



# European Civic Academy 2023

Building collective empowerment towards just and inclusive societies

## Key Takeaways

#ECA2023

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Building collective empowerment towards just and inclusive societies

## About the European Civic Academy

The **European Civic Academy** 2023, held on September 19-20 in the University of Kent Brussels School of International Studies, brought together around 90 individuals from various backgrounds and experiences, representing very diverse civil society organisations, movements and academia.

The theme of this year's edition of the academy was **Building collective empowerment towards just and inclusive societies... in the context of the European elections and beyond.**

The aim was to foster collaboration, share experiences, and identify strategies to renew civic actors' collective social and political agency and action to reverse the trends of political disenfranchisement and apathy.

On the day before the academy, we celebrated community and inspiring civic action during the **Civic Pride Awards 2023** ceremony.

The awards, presented annually, aim to recognise the inspiring work of civil society organisations and movements, raise their visibility at the European level, and share their commitment to EU values, civic freedoms, and democracy.

The Selection Committee chose three outstanding stories for this year's awards: **TGEU**, working to strengthen the rights and well-being of trans people, **Gribu palīdzēt bēgļiem** ("I want to help refugees") from Latvia, and the **Saami Council** and the Indigenous **Sámi rights movement** from Finland, Norway, Sweden, and Russia. Additionally, a special commendation was given to the **Hungarian protest movement** of teachers, students, and parents fighting for public education.



*The Saami Council's Anja Márjá Nystø Keskitalo accepts the organisation's Civic Pride Award*



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During the ceremony, we heard the four moving stories of civic action and mobilisation from across Europe. Interviews with the laureates of the awards can be found at the end of this report.

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Over the two days of the academy, participants shared their **stories of change and success**, but also **learnings from failure** to map out the strengths of civil society, to learn and unlearn, to build trust by putting fundamental values at the core of its action and connecting the humanity in all of us.

The goal was to **create a safer and braver space** that fosters open dialogue, active listening, collective care, and a shared sense of purpose in which everyone feels the **power to participate on an equal footing**.



*Professor Albena Azmanova speaks at ECA 2023*

In plenary sessions, we heard from outstanding academics on how to use the strengths of civil society to transform the environment and the systems in which civil society acts and operates. In break-out sessions, participants discussed how to foster progressive activism and oppose right-wing populism. By using participatory methodology, we explored a variety of challenges in our activism, such as how to centre marginalised and discriminated groups and how to harvest practices

that help to enable their voices to be heard, including decolonial, intersectional activism. Participants had the opportunity to attend a training on hopeful communications. We looked at how to foster a culture of care in civil society and discussed the challenges and opportunities of emerging digital technologies in terms of democracy and fundamental rights.

On the second day, we explored together how to translate the strength of civil society mobilisations and movements to the institutional and political levels. Finally, participants broke off into self-organised discussions on issues of their choosing.

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## Key takeaways from ECA 2023

### People, connections and values are the strengths of civil society

We discussed how civil society's **strength lies in the people**. It lies in the **collective**, our capacity to **shape society for the better** and put our **values at the core of our actions** and work.

Civil society's mobilisations are drivers to connect people and communities. Civic actors have the capacity to build synergies between various issues they address, including making intersectional connections between different struggles. In other words, we looked at how, through our everyday work on the ground, we have the ability to build trust, connect and create relations. We understand the needs of the people and the impact of policies on the wider population and specific groups.

The strength of civic actors is placing **collective care** at the centre of our work as empathy, solidarity, self-reflection and love are the motivations for our actions. In order to build on our collective strength, we need to build solidarities, synergies and convergence across single-issue mobilisations.

Together, we can oppose the false narratives that aim to create competition between different people and their rights.



*ECA 2023 participants present the findings from their breakout groups.*



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In her speech, Professor and Chair in Global Affairs at the School of Transnational Governance at the **European University Institute**, and convener of the university's Democracy Forum, **Kalyпсо Nicolaïdis** raised the question of *how we as civil society can use these reflections to transform society and the environment we act in.*

How can we harness our strengths, values, and practices as a power to change injustice and confront oppressive systems? We must activate these strengths to go from individual and collective emancipation to systemic transformation.



