

## Civil Society is Here to Stay! A Report on the Shrinking Civic Space Project (2019-2023)

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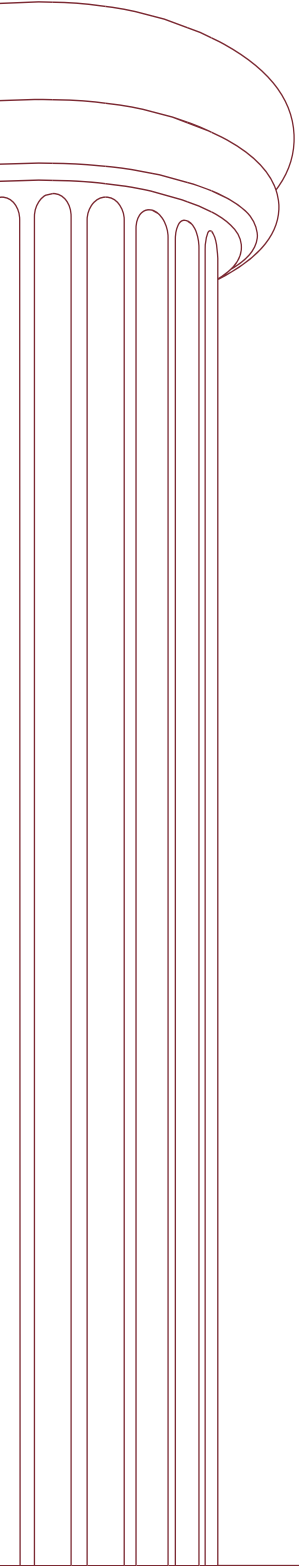
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# MAECENATA



Rupert Graf Strachwitz, Siri Hummel

## **Civil Society is Here to Stay!**

A Report on the Shrinking Civic Space Project  
(2019–2023)

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<b>The Maecenata Institute</b>	<p>The Maecenata Foundation is a think tank that focusses on the civic space, civil society, civic engagement, and philanthropy in a European and international context. The four permanent programmes of the foundation are the Maecenata Institute for Philanthropy and Civil Society, an independent research centre founded in 1997, the Tocqueville Forum, a policy and support unit founded in 2014, the Transnational Giving Programme, an assistance programme to donors founded in 2001, and the MENA Study Centre, a specific study programme für the Middle East founded in 2019.</p>
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## Introduction

When the Maecenata Institute's European Civic Space Observatory (ECSO) project was planned and initiated in 2018/19, it was grounded on the observation of a global democratic regression, which affected the freedom of scope and action for civil society in Europe. Since then, the situation has dramatically worsened. Freedom House noted in its (50<sup>th</sup>) 2023 edition of *Freedom in the World*: "Global freedom declined for the 17th consecutive year". (Freedom House 2023, 1) And the Economist Democracy Index 2023 noted that only 8% of the world's population live in a full democracy today, and that this figure is in decline (Economist Intelligence Unit 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic has had deeper effects on our social resilience than was originally believed, and has demonstrated the consequences of a psychological and physical exhaustion of society and the economy. It has substantially hit civil society not least due to its strong dependency on the will to give, be this in the form of empathy, volunteering, donating or contributing to public affairs in the form of social movements. Since then, several more immediate crises have affected our societies, notably the attack of Russia on Ukraine on 24<sup>th</sup> February, 2022, and the war in the Middle East following the seizure of 250 Israeli hostages by Hamas on 7<sup>th</sup> October, 2023. "We are currently in the middle of multiple global crises that leave us with a different outlook than the optimism that characterized the decades of the 1990s and early 2000s. The belief in continuous global democratic and developmental progress has been replaced by concerns for irreversible climate change, global geopolitical instability, democratic decline, new manifestations of authoritarian populism, and a reversal of developmental gains..."<sup>1</sup> The growth of civil society and the expansion of the civic space has been seriously affected by this succession of crises as by the downsizing of funds available for sustaining civil society organisations in Europe. Furthermore, the readiness of governments and the private sector to accept civil society as partner in the public sphere has seriously suffered.

The Maecenata Institute's European Civil Society Observatory Project, designed to take a critical bird's eye view of the civic space in Europe, received generous financial support from Porticus and the Open Society Initiative for Europe. It involved exchanges with 6 international governmental and non-governmental organisations (ICJA, Civil Liberties Union for Europe, European Civic Forum, Fundamental Rights Agency of the European Union, OECD, and PHILEA) and researchers and experts from and/or working on 19 European and non-European countries (Armenia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Croatia, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, The Netherlands, Poland, Romania,

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<sup>1</sup> Biekart, Kees / Kontinen, Tiina / Millstein, Marianne (2023): Introduction. In: *Civil Society Responses to Changing Civic Spaces*. Springer Nature (Palgrave Macmillan) Cham, Switzerland 2023, p. 3.

Slovakia, Spain, Switzerland, Ukraine, United Kingdom, United States). Their important contributions to the project are thankfully acknowledged.

In the course of the project, 1 book, 1 special issue of the journal Nonprofit Policy Forum (2022), 2 comprehensive country reports (on Austria and Germany) (online 2021), 11 other working papers in the Maecenata Opuscula online series, 9 policy papers in the Maecenata Observatorium online series, and 2 European reports in the Maecenata Europe Bottom-Up online series were published, mostly in English (see enclosed list). Though impaired by the covid pandemic, the project was able to move the issue by convening. Findings were presented at a number of conferences, workshops, meetings, and parliamentary hearings, including the World Conference of the International Society for Third Sector Research in Montreal, Canada, in 2023. Also in 2023, an international conference, organised by the Maecenata Institute, was held in Berlin (see report enclosed). Also, a database was developed and made publicly available (<https://shrinkingsspace.eu/en>). Furthermore, Maecenata staff<sup>2</sup> provided answers, information, materials, comments &c. to diverse parties throughout Europe and beyond. Importantly, in the course of the project, evidence-based results were assembled that provide a base for pursuing the issue, and a network of experts who are ready to continue working together was established.

To sum up, through this project, an overview was gained which ascertained that the civic space is contested, is in many instances shrinking, but has also gained momentum and cohesion both across national borders and across divides of purpose, structure, size, and citizens involved.

This final publication in the 2019 – 2023 research, policy, and publication project will highlight some of the outcomes, as presented in a ‘deep-dive’ workshop organised by Porticus in January, 2024. The chapter ‘Civil Society is Here to Stay’ reflects some of the points made in the presentation and discussed with participants. In addition, a number of relevant reports and documents are put on record in this volume.

Berlin, in February 2024

Dr. Rupert Graf Strachwitz

Dr. Siri Hummel

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<sup>2</sup> We would like to express our gratitude to Laura Pfirter, Florian Faltenbacher, Flavia Gerner and Johannes Roth, whose contributions were crucial to the successful completion of this publication.

## **Civil Society is Here to Stay – How to Develop its Positive Contribution**

The research and policy project conducted by the Maecenata Institute, Berlin, and colleagues from 2019 to 2023, has shown very clearly that the civic sphere, to include the space for civil society<sup>3</sup> has in some parts of Europe been obstructed or even virtually closed in recent years. In others it has been contested, has shrunk, has narrowed (viz. Ayvazyan 2019). The fundamental questions are as yet not resolved: Does the civic sphere in Europe have the space it should have and which it needs to enjoy in order to act as a responsible contributor to an open society grounded on the principles of human and civil rights, equality, the rule of law, and democracy? And importantly, in a normative approach to the future of our society, should it have that space?

Since the end of World War II, a compound of four sets of values has been seen as the cornerstone of a liberal open society: human and civil rights, the rule of law, democracy, and cultural traditions<sup>4</sup>. By a wide consensus, these values were considered one package with equal importance accorded to each of its elements. Modern civil society in a free civic space developed within this normative framework, while outside of it, a forceful clandestine civil society worked hard – and continues to do so – to see its own framework achieve this openness. What happened in Central and Eastern Europe including East Germany in 1989/1990 is just one, albeit a particularly successful example. For some years now however, complacency and deficiencies as well as outright opposition have halted this process. For one, old and new advocates of a dramatically different societal model have gained clout and in some instances real political power through formally democratic processes. Also, democracy alone is increasingly being regarded as the sole political value to the detriment of the others while being dangerously misinterpreted by populist movements as by party politicians. Finally, powerful movements have sprung up that openly oppose the notion of an open society and have successfully reintroduced authoritarian closed systems. The battle for which is to prevail is on. (Stewart 2022, 63)

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<sup>3</sup> The terms ‘Shrinking Civic Space’, ‘Shrinking Space for Civil Society’, sometimes shortened to ‘Shrinking Space’ have become widely used in recent years, supported by a wealth of academic and other literature, since Carothers and Brechenmacher first introduced the term ‘Closing Space’ in 2014. In order to maintain a neutral starting point and not presuppose that the space actually is shrinking, the term ‘Contested Space’ would be more appropriate. In order to uphold this view and yet stay with the well established term, both are used here interchangeably.

