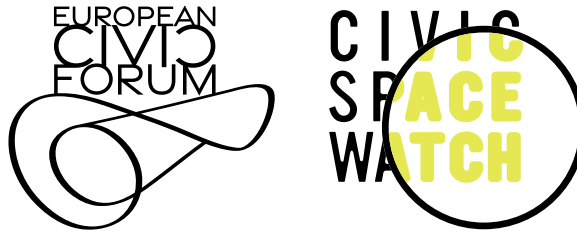


CIVIC SPACE REPORT 2025

Horizontal analysis





ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report was published by the European Civic Forum (ECF) in June 2025, with chapters written by its secretariat, member organisations, and partner organisations, including as part of the Net4Defenders project. Much of the content originally appeared as part of ECF's submission to the European Commission's Rule of Law consultation. Each chapter reflects the views and analysis of its respective author. For more information about the European Civic Forum, please visit www.civic-forum.eu.

EDITORIAL TEAM

Aarti Narsee	Lead author and country report editor
Kerttu Willamo	Co-author and country report editor
Benjamin Goodwin	Editor
Agapi Antonaki	Country report editor
Giada Negri	Editorial adviser
Jan Robert Suesser	Editorial adviser
Alexandrina Najmowicz	Editorial adviser
Adrien Labbe	Graphic design and report layout



**Co-funded by
the European Union**

The European Civic Forum is co-funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the granting authority. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

METHODOLOGY AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	4
Country report authors	6
FOREWORD	7
HORIZONTAL ANALYSIS.....	10
Executive Summary.....	11
Context	11
Summary of developments in European civic space in 2024.....	14
Old and new laws continue to restrict civic freedoms	14
Right to protest increasingly under threat.....	15
Criminalisation of solidarity	18
Harassment, SLAPPs, and hostile narratives against civil society.....	19
Worrying funding landscape at national and EU level.....	20
Inadequate and fragmented inclusion of CSOs in policymaking.....	24
Civic participation and structured civil dialogue at the EU level	26
Civil society resilience	28
Insiders v. outsiders.....	29
Institutionalising suspicion: FARA laws and other legal measures against civil society	30
Foreign narratives weaponised against excluded groups and movements	31
The counter terrorism narrative weaponised against fights for rights	32
Normalisation and legitimisation of exclusion narratives: a vicious circle	33
Chilling effect, reputational damage, and psychological toll	34

Disclaimer: The views expressed in each chapter are those of the author. The views expressed in the horizontal analysis are those of the European Civic Forum and do not necessarily reflect the view of regional or national organisations. The views expressed in the country and regional chapters do not necessarily reflect the views of the ECF.

Methodology and acknowledgements

This report was compiled and edited by the European Civic Forum (ECF). It is composed of a horizontal analysis, which looks at pan-European developments in civic space and the environment for civil society in 2024, which is written by the ECF, in addition to 16 country reports and one regional report written by civil society experts on the ground.

The ECF bases its analysis of civic space in Europe on six elements that we believe are crucial for an open and vibrant civic space:

1. **A conducive institutional, political, and socio-economic landscape.** The public's understanding of the role of civil society, the values it embodies, and the activities it pursues — and in turn the trust of and support for civil society — is in large part shaped by (historical) political culture, together with socio-economic structures and other emerging related events. Where the institutional, political, and socio-economic landscape is favourable, civil society enjoys widespread trust and support from the public.
2. **The respect of civic freedoms.** A well-implemented, supportive legal and regulatory framework for civic freedoms — in particular the freedoms of association, peaceful assembly, and expression — is essential for open civic space.
3. **Safe space and states' duty to protect.** Public authorities must fulfil their duty to protect civil society actors and human rights defenders from physical, verbal, and judicial attacks linked to their human rights work by taking action against perpetrators.
4. **A supportive framework for CSOs' financial viability and sustainability.** Supportive legislation on funding, including foreign and international funding, and the availability of sufficient and predictable resources are crucial to civil society's capacities, independence, and long-term strategic planning.
5. **Dialogue between civil society and governing bodies.** Governments, institutions, and other public bodies must take steps, through their policies and rhetoric, to empower citizens and the organisations that represent them to be meaningfully engaged in public debates and policymaking.
6. **Civil society's resilience to challenges to democracy, rule of law, and fundamental rights.** Where there is open civic space, civil society is strong, responsive and resilient in the face of challenges that aim to shrink this space.

Based on these pillars, the ECF developed a questionnaire to guide the contributors' analysis of their national or regional context.

The horizontal analysis draws on the findings of the country and regional chapters, in addition to other relevant reports, the ECF's Civic Space Watch platform, data from the Fundamental Rights Agency and the CIVICUS Monitor, and interviews conducted or information collected from regional organisations. The spotlight chapter on the "foreign" narrative and its impact on civic space draws on interviews, research reports and country reports. We conducted interviews with the following organisations: Balkans Civil Society Development Network, Climate Action Network (CAN) Europe, European Environmental Bureau (EEB), European Network Against Racism (ENAR), ILGA Europe, Philea-Philanthropy Europe Association, and the Platform for Undocumented Migrants (PICUM).

The country reports are written by 21 member and partner organisations, on the basis of our questionnaire. The authors choose the areas on which to focus on based on their expertise and the relevance of the issues for their national context.

We would like to thank these organisations and individuals, listed below, for their contribution.

Country report authors

-  Bündnis Für Gemeinnützigkeit - Civil Society Alliance Austria [Austria]
-  Bulgarian Center for Not-for-Profit Law [Bulgaria]
-  Glopolis and NeoN Coalition [Czech Republic]
-  Human Rights House Zagreb [Croatia]
-  Nyt Europa [Denmark]
-  Maecenata Foundation [Germany]
-  Network of Estonian Non-profit Organisations, [Estonia]
-  Ligue des droits de l'Homme [LDH] [France]
-  Ökotárs - Hungarian Environmental Partnership Foundation [Hungary]
-  Associazione Ricreativa e Culturale Italiana [Italy]
-  Civic Alliance Latvia [Latvia]
-  Breed Mensenrechten Overleg – BMO [Netherlands]
-  National Federation of Polish NGOs – OFOP, Batory Foundation & Legal Clinics Foundation-FUPP [Poland]
-  Academia Cidadã – Citizenship academy [Portugal]
-  Civil Society Development Foundation [FDSC] Romania
-  International Institute for Nonviolent Action – NOVACT & Omnium Cultural [Spain]
-  Balkan Civil Society Development Network [Western Balkans]

Foreword

This is a wake-up call: it's time for concrete action on civic space

Europe is experiencing a dangerous **rollback of civic freedoms**, in a context where the promise of **universal rights** and **democratic values**, enshrined in the EU treaties, is being steadily eroded by interconnected economic, social, cultural, and political factors.

This report is being published at a time when the **far-right is gaining traction**, both through electoral results and its increasing and worrying influence on mainstream politics, EU institutions, and policymaking. These forces promote an “us vs. them” vision of society, based on the exclusion of individuals and groups. They reject the idea that democracy must work for all, with public policies that tackle inequality, enable everyone to enjoy their fundamental rights, and build inclusion through solidarity.

This exclusionary approach is taking hold **as people are drawn to false “explanations” for the precarity they are facing**. The appeal of national identity and the exclusion of “others” stems largely from decades of competitive, market-driven policies. These neoliberal public policies pursued over the last four decades have allowed inequality to surge and precarity to grow, in a shift away from Keynesian economics, which linked economic decisions to redistribution for a relatively shared social wellbeing relying on social protections.

When redistribution no longer guarantees security of livelihoods, **people feel that they are in competition with each other for access to rights**, such as when it comes to jobs, housing, or social services. This is often instrumentalised through narratives that claim that “native” Europeans should have priority over “foreigners”.

These narratives are being used to justify exclusionary **laws and weaken protections for vulnerable groups**, by presenting outsiders as “threats” — **drawing a dangerous distinction between those who “belong” and those who do not**.

These developments also in part reflect Europe’s underlying historical prejudices and colonial past, with narratives of the supposed racial and cultural superiority of a white and Christian Europe and the worldwide spread of patriarchal religious ideologies. The actions of the Trump administration hark back to this historical approach, in which inequality was considered natural, justified by a colonial and patriarchal mindset. It is in this context that attacks on so-called “woke” agendas — gender equality, anti-racism, and climate justice — are gaining traction as part of a **deliberate strategy to delegitimise civil society** because it fights for real equality through the universal enjoyment of fundamental rights. By framing these rights as divisive, far-right and illiberal figures aim to justify and legitimise the repression of civil society organisations (CSOs) through **legal harassment** and **funding cuts**, amongst other measures.

It is also important to highlight the harmful impact of the “**securitisation**” approach, which is increasingly extended to a multitude of issues deemed “security threats”. Treating migration, protests, and dissent as threats has accelerated civic space restrictions, border militarisation, surveillance, and the **criminalisation of solidarity** and humanitarian assistance. This signals a broader move away from long-standing human rights frameworks.

Meanwhile, laws targeting NGOs under the guise of “transparency” or “national security” are silencing critical voices. The growing implementation of “foreign agent” and “anti-terrorist” laws and other legal instruments illustrates how rights-based advocacy is being reframed in several EU countries as a threat. Legislation in several countries now mirrors authoritarian models — **curtailing peaceful assembly**, punishing dissent, and criminalising solidarity.

Despite this bleak picture, we fully acknowledge the complexity of the current situation and rejoice that the forces supporting democracy and fundamental rights remain strong. We see how **civil society has demonstrated outstanding resilience** in the face of unrelenting challenges. Through **strategic litigation**, coalition-building, and **mass mobilisation**,

organisations across Europe have continued to defend democratic values and rights for all. They have partners inside governments and institutions to discuss issues at stake. But without meaningful support from those in leadership positions and a political vision, there is no way to put people’s wellbeing at the centre of policymaking.

If Europe is to live up to its proclaimed values, it must **reverse the trends of growing inequality and precarity and shrinking civic space**. This report is a **wake-up call**: it’s time for concrete action. Civil society actors, institutions, and citizens, each with their own means and responsibilities, must come together to achieve an **open and enabling civic space** and **fundamental rights and democracy for all**.

Horizontal analysis

Executive Summary

Europe is facing an unprecedented and intensified attack on civic space, with notable restrictions on the space for civil society being witnessed in several member states including **France, Germany, Italy** and the **Netherlands**. Nevertheless, civil society continues to push back through strategic litigation, coalition-building, and mass mobilisation.

In 2024, the growing popularity of far-right political groups across Europe impacted civic space. The scapegoating of social groups already facing exclusion was widespread. At the same time, governments increasingly questioned the credibility and applicability of international human rights conventions. In several countries, despite civil society's calls for reforms to existing laws restricting civic space, they remained in force. Furthermore, new proposals were introduced to target the work of civil society, ranging from so-called "foreign agents" laws to proposals targeting peaceful protests and those working on migration. The freedom of **peaceful assembly was increasingly restricted, with the Palestine solidarity and environmental rights movements disproportionately targeted**. The criminalisation of solidarity remains a serious concern in several countries and was reinforced by the EU's militarised and securitised approach to migration.

Notably, there was **a deliberate strategy to delegitimise civil society**, both at national and EU level. CSOs, activists, and journalists faced increasing pressure through legal intimidation and smear campaigns. Narratives suggesting that Europe is threatened primarily by foreign interventions had detrimental

impacts. In particular, organisations and activists working on issues such as anti-discrimination, climate and environmental justice, and LGBTQI+ and migrants' rights experienced disproportionate and unjust consequences.

The funding landscape for civil society worsened, with governments threatening the public funding of critical and watchdog organisations. The debate on whether CSOs engaged in civil dialogue and advocacy should receive public funding is a growing concern for civil society both at national and EU level. Additionally, the freeze of U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) funds is having a significant impact across Europe. Overall, spaces for participation and political engagement are increasingly under pressure, with civil society often sidelined or included as mere tokens in the policy making process.

This chapter analyses developments in civic space in both the EU and Western Balkans in 2024 and the start of 2025. It is divided into three sections. The **first section** provides an overview of the political, social and economic context which has shaped the space for civil society, while the **second section** summarises key developments in civic space in 2024. The **third section** features a spotlight on how foreign narratives blaming the "other" are impacting civic space. It draws on interviews, research reports, and the country chapters of this report to illustrate the practical effects of the "foreign threats" narrative, including how it is being weaponised to shrink civic space and public engagement more broadly.

Context

In 2024, European civil society mobilised people during the many elections held across the continent, advocating for democracy, social justice, inclusion, and fundamental rights for all. National elections took place in **Austria, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Croatia, France, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Portugal, Romania, and Serbia**, with **far-right political groups growing in popularity and gaining significant victories**. However, these parties only entered government in a minority of cases. In **Austria**, although the far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ) emerged

as the biggest party in the European, national, and regional elections,¹ the centre-right People's Party (ÖVP), centre-left Social Democrats (SPÖ), and liberal Neos party struck a coalition deal in late February 2025, leaving the FPÖ outside of government.

In **Germany**, the far-right Alternative for Germany (AFD) party gained its first state election victory in Thuringia — marking the first electoral victory for the far-right in the country since World War II.²

1. <https://www.diepresse.com/19227315/blau-tuerkise-zusammenarbeit-laut-experten-sehr-wahrscheinlich>

2. <https://www.politico.eu/article/germany-far-right-elections-victory-afd-cdu-olaf-scholz/>

CIVICUS MONITOR RATINGS BY COUNTRY IN 2024

COUNTRY	RATING 2024	CHANGE
 AUSTRIA	OPEN	
 ALBANIA	NARROWED	
 BELGIUM	NARROWED	
 BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA	OBSTRUCTED	
 BULGARIA	NARROWED	
 CROATIA	NARROWED	
 CYPRUS	NARROWED	
 CZECH REPUBLIC	OPEN	
 DENMARK	OPEN	
 ESTONIA	OPEN	
 FINLAND	OPEN	
 FRANCE	NARROWED	
 GERMANY	NARROWED	
 GREECE	OBSTRUCTED	
 HUNGARY	OBSTRUCTED	
 IRELAND	OPEN	
 ITALY	NARROWED	
 KOSOVO	NARROWED	
 LATVIA	OPEN	
 LITHUANIA	OPEN	
 LUXEMBOURG	OPEN	
 MALTA	NARROWED	
 MONTENEGRO	NARROWED	
 NETHERLANDS	NARROWED	↓
 NORTH MACEDONIA	NARROWED	
 POLAND	NARROWED	↗
 PORTUGAL	OPEN	
 ROMANIA	NARROWED	
 SERBIA	OBSTRUCTED	
 SLOVAKIA	NARROWED	
 SLOVENIA	OPEN	↗
 SPAIN	NARROWED	
 SWEDEN	OPEN	

RATINGS KEY
OPEN
NARROWED
OBSTRUCTED
REPRESSED
CLOSED

Source: CIVICUS Monitor: monitor.civicus.org

Following the 2024 elections in **Belgium**, the new “Arizona” coalition government was sworn in, comprising the Dutch-speaking right-wing nationalist N-VA, Christian Democrat CD&V, and socialist Vooruit parties, and the Francophone liberal MR and centrist Les Engagés.³

In **Romania**, the constitutional court annulled the first round of the presidential elections, which saw the victory of far-right, pro-Russia candidate Călin Georgescu, after concerns of potential unfair influence from abroad, including through the use of TikTok.⁴

In **France**, following the first round of legislative elections in which the far-right Rassemblement National came first, their expected victory in the second round was avoided thanks a huge mobilisation of voters by civil society to vote for the best-placed candidate to defeat the far-right in each constituency.⁵

In some countries, the **aftermath of elections in 2023 played a significant role in shaping the landscape for civic freedoms**. Anti-Islam populist leader Geert Wilders won a dramatic victory in the **Netherlands** and in July 2024, a new government was formed consisting of right-wing and extremist parties.⁶ Despite the defeat of **Poland's** Law and Justice (PiS) party in 2023 and the formation of a new government, the country has not seen a significant shift in its rule of law crisis, with several attempts at judicial reforms being halted by President Andrzej Duda, a staunch supporter of the former government.

