

Civic Champions' Toolkit

A Practical Guide to Defending & Reimagining Civic Space in Adverse Contexts



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Civil society organisations (CSOs) across Europe are facing unprecedented pressures: shrinking civic space, reputational attacks, disinformation, financial fragility, and burnout. Yet they remain at the heart of democratic resilience – defending rights, providing essential services, and creating spaces for participation and solidarity.

This toolkit was developed as part of the **CivicChampions project**, which aims to strengthen civic resilience, advocacy, and cooperation among civil society organizations in Bulgaria, Greece, Italy, and Cyprus. It draws on comparative research, national reports, and capacity-building practices across Europe.

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Guide Overview

This guide is a hands-on companion to the **CivicChampions seminar series** – created for civil society organisations, grassroots collectives, youth networks, and human rights defenders working in increasingly volatile environments. Grounded in the experiences of CSOs in **Bulgaria, Greece, Cyprus, and Italy**, this toolkit supports actors beyond borders – especially those working in small cities, rural areas, or informal networks. Whether you’re responding to legal threats, digital attacks, shrinking participation, or burnout, this Practical Guide equips you with tested tools, smart templates, and regionally relevant resources to help you build resilience, strategic influence, and sustainable civic structures.

How to Use It

The toolkit is **modular**: each chapter can be read separately depending on your needs. It combines **concepts, case examples, and ready-to-use tools** such as checklists, reflection boxes, and practical exercises. It is designed for **workshops, self-study, or organizational training**. You can use it both for **strategic planning** and for **day-to-day activism**.

- **Workshops:** Use annex templates for group exercises.
- **Organisational planning:** Apply checklists, audits, and role maps.
- **Advocacy campaigns:** Adapt tools for coalition-building, communication, or foresight.
- **Self-study:** Reflect with guiding questions and case examples.



Table of Contents

Introduction: Civic Resilience in Uncertain Times	5
Chapter 1: Legal Self-Defence for CSOs.....	9
Chapter 2: Advocacy & Policy Participation Tools.....	14
Chapter 3: Digital Defence & Cyber Hygiene.....	18
Chapter 4: Early Warning & Civic Foresight	21
Chapter 5: Strategic Communication & Disinformation Response	24
Chapter 6: Inclusive Participation & Intersectional Practice.....	27
Chapter 7: Stronger Together – Coalition-Building & Consortium Design.....	31
Chapter 8: Financial Diversification & Project Management	35
Chapter 9: Closing Reflections & Next Steps.....	38
Annex I – Resource Compendium	40
Annex II – Training Roll-Out Plan.....	43
Seminar 1: Defending Civil Space – Legal Literacy, Advocacy & Digital Defence in a Hostile Environment.....	43
Seminar 2: Messaging That Matters – Strategic Communication, Counter-Narratives and Inclusive Civic Participation	45
Seminar 3: Reimagining Civic Space Across Borders: Collaboration, Solidarity, and Shared Futures.....	46
Annex A – Legal Resources & Networks (Chapter I).....	50
Annex B – Advocacy & Policy Participation Tools (Chapter II)	53
Annex C – Digital Defence Tools (Chapter III).....	54
Annex D – Early Warning & Civic Foresight Tools (Chapter IV)	55
Annex E – Strategic Communication & Disinformation Response Tools (Chapter V)	57
Annex F – Inclusive Participation & Intersectional Practice Tools (Chapter VI)	60
Annex G – Coalition-Building & Consortium Design Tools (Chapter VII).....	63

Introduction: Civic Resilience in Uncertain Times

Who is this guide for?

This toolkit has been designed for **civil society organizations (CSOs), grassroots initiatives, and activists** working in Bulgaria, Greece, Cyprus, and Italy, as well as in broader European contexts where civic actors face comparable challenges in upholding their mission and even running their day-to-day operations. It is particularly oriented towards **small and medium-sized organizations**, informal groups, and young activists who often lack the institutional support systems available to larger NGOs but who nonetheless play a crucial role in defending democracy, community rights, and social justice.

The guide also aims to support **trainers, educators, and facilitators** who work with civil society and civic activists. Each section of the toolkit can be used to deliver capacity-building seminars, community workshops, or training-of-trainers sessions. Equally, it can serve as a **standalone self-help resource**, allowing organizations and individuals to draw on specific sections that meet their immediate needs (e.g., improving digital security, building coalitions, or strengthening advocacy skills).

Importantly, this guide was co-developed with input from **country reports and needs assessments** produced in the framework of the CivicChampions project (2024–2025). These reports highlighted the structural challenges CSOs face in the four focus countries, ranging from political polarization and economic precarity to disinformation and digital threats. The toolkit responds directly to these findings, ensuring contextual relevance.

Why now? Shrinking civic space and rising pressures

The past decade has seen a **marked decline in civic space globally**, with Europe no exception. Across different countries, and particularly in Southern and Eastern member states, civil society has come under significant pressure. CIVICUS Monitor (2024)¹ reports that **over 80% of the world's population now lives in countries where civic freedoms are restricted**. Civil society organizations are experiencing a dual squeeze: from **state-led pressures**, such as restrictive NGO laws, funding limitations, and stigmatization campaigns; and from **broader societal shifts**, including disinformation, polarization, and mistrust (FRA, 2022).

The **CivicChampions Country Reports** (Bulgaria, Greece, Cyprus, Italy) highlight a shared set of challenges:

- **Legal and administrative pressures:** burdensome registration procedures, weak consultation mechanisms, and selective application of laws.
- **Financial precarity:** over-reliance on short-term project funding, limited access to core or institutional support, and growing dependence on foreign donors.

¹ CIVICUS Monitor (2024). *Tracking Civic Space*. <https://monitor.civicus.org/>

- **Public distrust and polarization:** increasing anti-NGO rhetoric, stigmatization of human rights defenders, and growing disinformation campaigns portraying CSOs as “foreign agents” or “elite-driven.”
- **Geopolitical and socio-economic pressures:** the COVID-19 pandemic, war in Ukraine, and cost-of-living crises have intensified inequalities and increased demands on CSOs, even as their space to act has narrowed.

In **Bulgaria**, for example, the **CivicChampions Country Report** documents how civil society is often viewed with suspicion, and NGOs are accused of being “foreign agents” when they challenge entrenched power structures. At the same time, **low trust in institutions and high levels of corruption** weaken the enabling environment for CSOs. In **Greece**, austerity and economic crisis have left many organizations underfunded and over-reliant on precarious project-based support. **Cyprus** experiences limited recognition of NGOs as legitimate policy partners and struggles with North-South divisions. In **Italy**, despite a strong legal framework, many CSOs encounter bureaucratic obstacles and challenges to civic participation.

At the European level, reports by **CIVICUS**² and the **European Civic Forum**³ confirm these regional patterns, showing that shrinking civic space is no longer limited to Central and Eastern Europe but has become a pan-European concern.

The urgency of strengthening civil society capacities has been compounded by **new geopolitical and technological pressures**. Russia’s war in Ukraine has revived questions of democratic resilience and foreign influence in the EU. Meanwhile, digital spaces – once heralded as tools for democratization – have become sites of surveillance, harassment, and disinformation. For activists and CSOs, operating in this context requires not only technical skills but also **resilience strategies** that allow them to survive, adapt, and continue their work in hostile environments.

Building resilience as a civic imperative

In this context, CSOs need practical ways to stay active, safe, and effective. This guide focuses on exactly that.. Resilience does not mean mere survival, but the ability to **adapt to disruption, sustain critical functions, and innovate under pressure**⁴. For CSOs, resilience involves financial diversification, stronger alliances, and improved digital and security practices. It also requires emotional and organizational well-being to avoid burnout and sustain civic engagement over the long term.

Thus, this toolkit emerges **at a critical moment**: it provides practical strategies to help civil society actors navigate these pressures while maintaining their values, credibility, and capacity to act as watchdogs, service providers, and community builders

Throughout the following pages, we will be looking at several key dimensions of resilience:

² <https://monitor.civicus.org/>.

³ Civic Space Report 2025, <https://civic-forum.eu/>

⁴ Boin, A., & van Eeten, M. J. G. (2013). The resilient organization. *Public Management Review*, 15(3), 429–445. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2013.769856>.

- **Organizational resilience**, i.e., the ability of CSOs to maintain continuity, manage risks, and ensure financial sustainability.
- **Advocacy resilience** – sustaining public trust, shaping narratives, and resisting disinformation or delegitimisation.
- **Digital resilience** – protecting sensitive information, countering cyberattacks, and using digital tools safely and effectively.
- **Collective resilience**, i.e., the strength of networks, coalitions, and partnerships that allow civil society to act collectively even in polarized or repressive contexts.
- **Psychological resilience**, i.e., the capacity of activists and staff members to maintain wellbeing, avoid burnout, and continue meaningful engagement despite pressures.

This guide emphasizes resilience as a **practical and actionable approach**, grounded in everyday civil society struggles. It provides resources for strengthening internal governance, improving advocacy effectiveness, safeguarding digital presence, and fostering cooperation across borders.

How to use this Practical Guide

The Civic Champions‘ Toolkit has been structured to allow **flexible use**. It can be approached in two complementary ways:

1. **Seminar-linked use** – The toolkit is closely tied to the **CivicChampions seminar series**, which consists of three structured sessions (two national and one transnational). Trainers and facilitators can use the corresponding sections of the toolkit as preparatory or follow-up material, adapting them to the specific contexts of participants.
 - **Session 1 (National)**: Civic resilience, advocacy, and communication.
 - **Session 2 (National)**: Digital security, coalition-building, and financial sustainability.
 - **Session 3 (Transnational)**: Cross-country solidarity, European networking, and comparative learning.
2. **Standalone reference** – Activists or organizations can use the toolkit independently, consulting specific sections when facing challenges such as financial instability, coalition fatigue, or digital harassment. Each chapter of the toolkit is self-contained, allowing CSOs, activists, or educators to **pick and choose sections** according to their needs. For example, an organisation facing cyberattacks may turn directly to the digital security section, while another struggling with funding may focus on financial sustainability.

What You Will Find in Each Chapter

- **Chapter 1: Legal Self-Defence for CSOs** provides rights snapshots, tools to identify legal risks, and guidance for responding to harassment or SLAPP suits. It includes sample emergency protocols, role-play exercises, and resources for legal aid.
- **Chapter 2: Advocacy & Policy Participation Tools** shows how CSOs can intervene strategically in policymaking, with templates for advocacy, entry point mapping, coalition letters, and case studies of successful campaigns.
- **Chapter 3: Digital Defence & Cyber Hygiene** offers a digital self-assessment checklist, secure tool recommendations, and response plans for cyberattacks, illustrated with real examples from the region.
- **Chapter 4: Early Warning & Civic Foresight** helps organisations anticipate risks using local threat indicators, scenario-building, and foresight facilitation exercises.
- **Chapter 5: Strategic Communication & Disinformation Response** explores narrative framing, debunking smear campaigns, and storytelling techniques, with exercises and links to media literacy networks.
- **Chapter 6: Inclusive Participation & Intersectional Practice** equips CSOs to identify “who’s missing,” carry out inclusion audits, design accessible consultations, and learn from Roma groups, rural youth, and LGBTQ+ allies.
- **Chapter 7: Coalition-Building & Consortium Design** focuses on building alliances across borders, understanding partner roles, and designing EU-level consortia. It includes stakeholder mapping and budget templates.
- **Chapter 8: Financial Diversification & Project Management** offers strategies to reduce donor dependency, design sustainable projects, and avoid burnout in planning. Tools include fundraising canvases, budget skeletons, and sustainability checklists.
- **Chapter 9: Closing Reflections & Next Steps** ties the guide together, offering reflection prompts and action steps for CSOs to strengthen resilience and shape shared democratic futures.
- **Annex I: Resource Compendium** compiles all the links, contacts, and templates from the guide into one practical library.
- **Annexes A to G** containing template list, forms and off-the-shelf materials, pertaining to topics discussed under the various Chapters.

