



# CIVIC SPACES IN THE EU

Study of the existing socio-political frameworks and distinctive features characterising civic spaces in the European Union

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*Be like water making its way through cracks.  
Do not be assertive, but adjust to the object [...]*

*Be formless. Shapeless, like water.  
If you put water into a cup, it becomes the cup.  
You put water into a bottle and it becomes the bottle.  
You put it in a teapot, it becomes the teapot.*

(B. Lee)

## Introduction

The B.RIGHT SPACES project, co-funded by the CERV Programme<sup>1</sup> of the European Union, is based on the belief that civic spaces are strongholds for citizens' activism in Europe and support democratic participation. It assumes that civic spaces can be better promoted and protected through the synergetic action of multiple stakeholders, specifically local public authorities, civil society organisations (CSOs), Social and solidarity economy entities, and citizens, according to the principles and practices of subsidiarity and cooperation.

As such, the main goal of the first phase of the project was to observe, analyse and understand the conditions that enable, enhance, and foster civic spaces and participation, comprehend the distinctive features of civic spaces (in situ, digital, hybrid), and provide an overview of the territorial specificities and socio-political realities of civic spaces in the multilevel governance structure of the EU.

This Understanding and Analytical phase was led by imec-SMIT, Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB), in close cooperation with all Consortium partners, as part of Work Package 2.

This report reflects the first findings of the B.RIGHT SPACES' Study of Civic Spaces in the EU. The study begins with analysing relevant academic publications, institutional papers, and grey literature on using civic spaces in the EU to reflect on the conceptualisation of civic spaces and identify a working definition of the concept for the project. Further, the main scholarly debates on civic spaces in Europe are synthesised. The literature review reflects on the conditions that enable, enhance and foster civic spaces, barriers, and the socio-political and legal frameworks that regulate civic spaces in the EU.

Second, the results and discussion of a scouting survey rolled out by the Consortium in the partner territories

are presented. Lastly, the report is complemented by insights from the expert interviews, which help refine the approach towards the definition of civic spaces, the barriers and factors that enable it, as well as the multiple dimensions and factors that support it.

## 1. Review of Civic Spaces in the European Union

### 1.1 Conceptualisation of Civic Spaces

In conceptualising civic spaces, the approach of B.RIGHT SPACES focuses on the findings and conceptualisation proposed by the European institutions and international organisations, such as the European Parliament, the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). This approach recognises civic spaces as an environment for protecting and promoting not only civil and political rights, but also economic and social rights, with the intention of their progressive recognition and expansion.

Particularly, emphasis is placed on eight articles of the [European Charter of Fundamental Rights](#):

*Article 11: Freedom of expression and information*

*Article 12: Freedom of assembly and of association*

*Article 15: Freedom to choose an occupation and right to engage in work*

*Article 16: Freedom to conduct a business*

*Article 21: Non-discrimination*

*Article 23: Equality between women and men*

*Article 31: Fair and just working conditions*

*Article 36: Access to services of general economic interest*

In the first stage of the project, the academic and institutional definitions of civic spaces have been revised to refine the understanding of the term further and provide a working definition for the project. The following section briefly overviews these definitions, which inspire the B.RIGHT SPACES conceptualisation.

<sup>1</sup> [Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values programme](#)

## Defining Civic Spaces: insights from academic research

The concept of civic spaces became of interest to academic and political discussions relatively recently, in the late 20<sup>th</sup> – beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Biekart, Kontinen, & Millstein, 2023). Its origins are in the broader debates about democracy and human rights, mainly using public spaces for civic action.

Therefore, the term ‘civic space’ is often equalled to ‘**civil society space**’, perceived as a space where CSOs can express themselves and operate (Hossain, et al., 2019).

Moreover, civic spaces are viewed as ‘political spaces’ for civil society when their scope is to influence governance (Biekart, Kontinen, & Millstein, 2023).

Although there is no universally agreed definition of ‘civic spaces’, the existing conceptualisations complement each other rather than being contradictory. A diversity of understandings arises partly from differing ideological standpoints. It also reflects the fluid and complex nature of the processes through which members of society take action to shape their communities.

- *Civic Space as “set of conditions”*

Broadly, a civic space can be considered as the layer between the state, business, and family, where social interaction, organisation, debate, and action can occur (Buyse, 2018). As such, the civic space can refer to “the set of conditions that determine the extent to which all members of society, both as individuals and in informal or organised groups, are able to freely, effectively and without discrimination exercise their basic civil rights” (Malena, 2015). This set of conditions can include the political, legislative, societal and economic environments that enable, constrain, control and guide the activities of civil society actors and citizens, who can come together, express themselves, support each other, and act individually and collectively to influence their societies (Civic Space Watch, 2024); (Van der Borgh & Terwindt, 2014).

- *Civic Space as “arenas where interactions shape rights”*

Nevertheless, most researchers perceive civic space as an actual space that can be visualised as bounded and dynamic and includes a broad range of actors and processes (Biekart & Fowler, 2023). More specifically, civic spaces can be physical or digital spaces where groups or individuals gather to exercise their human

rights and fundamental freedoms, such as the freedom of association, expression, and peaceful assembly (Sardoč & Deželan, 2024). These social spaces are public arenas where state and market relations condition the capacity to mobilise, organise, and protect rights or shape public policies and interventions (Biekart & Fowler, 2023). The state’s role is to enable this environment to foster an exchange of communication, action, and networks, allowing citizens to engage in political issues (Castells, 2008).

The fact that civic spaces can evolve, are dynamic and multifaceted and are primarily impacted by political and institutional circumstances leads the narrative to the ‘shrinking’ or ‘closing’ of civic space (Carothers & Brechenmacher, 2014). A growing body of literature is dedicated to the concern that states and non-state actors restrict the space for independent CSOs through legal and extra-legal means, such as intimidation (Bossuyt & Ronceray, 2020); (Dupuy, Fransen, & Prakash, 2021). This view typically associates the expansion of civic space with democratisation, while its restriction is seen as a sign of resistance to democratisation.

- *Civic Space as “humanitarian space”*

Another approach to civic spaces derives from development aid literature, which focuses on civic spaces as humanitarian spaces shaped by the various actors involved in the aid chain (Biekart, Kontinen, & Millstein, 2023). The essential criteria for the existence of this space are the adherence to humanitarian law, the safety of humanitarian workers and access to at-risk populations. This approach also makes the case for using civic spaces to tackle sustainable development goals and support peace (UNDP; ICNL, 2021). At the same time, global challenges, such as climate change and unregulated technological progress, are recognised as challenges to civic spaces. To tackle them, independent funders must collaborate and invest in building civic power, developing alternative security frameworks, democratising the economy, and supporting grassroots movements (Hayes & Joshi, 2020). In practice, the international community’s response to closing civic spaces, such as providing emergency funding or support programmes, is criticised as limited and largely reactive due to poor coordination, bureaucracy, and risk aversion (Brechenmacher & Carothers, 2019).

Both approaches resonate with international development agendas, which express a growing concern about protecting and advancing democracy and fundamental rights worldwide. They implicitly define civic spaces to support these goals.

## Defining Civic Spaces: insights from international institutions

- *Civic Space as “enabling environment”*

According to the UN, “civic space is the environment that enables people and groups – or ‘civic space actors’ – to participate meaningfully in the political, economic, social and cultural life of their societies” (United Nations, 2020). Meaningful participation, in turn, requires open civic space: an environment that brings diverse voices into debates, safe channels and a vibrant media landscape that allows for peaceful disagreement and dissent (United Nations, 2020).

- *Civic Space as “enabling conditions for public good”*

The definition of OECD brings back attention to the legal, political, institutional and practical conditions that non-governmental actors need to access information, express themselves, associate, organise and participate in public life for the benefit of the whole society (OECD, 2024). The nuanced aspect of this definition is the focus on the public benefit of actions carried out in the civic space.

In this context, civic space becomes a platform where both individual and collective rights and freedoms can be exercised. The EU Charter of Fundamental Rights (2000) is the first major international human rights instrument that recognises the *economic rights* within the broader human rights framework, specifically Articles 15, 16, and 31. These articles guarantee the right to work, the freedom to choose an occupation, the freedom to conduct a business, and fair and equitable working conditions, thereby emphasising the role of civic spaces in promoting economic rights alongside civil and political freedoms. In this respect, it is worth mentioning that often the unique profile of the Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) is overlooked. SSE does not fully align with traditional CSOs or businesses. Unlike profit-driven businesses, SSE organisations prioritise social value, cooperation and community well-being. Bridging the gap between business and civil society, SSE plays a vital role in civic spaces and contributes to an inclusive economy where employment, entrepreneurship and working conditions promote both economic and social progress. Recognising the distinct profile of SSE actors is essential for promoting economic democracy, sustainable development and social justice in civic spaces (OECD, 2021). The International Labour Organisation (2022) adds to this vision: rooted in voluntary cooperation, democratic governance, and

prioritising people over capital, SSE promotes long-term sustainability. It encompasses cooperatives, social enterprises, mutual societies, and other entities committed to values like democratic participation, equality, fairness, and transparency. SSE entities aspire to long-term viability and sustainability, and to the transition from the informal to the formal economy. They strive for decent work, operating across all sectors to foster economic democracy, care for people and the planet, and community well-being.

Further, if ‘civil society’ is an abstract domain of social interaction (essentially, a theoretical construct), ‘civic space’ represents the actual circumstances in which civic engagement occurs in a given society at a specific time. The characteristics of civic space practically define the size, shape, and operating modalities of the civil society arena in a particular context. This includes determining the extent to which an operating environment can be considered ‘enabling’ for various civil society actors (UNDP; ICNL, 2021)

In the context of the European Union, a standard definition refers again to civic spaces as an enabling environment for civil society to play a role in political, economic and social life. It should include the appropriate regulatory framework, resource access, policy and decision-making participation, and a safe environment (FRA, 2022). Most importantly, like the UN definition, EU institutions stress three aspects: meaningful participation, exercising fundamental rights and engagement with one another and public authorities (European Parliament, 2022).

Thus, international organisations’ definitions focus mainly on an “enabling environment” for civil society and other civic space actors to participate in public decision-making and public life and exercise their civic freedoms. Consequently, civic spaces are crucial for democracy and good governance (Council of the European Union, 2021).

## Stakeholders in Civic Spaces

Civic space concerns a wide range of actors and stakeholders, including CSOs, local governments, social enterprises and citizens (Coenen, Biedermann, Claes, & Vande Moere, 2021).

The evolving concept of civic spaces traditionally considers CSOs as the main actors in fostering civic action.. While no universally agreed definition of civil society exists, due to its multifaceted nature, possible typologies of CSOs include non-governmental organisations (NGOs), associations, foundations,

charities, religious groups, and specialised forms such as think tanks, institutes or humanitarian organisations (UNDP; ICNL, 2021). According to their scope, CSOs can further be classified as socially or economically oriented (Mello Rose, 2021). Due to their constituencies, CSOs have the agency to shape civic spaces through existing institutional channels, including laws and procedures and the possibilities of contestation they offer, discourses, and maintaining and creating new spaces (Buyse, 2018). The EU Charter of Fundamental Rights (2000) expands this, introducing rights and freedoms that cover economic activities, employment, and the freedom to conduct business, emphasising the link between economic rights and civil liberties. Furthermore, the ILO (2022) underscores that, according to national contexts, the Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) encompasses cooperatives, associations, social enterprises, and self-help groups, operating in line with SSE values and principles.

In participatory and deliberative democracy frameworks, governments' discourses and practices tend to distinguish between 'citizens' and 'stakeholders', assuming that stakeholders represent a formally or informally constituted group or organisation that has or is thought to have a collective interest in an issue at stake (Kahane, Loftson, Herriman, & Hardy, 2013). Thus, in addition to CSOs and the other above-mentioned players, civic space stakeholders can be informal social and youth movements, trade unions, political parties, the media, individual human rights defenders, and journalists (Bossuyt & Ronceray, 2020).

