



Resolution on Combating shrinking space with expanding opportunities for youth organisations, national youth councils and international non-governmental youth organisations

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As we see today there are tendencies all over the world by governments and political groups to undermine strength and positions of the free democratic civil society youth sector. Perceiving active and independent youth civil society sector as a fundamental ground to build just and even opportunities for youth to have their voices raised, heard and involved in decision making processes and policies about youth itself and other common for society's topics, we realise that the problem of shrinking space is highly important and we, the European youth, demand for expanding of civic space!

The problem of shrinking space can be perceived from different angles and in different places in Europe and the world:

- Shrinking civic space is often connected to the rise of new political forces. These political forces secure the power in their hands, trying to weaken the position of other actors, both in the political and civic spheres. In Belarus the processes of shrinking space for civil society organisations (CSOs) have been an issue since 1995. As a result, when it comes to youth organisations in Belarus, in 2019 we see that their number has significantly decreased, and they struggle to overcome the barriers posed by the government. Some CSOs were forcefully closed, such as the Belarusian National Youth Council 'RADA', the Belarusian Student Alliance, Gay Belarus etc. Despite these facts, some organisations still continue their work with or without the official registration and are still fully recognised internationally, thanks to the support of the international community and its bodies.

- Persecution of CSOs, which do not fit in governmental ideology or work on strengthening democratic movements, is also one of the trends today. Recent developments in Hungary and previously in Russia made internationally supported CSOs victimised as Foreign Agents, leading to many barriers in conducting their work and even moving out of the country. Another part of this story is a seizing or direct interfering in activities of democratic organisations, forcefully changing or appointing board members, office workers for making them fully controlled youth representatives.

- Economic blackmailing of the youth sector has been a common case on the national as well as European level in recent years. In other countries, like in Belarus, the trend has reached its final status: there are no public youth grants available at all and all the budget provided by the state to the youth sector is allocated to governmentally controlled organisations (BRSM). In Hungary, if the National Youth Council would want to access governmental funding, they would strictly have to cooperate with the government. Some governments go even further to create their youth GoNGOs and participate in domestic and international events and calls for proposals falsely claiming to be democratic representatives of youth.

- When we speak about youth policies and decision-making processes on youth-related issues, we still see that paternalism is prevailing. Objectified and not even perceived as partners of the discussions, the forgotten youth organisations are trying to demand that

their voices are taken into account all over Europe.

- Access to public information is restricted by the government and, therefore, is a challenge for young people. National legal internet portal of Belarus provides information only on paid subscription. Also in many of the countries, media and the access to information and expression has become increasingly difficult. Media outlets are either owned and controlled by the State or private media sector is heavily regulated. Governments are not transparent and curate information to legitimize the State's rule.

- Another development is the increasing difficulty of getting real information. Fake news are used to attack civil society organisations and to skew the "opinion" of the people. Paid trolls are used to move the discourse in a direction that does not serve civil society and the youth.

- Non-formal unregistered youth groups and initiatives are left behind in all processes despite the fact that they are active. Public authorities ignore non-formal groups and their voices. In Belarus until July 2019 there was a criminal law 193.1 according to which a person who acts on behalf of unregistered / non-formal organisation could go to prison for up to 2 years. 18 people were found guilty for this. Now this article is substituted by administrative law with fines up to 500 Euro for each case.

- Young people face unique challenges in accessing resources and opportunities (unemployment, access to education in general and quality education in specific). The youth is seen as the future but not included in the development paradigm of the present. For example, formal education in Belarus is controlled by the State and is often a part of the State. On the other hand, non-formal education constitutes a part of civil society. In order to understand non-formal education in Belarus, it is important to acknowledge the state of civil society in the country, as well as its interaction with the State.¹ The Bologna Process in Belarus, which started in 2015 as a Road Map, is still far from final stages and student organisations or NGOs are not included by authorities despite agreements.

- The rise of antidemocratic ideologies, hate speech and hate crimes also need to be acknowledged. For example, the authorities of Belarus continue to refuse to allow lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex persons to exercise a number of rights. Same-sex relationships are stigmatized and civil society organisations working on related issues repeatedly have their requests for accreditation rejected. The inter-agency plan for human rights does not contain any recommendation aimed at ending discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex persons, thus failing to acknowledge it as a part of the reality of the Belarusian society.²

¹ Analytical paper: Non-formal education in Belarus: expanding the learning space [Electronic Resource] – <https://belarusdigest.com/story/analytical-paper-non-formal-education-in-belarus-expanding-the-learning-space/> Date of access: 21.09.2019

² Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Belarus [Electronic Resource] – https://ap.ohchr.org/documents/dpage_e.aspx?si=A/HRC/38/51 Date of access: 21.09.2019

All these barriers and obstacles lead to many challenges and problems for youth and youth organisations specifically and the most important challenges are easy to name: apolitical youth, lack of self belief that youth can really change anything, lack of resources and opportunities, lack of information, lack of participation in decision-making processes. Keeping these as main challenges that today's youth face, we urge for immediate actions from youth organisations, national governments, European institutions:

The European Youth Forum and its member organisations:

Commit to provide support to youth organisations, national youth councils and international non governmental youth organisations in situations when national governments violate autonomy and interfere with inner processes in youth organisations, national youth councils and international non governmental youth organisations until the autonomy of youth organisations, national youth councils and international non governmental youth organisations is not restored and not endangered.

Express their support to all marginalised and victimised youth CSOs in oppressive conditions and influence national authorities to grant autonomy to the youth sector.

Call upon national governments and international institutions to support and provide youth organisations, national youth councils and international non governmental youth organisations with sufficient, long-term, transparent and reliable financing without requirements.

Call upon local, national and European institutions to follow a spirit of equal partnership and the inclusion of youth in decision-making, policy and implementation of youth programmes.

Commit to addressing the topics of youth policy actively to the media and pursuing better visibility.

To acknowledge the specific role of non-formal youth groups and include them in discussions and decision-making process on youth issues.

Call upon national governments to fully support recognition of non-formal education and its methods.

Call upon the European Union, the Council of Europe, the United Nations and their Member States to guarantee sufficient opportunities for young people from all backgrounds to participate in the decision-making processes within the international institutions.

Call upon the European States and international institutions to recognise children and youth organisations as the promoters and protectors of democracy by enabling and expanding the democratic space.

Demand the European States and international institutions to respect, guard and enable freedom of assembly everywhere in Europe for youth organisations, national youth councils and international non governmental youth organisations.

Act in solidarity with youth organisations in other parts of the world with shrinking democratic space, learn from them and support them.