

EUROPEAN CIVIC ACADEMY

2021

KEY TAKEAWAYS

March 2021

**REBUILDING TRUST IN
DEMOCRACY**

FOR THE PEOPLE, WITH THE PEOPLE

ORGANISED BY:



WITH THE SUPPORT OF:



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INTRODUCTION

“Today we are tackling an essential and dramatic issue: in our societies, those who need rights the most often do not fight for them. In recent years, many popular sectors have fallen into the arms of reactionary and regressive movements, and among those who continue to believe in democratic values, many are often silent, disappointed and frustrated. How can we help to rebuild trust in participation, trust in citizen’s ability to influence political choices - which is at the heart of democracy?”



Raffella Bolini, Co-President European Civic Forum

On 24 March 2021, over 100 participants from civil society and academia gathered for the first edition of the European Civic Academy of 2021, to discuss the topic of ‘rebuilding trust in democracy: for the people, with the people’.

In a context characterised by growing distrust in democracy, divisions and inequalities in society, the Academy sought to build bridges between civil society and academic agendas, to discuss challenges and opportunities for collaborations related to the role of civil society organisations in enhancing civic and democratic spaces in Europe.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1

The rise of regressive narratives and their appeal to marginalised communities



"Everybody should know that as a citizen, you have power to act."

Priscillia Ludosky, Yellow Vests Movement

Recent years have seen an increase in reactionary and regressive movements, and an ideological polarisation in society. This has impacted democratic civil society's ability to mobilise and reach out to audiences captured by regressive narratives. It is therefore vital that civil society involves and empowers marginalised and underrepresented communities, making space not only for them to participate but also to be able to own their own narratives and struggles, alongside allies.

2

Working across movements: leave no one behind



"[Mobilisation is...] the process of collectivisation of existing networks and the creation of new ones...it is also a question of emotion, of empathy, of passionate politics"

Donatella della Porta, Scuola Normale Superiore

The last year has borne witness to positive popular counter trends such as Black Lives Matter movements, the emergence of invisible workers (domestic workers, delivery riders), and in the pandemic many associations have worked in strengthening mutual solidarity from below...

...It is crucial to ensure that these mobilisations communicate with one another and learn from each other, so as not to side-line these fights or leave people behind.

3

Resilience and recreating collective ties



"The pandemic creates opportunities for recreating collective ties."

Donatella della Porta, Scuola Normale Superiore

Whilst the pandemic has fuelled socioeconomic inequalities, and in turn heightened distrust in democracy and political institutions, it has also created opportunities for recreating collective ties via an explosion of grassroots community initiatives and movements. Within these movements, we have seen citizens working with and alongside CSOs striving to fill the holes of public policy. We have also seen significant adaptations to ways of working and a fostering of new partnerships, building resilience and strengthening solidarity.

4

Reflect on how the organisational culture and leadership can break the chain of exclusion



"How can civil society be looked at as a system of social stratification to address issues of inclusion and diversity?...How can we organise differently to address these issues?"

Professor Håkan Johansson, Lund University

Civic organisations participate in systems that exclude people based on gender, age, race and ability and, therefore, may reproduce organisational practices and leadership cultures that lead to exclusion. Overcoming these dynamics requires an intentional reflection and continue learning.

KEY ACTIONS

- **Solidarity needs to be a political act** that involves people of different social statuses, political spectrums, backgrounds, and from different movements. It is an act of coming together and should serve to build confidence and trust of those involved, whilst at the same time allowing for autonomy of movements.
- Housing matters are part of a larger global capitalist regime characterised by free movement of capital, involving landlords and funds travelling freely across borders, which creates housing crises and has led to a lack of affordable housing for many. **We need to address the systemic framework that enables this in order to create solidarity among the actors affected.**
- **“Nothing about us, without us!”: this principle should guide the work of civic and social organisations;** those for whose rights they stand and act for must be involved and have full ownership of the messages and actions.
- **Civil society must be intent on improving diversity and inclusion.** This is a journey that requires continuous adaptations and cultural considerations. It involves a conscious effort to create safer spaces to converse and fully understand how to be more accessible and identify primary constituents to account for. Meritocracy is a problem that can often hinder developments in these areas.

KEY ACTIONS (continued)

- **A renewed antiracist movement must be able to analyse the function of racism and organise against the wider processes of exploitation and dispossession** that underpin it; the aim of antiracism is not to preserve the concept of race but to abolish the global processes that maintain racism.
- People are questioning the value of a social and political system that does not address their needs. Whilst this breeds fertile ground for populist movements and regressive forces to grow, **community organising provides a good tool to address needs and promote participation, particularly in communities that having nothing to fear or loose.**
- **Migrant self-organisation is a bridge builder.** Self-organisation in migrant communities is important for promoting inclusion, empowerment and equal opportunities. However, migrant self-organisations often struggle to build long-term relationships with other CSOs because of fewer resources and weaker framework conditions.
- **An intersectional approach and intergenerational dialogue are necessary to achieve greater youth participation and empowerment** in organised civil society. Young people's voices at decision making levels are crucial for issues of empowerment and accessibility.

RESEARCH TAKEAWAYS

- **How does the lack of diversity and representation within civil society impact the ability to mobilise diverse constituencies?** Is there a correlation between these factors?
- Given that universities and research institutions form part of the global capitalist system, and are based on meritocracy and competitiveness, **what are the opportunities for activist academic research?** What are the possibilities and limitations for academics and how do they see their role?
- Who should we address with our demands regarding housing rights, accessibility and affordability? Is it the nation state? Is it the private businesses? Is it the EU Commission? **Who is the actor to target and who are we expecting to make the change so that housing is affordable and secure for everybody?**
- **How can we democratise democracy and reduce the gap between citizens and public institutions** in facilitating public participation in the choices that affect their communities?
- Many CSOs (especially in rural areas) are experiencing a **chilling effect**, which is breeding fear of association, being defunded, or debunked in the media. **What are the strategies that we can employ to overcome this hurdle**, which prevents mobilisations and cooperation?
- **How can we build trust in the possibilities of citizen influence and in rebuilding democracy?**
- **How can we work together to sustain spontaneous and grassroots mobilisations?** What are the factors that support them and what are the factors the work against them?
- **Are young people interested in one time engagement or long-term involvement?** How can they be motivated to stay in the long run and how can we reach out to more diverse groups of young people?
- **What is the role of digital social media in activism and what role does it play in mobilising young people?** How are young activists engaging with digital social media and what is the impact of online engagement?

RESOURCES

- **Civil Society Elites?** Comparing elite composition, reproduction, integration, and contestation in European civil societies. Lund University.
- **Holding the mirror up to ourselves: diversity and inclusion practices and trends in civil society organisations.**CIVICUS.
- **Introduction: Citizen Organisations, Transnational Solidarity and Collective Learning in Europe** by Christian Lahusen, & Ulrike Zschache, Universität Siegen; Maria Kousis, University of Crete.
- **Recovering Antiracism - Reflections on collectivity and solidarity in antiracist organising** by Azfar Shafi and Ilyas Nagdee, Transnational Institute
- **Youth Attitudes on Politics and Democracy in Central Europe** by National Democratic Institute

The next edition of the European Civic Academy will take place in June 2021, and will look at civil dialogue between institutions and civil society and how this can be strengthened to rebuild trust in democracy and institutions at local, national and regional levels.

The European Civic Academy is organised by the European Civic Forum and supported by Civil Society Europe, Solidar Foundation and the Colegium Polonicum Foundation.

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