By providing both **immediate tools** (checklists, strategies, exercises) and **broader frameworks** (resilience, advocacy, sustainability), the guide aims to support CSOs not only in coping with challenges but also in **actively shaping democratic futures**. As one activist interviewed for the Bulgarian country report noted: *“We cannot afford to only react. We need to build structures that last, that allow us to continue fighting tomorrow even if today feels impossible.”* This toolkit is one such structure.

Chapter 1: Legal Self-Defence for CSOs

Why Legal Preparedness Matters

Across Europe, the legal environment for civil society is tightening. For organisations that challenge entrenched power, expose corruption, defend migrants, or advocate for human rights, the law is often turned into a weapon rather than a shield. Civil society organisations (CSOs) are targeted with burdensome registration requirements, selective inspections, and even lawsuits designed to silence them. These lawsuits, known as **Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs)**, are rarely intended to win in court. Instead, they aim to drain organisations of resources, intimidate activists, and discourage others from speaking out.

This reality is especially visible in the CivicChampions focus countries. In **Bulgaria**, NGOs investigating corruption are smeared as “foreign agents.” In **Greece**, humanitarian organisations assisting refugees have faced criminal prosecution. In **Cyprus**, weak legal recognition of NGOs limits their ability to influence policy, while in **Italy**, even organisations with long traditions of civic engagement struggle with heavy bureaucratic burdens under the Third Sector Code.

In this environment, legal self-defence has become an essential part of civic resilience. It is not enough to rely on rights written in constitutions or EU treaties; CSOs must be proactive in preparing for the risks they may face, so that legal harassment does not paralyse their work.

Civic Rights at the Core

Civil society rests on three fundamental freedoms: the right to peaceful assembly, the right to association, and the right to free expression. These freedoms are enshrined in the [EU Charter of Fundamental Rights](#) and the [European Convention on Human Rights](#), but their implementation varies significantly.

In practice, these rights are often restricted. In **Bulgaria**, the sector has been threatened repeatedly with “foreign agent” style legislation that would stigmatise internationally funded NGOs. Even though such measures have not been fully adopted, the climate of suspicion weakens public trust. Participation bodies, such as the Council for Civil Society Development, exist in theory but often lack political backing.

In **Greece**, the right to association has been eroded by the introduction of multiple NGO registries. Organisations working in sensitive areas such as migration must register in overlapping databases, with authorities retaining wide discretion to deny or revoke licences. Assembly rights were also restricted by Law 4703/2020, which gave police the power to prohibit or disperse demonstrations under broad criteria.

In **Cyprus**, legal reforms in 2017 and 2020 tightened rules for associations and foundations, leading to the de-registration of organisations unable to meet sudden compliance deadlines. Banking institutions have also classified many CSOs as “high risk” for money-laundering, forcing them into heavy documentation burdens and limiting access to basic financial services.

In **Italy**, formal protections remain robust, but new decrees targeting environmental protests and humanitarian sea rescue operations have created a chilling effect. Fines and criminal

liability for non-violent protestors have raised the stakes of advocacy, while migration NGOs face increasing scrutiny.

Taken together, these examples demonstrate that the biggest threats to civic space today often come not from outright bans but from **administrative obstacles, selective enforcement, and reputational attacks**. Legal preparedness is a cornerstone of **civic resilience**. While resilience often focuses on finance, advocacy, or digital security, CSOs cannot survive if they are **legally vulnerable**. Organisations that understand their rights, anticipate risks, and have emergency protocols in place are better able to withstand pressure without collapsing or compromising their mission.

Tip: Regularly check your country’s [CIVICUS Monitor civic space rating](#) and national legislation updates through legal watchdogs to stay aware of changes.

Table 1. Rights in Practice (Bulgaria, Greece, Cyprus, Italy)

Country	Freedom of Association	Freedom of Assembly	Freedom of Expression
Bulgaria	Protected under the Constitution; NGOs can register, but public discourse frames them as “foreign agents.” Funding transparency laws are sometimes used politically.	Formally guaranteed; permits required for large gatherings. Protests frequently face heavy police presence.	Protected by law, but media capture undermines pluralism. NGOs and journalists face smear campaigns.
Greece	NGOs must register in national registries; those working on migration face additional burdens (Law 4686/2020).	Assembly rights exist but have been limited under “public order” rules; protests are often restricted.	Protected, but journalists and NGOs face SLAPPs and harassment. Migrant solidarity NGOs are vilified.
Cyprus	NGOs face complex registration and weak recognition as policy partners. Smaller groups often excluded.	Assembly is guaranteed, though restrictions exist in “sensitive” bi-communal contexts.	Expression protected, but activism across the North–South divide is politically sensitive.
Italy	Strong legal framework; diverse NGO forms recognized. However, regional disparities affect practice.	Assembly rights are protected and widely exercised, though populist authorities sometimes impose restrictions.	Expression protected, but NGOs working on migration and climate issues face delegitimization in media.

Practical Insight: Rights exist on paper. But practice depends on local political will, bureaucracy, and the strength of watchdog institutions.

Recognising and Preparing for Legal Risks

Not all organisations face the same type of legal pressure. For a small environmental group, the main risk may be sudden inspections or the withdrawal of permits; for a grassroots migrant support network, it might be accusations of facilitating “illegal activity”; for a human rights watchdog, defamation lawsuits are the most common threat. Legal risk is therefore situational – but it can be anticipated.

Organisations that survive legal harassment tend to share a common trait: **they have prepared in advance**. This does not mean employing a full-time legal department, but rather embedding awareness into the organisation's everyday work.

CSOs often fail to anticipate legal threats until it's too late. Use this checklist regularly:

✓ **Registration & compliance**

- Are your statutes and founding documents up to date?
- Are annual reports submitted on time?
- Do you meet financial reporting and tax requirements?

✓ **Contracts & agreements**

- Do you use written contracts for staff and volunteers?
- Do you review donor and partnership agreements for hidden liabilities?

✓ **Public communication**

- Is your messaging fact-checked to reduce risk of defamation suits?
- Do you have a spokesperson policy to avoid conflicting statements?

✓ **Events & protests**

- Do you apply for permits where required?
- Do you have a plan in case of detention or police confrontation?

✓ **Digital presence**

- Do you comply with GDPR in handling personal data?

If you answered “no” to more than 3 of the above, your organisation is **at risk** of legal or reputational attack.

SLAPP Response Guide

Among the most harmful developments for civil society in recent years is the spread of SLAPPs (Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation). SLAPPs are increasingly used in Europe. These lawsuits are often filed by powerful business or political actors against NGOs, journalists, or activists who expose corruption, environmental damage, or human rights abuses. The goal is not legal victory but intimidation, to silence journalists, activists, and NGOs: the mere fact of being sued can tie up organisations in court for years, drain them financially, and discourage others from speaking out.

If your organisation is targeted by a SLAPP, the first response is psychological as much as legal: stay calm, and do not allow the suit to paralyse your activities. Begin by documenting everything – court papers, correspondence, and related media reports. Contact a trusted lawyer as early as possible. Many cases have been dismissed or defused precisely because legal counsel intervened quickly. At the same time, do not isolate yourself. One of the most effective defences against SLAPPs is visibility: informing allies, networks, and watchdogs can help mobilise solidarity, attract public attention, and discourage further frivolous suits.

At the European level, support structures exist. The [CASE Coalition Against SLAPPs in Europe](#) monitors such cases and provides resources, while [ProtectDefenders.eu](#) offers support for human rights defenders facing legal or physical threats. Connecting to these transnational mechanisms can amplify protection beyond the national level.

If your CSO faces a SLAPP:

1. **Do not panic.** Remember: SLAPPs are about intimidation.
2. **Contact a lawyer immediately.** Identify a trusted legal aid provider (see template below).
3. **Document everything.** Keep copies of letters, emails, and any related harassment.
4. **Publicise carefully.** Consider whether going public strengthens your case or exposes you further.
5. **Seek allies.** Inform partner NGOs, umbrella groups, and networks like the **European Anti-SLAPP Coalition** (<https://www.antislapp.eu>).
6. **File a counter-complaint** where possible, e.g., for abuse of process.
7. **Seek solidarity.** Contact the **European Anti-SLAPP Coalition** (<https://www.antislapp.eu>).

Learning Through Simulation

Legal processes are intimidating, especially for activists and volunteers without legal training. Simulating a legal scenario through a **mini-moot court** exercise (see Annex A, at the end of the Practical Guide) can demystify this experience. By role-playing the different sides – the CSO, the government, the judge, the journalist – participants gain a deeper understanding of the strategies that might be used against them and practise articulating their defence in public interest terms.

Such exercises prepare organisations for real threats, while also strengthening internal solidarity, as members see themselves as active defenders of civic space rather than passive victims of repression.

Closing Note

Legal self-defence is about cultivating a mindset of preparedness, solidarity, and resilience. No organisation can eliminate risk, but every organisation can build the capacity to anticipate it, respond strategically, and emerge stronger. The law can be a weapon of intimidation, but it can also be reclaimed as a tool for protection and empowerment when CSOs act with foresight, clarity, and collective strength.

Chapter 2: Advocacy & Policy Participation Tools

Why Policy Participation Matters

Civil society is strongest when it not only defends itself against restrictions but also proactively shapes policy. Advocacy is not limited to protests or public campaigns; it also involves identifying the specific **entry points in the policy cycle** where CSOs can contribute expertise, propose alternatives, and hold decision-makers accountable. For organisations in Bulgaria, Greece, Cyprus, and Italy, where civic space has often been narrowed, the ability to participate in policymaking processes is both a democratic right and a survival strategy.

Yet, policy participation is not straightforward. Legal obstacles, bureaucratic complexity, and deliberate exclusion often make it difficult for CSOs to intervene. Still, opportunities exist – sometimes formally institutionalised, sometimes informally negotiated. The task for CSOs is to **map these pathways**, understand how they operate, and decide where their limited resources can be most effectively invested.

Understanding the Policy Cycle

The policy process rarely unfolds in a neat linear fashion; most decisions move through familiar stages: agenda-setting, drafting, consultation, adoption, implementation, and monitoring. Each stage offers possible entry points for CSOs.

- **Agenda-setting:** NGOs can frame issues through campaigns, public debates, or research, forcing policymakers to address concerns that might otherwise remain invisible.
- **Drafting and consultation:** CSOs may submit amendments, participate in working groups, or comment on public consultations.
- **Adoption:** Advocacy at this stage often involves lobbying parliamentarians or municipal councils, either directly or through coalition letters and public statements.
- **Implementation and monitoring:** CSOs can track how laws and policies are applied, documenting gaps, abuses, or successes, and feeding this information back into future cycles.

By viewing advocacy through this cycle, organisations can avoid the frustration of “speaking into the void” at the wrong moment and instead **target their interventions** where they are most likely to have impact.

Mapping Participation Tactics

CSOs have developed a wide repertoire of tactics to intervene in policymaking. Formal strategies include submitting shadow reports, participating in hearings, or drafting amendments to legislation. Informal strategies include cultivating relationships with sympathetic officials, joining advisory committees, or using media campaigns to put pressure on reluctant institutions.

A practical tool for organisations is a **Participation Tactics Map**: a simple diagram where you list the main policy forums relevant to your field – from parliamentary committees to municipal consultation councils – and identify how your organisation might engage with each. For example, an environmental NGO in Italy might map national parliamentary hearings on energy, EU climate consultations, and local municipal planning meetings as distinct but complementary venues for advocacy.

Institutional Pathways: Country Snapshots

Each country offers unique formal structures for CSO participation, though these are often under-utilised or under-resourced.

- **Bulgaria:** The Council for Civil Society Development, under the Council of Ministers, was designed as a body where CSOs could contribute to policy development and monitor implementation. In practice, its functioning has been uneven, but it remains an institutional channel that NGOs can use. The national Public Consultations Portal (strategy.bg) is another important mechanism, offering opportunities to comment on draft laws. At the municipal level, consultation councils exist in many cities, though their effectiveness depends heavily on local political will.
- **Greece:** National youth councils and sectoral advisory bodies provide spaces for input, but NGOs often rely on ad hoc working groups or parliamentary hearings. The 2020 assembly law and new NGO registries have complicated participation, but CSOs continue to intervene through written submissions and coalition letters.
- **Cyprus:** Social dialogue forums and national action plan consultations offer periodic entry points. Given the political division of the island, municipal-level platforms often become the most practical sites of CSO engagement, particularly for youth and cultural organisations.
- **Italy:** Formal pathways include parliamentary committees, national consultative councils, and EU-linked working groups. Italian NGOs frequently leverage EU mechanisms, submitting shadow reports to European institutions when domestic avenues prove closed.

