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**REPORT**  
**of the consultative meeting**

**Shrinking space for civil society:  
the impact on young people and their  
organisations**

**organised by the Youth Department of the Council of Europe  
in co-operation with  
the Council of Europe Conference of INGOs and the European Youth  
Forum**

**Strasbourg 7 – 8 November 2018**

The views expressed in this report are the views of the rapporteur and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the Council of Europe

## INTRODUCTION

This consultative meeting brought together 50 participants with the aim to explore the phenomenon of what has been referred to as the “shrinking civic space”,<sup>1</sup> its effect on young people and their organisations, and to examine models that are being used to ensure the meaningful participation of civil society.

The group of participants consisted of representatives of local, national and international youth organisations, and other stakeholders, such as representatives of: national governments, different Council of Europe bodies including the statutory bodies of the youth sector, other international organisations, donor organisations, research institutions and think tanks, and human rights institutions.

The meeting was organised by the Youth Department of the Council of Europe in partnership with the European Youth Forum and the Council of Europe Conference of International NGOs.

The meeting set out to:

- explore the challenges and restrictions faced by civil society organisations – with particular emphasis on young people and their organisations – to their activities and involvement in public life that are in contradiction with the relevant Council of Europe and other international standards;
- allow for in-depth reflection on and discussion of the current situation and its consequences, including various perspectives from civil society, governments, international organisations, and other stakeholders;
- explore positive examples that promote civil society participation, including mechanisms used by national and/or local/regional authorities and initiatives/practices used by civil society;
- identify realistic and effective courses of action for the Council of Europe youth sector, and possibly other sectors, to support youth participation on local, national, and international levels in the current political and legal environment.

The participants in the meeting came up with recommendations and ideas for the Joint Council on Youth (CMJ) on how to effectively address, within its terms of reference, the challenges faced by youth civil society organisations and the restrictions on their work, as well as examples of good practice that can be promoted in the States Parties to the European Cultural Convention.

The idea of the meeting was born a long time ago. As Anja Olin Pape, Chair of the Advisory Council on Youth, said in her introductory speech:

When two and a half years ago, the Advisory Council on Youth started working, we mapped the topics that we were already working on and what was missing, and this meeting is a result of that mapping. We have received numerous reports from national youth councils, international non-governmental youth organisations and more, both directly and from our partners like the

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<sup>1</sup> The term “shrinking civic (or civil) space” has been used in this report, however various contributors to the debates and exchanges suggested this term should be changed as it focuses on the negative consequences of action (or inaction) by governments.

European Youth Forum and others. We started thinking about what role we could play, deciding that the first step was to put it on the agenda of the Joint Council, as well as to push it up on the agenda within the Council of Europe and the member states. We had a thematic debate last March, where we discussed similar questions to those you will be discussing here today and heard great contributions from the Conference of INGOs as well as Dona Kosturanova from the Youth Educational Forum, who is also here today.

The results of the consultative meeting will feed into the work of the Joint Council on Youth, which will debate the recommendations and make decisions on the measures to be taken within its mandate.

This report was developed with the intention of providing an overview of the main discussions that took place during the meeting, together with the recommendations as proposed by the participants. It does not aim to present a detailed account of what transpired in the meeting, rather, its main purpose is to inform the Joint Council on Youth about the most relevant findings from the meeting and provide ideas for measures it may wish to take to address the issue of shrinking civil space and its impact on youth organisations.

## **THE BROADER CONTEXT: DEMOCRATIC NORMS, CIVIL SOCIETY AND SHRINKING SPACE**

The topic of shrinking space for youth organisations is “about youth and not just about youth, it is about the Council of Europe and not just about the Council of Europe” as Matjaz Gruden, Director of Democratic Participation in the Council of Europe, put it at the beginning of the meeting. He started his address by quoting the Secretary General of the Council of Europe who, in his latest report on the State of human rights, democracy and the rule of law: Role of Institutions, Threats to Institutions, confirmed that:

Oppressive legislation has been introduced in recent years, despite the Council of Europe’s attempts at persuading those governments to change course. In addition, a new, more insidious way of undermining these fundamental freedoms has emerged: invoking legitimate concerns such as the fight against corruption or against terrorism and the need for more transparency, while in fact distorting them and using them to attack selected NGOs and public events. Discrimination, notably on grounds of political views, religion, ethnic background or sexual orientation, is inflicted on the pretence of protecting the interests of society at large or of moral imperatives such as religious and traditional family values. Virulent government-led campaigns against selected associations, human rights defenders or civil society leaders at times amplify the adverse effects of such legislation.<sup>2</sup>

Mr Gruden suggested that the problem of shrinking space experienced by civil society touched one of the most existential challenges to the future of democratic institutions and the social and political model that had been built in Europe in the post-war decades. According to

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<sup>2</sup> State of Democracy, Human Rights and the Rule of Law - Role of institutions, Threats to Institutions, Report by the Secretary General of the Council of Europe, Council of Europe, p.47, available at <https://rm.coe.int/prems-199318-gbr-1201-rapport-sg-2018-web-a4/168090361c>.

Mr Gruden, “we do not need to spend a lot of time to agree that the situation is serious. The focus should be to understand why it is serious in order to know what to do about it” adding:

(...) shrinking space is not a coincidental transitional hiccup but it is the result of deliberate action against one of the pillars of democratic security, rule of law and a functioning democracy. The reason is that in the populist paradigm, civil society is a problem, it is a threat.

