective justice is at the core of a well-functioning rule of law system, and a crucial safeguard for the rights and freedoms of young people. What is more, access to a justice system that guarantees a fair protection of rights is enshrined throughout the European Convention on Human Rights - Articles 6 and 7, the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union - Articles 47 to 50 - as well as in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights - Articles 7 to 11.

Our research showcases and supports the need - beyond ratification - for proper implementation of these articles. This can be achieved through the inclusion of both adequate legal mechanisms, as well as the promotion of a justice system that considers young people's particular social, physical, economic, cultural and educational realities. Not only that, but more importantly, secure and effective access to justice seems to be the essence of a well-functioning democracy that values the participation of young people. Figure 6 showcases the clear **correlation between higher rates of effective access to justice and higher political rights scores of young people.**

Regarding the latter, equal access to justice is an important stepping stone for young people's full realisation of their political rights, including their participation in a politically plural society. Ultimately, a well-functioning rule of law system, along with robust participatory mechanisms that represent the diversity of voices in society, is translated into more resilient and empowered democracies. Those democracies hold respect and safeguards for human rights and fundamental freedoms at their core.¹²

Conversely, civil society organisations across the world also play an important role in enabling access to judicial mechanisms, as well as in contributing to the effective functioning of the justice system and to the respect of the rule of law as a whole.¹³ More importantly, the functions that civil society - including youth - perform in society through, for example, advocacy and acting as a watchdog, are essential for the realisation of an adequate rule of law system. This is further suggested by the higher levels of access to justice in those countries where the political rights of young people are further respected and promoted.

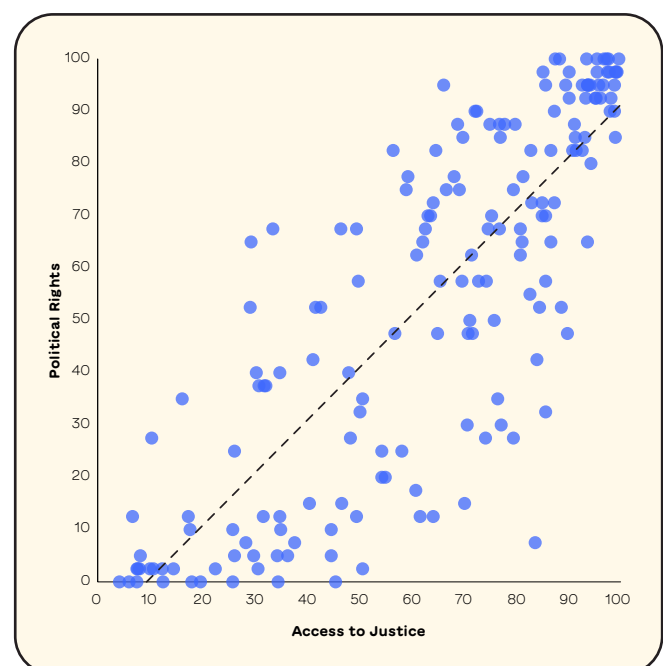


Figure 6: Access to Justice vs Political Rights based on 2022 scores

Personal Rights, Engagement in independent political associations and online media perspectives

Youth civil society - and particularly youth-led organisations - are often more vulnerable to attacks and retributions than other civil society sectors. This is mainly due to the high turnover of engaged individuals, the heavy reliance on the work of volunteers for their day-to-day

functioning - particularly at local level - and the struggle to access meaningful funding opportunities tailored to their structure and reality. In spite of this, research shows that young people face regular and specific challenges derived from oppressive actions from state actors.¹⁴

12 European Civic Forum (2023) - [Civic Space Report 2023](#)

13 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2022) - [Europe's Civil Society: Still Under Pressure](#)

14 European Youth Forum (2020) - [Report on Safeguarding Civic Space for Young People in Europe](#)

Creating the conditions for an encouraging environment for young people to actively engage in independent political associations is a fundamental aspect of a well-func-

tioning society. What is more, our research suggests that this is connected with the extent to which young people enjoy personal rights across the globe.

