



THRIVING
CIVIC
SPACE

FOR STRONG
EUROPEAN
DEMOCRACY

Friends of the Earth Europe

“IF SPACE EXISTS FOR CIVIL SOCIETY TO ENGAGE, THERE IS A GREATER LIKELIHOOD THAT ALL RIGHTS WILL BE BETTER PROTECTED. CONVERSELY, THE CLOSING OF CIVIL SOCIETY SPACE, AND THREATS AND REPRISALS AGAINST CIVIL SOCIETY ACTIVISTS, ARE EARLY WARNING SIGNS OF INSTABILITY.”

REPORT OF THE UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS.

Friends of the Earth Europe's grassroots network in 32 countries is proud of its place in European civil society. We help bring people's voices to decision-making, hold

governments, institutions and corporations to account, put forward community-powered solutions, and defend the planet which cannot speak for itself.

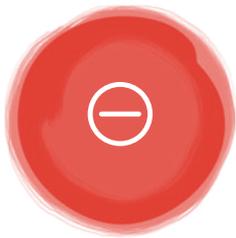


16

FRIENDS OF THE EARTH EUROPE
MEMBER GROUPS

HAVE EXPERIENCED SHRINKING CIVIC SPACE IN THEIR COUNTRY.

The most common form of shrinking space reported in our network is Stigmatization and negative labeling (13 countries). But members of our network say they have experienced all of the most common recognized forms of shrinking space.*



13

COUNTRIES

STIGMATIZATION
& NEGATIVE
LABELING



10

COUNTRIES

ADMINISTRATIVE
RESTRICTIONS
& UNDUE STATE
INTERFERENCE



9

COUNTRIES

CRIMINALIZATION
THROUGH
PROSECUTION
& INVESTIGATION



8

COUNTRIES

PARTICIPATION
UNDER
PRESSURE



5

COUNTRIES

PHYSICAL
HARASSMENT
& INTIMIDATION

"THIS [SHRINKING SPACE] IS A DANGEROUS TREND AND HAS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE OF EUROPEAN DEMOCRACY IF IT CONTINUES." **JAGODA MUNIĆ**, DIRECTOR, IN HUFFINGTON POST

* Based on the model of different types of pressure that civil society actors can face, by Van der Borgh and Terwindt, 2014.

SLOVENIA

STIGMATIZATION & NEGATIVE LABELING

Friends of the Earth Slovenia / FOCUS have witnessed environmental legislation increasingly being portrayed as an obstacle to economic development in the country.

When the government bypassed the normal environmental impact assessment process to push through a new car-painting plant, backed by the Canada-based company Magna International, near the city of Maribor,

NGOs raised the alarm. Subsequently FOCUS and other NGOs were invited to join the process of granting environmental consent for the project.

When they voiced concerns – around land use and air pollution – they became the target of a smear campaign. They received anonymous letters and e-mails, were attacked on social media, and media outlets began to report on the case with an unprecedented anti-NGO bias.

The defamation campaign culminated in a protest in front of FOCUS' office in Ljubljana blaming NGOs for blocking the investment. At the same time, FOCUS received support and thank you messages from people living near the planned plant. The NGOs succeeded in winning improvements to the planned plant. For example Magna International agreed to mitigate air pollution by transporting as much as possible by rail instead of by road.

“AS ENVIRONMENTAL NGOS IN SLOVENIA WE FELT OBLIGED TO EXPOSE POSSIBLE ENVIRONMENTAL THREATS IN THE CASE OF MAGNA STEYR'S PROPOSED FACTORY NEAR MARIBOR. HOWEVER, WE WERE PRESSURED, DISCREDITED AND ASSAULTED IN THE MEDIA, AS WELL AS THROUGH DIRECT ACTIONS.”

TOMISLAV TKALEC, FRIENDS OF THE EARTH SLOVENIA / FOCUS

CZECH REPUBLIC

ADMINISTRATIVE RESTRICTIONS & UNDUE STATE INTERFERENCE

In 2018 Friends of the Earth Czech Republic / Hnutí DUHA was awarded a grant by the Czech Ministry of Environment for work to promote zero-waste lifestyles. The ministry attached conditions to the grant which had not been announced during the call for proposals. These conditions were not applied to other grantees. They included

prohibiting Hnutí DUHA from initiating any petitions towards the ministry concerning zero-waste lifestyles. This would have made it very difficult for Hnutí DUHA to continue its pre-existing campaign against polluting incinerators. In light of the conditions imposed, Hnutí DUHA decided to refuse the grant.

“WE COULD NOT ACCEPT SUCH CONDITIONS BECAUSE WE ARE AN INDEPENDENT NGO. OUR POSITIONS AND CAMPAIGNS ARE NOT DEPENDENT ON STATE OR CORPORATE POWER.”

JÍŘÍ KOŽELOUH, FRIENDS OF THE EARTH CZECH REPUBLIC / HNUTÍ DUHA



A local referendum on plans for a golf resort in Dubrovnik.