<sup>4</sup> Viz. i.a. United Nations (1948), Council of Europe (1950), International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966), Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (1975), European Union (2000).

Civil society is deeply involved in this battle. It has been obliged to take on the function of watchdog, pointing out deficiencies, insisting on checks and balances, and clamouring for a civic space in which to legitimately participate in the affairs of the body politic (viz. Crouch 2011). Think tanks, academics, experts, civil society leaders and citizens from all walks of life have made it very clear that an open society cannot be attained piecemeal. The right to freedom of assembly, freedom of association, freedom of expression, and freedom of religion belong to the undivisible and fundamental human rights and civil liberties. The right to form communities of choice is derived from these fundamentals. The legitimacy of these communities' interaction with other spheres in society has long been established, as have the advantages that society derives from an active interplay between the officers of the state and collectives of citizens in preparing and executing policy decisions to be taken in parliamentary bodies elected by universal suffrage. This interplay may have been seriously damaged by the very essence of a modern liberal order to mean the "liberal neglect of the need for community (Crawford Ames 2022, 54).

For this reason if for no other, recent developments do not minimize the importance of the debate about a free and vital civic space, but rather render it ever more pressing. The Russian war against Ukraine heralds a new era in world politics and the end in Europe of a security policy adopted post-1989 that had focused on disarmament and cooperation while permitting the political map of Europe to be redrawn. The need to face armed aggression is diverting substantial resources away from sustainable contributions to social cohesion as to the enhancement of the civic space, ample evidence that a vibrant civic space is a precondition to a resilient open society notwithstanding. The resurgence of the Gaza conflict amplifies the sense of an aggravated global security situation. Tightening security policies and stepping up the so-called 'fight against terrorism', which has served as a catalyst for anti-NGO measures over the last decade, lead us to take an even more pessimistic view in regard to the future of the civic space, while more than ever believing it to be an indispensable element of a free and open society.

Somewhat amazingly, this view is not shared by a substantial part of the political and business elites. Political parties suffering from growing mistrust (Edelman 2024) and a sharp decline in membership have come to see civil society as unwelcome competitors in the public sphere. The insistence on a purely local frame for civil society activities reflects the conviction, most prominently expressed in conservative circles, that (in adapting Margaret Thatcher's famous quip) there is no such thing as civil society (to mean as a partner in politics). What there is and, in their opinion, should be cherished, is small-scale service provision and community building on a local and volunteer level in support of the political system. Business leaders, too, are less than pleased with protest movements that keep



them from unrestrictedly pursuing their business goals. Possibly, troublesome civil society activists clamouring for transparency, fairness and climate protection are in the way of urban and business development schemes. Finally, security considerations, shifting priorities and budget constraints are adding substantially to the pressure to divert attention to policy areas other than those that civil society tends to focus on. Be this as it may, civil society has gained clout over the past 30-odd years and is now facing a backlash and an ever steeper uphill battle.

Discussing these issues with members of political, academic, business, and media elites is far from easy. While staging a meeting with “representatives of civil society”, whoever these may be, is occasionally considered good PR when included in the programme of a state visit, and while dramatic public civil society protest action may occasionally attract media attention as has recently been witnessed in Belarus, Iran, Hongkong, Israel, and elsewhere, none of this has changed the overall attitude of disinterest, and failure to grasp the societal rank of civil society action. Broadly, these elites would contend that administrative and technical reforms on one hand and a tight regulatory framework supported by an elaborate system of controls on the other would suffice to overcome the polycrisis and render an open society resilient. The dominance of security, budgetary, and social services issues in the public domain does not help to mitigate this lopsided approach, while grant structures and interwoven interests encourage think tanks and political analysts to focus on other matters. It would therefore seem appropriate to call on a number of witnesses who have made it very clear what is implied.

### **What is at stake?**

The United Nations Guidance Note on Protection and Promotion of Civic Space, published in September 2020 upon consultation with a range of experts in the field, expresses it as follows:

“Civic space is the environment that enables people and groups – or ‘civic space actors’ – to participate meaningfully in the political, economic, social and cultural life in their societies. Vibrant civic space requires an open, secure and safe environment that is free from all acts of intimidation, harassment and reprisals, whether online or offline. Any restrictions on such a space must comply with international human rights law.” (United Nations 2020, 3)

Why this is so important, is explained in some detail in the European Civic Forum’s 2023 report:

“Democratic resilience requires both good *inputs* and good *outputs*. Participatory mechanisms which enable diverse voices to contribute to the democratic debate and a robust rule of law infrastructure are the key tools conducive to developing effective policies and measures. These *inputs* decisively contribute to make good policy-making possible.

However, it is crucial to understand that people evaluate the relevance of democracy based on its *outputs* - the ability of implemented policies to address their needs, concerns and hopes for the future. For many people, the legitimacy of our democratic system rests in its capacity to respond to existing insecurities (including in social, economic, environmental and cultural spheres), to collectively face crises and other challenges of our time, and to foster social cohesion and a shared vision for the future. Today, democracy is facing pressure both on its *inputs*, as democratic backsliding unfolds across the EU, and its *outputs*, as many fear for their future and are increasingly mistrust institutions' ability to deliver policies that will protect them." (European Civic Forum 2023, 3–4)

The OECD supports this view by stating:

"By promoting and protecting civic freedoms and providing concrete opportunities for collaboration with citizens and civil society, governments can better align services, policies and laws to societal needs. Ensuring a healthy civic space, both on and off line, is thus a prerequisite for more inclusive governance and democratic participation more broadly. Countries that commit to fostering civic space at both the national and local levels reap many benefits: higher levels of citizen engagement, strengthened transparency and accountability, and empowered citizens and civil society. In the longer term, a vibrant civic space can help to improve government effectiveness and responsiveness, contribute to more citizen- centred policies and programmes, boost social cohesion and ultimately increase trust in government." (OECD 2022, 16)

While it would seem that given the rank accorded the civic sphere and this role for civil society, the diminishing number of democratic and open countries in this world would cherish and foster the civic sphere as partner in resilience, the latest CIVICUS Monitor (2023) tells us a different story:

"In the past year, civic space has continued to be eroded in Europe and Central Asia. Of 54 countries, civic space is now rated as open in 19, narrowed in 19, obstructed in seven, repressed in three and closed in six.

In 2023, Europe grappled with the political and economic fallout of Russia's war on Ukraine. Widespread protests erupted in response to rising energy prices and cost of living increases in various European Union (EU) countries, including [Belgium](#), the [Czech Republic](#), [Greece](#) and [Portugal](#). Climate groups vehemently opposed shifts in energy policies adopted by EU countries in response to the conflict's disruption of the energy market. In response, European states escalated repression of environmental activists, responding to non-violent protests and civil disobedience actions with arrests, prosecutions and intimidation." (Civicus Monitor 2023, 41)

JURIST, an online legal news service powered by a global team of over 100 law student reporters, editors, commentators, correspondents and content developers from 50 law schools in 25 countries across six continents, swiftly commented:

"Germany's civic space was rated as "narrowed" in a new [report](#) from global rights watchdog [CIVICUS](#). Germany was one of seven countries downgraded in the People Under Attack 2023 report, which analysed how governments protect citizens' freedom of expression in 198 countries. The report found that over 30 percent of the world's population now resides in countries with restricted civic spaces—the most since CIVICUS Monitor started reporting in 2018. In their report, the CIVICUS Monitor rated

civic spaces on a scale from “open” to “closed” based on the level that authorities violate the their people’s freedom of speech and assembly. The CIVICUS Monitor defines civic space as “the respect in law, policy and practice for freedoms of association, peaceful assembly and expression and the extent to which the state protects these fundamental rights.” They worked with 20 civil society research partners to produce the report. CIVICUS Monitor downgraded the rating for civic space openness in Germany, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kyrgyzstan, Senegal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Venezuela. The last two are now rated as “closed” because their “conditions for civil society continue to worsen.” (Woodmass 6 December, 2023)

This is certainly not in line with what a number of high profile international policymakers have hoped for:

“In 2020, the Secretary-General of the United Nations (UN), António Guterres, launched a high-profile Call to Action for Human Rights with seven priority areas, including “rights in times of crisis” and “public participation and civic space” (UN, 2020). The same year, the European Union (EU) released a European Democracy Action Plan to address growing challenges to democracy (EC, 2020).” (OECD 2022, 17)

### **Is the civic space shrinking? And what does this imply?**

The term ‘shrinking civic space’ has been around for a number of years, but is usually associated with countries that suffer from an authoritarian government system. Countries like Belarus, China, Egypt, Russia, Iran, and Turkey are cases in point. In fact, a closing or even closed civic space is often applied to the situation in these and many other countries.

