

The background features a network pattern of interconnected nodes and lines, transitioning from dark blue at the top to orange at the bottom. The text is centered in the white space.

Shifting spaces. EaP edition

A collection of short stories about how shrinking space for civil society is affecting youth organisations, young people and youth work in EU Eastern Partnership countries

ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION

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EaP CSF is the largest umbrella organisation of NGOs from the Eastern Partnership region and the EU, working together with +1000 organisations to promote European integration, facilitate reforms and democratic transformations in the six Eastern Partnership countries – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. CSF's mission is to ensure effective participation of civil societies of Eastern Partnership and the EU in the process of planning, monitoring and implementation of the Eastern Partnership policy in constructive dialogue with the EU and EaP decision-makers.

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This compendium of stories is a publication dedicated to stories about shrinking space for civil society and its effects on youth organisations, youth work and young people in the Eastern Partnership countries, namely Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.

The complexity of shrinking spaces for civil society affecting youth work and young people is complex and currently under-researched, leading to a lack of measures that would consolidate youth spaces and young people's position on the overall. The narratives and storytelling are the first step, where young people from CSOs would like to consolidate and build better cooperation and contacts between people.

In this publication we share stories that document the realities of our, sometimes shrinking, spaces, in order to feel and to think, to make sense of a complex phenomenon. In these stories we can recognise civil society changes that are affecting someone else's (youth) work, and someone else's story, but it could be very well that some of them might sound very familiar or very recognizable.

These stories, our stories, are not over, and this is one of the reasons why we have to keep telling them! And we encourage you to do the same. So, if you want to share your story about shrinking space for civil society and its effects on youth work and young people, or if you have questions or would just like to get in contact with us, please drop us a line on the designated platform. The new stories will be regularly published on the www.shrinking.space.

This publication is implemented by the Federation of Youth Clubs of Armenia (www.fyca.net) in cooperation with the European Confederation of Youth Clubs (www.ecyc.org).

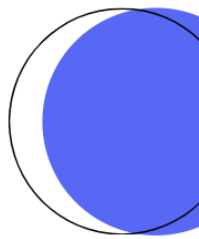
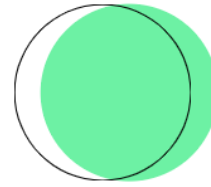
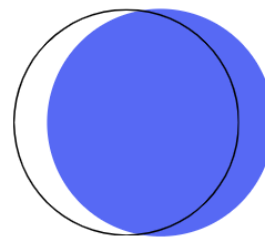
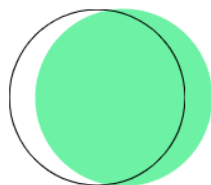


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Foreword by Diana Yeghiazaryan EaP Civil Society Forum delegate

Civic space is the place, where people exercise their rights to freedom of association, expression, and peaceful assembly. Different dimensions are fundamental to a functioning civic space: the right to information and expression, the right to assembly, the right to participate in political life, the right to equal treatment, and the right to justice, stemming from the rule of law. There are serious obstacles to civic space when it comes to young people. According to different researches, youth organisations believe that young people have limited access to civic space, and the majority of them perceive young people as underrepresented in a civic space.

Youth work is a social practice that empowers young people to embrace their full potential by developing their personal and social competencies through non-formal and informal education in order to grow up as active, participating and aware citizens of each society. Youth work and youth organisations of EaP countries safeguard civic space for young people, advocating for it being accessible for youth.

The EaP CSF Working Group 4 “Contacts between People”, which deals with a number of areas that include Education, Youth, Culture and Contacts between Seniors, address specific situations and levels of development of civil society in each EaP country. We undertook this project to find and write down the stories of shrinking space for civil society, focusing on the personal narratives of young people from 6 countries of the Eastern Partnership, namely Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine.

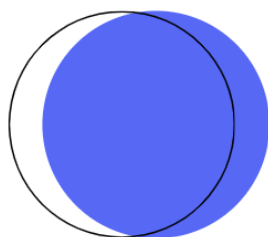
We are all going through a challenging period, in the circumstances brought by the COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictions caused by it in 2020. We would like to underline that all the work for this publication was done online and through using only the telecommunication tools. This situation decreased the human approach for the interactions and face to face interviews. Considering the sensitivity of this topic and personal cases, it was challenging to build an environment to make people talk about their, sometimes, not so pleasant experiences.

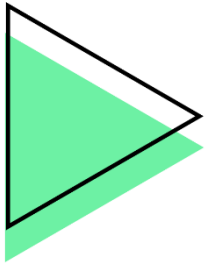
The Eastern Partnership region is living its most turbulent times, on the other hand. The obvious current situation in the EaP countries makes it particularly important to safeguard civic space in light of what is going on in Belarus, Nagorno-Karabakh, between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

We share these stories not only for research purposes but also for support and solidarity for others and strengthening CSOs in the Eastern Partnership region. The stories are available in the specially designated platform on www.shrinking.space, where all the stories may be found. If you can relate to any of the stories, want to share your story about shrinking space for civil society and its effects on youth work and young people, or if you have questions or would just like to get in contact with us, please drop us a line on the platform. We will help you in telling your stories, and the new stories will be regularly published on the www.shrinking.space.

We are thankful to all the respondents who shared their stories with us for this publication.

Enjoy your reading.





Are we on the same page? Terms and methodology of the publication

The shrinking space for civil society is a complex phenomenon that can take many forms. The term **“shrinking space”** we use in this collection of stories publication is **to describe various processes and measures taken by national governments to restrict the activity of civil society organisations that aim to limit freedom of expression, as well as the freedom of assembly and association of human rights and youth organisations.** Governments create legal and administrative barriers to make it more difficult for civil society organisations to operate. CSOs, particularly youth organizations, encounter challenges and repression from state and nonstate parties who try to reduce the political or civic space where they operate. This phenomenon is commonly called **“Shrinking Space”**, which, according to the many civil society experts, is defined as a framework or a concept capturing **“a dynamic relationship between repressive methods and political struggle”**¹.

We do not assume that in the past there was a broad space for everyone to work and grow or problems were not there. But with “shrinking space” for the civil society we refer to the recent developments that caused extra limitations, was a step back or took our even a minor freedom and independence from us and young people.

In order to understand the problem, we should look more at the consequences of the restrictions. Here are a few:

- weaker engagement of NGOs in public life and debate, caused by the ineffectiveness of participatory mechanisms and self-censorship or a lack of action by NGOs because of the risks involved;
- the prevention of NGOs from carrying out activities in the heart of local communities because of the labels attached to them;
- the disappearance of the smallest NGOs, as they are unable to cope with the pressure and restrictions;
- the polarization of society resulting from the division between the organisations considered as “acting in the public interest” and illegal “foreign agents”, which prompt organisations wishing to benefit from state funding to follow the political line promoted by those in power;
- the severing of ties between national NGOs and the international NGOs of which they are members.²

The complexity of shrinking spaces for civil society affecting youth organisations, youth work and young people is currently under-researched, leading to a lack of measures that would consolidate youth (work) spaces and young people’s position on the overall.

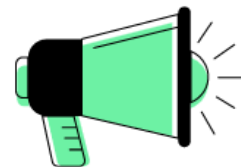
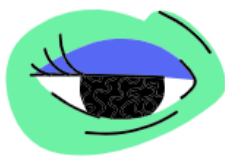
¹ Hayes, Ben, Frank Barat, Isabelle Geuskens, Nick Buxton, Fiona Dove, Francesco Martone, Hannah Twomey, and Semanur Karaman. On “shrinking space” a framing paper. Amsterdam. Transnational Institute. 2017, p 3–5, https://www.tni.org/files/publication-downloads/on_shrinking_space_2.pdf.

² REPORT of the consultative meeting ‘Shrinking space for civil society: the impact on young people and their organisations’, 11 February 2019 <https://rm.coe.int/cmj-2019-7-shrinking-space-report/168096cd0f>.

In this compendium of stories youth organisations and young people from 6 EaP countries, namely, Armenia, Georgia, Belarus, Moldova, Azerbaijan, Ukraine, share stories to document the realities of our shrinking spaces. The methodology used in this publication for the research is based on the narrative inquiry, which is the process of gathering information for the purpose of research through storytelling.

We aim to offer a space for reflection and sharing **the personal experience only young people have, that cannot be found in any other research, publication or behind policy papers.** We think that personal approaches and narratives are underestimated when the youth policies are being developed. We usually ask how to implement the policies in order to make them youth-friendly. However, we need to provide evidence of the first-hand information and expertise from the shrinking spaces young people and youth workers experiencing for the early stages of the policymaking cycle. In other words, if a doctor wants to treat a patient, he/she/they listen to the patient himself first of all. The patient is the expert of his own disease. In the same way, YOUTH are the experts of their shrinking civic space experience and we wanted to make the stories heard. In these stories, we recognise civil society changes and wounds that are affecting someone else's (youth) work and someone else's story.