These snapshots underline a key lesson: **formal bodies exist, but informal advocacy through allies and networks often makes the decisive difference.**

Tools for Strategic Engagement

To help organisations act more strategically, the toolkit provides several templates, Annexed at the end of this Practical Guide:

- **Entry Point Mapping Worksheet:** A guided exercise for teams to identify which committees, councils, or forums are most relevant to their work and who the gatekeepers are.

- **Coalition Letter Template:** A structured format for drafting joint statements to parliaments or ministries, maximising visibility and legitimacy.
- **Parliamentary Hearing Brief Template:** A two-page structure for presenting concise evidence and recommendations in hearings.
- **Campaign Redesign Canvas:** A visual tool for revisiting advocacy strategies when political circumstances shift (e.g., sudden elections, cabinet reshuffles, or crises).

Using these tools encourages organisations to treat advocacy not as a reactive activity but as a planned and adaptive process. To illustrate how these strategic engagement tools work in practice, the following case study offers a concrete example of what is feasible, what tends to trigger resistance and how CSOs can adapt.

Case Study: Resisting the “Foreign Agent” legislation in Bulgaria (2023)

In mid-2023, the Bulgarian far-right party *Vazrazhdane* reignited attempts to introduce a “Foreign Agents” legislation reminiscent of the Russian model – requiring NGOs, journalists, artists, and vloggers receiving foreign funding to register publicly as “foreign agents”⁵. Under this draft, individuals and organisations labeled as such would face stringent restrictions, from prohibitions on receiving state funds to bans on certain activities, all under a stigmatizing label⁶.

Widespread concern swiftly followed. Civic movements, legal experts, media organisations, and public figures coordinated their pushback, citing the bill’s incompatibility with European democratic norms⁷. Notably, the **OSCE/ODIHR** released a highly critical opinion in May 2025, asserting that the draft law violated core human rights protections like freedom of association and expression⁸.

Complementing the legal critique, a **broad civil society coalition** emerged. NGOs, watchdogs like the **Bulgarian Center for Not-For-Profit Law (BCNL)**, media outlets, and legal advocates conducted massive awareness efforts. They brought technical assessments to parliament, held media campaigns, and framed the draft as a foreign-style repression inconsistent with EU values.

Ultimately, that coalition’s multilayered strategy – legal argument, parliamentary letters, media presence, and EU-level framing – succeeded. In September 2024, the National Assembly’s Culture and Media Committee rejected the draft law in its first reading⁹.

What worked in this campaign was the ability to **combine multiple tactics**: technical critique of the draft, coalition letters to parliament, media advocacy, and appeals to EU institutions. Ultimately, the bill was stalled. This case illustrates how **layered advocacy – legal, political, and public – can block restrictive measures even in difficult environments**.

⁵ <https://www.intellinews.com/balkan-politicians-eye-russia-style-crackdown-on-ngos-with-mooted-foreign-agents-laws-339445/>.

⁶ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/09/19/foreign-agent-laws-authoritarian-playbook>.

⁷ <https://www.ecpmf.eu/bulgarian-far-right-partys-foreign-agent-bill-sparks-media-freedom-concerns-2>.

⁸ <https://www.osce.org/odihr/593471>.

⁹ <https://sofiaglobe.com/2024/09/19/bulgarian-pro-kremlin-minority-partys-foreign-agents-bill-defeated-in-committee/>.

Reflection:

Map your leverage – take 30 minutes with your team to answer:

1. Which policy forums are most relevant to our mission (local, national, EU)?
2. Who are the individuals (officials, MPs, ombuds staff) who could be allies?
3. Which coalitions can amplify our voice?
4. Where do we have the least influence, and what would it take to gain access?

Resources for Further Action:

- **Advocacy planning templates** (e.g., ODI’s RAPID Outcome Mapping, CIVICUS advocacy toolkit).
- **Template for submitting amendments/opinions** to draft laws (provided in Annex).
- **EU Consultation Portals:** [Have Your Say](#).
- **Regional collectives:** Balkan Civil Society Development Network (BCSDN), Policy Watch initiatives.

Further Reading:

- **Broad Civic Solidarity Reaction** – Policymakers, NGOs, and watchdogs condemned the draft as incompatible with EU values ([OSCE](#)).
- **OSCE/ODIHR Legal Assessment (2025)** – A detailed review concluding the bill was “incompatible with international human rights standards” ([OSCE](#)).
- **Comparative Context** – Reports on similar “foreign agent” legislation globally, highlighting their chilling effect on human rights and civic participation: [IntelliNews](#), [Human Rights Watch](#), [ECPMF](#).

Closing Note

Policy participation is about recognising where power lies, mapping the routes of influence, and deciding deliberately where and how to intervene. Even in contexts where civic space is shrinking, CSOs can find opportunities to shape decisions – provided they approach advocacy as a strategic and adaptive practice.

Chapter 3. Digital Defence & Cyber Hygiene

In the digital era, civil society's work is inseparable from online communication, cloud storage, and social media outreach. CSOs often rely on email lists to mobilize supporters, manage sensitive beneficiary data, and coordinate campaigns. At the same time, these digital tools expose them to cyber threats such as hacking, phishing, distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks, and surveillance. For many organisations, a well-targeted cyberattack can be as destructive as legal repression—crashing websites, exposing personal data, or compromising activists' security.

Real cases underline the urgency of digital resilience:

- Bulgaria: Malicious actors have launched large-scale DDoS attacks against government websites¹⁰ – including the presidential administration and justice institutions – highlighting how state or politically motivated harassment can also weaken civil society infrastructure
- Greece: Civil society has been affected by surveillance scandals such as the so-called “Predatorgate”, in which journalists and public figures were targeted with spyware via SMS links. Over 100 individuals, including media and NGO staff, were affected¹¹.
- Italy: Cyberattacks have surged, with DDoS attacks becoming a recurring challenge. Notably, cybercriminals—possibly with geopolitical agendas—recently targeted official sites, including those of the Foreign Ministry and major airports, though mitigation efforts limited systemic damage. Italy also faces threats from mercenary spyware deployed against journalists and humanitarian activists, such as the notable case involving Paragon Solutions targeting NGO members and reporters under suspicious circumstances¹².
- Cyprus: Digital platforms have become battlegrounds for disinformation. A 2024 study found that 77% of Cypriots regularly encounter fake or misleading content online, particularly in politically-charged contexts¹³.

These cases illustrate that digital threat vectors in the region span from criminal cybercrime to sophisticated surveillance and targeted disinformation. Building layered online security protects institutional data, but also reputation, individual safety, and the promise of democratic engagement. In contexts where mainstream scrutiny is intensifying, safeguarding digital spaces becomes just as important as defending physical ones.

¹⁰ <https://therecord.media/cyberattack-disrupts-bulgarian-government-websites-over-betrayal-to-russia>.

¹¹ <https://trt.global/world/article/176566566>.

¹² <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2025/feb/05/activists-critical-of-italian-pm-may-have-had-their-phones-targeted-by-paragon-spyware-says-whatsapp>.

¹³ <https://www.mdpi.com/2673-5172/5/4/99>.

The Basics of Cyber Hygiene

Good digital security begins with habits. The same way personal hygiene prevents illness, **cyber hygiene** prevents most attacks. Staff and volunteers should be trained in the following essentials:

1. **Strong authentication:** Use a password manager (such as [Bitwarden](#)) and enable two-factor authentication (2FA) on all accounts.
2. **Device security:** Keep laptops and phones encrypted and updated. Avoid using personal devices for sensitive work if possible.
3. **Access management:** Limit admin rights on shared platforms. Only give staff the access they need, and remove accounts when people leave.
4. **Safe communications:** Use secure apps such as [Signal](#) for sensitive conversations, and [ProtonMail](#) or [Tutanota](#) for encrypted email.
5. **Data backups:** Keep copies of important files both offline (on encrypted drives) and in a trusted cloud service.
6. **Awareness of phishing:** Train staff to recognise suspicious emails, attachments, or links.

These steps, while basic, block the vast majority of cyberattacks CSOs encounter.

Responding to Digital Attacks

Even the most careful organisation may eventually face a breach. What matters then is the ability to respond quickly.

The “first 24 hours” checklist should include:

- Disconnect affected devices from the internet to contain the breach.
- Inform your digital security focal point and management immediately.
- Contact trusted digital helplines such as [Access Now’s Digital Security Helpline](#) (available 24/7 in multiple languages).
- Document what happened: note the time, suspicious files, or error messages. Screenshots can help forensic teams.
- Communicate cautiously: assume compromised accounts may still be monitored. Use secure alternatives until cleared.

A **Cyberattack Response Plan** (template provided in the Annex) helps organisations avoid panic and confusion during an incident.

Self-Assessment Tool

Before moving on, ask your team:

- Do all staff and board members use 2FA on their accounts?
- Do we have a clear rule for removing access when staff leave?
- Do we back up our data regularly, and where is it stored?
- Do staff know what to do if they receive a suspicious email?

If the answer to two or more is “No,” your organisation needs a digital hygiene update session.

Resources and Support

- **Access Now Digital Security Helpline (24/7):** <https://www.accessnow.org/help/>
- **European Centre for Press & Media Freedom (ECPMF):** <https://www.ecpmf.eu>
- **Media Freedom Rapid Response (MFRR):** <https://www.mfrr.eu>
- **Signal (secure messaging app):** <https://signal.org>
- **ProtonMail (encrypted email):** <https://protonmail.com>
- **Tutanota (encrypted email):** <https://tutanota.com>
- **NGO Support Centre (Cyprus):** <https://www.ngosupportcentre.org>

Closing note

Digital defence is sometimes seen as technical, something to “outsource” to IT specialists. But in reality, it is a collective responsibility. Every staff member and volunteer plays a role in keeping an organisation safe. Just as good governance and financial transparency build trust with the public, digital hygiene builds trust among members, partners, and beneficiaries. In an era of rising cyber threats, resilience is not only about surviving attacks but also about **embedding a culture of digital care.**

Chapter 4: Early Warning & Civic Foresight

Why Early Warning Matters

The shrinking of civic space is usually gradual, built up through small legal reforms, financial restrictions, reputational attacks, or subtle changes in public sentiment. The danger is that these early signs are often missed, dismissed as “temporary,” or noticed too late. By the time a law is adopted or a hostile campaign has spread widely, the damage is much harder to reverse.

This is why **early warning systems** are essential for CSOs. Just as humanitarian organisations monitor conflict risks or environmental NGOs track ecological indicators, civic actors must learn to recognise the signals that point to a deteriorating operating environment. Early warning is not about predicting the future perfectly; it is about being attentive to trends and preparing responses before crises fully unfold.

Local Threat Indicators

Each country context has its own red flags, but across Bulgaria, Greece, Cyprus, and Italy, CSOs report several recurring indicators of shrinking civic space:

- **Legal shifts:** Sudden proposals for new NGO laws, “foreign agent” legislation, or registration requirements.
- **Financial pressures:** Delays in disbursing grants, sudden changes in tax treatment, or banks classifying NGOs as “high risk.”
- **Administrative harassment:** Increased inspections, repeated demands for documents, or sudden rejection of compliance forms.
- **Reputational attacks:** Media smear campaigns, public officials labelling CSOs as “foreign-funded,” or troll activity on social media.
- **Policing of protest:** Authorities denying permits or dispersing peaceful assemblies under broad pretexts.

By creating a **local indicator list**, each organisation can define which trends are most relevant in their environment and how to track them.

Scenario-Building for Resilience

Once threats are identified, the next step is to explore “what if” questions through **scenario-building**. This method, used in business and policy planning, helps organisations prepare for uncertainty by imagining multiple futures and designing flexible strategies.