Challenges to judicial independence have continued in **Hungary**, **Italy**, and **Spain**. For instance, in Italy, the government launched a series of attacks against the judiciary for being “politicised”, including smear campaigns.⁷ It has also proposed several laws aimed at limiting the actions of magistrates.⁸

The scapegoating of social groups already facing exclusion was widespread in 2024. In several countries, political leaders continue to fuel anti-rights narratives directly targeting LGBTQI+ people, migrants, racialised people, and other minorities. Under the Meloni government in **Italy**, LGBTQI+ rights, migrant’s rights, and sexual and reproductive rights have faced serious attacks. In **Portugal**, extremist rhetoric has increased, in particular towards immigrants, who the government is using as scapegoats for employment challenges in the country. Senior politicians in **Denmark** have made anti-transgender statements. For example, the former minister of gender equality made transphobic comments and claimed that “wokeism has gone too far”.⁹ The precarious environment for excluded groups is likely to worsen in the context of these political developments across many member states. The withdrawal of the proposed Equal Treatment directive from the European Commission’s 2025 work programme, without proposing any alternative, is a missed opportunity to fill the legislative gap that remains in ensuring protection from discrimination in the EU in all areas of life. The directive would have strengthened protections against discrimination based on religion, belief, disability, age, and sexual orientation, including for those at the intersections of race and gender. Although anti-discrimination CSOs argued that the proposal did not properly address the structures

of inequality, it would have nevertheless set a strong precedent for protection in the EU.¹⁰

In addition to this anti-rights rhetoric, governments have increasingly questioned the credibility and applicability of international human rights conventions. For example, in **Denmark**, a Social Democratic Party MP, and now taxation minister, argued against the democratic legitimacy of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), stating that in the future, Denmark should not abide by the court’s

Civic space in Europe continued to be impacted by the overall geopolitical context in 2024, with Russia’s invasion of Ukraine marking its third year, Israel’s ongoing destruction of Gaza — plausibly a genocide according to the International Court of Justice — and wider war in the Middle East, as well as the EU’s securitised and militarised approach to migration.

3. <https://www.brusselstimes.com/belgian-elections-2024/1424985/whos-in-belgiums-new-federal-government>

4. <https://www.politico.eu/article/romania-court-cancels-presidential-election-runoff-tiktok-russian-influence-calin-georgescu/>

5. <https://www.ldh-france.org/assurons-la-defaite-de-lextreme-droite-le-7-juillet/>

6. Parties including the Party for Freedom (PVV), the People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD), New Social Contract (NSC), and the Farmer–Citizen Movement (BBB).

7. https://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/politica/2024/10/19/salvini-mobilizzazione-contro-la-magistratura-politicizzata_639fdbc9-501c-46d5-9160-84c5bb0cdae.html

8. <https://www.ilmattoquotidiano.it/2024/12/09/separazione-carriere-camera-riforma-sogno-berlusconi/7797161/>; https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2024/12/09/news/bavaglio_stampa_separazione_delle_carriere_riforma_giustizia-423867671/

9. <https://jyllands-posten.dk/debat/kronik/ECE17337761/ibippi-har-faaet-mine-oejne-op-for-hvor-problematisk-juridisk-koensskifte-er/>

10. <https://www.enar.eu.org/the-end-of-the-eu-equal-treatment-directive-a-blow-to-equality-or-a-chance-to-rethink/#:~:text=After%2017%20years%20of%20stagnation,in%20European%20anti%20discrimination%20law.>

rulings, particularly on questions related to immigration and integration.¹¹ These arguments were reiterated by Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen, who stated that while she does not intend to withdraw Denmark from the conventions, they should not be set in stone.¹² In **Germany**, the conservative CDU party's political programme for 2024 argued that people seeking asylum should no longer receive protection under the Geneva Refugee Convention and European law.¹³ Meanwhile in the **Netherlands**, the internal affairs and justice and security ministers announced an investigation in April 2024 into the freedom of peaceful assembly, questioning whether the legal framework still corresponds to current developments.¹⁴ In 2024, people took to the polls across EU member states to cast their vote in the European elections, driven to vote largely due to rising prices, the cost of living, and the overall economic situation.¹⁵ Ahead of the elections, civil society

groups mobilised and called on MEPs to re-commit to fundamental rights, particularly for racialised groups¹⁶ and to support, protect, and empower civil society via the “Civil Society for EU” campaign.¹⁷ The elections saw significant progress in votes for the far-right in **France**, **Germany** and several other member states. With the three far-right political groups now making up a quarter of MEPs, there is even more urgency to protect rights for all people, in line with the Treaty's provisions.¹⁸

Civic space in Europe continued to be impacted by the overall geopolitical context in 2024, with Russia's invasion of Ukraine marking its third year, Israel's ongoing destruction of Gaza — plausibly a genocide according to the International Court of Justice (ICJ)¹⁹ — and wider war in the Middle East, as well as the EU's securitised and militarised approach to migration.

Summary of developments in European civic space in 2024

Old and new laws continue to restrict civic freedoms

Several existing restrictive laws continued to limit the freedoms of association and peaceful assembly in 2024. These laws added to CSOs' existing administrative, capacity, and resource challenges and result in an overall chilling effect.

In **France**, the *contrat d'engagement républicain* (CER), introduced as part of the “separatism law”, makes public subsidies conditional on compliance with a set of so-called “republican” principles and has been used to **target critical organisations**.²⁰

Hungary's Defence of Sovereignty Act, passed in late 2023, remained in effect. The law created the Sovereignty

Protection Office (SPO), which is tasked with investigating and reporting on any organisations or individuals perceived as critical.²¹

The **Spanish** government has taken no steps to reform the so-called Gag Law despite earlier promises to do so.²² The law has been increasingly used as a tool to criminalise demonstrations. Social movements have faced charges of being a “criminal organisation,” while activists and journalists have been accused of “terrorism” under the Spanish Penal code, which has been inadequately reformed.²³

In the **Netherlands**, a draft law on the administrative prohibition of organisations would give the justice minister

In 2024, several new laws were introduced that specifically target the work of migrants' rights organisations and the right to peaceful assembly.

11. <https://www.dr.dk/nyheder/politik/rasmus-stoklund-den-europaeiske-menneskerettighedsdomstol-er-blevet-et-stort>

12. <https://www.dansketaaler.dk/tale/mette-frederiksen-tale-ved-socialdemokratiets-kongres#source>

13. <https://www.nds-fluerat.org/59284/aktuelles/die-cdu-und-das-asylrecht/>; <https://www.proasyl.de/news/warum-das-neue-cdu-grundsatzprogramm-so-gefaehrlich-ist/>

14. <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/actueel/nieuws/2024/04/19/kabinet-laait-onafhankelijk-onderzoek-doen-naar-demonstratierecht>

15. <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3292>

16. <https://www.enar-eu.org/eu-elections-2024-racialised-communities-at-risk-without-firm-human-rights-commitments/>

17. <https://civilsocietyeurope.eu/open-letter-ensuring-a-vibrant-civic-space-in-the-european-union-civil-societys-expectations-for-the-next-five-years/>

18. <https://www.politico.eu/article/patriots-for-europe-jordan-bardella-viktor-orban-marine-le-pen/>

19. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/12/amnesty-international-concludes-israel-is-committing-genocide-against-palestinians-in-gaza/>

20. <https://www.ldh-france.org/refus-de-subvention-de-la-compagnie-de-theatre-arlette-moreau-les-associations-se-mobilisent/>

21. <https://szuverenitasvedelmi hivatal.hu/dokumentumaink/>

22. <https://www.boe.es/buscar/act.php?id=BOE-A-2015-3442>

23. https://www.elnacional.cat/en/politics/40-catalan-groups-warn-spain-penal-code-reform-regressive-democracy_926616_102.html

broad powers to ban an organisation if it is deemed to undermine “public order” or if it “creates, exacerbates or maintains a culture of lawlessness.”²⁴

In 2024, several new laws were introduced that specifically target the work of migrants’ rights organisations and the right to peaceful assembly. In **Italy** the Piantadosi law (NGO Decree law) requires sea-rescue ships to head directly to an Italian-designated port after one rescue, effectively disregarding any other distress calls at sea, complicating their work. Sea-rescue NGOs also face heavy financial sanctions.²⁵ An amendment to the Foreigners’ Law in **Portugal**, which ended the “Expression of Interest” regime (the process for regularising immigrants), makes it more difficult for immigrants to apply for regularisation and increases bureaucratic hurdles for associations helping migrants.²⁶

Several laws introduced in **Italy** aim to restrict the right to peaceful assembly. This includes the so-called “Ecovandals” law, which disproportionately targets environmental and climate rights activists²⁷ and the proposed new security decree (DDL 1660),²⁸ which introduces 20 new offences in the criminal code²⁹ and, in some cases, expands penalties for existing crimes.³⁰

In **Estonia**, a proposal to amend the Law Enforcement Act could potentially restrict the right to participate in protests, as it would grant the Police and Border Guard Board wide discretion to ban public gatherings as a preventive measure.³¹ In **Belgium**, the new government coalition agreement includes a plan to re-introduce prolonged judicial bans on the right to protest, which were scrapped under the previous government after widespread civil society and trade union opposition.³²

Right to protest increasingly under threat

The freedom of peaceful assembly was increasingly targeted in 2024, with some member states imposing

The freedom of peaceful assembly was increasingly targeted in 2024, with some member states imposing more severe restrictions on this right.

more severe restrictions on this right. A range of restrictions were put in place by governments at all stages of exercising this right: before, during, and after protests. Restrictive legislation passed in previous years

was used to limit peaceful assembly. In addition, other measures taken include protest bans, the use of excessive force, the detention of protesters, criminalisation, intimidation, harassment, and surveillance.

In 2024, environmental justice groups and the Palestine solidarity movement were particularly targeted with restrictions (see the case studies below).

One of the main challenges to the freedom of peaceful assembly is the limited accountability of police officers due to the lack of visible identification.

Other groups have also faced restrictions, such as those advocating for housing rights and the rights of women and LGBTQI+ people. In **France**, security concerns surrounding the **Olympic Games were used as a pretext to arrest dozens of activists staging protests**.³³ In one case, members of Hijabeuses, a women’s footballers’ collective fighting for the right to wear the hijab in sport, were arrested by the police and faced identity checks and public pat-downs after staging a protest during the closing ceremony of the Olympic Games. The collective’s members faced further violence and humiliation as they were taken into custody and searched, during which they had their head coverings removed.³⁴ Civil society in **Spain** reported that **housing rights activists faced many cases of rights violations**, including 67 police identity checks, 60

financial penalties, 41 judicial cases, and multiple police threats. Thus far, 21 activists have been prosecuted for protesting the eviction of *Bloc Llavors* and are facing 35 years in prison and €190,000 in fines.³⁵ In another case,

²⁴. https://www.eerstekamer.nl/wetsvoorstel/35079_initiatiefvoorstel_mutluer

²⁵. <https://www.valigiablu.it/ong-soccorso-mare-decreto-piantadosi-effetti/>

²⁶. https://www.rtp.pt/noticias/pais/retrocesso-associacoes-de-imigrantes-criticam-novas-regras_n1579920

²⁷. <https://www.wired.it/article/ecovandali-legge-governo-meloni-proteste-clima-ultima-generazione/>

²⁸. As of early May the government took the abrupt and arbitrary decision to transform the draft bill into a decree that was swiftly approved by the Council of Ministers, bypassing Parliament.

²⁹. <https://www.amnesty.it/ddl-sicurezza-ulteriori-preoccupazioni-per-limpatto-sui-diritti-umani/>

³⁰. <https://www.wired.it/article/ecovandali-legge-governo-meloni-proteste-clima-ultima-generazione/>

³¹. <https://news.err.ee/1609384949/plans-to-give-police-more-powers-and-ease-policing-restrictions-in-estonia>; <https://cms.advokatuur.ee/app/uploads/2024/06/KorS-VTK.pdf>

³². <https://www.amnesty.be/infos/actualites/arizona>

³³. <https://france.attac.org/actus-et-medias/salle-de-presse/article/la-france-deja-championne-olympique-de-la-repression#:~:text=Cette%20r%C3%A9pression%20s>

³⁴. <https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/france/160824/huit-femmes-du-collectif-des-hijabeuses-ont-ete-placees-en-garde-vue-en-marge-des-jo>

³⁵. <https://directa.cat/el-cas-del-vito-un-exemple-de-repressio-contra-lactivisme-i-les-persones-migrants/>

during the 8 March feminist demonstration in Madrid, activists faced verbal and physical attacks, including racial and xenophobic slurs. A man physically assaulted one participant, marking the first formally reported incident by the feminist group to the police.³⁶

One of the main challenges to the freedom of peaceful assembly is the limited **accountability of police officers** due to the lack of visible identification. This

was reported as a problem in several member states, including **Austria, Spain, Italy, and France**. In **Poland**, the interior ministry proposed a new regulation which would require an individual identification badge via a six-digit sequence identification number for police officers. However, the Polish ombudsman raised concerns that it may be difficult for members of the public to read the numbers on the badges.