Overall, there are 15 stories in this collection from 6 countries (Armenia – 4, Azerbaijan – 1, Belarus – 3, Georgia – 2, Moldova -2, Ukraine – 3). The storytellers identified their gender as male (7), female (7) and other (1) and were in the 18-35 years old age group. The data and respondents are anonymized intentionally in some of the stories, as the respondents/storytellers wished so. This has been done with the consent of the respondents related to the sensitivity of the topics. The stories were kept in the language of the people telling them to keep their authenticity. We intentionally did not change the texts a lot, so they sound like the first-hand experience.



In Armenia, youth information portal ERIT.am was created in 2009 with the financial support of the government. It aimed at giving information on youth initiatives and young people's lives and the challenges they face. Even though it was not a perfect platform, it was providing civil society youth organizations free opportunity to get professional media coverage in both news and photos/videos and was supportive in covering youth issues and new initiatives. Since 2020, the website has not been covering the youth field with its own content. The platform is now just distributing news coming from other news agencies and websites without any special focus on youth matters.

Access to information for youth is out of scope by Vahe Khachikyan

I started my experience in youth work accidentally; I was also very young and had the so-called life transition when I left my village to study in the city. I was searching for youth spaces and organisations to volunteer and went to several places to collect information. Little by little I started to be involved in different initiatives, began to organise events and activities for young people myself. After some time, I realised that I see myself in the civil society sector and more specifically in youth work. Now I build my work on the needs that I had when I entered this field, as I know people coming after me will have the same issues and problems with the access to information and youth opportunities.

Being the coordinator of [Vanadzor InfoTun project](#) (belongs to [NGO Center](#)), which works to increase awareness on public participation, I address a big issue of the young people's access to information. In school and university, young people do not get soft skills to use in real life or learn how to search properly and analyse information. The government also does not ensure youth-friendly information and access to it. I see no actions towards establishing the mechanisms of easy and accessible platforms for youth information. When I was 16, I also had issues of reading announcements and not understanding if they were about me. Yet they were about me, and I missed many opportunities then. Young people need to

get skills on how to get and understand information from the government agencies, and the formal language of the information should be presented in a more friendly way. Nowadays, the formal language whereby the government is communicating to young people is still all Greek to them.

Young people do not know where to find information. On the other hand, young people are used to ignoring information when they do not understand what it is saying. For instance, we implement projects on youth participation in local self-government bodies. And young people



ignore our emails stating they are not interested in that. However, when we reach them personally and inform them that for example, the poorly working city transport is the result of bad decisions and that they can change it, they become interested.

For enhancing youth participation, the state should coordinate youth-related information. Apropos to this, the ERIT.am, the state-funded youth portal was a very important platform to inform about youth opportunities and initiatives. In the past few years even with many challenges, it was operating well, however recently we see that the website is neglected. It should be the first platform for the proper awareness-raising on youth matters from all relevant sectors. There is no institutional approach to this website now. The problem is that the website's functioning is done through a state procurement process. This creates a situation of not spreading information properly. I think this digital platform should be coordinated by knowledgeable and caring professionals from the youth field and not by those who have won this or that tender. From recent experience, we see that the tender-received organization is not really taking responsibility for quality.

We cooperated with ERIT.am actively in 2018 and in 2019. Especially in 2019, when Vanadzor was the youth capital of Armenia, the website started a special series of articles entitled "The Pulse of Vanadzor" presenting stories about active young people from the city bringing publicity to the regional youth. Unfortunately, now the platform is not cooperative, we do not know who's responsible for the website, how much they are related to the youth field. Now the website does not differ from other news websites: there is no connection to the youth field, most of the publications are taken from other resources, and it does not have its own content. People who are aware of youth work should work there so that they can quickly respond to youth events. This situation shrinks the opportunities of youth CSOs to have government-financed and youth information providing platforms, which would be cooperative and proactive in covering civil society organizations' news. Unfortunately, NGOs lost the opportunity to present their stories in the united youth platform. The state should revise the operation of the platform in this regard.

Vahe Khachikyan - Youth worker, Project manager at "NGO Center" CSD NGO

In Ukraine, the “oblasts” (regions) have youth centres that are kept with the help of community budget. These centres belong to the community and deliver youth work and other services to young people. Local authorities and governors are always trying to influence and interfere with the youth centres’ independence. In this case, the authorities are apparently trying to block the renovation of the youth centre, thus shrinking the physical space of young people and youth workers.

Physical spaces for youth centres are permanently shrinking by anonymous



I am a youth worker at a community youth centre financed by the Community budget which itself is managed by the local authorities in Ukraine. In 2015 a new administrative change was applied. United territorial communities were created in Ukraine meaning that settlement councils, rural councils, and a city of district significance can unite in a new larger administrative unit. Our region is also involved in this kind of enlarged community. Unfortunately, people who are in charge of governing our youth centre are far from reality and unaware of what a youth policy is. Also, they are responsible for opening and organizing new youth centres. However, due to these circumstances, it is nearly impossible to explain to them the importance of youth work development.

Our Youth Centre is located in the old cinema building next to the town hall in the city centre. When the centre was founded, it was allocated to an almost useless building in the city centre. It is a former cinema and not in any way applicable to a youth centre. Moreover, the building is so old that it is, literally, being demolished on its own.

Two years ago, we applied for the renovation of our youth centre, collected and won the tender. However, we encountered many problems as a lot of people were against the renovation. One reason could

be that due to the renovation a theatre which was supposed to move there long before, would no more be able to. As we belong to the regional administrative district, there always have been a clash of benefits and political games. In Ukraine, we have a tender of the Ministry of territorial administration where you can apply if you are a communal institution, as our youth centre. After we won the tender and were ready to start the repairing of the building, the government banned us from doing so, claiming that it was a local monument and a historical building. The interesting thing is that when we were preparing all the documents for the tender application, we had meetings with the representatives of the building and other departments and were, therefore, given their consent for the repairing.

However, since then a lot of complications have occurred: the government has accused the youth centre. It was like a political game. Later the director of the department of sport and youth was fired. As a result, young people of our region lost the incredible opportunity of having a modern physical space, a youth centre, that could develop and improve youth work in the region.

According to the rules of the tender, we should already have started the

repairing/renovation, but the local authorities do not allow us to do this, claiming that this is a monument of local importance and cannot be reconstructed by us. As a result, we had to rewrite the project which means that we could no longer access the money for the repairing. The public council, which represents the interests of the public, justified all the actions afterwards. We had the impression that by hindering the renovation of the youth centre, they were, perhaps, defending someone's interests. The directors of the Department of Youth and Sports and the director of the youth centre were charged and prosecuted followed by the resignation of the director of the department.

Now we have written a new project for the renovation of the youth centre, but we don't know if we can win again, because officially we have already won it. This was, indeed, a bad experience for us. In this situation, we see that our regional government blocked the repairing of the youth centre. On the high ministry level, this renovation was

approved, but the sum of the renovation project was so big that our governments couldn't share their roles in this matter. Unfortunately, we just want to make a better space for the youth of the region (our region had fewer opportunities in Ukraine) and inclusion groups. However, we continue our mission with 9 people working in a small room with cracks inside and outside. It is really dangerous to even pass by the centre as the walls seem to be breaking apart. Just a few days ago, the governor of the region announced his resignation, stating that local authorities prevented him from assembling a team for the elections. For us, this means that there will soon be a new governor of the region, and our renovation story will have an unknown future.

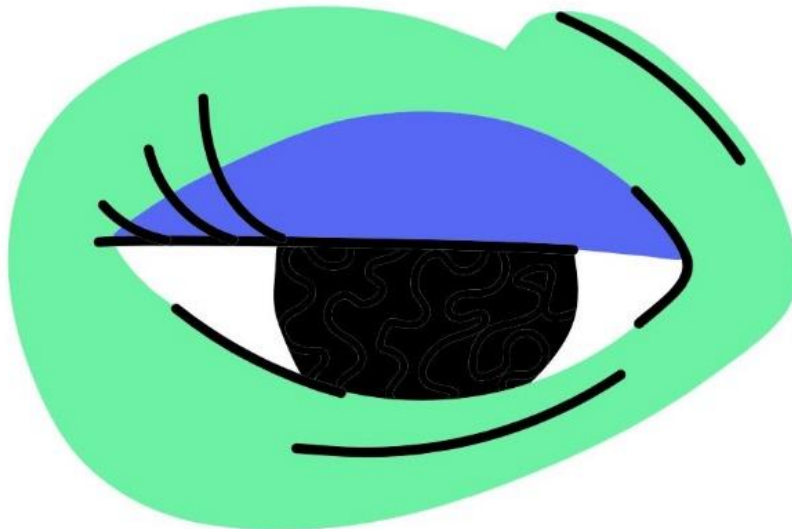
The most interesting thing here is that the mayor's office is literally next to these ruins. However, it seems like we live in totally different worlds- the mayor's office with perfect renovation and infrastructure, and the crumbling youth centre that is fighting to be the better place for the youth.



