

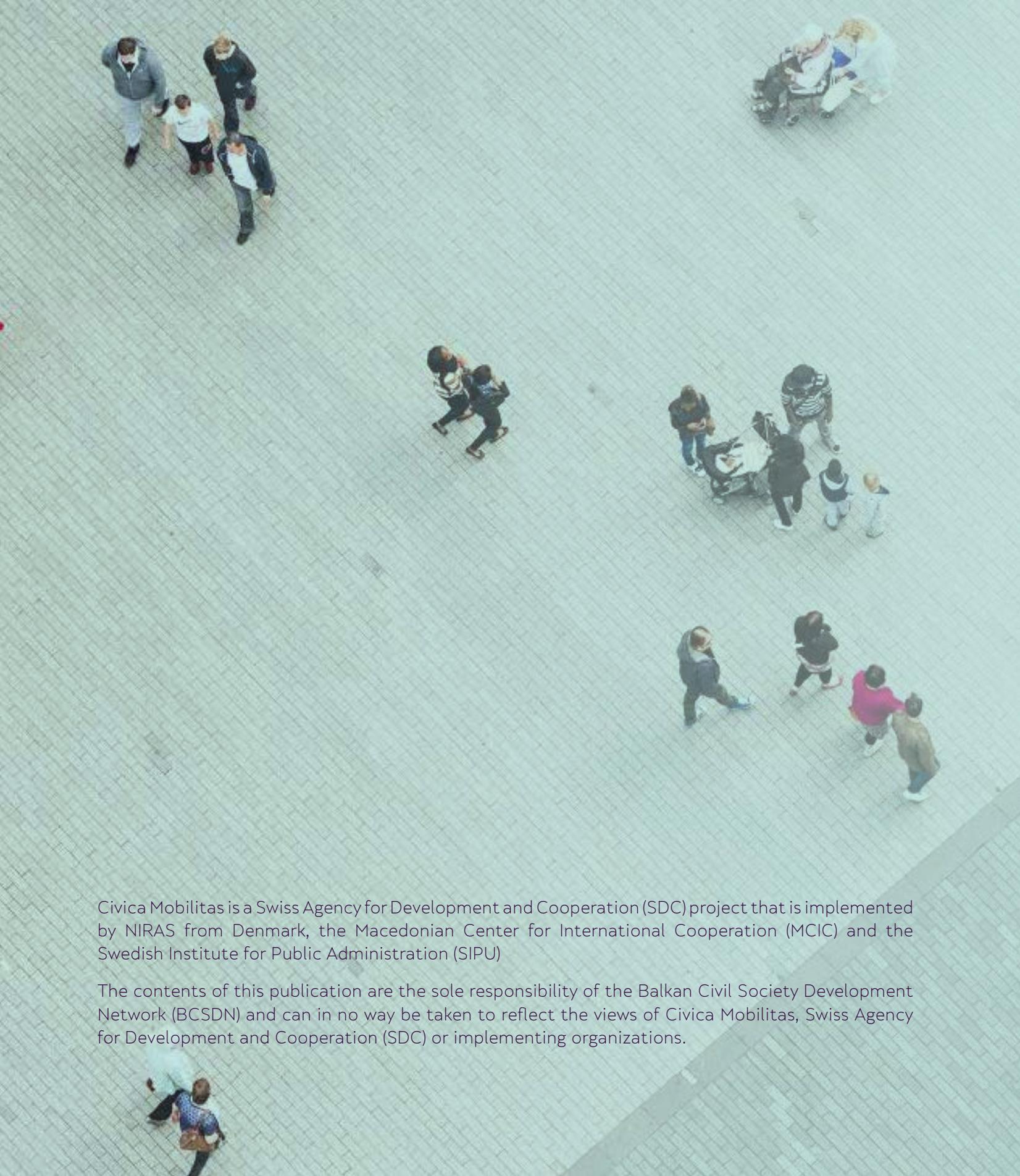


WHAT CAN
WE DO TO
PROMOTE
CIVIC SPACE



PERSPECTIVES
FROM THE
WESTERN BALKANS
AND TURKEY

March 2018



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On 21st June 2017, BCSDN organized a regional conference titled “The Role of CSOs in Promoting Civic Space” in Skopje, Macedonia. Gathering more than 40 CSO representatives from Macedonia, the Western Balkans and Europe, the conference aimed at discussing ways for promoting civic space and fostering enabling environment for civil society. A keynote speaker to the conference was Dhananjayan Sivaguru Sriskandarajah, Secretary General of CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation, whose opening speech provided a global perspective of the issue of shrinking civic space, pinpointing to reasons for a difficult operating environment for civil society. The following discussions were organized into three panel sessions focusing on good practices in monitoring and advocacy, on improving accountability, and on enhancing cooperation within the sector. A background document with the detailed agenda and the full list of speakers is available [here](#). The conference was part of the project “Protecting Civic Space: Duties and Participants”, supported by Civica Mobilitas, which aims to empower CSOs to be more active and effective in promoting civic space and an enabling environment, through an exchange of good practices and standards.