“Sometimes, civic space has been used interchangeable with the notion of civil society (Popplewell, 2018), but in most cases it resonates more with the notion of ‘enabling environments’ for civil society used in development policy discourses in reference to the conditions to which civil society operates.” (Biekart et al. 2023, 4)

“Since [the early 2000s], a veritable backlash against Western democratization efforts begun indeed to take place. Much of this backlash is directed against international CSOs and their local partners and is taking place in a broad range of countries all over the globe and in political regimes that range from authoritarian to flawed or, in the words of Hungary’s Viktor Orbán, “illiberal democracies” (Rupnik, 2016). Russia and China are among the perhaps most visible exponents of the crackdown on civil society, but similar tendencies are present in countries close to Western Europe (Hungary, Turkey), much of the Middle East, and large parts of Africa, Asia and Latin America. Between 2004 and 2010, the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law identified more than 50 countries had enacted measures to restrict civil society (Rutzen, 2015); between 2012 and 2018, new restrictions were considered or enacted in 72 countries (ICNL, 2018).” (Toepler et al. 2020, 650)

It is interesting to note that the V-Dem Institute of Gotenburg (Sweden) draws on approx. 440 indicators by which to establish the level of democracy in countries all around the world, of which

approx. 10% are connected to the civic space in terms of freedom of assembly, freedom of expression, freedom of information, equality before the law, individual liberties, and checks and balances within the government system. Arguably, a shrinking space has thus contributed to the massive deterioration in the state of democracy. “Advances in global levels of democracy made over the last 35 years have been wiped out. 72% of the world’s population – 5.7 billion people – live in autocracies.” (V-Dem Institute 2023, 6). Drastic changes over the past 10 years include: “Freedom of Expression is deteriorating in 35 countries in 2022 – ten years ago it was only 7. Government censorship of the media is worsening in 47 countries. Government repression of civil society organisations is worsening in 37 countries. Quality of elections is worsening in 30 countries.” (Ibid.) Summaries published by the Economist Intelligence Unit (2023), CIVICUS (2023) and Freedom House (2023) are even more pessimistic: While the Economist survey states that only 8% of the world’s population today live in a full democracy, Freedom House points out that global freedom has declined for the 17<sup>th</sup> consecutive year. The Civicus Monitor tells us that civic space has continued to be eroded in Europe and Central Asia. Of the 54 countries recently surveyed, civic space is now rated as open in 19, narrowed in 19, obstructed in 7, repressed in 3, and closed in 6.

A closer look reveals that the civic space in Western liberal democracies is contested not perhaps to the same degree, but in a more subtle yet extraordinarily effective way. As Bouchet and Wachsmann argued (2019), while measuring is difficult, and shared criteria for the comparison are lacking, society in Western Europe has been reluctant to acknowledge or even detect warning signs and has tended to paint the situation in all too bright colours. In November 2020, the Civil Liberties Union for Europe published a report titled ‘Germany’s Civic Space Problem’, and building on the then recent case of an organisation having been stripped of its charitable status, stated:

“CSOs in Germany are facing growing restrictions on their work, as certain politicians and commercial lobbyists are exploiting outdated and vague legislation to limit the ability of CSOs to promote public participation in decision-making or promote public interest goals towards decision-makers on issues of human rights and environmental protection.”

These observations were fully confirmed by Hummel et al. “The political system in Germany, which is characterised by representative, parliamentary democracy, has so far been reluctant to meet [...] demands for alternative participation, and in some cases has [...] reacted to them in a restrictive manner.” (2022, 76)

Germany is by no means unique. E.g., in the United Kingdom, restrictions on civil society organisations' freedom to interfere in public debates were introduced in 2014. As the wording was far from clear, the Charity Commission offered guidance that was even more restrictive. Charities were compelled to refrain from any political activity by pain of losing their tax-exempt status. When the 2016 Brexit referendum came up, they were forced to remain silent. Had they come out strongly in favour of remaining in the European Union (which most of them were prone to do), the referendum might well have gone the other way.

What is particularly alarming is that a number of political leaders who strive to suppress an independent civic space and replace it with a populist authoritarian and illiberal system have in many cases been elected by democratic procedures. Defending these procedures and maintaining that they are the essence of democracy is obviously not sufficient as a safeguard against infringements on civil liberties.

Above all, it is important to note that repression can take many forms (Ayvazyan 2019):

1. Restrictive administrative action (e.g. through the introduction of licensing requirements or the tightening or prolongation of licensing procedures);
2. Withdrawal of the financial basis (e.g. through the restriction or abolition of tax exemptions);
3. Police checks and obstructions under the pretext of combating terrorism or money laundering
4. Takeover and redistribution of activities (e.g. in the running of schools and social institutions);
5. Philanthropic protectionism (e.g. the obstruction of transnational donations with the so-called foreign agent argument);
6. Restrictions on freedom of assembly and association (e.g. through bans or restrictions on demonstrations);
7. Restrictions on freedom of expression and freedom of the press (e.g. through censorship, selective media information or the withdrawal of advertising revenue);
8. Intimidation and use of violence against civil society actors;
9. Criminalisation and stigmatisation of human and civil rights activists;
10. Targeted discrediting of CSOs or civil society as a whole through (false) accusations.

Given this wide range of harassment tools, it is hardly surprising that keeping track of even the most subtle instances of repression (which incidentally are often the most effective), constitutes an ongoing challenge which not only requires permanent observation but also professional evaluation. To give just one example, the Edelman Trust Barometer presents a comparatively small difference in rating trust in NGOs and governments respectively. (2024, 39-41) The civil society sector is not

being accorded in the same standard of public media coverage as the government and the private sector. Civil society actors and observers therefore both need to be educated to fairly assessing civil society in its normative context and practical expression as well as to the intricacies of governmental and administrative action in order to be able to judge whether particular measures taken by government agencies are grounded in their dedication to public benefit, their obedience to their political leaders, their lack of competence, their general mistrust of the citizen, or their desire to keep competitors for power at bay.

### **What solutions can civil society offer?**

Whether civil society can make a meaningful contribution to overcoming our present polycrisis is indeed the key issue that awaits being tackled. The project summed up here attempted to find some answers. It resulted in a number of publications (see attached list), and while the covid pandemic precluded holding as many meetings and conferences as was originally intended, a final conference could be held in Berlin in 2023 (see enclosed report, below).

The answer to the question is of course tied to defining what constitutes an open society. The Economist Democracy Index produces a ranking based on 60 questions that are grouped around five categories:

- (1) Electoral process and pluralism,
- (2) Civil liberties,
- (3) Functioning of government,
- (4) Political participation,
- (5) Political culture.

While northern European countries rank at the very top of the list of 187 countries (Norway 1, Iceland 3, Sweden 4, Finland 5, Denmark 6), only 10 EU member states are seen as ‘full’ democracies, while 17 are ranked as ‘flawed’, with Romania ranked lowest (61); to complete the picture, Switzerland holds rank 7, Canada 12, the UK 18, and the US 30, which leads to the US being rated as ‘flawed’. (Economist Intelligence Unit 2023, 7–11) It evolves that the state of democracy or, to use a wider term, an open society in Europe is not a healthy one, and that responsible governments should make it their business to do something about this and attract partners with whom they can form alliances. Clearly, this is not the case everywhere.

Drawing on this analysis as on the successes (see Berlin and elsewhere 1989) and failures (see the ‘Arab spring’ 2010) of civil society action as well as the failures in policy due to the enforced or voluntary absence of civil society action in the public sphere (see UK 2016), it is certainly fair to assume in a very broad sense that civil society action is a potential contributor in shaping policy, added to its other customary roles of providing services, building voluntary communities etc. Furthermore, there is a close interdependence between the openness of a society and the strength of civil society.

This can be demonstrated by comparing two world maps, one showing the state of civil society (CIVICUS 2023; fig. 1), the other one showing the state of liberal democracy (V-Dem Institute 2022; fig. 2).