Ideological limits for youth by anonymous

Since the events of 2013-2014 lots of things have changed in Ukraine. The first political violence during the Revolution of Dignity events, the annexation of Crimea and Sevastopol by Russia, and the endless bloody war in Donbass provoked and developed, once again, by the initiative of Russia itself and pro-Russian nationalist groups. All of those events and their consequences still determine how the

speakers about the positive sides of the times when Ukraine was a part of the Soviet Union because there could only be bad things then. Also, you are not encouraged to express your opinion on whether Russian should be recognized as an official language in some of the regions of Ukraine where it is more commonly used. If you try to say something like this, you will probably be labelled as a person who expresses sympathy to Russia



government and civil society set priorities and formulate a strategy for the future development of Ukraine.

Some politicians say that we are trying to build everything in opposition to Russia and its methods of governing. They say that we are democratic and European without a true understanding of those terms. As a result, some political groups concisely or not copy the autocratic elements of governing from Russia and Belarus. They create many limitations on what is acceptable to speak about and what is not. Many taboos have been established. For instance, you cannot

and Putin's cruel plans to invade Ukraine.

Recently I have faced a situation that revealed another problem I had been reluctant to accept before. I was asked to recommend a participant for one training course for Ukrainian youth activists. But after the first round of the internal selection process, the candidate was rejected by the committee. Looking for some constructive feedback for the applicant, I asked the recruiter about the reasons for the disapproval in order to give feedback to the person I recommended. I was stunned to learn the answer. The decision was based on

the fact that the application form was filled in Russian.

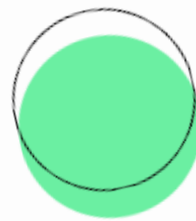
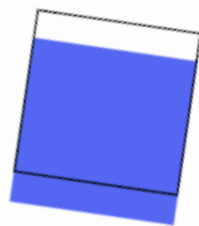
After my appeal to the illegality of such a discriminated approach, the applicant was approved to go to the second round of the selection. Eventually, this youth activist got a possibility to participate in youth training based on the criteria related to his motivation and achievements.

Some Ukrainian political parties, civic organisations, and activists view this military conflict with Russia not just as a political or ideological conflict but as a cultural one. Even the use of the Russian language in public speech and statements might be considered inappropriate. Unfortunately, the basic rights for freedom of speech and cultural self-identification can be ignored in reference to the war circumstances. The law states that all studies in Ukraine have to be conducted only in Ukrainian. However, some organisations just ignore it. And theoretically, they can be punished if they use other languages. But I've never heard about such cases.

Currently, a range of different Ukrainian nationalist groups has a sort of power on the decision-making process in the legislative initiatives and policies. They got this power due to the aggressive Russian foreign policy in Ukraine.

If you express your opinion in a different way than it is set by the Ukrainian nationalist groups, you should be ready for a real fight to be heard. In some cases, they can even physically attack you because of your opinion. However, the authorities will not protect you. So, we are restricted to tabooing the topics of the suppression of ethnic minorities and the advocacy of cultural diversity.

This situation has to be changed. Human rights should be always welcomed and celebrated. Young people should have a possibility for personal and professional development and growth, and should not be restricted from public bodies or political groups. Common sense should prevail for good society principles and faith in equity should be our priority now.



One of the oldest youth organizations in the history of Ukraine, the National Scouting Organization, known as Plast, was not recognized by the state until 2020. In 2019, Plast leaders advocated before the parliament to have a Draft Law on Plast, but newly elected President Zelensky did not sign the bill due to/referring to some troubles which could arise afterwards. The new version of the law was passed in early 2020, and the president signed it. However, the current law does not ensure financing for Plast. It reduced the chances for Plast, as a youth organization that has branches in Ukraine and outside the country, to grow.

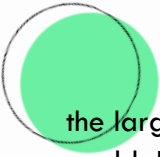
Scouts lost financial support by Roman Tymotsko

In 2019 newly elected president of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelensky rejected the law on “State Recognition and Support of Plast – National Scouting Organization of Ukraine”. The legislation was approved by the previously elected parliament at the end of May 2019 and awaited the president’s action for more than three months. Zelensky did not sign the law; instead, he returned it to the Parliament with his own proposals. It

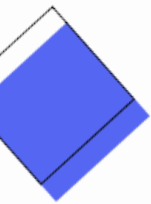
was up to the later elected Rada to act on Ukraine’s recognition and support of this scouting organization.

The Ukrainian scouting movement known as Plast was formed in Lviv in 1911. Throughout more than 100 years of its activity, Plast has endured various historical trials. Today Plast has over 12,000 members in 20 countries – 8,500 of them in Ukraine – which makes it





the largest Ukrainian youth movement in the world. Last year Plast volunteers in Ukraine invested more than 668,000 hours in working with children and teens in camps, during trips, competitions, mentorship, and regular group meetings.



Plast had various forms of cooperation with the state once Ukraine re-established its independence. For example, in the last three years, Plast scouts' activities had some financial support directly from the national budget. It was expected that the proposed new law on state recognition and support of Plast could form the basis for a more effective form of partnership. Notably, the U.S., Canada, Israel, Singapore, Australia, and other countries already have similar legislation recognizing their national scout organizations.

I would like to mention what was in the proposed law that was not signed by the president, and what exactly was included in this legislation. First of all, there was a statement regarding the state's recognition of Plast's "historic contribution to the civic education of children and youth, to the achievement and establishment of Ukraine's statehood." Also, the law expressed support for Plast's continuous activity for the course of more than a century. The legislation should have recognized the Plast scouting movement in Ukraine and the world, as well as its unique role in educating Ukrainian children and the youth, and should have made it impossible for other organizations to claim Plast's legacy as their own.

The practical aspect of the law should have included forms of cooperation with government institutions and mechanisms of support. The legislation also outlined the decision-making process regarding financial support for Plast on both national and local levels. It stated that the aim was to help Ukrainian scouting organizations engage more young people with patriotic values in civic education.

Considering that this earlier version of the law had been rejected by the president and then amended to take into account his comments, there were very few doubts that the president would sign and finally enact the legislation. On January 13 Volodymyr Zelensky signed the law on state recognition of the Plast movement. Almost a month earlier, on December 17, the Parliament of Ukraine passed the law with 316 votes (with at least 226 required) in the second affirmative vote on this legislation.

The state finally recognized Plast as a Ukrainian scouting organization and its historic contribution to civic education for young people, as well as Plast's contribution to the achievement of Ukraine's independence and development of statehood. However, the approved law does not provide direct financing. Plast remains a non-governmental, non-political organization, that is why Plast needs the support of Ukrainians and is continuing the campaign to raise 10.5 million hryvnias needed to grow the organization in 2020.

Roman Tymotsko - Development Manager for Ukrainian Scouting

A new Moldovan draft law on Non-commercial Organizations was circulated for public consultation in July 2020. While Moldovan CSOs supported the new draft law and pleaded for it to be adopted without delay and without amendments, the ruling socialist party was postponing its dates of coming into force. After the draft law got a public appeal from the Moldovan CSOs and received substantial media coverage from both national and international press, it was finally adopted, with small amendments that were to regulate many aspects of the NGOs' work and functioning and came into force on 27 August 2020.

However, this story could have ended differently if it weren't for the Moldovan NGOs' strong and proactive advocacy for their civic space. More often than not, the prevailing political climate in the country hinders the adoption of progressive and democratic changes related to NGOs in the legislation, which, as a consequence, limits the space for civil society.

How political games hinder the normal evolution processes for civil society actors ? by Veronica Jantoan

The draft law on Non-Commercial Organizations was registered in Parliament on the 3rd of April 2018. It was prepared by a working group, which included civil society representatives, assembled by the Ministry of Justice back in 2016. The draft law passed repeated public consultations, initiated by the Ministry of Justice, and had all the required endorsements. It passed its first reading in Parliament on 3 May 2018. On 28 May 2020, the parliamentary Committee for Legal Matters, Appointments, and Immunities proposed the adoption of the draft law in the final reading.

Earlier, many civil society organizations (CSOs) called on the Parliament to pass the draft law in the final reading, to bar any amendments that could impede non-profits' work, and to consult CSOs in a transparent and inclusive way regarding any prospective changes in the draft law.

The Moldovan National Platform of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, which is the most representative platform in the country, having over 90 CSOs member organizations, welcomed the parliamentary

Committee's proposal to adopt the draft law in the final reading.

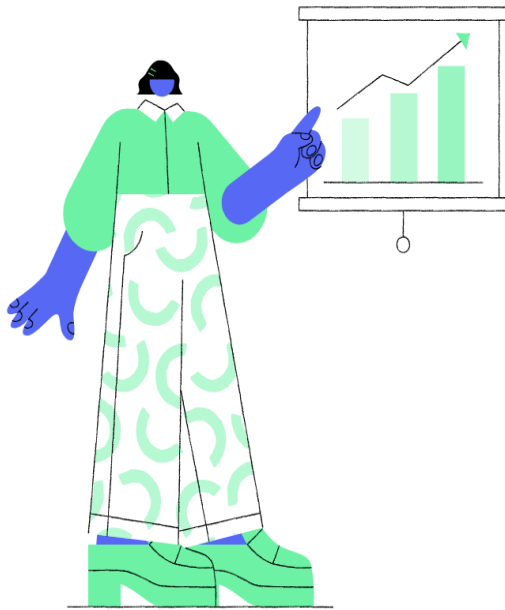
The new draft law is intended to bring significant improvements to the legal framework of Non-commercial Organizations. In other words, it simplifies the registration procedures for NGOs, eliminates registration fees, and removes the rigid internal organizational structure imposed by the previous laws. The new law also limits the authorities from exerting pressure on NGOs and excludes unjustified limitations for NGOs by persons from certain categories. Most importantly, the new law completely prohibits Non-commercial Organizations from supporting electoral candidates and sets clear limits on the relationship between non-profits and political parties. This was the main reason why the leading Socialist party in Moldova and its allies were not eager to pass it immediately.

