

Civic space in the EU in 2025

National Datasets

Annex to the Submission by the European Union
Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) to the
European Commission's rule of law report 2026.

*The national datasets cover the 27 EU Member States as well as the
FRA observer countries Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia. The
datasets were drafted by the agency's research network FRANET.
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Albania (AL)

Civic space in the EU in 2025

Country: Albania

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Disclaimer

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1. CIVIC SPACE PRESSURES

1.1. Deterioration of legal environment: freedom of association

1. Escalation of Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs)

- a) Throughout 2025, SLAPPs remained a prominent threat used to intimidate journalists and activists. Albania continues to lack specific legal safeguards against these abusive litigations, despite the European Parliament's adoption of an Anti-SLAPP Directive earlier in the cycle.
- b) SLAPPs are used to silence watchdogs by burdening them with legal costs and psychological pressure. This results in a "chilling effect" on freedom of expression and discourages CSOs from investigating sensitive areas such as corruption and organized crime.¹
- a) period.²

1.2. Deterioration of legal environment: freedom of assembly

1. Authorities' Actions: Bans, Dispersal, and Detentions

- (a) Bans and Dispersal: During 2024, the State Police reported no cases of restrictions or bans on assemblies organized by NPOs, and there were no reported instances of dispersal. For the period extending through September 2025, the European Commission noted that freedom of assembly continued to be generally respected.
- (b) Detentions: There were no reported instances of participants in peaceful assemblies being detained in 2024. The sources do not provide specific records of detentions occurring at public assemblies in the 2025 reporting period.³

2. Legal Environment and Regulatory Changes

- a) Vague Legal Grounds: While the legal framework remained unchanged through 2024, experts noted that the legal grounds for appealing against assemblies remain vague and open to broad interpretation by authorities.

¹ *Regional Conference Proceedings: "Resilient Voices: Western Balkans Civil Society in a Changing World"* (October 2025)

² European Commission (2025), [Albania Report 2025, Commission Staff Working Document SWD\(2025\)](#), Brussels, 4 November 2025.

³ European Commission (2025), [Albania Report 2025, Commission Staff Working Document SWD\(2025\)](#), Brussels, 4 November 2025.

- b) Restrictive Draft Legislation: Regional discussions in early 2025 highlighted a concerning trend of proposed legislation that could impact assembly. Specifically, draft criminal-code amendments penalizing protest actions were identified as measures that could deliberately restrict civic activity. Notification Requirements: The current law does not require prior authorization for assemblies, only notification, which was utilized by NPOs at least 17 times in 2024 for protests regarding local services, women’s rights, and environmental protection.⁴

3. Police Conduct and Chilling Effects

- a) Use of Force and Handling of Protests: While no specific public allegations of excessive force at general assemblies are detailed for 2025, the European Commission emphasized the need for law enforcement to improve its capacity to handle violence on the “margins of protests” while ensuring high human rights compliance, particularly concerning the safety of journalists.⁵

- b) Technological and Chilling Effects: Regional civil society forums in October 2025 raised concerns about surveillance and public smearing contributing to an “atmosphere of constraint” and a “chilling effect” leading to self-censorship among activists.

Internal Disruptions: Tensions were noted within institutional settings, such as October 2024 frictions between opposition MPs and the Republican Guard following the suspension of several members of parliament.⁶

IV. Other Negative Developments

- a) Shrinking Democratic Space: Civil society leaders reported in early 2025⁷ that the environment has shifted through an “unprecedented attack” on liberal values, causing democratic spaces to shrink and putting new, intense pressures on previously stable civic freedoms.⁸
- b) Stigmatization: Civic actors have faced an increase in negative narratives and online smear campaigns targeting their impartiality and funding, which indirectly impacts the willingness of individuals to participate in public advocacy and assembly.⁹

⁴ European Commission (2025), [Albania Report 2025, Commission Staff Working Document SWD\(2025\)](#), Brussels, 4 November 2025.

⁵ European Commission (2025), [Albania 2025 Report, Commission Staff Working Document, SWD\(2025\) 750 final](#), Brussels, 4 November 2025

⁶ Regional Conference Proceedings: [“Resilient Voices: Western Balkans Civil Society in a Changing World”](#) (October 2025)

⁷ Partners Albania for Change and Development (2025), Annual Report 2024, Tirana

⁸ Partners Albania for Change and Development (2025), [Annual Report 2024, Tirana](#)

⁹ European Commission (2025), Albania Report 2025, Commission Staff Working Document SWD(2025), Brussels, 4 November 2025.

1.3. Deterioration of legal environment: freedom of expression

1. Nationwide Suspension of a Major Social Media Platform (TikTok Ban)

- a) In March 2025, the government implemented a 12-month nationwide ban on TikTok citing concerns over youth violence. Access was eventually restored following an agreement on Albanian-language content filters.¹⁰
- b) The ban sparked intense debate regarding digital rights and state interference in freedom of expression, raising concerns that such measures could suppress political discourse during the May 2025 election period.¹¹

2. Practical Paralysis of VAT Exemptions for Foreign Funding¹²

a) Through mid-2025, the implementation of VAT exemptions for donation and grant agreements with foreign donors (including EU IPA III) remained effectively paralyzed. Impractical regulatory instructions issued in late 2023 remained the primary barrier. This administrative failure imposes severe financial burdens on the sector, hindering the implementation capacity and financial sustainability of non-profit organizations.¹³ (no need for it to be under b)

3. Escalation of SLAPPs Without National Legal Safeguards

Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs) continued to target journalists and activists investigating corruption, yet Albania still lacks specific national legal safeguards. Protective amendments are not foreseen until June 2027.

Abusive litigation burdens watchdogs with prohibitive legal costs and psychological pressure, resulting in widespread self-censorship to avoid harassment.¹⁴

4. Abrupt Withdrawal of Major International Donor Support

The 2025 funding landscape shifted dramatically due to the abrupt halt of USAID support and significant cuts by other bilateral donors, leaving massive financial gaps. The withdrawal destabilized

¹⁰ Partners Albania for Change and Development (2024), [*Monitoring Matrix on Enabling Environment for Civil Society Development – Country Report for Albania 2024*](#), Tirana.

¹¹ European Commission (2025), [*Albania Report 2025, Commission Staff Working Document SWD\(2025\)*](#), Brussels, 4 November 2025.

¹² Partners Albania for Change and Development (2024), [*Monitoring Matrix on Enabling Environment for Civil Society Development – Country Report for Albania 2024*](#), Tirana.

¹³ European Commission (2025), [*Albania Report 2025, Commission Staff Working Document SWD\(2025\)*](#), Brussels, 4 November 2025.

¹⁴ European Commission (2025), [*Albania Report 2025, Commission Staff Working Document SWD\(2025\)*](#), Brussels, 4 November 2025.

the sector beyond finances, fueling delegitimizing narratives against CSOs and increasing dependency on potentially politicized domestic public funding.¹⁵

5. Temporary Nationwide Ban on a Major Social Media Platform

In March 2025, the government implemented a **one-year ban on TikTok**, citing concerns over youth violence. Although access was eventually restored following an agreement on content filters, the suspension was initially applied nationwide.

The ban sparked intense debate regarding freedom of expression and digital rights. Critics argued the measure could be used to suppress political discourse and hinder online campaigning, particularly during the May 2025 election

1.4. Deterioration of legal environment: court cases

1. Intensification of Negative Narratives and Smear Campaigns

In early 2025, civil society organizations (CSOs) in Albania faced a notable increase in negative narratives and online smear campaigns. These attacks specifically targeted the impartiality and funding sources of civic actors, with local leaders describing the environment as an "unprecedented attack" on organizations and liberal values. This shift created a "new order" of hostility that undermined the perceived stability of the sector.

These campaigns erode public trust and foster an atmosphere of constraint and uncertainty. The resulting pressure forces organizations to prioritize institutional survival and rethink their alliance-building strategies to navigate a more hostile landscape, ultimately weakening their role as democratic watchdogs.¹⁶

2. Digital Rights Restrictions: The Nationwide TikTok Suspension

March 2025, the government implemented a 12-month nationwide suspension of the social media platform TikTok, citing the protection of children from harmful content following fatal youth violence. Access was later restored only after the platform agreed to implement Albanian-language hate speech filters.

The ban sparked intense national debate regarding digital rights and state interference in freedom of expression. Critics raised concerns that such measures could set a precedent for **suppressing political discourse** and online campaigning, particularly given the timing relative to the May 2025 parliamentary elections.¹⁷

¹⁵ Partners Albania for Change and Development and Balkan Civil Society Development Network (2025), *Resilient Voices: Western Balkans Civil Society in a Changing World – Regional Conference Proceedings*, Tirana.