**WANT TO READ MORE ABOUT KALYPSO'S TAKE ON DEMOCRACY? READ THIS!**

At the European University Institute's (EUI) State of the Union 2022 conference, Professor Kalyпсо Nicolaïdis used her keynote speech to launch a dialogue between her generation of baby boomers and students' Generation Z.

**[READ THE SPEECH!](#)**

## Democratising politics also means shifting the responsibilities

The current political landscape in Europe is at a critical juncture, as it faces the climate crisis and ecosystems collapse, new technological threats, cost-of-living crisis, pandemics, wars and conflicts, mass movement of people, disinformation, and the consequences of decades of policymaking driven by the needs of financial capitalism which have increased inequalities and precarity have created fears and insecurities regarding the future.

Rising social, economic and environmental vulnerabilities combined with weakened social protections fuel anger, distrust and polarisation. Today many feel that the democratic chain is broken and the current political system is unable to address or even hear their concerns and aspirations. In representative democracies, the power

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stems from below – from the people, their needs and aspirations, but today many do not feel represented by the political representatives. The gap between the power of the people and the political power and processes needs to be bridged. This means translating the power of the people into meaningful political influence.

Professor at the **Brussels School of International Studies** at the **University of Kent** **Albena Azmanova** explained that the neoliberal agenda of democratisation tends to outsource states' responsibilities onto the private sphere, individuals and organisations, at the same time as they are less and less equipped to assume them.

This creates disempowerment and deprives people of their agency to act for change. In time of ubiquitous precarity, as people feel more and more insecure, they tend to look for leaders and political offers that provide a sense of false security, providing fertile grounds for the rise of reactionary and even far-right parties.

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**Responsibility without power equals precarity.  
Power without responsibility equals  
autocracy.**

**In such a situation, the political discourse of  
'more democracy' becomes a tool of  
oppression.**

**PROFESSOR ALBENA AZMANOVA  
BRUSSELS SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES**



As civic actors, we need to put pressure on public authorities to take responsibility to deliver policies that address the needs of all and demand transparency and accountability in policy-making. Whenever those in power give us more responsibility, we must also demand the means and the funds to carry out these tasks. Only then will democratisation not be a trap that combines the responsibility of the many with the power of the few.



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## MORE READING FROM PROFESSOR AZMANOVA ON PRECARIITY

1) Azmanova, Albena (2022) "Six ways to misunderstand precarity: Reflections on social angst and its political offspring," *Emancipations: A Journal of Critical Social Analysis*: Vol. 1: Iss. 3, Article 2. Available at: <https://scholarsjunction.msstate.edu/emancipations/vol1/iss3/2>

2) Azmanova, Albena. "Precarity, Populism and the Future of Progressive Alternatives." 11 November. 2022, European Civic Academy, Scuola Normale Superiore, Florence, Italy. Keynote Address. Available at: <https://civic-forum.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/ECA-2022-Albena-Azmanova-Keynote-Speech.pdf>

## Political renewal, synergies and solidarity as a cure for precarity

The crisis of representative democracy and the incapacity of established political parties to capture and articulate social and economic needs and environmental concerns in a coherent political offer lead to political disenfranchisement and apathy. At the same time, when democratic tools (such as citizens assemblies, massive mobilisations and referenda) do not receive appropriate answers from institutions, it can additionally feed a sense of powerlessness and disempowerment.

The traditional channels of electoral democracy give voice to this fear and these reactionary attitudes. The big question is what we can do about it and how we as civil society can contribute to the renewal of the political processes and trust.

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**If even the largest mobilisations do not produce results and the people are not listened to, it can only increase democratic frustration – turning the democratisation process into a boomerang.**

**RAFFAELLA BOLINI**  
EUROPEAN CIVIC FORUM CO-PRESIDENT



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As a conclusion to oppose this trend, we need to have a stronger relation to politics and power and claim an equal seat at the table. We must renew the relationship between democratic institutions and civil society and movements: democracy can not be practiced only every fourth year individually in the voting booth.

Associate professor in the Department of Political Science of the **University of Amsterdam Enzo Rossi** discussed in his contribution how, for example, direct action taking form in many ways could be one tool to create power independently of the dominant power structures.



*ECA 2023 Participants*

We need to recognise that not all people and groups have the same political power within Europe. We need to listen to, include, and sometimes step down from our own position of power to include people from geographical and political peripheries. However, as **Taoufik Vallipuram**, representative of the **Democratizing Politics** initiative, pointed out in his speech, empowering the disempowered entails often a dimension of domination by elite groups from the top.