In the literature, the label 'citizen' has two meanings: strictly to refer to a person's legal status and to individuals in general as members of the broad public capable of civic action regardless of their legal status (Gaventa, 2002). The latter approach is also taken by the UN and the EU, which consider people and groups as the actors of civic spaces (United Nations, 2020).

Aside from stakeholder analysis and classification, the power distribution within civic spaces is a critical issue in the literature. One aspect of the debate concerns the social norms and the freedom of agency the state offers to various actors, including those from vulnerable groups, migrants and refugees. The extent to which such civic agency exists might define the quality of a civic space (Biekart & Fowler, 2023). Another aspect of the debate is the extent to which these actors are actually involved in policymaking. Broadly, the participation framework could be simplified to three

levels: a one-way relationship, in which the government produces and provides information to citizens; a two-way relationship, in which the government asks for and receives feedback from citizens at any stage of the policymaking process (consultation) and an "active participation" or collaboration, in which the governments offer citizens an active role in policy development, implementation and/or enforcement (OECD, 2001). However, this process is much more nuanced, and citizen and civil society power manifests fully only when they are considered partners, have delegated power or exercise control over the policymaking process, meaning there is a shared decision-making power between governments and citizens or an inclined balance of power towards the citizens (Arnstein, 2000). As such, mere consultation of CSOs is not very likely to empower people in policymaking. Additionally, a clear follow-up on the process and the willingness to change the status quo are essential for genuine participation (Jenkins & Carpentier, 2013).

### Types of Civic Spaces

A vast amount of literature is dedicated to the digitalisation of the public sphere, questioning to what extent the internet and other information and communication technologies (ICTs) facilitate deliberative democracy or hinder it. It is widely acknowledged that they have transformed the speed and ease of communication and information flows, transforming the social interactions in interconnection with the media into a "network society" (Castells, 2008). (Keating & Melis, 2017). They have also enabled real-world forms of civic and political engagement to be adapted to the digital world and introduced new venues for contributing to democratic life (Oser, Hooghe, & Marien, s online participation distinct from offline participation? A latent class analysis of participation types and their stratification., 2013). At the same time, multiple evidence points towards the online environment as a breeding ground for disinformation and misinformation (Bennett & Livingston, 2018) (Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017), as well as enabling hate speech, threats and harassment (Castaño-Pulgarín, Suárez-Betancur, Vega, & López, 2021) (Kunst, Porten-Cheé, Emmer, & Eilders, 2021) (Scaramuzzino, 2023).

The idea of online civic action does not neatly fit into civil society's traditional concept and array of actions, which is usually associated with formal organisations rather than informal digital interactions. However,

online media and social media, in particular, play a crucial role in fostering critical debate and new forms of civic engagement, thus reshaping civic space (Hossain, et al., 2019).

Notably, when governments restrict civic action, the online world offers an alternative for mobilisation in a virtual, claimed space (Maratea, 2013). The functioning and activities of CSOs, as well as other actors such as social enterprises, cooperatives, and community organisations, are usually often regulated by the state so that they can face complex procedures, complicated administration, invasive demanding reporting requirements, restrictions on activities, targeting of “political” work, and other barriers to their operations. According to Buyse (2018), for CSOs these barriers fall into four categories:

- democracy/democracy promotion,
- development cooperation,
- securitisation, and
- information and media technology.

Consequently, he notes the risk of augmented social polarisation, more fragile governance, and significant detriment to fundamental civil and political rights. In this context, it can be said that civic action and civic spaces are reciprocal, meaning that one influences the other.

Digital activism in this claimed space is yet another “coping mechanism” (Scaramuzzino, 2023) used by civil society and citizens, particularly to respond to shrinking physical civic space, in addition to other forms of creative protest, legal advocacy, etc. Moreover, while formal CSOs may lose their influence on individuals, online networks on different platforms may replace group ties, which Bennett and Segerer (2012) label as a new logic of connective action. It is not only that individuals might opt for online connections to real-world ones, but rather that the online environment offers a venue of political and civic expression beyond institutionalised politics. Although the literature concerning online engagement and civic action is inconclusive, some studies stress its potential to mobilise, build communities (Cho, De Zuniga, Rojas, & Shah, 2003), facilitate advocacy (Kim & Urpelainen, 2013), and increase civic attitudes (Koc-Michalska, Gibson, & Vedel, 2014); (Zait & Andrei, 2019). Some authors note the rise of the digital civic sphere in this context, claiming that the Internet and social media can be platforms for collective civic action across borders. Attention should be paid,

nonetheless, to the increasing presence of right-wing, extremist and populist movements in the digital sphere, which could further engage in online democratic pushbacks (Strachwitz & Toepler, 2022).

On the other hand, research has repeatedly questioned the belief that ICTs and the internet inherently foster a more democratic society by providing all citizens equal opportunities for political engagement. The internet can be an effective tool for people who are already active in their offline lives, while those who have never participated in social activities before are more likely to use the internet solely for entertainment purposes. Therefore, the Internet may not be able to attract new groups of people, such as the less educated or the young, to participate in social activities but could potentially reinforce existing divisions (Lutz, Hoffmann, & Meckel, 2014). Moreover, Hindman (2009) points out that, contrary to expectations, online political participation is not distributed evenly across the population. There are significant inequalities in who participates in online political activities.

Another stream of the literature refers to civic technology initiatives, meaning technologies developed and applied by communities for civic purposes, such as increasing participation, raising awareness and collecting public data (Hamm, et al., 2024). Such technologies are seen as innovative tools for public policymaking. Governments can use them for service provision, citizen engagement and data analysis, and by citizens to connect and collaborate with each other and the government (Saldivar, Parra, Alcaraz, Arteta, & Cernuzzi, 2019). They are particularly promising in consultation and co-creation processes. Among them, academia has researched the solutions that facilitate urban planning, involve CSOs in policymaking and other public sector participation, and strengthen community members' engagement (Saldivar, Parra, Alcaraz, Arteta, & Cernuzzi, 2019).

Additionally, their implementation can come with the pressure to innovate the civic sector can lead to tensions. These tensions can be grouped into four categories: in terms of issues the technology is supposed to solve and its perceived meaning by those using it; the use of technologies to amplify a message versus engaging with the public; the perceived contradiction between the use of technologies and the grassroots movements authenticity generated through offline connections; generational divides among those using and targeted by civic tech (Gordon & Lopez, 2019). Therefore, before implementing civic tech solutions as panaceas for efficiency and engagement,



there is a need to consider the practices of offline civic action and broader technology use in the civic space. It must be acknowledged that such initiatives can involve information security, data protection, and privacy (Mačiulienė & Skaržauskienė, 2020). The rise of new technologies, particularly artificial intelligence (AI), enables mass surveillance of civic engagement and activism, while information has become much easier to manipulate. Data protection, digital rights, ethical innovation, and platform regulation must be considered when discussing online civic spaces (Hayes & Joshi, 2020).

Lastly, research on the relationship between online and offline political participation has yielded mixed results. Some studies suggest a positive spillover effect, where online engagement leads to increased offline participation (Galais & Anduiza, 2016); (Angyal & Fellner, 2020). This effect appears persistent over time and applies to various forms of political action, including voting and demonstrations. However, the nature of this relationship may depend on developmental stages. Among late adolescents, online participation serves as a gateway to offline engagement, while for young adults, offline participation spills over into online activities (Kim, Russo, & Amnå, 2017). Overall, online political participation and civic activism studies stress the importance of combining online engagement opportunities with more traditional, offline participatory instruments (Oser, Hooghe, & Marien, 2013) (Randma-Liiv & Lember, 2022).

## 1.2 Debates on Civic Spaces in the EU

### Academic Research

Research on civic spaces is preceded by an extensive body of work focused on civil society. Scholars focussing on participatory and deliberative democratic theories, such as Schultz (2002), have developed frameworks to understand how civic spaces facilitate public participation and deliberation. Further, the analyses and debate on civic spaces have evolved in democracy scholarship from the necessity of facilitating and measuring the impact of civic action (Malena, 2015). This shift reconciles the earlier debates about civil society and its role in promoting active civic engagement, showing how both contribute to democratic development and societal change.

The academic debate approaches civic spaces from three perspectives. First, it considers them a space for the realisation of civic freedoms, referring to the extent

to which these are respected and protected (Dupuy, Fransen, & Prakash, 2021). Second, as the environment in which CSOs and citizens can act towards influencing policymaking (Buyse, 2018). This understanding of civic space directs attention to shaping citizens' actions beyond institutional manifestations such as media and CSOs. Here, the analysis starts with the variety of actions and practices undertaken by citizens and how they are either enabled or constrained by governmental actors (Biekart, Kontinen, & Millstein, 2023). Third, in relation to restrictive measures affecting the autonomy of CSOs and their capacity to operate, studying the causes, dynamics and consequences of these dynamics. This last strand of research became prominent in the mid-2000s, when scholars, policymakers, and activists raised concerns about the increasing trend of governments worldwide restricting civil society activities. These restrictions occur at the legislative level but also through the bureaucratisation of procedures and delegitimising rhetoric towards CSOs, which affects their ability to form, operate, advocate for specific issues, receive and utilise resources, and network with other entities (Dupuy, Fransen, & Prakash, 2021). More recently, discussions about civic space have centred on its restriction due to factors such as authoritarianism, restrictive laws, digital surveillance and COVID-19 (Brechenmacher & Carothers, 2019; Brown, Brechenmacher & Carothers, 2020).

Strachwitz and Toepler (2022) stress that violations of civic spaces are not recorded only in authoritarian regimes but also in Western democracies, often fuelled by the government's fear of losing power. Securitisation, squeezing organised labour, marketisation, the interplay with non-state actors, state retrenchment, and media are just a few of the fields in which civic spaces are subject to pressure (Sogge, 2020). Although shrinking civic space has been primarily associated with authoritarian regimes, an expanding backlash against democratisation has been noticed since the early 2000s, manifested against CSOs, particularly those receiving international funding (Toepler, Zimmer, Fröhlich, & Obuch, 2020). Such restrictions impact the financial sustainability of CSOs, which cannot access financing anymore or need to adapt to funding conditionalities that might limit their autonomy.

In this context, the international response has been vital in gathering and sharing timely information about restrictions, supporting local resistance through funding and applying diplomatic pressure on

governments for reforms. However, having a strategic framework, aligning the foreign policy responses, and the capacity to anticipate new threats could be improved (Brechenmacher & Carothers, 2019). Moreover, although, arguably, civic spaces are not always ‘closing’ or ‘shrinking’ but ‘changing’, this change is still linked to a broader democratic recession that requires the mobilisation of society at large (Bossuyt & Ronceray, 2020). Despite fundamental rights being enshrined in international law and included in most countries’ legal frameworks, the degree to which they are upheld varies significantly globally. In 2023, only 2% of the global population lived in countries with open civic spaces, while most countries have severe civic space restrictions (Firmin, et al., 2024).

The scholars suggest moving beyond the static concept of civic space, which focuses primarily on restrictions on certain civic freedoms or constraints on formal CSOs, which is prevalent in global policies. More attention needs to be paid to how the relational dynamics of civic space play out in different contexts and how states, regimes, and civil society actors continuously shape civic space in their various relationships (Dupuy, Fransen, & Prakash, 2021).