¹⁶ Partners Albania for Change and Development and Balkan Civil Society Development Network (2025), *Resilient Voices: Western Balkans Civil Society in a Changing World – Regional Conference Proceedings*, Tirana.

¹⁷ European Commission (2025), *Albania Report 2025, Commission Staff Working Document SWD(2025)*, Brussels, 4 November 2025.

3. Practical Paralysis of VAT Exemptions for Foreign Funding

Through mid-2025, the implementation of VAT exemptions for donation and grant agreements with foreign donors, including the EU's IPA III program, remained effectively paralyzed. Vague and impractical regulatory instructions—such as requirements for notarizing individual contracts for minor suppliers—rendered the system unusable for the majority of NPOs.

This administrative failure imposes a severe financial burden on the sector, as critical resources are siphoned into unrecoverable taxes. This compromises the financial sustainability and implementation capacity of organizations, particularly smaller ones, at a time of declining international aid.¹⁸

4. Proliferation of SLAPPs and Judicial Pressure

- a) Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs) continued to target journalists and activists investigating corruption, with reported cases rising to **73 annually**. While the government's National Reform Agenda 2024–2027 acknowledges the issue, it does not foresee the adoption of protective legal amendments until **June 2027**.

The lack of immediate legal safeguards creates a profound "**chilling effect**" on investigative reporting. Civic actors are often forced into self-censorship to avoid the psychological pressure and prohibitive legal costs associated with these abusive lawsuits, thereby eroding media independence and public accountability.¹⁹

5. Abrupt Withdrawal of Major International Donor Support The 2025 funding landscape was destabilized by the abrupt halt of USAID support and significant cuts by other bilateral donors. While the EU remains a primary donor, its existing mechanisms are reportedly unable to fill the resulting massive financial gaps in the sector.

The withdrawal has had a destabilizing effect beyond finances, fueling delegitimizing narratives against CSOs and increasing their vulnerability to external pressures. This fragile financial model forces organizations to focus on survival rather than proactive advocacy for fundamental rights.

1.5. Attempts to stifle civic engagement through violence, harassment and negative narratives

1. Intensification of Negative Narratives and Smear Campaigns

In early 2025, the operational environment for civil society in Albania was defined by what has been described as an "unprecedented attack" on organizations and liberal values. Civil society organizations (CSOs) faced a surge in negative narratives and online smear campaigns specifically designed to vilify civic actors and stigmatize their funding sources and impartiality. These campaigns contribute to an "atmosphere of constraint" across the region. These attacks erode public trust in civil society and undermine its role as a democratic watchdog. This hostile discourse creates a climate of

¹⁸ Partners Albania for Change and Development (2024), [Monitoring Matrix on Enabling Environment for Civil Society Development](#) – Country Report for Albania 2024, Tirana.

¹⁹ European Commission (2025), [Albania Report 2025, Commission Staff Working Document SWD\(2025\)](#), Brussels, 4 November 2025.

uncertainty, forcing organizations to focus on institutional survival and reassess their alliance-building strategies rather than proactively advocating for fundamental rights.²⁰

2. Unprecedented Political Pressure on the Judiciary and SPAK

During the 2025 reporting period, the executive and legislative branches exerted "unprecedented" public reactions and pressure against the Specialized Structure Against Organized Crime and Corruption (SPAK) and the High Justice Inspector. High-level politicians from both the ruling majority and the opposition employed rhetoric unfavorable toward the judiciary, challenging the independence of these institutions.

Such targeted political pressure undermines the separation of powers and the independence of justice institutions. This environment creates a chilling effect for magistrates and civic watchdogs investigating high-level corruption, as it signals a lack of state protection against political retaliation and weakens the rule of law.²¹

3. Escalation of Intimidation and Physical Threats Against Journalists

In 2025, verbal and physical attacks against journalists became more prominent, with media freedom organizations reporting 45 cases of safety violations. Intimidation efforts by state officials and police officers specifically targeted investigative and female journalists. A tragic peak in violence occurred with the fatal shooting of an Appeals Court judge in a courtroom, highlighting severe deficiencies in the safety standards for legal and civic professionals.

The continued lack of final convictions for attacks on journalists fosters a culture of impunity. This pervasive threat of violence and harassment leads to widespread self-censorship, as journalists and activists seek to avoid physical harm and professional retaliation, thereby eroding media independence and public accountability.²²

4. Proliferation of Digital Threats and Misuse of Personal Data

The number of digital threats, online harassment, and smear campaigns against civic actors increased significantly in 2025. Reports highlight a concerning trend where the personal and professional data of journalists and activists is misused by unauthorized entities to facilitate intimidation. Institutional mechanisms for reporting and addressing these digital threats currently remain insufficient. Digital harassment and data misuse serve as modern tools for silencing watchdogs, creating a "chilling effect" on freedom of expression in online spaces. This vulnerability discourages civic actors from engaging in digital advocacy on sensitive topics such as corruption and organized crime due to the fear of doxxing or online vilification.²³

5. Discriminatory Rhetoric and Gender Stereotyping in Public Life

During the May 2025 parliamentary elections, persistent gender stereotyping and discriminatory rhetoric were directed at politically active women. Despite a high number of female candidates, this rhetoric was utilized as a tool to stigmatize women in public life and served as a significant barrier to

²⁰ European Commission (2025), [Albania Report 2025, Commission Staff Working Document SWD\(2025\)](#), Brussels, 4 November 2025.

²¹ European Commission (2025), [Albania Report 2025, Commission Staff Working Document SWD\(2025\)](#), Brussels, 4 November 2025.

²² European Commission (2025), [Albania Report 2025, Commission Staff Working Document SWD\(2025\)](#), Brussels, 4 November 2025.

²³ European Commission (2025), [Albania Report 2025, Commission Staff Working Document SWD\(2025\)](#), Brussels, 4 November 2025.

their effective participation. Such negative narratives stifle the inclusivity of the civic space by discouraging women and marginalized groups from engaging in political and civic activities. This discriminatory atmosphere reinforces systemic inequalities and limits the diversity of voices contributing to the national democratic discourse.²⁴

6. Intensification of Negative Narratives and Smear Campaigns

During 2025, civil society organizations (CSOs) in Albania faced a notable increase in negative narratives and online smear campaigns. These attacks specifically targeted the impartiality and funding sources of civic actors. Local leaders have described the environment .

This stigmatization threatens the irreplaceable role of civil society as a democratic watchdog. Such campaigns erode public trust and foster an atmosphere of constraint and uncertainty, prompting organizations to rethink their alliance-building strategies to navigate a more hostile landscape.

1.6. Funding reductions and restrictions

1. Sudden Withdrawal of Major International Donor Support (USAID) The 2025 landscape was defined by a dramatic shift in international support, most notably the "abrupt halt" of USAID funding and cuts by other bilateral donors. While the EU remains a primary donor, its mechanisms are reportedly unable to fill the resulting massive financial gaps in the sector.

This withdrawal has destabilized the non-profit sector beyond just financial loss, as it has fueled delegitimizing narratives and online smear campaigns targeting the impartiality of CSOs. The sector now faces a "fragile" model where organizations are forced to prioritize survival over proactive advocacy.²⁵

2. Practical Paralysis of VAT Exemptions for Foreign Grants

Through mid-2025, VAT exemptions for donation and grant agreements with foreign donors (including EU IPA III) remained effectively paralyzed. Although procedures exist, impractical requirements—such as notarizing individual contracts for every minor supplier—rendered the system unusable for most NPOs.

This administrative failure imposes a severe financial burden, as critical resources are siphoned off into unrecoverable taxes. It threatens the financial sustainability and implementation capacity of organizations, particularly smaller ones, by creating insurmountable logistical and economic hurdles.^{26,27}

²⁴ European Commission (2025), [Albania Report 2025, Commission Staff Working Document SWD\(2025\)](#), Brussels, 4 November 2025.

²⁵ Partners Albania for Change and Development and Balkan Civil Society Development Network (2025), [Resilient Voices: Western Balkans Civil Society in a Changing World – Regional Conference Proceedings](#), Tirana.

²⁶ Partners Albania for Change and Development (2024), [Monitoring Matrix on Enabling Environment for Civil Society Development](#) – Country Report for Albania 2024, Tirana.