When aiming to democratise politics and renew the political sphere we should rather think about how to shift the power to those groups instead of speaking for them and maintaining the power *over* them.

## **Systems of oppression within civil society must be recognised and dismantled**

Our organisations and social movements do not exist in a vacuum outside of social norms, power hierarchies, and systems of oppression. Therefore, structures inherently connected with power such as race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, language, educational background and geographical peripheries affect the way civic actors operate and engage and need to be challenged in civic spaces.



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Discussions around privilege, power and who is represented and who is not in events such as the ECA, emphasise the importance of ensuring that civil society spaces are more inclusive and diverse. Involving and listening to marginalised voices and communities is vital for the effectiveness and legitimacy of civil society work.

If we want our organising to be a space in which we thrive and regenerate together, we need to embody and practice the values of care, justice and inclusiveness we hope to realise in our societies. This requires recognising and dismantling power asymmetries and the historical and continuing dynamics of systemic oppression that we may reproduce. However, it is also imperative to make sure that persons from marginalised communities are not only included as representatives of the minority or marginalised groups but also hold real power in civil society spaces, beyond tokenistic box-ticking.

This leads to the need to acknowledge and deconstruct the roots of all kinds of inequalities that are reflected in European societies, including their historical and colonial origins which often continue today. To decolonise, understand intersectional identities in our civic spaces and to involve all the people fighting for their rights means to recognise and dismantle power asymmetries and the historical and continuing dynamics of systemic oppression, including where we organise. Dismantling systems of oppression are often referred to as something theoretical, detached from the real world. We, as civic actors, need to ask ourselves what it looks like in practice.

What does it mean to decolonise European civil society? It means critically reflecting on how we are complicit in coloniality which survives colonialism and sitting with this discomfort. It means disrupting power and privilege to ensure that we are not reproducing systems of oppression.

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**We need to move away from speaking for excluded groups, but rather give up our seat to make space for them at the table for their demands to be heard.**

**None of this can happen unless we create an environment where colonised people and diaspora feel safe and heard.**



**AARTI NARSEE  
SENIOR POLICY AND ADVOCACY OFFICER  
EUROPEAN CIVIC FORUM**

## Civic Pride Awards laureates 2023

### Celebrating activism

The following short interviews with the **Civic Pride Awards** 2023 laureates demonstrate the vital role of civil society actors, movements, and organisations across Europe that protect and enact EU values and democracy, even in the face of shrinking civic space.

Each of the awarded organisations and movements embody the outcomes of the ECA and the agency, strengths synergies and solidarity of civil society.

### TGEU

Violence, discrimination, harassment, resentment and even murders. Pathologization, lack of affordable and accessible health care, mental health issues, and being rejected by your own family. Labor market discrimination, precarity and homelessness. The list goes on. The situation looks depressing when **Miles Rutendo Tanhira**, senior programmes officer at **TGEU**, describes the challenges faced by trans people across Europe today.



*Miles Rutendo Tanhira is interviewed at ECA 2023*

TGEU is a network organisation working to strengthen the rights and well-being of trans people in Europe and Central Asia by representing them politically and advocating for their human rights, offering information, training and providing support to trans people. In times of increased anti-rights backlash in Europe, TGEU has established itself as a legitimate voice for trans communities and that is why the European Civic Forum selected TGEU as one of the winners of the Civic Pride Awards 2023.



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Miles explains that trans communities continue to face escalating levels of transphobia across Europe. The challenges often permeate all aspects and levels of a transperson's life. The discrimination can be direct, indirect, structural, political, legal, medical... He also points out that not all trans persons' experiences are the same. Those experiencing intersectional discrimination are the ones most impacted. The situation is particularly precarious for refugees, undocumented people, people of colour, transfeminine people, sex workers, the elderly, the youth and trans people with disabilities.

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**Discrimination, violence, and poverty mutually reinforce each other, they create this cycle, which means that those living in poverty are more likely to suffer human rights violations and those disproportionately affected by discrimination and violence are more likely to be living in poverty**

MILES RUTENDO TANHIRA  
TGEU



**Collective care, shared values and inclusivity as the cornerstones of a resilient movement**

However, Miles points out that amidst all this adversity, trans communities remain resilient, united, caring for each other, celebrating small victories, resisting and collectively advocating for their rights. For example, at a legal level, there has been a lot of progress in terms of trans rights in Europe focusing mostly on the legal gender recognition.