### **Institutional Research for Evidence-Based Policymaking**

As part of its mandate to promote and protect human rights in the EU, the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) is working on civic space issues by collecting evidence and publishing reports on the challenges and risks for CSOs across the EU, while also highlighting promising practices and suggesting ways forward (FRA, 2024). Since 2018, the organisation has elaborated annual civic space reports by consulting CSOs across the EU. According to its research, the main CSO activity barriers reside in the regulatory framework, access to finance, a safe space and protections, access to decision and policymaking, and organisations' capacity and resilience (FRA, 2023). Although the situation of civic spaces in the EU cannot be generalised, some positive developments noted by FRA are the strengthening of cooperation between public authorities and CSOs, improvement of participatory framework and favourable policies towards developing civil society (FRA, 2023). An extensive analysis of the threats to civic spaces and democracy in the EU is provided by FRA in the Fundamental Rights Report (2024), including an overview of the legislative measures taken by the EU

institutions to protect and promote civic spaces. The institution recommends that the European Commission establish an observatory that monitors the state of human rights defenders in the EU, the restrictions on civic space, and the threats against civil society. Additionally, it suggests that member states review their legislation to ensure that public participation rules are sufficiently clear and inclusive. Both processes should be implemented with the involvement of CSOs (FRA, 2024). Changes in the state of the rule of law in Europe are monitored by the [European Network of National Human Rights Institutions](#).

The EU member states have been affected by the erosion of the rule of law and the shrinking civic space, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe. On top of the growing apathy of civil society itself, some governments became more selective in their support, favouring those CSOs with a supportive view and restricting those with more critical positions (Strachwitz, 2023). Although each Member State has its own socio-political and historical contexts that determine the evolution of civic spaces, their systematic interaction and institutional interconnection contribute to the expansion of similar dynamics across the EU (Negri & Pazderski, 2021). At the same time, due to the multilevel governance structure of the union, the EU has limited capacity to intervene at the national level. Nevertheless, the EU seems to be tackling the issues through a mix of legislative and non-legislative measures, such as the [Democracy Action Plan](#) and the [Media and Audiovisual Action Plan](#), including the legislative measures to ensure a pluralist media landscape (the [European Media Freedom Act](#), the [anti-SLAPP Directive](#)), the [Digital Service Act](#), aimed at ensuring the accountability of online platforms, providing funding for democracy, specifically through the [Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme \(CERV\)](#) and tackling the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic, through the [NextGeneration EU](#) recovery instrument (Havlíček, 2020).

OECD elaborates as well a broad analysis of the status of civic space, with a focus on legal frameworks, policies and institutions, as well as challenges, good practices and recent developments (OECD, 2022). Building on data from FRA, the OECD report acknowledges a strong foundation for protecting civic spaces, and improvements in several areas of civic space are noted, including a proactive attitude of CSOs, dynamic activism, public pressure and civic movements. However, all countries face challenges in protecting civic spaces, particularly for minorities and marginalised groups. Moreover, threats and attacks



against CSOs and activists are registered both offline and online (OECD, 2022). In a comprehensive practical guide, the OECD (2024) presents a whole-of-government approach to protecting and promoting civic spaces, highlighting four key steps in this regard: recognising civic space as a policy priority, reviewing whether the national policies and legal framework align with international standards, responding to the identified gaps and continuously monitoring the evolution of civic spaces.

A prominent example of this role is the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), which provides a platform for dialogue between civil society organisations and EU institutions. The EESC's *ad hoc* group on Fundamental Rights and the Rule of Law (FRRL) specifically addresses the challenges related to fundamental rights, democracy, and rule of law in EU Member States. Its mandate is to ensure that the rights of citizens are upheld and protected within the broader European framework, promoting accountability and transparency in member states. The FRRL's work is "*structured around an approach that covers areas considered particularly important and relevant to the work of the EESC: fundamental rights of social partners, freedom of association and assembly, freedom of expression and freedom of the media, the right to nondiscrimination, and the rule of law*" (EESC, 2024). In its work, including regular country visits to EU Member States, the FRRL group emphasises the indivisibility of all rights (civic, political, economic, social, and cultural) and its activities underscore the centrality of freedom of association, freedom of assembly, freedom of expression, and the right to non-discrimination in shaping a fair and just society.

Social and economic players, including trade unions, cooperatives, and advocacy groups, are instrumental in reinforcing these rights by challenging injustices, organising protests, and contributing to the policy discourse. For example, the right to freedom of assembly and the protection of civil society organisations both depend on the active engagement of these actors, as they offer vital feedback and critiques on governmental actions that may undermine citizens' rights. Social dialogue between employers, trade unions, and civil society organisations also contributes to broader democratic processes by facilitating a system of checks and balances within the EU.

This participation leads to more inclusive policymaking and encourages the effective enforcement of social and economic rights, such as the

right to non-discrimination and access to social protection. This is particularly important in sectors where inequality is prevalent, and where marginalised groups, such as migrant workers and those in precarious employment, may be at risk of exploitation.

### Independent research from the “players in the field”

Several reputable organisations provide global monitoring frameworks for democracy and civic spaces. At an international level, overviews are provided, among others, by [Democracy Reporting International](#), which gathers evidence of democracy developments around the world; [Freedom House](#), which assesses the degree of states' freedom and the level of democracy consolidation; the [International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance \(IDEA\)](#), which established global state of democracy indices; the [V-Dem Institute](#) that draws on hundreds of indicators to estimate the level of democracy worldwide, out of which some are connected to the civic space and the [Economist Democracy Index](#), focused on assessing the interplay between democratic rights and democratic institutions. A civic spaces assessment framework is provided by [OXFAM](#), which offers guidance on monitoring changes and assessing civic space conditions as they improve, stabilise, or deteriorate.

The state of civic spaces at a European level is reflected in comparative assessments realised by [CIVICUS](#), a global alliance of CSOs that monitors the state of civic space according to categories such as closed, repressed, narrowed, or open and the [Civic Space Report](#), realised by the [European Civic Forum](#) and the [Civic Space Watch](#). An initiative to monitor civic spaces in eight EU countries (Bulgaria, Denmark, France, Hungary, Netherlands, Poland and Romania) was launched in 2024 by the [European Center for Non-for-Profit Law](#).

Although all EU Member States supported an enabling civic space as an environment for protecting and promoting human rights in the EU (Council of the EU, 2023), the monitoring, assessment and categorisation endeavours for understanding the state of civic spaces are limited by the difficulty of coining measurement criteria and the discourses underpinning them. This also makes cross-country comparisons difficult. Additionally, the Western European approach towards assessing the state of civic space in Western liberal democracies has been somewhat overly optimistic, with a tendency to paint a rosy picture and fail to

acknowledge issues or detect warning signs (Bouchet & Wachsmann, 2019).

Moreover, there are growing concerns about democratic resilience, given decreasing institutional trust, excessive state interference and the narrowing of civic spaces in some established Western democracies, such as Belgium, France and Germany (CIVICUS, 2023). These have enabled restrictions on rights such as freedom of association, peaceful assembly and expression (FRA, 2024).

Substantial research has been commissioned or conducted by international organisations, foundations and non-profits to understand the state and stake of civic spaces in the EU. According to the research of Negri and Pazderski (2021), developed for [Civitates](#) through desk research and expert interviews, the EU member states could be classified into four categories: (1) those where the deterioration of civic space is entrenched (Hungary and Poland); (2) countries in which the civic space is fastly deteriorating (France, Slovenia, Hungary, Greece and Cyprus); (3) countries where at risk of fast deterioration (Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia, Italy, Spain, Slovakia and Czechia) and (4) states with open civic space (Ireland, Germany, Denmark, Netherlands and Sweden). Moreover, although in countries like Hungary, Poland, and Czechia, state public funding for CSOs was increasing, this was accessible mainly to those aligned with government policy (Novakova & van der Maesen, 2020). Positive lines of development are noticed in Northern countries, with Denmark, Sweden, and the United Kingdom praised for adopting a bolder and more comprehensive approach to civic spaces (Bossuyt & Ronceray, 2020).

Shrinking civic spaces in Europe have also been studied in the “European Civic Space Observatory” project implemented by [Maecenata Foundation](#). Through a series of country-specific case studies, the research developed under this project reflects how different historical, socio-economic and cultural traditions across the EU resulted in different civic spaces. In countries like Croatia and Italy, positive attempts to develop civic spaces are recorded despite unsupportive political circumstances (Hummel & Strachwitz, 2023).

Specifically, in Italy, the third sector is considered the most significant form of civil society, playing a leading role in areas such as circular economy, urban regeneration, training, etc. However, it is still viewed by the state as a service provider rather than an equally positioned stakeholder. Therefore, the lack of political

acknowledgement and support is challenging for the operating civic space (Salvatori, Scarpat, & Schiavone, 2023). Deteriorating situations are acknowledged in Slovakia, Austria, and Greece, and specific contextual circumstances, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and right-wing populism, lead them. The situation in Spain is presented through the theory of protest cycles lenses to explain the evolution from an intense phase of social mobilisation in Spain to a somewhat demobilisation phase in the early 2020s (Medina-Vicent & Feenstra, 2023).

More positive developments are acknowledged in Poland, where grassroots movements and established CSOs are increasingly active and trusted by the citizens to stand up to government abuses and support social cohesion (Domaradzka & Kołodziejczyk, 2023). Overall, a trend of increasing activity of smaller CSOs and informal groups that rely on solidarity more than public funding, focusing on short-term agenda changes rather than supporting institutional stability, can be noticed (Strachwitz, 2023).

### 1.3 *The B.RIGHT SPACES’ definition of Civic Space*

Building on the definitions outlined mentioned above and acknowledging the multifaceted nature of the concept, the B.RIGHT SPACES project has strived to reconcile differing understandings in order to highlight the consensus on the importance of civic space in protecting human rights and fostering democratic participation. In developing a working definition, project partners incorporated their unique roles, experiences and contextual perspectives to ensure that the definition was both comprehensive and relevant.

Therefore, a *working* definition was proposed and refined with the project partners with a two-fold aim. First, to reflect the key elements of the definitions reflected in the literature and proposed by international organisations. Second, to align the various understandings of the concept among the project partners and serve as a basis for further project activities. with two main objectives: firstly, to capture key elements from the literature and suggestions from international organisations; and secondly, to reconcile the partners' different understandings of the concept and provide a consistent basis for the project's ongoing activities.

The initial definition considered in the framework of the project is presented below. This was further adjusted to reflect the feedback received from

stakeholders in the partner regions and territories in response to a scouting survey conducted by the project partners from June to July 2024 (Chapter 2).

**Civic Spaces** are places in which stakeholders can engage in governance discussions and practices for democratic progress.

**Civic Spaces** can be specifically designated for certain purposes or repurposed; permanent or temporary; formal or informal; public, private or characterised by shared public-private ownership; physical/off-line, online or hybrid spaces. Civic Spaces can encompass a diverse range of settings that can coexist and can go from the local to the international level.

In **Civic Spaces**, individual citizens or groups, civil society organisations, private and public/governmental actors can meaningfully and collectively engage in governance practices for the political, economic, social and cultural progress of their communities, for equal access to services of general interest, freedom to choose an occupation and right to engage in work, freedom to conduct a business, access to fair and just working conditions.

**Civic Spaces** require an institutional setting that respects democratic rights, such as those addressed in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights and include freedom of expression and information, freedom of assembly and association, non-discrimination, equality, the right to engage in a transparent and democratic dialogue in an open, inclusive, secure and safe environment that is free from all acts of intimidation, harassment and reprisals. Ad hoc protective legal and political frameworks that enable continuous dialogue in an inclusive and equitable way and promote the use of adequate tools and resources are essential elements for the proper development, strengthening and flourishing of Civic Spaces.

*Fig. 1. The first definition of Civic Spaces proposed by B.RIGHT SPACES*

#### **1.4 Concluding remarks and steps forward in the B.RIGHT SPACES research on Civic Spaces in the EU**

The literature on civic spaces in the European Union reflects a dynamic and multifaceted landscape marked by academic debate, policy interventions and societal challenges. A recurring theme is the fluid nature of civic spaces, which evolve in response to socio-

political pressures and technological changes. There is a growing emphasis on viewing civic spaces not as static entities but as relational dynamics influenced by the interplay of state, civil society, and market forces.

