

The Role of CSOs in **PROMOTING CIVIC SPACE**

21th June (Wednesday), 2017

Hotel Park, Skopje, Macedonia

Regional Conference **BACKGROUND DOCUMENT**

Reaffirming the Value of Civil Society Action. The Role of CSOs in Promoting Civic Space

The presence of a vibrant, strong and free civil society is essential in order to guarantee sustainable development and to provide incentives for social and democratic change. Connected like never before, civil society actors around the world have found new ways to organize, demand greater government accountability, and inject their voices into policy debates. At the same time, as citizens' voices have grown louder and more influential, many governments have responded by cracking down on civil society. CSOs are increasingly working in an atmosphere of harassment, censorship, and inequitable legislation. Governments have conducted smear campaigns to turn public opinion against CSOs and portray them as "foreign agents" or "undesirables", intent on destabilizing society, while also adopting policies, instituting funding modalities and enacting legislation that in many cases is not conducive to forwarding the interests of CSOs. The trend of shrinking civic space, unfortunately, is a global

one which is why it is crucial CSOs to be aware and cooperating globally. Even the civic space in countries with long tradition of democracy has been downgraded; US was one of the five countries to be on CIVICUS Monitor's Watch List as a country where there is an immediate and developing threat to civic space.

If one zooms in to see the picture on the regional level, one will observe a similar situation – only in 2016 the space for effective civil society development and operation in the Western Balkans and Turkey has shaken immensely, with numerous incidents and cases of violation being reported in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Turkey. Zooming more in, to Macedonia one would see that the civil society community was operating in a tumultuous setting during the past 2 years. The annual reports on the civil society enabling environment in Macedonia by the Macedonian Center for International Cooperation, the

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USAID CSO Sustainability Index and the reports by the European Commission, all of them have confirmed that the environment in which civil society has been operating has been continuously deteriorating. At one point during 2017, Macedonia even found itself as one of 5

countries on CIVICUS Monitor's Watch List of countries where there is an immediate and developing threat to civic space. This seems more than logical – in fact, what is ongoing within civil society shadows global trends, and global trends do not surpass Macedonia.

I. **CSO Actions in Promoting Enabling Environment for Civil Society Development**

In order to operate effectively, civil society must have the space to speak out, to educate, to mobilize and to ensure that everyone can participate in the democratic processes of their country. The set of conditions that impact on the capacity of citizens to participate and engage in the civil society arena in a sustained and voluntary manner is what defines an enabling environment. BCSDN started dealing with the concept of enabling environment for civil society development in 2012, when with support of its member CSOs, partners and legal experts, developed the first Monitoring Matrix on Enabling Environment for Civil Society Development and a Tool-kit for measuring the

health of the legal, regulatory, and financial environment in which CSOs in WBTS operate.

In the efforts of creating an enabling environment, reliable and regular monitoring and reporting of trends in civil society space are needed to track whether civil society space and civil society environment is worsening or improving, and trigger early alerts to drive prompt action.

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II.

Practices and standards for civil society accountability

In times of changing role of civil society and active pressure and shrinking civic space, civil society actors need to ensure they retain their core missions, integrity, purposefulness and high levels of trust. Apart from improving civil society's performance by creating an enabling environment for civil society development, improvement "from within" is also necessary - CSOs in the WBT region need to improve their own standards, in order to increase the trust from their constituencies, the citizens, donors and policy makers. Civil society has an important role in holding all stakeholders, including itself, to the highest levels of accountability.

The Global Standard for CSO Accountability has an ambition to ensure a truly global approach and practice of CSO accountability. A shared understanding of what accountable CSO behavior looks like and the global network of like-minded peers aims to transform the understanding of accountability and to improve

CSOs' impact in times of shrinking civil society space and decreasing support for what civil society does. The Standard represents a set of commitments on how CSOs carry out their work, and it sets out actions on how to improve their results. Applying these principles can help CSOs to hold themselves and their partners accountable to a shared standard. It aims to explain to donors what they can expect when they support CSOs in carrying out initiatives and actions. It establishes credibility for the CSOs at all levels - with partners, the public, governments, and funders. A Global Standard with a unified and compelling narrative on civil society organizations' commitments to the public will help improve our work, support public trust and allow people to better hold us to account to our promises.

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III.

Building coalitions for promoting civic space

According to 2017 CIVICUS State of Civil Society Report a new threat to civil society is the resurgence of right-wing populism that is adding to unprecedented levels of restriction that civil society faces. In our region and globally we have noticed shrinking of the space for civil society head to head with a wider crisis of democracy: CSOs have used their right to express dissent, to protest, and to organize civil society's international-level actions; Governments have tried to limit the space for civic engagement. The ones in power have used financial means, their media or even misuse the institutions they have grasped, impeding the work of CSOs. At the same time, civil society initiatives and organization, non-democratic in their values have emerged to serve the populist or the nationalistic narrative of political parties. They do not hold any strong civil society roots, genuine participatory internal structures, and most of all they have promoted non - democratic values advocating for restriction of CSOs actions, funding and support.

All this is severely hampering the image and trust in the civil society among the general public; especially in countries without longstanding tradition of civil society (like in this region), where its value is still not widely recognized. It has been an impediment that the civil society responds with solidarity, quick mobilization and building coalitions for support to becoming stronger, more organized and loud in defending the common democratic values and in protecting civic space. We have seen such examples in our immediate neighborhood: Hungary, Poland, Romania and Croatia where the civil society pushed back on incursions on civic space and worked together in creating public awareness credibly framing what civil society is, why it matters and how it contributes positively to society. On a regional level few initiatives emerged to address the need for trans-European civil society actions in support of democracy, and one significant was the "Democracy Matters" initiative from Romania.