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**We have seen a gamut of legislative policies that are inclusive of trans people in terms of anti-discrimination, anti-hate speech, and also related to sports, labour market and transparency.**

**We have also seen an increase in visibility and representation. There are political groups with a very focused diversity and inclusion approach, willing to have trans people take leadership in their parties and governments.**

MILES RUTENDO TANHIRA  
TGEU

This shows, above all, how resilient trans communities are. There is an increasing collective organisation and supportive communities are emerging despite the challenges and the volatility. There are many things that other social movements and civic actors working for change could learn from TGEU's approach.

According to Miles, the core of resilient movements lies in collective care, shared values, visions, and purpose as well as centering intersectionality and inclusiveness in the way the movements organise. Throughout the interview, he talks about how important institutionalising well-being and collective rest is for movements.

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**Care means genuine inclusion and concern for the well-being and security of the people that are in the movement so that everyone can flourish and bedding rest within our practice**

MILES RUTENDO TANHIRA  
TGEU



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Movements that are led by compassion and accept people the way that they are, allowing vulnerability, are reflective and willing to learn and relearn and do not reinforce the same systems that they are fighting to dismantle are characteristics that make a movement stick together.

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**People in the movements will experience turbulence, challenges, breakdowns, fights, and conflicts, but because they have a shared purpose and collective vision, it keeps them together.**

MILES RUTENDO TANHIRA  
TGEU

## **The importance of listening and learning from trans communities**

Despite the strong resistance and resilience of trans people and the trans community, there is still a long way to go before every trans person's human rights are respected. When asked how the situation can be improved – how non-trans people can be better allies for trans people – Miles encourages us to listen to, learn from, and include the people most affected.

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**We cannot work alone. We need movements, partners, and allies. To build allies, we need to have mutual respect in the space. Whether it is trans people or another group, make sure that those marginalised within that group are also included. The most important thing is to create the space, involve them, collaborate, and let them lead”**

MILES RUTENDO TANHIRA  
TGEU

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## Gribu palīdzēt bēgļiem

The year 2015 will be remembered as the year when an exceptional number of refugees and migrants arrived in the EU. With over a million people seeking refuge and migrating to EU Member States, many countries were confronted by unprecedented challenges in welcoming, supporting, integrating and meeting the basic needs of the people arriving. **Gribu palīdzēt bēgļiem** (GPB), a Latvian movement to help refugees, migrants and asylum seekers was born out of this challenge.



*Linda Jākobsone-Gavala at ECA 2023*

The European Civic Forum chose GPB as one of the 2023 Civic Pride Awards recipients. The annually given award acknowledges the admirable efforts of civil society organisations and movements in Europe. The formation and work of GPB is an extraordinary example of civic engagement and people power in Europe.

**Linda Jākobsone-Gavala**, Project Manager and Board member at GPB tells us the story of the organisation whose name translates as “I want to help refugees”. It started as a movement in 2015 with a Facebook post by a business owner from Riga. He wanted to do something concrete seeing that the Latvian state could not meet the basic needs of the people arriving. He asked people to bring clothes, food and other basic necessities to his shop to share. The post developed into a Facebook group and later on even into a complete online platform that provides basic information about how to operate in Latvian society, such as how to apply for social benefits or enroll in schools.

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## Society as a whole wanted to help the people arriving

The next time Europe witnessed similar mobility of refugees and asylum seekers was in 2022 when Russia's invasion of Ukraine forced millions of people to leave their homes and seek refuge in the EU and neighbouring countries. Linda describes the mentality among the Latvian people and civic actors as positive and there was a strong willingness across Latvian society to work together to help people fleeing the war.

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**Everybody wanted to chip in and help somehow and do something the best that they can**

**LINDA JĀKOBSONE-GAVALA  
GRIBU PALĪDZĒT BĒGĻIEM**



The organisation has grown to be one of the leading human rights organisations in Latvia with around 20 employees and mobilizing over 3000 people to volunteer or make donations over the years. GPB is offering practical help in integration, working in four different languages, advocating, and collaborating with other national civil society organisations. GPB is an inspiring example of how ordinary people can be mobilized in a short time to change their communities for the better and help other people around them. The movement has also received recognition from the Latvian government for the work they do.

