



**First CONCORD Learning & Exchange Forum:
How are European NGOs addressing the challenges of shrinking civic space?**



CONCORD members gathered in Budapest on 8th and 9th November to discuss the shrinking space for civil society in Europe. This event, the first of its kind, aimed to foster information-sharing and mutual learning between our members about the solutions they are exploring. Our Hungarian members, HAND, supported the preparation of the event and highlighted the extreme situation for civil society in the country.

The two-day event was a participatory forum, where sessions ranged from more traditional panel discussions to those involving role play to encourage participants to step into other actors' shoes, and exchange spaces such as a marketplace where individuals could speak



to one another to get more detailed insights into each other's experiences. Participants included CONCORD members (4 board members, 7 network representatives, participants from 24 national platforms and members of the inclusive network committee) as well as guests from neighbouring countries such as Georgia, Macedonia and Azerbaijan, who all contributed to the event with their experiences of defending their civic space. As Johannes Trimmel, CONCORD President said when opening the event "we are not here to react to policies and processes but to set an agenda for change."



In order to start with a common understanding we invited speakers from [Civicus](#) and [Civil Society Europe](#) to share their organisations' recent reports and [tools](#) on civil society at the global and [European level](#).

Marianna from Civicus introduced participants to their [monitor](#), which tracks civic space around the world. The monitor is updated daily and gives the status of 140 countries with a searchable database of violations. It shows that 3.2 billion people are living in countries that have

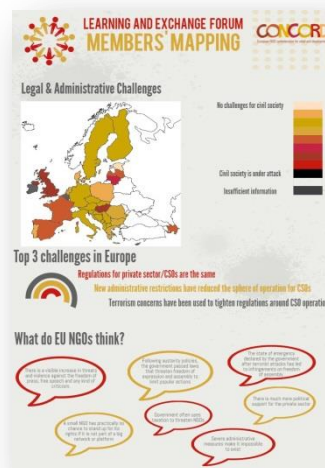
closed or repressed civic space. Some of the most common violations include excessive force at protests, the detention of activists and the detention and killing of journalists. Marianna reminded participants of the bright spots though: in some countries, enabling laws have been passed and activists have been released. Courts have made progressive judgments and the majority of protests remain peaceful.

Niccolo from Civil Society Europe shared the results of a recent report on civic space, which echoed the civicus findings, but in Europe. In general it is not as extreme within Europe as in other regions of the world, but similar trends can be observed.

After the global and regional level, we heard from Barbara from Hungary, who explained the evolution of civil society in the country over the last 25-30 years. She put the country's current position into context within its recent history and emphasised the need for civil society organisations to get back to the grassroots and connect with the people.

THE SURVEY:

Ahead of the meeting, we mapped our members' situations and produced infographics illustrating the policy and advocacy, as well as the legal and administrative challenges they are facing. The main points we learned from this mapping backed up the Civil Society Europe report finding that 58,7% of the organisations they spoke to found that conditions for CSOs are deteriorating.



As well as there being less funding for policy and advocacy work, this work is now only effective in larger coalitions, and consultations are no longer as influential as they have been. On the legal and administrative side, we see that regulations for civil society and private companies are the same, new administrative restrictions have reduced the CSO sphere of operation; and security concerns have been used to tighten regulations

around CSO operations.

THE LEARNING:

Participants actively engaged in the first exchange activity where they briefly presented an object that symbolised for them the shrinking space they experience in their countries. From spatulas symbolising the way in which governmental



support can flip, to beautiful scarves with complex patterns that reflect the labyrinth of administrative procedures, participants were creative in the way they visualised the challenges in their way. Participants talked through laws that seem good on paper but are not implemented and explained finances, symbolised by calculators and wallets, not being as healthy as they once were. There were good examples such as the Italian platform's involvement in the presidency of the EU, or the Czech platform's membership of a national council on sustainable development, and the startling examples such as Bulgaria's proliferation of government sponsored 'NGOs'. Potential solutions were shared, such as the [civic charter](#), and the scene was set for more exchange



of experience and learning from one another. CONCORD members shared their innovative examples of how civil society organisations are coming together to defend their space: Maite Serrano from Spain, Benedicte Hermelin and Patricia Spadaro from France, Farah Nazeer from the UK, Kristiina Rintakoski from Finland and Jan Bazyl from Poland.

From [hologram demonstrations in Spain](#), to taking the government to court in the UK, participants inspired one another to think creatively to address this common challenge.

In Hungary, when the authoritarian government organised a billboard campaign against migration in advance of a referendum in the country, humorous independent billboards popped up, created by designers determined to give the public an alternative view.



In the evening, we focused on Hungary itself, as well as the region around. This panel discussion was organised within the frame of a joint project run by four CONCORD members: CROSOL (Croatian national platform), HAND (Hungarian national platform), LAPAS (Latvian national platform) and SLOGA (Slovenian national platform).

Hungarian journalists shared their experiences of limits to their freedom of expression in recent months, including the closing of an independent newspaper

Népszabadság and participants heard more detailed accounts of the government raids on foundations benefiting from foreign funding. As with earlier interventions from across Europe, the point that once the questioning of the importance of civil society is accepted by the public, it is very difficult to recover, was made. In the second half of the panel, attention was turned to Poland and Croatia, where similar trends can be observed.

THE EXCHANGE:

Despite the different national situations, it was clear that there were common elements being experienced by many, such as a change of government leading to abrupt changes to activist rights; the importance of working on solutions across sectors, and the importance of innovative thinking to find novel ways of responding.

Participants used a marketplace setting to have more detailed discussions to share elements of projects, reports and tools. The [ladder project](#) was one project; CSOs and local authorities working together to change attitudes and involve local authorities more in development education. The additional tools included the example of the [Monitoring Matrix](#) designed and used in the Western Balkans and Turkey by the [Balkan Civil Society Development Network](#). There were discussions around many reports, including the ones that had already been heard of from Civicus and Civil Society Europe, but also neighbouring countries such as Azerbaijan.



In order to get the creative juices flowing before turning to our plan of action, on the second day participants were divided into four groups, to take part in four role play scenarios. The idea was to allow participants to experience the position of other stakeholders in familiar situations, such as



European consultations, the introduction of anti-advocacy laws, private sector involvement in international development and increased administrative burden for NGOs.

After the previous day of inspiration and exchange, and the creative roleplay session CONCORD members used the final half of the second day to make a plan for the action to take together going forward to defend CONCORD's space and that of its members in order to be an effective actor in international development.

NEXT STEPS:

CONCORD has space for working on this issue on the policy side within the civil society hub (hub 3) and more internally through the inclusive network committee. Representatives of both structures were included in the design and implementation of the session.

Interesting ideas to take forward include

- Mapping members' situations and working together to respond
- Creating space to come together to discuss this in the future – facilitating the exchange of good practice, as happened at the Learning and Exchange Forum 2016
- Denouncing the shrinking space with a coordinated awareness raising campaign
- Building on examples of members with allies, especially youth
- Better involving members of members in activities
- Developing a rapid response mechanism
- Creating a multi-stakeholder (media, academia, private sector) advisory group on shrinking space
- Creating a narrative for CONCORD on civic space in relation to SDGs with clear red lines
- Including the importance of civic space in the peer review process around the SDGs
- And even, forming a new political party to provide a real alternative to the current narrative!



Members emphasised that this theme is central to our work and underlined the need for space to come together to discuss joint responses and find the courage for collective action.

See our [blogpost](#), [storify](#) and [facebook](#) page for more.