The new law also establishes the legal framework concerning the Government's financial support for CSOs, a field that has

been insufficiently regulated by previous laws.

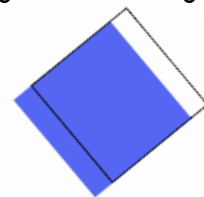
At first, the Socialist party members of the parliamentary Legal Committee proposed, without offering compelling arguments, that the draft law come into force on the 1st of January 2021. This proposal was not carried by the required number of votes.

The member-organizations of the Moldovan National Platform called on the Parliament to pass the draft law on Non-commercial Organizations, as voted by the parliamentary Legal Committee on 28 May 2020, in the second reading without delay. It was important to have the law come into force under the general rule, one month after its publication in the Official Gazette.

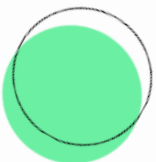


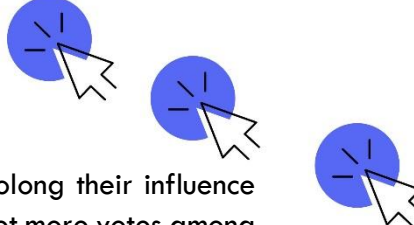
However, some changes in the draft law happened before the final reading. Article 6, paragraph 5 was re-written. Here is what it looks like: "(5) Non-commercial organizations may not participate in electoral campaigns, may not support material or provide services to political parties, except under the conditions established by the Electoral Code". The opposition noted that the phrase "CANNOT MAKE ELECTORAL AGITATION" has disappeared from the originally proposed wording.

The new law is now a reality. It came into force on the 27th of August, which demonstrates that the push from the opposition and the CSOs is much needed and can still bring positive change. Unfortunately, circumstances, when the authorities hinder the adoption of progressive laws, are a lot, which only confirms again the need for an active environment of CSOs, that engage with the authorities and represent the interests of the civil society. Even in the situation of shrinking space for the civil society organizations, their fast and precise response to the rapidly changing realities only reassures the society that CSOs are to be trusted and that the winds of change are starting to blow across the country.



Veronica Jantoan - Executive Secretary, Moldovan National Platform of the EaP Civil Society Forum



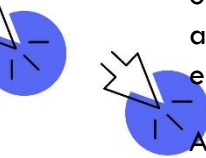


Representatives of some Georgian local authorities, those who wish to prolong their influence and keep offices, practice the creation of youth GONGOs with the aim to get more votes among young people. GONGOs are NGOs created by the government. They participate in domestic and international events and call for proposals claiming to be democratic representatives of Georgian youth. These GONGOs take the space of youth NGOs (especially the ones that impact through bringing youth work) and create artificial competition in the field. This type of policy narrows the space for regional small NGOs and contributes to the disappearance of them as they are unable to cope with the pressure and restrictions coming to them with limited access to funds and human resources.

GONGOs VS youth work organizations: who wins? by anonymous

In my country (Georgia) the government is shrinking youth organisations' and young people's spaces by trying to invade as many sectors as possible. In case of youth spaces, I see the government's interference in the youth sector by creating youth proxy organizations, or directly doing youth work via their youth departments and thus competing with existing youth structures by shrinking the independent (politically free, not affiliated to the parties) spaces for young people.

Georgia is a post-soviet country and till now most of the political parties do not share the democratic values - the tradition of the communist party still exists, it is the same as 30 years ago, where the ruling party tries to establish proxy or associated youth organizations funded by the state budget and thus increase the voters during the elections.



As a youth worker and member of a youth organization, I consider it a shrinking space when the government is competing with your organization; you are automatically in a poor position as the resources of the government seem unlimited in comparison with any youth organization.

Each municipality has its youth department. Whenever we go to the regions for

implementing youth work activities or opening a youth club/centre, the competition is starting. It also goes along with the process of discrediting the youth work NGOs. When you start as a youth organisation to grow, your opportunities are getting limited, the authorities start to challenge your work. We have recently experienced the situation, where they scared the young people through their parents and their party members not to attend our youth clubs, not to join our educational activities, etc. Apart from this, they use youth to join their parties' youth wings but as decoration without any real participation in the decision making. They not only make trouble for us as real youth-oriented organizations that have no political affiliation but also use those regional youth and make them not take part in our activities.

In many cases, young people either are very politicised in Georgia or are making money through the youth field. Cooperation with Municipalities for local NGOs is getting more and more difficult and challenging, which leads to the consequence where the smallest local NGOs disappear as they are unable to cope with the pressure and restrictions.

In 2006 the government of Belarus liquidated the Belarusian National Youth Council "RADA". Since then RADA has been operating without registration like many other youth organizations and activists repressed by the authorities. At the same time, the process of the establishment of the so-called GONGOs is quite active in the country. (GONGO stands for Government organized or operated NGO. The term refers to the organizations created under or with the support of governmental authorities to lobby certain interests or implement certain programs.) Regardless of the unfavourable conditions created for the civil society organizations in the country, RADA continues its work for the benefit of the Belarusian youth and Belarus.

Enemies in the eyes of the government by Lavon Marozau

In 2006 the law prohibited the RADA's activities in the country, but it is still operating in Belarus for young people. One of our main problems after we lost the space for the youth council is related to the activities of GONGOs. In Belarus, there are many GONGOs. We almost do not have any connection with the government and those proxy organisations. But the interesting thing is that when we go abroad to participate in international meetings, such as with the European Parliament or Council, we meet with our governmental representatives there. Sometimes they approach us or we talk about some things. However, inside our country, we do not have any communication.



We also do not have a registration in Belarus and do not receive any support from the government. Anyway, we do not have any registration as we lost our organization according to the constitutional court's decision. One of the GONGOs wanted to

join us, we said no, as they were not following the principles of human rights and democracy. After that, the government saw danger in RADA, made an investigation on us, made lots of court trials and ended up closing us. Now we are in the shadow situation. Our government does not recognize us. But we believe in peaceful and democratic change, so we do our job.

Also, GONGOs are constantly creating problems for us. For example, recently they sent a letter to the European Youth Forum telling that they should not trust our report on the torture and violations of human rights in Belarus. We submitted an alternative report on youth to the human rights council. So, our GONGOs send letters saying not to recognize and trust us in this regard. Of course, the international public is on our side. However, when we were working on the new youth policy for the upcoming 10 years, we called those GONGOs to cooperate to make some joint recommendations. They never came to us to cooperate. As far as we know none of the well-known GONGOs submitted any recommendation to the new youth policy document. Regardless of all this, RADA has joined the human rights company "Abolition of the death penalty in Belarus", and this year in November we will present a new Resolution in the European Youth Forum on this occasion. In November 2020 we will present the first alternative report on youth

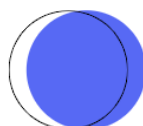
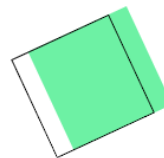
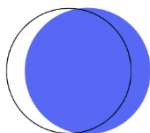
rights in Belarus to the UN Human Rights Council, and next year an alternative response on youth rights will be prepared for the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

I was a lecturer for 5 years in Minsk. In 2016 I lost my job for a political reason: I entered the committee of discrimination against women not from the official government's, but from the NGO side. When I came back, the administration of my university told me they did not agree with my position and activities. To make it clear, we do not have any private universities. Each university, even "officially" the private ones, depends on the response of government's permission. You cannot work for the University and NGO at the same time. The government considers you an enemy in your own country if you work on human rights protection and in an NGO. I work in the field of youth rights. The only activities we can do now is at the international level. For example, last year we initiated the Resolution on "Combating shrinking space with expanding opportunities for youth organisations, national youth councils and international non-governmental youth organisations" at the European Youth Forum. On the

international level, the government responds to our reports and statements. We had EU-Belarus consultation in 2019, where several people came from the government. In Brussels, we talked and they said they wanted to cooperate with us, but when we are back, they forget about us.

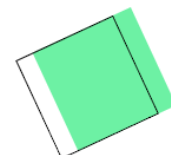
We do not talk about money, recognition or participation, which we do not have for the past 20 years. We have a situation now where the government makes a special force to deprive NGOs of legal opportunities, such as doing a registration, making an association, opening an account in a bank. Many of our members were arrested and investigated then. We are still alive and operating in the situation of 0 participation with the government in the country. We do not have any legal opportunities to be part of the policymaking of the country. They do not recognize us and pretend we do not exist when we try to talk with our government. Now, all our members and activists are under the danger of being illegally arrested as a result of the situation created after the Belarusian elections in July. With this hard situation, we still try to exist and continue our work.

