Shrinking Civic Space for Youth

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Deželan et al. (2020). *Safeguarding Civic Space for Young People in Europe*. Brussels: EYF.

Deželan , Yurttagüler (2021). *Shrinking democratic civic space for youth*. Strasbourg, Brussels: Youth partnership.

The importance of civic space

Open and democratic civic space is one of key _safeguards_ against tyranny and oppression and is _promoted_ by civil society organisations.

There is a global trend of _'reverse transitions'_ (democratic regression); i.e. 'global _authoritarian pushback_ against democracy and human rights' composed of _anti-democratic and neoliberal tendencies_ including _hate speech, fake news, populism, conflicting diversity._

The persistent _silencing_ of voices of civil society under the camouflage of alleged _"urgency" to respond_ to various crises (economic, health etc.).

The "shrinkage" appears _irrespective of 'traditional' distinctions_ between countries (wealth, democratic tradition, human rights track record, geopolitical location etc.).

What is a civic space?

Civic space is a _physical, virtual and legal place_ that allows citizens to _form associations_, _to gather_, _to speak out_ on public issues and to _participate in_ public decision making with an aim of improvement of our collective wellbeing.

Civic space is generally _constituted_ around _freedoms of expression, association and assembly_ and _facilitates_ the ability of citizens _to debate and exchange information, to organize and to act._

Why youth civic space?

Youth civic space is a space for _meaningful participation of young people_ in society where one can take advantage of its basic democratic freedoms.

Since youth civic space is particularly _dynamic and constantly changing_, certain _types of actors/organizations_ prove to be _key_ in their safeguarding because they _target_ youth-specific issues and _place_ them on the agenda.

These are _youth-led, youth work, for-youth_ organisations, _non-formal groups_ of young people that act as _'laboratories of democracy'_ and are an important _catalyst_ of social innovation.

Key analytical dimensions of a civic space

Five dimensions of examination of shrinkage:

1. freedom of information and expression;

2. rights of assembly and association;

3. citizen participation;

4. non-discrimination and inclusion;
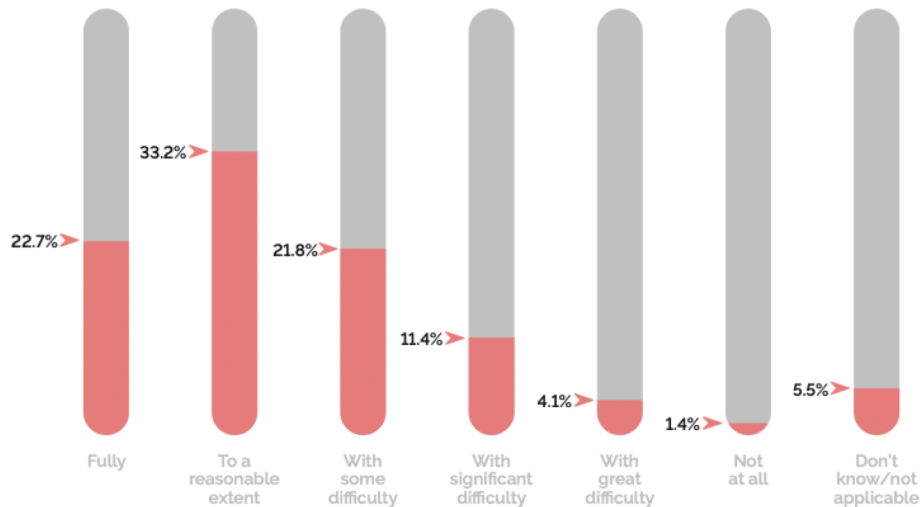
5. human rights and the rule of law.

Results – access to information

- <u>more than a third</u> of organizations have troubles accessing information
- almost a half have at least some fear of retribution as a result of expressing themselves

Table 1: To what extent are you able to access the information you seek (including financial information) from government sources?

