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CHAPTER 13

Conclusions: Spaces of Hope and Despair?

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1 Introduction

This concluding chapter will summarize the findings and explore where we see perspectives for positive social change. The starting point of this volume was to look at three interrelated questions. The first was: *what is the context in which civic actors operate in relation to 'constrained settings' or 'changing civic spaces'*? And *what are the characteristics of these?* The idea was to see how contexts influence the situation of specific settings and changes in civic spaces. The second question was related to the specific angle taken by each author: *which questions are addressed, and what are*

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specific findings, or arguments and/or contributions? And the third question tried to look at the implications for civic action: *how are civil society responses summarized and discussed in the various chapters? What would be three main characteristics or conclusions?* As was demonstrated in the previous chapters, the authors have had very different ways to address these questions, while the case studies covered a wide array of contexts. Below, we will draw out some commonalities as well as issues that merit further discussion.

2 Context of Civic Action

During the period of preparing and discussing this volume, the context of civic action changed dramatically worldwide. The February 2022 invasion in Ukraine led by the Putin regime comes just a year after the attempt to end American democracy with the raid on the Capitol in January 2021. Vladimir Putin, Viktor Orbán, Jair Bolsonaro, and Donald Trump, as well as many other 'modern' populist and/or authoritarian (male) leaders worldwide are actually coming to power in ways that are strikingly similar to how Hitler's National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP) was elected in the 1930s. They used their societal support to undermine the democratic process by persecuting opposition leaders, eliminating democratically established organizations (such as trade unions) and withdrawing historical rights by basically reversing laws (on abortion, or LGBTIQ+, etc.). The purpose was to polarize society and to scare the population by massively circulating fake news. The only solution left, they argued, was to limit democratic rights, re-establish law and order which must be implemented by a strong leader. The restrictions for citizens' movements and gatherings during the COVID-19 pandemic were also used to constrain opposition and civil society activists in more direct and even more violent ways (CIVICUS, 2021; Pleyers, 2020).

A series of national and international developments can be identified that profoundly changed the world which has had its impact on our perceptions of changing civil societies and civic spaces. A first series of events started in Hong Kong in the Spring of 2019, when massive popular street protests demanded an end to the extradition law, generally seen as an erosion of Hong Kong's legal system and increased control of China. Even though the law was eventually suspended, a massive civic movement of an estimated one million inhabitants continued its street protests, which stood at the basis of a landslide victory of pro-democracy parties

in the November 2019 elections. The protests kept growing in size, until lockdown measures in 2020 prevented people from taking the streets. Another key development was the worldwide outbreak of COVID-19 and the measures taken by many governments to restrict civic freedoms from March 2020 onwards, as we have seen. The Russian invasion in Ukraine unleashed widespread social unrest in all neighbouring states of the Russian Republic. And not least in Europe, where progressive governments are massively losing national electoral contests (most recently in Sweden and Italy) to neopopulist and right-wing coalitions with a strong anti-migration and anti-EU agenda, often openly supporting the Putin regime.

What all these developments have in common is that they are shattering a common belief in democratic norms and confirm an international trend of increased authoritarianism and a disruption of state-citizens relationships. This was already felt with the restrictions of freedoms during the pandemic (often for a good reason) with a rapid introduction of new legalization to restrict movements of citizens. Often these new laws at a later moment were also used to further restrict opposition protests and civic spaces more generally. Overall, they revealed a profound weakness of the multilateral system, in particular the United Nations, most clearly demonstrated by intergovernmental bodies such as the WHO (during COVID-19) and the UN Security Council during the Russian invasion in Ukraine. In addition, press freedom was no longer a basic principle, as state restrictions—legal and violent—were imposed to silence dissent and media, thereby also allowing a massive emergence of fake news and a circulation of half-truths on social media. This 'neopopulist turn' has been channelling general citizen's disappointment away from a society controlled by what is said to be 'a (global) left-wing urban elite' into the hands of a weird global coalition of conspiracy trolls, anti-vaccination circles, and climate change doubters, to mention only a few of their supporters. The result is that liberal democracy is threatened worldwide and democratization processes are either slowing down or are reversed. The authors in this volume have observed its consequences: drastic changes in civic spaces, confirming the global trends we already identified in the Introduction of this volume.