Lavon Marozau - International Secretary of Belarusian National Youth Council RADA (www.rada.fm), Human Rights Defender



The government restricted Civil Society Organisations in 2013 from registering legally in the country as well as receiving funding from foreign donors. Moreover, independent civil society organizations have substantially cut back their operations in recent years. The NGOs not working under the control of the government are hardly receiving finances from the state and also cannot apply for the foreign funds legally. This constantly shrinks the space for the natural development of civil society organisations in the country, which is negatively affecting young people and their organisations. The registered organisations are mostly considered pro-governmental; however, Civil Society Organisations are considered against the government.

The “managed civil society” threatens civic space for youth in Azerbaijan by anonymous



After 2013 and 2014, the government started restricting everything. The government doesn't allow NGOs to register by pointing out there are many organisations and NGOs can't register more as many NGOs don't operate currently. If the NGO leaders are interested in applying to register NGOs, they are mostly rejected. Only organisations which are supported by the government managed to register in the last years, this also requires having pro-governmental opinions and actions inside the NGO.

The CSOs cannot get grants outside the country, as the government prohibits it. If you try to get a grant from the outside, it is illegal and it shouldn't be through Azerbaijani banks. The government does not allow receiving foreign funds and shrinks all the chances. It has a negative influence on our work. Now it is possible to get the small grants only through the embassies in the country.

The international organisation branches cannot register in Azerbaijan. If you can, it means you work with the government and are not totally independent. All of this affects our work. We are always being checked. They see if we receive grants and if that is a thing it is a crime. Whatever we

do, we are very careful in order not to be restricted or banned. We try to use these small grants.

It shrinks our spaces, makes the number of people working in civil society organisations fewer and fewer. Even if you are a neutral NGO, not active in civil society, you can be considered as CSO and not get the chance to be registered. You need government's support in order to get registered. If you want to work, you should look very neutral, choose safe topics.

There are fewer places and chances to enter civil society. You should always have some kind of reference in order to think about entering the field, it is not easy. It is hard to get a great job here. Young people move from this field to private companies. Young people are hardly finding their way to be engaged in the NGO sector and try to find their place in other areas.

You should have reference to people in CSO in order to apply for projects and be successfully selected. I was unemployed for the past 8 months. I managed to write a project, but I knew that I had to find a reference person in order to implement my project. You can have difficulties applying for a project and receive money from the

local funds. You may have amazing ideas, a great way of implementation, but if they do not know you, they will not trust and select your project idea. However, in the end, if you have a reference person, your idea can be accepted and you can start implementing a project.

Lack of fair and transparent competition and absence of foreign funds eliminate almost all the opportunities for Azerbaijan's youth NGOs to develop and become the strong voice of the civil society sector.



In Armenia, the youth community centre of Jermuk used to be the place where young people could get civil, democratic and active citizenship education, participate and be involved in the free youth services. However, the local municipality was permanently suppressing and eventually suspended the youth centre's independent activities thinking that young people should act as decoration. They consider the community budget belongs to the authorities and should serve the different needs of the ruling party. The closure of this CNCO took the physical space from young people of Jermuk city. The only operating Community youth centre now is the youth Palace of Gyumri in all over Armenia. However, as the events showed, this youth centre is also not ensured against suffering the same fate.



The shrinking space for Jermuk Youth Centre and local youth work by Syuzanna Simonyan

I worked for Jermuk Youth Centre, a community non-commercial organisation, and I was involved in its establishment from the very beginning. Jermuk Municipality in Vayots Dzor Province became its main financing body. However, all the projects were independent. They tried to use different leverages on youth sometimes, but I wanted to avoid them if possible, as there should be no politics in youth work. It was the only organisation in our city working for youth and having more than 200 volunteers; we cooperated with other local and international organisations, had many grants. I was the only staff member who got a salary from the community budget, though many of our projects were not financed and were done on a voluntary basis.

The Community leaders were always trying to tell us what to do and interfere in our daily youth work. During the revolution of 2018, a conflict happened between the mayor of the city Jermuk and us. The main issue was that we, as young people, and me, as their leader, were actively participating in the demonstrations, as we had our public opinion as citizens. Their position was that if we had that political position and were financed by the government and supported by a political party, we couldn't attend the

demonstrations against the ruling party. And on the same day in April 2018, they told us to leave the youth centre and they closed the door. At that point, we even had a financed project for youth by the US Embassy, aimed at opening a big youth technological club, which we couldn't implement because they suspended our Centre's activities. The municipality completely closed the youth space at that time and forbade us to implement any project or event, and they even started political persecutions against us, as the members of the organised youth.

After that, they fired me as I was the leader who was against the work of the municipality and the mayor. They even told me that we shouldn't talk about democracy and think so openly. In particular, on April 22, they didn't allow me to go there to implement the already planned event. They limited my mobility, didn't let me go out of my house. The young people went to the mayor to complain about this without a positive result though. On 23 April they fired me, then Serj Sargsyan resigned in the afternoon. On April 24 we decided to go to the peaceful march devoted to the victims of the Armenian Genocide. However, they thought we were planning another demonstration.

With all the increasing anger and political boom of those days related to the revolution, the local authorities, however, got afraid a bit. They called me back to work after a month and reopened the Centre after two months. Yet they started to control us actively and limit our activities, such as not allowing us to gather with many young

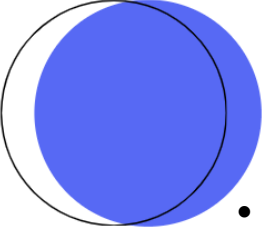
After a few months, I was called by the authorities and told they were merging several organisations and increasing the size. They had no understanding of youth work, youth activities in general, even though we had been working for several years. Those who were close to authorities got the positions of managers. I was



people, talk, have our meetings, etc. It was a very unstable period. I knew that the situation would not enhance; however, in May I came back to my work as I wanted to do more for young people, implement the project we had won, but it turned out they would not allow me to implement the already granted projects. I even sent the money of the grant we had received on our account back to the donors. They told me to come and sit in the Municipality, not allowing me to work properly and go to the youth centre, which is situated in another building. They also were spreading bad rumours about me, doing political prosecution. I also felt a lot of personal pressure on me. In the past few years, I have experienced a very stressful period. I hoped everything would change, but now it is even worse.

appointed as a youth field specialist there. After several months they told us that they were also moving us to another place, namely, to a chess school. They took our physical space of the youth centre from youth and gave it to others. They apparently didn't want youth to be there. However, our mayor always says that we have a youth club. But it is not the same as it used to be, as we don't have space first of all. Then they don't allow us to do something independently. They basically expect from youth to do their PR, advertise the city mayor and support. However, we don't want to do that, we don't want to be engaged in politics. After all, we have such a sad picture now:

- We don't have independence for our free gatherings and meetings.



- They took our physical space.
- The position of a youth worker was shrunk into a “youth field specialist” with less salary.

One of the issues of such a story and situation is financing. They don't understand that the community budget is for all and is formed by our taxes. They see it for the needs of the city mayor. We wanted to participate in decision making. We tried to create a council next to the city mayor; we tried to insert a participatory mechanism with SMS for the community issues. All these proposals came from young people but were not heard or implemented.

Secondly, there is a big fear from youth. They attribute supernatural power to young people and are afraid of them. Why? They don't want healthy, critical and active youth that understands its rights, knows that the budget belongs to all, and that we have the right to participate in our community's good governance. It is widespread to talk that young people are leaving provinces and regions now. Yet they expect us to be dependent, stay here as decoration, clap for the municipality's work, share the posts on social media, that's it.

Some years ago, when we were quite stronger, I wanted to develop local youth policy, and I got an answer that youth shouldn't be involved in politics (in Armenian “policy” and “politics” are expressed by the same word “qaghakakanutyun”- «քաղաքականություն»). All the time we have barriers, barriers and barriers. Only by having the physical space of the youth

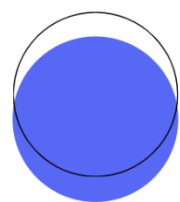
centre, did we manage to do youth work for years and develop youth.

The revolution didn't happen in our city. The old authorities are still there. The only change was the understanding that youth is a power and a threat to the authorities, rather than a resource. The bright and competent youth are leaving the city and the country. We created such a contingent where everyone wanted to contribute for free or any financial income, teach something. Now we really lost this enthusiastic contingent among youth. Currently, we are working with youth aged 14-18 and above 22-23. The student youth aged 18-22 are abroad, they used to come for the weekends only. After the revolution, we lost many young people, because they don't want to go back to Jermuk, as we don't have anything to offer them now. They were coming, as we were suggesting diverse projects then, where they could find theirs, share and be engaged. Now we use our personal spaces, my house, for example.

