

PRESS RELEASE

Berlin, January 4th, 2021

What is Civil Society?

The new Maecenata publication

While civil society is a term that appears more and more frequently both in political debates and the media, there seems to be little agreement as to what it actually means. In continental Europe in particular, discussions are quite regularly interrupted by someone saying: “For me, civil society means something very different!” or “Civil society? I don’t know what that is!” On the one hand, we are in an age where non-state actors, communities of choice, NGOs and civil society in general are arguably determining the course of events to a greater extent than ever before. On the other hand, we are witnessing a shrinking space for civil society in more and more parts of the world. This is unsatisfactory, and a cause for concern. We need an ongoing and informed debate on the potential and the limits of civil society action.

The new Maecenata publication

What is Civil Society? A Primer

written by Rupert G. Strachwitz, Director of the Maecenata Institute, and an expert in civil society and philanthropy studies, is based on a [German version](#) published in 2020. Its aim is to supply decision makers, the media, and the public with a basic working definition and introduction, while making no attempt at discussing theory. The author does not in any way wish to preclude vital academic and expert debates on the subject from continuing. On the contrary, it is hoped that this short summary may help put these on an improved footing.

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For more up to date factual information, CIVICUS and others provide a wide range of publications. Maecenata will publish a **report on the shrinking space for civil society in Europe** in 2022.

Find here [Maecenata’s latest English publication list](#).

The [Maecenata Foundation](#) is a think tank that focuses on civil society, philanthropy and the civic space. Its core unit is the Maecenata Institute, a research and policy centre, founded in 1997. Maecenata operates from Berlin, Germany, with a strong European and international outlook.

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