

# Seminar on Shrinking Civil Society for Youth



## Introduction

Young people and youth organisations hold an important role in democratic society, however the phenomenon of shrinking civil space is affecting young people and youth organisations in Europe at a disproportionate degree. This is a human rights concern and is being underestimated.

Shrinking civil space is an issue which must not be simply worked around, but directly confronted; as overt attempts to reduce, or even just negligence in protecting, civil society space is an affront to fundamental democratic values.

In April 5<sup>th</sup> a group of young people from 17 different National Youth Councils and International NGOs from throughout Europe met in Ireland, hosted by the National Youth Council of Ireland, to discuss their experiences of Shrinking Civil Space for Youth. The goals of the seminar were;

Goals of the Seminar:

- To gather examples of SCS for Youth in different contexts (NYC, Grassroots, International)
- To highlight the value of youth organisations in a functional democracy, human rights, law
- To raise awareness of SCS for Youth amongst youth organisations in different regional, national and European contexts.
- Identify actions and space for cooperation and advocacy on the issue of SCS for Youth.
- Highlight the role of states / EU / CoE to create enabling environments for youth organisations

They shared how shrinking civil society space is affecting their realities and that of their youth organisations. The group had an opportunity to meet with individuals and organizations that are challenging the effects of shrinking civil society spaces. Throughout the event the young people developed solutions that they can take on an individual, organizational and societal level. This report is a synopsis of the event, and a collection of the solutions that they group drew up on the day of the event.

## Presentations

### National Youth Councils

Input: As preparation for the seminar the national youth council representatives were tasked with researching their national context around the topic of youth and civil space. The input from the youth people was similar across all national experiences. The limited funding, that is available to young people to participate in civil society, is based on the needs of the government and there is no structural funding available. The funding that is available tends to be short term, which makes it difficult for civic society organisations to work sustainably. There seemed to be less political will to encourage young people to engage critically with political structures.



### Irish Council for Civil Liberties (Liam Herrick)



Input: Liam highlighted that there are concrete attacks on human rights in other parts of the world but also in Europe. The press, the judiciary and civil society are under attack.

Legitimate regulations on campaigns aiming to influence public policy (in the context of foreign powers meddling in elections for instance) do as an (unwanted) consequence also infringe on the activities of civil societies. Rules and Laws created to Protect society can have a lasting negative impact on civil society and create shrinking civil space.

Civil society needs to claim its legitimacy back. A democracy where only parties and business gets to define public policy is flawed. A real democracy has a national conversation including every societal actor. We need to work closer together.

A time limit i.e. couple of months before a referendum but allowing civil society to have a general debate otherwise.

Information on the People's Voice campaign for Electoral Act Reform can be found <https://www.iccl.ie/human-rights/civil-society/sign-peoples-voice-campaign-electoral-act-reform/>

### Young European Federalists (JEF) (Leonie Martin)

*JEF is a supranational, politically pluralist youth NGO with about 30,000 members in over 35 countries. The goal of JEF is the creation of a democratic European federation as a guarantee for peace and more free, just and democratic society.*

Input : Leonie echoed the need for a response to challenge the effects of shrinking civil society spaces. JEF believe



in upholding the values of the European Union. One of which is the 'Rule of Law'. In its

simplest understanding the rule of law is the restriction of the arbitrary exercise of power by subordinating it to well-defined and established laws.

JEF gave many examples throughout Europe of how the Rule of Law is not being upheld; how people are being silenced due to their own political opinions, how journalism is being controlled by the political elite and is losing its political integrity. These were not isolated incidences, but areas throughout Europe. In locations such as Belarus, Hungary, Bulgaria, Malta and Poland.

JEF highlighted a report commissioned by the European Youth Forum in 2018 stating the impact that shrinking civil society space is having on young people across Europe.