The conference presented an opportunity to bring practices and experiences from Europe and the globe to CSOs in the country and the region, with the aim to encourage them to contribute to locally promoting civic space and an enabling environment for civil society development. Based on the inspiring keynote speech and shared local efforts and experiences from the countries in the region, we have prepared an overview of the conclusions that came out of the lively discussions. We hope it will inspire other CSOs, formal or informal civic initiative in the countries, the region or globally, to take affirmative action in promoting civic space where they operate, and for donors to rethink their funding strategies. It is time we reimaged democracy!



Strong and free civil society is vital for having sustainable development and for driving social and democratic change. However, according to various reports, civil society is “free” in only handful of countries in the world; the Civicus Monitor – a tool that monitors civic space globally – has classified only 26 countries as having “open” civic space, which is only 3% of the world population¹. On the other hand, 3 billion people live in countries where civil society is closed or oppressed, and unfortunately, even democracies traditionally considered as “healthy” (such as the US and the UK), show noteworthy signs of shrinking civic space and civic freedoms. The most frequent violations to civic space on a global level are detentions of activists, limitations of protests or use of excessive force, and attacks on journalists. A more recent trend is also governments introducing new forms of bureaucracy to slow down civil society organizations (CSOs), demonizing the independent civil society and presenting CSOs as enemies of the state and of the people². The rise of populism and government-“owned” CSOs are further feeding these arguments and fuelling the discourse among the public.

In parallel with these political phenomena affecting the civic space, civil society is facing additional challenges: decline of public trust in the sector, absence of civil society infrastructure and insufficient funding. The decline of the citizens’ trust towards civil society is corresponding with the decline of the overall trust in the institutions and in democracy³; however, it is also a result of the failure of civil society to be more representative and accountable to their constituencies⁴. Many donors’ funding strategies further enhance the problem: as response to the increasing pressure they face to measure results and lower administrative costs, many channel their support through bigger organizations and/or private consultancies, creating incentives for growth of professionalized civil society organisations, which are excellent at “accounts-ability”, but less good at driving change. In turn, in absence of funding for capacity building of smaller CSOs and lack of an overall strategy for development of civil society, the sustainability, diversity, and empowerment of the sector is put into question.

1 <https://monitor.civicus.org/globalfindings0417/>

2 Ibid.

3 <http://www.edelman.com/trust2017/>

4 <https://www.civicus.org/documents/reports-and-publications/SOCS/2017/state-of-civil-society-report-2017-executive-summary-en.pdf>



Unfortunately, these trends have not surpassed the Balkans region either: only in 2016 the space for effective civil society development and operation in the Western Balkans and Turkey (WBT) has shaken immensely, with numerous incidents and cases of violation being reported in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Turkey. The trust in the civil society has not been on the rise in almost any of the countries in the past years.

In such times when the local trends are in fact global ones, across the world CSOs can do a lot to promote the civic space globally. From exchanging experiences, showing solidarity, building broad coalitions, using new technologies and using international leverage, here are the things CSOs can do to promote civic space.



RAISE AWARENESS ABOUT CIVIC SPACE AND CIVIL SOCIETY ENABLING ENVIRONMENT

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. Civic space is created by a set of rules, which allow people to organize, participate and communicate with each other freely and without hindrance, and in doing so, influence the political and social structures around them. 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. Improving the enabling environment should be the aim of all civil society organizations and gathering the support from the people for this is a prerequisite. Active advocacy and support for wider civic education which should take place in venues other than schools and in different stages of the citizens' lives would certainly promote the understanding of democracy, the role of civil society, citizen participation, and the value of civic space.

A valuable tool that tracks and rates the respect for civic space on a global level, and in as close to real-time as possible, is the [CIVICUS Monitor](#). Multiple information streams are used to inform the rating of each country's civic space, ranging from open to narrowed, obstructed, repressed or closed. The interactive world map allows online visitors to access live updates from civil society around the world, track threats to civil society and learn about the ways in which the rights to association, expression and peaceful assembly are being realized or challenged in all countries. The CIVICUS Monitor is a tool developed by civil society, for civil society - all interested CSOs can participate and work together with CIVICUS members and partners to track changes in civic space by directly submitting updates on civic space in their country.