Case study: Defenders of environmental justice on the frontline

Across Europe, people have staged actions to show their growing concerns about the environmental and climate crises and the inaction of decision-makers. As in previous years, in 2024, governments imposed

Some governments have imposed heavy fines or introduced legislation specifically targeting movements, organisations, and activists campaigning for environmental justice.”

several restrictions on these groups, including mass arrests, intimidation, harassment, humiliation, criminalisation, and surveillance. Some governments have imposed heavy fines or introduced

legislation specifically targeting movements, organisations, and activists campaigning for environmental justice.

Several EU member states have used **public vilification** to delegitimise the actions of these groups. In **France**, authorities banned a demonstration against the construction of a motorway and used excessive force against protesters, including using explosive grenades, while the interior minister publicly vilified the activists involved.³⁷

In **Poland**, Prime Minister Donald Tusk called on the authorities to respond strongly to the climate movement Last Generation's actions, deeming it a threat to public order, while the TVP3 Warsaw public broadcaster announced it would stop reporting on the activities of the “controversial” group.³⁸ In **Germany**, Last Generation activists faced over 5,000 criminal proceedings and fines exceeding €1 million.³⁹ In May

2024, five members were indicted for allegedly forming a criminal organisation following protests at refinery facilities. This led to raids, the phone surveillance of journalists, and the freezing of their bank accounts. In the **Czech Republic**, the agriculture minister falsely blamed the environmental organisation Hnutí DUHA for the severe impacts of floods, triggering harassment and threats against its members.⁴⁰

In **Italy**, civil society has expressed concerns that the new “Ecovandalism” law will be weaponised against environmental activists, as it imposes severe penalties, including fines up to €60,000 and potential five-year prison terms for defacing cultural or landscape sites.⁴¹ In 2024, an activist from the Last Generation movement was placed under a restrictive surveillance order, banning him from demonstrations and imposing a curfew.⁴²

Despite being non-violent, disruptive protest tactics like roadblocks and site occupations attract media and political scrutiny, often being labelled as a threat to security, anti-democratic, violent, or even as terrorism.

In **the Netherlands**, several members of Extinction Rebellion (XR) were preventively detained before the start of a climate demonstration and eventually prosecuted for sedition.⁴³ In **Serbia**, environmental defenders were arrested for attempting to stop forest logging⁴⁴ and activists opposing the Rio Tinto mining project faced violence by police, threats, vilification, serious charges, and raids on their homes.⁴⁵

36. <https://www.elsaltodiario.com/racismo/feministas-antirracistas-comision-8m-denuncian-actitudes-xenofobas-durante-manifestacion-madrid>

37. https://www.lemonde.fr/planete/article/2024/06/05/autoroute-a69-toulouse-castres-les-opposants-determines-a-maintenir-leur-rassemblement-malgre-l-interdiction_6237315_3244.html

38. <https://warszawa.tvp.pl/83788448/ostatnie-pokolenie-tvp3-warszawa-nie-bedzie-promowac-aktywistow>

39. <https://taz.de/Klimaschuetzerinnen-unter-Druck!/5988503/>

40. <https://vyzva.hnutiduha.cz/#no-back>

41. <https://www.amnesty.it/it-ddl-contro-gli-attivisti-climatici-e-legge/>

42. <https://www.editorialedomani.it/fatti/giacomo-baggio-ultima-generazione-attivista-rischia-sorveglianza-speciale-tribunale-t3y9j6mq>

43. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur35/6650/2023/en/>

44. <https://n1info.rs/vesti/sukob-aktivista-s-policijom-na-sodrosu-nekoliko-osoba-privedeno/>

45. <https://www.ft.com/content/a916bcb8-a779-412f-8772-ea0f88f10bd9>

Despite being non-violent, disruptive protest tactics like roadblocks and site occupations attract media and political scrutiny, often being labelled as a threat to security, anti-democratic, violent, or even as terrorism. However, it is important to remember that international human rights law protects peaceful assembly and recognises civil disobedience as legitimate.

Case study: Palestine solidarity movement under attack

More than a year after the Hamas attack against Israel and Israel's ongoing destruction of Gaza — plausibly a genocide according to the International Court of Justice (ICJ)⁴⁸ — people across Europe have continued to stage

In February 2025, the Berlin police banned chants in Arabic, imposed restrictions on movement during protests, and began banning organisers from participating in protests via official letters issued during police visits.

protests in solidarity with the Palestinian people. Since October 2023, many member states have violated international human rights standards on the freedoms of peaceful assembly, expression, and association — a trend that was prominent throughout 2024.⁴⁹

Protests in solidarity with Palestine were **banned** in several member states, including in **France**,

Germany, the **Netherlands** and **Italy**. In the **Netherlands**, the Amsterdam municipality imposed a weekend-long protest ban after the riots involving Israeli football supporters and local youth in November 2024.⁵⁰ Protesters who disregarded the ban reported that police used excessive violence against them.⁵¹ This trend has spilled over into 2025. In February 2025, the Berlin police banned chants in Arabic, imposed restrictions on movement during protests, and began banning organisers from participating in protests via official letters issued during police visits.⁵²

The UN Human Rights Committee⁴⁶ affirms that disruptions caused by protests must be accommodated and accepted. The UN Special Rapporteur on Environmental Defenders⁴⁷ highlights the urgent need for states to uphold these rights, refrain from excessive force or punitive measures, and ensure environmental defenders are not unjustly penalised.

The use of excessive force, including pepper spray, water cannon, physical violence, and kettling tactics and the **detention of protesters were documented in several member states**.⁵³ Police in **Germany** have repeatedly used disproportionate force against protesters, including minors.⁵⁴ In **Austria**, police cleared a Palestine solidarity encampment at the University of Vienna on 8 May 2024, using drones, surveillance vans, police dogs, lorries, and a crane. In November, the Vienna Administrative Court ruled that the actions were unlawful and unconstitutional. The police reasoned that the encampment showed “solidarity with the aims of Hamas” due to participants chanting the slogan “From the River to the Sea, Palestine will be free”. They also cited offences violating the anti-mask law. The court dismissed this reasoning and found that the chant does not constitute an incitement to commit a terrorist offence or an identification with Hamas specifically, unless further expressions suggest otherwise.⁵⁵

Organisations and individuals participating in protests have faced **intimidation, harassment, detention, and surveillance**, including in **Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Greece**,⁵⁶ **Italy, Romania** and the **Netherlands**. Berlin police carried out coordinated raids in several districts against five activists suspected of committing “pro-Palestinian crimes,”⁵⁷ including breach of the peace, incitement to hatred, and the use of symbols of unconstitutional organisations, while authorities have targeted Palestinian refugees living in **Germany** through deportation and the threat thereof.⁵⁸ In **Denmark**, the NGO Global Aktion has experienced harassment and threats in relation to their work on

⁴⁶. <https://docs.un.org/en/CCPR/C/GC/37>

⁴⁷. https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2024-02/UNSR_EnvDefenders_Aarhus_Position_Paper_Civil_Disobedience_EN.pdf

⁴⁸. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/12/amnesty-international-concludes-israel-is-committing-genocide-against-palestinians-in-gaza/>

⁴⁹. Our analysis includes EU members and the UK.

⁵⁰. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cx243z69w4no>

⁵¹. <https://www.amnesty.nl/politiegeweld-in-nederland>

⁵². https://www.berliner-zeitung.de/politik-gesellschaft/arabische-parolen-und-maersche-werden-verboden-berliner-polizei-geht-gegen-palaestina-demos-vor-li.2293210?utm_source=chatgpt.com

⁵³. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/general-comments-and-recommendations/general-comment-no-37-article-21-right-peaceful>

⁵⁴. <https://www.newarab.com/news/children-young-7-arrested-german-police-gaza-demos>

⁵⁵. <https://www.verwaltungsgericht.wien.gv.at/Content.Node/rechtsprechung/VGW-102-067-8305-2024.pdf>; <https://elsc.support/news/vienna-administrative-court-declares-police-raid-of-palestine-solidarity-encampment-vienna-unconstitutional>

⁵⁶. <https://miir.gr/epilektiki-paremvasi-tis-elas-gia-to-palaistiniako-kataggelia/>; <https://thepressproject.gr/athooi-me-symfoni-gnomi-dikasti-kai-eisangelea-oi-28-syllifthes-tis-katalipsis-tis-nomikis-se-allilengyi-ston-palaistiniako-lao/>; https://www.efsyn.gr/ellada/koinonia/432784_dysanexia-tis-kybernis-stis-kinitopoiiseis-gia-tin-palaistini

⁵⁷. <https://monitor.civicus.org/explore/repression-of-palestine-solidarity-continues-raids-detentions-and-police-brutality/>

⁵⁸. <https://www.palaestinaspricht.de/news/statement-deportation-10022025-berlin>

Palestine, while activists associated with the organisation have been subjected to house searches and illegal arrests and had their phones seized.⁵⁹ In **Spain**, several cases of rights violations were recorded against the movement, including 34 arrests, 133 police identity checks and 16 judicial cases, with protesters facing racial profiling, police violence, and hate crime charges.

Organisations have also been publicly vilified and threatened with funding cuts. This was the case in **Netherlands** for three NGOs who brought a court case against the state related to the export of weapon components to Israel. Similarly, in **Germany**, Jewish Voice for a Just Peace in the Middle East had its bank accounts frozen.

Freedom of expression continues to be restricted in several member states, with legitimate criticism of Israeli authorities unduly conflated with antisemitism and branded “apology for terrorism” in order to silence

activists and organisations. In Germany, the censorship of free expression includes the cancellation of guest speakers at lectures or events, the cancellation of art exhibitions, and the banning of Palestinian symbols such as the watermelon, the Palestinian flag and the Keffiyeh scarf. In Denmark, a new political agreement proposes an increase in penalties for antisemitic crimes in the criminal code and several other laws and gives the police broad powers. For example, police may order any platform provider to remove so-called “terror-related” content without a court order.⁶⁰ The agreement also refers “the new antisemitism” which it describes as antisemitism “generated out of a contempt for the State of Israel,” raising fears about the conflation of antisemitism with legitimate criticism of Israel. In the Netherlands, there were multiple parliamentary motions calling for the prohibition or criminalisation of the phrase “From the River to the Sea”, on the grounds that it was seen as antisemitic, but this has been dismissed by the courts.⁶¹

Criminalisation of solidarity

In 2024, CSOs and human rights defenders (HRDs) defending migrants’ and refugees’ rights and providing for their basic needs (due to the failure of states), continued to be targeted by authorities through legal actions, and bureaucratic and administrative burdens. This **criminalisation of solidarity** took place in the context of the more than 120,000 pushbacks that were recorded at the EU’s borders in 2024, including almost 20,000 at the eastern borders.⁶² In 2024, at least

Not only are these organisations and rights defenders working in an increasingly strict immigration policy environment, but their work is often demonised, stigmatised, and incorrectly labelled as human smuggling or trafficking

142 HRDs faced judicial proceedings in the EU due to their work for migrants’ rights, including sea rescue operations, humanitarian work, providing shelter and basic needs for people in distress, and civil disobedience actions. Most trials against HRDs standing in solidarity with migrants were unfounded and often resulted in acquittals. Among those

facing proceedings in 2024, 41 people were acquitted or had their charges dropped and two individuals were convicted, one of whom received a suspended sentence.⁶³

Not only are these organisations and **rights defenders** working in an increasingly strict immigration policy environment, but their **work is often demonised, stigmatised, and incorrectly labelled as human smuggling or trafficking**. International human rights bodies, such as the Council of Europe, have called on European member states to end their repression of HRDs assisting refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants.⁶⁴

In 2024, many incidents of criminalisation of solidarity took place across Europe. In **Poland**, five activists providing aid to refugees near the Polish-Belarusian border face prosecution under provisions of the Criminal Code, which criminalises facilitating unauthorised border crossings.⁶⁵ In **France**, volunteers from Utopia 56, an organisation supporting exiled people in Calais, were violently assaulted by police in August

59. Information directly received by our Danish member, Nyt Europa

60. <https://www.justitsministeriet.dk/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Aftaletekst.pdf>

61. Court of Amsterdam, 15 August 2023: <https://uitspraken.rechtspraak.nl/details?id=ECLI:NL:GHAMS:2023:2271>

62. <https://ecre.org/eu-eastern-borders-ngo-report-highlights-systematic-pushbacks-at-eu-borders-%E2%80%95-european-court-hears-landmark-push-back-cases-against-poland-latvia-and-lithuania-%E2%80%95-ngo/>

63. <https://picum.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Criminalisation-of-migration-and-solidarity-in-the-EU-2024-report.pdf>

64. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/europe-must-end-repression-of-human-rights-defenders-assisting-refugees-asylum-seekers-and-migrants>

65. <https://ecre.org/eu-eastern-borders-ngo-report-highlights-systematic-pushbacks-at-eu-borders-%E2%80%95-european-court-hears-landmark-push-back-cases-against-poland-latvia-and-lithuania-%E2%80%95-ngo/>

2024.⁶⁶ The organisation also faced legal action, with volunteers accused of defamation and false rescue alerts.⁶⁷

In the **Netherlands**, two immigration lawyers were unlawfully prosecuted for fraud and human trafficking for providing legitimate legal assistance to migrants and asylum seekers.⁶⁸

In **Italy**, migrants' rights organisations have been targeted by high-level officials, including Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni and Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini, who have accused sea rescue CSOs of smuggling.⁶⁹ Italian civil society is fighting back by campaigning against a policy requiring doctors to approve migrants and refugees as "fit for detention," which disproportionately affects migrants with disabilities. Disability and immigration policies do not sufficiently take into consideration how immigrant status can affect people with disabilities, such as the recognition of them and their disabilities, their access to support services, access to residence permit-related assistance, and navigating the whole migration system.⁷⁰

The director of the Youth Initiative for Human Rights was detained at **Serbia's** borders several times since July 2024, facing prolonged, unexplained interrogations. These cases illustrate the growing repression,

demonisation, and harassment of humanitarian aid and migrants' rights work, with governments imposing legal and administrative obstacles, targeting activists, and restricting aid to migrants and refugees who are already in a vulnerable situation.