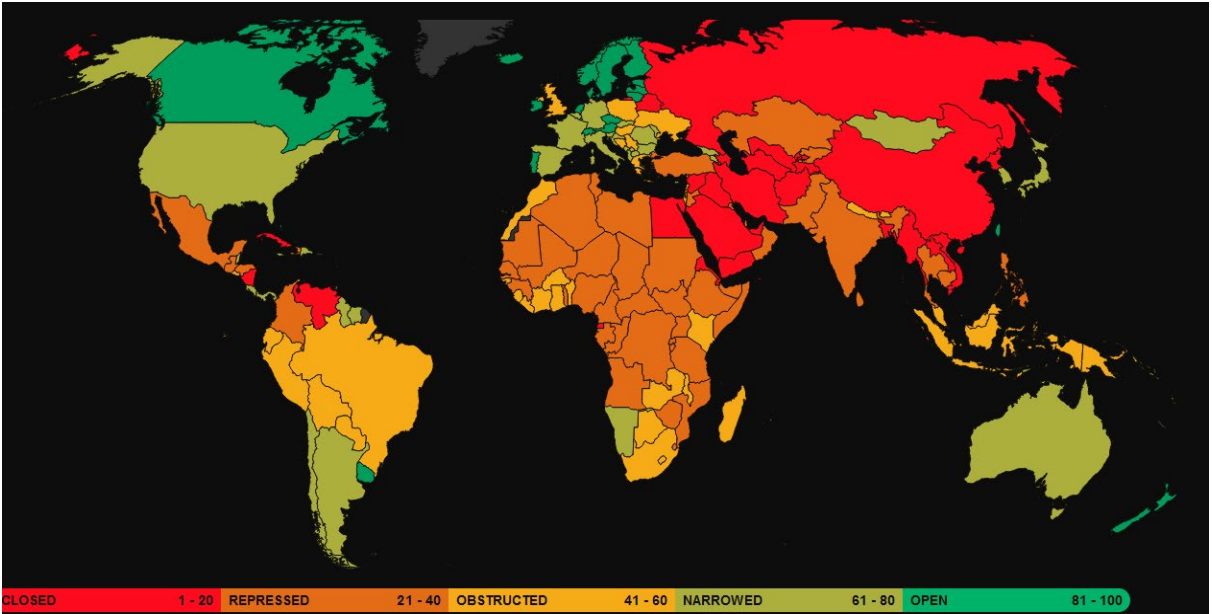


Fig. 1 The national civic space ratings of 2023 (CIVICUS Monitor, 2023)

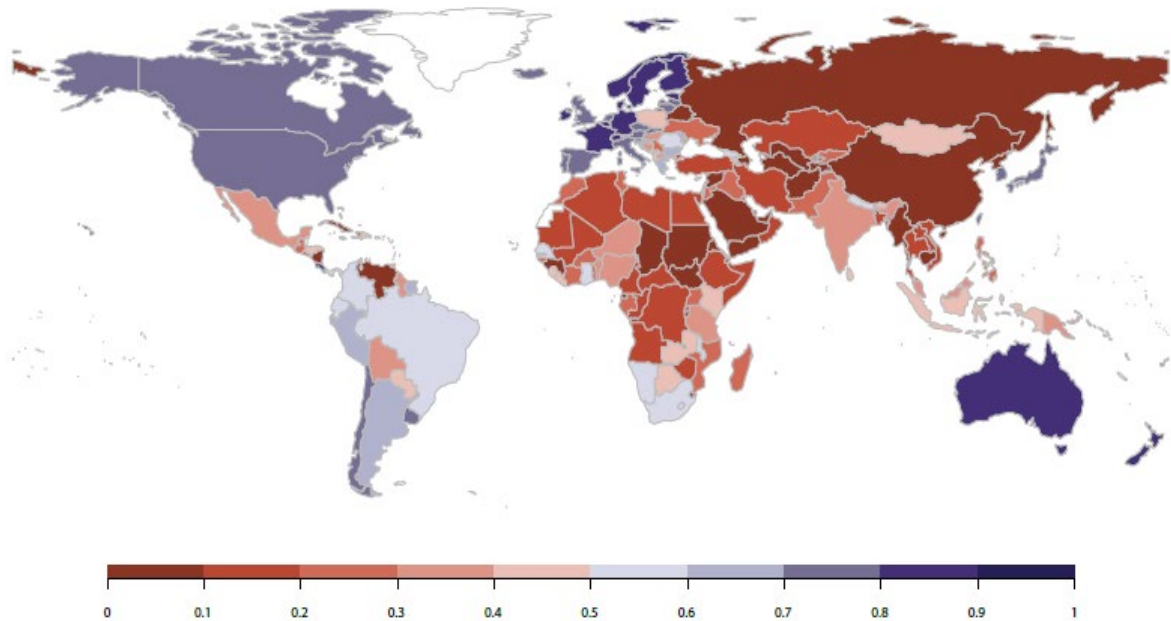


Fig. 2 The state of liberal democracy (LDI) (V-Dem Institute, 2022)

It is easy to see that this close interdependency exists, and this may serve as a prime argument why governments committed to an open society must make it their business to foster a vibrant and thriving – and needless to say independent – civil society that will operate in a civic space called upon to participate in policy matters and, more generally, in shaping the overall public sphere.

While the interdependency may be illustrated quite obviously in this way, the dots which lie beyond this reciprocity, and which create this interconnection are manifold and worth inspecting more closely, especially when wishing to ask and look in the direction of what civil society can do to support democracies. This question, which might sound like an old Toquevillian one, gets a new twist in the light of democratic deterioration.

The assumed link between civil society and democracy is commonly described like this: Civil society serves as a vital pillar of democracy by promoting accountability, representation, and participation, while democratic government guarantees and protects basic prerequisites for civil society such as civil liberties, i.e. the freedom of assembly and association. While there is much empirical and theoretical evidence of this good partnership this seems to be too static a focus lacking to acknowledge the current development of democratic deterioration.



We are currently experiencing a transformation of democratic politics, characterised by a degeneration of purportedly stable liberal democratic governments, the rise of right-wing populism and a loss of institutional trust. This process is driven by economic and social insecurity, polarised political debate and social division. When it comes to democracy building, civil society research for a long time focused on states which were in the transition from autocracy to democracy, in this perspective corresponded to the waves of democracies (viz. Huntington 1991) and the idea of an unstoppable line of progression towards a global triumph of liberal democracy and the famous 'end of history' (viz. Fukuyama 1992). In this tradition, civil society, with its capacity not only to voice and mobilise opposition but also to integrate new elites into a working democratic governance system, indeed could be seen as a requirement to a successful change of regime towards democracy.

Democratic political systems habitually offer a sophisticated normative self-description, according to which they embody the highest form of government. Democracies promise to shape politics better than any other conceivable political system. These promises of democracy include, above all, the prospect of freedom, social and political equality and justice, participation and security. The global appeal of democracy is based on these promises, but also, increasingly, the scepticism and criticism of the non-fulfilment of these promises. Established democracies thus face problems of legitimacy, which are due to the syndromes of disappointment caused by the "unfulfilled promises of democracy" (Bobbio 1984). Democratic deterioration is often ushered by growing populist parties and movements which gain power by disenchanted citizens, who no longer feel represented by the democratic institutions any more (Schäfer/Zürn 2022). These parties tend to demolish the institutions and checks and balances that have brought them to power, and tend to undermine the democratic system. E.g. less than half the citizens of Germany are satisfied with the way democracy is working in their country. The rate of institutional trust has declined, not only towards political leadership and parties but also in the form of government itself. The most alarming fact is that the younger cohorts among those doubting are growing and that those younger people have no optimism in shaping their future under democratic rule. (Zick et al. 2023, Bertelsmann 2023) Confronted with these current situations, how can civil society avert democratic deterioration?

For this, we have to assume axiomatically that this could be successful whenever civil society deposits on the promise of democracy – namely freedom, justice and equality.<sup>5</sup> From this starting point, we may look at different institutional and cultural arenas where this depositing can be

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<sup>5</sup> Not to mention security and peace, subjects not dealt with in the context of this paper.

accomplished. Those spheres may be derived from models of social stability such as the Senghaas Civil Hexagon (Senghaas 1999) and may be understood as modules or blocks which when pieced together, constitute a strong base, and increase the likelihood of a stable and peaceful society. Adapted to established democracies, in our hexagon (fig. 3), we propose the following modules: control of power, political education and culture, social justice, *agora* and participation, social Innovation and respectful pluralism. These modules surround a core of democratic minimal criteria which are the rule of law and civil liberties, fair elections and checks and balances.