- one in three youth organisations experience difficulties in accessing information from government
- one in ten can't freely use the internet
- one in eight experience difficulties in organising public assemblies
- two in five think there might be some form of retribution

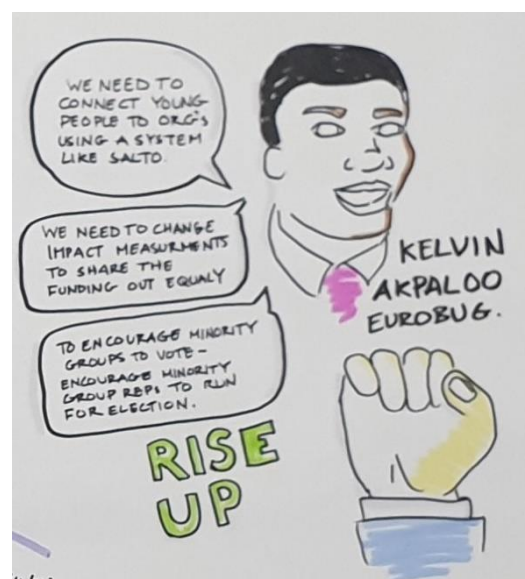
JEF believe that the time to act is now. They believe that young people need to use their voice and civic duty to respond to shrinking civil spaces. They want to empower people to vote during the European Parliament Elections. They want young people to;

- To study their rights
- Identify stories
- Speak up
- Be mentally prepared
- Strengthen alliances

### Kelvin Akpaloo

*Kelvin is a highly creative digital arts graduate who uses is creativity and energy to bring about positive change in society. He has volunteered with EuroBug-which focuses on intercultural learning and inclusion of ethnic minority groups in Ireland. He has also been an active member of the National Youth Councils 'No Hate Speech Movement' which was funded by the Council of Europe.*

Speech: Kelvin spoke of his passion for creative community engagement. He talked about his experience working with small youth organisations and shares how they are unable to compete for large European funded grants because the application process is too complicated and the larger organisations have far more experience, so they would usually get the funding. Kelvin suggests having a midway review of first-time applicants for the Erasmus+ application process prior to the deadline or a grant specifically for first time applicants and young people. This would allow for everyone to have a more equitable opportunity to receive an Erasmus+ funded application.

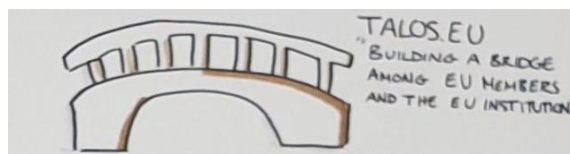


Kelvin also spoke about identity and how it is important to be represented by people who look like you. If we want young people from minority backgrounds to engage in politics, then we need to encourage those from minority group to run for election.

### Talos (Denes)

*Talos is a civic technology startup with a mission: to foster European civicism, by encouraging political engagement.*

Input: Denes introduced the participants to the Talos.eu website. The website provides people an online space to launch and support civic initiatives. This website provides a space for civic engagement and shows whoever used the structure what is going on in the rest of the countries in Europe.



### European Parliament Office in Ireland (Michael Bruton)

*The European Parliament Liaison Office in Ireland provides information on the European Parliament's role and powers, on the Irish MEPs and their activities and on issues currently being considered by Parliament which are of significance for Ireland and for Europe as a whole.*

To conclude inspiring inputs, Michael Bruton, Election Officer for the European Parliament Office in Ireland, provided an overview of the work that the Parliament is doing to encourage young people to take an active part in the 2019 European elections.

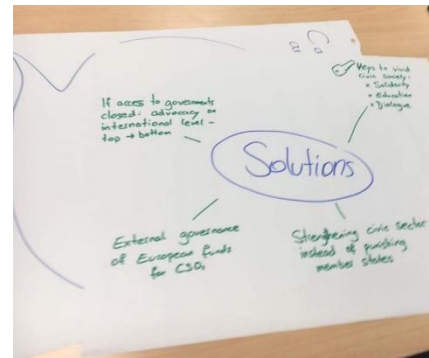
In advance of the election, the European Parliament has launched an information awareness campaign called 'This Time I'm Voting'. As an apolitical initiative, the EU is looking to encourage young voters to take an active stance and participate in the upcoming vote on Friday, 24 May. With voter turnout amongst 18-24 year olds on a steady decline EU-wide, the European Union wants to create an energy around the election and encourage young people to take an active stance in shaping their future by sharing information in their communities, schools and universities.