The trend of criminalising solidarity is mirrored at the **EU level**. The EU's Pact on Migration and Asylum,⁷¹ introduced by the Commission in November 2023 and adopted in April 2024, criminalises migration and solidarity efforts under the pretext of combating people smuggling. The package expands police powers and punitive measures against migrants and those who assist them or advocate for their rights. The new Facilitation Directive⁷² in the pact introduces vague definitions that blur the distinction between smuggling, humanitarian aid, and human rights work, violating UN standards.⁷³ It criminalises not only migrants but also humanitarian workers, CSOs, and rights defenders working for migrant's and refugees' rights. The directive expands criminalising measures, encouraging stricter enforcement of criminal law against migrants and those providing aid and legitimises violent deportations, leaving civil society groups and HRDs at risk of prosecution. It also legitimises repressive policing tactics that disproportionately target migrants and racialised groups.⁷⁴

Harassment, SLAPPs, and hostile narratives against civil society

In 2024, CSOs, activists, and journalists faced increasing pressure through legal intimidation, smear campaigns, and governmental hostility. The Council of Europe's Expert Council on NGO Law found a widespread and troubling pattern of civil society stigmatisation across Europe, particularly targeting organisations working on human and minority rights, anti-corruption, investigative journalism, and environmental issues. Forms of stigmatisation included restrictive legislation, media smear campaigns, physical attacks, exclusion from decision-making, and limited access to public funding.⁷⁵

A growing trend across Europe shows an increasing use of Strategic Lawsuits against Public Participation (SLAPPs) and other types of malicious lawsuits as a tool to intimidate and censor civic actors. According to the CASE coalition's most recent research report,⁷⁶ which monitors SLAPP cases, legal mechanisms are being systematically misused to suppress public participation, with 1,049 SLAPPs filed in the period 2010-2023, of which 166 were in 2023. A significant number of the cases occurred in **Italy** (26), **Romania** (15), and **Serbia** (10).

66. https://x.com/Utopia_56/status/1819383803749482999

67. <https://utopia56.org/utopia-56-visee-par-trois-procedures-judiciaires/>

68. <https://uitspraken.rechtspraak.nl/details?id=ECLI:NL:RBAMS:2022:3127&showbutton=true&keyword=mensenhandel,immigratie,IND,Turks&idx=3>

69. https://www.facebook.com/giorgiameloni.paginaufficiale/posts/open-arms-una-delle-tante-ong-che-agevola-gli-scafisti-nel-mediterraneo-ha-de-nun/10156452355807645/?locale=pt_BR; https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2019/01/23/news/salvini_ho_le_prove_di_contatti_tra_ong_e_traffican-ti_-217266201/

70. <https://picum.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Navigating-disability-and-irregular-status-in-Europe.pdf>

71. https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/pact-migration-and-asylum_en

72. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52023PC0755>

73. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/protocol-against-smuggling-migrants-land-sea-and-air>

74. <https://www.equinox-eu.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Towards-a-safer-migration-How-to-end-the-criminalisation-of-migration-and-solidarity.pdf>; <https://picum.org/blog/eu-pact-on-migration-and-asylum/>

75. <https://rm.coe.int/study-on-stigmatisation-of-ngos-in-europe-en/1680af95df>

76. https://www.the-case.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/CASE-2024-report-vf_compressed-1.pdf

For example, in **Bulgaria**, the interior minister initiated a SLAPP case against two investigative journalists⁷⁷ and in **Hungary**, government officials intensified their use of lawsuits and smear campaigns to vilify civil society and dissenting voices.⁷⁸ In **Croatia**, journalists and civil society actors were subjected to multiple SLAPP cases throughout the year, reflecting an ongoing trend of legal harassment.⁷⁹ In **Romania**, real estate developers sought to incapacitate CSOs by demanding huge legal fees or even their dissolution.⁸⁰ In **Serbia**, SLAPP cases also targeted CSOs advocating for marginalised communities. Fighting legal battles is resource intensive for CSOs, draining financial and other capacities. In the **Czech Republic**, 83 activists from the environmental group Limity jsme my were ordered to pay over one million Czech crowns (almost €40,000) in damages for their participation in a peaceful blockade against coal mining six years earlier.⁸¹ The majority of these lawsuits were filed by businesses (45.2%), followed by politicians (35.5%), demonstrating how those in positions of power often use SLAPPs as a tactic to silence criticism. Journalists, particularly those operating individually, remained the most frequent targets, followed by media outlets, editors, activists, and CSOs. Many SLAPPs are not reported due to fear of retaliation, leading to a chilling effect on freedom of expression and civic engagement.

Similarly, smear campaigns and hostile rhetoric have been used to delegitimise civil society and critical voices across Europe in 2024. In **Romania** and **Serbia**, civil society and media faced harassment and smear campaigns, particularly those working on democracy,

Similarly, smear campaigns and hostile rhetoric have been used to delegitimise civil society and critical voices across Europe in 2024.

LGBTIQ+ rights, and gender and minority issues and in the context of the elections. In **Croatia**, youth activists were publicly threatened and smeared for condemning the glorification of war criminals.⁸²

In the **Netherlands**, politicians and media have repeatedly attacked CSOs and rights defenders. In one example, baseless accusations against a staff

member at the organisation PAX, stemming from an Israeli state report, were uncritically echoed by Dutch political parties and media, enabling an unprecedented attack on local NGOs by a foreign state.⁸³ The PVV party, a member of the ruling coalition, called for halting state funding to NGOs in response to actions it opposed, such as a lawsuit led by several organisations aiming to halt the delivery of F-35 jet parts to Israel.⁸⁴ In **Italy**, government officials have openly criticised LGBTIQ+ organisations and called for their criminalisation amid a rise in homophobic incidents and violent attacks targeting LGBTIQ+ activists.⁸⁵ In **Poland**, investigations revealed that Klementyna Suchanow, one of the leaders of the Polish Women's Strike, was spied on with Pegasus spyware.⁸⁶ The secret services and police in **Serbia** deployed spyware against journalists and activists, further undermining press freedom.⁸⁷

In **France**, an investigative journalist who has faced invasive surveillance is facing serious charges of "appropriation and disclosure of a national defence secret" over her reporting on a secret French military operation in Egypt and could face up to five years in prison and a €75,000 fine.⁸⁸

Worrying funding landscape at national and EU level

Overall, the funding landscape for civil society has deteriorated due to the shrinking of state budgets, the freezing of funding by USAID, de-risking measures by banks, and legal proposals and smear campaigns that question the legitimacy of civil society.

Several member states have **reduced their budgets** including **Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Germany** and **the Netherlands**. In April 2024, the **Finnish** government announced austerity measures, including **cuts of almost one-third to the funding of social welfare groups** by 2027, and a complete halt to **funding for peace organisations**.⁸⁹ In February 2025, the new **Belgian** coalition government announced

⁷⁷. <https://aej-bulgaria.org/slapp-kstoyanov/>

⁷⁸. <https://24.hu/belfold/2024/10/01/orban-viktor-24hu-per-itelotabla-uj-eljaras/>

⁷⁹. https://zelena-akcija.hr/system/document/1355/doc_files/original/ZA_AnalizaFIN-3.pdf

⁸⁰. https://portal.just.ro/2/SitePages/Dosar.aspx?id_dosar=300000001024226&id_inst=2

⁸¹. <https://limityjsmemy.cz/2024/11/za-blokadu-uhelneho-dolu-bilina-musi-protestujici-zaplatit-milion-cez-pritom-vydelava-miliardy/>

⁸². <https://www.yihr.hr/hr/iza-postavljanja-kuglica-na-trg-bana-josipa-jelacica-stoji-yihr>

⁸³. <https://paxforpeace.nl/news/criticism-on-israel-should-be-allowed/>

⁸⁴. <https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/blg-1138000.pdf>

⁸⁵. <https://www.omofobia.org/sito/cronache-di-ordinaria-omofobia-da-maggio-2023-a-marzo-2024/>

⁸⁶. <https://wiadomosci.onet.pl/kraj/liderka-strajku-kobiet-inwigilowana-za-pomoca-pegasusa-to-mnie-zupelnie-nie-dziwi/80r1te5>

⁸⁷. <https://securitylab.amnesty.org/latest/2024/12/serbia-a-digital-prison-spyware-and-cellebrite-used-on-journalists-and-activists/>

⁸⁸. <https://disclose.ngo/fr/article/filature-cyberespionnage-la-surveillance-hors-norme-subie-par-ariane-lavrilleux>

⁸⁹. <https://civicspacewatch.eu/finland-the-impact-of-the-governments-austerity-package-on-csos/>

that it would cut its foreign aid budget by 25% over five years. Difficulties in the **Estonian** economy have led to budget cuts in the public sector, which in turn affect funding for CSOs from state budgets.

Additionally, the **freezing of U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) funds** for 90 days pending review has already had a significant impact on civil society across Europe, particularly in Eastern Europe⁹⁰ and the Western Balkans region. The freeze has placed many CSOs in crisis mode, as they struggle to retain their staff, support partners, and sustain their work. Furthermore, the freeze is being used by authoritarian governments as a pretext to further restrict the space for CSOs.⁹¹ A wide smear campaign

Additionally, the freezing of U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) funds for 90 days pending review has already had a significant impact on civil society across Europe, particularly in Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans region.

has been launched in the Western Balkans region to discredit CSOs, journalists, and media representatives as corrupt, partisan, and driven by foreign agendas. False or partial portrayals of project funding have fuelled disinformation and intimidation, eroding CSOs' legitimacy.⁹²

Several member states have **challenged tax benefits** available for civil society, in some cases **equating civil society's work for the public interest to commercial interests**. The

new **Belgian** coalition government stated its intention to reduce the **tax reduction** granted to private donations from 45 to 30%.⁹³ The **Dutch** government announced budget cuts to prevent tax deductions for charitable donations, which usually are applied to NGOs when they obtain public benefit status. In addition, the parliament passed a motion to remove the tax exempt status of climate action group, Extinction Rebellion for donations they receive, a decision which should normally be made by the Tax Authority. In **France**, amendments to the finance bill prevent tax reduction benefits for donations to associations that have members who have

been convicted of a broadly defined scope of offences (such as trespassing and other offences related to civil disobedience).

The debate around CSOs who carry out economic activities is growing. In the **Czech Republic**, the law requires a clear separation of civil and business activities, which has legal and tax implications for CSOs. However, the legal framework does not fully reflect the reality in which CSOs may turn to the market for financial stability. If its activities resemble business activities, it risks being reclassified as a commercial entity, subjecting it to stricter regulations.⁹⁴ In **Latvia**, a proposal to impose corporate income tax on CSOs who carry out economic activities without public benefit status was suspended after civil society raised concerns. In **Italy**, a regulatory intervention which aims to eliminate the VAT exclusion regime for non-profit associations that carry out economic activities, effectively placing them on the same footing as for-profit companies, was postponed by one year after concerns were raised by the sector.

In **Serbia** and **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, hidden taxes such as inflated bank charges on international donations reduce grant income. Similarly, unclear guidelines and cumbersome procedures for tax incentives discourage corporate and individual giving, leaving CSOs underfunded. In **Albania**, while the introduction of a 0% VAT policy for foreign-funded projects was intended to streamline operations, it has instead increased administrative burdens due to complex registration requirements and cumbersome procedures for every purchase.

Several member states have challenged tax benefits available for civil society, in some cases equating civil society's work for the public interest to commercial interests.

CSOs in several member states continue to face administrative and bureaucratic challenges related to **anti-money laundering (AML) and counter-terrorism financing (CTF) measures**. In **Albania**, **North Macedonia**, and **Serbia** CSOs are classified as high-risk entities, subjecting them to enhanced due diligence and limiting their financial access.⁹⁵ In

90. <https://www.politico.eu/article/usa-id-freeze-russia-influence-eastern-europe-georgia-ukraine-moldova-belarus-ngo-media/>

91. <https://balkanncsd.net/fallout-of-the-us-funding-freeze-puts-western-balkans-civil-society-under-attack/>

92. <https://balkanncsd.net/fallout-of-the-us-funding-freeze-puts-western-balkans-civil-society-under-attack/>

93. <https://www.amnesty.be/infos/blogs/blog-carine-thibaut/deduction-fiscale-belgique>

94. See the presentations from the Conference organised by the Government Plenipotentiary for Human Rights and the Czech Council for Children and Youth at the anniversary of the Civic Code:

<https://vlada.gov.cz/cz/ppov/rnno/aktuality/konference-deset-let-noveho-spolkoveho-prava-213589/> https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9HQV_jkmK8U

95. <https://balkanncsd.net/novo/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/127-4-BCSDN-Background-Analysis-2024.pdf>

CSOs in several member states continue to face administrative and bureaucratic challenges related to anti-money laundering (AML) and counter-terrorism financing (CTF) measures.

a positive development, while in **Kosovo** CSOs are currently subjected to extensive reporting requirements, a new draft AML law which proposes to remove this classification is pending Assembly approval.⁹⁶ **Bosnia and Herzegovina** also passed a law excluding CSOs as obliged reporting entities⁹⁷ but continued to indirectly restrict their banking services.⁹⁸ In the **Netherlands**, access to

financial services for Dutch CSOs has been limited due to “de-risking” practices by financial institutions, which include “inordinate delays in cash transfers, onerous due-diligence requirements, the inability to open bank accounts and arbitrary closure of bank accounts.” There are several impacts of “de-risking” practices on CSOs’ work, including the inability to provide key services, the cancellation of projects, damage to their reputation, and difficulties in raising funds for services nationally and across borders.⁹⁹

Similarly, a new EU package on AML/CTF, adopted by the Council and the Parliament in May 2024 fails to consider the nuances and specificities of civil society. It will significantly impact the sector, including related to crowdfunding platforms, cross-border transfers, donations through virtual currencies, and the obligation for non-profits to identify and register their beneficial owners.¹⁰⁰

The **politicised access to funding** remains a concern in several member states, including in the **Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany, and the Netherlands**. In **Denmark**, there have been attempts by some politicians to defund Action Aid Denmark, which has been accused of spending taxpayers’ money “on left-wing propaganda,” due to its campaigns on Gaza and minority rights. The oldest Danish LGBTQI+

organisation, LGBT+ Danmark, saw its funding cut by 62%, shortly after the organisation responded to a transphobic statement by the gender equality minister.

Despite attempts to amend the Tax Update Act, civil society in Germany continues to encounter legal ambiguities related to compatibility between non-profit status and political engagement due to a lack of uniform interpretation by the tax authorities.¹⁰¹ Members of the far-right AfD party have capitalised on this by systematically reporting CSOs engaged in countering right-wing extremism to tax authorities for alleged political activity.¹⁰² The withdrawal of not-for-profit status is likely to result in financial hardship for these organisations as they are likely to receive fewer donations and would no longer be eligible for public or philanthropic funding.¹⁰³ More recently, in 2025, following their election victory, Germany’s CDU/CSU submitted an inquiry, comprising 551 questions, to the Bundestag on the political neutrality of NGOs. Some questions accuse NGOs of “party-political influence” due to their role in pre-election protests staged against the CDU party.

