



EUROPEAN HUB
for CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 2 INTRO
- 4 ABOUT
- 5 GUIDING REPORT
- 8 CO-CREATION PROCESS
- 10 WORKSHOP REPORTS
- 18 HACKATHON REPORT
- 28 VISION 2020+
- 29 HOW YOU CAN GET INVOLVED
- 32 IMPRINT

INTRO



United for a Cultural Project Named Europe

Dear Reader,

Europe is our project. It is never finished but an aspiration – politically, economically and culturally. It is an aspiration to cooperate for a better future and a European way for ourselves and for our international partners.

The value of this commitment and especially cross-border civil-society cooperation cannot be highlighted enough. It builds and strengthens a sense of belonging to a genuine European community that goes beyond the sum of its treaties, institutions and member states.

Such a community needs free spaces – physical as well as virtual – to foster discourse, democratic dissent and practical cooperation. Therefore, I would like to thank all those who – even in uncertain times – remain committed to the idea of the cultural project named Europe and who contribute to a #EuropeUnited of civil societies.

ANDREAS GÖRGEN

Head of the Cultural and Communications Department
German Federal Foreign Office



Dear Reader,

What is the first thing that comes to mind when you think of European civil society?

During the last several years I've talked to many civil society actors from across Europe, who's stories all had one thing in common. Whether a grassroots activist or an established NGO, they all reported facing new levels and forms of political pressure. Basic resources that a civil society actor needs in order to operate successfully, such as spaces to gather and meet, fair media landscape, funding or unbiased legal systems are increasingly threatened in some countries. This phenomenon has a name: shrinking spaces.

As a progressive think tank we constantly aim to think as Europeans and promote an inclusive, fair and diverse democracy. Thus, it is imperative that we counter these shrinking spaces. We believe that there are several legitimate and meaningful ways to empower civil society; we have chosen civic tech. Civic tech describes the full range of digital tools and services, developed by and for civil society.

What if a civil society organisation suffering from shrinking spaces could find some of the resources it needs via an online tool that connects them with other actors from across Europe? What if European networks can provide spaces of collaboration that are no longer feasible within certain national contexts? The European Hub for Civic Engagement is envisioned to be exactly such a platform.

The path to a European platform that brings together civic actors, tools, resources, and funding, is long. There is much that can go wrong and a lot to learn. However, we believe that if there is a chance to empower one of the most valuable resources this continent has, its critical civil society, then we cannot hesitate to do our part. We are thankful to anyone who wants to participate in this endeavour.

Together we can work towards open spaces for Europe!

PAULINA FRÖHLICH

Head of Programme | Future of Democracy
Das Progressive Zentrum

ABOUT

The European Hub for Civic Engagement (Hub) uses tech-driven solutions to network and strengthen European civil society. The Hub envisions a digital platform that allows civil society actors across Europe to create community, share ideas and resources, and rethink funding opportunities.

In many European countries, civil society is being eroded and in several countries, civic organisations are being forced to dissolve. This trend poses not only an existential threat to democracy but is also a roadblock to the current European integration process. As spaces for civil society to act are shrinking, now is the time to work on supporting a diverse and sustainable civil society for Europe.

Civil society is a potent antidote against the rise of authoritarian governments many democracies around the world are currently experiencing. As these undemocratic forces slither across national borders, it is imperative that civil society actors also collaborate on regional and European levels. Unfortunately, cross-border cooperation in Europe has proven to be difficult, as there is no central institution for civil society to turn to for community, information, and support.

We believe that recent digital advances can empower civil society across Europe. To help support an integrated civil society in Europe, we launched the pilot phase of the European Hub for Civic Engagement in 2019. The pilot phase's main goal was to identify civil society's current needs and the most pressing issues they face.

Civic tech stands for digital open source tools that support civil society actors' work for a social purpose.