Through the European Parliament's website [www.thisimeimvoting.eu](http://www.thisimeimvoting.eu), the European Union is building an active community of citizens who want to spread the word about the European elections next May. With over 300,000 people already signed up throughout the EU, European Parliament Office in Ireland have started creating an enthusiastic group of volunteers that are actively promoting the elections by distributing leaflets, posters, badges and more. This time it is not enough to just to hope for a better future, young people must actively shape that future!

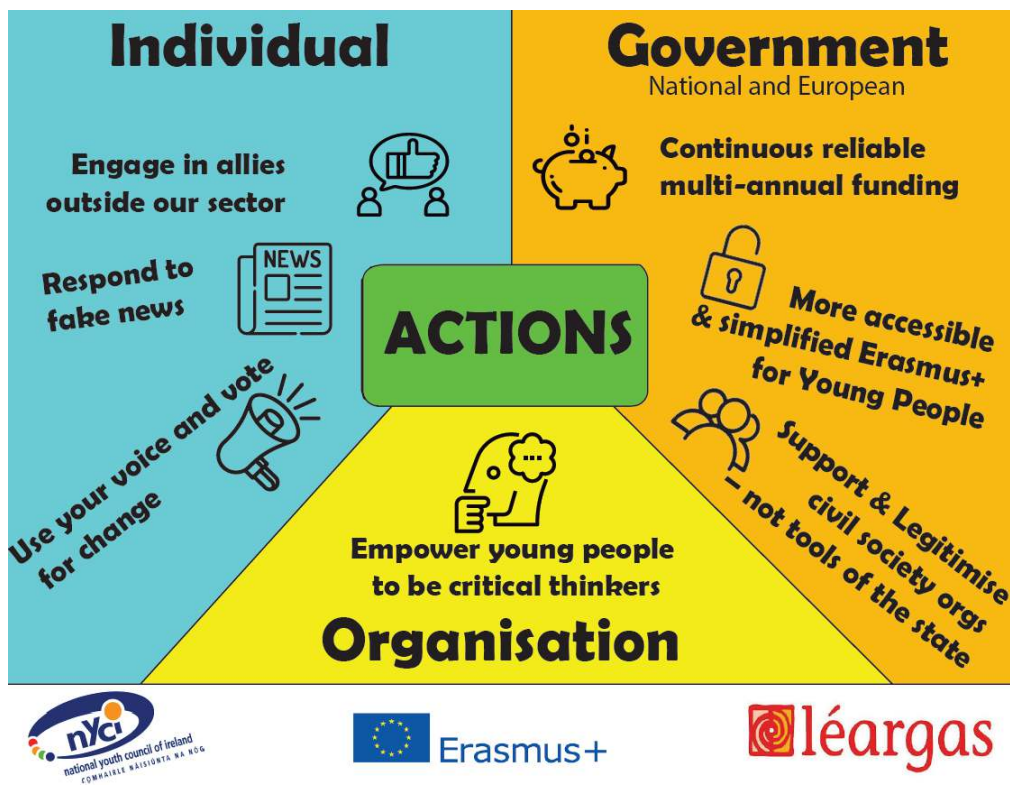
## Responses

Throughout the seminar the young people taking part were given opportunities to come up with responses and solutions to shrinking civic space. The participants came up with many similar responses and solutions, as such they were combined;

1. We need an environment of recognition, understanding, and solidarity
2. We need fair regulation under which CSOs can operate effectively and independently
3. We need funding which is sustainable and does not instrumentalise youth organisations
4. We need to update civic education
5. Space & Participation for all; we need to confront barriers
6. We need a holistic approach, and to cooperate across sectors
7. We need to take solidarity beyond words; establishing a European 'Solidarity Fund'
8. We must frame this as a human rights crisis, we need to communicate our realities



The responses were brought together in a poster that represents the actions that can be taken at an individual, organisations and governments on a national and European level



The European Parliament Elections are taking place on the week of the 23<sup>rd</sup> to the 26<sup>th</sup> of May. The young people taking part in this event believe that this is the time to respond to shrinking civil space. The young people were given space and time to work collaboratively on developing recommendation and actions to respond to this concern.

## **5 Actions To Take During The European Parliament Elections**

- 1) Find Out The Date Of The Vote**
- 2) Be Aware Of Your Rights**
- 3) Make Connections**
- 4) Share Your Stories**
- 5) Use Your Vote**