The academic discourse on civic spaces centres around three primary themes:

- **Civic Freedoms and Fundamental Rights:** The extent to which fundamental rights, such as freedom of expression, association, and assembly, are respected and protected in various contexts.
- **Civic Participation and Policymaking:** The role of civic spaces in enabling individuals and groups (citizens and CSOs) to participate in governance and policymaking, focusing on the diverse engagement mechanisms and their effectiveness.
- **Restrictive Dynamics:** There is increasing concern over governmental restrictions at the political, institutional, and legal framework levels, such as increasing authoritarian tendencies, bureaucratic hurdles, and legal limitations. Additionally, new threats emerge in established contexts, shaped previously by socio-economic and cultural factors. Among them are digital surveillance, the spread of disinformation and misinformation, and various constraints on the autonomy of CSOs and individuals.

Despite the solid legal frameworks established by the EU to promote and protect civic spaces and the guidance offered by international organisations focused on human rights and development, threats persist in various forms. Embedded economic and bureaucratic barriers, such as burdensome administrative requirements, restricted access to funding, and financial vulnerabilities, threaten the sustainability of CSOs. Restrictive legislation still exists and is explicitly and implicitly applied to constrain civic action, including laws targeting the international funding of CSOs. The erosion of the rule of law is noted progressively, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, where governments have selectively supported compliant CSOs while restricting critical voices. Although the online environment is praised as an alternative to offline civic space restrictions and as an opportunity to mobilise communities, this opportunity comes with digital challenges, such as the rise of online disinformation, surveillance, and hate

speech, coupled with unequal access to digital civic participation and AI-enabled surveillance and privacy risks. As long as regulating this online civic space is still a work in progress, its use as an alternative environment for civic action does not come without risk. At the same time, societal polarisation and populism are noted both offline and online. These risks and challenges are well documented in the literature, which stresses the need for coordinated responses informed by rigorous research, inclusive policymaking, and stakeholder active engagement.

At the same time, monitoring data is often presented at an aggregate level, and country-based insights are provided either by authorities or by cooperation between authorities and the most potent CSOs. There seems to be a lack of cross-national studies and comparative analysis to understand the varied trajectories of civic spaces within EU member states, accounting for historical, cultural, and socio-economic factors. Also, the relational dynamics between states, non-state actors, and civil society to identify patterns of cooperation and conflict and impact in civic spaces could be further explored.

Building on the reviewed literature and on the B.RIGHT SPACES' definition of civic spaces, a scouting survey was developed as a second stage of the B.RIGHT SPACES Project's research and understanding phase. Elaborated by smit-VUB, carried out among the REVES members, and performed by local actors in the partner territories, the survey aimed to understand the repertoire of civic spaces implemented in different European regions, map their characteristics and identify and analyse the factors that enable, support and inhibit civic spaces in the partner territories. The following section presents the main insights from this research.

## 2. Civic Spaces in the B.RIGHT SPACES partner territories. The results from the scouting survey

### 2.1 General Information

As part of the “Understanding Civic Spaces in the EU” (WP2) endeavour, the VUB team, in cooperation with the project partners, developed, implemented, and analysed a scouting survey to understand the repertoire of civic spaces implemented in different European regions, identify and analyse the conditions for success

and the pitfalls of civic spaces, and support civic spaces.

The survey, which included 22 questions ranging from general information to comprehension and opinion questions, was created in English and translated by the project partners into six languages: Catalan, French, Italian, Spanish, Polish, and Portuguese. As a result, seven online surveys (including English) were launched on the EUSurvey platform, remaining open for one month, from the 5th of June to the 5th of July 2024. The project partners ensured the promotion of the survey, as follows: Generalitat de Catalunya and XES promoted the Catalan survey; REVES distributed the English, French and Spanish surveys; the Italian version was distributed by PARSEC, CSV Lazio and Municipality of Turin; the Polish was distributed by FISE and the Portuguese by the Municipality of Torres Vedras and EMERGE. The translations facilitated the dissemination of the study among non-English speaking populations.

As a result, 272 individual responses were gathered. Most of these (97) come from Italy, 78 from Catalonia, 54 from Poland, and 30 from Portugal. Interestingly, some of the surveys filled in Polish come from respondents based in Portugal (2) and Germany (1). The remaining answers were provided in English, French and Spanish and belonged to respondents based in Finland (2), Sweden (1), Spain (2), France (2) and Belgium (1). The latter answers come from members of the REVES network.

Table 1 reflects the total answers per language. As mentioned above, the language of responses only sometimes coincides with the country where the respondent is based, although this is mostly the case.

Language	No. of answers
Catalan (CAT)	78
English (EN)	4
Italian (IT)	97
French (FR)	3
Spanish (ES)	3
Polish (PL)	57
Portuguese (PT)	30
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>272</b>

*Table 1. Overview of the number of answers to the scouting survey per language*



The varied number of answers might be related to the partner organisations' different constituencies and target audiences. Also, the fact that three partner organisations – PARSEC, Citta di Torino and CSV Lazio – are based in Italy facilitated the collection of the highest number of answers from this country.

The survey was answered by individuals representing member organisations of the partner organisations. Although the respondents provided their personal data (name, email, and affiliated organisations), the answers were disconnected from the names and analysed as anonymous. The only personal data referred to in this report is the respondents' gender (Figure 2).

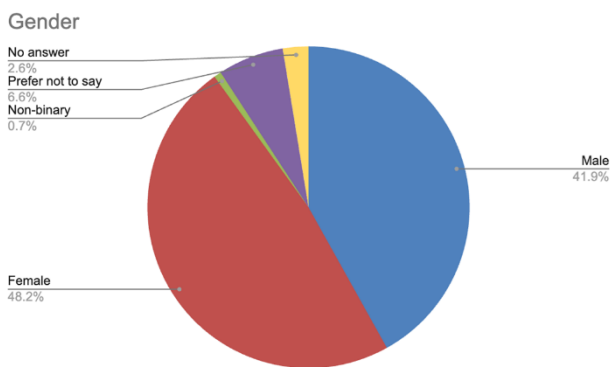


Fig. 2 Respondents' gender

The types of organisations the respondents represented varied from CSOs/NGOs and non-profits (NPOs) to public administrations, social economy organisations, businesses, formal or informal community groups, and others. The majority of organisations responding to the survey were CSOs/NGOs/NPOs (40%), followed by public administrations (23%) and social economy organisations (13%).

An overview of the profiles of the represented organisations in the survey is presented in Figure 3.

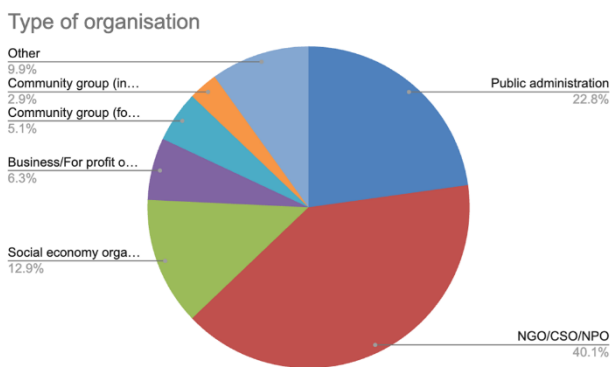


Fig. 3 Type of organisation represented by the survey respondents

Most of these organisations have a local geographical reach, with some operating at a regional level and some at a national level (Figure 4).

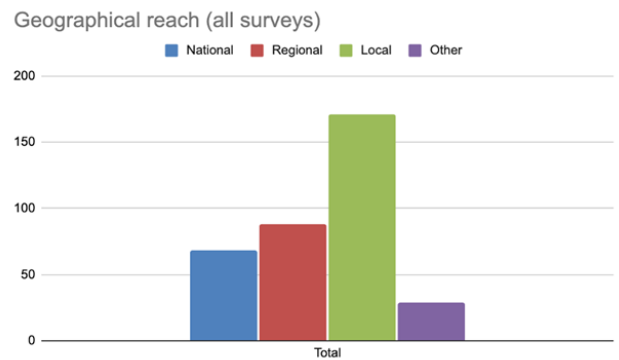


Fig. 4 The geographical reach of responding organisations

Figure 5 displays the organisations' geographical reach according to the response language.

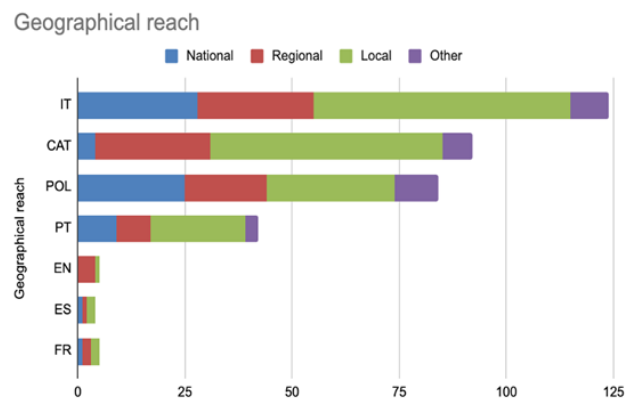


Fig. 5 The geographical reach per language

## 2.2 Defining Civic Spaces

To understand whether the approach to civic spaces proposed by B.RIGHT SPACES is comprehensive and reflects the realities on the ground in the partner territories, the first question asked by the scouting survey was whether the respondents agreed with the proposed definition (Figure 1). Regardless of their answers, they could also provide feedback based on their experience, understanding, and suggestions for clarification.

More than 90% of the respondents agreed with the proposed definition. Based on the feedback received, it can be perceived that most refer to **civic spaces as physical places** that can host activities, facilitate meetings and dialogue, engage communities and

enable participation in public life. It was stressed that such spaces are inherently polyvalent and in proximity to the communities. As one of the respondents put it, *“civic spaces are for those who live in and need them, above the imaginary and abstract spaces organised and thought by technocrats”*. Similarly, some answers reflected on civic spaces for protest and disagreement, which, although enabled by political frameworks, should allow the expression of resistance, discontent and alternative views.

A few respondents also emphasised that civic spaces are spaces for freedom, which comprise a set of measures that governments, administrations, and citizens take to ensure civic participation and exercise fundamental freedoms.

The disagreements towards the proposed definition came from three surveys: the Polish, the Catalan and, to a small extent, the Italian. The main concerns expressed by the respondents who disagreed with the definition concerned its overall complexity (Polish survey), as well as the public-private management of civic spaces and the use of civic spaces for economic activities (Catalan survey). One Italian respondent insisted on providing examples, specifying that cultural centres are civic spaces. The difficulty expressed by the Polish answers in understanding the study might be due to language specificities. Notably, the Polish survey answers also insisted most on defining civic space as physical space. The Catalan survey answers nuanced the importance of self-organised civic spaces, independent from public-private control and depoliticised.

At the same time, the survey reveals that 14% of Catalan respondents perceived safeguarding civic spaces as being ‘always discussed’ in public discourses and 42% as ‘sometimes discussed’. In contrast, 44% of Polish answerers shared that the topic is ‘rarely discussed’. The Portuguese answers (43%) reflect the same impression that the topic is rarely on the public agenda in their region. The Italian survey reveals a more optimistic view, with 38% believing it is ‘often’ addressed and 41% of the respondents indicating that the topic is ‘sometimes’ in the public discourse. However, in the Italian case, 59% consider the topic rarely present in traditional media. This belief is also shared in other territories (50% of the Polish answerers and 50% of the Portuguese, and most of the few Spanish and French answers). Again, the Catalan region reflects a different view, with 36% of the respondents believing the topic is often or always present in the media. Connecting these insights with

the feedback received to the proposed definition, we might assume that both the presence and the absence of the subject in public discourses and media shape the understanding of the concept. When the subject is broadly discussed, as it is in Catalonia, the focus might shift from the physical boundaries of space to the values it incorporates and enables. On the contrary, when civic spaces are not discussed, their legitimacy might be questioned and the activities they enable – oriented towards gaining this legitimacy.

