Embargoed: 15 September 2020

Austria civic space rating upgraded to open

Political gains made by the Green party and increasing dialogue between government and civil society, has led to an improvement in civic space in Austria, prompting a ratings upgrade from narrowed to open. Only 3% of the world’s population lives in countries with open civic space, where citizens are free to form associations, peacefully demonstrate in public spaces and practice freedom of expression. This ratings decision by the CIVICUS Monitor was taken following a thorough assessment of conditions in the country for the free exercise of civic freedoms, as protected by international law.

In 2018 under the ÖVP-FPÖ (Peoples Party -Freedom Party Austria) coalition government, Austria was downgraded to narrow following a deterioration in civic space. During this period, the government refused to engage with civil society organisations (CSOs) but instead pursued smear campaigns against them. In addition, funding to NGOs in many sectors was also drastically reduced. More specifically, NGOs working with migrant and refugee rights were labelled as ‘human traffickers’ by Chancellor Sebastian Kurz. Freedom of expression came under threat as government officials attempted to prevent independent media from reporting on certain briefings and subjected them to online attacks.

However, the September 2019 election outcome has resulted in a positive change, as the far-right FPÖ party was replaced in the coalition by the Green party. The Green party has been more open to dialogue with CSOs which presents the sector with the unique opportunity to make themselves heard again. CSOs demands are now being taken into consideration in governments current work programs.

The financial support allocated during the COVID-19 pandemic through a 700 million Euro support fund, exclusively for Not-for Profit Organisation’s (NPOs), after consultation with the sector, is a welcome development. In an unprecedented move, on 13 May 2020, a law (20. Covid-19 Gesetz) which was passed by parliament to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic, made mention - for the first time in Austrian history - of "NPOs". This signals that the sector is being recognised. Throughout this process, CSOs report that they were thoroughly involved and regularly consulted, marking a significant shift in government’s approach.

“The inclusion of CSOs in various consultation processes, including during the COVID-19 pandemic, by the Austrian government is an example of good practice which other states in the region should follow,” said Aarti Narsee, civic space researcher for the region.

However, the hard line of the government on migration-related issues persists in Austria. In a recent example, the ÖVP Foreign Minister remarked that the country will not assist with the dramatic migrant situation in the Lesbos Moria Camp in Greece after it had been set on fire, because it “does not want to send wrong signals to the migrants”.

Press Release
“While we welcome these positive developments in civic space in Austria, we also want to urge the leading ÖVP party to refrain from its anti-migrant rhetoric- a tactic which has not ceased with the new governing coalition,” said Narsee.

*Austria is now rated open on the CIVICUS Monitor. Visit Austria’s homepage for more information and for the latest updates.

For more information or to arrange an interview, please contact:

Aarti Narsee, Civic Space researcher, CIVICUS
aarti.narsee@civicus.org or media@civicus.org