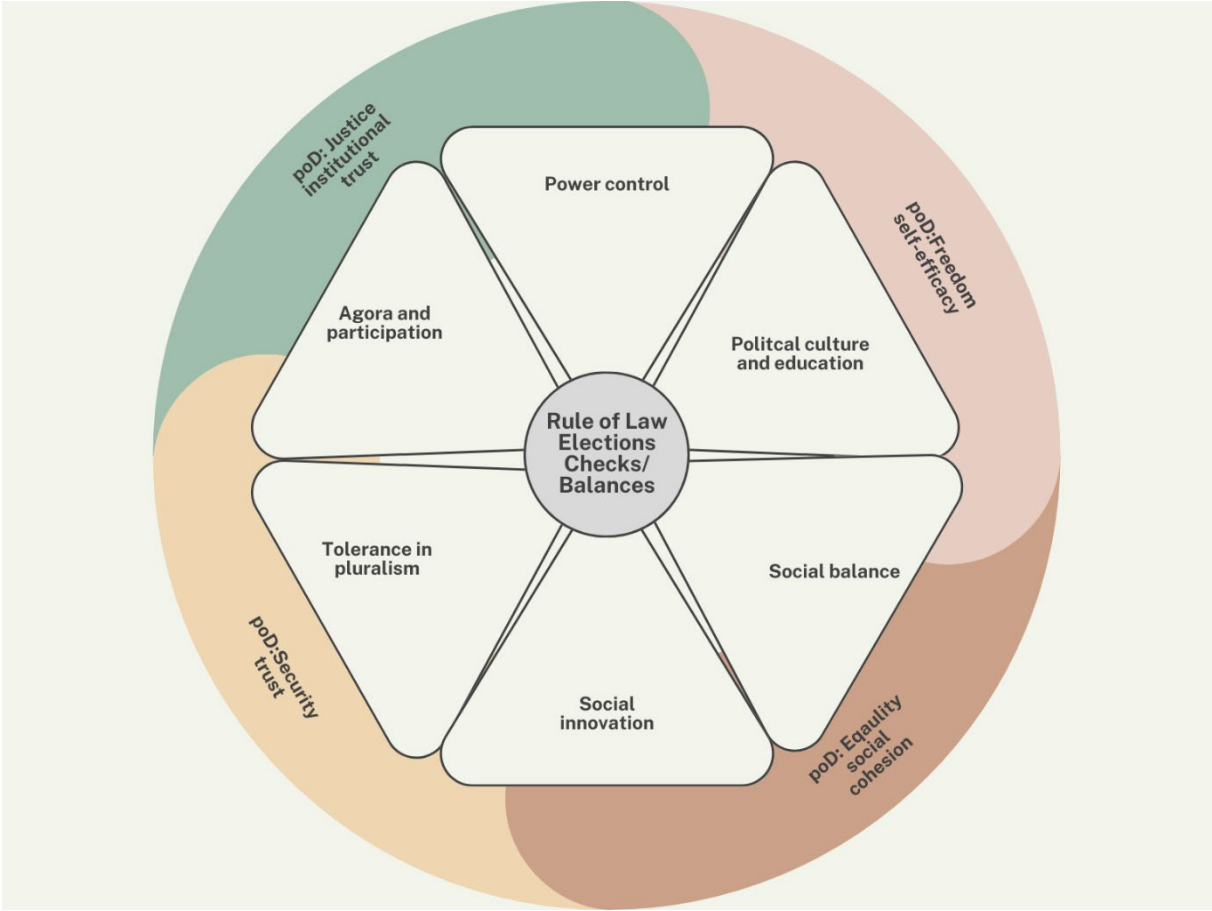


Fig. 3 The hexagon of democratic resilience (own visualisation, 2024)

The number of modules is not necessarily exhausting but should be a proposal for a preferably holistic view of areas where civil society can make a contribution to averting democratic deterioration and a collection of research gaps to prove these hypotheses.

### **a) Control of power by transparency and accountability can help to stabilise institutional trust**

Civil society can promote transparency and control of the exercise of power by monitoring the government and highlighting potential misconduct. If this transparency is answered by accountability in the political system more people feel that the institutions act fairly, which means that they believe that these institutions are fair and equal and that institutions apply the laws and rules consistently, regardless of personal preference, social status, ethnicity, or other personal characteristics. Conversely, a lack of equity in institutions can undermine citizens' trust. When people feel that the institutions are biased, promote corruption, or are unable to make just decisions, they lose trust in these institutions. This can lead to a decrease in the willingness to follow or turn to the institutions, which ultimately weakens the social fabric and affects the functioning of society.

CSO like Transparency International or Lobby Control are well-known actors in this area, but accountability and transparency are promoted by statements on draft laws by associations too and the field of non-profit journalism, like Correctiv, that often investigate political misconduct is often overseen when we talk about watchdog function of civil society. What is unclear though is firstly a systematical overview of the mechanism, outreach and level of this impact and secondly interdisciplinary research about how and to what extent these activities can restore individual institutional trust.

### **b) Political education and culture as the staple food for democracy**

Well-informed and politically educated citizens are vital for democracy. Through education and a culture that values critical thinking, citizens understand democratic principles and are empowered to make informed choices during elections, holding representatives accountable and becoming active and self-efficacious in the sense of a political being. Political education can also foster a sense of civic duty and encourage active participation. CSO play an important role in promoting political education and democratic culture by disseminating information, teaching skills and encouraging discussions. There are numerous CSO such as the German Association for Political Education e.V. (*Deutsche Vereinigung für Politische Bildung e.V.*), that not only teach in schools but also advocate for this topic as a policy matter, that should be supported by the government in a serious manner.

While there are many examples of those associations and initiatives, an extended mapping to grasp their impact and to make a serious statement about the subsectors' capacity is still missing.

### **c) Restore social cohesion through more social justice and equality**

Social inequality refers to the unequal distribution of resources, opportunities, and privileges within a society. Studies have shown that societies with high levels of social inequality tend to experience greater social unrest, higher crime rates, and political instability. Conversely, societies with lower levels of inequality tend to be more stable, with stronger social cohesion and trust among citizens. In examining how societies can reduce social inequality and promote stability, it's crucial to consider the role of institutions and processes that foster social justice. One key aspect of promoting social justice is the presence of institutions that buffer social hardships and provide support to vulnerable populations. These institutions may include welfare associations, community-based organisations, and other civil society actors. By offering services such as healthcare, education, housing assistance, and employment programs, these organisations help mitigate the effects of inequality and provide essential support to those in need. Moreover, civil society plays a vital role in addressing systemic inequalities and advocating for the rights and interests of marginalized communities and groups. Through grassroots organizing, advocacy campaigns, and policy initiatives, CSO work to challenge discriminatory practices, promote inclusive policies, amplify the voices of marginalized groups and contribute to the realisation of democracy's promise of justice and equality for all citizens. CSO can also play an important role in enhancing social mobility, for example by helping underprivileged young people to get better education and degrees, keeping in mind that a high rate of social mobility is proven to be conducive to social cohesion.

### **d) Social Innovation**

Civil society can be seen as a breeding place for social innovation. Social innovation refers to the development and implementation of new ideas, approaches, and solutions to address social challenges and improve societal well-being. In a rapidly evolving world characterized by technological advancements, demographic shifts, and environmental changes, social innovation becomes increasingly crucial for adapting democratic structures to meet the evolving needs of society. One of the key strengths of civil society in fostering social innovation lies in its grassroots nature and its close connection to local communities. Unlike governmental or corporate entities, CSO often have a deep understanding of the specific needs, concerns, and aspirations of the communities they serve. Moreover, civil society organisations are often characterized by their flexibility, agility, and willingness to take risks. Freed from bureaucratic constraints and profit motives, CSO have the freedom to experiment with innovative approaches and unconventional ideas

that may not be feasible within traditional institutional frameworks. This experimental ethos fosters creativity, collaboration, and learning within civil society, leading to the emergence of novel solutions to complex social problems. Furthermore, civil society serves often as a platform for collaboration and collective action among diverse stakeholders, including community members, activists, academics, and policymakers.

In the context of democratic innovation, CSO plays a pivotal role in ensuring that democratic structures remain dynamic, responsive, and inclusive by generating new ideas, models, and practices for citizen engagement, governance, and public service delivery, making them more effective, accountable, and participatory (Mair 2023). Whether through digital platforms for e-democracy, participatory budgeting initiatives, or community-led development projects, social innovation empowers citizens to actively engage in shaping their communities and influencing decision-making processes. But again, more research is necessary to explain all those connections.

#### **e) Tolerance in Pluralism**

Due to globalisation and migration European societies have become much more heterogenic in terms of cultural and ethnic structures than they have been some decades ago. In addition, the change in values and the pluralisation of lifestyles are increasingly calling into question traditional conventions and guiding principles, and also due to the emergence of long-hidden forms of diversity, struggles for recognition are gaining in importance, which must be negotiated with each other. (Mau et al 2023) Civil society, with its multitude of groups and organisations with different interests and opinions, can build bridges here and contribute to ensure that different perspectives are considered. By bringing together individuals from different cultural backgrounds for meaningful interactions by choice, cultural events, and joint projects, civil society organisations create opportunities for people to learn about and appreciate each other's cultures, traditions, and perspectives. These encounters help break down stereotypes, foster empathy, and build trust, laying the foundation for peaceful coexistence and cooperation.

Additionally, civil society plays a crucial role in advocating for the rights and dignity of marginalized and underrepresented groups and the recognition and inclusion of diverse identities and experiences in the public sphere. Furthermore, civil society acts as a watchdog, monitoring government policies and practices related to migration, diversity, and integration, and holding authorities accountable for their actions. Thanks to Putman and others we know that CSO can build

those bridges, hence it is important to understand exactly how and to support this ability (Putnam 1995).

