

International Civic Forum

Anti-rights groups on the rise: How can we jointly address this challenge?

Date	30 November – 1 December 2021
Time	2:00 pm – 5:00 pm CET
Location	virtually

Concept Note

Since 2016, the [International Civic Forum \(ICF\)](#) convenes leaders from civil society, media, philanthropy, government and business who are at the forefront of protecting and advancing civic space around the globe. It is an annual civic space platform to network, build trust and identify opportunities for collaboration. Building on the ICF 2020, in 2021 we further strengthen synergies with the [Solidarity Action Network \(SANE\)](#). The ICF 2021 will be convened in partnership with the [Funders' Initiative for Civil Society \(FICS\)](#) to bring different stakeholders together and create new connections.

At the ICF 2021, we'd like to shed light on the following issue: **“Anti-rights groups on the rise: How can we jointly address this challenge?”**

Closing space for civil society has been often perceived only from a state-centric perspective. Although the state apparatus continues to be the main actor imposing restrictions on civil society organisations (CSOs) and activists, non-state actors also play a relevant role in restricting space for civil society and threats and attacks from them are on the rise. Non-state actors are a broad and heterogeneous category, including armed groups, paramilitary forces, movements, religious groups or corporations and private actors among others. Anti-rights groups represent a distinct category of non-state actors as they position themselves as part of civil society but attack fundamental and universal human rights. They target specific groups such as women, LGBTQI, religious minorities, indigenous people, ethnic and racial minorities or migrants and refugees as well as civil society organisations that defend rights of these groups¹. At the intersection with these groups, other actors such as journalists, environmental defenders or anti-corruption campaigners are affected too. Anti-rights groups restrict the civil society space through discursive tactics, threats, endangering the physical and mental wellbeing of people as well as lobbying, co-opting policy makers² or litigation. In some cases, they also use human rights arguments and processes to advance their agenda.

The anti-right groups are not a new phenomenon, however, as the 2019 CIVICUS report shows, they have risen in prominence and are achieving unprecedented levels of influence and impact. They

¹ CIVICUS (2019): Against the wave. Civil society responses to anti-rights groups. Available at: https://www.civicus.org/documents/reports-and-publications/action-against-the-anti-rights-wave/AgainstTheWave_Full_en.pdf

² Pousadela, Ines M. and Perera, Dominic R. (2021): The Enemy Within? Anti-Rights Groups and Restrictions on Civil Society. Global Policy Volume 12. Available at: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/1758-5899.12981>



have become more confident, more visible and better resourced. They shape public narratives – also via spreading disinformation – and their recent victories are a backlash to gains progressive civil society has won over the past decades.³ Early studies further indicate that the COVID-19 pandemic has increased radicalisation, particularly among far-right groups.⁴

Therefore, it is necessary to understand better where anti-right groups come from, what tactics they use, what opportunities they exploit in times of uncertainty and crisis, and what impact they have in order to develop effective strategies to counter them. Rather than being only reactive and defensive to attacks they make or threats they pose, a futures aspect needs to be added to broaden the picture by anticipating their next moves, developing long(er)-term strategies and providing support and solidarity to peers and partners who already are or might be targeted in the future.

The following interlinked themes will be addressed at the ICF 2021:

Day 1 (30 November):

- **Challenges posed by anti-rights groups and their impact on rights-based civil society**
We need to understand better what challenges anti-rights groups pose and what impact they have. Anti-rights groups are not a homogeneous group and we need to scrutinise who they are, how they are funded, how they are connected to other actors – in some cases also government forces – and how they strategise from the local and national to regional and international levels, using often the same tactics as rights-based civil society actors. We need to understand how they exploit crisis in order to anticipate future tactics and be ready to counter them.
- **Online space as a breeding ground for attacks from anti-rights groups**
Anti-rights groups often mobilise online and use social media in similar ways as rights-based civil society actors to promote their activities and messaging.⁵ Online space makes it easier for them to organise at the national, regional as well as international level and is a breeding ground for targeted threats and attacks. Nowadays, the public narrative is being largely shaped in online space and co-shaped by anti-rights groups through various tactics, including disinformation and hate speech. Therefore, we'll pay particular attention to challenges and impact they have in the online space.

Day 2 (1 December):

- **Sharing experience and learning from good practices**
ICSOs and CSOs that have been targeted by anti-rights groups developed response strategies and resilience mechanisms to address them, built coalitions and engaged with

³ CIVICUS (2019): Against the wave. Civil society responses to anti-rights groups. Available at: https://www.civicus.org/documents/reports-and-publications/action-against-the-anti-rights-wave/AgainstTheWave_Full_en.pdf

⁴ Davies, Garth; Wu, Edith and Frank, Richard (2021): The Potential Effects of COVID-19 on Radicalisation to Violent Extremism. Global Network on Extremism & Technology. Available at: <https://gnet-research.org/2021/09/21/the-potential-effects-of-covid-19-on-radicalisation-to-violent-extremism/>

⁵ AWID (2017): Rights at Risk. Observatory on the Universality of Rights. Trends Report 2017. Available at: <https://www.awid.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/rights-at-risk-ours-2017.pdf>



relevant stakeholders. We'd like to encourage experience sharing among ICF participants, hear about concrete examples and learn from good practices.

- **Strengthening solidarity and taking actions**

Threats and attacks of anti-rights groups are most felt by organisations at the forefront that work with women, LGBTQI, refugees or minorities. We'll discuss how international actors can act in solidarity with local partners and activists that are being targeted. We'll explore how we can address existing gaps, what avenues could be used or created and how we can come together to jointly address anti-rights groups.

Format

The ICF will be a closed virtual event providing a safe space for exchange. We will alternate between different formats to enable rich and outcome-oriented discussions. Formats will include panel discussions as well as breakout sessions.

Participation

We invite senior ICSO and CSO, philanthropy, academia, media and business professionals working at the global, national or local level who are interested in exploring the issue, learning from others and strengthening their capacities. We believe the event will be particularly relevant for those working on operational space for civil society as well as civil society and the online and media landscape.

Contact

For further information or ideas for the ICF, please contact Eva Gondorová, Project Manager, at egondorova@icscentre.org.