3 Approaches to (Changing) Civic Space

The concept of civic space is still relatively young, and this is clearly reflected in the multiple meanings used in this volume. One can broadly identify four different ways in which civic space was conceptualized by the various authors.

The first and most common one is that civic space is defined as *an arena for established CSOs* to engage with human rights and advocacy, but in addition also an arena in which individual citizens and informal groups can act to address issues meaningful for them (Kontinen and Nguyahambi, this volume). This conceptualization usually holds that the widening of civic space typically is connected with democratization, while restricting civic space has been seen as a feature of pushback against it (Carothers & Brechenmacher, 2014). Biekart and Fowler (this volume) add that civic space may also be widening due to the expanded activities of anti-democratic and neopopulist groups in civil society, acting as constituencies for the new hybrid and authoritarian regimes. In their view, civic space is not only the space especially dedicated for democratic associations and CSOs. Overall, defining civic space as an arena for CSOs and citizens groups, be they democratic or anti-democratic, emphasizes the dynamic nature of civic space.

A second approach of civic space is to highlight 'humanitarian space' (Khan, this volume). Hilhorst and Jansen (2010) characterized humanitarian space as an arena in which humanitarian assistance is shaped by the social negotiation of multiple actors along the aid chain. Khan refers in his chapter to three fields: respect for humanitarian law, the relative safety of humanitarian workers, and the access of humanitarian actors to the population at risk. Looking at Bangladeshi NGOs, Khan (this volume) found three defining characteristics: (i) discrepancies in localization discourses; (ii) institutional multiplicity; and (iii) disparities in accountability mechanisms. He sees humanitarian space to be 'more attuned to civil society actors located in civic spaces: the physical, virtual, and legal spaces where people exercise their freedom of association, expression, and peaceful assembly'. Therefore, here we see the typical approach of a humanitarian 'enabling environment' with a multitude of humanitarian actors in addition to what Khan calls 'everyday policy and implementation practices in the constrained settings of the Rohingya response from the perspective of Bangladeshi NGOs'.

A third approach to civic space is found in Pegler et al. (this volume), which is building on a notion from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Here, civic space is understood wider *as a set of policies, laws, institutions, and practices*; the more individuals can freely express, associate, and assemble themselves, the broader and healthier the civic space. However, Pegler et al. specify civic space in the setting of traditional communities in the Brazilian Amazon that are traversed by the global value chains of soy. In that sense, they argue that 'civic space is a way of being and a right to be'. They refer to Milton Santos who defines territory as 'the appropriated space'. The idea is that civic space is 'an indissociable element of the material and social bases dialectically de/re-composing the Amazonian territory'. It is a space that is permanently disputed as part of 'the different logics of social reproduction'. Traditional communities have resisted the intervention of state and capital and their capital accumulation in their territories, which has been going on since the start of colonization 500 years ago. The fact that they are still in that space, despite these interventions, is depicted as a form of resistance for decades by these communities against a combination of land grabbing, land concentration, social inequality, deforestation, pollution, water exhaustion, erosion of biodiversity, and many other forms of violence.

A fourth approach looks at civic space within a *specific civil society sector*, such as women's organizations. Huxter (this volume), for example, identifies a special 'women's civic space' as a space for peace. She follows the UN definition of civic space as 'the environment that enables people and groups (…) to participate meaningfully in the political, economic, social and cultural life of their societies' (United Nations 2020). She argues that civil society actors, such as women advocates, 'should feel safe to freely express their views and effect change peacefully and effectively'. Her point is that women's civic space has been considerably constrained, after the breakout of the Kosovo conflict, by widespread ethnic/national division, alongside traditional patriarchal structures. This was triggered by the fact that women often left their jobs after the outbreak of conflict and stayed home to take care of family and children, leading to women's empowerment as they were in charge at home. However, after the conflict ended, they often did not return to their earlier jobs, whereas men took charge again of the decisions at home. Huxter concludes: 'Double trapped by patriarchy and the ethnic/national divisions in the city, women felt silenced and powerless. In response, women from different

ethnic/national communities started getting together to learn, work and travel as part of their participation in women's empowerment initiatives facilitated by local and international organisations'. This then is what she has labelled as a 'women's civic space' for peace, which is rather different from previous notions that generally emphasize a wider enabling environment.