²⁷ European Commission (2025), [Albania Report 2025, Commission Staff Working Document SWD\(2025\)](#), Brussels, 4 November 2025.

3. Significant Decline in the Sector Workforce due to Financial Hardship

Data reported in early 2025 revealed a significant decrease of approximately 1,000 employees in the NPO sector compared to the previous year. This sharp decline is directly attributed to the "broader impact of the financial difficulties" and the withdrawal of donor support rather than a decrease in the number of organizations.

The loss of human capital reflects a concerning trend for the sector's long-term sustainability and resilience. It diminishes the capacity of CSOs to provide social and democratic services, effectively weakening their role as watchdogs and partners in Albania's EU integration process.²⁸²⁹

4. Inefficiency and Reduction of Domestic Public Funding

Public funding remains "insufficient" and prone to politicization. In 2024-2025, the Agency for the Support of Civil Society (ASCS) budget saw only a 1% increase, failing to meet the legal requirement for a 2% annual increase. Additionally, funding for NPO-led free legal aid was entirely halted due to regulatory delays.

Consequences: The lack of predictable, long-term public support forces CSOs to become increasingly dependent on potentially manipulated domestic funds or short-term international cycles. This risks the continuity of vital social services and compromises the operational autonomy of independent civic actors.³⁰³¹

5. Administrative Pressures from New AML/CFT and Registration Requirements

New EU-wide Anti-Money Laundering and Countering the Financing of Terrorism (AML/CFT) packages, coming into effect by 2027, have begun imposing heavy compliance and due-diligence burdens on CSOs. Domestically, the continued absence of a functional electronic registry forces NPOs to endure costly, paper-based registration and re-registration processes.

These regulatory pressures disproportionately affect small CSOs and those relying on crowdfunding platforms. Administrative delays and high compliance costs create a "chilling effect" on financial operations, further restricting the sector's implementation capacity and financial independence.³²

6. Abrupt Withdrawal of Major International Donor Support

The 2025 funding landscape was marked by a dramatic shift due to the abrupt halt of USAID support and significant cuts by other bilateral donors. While EU funding remains, it is unable to meet the resulting financial gaps. The withdrawal has had a destabilizing effect beyond mere finances, fuelling delegitimizing narratives against CSOs. This creates a high dependency on scarce or potentially

²⁸ Partners Albania for Change and Development (2024), [Monitoring Matrix on Enabling Environment for Civil Society Development](#) – Country Report for Albania 2024, Tirana.

²⁹ European Commission (2025), [Albania Report 2025, Commission Staff Working Document SWD\(2025\)](#), Brussels, 4 November 2025.

³⁰ Partners Albania for Change and Development (2024), [Monitoring Matrix on Enabling Environment for Civil Society Development](#) – Country Report for Albania 2024, Tirana.

³¹ European Commission (2025), [Albania Report 2025, Commission Staff Working Document SWD\(2025\)](#), Brussels, 4 November 2025.

³² Partners Albania for Change and Development and Balkan Civil Society Development Network (2025), [Resilient Voices: Western Balkans Civil Society in a Changing World – Regional Conference Proceedings](#), Tirana.

politicized domestic public funding, which risks being used as a tool for political manipulation rather than sector support.

1.7. Barriers to participation in law and policy-making

Barriers to Participation in Law and Policy-Making in Albania: 2025 During 2025, participation mechanisms for civil society in Albania remained largely formalistic and superficial, with significant barriers to meaningful inclusion. While the legal framework for consultation exists, its implementation is often a "pro-forma" exercise conducted at late stages of policy drafting, which undermines trust and reform ownership. The Partnership Platform for European Integration (PPEI), a key mechanism for accession negotiations, reports critically low engagement, with only 16% of surveyed non-profit organizations (NPOs) participating. Furthermore, secondary legislation remains exempt from mandatory public consultation rules, and more than one-third of draft laws approved in 2024 originated outside the government's analytical program, limiting the window for civic oversight. Representation is also highly centralized; NPOs based outside the capital face significantly greater barriers, representing only 3% of those participating in EU integration discussion tables. Marginalized communities, particularly persons with disabilities, continue to face unaddressed accessibility issues regarding online public services. The lack of meaningful engagement has led to a regression in state-NPO dialogue and a pervasive "illusion of inclusion". Because consultation results are rarely taken into account in a documented or meaningful manner, NPOs have little influence on final policy outcomes, which discourages future active involvement. The exclusion of opposition members and limited civil society roles in key bodies, such as the ad hoc Anti-Corruption Committee, has raised concerns regarding the politicization and credibility of the reform process.³³ Additionally, the lack of timely and transparent feedback from public authorities prevents evidence-based policymaking and weakens the accountability of democratic institutions. This environment forces many organizations to focus on institutional survival rather than utilizing their expertise to act as a "driving force" for governance quality.

1.8. Other developments

1. Chronic Institutional Stagnation and Lack of Data Transparency As of late 2025, the national electronic register of NPOs, originally due in 2023, remains non-functional. Furthermore, the new "Roadmap for Civil Society 2024–2027" has been delayed for two years, and assessments reveal that only 11% of the previous roadmap's measures were fully implemented. The absence of the registry maintains high administrative burdens and costs for organizations outside the capital. The delay in the strategic Roadmap reflects a low level of government commitment, leaving the sector without a clear framework for institutional cooperation or sustainable support.³⁴

³³ European Commission (2025), [Albania Report 2025, Commission Staff Working Document SWD\(2025\)](#), Brussels, 4 November 2025.

³⁴ Partners Albania for Change and Development (2024), [Monitoring Matrix on Enabling Environment for Civil Society Development](#) – Country Report for Albania 2024, Tirana.

2. Restrictive AML/CFT "High-Risk" Classification for NPOs

National strategies in 2025 continue to classify the NPO sector as "high-risk" for money laundering and terrorist financing. This requires banks to apply "enhanced due diligence" for all NPO transactions, and the forthcoming EU AML/CFT package will introduce even stricter compliance standards by 2027.

These regulations impose heavy administrative and financial burdens, particularly on small CSOs and those using crowdfunding platforms. Banks' "de-risking" practices create unintended barriers to local giving and siphon critical resources into complex compliance reporting.³⁵

3. Electoral Polarization and Abuse of State Resources in 2025

The May 2025 general elections took place in a "highly polarized environment" characterized by a lack of a level playing field. International observers identified the widespread use of administrative resources and institutional leverage by the ruling party to gain an unfair advantage. The misuse of state resources undermines the fairness of the democratic contest and weakens public trust in institutional neutrality. This environment discourages authentic civic participation and participation of marginalized groups, as the political space is dominated by patronage networks.³⁶

4. Legislative Risks to Environmental Space: The "Mountain Package" In March 2025, Parliament adopted the "Mountain Package" law to promote investment in forests and pastures through fiscal incentives and land acquisition facilities. This follows 2024 amendments to the Law on Protected Areas that already reduced nature protections.

b) This legislation threatens local land-use rights and environmental management, often in conflict with EU habitats directives. It risks harm to ecological values and Natura 2000 sites, while sidelining community voices and civic oversight in favor of large-scale industrial or tourism projects.³⁷

5. New National Strategy Against Foreign Interference and Disinformation

In July 2025, Parliament adopted the first National Strategy against foreign interference and disinformation. While intended to counter external hybrid threats, the drafting process was criticized for a lack of broad consultation with civil society and media actors.

b) Civil society actors have raised concerns that the strategy's focus on external threats could be utilized to restrict legitimate dissent. Without proper safeguards, such measures risk impacting freedom of expression and pluralism, potentially creating new legal mechanisms to stigmatize independent voices.³⁸

6. Unprecedented Political Pressure on Independent Institutions

The 2025 reporting period saw unprecedented public reactions and pressure from the executive and legislative branches against the Specialised Structure Against Organised Crime and Corruption (SPAK). This included unfavourable rhetoric toward the judiciary by the ruling majority and opposition.

³⁵ Partners Albania for Change and Development (2024), [Monitoring Matrix on Enabling Environment for Civil Society Development](#) – Country Report for Albania 2024, Tirana.

³⁶ European Commission (2025), Albania Report 2025, Commission Staff Working Document SWD(2025), Brussels, 4 November 2025.

³⁷ European Commission (2025), [Albania Report 2025, Commission Staff Working Document SWD\(2025\)](#), Brussels, 4 November 2025.

³⁸ Partners Albania for Change and Development (2024), [Monitoring Matrix on Enabling Environment for Civil Society Development](#) – Country Report for Albania 2024, Tirana.