Therefore, according to Mr Gruden, the issue of the shrinking space for civil society should be seen within this populist paradigm, he reminded the participants that understanding populism as “doing what people want” is very simplistic and manipulative:

The populists see themselves as representing the people – presented often as a monolithic unique entity with singular interest and will – and in the name of that, they put themselves above all the systems of democratic society and the systems of checks and balances that have to exist in a functioning democracy. The judiciaries that oppose them are labelled as enemies of the people. Media that criticise them are named fake media or enemies of the people. Civil society that is exercising its democratic role is labelled as foreign agents or enemies of the people.

Matjaz Gruden clearly stated that youth organisations have a particular and important role to play in any response to the phenomenon of shrinking space. Young people should stand up and protect the institutions that are indispensable in a democracy. He concluded that in order for the institutions to function “they need the proper environment in which people understand, support and embrace democracy, rule of law and human rights, but in order to have that, you need democratic intelligence – skills, knowledge and attitudes, empathy and solidarity and historic memory – to understand what happens when there is no democracy or rule of law.”

Anna Rurka, President of the Conference of INGOs of the Council of Europe, who addressed the participants next, provided data confirming Matjaz Gruden’s statement quoting the Eurobarometer Standard from 2016 which showed that in 12 of the 28 member states of the European Union more than 50% of the population is not satisfied with the way that democracy works in their country. She added that:

(...) the shrinking civic space is a sign of the crises facing liberal democracy, but this specific problem needs a specific answer. Liberal democracy is a construction and is progressively developed in the member states. It has several components and each one needs a specific action and instrument to be protected or to be secured. If we want to provide an efficient answer we need to react at an early stage of the problem. With regard to the subject of our concern today, acting early means observing the interaction between negative labelling of NGOs and the restrictive steps taken by the state and undertaking action as soon as the labelling starts.

She also reminded the participants that the shrinking space for civil society is a complex phenomenon that can take many forms and underlined that all action in response to the shrinking space should start with a reflection on existing freedoms and rights – notably freedom of speech and freedom of assembly and association: what they really mean, how they

are implemented, what the role of the state is in promoting and protecting them, and in making sure all people can enjoy them:

(...) the state no longer needs a specific law, such as the “foreign agent” law adopted in the Russian Federation, to weaken NGOs in the public space. The labelling occurs through the rhetoric used, sometimes even through specific campaigns targeting certain national or international NGOs by name. The objective of that is the de-legitimisation of these NGOs which are most often human rights organisations. In the public eye, the speculation relating to foreign funding is associated with treason against the nation. (...) The starting point of all action should always be the analysis of existing and guaranteed freedoms and rights, both at the national and international level. The right to freedom of association and assembly, to freedom of expression and participation, and to freedom of movement are essential for democracy. (...) We know that these rights can be restricted when “necessary in a democratic society in the interests of national security or public safety, public order, in the name of protection of public health or the protection of the rights and freedoms of others”. However today, the threats and tensions come from the fact that the many restrictions do not respect the principle of proportionality and do not pursue a legitimate aim. The only compass we have regarding restrictions on rights is the European Convention on Human Rights, articles 17 and 18.

In her concluding remarks, Anna Rurka stated that in order to understand the problem and take its measure, we should look more at the consequences of the restrictions. She mentioned a few:

- weaker engagement of NGOs in public life and debate, caused by the ineffectiveness of participatory mechanisms and self-censorship or a lack of action by NGOs because of the risks involved;
- the prevention of NGOs from carrying out activities in the heart of local communities because of the labels attached to them;
- the disappearance of the smallest NGOs as they are unable to cope with the pressure and restrictions;
- the polarisation of society resulting from the division between the organisations considered as “acting in the public interest” and illegal “foreign agents” which prompt organisations wishing to benefit from state funding to follow the political line promoted by those in power;
- the severing of ties between national NGOs and the international NGOs of which they are members.

It is evident that the phenomenon of shrinking space for civil society is very complex. It needs to be seen in a wider perspective, taking into account the political, social and cultural contexts as only then one can try to understand its roots. At the same time, it is important to understand the consequences or impact it has, not only on civil society organisations, but on society at large.

## **VARIOUS PERSPECTIVES ON SHRINKING SPACE**

Are civil society organisations complicit in the shrinking space? This question was posed to the invited guests who took part in the first panel “Observing the “Shrinking space” – Perspectives of Council of Europe institutions, civil society, and academia” that took place during the first

day of the meeting. While the answers were negative, the panellists drew participants' attention to several aspects that should be taken into account when discussing the phenomenon of shrinking space for civil society:

- Veronika Bilková, Vice-President of the Venice Commission, highlighted that recent years had brought many changes on different levels: countries had changed (from liberal to illiberal), societies had changed – new challenges had appeared (migration or terrorism), NGOs had changed – they were more numerous, more political and also more professionalised, and therefore more distant from society at large. She stated that NGOs had become more political, which was a new phenomenon especially in Eastern Europe, and people were not able to grasp this new area of their activity, NGOs having previously been perceived as charities.
- The authorities were able to introduce restrictions on NGOs, apparently with the silent consent of society which was unable to show sufficient solidarity with the organisations being targeted. Richard Youngs from Carnegie Europe saw this problem as a result of the activity of many NGOs that were not able to build roots down to other actors in the (unorganised) society.
- Ewa Kulik-Bielinska, Director of the Stefan Batory Foundation in Poland, concurring with what Matjaz Gruden had said at the beginning of the meeting, said that populists or authoritarian regimes claimed to represent the nation, calling themselves the only legitimate voice for society. A harder line against civil society organisations was definitely one of the key elements of populist state policies. Opposition from civil society constituted a particular moral and symbolic problem for state authorities: it undermined the authorities' claims to be the only and exclusive moral representative of the nation. Therefore, they tried to make people understand that civil society had nothing to do with "the real nation". This definitely made the work of civil society organisations, especially the ones that were critical and voiced the concerns of weaker and disadvantaged social groups, more difficult, if not impossible.
- Raphaël Comte, the Parliamentary Assembly's General Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, put it differently. For him, democracy did not always bring the rule of law and human rights. In illiberal democracies, the country could have democratic decisions and elections while at the same time adopting new laws against organisations or minorities. He also mentioned the sanctions that had been put in place – suspending the right to vote for the Russian Federation in the Parliamentary Assembly – however, the same did not apply in the Committee of Ministers, as one of the participants said.
- Bojana Urumova, Deputy to the Director of the Office of the Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe stated that the phenomenon of the shrinking space for civil society pushed different organisations to develop survival strategies, such as changing their name or re-registering the organisation.

