Investing in Change: Understanding and Enhancing Support for Civic Space in Europe

Mapping of Funding for Civic Space in the European Union
Launched in 2018, Civitates is a philanthropic pooled fund to defend and promote democracy and civic space across the European Union. It provides funding and capacity building for civil society actors to come together, revitalise public discourse, and ensure that all voices are heard.

The pooled fund supports cross-sectoral coalitions that strengthen the resilience of the civil society sector; initiatives that address the impact of new information technologies on the quality of democratic processes and institutions; as well as independent, public interest journalism in Europe.

In 2023, Civitates began a process to refresh its strategy and to orientate it into the future. This consultation included reviews of its work so far; surveys of its grantee partners; and analysis of trends that will impact civil society’s space and ability to operate. As a key part of this process, Civitates sought to understand the landscape of funding for civil society organisations working in the EU to protect and advance civic space. Accordingly, it commissioned an external study to identify, in particular, where there appears to be more or less funding towards different countries, groups or kinds of activities to defend civic space.

That study was undertaken by an independent consultant and developed through interviews with funders and with civil society organisations; analysis of funding calls; and review of different reports and documents. It covers both the activities of private foundations but has a particular focus on public donors like the European Commission’s Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) programme.

The findings of the study have been used to refine Civitates’ future strategy. This paper summarizes its key findings and is particularly directed towards donors currently working or contemplating to support civic space in the hope that it can help inform their strategies and identify areas where they can adapt to better protect and expand civic space in the EU.

Elisa PETER, Director, Civitates

1 Like those who actively participate in Civitates - https://civitates-eu.org/foundation-partners/
2 A category that includes both funding from governments and supranational institutions like the European Commission as well as from bilateral agencies like US Agency for International Development (USAID).

Disclaimer: the views expressed in this report are those of the author. They do not purport to reflect the opinions or views of Civitates or its donor partners.
WHAT IS CIVIC SPACE?

Civicus describes civic space as:

...the place, physical, virtual, and legal, where people exercise their rights to freedom of association, expression, and peaceful assembly. By forming associations, by speaking out on issues of public concern, by gathering together in online and offline fora, and by participating in public decision-making, individuals use civic space to solve problems and improve lives. A robust and protected civic space forms the cornerstone of accountable, responsive democratic governance and stable societies³.

Restrictions on this civic space in countries around the world – ‘closing civic space’ - are, by now, a well-known and entrenched phenomenon⁴. Even ten years ago, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace was describing the trend as a “global pushback”, a trend which is “lasting” and “likely to persist for the foreseeable future”⁵.

This analysis has been since borne out to be true. The 2023 Civicus Monitor – which systematically tracks civic space conditions around the world – describes a “startling decline” in civic space since it began tracking it in 2018 which “points to a major civic space crisis that requires immediate, global efforts to reverse”⁶.

The European Union has not been immune to this challenge so that Civicus, in 2023, determined that 15 of the Member States had civic space that was either ‘obstructed’ or had ‘narrowed’. These include countries from across the bloc like Hungary and Poland where a shift to an authoritarian model of democracy is well-known but also longer established democracies such as Italy, Spain, France and Germany. In recent years, it has been groups and activists working to advance climate, reproductive, gender, migrant and other human rights, as well as racial justice that have been most targeted, even though the measures directed towards them affect civil society as a whole.

Accordingly, a number of different EU institutions have drawn attention to the severity and impact of the issue, such as the European Parliament’s resolution in 2022 which warns about the degradation of civic space throughout the EU and stresses how such actions by governments “jeopardise active citizenship and the expression of critical voices, thereby undermining public debate and hence the very foundations of democracy”⁷.

It was in response to these challenges that Civitates was established in 2018.

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⁴ Space is closed through a multitude of tactics including restrictions on the rights to association, assembly and freedom of expression; criminalization of activism and journalism; intimidation and physical attacks; legal harassment; public attacks and smear campaigns against NGOs; digital censorship and restrictions on independent media; and barriers on the ability to access funding.
WHAT IS CIVIC SPACE GRANT MAKING?