Such pressure undermines the separation of powers and threatens the independence of justice institutions. This environment endangers the safety of magistrates and weakens the overall rule of law, which is a fundamental pillar of a functioning democracy.

2. CIVIC SPACE EXPANSION

2.1. Improvements in legal environment: freedom of association

Modernizing the Registration Framework for NPOs

In May 2025, the government launched the draft law “On the registration of nonprofit organisations” for public consultation. This legislative initiative aims to incorporate essential changes mandated by previous Constitutional Court rulings, particularly regarding the proportionality of administrative sanctions for NPOs.

Once adopted, this law is expected to align Albania's association procedures with international standards. By addressing the issue of punitive sanctions and providing a clearer legal basis for registration, the measure potentially reduces administrative burdens that have historically hindered the sector's formal development.³⁹

2.2. Positive narratives

Formal Recognition of CSOs as Accession Partners

In April 2025, the EU-Albania Joint Consultative Committee (JCC) held its inaugural meeting, establishing a formal platform linking Albanian civil society with the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC). This platform is designed to provide structured input from non-state actors into the EU accession negotiations

b) The establishment of the JCC provides an "encouraging sign" that reinforces a positive narrative of civil society as an irreplaceable partner in democracy and governance. It elevates the status of civic actors from mere participants to active shapers of the national reform agenda, ensuring the accession process remains a "whole-of-society project".⁴⁰⁴¹

³⁹ Partners Albania for Change and Development (2024), [Monitoring Matrix on Enabling Environment for Civil Society Development](#) – Country Report for Albania 2024, Tirana.

⁴⁰ European Commission (2025), [Albania Report 2025, Commission Staff Working Document SWD\(2025\)](#), Brussels, 4 November 2025.

⁴¹ Partners Albania, *Annual Report 2024*; Partners Albania, *Declaration of the Regional Conference “Resilient Voices”*, Regional Conference “Resilient Voices”, October 2025.

2.3. Improvements in participation

Digital Innovation in Parliamentary Public Consultation

- a) In April 2025, the Albanian Parliament introduced a new digital tool for public consultation. This initiative was launched to improve the transparency of the legislative process and provide citizens and NPOs with a more accessible platform to submit input on draft laws.⁴²
- b) While the implementation of consultation remains a work in progress, this new tool provides a structured mechanism to move beyond "formalistic" engagement. It has the potential to enhance citizen engagement and ensure that diverse perspectives are considered during the preparation of key reforms linked to the EU integration agenda.⁴³

2.4. Other developments

Incentivizing Inclusive Representation in Governance

- a) In July 2025, the government appointed a member of the Roma community as Deputy Minister of Health and Social Protection, specifically tasked with social inclusion. This follows the adoption of implementing legislation in late 2024 that strengthened the rights of national minorities to self-identification and language use.
- b) This appointment serves as a significant step toward the meaningful representation of marginalized groups in executive decision-making. It signals an institutional commitment to tackling anti-gypsyism and discrimination, ensuring that the needs of vulnerable communities are directly reflected in national social policies.⁴⁴

⁴² European Commission (2025), [Albania Report 2025, Commission Staff Working Document SWD\(2025\)](#), Brussels, 4 November 2025.

⁴³ Partners Albania for Change and Development (2024), [Monitoring Matrix on Enabling Environment for Civil Society Development](#) – Country Report for Albania 2024, Tirana.

⁴⁴ European Commission (2025), [Albania Report 2025, Commission Staff Working Document SWD\(2025\)](#), Brussels, 4 November 2025.

Austria (AT)

Civic space in the EU in 2025

Country: Austria

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1. CIVIC SPACE PRESSURES

1.1. Deterioration of the legal environment: freedom of assembly

Disproportionate Law Enforcement Intervention at the Peršmanhof Memorial Site

a) Summary

On 27 July 2025, Austrian security authorities conducted a massive operation at an “Antifa Education Camp” hosted by the Carinthian Slovenian Students’ Club at the Peršmanhof Memorial.⁴⁵ Supported by a police helicopter and a canine unit, the intervention involved the systematic identification of approximately 60 participants, unauthorised entry into the premises against the will of the occupants, and temporary arrests.⁴⁶ While official justifications cited administrative and immigration offenses, an expert Commission set up by the Federal Ministry of the Interior identified these as pretexts for the systematic identity collection of 60 participants.⁴⁷ The commission found the operation procedurally illegal and disproportionate, involving several unauthorized arrests conducted without a legal mandate.⁴⁸

b) Consequences

The use of administrative law as a pretext to target political education projects creates a chilling effect. The categorical stigmatisation of anti-fascist groups as “left-wing extremist” undermines freedom of assembly and the rights of minorities and can be perceived as a danger to marginalised voices and critical actors in civil society.

⁴⁵ CIVICUS Monitor (2025), [Armed police and helicopters deployed to execute raid on antifascist youth camp](#), 31 October 2025.

⁴⁶ Austria, Federal Ministry of the Interior (2025), [Bericht der Expertinnen- und Expertenkommission Peršmanhof](#), Vienna.

⁴⁷ Austria, Federal Ministry of the Interior (2025), [Bericht der Expertinnen- und Expertenkommission Peršmanhof](#), Vienna.

⁴⁸ Austria, Federal Ministry of the Interior (2025), [Bericht der Expertinnen- und Expertenkommission Peršmanhof](#), Vienna.

1.2. Deterioration of legal environment: freedom of expression

Expansion of state surveillance: legalisation of “messenger monitoring”

a) Summary

In July 2025, the Austrian National Council passed a controversial legislative package⁴⁹ legalising the surveillance of messages sent in encrypted form via any messaging service. The law permits the use of state-sponsored spyware to intercept digital communications at the source, specifically for investigating terrorist threats and serious constitutional crimes. However, the law is not yet in force, and the necessary software must first be procured.⁵⁰

b) Consequences

The legalisation of invasive spyware represents a regression for the Austrian civic space. Experts from Amnesty International and epicenter.works emphasise that monitoring messaging services in a manner that complies with human rights is not feasible without simultaneously granting full access to the entire smartphone, thereby compromising the security of the entire device.⁵¹ Critics argue that journalists, scientists, activists, and opposition forces are regularly targeted by such comprehensive surveillance technologies and that the law lacks the necessary safeguards to rule out this risk of abuse.⁵² For civil society, the surveillance of encrypted messaging services creates a profound chilling effect as it undermines the confidentiality of communication.

SLAPPs and the struggle for anti-SLAPP legislation

c) Summary

Strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs) that are filed against journalists with the aim of suppressing critical reporting remain a critical threat in Austria. Notable cases included the right-wing FPÖ party's legal actions against media outlets.⁵³ In this case, Florian Klenk, the editor in chief of the Austrian magazine “Falter”, had reposted a video of FPÖ leader Herbert Kickl with a Falter advertising slogan in January 2025. According to Klenk, reposting and sharing are standard features of social media platforms. Yet, the FPÖ lawyer claims that the FPÖ holds the exclusive rights to the video and that Klenk's repost constitutes unauthorized use of copyrighted material. The FPÖ thus sued Klenk for a total value of €47,500. The Austrian newspaper Der Standard notes

⁴⁹ Austria, [Staatsschutz- und Nachrichtendienst-Gesetz, Sicherheitspolizeigesetz u.a.](#), Federal Law Gazette I No. 54/2025, 29 September 2025; Austrian Parliament, [Parlamentskorrespondenz Nr. 661: Nationalrat gibt nach intensiver Debatte Zustimmung zu Messenger-Überwachung](#), 9 July 2025.

⁵⁰ Epicenter.works (2025), [epicenter.works, "Bundestrojaner beschlossen – und jetzt?", 12 August 2025.](#)

⁵¹ Amnesty International Austria (2025), [„Messenger-Überwachung“: Einsatz von Spionagesoftware menschenrechtswidrig](#), 8 July 2025; epicenter.works, [Offener Brief: Internationales NGO-Bündnis warnt vor Bundestrojaner](#), 8 July 2025.

⁵² Amnesty International Austria (2025), [„Messenger-Überwachung“: Einsatz von Spionagesoftware menschenrechtswidrig](#), 8 July 2025; epicenter.works, [Offener Brief gegen den Bundestrojaner](#), 8 July 2025.