Still, the various conceptualizations of civic space do not really seem to contradict each other, as they are all specifications of the same idea that was articulated by CIVICUS (2016) as 'the place, physical, virtual, and legal, where people exercise their rights to freedom of association, expression, and peaceful assembly'. What is clear from the chapters is that these various spaces were all changing in some way or another. Gaventa and Anderson (this volume) argue that after a period of democratic gains, we have entered a period of 'democratic reversal'. They refer to Tilly and Tarrow (2015) who speak of the 'new normal' of hybrid regimes—combining some elements of democratic representation with the hallmarks of authoritarianism and intolerance of dissent (Alizada et al., 2021; Repucci & Slipowitz, 2021). A clear example of this new hybrid regime discussed in this volume is Brazil. Mendonça et al. (this volume) describe the rise of conservative governments in all spheres of public authority, of course culminating in the election of the populist Brazilian president Bolsonaro in 2018. The result was that many civil society organizations were forced to close down, and that others were threatened in their existence. Speaking of Brazilian philanthropy, Mendonça et al. point at the aggravation of social inequalities and the increase of vulnerabilities of the marginalized. Despite this, they detected 'an explosion of mobilizations and donations provided by corporations, wealthy families and individual donors'. In fact, this was seen by many as a watershed in the culture of giving and grant making in Brazil.

In the case of Algeria, Spitz (this volume) argues that civic space was already restricted long before the uprisings of the Hirak. He points out that it was already very difficult to launch demonstrations as they were forbidden by the regime. In addition, all kinds of obstacles were created for establishing and funding nongovernmental organizations (NGOs); in addition, the media were censored and intimidated in order not to report on civic resistance. It was the popular resistance and mobilization that opened up civic space, even though the regime quickly responded with a combination of co-optation and repression to regain control. By the time the Hirak movement restarted, it was soon faced with all kinds of

repression, which illustrated that the gains made in civic space expansion had been lost again.

A similar experience is reported by Kontinen and Nguyahambi (this volume) referring to Tanzania, which has democratic institutions and allows multiple political parties, but basically has been ruled by a single party that has hindered large-scale mobilization by opposition parties. The authors refer to several examples in which civic space was restricted by the regime: (i) restriction of NGO activities by bureaucratic harassment and reporting requirements; (ii) vilification by highlighting stereotypes of NGOs as *wakorofi* (trouble-makers) and/or agents of imperialists; (iii) critique of foreign NGOs campaigning for gay rights as 'colonial', thereby stressing African culture. In addition, the government restricted civic space during campaigns and elections by slowing down the internet, controlling social media, and excluding particular CSOs from voter education activities. Especially after the 2020 elections, demonstrations against election fraud organized by the opposition forces were hindered by security forces, leading to the arrest of many opposition members. Kontinen and Nguyahambi argue that 'this closing of civic space and co-opting civil society action was part of the new politics of African socialism, which revolved around one party'.

Policies to control the COVID-19 pandemic often were another instrument to limit civic space. In the case of Sri Lanka, Fernando (this volume) describes how the chief of the armed forces was appointed to head the National Operations Centre on COVID-19. Special intelligence units of the military and the police carried out search operations for contact tracing and arrests of those who violated curfew and quarantine regulations. In fact, the entire health infrastructure was militarized with quarantine centres run by military personnel and their camps. Gaventa and Anderson argue that the pandemic 'led governments around the world to legislate, regulate, and police more aggressively and autocratically in the name of public health'. Sometimes, these restrictions of civil liberties were seen as acceptable, given the general state of uncertainty that required severe measures in order to safeguard the public health system. But in several countries, they reported extreme effects of these restrictions such as heavy policing of lockdowns and mobility restrictions which led to extra-judicial deaths, as well as providing opportunities for sexual violence and corruption by security forces. In other countries they witnessed harassment of journalists critical of the COVID-19 response by governments, curtailing of press freedom and attacks on media offices.