The outgoing government did not reject the inquiry, despite concerns that it is excessive.¹⁰⁴

The politicised access to funding remains a concern in several member states, including in the Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany, and the Netherlands.

The debate on whether CSOs engaged in **civil dialogue and advocacy** should receive **public funding** is a growing concern for civil society. In its report on the funding of associations, the Venice Commission

made an explicit distinction between lobbying versus advocacy, noting that “Lobbying as a professional remunerated activity should be clearly defined in the legislation and be clearly distinguished from ordinary advocacy activities of CSOs, which should be carried out unhindered.” It also emphasised that CSOs have the “right to participate in matters of political and public debate, regardless of whether the position taken is

⁹⁶. Projekligji-per-plotesim-ndryshimin-e-Ligjit-Nr-05-L-096-per-PPP-LF.pdf

⁹⁷. <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2024/02/19/bih-adopts-legislation-related-to-the-prevention-of-money-laundering/>

⁹⁸. <https://balkanetsd.net/novo/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/127-4-BCSDN-Background-Analysis-2024.pdf>

⁹⁹. Human Securities Collective, “De-Risking & Financial Inclusion Civil Society”.

¹⁰⁰. <https://ecnl.org/sites/default/files/2025-03/Unpacking%20the%20EU%20AMLCFT%20package.pdf>

¹⁰¹. Strachwitz, R. G. (2024). Rahmenbedingungen für die Zivilgesellschaft: Anspruch und Wirklichkeit. (Opuscula, 194). Berlin: Maecenata Institut für Philanthropie und Zivilgesellschaft, pp. 21–22.

¹⁰². https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/bitstream/handle/document/96407/ssoar-2024-strachwitz-Rahmenbedingungen_fuer_die_Zivilgesellschaft.pdf?sequence=4&isAllowed=y&Inkname=ssoar-2024-strachwitz-Rahmenbedingungen_fuer_die_Zivilgesellschaft.pdf

¹⁰³. <https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/gemeinnuetzige-vereine-politisch-afd-anzeige-100.html>

¹⁰⁴. <https://www.tagesschau.de/faktenfinder/kontext/gemeinnuetzigkeit-afd-100.html>

¹⁰³. Troschke, H. (2024). Civil Society in Germany: Data, Facts, Developments. (Opuscula, 192). Berlin: Maecenata Institut für Philanthropie und Zivilgesellschaft, pp. 34–38. https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/bitstream/handle/document/94356/ssoar-2024-troschke-Civil_Society_in_Germany_Data.pdf?sequence=6&isAllowed=y&Inkname=ssoar-2024-troschke-Civil_Society_in_Germany_Data.pdf

¹⁰⁴. <https://dserver.bundestag.de/btd/20/150/2015035.pdf>

The debate on whether CSOs engaged in civil dialogue and advocacy should receive public funding is a growing concern for civil society.

in accord with government policy or advocates a change in the law.”¹⁰⁵

In the **Netherlands**, there is increasing debate on funding for CSOs lobbying

and engaging in advocacy and working on “politicised” topics like women’s and children’s rights, LGBTQI+ rights, and refugee rights.

In the **Czech Republic**, a new law on lobbying may impact the public’s willingness to donate to organisations who are identified as “lobbyists” — a term with negative connotations for many and politically abused for smear campaigns against civil society. The proposal is also likely to impose further administrative burden on CSOs.¹⁰⁶

Attacks on NGOs at EU Level

There have also been concerning developments related to the funding landscape at the EU level.

In May 2024, new policy guidelines on the funding for lobbying activities¹⁰⁷ prepared by the Commission’s secretariat-general and directorate-general for budget stated that entities receiving EU funding should ensure that their lobbying and advocacy activities “avoid reputational risk.” These activities include:

“sending letters, organising meetings or providing advocacy material to EU institutions or specific members of an institution; or identifying specific members or officials of an institution to evaluate or describe their positions, or to discuss specific political content or outcome.”

This is concerning as it captures a wide range of advocacy activities in which CSOs are engaged and is likely to lead to a chilling effect.

In December 2024, several environmental NGOs received an email from the agency responsible for beneficiaries of the Commission’s LIFE programme, which funds diverse environmental projects. In the email, the agency requested the NGOs to review their grant contracts for 2024 that were approved and signed earlier in the year considering the new guidelines.¹⁰⁸

In a December 2024 draft discharge report for the Budgetary Control Committee on the implementation of the EU budget, European Peoples Party (EPP) MEP Monika Hohlmeier argued that NGOs were

“allegedly used as vectors of foreign interference” and underscored that NGOs and networks have an

In a December 2024 draft discharge report for the Budgetary Control Committee on the implementation of the EU budget, by European Peoples

“activist agenda,” and are trying to harm the work of the Parliament by “sending prewritten amendments and papers for committee decisions.” The report called for the Parliament to make a distinction between “NGOs and professional networks staffed with political activists” and to **sanction NGOs that “unduly try to manipulate decisions.”**¹⁰⁹

Following this, a debate in the European Parliament on the transparency of lobbying carried out by entities financed through the LIFE programme was called by the EPP and ECR groups on 22 January 2025. During the debate, EPP MEP Monika Hohlmeier accused environmental NGOs of being paid by the Commission to lobby the European Parliament, particularly on the Green Deal.

Following this, the chair of the Budgetary Control Committee wrote to the Commissioner for Budget, Anti-Fraud and Public Administration, requesting to see the 2023 grant agreements of all beneficiaries from several directorates¹¹⁰ to “assess how EU funds are allocated and for ensuring transparency and accountability.”¹¹¹ In an earlier letter to the Commissioner in January 2025, the committee also requested to see all grant agreements signed with

¹⁰⁵. [https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD\(2019\)002-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD(2019)002-e);

¹⁰⁶. <https://vlada.gov.cz/cz/ppov/rnno/zapisy-ze-zasedani/zasedani-rady-vlady-pro-nesatni-neziskove-organizace-dne-30--zari-2024-217664/>

¹⁰⁷. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/290965/Guidance_funding%20to%20lobbying%20activities_final%20Ares\(2024\)3320196-%2007052024.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/290965/Guidance_funding%20to%20lobbying%20activities_final%20Ares(2024)3320196-%2007052024.pdf)

¹⁰⁸. <https://www.politico.eu/article/european-commission-ngos-lobbying-environmental-advocacy-green-funds-life-program/>

¹⁰⁹. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CONT-PR-764999_EN.pdf

¹¹⁰. DG DEFIS, DG RTD, DG ENV, DG CLIMA, DG AGRI, DG JUST and DG HOME

¹¹¹. https://www.politico.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/04/document-2025_2_3.pdf

Transparency International, including its national chapters or affiliated organisations, from 2023 and 2024.¹¹²

On 1 April 2025, the Commission issued a statement on the LIFE Programme confirming its commitment to civil society while at the same time stating that some NGO work programmes annexed to the operating grant agreements contained “specific advocacy actions and undue lobbying activities.”¹¹³ On 7 April 2025, the European Court of Auditors published a report which found that, despite progress, the Commission still had improvements to make when it comes to the transparency of their funding programmes.¹¹⁴ However, the report did not find any evidence that grantees had not complied with EU values. To coincide with the report’s publication, more than 570 CSOs from across Europe signed a joint statement calling for an end to the attacks on funding for NGOs.¹¹⁵

Questions regarding NGO funding and transparency have also been raised in the European Council. For example, on 25 February 2025, the Hungarian government requested “full and unrestricted access” to grant agreements between the Commission and NGOs. It also called for a transparency system that will allow public and government scrutiny.¹¹⁶

There have also been attacks outside the EU institutions. Following the controversy with the environmental NGOs’ grant agreements, the Hungarian think tank MCC released a report accusing NGOs who are funded by the Commission of being a “propaganda machine.”

Civil society has called on the Commission to strengthen the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) programme by tripling the budget.

The report names several Brussels-based European networks that receive funding from the European Commission, including ILGA Europe, which works on equality for LGBTIQ+ people and European Network Against Racism, which works on anti-discrimination.

These developments come as the European institutions are set to negotiate the next Multi-Annual Financial Framework (MFF), which determines the budget spending of the EU for the period 2028-2034. Civil society has called on the Commission to strengthen the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) programme by tripling the budget.¹¹⁷ Concerning amendments have been tabled in the LIBE Committee on the MFF. For example, ECR MEP Paolo Inselvini called for EU funds to be monitored “strictly, to ensure that they are not used to support specific lobbying activities.” MEP Fabrice Leggeri from the Patriots for Europe group raised concerns over the “financing NGOs with close ties to terrorist movements.” Several MEPs from the Patriots

for Europe group called for a thorough investigation into the “Green lobby scandal”, to recover all the taxpayers’ money unduly spent and to “put an end to any unjustified funding to NGOs and CSOs.”¹¹⁸

On a positive note, the Council of the EU adopted conclusions on the application of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights.¹¹⁹ The conclusions recognise the “paramount importance and mutually strengthening role of different funding sources,” including funds provided by the

EU via the CERV, member states, private donors, and international organisations.

Inadequate and fragmented inclusion of CSOs in policymaking

Across Europe, the inclusion of civil society in decision-making continued to be inadequate in 2024. This was the case for **access to information, public and online consultations, and structured civil dialogue**. Overall, spaces for participation and political engagement are increasingly under pressure. On social media,

disparate and opaque content moderation practices are restricting open debate, while online harassment discourages participation among certain groups.¹²⁰ In traditional media, press freedom is shrinking, limiting people’s access to diverse and critical information.¹²¹ At the same time, public spaces are becoming more

¹¹². https://www.politico.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/30/D20252018-Letter-Herbst-Serafin_NGOSTI-1.pdf

¹¹³. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_25_942

¹¹⁴. <https://www.eca.europa.eu/en/publications/SR-2025-11>; <https://transparency.eu/eca-report-no-scandal-but-the-commission-needs-to-invest-in-a-more-understandable-database/>

¹¹⁵. <https://civic-forum.eu/publications/open-letter/unprecedented-attacks-on-ngos-in-the-eu-we-call-on-all-democratic-forces-to-act-for-a-strong-and-independent-civil-society>

¹¹⁶. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/gac/2025/02/25/>

¹¹⁷. <https://civic-forum.eu/publications/open-letter/joint-letter-strengthening-and-shielding-european-democracy-with-the-upcoming-mff>

¹¹⁸. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/LIBE-AM-770021_EN.pdf

¹¹⁹. <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-6878-2025-INIT/en/pdf>

¹²⁰. https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2023-online-content-moderation_en.pdf

¹²¹. <https://rm.coe.int/prems-013425-gbr-2519-annual-report-2025-correction-cartooning/1680b48f7b>

controlled, with increased surveillance and restrictions on peaceful assembly and expression.¹²² These trends contribute to a narrowing of civic space, making it

Across Europe, the inclusion of civil society in decision-making continued to be inadequate in 2024.

harder for people and CSOs to participate in democratic political life.

While **public consultations** take place at the national level, in several countries civil society is merely included in a **tokenistic manner**, with their inputs

not adequately taken into consideration. In **Croatia**, public consultations are often treated as a mere formality, conducted late in the legislative process without meaningful engagement.¹²³ Similarly, in **Spain**, civil society has had limited involvement in shaping the National Implementation Plans for the Pact on Migration and Asylum, while the reform of the Gag Law lacked transparency and meaningful dialogue.¹²⁴ In **Poland**, migrant's rights organisations were consulted only after the government drafted and finalised its migration strategy, which suspends the right to asylum.¹²⁵ In **Slovenia**, in most legislative processes, the government failed to comply with the minimum consultation period of 30-60 days to which it committed.¹²⁶ In **Italy**, trade unions repeatedly voiced frustration over being sidelined in key labour market decisions, with no prior consultation before policies were announced.¹²⁷ In the **Netherlands**, the asylum and migration ministry attempted to push through a temporary asylum crisis law without proper consultation, a process that was ultimately halted by the senate amid criticism from civil society and politicians.¹²⁸ The government then sought to fast-track proceedings, further raising concerns about the lack of participatory decision-making.

Overall, spaces for participation and political engagement are increasingly under pressure. On social media, disparate and opaque content moderation practices are restricting open debate, while online harassment discourages participation among certain groups.

There is a growing reliance on **online consultations**, which offer accessibility advantages for some, but are **inaccessible for marginalised groups on the periphery**. In addition, the use of such consultations could result in limited engagement due to shorter deadlines, which affect the quality of public participation and undermine the overall legitimacy of decision-making processes. In the **Netherlands**, while the consultation period is typically between six to eight weeks, in the case of an initiative on counterterrorism, it was limited to just five days, restricting the ability of civil society and the public to provide meaningful input. In a positive example, a new public consultation platform was launched on the **Polish** parliament's website in October 2024,¹²⁹ while in **Spain**, digital tools have been introduced at national and regional levels to involve the public in policymaking.¹³⁰

In contrast, some countries have also taken steps to improve public participation in decision-making. In **Poland**, the civil society minister established expert working groups on legal simplification for CSOs, activism, and civil dialogue, although the implementation has been slow.¹³¹ Legal reforms now require public consultations before laws are passed.