⁵³ Mapping Media Freedom (2025), [Austria's far-right party FPÖ sues Falter's editor in chief](#), 3 March 2025; CIVICUS Monitor, [FPÖ sues Falter editor over reposted video](#), 31 October 2025.

that copyright infringements are usually valued at around €500.⁵⁴ Another case concerned threats by a cybersecurity company founded by former chancellor Sebastian Kurz against the Austrian magazine “Falter” with legal action.⁵⁵ With its Legal Service for Journalism, the Concordia Press Club has launched a programme to provide legal support to journalists and thereby strengthen press freedom. Since February 2021, freelance and employed journalists have been able to contact the Journalism Legal Service for legal support. Media reports now indicate a sharp increase in legal advice for journalists. While journalists sought legal advice 66 times between autumn 2022 and 2023, this figure almost doubled to 118 between autumn 2024 and 2025.⁵⁶

d) Consequences

The use of SLAPPs continue to exert a chilling effect on civic space through weaponisation of the legal system to cause financial and psychological exhaustion. Experts warn that without comprehensive domestic legislation, SLAPPS undermine freedom of expression and the watchdog function of the press. The high cost of legal defence services forces smaller NGOs and independent journalists into self-censorship, effectively shielding powerful actors from public scrutiny and weakening democratic accountability.⁵⁷ Civil society alliances and the Press Club Concordia have urged the Austrian government to implement robust national protections.⁵⁸ To combat SLAPPS, a Journalism Legal Defence Fund was set up in March 2025 to provide financial and legal support in the face of abusive intimidation practices by right-wing groups.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ Mapping Media Freedom (2025), [Austria's far-right party FPÖ sues Falter's editor in chief](#), 3 March 2025; CIVICUS Monitor, [FPÖ sues Falter editor over reposted video](#), 31 October 2025.

⁵⁵ CIVICUS Monitor, [Kurz-linked firm threatens Falter over planned investigation](#), 31 October 2025; European Centre for Press and Media Freedom, [Mapping media freedom: Austria](#), without date.

⁵⁶ DerStandard, [Ressourcenmangel, Slapp-Klagen: Starker Anstieg bei rechtlicher Beratung für Journalisten](#), 16 Dezember 2025

⁵⁷ Presseclub Concordia (2025), [Offener Brief an Bundesregierung: „Anti-SLAPP Vorgaben wirksam umsetzen“](#), without date; orf.at (2025), [Bündnis fordert von Regierung Vorgehen gegen „SLAPP“-Klagen](#), 17 July 2025.

⁵⁸ Presseclub Concordia (2025), [Offener Brief an Bundesregierung: „Anti-SLAPP Vorgaben wirksam umsetzen“](#), without date.

⁵⁹ Presseclub Concordia (2025), [Klagsfonds Journalismus](#), without date.

1.3. Attempts to stifle civic engagement through violence, harassment and negative narratives

Targeted scrutiny: parliamentary inquiries and “funding task force”

a) Summary

In August 2025, the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) initiated a massive parliamentary inquiry targeting the NGO sector.⁶⁰ The party submitted over 2,000 questions to various ministries, seeking exhaustive data on the finances, state support, and internal memberships of over 700 organisations.⁶¹ The Federal Chancellor announced a “funding task force” to scrutinise all public financing of civil society, citing the need for rigorous oversight.⁶² The ministries have later disclosed payments to a total of 725 organisations.⁶³

b) Consequences

Such sweeping inquiries serve to stigmatise and incite resentment against organizations providing essential public services.⁶⁴ By demanding publicly available data under the guise of transparency, the initiative acts as a tool of intimidation, threatening the sector’s independence and the right to freedom of association. Critics argue that the creation of a dedicated task force validates a coordinated anti-NGO campaign amplified by tabloid platforms, which baselessly alleges the misappropriation of public funds.⁶⁵ This fosters public suspicion and potentially creates a chilling effect that hampers the work of independent civil society.

1.4. Funding reductions and restrictions

Structural risks to media pluralism

a) Summary

⁶⁰ See, for instance, Schnedlitz, M. (2025), [Parliamentary inquiry on „Wie viel Steuergeldmillionen verschlingt das NGO-Business in Österreich?“](#) (2738/J), 25 June 2025.

⁶¹ CIVICUS Monitor (2025), [FPÖ launches inquiry into NGO funding](#), 31 October 2025; derStandard (2025), [NGOs unter Beschuss: Wie die FPÖ daran arbeitet, die Zivilgesellschaft zu diskreditieren](#), 14 August 2025.

⁶² derStandard (2025), [Regierung will nach FPÖ-Kampagne Strenge gegenüber NGOs zeigen](#), 26 August 2025.

⁶³ Die Presse (2025), [Förderungen: Regierung legt Zahlungen an 725 Organisationen offen](#), 26 August 2025.

⁶⁴ CIVICUS Monitor (2025), [FPÖ launches inquiry into NGO funding](#), 31 October 2025; derStandard (2025), [NGOs unter Beschuss: Wie die FPÖ daran arbeitet, die Zivilgesellschaft zu diskreditieren](#), 14 August 2025.

⁶⁵ Presseclub Concordia (2025), [Concordia verbrieft: FPÖ und Krone gegen die Zivilgesellschaft](#), without date; CIVICUS Monitor (2025), [FPÖ launches inquiry into NGO funding](#), 31 October 2025.

As the decline of traditional revenue streams increasingly jeopardises the functionality and diversity of the Austrian media market, the state has intervened with targeted subsidies. However, a report by the Austrian Court of Audit criticises these measures for failing to enhance pluralism or facilitate market entry for new media outlets.⁶⁶ This finding reinforces the identical and long-standing demand by Reporters Without Borders Austria.⁶⁷ Moreover, concerns regarding the definition of “quality media” were raised by Press Club Concordia.⁶⁸ This comes at a time when the sector faces economic instability, evidenced by significant layoffs at quality newspapers.⁶⁹

b) Consequences

These factors create an environment where independent journalism is financially precarious while state-dependent funding fails to provide incentives for a diverse media landscape and professional journalistic activity. When public funding neglects young and innovative media formats, it distorts public discourse and weakens the watchdog function of the press.⁷⁰ This structural imbalance, coupled with the economic vulnerability of quality outlets, potentially reduces the availability of reliable information.

2. CIVIC SPACE EXPANSION

2.1. Improvements in legal environment: freedom of expression

Freedom of Information Act entered into force

a) Summary

On 1 September 2025, the Freedom of Information Act (*Informationsfreiheitsgesetz*)⁷¹ entered into force, marking a fundamental shift in the Austrian legal framework regarding administrative transparency. This legislative milestone effectively abolished the long-standing constitutional principle of official confidentiality (*Amtsverschwiegenheit*), replacing it with a proactive constitutional right to access information.

b) Consequences

⁶⁶ Austria, Austrian Court of Audit (2025), [Medienförderungen durch die KommAustria und die RTR Bericht des Rechnungshofes](#), July 2025.

⁶⁷ Austria, Reports without Borders Austria (2025), [Rechnungshof bemängelt Schieflagen in der Medienförderung](#), 25 July 2025.

⁶⁸ Presseclub Concordia (2025), [Gemeinsam gegen Angriffe: Kuckucksjournalismus](#), 2025.

⁶⁹ Presseclub Concordia (2025), [Concordia verbrieft: Schlechte Nachrichten für den Journalismus](#), 2025.

⁷⁰ Austria, Reports without Borders Austria (2025), [Medienförderung: Mehr Geld im Topf allein ist nicht genug!](#), 4 November 2025.

⁷¹ Austria, Freedom of Information Act (*Informationsfreiheitsgesetz*), Federal Law Gazette I No. 5/2024.

The entry into force of the Freedom of Information Act significantly strengthens the operational capacity of civil society in Austria. By establishing a constitutional right to access information, the law provides NGOs, investigative journalists, and advocacy groups with a robust legal tool to monitor government activities and public spending. The Act marks a democratic paradigm shift, granting civil society stronger tools to hold public authorities and majority state-owned companies accountable.⁷² Key benefits include shorter response deadlines (4–8 weeks) and narrower grounds for secrecy.⁷³ Some shortcomings remain: exemptions for small municipalities, the lack of an independent review body, and persistent transparency gaps regarding parliamentary data.⁷⁴

⁷² Verein Demokratieindex (2025), [Demokratieindex 2025: Die Schwerpunkte](#), without date; CIVICUS Monitor (2025), [New Freedom of Information Act greatly improves transparency](#), 31 October 2025.

⁷³ Presseclub Concordia (2025), [Concordia verbrieft: Die Ära der Informationsfreiheit beginnt](#), without date.