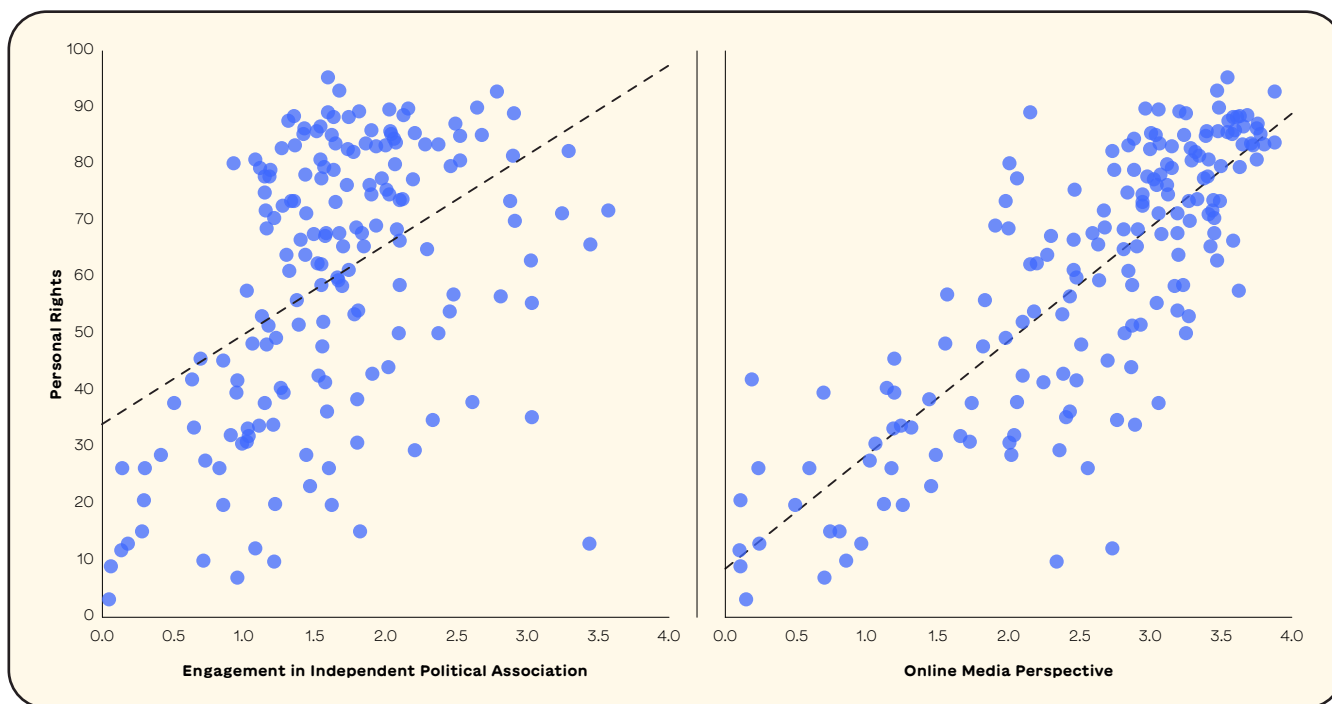


Figure 7: Personal Rights score vs Engagement in Independent Political Association and Online media Perspective in 2022.

As seen in Figure 7, our analysis reveals a positive correlation between the **proportion of young people engaged in independent political associations and the score of their personal rights**. When young people engage in organisations with a political motive independent from state actors, they gain the space to advocate for their own rights, voice their concerns and influence policy decisions. Involvement in these associations strengthens their collective voice, thereby contributing to the protection and extension of youth rights.

Participation in independent organisations with a political motive is only possible in a context where public institutions facilitate meaningful registration processes for civil society organisations, provide adequate conditions for the running of their operations and offer access to fair and appropriate funding opportunities. However, civil society organisations, and specifically youth organisations, have reported suffering pressure and experiencing barriers on those aspects, which ultimately stand at the core of the freedom of association. The impact of this on the proper functioning of our democracy is likely to be

high: if young citizens are discouraged from exercising their freedom of association from early on, not only will their own personal rights be negatively impacted, but it is likely that their future participation in democratic processes will also be hindered.¹⁵

Similarly, Figure 7 also shows the positive correlation between **the extent to which major domestic online media outlets represent a wide range of political perspectives and youth personal rights**. With the proliferation of digital platforms, online media has become a powerful tool for disseminating information, shaping public discourse and influencing political agendas. For example, online media that portrays a wide range of political opinions and views helps to raise awareness, mobilise support and hold authorities accountable. A society where diverse voices and perspectives are represented and have a space in online media creates the conditions for young people to further access their rights. This positive correlation thus underscores the importance of promoting a dynamic and independent online media

15 European Youth Forum (2022) - [Position Paper on Safeguarding Civic Space for Young People in Europe](#)

landscape, which reflects the diversity of the domestic political realities.