We had a space which was like a family and such a warm environment. I had a feeling as if a part of my body was being cut. Now I hope the new generation will not have the same issues, as I had back then. This is not my personal story or the case of our city's youth. These challenges are faced by all young people throughout the republic.

Based on more than ten years of experience in the youth field, in my opinion, we now need a mechanism where everyone has their contribution to the youth centres, yet the decisions are made by young people themselves, and nobody can interfere in their decisions.

Syuzanna Avetisyan – The former head of Jermuk Youth Centre; President of Community initiative for development NGO



In November of 2019 in Moldova, as a result of local elections, there were some political changes: the socialist party came to replace democrats. After this shift, they involved their principles to the governance aiming to control all of the political and social areas of the town. This brought about a situation, where the Youth Centre of Cahul District council and youth workers started to face challenges caused by the local authorities, they were forcefully fired and the centre suspended its de facto activities. Young people of the district lost their physical youth centre and many impactful opportunities provided by the youth work.

When the political shift shuts down a youth centre by Delia

Fortu



I worked at the Youth Centre, which belonged to the Cahul District Council of Moldova. That organisation didn't have legal status, so we could not independently do projects. The local authorities could give us legal status but they didn't want to. I liked my work as a youth worker. All the finances came from the Cahul regional authorities. It was hard to cooperate with the regional authorities, as everything was decided on a political basis. When the authorities changed after the Moldovan local elections in October 2019, our work started to

degrade. The new authorities changed all the workers replacing them with people from their allies. After the elections, they made the situation harder, they made us leave by our will. Also, when asked for money for activities, we did not get any. It was hard to agree to do anything.

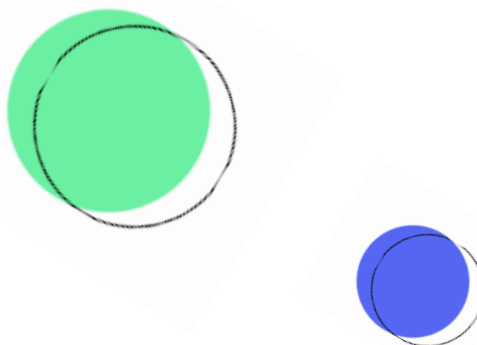
In the youth centre, there were 14-35 years old young people. We had 3 workers, the manager and 2 youth workers. The new authorities started to limit our activities and events and make hardships for our work. For the last few years, we had almost a 2500

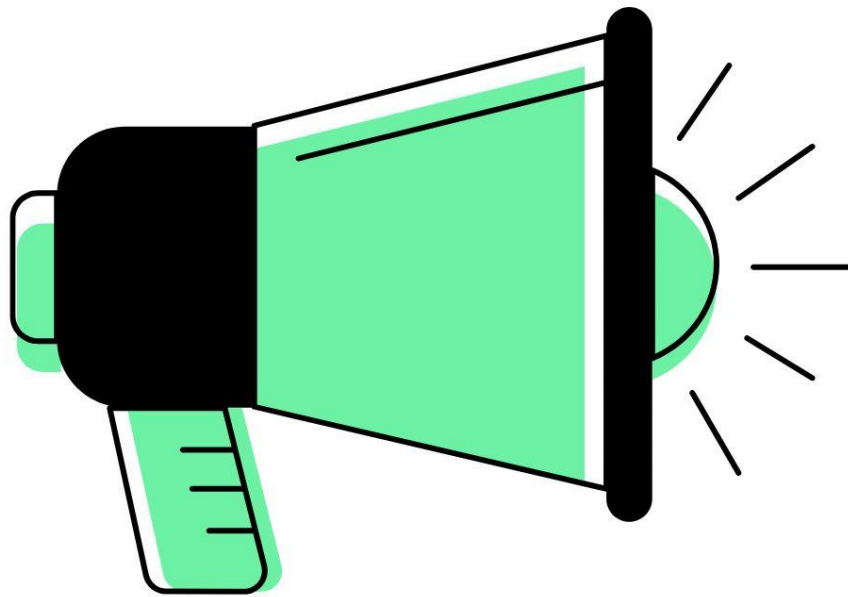
Euro budget which was cut up to 500 for this year. When I was fired, all the activities for young people were stopped.

All happened like this. Our manager of the centre went on maternity leave. I had to replace her position during that period. The authorities didn't want to make the documents of transition and postponed that moment all the time. They said they had more important things than our youth centre related issues. After that, they started to check us and micromanage. At the joint meetings with the council, they announced that they were not satisfied with our work, we were not working properly, we were spending lots of money on utilities (electricity, water, gas, etc.). I continued to work for 2 people, yet my salary was the same. Then after some time, I was informed that they wanted to open a criminal case on me because I did not follow the policies and procedures. So they made me sign the resignation documents. Then they started spreading the news (also in mass media) that I was a bad worker and I didn't want to

negotiate and cooperate with them. The issue was that they counted our working hours. However, we had to go to all the local rural areas and work with our community or go to the mayor's office for signing some documents, which they counted as not being at the workplace. They destroyed my reputation and spread rumours on me in the mass media. The president of the regional council did all of this to me. All this was related to political matters in Moldova at that time. Apparently, the local authorities did not want youth to be there and made the people resign themselves.

There is a strange mentality in many post-soviet countries. I think the attitude towards youth is like "you are young, you don't understand anything, we will decide all for you". I think the situation with youth centres without legal status should be solved. In my view, giving legal status for having some projects and getting finances for them is the solution, which can also help the youth centre representatives to have independence.





In Georgia, the LGBTQ+ community and organizations working in the field have always faced problems. After the Bassiani riots in 2018, when the police and government started to shut down and limit the activities and gathering spaces and even prevent the closed events. The community members were labelled as foreign agents, supporters of the EU and west, not real patriots of the country. Many LGBTQ+ organizations cannot find safe physical space for events and organize activities, because the security of their spaces and personal lives are not ensured by the government through the police. This leads to the prevention of NGOs from carrying out activities in the heart of local communities because of the labels attached to them. This is the consequence of the shrinking space in Georgia.

The physical spaces and security for LGBTQ+ people are in danger by Miko Shah

My name is Miko Shah. I identify myself as a bisexual in the LGBTQ+ community of Georgia. I am a co-founder of Tbilisi Pride organisation. We represent the union of queer people and supporters.

We organise the annual pride week in Tbilisi, we carry out social campaigns and advocate for policy changes and civil rights of the community. We also work a lot with the parents of LGBTQ+ community people,

teaching them how to approach and treat their children, we work with the media, teaching them how to cover news concerning LGBTQ+ correctly. When we were registering the organisation, we had challenges as our first application was rejected. It was related to our name and type of activity.

Two years ago, the government made aggressive police checks in nightclubs, which

is known as “Bassiani riots”. Club is a space for youth to feel safe and gather, especially for the LGBTQ+ community, those who left their families and live alone. Going to clubs for us is also a way to socialize. It gives us a chance to network and generate ideas. As soon as the clubs gained huge popularity, many conservative media outlets started to blame them for “making our young generation filthy”, “selling drugs”, “spreading wrong values” and so on.

On that day I was also there when the police came and shut down all the parties blaming the night club for selling drugs. Dozens of special forces entered the club in the middle of the party and arrested a lot of people. Later the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia issued a statement which said that they had arrested 5 drug dealers. What they did not say loudly enough was that none of them was at the club. Next day thousands protested against the police brutality, unprofessionalism of special forces, Georgian policy about drug usage, as well as the culture of planting drugs. The government used narratives against LGBTQ+ community members, labelling us as the agents of the European Union, not real patriots that want to take the Georgian culture away, make the country too liberal, and they spread other fake news about us.

They took from us our physical spaces, but when we tried to show publicly and express ourselves as a community and civil society representative, we were limited as well,

Miko Shah - co-founder of “Tbilisi Pride”

because the police always appeared and cancelled our activities.

At our organization’s events, they usually tell us that religious groups or radical people could come and in order to prevent the escalation, they do not want our events to be held. Of course, this is not a valid argument. If the police are the only one in the country who can officially use the force to protect the citizens, then whom else to call. In our country, we are not allowed to carry a gun and if you want to protect yourself legally, you have to call the police.

It is very important to mention that Georgia is quite a conservative country, especially the elderly. Spaces like Bassiani club, where you can use your right of expression, are not many. In my country, many young people are free and colorful, but the system of the government is oppressive in its nature.

We also had cases of cancelling the events, where we were supposed to screen a movie or implement the organization’s activities, but the police came and wanted to prevent us from doing that. And this happens when our events are not even public. We organise events which are not for everyone and the information circulates only among certain people for security concerns. The police wanted to shut down such kind of events too.

In my view, civic space is getting smaller and smaller and less inclusive for the LGBTQ+ community and organizations working in the field.



The Ministry of Antimonopoly Regulation and Trade (MART), together with the Ministry of Education in Belarus, is working to identify and suppress the spread of advertisement and promotion about the educational opportunities of Belarusians abroad. This shrinks young people's and students' opportunities to study abroad, get quality education and develop themselves as well-educated citizens. Moreover, the youth NGOs working with international projects face many challenges and get censored by the government a lot, as any type of information about the youth mobility opportunities or media publications, call for participants should be agreed with the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Internal Affairs.