For example:

- *What if a “foreign agents” legislation is adopted in Bulgaria within the next year?*
- *What if Greece tightens restrictions on NGO registries?*
- *What if new technology leads to digital surveillance of protests in Italy?*

- *What if Cyprus' banking restrictions escalate, cutting off NGO accounts?*

By asking these questions in workshops, CSOs can map out possible consequences and identify pre-emptive actions: diversifying funding, building coalitions, training staff in digital security, or strengthening EU-level partnerships.

Tools for Civic Foresight

To make foresight practical, the toolkit provides facilitation tools:

1. Scenario-Building Prompts

- “Imagine it is two years from now, and our organisation has been labelled a ‘foreign agent.’ How did this happen?”
- “Picture a scenario where half our staff are facing defamation suits. What would we have done differently?”
- “What if public trust in NGOs collapses by 50%? How do we rebuild legitimacy?”

2. Foresight Flashcards (Workshop Tool)

Cards with triggers such as *“Banking restrictions tighten”*, *“Mass protests erupt”*, *“EU passes protective directive”*. Participants draw cards and brainstorm responses.

3. Threat Indicator Journal

Encourage each CSO to keep a monthly log of political, legal, and financial changes in their environment. Even minor trends, when tracked systematically, help reveal broader patterns.

Civic Space Trends to Monitor

The CivicChampions country reports identified several regional trends that merit ongoing monitoring:

- **Bulgaria:** Recurring attempts to stigmatise NGOs as “foreign agents”; fluctuating political will around civic councils.
- **Greece:** The institutionalisation of NGO registries, combined with broader limits on assembly.
- **Cyprus:** Ongoing banking restrictions and administrative burdens following the 2017 NGO law reform.
- **Italy:** The criminalisation of humanitarian and environmental activism through decrees and fines.

Beyond the national level, CSOs should watch EU-level initiatives such as the **Anti-SLAPP Directive** and the **European Media Freedom Act**, both of which may strengthen protections for civic actors.

Discussion:

Ask your team:

- Which **three local indicators** would give us early warning that our space is shrinking?
- If those indicators appear, do we have a **response plan**?
- Who is responsible for monitoring and reporting on these trends?

Resources:

- **CIVICUS Monitor:** <https://monitor.civicus.org> – Global database tracking civic space trends by country.
- **European Civic Forum – Civic Space Watch:** <https://civicspacewatch.eu> – Reports and alerts on restrictions in Europe.
- **Balkan Civil Society Development Network (BCSDN):** <https://www.balkancsd.net> – Regional network monitoring civic space in Southeast Europe.
- **European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA):** <https://fra.europa.eu> – Research and data on rights and civic participation.

Closing note:

Early warning and foresight are not abstract exercises. They are everyday practices of paying attention, imagining alternatives, and rehearsing responses. By embedding these habits, CSOs move from being reactive to becoming proactive – shifting from a posture of survival to one of strategic resilience.

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Chapter 5: Strategic Communication & Disinformation Response

Why Communication Matters More Than Ever

Communication has always been a vital part of civil society action. Yet in today's environment of **shrinking civic space, polarisation, and online hostility**, communication is not simply about telling your story – it is about safeguarding your legitimacy. When NGOs are accused of being “foreign agents” in Bulgaria, when migration NGOs in Greece are smeared as criminal collaborators, or when environmental activists in Italy are labelled as economic saboteurs, communication becomes a defensive shield as well as an advocacy tool.

If ignored, hostile narratives erode public trust, weaken fundraising, and leave organisations isolated. But when communication strategies are **proactive, values-driven, and carefully planned**, they can turn attacks into opportunities: strengthening credibility, broadening audiences, and building solidarity networks.

Understanding Disinformation in Civic Space

Disinformation is often deliberate, designed to confuse publics, stigmatise dissent, or delegitimise organisations. It takes multiple forms:

- **Hostile labelling:** framing CSOs as “foreign agents,” “traitors,” or “NGOs-for-hire.”
- **Fabricated scandals:** circulating false claims of corruption, tax evasion, or misconduct.
- **Astroturfing:** deploying fake grassroots accounts to simulate outrage.
- **Selective framing:** portraying advocacy as “anti-national” or “elitist,” even when grounded in democratic rights.

For instance, Bulgarian NGOs opposing restrictive legal reforms have been attacked as “servants of Brussels,” while in Cyprus, EU-funded youth organisations have been accused of “pushing foreign agendas.” In Italy, humanitarian NGOs rescuing migrants at sea have been painted as enablers of illegal migration. These examples underline that disinformation is part of **systematic campaigns to weaken civil society's moral authority**.

Responding Through Values-Based Message Framing

The key mistake many CSOs make when facing smears is to **repeat the hostile framing**. By restating the accusation (“We are not foreign agents”), they unintentionally reinforce the negative association.

A more effective approach is **values-based message framing**. This means reorienting the conversation around positive, shared values – fairness, dignity, safety, accountability – rather than defensive denials.

- When accused of being foreign-funded, CSOs can stress: *“Our work is transparent, our accounts are audited, and every activity is designed to protect citizens' rights.”*

- When accused of undermining national interests, CSOs can reply: *“Our mission is to strengthen communities, ensure fairness, and uphold the dignity of all residents.”*
- When environmental NGOs are framed as blocking growth, they can emphasise: *“Healthy communities and sustainable jobs depend on protecting our environment.”*

By speaking the language of values, CSOs connect not only with their supporters but also with **wider, sceptical audiences** who may share concerns but distrust “NGO jargon.”

Building Credibility in the Digital Age

In the noisy digital world, credibility is one of civil society’s most valuable assets. To maintain and strengthen it, organisations should adopt a culture of **openness, consistency, and proactive engagement**.

First, **transparency** is non-negotiable. Publishing funding sources, audited accounts, and project results in clear, accessible formats makes it much harder for opponents to suggest impropriety.

Second, **consistency across platforms** is critical. If an NGO’s website says one thing and its Facebook posts another, it creates confusion that can be exploited. A unified tone and narrative across all communication channels builds trust.

Third, **storytelling** humanises abstract causes. Policymakers may respond to reports and statistics, but broader publics connect to lived experiences. Telling the story of a young volunteer, a community transformed, or a family supported by NGO work gives audiences something tangible to hold onto.

Finally, credibility depends on **response capacity**. Smear campaigns often spread rapidly; if an NGO cannot respond within 24–48 hours, the narrative may solidify. Even a short factual statement – “Here are the facts, here are our values” – shows confidence and prevents silence from being interpreted as guilt.

Practical Tools in Action

While communication strategies must be tailored to each organisation, several practical tools can strengthen resilience:

- A **Social Media Credibility Checklist** ensures that all accounts are consistent, transparent, and responsive. This reduces vulnerabilities before attacks occur.
- **Storytelling methods** – starting with people, not policies – help create narratives that resonate. For instance, an anti-corruption NGO might tell the story of how uncovering misuse of funds enabled a school renovation, linking transparency to children’s futures.
- **Smear response exercises** allow staff to rehearse crisis situations. For example, in a workshop, one team might draft a reactive press statement, another might design a counter-campaign on Instagram, and a third might prepare talking points for donors. Such rehearsals reduce panic when real incidents occur.

These tools can be adapted for different sizes of organisations. Even a small community group can benefit from adopting a clear crisis protocol and one-page messaging guide. (Check Annex)

Discussion:

Disinformation thrives where there is silence or confusion. CSOs that invest in proactive, values-based communication can withstand attacks and even emerge stronger. Communication should be seen as a **core element of organisational resilience**, just like financial sustainability or legal preparedness.

Ask yourself and your team:

- Are we telling our story clearly, consistently, and *through human voices*?
- Do we have a protocol for rapid response when smears appear?
- Are we building trust proactively, so that hostile narratives ring hollow?

The answers to these questions will determine not only how CSOs survive the current wave of disinformation, but also how they **build credibility for the future of democratic participation**.

Chapter 6: Inclusive Participation & Intersectional Practice

Why Inclusion Matters

Civil society exists to broaden democratic participation. Yet ironically, CSOs themselves sometimes reproduce the exclusions they seek to challenge. Meetings may be held in inaccessible venues, consultations may overlook rural or minority communities, and campaigns may privilege the voices of educated elites over those at the margins. In contexts like Bulgaria, Greece, Cyprus, and Italy – all marked by socio-economic divides, migration tensions, and gendered inequalities – inclusive practice is a matter of **legitimacy and effectiveness**.

When marginalised groups are absent, advocacy risks becoming detached from lived realities. Conversely, when diverse voices are present and empowered, campaigns gain credibility, resonance, and resilience. Intersectional practice – recognising how different forms of exclusion (gender, ethnicity, class, sexuality, disability, rurality) overlap – equips CSOs to address not only who is at the table, but also who continues to be left out.

Mapping Who's Missing

The first step towards inclusion is to ask a deceptively simple question: **Who is missing from our work?**

This can be done through a “**Who's Missing?**” **mapping exercise**. The organisation draws a circle representing its current participants – members, beneficiaries, volunteers, or stakeholders. Around it, staff list groups that are absent but potentially affected by their work: Roma communities, migrant workers, people with disabilities, rural youth, LGBTQ+ activists, elderly citizens, or single mothers.

Once these groups are identified, the next step is to ask:

- Why are they missing? (Lack of invitation, inaccessible format, cultural barriers, fear of stigma?)
- What are the consequences of their absence? (Distorted priorities, weaker legitimacy, missed opportunities?)
- How can we change our practices to lower barriers?

By systematically posing these questions, inclusion shifts from a rhetorical goal to a **structured organisational habit**.

Accessibility and Inclusion Audits

Many exclusions are not intentional but stem from logistical or cultural defaults. This is why accessibility audits are powerful tools. A simple audit asks:

- Are our meeting spaces physically accessible (ramps, restrooms, transport links)?

- Are our materials available in plain language or minority languages?
- Are events scheduled at times accessible to working parents, rural participants, or people with caregiving duties?
- Do we provide translation, childcare, or travel support when needed?
- Is the visual representation in our communications diverse, reflecting the communities we aim to serve?

Even small adjustments – holding hybrid meetings, offering transport stipends, or designing materials with simpler language – can radically widen participation.

Intersectional Practice in Action

Intersectionality is both a theory and a practical lens. First introduced by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989¹⁴, the concept highlights how people’s lives are shaped by overlapping systems of power. A Black woman, for example, may experience discrimination differently than a white woman or a Black man — because racism and sexism do not operate separately but combine in ways that are specific and unique. Feminist thinkers such as Patricia Hill Collins¹⁵ and bell hooks¹⁶ have expanded this framework, showing how class, sexuality, geography, and other identities also intersect.

For civil society organisations (CSOs), intersectionality is not an abstract academic idea — it is a **practical method for inclusive advocacy**. If campaigns focus on only one dimension of inequality, they risk leaving behind those who experience multiple, overlapping forms of exclusion. An intersectional approach helps CSOs ask: *Whose voices are missing? Whose needs are invisible? Whose participation is blocked by more than one barrier at the same time?*

In the CivicChampions countries, examples show how these overlapping barriers shape daily realities:

- **Roma rights organisations in Bulgaria** remind us that exclusion is not only about ethnicity. It is compounded by rural isolation and poverty, which together deepen marginalisation and limit opportunities ([ERRC](#)).
- **Rural youth in Greece** face both geographic isolation and weak digital connectivity. Even when governments open “online consultations,” many rural young people remain excluded simply because they cannot connect ([OECD report](#)).
- **LGBTQ+ groups in Cyprus** confront cultural stigma and limited legal protections. Without intersectional awareness, mainstream CSOs risk reinforcing invisibility instead of addressing it ([ILGA-Europe](#)).

¹⁴ <https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1052&context=uclf&utm>.

¹⁵ <https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/black-feminist-thought/book226640>.

¹⁶ <https://www.routledge.com/Feminist-Theory-From-Margin-to-Center/hooks/p/book/9780896086135>.

- **Migrant women in Italy** face exploitation in precarious labour markets, where gender discrimination intersects with migration status. Advocacy must therefore speak to both gender and migration together ([PICUM](#)).