AVOID PORTRAYING IT AS IT IS JUST ABOUT CSOS

While regulations and practices that interfere with the work of CSOs should worry the civil society, we should have in mind that civic space is not only about civil society organizations. Civic space, after all, is about the fundamental challenges of citizens to demand and promote social change. Thus, instead of only CSOs working on improving the operating environment of civil society, the issue of shrinking civic space is something that affects everybody, and it should be presented as such.

MONITOR THE ENABLING ENVIRONMENT AND BUILD A BETTER EVIDENCE BASE

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

Solid research and advocacy tools are needed to enable CSOs' inclusion in policy-making, as a way to more transparent, predictable and quality policies, as well as a common understanding and reaction of the sector when these are breached. There are several monitoring tools practiced by CSOs on different levels.

A very detailed tool that closely monitors the environment in which CSOs operate is BCSDN's own tool – the Monitoring Matrix for Enabling Environment for Civil Society Development. Specifically designed for the Western Balkans and Turkey region, the Monitoring Matrix was developed in 2012 with the support of BCSDN members and partners. The Matrix is divided in three main areas: basic freedoms (freedom of expression, of assembly and of association), CSO financial viability, and Government – CSO relationship. It uses various methodological tools (from surveys to expert meetings) and it reports on the country state of affairs both in legislation and in practice. The annual monitoring exercise is used for (country-specific) advocacy activities aiming to provide consistent and continuous pressure to national Governments in the development and implementation of appropriate legislation in the area of civil society development.

MAKE SURE THAT CSOS CAN VOICE OPINIONS WITHOUT FEAR OF CENSORSHIP OR PUNISHMENT

We cannot protect civic space without protecting freedom of expression. With global media freedom at its lowest level since the start of the century⁵, journalists and media workers often face harassment, threats and verbal and physical attacks for conducting critical or investigative journalism; governments target their critics using the legal system, or interference in editorial policy, and new challenges emerge with the growing fake news.

With this in mind, CSOs are less able to voice their concerns and protect civic space, making freedom of expression an issue of extreme importance. While standing for freedom of expression, CSOs should show solidarity and mobilize resources to support immediate actions aimed for protecting those under attack from libelling and smear campaigns. Joint action and advocacy is needed to fight fake news, political influence and control that harm civic space.

⁵ <https://www.article19.org/resources/new-article-19-metric-measures-global-threats-freedom-expression-information/>

TRY TO WIN HEARTS AND MINDS OF PEOPLE

With declining trust in civil society (or traditionally low trust as in the Western Balkan countries), many people question CSOs' representativeness. Oftentimes CSOs are represented as interest groups with funders' "foreign" agendas rather than focus on peoples' needs and concerns. Raising awareness about the value of civil society and how we, as civil society, are making our societies and communities better should be one of CSOs' key priorities. For this, it is crucial that CSOs continuously communicate with the wider public, and be in constant dialogue with the stakeholders about what they want, what they have to offer and how they are working effectively to achieve change.

IMPROVE OUR OWN ACCOUNTABILITY

In time of shrinking civic space, apart from improving the external environment to be more enabling for civil society development, improvement “from within” is also necessary. In the Western Balkans and Turkey, the importance of accountability and transparency of CSOs’ work, and how it contributes to the creation of a more enabling environment for civil society, has not been explored enough. Often due to lack of understanding and lack of internal mechanisms and capacities, most CSOs apply very few feedback and accountability mechanisms, and they are mostly tied towards their donors, rather than their direct beneficiaries and partners. In order to increase the trust from their constituencies, the citizens, donors and policy makers, and build stronger support for defending the civic space, CSOs have to improve their own standards and ways of work.

There are several mechanisms that CSOs can introduce in order to improve their accountability, emerging from different global or regional initiatives. One of those, based on exchange of different accountability standards and aimed to enhance CSO accountability as a direct act against the shrinking of civic space, is the Global Standard for CSO Accountability. It was developed by nine well-established networks and accountability initiatives from all over the world including BCSDN, and it is centred on the concept of dynamic accountability. It represents a set of commitments on how CSOs should carry out their work and be in constant dialogue with their stakeholders in order to improve their results and hold themselves and their partners accountable to a shared standard. The standard is organised in three clusters: Cluster A – What we want to achieve, Cluster B – Our approach to change, Cluster C – What we do internally. The clusters are deliberately aspirational – the focus is not only on what CSOs do now, but also on what they can do in the future, and they call on CSOs to enhance their performance, both individually and collectively, and to contribute to a better world. The Global Standard offers different types of involvement, cooperation and learning opportunities for CSOs, accountability initiatives, donors and the public.