The pilot phase began by commissioning a guiding report that compiled expert opinions on European civil society, its challenges and opportunities, as well as on civic tech. The Hub then used the report's findings as the framework for workshops in Gdansk and Lisbon, where invited civil society actors were able to debate and elaborate on the current main issues affecting their work and what their organisations would need to continue working. This feedback was categorised into four main challenges. They were then used as framing for civic tech actors at our hackathon in Tallinn to create four prototypes that directly address the needs of civil society organisations (CSOs) in Europe. Following the pilot phase, the Hub will continue by testing prototypes and other digital tools in close collaboration with our target user groups and partners.

During the Hub's pilot phase, we achieved our goal: we were successfully able to identify civil society's needs through a collaborative process. We also learned that connecting and matching civil society actors across Europe should be the core of our work. As we move forward, we hope to match and network a wide range of civil society actors across Europe, so that they can build community, share ideas and resources, and access a larger pool of funding opportunities.

As the Hub continues to grow, we look forward towards embodying the Hub spirit by working at the intersection of civil society, technology, and politics, and to turn the Hub into a reality together.

GUIDING REPORT



CURRENT TRENDS, CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES OF EUROPEAN CIVIL SOCIETY & CIVIC TECH

At the beginning of the pilot project we commissioned the pollytix strategic research company to write a report based on 15 expert interviews with leading representatives of European civil society, from the civic tech community, academia, and funders. The results gave us a current overview of the trends, challenges and breadth of civic engagement in Europe.

Based on these in-depth interviews and responses, we then decided on the main premises for the European Hub for Civic Engagement, divided into three main areas: politics, civil society and civic tech. These main areas were then used as the discussion framework for our two workshops.

The Current Political Context and its Effect on Civil Society

The work of CSOs is effected by national, European and global developments and trends. For example, the digitisation of many corners of society has affected how CSOs communicate internally, outwards to the public and provides new opportunities to mobilise their supporters. Many CSOs are also rethinking how they structure themselves: some CSOs are becoming more professionalised, by hiring trained staff and focusing on lobbying efforts to enact change. Other CSOs, empowered by digital tools, are

loose networks that incorporate grassroots and influence politics and policy through expansive mobilisations and demonstrations.

More importantly, these structural trends are all occurring within a specific political context. A polarised political sphere is a reality for many European countries. One of the major social conflicts of today plays out between two opposing world views concerning the role that society should play in the globalised world: The cosmopolitan world view is more globally oriented and rooted in the belief in universal values. While, within the communitarian perspective, citizens look for orientation within their social group and, at its extreme, develop nationalist sentiments. These trends take place across the political spectrum. Far-right movements and governments are a particularly devastating result for many civil society actors due to their hostile rhetoric and policies that serve the purpose of eliminating political opposition. Notably, the financial crisis with its detrimental consequences for southern European countries has also left a mark on left-leaning political and societal actors looking to defend the national labour force. Though without the same negative consequences for civil society, they are also taking on more national issues than they did in the past. At the same time, major global issues are taking up more and more space within national political arenas. During the last decade there has been a political calibration towards migration and refugee policies, the environment and climate change, all issues that demand solidarity as well as global responses and solutions.

EXPERT QUOTES

**DONATELLA DELLA PORTA**

Director
Centre of Social Movements Studies
Scuola Normale Superiore

“As a start, public institutions should act in their own self-interest and reflect on why they need civil society in order to function well. Institutions may find it easier to bypass moral discussions, which are inherent to all civil societies. But when public institutions are aligned with civil society, they will have the right built-in mechanisms and basic structures to work in and for that same society. The premise for this sort of alignment is a well-informed public consisting of active citizens who are able and willing to engage in political debate amongst each other.”

**AMANDINE CRESPY**

Associate Professor
Université libre de Bruxelles

“There has been a process of professionalisation of CSOs which have tried to gain influence on decision makers. To do that, they have increasingly used what we call repertoires of actions which are very similar to the repertoires of actions of decision makers. This means it is more technocratic, it is more professional, it is more about lobbying than about mass protest on the streets. For this reason, a number of organisations have lost touch with grassroots movements to a certain extent and have become more moderate and less radical. And as a reaction to that, a number of movements have emerged completely separately from organisations.”