These cases illustrate the key point: intersectionality is not about “adding diversity” as an extra layer; it is about designing initiatives that **actively challenge the multiple structures of exclusion at once**.

For trainers and activists, an intersectional practice can mean:

- Mapping “who is missing” in your coalition or consultation.
- Checking if advocacy messages unintentionally speak to only one group while excluding others.
- Ensuring that workshops, campaigns, or policy proposals take into account more than one dimension of inequality.

Intersectionality, in short, is a **tool of resilience**. It ensures that civic action strengthens everyone, not just those who already have partial access to power. By recognising these overlapping barriers, CSOs can design initiatives that do not merely “add diversity” but actively **challenge intersecting structures of exclusion**.

Tools for Inclusive Practice

To make inclusion actionable, this toolkit offers several practical aids:

1. **Who’s Missing? Mapping Tool** – A participatory exercise to identify absent voices and brainstorm ways to engage them.
2. **Accessibility & Inclusion Audit** – A checklist covering venues, communications, scheduling, and support measures.
3. **Inclusive Agenda Template** – A model for designing consultations that embed diverse participation (e.g., breakout groups, multilingual facilitation, hybrid access).
4. **Case Briefs** – One-page summaries of good practices (Roma organisations in Bulgaria, rural youth initiatives in Greece, LGBTQ+ coalitions in Cyprus, migrant networks in Italy).

Regional Illustrations:

- **Bulgaria:** Roma women’s organisations have demonstrated inclusive consultation methods by organising meetings in local communities, using trusted mediators, and providing childcare on-site.
- **Greece:** Some municipal councils have successfully involved rural youth in planning by offering travel reimbursements and online participation tools, ensuring their voices are not lost in urban-centric policymaking.

- **Cyprus:** LGBTQ+ allies have worked with mainstream NGOs to include anti-discrimination clauses in broader social policies, shifting visibility from the margins to the centre.
- **Italy:** Migrant solidarity networks have built coalitions that deliberately centre migrant voices in campaigns on labour rights and humanitarian assistance, resisting the tendency for advocacy to be “about” rather than “with” migrants.

Reflection Questions:

- Which groups are consistently absent from our meetings, campaigns, or governance structures?
- What structural or cultural barriers keep them out?
- How can we redesign our events, materials, and coalitions to make them genuinely accessible?
- Are we prepared to share decision-making power, not just symbolic visibility, with marginalised groups?

Resources:

- **European Network Against Racism (ENAR):** <https://www.enar-eu.org>
- **ILGA-Europe (LGBTQ+ advocacy):** <https://ilga-europe.org>
- **European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC):** <http://www.errc.org>
- **EESC Civil Society Organisations Group – Inclusive Participation Resources:** <https://www.eesc.europa.eu>
- **Accessibility Guidelines (W3C Web Accessibility Initiative):** <https://www.w3.org/WAI>

Closing Note

Inclusion requires deliberate practices, structural adjustments, and a willingness to reconfigure power. By embedding intersectional perspectives into everyday operations, CSOs not only strengthen their legitimacy but also unlock new forms of creativity, solidarity, and resilience. A movement that includes everyone is a movement capable of withstanding external pressures and driving lasting change.

Chapter 7: Stronger Together – Coalition-Building & Consortium Design

Why Cross-Border Collaboration Matters

Coalition-building is not only a strategy for amplifying advocacy at the national level; in today's interconnected Europe, it is also a necessity for survival and influence across borders. Shrinking civic space in Bulgaria, Greece, Cyprus, and Italy is often driven by similar dynamics: restrictive laws, reputational attacks, funding insecurity. By connecting across national boundaries, CSOs can pool resources, share tactics, and gain visibility in European policy arenas.

Cross-border coalitions are especially powerful when they combine **local legitimacy** with **international leverage**. Local grassroots groups bring trust within their communities and the ability to mobilise quickly. International partners bring access to EU-level platforms, larger funding streams, and credibility in the eyes of policymakers. Together, these alliances transform local struggles into **European conversations**, protecting vulnerable organisations from isolation.

Local Coalitions vs. International Consortia

It is useful to distinguish between two modes of collaboration:

- **Local coalitions** are networks of organisations within one country or community. They are essential for rapid mobilisation and grassroots legitimacy. For example, the coalition of NGOs in Bulgaria that resisted the “foreign agent” legislation succeeded because it united diverse actors around a shared national concern.
- **International consortia** are formal partnerships created to design and implement projects under EU or international funding schemes. These are often more complex – requiring legal agreements, shared budgets, and detailed work packages – but they unlock resources that local coalitions cannot access alone.

Successful CSOs learn to navigate **both levels**, moving from local solidarity to international project collaboration.

Building Effective Consortia

Funders like the European Commission place high value on cross-border collaboration. Programs such as **CERV (Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values)**, **Erasmus+**, **Horizon Europe**, and **Interreg** explicitly require multinational partnerships. But effective consortia are not built overnight.

Key principles include:

1. **Trust and Shared Ownership**

Every partner must feel that their voice matters, not only the coordinator's. Rotating facilitation roles and transparent communication build long-term confidence.

2. **Complementarity**

Partners should bring distinct strengths: a youth NGO for outreach, an academic partner for research, a grassroots group for legitimacy, a large NGO for administrative capacity.

3. **Clarity of Roles**

A consortium is not just a list of names. Defining who coordinates, who leads on which work package, and who handles evaluation prevents future conflict.

4. **Balance**

Funders expect geographic and thematic diversity. A consortium that mixes countries, sectors, and organisational sizes signals credibility.

5. **Sustainability**

The most effective consortia think beyond one project. They treat each grant as a stepping stone toward long-term cooperation.

From Idea to Proposal

One of the most challenging steps is turning an idea into a **fundable project**. The process involves:

- Reading the call for proposals carefully and matching it to your strengths.
- Aligning consortium objectives with funder priorities without losing sight of your mission.
- Translating ideas into **work packages (WPs)** – each with tasks, deliverables, deadlines, and indicators.
- Building a logical framework and timeline (Gantt chart) that shows feasibility.

For example, a network of CSOs across Bulgaria, Greece, Cyprus, and Italy could respond to a CERV call by designing a project on defending civic space. Work packages could include:

- WP1: Mapping threats (led by an academic partner).
- WP2: Building resilience workshops (led by NGOs).
- WP3: EU-level advocacy campaign (coordinated by a Brussels-based organisation).
- WP4: Evaluation and sustainability plan (shared among partners).

Managing Budgets and Administration

Financial resilience is central to consortium work. Mismanaged budgets can destroy trust and credibility. Key principles include:

- **Eligibility:** Know what costs are fundable (salaries, travel, events) and what are not (political lobbying, profit-making).
- **Fair distribution:** Budgets should reflect work, not hierarchy. Small NGOs should not be expected to deliver major outputs with minimal funding.
- **Transparency:** Share budget breakdowns early and update partners on changes.
- **Risk management:** Anticipate problems – delays in payments, exchange rate fluctuations, or partner withdrawal – and plan responses.
- **Audit readiness:** Keep timesheets, contracts, and procurement documents organised from day one.

A **budget skeleton exercise** (as included in the seminar) helps participants learn to balance ambition with realistic resource allocation.

Sustaining Partnerships Beyond One Project

Too often, consortia dissolve after the project ends. To avoid this “one-off syndrome,” CSOs should:

- Continue meeting informally to discuss new calls.
- Share visibility (e.g., joint newsletters or social media campaigns).
- Pool resources like training materials or contact databases.
- Build a collective identity – not just “a project consortium” but a **network with a shared mission**.

The strongest European networks – in fields like human rights or environmental justice – started as project consortia but grew into long-term alliances.

Country & Regional Illustrations:

- **Bulgaria:** The Civic Council under the Council of Ministers shows how institutionalised spaces can enable coalition work, though CSOs remain cautious about tokenism.
- **Greece:** Networks of youth organisations and trade unions have demonstrated the power of hybrid alliances, bridging grassroots activism and institutional legitimacy.

- **Cyprus:** Cross-community CSO consortia have built rare spaces of trust, where Greek and Turkish Cypriot organisations collaborate despite political barriers.
- **Italy:** National consortia in the environmental field have successfully scaled up local struggles, securing EU funding to link climate advocacy with community health.

Resources:

- **CERV Programme (European Commission):** <https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/portal>
- **Erasmus+ Programme Guide:** <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu>
- **Horizon Europe Funding Calls:** <https://ec.europa.eu/info/horizon-europe>
- **Interreg Europe Cooperation:** <https://www.interregeurope.eu>
- **The Good Lobby – Partnership Tools:** <https://thegoodlobby.eu>
- **Civil Society Europe:** <https://civilsocietyeurope.eu>

Reflection:

Ask yourself and your team:

- What **cross-border allies** could strengthen our projects?
- How do we balance **local legitimacy** with **international leverage**?
- Are our coalitions designed to **survive beyond a single project**?
- What role would we play in a consortium – coordinator, thematic lead, or supporting partner?

Closing note:

Coalitions and consortia are more than project mechanisms. They are expressions of solidarity across borders. In times when civic space is shrinking, they allow organisations to **stand together, share burdens, and imagine futures that no single actor can achieve alone.**

Chapter 8: Financial Diversification & Project Management

Why Financial Resilience Matters

For many CSOs across Bulgaria, Greece, Cyprus, and Italy, financial precarity is not an exception. Funding is often project-based, tied to short cycles, and dependent on donor priorities that may shift suddenly. Local fundraising remains limited, while state subsidies can be politically manipulated. This fragile environment makes CSOs vulnerable: one lost grant, one hostile law, or one reputational attack can threaten an entire organisation's survival.

Financial resilience therefore becomes a core dimension of **civic resilience**. Just as NGOs must defend their rights legally and reputationally, they must also diversify their funding sources, professionalise their project management, and build sustainability models that allow them to weather financial shocks.

Beyond the Single Donor Model

The most common trap for CSOs is over-reliance on one donor or funding scheme. While EU programmes such as CERV, Erasmus+, or Horizon Europe are crucial, they cannot be the sole lifeline. Diversification means blending **multiple streams of income**:

- **Project grants** (EU, international donors, foundations).
- **Membership fees** (even symbolic, to build a sense of ownership).
- **Microgrants or crowdfunding** (especially for local grassroots initiatives).
- **Service provision** (training, consulting, cultural activities).
- **Events and campaigns** (fundraising concerts, community fairs, online campaigns).
- **Partnerships with municipalities or local businesses** (with safeguards to protect independence).

Diversification is not only financial; it is also political. A CSO that shows multiple supporters – from community members to European institutions – sends a strong signal of **legitimacy and autonomy**.

Project Management as a Resilience Tool

Strong project management is often underestimated in activist environments, but it is central to financial sustainability. Donors increasingly look not only for good ideas, but also for credible plans, transparent budgets, and reliable delivery.

Key practices include:

1. **Planning with Realism**

Avoid “over-promising” to secure funding. Unrealistic objectives lead to burnout, reputational harm, and donor distrust.

2. **Clear Roles and Shared Tools**

Use shared drives, role maps, and MOUs (memoranda of understanding) so that responsibilities are transparent. This prevents last-minute confusion.

3. **Budget Discipline**

Track expenses in real time, align them with deliverables, and prepare for audits from day one. A good practice is to keep a “shadow budget” for internal tracking alongside the donor’s official format.

4. **Burnout-Aware Planning**

Human sustainability is as important as financial sustainability. Build realistic timelines, rotate responsibilities, and recognise the limits of volunteer energy.

5. **Risk Awareness**

Every project carries risks: political backlash, payment delays, partner withdrawal. Anticipating them and writing mitigation strategies into proposals increases credibility and resilience.

Practical Tools

To operationalise these principles, this toolkit provides several ready-to-use exercises:

- **Alternative Funding Brainstorm Canvas:** A one-page tool where organisations list all potential income streams, assess feasibility, and set targets.
- **Sustainability Checklist:** A structured list to assess whether a project plan includes diversified funding, transparent roles, and post-project follow-up.
- **Budget Template for Small CSOs:** A simplified spreadsheet that aligns costs with activities and deliverables, ensuring audit-readiness.
- **Project Roles Mapping Template:** A visual diagram clarifying who is responsible, accountable, consulted, and informed (RACI model).
- **Burnout Risk Radar:** A reflection tool to assess team workload, highlight stress points, and adjust planning before burnout occurs.