The narrative of the shrinking space for civil society causes many dilemmas. The term has been used by a number of organisations, such as the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human

Rights, Amnesty International or the European Parliament to describe various processes and measures taken by national governments to restrict the activity of civil society organisations.

During the panel discussion and in other parts of the consultative meeting, some participants and speakers argued that the term “shrinking space” focused on the negative consequences civil society suffered – from action or inaction by governments – whereas it would be essential to stress the potential of civil society to organise and stand up to the challenges they and their societies experienced. Veronika Bilková also pointed out that the term was reductionist and generalist, suggesting that all organisations suffered from restrictions of their activity, which was not necessarily the case. According to her, the term “shrinking space” assumed that, in the past, there had been a broad space for everyone, which was a myth. Richard Youngs added that the term “shrinking space for civil society” made the problem seem more innocuous than it actually was: the term was limited to a narrow sphere of organised civil society. He suggested that one should talk rather about threats to personal freedoms, then people may realise that it was about them and not only about organised civil society. One of the working groups during the meeting came up with the idea of calling it “enlarging spaces” to stress the action-oriented aspect of the phenomenon: organisations focusing on developing strategies and taking action to make sure the space was not shrinking but rather expanding. However, it was felt this approach may also raise many controversies and could meet with disagreement.

Raphaël Comte spoke of big international organisations that were sometimes perceived as keeping silent on the subject, especially in smaller countries. They did not seem to be doing much besides expressing “concern”. However the mandate of different international bodies was limited – sometimes they could only act on a request from the state or other entity, such as the Venice Commission. Richard Youngs explained that international organisations’ role was limited by their mandate and structurally they would always find it difficult to react in the way civil society expected; therefore, they seemed not to be the most important player in combating the shrinking space.

Many important documents have been published by these different bodies that can be helpful in understanding the phenomenon of shrinking space, for example:

- Joint Guidelines on Freedom of Association (Venice Commission) – based on the extensive case law of the European Court of Human Rights, among other standards, they illustrate key principles and give examples of good practice from individual states.
- Compilation of Venice Commission opinions concerning freedom of assembly and freedom of association – these two documents include compilations of extracts from opinions and reports/studies adopted by the Venice Commission on issues concerning the freedom of assembly and freedom of association.
- The Shrinking Space for Human Rights Organisations (Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights) – describes different measures undertaken by national governments in several member states of the Council of Europe that aim to limit freedom of expression, as well as the freedom of assembly and association of human rights organisations.
- Various resolutions on the phenomenon of shrinking space for civil society and the safety of human rights defenders adopted by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

All these documents are collected in the **“Compendium of Council of Europe documents related to youth NGOs and youth participation”** prepared for the consultative meeting. The aim of this Compendium is to provide civil society organisations, especially youth organisations – whether formal or non-formal – with various Council of Europe policy documents and statements that relate to young people, youth participation (or participation in general) and NGOs. It is primarily intended to support youth organisations in finding relevant policies or statements they can use to inform their work and develop or defend their stand on youth issues. It can also be helpful in understanding the role of youth NGOs and their work in the wider frame of human rights. The Compendium can be found [HERE](#).<sup>3</sup>

## SHRINKING YOUTH CIVIL SPACES

The world of youth organisations is very diverse – from informal youth groups and registered small NGOs to bigger networks and international organisations that bring together various entities under one umbrella, pursuing common goals.

The Committee of Ministers’ Recommendation on the legal status of non-governmental organisations in Europe (CM/Rec(2007)14)<sup>4</sup> recognises different types of NGO, such as formal (registered) and informal, membership-based and those without required membership, established both by individuals and groups. It states that NGOs should be free to pursue their objectives, which should be consistent with the principles of a democratic society, adding that NGOs should not be subject to direction from any public authority.

What is more, the recommendation on youth work (CM/Rec(2017)4), adopted by the Committee of Ministers in 2017, defines youth work as “a wide variety of activities of a social, cultural, educational, environmental and/or political nature by, with and for young people, in groups or individually.”<sup>5</sup>

Youth work is a social practice, it is about young people working together in the societies where they live, addressing issues of concern to them and dealing with the challenges they face. As Tomaz Dezelan from the University of Ljubljana put it in his presentation during the consultative meeting: youth organisations are laboratories of democracy and democratic innovation. His research,<sup>6</sup> conducted for the European Youth Forum, shows some interesting findings regarding the shrinking space for youth organisations:

- more than a third of the youth organisations surveyed have trouble accessing information, almost half have at least some fear of retribution as a result of expressing themselves;

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<sup>3</sup> Available at [www.coe.int/en/web/youth/compendium](http://www.coe.int/en/web/youth/compendium).