⁷⁴ Reporters without Borders Austria (2025), [Wir sehen dem Informationsfreiheitsgesetz mit Hoffnung und Skepsis entgegen!](#), 28 August 2025.

Belgium (BE)

Civic space in the EU in 2025

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Disclaimer

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1. CIVIC SPACE PRESSURES

1.1. Deterioration of legal environment: freedom of association

Proposed bill on the ban of certain dangerous organisations

a) Summary

In July 2025, following a proposal from the Minister of Interior, the Federal Council of Ministers approved a draft bill creating a legal framework to allow certain legal entities, unincorporated companies, and de facto associations and groups which are considered dangerous to be banned. The proposed procedure would allow the Minister of Interior to propose to the Council of Ministers the adoption of a royal decree administratively banning the concerned entities. The ban would be possible if the entity carries out or supports, in a substantial, repeated or organised manner, acts constituting a serious and present threat to national security or to the permanence of democratic and constitutional order. It could take two forms: a prohibition on some or all of the organisation's activities or the administrative dissolution of the organisation⁷⁵.

The government asked for the opinion of the Federal Institute for the protection and promotion of Human Rights (FIRM-FIDH) and the Council of State. FIRM-FIDH issued an unfavourable opinion⁷⁶ while the Council of State issued reservations on the draft bill⁷⁷.

b) Consequences

Given the bill's broad scope and imprecise language, it may affect many associations and their activities, even if they pose no risk, or only a very low risk, to national security or democratic and constitutional order. If it is adopted, it is therefore likely to create restrictions on freedom of association and freedom of expression, which could have a widespread chilling effect on the exercise of these rights⁷⁸.

⁷⁵ FPS Chancellery of the Prime Minister, Legal framework relating to the administrative prohibition of radical organisations ([*Cadre légal relatif à l'interdiction administrative d'organisations radicales*](#)), 25 July 2025 (accessed 19 February 2026).

⁷⁶ Federal Institute for the protection and promotion of Human Rights, Opinion No. 2025/9 of 18/09/2025 of the Federal Institute for the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights ([*Avis n° 2025/9 du 18/09/2025 de l'Institut Fédéral pour la protection et la promotion des Droits Humains*](#)), 29 September 2025 (accessed 19 February 2026).

⁷⁷ RTBF, The draft bill on radical organisations is to be amended: the government could temporarily suspend an organisation ([*L'avant-projet de loi sur les organisations radicales va être modifié : le gouvernement pourrait suspendre temporairement une organisation*](#)), 8 January 2026 (accessed 19 February 2026); VRT, Belgian government can't ban extremist organisations at wish, 8 January 2026 (accessed 19 February 2026).

⁷⁸ Federal Institute for the protection and promotion of Human Rights, Opinion No. 2025/9 of 18/09/2025 of the Federal Institute for the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights ([*Avis n°*](#)

1.2. Deterioration of legal environment: freedom of assembly

Persistent restrictions to the exercise of the right to protest

a) Summary

In 2025, tribunals, NGOs and public institutions alerted on restrictions to the freedom of peaceful assembly.

Despite a March 2025 judgment from the Brussels First Instance Tribunal which found that the Belgian State, the Brussels mayor and the local police had committed a fault by illegally using the kettling technique in Brussels in 2021⁷⁹, the Brussels mayor stated that the kettling technique would be ‘assessed according to the circumstances and could be used again’⁸⁰. The use of this technique was observed in subsequent protests⁸¹.

Amnesty International published a report in October 2025 on the situation of the right to protest in Belgium. Based on the analysis of the Belgian legislation and practices observed between 2020 and 2024, Amnesty International concluded that the local interpretation by municipalities of the right to protest allows the punishment of individuals exercising their fundamental rights without resorting to violence or disturbing public order, with individuals being issued with administrative local fines for example simply because demonstrations have not been explicitly authorised by the municipalities⁸². According to a report published by Unia in 2025, based on interviews conducted between June 2024 and April 2025, there is a disparity in police and administrative responses based on the political content

[2025/9 du 18/09/2025 de l’Institut Fédéral pour la protection et la promotion des Droits Humains](#), 29 September 2025 (accessed 19 February 2026).

⁷⁹ Brussels Court of First Instance, 4th Chamber (*Tribunal de Première Instance de Bruxelles, 4^{ème} chambre*), Human Rights League v. the Belgian State / the Brussels-Capital Police Zone / the Mayor of the City of Brussels (*Ligue des droits humains c/ l’État belge / la zone de police de Bruxelles-Capitale / le bourgmestre de la ville de Bruxelles*), 23/482/ A, 14 March 2025.

⁸⁰ BX1, The kettling technique ‘could be reused’: the Human Rights League ‘extremely concerned’ by Philippe Close's comments (*La technique de la nasse “pourrait être réutilisée”: la Ligue des droits humains “extrêmement préoccupée” par les propos de Philippe Close*), 26 April 2025 (accessed 20 February 2026).

⁸¹ See e.g. RTBF, Heavy-handed police intervention during national protest: what happened? The police justify their actions (*Intervention musclée de la police lors de la manifestation nationale : que s’est-il passé ? La police se justifie*), 16 October 2025 (accessed 20 February 2026).

⁸² Amnesty International, Too Little Freedom, Too Many Rules. The state of the right to protest in Belgium (*Te Weinig Vrijheid, Te Veel Regels. De staat van het recht op protest in België*), 28 October 2025 (accessed 20 February 2026).

of demonstrations, with administrative local fines appearing to be used as political deterrence of certain social movements⁸³.

The federal government's agreement published in 2025 also includes a plan to allow the courts to ban rioters from future protests (on top of their conviction for rioting)⁸⁴, which has been criticised as potentially leading to unjustified restrictions on the right to protest⁸⁵.

b) Consequences

These restrictions act as deterrents to the freedom of assembly, leading individuals to re-evaluate their involvement in protests for fear of being punished⁸⁶.

1.3. Deterioration of legal environment: court cases

Unimplemented court decisions and challenges to the independence of the judiciary

a) Summary

In 2025, Belgian authorities continued to disrespect judicial decisions by deliberately not implementing them. Unimplemented decisions mainly concern the reception crisis, caused by the lack of reception capacity in the country. Due to limited capacity, Fedasil (the Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers) has not systematically provided a reception place to all asylum seekers, a situation that has persisted for years⁸⁷. According to FIRM-FIDH, on 8 September 2025, more than 1 900 asylum seekers were on the waiting list for a reception place, even though they should have been able to get a place from the moment they requested international protection. Since the beginning of 2025, the average waiting time has been between three and four months. FIRM-FIDH continues to note that since January 2022, nearly 15 000 court orders mandating the accommodation of asylum seekers have been issued by national courts, of which almost 11 000 have been officially notified to Fedasil. At the international level, the European Court of Human Rights has issued more than 2 300 similar rulings

⁸³ Debailleul, C., Flasse, C., Pieret, J., Tatti, D., Van Crieelingen, M., Vercauteren Drubbel, M. and Waiengnier, M., Research Report on Inequalities Related to Municipal Administrative Sanctions 'INESAC' (*Rapport de Recherche Inégalités Liées aux Sanctions Administratives Communales « INESAC »*), 2025, pp. 199-200 (accessed 20 February 2026).

⁸⁴ Belgian government, Federal Coalition Agreement 2025-2029 (*Accord de Coalition Fédérale 2025-2029*), 31 January 2025, p. 26 (accessed 20 February 2026).

⁸⁵ "Right to protest" Coalition (*Coalition "Droit de protester"*), The right to protest under threat again in Belgium (*Le droit de protester à nouveau menacé en Belgique*), 20 June 2025 (accessed 20 February 2026).

⁸⁶ See e.g. Debailleul, C., Flasse, C., Pieret, J., Tatti, D., Van Crieelingen, M., Vercauteren Drubbel, M. and Waiengnier, M., Research Report on Inequalities Related to Municipal Administrative Sanctions 'INESAC' (*Rapport de Recherche Inégalités Liées aux Sanctions Administratives Communales « INESAC »*), 2025, p. 200 (accessed 20 February 2026).

⁸⁷ See e.g. Cantillon, B. and Zomignani Barboza, J., *Franet National contribution to the Fundamental Rights Report 2024 – Belgium*, 2024, pp. 25-27 (accessed 19 February 2026).