Regional Illustrations:

- **Bulgaria:** Small NGOs working with Roma communities have successfully combined EU project funding with local donations in kind (e.g., food, space, volunteer time), creating hybrid sustainability.

- **Greece:** Youth networks have tapped into Erasmus+ for international exchanges while maintaining local fundraising through community events.
- **Cyprus:** Women's NGOs often combine small state grants with EU funds, but financial resilience improves when they charge symbolic membership fees, fostering community ownership.
- **Italy:** Environmental movements have increasingly diversified into crowdfunding and partnerships with local cooperatives, reducing dependence on volatile state funding.

These cases show that financial resilience is not about eliminating donor dependence entirely, but about creating **safety nets and fallback options**.

Resources:

- **CERV Funding Opportunities (EU):** <https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/portal>
- **Erasmus+ Programme Guide:** <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu>
- **Horizon Europe Calls:** <https://ec.europa.eu/info/horizon-europe>
- **Fundraising Strategy Resources (NGOsource):** <https://ngosource.org>
- **European Fundraising Association:** <https://efa-net.eu>
- **Philanthropy Europe Association (Philea):** <https://philea.eu>

Reflection:

- How dependent are we on a single donor or funding stream?
- Do we have at least three distinct sources of financial support?
- Are our project management practices strong enough to pass a rigorous audit?
- How do we account for human sustainability (burnout prevention) in our planning?

Closing note:

Financial diversification and professional project management are not just administrative tasks. They are acts of **strategic resilience**, ensuring that civil society can continue to operate independently, even in uncertain times. By building stronger financial foundations and smarter project systems, CSOs in Bulgaria, Greece, Cyprus, and Italy can not only survive shrinking civic space – they can actively reimagine civic futures with confidence.

Chapter 9: Closing Reflections & Next Steps

Standing Together in Uncertain Times

This toolkit was born out of a recognition that civic space in Europe is under pressure. Across Bulgaria, Greece, Cyprus, and Italy, civil society organisations face common challenges: shrinking freedoms, hostile narratives, financial precarity, and burnout. Yet, despite these pressures, CSOs remain the **backbone of democratic life**. They defend rights, support communities, and create spaces for solidarity and imagination.

The chapters of this guide have explored the many dimensions of resilience: from legal self-defence and digital security to inclusive participation, coalition-building, and financial diversification. Each section provides not only concepts but also **practical tools, exercises, and resources** to use in daily practice. Together, they form a survival kit – but also a vision kit – for reimagining civic futures.

Reflection: What Have We Learned?

As you close this guide, consider the following questions with your team or network:

- **Resilience:** Where is our organisation most vulnerable – legally, financially, digitally, or socially? How can we strengthen these weak points?
- **Solidarity:** Who are our allies – locally, nationally, and across borders? How can we deepen these relationships?
- **Participation:** Who is still missing from our work? How do we ensure their voices are included?
- **Sustainability:** Are we building financial and human systems that will last beyond a single project?
- **Vision:** What future are we working towards – and how do our daily practices reflect that future?

From Reflection to Action

1. **Start small but deliberate.** Use one tool from this guide in the coming month – a digital security checklist, a stakeholder mapping exercise, or a sustainability audit.
2. **Share your learning.** Bring these tools into your networks, coalitions, and communities. The more CSOs share methods, the stronger the sector becomes.
3. **Think cross-border.** Build bridges beyond your country. Shared challenges require shared strategies.
4. **Plan for the long term.** Don't let projects end at the final report. Use them as stepping stones towards more ambitious cooperation.

5. **Celebrate wins.** Even small victories – a successful consultation, a secure system, a new partner – strengthen morale and legitimacy.

The European Dimension

This toolkit was developed under the **CivicChampions project**, co-funded by the European Union. While EU frameworks sometimes constrain local activism with complex procedures, they also provide vital lifelines: funding opportunities, policy entry points, and spaces for transnational solidarity. Civil society must continue to push the EU to defend rights at home, while also using EU tools to reinforce local struggles.

Next Steps

- **Use the Annexes.** They are designed for workshops, self-study, and team reflection.
- **Stay connected.** The networks built through the CivicChampions seminars are the beginning of long-term alliances.
- **Adapt and expand.** Translate, localise, and update these tools to fit your contexts. This guide is not a finished product – it is a living resource.
- **Look ahead.** Civic space will continue to shift. By combining resilience with creativity, CSOs can shape not only how they survive but how they **reimagine the future of democracy**.

Closing note

Civil society is strongest when it remembers that it is not alone. The struggles of one country resonate across borders. The victories of one network inspire others. By defending rights, building alliances, and sustaining ourselves with care and imagination, we remain **Civic Champions** – not only for our communities but for the democratic fabric of Europe itself.

Annex I – Resource Compendium

A consolidated list of practical contacts, guides, and platforms referenced throughout the toolkit.

1. Legal Self-Defence & SLAPP Protection

- **European Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ECNL):** <https://ecnl.org> – Resources on civic freedoms, NGO legislation, and SLAPP defence.
- **CASE Coalition Against SLAPPs in Europe:** <https://www.the-case.eu> – Network of NGOs, lawyers, and media groups tackling strategic lawsuits against public participation.
- **Access to Justice EU Portal:** <https://e-justice.europa.eu> – Country-level information on rights and legal aid.
- **Human Rights Watchdog Networks (Council of Europe):** <https://www.coe.int> – European mechanisms to report rights violations.

2. Advocacy & Policy Participation

- **Council of Europe Conference of INGOs:** <https://www.coe.int/en/web/ingo> – Platform for CSO participation at European level.
- **Civic Space Watch (ECF):** <https://civicspacewatch.eu> – Updates on civic space restrictions and advocacy resources.
- **Balkan Civil Society Development Network (BCSDN):** <https://www.balkancsd.net> – Regional network supporting policy advocacy.
- **The Good Lobby:** <https://thegoodlobby.eu> – Tools for CSO advocacy and policy influence.
- **EU Public Consultations Portal:** <https://ec.europa.eu/info/consultations> – Submit feedback on draft EU policies.

3. Digital Defence & Cybersecurity

- **Access Now Digital Security Helpline:** <https://www.accessnow.org/help> – 24/7 assistance for CSOs under cyberattack.
- **Digital Defenders Partnership (DDP):** <https://digitaldefenders.org> – Support for activists facing digital threats.

- **Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) Security Guides:** <https://ssd.eff.org> – Step-by-step cybersecurity practices.
- **Reporters Without Borders Digital Safety Guides:** <https://rsf.org/en/digital-security> – Tailored for journalists, useful for CSOs.

4. Early Warning & Civic Foresight

- **International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL):** <https://www.icnl.org> – Civic space monitoring and foresight reports.
- **CIVICUS Monitor:** <https://monitor.civicus.org> – Global civic space trends and indicators.
- **OECD Foresight Resources:** <https://www.oecd.org/strategic-foresight> – Tools for scenario planning.
- **Nesta Futures Toolkit:** <https://www.nesta.org.uk/toolkit/futures-toolkit> – Practical foresight exercises.

5. Strategic Communication & Disinformation Response

- **EUvsDisinfo (European External Action Service):** <https://euvsdisinfo.eu> – Debunking Russian disinformation narratives.
- **First Draft News:** <https://firstdraftnews.org> – Training on misinformation and verification.
- **Civic Space Watch Media Resources:** <https://civicspacewatch.eu/media> – Tools for countering smear campaigns.
- **Media Literacy Clearinghouse:** <https://www.medialit.org> – Educational resources for critical media engagement.

6. Inclusive Participation & Intersectionality

- **European Network Against Racism (ENAR):** <https://www.enar-eu.org> – Anti-racism advocacy and resources.
- **ILGA-Europe:** <https://ilga-europe.org> – LGBTQ+ rights and inclusion.
- **European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC):** <http://www.errc.org> – Roma rights advocacy and litigation support.
- **EESC Civil Society Organisations Group:** <https://www.eesc.europa.eu> – Guidelines for inclusive participation.

- **W3C Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI):** <https://www.w3.org/WAI> – Accessibility standards for online tools.

7. Coalition-Building & Consortium Design

- **European Civic Forum (ECF):** <https://civic-forum.eu> – Platform for European civic coalitions.
- **Civil Society Europe:** <https://civilsocietyeurope.eu> – Umbrella group for EU-level civic coordination.
- **Solidarity Action Network (SANE):** <https://solidarityaction.network> – Support for civic activists in hostile environments.
- **Balkan Civil Society Development Network (BCSDN):** <https://www.balkancsd.net> – Regional advocacy and coalition support.

8. Financial Diversification & Project Management

- **CERV Programme (EU):** <https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/portal>
- **Erasmus+ Programme Guide:** <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu>
- **Horizon Europe Funding Calls:** <https://ec.europa.eu/info/horizon-europe>
- **Interreg Europe Cooperation:** <https://www.interregeurope.eu>
- **European Fundraising Association (EFA):** <https://efa-net.eu>
- **Philanthropy Europe Association (Philea):** <https://philea.eu>
- **NGOsource – Fundraising Strategy Tools:** <https://ngosource.org>

Annex II – Training Roll-Out Plan

Seminar Title	Focus	Key Elements
Seminar 1: Defending Civil Space	Legal resilience, advocacy, digital defence, civic foresight	Legal literacy, SLAPP protection, advocacy tools, digital hygiene, early warning simulation
Seminar 2: Messaging That Matters	Strategic communication, counter-narratives, inclusive participation	Disinformation response, message redesign, intersectionality, inclusive engagement
Seminar 3: Reimagining Civic Space Across Borders	Cross-border collaboration, project management, financial sustainability, EU solidarity	Coalition-building, shared fundraising strategies, regional collaboration mapping

Seminar 1: Defending Civil Space – Legal Literacy, Advocacy & Digital Defence in a Hostile Environment

Duration: 3 hours

Target Audience: CSO practitioners, grassroots organisers, youth leaders, legal defenders, and other civic actors

Overview

As political hostility, legal repression, and digital surveillance intensify in Bulgaria, civil society actors must move from survival to strategy. This high-impact session offers practical tools to help civic actors assert their rights, influence public decisions, and protect themselves – legally, digitally, and collectively. The workshop blends legal knowledge, policy participation, cyber hygiene, and early warning tools in an accessible, actionable format.

Session Goals

- Understand how current legal and political frameworks constrain CSO work
- Learn to defend themselves against legal and administrative harassment (e.g., SLAPPs, deregistration)
- Gain skills to influence policy even in hostile environments
- Strengthen digital security and cyber preparedness
- Build capacity to anticipate threats through Early Warning Mechanisms (EWM)

Agenda

15:00 – 15:10

Opening & Context Setting (10 min)

- Welcome & goals of the session
- What is “shrinking civic space”? Key trends
- Why protection, participation, and foresight matter now

15:10 – 15:50

Part 1: Legal Self-Defence for Civic Actors (40 min)

- Know your rights: Bulgarian laws on NGOs, protest, foreign funding
- Legal harassment tactics: SLAPPs, audits, deplatforming
- *Mini Moot Court*: Role-play a CSO under attack and prepare a response
- Quick-response toolkit: emergency protocols, legal aid, support networks

15:50 – 16:30

Part 2: Strategic Advocacy & Participatory Influence (40 min)

- How to participate when consultation is shrinking
- *Understanding the policy cycle*: where and how CSOs can intervene
- *Case study*: The fight against Bulgaria’s “foreign agent” law
- *Campaign redesign clinic*: Align advocacy goals with shifting political windows
- Map your institutional entry points: from local councils to national ministries

16:25 – 16:40 Short Break (15 min)

16:40-17:10

Part 3: Digital Resilience Bootcamp (30 min)

- Real examples of digital attacks on Bulgarian CSOs
- *Hands-on tools*: encrypted messaging, secure logins, digital hygiene
- *Cyberattack simulation*: how to respond to phishing, hacking, or leaks
- *Checklist exercise*: Is your organisation digitally protected?