## Solidarity and cooperation despite state violations

However, the Latvian state has not always been sympathetic to the organisation even though GPB has patched up on some of the state duties, such as the information webpage that is still run by the organisation and relying on the efforts of GPB's volunteers. The Latvian State Border Guard has initiated criminal proceedings against members of the organisation for helping refugees cross the border to Latvia as well as executed pushbacks of refugees and migrants on the Latvian-Belarusian border.



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This is part of a Europe-wide phenomenon where asylum seekers and migrants trying to enter the EU face pushbacks and other human rights violations at EU borders and civil society groups trying to support them have been criminalised because of the solidarity they showed.

Despite the backlashes from the government GPB still continues its work and pushes the government for better policies that respect human rights and fulfill their state obligations. Thanks to the impressive engagement and mobilization of people the movement has made since its emergence, Linda has learned the importance of cooperation within civil society, but also between other sectors such as business and municipalities.

To make sure all the people on the move arriving to a new country have what they need, feel included and welcomed as well as to tackle injustice and discrimination against these people she wishes civic actors to see more opportunities for synergies.

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**We should learn how to take these lessons forward and that absolutely relates to civic protection or trust in the other NGOs. I would expect and hope that we will learn that difference is not an enemy, and that we can actually do things better if we do things together. What we have learned is a lot about civic protection and a lot about the power of civil society that we have.**

LINDA JĀKOBSONE-GAVALA  
GRIBU PALĪDZĒT BĒGĻIEM

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## The Saami Council and the Sámi rights movement

“We are one people divided in four different countries by national borders. That’s why it is so important for us to speak with one voice”, **Anja Márjá Nystø Keskitalo** emphasizes when asked about the **Sámi rights movement’s** importance and what it stands for. She is working as an advisor at the Saami Council, a non-governmental organisation promoting Sámi rights since 1956.



*The Saami Council’s Anja Márjá Nystø Keskitalo accepts the organisation’s Civic Pride Award*

The Sámi people are the indigenous inhabitants of Sápmi, the Arctic region that stretches over northern Norway, Sweden and Finland, and northwestern parts of Russia. They are the only indigenous people in the European Union, with origins tracing back to over 10,000 years ago, well before the establishment of national borders. Still today reindeer herding, fishing and traditional ways of living are part of everyday life for many Sámi people.

The **Saami Council** and the **Sámi rights movement** are one of the laureates in the Civic Pride Awards 2023. The Saami Council consists of nine member organisations from all four countries and is one of the oldest indigenous peoples’ organisations with tight bonds to the global indigenous rights movement. The organisation aims to maintain the cultural, political, economic and social rights of the Sámi people and indigenous people in general.

### **The colonial legacy still contributes to many challenges for the Sámi people**

Despite the increased global recognition of indigenous rights in recent years and the Nordic countries’ reputation as democratic, equal and committed to human rights, the Sámi people still face many struggles.

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The four countries have been consistently reprimanded by the UN for their human rights violations against their indigenous peoples. The challenges include discrimination, violations of self-determination, language and culture loss caused by colonialism, and environmental destruction, such as mining, logging and loss of land which threatens the communities' culture and way of life.

An increased struggle for the Sámi people is also green colonialism referring to the exploitation of indigenous territories, resources and people in the name of green transition. Anja Márjá gives a recent example from Norway. Already in 2021, Norway's Supreme Court ruled that the construction of Europe's largest onshore wind farm at Fosen in central Norway violates the rights of the Sami and endangers their traditional way of life.

However, the wind farm was built and is still in operation, which is strongly opposed by the Sámi rights movement and especially by young Sámi activists who are organising protests and blockades in front of key ministries in Oslo. Many of the protesters were detained and fined in the incidents.

## **Solidarity within the global indigenous movement**

Possibly because the national authorities have not been listening to the Sámi voices, the movement has since its uprising been effective in establishing contacts and building synergies and solidarity with other indigenous communities globally. Because of the shared history and legacy of colonization, many indigenous peoples are facing the same challenges whether it is indigenous peoples in the Amazon, Australia, or the Arctic tundra. In recent years the movement has also found allies and got increased support from climate activists and environmental groups.

In terms of how the European civil society can support and be better allies to the Sámi and indigenous peoples Anja Márjá has an clear answer.