Further, diverse elements of civic spaces were suggested based on the respondents' experience. Among them, the importance of different types of civic spaces, not only physical but also online and hybrid, was stressed by those who considered that integrating advanced technologies and digital platforms is crucial to the expansion and accessibility of civic spaces, enabling broader and more diverse participation. At the same time, several respondents questioned the existence of online civic spaces. Then, the scope of civic spaces was refined in many comments. These reflected participation in civic life/active citizenship as essential, together with community governance. Many respondents mentioned cultural, educational and recreational activities. Notably, the cultural and social dimensions were so crucial to some respondents that a suggestion was provided to change the order of key activities accordingly, starting with cultural and social activities and ending with economic and political ones. In contrast to privately dominated spaces, socio-economic activities were emphasised, particularly in the Catalan and Italian surveys.

Alongside promoting and protecting civic rights, which the proposed definition included, numerous feedbacks insisted on various dimensions of inclusivity, such as free access for everyone, regardless of their legal status, vulnerabilities and age. In this respect, marginalised groups should find a place in civic spaces, too. An original comment stressed the importance of enabling intergenerational exchange and providing opportunities for people of different ages to interact and deliberate for their community.

“Sustainability” is a concern that is not explicitly reflected in the proposed definition but was highlighted by several survey respondents across all languages. They emphasised that all activities conducted within civic spaces should respect environmental principles and prioritise sustainability, including educational programmes.



These considerations come from the profound acknowledgement of the need to preserve, protect, and improve civic spaces as living places.

Lastly, the governance aspect was discussed. Specifically, civic spaces are seen as opportunities for co-design based on individuals' engagement and participation in co-implementing activities and experimenting with co-management models. The answers from different territories reflected an insightful contradiction: while some insisted on the public/private ownership and/or management of civic spaces, others stressed the importance of grassroots, self-organised and self-managed communities.

With the acknowledgement that all these insights reflect the experiences of CSOs active in the partner territories, with specific profiles of activity, they were considered for updating the proposed definition, presented below. The additions are highlighted in bold:

Civic Spaces are places where stakeholders can participate in governance discussions and practices on issues that affect their communities. They are the breeding ground for democratic progress, inspiring collective action and fostering a sense of shared responsibility.

Civic Spaces can be designated for **specific** purposes or repurposed, permanent or temporary, formal or informal, public or private, or characterised by shared public-private ownership. **They can also be physical/offline, online, or hybrid spaces.** Civic Spaces can encompass diverse settings that can coexist and go from the local to the international level.

In Civic Spaces, **all individuals, regardless of age, background, or group affiliation, along with civil society organisations and private and public actors, can meaningfully and collectively engage in governance practices and co-design policies, co-implement projects and co-manage the civic space per se.** This inclusive environment fosters political, economic, social, **environmental**, and cultural progress, ensuring equal access to services of general interest, freedom to choose an occupation and right to engage in work, freedom to conduct a business, and access to fair and just working conditions. **Civic spaces operate under principles of environmental sustainability and respect for human rights.**

Civic Spaces require an institutional setting that respects democratic rights, such as those addressed in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights and include freedom of expression and

information, freedom of assembly and association, non-discrimination, equality, the right to engage in a transparent and democratic dialogue in an open, inclusive, secure and safe environment that is free from all acts of intimidation, harassment and reprisals.

Fig. 6. The updated and refined definition of Civic Spaces proposed by B.RIGHT SPACES

### 2.3 Stakeholders in Civic Spaces

While the literature presents a broad array of civic space stakeholders, analysing their contribution from various perspectives and typologies, through this scouting survey, we aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the role of these stakeholders. Therefore, two questions were posed to identify the actors who promote and those who participate in civic spaces. Participation refers here to carrying activities in civic spaces and not necessarily to the participatory policy and decision-making processes.

The project partners recommended distinguishing between these two categories of actors, remarking in practice on a clear differentiation between them.

The aggregate results from these questions are presented in Figures 7 and 8.

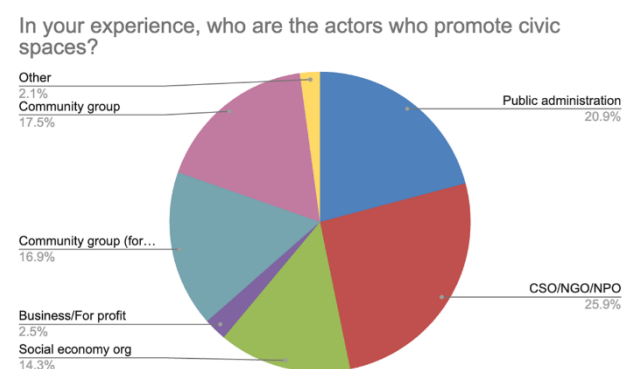


Fig. 7 Actors who promote civic spaces

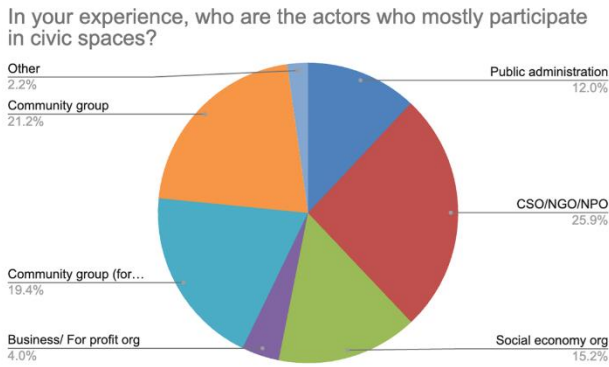


Fig. 8 Actors who participate in civic spaces

In the respondents' experience, CSOs/NGOs/NPOs are the most potent actors in promoting and participating in civic spaces. While public administrations are nearly equally important in promoting civic spaces, they participate in them to a lesser extent. This could be explained by their more enabling role in civic spaces. This is also reflected by the fact that, in the experience of most respondents (84%), public authorities share resources such as finance, physical facilities, online tools, and others to support civic spaces. However, their perceived lesser participation in civic spaces may reflect limited engagement in participatory policymaking in the respondents' territorial context.

Formal and informal community groups are less involved in promoting civic spaces than CSOs and public administrations. However, in terms of participation, they are almost as present as CSOs and much more active than public administrations. When the perceived contribution of both formal and informal community groups is combined, it surpasses that of CSOs and public administrations in both promoting and participating in civic spaces.

Social economy organisations have a nearly similar level of engagement in promoting and participating in civic spaces. This aligns with the feedback received on the proposed definition of civic spaces, in which many respondents stress the importance of social economies for supporting the existence of civic spaces.

Across all surveys, businesses and for-profit organisations are perceived as the least involved in promoting and participating in civic spaces.

Several specifics can be observed at the territorial level. Among all respondents, those answering the survey in Italian gave the most weight to the contributions of CSOs, with 30% perceived as promoting civic spaces and 26% perceived as participating in civic spaces. Similar to the overall data,

public administration is the second most important actor in fostering civic spaces, after CSOs, while formal and informal community groups are second at participating in civic spaces, close to the level of CSOs. Surprisingly, in Catalonia, the public administration, followed closely by formal and informal community groups and social economy organisations, are regarded as promoting most of the civic spaces. CSOs hold the fourth position in this regard. In terms of participation, informal and formal community groups are leading, followed by social economy organisations, and only followed by the CSOs and public administration. The Polish answers strongly recognise CSOs as promoters of civic spaces, followed by public administration. All other stakeholders have comparatively insignificant contributions to civic space promotion. In the Polish experience, CSOs and informal community groups contribute the most with their activities in civic spaces. Social economy organisations and public administrations were indicated by only 4% of the respondents as participating in civic spaces. The Portuguese experience reflects public administration's active and primary role in promoting civic spaces, followed by CSOs. In this case, CSOs, followed by public administrations, formal and informal community groups, and social economy organisations, participate most in civic space.

The answers received in English, French, and Spanish from the REVES network again reflect a stronger role of CSOs in promoting civic spaces than public administrations and a higher participation of CSOs and social economies compared to other groups.

While the scouting survey does not offer a clear explanation for these variations, one can assume that the historical, political, legal, socio-economic, and cultural factors specific to each region and territory in which the survey respondents operate could justify the different perceptions and experiences. Moreover, while not statistically relevant, this data offers insights into territorial dynamics at a micro-level that are often overlooked in broader-focused research, enriching the understanding of how the relationship between different stakeholders shapes civic spaces.

#### 2.4 Types and Focus of Civic Spaces

Although the literature is relatively positive about the digital environment's potential for fostering alternative civic spaces, this optimism does not resonate with the majority of survey respondents. In their experience, physical civic spaces remain prevalent. Approximately

one-fifth are familiar with and engaged in some hybrid civic space, incorporating both offline and online dimensions. Respondents from Poland stand out, with 39% involved in hybrid civic spaces. This experience is followed by Italian respondents (18%), those from Catalonia (8%), and Portugal (7%). Simultaneously, only Polish and Catalan respondents indicated their experience with online civic spaces, which accounts for 1% of overall responses.

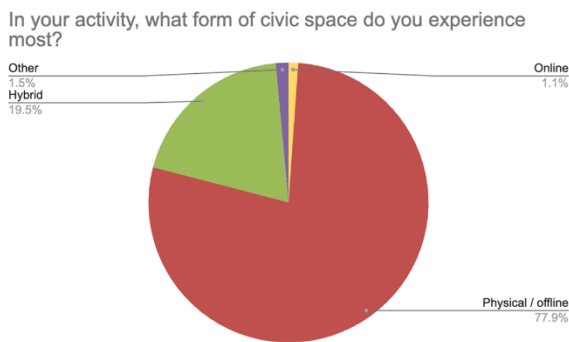


Fig. 9 Types of civic spaces experienced

To gain a more nuanced picture of the variety of experienced civic spaces in the partner territories, a question was asked about the topics and issues dealt with.

The respondents could choose between the following options:

- Social needs (fundamental rights, inclusion)
- Community cohesion (democracy, participation and community building)
- Local development and economic support through entrepreneurship
- Local development through education, culture and sport
- Environmental sustainability (e.g., conservation, green initiatives)
- Public health and well-being (e.g., healthcare access, mental health support)
- Political debate and advocacy (e.g., civil liberties, policy reform)
- Cultural diversity and integration (e.g., multiculturalism, interfaith dialogue)
- Technology and innovation (e.g., digital inclusion, access to information)
- Other

The collected answers reflect various experiences, with slightly different focuses between territories. At an aggregate level, social needs (fundamental rights, inclusion), community cohesion (democracy, participation and community building), and local development through education, culture and sport are the central focus elements in civic spaces across the partner regions. Conversely, technology and innovation, public health and well-being, and local development through entrepreneurship rank low among the topics dealt with.

This could potentially reinforce the idea that civic spaces traditionally focus more on human rights, community, participation and education.