© FoE Croatia

“THIS IS PART OF A GLOBAL PHENOMENON WHERE THE SPACE FOR CIVIL SOCIETY IS BEING REDUCED, ESPECIALLY FOR THOSE WHO ARE MOST CRITICAL OF THE CURRENT NEOLIBERAL ECONOMIC SYSTEM.”

ENES CERIMAGIC, FRIENDS OF THE EARTH CROATIA / ZELENA AKCIJA

CROATIA CRIMINALIZATION THROUGH PROSECUTION & INVESTIGATION

Friends of the Earth Croatia / Zelena Akcija has, since 2010, been closely following plans for a golf resort in the city of Dubrovnik. In cooperation with a local citizens' initiative, they have raised awareness of the negative environmental impacts of the planned resort, and unmasked potential corruption related to the project. In a 2013 referendum organised by the initiative, 84% of local residents who voted said they were against the plan. The campaign against the golf resort won three court rulings against permits for the project.

In 2017 the project investor filed a claim against the Republic of Croatia with a private, international arbitration tribunal, seeking 500 million US dollars in damages due to these court rulings. Within a matter of weeks after the claim was filed, permits identical to ones annulled by the courts were re-issued. Zelena Akcija called this racketeering.

Now Zelena Akcija is being sued by the investor. The investor is seeking the prosecution of, and penalties for, Zelena Akcija's management, as well as damages and a gagging order which would prevent Zelena Akcija from speaking publicly about the project. Losing the lawsuit would force Zelena Akcija to pay fines, fees and interest capable of shutting the organisation down.



AUSTRIA PARTICIPATION UNDER PRESSURE

"WE EXPECT A CONTINUATION OF ATTACKS ON CIVIL SPACE IN AUSTRIA IN THE COMING YEARS." **REINHARD UHRIG**,
HEAD OF CAMPAIGNS, FRIENDS OF THE EARTH AUSTRIA / GLOBAL 2000

The 2017 Conservative-Freedom Party coalition brought a number of direct attacks to Friends of the Earth Austria / Global 2000, and Austrian civil society's work.

From the start members of the governing parties used tactics to delegitimise critics. This culminated in 2018 in changes to Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) legislation.

The government proposed that all organisations wishing to participate in EIA processes first prove they have at least 100 individual members - and they do this by supplying the names and addresses of these persons to the ministries of the environment and economics. After a fierce, public debate on this clear breach of data protection rules, legislation was passed which forces organisations to supply 100 names and addresses of members to a solicitor.

The government proposed further legal changes which would have seen big infrastructure projects subject to EIAs automatically approved after 12 months. This was also heavily criticised by NGOs and legal experts. The government changed the proposal so that projects are automatically transferred to the next legal stage of the approval process – a decision for which the European Commission has started infringement proceedings against Austria.

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA PHYSICAL HARASSMENT & INTIMIDATION

The brave women of Kruščica.
© Andrew Burr

Kruščica is one of multiple villages in Bosnia-Herzegovina where residents have been resisting hydropower developments, supported by Friends of the Earth Bosnia & Herzegovina / Center for Environment.

Two controversial proposed dams would bring significant damage to the surrounding natural environment and the village's drinking water.

Kruščica residents had been peacefully protesting for a month when, in August 2017, riot police violently removed them, seriously injuring several people. The protestors neither provoked nor resisted the police but were nevertheless forcibly removed to allow construction equipment to pass. The protestors, mostly women, became known as the

'brave women of Kruščica'. They had not been environmental campaigners beforehand, but stood up to stop the destruction of their natural resources after the local government planned and approved the project in secret.

Despite the violent clampdown, the villagers went on to block construction work for over 500 days. Center for Environment supported them throughout by providing legal, technical and moral support.

In December 2018 the regional court upheld the villagers' objections to the dams, ruling that residents had not been adequately informed of and involved in the decision-making procedures.



"THE WOMEN OF KRUSČICA ARE EXCEPTIONALLY BRAVE, NOT ONLY PREVENTING BULLDOZERS FROM DESTROYING THEIR NATURE AND RESOURCES BUT ALSO WITHSTANDING ATTACKS FROM THE POLICE. THEIR AMAZING VIGIL HAS PREVENTED GREEDY DEVELOPERS FROM DESTROYING THEIR RIVER."

NATASA CRNKOVIC, PRESIDENT, FRIENDS OF THE EARTH BOSNIA / CENTER FOR ENVIRONMENT

'THRIVING CIVIC SPACE FOR STRONG EUROPEAN DEMOCRACY'



87% OF RESPONDENTS SAID IT IS ESSENTIAL OR VERY IMPORTANT THAT CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS AND ACTIVISTS CAN OPERATE FREELY AND CRITICISE THE GOVERNMENT OR MAJOR ECONOMIC INTERESTS WITHOUT ADVERSE CONSEQUENCES. **SPECIAL EUROBAROMETER 489 RULE OF LAW REPORT**, JULY 2019

A Fridays For Future climate strike in Ljubljana, Slovenia.
© FoE Slovenia / Nejc Trampuš

SHRINKING SPACE

Human rights defenders, trade unionists, young people, environmental activists and non-governmental organisations are on the frontline of battles to defend the public interest in many EU countries.