The International Center for Civil Society says that closing civic space is:
“... long-term change that doesn’t present as a crisis with actual impact in the immediate future. The intersecting trends that are closing civic space... are complex and multifaceted. It is difficult to see the entry points and often impossible to have a confident theory of change in a massively entangled, interconnected system. There are no obvious actionable solutions.... Nor is there a legal process or clear advocacy target to influence. These trends are not ‘campaignable’, and this makes it hard to articulate a clear and compelling case to mobilize people. Reactive responses to specific manifestations – a repressive law...– are more straight forward, feel more impactful, and are better supported by most donors and members than long-term attention to, and attempts to influence, underlying causes⁸.

There are multiple types of activity undertaken by donors to support civil society where civic space is being threatened. These include both grantmaking to expand and improve civic space but also support to sustain organisations that are operating in contexts where civic space is closing and where they and their activities are under threat.

Accordingly, The Funders Initiative for Civic Space and Global Philanthropy Project break civic space strategies into those that:

→ Defend and protect civil society in places where civic space is closing;
→ Challenge and resist efforts to close civic space;
→ Open and expand civic space⁹.

These strategies are directed at multiple levels – societal, sectoral, organisational and at the level of the individual activist¹⁰. Some of these strategies are represented in this chart here:

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¹⁰ With thanks for the EU Fundamental Rights Agency, the Funders Initiative for Civil Society and the Fund for Global Human Rights whose thinking influenced this framework.
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**DEFENDING**                                  **EXPANDING**
The nature of the issue of civic space – driven by powerful, complex and inter-connected trends – means that a key strategy is in strengthening civil society organisations so that they are more resilient but also able to adapt, create new alliances, invest in new ways of working and reach new audiences. One particular need that has been highlighted is the ‘anticipatory capacity’ of civil society – the capability of organisations to look ahead towards potential emerging scenarios and develop and implement work that address them, rather than to be exclusively reacting to threats and challenges.11

It’s not what [just] what you do, it’s the way that you do it:

Alongside funding dedicated to organisational strengthening and capacity building, the modalities of how that funding is given is also a critical dimension of civic space grantmaking. These modalities include:

→ The length of grants;
→ The restrictions that are placed on the financial support provided;
→ The administrative and financial requirements placed on grantees and applicants;
→ The framework for assessing impact;
→ The extent to which civil society is involved in co-creating the direction of funding strategies.

These have been highlighted both by civil society and international experts as having the potential to limit the impact, sustainability and agency of civil society organisations generally which are highly important in contexts of closing civic space.12 Consequently, authorities like the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and association13 and the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the OECD14 have called for practices that empower civil society including by:

→ Increasing the availability and accessibility of flexible and core support.
→ Making funding available over multiple years;
→ Engaging in extensive consultation with civil society to understand their needs, context and the effects of their funding and engage them meaningfully in the development of funding programmes;
→ Streamlining administrative requirements and accelerate processes;
→ Incorporating adaptive and flexible processes into results management of civil society funding.

These recommendations align with what is increasingly seen as good practice on the part of grant makers15. However, they take on an even greater importance in the context of the issue of closing space where a strong, independent, adaptive civil society which has the resources it needs is critical.16 Alongside this long-term and flexible support, there is also a need for rapid response funding to support civic space actors to respond to emergencies and take advantage of time-sensitive opportunities.