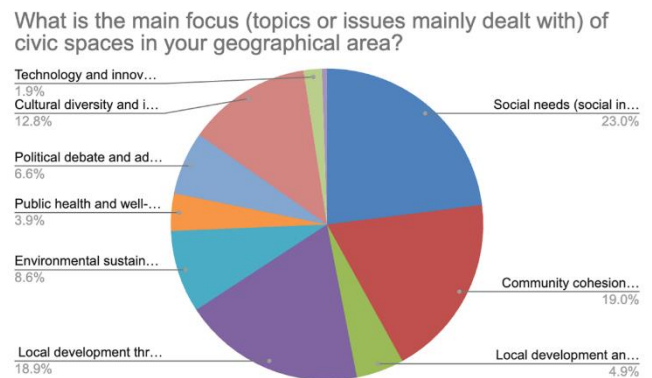


Fig. 10 Focus topics of civic spaces

Different territories have different centres of attention. The Italian and Portuguese respondents' main focus is social needs. Community cohesion is a priority for the Catalan respondents, followed closely by social needs. Additionally, the Catalan respondents primarily chose political debate and advocacy more than the others. The Polish prioritise local development through education, culture, and sport in their activities, as well as cultural diversity and integration. These two sets of activities also benefit from significant support from the Portuguese respondents. Environmental sustainability is not largely addressed in the surveyed civic spaces, scoring systematically higher than local development and economic support through entrepreneurship, except in Catalonia, where the latter prevails.

## 2.5 Factors supporting and impeding the development of Civic Spaces

Five factors that could support or hinder civic spaces were proposed to the respondents: the political framework, the institutional *and legal* framework, cultural factors, social factors, and economic factors. They were asked to share the extent to which these factors support or impede the development of civic spaces based on their experience. In doing so, they could rate each factor on a scale from 0 to 5, with 0 being not at all and 5 – to a great extent.

Chiefly, the appreciation of each factor varies across the partner territories, potentially reflecting the reinforcing effect in their dynamics.

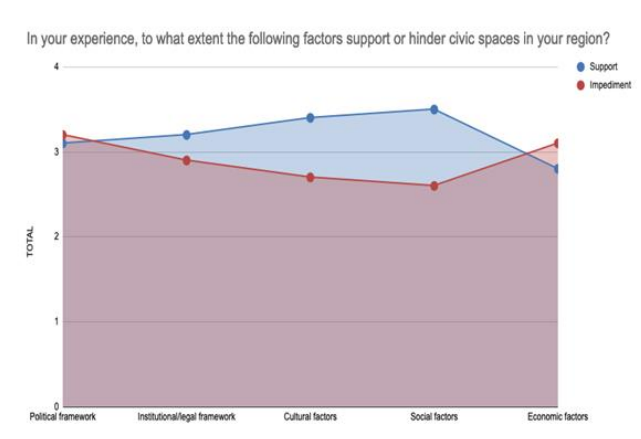


Fig. 11 Factors supporting or impeding civic spaces

- Political framework

At an aggregate level, a contradictory experience is noticed among the respondents, with a 0.1 difference between those who indicate that, in their experience, the political framework rather supports civic spaces in their regions somewhat (34%), to a large (20%) or great (12%) extent, and those who believe that the political framework is unsupportive. Among those most optimistic about it were the few respondents to the French survey and the Portuguese respondents. Conversely, the Italian respondents suggest that the political framework impedes civic spaces' development. The few English and Spanish survey respondents share a similar opinion.

- Institutional and legal framework

Responses regarding institutional and legal frameworks suggest that they support civic spaces. However, the interpretation is nuanced. Forty-one percent of the respondents perceive this support as

limited or insignificant. By contrast, when the institutional and legal framework is viewed as an impediment, seventy-one percent of the respondents consider it a barrier, to some extent or a great extent. The institutional and legal framework is perceived as a barrier in more territories than the political framework, as highlighted in survey responses from Italy, Catalonia, and Poland.

- Cultural factors

Cultural factors favour the development of civic spaces in the partner territories. Eighty-two per cent of the respondents scored them as generally supportive of civic spaces, which is reflected across all languages except for a few English surveys.

- Social factors

Among all factors, the social ones are perceived as the most supportive towards civic spaces. These are scored more positively than negatively across all languages. Even when they are perceived as a barrier, less than 50% of the respondents believe they can hinder civic spaces somewhat to a great extent.

- Economic factors

The economic factors are seen mainly as an impediment to civic spaces in the survey territories. All answers, except the English ones, indicate that they are rather a barrier than a factor facilitating civic spaces. When considered as a barrier, 75% of the respondents said they can negatively impact civic spaces. Even when positively perceived, only 48% of the answers state that they support civic spaces from somewhat to a great extent. This indicates a widespread perception that economic conditions can easily hamper civic spaces.

Overall, cultural and social factors are considered supportive of civic spaces, with the highest level of agreement among respondents. Institutional, legal, and economic factors are more contentious, and many respondents view them as barriers to civic spaces. The political framework is seen as somewhat supportive, but there is still significant disagreement.



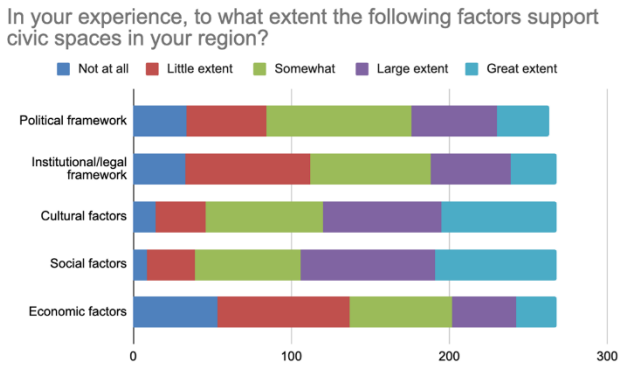


Fig. 12 Factors that support civic spaces

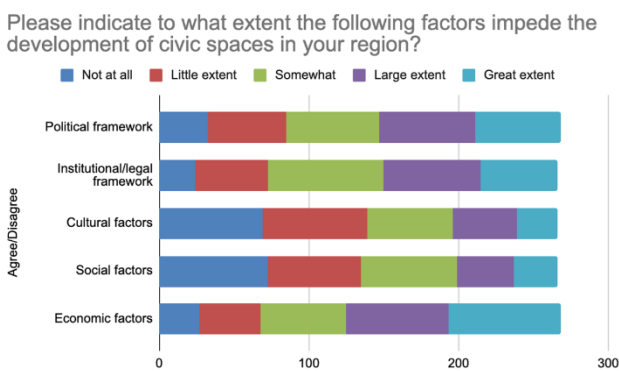


Fig. 13 Factors that impede civic spaces

## 2.6 Discussion of results

The scouting survey rolled out throughout June 2024 in the framework of the B.RIGHT SPACES project aimed to explore the dynamics of civic spaces across the partner territories, focusing on their definition, characteristics, and the factors shaping their development. The findings reflect both the richness and complexity of civic spaces, revealing significant regional diversity in interpretations, practices, stakeholder engagement and challenges.

Most respondents (over 90%) agreed with the proposed definition of civic spaces, emphasising their physical, hybrid, and polyvalent nature. Feedback highlighted inclusivity, sustainability, and grassroots governance as critical dimensions. Disagreement stemmed from issues such as language complexity and the role of economic activities in civic spaces. These aspects were further addressed in the Consortium and inspired the discussion with experts and Advisory Boards.

Although the collected answers can not be generalised, they provide valuable and useful insights about the local level ecosystem of civic spaces. Complementary to the broad literature that investigates civic spaces,

these findings shed light on particular experiences and interpretations which reflect territorial specificities.

CSOs/NGOs/NPOs emerged as primary promoters and participants in civic spaces, followed by public administrations and community groups. Business involvement is minimal, highlighting either a weakness concerning the economic aspect of civic spaces or an opportunity to strengthen private sector contributions. This idea, however, is contested by many respondents to the survey.

Social and cultural factors are perceived as the most supportive of civic spaces in the project territories, while economic conditions and institutional frameworks often act as barriers. Political frameworks displayed mixed impacts, reflecting varying regional contexts.

While the survey attracted 272 responses, the distribution was uneven, with underrepresentation in some regions and languages potentially skewing the results.

Challenges in translating and interpreting survey terms may have influenced the clarity and consistency of responses and posed challenges for interpretation. The translation and analysis of the open questions, particularly the feedback and suggestions for the definition, had to be conducted manually. In the absence of a translation service, online translators were consulted, yet multiple responses required the help of the partners to be better understood and translated correctly. Despite the best efforts of the research team and the partners, certain inaccuracies might remain.

The findings are limited to partner territories and do not necessarily reflect broader EU-wide trends. The exploratory nature of the research provides valuable insights but lacks statistical generalizability. Nevertheless, it can serve as a foundation for further research and action to promote and protect civic spaces across Europe.

### 3. Insights from the Expert Interviews

Following the scouting survey, which reflected a remarkable diversity of perspectives and experiences of civic spaces, the project partners conducted a series of expert interviews with a twofold aim. First, to address and clarify the tension points identified in the literature or revealed by the scouting survey. Second, to better understand the existing civic infrastructure, public spaces, and the initiatives promoting civic engagement, thereby providing updated content to make the map of the different territorial characteristics of civic spaces in the EU sounder and more robust.

The semi-structured interview reflected on the definition of civic spaces, including conceptual clarifications, examples, focus issues, the actors of civic spaces, types and management of civic spaces, and enabling and hampering factors in civic spaces within public discourse.

Fifteen expert interviews were conducted throughout October 2024. The interviewees present diverse perspectives, as they belong to different sectors of activity, representing civil society, community groups, academia, public administrations and international organisations. The majority reflect local or regional experiences of civic space, while four offer a transnational perspective. This section presents a preliminary descriptive analysis of these interviews. By focusing the analysis on the narrative threads of the interviewees, the study contributes to enhancing the understanding of civic space dimensions and identifying its characteristics based on the experiences of the experts interviewed. Furthermore, the interviews will undergo a second round of analysis, enabling us to explore the specificities of civic spaces in partner territories and identify connections among the discursive ideas (to be presented in D2.2).

#### 3.1 Defining civic spaces

At the start of the interviews, the experts were asked to comment on the definition of civic spaces proposed and revised by B.RIGHT SPACES based on the insights from the scouting surveys.

The received feedback reflects a different understanding of the concept.

The proposed definition resonates most with **the approach of international development and humanitarian organisations**, which is in line with

their mandate and which was shared in the interviews by the experts with a transnational view. This also encompasses the most common views in the academic and grey literature.

From this perspective, civic spaces are physical and virtual spaces promoting public participation and human rights. They enable policy and legal reforms, as well as various other activities, which are reflected in the ground experiences.

For example, the EU Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) considers civic spaces primarily through a human rights lens. The agency organises civic space into five key pillars: the legal environment, access to resources, participation and consultation in policy-making, and threats and attacks. Additionally, a cross-cutting dimension considers the capacity and resilience of civic actors, emphasising both organisational sustainability and the psychological support needed to withstand increasing pressures.

However, civic space wasn't initially a core focus, an increasing number of challenges reported by the agency's network of over 1,000 civil society organisations have made it essential. Over time, the FRA's perspective has aligned with UN definitions and frameworks, reflecting global patterns in civic space issues.

The OECD approach also reflects a variety of experiences on the ground. The expert interviewed stresses that there are countries where civic spaces are a cornerstone of social economy, social entrepreneurship, and social innovation. With this in mind, he stresses the importance of civic space as an enabler for civil society and social economy organisations to test, experiment with, and participate in projects and solutions.

A view strongly oriented towards civic space as a place of public promotion, debate and deliberation of public policy is shared by an expert from ActionAid, Italy. Although informed by national experiences, based on the structured campaigns that his organisation promotes, this approach is also aligned with the international development agenda.

*"A physical space has its limits; it is a physical space. We must transform these spaces into civic spaces."  
[Expert 4]*

Other local perspectives reveal more nuanced interpretations, reflecting that **the nature and purpose**



**of civic spaces are context-specific.** Some countries focus on civic spaces as platforms for democratic participation, while others view them as spaces for economic activity or problem-solving.

Although several experts mention the focus on fundamental rights, the terminology used to exemplify civic spaces differs across territories.

For example, in Catalonia, civic spaces are viewed as “community spaces.” They address and represent the community's needs. Similarly, as communities are rarely closed or isolated, civic spaces frequently interact and influence one another. In such spaces, transversal issues, such as women’s inclusion, gender equality, and the inclusion of people with impairments, can also be addressed to ensure equitable participation.