BUILD COALITIONS FOR ENSURING STRONG SUPPORT

To effectively promote civic space, CSOs have to ensure a wider support base and build coalitions with broader scope of stakeholders, such as trade unions, religious communities or informal activists and groups, as well as go beyond the usual suspects and try to ensure support by other social actors, such as businesses.

Promoting civic space is a long term engagement and while it has to start locally with building conditions for effective citizens' actions close to the ground, CSOs across the world need to show solidarity and act together. Cooperating and joining forces with as many organizations, formal and informal civic initiatives, is much more effective than just few organizations safeguarding the civic space on their own. Lessons from the region teach us that when civic space and democracy are under attack, showing bigger solidarity on international and global level might be a game-changer. Moreover, CSOs can help each other and act pre-emptively if those coming from countries where civic freedoms have been/are backsliding share their experience and lessons learned.

In the region, an example of a joint CSO action for promoting civic space on international level was an initiative that emerged from a CSO forum organized in Romania in 2016 under the title "Democracy Matters". The Forum gathered together a collation of CSOs from Central and Eastern Europe, academia, political activist groups, movements and others to jointly discuss the raising populist narratives by developing 4 components with concrete action points: 1. Awareness-rising campaign on global level; 2. Commitment to monitoring on local level; 3. Advocacy for setting the civic space higher up on the EU agenda; and 4. Initiation of citizens democracy dialogues for communicating the need for promoting liberal democracy, civic space and civil society to a wider audience.

ACHIEVE MORE BY JOINING AND MOBILIZING RESOURCES

In times of limited funding for immediate action, combining resources can save the day. This can include sharing of office space, technical equipment, access to information or communication tools and even personell. A step further is joint mobilization of resources and fundraising that can be done through organizing thematic fundraisers or thematic public campaigns (that combine advocacy and fundraising), joint cultural events, auctions, publications etc.

The foundation SOLIDARNA in Croatia was established on the initiative of 55 human rights activists and civil society organisations with the aim to safeguard the sustainability of human rights protection, the rule of law and democratic standards in Croatia. The foundation was established in 2015 by joining resources and has managed to successfully mobilize greater support and raise additional funds to create fund for urgent and small-scale initiatives of CSOs aimed to defend civic space, democracy and human rights. Its campaign - "Drugotna na sav glas!" (lit. Secondary Out Loud!), launched as a response to the increasing attacks against reproductive and sexual rights of women in Croatia, became particularly successful. Through various activities for raising awareness and donations SOLIDARNA managed to raise 8.000 EUR, which, matched with 15.000 EUR from the Foundation's general fund, was used for setting up a special fund for activities of grass roots organizations working on issues related to gender equality and woman's rights.

SUPPORT CIVIL SOCIETY INFRASTRUCTURE

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INVEST IN CIVIC EDUCATION

In times when democracy is being questioned, when the role of civil society is being systematically undermined by governments, we need to empower citizens to become active civic actors who are ready and willing to bring change in their societies. Yet, in order to get people engaged, we need to have appropriate education leading citizens to take part in decision-making. For citizens to actively engage on community level, we need to teach civic rights, so that basic freedoms are understood and exercised. In the Western Balkans, according to the Monitoring Matrix on Enabling Environment for Civil Society Development – Regional Report 2015, support to civil society and civic engagement may be efficiently promoted through formal or non-formal education, however, the educational system does not sufficiently include civic engagement in the official curricula. Investing in civic education will not only promote civic space, but will make our democracies stronger.

DONORS SHOULD ADAPT THEIR FUNDING MECHANISMS TO CURRENT TRENDS

Pressured by the decreased people's trust and the demand for greater visibility of their actions, many donors' funding models derive largely from their desire to easily evaluate their contributions, to immediately identify and quantify successes, increase the visibility of the funding they provide, and if possible, lower administrative costs. Under this rationale, many of the largest donors have streamlined their funds through large international organizations and/or foreign private companies, and orient their funding towards providing more short-term project support with immediate impact, rather than provide strategic and long-term support development of civil society. Such funding strategies harm the diversity of the sector and its further development and leave little room for actions aimed to support the development and operationalization of enabling environment for CSO actions – something that is essential for CSOs to be able to fully exercise their transformative power in society and bring real change. In order to have effective responses to common civic space challenges, donors need to adapt their grant-making practices, to be able to respond more promptly to the immediate needs on the ground, to foster work through coalitions and multi-sectoral groups, and to make use of multi-stakeholder local initiatives, local “fundermaderies” and multilateral fora to protect or widen civic space.