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**Civil society can help to spread the awareness about the Sámi people especially in the European context but also indigenous peoples' rights generally.**

**You can help us to create the space for indigenous peoples' voices and also the space for different ways of knowing and indigenous world views when talking about how our societies are shaped,**



ANJA MÁRJÁ NYSTØ KESKITALO  
SAAMI COUNCIL

## The Hungarian movement for public education

The Hungarian movement for better public education received a special commendation in the Civic Pride Awards 2023. **Szilvia Imre**, **Anikó Talyigás** and **Kinga Weszely** told us the story of **Pedagógus Egység**, a Hungarian teachers' organisation and an important part of the widespread movement of teachers, parents and trade unions fighting to change Hungarian public education. Pedagógus Egység, Teachers United, organises protests and civil disobedience actions to call for the Hungarian government to make improvements and increase resources for the public education system in the country.

The movement became bigger and more active in 2022 although the origins of the protests started already by the fall of the communist era in the 1990s. Ever since the governments have not been able to answer the challenges in the education sector, the three teachers tell us. However, the Orbán government has made many reforms that have undermined the quality of education and the already scarce resources allocated to it. Both the teachers and the students are overburdened. As the teachers' working conditions are poor and the salaries are very low, more and more teachers are forced to take

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extra jobs in evenings, weekends and school holidays or move to private schools with better salaries. Social mobility in the country is low, there is a huge inequality gap between urban and rural areas and the Roma children are segregated, Kinga tells us. The teachers also bring up the issue with the teaching material. In recent years the publication of books has become centralised which has led to deterioration in the quality of teaching materials and books published in haste.



*Anikó Talyigás and Kinga Weszely of Pedagógus Egység*

In addition, the new national curriculum, which was launched in 2020, is heavily criticized as overloaded and an extension of the government's right-wing populist and national-conservative ideology. As the movement for public education grew and the opposition and strikes against the policies increased, the government issued some laws making striking more difficult for the teachers, hugely undermining their employment rights, and putting them in an even more precarious position.

## Civil disobedience as a tool to change the education

Szilvia, Anikó and Kinga told us that fundamentally, the education crisis is about democracy. The school mirrors the rest of society and its values. "We cannot have a democratic society without democratic schools", Szilvia summarised.

On the other hand, schools and teachers can also be key actors for change in shaping society towards equal, just and democratic futures.

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**Our school system has to reflect the values that we are striving for. If the school doesn't reflect the society that we are working for, then it's just simply and practically not possible to build up a society like that.**

**SZILVIA IMRE  
PEDAGÓGUS EGYSÉG**

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The mobilisation of teachers, students and parents to change the course of the education system has been huge. Some teachers started to do civil disobedience actions in the schools by refusing to teach but the government did not listen and clashes with the authorities continued. The new laws against striking and civil disobedience have led to arbitrary layoffs of teachers opposing the government rules and as well as police violence during protests.

## Widespread solidarity from Hungary and abroad

However, the movement resisted and the repression made the movement even stronger.

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**The acts on behalf of the government have just further enhanced solidarity between teachers, students and parent movements and since then we have been working even more fiercely on solving these issues and trying to be as effective as possible. It is very moving to see how many and what creative ways our students and parents joined in the movement and showed their solidarity with the teachers and the whole Hungarian public education”.**

**KINGA WESZELY  
PEDAGÓGUS EGYSÉG**

All three teachers point out that the persistence, feeling of community and solidarity in the broad movement is the glue that keeps them strong despite the government's actions. The solidarity extends even beyond Hungary.

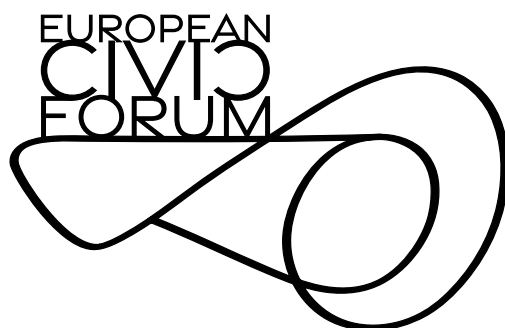
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**We feel that we really are visible when colleagues from abroad send us photos and messages about how they stand with us.**

**ANIKÓ TALYIGÁS  
PEDAGÓGUS EGYSÉG**



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