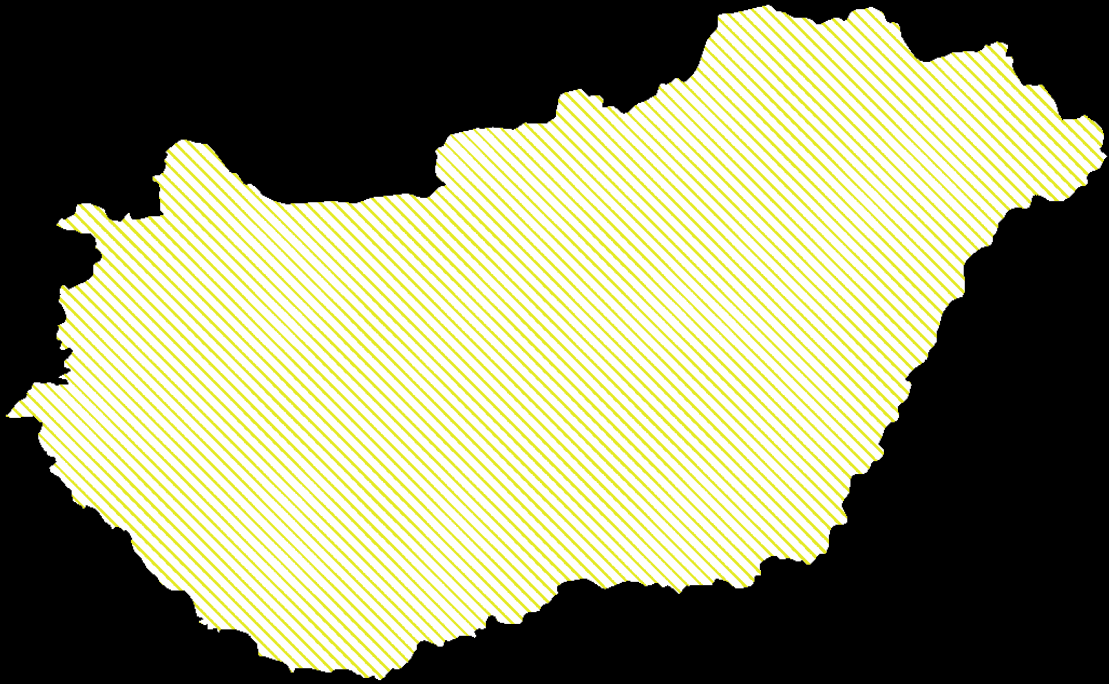
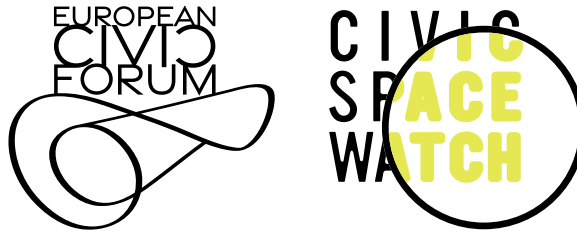


CIVIC SPACE REPORT 2025

Hungary

By Ökotárs — Hungarian Environmental Partnership





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.

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Ökotárs-Hungarian Environmental Partnership Foundation is an independent foundation committed to strengthening and supporting civil society and community initiatives in Hungary. It provides grants, training, and technical assistance with the aim of contributing to the development of a democratic, sustainable and equitable society and an institutional system based on citizen participation.



ökotárs
alapítvány

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Key civic space trends

-  The Sovereignty Protection Office (SPO) escalated the official smearing and vilification of critical organisations.
-  Restrictive legislation continues to shrink civic space, with no steps taken to remove existing barriers or enable civic participation.
-  Civil society organisations (CSOs) face persistent funding challenges, relying heavily on foreign and crowdsourced support.

Summary

The decade-long trend of shrinking civic space has continued in 2024. Civic space in Hungary is rated as “obstructed”, by the CIVICUS Monitor.¹ The government made no steps to implement the European Commission’s 2023 recommendation to “remove obstacles affecting civil society organisations and foster a safe and enabling civic space, including by repealing legislation that hampers their capacity of working, in particular the immigration tax.” Rather, a new piece of restrictive legislation, the Protection of National Sovereignty Act, was added to the government’s “toolbox” for obstructing civic space. Restrictive legislation was not repealed, smear campaigns and vilification remained a routine practice, and civil society organisations’ (CSOs) opportunity to engage in civic participation remained limited.