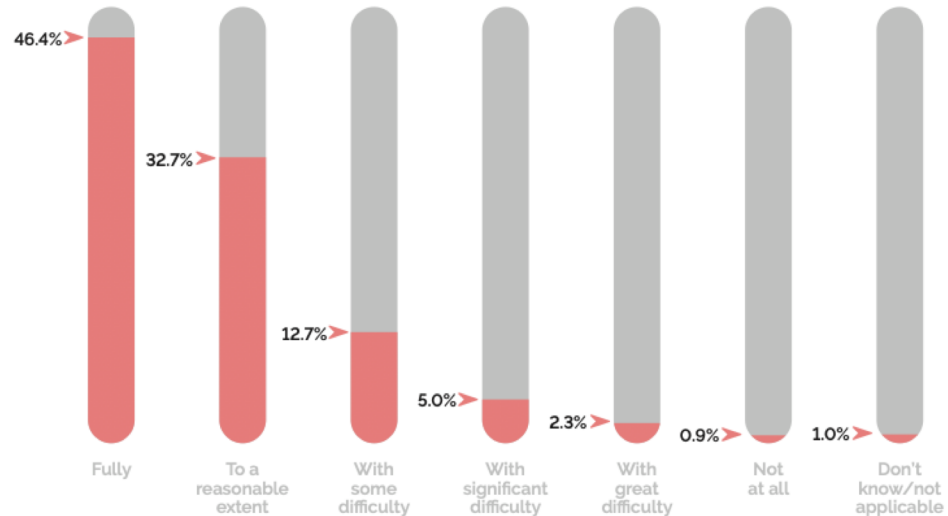|		Fully	To a reasonable extent	With some difficulty	With significant difficulty	With great difficulty	Not at all	Don't know/not applicable	Total
Region in Europe	EU15 and EEA	30.1%	41.6%	17.7%	3.5%	1.8%	1.8%	3.5%	100.0%
	EU13	18.0%	27.9%	26.2%	19.7%	3.3%		4.9%	100.0%
	Rest of Europe	10.9%	19.6%	26.1%	19.6%	10.9%	2.2%	10.9%	100.0%
Total		**22.7%**	**33.2%**	**21.8%**	**11.4%**	**4.1%**	**1.4%**	**5.5%**	**100.0%**

Results – freedom of expression

- <u>one fifth</u> of organizations experience visible difficulties expressing themselves

- one quarter of EU13 MSs

- almost a half of organizations outside EU/EEA

Table 2: To what extent are you able to freely express yourself in public without fear of retribution?

		Fully	To a reasonable extent	With some difficulty	With significant difficulty	With great difficulty	Not at all	Don't know/not applicable	Total
Region in Europe	EU15 and EEA	60.7%	32.1%	5.4%	0.9%	0.9%			100.0%
	EU13	35.5%	37.1%	17.7%	8.1%	1.6%			100.0%
	Rest of Europe	26.1%	28.3%	23.9%	10.9%	6.5%	4.3%		100.0%
Total		**46.4%**	**32.7%**	**12.7%**	**5.0%**	**2.3%**	**0.9%**	**1.0%**	**100.0%**

46.4% Fully
32.7% To a reasonable extent
12.7% With some difficulty
5.0% With significant difficulty
2.3% With great difficulty
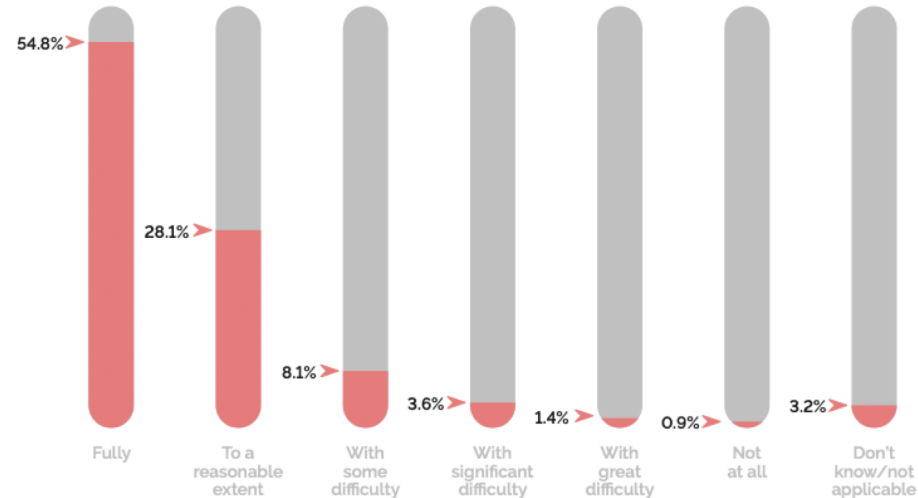0.9% Not at all
1.0% Don't know/not applicable

Results – rights of assembly and association

- <u>around 15%</u> of organizations experience difficulties in organizing/participating in public assemblies and demonstrations without fear of retribution

- more than 30% of organizations outside EU/EEA

Table 4: To what extent are you able to organise/participate in public assemblies or demonstrations without fear of retribution?