<sup>4</sup> Recommendation CM/Rec(2007)14 of the Committee of Ministers on the legal status of non-governmental organisations, Council of Europe, available at <https://rm.coe.int/16807096b7>.

<sup>5</sup> Recommendation CM/Rec(2017)4 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on youth work, Council of Europe, available at <https://rm.coe.int/1680717e78>.

<sup>6</sup> The summary is available at <https://rm.coe.int/2018-shrinkingcivicspacesforyouth-executivesummary/16808eb41b>.



- 42% of organisations do not feel completely free from government interference, a quarter of organisations experience undue restrictions and interference into their functioning;
- more than a third experience barriers to foreign funding, a quarter of organisations perceive a noticeable presence of market indicators (their work is evaluated against indicators used for companies);
- a quarter of organisations are not able to fully engage in advocacy and experience difficulties in participation;
- 87% detect at least minor influence of public authorities on their functioning, three quarters of organisations have rarely or never been invited to participate in policy formulation by local or European authorities;
- a third of organisations believe their opinion is not encouraged, a half that their opinion is not taken into account;
- one fifth of organisations believe young people have limited access to civic space, a half that they are under-represented in it;
- women, minority groups and primarily economically disadvantaged youth are perceived to be even more so;
- a third of organisations believe human rights are only moderately respected when it comes to youth;
- more than 40% of organisations believe youth is only moderately free from political pressures;
- a third of organisations believe that the rule of law is only moderately respected when it comes to youth.

Youth organisations experience the shrinking space for civil society in a variety of ways and on many different levels. When it comes to access to information, they face many barriers, for example: missing information when applying for funding (some is hidden by public agencies, though is available upon request), unresponsiveness of public authorities, information provided in a non-accessible language or prejudice and suspicion towards minority or religious organisations. The barriers do not end with difficult access to information. Youth organisations are the target of smear campaigns by politicians, GONGOs (NGOs created by the governments) or pro-government media. Such campaigns do not only target organisations but also individuals associated with them. They are often accompanied by hate speech, verbal abuse or discrimination. The findings of the study were confirmed by the participants who shared their experiences of the shrinking space for civil society. Among their many challenges, they mentioned a hostile and offensive narrative used by the authorities: organisations being called migrant-lovers, terrorist-lovers, spies, Soros mercenaries, fraudsters, unpatriotic, unelected, Trojan horses, corrupt, money-laundering machines or elitist.

Official statements made by organisations are sometimes twisted by the media or presented out of context in order to defame them. Some organisations reported that governments establish special funds for “well-behaved” youth organisations, making funds unavailable for NGOs that either criticised the authorities or were perceived as politically “troublesome”. In extreme cases, some youth organisations fear they may be banned or attacked by militant groups. These challenges are, in fact, barriers to youth participation and make it difficult for youth voices to be heard. As Mr Dezalan put it: increasingly hostile conditions for civil, political and social engagement across the globe prevent young people from being agents of social change and deflect youth organisations from facilitating this process.

In his final remarks, Tomaz Dezelan drew some general recommendations from the research, underlining the need to:

- recognise the specific situation of young people and youth organisations;
- devote attention to informal youth groups/initiatives, young people outside youth organisations;
- invest in the building the capacity of young people and youth organisations;
- strengthen the detection and prevention of anti-democratic legal and policy manoeuvres by government and other stakeholders, particularly from a youth perspective;
- facilitate definitions and acceptable expressions of democratic activity by or in collaboration with youth since these are determined through cultural and social processes within each successive generation.

## **RESPONSES TO THE PROBLEM OF SHRINKING SPACE FOR CIVIL SOCIETY**

How can civil society, including youth organisations, expand the space that is shrinking? What is the role of international organisations? What is the role of other stakeholders, such as donors?

Anna Rurka stated at the beginning of the meeting that the authoritarian playbook is a "VACUUM", composed of: V – victory, A – a mass power, C – control critics, U – underscore legitimacy, U – undermine democratic norms, M – maintain power. The "antidote" to that is a "people's playbook", that is to say "PEOPLE" composed of: P – to participate, E – to engage locally, O – to organise coalitions, P – to promote democratic norms, L – to listen, and E – to envision the future.

Richard Youngs added that organisations should not employ a purely legalistic approach but rather focus on rebuilding the credibility and legitimacy of the notion of civil society. The challenge is to build a broader network of alliances, a network of support.

The participants were invited to share their experiences of the shrinking space for civil society and the responses they employ in order to deal with it. They joined different "stations", each of which had a specific topic to discuss. The exercise aimed to create a practical cognitive link between the analysis of the current situation and the identification of recommendations for possible measures to be taken at Council of Europe level. The following stations were organised:

1. freedom of expression and information;
2. freedom of assembly and association;
3. citizen participation;
4. non-discrimination;
5. human rights and the rule of law;
6. narratives/safety and well-being.

The participants identified many examples of how youth organisations can deal with an increasingly hostile political environment, focusing on co-operation with different stakeholders, including local authorities, building networks and alliances, reaching out to unorganised youth, providing civic education or enhancing the spirit of participation and activism (organising campaigns or taking part in peaceful assemblies).

Some of the measures and projects mentioned by the participants include:

- a youth camp – learning about activism and reflecting on one’s own potential and impact on society;
- non-formal education workshops for school students on freedom of expression;
- an Internet app for sharing information about environmental issues;
- a toolkit on digital security;
- citizen observers – monitoring local elections;
- the re-naming and re-registering of organisations in some extreme cases;
- press conferences and information to society about their activities.