The Defence of Sovereignty Act, passed in late 2023, remained in effect, with the creation of the Sovereignty Protection Office (SPO) being the most important

development of 2024. The SPO, which is tasked with investigating and reporting on any organisations or individuals perceived as critical, has already published misleading reports containing disinformation and factual errors. Although it lacks sanctioning powers, the SPO’s reports contribute to smearing and vilifying independent and critical organisations. This shifts restrictive tactics used against CSOs from mere communication and propaganda to an official political level, thus creating a climate of fear and having a strong deterrent effect on the organisations who are at risk of being targeted.

The right to peaceful assembly was occasionally violated, mainly regarding Palestine solidarity protests. The blocking of and lack of coherent and accessible state funding remained an issue and led to an increased dependency on unsustainable crowdsourcing and foreign funding for independent civil society.

¹. <https://monitor.civicus.org/country/hungary/>

Institutional, political, and socio-economic landscape

2024 was characterised by unusual political developments and worsening economic conditions. The first part of the year was marked by the so-called “pardoning scandal”, which exposed systemic corruption. In February, an independent media outlet discovered² that then President of the Republic Katalin Novák had pardoned the deputy director of a children’s home who attempted to cover up acts of paedophilia by his supervisor. The public outcry that followed led to the resignation of the president and the justice minister Judit Varga and sparked mass protests. This political crisis created an opportunity for the TISZA party, a new political movement led by Péter Magyar, the ex-husband of former justice minister Judit Varga, who previously held high positions in the public administration. Building on public dissatisfaction, which drew tens of thousands to the streets in the spring, TISZA won 30% of the votes at the European elections on 9 June, leading the polls by between two and seven percentage points (depending on the survey) over Fidesz, representing the most significant opposition in recent years.

The municipal elections held on the same day also produced interesting results. In Budapest, opposition mayor Gergely Karácsony defeated a Fidesz-backed challenger by only a few hundred votes after two recounts. There was a deadlock in the assembly with none of the major factions — Fidesz, TISZA, or the leftist opposition — securing a majority. In the Hungarian electoral system, both parties and associations can nominate candidates at the municipal-level elections. Several local groups successfully used this option in smaller settlements, gaining representation in their assemblies or taking them over entirely.

The economic situation continued to deteriorate in 2024, with GDP practically stagnating due to a continued decline in construction and manufacturing, which is dominated by the automotive industry.

The budget deficit forecast was revised twice during the year, reaching 4.8% of the GDP.³ The suspension and likely loss of significant parts of EU funding exacerbated the problem. This has had a growing impact on people’s everyday life, visible in decreasing levels of consumption, fuelling the discontent with the current regime.

Amid these challenges, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán sought success on the international stage. Following the European elections, he led the formation of a new far-right group in the European Parliament, Patriots for Europe. During the second half of the year, when Hungary held the rotating presidency of the Council of the EU, Orbán’s efforts to strengthen ties with Russia, other Eastern authoritarian regimes, and incoming US President Donald Trump, led to diplomatic conflicts with fellow EU and NATO members.

Domestically, emergency governance measures remain in effect since 2020, routinely being extended by the parliament every six months. The judiciary remains largely independent, at least at the lower levels. However, the Curia — Hungary’s highest judicial authority — is increasingly populated with pro-government judges and in 2024 overturned several rulings that were in favour of human rights organisations and independent media outlets on issues ranging from access to information to defamation and compensation. The Constitutional Court, long co-opted by the government, continues to avoid politically sensitive cases. Human rights organisations therefore often rely on the European Court of Human Rights, especially in cases related to violations of the rights of migrants and refugees. Meanwhile, Hungary has still not complied with a 2020 ruling of the European Court of Justice which condemned its restrictive immigration legislation. As a result, Hungary received a €200 million fine in June — a figure which grows by €1 million daily until it is paid.

