EUROPEAN CIVIC ACADEMY

2021

WORKING PAPER

REBUILDING TRUST IN DEMOCRACY

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR CIVIC ACTIVISTS

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INTRODUCTION

During this fourth edition of the European Civic Academy, we will bring together leading academics and civic actors to discuss obstacles and ways forward for civic organisations and social movements in the current context, characterised by growing distrust in democracy and divisions inside our societies.

In the last decades, the dominant model of the so-called "governance" has globally been based on the primacy of the finance and of the free market. The consolidation of such an economic system characterised by rising inequalities, concentration of wealth and shrinking social rights has resulted in the surge of distrust in democracy by many citizens, especially those who feel left out of our welfare systems. Many are questioning the value of a political system they perceive as unable to respond to their social needs and aspirations. Democracy has been weakened as a shared common denominator inside our deeply polarised societies. The universality of rights, which was at the heart of the post-WW2 consensus, has been increasingly put under pressure by the functioning of the globalised economy and by policies that rely on competition for access to rights. In this context, regressive political offers took advantage of grievances in society, putting forward exclusionary discourses most often based on racism and discrimination. This mainstream governance approach has also translated in a wide range of trends and practices insulating certain policies from democratic checks and balances with different intensity all-across Europe, including the deployment of a range of legislative, judicial and coercive measures to shrink the space for democratic civil society and other social actors calling the state and market institutions to account.

The COVID-19 pandemic shook the balance of power between actors of the governance system, creating conditions for the State and institutions to take more direct actions for the common good. Moving beyond their mostly regulatory approach, States have played a major role in deciding measures for slowing down the spread of the pandemic and introduced socio-economic support for those hit by the crisis. In parallel, from the onset, the COVID-19 pandemic has recalled how diverse and fundamental civic actors' roles are. Everywhere, organised civic actors and self-organised citizens' groups have been and are in the front line trying to respond to people's needs, to alert institutions of the limitations and consequences of public policies on society, to react against abuses of power, to ensure the rights of all were at the centre of the response to the crisis. They have done so in detrimental conditions and despite being critically weakened by the closing of public space, restriction of civic freedoms and downsizing of their capacities to act (see <u>Activizenship #5 - Civic Space Watch report 2020 - Stories from the lockdown</u>).

People experienced a moment of coming together to confront the multiple consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic putting the common good in practice. Such a momentum, if it was long-lasting, could revitalise trust in democracy. It could be an opportunity for civic and social organisations to regaining recognition of their crucial role in society and a central role in the so-called "democratic governance".

However, the COVID-19 pandemic effects have exacerbated the already existing socio-economic, democratic, and environmental vulnerabilities. All indicators that reflect poverty, inequality, disadvantages are soaring, deepening existing cultural, geographical and socio-economic divides - including based on religion, ethnicity and gender, between countries and inside societies. Many Governments...

...showcased a lack of political culture when they did not rely on people's knowledge and initiatives in times of crisis, and did not conduct meaningful, consistent dialogue with civil society. Yet, civic actors are in a privileged position to provide information on the realities that citizens live and meaningful advices, and insufficient consideration of civic actors has been an important factor for lack of reactiveness of the government to many societal emergencies.

Inadequate answers from institutions to the socio-economic hardships and uncertainty for the immediate future can only fuel societal despair. This revives the risk of a surge in distrust. In this context, democratic actors will find themselves in harsh competition with regressive political narratives to the societal tensions that are starting to re-emerge with various intensities in Europe.

The European Civic Forum (ECF) observes these trends through its members and partners, including the working group of national platforms, and inform about them through the Civic Space Watch (http://civicspacewatch.eu/), a platform collecting resources on threats to fundamental rights as well as on positive initiatives to counter them.

THE EUROPEAN CIVIC ACADEMY

The **European Civic Academy** was launched by the European Civic Forum in 2016 to connect and build bridges between civil society and academic agendas, to provide space for civil society actors to discuss with academics and identify priorities and possibilities for collaborations related to the role of CSOs in enhancing civic and democratic spaces in Europe. The objectives of the European Civic Academy are three fold: (1) mapping civil society needs in terms of research priorities; (2) enable civic actors to gain knowledge about existing research, methodology and approaches to inspire a strengthening and a renewal action framework; (3) increase awareness among academic researchers about civil society needs and priorities and identify collaborative opportunities for future research.

Three sessions have been organised so far: in 2016 in La Rochelle (France); in 2017 in Brussels; in 2019 in Slubice (Poland). It allowed exchanges, but not yet the building of a strong linkage between the civic actors and the academic world. The editions to come shall benefit from the cooperation process that has developed between ECF, Civil Society Europe, Solidar and the Colegium Polonicum Foundation.