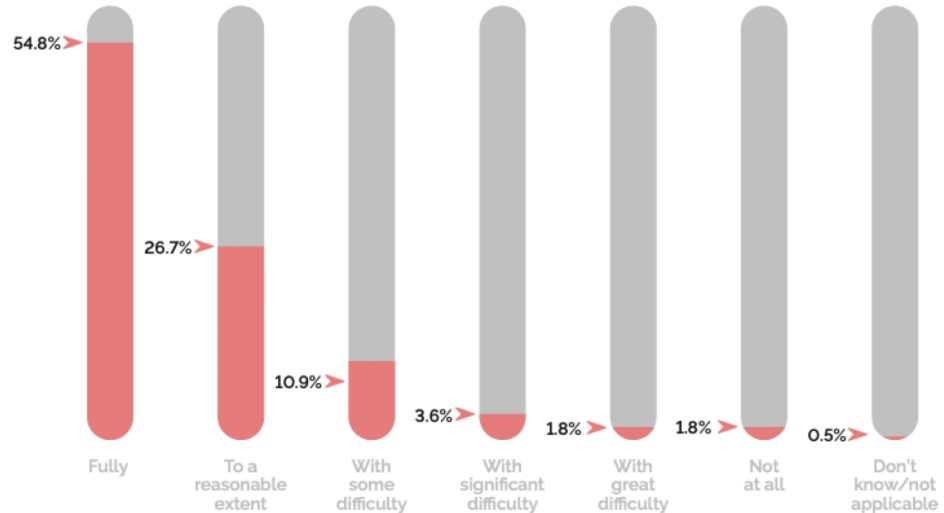|		Fully	To a reasonable extent	With some difficulty	With significant difficulty	With great difficulty	Not at all	Don't know/not applicable	Total
Region in Europe	EU15 and EEA	64.6%	27.4%	3.5%	1.8%			2.7%	100.0%
	EU13	51.6%	30.6%	8.1%	3.2%	1.6%		4.8%	100.0%
	Rest of Europe	34.8%	26.1%	19.6%	8.7%	4.3%	4.3%	2.2%	100.0%
Total		**54.8%**	**28.1%**	**8.1%**	**3.6%**	**1.4%**	**0.9%**	**3.2%**	**100.0%**

Results – rights of assembly and association

- more than 40% of organizations do not feel completely free from government interference
- 15% of organizations experience at least some difficulties

Table 5: To what extent is your organisation able to function independently and free from government interference?

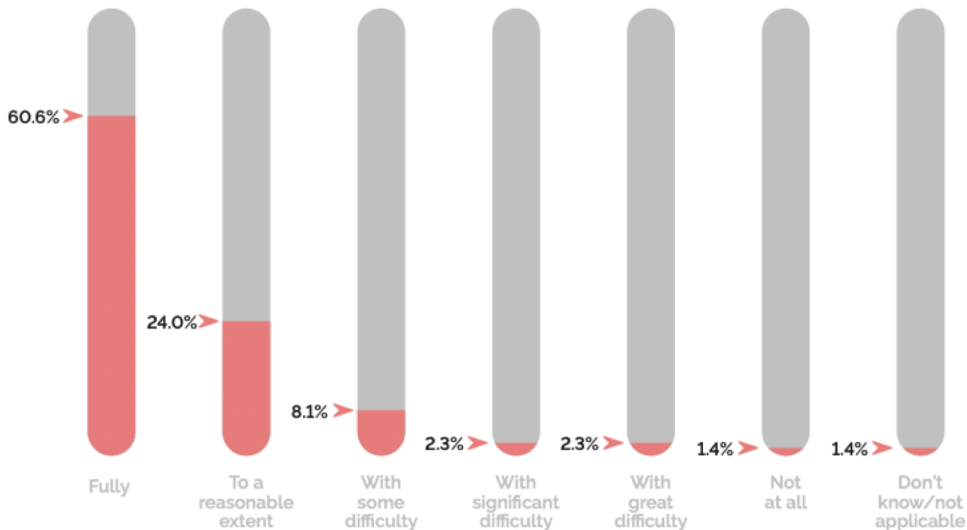|		Fully	To a reasonable extent	With some difficulty	With significant difficulty	With great difficulty	Not at all	Don't know/not applicable	Total
Region in Europe	EU15 and EEA	65.5%	22.1%	8.0%	3.5%	0.9%			100.0%
	EU13	45.2%	30.6%	16.1%	4.8%		1.6%	1.6%	100.0%
	Rest of Europe	41.3%	32.6%	10.9%	2.2%	6.5%	6.5%		100.0%
Total		**54.8%**	**26.7%**	**10.9%**	**3.6%**	**1.8%**	**1.8%**	**0.5%**	**100.0%**

Results — engagement in advocacy activities

- only 60% of organizations report the ability of full engagement

- 15% experience clear difficulties

Table 14: To what extent are you able to freely engage in advocacy activities without fear of retribution?