2. <https://444.hu/2024/02/02/novak-katalin-kegyelmet-adott-a-bicskei-gyerekotthon-pedofil-exigazgatojat-fedezo-buntarsnak>
3. <https://kormany.hu/hirek/a-2024-es-penzforgalmi-koltsegvetesi-hiany-a-vartnal-sokkal-kedvezobb-lelt>

The regulatory environment for civic freedoms

Freedom of association

The overall legal framework for CSOs⁴ did not change in 2024, and generally conforms to relevant human rights standards. According to the latest statistical data, in 2023, approximately 53,700 CSOs operated in Hungary, reflecting a slight (<200) increase compared to the previous year.⁵ CSOs are obliged to publish their annual report on an online registry maintained by the court. In 2024, there were no reports of forced dissolutions of CSOs. However, a uniformity decision issued by the Curia in November (16/2024 JEH), introduced a change

in the registration fees for foundations, approving only those that either have a public benefit status or are obliged to obtain it within two years. Furthermore, towards the end of the year, the government proposed transferring the registration of legal persons, including CSOs, from the judiciary to an administrative body, most likely the Ministry of Justice. By the end of the year, no further concrete details emerged regarding this matter.

Freedom of peaceful assembly

Laws and regulations on peaceful assembly remained unchanged in 2024. The police were generally cooperative during both the notification and the execution of peaceful assemblies. However, the blanket ban on Palestine solidarity demonstrations remained in effect, and the ban was even upheld by the Curia and the Constitutional Court.⁶ Despite this, in August, one such smaller event took place peacefully, known as the “World’s Indigenous Peoples Day Protest”.

In 2024, fewer protests took place compared to the previous years, but several court decisions against participants in earlier protests raised concerns. For example, in October, opposition MP András Fekete-Győr and another activist received suspended prison sentences for throwing a smoke grenade towards the police at a 2018 protest.⁷ Similarly, a protestor wearing a gas mask at a 2022 demonstration was placed on one-year probation for covering his face.⁸ These cases reflect a clear intent to deter dissent.

Freedom of expression and the right to privacy

No changes occurred in the legal framework for freedom of expression and the right to privacy. Although no cases of surveillance or outright censorship came to light, independent media and activists were systematically targeted through excessive police measures (e.g. when officers tried to confiscate the camera of a Telex journalist at a public forum of a Fidesz MP),⁹ smear campaigns, and defamation lawsuits initiated by government officials.¹⁰

The Commissioner for Fundamental Rights (the ‘ombudsman’) remains rather inactive, hardly fulfilling his protective role. Out of the 82 reports published by the CFR in 2024, none dealt with the rights of LGBTQI+ people or refugees and migrants, despite the various rights violations suffered by these groups. Furthermore, none of these reports focused on the situation of human rights defenders, media pluralism or judicial independence, despite the wide-ranging problems prevalent in these areas.¹¹

⁴. This includes the Civil Code (Act V of 2013), the Nonprofit Act (CLXV of 2011) on the freedom of association, public benefit status and the operation and financing of civil society organisations) and other relevant regulations, such as the provisions for the establishment, operation and dissolution of CSOs.

⁵. Central Statistical Office: https://www.ksh.hu/stadat_files/gsz/hu/gsz0014.html

⁶. <https://ataszjelenti.444.hu/2024/05/15/ha-a-bekeparti-miniszterelnok-megtiltja-a-beketuntetest-arra-nem-vonatkozik-a-jog>

⁷. <https://telex.hu/belfold/2024/10/17/fekete-gyor-andras-harmadfoku-itelet-targyalas-hivatalos-szemely-elleni-eroszak>

⁸. <https://ataszjelenti.444.hu/2024/07/09/gazmaskban-tuntett-bunozokent-kezelik>

⁹. <https://helsinki.hu/a-telex-ujsgairoi-megpanaszoltak-a-rendorseg-onkenyes-intezkedeseit/>

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

¹¹. See e.g. ILGA Europe’s Rainbow Map (<https://rainbowmap.ilga-europe.org/countries/hungary/>) on the situation of LGBTQI people; and the Hungarian Helsinki Committee’s statement submitted to the 2024 OSCE Warsaw Human Dimension Conference on the systemic rights violations committed against migrants and asylum-seekers, available at: https://helsinki.hu/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2024/11/OSCE-Warsaw-Human-Dimension-Conference_Re-fugees_HU-CSO-input_02102024.pdf.