In **Spain**, while participatory budgeting is being implemented in cities like Madrid, Barcelona, and Valencia, participation rates remain low, with greater engagement at local levels. In the **Czech Republic**, the Department for Cooperation with Civil Society proposed new commitments under the Open Government Partnership Action Plan 2025–2026, including piloting participatory and deliberative processes and preparing a citizens' assembly.¹³²

A growing lack of **access to information** for civil society to decision-making and open governance was also evident in

¹²². https://ecnl.org/sites/default/files/2024-10/ECNL%20Biometrics%20Surveillance%20Strategies%202024_v%2030.09.24.pdf

¹²³. <https://www.kucaljudskihprava.hr/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Regional-Report-on-Human-Rights-Defenders-Regional-Network-of-Human-Rights-Houses-1.pdf>

¹²⁴. <https://elpais.com/espana/2024-12-05/mas-de-20-organizaciones-reclaman-al-gobierno-participar-en-la-aplicacion-del-pacto-migratorio-de-la-ue.html>

¹²⁵. <https://www.dw.com/en/poland-tusk-plans-to-suspend-right-to-asylum/a-70478179#:~:text=Polish%20Prime%20Minister%20Donald%20Tusk%20on%20Saturday%20announced,Belarus%20and%20seek%20refuge%20in%20the%20European%20Union.>

¹²⁶. <https://www.cnvos.si/stevec-krstev/>

¹²⁷. https://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/economia/2024/12/01/cgil-e-uil-chiamano-meloni-non-ignori-500mila-persone-_7ae0a46f-903f-4135-b617-7efc36d-5f6a7.html

¹²⁸. <https://nos.nl/artikel/2540112-eerste-kamer-tegen-gebruik-van-noodrecht-voor-asielmaatregelen>

¹²⁹. https://www.sejm.gov.pl/sejm10.nsf/agent.xsp?symbol=KONSULTACJE_PROJEKTY&NrKadencji=10

¹³⁰. <https://plataformadeparticipacionciudadana.es/>

¹³¹. https://publicystyka.ngo.pl/rzad-otrzymal-propozycje-ulatwiajace-dzialalnosc-organizacji-pozarzadowych-co-z-nimi-zrobi?fbclid=IwY2xjawF5mBpleHRuA2FlbQlXMQABHXMPjls_PMIImPH3kOFxS-T3YVPeEe5-4kbb2K-6RsWMQjOxP1Kc7IfzQZA_aem_fAJ_exuNBQ55CpD0muMuCg

¹³². <https://korupce.cz/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Akcní-plan-Ceske-republiky-Partnerství-pro-otevřené-vladnutí-na-období-let-2025-az-2026.pdf>

2024. In **Hungary**, Government Decree 146/2023 has enabled public hearings to be conducted electronically, often via email, limiting direct public participation.¹³³ In the **Netherlands**, authorities routinely obstructed or delayed access to information, with an average response time of 172 days, far exceeding the legal maximum of 42 days.¹³⁴ **Denmark** has also seen a shift toward more closed decision-making processes, as a significant number of legislative negotiations now take place in closed ministry meetings instead of the parliament, where public access is guaranteed.¹³⁵ Furthermore, in several member states, access to information legislation remains a challenge.

Adequate, timely, genuinely participatory, and **structured civil dialogue remains largely insufficient across the European countries**. While civil society is consulted to varying degrees depending on the topic, political will, and available resources, there

Adequate, timely, genuinely participatory, and structured civil dialogue remains largely insufficient across the European countries.

remains a lack of systematic policies, frameworks, and practices to ensure meaningful engagement. In **Austria**, participation processes are inconsistent and heavily dependent on the willingness of individual ministries or departments due to the lack of a framework.¹³⁶ In **Bulgaria**, while the Council for Civil Society Development (CCSD) exists, it remains ineffective

due to political circumstances. Even when there are functional forums for structured dialogue, the implementation of outcomes is not binding.¹³⁷ In the **Czech Republic**, the Government Council for NGOs recommended the approval and implementation of a methodology on the participation of NGOs in consultative and working bodies. However, its adoption is voluntary, leaving it up to individual ministries to decide whether to apply it in practice.¹³⁸ In **Latvia**, the Memorandum of Cooperation between CSOs and the Cabinet lacks sufficient funding and institutional support to operate effectively.

Civic participation and structured civil dialogue at the EU level

At the EU level, civic participation and structured **civil dialogue in decision-making is inconsistent**, with both **promising commitments and concerning shortcomings**. An EESC study, "Mapping civil dialogue practices in the EU institutions" finds that there are several civil dialogue practices across institutions, including the European Commission, the Parliament, and other European bodies such as the Fundamental Rights Agency. However, it notes that these practices have several shortcomings, including a lack of common understanding of what civil dialogue is, CSO workers being identified as lobbyists, and capacity challenges arising from human resources issues and burdensome reporting.¹³⁹

On a positive note, the new **European Commission announced plans to launch a civil society platform and develop a civil society strategy**, a key demand from European CSOs.¹⁴⁰

At the EU level, civic participation and structured civil dialogue in decision-making is inconsistent, with both promising commitments and concerning shortcomings.

These policies could be an opportunity to overcome existing challenges with regards to European civil dialogue.

Other platforms for **civil society engagement on thematic issues** such as the EU migrant's rights platform and EU Roma platform have had **mixed reviews from civil society**. For example, in 2024 Roma rights CSOs raised concerns over the 17 Roma platform which lacked meaningful engagement from high-level EU officials and overall political support. As antigypsyism intensifies across Europe, the absence of strong institutional support is more glaring than ever.¹⁴¹

Thus far, **civic actors involved in participatory processes have not been included as equal partners** but rather in a tokenistic manner, with no allocation of financial resources for participation in expert groups. For

¹³³. <https://telex.hu/english/2023/04/28/new-decree-makes-public-hearing-without-the-public-present-possible-in-hungary>; <https://debreciner.hu/cikk/nem-vehetnek-reszt-szemelyesen-a-debreceniek-az-ujabb-akkumulatortgyar-kozmegehallgatasan-eve-power-debreciner>

¹³⁴. <https://www.imi.nu/userfiles/imi.nu/files/Blaadjes-op-het-spoor-rapport.pdf>

¹³⁵. https://justitia-int.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Rapport_Udfordringer-i-lovgivningsprocessen_15072024.pdf

¹³⁶. <https://www.degruyterbrill.com/document/doi/10.1515/npf-2019-0029/html>

¹³⁷. https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/fd6bb85d-4aaa-4c79-88a2-8709edfb2002_en?filename=10_1_58051_coun_chap_bulgaria_en.pdf

¹³⁸. <https://vlada.gov.cz/cz/ppov/rnno/zapisy-ze-zasedani/zasedani-rady-vlady-pro-nestadni-neziskove-organizace-dne-19--prosinec-2024-217720/>

¹³⁹. Forthcoming EESC report; <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2025-03/Berta-Mizsei.pdf>

¹⁴⁰. <https://civic-forum.eu/ecf-events/co-creating-a-strategic-approach-for-an-open-civic-space>

¹⁴¹. <https://ergonetwork.org/2024/10/a-step-back-in-roma-inclusion-eu-roma-platform-fails-to-address-rising-challenges/>

On a positive note, the new European Commission announced plans to launch a civil society platform and develop a civil society strategy, a key demand from European CSOs

example, in the case of the Commission's expert group on the views of migrants in the field of migration, a s y l u m , and integration,¹⁴² those with lived migration experience were not invited to co-create

the agenda of the group nor financially compensated for their time taken to participate.¹⁴³

One of the main concerns when it comes to policymaking is that the **European Commission usually defines the direction of a policy before a consultation begins**, leaving limited space for meaningful contribution. The consultation processes fall short, with limited advance notice, a lack of draft guidelines for targeted input, inaccessible feedback formats, and restrictive character limits to respond to complex questions, which are posed as leading questions and not neutrally. These shortcomings hinder constructive engagement and weaken the quality of input from civil society.

One of the main concerns when it comes to policymaking is that the European Commission usually defines the direction of a policy before a consultation begins, leaving limited space for meaningful contribution.

At the same time, recent legislative processes reveal significant gaps in implementing structured dialogue. For example, **during the adoption of the EU AI Act**, presented as a landmark global standard-setting regulation, **civil society was insufficiently consulted**. CSOs have called on the Commission and the AI Office, created for EU level oversight, to ensure that future consultations, particularly around the AI Act's implementation, allow for meaningful and inclusive participation. Moreover, shortly after the

act's adoption, the new Commission shifted its focus towards short-term competitiveness goals, deregulation and "simplifying the rules"¹⁴⁴ on AI, in response to pressure from big tech companies and member states. It intensified discussions with corporate lobbyists,¹⁴⁵ while excluding civil society from the discussions on ensuring accountability on the act. For instance, the Commission withdrew the AI liability directive from its work programme to prioritise competitiveness and innovation.¹⁴⁶

Similarly, the adoption of the **Omnibus Directive**, a proposal to amend three key pillars of the European Green Deal,¹⁴⁷ was marked by a **lack of civil dialogue with civil society**, while **prioritising multinational enterprises, including fossil fuel giants**,¹⁴⁸ as well as procedural irregularities. Over 170 civil society actors, human rights and environmental defenders, trade unions, and climate activists warned that the proposal risks dismantling already approved critical EU law that protects human rights and the environment.¹⁴⁹ The developments with the AI Act and Omnibus proposal reflect a broader trend of deregulation and weakening of human rights protection standards in favour of boosting industry interests and competitiveness.¹⁵⁰

Civils society's concerns over the foreign funding directive proposed in December 2023 as part of the Commission's Defence of Democracy package have been ignored. CSOs continue to call for the withdrawal of the

package and a thorough fundamental rights impact assessment.¹⁵¹ In addition, in 2024 President von der Leyen announced her plan to introduce a European Democracy Shield to "counter foreign information manipulation and interference online, by detecting, analysing and proactively countering disinformation and information manipulation as well as hybrid

The adoption of the Omnibus Directive, a proposal to amend three key pillars of the European Green Deal, was marked by a lack of civil dialogue with civil society, while prioritising multinational enterprises, including fossil fuel giants.

¹⁴². <https://ec.europa.eu/transparency/expert-groups-register/screen/expert-groups/consult?lang=en&do=groupDetail.groupDetail&groupId=3734>

¹⁴³. Interview with Ivorian community of Greece & Voicify.

¹⁴⁴. <https://www.politico.eu/article/virkkunen-stands-firm-against-american-pushback-against-eu-tech-laws/>

¹⁴⁵. <https://ec.europa.eu/transparencyinitiative/meetings/meeting.do?host=8507138f-6be3-4068-9645-5b40bfa5b31f&page=5>

¹⁴⁶. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/tech/news/commission-withdraws-ai-liability-directive-after-vance-attack-on-regulation/>

¹⁴⁷. The Omnibus proposal amends the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD), the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD), and the Taxonomy Regulation

¹⁴⁸. <https://www.linkedin.com/feed/update/urn:li:activity:7293242930234884096/>

¹⁴⁹. <https://corporatejustice.org/publications/joint-statement-on-omnibus/>

¹⁵⁰. <https://corporateeurope.org/en/2025/02/deregulation-watch>

¹⁵¹. <https://civic-forum.eu/our-work/defence-of-democracy>

threats.”¹⁵² With the broad consultation launched in April 2024, there are concerns over the Commission’s focus on strengthening democracy through a defence

and militarised approach that primarily focuses on external threats to democracy without equal attention to the threats coming from within.

Civil society resilience

Despite intensifying pressure on civic space across Europe, 2024 was also marked by a renewed demonstration of civil society’s resilience and commitment to defending democratic values. Across the continent, CSOs, HRDs, and activists **used litigation, formed new alliances, and led mass mobilisations to safeguard fundamental rights and fight authoritarianism**. Once again in 2024 CSOs effectively used the courts to protect rights and hold governments to account. For instance, across Europe, courts played a crucial role in upholding the rule of law and fundamental freedoms by overturning protest bans and other restrictive decisions, reaffirming the important role of civil society in democracy. In **Denmark**, for example, a large number of activists sued the Copenhagen Police Department for illegal or prolonged detention and other breaches of the legal limits on the detention of activists. In some cases, the court ruled in favour of the activists.

In **Germany**, Greenpeace and Germanwatch filed a complaint against the federal government, challenging its climate policy and demanding stronger climate action.¹⁵³ Similarly, Deutsche Umwelthilfe brought legal action against the newly enacted climate protection law, arguing that it fell short of Germany’s climate commitments.¹⁵⁴ Meanwhile, Gesellschaft für Freiheitsrechte underscored the growing role of litigation by bringing 35 cases focused on democracy and fundamental rights to courts.¹⁵⁵

Similarly, in the **Netherlands**, public interest litigation was a powerful tool for advocacy in 2024. Civil society actors successfully challenged a range of government actions, including halting the export of certain weapons to Israel,¹⁵⁶ contesting inadequate environmental protections,¹⁵⁷ defending legal aid funding for

refugees,¹⁵⁸ and confronting anti-Muslim discrimination by banks.¹⁵⁹ Beyond the courtroom, civil society in the Netherlands also played a proactive role in shaping public discourse and protest practices. Organisations such as Amnesty International, alongside academics and local authorities, contributed to initiatives that brought together protesters, police, and community actors and trained them in de-escalation tactics and protest action, showing how civic space can be defended through collaborative engagement.¹⁶⁰

In **Serbia**, civil society responded to worsening conditions with proactive support mechanisms. In February 2024, the CSO Civic Initiatives launched a programme which provides immediate support to organisations facing threats, attacks, or burdens and helps them to continue their work despite growing obstacles.¹⁶¹ A national anti-SLAPP coalition was also established in 2024, followed by the launch of the first regional anti-SLAPP coalition.¹⁶² This regional platform aims to facilitate resource sharing, enhance cooperation, and improve communication among civil society actors tackling SLAPPs in the Western Balkans.

2024 saw street mobilisations and grassroots activism across Europe, highlighting the **strength of collective action in defending rights and civic space**. In **Spain**, demonstrations drew large crowds across the country, driven by calls for solidarity with Palestine and housing rights, and opposition to mass tourism. In **Portugal**, mass mobilisations brought together diverse groups advocating for anti-racism, labour rights, women’s rights, and housing rights. **Italy** saw large demonstrations in late 2024, as hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets to protest against the Meloni government’s proposed security bill.¹⁶³ In **Serbia**, the biggest

Across the continent, CSOs, HRDs, and activists used litigation, formed new alliances, and led mass mobilisations to safeguard fundamental rights and fight authoritarianism

¹⁵². https://commission.europa.eu/priorities-2024-2029/democracy-and-our-values_en

¹⁵³. <https://www.greenpeace.de/klimaschutz/klimakrise/gemeinsam-fuer-mehr-klimaschutz-klagen>

¹⁵⁴. <https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/innenpolitik/klimaschutzgesetz-klage-100.html>

¹⁵⁵. <https://freiheitsrechte.org/en/themen/demokratie>

¹⁵⁶. <https://uitspraken.rechtspraak.nl/details?id=ECLI:NL:GHDHA:2024:191>

¹⁵⁷. <https://uitspraken.rechtspraak.nl/details?id=ECLI:NL:RBDHA:2025:578>

¹⁵⁸. <https://uitspraken.rechtspraak.nl/details?id=ECLI:NL:RBAMS:2025:919>

¹⁵⁹. <https://oordelen.mensenrechten.nl/oordeel/2024-63>; <https://oordelen.mensenrechten.nl/oordeel/2024-62>

¹⁶⁰. <https://www.politie.nl/nieuws/2023/juni/26/04-inzet-vredeseenheden-werkte-de-escalerend.html>

¹⁶¹. <https://www.gradjanske.org/otvoren-fond-za-urgentnu-podrsku/>

¹⁶². <https://balkancsd.net/united-against-slapps-strategies-for-defending-freedom-of-expression-in-the-western-balkans-2/>

¹⁶³. <https://www.unionesarda.it/en/italy/in-rome-the-march-against-the-security-bill-quot-a-serious-attack-on-rights-and-democracyquot-w7ox2e4v>

wave of student-led anti-government protests since the break-up of Yugoslavia took place.¹⁶⁴ And in **France**, June 2024 witnessed a wave of nationwide protests following the far-right National Rally party's victory in

the European Parliament elections, with hundreds of thousands participating,¹⁶⁵ showcasing the central role of civil society mobilisation and resilience.