**CHRIS WORMAN**

Vice President
Alliances and Program Development
TechSoup

“Civil society knows its problems and needs tools to solve them. Civic tech communities want what they build used. The two have got to cooperate to ensure the right tools are built and fit for purpose. Benefits of doing so go beyond tools. If civil society is engaged in design, they become more sophisticated technology users and, subsequently, stakeholders in digitalizing economies – aware of what tech can do for them, risks of exclusion, etc... they become aware of their potential as a stakeholder and ally in driving for policies that ensure they and their communities get the best out of tech.”



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Shrinking Spaces and other Challenges for Civil Society in Europe

Civil society actors face many operational obstacles. Funding often only supports short term work, its distribution can be politicised and restricted by governments that oppose civil society, and less-established organisations lack the know-how on how to gain significant sums of funding. The organisations must consider several factors when adopting new technology to optimise their daily work. Additionally, many respondents detailed the difficulty of doing work that traditionally has been done by the public sector or competing with the for-profit commercial sector.

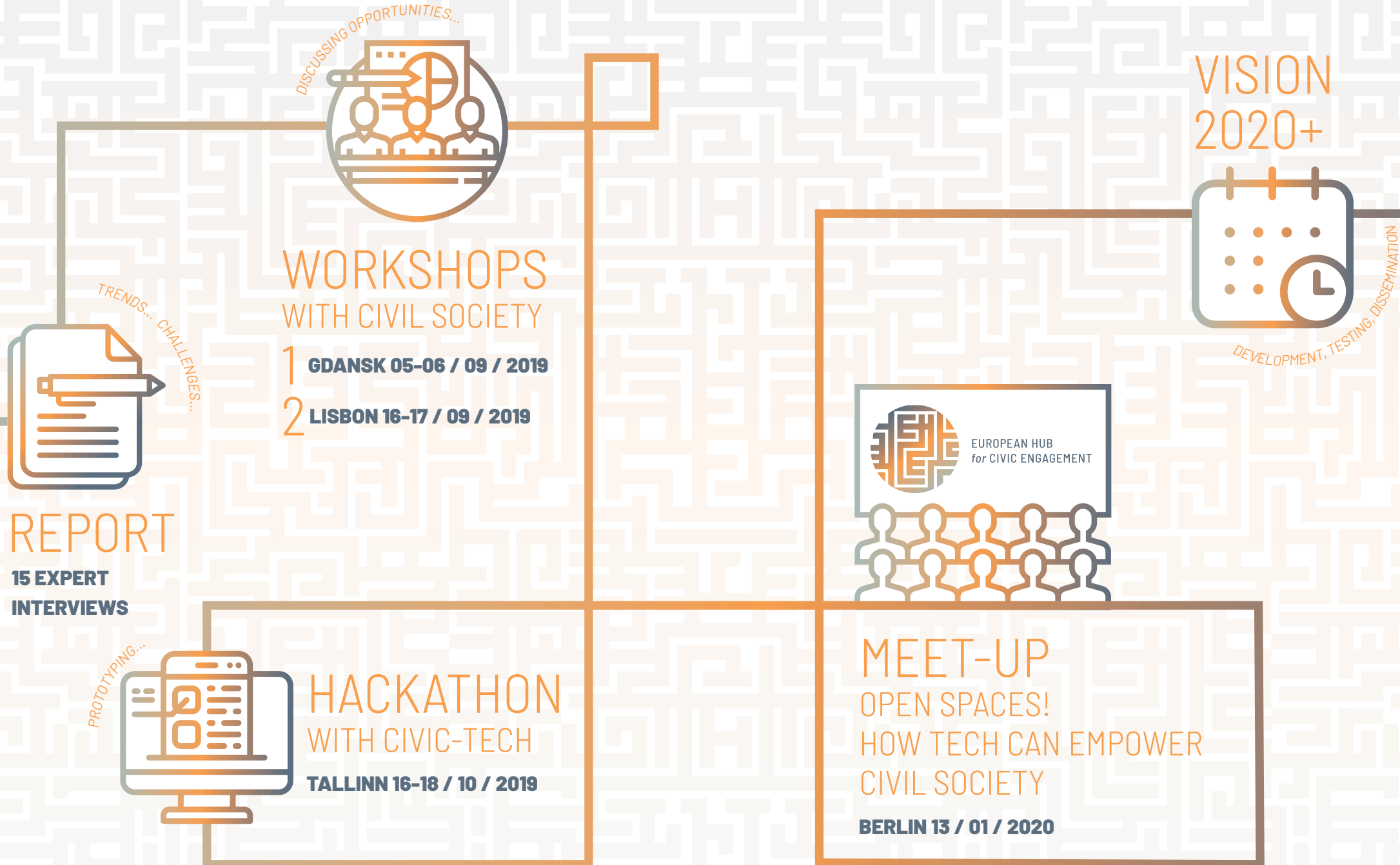
These challenges are multiplied within certain political spaces. Authoritarian governments have passed laws that restrict both domestic and foreign funding for CSOs, limiting the national space in which they can operate. Spatial issues also play a role in determining how CSOs can collaborate outside of national borders, and also within and between urban and rural locations. Whether the space to act politically is shrinking or is difficult to bridge due to geographical reasons, it is clear that these challenges need to be reframed within new conceptions of space.