In Italy, “civic hubs” are presented as examples of using common spaces to generate connections between services, interventions, events, protests, etc., the interception of needs, the direct participation of citizens, and the redevelopment of social ties. The quality of the spaces that guarantee the functioning of this mechanism is “accessible to all.”

In Poland, spaces with similar characteristics are labelled as “local activity spaces.”

Such differences in terminology complicate a shared understanding and approach towards civic spaces in the partner territories.

This view is shared by an expert who stresses that, as a cross-border project, B.RIGHT must contend with “*a diversity of naming.*” Labelling a space as ‘civic’ will have different meanings for diverse populations. Often, the approach is related to urban areas or transnational spaces, thereby referring to physical environments. The expert emphasises the non-material dimension of civic spaces, which includes ideas, beliefs, myths, and culture. The B.RIGHT project's definition of civic spaces may lack a cultural dimension, particularly when considering the cultural functions that could drive social transformation. In the context of civic spaces, culture can enhance community engagement and civic participation. Participation per se should not be viewed solely in the context of policymaking. For instance, creative participation or creative citizenship is indeed a form of amplifying people’s voices, increasing agency, and emboldening action.

According to these different interpretations, various priorities of civic spaces can be highlighted.

For example, when starting from the idea of connecting all the positive aspects of a neighbourhood, the **local**

**economy** becomes a priority. This approach connects local economic actors to the needs of the territory and resources, with the aim of maximising results through collaboration.

The need for **accessibility and openness** of civic spaces is also emphasised. An interviewee identifies kindness as the fundamental principle guiding civic spaces, translating this kindness into the **inclusion** of individuals with disabilities, minorities, and vulnerable groups, and creating programmes that target all individuals, regardless of age, cognitive abilities, or special needs.

Similarly, suppose civic spaces are considered places where people interact and co-create. In that case, the focus can shift towards participatory exercises aimed at **making the space (and the planet) a better place.**

Among other key elements of civic spaces mentioned by experts are **safety, sustainability, access to resources, and the exchange of practices between civic spaces** (operating in the same region or country, but not only).

This diversity of perspectives underscores the challenge of encompassing all aspects in a universal definition of civic spaces.

Finally, scholarly debates highlighted a broader confusion, which was reflected in expert interviews and the interchangeable use of the terms ‘civic space’ and ‘public space’.

Experts agree that civic spaces are public spaces. The difference lies in their accessibility, openness, and availability to the community. Sometimes, public spaces can become civic spaces through grassroots activation processes. An interesting remark is that organising a civic space aimed at resistance is perceived as short-lived. Affirmative actions, on the other hand, have a greater chance of longevity.

As one expert articulated, when considered synonyms, the public space concept is placed within the context of the public sphere (as elaborated by Jürgen Habermas and Hannah Arendt). Therefore, it is regarded as a space for discussing matters of public interest. When this heterogeneous and informal space adopts a structured connotation, it transforms into a civic space.

However, the term “civic” often carries associations with legal matters, such as “civic ordinances.” One major concern is the perception of these spaces as rights granted by the administration rather than as returns of ownership to the community, which could affect their long-term sustainability. Moreover,

excessive bureaucratic and administrative regulation of public spaces can deprive them of both their public and civic dimensions.

*“Perhaps public spaces can be understood as spaces that belong to everyone or that belong to no one.”*  
[Expert 7]

### 3.2 Stakeholders in civic spaces

The expert interviews highlight several key stakeholders in civic spaces and their roles and contributions. The insights are generally aligned with the findings from the literature and the scouting survey. However, the interviews shed light on specific aspects of their interactions and their dynamic nature across the partner territories.

The three main categories of stakeholders are **public administrations (PAs)**, **civil society** (comprising non-profit organisations, often referred to as the ‘third sector’ in the Italian context), and **citizens**, either as individual or informal groups.

**Public administrations** are presented as a facilitator and enablers of civic spaces at the national, regional, or local levels, mainly providing strategic direction, resources (financial and/or material) and political support. At a national level, the public administration coordinates the systemic implementation of civic spaces and their recognition. Regionally, PAs can engage in systemic actions and acknowledgement. Locally, they can ensure the extent to which civic spaces can influence policy-making and governance, provide support, and manage public facilities. In practice, there is a constant interplay between these levels of administration.

Interestingly, an expert mentions the institutions providing social and health services as actors of civic spaces, who can occasionally host activities or provide support. Nevertheless, civic spaces can exist beyond the interaction with authorities.

*“It could be anybody who has the possibility or the competence to allow these civic spaces to exist. Sometimes, these things happen outside of any interaction with local authorities. Sometimes it’s something that people themselves start because they need to, they’ve identified the need to come together to address a specific challenge, and then it gets enough attraction for the local government to notice it.”*  
[Expert 1]

When civic spaces are considered ‘community spaces’, interviewed experts consider that there is no need for the presence or involvement of any institution or authority. The civic spaces are, in such cases, spaces of community management. If in Catalonia, reference can be made to networks of community spaces (such as self-managed cooperatives, informal groups aiming to maintain popular traditions and knowledge, etc.), in Poland, there is growing interest in building a national network for civic spaces, moving beyond the centralised focus on Warsaw to foster connections across the country. This effort aims to create support networks that bridge regional disparities, addressing a recurring gap in national-level coordination. These two experiences reflect two approaches to civic spaces: bottom-up and top-down. One of the interviewed experts stresses that both should co-exist.

It is recognised that civic spaces often employ collective and community governance models, fostering inclusivity and shared responsibilities.

However, institutional support may be necessary for more specialised or costly services. Another expert shared that a successful model of civic space development, in her experience, involves cooperation between a grassroots group and an institution, which enabled the group’s activities by providing space and resources. Such bottom-up initiatives are important because they are driven by purpose and offer meaning to their communities. Aside from cooperating with administrations to gain resources, grassroots groups might also need to strive for legal recognition, enabling their further impact. In these cases, trade-offs may need to be made between ensuring the initiative’s sustainability and functioning within a specific institutional framework.

On the other hand, concerns were raised regarding a top-down approach to civic spaces, where public authorities may create formal spaces that lack grassroots engagement. This approach could risk alienating community-driven organisations, especially if civic spaces become overly regulated or influenced by political agendas. For example, civic spaces opt for self-organisation when PAs impose restrictive controls, such as surveillance and frequent audits, such as in Hungary. At the same time, CSOs might feel discouraged from engaging with the authorities.

**CSOs** serve as intermediaries between citizens and institutions. It is also brought to the attention a professionalisation trend within civil society, which should be met with optimism and caution. On one hand, this trend fosters expert-driven advocacy, which

is often valued in complex policy discussions at the EU level, allowing civil society to engage more effectively in areas such as rule-of-law initiatives. This dynamic has led to increased policy influence within EU institutions, which appreciate the technical expertise brought to the table by professionalised civic actors.

Conversely, professionalisation may contribute to a decline in volunteerism, likely due to economic pressures and changing societal values around unpaid work. If the shift away from volunteerism continues, the sustainability of volunteer-driven sectors, especially in fields like environmental activism and refugee support, could be at risk.

In the Italian context, **the third sector** (including social economy associations, organisations, cooperatives, foundations, and other legal forms) is considered the leading actor in civic spaces.

The third sector animates neighbourhoods, engages with, and addresses community needs. Another stakeholder mentioned here is the Social Centres, sometimes linked to a partisan political identity.

**Formal and informal community groups**, such as neighbourhood committees, cultural groups and student collectives, bring different perspectives based on their community life experiences and contribute to the particularities of civic spaces across territories.

As highlighted in the previous section, **social economy organisations**, such as artisanal groups, independent local producers, and others, are vital for fostering a dynamic and lasting civic space. CSOs themselves can sometimes experiment with different types of activities, such as a mix of social entrepreneurship and advocacy. This approach allows them to tackle both socio-economic and policy issues. When economic activities are carried out from a community-managed perspective, the civic space can generate income, and its surplus can be used to the benefit of the community, creating solidarity and supporting new projects.

Some experts also mention **private actors**, such as companies and corporations, as stakeholders in civic spaces because they provide resources (such as funding or facilities) or engage in partnerships to support civic spaces. From a transnational perspective, the idea that civic spaces should be free of economic activity is considered outdated. Modern civic spaces often incorporate and mix enterprise, volunteerism, and participation elements. Similar to the support offered by private actors, concerns are raised about the independence of civic spaces collaborating with these entities.

Citizens, referred to as **individuals regardless of their legal status**, remain at the core of civic spaces. They bring local knowledge, motivation, and passion to create and maintain meaningful civic spaces. Among them, particularly the volunteers, citizens who are active formally or informally in local networks are appreciated for offering time and effort to support and sustain civic initiatives. One expert raises awareness about burnout among those involved in civic activities, who are often self-driven, passionate and motivated. While this can ensure effective management and the success of civic spaces, it can come at the cost of the person or groups who run the civic space.

The human and inter-organisational relationships in the civic spaces characterise and determine their success. Collaboration requires mutual respect and recognition of roles. However, sometimes diverging interests and motivations can generate friction points among stakeholders.

Several experts refer to divergences between CSOs and public administrations, varying depending on the context. One of the interviewees frames the issue as the lack of understanding and, thus, acknowledgement of the publicness of civic spaces from the side of PAs. Attempts from the side of public administration to take ownership of CSO initiatives can be particularly harmful. When political entities attempt to co-opt civic models, the authenticity of grassroots movements is undermined. Moreover, differences in the conceptualisation of civic spaces can lead to friction between actors. For instance, if the PA considers civic spaces merely physical locations, which they can enable by providing venues for community gatherings, while CSOs refer to civic spaces as relational networks, the priorities of the two will be misaligned.

Limited collaborative practices can create challenges, resulting in defensive bureaucracy or self-isolation among organisations. The lack of a culture of collaboration among stakeholders and an institutional and legal framework to support formal and informal exchanges creates a gap in understanding. Additionally, bureaucratic resistance from PAs and self-referential attitudes among CSOs can further hinder cooperation.

### 3.3 *Online vs offline Civic Spaces*

If, at a transnational level, digital civic engagement is met with enthusiasm, its legitimacy is questioned from national and regional perspectives. Opinions seem to

converge about **the necessity of hybrid civic spaces**, which enable both types of participation.

The experts interviewed answered the question about their experience with online civic spaces from two perspectives, distinguishing between the **online environment as a civic space** and **online tools used for communication** within and about civic spaces.

The online civic space is viewed as both an enabler and a challenge. Numerous studies and experts agree that digital tools increase accessibility and reduce participation costs. Although less visible than physical spaces, online civic spaces offer the possibility for instant participation that enables new forms of community dynamism and collaboration. Moreover, they can exist independent of restrictive laws concerning physical civic spaces.

Several examples of online civic space are provided, ranging from [Wikipedia](#) as a community-managed civic space to online initiatives for small communities, such as food sharing, clothing exchange, donating furniture, and neighbourly assistance. One of the experts mentioned the latter as continuous practices that are not perceived as civic actions by their participants, who instead focus on the addressed needs. Another expert described similar practices in Italy during the COVID-19 pandemic as examples of civic spaces transferred online when the physical ones were inaccessible. Additionally, digital spaces can serve as spaces for civic participation through crowdfunding or advocacy campaigns.

*“At the political level, there is a tendency to identify and confuse the relationship with the individual citizen in the digital space as a form of participation. This is wrong and very risky.”*

[Expert 2]

A different dimension of online civic spaces refers to political participation, such as submitting petitions to public authorities. Examples provided are those of [Decidim](#) and [Consul](#) as participatory platforms that are often used. One interviewee points out that there is a lack of awareness of how citizens can digitally participate in policymaking, from urban planning to participatory budgeting. However, increased communication efforts are necessary to inform citizens about them. Additionally, while the shift to digital-only participation tools by some authorities is convenient, this doesn't necessarily increase citizens' impact on decision-making. Without a robust framework for

online participation, many digital venues offer just an illusion of participation.