SPOTLIGHT

THE “FOREIGN” THREAT: HOW NARRATIVES BLAMING THE “OTHER” ARE IMPACTING CIVIC SPACE

“Other”, “foreign”, “outsider”, “non-European”. These are all terms that have increasingly entered public discourse and policymaking. They are central to narratives suggesting that Europe is threatened primarily by foreign interventions, resulting in misguided public policies that have profound consequences for fundamental rights and civic space on the continent and abroad.

In this section, we explore **concrete examples of how these narratives have detrimental consequences**, including threats to the rule of law, the erosion of democracy, and mistrust in institutions.

Insiders v. outsiders

The increasing use of narratives of “foreign” influence and of “insiders v. outsiders” across Europe is a significant and worrying trend. Those who interpret societal issues through the lens of “insiders v. outsiders” **promote a vision of society that excludes some individuals and groups**. They reject pluralism — a basic feature of any society — and in particular the fact that people’s identities are multifaceted and crosscutting. This vision rejects the idea that democracy must work for all, with public policies that enable everyone to enjoy their fundamental rights, tackle inequality, and build inclusion through solidarity.

These narratives are being used to stigmatise, exclude and repress communities, increasing their marginalisation. Since the missions of civil society organisations (CSOs) are rooted in the principle of universal access to rights, they too have become targets of exclusionary narratives that question their legitimacy. These narratives frame anything different as a threat and disregard the variety of lived experiences that constitute

Our analysis draws on interviews, research reports, and the country chapters of this report. In addition to our members’ inputs, we conducted interviews with the following organisations: Balkan Civil Society Development Network, Climate Action Network (CAN) Europe, European Environmental Bureau (EEB), European Network Against Racism (ENAR), ILGA Europe, Philea-Philanthropy Europe Association, and the Platform for Undocumented Migrants (PICUM), to capture a broader understanding of practical effects of the “foreign threats” narrative, including how it is being weaponised to shrink civic space and public engagement more broadly.

and enrich societies. In the case of migration, for example, “foreign” narratives underpin policies used by member states to shrink human rights protections.

Tools directed at shrinking the capacity of organised civil society to act may include legislation, such as Foreign Agents Registration Acts (FARAs) and counter-terrorism laws, and public vilification and smear campaigns. Some governments have repeatedly charged CSOs, social movements, and civic actors, without any evidence, with being vectors for “foreign interference”, acting on behalf of foreign interests or against “national values”, threatening national security, or promoting terrorism.

This reflects a wider trend of **securitisation**, presenting some social or political issues as “dangerous”, which is used as a pretext for breaking democratic norms. In the name of addressing “Security” and “safety”, states bypass regular processes and legal norms in mature democracies: new laws are fast-tracked, oversight is weakened, rights are suspended, and

¹⁶⁴. <https://balkaninsight.com/2024/12/23/mass-rally-blocks-serbias-capital-demanding-accountability-for-station-disaster/>

¹⁶⁵. https://www.lemonde.fr/en/politics/article/2024/06/16/french-protesters-turn-out-in-droves-against-far-right-caught-between-despair-and-the-will-to-fight_6674931_5.html

democratic norms are sidelined. Several of the public policy goals pursued under such frameworks — such as safeguarding, preventing terrorism, ensuring transparency, and protecting democratic institutions — are legitimate. But these securitisation frameworks often follow unfocused definitions and are harmful when they are used extensively against people, organisations, and communities based on prejudices and not on evidence of wrongdoing. In practice, they become a means of stifling fundamental rights and critical voices and targeting groups based on their identities, beliefs, or opinions. Issues that were once seen as matters of political debate and arenas of legitimate civic participation are now treated as security concerns, triggering exceptional laws, restrictive measures, and widespread delegitimisation. The “foreign” narrative portrays civil

society actors, excluded groups, and dissenting voices as proxies for enemies or as destabilising forces, opening an avenue for repressive policies.

The surge of these narratives reflects deeper anxieties and social vulnerabilities and takes place in a context of a growing backlash against progressive ideas and related policies about gender, race, immigration, and the environment, collectively demonised as “woke culture” or “wokism”. This trend is growing globally, and Europe is no exception. In many member states, there has been a **pushback against social and racial justice, human rights work, and progressive thinking, scapegoating those who are vulnerable and in precarious situations.**

Institutionalising suspicion: FARA laws and other legal measures against civil society

Narratives blaming the “other” have been typically promoted by authoritarian and illiberal regimes to cement their power and delegitimise civic actors defending democratic values and rights in their countries. The Russian dictatorship has been at the vanguard of repressive measures relying on irrelevant, fanciful accusations of “foreign agents”, which paved the way for the destruction of organised civil society with the banning of all opposition. Within the EU, the Hungarian government is the most obvious example of an illiberal regime that repeatedly launches smear campaigns and other attacks that brand CSOs as working for foreign interests. However, this trend is not restricted to these well-known cases, with an increasing number of countries using such narratives to justify restrictive laws.

One prominent pattern is the introduction of so-called FARA laws — legislation that brands those receiving funding from abroad as “foreign agents” and, on this basis, sets various obligations under so-called transparency requirements aimed at constraining their ability to operate.

Authoritarian and illiberal regimes claim that foreign funding is primarily aimed at undue interference in the public life of a country, and that civic actors that receive funding have an agenda that supports foreign states’ interests. These accusations are often rooted

in conspiracy theories and deny evidence that CSOs are using funds in full transparency, and most often to defend democracy.

However, while some FARA laws appear to be tools of repression by design, others with far lesser restrictions, sometimes introduced with ostensibly reasonable intentions, can nevertheless have devastating consequences for civil society.

FARA laws have been primarily criticised for their ill-defined language, selective and politically-motivated enforcement, and negative consequences for democratic freedoms, including for CSOs, and minority and diaspora groups.¹⁶⁶ But they are also harmful as they are based on the assertion, often made explicitly by governments, that CSOs’ missions and agendas are set by their funders, and that donors fund CSOs as a means of foreign interference. This damaging allegation — refuted by funders and CSOs alike — can have a long-lasting impact on CSOs’ reputations and a chilling effect on their work, even in countries that have walked back or abandoned FARA laws.

Several states in Europe have proposed FARA-like laws, including **Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Montenegro,¹⁶⁷ the Netherlands, Serbia, and Slovakia.** In Bosnia’s Republika Srpska, a draft law¹⁶⁸ imposes discriminatory and burdensome reporting and compliance requirements on all CSOs receiving foreign funding and bans these organisations from

¹⁶⁶. <https://www.thegoodlobby.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/TGL-Study-How-to-Evaluate-a-Foreign-Influence-Legislation-A-Comparative-Analysis.pdf>

¹⁶⁷. <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/politika/727885/ambasada-sad-zakon-o-stranim-agentima-mogao-bi-da-stigmatizuje-nvo-i-omete-kriticki-rad-nezavisnih-medija>

¹⁶⁸. <https://www.rferl.org/a/republika-srpska-foreign-agents-law-dodik/32890514.html>

proposing laws or “influencing public opinion”.¹⁶⁹ In Serbia, a registry for “agents of foreign influence” proposed in November 2024 would impose severe penalties for non-compliance.¹⁷⁰ In Slovakia, proposed amendments put forward by the far-right coalition member, the Slovak National Party (Slovenská Národná Strana – SNS), would require organisations which receive over €5,000 in foreign funding to be labelled as “organisations with foreign support” and disclose their donors.¹⁷¹ The Dutch parliament fast-tracked its consideration of a draft law on the transparency of civil society, labelled as being aimed at fighting foreign influence. The proposal introduces broad administrative powers, excessive administrative obligations for registration, and far-reaching sanctions, including the suspension of an organisation’s activities for up to two years.¹⁷²

At the EU level, a “foreign funding directive” proposal introduces “transparency and accountability standards” for “interest representation on behalf of third countries”.

Foreign narratives weaponised against excluded groups and movements

While these narratives have wide-ranging consequences for civil society in general, specific groups are more likely to be targeted and therefore experience disproportionate and unjust consequences. This includes organisations and activists working on issues such as anti-discrimination, climate and environmental justice, and LGBTQI+ and migrants’ rights. These organisations often receive funding from abroad precisely because their own governments are indifferent, if not openly hostile, to the rights they defend.

The “foreign agents” narrative has particularly been weaponised against LGBTQI+ rights in several member states. When a FARA proposal was tabled in **Bulgaria**, MPs tabled several amendments directed against LGBTQI+ defenders, some of which were adopted. The government also supported the “foreign agents” narrative, singling out LGBTQI+ rights organisations as representing foreign values. In **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, the government indicated its intention to adopt a ban on LGBTQI+ organisations entering schools, at the same time as FARA legislation was

The directive would require entities (including CSOs) to disclose funding from outside the EU and would create a register for entities or organisations that receive such funding.¹⁷³ Under the draft law, the requirement for organisations to register would not be based on their mandate. Rather, merely receiving funding from abroad is cause for suspicion. The underlying prejudice is that foreign money is bad by nature when it is directed to civic activities. It should be noted that this is precisely the opposite of the assumption made for foreign investment in the economy, which is considered beneficial by default.

While these FARA-style laws are some of the most prominent examples of policies stemming from the “foreign threat” narrative, they are not the only ones. Governments often justify restrictive laws with claims that they are preventing actions carried out on behalf of foreign interests, contrary to domestic interests, public order, or related to terrorism.

pending approval. In **Hungary**, the narrative has been used to target many organisations, including those working on LGBTQI+ rights, with state-controlled media outlets publishing articles that smear LGBTQI+ organisations as mercenaries of “foreign” interests such as “Brussels” or George Soros.¹⁷⁴ Besides the country’s proposed FARA law, **Slovakia** may soon introduce new regulations aimed at restricting LGBTQI+ “propaganda” in schools, after a September 2024 draft bill failed to pass its second reading.¹⁷⁵

Environmental and climate groups have also been targeted,¹⁷⁶ often accused of being “eco-terrorists,” “enemies of the state”, or as a threat to national security or public order.¹⁷⁷

For example, in **Romania**, in October 2024, the Directorate for Investigating Organised Crime and Terrorism (DIICOT) launched an inquiry against Greenpeace and several other NGOs opposing key energy projects, claiming to investigate their ties to

¹⁶⁹. https://sarajevotimes.com/what-happened-to-the-announced-foreign-agents-law-in-the-republika-srpska/#google_vignette; <https://lens.civicus.org/interview/the-new-foreign-agents-law-isnt-about-transparency-its-about-silencing-dissent/>

¹⁷⁰. <https://telegrafi.com/en/vulin-propono-ligj-per-agjentet-e-huaj-cfare-te-thote-kjo-per-serbine-dhe-paralajmerimet-nga-brukseli-dhe-uashingtoni/>

¹⁷¹. <https://civicspacewatch.eu/slovakia-ngo-draft-law-stigmatises-csos-mirroring-hungarys-path/>

¹⁷². <https://www.tweedekamer.nl/kamerstukken/wetsvoorstellen/detail?cfg=wetsvoorstel&qry=wetsvoorstel%3A35646>

¹⁷³. <https://civic-forum.eu/our-work/defence-of-democracy>

¹⁷⁴. <https://www.ilga-europe.org/report/2025-rule-of-law-report/>

¹⁷⁵. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/slovak-national-party-pushes-anti-lgbti-school-bill-echoing-hungarian-controversy/>

¹⁷⁶. <https://unece.org/climate-change/press/un-special-rapporteur-environmental-defenders-under-aarhus-convention-releases>

¹⁷⁷. <https://www.statewatch.org/media/4190/un-unsr-environmental-protest-civil-disobedience-crackdowns-28-2-24.pdf>

Russia.¹⁷⁸ The organisations targeted state that the foreign agents narrative is being used to delegitimise their lawful activism.¹⁷⁹

Environmental rights activists in **Serbia** opposing the Rio Tinto lithium mining project have been branded as foreign agents, accused of acting against national stability and promoting Russian propaganda. For example, Serbia's President Aleksandar Vučić is quoted as labelling the protest movement as attempts at a "colour revolution" orchestrated by foreign influences and "mercenaries who work against the interests of Serbia."¹⁸⁰

Migrants' rights groups have also been accused of acting against state interests or on behalf of foreign powers. This has been the case with foreign-funded NGOs working on migration in Hungary, who have been accused of acting on behalf of US philanthropist George Soros.¹⁸¹ KISA, an organisation working on anti-discrimination and migration issues in Cyprus, has been repeatedly targeted and attacked, including for "cooperating with terrorist religious organisations."¹⁸²

There is evidence that Belarus and Russia, among others, have weaponised migrants' moves to reach the EU as part of the ongoing confrontation between

the two countries and the EU. Member states' responses have repeatedly included attacks on migrants' rights, claiming that migrants in need of protection should be addressed as threats to national security or public order.¹⁸³ For example, in **Poland**, the government proposed the suspension of the right to asylum in light of migrant arrivals at the Polish-Belarusian border. In the **Czech Republic**, an amendment to the Lex Ukraine VII law introduces the offence of "unauthorised activity for a foreign power" for assisting migrants, with a basic penalty of up to five years in prison, and up to 15 years in case of a state of war. It would apply to those the government claims work for a foreign country or organisation "with the intention of threatening or harming the constitutional establishment, sovereignty, territorial integrity, defence or security of the Czech Republic". There is no doubt that the claim could be directed at any moment against anyone assisting a migrant in accessing their rights.¹⁸⁴

At the EU level, "threats to security and public order" are often cited to justify restrictive and harmful migration policies, as seen in the EU Migration and Asylum Pact, the new Schengen Border Code, and the new Returns Regulation.¹⁸⁵

The counter terrorism narrative weaponised against fights for rights

Measures to counter terrorism and violent extremism, which may be legitimate for preventing violence, have been unduly used to shrink civic space¹⁸⁶ and to target excluded groups and movements. Some states have expanded their definition of terrorism, misusing the term to stifle critical voices and actions, such as peaceful civil disobedience. Civil society in several countries has been impacted by such measures, which include counter-terrorism and anti-money-laundering (CT/AML) legislation (see section on funding), judicial harassment, and surveillance.¹⁸⁷