#### **f) Agora and Participation**

In a democracy, citizens have the right to participate in political processes and influence decisions. Representative democracies often lack variable forms of participation beyond elections, which can cause the citizens' disenchantment with the form of government and a loss of legitimacy. Civil society plays a crucial role by providing platforms for citizens to organize, discuss, and present shared concerns. The agora, symbolizing the public square, epitomizes the space where democratic ideals come to life through citizen participation, which can foster dialogue, debate, and the exchange of ideas, reinforcing the democratic promises of justice, equality, and freedom.

So, in order to stabilize new and multiple forms of participation and create places for citizens and political self-efficacy civil society needs space to develop. Many CSO and informal civil society initiatives coordinate for example the spaces for protest and to voice demands, to set up petitions or town hall meetings. Despite the crucial role of civil society in democratic development, there remain significant gaps and underdeveloped areas in both practice and research. Research can identify these gaps, such as the lack of resources, infrastructure, or supportive policies for civil society initiatives, and offer recommendations for addressing them to create more inclusive and robust democratic ecosystems and should analyze the effectiveness of different types of CSOs in promoting citizen engagement and influencing policy outcomes, as well as assess the challenges they face in fulfilling their roles within the democratic landscape.

## Conclusion

It is certainly a truism to say that democracy, or to put it more widely, an open society depends on the engagement of its citizens. Given that 80% or more of this engagement is organized and executed in communities of choice rather than in the context of a “nation” or indeed any other community of fate, communities of choice deserve special attention. It is these communities of choice that make up civil society which in turn constitutes the backbone of the civic space.

Given that making political leaders understand this relationship continues to be a steep uphill battle, it appears necessary to continue providing well-researched, balanced, and serious substantiation in support of this argument, while not neglecting a critical appraisal. This has been attempted by a plethora of academics (see bibliography of shrinking space enclosed). The extensive list of publications listed here may also serve to prove that the whole concept of civil society or indeed of the civic sphere is not a short-lived fashion, but is grounded in political theory and has undergone many instances of political practice.

The reasonings touched on here are complex – as complex as other societal challenges, viz. climate change, artificial intelligence, a new world order in security terms etc. They have as many different aspects and nuances as other fields, and a wide range of different theories and viewpoints need to be brought into the discussion (viz. Alexander 2006). The role of the civic space in a new world order in whatever terms is not only a fact to be included in any reckoning but also a subject that merits detailed academic groundwork, both in theoretical disciplines and in the applied sciences. In many countries this hardly exists. Civil society studies as a field of study in political science, history, and other disciplines are seriously lacking. It would therefore seem imperative that the wealthier subsectors of civil society (foundations, large NGOs, umbrella organisations) and individual funders and donors devote resources to independent research to be organized in think tanks as well as in academic institutions. However, these efforts should not be confused with supporting their perfectly legitimate lobbying efforts.

The Maecenata Institute as an independent research centre has contributed to this research in the past, not least by assembling experts from all over Europe and attempting to present comparative overviews (Hummel and Strachwitz (eds.) 2023) as well as country by country surveys, ranging from detailed assessments (Simsa et al. 2021 / Hummel et al. 2022) and comprehensive studies of different aspects in various countries to concise birds'-eye views of special situations and issues (Hien 2023 /

Cibian 2022 / Niederberger 2021 / D'Ambrosio 2021 / Ayvazyan 2020 / Hummel 2019 / Bouchet and Wachsmann 2019). They all serve to continue to raise awareness and nudge decision-makers to devote interest and policies to this vital and indispensable precondition both of social change and of open society resilience. Influencing public opinion has been only moderately successful, while the term civil society as the overall title for all types of organized and spontaneous citizen action is now well established, ongoing attempts to avoid the term appearing increasingly absurd.

However, much more and more diversified research is of essence, if the role, scope, and importance of the civic space is to be generally recognized. Furthermore, civil society research needs to be intertwined with more general areas of theoretical and empirical research. Opinion leaders, media and others still need to be convinced, and the international research agenda needs to be enriched by integrating the role of the civic space into their work. International reporting still needs to be improved. Research needs ongoing programmes and ongoing funding in order to preserve and expand networks of dedicated researchers, follow up on existing projects and publications, and maintain independent sources of information and reporting mechanisms. A long-term independent civic space observatory is needed. And of course: the civic space and civil society itself cannot exist without a permanent and intensive critical accompaniment.

Why all this? The answer is quite simple: Civil society is here to stay. It should be recognized, treated, and respected accordingly.



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**Laura Pfirter**

## **The European Civic Space Observatory (ECSO)**

The societal sphere distinct from the state, the private sector and the personal sphere, in which citizens engage in voluntary, collective action and not-for-profit organisations, is under threat and shrinking in many places (viz. Strachwitz & Hummel in this volume). Given that for some time now, a global trend has become apparent in which the civic sphere has come under increasing attack in many countries around the world, it seemed necessary to improve the way instances of attempting to shrink, obstruct, close, or otherwise influence the development of this part of the public sphere were documented and to offer assistance to those afflicted by these attempts. The attacks come from a variety of state and non-state actors and range from restrictions on rights and bureaucratic harassment to physical and psychological violence visited upon activists. In the course of their research and interviews with a broad range of civil society actors, the researchers of the Maecenata Institute for Philanthropy and Civil Society became aware that many affected organisations and activists do not know how to deal with threats and where to seek help. Many of those affected also seemed to be afraid to defend themselves or fear the high cost of legal action. At the same time, however, it has emerged that with the number of attacks and restrictions on civil society work rising the wealth of knowledge on countermeasures has increased as well. Civil society organisations in particular have developed a wide range of offers of help or guidelines that those affected can fall back on in an emergency and that mostly free of charge. That some government and commercial agencies are also addressing the issue and providing contact persons and services, also deserves mention.

As one part of the Shrinking Civic Space Project<sup>6</sup>, the Maecenata Institute has begun to develop a database that aims at providing information around this subject. The website [www.shrinkingspace.eu](http://www.shrinkingspace.eu) provides a platform on which the Maecenata Institute connects those affected with offers of help. To this end, the former may filter offers of help according to overarching topics (e.g. legal uncertainties & problems with regulatory requirements, help with threats & attacks, help for participation in civil dialog and political involvement, help with access to resources). In a second step, it is possible to select information according to different areas and expressions of the

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<sup>6</sup> The website [www.shrinkingspace.eu](http://www.shrinkingspace.eu) was created in 2022 as part of the European Civic Space Observatory (ECSO) project of the Maecenata Institute for Philanthropy and Civil Society (MI) with generous financial support from Porticus and the Open Society Initiative for Europe (OSIFE). It was planned by Siri Hummel and Laura Pfirter. The web site was implemented by Maik Hagelüken from Roundbased Development on a pro bono basis, and is currently available in English and German.

shrinking civic space. This allows those seeking help to quickly and easily obtain a list of suitable offers for their concerns. The list contains a brief description of the helping organisation, the type of help and various contact options. Stakeholders who offer help with shrinking civic space can register their offers on the website themselves. In addition, the Maecenata Institute researches new offers of help at regular intervals and adds them to the search mask, making it possible to search for help on an increasingly detailed basis in the long term. When compiling the offers of help, care was taken to ensure that the majority of them are organised by civil society actors and are free of charge or at least very inexpensive. This is intended to ensure that the hurdles to making effective use of help are as low as possible.

Today, in addition to the possibility of seeking help, the website also offers the option of reporting attacks. In this way, the Maecenata Institute seeks to pursue the goal of establishing a monitoring system and publicising particularly serious cases of shrinking civic space. Finally, the website provides concise and understandable information on what shrinking civic space is, what phenomena are involved and why they should be taken seriously. In this context, we trace the current debate on the topic in Germany and the European Union and refer to international indices and relevant research literature on civic space. In a third step, it is also intended that the platform provides more general information about various types and aspects of civil society.

With this website, the Maecenata Institute wishes to contribute to protecting the civic space and helping to establish a strong network of solidarity in Europe.

**Florian Faltenbacher and Flavia Gerner**

## **Report on the ECSO-Symposium: The Civic Space in Europe – Shrinking, Growing, Enhancing?<sup>7</sup>**

The danger of a shift to the right in parliaments of certain EU countries, the silencing of critical voices, the growing oppression of minorities and the enormous legal and political restrictions on many civil society actors such as the climate movement are topics that attracted the attention of participants and speakers during the conference on the state of the civic space and democracy in Europe organized by Maecenata Institute. The conference marked the end of a three-year research project that explored the critical issues of the changing civic space in Europe, and in a number of countries in all parts of Europe in particular. The project was made possible through generous support from Porticus and from Open Society Foundations.