New Censorship for education abroad by Anton Savitskiy

The main thing we lost is the feeling of safeness, and the consequences are obvious: lack of freedom, no opportunity to assemble, no freedom of speech and total absence of pluralism. Previously, before the political protests all around the country started, the feeling of deprivation of freedom was not so tangible and visible, because the government worked hard to pretend to be a liberal and democratic country, although almost everyone knew the truth.

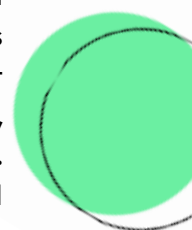
One of the painful topics for youth is the education abroad because we have a tendency that more and more students move abroad to study, that is why in June 2020 a rule was introduced that said you can't discuss or promote some educational programs that take place abroad without the permission of the Ministry of Education. Officials say this is done for the Belarusian youth not to be deceived by the illegal advertisement.

As reported on the website of the Ministry of Education, now the concept of "advertising" includes information about the impressions of citizens about their studies and the peculiarities of education in certain foreign educational institutions. Such information must be coordinated with the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Ministry of Education.

Today, according to UNESCO, about 24 thousand citizens of Belarus study abroad. Hundreds of people leave for exchange, under various programs, including those financed within the framework of the support by the European Union. The well-known European program ERASMUS+ for youth allowed Belarusians not only to study abroad, but also to improve the material base of the universities. Currently they create conditions where Belarusians cannot share their experience without the permission of the government.

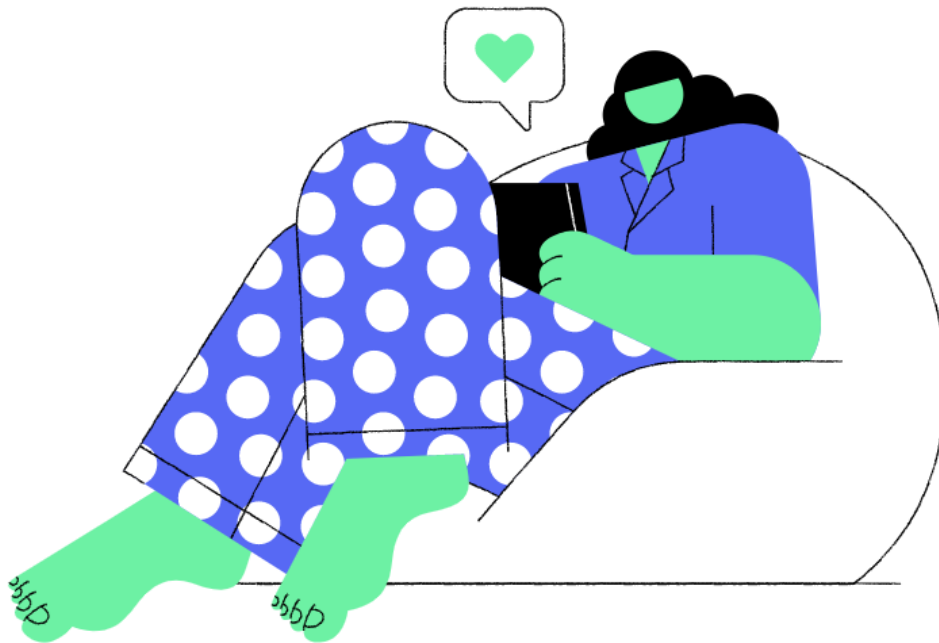
The introduction of the new rule probably will affect youth NGOs and non-formal education provided by them. The officials take education, on the whole, not distinguishing between higher education, master's degree or anything strictly formal. Under this term, they underline the word "education" only, which can mean anything. In Belarus, the government normally interprets the law the way it wants to. In this situation, the youth organisations which are working mainly with Erasmus+ programme and Mobility, according to this "innovation" have to formally ask the Ministry of Education if their articles or workshop or anything connected with studying abroad meet their absurd requirements.

This is something new, and that happened when I had already moved to Poland,



nevertheless lots of pressure in this respect was felt even a long time ago, they just decided to legitimize this pressure now. If you go from your university to some European country in the framework of

All in all, they aim to prevent students from moving abroad or from "seeing a new reality" that is definitely much more respectful and people-oriented than the Belarusian one. One interesting fact shows



Erasmus+, you have to share the experience from the angle that university considers "appropriate", so this way your experiences turn into the propaganda Belarusian authorities use on a daily basis.

why they are so worried: since 1990 almost one million people, mainly young, have moved abroad and have never come back.

Anton Savitskiy – student

NYCA was founded in 1997 with the aim to unite youth organisations' voices and protect youth rights in Armenia.

In the past few years, it had strong links with the ruling party in the country. It was not acting as a uniting organisation and advocating for youth civil society organisations and not even doing its international representation of the Armenian young people. However, by getting the state's financial support, it always used to fill the civil space which was supposed to be used by youth organisations. In 2018 the political shift brought expectations that the national youth council would be reformed and start to function implementing its priorities that were set back in 1997 when it was founded. The change did not happen, which day by day leads to the shrinking of even more civic space for the youth organisations.

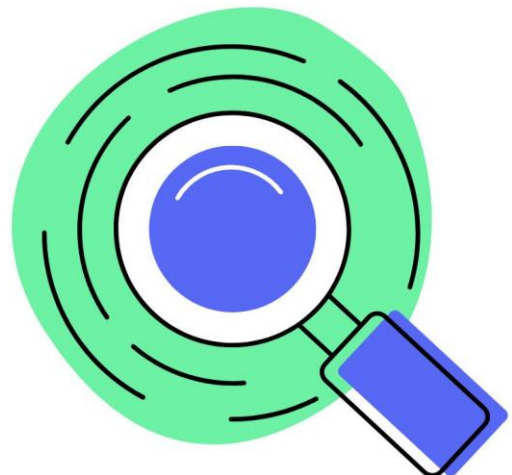
The incognito National Youth Council by Arthur Najaryan

I would like to talk about the most significant issue related to the youth platform and space that all the youth fields, in general, have always faced in Armenia. It is about the National Youth Council of Armenia (NYCA), which is itself a big national-level platform getting support from the state to coordinate the whole field. However, over the last few years, its function has had just an artificial role in getting substantial financial support from the state budget and not representing the united youth voice. At the international youth events, all the neighbouring countries had representatives from the national youth councils, while Armenia had no representatives from NYC at all. Even being active in the field did not help us to know the names of representatives, who were to represent our country there. This was always an issue. At different high-level serious youth events held in Brussels, when Armenia was to be adequately represented through the National youth council, it was openly announced that Armenia was not in any way represented there.

The matters related to NYCA were not taken seriously or weren't beneficial for some people. As a result, the Republic of Armenia on the international level was represented only through the NGOs, which they did very well. But there were mandate issues, where

NGOs couldn't talk on certain problems if the NYCs were silent. So we didn't have appropriate representation and lost many youth opportunities because of the inactive NYCA.

We tried to raise these issues several times. However, we couldn't meet first of all with a representative from NYCA. For example, at the youth forum in Lithuania several years ago, where many sectors were represented except NYCA, we discussed the issue on the spot wondering who the representative of the national council was. We got the name from a contact person representing NYCA; however, when we arrived in Armenia, it turned out this person was not the representative anymore. The changes were



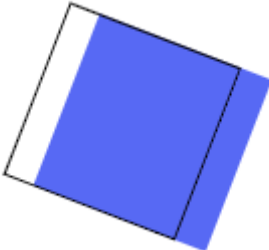
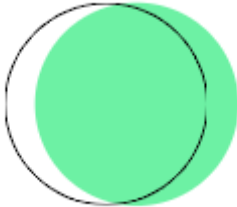
so rapid; we couldn't follow at some point. It was like a closed mafia, like a closed club service provider. We couldn't understand who was in charge of this. We informed this to the ministry representatives before the revolution several times. After the revolution, the youth foundation and several SNCOs were closed. De jure NYCA exists, but de facto it is empty. Even the decision-makers informed us about the same issue, but it turns out that all parties are in the same boat. It became apparent that here it is also a political position.

If YIC or any other NGO has success at the national or local level, it is excellent. But I don't think Armenian youth's participation matters should be related to only this or that NGO. If someday an NGO decides to suspend its activities or close the NGO, then it means the field is based solely on NGOs, which is wrong for me. I have another vision on this. There should be a specially

developed and sustainable system around which different NGOs will be united contributing to the targeted services, the implementation of the state's main directions and the solutions of the field. NYCA has all potential to become that organisation.

Another main issue is that we do not need artificial, symbolic, not functioning youth councils but really and systematically working mechanisms. If one city's mayor understands the importance and does things for youth spaces, the other mayor does not. This is an isolation. The state should ensure the operation of the model. In these structures, all clusters of youth should be involved, and they should themselves suggest their solutions and not just raise problems. Now we have youth that brings solutions to the table as we have more rebellious and demanding youth. Youth is a resource, but if governed wrong, that will bring challenges for the authorities.