12 For example, The Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association has drawn attention to how funding practices of donors can reduce the sustainability and impact of civil society. These practices include “complex and onerous grantmaking processes and administrative requirements, a demand for short-term impact and unequal power relationships”, https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/ahrc5023-access-resources-report-special-rapporteur-rights-freedom
15 See, for example, the increasing support for the model of ‘Trust-Based Philanthropy’ and the principles outlined here: https://www.trustbasedphilanthropy.org/practices
16 See, for example, the European Civic Forum and Civil Society Europe (2023), How can we enable, protect and expand Europe’s civic space, to strengthen democracy, social and environmental justice? Recommendations for the European Commission
OBSERVATIONS AROUND FUNDING FOR CIVIC SPACE:

The mapping looked both at private foundations as well as public donors with a greater emphasis on the latter. There are a number of observations that can be made across the ecosystem of funding for civic space, however, and these include:

Across the funding ecosystem:

- Major changes and disruptions to funding – at the time of this research was carried out at the end of 2023, a number of donors were changing plans and priorities and so the future for a significant amount of funding towards the protection and expansion of civic space was not clear. The impact of these changes for the sector, however, is likely to be significant with one key private donor potentially leaving the sector altogether. This is explored in more detail below.

- An absence of actionable data – contributing to this uncertainty is an absence of data around what is being funded and by whom in this space. This renders it difficult to understand the real impact of some of the changes outlined above but it also means that it not possible to determine precisely the levels of funding to different geographies, activities, types of organisation in a way that can help identify gaps and refine strategies.

While there are different data sets - for example, those gathered from private foundations17 - these have limitations. There is an obvious need for better tracking of grantmaking to civic space both by private foundations and public donors18.

- There is a need for greater coordination and cooperation among donors, particularly between public donors and private foundations – information-sharing and cooperation largely seems to happen on an ad hoc basis. While there is coordination among some networks of private foundations19 respondents felt that there was a need to build on this and to bridge the gap between public and private philanthropy working on these issues. The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights20 has highlighted that this can “lead to overlaps and gaps in terms of themes, types of activities, and geographical areas”21 but it also means that learning and analysis from their work does not end up being shared in a way that would help develop the field of civic space grantmaking generally. Interestingly, this was a need identified not only by funders but also by civil society.

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17 For example, that gathered in a collaboration by Candid, Ariadne – the Network for European Social Change and Human Rights Funders – and the Human Rights Funders Network here: https://humanrightsfunding.org/issues/civic/ and here: https://www.hrfn.org/map/#
18 Given the diversity of strategies to protect and expand civic space described above, real care should be taken around any categories and definitions being used so that the data is usable and does simply include any funding provided to civil society in the EU.
19 Like Ariadne, Philea and Civitates itself.
20 Hereafter ‘FRA’.
Current features of private funding for civic space:

Specific findings related to the funding of work to protect and expand civic space by private philanthropy are described below:

→ There are significant changes going on within the community of private philanthropy – most notably the Open Society Foundations, a key supporter of civil society in the EU, is going through a prolonged period of reorganisation with statements that they will withdraw or terminate large parts of their current work in the European Union. The significance of this is not only in the size of funding that will be lost but in the fact that OSF provide long-term and flexible funding that is invaluable to civil society organisations and that it funds across multiple levels of civil society (from the grassroots through to international and regional NGOs). These changes were not happening within one single funder – a number of private foundations that are supporting work to protect and advance civic space were going through strategic reviews, the outcomes of which were not finalized.

→ There is a relatively narrow pool of private foundations working on civic space – several respondents stated that they had witnessed a reduction in private funding in recent years toward civic space and that there is a high reliance on a relatively limited number of private foundations who, like OSF, have a global remit and predominantly based outside of the EU like CS Mott, Oak and Sigrid Rausing Trust. Some private foundations like these that had been funding within the EU had pivoted to focus on other issues or other parts of the world.

There are some promising initiatives emerging at the country level – a number of new funds have been established or are in the process of being established with a focus on countries in Western Europe to address concerns about shrinking civic space. OSF, Porticus and Foundation de France are supporting efforts to assess the feasibility of establishing a pooled fund to protect democracy and civic space in France. Similar initiatives have been set up in Germany. Stiftung Mitarbeit recently started to implement the Förderfonds Begegnung und Zusammenhalt which operates with similar tools and instruments. Initiative Offene Gesellschaft, in which Robert Bosch Stiftung and others participate or the ‘Mitwirken’ programme, a project by the Hertie Stiftung, are other examples of philanthropic initiatives to strengthen democracy and civic space at domestic level.