Many of the participants’ ideas are reflected in the recommendations emanating from the meeting which are listed at the end of this report.

What is the role of institutions, donors and civil society in resisting the shrinking space for civil society? This was the topic of the meeting’s second panel. Dona Kosturanova, Executive Director of the Youth Educational Forum (“the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia”) stated that the role of NGOs was crucial here: they needed to be informed about the role of international bodies and how they could influence them by e.g. providing data, being involved in shadow reporting, acting as witnesses, etc. What was more, they needed to make sure that big international organisations were not detached from local realities and the needs of organisations that operated on that level. There was still much to do in this domain.

The organisations needed to win solidarity among the wider public in order to be supported in their work in the hostile environment. This was mentioned several times during the meeting. The question still remained: how to make people care in countries that experience the shrinking space for civil society. The panellists had the following ideas:

- Veronika Móra, Director of Ökotárs Foundation (Hungary) noted that indeed, at the beginning when civil society organisations began to experience restrictions, society was indifferent. However, with time, more and more people had expressed concern. She stressed that the role of civil society organisations was very important and that they had to work hard in order to inform society about their activities and to raise awareness of what society would lose if civil society organisations disappeared. Only then would solidarity develop. Hungary had recently seen many spontaneous reactions from citizens who had organised and stood against the restrictions imposed on civil society having realised that they were also affected.
- Balázs Dénes, Executive Director of Civil Liberties Union for Europe claimed that society was deeply concerned about the issues NGOs were working on, such as corruption, youth, education or the environment, however they did not know which NGOs worked

on these issues and how. Saying this, he had noticed it was extremely important to stay close to people so they could associate with the NGOs' work.

- Dona Kosturanova insisted that people did care but only as much as they felt a connection to the organisations and their role in society. She said "Civil society organisations are the ones who know who their constituencies are as they work with them – they will be the ones who will receive more support in times when things go wrong (...) If you want to survive, the key here is to know and inform your constituents. When we were under state harassment, we didn't wait for them to tell on the news what they found out, we scheduled regular press conferences to inform the public how far the inspections are going, how many inspectors we have, that we have given them what they wanted, because we wanted to be in control of the narrative. This is how you can get public support". She also mentioned fear as the key factor influencing citizens' support: many people showed support, but they did not do it in public as they were afraid to do so.
- Päivi Anttila, Senior Sector Officer – Civil Society, EEA-Norway Grants also underlined the need to win citizens' solidarity. The EEA Norway Grants did so by supporting organisations outside metropolitan areas, supporting smaller organisations to develop their communication with their constituencies.
- Maria Giovanna Manieri, Advisor on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs, The Greens European Free Alliance in the European Parliament considered the issue of funding as crucial to the response to the phenomenon of the shrinking space of civil society.

The issue of funding was highlighted during the panel. The EEA-Norway Grants mechanism had been very active for the past few years, providing financial support for grassroots' organisations mainly with the aim of developing civil society in 15 member states of the European Union (3 000 projects in the last 3-4 years, which covered only some 10% of demand as Päivi Anttila explained). Maria Giovanna Manieri said that the European Union was in the process of increasing the funds available for NGOs within its European programmes (especially the Rights and Values Programme) that aimed to promote and protect fundamental rights and increase participation in civil society. However, as Veronika Móra said, such programmes must be more accessible – especially for smaller NGOs – as it was very difficult for NGOs active at the local level to respect the rules set by the big donor organisations or institutions and they did not necessarily have much experience in managing international grants. All in all, in order to respond to the shrinking space for civil society, NGOs needed to make sure they were operational and sustainable. Without funds, that was barely possible.

It was important to realise that NGOs were not alone in the fight, though it may seem so. In times of turmoil, when NGOs have to run activities under constant pressure, when colleagues were threatened, it was difficult to see the bigger picture of the international community and where one stood in that picture. Naturally, international organisations had an important role to play, however, their impact may not always be visible as we would like.

## SOME FINAL COMMENTS FROM THE RAPPORTEUR

The consultative meeting on shrinking space for civil society and the role of youth organisations concluded with the drafting, by participants, of many recommendations for consideration by the Joint Council on Youth. However, the meeting should not be seen as a starting point but rather a contribution to a bigger picture: the subject is being widely debated in the Council of Europe (Parliamentary Assembly, Commissioner for Human Rights, Committee of Ministers) and other international organisations and institutions. Just to mention a few:

- ILGA Europe held a strategising event on shrinking space for LGBTI organisations in 2015. The summary paper<sup>7</sup> from the event includes an analysis of how LGBTI organisations are affected by the phenomenon and how they respond to it. It also contains some recommendations for LGBTI organisations for the future, which are very much in line with what participants in the consultative meeting proposed.
- In 2016, the European Roma Grassroots Organisations Network (ERGO Network) organised a public event to discuss the issue of shrinking space for Roma civil society organisations. “One of the conclusions is that there is a squeeze on available funding for work that is not strictly oriented to the provision of social services: advocacy, watchdog work, civil monitoring, community empowerment and activism. That shrinking space of civil society is a trend in Europe, but hits hard on Roma organisations, as they are scarcely equipped and often struggling for survival.”<sup>8</sup>
- In 2017, the European Parliament published a study on the EU response to shrinking space for civil society<sup>9</sup> presenting the range of policy tools developed by the EU for pushing back against restrictions on civil society across the world. It proposes many precise policy changes to be introduced to make an EU response sharper and proactive.
- The Fundamental Rights Agency has published many reports that include an analysis of the current challenges faced by NGOs.<sup>10</sup>
- The OSCE and Amnesty International have published many papers on the work of human rights defenders.<sup>11</sup>
- The Council of Europe Committee of Ministers adopted a recommendation on 28 November 2018 which calls on member states to ensure national legal frameworks and political and public environments to protect and promote civil society space.<sup>12</sup>

These are just a few examples, there are many others, as well as numerous manuals and toolkits published across the world on the safety of human rights workers, participation in the local community and youth participation.

