

Strengthening democracy on the ground: How grassroots civil society organisations are countering the shrinking civic space across Europe

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Thank you very much for the invitation to speak to you on the role of civil society in maintaining the values of tolerance, respect and equality for all. I don't think many of us ever thought how increasingly challenging that work would become in a Union based precisely on those values.

The title of this conference reminds us of how fragile democracies are, how we need constantly to nurture and uphold the institutions and organisations that allow societies to thrive. If democracy is an ecosystem then the attacks we are witnessing on parts of that ecosystem - whether rule of law or equality - are attacks on the entire ecosystem itself. And, just as in nature, the damage can be immense.

We face a situation where we can no longer say with any certainty that there is agreement on what our shared values are. The gross manipulation of facts and images through social media and other new technologies even means the absence of a shared set of facts from which to draw conclusions and make rational decisions. How often do we ask ourselves when looking at an event on our smartphones, Is this Real?

What we are also witnessing is an increased polarisation of our politics and of our societies. Political and societal divisions are not new but what is most concerning about the nature of those divisions today is the increasing eclipsing of truth by those divisions. Authoritarian or populist leaders draw their power from encouraging people not to look at facts, but rather the motivation of those who put those facts before them.

We see that in the attempts to impeach President Donald Trump when the motivation of the Democrats is considered to be more important by Trump supporters than the facts of the case made against him. Incredibly, the very obvious facts of the climate emergency are also politicised even as Australia burns, the ice caps melt and small island nations are threatened with extinction.

Politics has become a zero sum game. One side wins absolutely only when the other side loses absolutely. Social media has amplified this trend, giving a platform and audience to views that were once marginal but which are in danger of being normalised or already have been.



Against this background, civil society organisations stand in sharp and welcome relief. Projects such as those being put forward today by Advocate Europe remind us of the values we share and of the communities we can build - values and communities that reach beyond the sound and the fury of short term politics.

By being inherently optimistic, by seeking positive change, by actually living the values in our treaties, civil society organisations are being 'subversive' in those countries that make a virtue of polarised politics. You are the shield against the forces that thrive on disruption and chaos.

But this also very often puts you in the front line against governments who do not welcome your truth telling or your actions for positive change and for the protection and strengthening of democracy.

Civil society organisations can then become a target in countries where messages of tolerance and inclusiveness threaten the dominant narrative about what is good or bad for a society, or where the 'blame' for economic or other problems is put on marginalised or vulnerable groups. And that is when you need the support of individuals and of institutions to make sure that your voices are not silenced and your ambitions not destroyed.

The eight projects supported by Advocate Europe this year cover democratic participation and civic engagement, gender equality, fighting fake news and protecting the environment.

Those are projects that speak directly to our contemporary European society. They hold up a mirror to how we are and more importantly they can show us where and how we need to act so that things can be improved.

But you cannot work to influence or to exert pressure in isolation and civil society has necessarily to engage with political structures no matter how imperfect at times they might be.

And that is the importance of the EPC's and the Mercator Foundation's 'Connecting Europe' programme. It recognises that people with good ideas need to be connected with policy-makers in Brussels.

Allowing civil society meaningful access to decision-makers should be a priority for all EU institutions. In practice this means that civil society feels encouraged to take part in the broad decision-making of the EU, whether through meeting policy- and law-makers or answering public consultations and to be aware of all the platforms where it can make itself heard.

Civil society needs to use its central power as influencers, so that their progressive ideas sow the seeds that lead to progressive policy changes.

Exercising this influence at the EU level is not easy. EU law-making is complex, the decision-making processes that lead from A to B are not always apparent and, regrettably, those with many resources are often able to open influential doors more easily than those with few.



But it is in the EU's own interest to have a strong and active civil society operating within and around its law-making framework. It is civil society, acting for the general good, rather than a private profit line, that makes 'Brussels' relatable to ordinary people. This in turn acts as a bulwark against populist Eurosceptic criticism.

If EU institutions don't engage with those who support the EU and who want it to succeed they leave the door open for negative voices with their superficially attractive but false promises about easy solutions to today's complex problems.

Many of the inquiries my office carries out relate to increasing civil society access in Brussels. It is also often civil society - along with others - that help to amplify my proposals to facilitate their acceptance by the institutions.

A good example of where my office was part of what I like to call a 'coalition of influencers' concerned my inquiry into the transatlantic trade talks - TTIP. Thanks to civil society, as well as media, and members of the European Parliament, the European Commission put in place several transparency measures, allowing people to see what was being negotiated and when.

It has been a priority of my office to level the playing field for civil society organisations in the EU, allowing them to take their seats at influential tables in Brussels.

I did this with expert groups - the hundreds of groups that give specialist advice to Commission policy-makers. Based on my recommendations, the Commission made a number of improvements to the system including developing a new conflict of interest policy for experts appointed in a personal capacity and making the selection procedure for experts more transparent.

The Commission also committed to ensuring a greater balance in the group, and to allow the public to see the reasoning behind the selection of a group's members.

I have also looked to the accountability of decision-making by member states in the Council the so called 'black box' among the EU institutions.

I have asked that Member State positions on draft legislations are recorded and that decisions to mark documents as not for publication are reasoned. This would allow civil society and others to hold governments to account, obliging them to explain - as we expect at the national level - their positions on draft laws.

NGOs have been important complainants in other inquiries concerned with helping people to exercise their right to take part in EU decision-making.

One, for example, concerned Member State positions on assessing the risk of pesticides to bees, another the transparency around decisions setting annual fishing quotas.

While progress has been made, there is still work to be done to change the culture so that



institutions proactively and automatically consider civil society as necessary for legitimising EU decision-making.

Common rules for all EU institutions on stakeholder engagement and civil society dialogue would also be an important step to this end.

To conclude, we are all rightly concerned at the contemporary undermining of our European democracy including the shrinking of the civil society space and individual rights being rolled back. But we should also be encouraged by the increasing numbers of those like yourselves engaging in active participatory democracy, and the innovative ways - some of which are being celebrated today - of giving voice to those who would not normally be heard.

The obligation on all of us to ensure that the message of inclusiveness and tolerance is not just listened to, but acted on.

Thank you.