Arthur Najaryan – Youth field expert, researcher





In Belarus, the space for youth NGOs is shrinking day by day. Money transfers coming from abroad, specifically the youth project funds or even the travel reimbursements of the youth mobility participants are taxed a lot, as they are considered an income if not proved to be from your relatives. This situation created permanent challenges for youth NGOs and young people involved in international mobility projects through the European institutions. For years youth NGOs were not able to find a legal way to justify the European funds or even the simple money reimbursements without being taxed by the government. The situation even worsened after the presidential elections of 2020 in Belarus, when young people could be investigated or even arrested for getting foreign money for projects or for reimbursement.

When the travel reimbursement can be a threat for youth NGOs by anonymous

All the money coming from abroad is considered an income, more often an illegal income unless you can prove that the money is from your relatives. All the money that comes from abroad is tracked by the government's tax offices. This usually works in this way: you are getting money from abroad and then there are two options: 1) you are lucky and nothing happens to you (this is also possible); 2) the tax service office calls you and tells that you have an income from abroad with all the consequences. Nobody knows the logic when they pay attention and when they do not. If it was from your relatives, you should just prove it and that's fine. Even the reimbursement for already spent money is not an excuse to not pay the taxes with high rates. There is always a chance that you will be lucky and the government will not deal with your case if you got the money, but you never know.

Apropos of NGOs operating in Belarus, there are currency income laws; formal control is usually made by banks. Belarusian youth NGOs have always had restrictions about receiving money from abroad for their activities. For example, it is hard to receive funds in the country even from the EU Erasmus+, the world-famous fund which has a reputation and is reliable. To get money as a grant for a project from abroad, NGOs

preferably ask the special Department for permission even before applying for the grant. When an NGO gets the project approved and the money, it asks for permission to use it. NGOs can wait up to half a year for permission and implement the project only after getting the money on their account. The tax services can consider your case at least for half a year, and you cannot use the money during that period. They can also not give you permission in the end.

This is how it was before the presidential elections in 2020. Now we have a total failure of the justice system. It seems that laws do not exist anymore. At present, I would call it the riskiest thing to do, to get a grant as an NGO. And I also don't know what will happen to you if you get the money from abroad as an NGO or an individual, because there is not a rule of law in Belarus anymore. If money came from abroad even as reimbursement, it doesn't matter, this can end very badly, you are under the danger of being imprisoned. When the laws don't operate, it is very hard to understand what is legal and what is not, what is restricted and what is not (or maybe it is better to say that everything is restricted).



For me, as a person who is involved in international youth work, it is impossibly difficult to assess any limits of youth work or any economic difficulties. Any actions that I am taking as a youth worker or representative of my NGO I should overthink a lot on the point "would it cause suppression to my NGO?". Belarusian young people have fewer economic opportunities in this regard, as even the participation in international projects is difficult; the travel reimbursements are challenging to get when you are back to Belarus. It causes hardships and troubles for youth NGOs that are

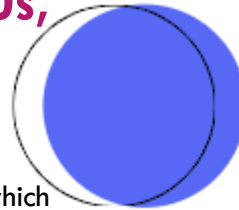
mainly involved in international activities and have lots of participants. In the end, it seems nonsense to be put in prison for money received from abroad for reimbursement, but if you are an activist and already have some problems, money from abroad can end very badly.

When our NGO should do local activities, which are part of the European funds and big projects, giving some subgrants, we always have to find a safe way to use this money. We find people who can bring this money in cash to our country and we provide receipts afterwards. This situation complicates the normal way NGOs should operate. Thanks to the international partners of our NGO that are always very inclusive and understanding in this aspect with making reimbursement in cash, we got a huge help in overcoming this barrier.

Another example is about one of our partners in Europe that wanted to help us during COVID-19. They wanted to collect money personally inside an NGO or among friends (so we are talking about some 200 EUR in total and it is more about solidarity than a huge help) and we would use this money for masks or antiseptics for the institutions that were not provided with them. We didn't find a legal way to do so, something that wouldn't be a threat to our NGO. We didn't get this help in the end. This situation shrinks especially youth organizations' rights and spaces to initiate civic education. Different youth projects are always facing permanent economic difficulties. It's hard to develop civil society youth organizations that do not get financial support from the government.

In the past few years, the Armenian CSOs have constantly faced the government desire to take them under control through getting more financial information on them. At present the State Revenue Committee gets more information than it did before, which raised questions about the need for these amendments to the NGO law. The changes have been made without proper consultations during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. Because of the new law now the NGOs are asked for more information on their financial income with a detailed description of the implemented projects. This shrinks the space for civil societies to freely decide on their accountability and relation with the public in regards to the information they want to publicize.

More legitimacy, transparency and accountability to NGOs, but in reality... by anonymous



The only reporting obligation for NGOs was to provide the state with a financial report if the NGO used public money.

On 29 October 2018, the State Revenue Committee of Armenia published draft amendments to the Law on Public Organisations. The original Law on Public Organisations dates from 2016 and required reporting only by those NGOs in receipt of public resources (resources of state or local self-government bodies and bodies or legal entities that manage public resources). The draft proposed in 2018 introduced a reporting requirement for all public organisations regardless of their funding source. In its first version, it required the online publication of personal data about donors, members, staff, governing bodies and volunteers who had received funding. Finally, the part of the report to be published online should include “the names of public administration and local self-government bodies, the names of legal entities, the residency and the legal form of the organisation, the group of individuals according to the size of the income made. The part of the report which would not be published online includes the physical person's name, surname, the amount of income, the passport data, public service number, residency address or place of

registration, telephone number all of which are non-disclosable personal data, and the processing, as well as transfer of these data to third parties and their use, shall be carried out exclusively by the authorized body, in accordance with the procedure established by law. Personal data relating to the source of annual income may be included in the report published on the website at the discretion of the organisation publishing the report, and only in compliance with the law.”

The first proposal met with strong opposition by the NGO sector which was basing itself on Council of Europe standards. In this context, a Working Group on the “Issues of Transparency and Accountability Provision of NGOs and Foundations” was set up under No 93-A Decree dated on 14 February 2019. The draft law was developed by this Working Group which was composed of representatives of the public authorities and 9 members representing civil society organisations. My organisation and I were not part of this working group, but most of the selected organisations are trusted by CSO representatives.

At the end of February 2020 NGOs were consulted by parliamentary committees on the proposed amendments to the Law on

Public Organisations. On 6 March 2020 the law was passed in its first reading. The amendments adopted in the first reading refer to Article 24 of the current Law. After the second reading in the National Assembly of the Republic of Armenia, which took place on 25 March 2020, the President signed the amendments on 8 April 2020.

The issue here is related to the so-called “shrinking space” for civil society organisations.

We see the fact that the government wants full and comprehensive information about each NGO, about the whole third sector. Even though we still have not

submitted any report, as we were waiting for the official template forms to be published and it was optional for the first year, we think that this should be seen in the recent development of labeling many organisations. In Armenia we have the labeling of “Soros” organisations, or if you are working with European institutions, foundations and NGOs, then you belong to the pro-European anti-nationalistic and anti-traditional groups, you “eat” grants and do money laundering. Also, in the Armenian society the recent discussions on the Istanbul convention have led to the rise in hate speech against the Council of Europe and the EU.

All the above-mentioned processes of adopting a law also need to be seen through the prism that happened during the strictest lockdown and COVID-19 pandemic outbreak. After the public discussion with

NGOs and Parliamentarians, where no consensus was reached, many left the room with anger and feeling that watchdog NGOs are being restricted now. When the full lockdown started, there were no further public discussions with the stakeholders. The law was passed so quickly and quietly that we all were disappointed. All the processes in the country were slowed down, however, the

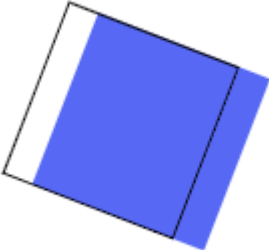
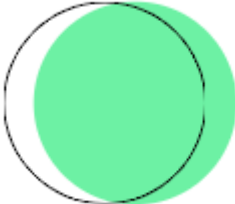
parliament was operating as if there was nothing happening in the country, even more than 100 MPs gathered in one room without proper social distancing most of the time and passed laws.

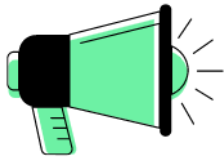
As a youth NGO, we will see what this new amendment brings, however, this is a concrete example of shrinking CSOs’ space by forcing them to publish their donors, financial income and projects. We see it as an attempt to have access to the full financial information of NGOs under the excuse of making NGOs more legitimate, accountable and transparent to the public. This could raise and deepen the polarisation of society resulting from the division



between the organisations considered as “acting in the public interest” and “foreign agents” because of publishing all financial income and the donors list of NGOs. We do not believe in the fake narrative of bringing more visibility and transparency to the NGO sector, as many NGOs voluntarily publish

their financial income and projects in their websites and are accountable to their stakeholders and target groups. This extra information which is mandatory and is submitted to the state body can be used to control the NGOs and make them dance to the government’s tune.







www.shrinking.space