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<sup>7</sup> The document is available at [www.ilga-europe.org/sites/default/files/strategizing\\_event\\_summary\\_paper.pdf](http://www.ilga-europe.org/sites/default/files/strategizing_event_summary_paper.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> Messages from the public event “countering shrinking space for Roma civil society” are available at <http://ergonetnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Countering-shrinking-space-for-Roma-civil-society-1.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> Shrinking space for civil society: the EU response, available at [www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2017/578039/EXPO\\_STU\(2017\)578039\\_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2017/578039/EXPO_STU(2017)578039_EN.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> The reports are available at <https://fra.europa.eu/en/cooperation/civil-society/civil-society-space>.

<sup>11</sup> More information is available at [www.osce.org/odihp](http://www.osce.org/odihp), [www.amnesty.org.uk/human-rights-defenders-amnesty-international](http://www.amnesty.org.uk/human-rights-defenders-amnesty-international).

<sup>12</sup> Recommendation CM/Rec(2018)11 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on the need to strengthen the protection and promotion of civil society space in Europe, available at [https://search.coe.int/cm/pages/result\\_details.aspx?objectid=09000016808fd8b9](https://search.coe.int/cm/pages/result_details.aspx?objectid=09000016808fd8b9), accessed 5 February 2019.

Many of the documents tackle very specific issues, however, some points are common for almost all of them:

- There is a strong need to build alliances, partnerships and coalitions in order to amplify the voice of civil society organisations and organise a net of support.

*The Youth Department has a long tradition and experience in supporting the development of networks of youth organisations. Many of them were created as a result of educational activities. Therefore, the tradition should be reinforced and a strong networking element be included in the activities run by the Youth Department with the aim of supporting each other and developing a co-ordinated approach to respond to the phenomenon of shrinking space for civil society.*

- The issue of funding is crucial as restrictions on civil society organisations related to access to funding affect the sustainability of the sector.

*The grants of the European Youth Foundation and the programme of national and regional training courses in Human Rights Education were provided to a big number of youth organisations in Europe. However, there are many issues to be considered and solutions should be sought as to how to provide financial support to organisations in countries that put severe restrictions on receiving foreign funding.*

- Minority (youth) organisations are especially affected by the shrinking space for civil society.

*Minority (youth) organisations are very often targeted by the authorities, their work is thus undermined. What is more, some of them, such as LGBTI organisations, experience severe consequences, including physical violence). The Youth Department has been working with many minority youth organisations providing them with the space to raise their concerns and work together to find solutions to the challenges they experience. Therefore, the future strategy for the Youth Department could include some reflection on how to reinforce this work.*

The phenomenon of shrinking space for youth organisations is very complex and includes social, political and economic aspects. Some of these aspects are complex and may be difficult to comprehend fully, especially for young people. This makes youth organisations even more vulnerable to the consequences of the shrinking civic space. The purpose of the consultative meeting was not to come up with solutions for particular organisations but rather to provide an opportunity to join forces and to consider collaboratively how the youth sector can respond to the challenges experienced by youth organisations.

The dynamic nature of the shrinking space phenomenon makes any effort to find effective responses challenging. Many of the recommendations emerging from the meeting are very specific. The Council of Europe youth sector statutory bodies can respond to challenges that fall within their terms of reference and the Youth Department's on-going work programme, as well as according to the availability of resources. Their response should make every attempt to take into account the on-going work and available resources of other Council of Europe bodies as a well-co-ordinated response would be stronger.

Visit the Youth Department's [website](http://www.coe.int/en/web/youth/shrinking-space) on shrinking space for civil society [www.coe.int/en/web/youth/shrinking-space](http://www.coe.int/en/web/youth/shrinking-space) and consult the [Compendium of Council of Europe documents related to youth NGOs and youth participation](http://www.coe.int/en/web/youth/compendium) [www.coe.int/en/web/youth/compendium](http://www.coe.int/en/web/youth/compendium)

## RECOMMENDATIONS

This section presents the recommendations that were developed by the participants in the meeting. They are generally directed to the Council of Europe youth sector, if not stated otherwise, to inform their decisions on the programme of activities. They also provide general direction for the Joint Council on Youth on how best to tackle the phenomenon of the shrinking space for civil society. Some recommendations are very detailed and propose concrete solutions to address the issues arising from the shrinking space in general, others address those that affect youth organisations in particular. They have been grouped according to the themes they aim to tackle.

### SHARING AND EXCHANGING IDEAS

1. To facilitate the exchange of good practices dealing with the issue of the shrinking space for civil society.

The Youth Department should mobilise existing networks of organisations encouraging them to share the different practices they use to challenge the restrictions they face and the strategies they develop to deal with the consequences of the shrinking space. Such practices should come from youth organisations and other NGOs that work with young people and could be shared on an Internet-based platform to be developed. Good practices should also include examples of how to safeguard and strengthen open and democratic civic spaces for young people and promote constructive dialogue among policymakers, stakeholders and youth organisations.