Safe space

In 2024, the enactment of the Protection of National Sovereignty Act (LXXXVIII of 2023) represented a significant threat to CSOs, independent media and activists, resulting in a chilling effect.¹² Despite some initial delays, the Sovereignty Protection Office (SPO) established under the act was fully functional by spring, with a total workforce of over 100, in spite of the infringement procedure launched by the European Commission in February challenging its legal basis.¹³

The SPO's first "investigations" targeted investigative news portal Átlátszó, Transparency International-Hungary (TI-HU),¹⁴ and a local CSO, Göd-ÉRT Association, each of which received a long list of documents and information to be submitted to the office. All three organisations refused full cooperation, instead directing the SPO to their publicly available data. As the SPO has no sanctioning powers, the organisations suffered no direct consequences. However, the SPO published its "findings", which included accusations and misinformation bordering on conspiracy theories. At the same time, under the act, the organisations investigated have no legal remedies available to challenge these false or misleading statements. Therefore, TI-HU turned to the Constitutional Court which, on 15 November, ruled against the motion and affirmed the constitutionality of the act. The court justified its decision by stating that the SPO is not an authority and has no administrative powers, therefore there is no need for a legal remedy.¹⁵ The case will likely continue at the European Court of Human Rights.

Among the investigations¹⁶ conducted by SPO, the case of Göd-ÉRT stands out. This local CSO has long been involved in opposing a major car battery factory north of Budapest. It was a partner in a project led by Átlátszó, aimed at creating a network of similar groups around the country and supported by the EU Citizens,

Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) programme. In the municipal elections, Göd-ÉRT successfully nominated candidates for the local assembly. However, the SPO raised suspicions that the organisation had used foreign funding for the election campaign, despite the association withdrawing from the programme and ending its partnership with Átlátszó prior to the start of the campaign. This case sends a strong message to local organisations aiming to engage and participate in public matters locally.

Finally, in late December, the SPO published an "analysis" of the grant making activities of Ökotárs Foundation.

Alongside the SPO's intimidating actions, there were also occasional smear campaigns in the pro-government media, though probably with lower intensity than in previous years, as the political focus shifted towards the new political challenger of the government, Péter Magyar. One of the main targets of the campaigns was the Free Media re-granting programme, which supports independent outlets and is managed by Mérték Media Monitor and Ökotárs Foundation and funded by the US Embassy in Budapest.¹⁷

In addition, a notable incident involved the "Common City" festival, which brought together 23 CSOs in Debrecen (Hungary's second largest city) and was organised by Amnesty International Hungary and the Association of Alternative Communities, a local CSO. The original venue, owned by the University of Debrecen, cancelled the event 10 days before its scheduled date. Although the organisers managed to find an alternative venue, it also backtracked on its decision at the last minute, citing technical issues and clashing programs.¹⁸ It is generally becoming increasingly difficult for CSOs in rural areas to secure venues for their events.

¹² <https://szuverenitasvedelmihivatal.hu/jogszabalyi-kornyezet/>

¹³ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_24_4865

¹⁴ <https://szuverenitasvedelmihivatal.hu/dokumentumaink/>

¹⁵ <https://alkotmanybirosag.hu/kozlemeny/nem-alapto-veny-ellenesek-a-szuverenitasvedelmi-hivatalrol-szolo-torveny-tamadott-rendelkezesei/>

¹⁶ <https://www.godert.hu/szuverenitas/>

¹⁷ E.g. <https://pestisracok.hu/most-epp-ennyi-penzt-kapott-a-baloldali-fuggetlen-media-az-amerikai-kulugyol/>

¹⁸ <https://debreciner.hu/cikk/kozos-varost-debrecen-civil-fesztival-amnesty-international-papp-laszlo-polgarmester-debrecen-debreciner-20240927>

Financial viability and sustainability of civil society

The financial situation of civil society did not change significantly in 2024. According to the latest official statistics, which cover the previous calendar year, the total income of associations and foundations in 2023 grew somewhat compared to the previous year, reaching 1,345 billion HUF (€3.36 billion) compared to 1,270 HUF (€3.3 billion). Its composition remained the same: approximately 40% public and 22% private funding, with the remaining coming from business and other income. The majority of CSOs operate on a small annual budget (less than five million HUF, or €12,500), relying heavily on voluntary work, which seriously limits their capacities. This is especially visible in the countryside, where CSOs must increasingly make up for missing or insufficient services (in social care, education, etc.) of the institutional system.

The awarding of public funding continues to lack transparency and appears to be politically biased. As stated in previous submissions to the Commission, independent CSOs perceived as critical, such as those working on human rights, democracy, gender issues, independent arts, and similar areas, can rarely secure public funding. Therefore, they continue to rely on international sources, especially the re-granting programmes funded by the CERV, USAID as well as philanthropic donors, which remained active in 2024.