(provisional measures). FIRM-FIDH claims these thousands of court decisions are being deliberately ignored by the Belgian authorities⁸⁸. In this regard, after the Belgian Federal Minister for Asylum and Migration, Social Integration and Urban Policy declared in an interview that she refused to comply with judicial decisions regarding reception of asylum seekers, the Belgian judiciary published a press release stating the Minister's statements are symptomatic of a worrying trend in which a member of the executive branch believes they can place themselves above the law, which is contrary to the principles of a democratic rule of law⁸⁹.

FIRM-FIDH also noted that while the most well-known example of lack of implementation of judicial decisions is the systematic refusal of federal authorities to provide accommodation for asylum seekers, disregard for court decisions also extends to other areas, such as prison overcrowding and noise pollution from Brussels Airport in Zaventem⁹⁰.

Besides the non-respect of court decisions, the Belgian prime minister also co-signed a letter⁹¹ addressed to the European Court of Human Rights, in which, together with other European heads of government, he questions the Court's interpretation of the European Convention on Human Rights regarding the expulsion of migrants involved in criminal activities. In response to this letter, six Belgian human rights institutions called on the Belgian government to reaffirm its support for the European Court and the Convention, noting that the Court cannot be subjected to political pressures⁹².

Finally, FIRM-FIDH also expressed concern about the announced reforms to the council for alien law litigation, as provided in the federal government agreement⁹³. The proposed reform provides that the council would become part of a new Federal Public Service for Migration⁹⁴, and its judges would no

⁸⁸ Federal Institute for the protection and promotion of Human Rights, Reception crisis: Myria and the Federal Institute for Human Rights warn of a decline in rights (*Crise de l'accueil : Myria et l'Institut fédéral des droits humains alertent sur un recul des droits*), 18 September 2025 (accessed 19 February 2026).

⁸⁹ College of Attorneys General, College of Courts and Tribunals, and the Court of Cassation (*Collège des procureurs généraux, Collège des cours et tribunaux et la Cour de cassation*), Joint reaction from the judiciary to the recent statements by Minister Anneleen Van Bossuyt (*Réaction commune du pouvoir judiciaire aux déclarations récentes de la ministre Anneleen Van Bossuyt*), 1 October 2025 (accessed 19 February 2026).

⁹⁰ Federal Institute for the protection and promotion of Human Rights, The FIHR is concerned about respect for the rule of law in Belgium (*L'IFDH préoccupé par le respect de l'État de droit en Belgique*), 29 January 2025 (accessed 19 February 2026).

⁹¹ Available at: https://www.governo.it/sites/governo.it/files/Lettera_aperta_22052025.pdf (accessed 19 February 2026).

⁹² Federal Institute for the protection and promotion of Human Rights, Six human rights institutions call for respect for the independence of the European Court of Human Rights (*Six institutions des droits humains appellent à respecter l'indépendance de la Cour européenne des droits de l'homme*), 27 May 2025 (accessed 19 February 2026).

⁹³ See Belgian government, Federal Coalition Agreement 2025-2029 (*Accord de Coalition Fédérale 2025-2029*), 31 January 2025, pp. 182-183 (accessed 19 February 2026).

⁹⁴ See e.g. RTBF, Centralisation of administrative procedures, creation of a Federal Public Service for Migration: how Arizona is reforming the federal administration (*Centralisation des démarches*

longer be appointed for life, but for a renewable five-year term. According to FIRM-FIDH, these measures pose a risk to the independence and impartiality of judges, as well as to the separation of powers⁹⁵.

b) Consequences

As a consequence of the lack of respect for judicial decisions by Belgian authorities and current challenges to the independence of the judiciary, civil society organisations find themselves unable to represent collective interests effectively, as judicial action may not yield results. This may be exacerbated by decisions regarding funding, explained in section 1.5 below.

1.4. Attempts to stifle civic engagement through violence, harassment and negative narratives

Degrading environment for journalists

a) Summary

In 2025, certain journalists, academics, artists and other citizens were harassed or targeted by negative narratives.

FIRM-IFDH conducted an online survey between October and November 2025 on the quality of civic space in Belgium⁹⁶. 1,433 academics, 408 journalists and 390 artists responded to the survey. A large share of respondents across all target groups reported that the situation has worsened over the past five years. The three most frequently cited negative experiences were disinformation campaigns, threats and insults. Key perceived threats to press freedom included the harmful impact of social media (trolls, hate campaigns, disinformation), political pressure or government interference, and political attacks undermining the credibility of media and journalists. Nearly one quarter of journalists said they are sometimes concerned about their safety, and one in four reported experiencing censorship (pressure not to publish) at least once in the previous two years. Around 30% also reported facing external pressure several times a year to remove critical perspectives or limit, alter or reframe coverage. Journalists mainly identified their direct supervisors and Belgian politicians as sources of interference and pressure⁹⁷.

These trends were observed during incidents in 2025 where journalists were subjected to negative narratives and harassment by certain politicians and political parties. Two alerts were submitted to the Council of Europe's Safety of Journalist Platform, with threats of legal proceedings and physical threats

[administratives, création d'un SPF Migration : comment l'Arizona réforme l'administration fédérale](#)), 1 January 2026 (accessed 18 February 2026).

⁹⁵ Federal Institute for the protection and promotion of Human Rights, The rule of law under pressure: the Federal Institute for Human Rights calls for concrete action ([L'État de droit sous pression : l'Institut fédéral des droits humains demande des actions concrètes](#)), 15 October 2025.

⁹⁶ FIRM-IFDH, Studies and Research ([Études et recherches](#)), n.d. (accessed 23 February 2026).

⁹⁷ Written information received from a representative of FIRM-IFDH on 9 February 2026.

being addressed to journalists⁹⁸. Public media were also subjected to negative narratives and pressure to publish, modify or delete certain content. A journalistic ethics organisation was also subject to criticism⁹⁹.

Several citizens or journalists filming or covering protests or civil disobedience actions were also subjected to violence and arrests, a development which was the subject of three alerts submitted to the Council of Europe's Safety of Journalist Platform¹⁰⁰ and was reported by the European Commission in its 2025 Rule of Law Report¹⁰¹.

b) Consequences

These attempts to stifle civic engagement developments are reported to feed distrust against the media¹⁰² and to lead to self-censorship¹⁰³.

1.5. Funding reductions and restrictions

Funding reductions and politicisation of subsidies for civil society organisations

a) Summary

A number of developments in 2025 affect the funding of civil society in Belgium.

Federal level

⁹⁸ Safety of Journalists Platform, [Blogger Served with a Letter of Formal Notice by MR Party President for Re-sharing a Journalistic Investigation](#), No. 153/2025, 11 August 2025 (accessed 20 February 2026); Safety of Journalists Platform, [Party Leader Threatens the Physical Safety of RTBF Journalist](#), No. 154/2025, 11 August 2025 (accessed 20 February 2026)

⁹⁹ Human Rights League (*Ligue des Droits Humains*), State of Human Rights – 2025 Report (*État des droits humains – Rapport 2025*), 14 January 2026, p. 18 (accessed 20 February 2026).

¹⁰⁰ Safety of Journalists Platform, [ZIN TV Journalist Violently Arrested While Reporting](#), No. 7/2025, 30 January 2025 (accessed 20 February 2026); Safety of Journalists Platform, [Freelance Journalist Thomas Haulotte Held in Administrative Detention Overnight](#), No. 68/2025, 16 April 2025 (accessed 20 February 2026); Safety of Journalists Platform, [Freelance Journalist Erika Di Benedetto Assaulted by Police while Covering a Protest](#), No. 228/2025, 10 October 2025 (accessed 20 February 2026).

¹⁰¹ European Commission, [COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT 2025 Rule of Law Report Country Chapter on the rule of law situation in Belgium](#), SWD(2025) 901 final, 8 July 2025, p. 15 (accessed 20 February 2026).

¹⁰² Human Rights League (*Ligue des Droits Humains*), State of Human Rights – 2025 Report (*État des droits humains – Rapport 2025*), 14 January 2026, p. 18 (accessed 20 February 2026).

¹⁰³ Ibid.; Written information received from a representative of FIRM-IFDH on 9 February 2026.

The federal government agreement¹⁰⁴ proposes a simplification of the human rights landscape in Belgium, promoting more collaboration between the different institutions in the country. In this context, the agreement announces a 25% budget cut to the Interfederal Centre for Equal Opportunities and Opposition to Racism and Discrimination (Unia), Belgium's equality body. Unia's directors expressed their outrage in this regard, questioning whether the reduction was in line with EU Directive 2024/1499 on equality bodies¹⁰⁵.