17:10-17:40

Part 4: Early Warning & Civic Foresight (30 min)

- Introduction to Early Warning Mechanism (EWM) – what it is and how CSOs can contribute
- *Foresight simulation*:
 - Break into teams and build short civic space scenarios (e.g., “Digital Fortress”, “Backlash Wave”, “Civic Renewal”)
 - Discuss: How would your organisation adapt? What coalitions and tools would you need?
- Debrief: What warning signs should we watch for? What can we do together now?

17:40-18:00

Wrap-Up & Local Networking (20 min)

- Key takeaways from the day
- Shared resource folder, tools, and legal/digital checklists

- Evaluation (via Mentimeter or brief handout)
- Invitation to join Seminar 2 & follow-up support channels

* * *

Seminar 2: Messaging That Matters – Strategic Communication, Counter-Narratives and Inclusive Civic Participation

Duration: 3 hours

Target Audience: CSO practitioners, grassroots organisers, youth leaders, legal defenders, and other civic actors

Overview

In a time of polarisation, misinformation, and civic mistrust, the way civil society speaks, and who gets heard, has never mattered more. This session empowers participants to sharpen their narrative strategies, build public trust, and centre inclusion in how they communicate and act. Through hands-on exercises and reflective group work, CSOs will explore how to counter disinformation, engage excluded communities, and reshape participation beyond tokenism.

Session Goals

- Improve public communication and narrative strategy under disinformation pressure.
- Reflect on who is (not) included in civic participation and why.
- Explore intersectional, non-tokenistic, and participatory methods for civic engagement and narrative building.

Agenda

15:00 –15:10

Welcome & Icebreaker (10 min)

- Brief introduction to the goals of the session
- Icebreaker prompt: “*Who do we speak for—and who’s listening?*”
- Participants mark which groups their organisation aims to reach and actually currently reaches (quick sticky note wall or Mentimeter)

15:10 – 15:50

Part 1: Surviving the Noise – Disinformation & Narrative Power (40 min)

- Input: Overview of disinformation tactics targeting civil society (e.g., anti-gender, anti-NGO, pro-Russian narratives in Bulgaria)
- Exercise: “*Debunk This!*”
 - Small groups analyse real smear posts and collaboratively reframe them
 - Focus on emotional tone, values, and credibility
- Key takeaway: Strategic communication is about clarity, empathy, and legitimacy under pressure.

15:50 – 16:30

Part 2: Message Makeover – Communication Under Pressure (40 min)

- Workshop on strategic messaging, values, emotional intelligence
- **Group work:** Rewriting a real campaign post with inclusive and value-based framing]
- Group reflection: How do we reclaim public trust while staying true to our values?

16:25 – 16:40

Break (15 min)

16:40-17:10

Part 3: Participation that Matters – Intersectionality & Representation (30 min)

- Input: why marginalised groups are unheard, not apathetic (Roma, LGBTQ+, migrants, youth)
- **Case carousel:** CSOs share challenges with representation and how they addressed it

17:10-17:40

Part 4: Inclusion Without Tokenism – Reimagining Participation (30 min)

- Working groups: “From access to transformation”—design a more inclusive activity
- Shared learnings and feedback
- **Closing Circle (10 min)**
- Reflection: What will we change in our own work?
- Share a sentence or post-it on a wall or digital board
- Reminder about follow-up opportunities, support tools, and Seminar 3

* * *

Seminar 3: Reimagining Civic Space Across Borders: Collaboration, Solidarity, and Shared Futures

Duration: 2.5–3 hours

Target Audience: CSO practitioners from Bulgaria, Greece, Italy, and Cyprus

Overview

Coalition-building, cross-border project design, sustainable management, and funding resilience

Session Goals

- Build stronger cross-border relationships and shared civic strategies.
- Explore practical tools for coalition-building and EU-level collaboration.
- Share experiences in project sustainability, funding, and managing burnout.

- Reflect on how EU frameworks both enable and constrain local activism.
- Strengthen participants' capacity to co-design, fund, and sustain collaborative initiatives.

Agenda

15:00 – 15:10

Welcome, Intro

- Map where participants are from and sectors of work
- Overview of the session goals: partnerships, project design, and financial survival
- Zoom functions: breakout rooms, polls, collaborative docs
- Quick online live poll: “Have you been part of an international project before?”

15:10 – 15:40

Lecture 1 – Building Strong Consortia & Strategic Alliances (*Plenary*)

Content:

- **Why partnerships matter:** advocacy strength, visibility, resources, and resilience in shrinking civic spaces
- **Local allies vs. international partners:**
 - Local: community trust, rapid mobilisation, grassroots legitimacy
 - International: access to larger resources, political leverage, entry into EU/global spaces
- **Successful collaboration models:**
 - Local coalitions for policy change
 - International thematic networks (environment, gender equality, human rights)
 - Hybrid partnerships mixing grassroots, large NGOs, academia, local authorities
- **Core principles for alliances:** trust, shared ownership, complementarity, clear communication
- Pitfalls to avoid: tokenism, dependency, “paper” partnerships
- **How this translates to consortia:**
 - Definition & purpose of consortium projects
 - Key differences from national projects
 - Roles in a consortium: coordinator, co-beneficiary, associated partner
 - Matching partner strengths to project objectives and work packages
 - Ensuring geographical and thematic balance for funder requirements
- Funders' perspective: why they value cross-border collaboration
- Common EU/international funding schemes (CERV, Erasmus+, Horizon Europe, Interreg)
- Roles in a consortium: coordinator, co-beneficiary, associated partner

- Common challenges in multinational teams: communication gaps, admin complexity, cultural differences
- Tools to sustain partnerships between projects, shared calendars, partner databases, informal peer networks

15:40 – 16:05

Breakout 1 – Mapping Your Potential Consortium

- In small groups:
 1. List types of organisations you would invite for a real project idea
 2. Assign potential roles to each (coordinator, thematic lead, evaluator, etc.)
 3. Identify what each role brings to the table
- Fill in a shared template (Miro/Jamboard)

Plenary share-back (5 min)

16:05 – 16:30 | Lecture 2

From Idea to Consortium Proposal (*Plenary*)

Content:

- Turning an idea into a fundable project
- Reading and matching a call for proposals
- Aligning consortium strengths with project objectives
- Writing clear objectives, work packages (WPs), and deliverables
- The importance of a logical framework and Gantt chart

16:30 – 16:50

Breakout 2 – Drafting a Work Package

- In groups:
 - Choose one project objective
 - Break it into tasks & deliverables
 - Assign each to a hypothetical partner
 - Identify indicators for measuring success

Plenary feedback (5 min)

16:50 – 17:10

Lecture 3 Budgeting & Admin in Consortium Projects (*Plenary*)

Content:

- Eligible vs. ineligible costs
- Budget distribution between partners
- Financial roles: coordinator vs. partner responsibilities
- Timesheets, procurement, audit readiness

- Risk management in financial matters

17:10 – 17:30

Breakout 3 – Building a Consortium Budget Skeleton

- Groups create a simple budget for a 24-month project
- Discuss 1 budget-related risk and how to address it

Plenary wrap-up (5 min)

17:30 – 17:50

Lecture 4 – Sustaining the Consortium Beyond One Project (*Plenary*)

Content:

- Maintaining relationships between partners
- Joint planning for future calls
- Sharing resources & visibility
- Using networks and digital platforms for long-term cooperation

17:50 – 18:00

Closing & Next Steps

- 1 takeaway + 1 next action (online poll)
- Share Resource folder: consortium mapping template, WP template, budget table, EU calls list, MoU samples

The following annexes can be printed as worksheets, used in simulation exercises, or adapted as training slides.

Annex A – Legal Resources & Networks (Chapter I)

Legal Aid & Watchdog Contacts (by country)

Bulgaria

- Bulgarian Helsinki Committee – strategic litigation and legal defence.
- Access to Information Programme – legal support on freedom of information.

Greece

- Greek Council for Refugees – legal support on asylum and refugee rights.
- Hellenic League for Human Rights – litigation and monitoring of rights violations.

Cyprus

- [Cyprus Refugee Council](#) – legal and social support for migrants and asylum seekers.
- KISA – Action for Equality, Support, Antiracism – advocacy and legal defence in discrimination cases.

Italy

- Antigone – legal defence on prison conditions and rights.
- CILD – Italian Coalition for Civil Liberties and Rights – advocacy and litigation on civic space and rights.

SLAPP Defence Networks & EU-Level Resources

- [CASE – Coalition Against SLAPPs in Europe](#)
- ProtectDefenders.eu – EU mechanism for protecting human rights defenders.
- [European Center for Not-for-Profit Law \(ECNL\)](#) – guides on civic freedoms and resilience.
- Justice & Environment Network – environmental law support.

Sample Emergency Protocol & Legal Contact Template

Emergency Protocol (one-page to keep in office):

- **Emergency Contact (lawyer):** Name, phone, email
- **Secondary Contact (NGO partner):** Name, phone
- **What to do if visited by police/tax authority:**
 - Stay calm; ask for ID and written order.
 - Call lawyer immediately.
 - Do not sign documents without legal advice.
- **What to do if served with lawsuit:**
 - Accept papers; do not argue with process server.
 - Notify lawyer within 24 hours.
 - Inform board and trusted partners.

Legal Contact Card Template:

- Lawyer's name & firm
- Emergency phone (24/7)
- Email
- Area of expertise (NGO law, labor, SLAPPs, tax, GDPR)
- Backup contact

Learning Through Simulation: The Mini-Moot Court Template (Role-Play Exercise)

This role-play exercise can be used in seminars or training workshops to help CSOs prepare for legal intimidation.

Roles:

- Judge
- NGO defendant (your team)
- Plaintiff (e.g., company or politician)
- Lawyers (for each side)
- Observer panel

Scenario examples:

1. NGO accused of defamation after publishing corruption report.
2. NGO fined for “illegal assembly” after organizing a protest.
3. NGO investigated for “foreign funding” and forced to disclose donor list.

Steps:

1. Assign roles and give 15 minutes preparation.
2. Hold a short 10-minute “hearing.”
3. Debrief: What arguments worked? What defences failed? What lessons apply to real life?

Annex B – Advocacy & Policy Participation Tools (Chapter II)

1. Entry Point Mapping Worksheet

Policy Arena	Relevant Bodies/Actors	Potential Allies	Our Leverage (High/Med/Low)	Next Step
National Parliament	Committee on Environment	Sympathetic MP	Medium	Request hearing slot
Municipal Council	Local Development Committee	Youth Council rep	High	Draft joint proposal
EU Consultation	EC “Have Your Say” portal	Partner NGO network	Low	Submit comments via coalition

2. Coalition Letter Template

To: [Ministry/Parliament Committee]

Subject: [Proposed Law/Policy]

We, the undersigned civil society organisations, representing [fields/sectors], urge you to reconsider [specific clause]. This provision risks [explain harms].

Instead, we propose [alternative wording]. Our proposal aligns with [European/national standards].

Signed,
[List of CSOs + contact person]

3. Campaign Redesign Canvas

Current Goal	Challenge	Opportunity / Policy Window	Adapted Tactics	Who Leads?
Block “foreign agent” legislation	Gov’t majority in parliament	EU critical statements	Coalition letters + media campaign	NGO X

Annex C – Digital Defence Tools (Chapter III)

1. Digital Security Self-Test

- Do all staff use **2FA** for email and social media? (Yes/No)
- Do we use a **password manager**? (Yes/No)
- Are all laptops/phones **encrypted and updated**? (Yes/No)
- Do we back up key data monthly in at least two places? (Yes/No)
- Do we have a **plan for account takeover**? (Yes/No)

If you answered “No” to 2 or more: schedule a digital hygiene session within the month.

2. Cyberattack Response Plan (Template)

When suspicious activity is detected:

1. Disconnect affected device from the internet.
2. Inform focal point & management immediately.
3. Contact [Access Now Helpline](#) for tech support.
4. Document details: error messages, fake emails, suspicious files.
5. Switch to secure communication channels until cleared.