New Opportunities with Civic Tech

The trends and challenges named above need responses on several levels. Tech-driven solutions are a clear way forward. Technology can give organisations access to tools, resources, networks, and the opportunity to exchange ideas. However, there was no agreement between the interviewees on what civic tech is, nor on its exact purpose for civil society. While some understood civic tech to be a non-profit mechanism and an open source technology for civil society, others considered it to be a commercial tool, that isn't necessarily for non-profit or open source.

There was, however, an agreement from the vast majority of civil society actors interviewed that stronger networks supported by digital tools would be desirable and effective. The consensus was that transnational collaboration is necessary to address the issues that civil society in Europe is currently facing. Also, there was enthusiasm among the interviewees to participate in such a project, if the Hub could coordinate and support a digital platform or digital tools that bring organisations together as a transnational network.

CO-CREATION PROCESS





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REPORT FROM THE WORKSHOPS IN GDANSK AND LISBON





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In September 2019, we hosted two workshops in Gdansk, Poland and Lisbon, Portugal, with an inspiring mix of 42 civil society representatives from 23 European countries.

Using the commissioned guiding report as a framework, the discussion-rich workshops were able to pinpoint and expand on exactly what is needed to strengthen civic engagement and collaboration between civil society actors across Europe. After identifying polarised political discourses, harassment of civil society, and the lack of funding as several common problems, the discussion at the workshops turned to how digital tools for European civil society could address the debated issues.

The workshops recognised that digital advances have the potential to interconnect and strengthen a common European civil society. However, many at the workshop anecdotally pointed to the lack of efficient digital tools, digital know-how, and budget restraints as barriers to fully benefit from existing civic tech. Notably, the participants stressed that these tools must be user-friendly, fast, secure, and enjoyable to incentivise usage.

From our perspective, as the Hub team, the first-hand experience that the participants from CSOs shared with us were invaluable for our future course of action towards building a digital platform. We had collected insights into the most pressing issues for civil societies in Europe and had an idea of what types of digital tools would be most useful for them.

ISSUE #1: THE SPLINTERING OF EUROPEAN SOCIETIES

Workshop participants stressed that they were experiencing and operating in polarised and splintered political environments. A polarised political climate drives political opinions to the far ends of any debate, making it difficult for CSOs to work pluralistically.

Many participants noted that these effects were most prominent during elections. Not only do the polarised public discourses take centre-stage, they also create a political climate in which superficial or non-factual statements thrive. Only through frameworks heightening these issues, certain media forms and outlets flourish in spreading polarizing information. This polarization pushes civil society actors in reactionary modes towards restrictive policies, ripping away any capacity in proactively building an inclusive and forward-thinking society.

OUR RESPONSE:

The Hub should foster community building and advance ideas on how to combat polarisation, raise civil society voices across Europe, and increase civil society's agenda setting power by...

- **being a safe home-base for networking** – many participants highlighted the usefulness in having a central location to share knowledge and find partners using a “filter function”.
- **creating options for in-person meetings** – which is what brings organisations together.
- **supportive learning** – there is a need to test ideas and get feedback from the field and funders.
- **offering co-creative spaces** – participants would like physical co-creation spaces, for inspiration, brainstorming and events.