“Oltalom” Charitable Association and the related Hungarian Evangelical Fellowship (HEF) continued to be the main targets of systematic defunding campaigns. In late August, the government suddenly withdrew the

licences of several of their schools, which were attended mainly by disadvantaged children, citing unpaid taxes — accrued primarily due to years of missing public funding.¹⁹

In general, crowdsourcing remained an essential source of income for many CSOs. In 2024, the total amount collected from the assigned 1% of the income taxes grew significantly compared to the previous year, reaching 17,3 billion HUF (or €43.25 million) from 15.3 billion HUF (or €40 million), despite the number of taxpayers using this option decreasing by 3%.²⁰ While more traditional charities remain the main beneficiaries of this source, Partizán, an independent political media outlet operating via a YouTube channel, topped the list, raising 415 million HUF (more than €1 million) from this source. However, the pro-government media and more recently the Sovereignty Protection Office portray EU funding as suspect and a threat. For example, the SPO analysis about Ökotárs says that “as of 2021, the *Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) programme, coordinated by the European Commission [...] has created an opportunity for US interest groups to channel internal EU resources to their political pressure groups in Hungary and across Europe through the occupation of the European Commission*”), thereby trying to deter CSOs from applying to these sources.²¹

The 25% immigration tax rate remains in effect, though not implemented. There is no tax benefit for individual donations and only a very limited one (20% of corporate tax) for companies.

Civil dialogue and the right to participation

Neither the legal basis nor the practice of (the lack of) participation changed in 2024. In spite of legal requirements, meaningful consultation during the legislative process is rare. Significant laws are not published for public consultation, such as in the case of the 13th Amendment to the Fundamental Law in 2024. In another attempt to circumvent the obligation

of public consultation, the government introduced laws to the parliament that are clearly part of its policy via the governing majority MPs (e.g. the Sovereignty Protection Act) or via parliamentary committees (e.g. the 14th Amendment to the Fundamental Law). Ministries almost never provide a longer consultation period than the statutory minimum, irrespective of the

¹⁹. <https://oltalom.hu/2024/08/28/met-kozlemeny-a-wesley-kincsei-es-a-mav-telepi-wesley-iskola-mukodesi-engedelyenek-visszavonasarol/>

²⁰. <https://atlatszo.hu/adat/2024/09/15/partizan-heim-pal-gyermekekhoz-es-mentosok-igy-alakult-az-szja-1-kedvezmenyezettek-listaja-2024-ben/>

²¹. <https://szuverenitasvedelmi hivatal.hu/hirek/az-okotars-alapitvany-a-politikai-nyomasgyakrol-halozat-hazai-elosztokozpontja>

length and complexity of the draft law. According to data collected by K-Monitor Association,²² between 1 October 2022 and 4 October 2024, out of the 1,730 draft laws published, the consultation period was longer than eight days in only six instances. The manner in which draft laws are published only formally meets the legal requirements. It is a recurring practice that draft laws are published for consultation with a one-sentence reasoning, “this occurred in 2024,” e.g. in the case of the laws authorising the government to extend the state of exception. The majority of opinions submitted are rejected by the government. According to K-Monitor’s data, between 1 October 2022 and 4 October 2024, at least 88% of the opinions were rejected, and without any real reasoning, e.g. that “the draft law implements the decision of the Government” or that the opinion “is contrary to the opinion of the legislator”.

Using the opportunity created by government decree 146/2023, public hearings conducted without the public, i.e. held through electronic means (whereby opinions may be submitted via e-mail or left on an answering machine), are becoming widespread. This is especially used in cases of planned investments likely to generate local protest due to their potential environmental impacts, such as the projects in Debrecen.²³

Towards the end of the year, a draft government decree²⁴ on the further education of teachers was published for consultation. If accepted, this would narrow CSOs’

(limited) possibilities to cooperate with schools further by making the National University of Public Service and the Education Office the sole providers of credits for attending trainings and events. Currently, many CSOs provide such services to schools.