2. To develop a compendium on how to address the issues of shrinking space on different levels (international, national and local).

The proposed compendium, in either online or offline form, should include examples of practices from civil society on dealing with the consequences of the shrinking space. It could also include:

- examples of co-management practices/models on national level, e.g. co-management structures of national authorities and youth councils;
- practices related to co-operation between municipalities and youth organisations (e.g. in the area of civic education).

3. To create mechanisms to facilitate the transfer of methodologies (know-how) for working and reaching out to young people who experience social and economic difficulties.
4. To promote community organising.

This can be done by making various tools on community organising and participation more available for wider audiences.

## **RESEARCH AND DATA COLLECTION**

- 1.** To conduct research on the developments, outcomes and consequences regarding the shrinking civil space with a particular focus on young people and youth organisations.

There is a clear absence of research on how young people and youth organisations experience the consequences of the shrinking space in many member states of the Council of Europe. The research should:

- focus on the roots of the phenomenon (why is it happening?);
  - use the intersectionality approach, e.g. studying what is happening to disadvantaged and/or minority groups such as “young women”, “young LGBTIQ people” or “young migrants”;
  - give conceptual clarity, focusing on the realities of young people and youth organisations as there is a tendency to widen the perspective and cover issues not necessarily relevant for them;
  - explore the concept of “youth”: what is a youth organisation?” Is there a difference between a youth organisation and a youth-led organisation? Freedom of assembly and freedom of association can have different meanings and consequences for young people, youth organisations and youth-led organisations;
  - provide and analyse various examples of practice of how to protect and expand civic space;
  - focus on other challenges faced by young people nowadays;
  - be regularly updated.
- 2.** To carry out a study on the influence of civil society on decision-making processes in representative democracy (focusing on youth organisations).

The participants argued that there is general distrust regarding the work of civil society organisations. In order to display the beneficial effects of civil society, relevant data is needed to design effective awareness-raising measures targeting the society at large. This study could also cover the work of youth centres whose function is sometimes misunderstood. Hence, there is a need to understand the function of different types of youth centres in different societies and to propose recommendations for their work.

- 3.** To collect and regularly update data on the situation of youth organisations in the member states of the Council of Europe and how they are affected by the phenomenon of the shrinking space for civil society.

The study could start by mapping the restrictions that are put on youth organisations in different member states and how they affect their work. It would require the creation of a reliable fact-finding mechanism, so the information is accurate and up-to-date. It can also include data on other topics relevant for youth organisations, such as advocacy, and analyse trends in civil society.



## **CAPACITY BUILDING AND AWARENESS RAISING FOR YOUNG PEOPLE AND YOUTH ORGANISATIONS**

- 1.** To develop and prioritise different training activities that aim to strengthen youth organisations, such as trainings on organisational management and on advocacy (including working with the media).

Such activities should especially target participants from informal youth groups.

- 2.** To develop DIY tools for young people and youth organisations (preferably available online).

These tools could provide guidance to young people and youth organisations on, for example, how to develop youth initiatives or youth projects, how to organise campaigns, etc. They could also include tips on how to work with the media and build partnerships with other civil society organisations, presenting positive stories of best practices.

- 3.** To promote civic education in formal and non-formal education.

Youth organisations can play a vital role in developing young people's civic competences that can lead to increasing youth participation. In order to strengthen their role in this process, the participants thought it would be important to analyse restrictions on national levels: what are the entry barriers for youth NGOs to conduct civic and non-formal education in formal educational institutions.

- 4.** To organise a campaign to promote democratic culture, with a strong focus on the social and political rights of young people to engage in order to increase young people's participation in political life.

A campaign should be based on the Council of Europe's Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture and on the experience gained in the No Hate Speech Movement youth campaign.

- 5.** To encourage member states to organise capacity-building trainings for the representatives of authorities responsible for youth (on national and local levels) in order to develop their competences related to increasing youth participation and involving young people and youth organisations in the political decision-making processes.
- 6.** To include the topic of "shrinking space for civil society" as a priority for the organisers of study sessions run in co-operation with the European Youth Centres of the Council of Europe.
- 7.** To continue the development and implementation of the 50/50 trainings that bring together representatives of authorities (decision makers) and young people in order to explore possibilities for co-operation.

These meetings should also address the topic of the shrinking space for civil society and how it affects youth organisations.

8. To organise another consultative meeting on the shrinking space for civil society organisations.

This meeting should bring together representatives of youth organisations (including informal youth groups) who have to deal with the negative consequences of the shrinking space, donor organisations/institutions and other organisations to discuss the current issues, develop ideas on how to deal with the phenomenon and empower organisations that are experiencing difficulties due to the political climate in the countries where they operate.

## **POLICY**

1. To develop recommendations on the role of youth and youth organisations in dealing with the shrinking space for civil society.

These recommendations should be based on the already adopted recommendation on youth work.<sup>13</sup>

2. To create guidance for the practical use of the Council of Europe's policy documents that can be relevant for young people and youth organisations.

## **FUNDING**

1. To guarantee funding from the European Youth Foundation for youth activists and youth organisations in crisis.

Some organisations cannot receive funding because of the existence of so-called "foreign agent" laws. Funding such youth organisations and networks could be made a priority of the European Youth Foundation. This would require the development of certain criteria, for example some funding may be reserved for hubs of youth NGOs that offer space, logistical support and guidance for organisations affected by the phenomenon of the shrinking space for civil society. The participants proposed to establish a mini/pilot grant scheme for informal groups of young people to foster the development of civil society.