Protests were forbidden, especially by opposition political parties, when the parties of the government were not harassed. As Kontinen and Nguyahambi show, it allowed the Tanzanian government to declare the country free of COVID-19 in the middle of the pandemic, and to refuse its participation in the international Covax-vaccination scheme, arguing that it was part of a conspiracy to harm Africans. Instead of vaccinations, it was proposed to use traditional herbal remedies and steam treatment against the virus. As such, the COVID-19 restrictions provided many governments with legitimate ways to curb popular protest against government policies and to restrict freedom of press and association.

Gaventa and Anderson emphasize that the freedom for citizens to organize, raise their voices, and to make claims have been restricted through legal as well as physical means, both offline and online. Forced disappearances of prominent government critics were common tactics as well as targeted harassment of individuals online. It echoes the assertions of Van der Borgh and Terwindt (2012: 1070–1072), who distinguished five sets of actions and policies that can restrict operational space for CSOs: physical harassment and intimidation; preventative and punitive measures; administrative restrictions; stigmatization and negative labelling; and pressure in institutionalized forms of interaction and dialogue between government entities and civil society, distinguishing co-optation or closure of newly created spaces. An important observation here is that constraints on civic space often seem to be selective, as restrictions are mostly affecting groups critical of the government. As we have seen before, also in the monitoring of civic space by CIVICUS (2016), a common pattern is that these restrictions are generally related to the freedom of expression, association, and assembly and how these are implemented (Lewis, 2013).

4 Civil Society Responses to Changing Civic Spaces

The chapters in the book describe a wide variety of actions by civil society organizations (CSOs) as a response to restricting civic spaces. Basically, seven different responses can be identified: community-level reactions, street protests, women's initiatives, artist interventions, donor-funded NGOs, co-optation with the regime, and advocacy efforts. Below, these various civil society responses are briefly summarized.

The first reaction seems to be initiated at the local (community) level, later reinforced by national as well as international support. Gaynor (this volume) notes how in the DRC, the community groups were financed via local CSOs as part of international peacebuilding efforts in the aftermath of the 1999–2003 atrocities. These community groups carried out externally designed peacebuilding activities in collaboration with local authorities. But they also carried out their own initiatives, like supporting local authorities in managing local disputes, and attempts to reduce fees for schools and 'road taxes' at military roadblocks. Gaynor emphasizes that these local actions, in order to really have an impact, inevitably had to be supported out of solidarity by national and global actions and networks: 'in the absence of international supports for such actions, local civil society initiatives will remain limited to conflict containment rather than conflict transformation and ongoing violence and unrest will be inevitable'. Also zooming in on local-level responses, Pegler et al. suggest that the voice of affected communities can speak very loudly, when they realized they were not '(…) compensated for the loss of food security and access to the river, for the inability to fish, or plant and harvest, or for their expropriation and resettlement in far away, poorer regions'.

A second set of civil society responses is quite evident in the form of collective action and street protests with a variety of tactics. These actions often emerged from a sense of moral outrage and also when more institutionalized channels for engagement were missing or were distrusted (Hossain et al., 2021). Gaventa and Anderson mention large protests, particularly to demand access to affordable and reliable energy in the countries they focused on. These national-level fuel protests were triggered by cuts of fuel subsidies, and especially in countries with high levels of national resources and relatively weak forms of governance. Despite the rapidly closing civic spaces during the COVID-19 pandemic, many citizen mobilizations emerged throughout the world, both in the North (with movements such as Black Lives Matter) as well as in countries of the South related to health and harassment issues (Anderson et al., 2021; CIVICUS, 2021; Pleyers, 2020). Especially in the months preceding the global COVID-19 pandemic-induced lockdowns, street protest flourished as a way to protest against the restrictions to civic space, as several chapters in this volume also highlighted; sometimes quite successful, as Spitz showed with the Hirak movement in Algeria.