Current features of public funding for civic space:

The consultation looked in more detail at the programmes of public donors. Most notably, the European Commission’s ‘Citizen’s, Equality, Rights and Values Programme’ but also others funding civic space work like the EAA and Norway Grants initiative, the National Endowment for Democracy and the German Marshall Fund. The key findings are that:

→ There are also major transitions going on among public donors – the launch of CERV represents significant new funding for civil society in Europe, with some of its initiatives directly seeking to address the issue of closing civic space. However, it is relatively new and the projects that it supports are at an early stage; additionally, results of its spring 2023 call for proposals to support work on civic space had not been announced at time of writing. Accordingly, its effectiveness and impact on civil society working to protect and expand civic space is not yet clear. Additionally, the other major funding stream – the Norway/EAA Grants Programme – was in hiatus as it was being

Among European donors, an important role is being played by the foundations participating within Civitates but there is a sense from respondents that the issue of closing space is not being sufficiently prioritized by private European philanthropy.

23 https://civitates-eu.org/foundation-partners/
24 https://www.begegnungsfonds.de/kontakt
26 Hereafter referred to as ‘CERV’.
renegotiated. The result of this was a large amount of disruption and uncertainty on the part of civil society about these major players and difficulty in making detailed conclusions about their impact.

There are promising practices emerging among public donors – respondents pointed towards area of positive grantmaking practice. For example, the EAA and Norway Grants had, during Covid, moved to a rapid response grantmaking model and streamlined their processes. Similarly, there is effort being given to reach grassroots and local CSOs – both CERV and the EAA and Norway Grants are seeking to empower parts of civil society that are traditionally harder for them to support including through funding for national-level intermediaries who have the capacity and relationships to make re-grants to smaller and grassroots organisations. More generally, respondents pointed to examples of positive practice within the EC in how it supports civil society under pressure outside of the EU within the context of its development programmes.

There is great concern that the aspirations of these programmes – particularly of CERV – are undermined by the modalities of their grantmaking. Despite these positive signs, there is a feeling that a number of issues, both strategic and operational\(^27\) - are having the effect of deprioritizing critical activities and approaches that are necessary for the expansion of civic space\(^28\). The examples of positive practice in the EU’s external support mentioned above are not being mirrored in terms of support to civil society under pressure within the EU. There were specific complaints about the impact of CERV’s requirement for co-funding generally and specifically its application to re-granting intermediaries\(^29\). These are discussed further below.

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27 For example, the underlying theory of change apparent behind CERV’s calls, the kinds of activities that it is geared towards supporting, the nature of the framework that it pushes applicants to use for planning and budgeting, and the way that it assesses impact.

28 The calls that have been issued and the process of evaluating applications seem to be geared more towards service-delivery or advocacy goals that may be unrealistic within the timeframe of the project, particularly in a context where civic space is closing or closed and the context is evolving rapidly. Additionally, the way advocacy work is described in CERV’s calls appears to be about awareness-raising or about meetings with officials and policymakers. It does not seem to lend itself to a broader campaign while the lack of flexibility in developing milestones and budgets are problematic in terms of navigating the fluid political context in which civic space issues exists where dynamics shift and new opportunities and challenges constantly emerge.

29 This is 20% on regular projects but reduced to 10% for intermediaries. While that reduction seems like an improvement, it’s the case that regranting will increase an intermediary’s budgets significantly and so this 10% still represents a significant burden for an organisation to meet. This is compounded by the low threshold for indirect costs (around 7%) and so respondents often have to subsidise CERV initiatives from their core costs. Practically, it is hard to understand the logic of applying a co-funding requirement for funds that the EC is seeking to re-grant and to anticipate that many donors would be willing to contribute funding to enable the delivery of a service on behalf of the EC but it also ignores the context in which many of these organisations are operating. It was noted that for some of the EU’s funding for human rights defenders outside of the EU – for example, the ‘Global Europe instrument’ – the requirement for co-financing could be waived and that a similar degree of flexibility could shown to civil society within Europe.
The consultation and review revealed the following gaps and needs:

→ Funding tends be reactive and directed towards defensive strategies – interviews and review of the grants data that is available revealed that funding is being given primarily to countries where civil society has deteriorated significantly and a crisis of civic space is underway.