		Fully	To a reasonable extent	With some difficulty	With significant difficulty	With great difficulty	Not at all	Don't know/not applicable	Total
Region in Europe	EU15 and EEA	73.5%	19.5%	2.7%		2.7%	0.9%	0.9%	100.0%
	EU13	50.0%	27.4%	16.1%	3.2%			3.2%	100.0%
	Rest of Europe	43.5%	30.4%	10.9%	6.5%	4.3%	4.3%		100.0%
Total		**60.6%**	**24.0%**	**8.1%**	**2.3%**	**2.3%**	**1.4%**	**1.4%**	**100.0%**

60.6% — Fully
24.0% — To a reasonable extent
8.1% — With some difficulty
2.3% — With significant difficulty
2.3% — With great difficulty
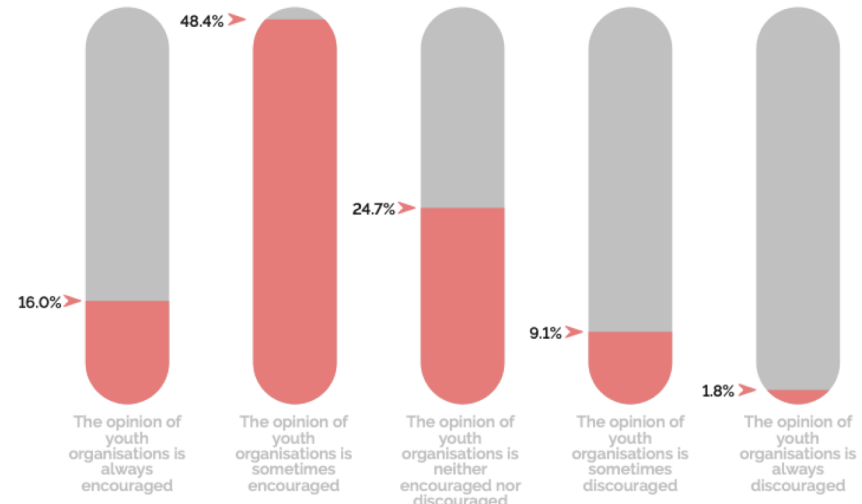1.4% — Not at all
1.4% — Don't know/not applicable

Results – collaboration with authorities

- one tenth of organizations report their opinion is sometimes or always discouraged

- one fifth in EU13 countries

- one third of organizations report their opinion is never encouraged

Table 8: How would you describe the collaboration of youth organisations with public authorities? (seeking opinion)

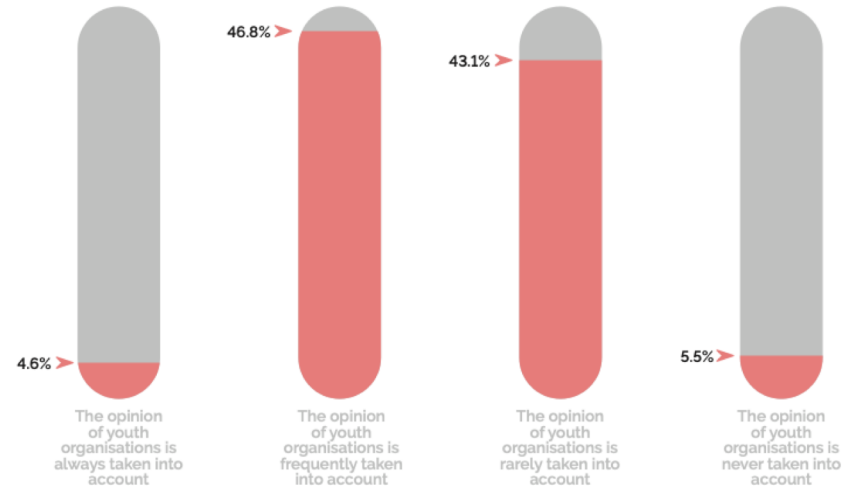|		The opinion of youth organisations is always encouraged	The opinion of youth organisations is sometimes encouraged	The opinion of youth organisations is neither encouraged nor discouraged	The opinion of youth organisations is sometimes discouraged	The opinion of youth organisations is always discouraged	Total
Region in Europe	EU15 and EEA	16.8%	55.8%	20.4%	6.2%	0.9%	100.0%
	EU13	10.0%	43.3%	26.7%	16.7%	3.3%	100.0%
	Rest of Europe	21.7%	37.0%	32.6%	6.5%	2.2%	100.0%
Total		**16.0%**	**48.4%**	**24.7%**	**9.1%**	**1.8%**	**100.0%**

