



## **“From the Past to the Future: A Living Civic Space for a Living Democracy”**

Council of Europe Office in Brussels

28.02.2020

10.00 – 17.00

### **Draft concept note**

The civil society sector comprises varied forms of organisation. These may be in response to the varied needs of their members or to the diverse legal requirements where they are. A closing civic space impacts all forms of independent civil society and appears to be one of the symptoms of the “ill-democracy”. A rapidly changing political, economic, technologic and social landscape impacts quite significantly the civil society sector, and especially its sustainability. Faced with these changes, civil society organisations work to strengthen their organisational resilience, financial viability and capacities for action. They must also constantly look for new solutions to increase their capacities, seek out visibility and partnerships, adapt their engagement with citizens and advocacy with policymakers as well as new means of engaging with their own constituency and membership.

The factors which undermine the CSOs capacities to fulfil their democratic role are both external and internal: deterioration of legal environment, including tax law, access to funding, de-legalisation, harassment, psychological and institutional pressure, public smear campaigns, orchestrated by public authorities, political parties, other civic groups, a decrease of the organisational capacity of the sector, loosing connection with citizens and for some of the big European networks, loosing connections to their membership.

Special care must also be taken to ensure that all functions of civil society are enabled, not just those most visible and apparent (i.e. policy/political ones). While the conception of CSOs as watchdogs and lobby bodies is commonplace within the public consciousness, the role of CSOs for individuals and communities is equally essential to be protected and valued during these changing times. By connecting individuals and communities, CSOs provide a space for the formulation of collective identities, and the identification of the needs and interests attached to these identities. Before CSOs can contest norms and impact opinion formation

within the State-realm (its lobby/watchdog/external face and function) it is necessary for communities to have space to deliberate norms and to actively construct their political and moral identities as individuals and communities.

*Keynote speech: Richard YOUNGS – Senior Associate at Carnegie Endowment, Professor at University of Warwick*

*Panel 1 – Civil Society sector seen by others*

How do policymakers, ombudsmen, civil servants, academia, journalists and the business sector see the legitimacy and effectiveness of different expressions of civil society? Which is the most ethical model of funding and governance forms which respect the self-governing and self-organising character of the CSOs?

*Panel 2 - NGOs /CSOs /social movement look at themselves*

Do the activists, change-makers and human rights defenders need NGOs? What can NGOs and social movements learn from each other and how can they work together? How do the NGOs and umbrella organisations work with and approach non institutionalised citizen groups and social movements?

*Interactive debate: Which transformations are here to stay? What is the future of civil society as a sector? What is the role for governments, donors, institutions or communities supporting the sustainability of the CSO sector?*

*Closing panel: Conclusion and statement. Possible next steps.*