3. Digital Threat Incident Log (for internal use)

Date	Type of Threat	Details	Response Taken	Follow-up Needed
01/09/2025	Phishing email	Fake donor Staff request	flagged & deleted	Share awareness note with team

Annex D – Early Warning & Civic Foresight Tools (Chapter IV)

1. Threat Indicator Journal (Template)

A simple monthly log to track early signs of shrinking civic space.

Date	Indicator Observed	Category (Legal / Financial / Political / Reputational / Security)	Source (media, gov't, bank, police, etc.)	Potential Impact on CSO	Follow-up Action
10/09/2025	Draft “foreign agent” legislation introduced in parliament	Legal	Official Gazette	High – would stigmatise foreign-funded NGOs	Prepare coalition statement
12/09/2025	Bank asked for new compliance documents	Financial	Bank branch	Medium – delays in operations	Contact partner CSOs to compare cases
15/09/2025	Minister publicly called NGOs “enemies of the state”	Reputational	TV interview	High – risks smear campaign	Draft rapid response note

Tip: Even if one incident seems small, a pattern of repeated entries shows when risks are escalating.

2. Scenario-Building Workshop Prompt Sheet

Use these prompts in team sessions. Assign a facilitator to guide discussion.

Step 1: Imagine it is *two years from now*. One of the following has occurred:

- A law is passed labelling “foreign-funded” NGOs as agents.
- Banking restrictions block CSO accounts.
- Mass protests are banned, and police disperse gatherings with fines.
- Public trust in NGOs collapses after a smear campaign.

Step 2: Ask:

- *How did we get here? What early warning signs did we miss?*

- *How would this scenario impact our organisation, beneficiaries, and staff?*
- *What could we do today to reduce these risks?*

Step 3: Summarise in a 1-page action plan.

3. Foresight Flashcards (for Training)

Print on cards and shuffle during a workshop. Each card is a scenario trigger.

Examples:

- *“Banking rules tighten: CSO accounts frozen without warning.”*
- *“Government proposes NGO foreign agent legislation.”*
- *“Police require permits for all gatherings over 20 people.”*
- *“Public broadcaster airs documentary accusing NGOs of corruption.”*
- *“EU adopts new civic protection directive.”*

How to use: Divide participants into groups, draw a card, and spend 15 minutes drafting a rapid response. Rotate scenarios for practice.

4. Early Warning Dashboard (Simple Worksheet)

For quarterly reviews.

Indicator	Status (Green / Yellow / Red)	Evidence	Response Plan
NGO legal environment	Yellow	Draft bill under discussion	Prepare advocacy campaign
Funding & banking	Green	No new restrictions	Maintain donor diversification
Public perception	Red	Recent smear campaign in national TV	Launch social media counter-narrative
Protest rights	Yellow	Police dispersed youth protest	Engage ombuds office

Annex E – Strategic Communication & Disinformation Response Tools (Chapter V)

1. Values-Based Message Framing Worksheet

Step 1: Identify the hostile narrative

Example: “NGOs are foreign agents undermining our national sovereignty.”

Step 2: Define your core values (3–4 keywords)

- Transparency
- Accountability
- Public service
- Solidarity

Step 3: Reframe the message

Instead of repeating the smear, respond with a values-based narrative.

“We are proud that our funding is transparent, our accounts are publicly available, and our work is dedicated to protecting citizens’ rights and dignity.”

Step 4: Translate into communication products

- Press statement headline
- 3 social media posts
- One human story to illustrate values

2. Disinformation Debunking Template

When a false claim appears online or in media:

Step	Action	Example
1. Identify	Record the exact false claim, source, and spread.	“NGO X misuses donor funds” published in daily tabloid.
2. Verify	Cross-check with internal data and independent sources.	Audit report shows 98% funds spent as intended.
3. Respond	Issue a factual, concise correction rooted in values.	“Our audited reports are public. Every euro goes to services for communities.”

Step	Action	Example
4. Amplify	Share correction via allies and coalitions.	Partner CSOs retweet, EU embassy reposts statement.
5. Document	Save screenshots for legal and advocacy purposes.	File added to disinformation incident log.

3. Social Media Calendar (Template for CSOs)

Plan proactive, values-based messaging to build credibility and avoid only reacting to smears.

Date	Content Theme	Post Type	Platform	Responsible	Goal
Week 1	Transparency	Infographic of funding sources	Facebook, Instagram	Comms Officer	Build trust
Week 2	Human story	Short video of beneficiary impact	TikTok, YouTube	Volunteer	Showcase impact
Week 3	Advocacy	Joint coalition statement	Twitter/X	Director	Policy influence
Week 4	Education	Myth-busting carousel: “3 facts about NGO funding”	Instagram, LinkedIn	Intern	Counter disinfo

4. Smear Response Quick Protocol

1. **Don’t panic** – Avoid emotional or rushed replies.
2. **Centralise communication** – Assign one spokesperson.
3. **Respond with facts + values** – Never just repeat the smear.
4. **Leverage allies** – Ask coalitions, international partners, and trusted journalists to share your correction.
5. **Document everything** – Screenshots, dates, and links are critical for legal or reputational defence.

5. Example Exercise: Rewriting Smear Narratives

Scenario

“Your NGO is accused in national media of serving foreign interests. A journalist calls asking for comment.”

Card:

Task: In small groups, draft:

- A press statement (100 words).

- A values-based social media thread.
- A one-paragraph explainer for donors.

Debrief Questions:

- Did your draft avoid repeating the smear?
- Did you connect your response to shared values?
- Was the message concise and audience-appropriate?

Annex F – Inclusive Participation & Intersectional Practice Tools (Chapter VI)

1. “Who’s Missing?” Mapping Tool

Purpose: To identify absent voices and explore why they are excluded.

Instructions: Draw a circle in the middle of a flipchart or whiteboard and write the name of your organisation/campaign. Inside, list the groups you currently reach. Around the circle, brainstorm groups that are affected by your work but are missing.

Current Participants	Who’s Missing?	Why Are They Missing?	Possible Actions
Urban youth activists	Roma communities	Lack of outreach, mistrust	Partner with Roma mediators
Women’s organisations	Migrant workers	Language barriers, legal insecurity	Provide translation, safe meeting spaces
NGOs in capital city	Rural youth	Distance, costs, digital gaps	Hybrid events, travel stipends

2. Accessibility & Inclusion Audit

A quick checklist for events, campaigns, and organisational practices.

Physical Access

- Venue has wheelchair ramps and accessible toilets.
- Public transport or transport stipends available.

Communication Access

- Materials are in plain language (avoid jargon).
- Translations into minority languages available.
- Hybrid/online access provided when possible.

Participation Support

- Events scheduled at times accessible to parents and working people.
- Childcare or caregiver support available when needed.
- Participants compensated for travel/meal costs.

Representation

- Speakers and visuals reflect community diversity.
- Facilitation allows for multiple voices, not only “experts.”

Scoring: For each item, mark **Yes** / **Partially** / **No**. Aim for at least 80% “Yes.”

3. Inclusive Agenda Template

Meeting/Consultation Design

Agenda Item	Method	Inclusion Feature
Opening remarks	Short framing by facilitator	Acknowledge diversity of participants; invite all voices
Topic 1 discussion	Breakout groups	Mix participants across gender, age, region
Reporting back	Small group reps	Ensure time limits so all groups are heard
Reflection round	“1-minute per person” circle	Guarantees everyone speaks, not just outspoken voices
Closing	Summary of action points	Confirm shared ownership of outcomes

4. Intersectional Case Brief (Workshop Exercise)

Scenario: A national campaign on labour rights is dominated by urban trade unions. Migrant women working in agriculture and Roma workers are not represented.

Task:

- Identify the intersecting barriers faced by these groups (e.g. gender, ethnicity, migration status, rurality).
- Redesign the campaign strategy to include them.
- Suggest at least one structural adjustment (translation, regional consultation, migrant worker representatives on the steering committee).

Debrief Questions:

- How did intersectionality change your campaign priorities?
- What structural changes are needed in your organisation to sustain this inclusion?

5. Participation Pledge (Template)

We commit to:

1. Identifying and engaging missing voices in our campaigns.
2. Conducting at least one accessibility and inclusion audit per year.
3. Sharing decision-making power with marginalised groups, not just symbolic visibility.
4. Ensuring that our communications reflect the diversity of our communities.

Signed by: [Organisation / Date]

Annex G – Coalition-Building & Consortium Design Tools (Chapter VII)

1. Stakeholder & Ally Mapping Worksheet

Purpose: To identify potential coalition or consortium members, their roles, and their added value.

Actor / Organisation	Type (Local NGO, Youth, Academic, EU-level, Media, Authority)	Potential Role	Strengths / Resources	Risks / Concerns
Roma community NGO (BG)	Local grassroots NGO	Outreach & community trust	Strong legitimacy with Roma communities	Limited admin capacity
Youth Council (GR)	National youth body	Policy advocacy	Connection to national consultations	Politicised environment
University partner (CY)	Academic institution	Research & evaluation	Expertise, credibility	Slow admin processes
Environmental NGO (IT)	Thematic network	Campaigning, media outreach	Visibility, EU contacts	Competing priorities

Instructions: In small groups, map 5–6 potential partners for a project idea. Discuss their roles and how they complement each other.

2. Consortium Design Canvas

A one-page tool to clarify the structure of a cross-border consortium.

Project Title / Theme: _____

Partner	Country	Proposed Role	Work Package Lead? (Y/N)	Key Contribution
Coordinator	[e.g., Bulgaria]	Financial & admin coordination	Yes	EU funding experience
Partner 1	[e.g., Italy]	Thematic lead (environment)	Yes	Campaign expertise
Partner 2	[e.g., Cyprus]	Evaluation & research	No	Academic credibility

Partner	Country	Proposed Role	Work Package Lead? (Y/N)	Key Contribution
Partner 3	[e.g., Greece]	Grassroots mobilisation	Yes	Community outreach
Associated Partner	[EU-level network]	Dissemination	No	Access to Brussels policymakers

Shared Principles:

- Trust & transparency
- Equitable distribution of tasks & budget
- Joint ownership of outputs

3. Work Package (WP) Template

Objective: _____

WP Leader: _____

Task	Responsible Partner	Deliverable	Deadline	Indicator of Success
Mapping threats to civic space	University (CY)	Comparative report	Month 6	Report published online
Training workshops	NGO (BG)	4 national trainings	Month 12	100 participants trained
Advocacy campaign	Youth Council (GR)	EU-level petition & event	Month 18	1,000 signatories, media coverage
Evaluation	NGO (IT)	Final evaluation report	Month 24	Report submitted to funder

4. Consortium Budget Skeleton Template

Project Duration: 24 months | **Total Budget:** €500,000

Budget Category	Coordinator (BG)	Partner (IT)	Partner (GR)	Partner (CY)	Total
Staff costs	€80,000	€60,000	€55,000	€65,000	€260,000
Travel & meetings	€10,000	€12,000	€8,000	€10,000	€40,000
Subcontracting	€15,000	€10,000	€5,000	€10,000	€40,000
Events & workshops	€20,000	€15,000	€15,000	€15,000	€65,000

Budget Category	Coordinator (BG)	Partner (IT)	Partner (GR)	Partner (CY)	Total
Dissemination	€10,000	€10,000	€7,500	€7,500	€35,000
Overheads (7%)	€9,800	€7,800	€6,600	€7,800	€32,000
Total	€144,800	€114,800	€97,100	€115,300	€472,000

(Remaining funds may be allocated to risk buffers or contingency.)

5. Trust-Building Checklist

- Do all partners have access to the same project documents?
- Have we agreed on clear decision-making rules?
- Is budget distribution transparent and proportional to tasks?
- Do smaller grassroots partners feel they have a voice?
- Do we have a plan for resolving conflicts (e.g., mediation, rotating facilitation)?
- Are we planning informal spaces (virtual coffee breaks, retreats) to strengthen relationships beyond project outputs?

✦✦ This annexes mirror the **seminar breakout activities**:

- *Breakout 1* → Stakeholder mapping & Consortium Design Canvas.
- *Breakout 2* → Work Package drafting.
- *Breakout 3* → Budget skeleton & risk analysis.