Results – acknowledgment of opinion

- <u>half</u> of organizations believe the opinion of youth organizations is <u>rarely taken into account</u>

- only around 5% of organizations believe it is always taken into account

Table 12: How would you describe the collaboration of youth organisations with public authorities? (willingness to acknowledge opinion)

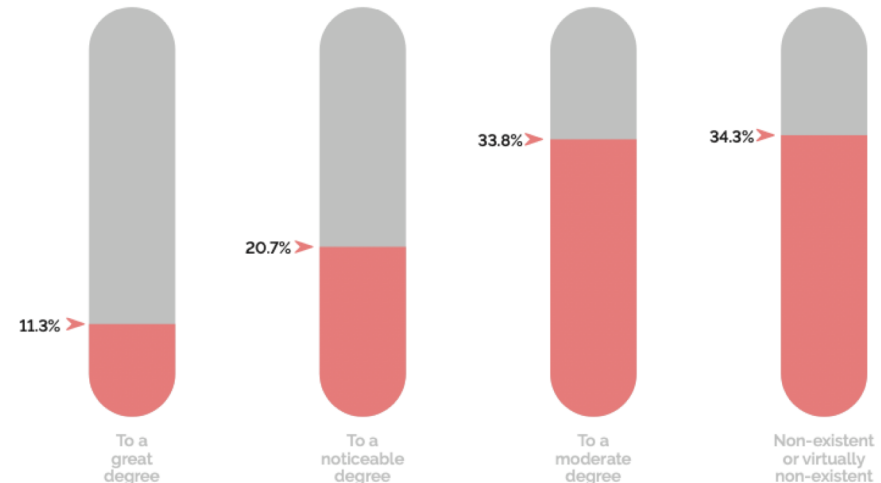|		The opinion of youth organisations is always taken into account	The opinion of youth organisations is frequently taken into account	The opinion of youth organisations is rarely taken into account	The opinion of youth organisations is never taken into account	Total
Region in Europe	EU15 and EEA	3.6%	54.5%	37.5%	4.5%	100.0%
	EU13	5.0%	36.7%	48.3%	10.0%	100.0%
	Rest of Europe	6.5%	41.3%	50.0%	2.2%	100.0%
Total		**4.6%**	**46.8%**	**43.1%**	**5.5%**	**100.0%**

Results – access to funding

- <u>a third of organizations</u> experience problems with access to funding due to "market indicators"

- more than 10% to a great degree regardless of region

- more than a third experience barriers to foreign funding

Table 6: When competing for public funding or being evaluated for activities performed, to what degree are youth organisations assessed by "market" indicators (e.g. the amount of private funds acquired; basic quantitative indicators etc.)?

		To a great degree	To a noticeable degree	To a moderate degree	Non-existent or virtually non-existent	Total
Region in Europe	EU15 and EEA	9.8%	21.4%	37.5%	31.3%	100.0%
	EU13	14.3%	14.3%	35.7%	35.7%	100.0%
	Rest of Europe	11.1%	26.7%	22.2%	40.0%	100.0%
Total		**11.3%**	**20.7%**	**33.8%**	**34.3%**	**100.0%**

11.3% — To a great degree

20.7% — To a noticeable degree

33.8% — To a moderate degree

34.3% — Non-existent or virtually non-existent

The nature of shrinkage in the youth field

- Confirmation of the general trend of shrinking civic spaces (*regardless of economic condition, democratic tradition etc.*).

- There is a difference in sophistication of the governments' toolkit across countries.

- "Conventional" shrinkage is accompanied with social market failures (*inability of the state to meet social needs as a result of budgetary deficit and/or privatization agenda*).

- Tackling social market failures presents a form of shrinkage (*increased need of CSO to fill the gaps in services created by withdrawal of the state; creation of new, contested spaces by the creation of government-organized NGOs*).

- Amplification of shrinkage as a result of COVID-19 pandemic.

Recommendation for action

- detection and prevention of anti-democratic legal and policy manoeuvres by governments and other actors

To do this, it is essential to:

- define shrinking space more broadly to also include processes having indirect effect on the exercise of basic freedoms

- develop analytical lenses and collect data that bring the stratification of access and agency across identities, cultures, and communities

- develop and support strategies for reclaiming the civic space tailored to the particular circumstances and needs of those affected

More at

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EUROPEAN UNION

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CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Shrinking democratic civic space for youth

Tomaž Deželan and Laden Yurttagüler

Pool of European Youth Researchers