The kinds of activities that are predominantly being supported are those within the ‘Defend and Protect’ categories described above. This is problematic given the initially incremental and gradual nature of closing civic space in democracies\(^{30}\), meaning that – by the time that funding is allocated towards the issue in a country – the problem and dynamics are more fully entrenched.

Defensive work is, of course, highly important but there appears to be a gap in support for work that looks ahead and supports ‘anticipatory’ work (“Open and Expand” categories described above) in contexts or trends that have yet to present as an emergency and where there may be more opportunity to influence them.

→ Interventions tend to focus on addressing symptoms and not the underlying problem – as described by the International Center for Civil Society, funding is predominantly directed towards the “specific manifestations” of long-term and intersecting trends rather “than attempts to influence underlying causes”\(^{31}\).

Another example was that of training for organisations on organisational communications but not for the kind of work to activate and shift values of the public that inform attitudes towards civil society and determine whether a CSO is likely to be listened to in the first place.

→ There is an uneven spread of funding across the different regions of the EU – most of the funding going to work to promote civic space is to countries in Central and Eastern Europe – particularly, Poland and Hungary but also Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia. This is partly explained by the tendency to focus on situations where civic space has deteriorated significantly or where there is a crisis. However, it also reflects the fact that some of the key public donors have geographic remits that include the former communist countries of the Eastern Bloc. However, as described in the introduction, closing civic space is a global phenomenon and there have been signs of deterioration across the EU, including in long-established democracies. Funding to civil society in Central and Eastern Europe continues to be of great importance – however, this leaves important gaps across the EU.

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Beyond this, the consultation identified a number of specific strategies as needing more funding. These included:

- Strategic litigation and advocacy and campaigning activity by civil society organisations in relation to civic space issues, particularly those acting as watchdogs and whistleblowers;

- Initiatives to protect the safety and security of front-line pro-democracy players – both that which is anticipatory and builds the capacity of organisations and individuals related to holistic security\(^32\) but also for rapid and emergency funding that help activists and organisations deal with immediate threats and their impact. Many respondents concerned about security drew attention to the EU Human Rights Defenders mechanism, ProtectDefenders.eu, which provides support to activists outside of the EU and called for the creation of a similar mechanism for activists working within the EU.

- Efforts that bridge across sectoral siloes and that may help build aligned or shared strategies in relation to civic space issues that affect groups whatever they are working on (for example, challenges to the ability to protest). The programmatic focus of funders and a lack of resources to take the time to develop relationships and to collaborate outside of one’s specific sector was also considered to inhibit such efforts.

- Initiatives to build collaboration between civil society facing similar threats to civic space across different countries is also highlighted as important.

- Work that seeks to proactively build narratives over the longer-term that activate support for civic space and civil society, and which seek to transform the underlying attitudes and values of the public towards them (rather than tactical communications campaigns)\(^33\) as well as to counter smear campaigns in the short-term. Efforts and infrastructure to respond to disinformation were also highlighted as important.

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\(^{32}\) Which covers physical, digital and psycho-social security.

\(^{33}\) The distinction between narrative change and communications work is described in more detail here: [https://narrativeinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/transforming-narrative-waters.pdf](https://narrativeinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/transforming-narrative-waters.pdf)
Respondents drew attention to issues around the way that much funding is being given in a way that runs contrary to the recommendations of the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and association and the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) described above. In particular, they called for:

- **Longer-term funding that is not project-based**, that enables organisations to be responsive and flexible and to invest in their organisational resilience in the face of threats. This should be complemented with mechanisms that allow for rapid response funding in relation to urgent or time-bound issues – most notably, threats to security and other kinds of attacks but also related to advocacy opportunities that may suddenly arise.