During the interviews conducted by ECF for this section, participants reported that narratives linked to countering terrorism have impacted groups working on anti-discrimination. For example, since 2017, the Forum

of European Muslim Youth and Student Organisations (FEMYSO) has repeatedly been accused of having links with the Islamist organisation Muslim Brotherhood¹⁸⁸ — a claim it has firmly denied. Even if no evidence has been publicly presented, the allegations continued to impact their work in 2024. Through various false narratives, spread via academics, the media and by some members of the European Parliament, the youth group has also been accused of promoting Sharia interests on behalf of the Qatari government. This narrative has also been used against their members at the national level. For instance, Kauthar Bouchallikht, who served on the board of FEMYSO, was repeatedly smeared during her campaign for the Dutch elections as a Green Party candidate. Beyond the issue of those various allegations, FEMYSO states that while the

¹⁷⁸. <https://www.g4media.ro/surse-dosar-penal-la-diicot-dupa-o-plangere-a-ministrului-energiei-fata-de-organizatii-care-se-opun-unor-proiecte-energetice-plangerea-vizeaza-mai-multi-activisti-de-mediu-inclusiv-greenpeace-upda.html>

¹⁷⁹. <https://www.greenpeace.org/romania/comunicat-presa/10120/ministrul-energiei-sebastian-burduja-ataca-organizatiile-de-mediu-si-justitia-din-romania/>

¹⁸⁰. <https://www.gradjanske.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Weaponizing-Influence-Report-Civic-Initiatives.pdf>

¹⁸¹. <https://www.article19.org/resources/european-court-of-human-rights-hungarian-anti-immigration-law-restricts-ngos/>

¹⁸². <https://monitor.civicus.org/explore/anti-racism-cso-kisa-continues-to-fight-its-dissolution-banks-treat-csos-as-high-risk/>

¹⁸³. <https://picum.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Betwenn-Administrative-and-Criminal-Law.pdf>

¹⁸⁴. https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/domaci/ministr-spravedlnosti-blazek-trestny-cin-cinnost-pro-cizi-moc.A250207_115914_domaci_ijan

¹⁸⁵. <https://picum.org/blog/new-returns-regulation-ushers-in-dystopian-detention-and-deportation-regime/>

¹⁸⁶. https://defendcivicspace.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/SRCT_GlobalStudy-1.pdf

¹⁸⁷. https://defendcivicspace.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/SRCT_GlobalStudy-1.pdf

¹⁸⁸. <https://femyso.org/femyso-responds-to-false-allegations-on-links-to-muslim-brotherhood/>

representation of Muslim youth in Europe is improving, there is still a sense that Muslim women who wear a hijab are “foreign and do not belong in Europe.”¹⁸⁹ And indeed, research by anti-discrimination organisations has also outlined how Islam is seen as “violent and a threat to European values and identity.”¹⁹⁰ During interviews, participants explained that racialised groups are particularly impacted due to a dangerous “normalisation” of Islamophobic prejudice in public policies, in particular as Islam and Muslims are equated with violent extremism and terrorism.¹⁹¹

In the case of those expressing solidarity with the Palestinian people, the illegitimacy of public policies reflecting such prejudices has been recognised in some cases, but not all (see case study for further examples). For instance, in **France**, an October 2023 ruling by the Council of State suspended the systematic ban on demonstrations in solidarity with Palestine, rejecting that such solidarity is associated with supporting

terrorism.¹⁹² However, not all cases have seen similar rulings. In July 2024, after a terrorist attack in La Grande-Motte, demonstrations in solidarity with Palestine could be banned again, as the authorities equated them with terrorist threats.¹⁹³

According to environmental rights organisations and UN reports,¹⁹⁴ those fighting for environmental and climate justice have also been targeted as “eco-terrorists”. In **Spain**, the environmental groups Futuro Vegetal and Extinction Rebellion (XR) were branded as terrorist groups in an annual report by the attorney general.¹⁹⁵ In **Denmark**, “climate extremists” are included in the list of terrorist threats to the country, drawn up by the Danish Security and Intelligence Service.¹⁹⁶ In **Sweden**¹⁹⁷ and **Austria**,¹⁹⁸ previous cases show how high-level politicians have publicly labelled environmental activists and organisations as eco-terrorists and threats to the country.

Normalisation and legitimisation of exclusion narratives: a vicious circle

In addition to the legislative tools used to target civil society and movements, the spread of these narratives in the public domain plays a key role in delegitimising the fight for rights for all and against shrinking civic space. Several actors play a role in legitimising these “foreign” narratives, including government officials, political actors, the media, and corporate entities.

Participants ECF interviewed explained that **once these narratives are normalised through the repetition of propaganda fuelled by echo chambers, including media and social media platforms that amplify them, they gain undue legitimacy among parts of society**. For example, senior government officials in several member states, such as **France**, **Germany** and the **Netherlands**, have labelled the Palestine solidarity movement as “terrorist”.¹⁹⁹ This narrative has been echoed through media outlets’ coverage of Palestine solidarity protests. As noted by the UN Special

Rapporteur in her report on global threats to freedom of expression arising from the Gaza conflict, “private actors, such as universities, cultural institutions and funders, even media outlets, have played a disturbing role, intimidating, isolating and silencing voices that differ from theirs”.²⁰⁰

Similarly, media reports have dehumanised migrants and justified the instrumentalisation of migration taking place in several member states.²⁰¹ In **Romania**, the civil society sector has been accused of working for and being controlled by foreign interests by parts of the media, while a high-level politician launched a public call to compile a list of civil society “villains” who promote a foreign agenda.²⁰²

Attacks against LGBTQI+ people have also become increasingly normalised, often fuelled by public figures and state institutions. This has been documented in

¹⁸⁹. Interview with FEMYSO

¹⁹⁰. https://www.enar-eu.org/wp-content/uploads/suspicion_discrimination_surveillance_report_2021.pdf

¹⁹¹. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/EUR0136062021ENGLISH.pdf>; <https://www.enar-eu.org/suspicion-discrimination-and-surveillance-the-impact-of-counter-terrorism-law-and-policy-on-racialised-groups-at-risk-of-racism-in-europe/>

¹⁹². <https://civic-forum.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/ECF-Rule-of-Law-Submission-Repeated-repressions-of-Palestine-solidarity.pdf>

¹⁹³. <https://www.ldh-france.org/la-mobilisation-de-soutien-au-peuple-palestinien-de-nouveau-interdite-par-le-prefet-de-lherault/#:~:text=Conform%C3%A9ment%20%C3%A0%20son%20annonce%20publique,30%20et%2031%20ao%C3%BBt%202024>

¹⁹⁴. https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2024-02/UNSR_EnvDefenders_Aarhus_Position_Paper_Civil_Disobedience_EN.pdf

¹⁹⁵. https://www.publico.es/sociedad/dos-activistas-ecologicas-pegan-marcos-cuadros-majas-goya-museo-prado.html#google_vignette; <https://www.publico.es/politica/fiscalia-considera-grupos-terroristas-extinction-rebellion-futuro-vegetal.html>

¹⁹⁶. <https://pet.dk/en/-/media/mediefiler/pet/dokumenter/analyser-og-vurderinger/vurdering-af-terrortruslen-mod-danmark/vurdering-af-terrortruslen-mod-danmark-2023-eng.pdf>

¹⁹⁷. <https://www.dn.se/sverige/statsministern-hanvisade-till-sakerhetshot-70-aring-enda-anmalda-aktivist/>

¹⁹⁸. <https://www.heute.at/s/oekoterroristen-justiz-nimmt-fpoe-mann-nun-ins-visier-120010704>

¹⁹⁹. <https://civic-forum.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/CIVIC-SPACE-REPORT-2024-RESTRICTIONS-ON-PALESTINE-SOLIDARITY.pdf>; <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/02/stop-punishing-palestinian-solidarity-and-start-punishing-those-who-commit-genocide/>

²⁰⁰. <https://docs.un.org/en/A/79/319>

²⁰¹. <https://rm.coe.int/1680706b00>

²⁰². <https://www.g4media.ro/nicolae-robu-pnl-vrea-sa-faca-un-recensamant-al-celor-mai-importanti-sorosisti-din-romania.html>

several countries, including **Bulgaria, Hungary, North Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, and Slovakia**. In **Albania** and **Italy**, conservative coalitions are perpetuating harmful narratives against LGBTIQ+ people.²⁰³

These narratives have also been promoted at the European level. In the case of the smear campaign against FEMYSO, some MEPs have been complicit in spreading the narrative that the organisation is linked to the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood group. They have questioned the credibility and legitimacy of the organisation through parliamentary questions.²⁰⁴ In another example, the French member of the Patriots for Europe Group blocked the participation of the European Network against Racism (ENAR) in a Europol consultative forum on fundamental rights and accused it of being part of the Muslim Brotherhood, citing the need to “limit the influence of associations that are harmful to Europeans”.²⁰⁵

Chilling effect, reputational damage, and psychological toll

Once they are branded as “foreign agents” or “terrorists”, or accused of acting against national interests, it is difficult for civil society organisations and activists to escape these labels and the stigmatisation and reputational damage they cause. Since these charges may stem from and be fuelled by those in power, it is a challenge for CSOs to hold those who spread them to account, especially since litigation against perpetrators requires time and resources, which civil society does not have

Beyond these long-term effects, these narratives are used to justify the criminalisation of civic activism, which is now fast progressing. For example, in the case of climate groups the narrative is used to justify imposing harsher criminal sanctions. In Germany, the **CDU/CSU** party group called for harsher penalties against climate groups.²⁰⁶ In Italy, following a massive media campaign against climate activists, including public vilification by Salvini and other government officials,²⁰⁹ a series of regulatory measures have criminalised the main forms of environmental protest in an attempt to

A report by the EU counter-terrorism coordinator, which was prepared for the Council of the EU, examined the role of climate change and environmental concerns in violent extremist and terrorist radicalisation in the EU, normalising some of the charges mentioned above. It cited concerns over the radicalisation of several environmental groups, including Ende Gelände (Germany), Extinction Rebellion, Just Stop Oil, Last Generation, Plane Stupid and Soulèvements de la Terre (France).²⁰⁶

Private entities can also contribute to legitimising this narrative. This has been seen in cases where environmental rights groups have been smeared, like in the case of Rio Tinto in Serbia and Savannah Resources, responsible for lithium mining in Portugal.²⁰⁷

silence these movements.²¹⁰ The narrative is also being used to justify the criminalisation of those working on migration, including in **France, Greece, Italy** and **Spain**.

The right to public participation is also significantly impacted. For example, FEMYSO has experienced de-facto blacklisting as it has been excluded from formal participatory spaces, such as the EU Anti-Racism Forum and Council of Europe youth advisory spaces, and well as informal forums. Palestine solidarity activists have been banned from public events on several occasions, after facing smears of links to terrorism. For example, a Schengen-wide entry ban was imposed on British Palestinian doctor Ghassan Abu Sittah, barring his entry from **France, Germany** and the **Netherlands**, where he was set to speak at public events, including a French senate meeting. The ban was later declared unlawful in court.²¹¹

These narratives also have a chilling effect, where those who find themselves targeted scale down their bold messages or self-censor out of fear. For example, as explained by one participant in an interview, when

²⁰³. <https://www.ilga-europe.org/files/uploads/2025/02/ILGA-Europe-Annual-Review-2025.pdf>

²⁰⁴. See one example: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/P-9-2023-002104_EN.html#def1

²⁰⁵. <https://x.com/FabriceLeggeri/status/1889741003705180460>

²⁰⁶. <https://www.statewatch.org/analyses/2024/environmental-activism-under-the-eu-counter-terror-microscope/>; <https://www.statewatch.org/media/4188/eu-ctc-violent-environmental-extremism-twp-paper-5982-24.pdf>

²⁰⁷. <https://www.jornalmapa.pt/2024/09/26/novos-contos-das-montanhas-barrosas-usurpacoes-intimidacoes-e-resistencia/>; https://visao.pt/visao_verde/ambiente/2023-11-20-populacao-de-covas-do-barroso-acusa-empresa-mineira-de-entrar-a-forca-nos-terrenos/

²⁰⁸. <https://www.cleanenergywire.org/news/experts-reject-tougher-penalties-climate-activists-civil-disobedience-germany>

²⁰⁹. https://x.com/matteosalvinimi/status/1714944104474255624?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Eetweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1714944104474255624%7Ctwgr%5E80d03058d13a085714e886d072f12db9988f5896%7Ctwcon%5Es1_&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.fanpage.it%2Fpolitica%2Fsalvini-contro-ultima-generazione-sono-eco-imbecilli-multe-piu-care-per-chi-blocca-la-strada%2F

²¹⁰. <https://www.indifesadi.org/2024/07/05/diritto-non-crimine/>; <https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2023/01/15/salvini-contro-gli-ambientalisti-di-ultima-generazione-sono-vandali-meritano-di-andare-in-galera/6936848/>

²¹¹. <https://taz.de/Nachspiel-zum-Palaestina-Kongress/16010953/>

“anti-LGBTQI+” propaganda laws are promoted, even when they are not adopted, they can harm the reputation of the organisations and create a general climate of fear for those working on LGBTQI+ rights.

They also lead to the draining of civil society’s capacity and resources, including significant mental health impacts on activists and staff, given that they often have to deviate from their core missions and work to counter negative narratives.

Overall, these narratives create a vicious circle for democracy and the rule of law. First, they reinforce the idea that rights can only be guaranteed for some and not for all and that there is a trade-off between freedom and security. As a result, already marginalised and critical voices are silenced and isolated from the public debate. This, in turn, leads to further polarisation and radicalisation in society, which further fuels governments’ security agendas that weaken civic freedoms and ultimately put democracy into question.

CIVIC SPACE REPORT 2025



About European Civic Forum

European Civic Forum (ECF) is a pan-European network of nearly 100 associations and NGOs across 29 European countries. Founded in 2005 by our member organisations, we have spent nearly two decades working to protect civic space, enable civic participation and build civil dialogue for more equality, solidarity and democracy in Europe.

civic-forum.eu



About Civic Space Watch

CivicSpace Watch is an online platform that gathers data and reports on developments in civic space at the national and EU level and analyses national and European trends in civic space. Powered by the European Civic Forum, it collects findings through regular contact and interviews with a strong network of members and partners on the ground, as well as ongoing media and social media monitoring.

civicspacewatch.eu



**Co-funded by
the European Union**

The European Civic Forum is co-funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the granting authority. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.