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ISSUE #2: HARASSMENT OF CIVIL SOCIETY ACTORS IS INCREASING

Across Europe, space for civil society is shrinking through the passing of restrictive laws, aggressive responses to lawful demonstrations, and the effectiveness and pervasiveness of far-right social media. In such an environment, there are institutional, political, and cultural influences that create an anti-civil society sentiment in many countries.

This defamation of civil society has several consequences. One worrying effect is that civil society actors are increasingly fearful of being monitored by the state and the right to express their opinion, resulting in a dampened civil society voice within the public sphere. However, the harassment does not only come from the state: extreme right-wing actors abuse social media to spread hate speech, which complements and amplifies state repression against civil society. Through these developments, anti-civil society sentiment and harassment is legitimised and then increasingly accepted by the general public.

OUR RESPONSE:

The Hub should support civil society actors by providing them with practical resources to combat harassment by...

- **offering space for knowledge exchange and advocacy work** – transfer of know-how on “how to advocate” between the local and the European level, providing access to tools and trainings.
- **creating room for collaboration** – users could use the Hub to find coalition partners for advocating, creating and promoting a campaign.
- **enabling people to ask for information** – organisations can ask questions that are matched to a resource that is capable of responding to the question.
- **being secure** – all actors using the digital tools must feel safe and engage in consenting and transparent interactions.
- **relying on fact-checking** – the Hub needs to ensure high quality and truthful content.

ISSUE #3: FUNDING IS DIFFICULT TO OBTAIN AND POLITICISED

How funding is distributed and received is central to civil society actors’ abilities to operate, function, and exist. State funding for civic engagement has been drastically cut in some countries, and companies have to consider reputational risks when financially supporting civil society actors. Furthermore, funding from abroad is often not an alternative to a lack of domestic funding, since it could have the undesired side-effect of discrediting civil society actors in countries with anti-civil society public discourses, or is difficult to obtain due to laws that restrict foreign funding.

These developments have many repercussions, as even basic bureaucratic tools, such as reports and taxation regulations are used to complicate daily life for CSOs. However, if funding is received, its sustainability is constantly in doubt. These issues are more challenging for young organisations; a lack of knowledge on how to draft applications only enforces the barriers to access the limited funding available.

OUR RESPONSE:

The Hub should make funding possibilities and know-how more accessible by...

- **matching organisations** with appropriate funders.
- **providing information** on how the funding process functions and how to write a successful application.
- **supporting transparency** – the Hub should support funding mechanisms that encourage clear funding structures, and encourage processes that are clear and transparent.



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What made these workshops so effective?

We utilised a bottom-up approach of involving civil society actors in the development process that can help us build tailor-made solutions for their unique daily working challenges. The workshops were able to give civil society actors a voice in the creation process; a collaborative approach that is also at the core of the project itself.



REPORT FROM
THE HACKATHON
IN TALLINN



EUROPEAN HUB
for CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

>Welcome
Welcome
Welcome
To
Tallinn

EE

PROTOTYPES THAT ADDRESS EUROPEAN CIVIL SOCIETY'S NEEDS

After the two discussion-based workshops, we hosted a hackathon in Tallinn, Estonia, in October 2019.

The participants included programmers, designers and civil society representatives.

This diverse mix of professionals developed four prototypes that will serve as inspiration for the Hub's work in 2020.

The hackathon took place over two and a half days and was facilitated by the Hub's partner DATA4CHANGE.

To provide the hackathon participants with working material, the issues from the guiding report and the previous workshops were grouped into four main challenges:



To help mold the challenges into a workable form for the hackathon participants, we created 'user stories'; examples of how each challenge could directly affect a civil society organisation. At the hackathon, four teams of civic tech actors (each group corresponding with one of the main challenges) then developed prototypes based on the curated user stories. These prototypes were first presented at the Hub's Meet-Up in Berlin, 13 January 2020.