One example of donor funding, strategically and thoughtfully developed to provide long-term development of civil society as a sector with the aim to achieve positive gains for democracy, is the CIVICA MOBILITAS support facility by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, implemented since October 2014 in Macedonia (to September 2018). The project supports civil society in promoting the civic space and bringing social change in areas such as good governance, decentralization and civil society development, as well as in addressing and mainstreaming, where possible, three so-called “transversal issues”: gender, inter-ethnic relations, and migration. With a mission to be the driving force for a sustainable civil society, the project has a goal during a period of 4 years to reach a “critical mass” of CSOs that actively engage in achieving positive social changes in Macedonia. For achieving this mission, the programme has three components identified as key for sustainable civil society development: constituency building, grant scheme and research & development. According to their preliminary analysis, so far, between 31 and 68 per cent of their grantees have been actively engaged in at least one of the main civil society initiatives in the past period – from the “Colourful revolution”, the Blueprint for urgent democratic reforms, to the Letter to the Government for establishment of the Council for cooperation between CSOs and Government.

ADVOCATE (AND PRACTICE) PARTICIPATORY GRANT-MAKING

The growing demand for greater accountability and improved effectiveness have been pressuring donors to change their funding practices, and some progressive donors have responded to this by finding ways to include the final beneficiaries and those most affected to have a say on the funding they provide.

Also referred to as ‘peer review grant-making’, ‘community funding’, or ‘activist funding’, participatory grant-making lies on the idea the grants awarded will be more effective, relevant and valuable if the communities affected participate in decision-making and if the funds are granted to those most capable to bring change. The participatory grant making is not a new approach, but it has been attracting a lot of attention and praise more recently, and it is certainly a trend that can positively influence the fight for open civic space. If more donors practice participatory mechanisms in grant-making, they will be more responsive to the urgent needs and social challenges including the immediate threats to civic space and civil society environment. Therefore, practicing participatory grant-making by donors and CSOs that are also grant providers can be supportive to efforts linked to safeguarding civic space and improving aid effectiveness.

A group of grant-makers and loud advocates from across the world, (the Ford Foundation, Disability Rights Fund, FRIDA - The Young Feminist Fund, Red Umbrella Fund, UHAI, and the Wikimedia Foundation) gathered together to develop a practical Guide to introduce all interested foundations with the existing participatory mechanisms and help them in addressing the key challenges.

LEVERAGE INTERNATIONAL PRESSURE

In cases of immediate actions against civic space and related freedoms, CSOs should use their communication channels and spread the word widely so that the international community can put pressure on governments and show solidarity with civil society via bilateral and multilateral channels. The UN Human Rights Council offers support to CSOs through the document “Protecting civic space and the right to access resources” which summarizes the general principles under international human rights norms and standards regarding the ability of civil society to seek, receive and use resources.

Keeping track of the relevant commitments undertaken by governments on the international level might be another approach CSOs can use to pressure governments. An example of such governments commitments can be the global initiative Open Government Partnership launched in 2011 to provide an international platform for domestic reformers committed to making their governments more open, accountable, and responsive to citizens. On a European level, the Council of Europe in November 2017 approved the Guidelines for civil participation in political decision making, emphasizing participation of citizens to be at the heart of the idea of democracy, following the earlier Document of the Council of Europe - the Code of Good Practices of civil participation in decision making processes adopted in 2009. The EU has also been developing mechanisms to react to the shrinking of civic space, and a Study from 2017 by the European Parliament – “Shrinking space for civil society, The EU response” outlines EU’s mechanisms at disposal and the possible ways in which the EU should modify its response to the shrinking space challenges. Focusing on this region, in November 2017, all the Ministers in charge of Public Administration Reform from Western Balkan countries committed to improve civic participation by signing the joint Western Balkans Recommendation on Public Participation developed on the initiative of the Regional Cooperation Council and the Regional School for Public Administration.

REMEMBER THAT HISTORY IS ON OUR SIDE

While recent political developments across the world, including the rise of populism and shrinking civic space, might be discouraging for our aspirations for strong and free civil society, it is obvious that there are growing demands for new forms of participatory democracy. A more engaging form of democracy, making use of new technologies, could empower citizens to participate more effectively in society and be the main bearers of change. The Balkan region has been a witness to civic engagement bringing change in times of most restrictive and closed civic space - a proof that activism, coalition building and solidarity have brought change in difficult times.

“The fight that we are fighting in civic space is not just about improving the operating environment for civil society, but it is actually to fight about new forms of participatory democracy and to put citizens at the very heart of democracy.”

Dhananjayan Sivaguru Sriskandarajah



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