The conference opened with an introduction Dr. Siri Hummel, director of the Maecenata Institute. She raised a number of concerns and issues which were taken up on several occasions during the conference. She reminded the audience that the principles of democracy are increasingly being threatened, and a setting characterized by declining civic space in many parts of the world is encountered by the associates of the "Civic Space in Europe" project ECSO (European Civic Space Observatory) over the last years. We are witnessing democratic backsliding in the EU and a shrinking or changing civic space. Hence, the reasons and consequences of these developments need to be monitored more closely. In this context, the idea of a project that monitors civic space, with a special focus on the identification of tendencies and issues in Europe was developed.

Siri Hummel also presented the edited volume "Contested Civic Spaces: A European Perspective", completed in time for the conference in the framework of the project. 12 experts from different countries in Europe examined the question whether the space for civil society is shrinking. Aimed at policy makers, civil society scholars and the field, the book provides insights into the latest civil society developments and aspects such as the changing interaction between state, market and civil society and the impact of populist movements on civil society.

As one part of the project a new website and database was developed, which was presented by Laura Pfirter following the introduction. It was created in order to connect those organisations who work in the field of protection of civil society with the concerned organisations and actors and offers

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<sup>7</sup> The symposium was held at the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 10–11 July, 2023.

assistance to organisations and activists in need of information on the subject of a shrinking civic space. Organisations and individual citizens who may provide support to civil society have the opportunity to register on the website and can then be found by those who require assistance.

### **1<sup>st</sup> session**

The conference then proceeded with a session comprised of country reports from Austria, Germany and Hungary, presented by Ruth Simsa, Siri Hummel and Melanie Hien. All three speakers agreed that there is at least a changing, if not a shrinking civic space. In their reports, they emphasized the specific national context and political situation in the countries they referred to in their presentations.

Ruth Simsa reported on the situation of civil society in Austria, a country with a strong democratic tradition while currently, since the mushrooming of right-wing populism, an example for a shrinking space. The semi-authoritarian politics in Austria correlate with the upcoming right-wing forces during the last years. At the beginning of her presentation, Ruth Simsa introduced the concept of the 'Raw Bourgeoisie', which was repeatedly taken up all through the conference. The term describes the insidious, subtle, and smooth spread of populism, which is often not immediately apparent but carries significant consequences for marginalized groups, as observed in Austria. The empirical data collected during the project addressing the two phases from 2017 to 2019 (government coalition of FPÖ and ÖVP) and from 2020 to 2023 (coalition of ÖVP and the Greens) totally underpins the hypothesis that the model of liberal, representative democracy is in crisis. Even if the general situation for civil society has recently improved slightly and there is less defamation and delegitimation of civil society actors by the government, conditions are not expected to be good in the near future. According to Ruth Simsa, rather than a significant decline, a redirection of funds from politically independent to politically dependent CSOs is particularly noticeable. These developments coincide with increasing corruption, media concentration, increasing inequalities of income and wealth and polarisation within the society. With the currently increasing suppression and violence towards climate activists, the window of slightly improved conditions might close again in the very near future.

Siri Hummel picked up from this conclusion and asked whether a radicalisation of climate activists could lead to more stringent restrictions for civic space in Germany. While climate movements have a long tradition, the classical players in the field of environmental and animal protection are recently more and more accompanied by "new kids on the bloc", a younger generation of climate activists.

Narratives of increased aggressiveness may be observed in Germany, while public support for different forms of protests is high. Nevertheless, several examples of the contested discourse are to be identified, the most recent example being the “Last Generation” (Letzte Generation) being accused of forming a criminal association. The criminal code in Germany simplifies strict monitoring of civil society groups which results in noticeable lack of freedom for them. A new project idea, presented by Siri Hummel and discussed with the participants, was the investigation of the discourse around climate protests in Germany analysing interviews with activists, media and social media coverage and parliamentary documents or documents of election campaigns with the aim of responding to questions related with the German discourse on climate protests.

Melanie Hien from the University of Regensburg presented the third country report with a focus on civil society at a turning point in Hungary. While an example of a pioneer for the rights and opportunities for participation of foundations and associations, when there was a boom in civil society activity during the transition period in the 1990s, much has changed since 2010. For example, the introduction of a one percent income tax paid out to a CSO of the tax payer’s choice can be seen as a source of special support, but regulations have been gradually phased out and new laws have increasingly conditioned CSO in regard to this source of funding. In 2002, the national conservative Civic Circles Movement was revived by Viktor M. Orbán in order to expand the grassroots networks, associations, and media of the political right and to contribute to Fidesz party's electoral success. With the introduction of laws regulating the non-profit status of organisations and obligations to disclose foreign funding, non-profit organisations are experiencing enhancing challenges, and dependence on national funding is creating major difficulties in the sector.

## **2<sup>nd</sup> session**

The focus shifted to the increasing pressures that civil society activists and organisations are facing globally.

Packed with figures and statistics, Deniz Devrim, representing the OECD, opened the debate and presented the findings of the OECD’s Global Report on the Protection and Promotion of Civic Space, published in December of 2022. The report focusses on the protection of civil liberties, access to information as a right, media freedom and civic space in the digital age, and the enabling environment for civil society. Devrim highlighted the challenging and evolving context in which the protection of a civic space is taking place and pointed to the overall decline of open societies. Following the OECD report, Kerstin Giese from Bread for the World presented the Civil Society Atlas,



which this year focuses on migration. She highlighted the case of Greece, where civil society faces many challenges, Giese gave an impressive account of the increasing criminalisation of civil society engagement for immigrants. As examples, Giese highlighted containment measures, restricted access, and the implementation of an NGO registration law. She also discussed the criminalisation of solidarity efforts, which may result in over 100 years in prison for individuals involved in civil society work. Furthermore, restrictive NGO registration requirements and funding restrictions were identified as significant obstacles. Migrant defenders in Greece are in constant danger as a result of these pressures, and defamation is a widespread problem. A provocative and completely different approach was offered by Gerry Salole from the European Cultural Foundation, which marked the last contribution of the section. He challenged the idea that civil society really needs explicit protection. Salole stressed that civil society is by nature adaptive and finds ways to continue its existence. He argued that it is in the nature of civil society, as a form of human behaviour, to be resilient and adaptable. It is because of this characteristic that there is a wide variety of civil society organisations, of all sizes and shapes. Salole questioned the use of empirical reports and stressed the need to think about civil society in a new way, finding different approaches to combine the strengths of diversity within civil society.

The statement that civil society does not necessarily need to be protected met with some resistance from the audience. However, there was general agreement that too little attention is paid to the diversity of civil society and too little focus to the resulting strengths.

### **3<sup>rd</sup> session**

A panel discussion completed the first day of the conference. The panelists were Sergey Lagodinsky MEP, Aarti Narsee of the European Civic Forum, and Gerry Salole from the European Cultural Foundation. Dr. Rupert Graf Strachwitz, CEO of the Maecenata Foundation, chaired the panel. All three speakers responded with a definite yes to his first question as to whether civil society should be protected. As outlined before, Gerry Salole underlined that this should not mean that civil society needs protection or cannot protect itself, it is indeed more resilient than we believe. Aarti Narsee emphasized the serious threat that civil society faces due to the right-wing shift as well as democratic backsliding in many European countries. Sergey Lagodinsky, the politician, followed this up by making the salient point that protecting civil society is synonymous with protecting democracy, as there would be no democracy without civil society. In the course of the discussion, the three speakers set different priorities, but it became clear above all that there is considerable demand for academia to collect data, listen to the representatives of civil society in their concerns, put topics on the agenda

and thus introduce them to more general debates. During the discussion, the importance of being transparent and creating opportunities for marginalized groups to contribute to academic discourse was emphasized. It was agreed that in order to gain a holistic view of civil society, it is necessary to discuss the dark side of civil society and to realize the importance of controversy for democracy.

#### **4<sup>th</sup> session**

Recovered and inspired from the first day, the second day of the conference began with country perspectives on civil society in England and the Netherlands.

Asif Afridi from brap Birmingham provided an insight into the current challenges and future opportunities for civil society in England. Afridi discussed the decline in trust and confidence in charities over the last decade. Inequalities within the sector, such as funding disparities and pay gaps, were highlighted as key issues. Afridi also addressed legal restrictions, including the Transparency of Lobbying, Non-Party Campaigning and Trade Union Administration Act, which have limited the role of civil society in public and political debate. Afridi emphasised the need for greater awareness of power-sharing, accountability, connectivity and trust within civil society to overcome these challenges.

Crossing the Channel to the Netherlands, Ulla Pape of the Free University of Berlin discussed the transition of civil society in the Netherlands from "privileged partnership to political neglect", as her title suggested. Ulla Pape noted that while there are no legal restrictions, there has been a decline in understanding and support for civil society. Dutch civil society organisations are often seen primarily as service providers rather than as representatives of citizens, which reduces the appreciation of their democratic function. Pape highlighted the growing polarisation between the political elite and the public, which challenges the role of civil society in bridging this gap. In addition, she reported an increased vertical fragmentation of Dutch CS, whose advocacy function is compromised due to its partly highly market-oriented logic.