- **An urgent review of grantmaking processes** to ensure that these align with the aspirations of these programmes to empower civil society and reflect the context in which these groups are operating. Respondents pointed to slow and cumbersome processes that limited their ability to plan effectively and respond to new developments and represent a heavy investment of resources for them. They also described how co-funding requirements, unrealistic unit costs, and an extremely low indirect overhead meant that they are having to subsidise grants out of any core income that they do have and cutting into the organisational infrastructure that is key for resilient and effective organisations. Moreover, such requirements overlook the challenges around the funding landscape described above, particularly for groups in countries where fundraising from the public is harder because of smear campaigns against them that are often a key feature of closing space.

- **A review of the way that results are assessed to reflect the nature of the challenge and the strategies that can address these** – there is a call for existing evaluative methods to be adapted so that they rely less on rigid frameworks focussed on outputs and which are more appropriate for service-delivery to ones that look towards impact, enable adaptation of the deliverables and strategies towards that and which are applicable to the kinds of activities like advocacy and campaigning that are key for the advancement of civic space.

- **Greater attention to the sustainability and resilience of staff within civil society in contexts where civil society is under pressure.** This particularly relates to issues connected to risks to mental health (particularly the issue of burn-out) from operating in such environments as well as low salaries and working conditions that are perceived to contribute to staff turn-over. The financial requirements described above could limit the ability of organisations to invest in this at a time when it is critically important.

- **A call to look beyond formal NGOs to support new forms of civil society organizing.** This includes social, climate and youth movements that are all being affected by closing space and which may have the ability to galvanise and mobilize wider parts of the public for democratic and civic values. One example that provided inspiration to respondents was the mobilization of voters during the recent elections in Poland, raising the question as to whether funders could support wider social movements and non-partisan work to maximise the advantages of political moments like elections.
A transformation of the way that civil society helps to shape the strategies and priorities of public funders and a call for genuinely participatory approaches to grantmaking. The call for greater participation has an ethical imperative but it’s also the case that, given the rapidly changing context that CSOs are operating in, they are best positioned to identify what their organisations need to challenge closing civic space. While respondents were aware that several donors had forums for dialogue with civil society, these were sometimes seen as performative and focussed on those donors communicating their programmes to civil society. There was a clear ask for the input of civil society to be given greater weight and for ways of working that focussed on co-creation of programmes.
CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS:

It is vital to have a multiplicity of strategies to protect and advance civic space and to give attention to longer-term trajectories and root causes rather than only to defensive and reactive strategies.

Given the complexity of the issue, a strong, creative, capable and adaptive civil society that is able to look ahead and flip between different tactics is vital. The priorities and practices of donors in helping to develop and support such a civil society is vital.

Towards this, the following recommendations are made to donors of all kinds (both private foundations and public) looking to advance civic space:

- Build spaces for sharing of learning, strategies and development of collaboration and coordination among donors, particularly those that link private and public donors.
- Find ways to map and track what funding is going to defend and advance civic space so that gaps and needs can be understood.
- Consider where investments are being made and where they sit in the framework of defending civil society, resisting closing space or expanding civic space with a view to ensuring that support is not only being given to defensive work.
- Look to support civil society where threats to civic space are beginning to emerge and where there may be opportunities to prevent further deterioration rather than only on countries where there is a full crisis of civic space.
- Accordingly, recognize that the challenge of civic space is one that is global and not confined to particular regions so that support to civil society working in established democracies is available.
- Ensure that grantmaking practices are aligned with the recommendations of the OECD DAC but, more broadly, reflect the context in which civil society is operating in, the strategies and tactics required to make change, and the resilience and capabilities they need.
- Accordingly, move to a form of partnership with civil society to better understand the impact of these practices but also the actions that are needed to advance civic space.
Civitates is an initiative hosted by the Network of European Foundations.

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