At the same time, sustained advocacy led to some successes this year, the most notable example being that of changing the regulations in prisons forbidding bodily contact between inmates and their families. The Hungarian Helsinki Committee and other groups had long campaigned against these rules violating the dignity of detainees since their introduction in 2017.²⁵

Key human rights and anti-corruption CSOs have continued to actively participate in the Monitoring Committees of EU Structural Funds throughout the year. Their representatives evaluating their impact of the first year stated that, while their proposals were often overruled by the governmental majority, they managed to achieve some positive changes. Their presence in the committees was important and provided crucial insights on the use of the funds.²⁶ As in 2023, CSO members of the Anti-corruption Task Force – Átlátszó, K-Monitor Association and TI-HU – voted against adopting the annual report of the Integrity Authority due to its weak findings and lack of ambition.²⁷

Civil society resilience

Although no new polls or studies have been conducted, the general impression is that Hungarian people still view CSOs rather positively and acknowledge their importance.

However, after more than 10 years of operating under pressure, the signs of mental fatigue and burnout in civil society are widespread, especially among smaller organisations working in rural areas. These organisations, who are more dependent on the local authorities, are struggling in the day-to-day to survive. The main symptoms observed are in activities, lack of innovation,

unwillingness to engage in anything perceived to be risky, and a lack of interest in broader cooperation and partnerships.

At the same time, coalitions of larger organisations continue to develop — the most significant “horizontal” (i.e. covering civil society and civic space issues) one, Civilisation, remains operational and active, serving as a platform of self-defence and the exchange of knowledge. Coalitions working on specific thematic fields (often adopting the Civilisation working model) are also becoming more established. These include the Egalipe network of Roma and pro-Roma CSOs, the Housing Coalition, Aspectus Group composed

²². https://k.blog.hu/2024/11/29/public_consultation_--_there_would_be_a_need_for_it

²³. <https://debreciner.hu/cikk/nem-vehetnek-reszt-szemelyesen-a-debreceniek-az-ujabb-akkumulatorgyar-kozmeghallgatason-eve-power-debreciner>

²⁴. <https://cdn.kormany.hu/uploads/document/1/16/163/163c3289f85a4e698689ee3fadb4a026bebe34.pdf>

²⁵. <https://helsinki.hu/tomeges-jogsertest-szamolnak-fel-a-bortonokban/>

²⁶. <https://tasz.hu/cikkek/egy-ev-tapasztalata-a-monitoring-bizottsagokban/>

²⁷. <https://transparency.hu/hirek/korrupcioellenes-munkacsoport-jelentes-nemszavazat/>

of major CSOs in four countryside cities (Pécs, Szeged, Debrecen and Miskolc), the Water coalition focusing on drinking water quality and access.²⁸

Furthermore, in 2024 the “Civil EU Presidency,” a cross-coalition joint action, was launched. As civil society had no avenue to engage with the Hungarian Presidency of the Council of the EU in the second half of the year, the Association of Great Lakes and Wetlands and Civilisation Coalition initiated an alternative presidency addressing issues not (or not sufficiently) represented on the official

agenda under the motto “Democracy - Solidarity - Green Transition”. Various CSOs organised a series of seven events successfully, covering topics such as forestry and environmental justice, women’s rights and civic space. While these didn’t receive much media coverage, each had an attendance of 50 to 200 participants, including EU officials, international and Hungarian experts, and were well-received within the relevant professional circles. Each event adopted a set of recommendations/demands aimed at the EU and national level policymakers, which are publicly accessible.²⁹

Recommendations

TARGETED RECOMMENDATION:

- **Urgently repeal the Act on the Protection of National Sovereignty (LXXXVIII of 2023) and eliminate the Sovereignty Protection Office (SPO) before the end of 2025.**
- Remove obstacles affecting civil society organisations and foster a safe and enabling civic space, including by repealing legislation that hampers their capacity of working, in particular the immigration tax.
- Refrain from abusing the special legal order and immediately eliminate the situation where the temporary state of emergency becomes *de facto* permanent.
- Repeal the discriminatory anti-LGBTQI+ or “child protection” legislation of 2021.
- Implement the judgement of the European Court of Justice in case C821/19 and repeal the “Stop Soros” law criminalising the assistance of asylum seekers in lodging an asylum application.
- Refrain from smearing, harassing, and attacking civil society and creating additional administrative burdens to hamper their work.
- Ensure that there is funding transparency and equal access for all CSOs to state funding, including the National Cooperation Fund and Village and Town Civil Funds.
- Refrain from imposing bans on the right to peaceful assembly and expression in line with international standards, especially regarding solidarity with the Palestinian people.

²⁸. <https://civilizacio.net/hu/tevekenysegeink/egyuttmukodesek>

²⁹. For more see: <https://civilpresidency.hu/en/home>

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



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