## **OTHER RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. To establish mentoring programmes for young leaders;
2. To start a discussion on how the Youth Department can support young people under threat;
3. To promote co-management as a standard for the member states;
4. To develop a "quality label" for youth organisations as trusted partners of the Youth Department;
5. The European Youth Forum should make sure that EU youth goals deal with the shrinking space for youth organisations;
6. The Living Library methodology, promoted by the Youth Department, should include "books" from organisations affected by the shrinking space for civil society;

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<sup>13</sup> Available at [https://search.coe.int/cm/Pages/result\\_details.aspx?ObjectId=0900001680717e78](https://search.coe.int/cm/Pages/result_details.aspx?ObjectId=0900001680717e78).

7. To think about changing the term “shrinking space” into a more positive one, e.g. enlarging civic space;
8. To involve other partners dealing with the phenomenon in the activities organised by the Youth Department (e.g. members of the Parliamentary Assembly, Commissioner for Human Rights, Conference of INGOs, etc.);
9. To develop effective interfaces and communication platforms connecting youth and decision makers;
10. To promote volunteering.

## PROGRAMME OF THE CONSULTATIVE MEETING

### Wednesday 7 November 2018

09.15 - 09.30 **Opening**

**Anja Olin Pape**, Chair of the [Advisory Council on Youth \(CCJ\)](#)

09.30 – 09.50 **Introductions**

09.50 – 10.15 **Freedom of association and assembly – essential pillars of democracy in Europe**

**Matjaž Gruden**, [Director of Democratic Participation](#)

Questions from the floor

10-15 – 10.40 **Civil society experience of shrinking spaces**

**Anna Rurka**, President of the Council of Europe [Conference of INGOs](#)

Questions from the floor

10.40 – 10.55 **Overview of the programme and the methodology**

10.55 – 11.00 Technical announcements

11.00 – 11.30 Break

11.30 – 13.00 **Panel discussion: Observing the “Shrinking space” – Perspectives of Council of Europe institutions, civil society, and academia**

#### Panellists

**Raphaël Comte**, **General Rapporteur** on the situation of human rights defenders of the [Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe](#)

**Bojana Urumova**, Deputy to the Director of the Office of the [Commissioner for Human Rights](#) of the Council of Europe

**Veronika Bílková**, Vice-President of the Council of Europe [Venice Commission](#)

**Ewa-Kulik Bielińska**, Director, Stefan Batory Foundation (Poland)

**Richard Youngs**, Senior Fellow, Democracy, Conflict, and Governance Program, Carnegie Europe

**Moderator: Jeremy Moakes**, Directorate of Communications, Council of Europe

This panel discussion aims to explore the shrinking space phenomenon by drawing on the perspective of key Council of Europe bodies, such as the Venice Commission and the Commissioner for Human Rights, the experience of civil society as well as the knowledge and analysis of the academic sphere concerned with the issue. How do key institutions tasked with protecting human rights differ in their approaches to the issue? How do international political bodies like

the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe or the European Parliament aim to engage with the subject? What has been the experience of civil society in countries where the problem is most visible?

Questions from the floor

13.00 – 14.15 Lunch

14.15 – 15.15 **“Shrinking youth civic spaces”**

*A study commissioned by the [European Youth Forum](#)*

**Dr. Tomaž Deželan**, University of Ljubljana

Questions from the floor

15.15 – 18.00 **Exploring and sharing realities**

Presentation of the exercise by **Ruxandra Pandea**

18.00 – 18.30 **Summing up our shared realities**

Presentation of the exchanges

18.30

**Close of the meeting**

## **Thursday 8 November 2018**

09.15 – 11.00 **Panel discussion: Resisting the “Shrinking Space” – Perspectives from institutions, donors, and civil society**

### **Panellists**

**Maria Giovanna Manieri**, Advisor on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs, The Greens European Free Alliance in the European Parliament

**Päivi Anttila**, Senior Sector Officer – Civil Society, EEA-Norway Grants

**Balázs Dénes**, Executive Director, Civil Liberties Union for Europe

**Dona Kosturanova**, Executive Director, Youth Educational Forum (“the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia”)

**Veronika Móra**, Director, Ökotárs Foundation (Hungary)

**Moderator: Bálint Molnár**, Deputy Executive Director, European Youth Centre Budapest, Council of Europe

This panel discussion aims to explore the responses from institutions, donors, and civil society actors to the shrinking of space for civic activism. Can the shrinking space be resisted? What can donors – both institutional and private – do to provide effective assistance to NGOs and activists who are faced with various forms of pressure? How can and should activists react to various forms of restriction? Are there replicable best practices? Is there a need for a more co-

ordinated strategy from donors and civil society to successfully resist the shrinking space?

Questions from the floor

11.00 – 11.30 Break

11.30 – 15.30 **Formulating recommendations**

13.00 – 14.15 Lunch

15.30 – 16.00 **Presentation of the recommendations**

16.00 – 16.30 Break

16.30 – 17.10 **Where to now?**

**Ivan Hromada**, vice-chair of the [European Steering Committee for Youth \(CDEJ\)](#)

**David Neuber**, Bureau member of the Advisory Council on Youth (CCJ)

**Rares Craiut**, Bureau member of the Conference of INGOs

**Ville Majamaa**, Board member of the European Youth Forum

**Antje Rothemund**, Head of the Youth Department

17.10 – 17.20 **Evaluation of the meeting**

17.20 – 17.30 **Close of the meeting**

**Antje Rothemund**, Head of the Youth Department