

SPACE for Civil Society

Strategic Partnership Approach to creating a Conducive Environment

An own-initiative concept note by the European Partnership for Democracy

Relevance

Crucially for any democracy, civil society needs space to proactively play its democratic role as watchdog, partner in policy dialogue or provider of certain services to local populations. However, the phenomenon of “shrinking civil society space” advances steadily as part of a global trend towards electoral authoritarianism, illiberal democracy or political backsliding. To counter this threat, supporters of democracy must adopt an approach that targets all relevant domestic stakeholders - from grassroots level to high-level decision makers. Instead of insisting on the predominantly reactive response, which prioritises protecting civil society, the European Partnership for Democracy sees a need to act upon the “political economy of civil society” to yield sustainable change rather than short-lived victories. This need is based on prevailing academic and policy research as well as practical experience in the field.

Creating SPACE in three steps

To implement joint programming to strengthen civil space, the European Partnership for Democracy, comprising **18 European members with projects in over 100 countries**, presents to EU Delegations and member states the Strategic Partnership approach for a Conducive Environment for civil society (SPACE).

EPD acts as a direct interlocutor for stakeholders throughout the project, discussing priorities related to civic space and providing advice as to which actors should be targeted and how. However, the final project design depends on the policy and programming priorities of the donor. Once this decision has been taken, EPD will implement the project following a three-step approach:



Step 1) A politically-informed assessment of civil society space: SPACE starts out with a Democracy and Institutions for a Conducive Environment (DICE) assessment aimed at creating a better understanding of how democratic institutions drive or hinder the development of civil society space in the country. DICE is tailored to the local context, as it uses tools for stakeholder mapping and Political Economy Analysis (PEA) to identify opportunities for influencing positive change.

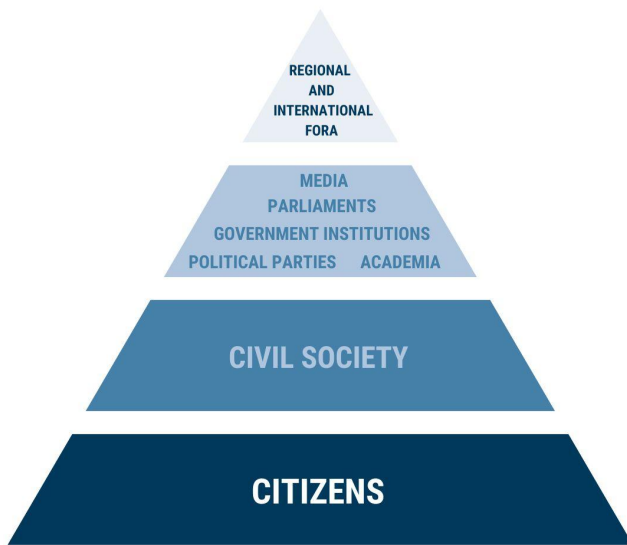
Step 2) Identification of potential solutions and capacity needs of local stakeholders: Following discussions with the EU Delegation or member state(s) on the DICE assessment, SPACE organises workshops to bring together civil society with representatives of democratic institutions. Based on the DICE assessment and the multi-stakeholder discussions, EPD drafts an Action Plan for a Conducive Environment for civil society, to be reviewed and adopted by the stakeholders, thereby ensuring broad local ownership.



Step 3) Provision of tailor-made support: SPACE offers a wide range of activities to EU Delegations and member states, aimed at implementing the Action Plan by targeting one or several of four levels of intervention: 1) Citizens, 2) Civil society, 3) Political institutions, 4) Regional and international fora.

Engaging with all relevant stakeholders

SPACE aims to contribute to a conducive environment for civil society in a targeted country by developing relationships between civil society and other key actors that strive to open democratic space rather than focusing solely on civil society space as a separate sphere in society.



For this reason, SPACE engages a range of different actors and operates at various levels of society:

Citizens (level 1): SPACE raises awareness and capacitates the general public to take an active part in political life.

Civil society (level 2): SPACE encourages and facilitates a constructive engagement of civil society with state actors, thereby contributing to home-grown solutions for creating a conducive environment for civil society.

Democratic institutions (level 3): SPACE encourages democratic institutions - the executive, legislature and the judiciary as well as academia and the media - to engage with citizens and civil society in policy dialogue and provide them with technical support to facilitate the process.

Regional and international fora (level 4): SPACE facilitates networking and exchange among like-minded civil society actors to promote mutual learning and cross-fertilisation of initiatives in international fora and support joint advocacy.

SPACE in action

The following activities have already been carried out successfully by EPD members around the world:

- **Level 1:** Democracy schools and targeted capacity building programmes for high potential social activists, awareness raising and development education and media/social media training.
- **Level 2:** Sub-grants to civil society actors to pilot partnerships with democratic institutions, promoting inclusive policy dialogue, peer exchanges and developing digital platforms for civil society engagement in the political process.
- **Level 3:** Technical assistance to parliamentary bodies, political party support, enhancing judicial oversight, engaging directly with high-level leadership and supporting the media.
- **Level 4:** Advocating for civil society space and sharing best practice.