WORKING TOPICS

In the context described above, civil society has to tackle long-standing structural weaknesses as well as emerging challenges in order to put the common good at the centre of the political agenda. We propose for the 2021 edition three working topics to focus the discussion between civic actors and academics. To foster the reflection and build civil society capacities, we will invite leading academics and civic actors to showcase research findings and good practices.

1) INCLUSION: FOR THE PEOPLE, WITH THE PEOPLE

How to involve people and communities that are marginalised and in need is one of the major challenges for the democratic organised civil society and social movements. Another trend relates to ideological polarisation in society that affects democratic civil society's ability to mobilise and reach out to audiences attracted by regressive narratives.

In the last period, strong mobilisations have been developed to tackle climate change and fight for feminist issues. They bring together mostly – sometimes exclusively – middle-class people in urban areas.

Also, a number of self-organised actions involve people that are excluded or discriminated. Examples include the Black Lives Matter movement, self-organisation of migrants, Roma and domestic workers.

The effects of pandemic have also mobilised other communities particularly hit, i.e. renters, doctors and health workers, families with relatives inside retirement houses, professionals in culture, small business owners, self-employed, ….

A crucial issue is how to ensure that these mobilisations communicate with one another and learn from each other, not side-lining any of these fights, reinforcing each of them. The image of fingers belonging to a common hand can be illustrative.

> *Who is involved in civic efforts? What factors (national framework, social history, local concerns...) lay behind the various constituencies of associations and movements? How do civic activists reach out to social sectors or geographical areas that do not mobilise, especially those who experience exclusion? Are the multiple mobilisations informing and influencing each other?*

> *Has the COVID-19 civic response facilitated civil society's ability to reach out to different audiences and mobilise more diverse sectors of our societies, for their immediate and long-term needs to be addressed? To what extent are civic actors able to re-capture those that are attracted by regressive identity-based backwards thinking?*

2) DIALOGUE BETWEEN CIVIL SOCIETY AND INSTITUTIONS: LOST IN TRANSLATION?

In many countries as at the European level, dialogue between institutions and civil society is often weak when not absent. Governments and institutions often praise consultation with individuals through online processes at the detriment of dialogue with the collective approaches brought by organisations and movements. The role expected from organised civil society is often restricted to service delivery. In some countries, Governments are even establishing "their" NGOs in order to side-line independent ones.

For policymakers to protect the common good, there is a need to ensure the proper functioning of civil dialogue at the central and local level. The management by institutions of COVID-19 crisis could be an opportunity for change. Close cooperation and dialogue often developed with local authorities, concerning mostly local actions, is a promising example, but often not replicated at the national level.

❯ *Being an intermediary body between citizens and institutions, how can organised civil society contribute to rebuilding trust in democracy and institutions? What can we learn from the situations where public authorities and civil society's dialogue seems to work? How to ensure the rebuilding of trust also takes a European dimension? How can the Conference for the Future of Europe involve civil society to close the gap between citizens' demands and policy outcomes?*

❯ *What are the tools and means to bring people's voices to the institutions when civil dialogue channels are not functioning? How can civil society reclaim a political voice without being dismissed as a partisan actor? What are the lessons to be learned from civic activism that created political platforms?*

3) CONVERGENCE: ALL FOR A BETTER WORLD, BUT ALL FRAGMENTED?

Democratic civic actors usually share similar values and aspirations for a just and sustainable world; however, they often consider the issue they deal with as the entry point to achieve a different and better society and world and the most urgent to tackle. As the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the systemic connexions of the multiple crises the world is facing, it highlighted the urgency for different thematic approaches to look at each other and work together, including the intersectionality of each issue at stake.

The mistrust that sometimes characterises relationships between civic actors with different theories of change and ways of organising has to be addressed and overcome. In this regard, in the last year, both the experiences of Black Lives Matter and the Polish Women Movement have been able to transform a one-issue movement in a space of convergence for large parts of the democratic civil society in their own countries, and they both have been a sign of counter-tendence to fragmentation.

> *Is convergence of democratic agendas the best path to systemic change? How to prevent from creating hierarchies of needs, issues and fights? Are there any attempts to overcome thematic fragmentation? What obstacles do they face? What can we learn from experiences of mutual contamination and convergence?*

> *What are the relations between movements, organised civil society and other forms of democratic activism - conflict-cooperation, trust/mistrust? How are the different actors discussing this issue? Does this dialectic contribute to any contamination, debate or change between different concepts and practices towards a better world?*

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