

**Conclusions from
The Forum on State of Civil Society and Civic Space in
Europe
Tallinn, November 16-17, 2017**

Shrinking civic space is not a country specific problem, it is a EU level concern, a wider trend that cannot be ignored, nor just dealt case by case when problems grow. Prevailing values in the EU are not any more the ones that created the EU: spread of anti-European and highly nationalistic points of view; people not interested, illustrated by low turnout on European elections; rising proportions of far right populists in power of decision making; alternative interpretations of the essence of democracy, and many other that threaten citizen participation and growth of civil society.

Empowered civil society can be the answer to spreading populist views, anti-civil society propaganda. If people are protesting, these movements are not about fighting governments, these are about preserving European values. We cannot afford losing in terms of rights or freedoms. Tendencies in EU impact trends in each of the countries. We need stronger mechanisms to prevent a domino effect.

Europe needs networks that involve and voice the people, neighbours gathering to do what is needed in communities, grassroots activism that flourishes, takes action and stands up. Mission of civil society, especially at the moment, is to work on human rights, anticorruption, rule of law, inclusion of diverse societies. Activism and activists should not be and should not feel they are invisible and powerless, or threatened. Civil society is everywhere and civic space is needed for enabling civic action in communities, regions, national and EU level.

CSOs, groups of activists and impact of their action for increasing civic space in Europe could be supported with the following measures:

- launch of the **European Endowment for Democracy**, a funding mechanism for supporting democracy building inside the EU. Finances are needed to help CSOs educate the public and build support for rights, democracy and the rule of law and also to support litigation by CSOs.
- agreement on a statute for a **European Association**, a new legal form at EU level that CSOs can register under, for CSOs to collaborate across borders. If organisations find themselves targeted with administrative burdens by governments trying to silence them, they can just register under an alternative EU level legal form that hasn't been designed to weigh them down.
- **a body or person at EU level who is responsible for civil society** - to collect information about trends and incidents showing that CSOs are being targeted; speak out and apply diplomatic pressure to help organisations, networks and civic activists if national governments do not follow agreements on EU level.

- **a budget for “high visibility events”** to talk about the state of civil society and civic space should be re-established in the EU budget, in order to support national civil society organisations to take a more coordinated lead with larger impact in working with priority issues.

At the same time continuous attention is needed for building more supportive structures to civic space on national level, including:

1. **adequate public policy consultation processes developed for more legitimate decision making.** Binding agreements for consultations and cooperation guarantee that citizens' opinions are deliberated and considered, as well as the role of civil society taken into account;
2. **funding mechanisms, their purposefulness and effectiveness are to be assessed and developed,** for supporting creation of civic space and empowering CSOs in their mission in every country;
3. **administrative and legal measures regulating civic participation should be assessed,** following changing the rules, which limit freedoms of individuals and associations to exercise their freedom of association and peaceful assembly;
4. **smear campaigns against civil participation or civil society organisations do not belong into European governing culture and should be intolerated, together with physical attacks on activists and/or on CSO's offices.** Role of CSOs and civic activism cannot be put into question.

We, as civil society actors need to address the state of civil society and agree upon a stronger coordination with tangible action plans for:

- involving and empowering national civil society networks
- improving coordination of civil society efforts and cooperation of networks for protecting civic space
- mainstreaming civil society as an issue of concern for European future

United voice of civil society and stronger messages help to voice the expectations of citizens, hold governments accountable. Shared best practices and recommendations give tools for advocacy.