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COMMUNITY CHALLENGE

"We want to identify strategic partners so that we can forge stronger bonds with mission-aligned organisations to collaborate with." (user story)

This user story illustrates the difficulty in exchanging knowledge and building efficient networks that could unleash civil society's potential to work on a European-wide level. To cooperate beyond borders, the Hub aims to offer a digital space where networking and community building is not dependent on geographic and institutional hurdles.

PROTOTYPE: To enhance networking opportunities, the community challenge team developed a "bonfire" concept. Each interactive "bonfire" will represent an issue and the members can then digitally gather around it to brainstorm, discuss, and network. Members can follow "bonfires" on the platform that group together topics of interest, civil society actors, and the locations of civil society projects and endeavours. Considering the sensitivity of some civil society actors and their work, anonymous interaction is possible.

- Discuss issues that matter within a transnational network
- Learn new perspectives from civil society actors from across Europe
- Find out which issues are being addressed and by whom

“We want to access curated resources that are important to the field we work in so that we can be up-to-date and informed.” (user story)

Civil society actors often start at zero when working on a new topic or when establishing their organisation. The problem they want to address is identified and clear, yet the resources to make a meaningful impact are unattainable. However, these resources do exist. Whether it is know-how, technical skills, or other more experienced actors in the field, sharing of these resources can only strengthen both new and veteran civil society actors. A European civil society that is able to efficiently share and provide verified resources is one that can continue to grow and provides space for the multitude of diverse voices.

PROTOTYPE: To share and source information, a simple-to-use multilingual interface prototype was created that can provide quality resources to European CSOs. The platform verifies the legitimacy of resources through feedback components, which could include fact-checking, defined guidelines, and expert certification.

- Access practical resources from a European wide pool
- Share your know-how with other organisations to help strengthen European civil society
- Learn how to address common issues from new perspectives

“We want to know which organisations are being funded by which donors so that we can have more transparency.”(user story)

How funding is awarded and distributed can be unclear and difficult for less experienced civil society actors. Due to the increase in anti-civil society sentiment, countries across Europe are cutting funding for CSOs.

Notably, it can also be a reputational risk for non-state actors to financially support critical CSOs. Even in democratic spaces that are welcoming of civil society, bureaucratic structures and demands of grantmakers can limit engagement and impede creativity.

“We want to share our campaign/project that is a work in progress so that we can receive feedback and encourage others to contribute to it and/or help us to promote it.” (user story)

The path for an idea to become a developed project requires feedback, critique, and comments. Often, ideas fail because they simply did not have enough interaction that could transform it into the next step. As a result, the Hub wants to support the exchange of ideas within a secure, supportive and constructive framework. The core function allows the user to present an idea and to receive feedback for examining what is achievable and reasonable.

PROTOTYPE: Ideas are often at different stages of their development. To address this, the idea team created two components of the prototype – one for “idea sparks”, which are ideas at a very early stage, and one for ideas that have already taken considerable steps to becoming a project. In both cases, initial questions can guide the Hub user as they set up a profile for their idea or project. After completing their profile, they then could interact with other users and receive comments and suggestions. The profiles are not static; the idea would grow as it interacts with other ideas, suggestions, and comments on the platform. A user could store all of their personal projects and sparks, feedback requests from other members, and discussion threads on their own page. Ultimately, the ideas develop into a project and move over to another section of the platform.

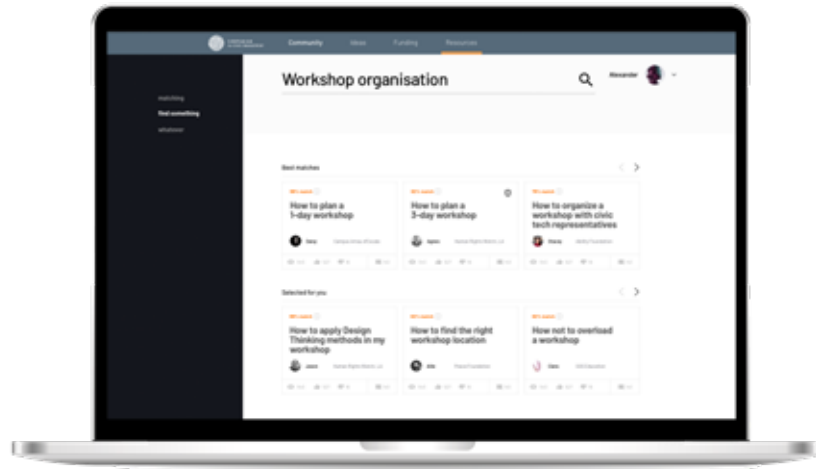
- Create sparks (early-stage ideas) and find people interested in collaborating
- Upload developed ideas and find cooperation partners
- Receive feedback and advice on your ideas and how to turn it into a project

