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Position Paper 2/6

ADVANCING SOCIAL JUSTICE IN EUROPE

SOLIDAR CALLS FOR FIGHTING BACK
THE SHRINKING CIVIC SPACE

In Partnership with:
thistimeimvoting.eu

No democracy without strong Civil Society Organisations

Civic space is the bedrock of any open and democratic society. Civil Society Organisations are a key player for our democracy to flourish, and the more the civic space shrinks the less a society can be considered democratic.

Today, the civic space is narrowing in a growing number of countries worldwide[1], including in the EU. Together with it, democracy itself is under attack. The far right-wing and populist parties have waged a war against solidarity, in fact, CSOs are under threat in all the countries where these parties entered government. Hungary, Italy, and Poland are a warning that cannot be ignored. Nationalists, the far-right and populists are undermining representative democracy by questioning it at large, fueling confusions and using scapegoats to divert people's frustration into easier targets.

Since 2017, Hungary and Poland have introduced laws designed to restrict and undermine civil society, notably in terms of their funding. SOLIDAR Foundation helped to raise awareness about the dangerous situation for CSOs in Hungary by organising a study visit in September 2018, where our members from different countries learned about the developments of the situation on a peer-to-peer basis and strengthen their alliance to put up the fight against restrictions to the civic space. **But bleak times for CSOs have not come down to Eastern Europe only**. In fact, the right to peaceful protest has been lately curtailed in France and Spain. In Italy, the government repeatedly attacks NGOs who are rescuing migrants at sea. Our member ARCI, in Italy, just launched a weekly radio broadcast[2] to provide with factual information about migration and the work that NGOs do to help migrants integrating into society.

SOLIDAR and SOLIDAR Foundation, together with our members, partners and allies fight against the undergoing criminalisation of solidarity and the related attempt to undermine CSOs' possibility to operate freely in society as a basic part of the activities that we carry out.

CSOs alone cannot fight back authoritarian-leaning governments. The law needs to stand behind them and the EU institutions must continue playing their role and uphold the rule of law, fundamental rights and freedom in all its shapes and with it the openness of the civic space. Civil society must be safe and free, all across the EU. **And EU institutions are the ones thanks to which solidarity can not only be expressed but also enforced**. The EU Agency for Fundamental Rights and the European Commission must continue upholding the EU fundamental values against the authoritarian turn taken by these governments.

Why the openness of the civic space matters

Civic space should not just be regarded as fundamental to any strong democratic system. For us, a vivid and broad civic space represents an indispensable and powerful agent for change.

With an open civic space, citizens and civil society organisations are able to organise, participate and communicate smoothly. In doing so, they are able to claim their rights and influence the political and social structures around them[3]. Our members are carrying out essential activities for democracy to be open and vigorous. At the local, national and European level.

Our member in Czech Republic, the Multicultural Centre of Prague, carries out a number of projects to develop active citizenship, namely by raising awareness about the multicultural background of the country[4] and the importance of recognising when democracy is on the brink[5]. In Spain, our member Liga Española de la Educación y la Cultura Popular runs a project on citizenship education to encourage democratic participation respecting and appraising pluralism in society. In the UK, Volunteering Matters runs Future Matters[6], a project that is empowering young people to devise and run their own volunteering initiatives thus to turn their lives around whilst making a difference in their local community.

1. See CIVICUS and CIVICUS Monitor, https://www.civicus.org/ and https://monitor.civicus.org/ 2. See https://www.arci.it/da-oggi-labc-dellimmigrazione/ 3. See also the Report of the Independent Commission for Sustainable Equality | 2019-2024, https://www.progressivesociety.eu/sites/default/files/2018-12/S%26D_ProgressiveSociety-SustainableEquality_BROCHURE_V18_spreadsWEBSITE.pdf 4. See http://praha.mkc.cz/?page_id=42&lang=en 5. See https://mkc.cz/en/about/our-projects/democracy-on-the-brink-historical-lessons-from-the-late-1930s 6. See https://volunteeringmatters.org.uk/project/futuresmatter/

Civil society organisations to play a strong role in a vivid and broad civic space

SOLIDAR's mission is to advance social justice in Europe and worldwide to achieve a sustainable society. The transformation of our societies into communities capable of achieving sustainable well-being for the many can only be achieved through participation, empowerment, transparency, involvement and responsibility - from the individual to collective levels.

This is why our role is essential and must be reclaimed. Hence, it is critical for the EU to ensure a vivid and broad civic space across our nation states and at the European level. In order to achieve it **SOLIDAR demands**

- A legal framework to allow independent civil society to function without government interference across the whole of the European Union

- An enhanced role for the European Economic and Social Committee to finally unleash the potential of the principle of participatory democracy enshrined in Article 11 of the Treaty of Lisbon. Only by a clearly established, efficient, inclusive and transparent consultation role for the EESC and the duly participation of civil society in European policy processes the EU can bridge the gap that currently separates it from citizens across the continent

- CSOs to be meaningfully consulted on programming processes and have access to the EU funding, while respecting the diversity of the sector

- The adoption of a Statute for European Associations that clearly defines CSOs as a third element of our society, different from both market players and bodies of public authority. Today, the lack of a definition creates hindrances in relation to State Aid legislation, taxation (VAT), public procurement, anti-money laundering directive

- Strengthen and broaden the role of the EU Multi-Stakeholder Platform on the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, in line with UNSDG 17.

Eager to know more?
Check out our publications

- The CIVIC Space Watch and CIVICUS

- Our Manifesto for the European Elections

- Sustainable Equality: the Report of the Independent Commission| 2019 - 2024

- What can be done to fight back the shrinking space in Europe

- European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights Report 2018 Challenges facing civil society organisations working on human rights in the EU

- SOLIDAR Foundation Study visit to Hungary and article on the Central European University

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SOLIDAR is a European network of membership based Civil Society Organisations who gather several millions of citizens throughout Europe and worldwide. SOLIDAR voices the values of its member organisations to the EU and international institutions across the three main policy sectors; social affairs, lifelong learning and international cooperation.