According to the Civicus State of Civil Society report 2019, there are now serious restrictions in civic space on every continent, including Europe.*

Europe is experiencing a long-term decline in democracy, with deterioration in the categories of political culture, functioning of government, electoral process and pluralism, and civil liberties.**

At the same time, political participation in Western Europe has been increasing.** Turn-out in the European Elections rose for the first time ever in 2019 – up 8% on 2014. And among 16/18-24 year olds turn-out doubled.***

Every day across Europe people take action to protect things they care about, and to improve their lives and the lives of others and our shared environment.

From meeting their elected representatives, to writing letters and signing petitions, through volunteering and participating in community groups and initiatives, to protesting in the streets, people are expressing themselves and shaping decisions.

These actions are all evidence of a healthy democracy.

Civic space and dialogue, including civil society organisations, are fundamental to a vibrant, well-functioning democracy. Civil society organisations play a crucial role in enabling democratic participation and allowing people to get their voices heard in policy development and decision-making.

People are not apathetic – citizens want to be part of finding solutions to the challenges societies face. An open, plural and dynamic civic space allows citizens to be an active part of the political sphere beyond elections. It also encourages governments to be transparent and accountable. Europe needs to reinforce civic space as a central feature of a strong democracy.

* Civicus – 2019, State of Civil Society report. ** Democracy Index 2019 – The Economist Intelligence Unit Limited. *** <https://election-results.eu/turnout/>

ROOT CAUSES

The root causes of this shrinking civil society space can be found in the economic crisis over the last decade, and the neoliberal response to it. Austerity measures, welfare cuts, and increased unemployment and precarity, have led to the rise of inequality and discontent. This has been used by populists to challenge the existing socio-political system and put blame on 'others', be it migrants and refugees or the European Union.

Below: Demonstrators are surrounded by police at a landfill construction site in Shies, Russia. © <http://7x7-journal.ru>



The response has been a contraction of human rights and liberties, and a shrinkage of space for civil society.

We have witnessed new types of governance through rapid, un-consulted changes to constitutions and legislation, mostly linked to populist authoritarian governments which have taken power in some countries. At the same time there is an attack on all opposition – in particular civil society – by limiting funding and freedom of speech.

But the influence of the corporate sector should also not be underestimated, be it direct or indirect. Public interests often lose out over corporate interests, notably when it comes to natural resources and our environment. This is illustrated in the many cases of environmental and human rights defenders being attacked, sometimes with deadly consequences.

Below: Volunteers take part in FoE Bulgaria's annual clean-up in Pirin National park. © **Luka Tomac**

Bottom left: Members of community-owned Schleswig Holstein citizens' wind park in Germany. © **Jörg Farys, Die Projektoren**





INCREASING PEOPLE POWER

One of the goals of Friends of the Earth Europe in the years to come is to diminish the power of corporations and increase the power of people.

At a time when civic rights are under pressure across Europe and globally, the European Union should lead by example by strengthening democracy and ensuring the conditions for organised civil society to flourish. The EU also has a duty, as a global standard-setter to maintain and increase civic space.

We call on the EU, national and local governments to actively defend the right for people and organisations to campaign for the public interest, to support them when they are threatened or attacked, and to strengthen dedicated EU funding for public interest organisations.

It is imperative that our institutions and elected representatives defend freedom of the press, freedom of assembly and the right to protest, and funding and access for civil society organisations to fulfil their watchdog role.

European Commission President, Ursula Von der Leyen, has made ‘a new push for European democracy’ one of her priorities. In light of her wish to go further than ever before to give Europeans a stronger role in decision-making, ...

WE CALL FOR:

1

the active involvement and promotion of participation of CSOs in EU policy-making, including in the preparation of the Conference on the Future of Europe;

2

the active protection of CSOs, including the expansion of rule of law mechanisms for their protection, measures to promote and enable civic space, and adequate funding;

3

the prevention of new legal frameworks in any member state that are restrictive for the freedom of association, assembly or expression.

“WE NEED MEPS TO DEFEND OUR FREEDOMS AND RESPOND TO THE DEMANDS FOR CLIMATE ACTION FROM THE STUDENT STRIKES AND CITIZEN PROTESTS.” JAGODA MUNIĆ, DIRECTOR, IN HUFFINGTON POST



Friends of the Earth Europe gratefully acknowledges financial assistance from the European Commission (LIFE Programme), the Adessium Foundation and the Open Society Initiative for Europe (OSIFE). Detailed information about Friends of the Earth Europe’s funding can be found at: www.foeeurope.org/about/financial. The contents of this document are the sole responsibility of Friends of the Earth Europe and cannot be regarded as reflecting the position of the funder(s) mentioned above. The funder(s) cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information this document contains.

www.foeeurope.org

for the **people** | for the **planet** | for the **future**

Friends of the Earth Europe

Mundo-B Building, Rue d’Edimbourg 26,
1050 Brussels, Belgium

tel: +32 2 893 1000

info@foeeurope.org twitter.com/foeeurope

facebook.com/foeeurope soundcloud.com/foeeurope

EU Transparency Register no. 9825553393-31



**Friends of
the Earth
Europe**