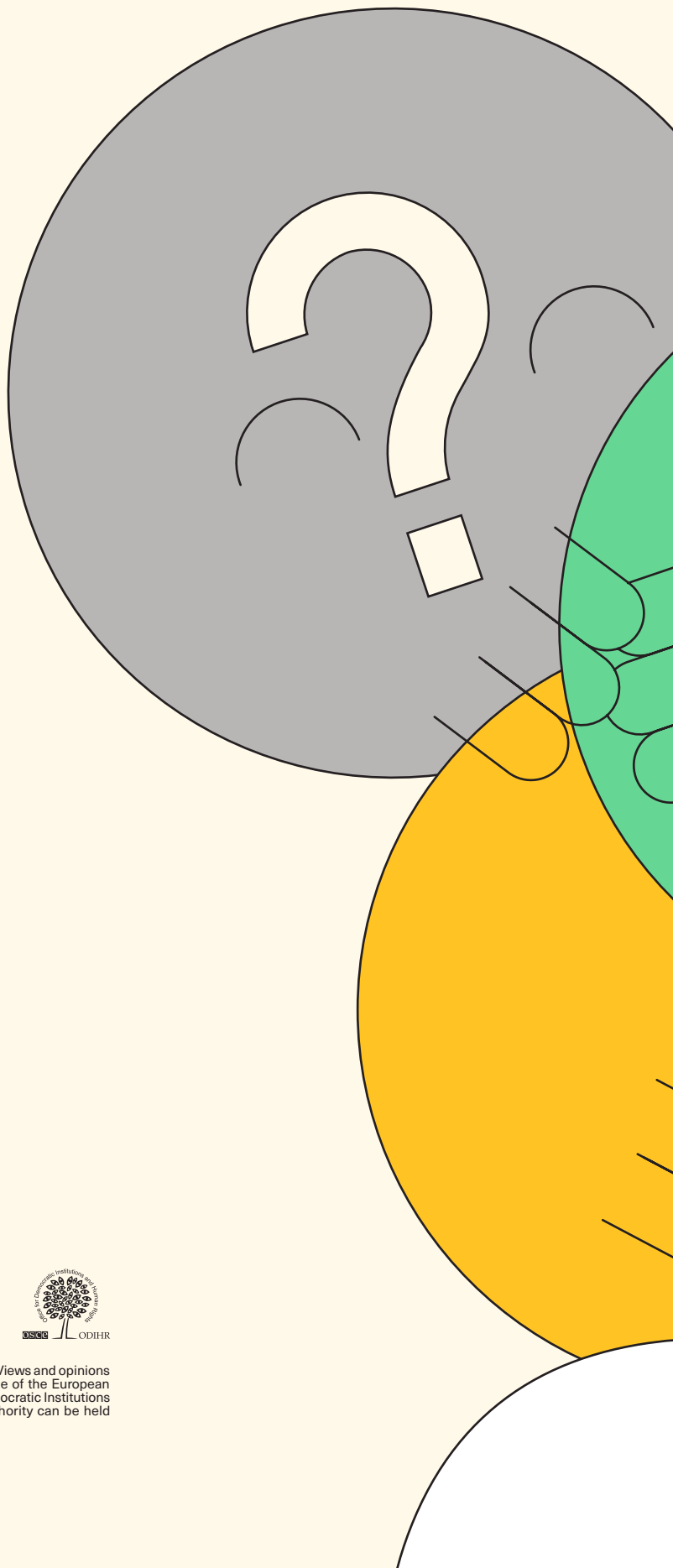
However, it is important to acknowledge that not all young people have equal access to digital spaces and online media - and by extension to exercise their freedom of information - and may lack the necessary skills to navigate them. This digital divide creates a societal one, which efforts should be made to address and bridge. Thus, it is crucial to ensure that young people from marginalised backgrounds are able to access the digital realm equally, and are provided with the necessary competencies to navigate it and participate in it.

Conclusion

The freedoms of expression, information, association, peaceful assembly and the right to privacy are fundamental civic freedoms that enable effective civic participation. The respect of the fundamental freedoms of young people - and indeed everyone - is an essential precondition for the good governance and vitality of any democratic society. Recognising and supporting these connections are crucial steps towards the wellbeing and progress of young people and the full realisation of their rights. It is crucial that international organisations, as well as governments at all levels, recognise these connections and adapt their policies accordingly.

In addition, online spaces need to be regulated effectively to ensure equal access to quality information and to enhance young people's participation. Fostering the participation of young people in civic engagement associations¹⁶ - a basic element of freedom of association - and respecting and promoting diverse and independent media are essential elements for the protection of the personal rights of young people. Moreover, these are key elements for youth progress globally, and as such they should be safeguarded and protected.

¹⁶ The proportion of the population actively involved in associations, such as environmental, animal rights or LGBTIQ+ rights groups. This indicator is defined as 'Engagement in independent political associations' by v-dem.



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