PROTOTYPE: To accomplish the Hub’s goal of increasing the chances of next generation, growing and harrassed organisations to be funded, the funding team developed a tool that would improve access to funding for its members and their ideas. The Hub funding prototype suggests a format that allows for the civil society actors to take a more active role in the funding process. This role will allow the users to better define the relevance of their project, the involved actors and locations as well as the overarching goals.

The tool would also generate crucial outputs such as budget calculations or point out missing info within the proposal. It would also provide advice for each stage of the application process and match the applicant to relevant funders, regardless of geographic locations.

- Gives more agency to the funding applicants
- Streamlines funding applications
- Improve the content of applications








THE OVERARCHING CHALLENGE: MATCHMAKING

One issue is at the core of all of the four challenges: matchmaking. During the hackathon, it became clear that all four challenges are interlinked through their need to increase networking opportunities and exchanges between the large array of civil society actors. Smart, digital tools can provide the opportunity for civil society actors to be matched and connect with the ideal support, resource, funding, and people to thrive.

 **COMMUNITY** can be built through matching civil society actors with similar interests.

 **RESOURCES** can be shared and distributed between civil society actors, who match each other on the digital platform.

 **IDEAS** can be critiqued, commented on, and worked on by people matched to a user's project, from all over Europe.

 **FUNDING** can be by a larger, more diverse network, with the funding receivers playing a more active role on a transparent and interactive platform designed to match funding applicants to funders.





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VISION 2020+

Our pilot phase confirmed our project's philosophy: when we listen to and involve civil society actors in the creation process, the more relevant and empowering our digital platform will become. The pilot phase also highlighted just how talented and capable a networked European civil society is, and also the urgent need to create a central platform that continues to build a collaborative European civil society. We now have the needs, desires and recommendations we collected from civil society. And through working with civil society actors from all over Europe, our next step is crystal clear: We want to build digital tools to match and network civil society actors across Europe!

Starting in January 2020, together with "Citizens for Europe", "Alliance4Europe" as well as the "BMW Foundation", the "Open Society Foundations" and further partners, we will develop a community management tool. This digital tool will have three matchmaking functions: an index of European CSOs, a calendar with current events, and a classified section with requests from civil society.

To support these next steps, we are planning in-person meetings with an expanded group of civil society actors, which will also include participants from the art and culture sectors. As our prototypes are tested and given input by civil society actors, our digital tools will continue to organically grow. That is precisely our goal for 2020: to grow our digital platform through connecting, matching, and networking civil society actors across Europe.

As we enter this second phase of expansion, we would like to thank all our partners and participants. Without their active involvement, the Hub would still be just a seed. With the lessons from our prototypes in hand and a growing list of partners, we are excited to continue growing our network. Come join our project and let us work together to make the Hub a living ecosystem for European civil society in 2020 and beyond. How can you get involved? Take a look at the next page for more information.

HOW YOU CAN GET INVOLVED:



→ YOU ARE A CIVIL SOCIETY ACTOR...

... BECOME A TESTER FOR THE PROTOTYPES.

→ FURTHER CONTRIBUTION...

... CHALLENGE OUR IDEA.

... HELP US GROW AWARENESS.

... TELL US WHO ELSE SHOULD JOIN.



→ YOU ARE A DEVELOPER/DESIGNER...

... COME AND SHARE YOUR SKILLS WITH US.



→ YOU ARE A FUNDER...

... SUPPORT OUR ENDEAVOUR.

→ FURTHER INFORMATION:

EUROPEANHUB.ORG



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