EUROPEAN CIVIC ACADEMY

KEY TAKEAWAYS

October 2021

REBUILDING TRUST IN DEMOCRACY

ALL FOR A BETTER WORLD, BUT ALL FRAGMENTED?
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INTRODUCTION

“Maybe the first reason why it’s so difficult to draw conclusions from this event is that the agenda we tried to tackle, with these three sessions of the European Civic Academy 2021, is obviously too big and complex to be answered. But I’m optimistic because, even if we didn’t find the answers yet, we succeeded in asking ourselves the right questions. It’s not easy, but we have to find a simple way to be happy with our results, as long as our CSOs’ work is based on equality, solidarity, democracy and inclusiveness. When we have these four principles at the core of our fights and mobilisations, we know we are going collectively in the right direction.”

Jan Robert Suesser,
Vice-President of the European Civic Forum

On 27 October 2021, roughly 50 participants from civil society and academia gathered for the third online session of the European Civic Academy of 2021 to discuss the topic of ‘All for a better world, but all fragmented?’.

In a context characterised by growing distrust in democracy and societal divisions, 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. The aim of the Academy is to create a space for exchanges among different generations, approaches, struggles and countries, providing food for thought and activism.
Building convergence among democratic agendas means recognising the interconnections of the systems of oppression that civic actors work to dismantle, as well as the fact that we need to work together to achieve a fairer society. Working towards convergence does not mean eliminating thematic specialisations, but it means rather sharing them to build a common knowledge for all civil society democratic efforts. Even before the pandemic, large intersectional movements - such as Black Lives Matter in the USA and Women Strike in Poland - have aggregated different types of democratic oppositions in their countries.

“In the past decade, CSOs have experienced a thematic specialisation on different issues, which has produced very good results in terms of consolidation of knowledge and skills. On the other hand, it has brought to a closure inside “thematic silos”, making more difficult to join agendas and forces and put this specific knowledge at the disposal of others. Then the pandemic came. Covid-19 has confronted us all with our interdependence and vulnerability: the need to converge towards a common narrative, without any kind of hierarchy, is again emerging.”

Raffaella Bolini, Co-President of the European Civic Forum
The Covid-19 pandemic made strengthening alliances within civil society even more urgent, in order to tackle the many interconnected crises exposed by the virus: health crisis, economic crisis, welfare state crisis, climate crisis, mental health crisis, etc.

2 The Covid-19 pandemic led to an explosion of activism

“We still have a long road to travel to definitively determine the tide in democracy’s favour across European civic space. There is a lot of potential, but a lot of limitations too.”

Richard Youngs, Senior Fellow in the Democracy, Conflict, and Governance Program, Carnegie Europe

Since the Covid-19 pandemic started, it has been characterised by a growth in many new initiatives, particularly at local level, organised to respond to the health emergency and its socio-economic and democratic consequences. Activism is speaking more directly to local concerns, gaining more legitimacy at local community level and attracting new participants (the majority of whom would not have previously defined themselves as very politically engaged). Also, the pandemic offered an opportunity for exploring different types of economic and political agenda. Many CSOs have taken this as an opportunity for a deeper, more conceptual, re-think. However, there are still several dividing lines within this explosion of civic activism – for example, between new grassroots informal initiatives and traditional NGOs. There is a need for pluralism in tactics and ways of organising, to explore how different strategies complement and strengthen each other.
The tools that can support civil society actors towards alliance-building and convergence can be different. Intersectionality offers an analytical lens to understand power dynamics, and what kind of systemic solutions can be put in place by CSOs against systems of oppression that are reproduced also through certain organisational practices and cultures. Intersectionality has been used as a frame for reflection and action by many 2020 movements and initiatives, especially after the unprecedented racial justice mobilisation under the slogan ‘Black lives matter’. In many places around the world, social movements and intellectuals are reasoning on the society of care - a society no longer oriented towards profit but towards caring for and protecting life, all lives, of humans, of nature, of the planet - as a potentially common umbrella narrative for all our issues. Sometimes, though, convergence among CSOs stems from the need to join forces against a ‘common enemy’. It was the case with the Friday protest movement against the illiberal government in Slovenia, now trying to evolve into a social movement, coordinating different types of organisations to propose very concrete demands ahead of elections.

“We can’t fight racism without connecting it to other oppressions, and here is the challenge: how do we build true alliances, in order to support each other?”

Julie Pascoët, Senior Advocacy Officer of European Network Against Racism
The notion of care can offer a positive common framework to build convergence among CSOs. Covid-19 has contributed to politicising care, showcasing the crucial role that caregivers play in society and putting at the centre of the political action our vulnerabilities. Caring is not something that we do alone, in private or only as part of a family, but something that is part of our rights and responsibilities as citizens, something that needs to be discussed and decided collectively and democratically.

It is important to start mainstreaming, as much as we can, an intersectional approach within CSOs, broadening alliances across topics and areas of work, and ensuring diversity and inclusiveness. In order to achieve systemic change, we need to challenge the structure of power, inequality and oppression in our society.

We need to challenge our own relationship to this structure as well, by questioning our actions and modus operandi against the risk to reproduce and perpetrate a racist, supremacist, patriarchal, inegalitarian capitalist system. Besides, civil society should really amplify the needs and struggles of the most marginalised groups, or individuals, including through international solidarity: many movements need to embed gender justice, LGBT+ community and people with disabilities, being careful at avoiding tokenism.
In relationship-building, trust is often an issue, we need to invest more on this at the movements level. **Framing social movements as a sort of ecology can build capacity to work across differences.** Tensions may always arise in terms of strategies, approaches, identities of organisers, but **engaging in conflict can be useful for CSOs**, sparkling ideas and making change happen. Sitting with discomfort is important: opening and trying out new tools and strategies can increase civil society capacity in a surprising way.

In order to gather different stakeholders around the same campaign, **we need to find a common denominator**: this could be controversial, especially for member-based organisations; but, once the denominator is identified, it can be a strength for a solid cooperation. The involvement of politicians in a campaign can be also problematic, if the campaign is aiming at systemic change; so, it is important to maintain a bottom-up grassroot-led direction for civil society campaigns and alliances, following the example of Black Lives Matter.

**Knowledge is fundamental to help CSOs in their advocacy work.** Latest research shows that the Covid-19 pandemic has brought up some long-term trends, such as altruistic individualism (a much more individualistic kind of engagement, reinforced by social media) and a renewed sense of trust in associations.
QUESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

• How are social movement across Europe approaching the need to build convergence among different democratic agendas, amidst the Covid-19 crisis?

• How has the health crisis catalysed and accelerated prior and deep-rooted mutations of civic engagement? What are the long-term trends?

• Is the notion of care enough, for civil society, to work together and to think of CSOs as strongly interdependent?

• How to promote a unifying approach, across diverse stakeholders, to overcome the differences in method to promote social justice?

• How to gather different stakeholders around the same campaign?

• How to take care of the emotional aspect of activism? How to use conflict, in practice, as a way to improve strategy and support a broad change?

• How is it possible to integrate environmentalism, racial justice, social justice and gender equality in an intersectional narrative and action?

• How to strike the balance between reflection and action?

• What’s the role of institutions and public authorities? How to facilitate interactions between them and the broader civil society?
RESOURCES

- Catherine Rottenberg and Lynne Segal (from the Care Collective), *What is Care?*, Goldsmiths Press

- European Alliance for a Just Transition


- The Care Collective, *Care Manifesto. The Politics of Interdependence*, 2020


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