A third reaction can be characterized as a gender-specific effort to counter restrictions of civic space. Gaventa and Anderson (this

volume) observe that the sense of moral outrage around insecurity often seemed to be a trigger for collective social action, in particular by women. They mention the example of women from the Hazara ethnic group who mobilized against the ethno-sectarian killings of their sons and husbands. Also, in countries like Mozambique and Pakistan, women engaged in gender-specific protests, maintaining community norms around gender roles: '(…) foregrounding their identities as concerned mothers or wives, or their role in defending the honour of the community, made their actions more socially acceptable (…)'. Huxter (this volume) in her research on Kosovo explains how women expanded their civic spaces to cooperate in training activities, business initiatives, joint travels, in order to create opportunities for new relationships beyond the traditional patriarchal and/or ethnic-national dividing lines.

A fourth civil society response is the active role played by artists. In the case of Algeria, Spitz (this volume) describes how artists and protesters used their creativity as a lever for political action, using popular art forms such as music, graphic, novels, satirical cartoons and photography. This was disseminated through online platforms, unauthorized poster campaigns, underground posters and graffiti messages on walls. He quotes Ben Boubakeur, who stated: 'music can mobilize a crowd, animate the event and remobilize, especially in the face of police brutality'. In addition, Spitz describes how the protesters used placards and banners for their political expressions, showing creativity and humour. The Hirak movement also was supported by cartoonists who circulated their work in the national and international press. The work by artists contributed according to Spitz to building a counter narrative, opposing the official image of the Algerian state as an Arab-Islamic nation, and unmasking the authoritarianism of those in power. Similar experiences with artists are reported by Gaventa and Anderson when they describe how hip-hop was found to be an important way of conveying demands for public accountability in Mozambique. They argue that cultural expressions of dissent and critique of the status quo are more often seen in closed or authoritarian settings.

A fifth type of civil society response is indirectly coming from donor-funded NGOs and CSOs. Gaventa and Anderson (this volume) show how donor-funded programmes can create space for citizen action to resolve pressing issues at a community level and engage in dialogue with officials. Kontinen and Nguyahambi (this volume) warn that 'NGOs must strike a balance between donor agendas stressing rights and good governance,

and their interpretation as imperialist, foreign agendas or involvement in opposition politics by the government'. They stress that civic space in Tanzania should not only be seen from the point of view of established CSOs but also take into account the views from local and informal groups. In addition, it should be analysed why certain kinds of civil society activities enjoy more freedom than others and how these differences relate to the dynamics of the political system. Khan points out that Bangladeshi NGOs had to negotiate with the authorities to ensure their organizational legitimacy for humanitarian funding with foreign donors. So even though there is a demand for a locally led response, there is a paradox about this localization discourse as humanitarian space is constrained for organizations that are located low in the power hierarchy.

A sixth response from civil society may be to be co-opted by the regime. Van Wessel (this volume) suggests that CSOs can respond strategically in order to navigate restrictions to protect their operational space. She identifies strategies such 'as reframing into less-threatening language; shifting from national-level to local-level advocacy; shifting from agenda-setting advocacy to implementation; the management of visibility, for example using different platforms and supporting social movements behind the scenes; and the building of trustful relations with state actors'. Co-optation can be a way to advance the needs of the constituency or even to promote particular agendas of state agencies, for example by being sensitive and not challenging state requirements. Gaventa and Barrett (2012) also showed that associations in fragile settings can have important roles in constructing citizenship, improving practices of participation, strengthening accountability, and contributing to social cohesion.

A seventh and last civil society response has been to engage in lobbying and advocacy initiatives. Gaventa and Anderson mention how NGOs have played important roles as advocates for citizens, as watchdogs and monitors, and as protectors of key rights and policies. Especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, new CSO alliances and collaborations met immediate needs and played a watchdog role on government action (Anderson et al., 2021). They also demonstrate that engagement and claims-making with authorities can happen more discretely as a form of self-protection, or via a web of informal intermediaries. Van Wessel (this volume) reminds us that these advocacy efforts in contexts of restricted civic spaces involves risk management, even though there is little guidance on how to identify, mitigate, and respond to the diverse types of risk. She mentions risks

like organizational survival, losing autonomy and integrity, delegitimization, legal prosecution, or shutdown. It will require careful operation and intelligence work, as well as keeping a close eye on funding and relationships.