Attention is drawn to the fact that while enabling direct contributions to policymaking, online participation initiatives risk being short-lived and ensuring only superficial involvement, which lacks the continuity, expertise, and community support that CSOs, as intermediaries, offer.

As communicative tools, online platforms are leveraged by CSOs to communicate and connect with their communities. An example is presented of culture-centred civic spaces, which can promote and disseminate content online, particularly to younger audiences. An important balance to maintain is the one between online and offline engagement, particularly, in this case, in relation to art events. A similar view is shared from a transnational level, confirming that digital platforms can enhance visibility but, arguably, cannot replace real-life community-based action.

*“The digital dimension can encourage people to get together, but then, in the end, the action must be developed on the ground.”*

[Expert 2]

Most interviewees suggest that modern civic spaces should necessarily be **hybrid, with online space as a complementary mechanism for participation on the ground**. Civic spaces' territorialised and relationship-based nature is emphasised as irreplaceable in a digital-only environment. Online civic space can be inaccessible due to digital divides, and therefore, the complementarity of online-offline spaces might increase accessibility and inclusivity. An online community generally inaccessible is defined by an expert as a 'community of practice', not a civic space. It must be mentioned that two of the experts experience only physical civic spaces in their activity. They also insist on the importance of civic spaces for creating a sense of community and trust that real-life interactions foster much better than digital ones.

Among the risks posed by online civic spaces, the experts resonate with the topics discussed in the literature. The social media's structure, controlled by private interests, limits true engagement by creating closed environments that hinder broad message dissemination and meaningful interaction. Additionally, hate speech and targeted harassment pose risks to activists operating online, affecting their

freedom to express and organise. FRA data also indicates a rise in perceived digital surveillance

Recognising these vulnerabilities, there is an ongoing push within the EU to establish frameworks for the holistic protection of civic actors. Digital security measures, such as enhanced training on encryption and surveillance countermeasures, are seen as essential to address vulnerabilities in online spaces.

### 3.4 *Success factors and barriers to civic spaces*

#### **The importance of political and legal frameworks**

The interviewed experts highlighted the complex role of the political, institutional and legal frameworks, all three essential for civic spaces to exist and succeed.

**A lack of strategic foresight and prioritisation** is a critical aspect concerning the political framework. Political pressure favouring short-term visions over long-term investments in open, accessible civic spaces can hinder, involuntarily, their development. Particularly in contexts that do not have a strong participatory culture, policies that leave room for the genuine participation of citizens are seen as essential criteria for the success of civic spaces.

The **legislative framework** enables civic spaces but can also constrain their development, depending on a country's democratic level. In Western democracies, legal framework provisions dictate the legitimacy of civic spaces and the degree to which they promote and protect civic rights. However, indirect policies may unintentionally hinder these efforts.

In some cases, EU policies intended to ensure transparency, combat crime, and ensure security, such as security regulations or banking regulations, may create obstacles for grassroots organisations by increasing operational costs or constraining their activities.

For example, in France and Belgium, financial controls and anti-criminal legislation are indirectly causing associations to shut down due to demanding and stringent monitoring requirements. A specific case mentioned was a new French law on republican values, which imposes scrutiny on associations with international ties, affecting civic organisations not directly targeted by the legislation. Furthermore, these policies may inadvertently limit civic spaces' freedom,

especially in cross-border collaborations or funding channels linked to international organisations.

An interviewee underscores that the effectiveness of civic space is often constrained not only by formal laws but also by local-level interpretations of these laws. In particular, the right of assembly, though widely recognised internationally, is often limited by restrictive measures enforced by police or municipal authorities. These measures can reduce civic space by making public demonstrations and gatherings more difficult.

He cites numerous examples where political dynamics have a profound influence, both in shrinking and expanding civic space, such as those observed in Poland and Hungary. These countries, under authoritarian-leaning governments, have significantly restricted civic spaces, often through regulations that monitor and control funding for NGOs. Notably, in Poland, where civil society is historically organised and resilient, it has managed to maintain its activities despite restrictions.

Countries like Spain, the Baltic Republics, and Romania demonstrate how positive governmental relationships can open civic spaces, allowing civil society to engage constructively in national reform and resilience discussions.

The Recovery and Resilience Plan in France is a case in which civil society's involvement evolved from non-participation to a core aspect of the dialogue. This shows that institutional spaces can empower civil society if properly managed.

It is emphasised that **when institutional frameworks are created for civic participation** (e.g., the European Semester or through consultation frameworks), **they do more than just provide space**. They push organisations to develop the necessary skills and capacities to engage meaningfully. This dynamic has enabled civil society organisations in various countries to become more skilled at addressing complex issues, rather than sticking to surface-level or slogan-driven advocacy.

This is particularly true of economic governance processes. Where CSOs have been given space, such as in Italy's Recovery Plan discussions, they have moved beyond superficial critiques to more substantive contributions.

Distinctions are made between the various impacts of legislation: while supranational and national regulatory frameworks may seem to impact local civic actions less, national-level organisations, especially those

focused on advocacy, often face notable legal and political barriers to their activities.

### Institutional frameworks

The main institutional barrier mentioned by the interviewed experts is **over-bureaucratisation**.

Several experts mention bureaucratic burdens created by local, national and European administrations as barriers to civic spaces.

It is commonly agreed that excessive bureaucratic complexity can stifle organisations' ability to operate effectively. Sometimes, bureaucratic hurdles encountered when attempting to register an organisation, such as in countries like Greece, Cyprus and Romania, impede regulatory compliance and discourage the civil sector.

Another aspect relates to **bureaucratic demands linked to funding**. Experts observed that smaller registered organisations may lack the resources to comply with bureaucratic demands. This was particularly noted in instances where public funding requires extensive administrative oversight, deterring smaller groups from accessing these resources. However, when organisations decide to access such funds, their efforts are channelled towards requirements fulfilment, limiting the capacity for other parallel activities. A divide has, therefore, emerged between larger, professionalised organisations capable of navigating bureaucratic demands and smaller, grassroots movements that struggle. Some civic groups, particularly in Eastern Europe, have turned to alternative funding models like crowdfunding to maintain independence and avoid the political pressures often accompanying public funding. Experts emphasise the need to elaborate support policies that do not bureaucratise civic action.

Another aspect perceived as an institutional barrier is the **rigidity of public administrations** and their inability to grasp the complexity and multidimensionality of civic spaces. Based on the experience of a different expert from another region, the **lack of a common vocabulary that would facilitate the dialogue** between public administrators and civic spaces comes across as a barrier.

On the civil society side, the lack of institutionalised procedures and mechanisms might threaten their sustainability when human resources change.

At the supranational level, a core challenge is the **disconnect between EU institutions and grassroots**

**civic actors**. While FRA primarily engages with national and EU-level organisations, local needs and issues often differ, as **local organisations tend to focus on immediate, practical concerns** distinct from higher-level policy discussions.

Addressing this gap requires more inclusive, multilevel consultations that draw equally from both local and national actors. This disconnect is part of a broader critique of EU consultation processes, where **genuine engagement often falls short of ideals like co-creation and empowerment**, particularly in local contexts where capacity or willingness to involve communities may be lacking.

### Socio-economic factors

The lack of economic support, as well as support in terms of human resources, training, and knowledge transfer, can be listed among the obstacles to the development of civic spaces.

The importance of training and continuous operational support for both public administrations and civil society is stressed by several experts from both national and transnational perspectives.

Aside from the acknowledgement and recognition of grassroots movements by public administrations, investing in increasing their managerial and operational capacities is vital. Also, an expert suggests that CSOs should reflect on the business models of their activities. Lastly, civic education in schools is seen as a potent means of increasing civic skills and enabling civic action.

*“Each community has its own characteristics, and therefore, there are areas where we can find elements of systematisation that help us, but not necessarily.”*  
[Expert 5]

### Concluding remarks

Civic spaces are essential for fostering community engagement, social cohesion, and economic development. However, to enable their further protection and promotion in the European Union, it is critical to understand what civic spaces entail, what meanings are attributed to this concept, and what experiences shape these spaces at a local, regional and national level. This report reflects on the conceptualisation of civic spaces from an academic, institutional, and empirical perspective to provide a



nuanced understanding of their theoretical, institutional, and practical dimensions.

A robust and sustainable civic space is the result of a **dynamic interplay between theoretical frameworks, institutional structures and practical actions**. This integrated perspective ensures that civic spaces are not static but evolve in response to societal needs and serve as vital platforms for democratic participation and the protection of fundamental rights. Such an approach requires continuous dialogue, reflection and adaptation in order to remain relevant and effective in the EU's ever-changing socio-political landscape.

Scholarly debates and supranational development agendas focus on civic spaces as critical arenas for democratic engagement, where individuals and organisations can actively participate in governance and public discourse. This is indeed reflected in the experience of civil society actors from the B.RIGHT SPACES partner territories. However, the study reveals a diverse range of more nuanced interpretations and practices at local and regional levels, highlighting the multifaceted nature of civic spaces across the EU.

The importance of diverse actors - including civil society organisations, social enterprises and community groups - is emphasised, highlighting their role in promoting collective action, inclusivity and democratic values. The main results of the scouting surveys and the expert interviews enrich the insights from the literature concerning the stakeholders in civic spaces. Particularly, social and solidarity economy actors seem to have an increasingly relevant role in promoting and supporting civic spaces.

Physical or hybrid civic spaces serve as platforms for securing civil, political and economic rights. Despite the democratising promises of digital environments, exclusively online civic spaces are rarely experienced. The use of online tools for communication purposes is explored with a mix of enthusiasm and serious acknowledgement of the risks they imply.

Institutional and policy frameworks play a crucial role in shaping civic spaces, either enabling or constraining their development. The analysis highlights the importance of legal structures, pointing to the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights and various international policy instruments as the basis for protecting civil liberties such as freedom of expression, assembly and association.

However, several barriers hinder the effective functioning of civic spaces. These include a lack of strategic vision concerning the development of civic

spaces and, related to this, a lack of public support. Even when public support is available, this is over-bureaucratised and, therefore, inaccessible for many civic space actors. Politicisation is another risk that comes together with the public backing for civic spaces. Moreover, aside from economic struggles, civil society needs more support for training, knowledge transfer and recognition. To overcome these barriers, recommendations focus on reducing bureaucratic hurdles and promoting multi-stakeholder dialogue. Furthermore, collaborative frameworks and public-private partnerships can create an enabling environment that increases the impact of civic initiatives.

Insights gathered from expert interviews bring the practical dimension of civic spaces to life. These real-world perspectives highlight successful initiatives driven by community efforts and social economy enterprises. Such examples underline the importance of grassroots mobilisation, inclusive governance, and adaptive strategies in navigating evolving political and social contexts. It is argued that sustainability depends on active community participation and ongoing institutional support. Harnessing digital technologies, fostering cross-sectoral collaboration, and recognising the unique contributions of social and solidarity economy (SSE) enterprises are identified as key strategies for strengthening civic spaces and promoting social cohesion and democratic values.

Finally, acknowledging the challenge of reconciling the complexity of civic spaces within a strict definition, the B.RIGHT project focus shifts towards creating a **conceptual map** that reflects the multitude of interpretations of civic action across the partner territories. This map will comprise insights from the research as well as further views from the regional Advisory Boards and partner territories. An in-depth review of civic spaces in the partner territories will subsequently be provided as part of the project deliverable D2.2 "In-Depth review of Civic Spaces in the EU - The cases of: Catalonia, Rome, Torino, Torres Vedras and Warsaw".

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