

**'The Argentine government sent a chilling message regarding civil society participation; this reduction of civic space in global discussions should be monitored'**

*CIVICUS speaks to Gastón Chillier, Executive Director of the Centre for Legal and Social Studies (CELS), an Argentine human rights organisation. CELS was founded in 1979, during the military dictatorship, to promote human rights, justice and social inclusion. In its early years, CELS fought for truth and justice for the crimes committed under state terrorism. In the late 1980s it expanded its agenda to include human rights violations committed under democracy, their structural causes and their relationship to social inequality. CELS advances its agenda through research, campaigning, alliances with other civil society actors, public policy advocacy and strategic litigation in both national and international forums.*



**1. Tell us about the Argentine government's decision to revoke several civil society organisations' accreditation for the World Trade Organisation (WTO) Ministerial Conference in Buenos Aires**

Sixty-five people from around the world whose organisations had been accredited to participate in the WTO Ministerial Conference, held in Buenos Aires from 10 to 13 December 2017, received emails from the WTO that stated that the security authorities of Argentina, the host country, had rejected their accreditations "for unspecified reasons." Some of these people decided to travel to Argentina regardless, to participate in other activities. Many of them were retained for hours at Ezeiza International Airport before being allowed to enter the country. Two people – [Petter Titland](#), a Norwegian activist from ATTAC (Association for the Taxation of financial Transactions and Aid to

Citizens), and the British-Ecuadorean journalist [Sally Burch](#), who was due to participate in the Ministerial Conference as an expert on internet regulation – were denied entry and subsequently deported.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs initially issued a press release [explaining](#) that the accreditations had been rejected because these people or their organisations “had made explicit calls via social media for violent demonstrations, expressing their intent to generate intimidation and chaos.” It became clear that the government had been gathering intelligence, very possibly on the basis of people’s organisational affiliation or political opinions, something that is explicitly prohibited under Argentine law.

## **2. What did civil society do to get the government of Argentina overturn its decision?**

Argentine civil society organisations (CSOs), and my organisation CELS in particular, worked to defend the blacklisted activists’ right to participation and freedom of movement and ensure their entry into Argentina. We collected and shared information locally and with their organisations back home. We also alerted embassy and justice officials as people were being retained at the airport. Finally, we took legal and administrative action.

More specifically, CELS filed habeas data petitions, a request for public information and a collective habeas corpus, while also dealing with the cases of Titland and Burch, and provided advice and support to some of the other people directly affected. In addition, we helped get the word out to journalists, via social media, press interviews and media releases.

Through these [legal and administrative petitions](#), we requested that the government specify the security restrictions established for participating in the WTO event and explain the links between that evaluation and the prohibition or restriction of individual activists’ entry into the country.

At a court hearing on the collective habeas corpus we filed on behalf of the civil society activists who were retained upon arrival, the government presented a list with the names of the 65 people whose accreditations had been rejected, but insisted that this did not impede entry into Argentina and that it had had no bearing on Titland’s and Burch’s deportations. They did acknowledge, however, that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had forwarded this list to the National Migrations Office, as an ‘alert.’ Both Titland’s and Burch’s names appeared on that list.

In response to our other petitions, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs claimed that they could not provide details regarding which information had been gathered on those 65 people or how it had been gathered, and forwarded our queries to the Ministry of Security and the Federal Intelligence Agency. We are still awaiting their responses.

Thanks to civil society’s legal, diplomatic and media pressure, the Argentine government was forced to backtrack in some cases. After Titland and Burch were deported no one else was prohibited from entering the country. Also, on 10 December the Argentine government announced that it was re-accrediting a handful of people who were on the

list, including Titland, who eventually returned to Argentina and participated in the conference.

However, many other people and CSOs remained unaccredited, including the Chilean CSO Derechos Digitales, the Argentine CSO Fundación Grupo Efecto Positivo and the British CSO Global Justice Now. Some activists whose names were on the list told us they refrained from travelling to Argentina out of fear, and others had their visas rejected. Some of them worry that these rejections and alerts will remain on their migration records.

### **3. What are the implications of the Argentine government's decision for the legitimacy of the WTO talks, and more generally for the perspectives of civil society participation in future global discussions?**

The Argentine government's decision to reject the accreditation of activists on the basis of intelligence that may have been gathered unlawfully, retain them in the airport and, in the two most notorious cases, deport them to third countries, caused tension with the WTO itself as well as with other countries, and notably Norway. It would appear that the Argentine government sought to curtail the civil society participation in this Ministerial Conference. Regardless of the meeting's outcomes, this undoubtedly had an impact on the legitimacy of the talks.

This was the first time when activists have been turned away on this scale, and it sets a very negative precedent for civil society participation. The Argentine government's actions have sent a chilling message regarding the country's commitment to civil society participation. This reduction of civic space in global discussions is a new dimension that should be monitored. And it should sound the alarm for global civil society to ensure that other governments do not turn this precedent into routine practice.

### **4. How would you describe the general environment for civil society in Argentina? What needs to change for civic space to improve in the country?**

Although Argentina is far from having the worst scenario in the region, the environment for civil society is deteriorating. The current administration has ordered the repression of social protests and promoted or tolerated the criminalisation of demonstrators and of some prominent social leaders. It has also shown disdain for civil society participation, for example when appointing Supreme Court justices by decree – and therefore bypassing all instances of public participation in the process – and leading a fast-track attempt to fill the long-vacant Ombudsman position, again ignoring civil society in the process. In both cases, public outcry pressured the government into backtracking.

In addition, CELS and other national and international human rights organisations that played a role in the case of Santiago Maldonado, a young man who disappeared during the illegal repression of an indigenous community's protest and was found drowned nearly three months later, were targeted for demonization by some national government officials.

For civic space to improve in Argentina, the government should provide guarantees for the effective exercise of the right to protest, ensuring that force is legally and responsibly used by the security forces. It should also give priority to political channels to reach concerted solutions to social conflicts and demands, and it should respect and promote a variety of mechanisms for civil society participation in key political processes.

- Civic space in Argentina is rated as 'narrowed' by the [CIVICUS Monitor](#)
- Get in touch with CELS through their [website](#) or [Facebook](#) page, or follow [@CELS\\_Argentina](#) and [@gchillier](#) on Twitter