5 Spaces of Hope and Despair?

There is a clear consensus that authoritarian (and hence anti-democratic) forces are contributing to a further restriction of civic spaces all over the world. Biekart and Fowler (this volume) argue in addition that civic space is actually expanding for the constituencies of these authoritarian and neopopulist governments as these used the key tools of civic space (such as social media) to become dominant civic forces by using fake news and half-truths to manipulate public opinion. Civic spaces are therefore changing in different directions and with unclear outcomes. The findings in this volume trigger the question whether current developments in civic space actually provide civil society actors with opportunities to be hopeful. On the one hand, after seeing the diversified ways in which civil society actors are responding to the reduction of civic freedoms, one may be optimistic that eventually democratic forces will overcome these restrictions. On the other hand, are the many instances of shrinking civic spaces rather pointing at bleak perspectives for the near future?

Returning to the relational and contextual research agenda elaborated in the Introduction, we suggest a few perspectives and new research agendas that may provide civil society platforms to identify, analyse, and sketch some hope, despite this current context of despair.

First, while civic space is much discussed in relation to the space for NGOs and other CSOs, some spaces of hope may be identified in the everyday spaces where people's agency is continuously exercised to improve life conditions and to show solidarity. After all, it was during COVID-19 when we witnessed impressive practices of solidarity at the local level throughout the world, often without any government interference. The lockdowns had reduced the world to a multitude of local communities where latent civic agency suddenly flourished with spontaneous support to the more vulnerable people in the community. Soup kitchens, basic health care, but also artist-led creative solutions, showed that our individualistic societies still were capable of generating basic human solidarity. The latent civic agency also has potential to manifest itself not only through local solidarity but also in ways that engage with

the unjust circumstances through everyday resistance and 'doing things differently'. Therefore, more analysis is needed to identify the ways in which civil society actors exercise agency within and across different scales to promote both incremental and transformative changes (Jacobsson & Korolczuk, 2020; Millstein, 2017).

Second, the trend of diminishing donor funding for local CSOs is hindering their capabilities to act, but it can also open possibilities for new forms of civic action. This may materialize issues and ideas previously introduced by donors, but in more localized ways without a need to strictly align with donor agendas or to depend on donor funding. However, as some chapters have showed, international networks and contacts are often essential for marginalized voices to be heard and transformations to take place, as they can provide much-needed leverage against the power holders. Therefore, alternative ways of supporting the agency, agendas and ideas of Southern civil society actors should be identified, also together with the civil society actors from the Global North (see van Wessel et al., 2023).

Third, while some of the developments in authoritarian contexts might seem to be 'hopeless', there is often some kind of latent civic agency, which can under certain circumstances turn into more open protest and result into tangible transformations. We have seen this with artists like Wei Wei in the Chinese context. Even Russia has shown examples of this from the female protest group *Pussy Riot* in 2011 to the social media comments by opposition leader Alexei Navalny from his prison cell a decade later. Also in Brazil, we see signs of hope with the growing opposition against the Bolsonaro regime, which to the despair of many had followed an orthodox Trumpist pathway.

Finally, some issues may have been missing in this volume, and we look forward for this to be addressed in future research. We already referred to China and Russia, countries with relatively closed civic spaces that need to be analysed more systematically as they evolve in different directions. But this certainly also goes for many countries in the Global South not addressed in this volume (Biekart & Fowler, 2022: 300). Another area that we may have given insufficient attention is the dynamic of civic space in relation to markets and financial gains. Even though there are reflections included in the chapters by Pegler et al. and by Gaynor who describe civil society actors resisting extractive industries supported by regimes for the promise of financial benefits. A further field of research is related to the monitoring (and 'measuring') of civic space and especially the changes

that happen over time. Currently, civic space is often described in a static sense, even though multiple dynamics are affecting its situation over time. Which brings us to the final prospect: academic scholarship as well as policy-oriented studies still have a lot to contribute in terms of providing evidence to sustain the wide variety of civic spaces with all its local features and appearances. Whether we expect predominantly hope or despair for civic space research, it certainly is a young and unexplored field of study to which this volume has contributed. We do hope it may inspire further research rather than provide overarching conclusions on how civic space should be conceptualized, measured, or protected through development interventions.

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