#### **5<sup>th</sup> session**

The session zoomed into the Eastern and South Eastern parts of Europe, namely Romania, Greece and Slovakia. Chaired by Rupert Graf Strachwitz, the session featured presentations by Stefan Cibian of the Făgăraș Research Institute, Vasilios N. Makrides of the University of Erfurt and Boris Strečanský of Comenius University, Bratislava. Cibian discussed the vulnerabilities of a consolidating civil society sector in Romania. In his view, the lack of trust in civil society is a legacy of the country's

totalitarian past. Cibian noted that although freedom exists constitutionally, it is not fully realised in people's lives. He also pointed to the impact of EU funding programmes on civil society, which initially reduced the space for civil society organisations because they did not fit the specificities of Romanian civil society, due to the level of funding and bureaucratic hurdles. Nevertheless, Cibian emphasised the importance of civil society's role in maintaining democracy and the need for cooperation within civil society.

After Kerstin Giese had already provided a glimpse of the challenges facing civil society in Greece, Professor Vasilios Makrides focused on civil society in Greece in a more general way. He noted the presence of both informal and formal civil society networks in Greece and emphasised the need to distinguish between them. Makrides discussed challenges such as negative public opinion of the civil society sector, particularly due to corruption scandals, as well as tensions between formal and informal civil society in addressing the refugee crisis. For him, it is important to overcome negative perceptions and strengthen the image of civil society in order to face the many challenges mentioned by Kerstin Giese. Finally, Boris Strečanský's presentation on the current state of civil society in Slovakia gave an impression of the challenges of normative vision and engagement. Strečanský mentioned the rise of right-wing movements, demonstrations, and civic engagement, as well as the struggle for autonomy, legitimacy and emancipation within civil society. He noted the failure of the concept of political parties regarding good political offers that counteract a shift to the right and emphasised the importance of inter- and cross-sectoral cooperation to counterbalance the degradation of the state and the public sector.

## **Conclusion**

To add some variety to the way the discussions took place during the conference, the participants met at flipcharts in small groups for the last part of the programme. Four different questions were discussed in a world café format. This made it possible to address questions that had arisen at various points during the conference. One of these questions related to the biggest challenges civil society is facing in contemporary Europe. In the wake of climate change, democratic backsliding, and increasing inequality, major difficulties are ahead for civil society. Despite a digitized world in which society continues to transform, the present symptoms of crisis in some cases lead to a reinforcement of national identity, and civil society's responses to these challenges are not simple. While the answer to the question regarding countering extremism consisted mainly of better monitoring and agenda setting, the participants agreed that sharing knowledge and building

coalitions is a resilience-building measure. At the same time, all legal means would have to be permanently employed in order to take action against any act of defamation, agitation, etc. On the question of the best balance between legal protection and control, it was argued that in a democratic environment, civil society itself should be able to participate actively in decision making processes. For this to happen, however, fundamental rights must be guaranteed, including, most importantly, the freedom of assembly.

Siri Hummel and Rupert Graf Strachwitz closed the conference with a condensed analysis of the situation. In the course of the project, but also in listening to the country reports at the conference, it became clear that a shrinking civic space may be observed as a global phenomenon, including all of Europe. Among the core problems that civil society must address are the difficulties caused by right-wing populism and extremism. The reports have shown that not all areas in civil society are equally attacked by such developments, examples of particularly affected areas identified during the research are migration aid and climate protest. Considering the need for a common identity as civil society is pressing, could this be a way to fight together for better framework conditions?

Civil disobedience is - as most agreed - an important and necessary part of the strategy of civil society and social change. An awareness of past struggles can contribute to a better understanding of these social necessary dynamics. Not to forget, no matter the circumstances, civil society is resilient. As an alliance of representatives from academia and civil society from 12 different countries, the project can help make civil society an important partner in the fight for democracy. Research on the topic of Shrinking Space in Europe will not end with the publication of the anthology "Contested Civic Spaces" and the 30 publications related to the project. Rather, further work on the subject will follow, with the goal of exploring the many important questions discussed during the conference.

## Events and Presentations

### Events

- 10./11.07.2023: Symposium: The Civic Space in Europe – Shrinking, Growing, Enhancing?
- 30.11.2022: Porticus Workshop, Vienna, Austria
- 14.07.2022: Roundtable, ISTR Global Conference, Toronto, Canada
- 10.06.2022: Andrassy University Conference, Budapest, Hungary
- 26.04.2022: Facing shrinking space - How are you Civil Society? Online-Event
- 26.10.2022: Presentation on the legal expertise „Politische Teilhabe der Zivilgesellschaft“ (Siri Hummel), organised together with Gesellschaft für Freiheitsrechte, Open Society Foundation and Allianz Rechtssicherheit für politische Willensbildung
- 03.09.2021: Workshop: Empowering Civil Society. Maecenata & Porticus
- 13.07.2021: Roundtable, ISTR Global Conference, online
- 12.06.2021: ISTR Roundtable: Civil Society Challenges in Advanced Economies/Shifting Democracies, together with Associate Prof. Ruth Simsa and Prof. Anna Domaradzka
- 14.07.2020: Workshop with associates, online
- 24.04.2020: Workshop with associates, online
- 04.12.2019: European Civic Forum, Brussels
- 14./13.11.2019: Workshop, Transcultural Leadership Forum, Zeppelin University, Friedrichshafen, Germany
- 17.05.2019: Bundesnetzwerk Bürgerschaftliches Engagement

### Presentations

- 10.01.2024: The Contested Civic Space: A Deep Dive – Porticus; Online Presentation (Siri Hummel, Rupert Graf Strachwitz)
- 05.12.2023: Transnational Giving Europe Conference Call - Presentation on the Shrinking Civic Space Project (Siri Hummel)
- 18.10.2023: Seminar on Shrinking Civic Space (Siri Hummel)
- 30.05.–01.06.2022: Impulse ‘Shrinking Civic Space in Germany?’ Conference Budapest (Siri Hummel)
- 26.04.2022: Facing shrinking space – How are you Civil Society? Roundtable ESCO (Siri Hummel)
- 18.11.2021: Presentation, Die engagierten Europäer, Berlin
- 07.09.2021: Presentation, Allianz Rechtssicherheit für politische Bildung, online
- 02.06.2021: European Civic Academy, Civil Society (Rupert Graf Strachwitz)
- 19.05.2021: Deutscher Kinder und Jugendtag: Shrinking Civic Spaces? Online-Vortragsveranstaltung (Siri Hummel)
- 17.05.2021: Presentation on the study at the event #DSEEtalk: „Zivilgesellschaft in und nach der Pandemie. Was jetzt zu tun ist“ (Malte Schrader)
- January 2021: „Shrinking Spaces? Der Kampf um den zivilgesellschaftlichen Handlungsraum“ Stadtjugendring Potsdam (SJR) (Siri Hummel)
- November 2020: Shrinking Space of Civil Society? 3rd Offenburg Talk from Youth in Europe (Siri Hummel)
- October 2020: Zivilgesellschaft: Karriere eines Grundbegriffs (Siri Hummel)
- September 2020: Angriff auf die Zivilgesellschaft? Der umkämpfte Handlungsraum für zivilgesellschaftliche Akteure in Deutschland (Siri Hummel)

- June 2020: Rechte Zivilgesellschaft? FES Tagung in Kassel Baunatal (Siri Hummel)
- May 2020: What is the Shrinking Space of Civil Society? Lecture in the Non-Profit Management Studies at the HRW Berlin (Siri Hummel)
- January 2020: Stammtisch für die gute Sache - Onlinekommunikation für NGOs und nachhaltige Unternehmen (Siri Hummel)
- November 2020: French/German Foundations meeting, key note, online (Rupert Graf Strachwitz)
- November 2020: International Civil Society Centre: Global Perspectives Conference (workshop) online (Rupert Graf Strachwitz)
- September 2020: Anglo-German Koenigswinter Conference (Berlin/online) (Rupert Strachwitz)
- July 2020: Convoco Forum, Salzburg (Rupert Graf Strachwitz)
- July 2020: Georgetown University Rome Webinar, online (Rupert Graf Strachwitz)
- March 2020: Irish and German Civic Space Actors Coordination, online (Rupert Graf Strachwitz)
- March 2020: Government of Wales Conference, Berlin (Rupert Graf Strachwitz)
- February 2020: German Foreign Office Strategic Dialogue Meeting (Rupert Graf Strachwitz)
- January 2020: PEX Conference, Madrid, Workshop (Rupert Graf Strachwitz)

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