In December 2025, new legislation was adopted in Belgium to reduce the tax deduction for donations to recognised NGOs from 45% to 30%, with retroactive effect from 1 January 2025¹⁰⁶. In March 2025, when the bill for the law was presented, 473 organisations, including NGOs and universities, signed an open letter opposing the reduction, claiming it could reduce the amount of donations NGOs receive¹⁰⁷.

Flanders

In Flanders, six civil society organisations had their funding cut, despite having received a positive advice from the assessment committee, which, according to the Flemish decree on the subsidisation of socio-cultural adult education (*Decreet over de subsidiëring van het sociaal-cultureel volwassenenwerk*)¹⁰⁸, is in charge of assessing grant applications from organisations and formulating a recommendation on the award of the grant. While the Flemish government claimed that the cuts were made because the organisations were involved in or not unequivocally distancing themselves from violent extremism, the concerned organisations claimed that the decision was political, as it targeted organisations that are critical of the government¹⁰⁹.

¹⁰⁴ Belgian government, Federal Coalition Agreement 2025-2029 (*Accord de Coalition Fédérale 2025-2029*), 31 January 2025, p. 85 (accessed 19 February 2026).

¹⁰⁵ Unia, Federal government agreement: minus 25%? Unia's management is outraged! (*Accord du gouvernement fédéral: moins 25 %? La direction d'Unia s'indigne!*), 3 February 2025 (accessed 19 February 2026).

¹⁰⁶ See Amnesty International Belgium, Donations and tax receipts: Frequently asked questions (*Dons et attestations fiscales Les questions fréquentes*); Greenpeace, The tax deductibility of donations is decreasing and going down to 30%: what does this mean? (*La déductibilité fiscale des dons diminue et passe à 30 % : qu'est-ce que cela signifie ?*), 15 December 2025 (accessed 19 February 2026)

¹⁰⁷ See e.g. La Libre, The reduction in the tax deduction for donations will penalise thousands of beneficiaries (*La diminution de la réduction fiscale des dons pénalisera des milliers de bénéficiaires*), 13 March 2025; Amnesty International Belgium, Reducing the tax deduction for donations will penalise the generosity of Belgians and thousands of beneficiaries (*La réduction de la diminution d'impôt des dons pénalisera la générosité des belges et des milliers de bénéficiaires*), 13 March 2025 (accessed 19 February 2026).

¹⁰⁸ Available at: <https://codex.vlaanderen.be/Zoeken/Document.aspx?DID=1038228¶m=inhoud>. See articles 19 and 30.

¹⁰⁹ See e.g. Struys, J., Flemish government cuts subsidies to left-wing non-profits due to "violent extremism" (*Vlaamse regering snoeit in subsidies van linkse vzw's wegens "gewelddadig extremisme"*), De Standaard, 13 November 2025; MO, Six organisations appeal to the Council of State against the elimination of subsidies (*Zes organisaties stappen naar Raad van State tegen schrappen subsidies*), 19 November 2025; Vandebos, N., A critical and autonomous civil society is

In this regard, the Flemish action plan for the prevention of violent radicalisation, extremism and terrorism¹¹⁰ proposes to introduce a binding clause to the Flemish Code of Public Finances allowing the Minister of Budget to suspend subsidies from organisations suspected of being involved in, supporting or advocating for violent extremism while the Minister seeks information from the security services to confirm the suspicions.

Finally, the 2026 Flemish budget includes an article¹¹¹ stating that legal costs incurred by organisations directly or indirectly related to initiating legal proceedings against the Flemish government are not eligible for funding. This means organisations receiving Flemish subsidies may no longer use that money to initiate legal proceedings against the Flemish government¹¹². Similarly, the new Flemish action plan on building permits calls for a halt on strategic litigation procedures by environmental and nature conservation organisations, which, according to the plan, are not aimed at safeguarding a concrete, actual, and/or personal interest, but at influencing policy through legal means¹¹³.

Wallonia-Brussels Federation

Following closed-door budget talks in October 2025, the government of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation decided to withdraw subsidies granted to organisations deemed to be close to political parties. According to the Federation of Employers in the Continuing Education and Adult Training Sectors, the criteria to decide on whether organisations are close to political parties are not clearly defined and open to broad interpretation, thus potentially applying to any citizens' association¹¹⁴.

b) Consequences

As a consequence of these developments, civil society organisations are exposed to funding reductions as well as increasing political pressure, in view of the fact that fundings decisions appear to be politically motivated.

crucial to combat democratic erosion (*Een kritisch en autonoom middenveld is cruciaal om de democratische afbraak te bestrijden*), MO, 14 November 2025 (accessed 19 February 2026).

¹¹⁰ Flemish action plan for the prevention of violent radicalisation, extremism and terrorism (*Vlaams actieplan ter preventie van gewelddadige radicalisering, extremisme en terrorisme*), p. 86 (accessed 19 February 2026).

¹¹¹ PROGRAM DECREE for the 2026 budget (*PROGRAMMADECREET bij de begroting 2026*), art. 50

¹¹² See De Morgen, Organisations are no longer allowed to use subsidies for proceedings against the Flemish government (*Organisaties mogen subsidies niet meer gebruiken voor procedures tegen Vlaamse overheid*), 13 October 2025 (accessed 19 February 2026).

¹¹³ Available at: Action Programme on Legally Secure and Robust Permitting (*Actieprogramma inzake rechtszekere en robuuste vergunningen*), p. 25 (accessed 24 February 2026).

¹¹⁴ Federation of Employers in the Continuing Education and Adult Training Sectors (*Fédération des Employeurs des Secteurs de l'Éducation permanente et de la Formation des Adultes*), In a true democracy, no power can decide which voices can be silenced! (*Dans une démocratie digne de ce nom, aucun pouvoir ne peut décider quelles voix peuvent être réduites au silence !*), 27 November 2025. See also: Human Rights League (*Ligue des Droits Humains*), State of Human Rights – 2025 Report (*État des droits humains – Rapport 2025*), 14 January 2026, pp. 23-24 (accessed 19 February 2026).

2. CIVIC SPACE EXPANSION

2.1. Improvements in legal environment: freedom of expression

Increased legal and judicial protection to freedom of expression

a) Summary

In 2025, Belgium started taking steps to adopt new legislation on Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation (SLAPP) to transpose the EU Anti-SLAPP Directive¹¹⁵. FIRM-IFDH, which acts as Belgium's focal point on SLAPP¹¹⁶, has been consulted three times regarding draft legislation in this regard, to ensure that national acts properly implement the EU Directive¹¹⁷.

The EU Commission 2025 Rule of Law Report noted that "Lawsuits targeting major media outlets have raised concerns about press freedom and misuse of judicial procedures"¹¹⁸ in Belgium. Similarly, the Human Rights League (*Ligue des Droits Humains*) had expressed concern over the unduly use of legal action against journalists as well as court decisions taken against journalists¹¹⁹. In its 2025 report, however, the League noted that courts have overturned several judicial decisions censuring the media, highlighting their unconstitutionality. A belated, but welcome, reaffirmation of the constitutional protection of the press, according to the League¹²⁰.

b) Consequences

¹¹⁵ Directive (EU) 2024/1069 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 April 2024 on protecting persons who engage in public participation from manifestly unfounded claims or abusive court proceedings ('Strategic lawsuits against public participation'), PE/88/2023/REV/1, OJ L, 2024/1069, 16.4.2024.

¹¹⁶ Federal Institute for the protection and promotion of Human Rights, [What does FIRM-IFDH do against SLAPP?](#) (accessed 20 February 2026).

¹¹⁷ Federal Institute for the protection and promotion of Human Rights, Opinion on the protection of victims of SLAPP suits, ([Avis sur la protection des victimes de poursuites-bâillons \(SLAPP\)](#)), 30 September 2025 (accessed 20 February 2026).

¹¹⁸ European Commission, [2025 Rule of Law Report - Country Chapter on the rule of law situation in Belgium](#), SWD(2025) 901 final, 8 July 2025, pp. 14-15 (accessed 20 February 2026).

¹¹⁹ Human Rights League (*Ligue des Droits Humains*), State of Human Rights – 2024 Report ([État des droits humains en Belgique – Rapport 2025](#)), Freedom of the press: a reminder of the fundamental (rights) ([Liberté de la presse : rappel des \(droits\) fondamentaux](#)), 15 January 2025 (accessed 20 February 2026).

¹²⁰ Human Rights League (*Ligue des Droits Humains*), State of Human Rights – 2025 Report ([État des droits humains – Rapport 2025](#)), 14 January 2026, p. 19.

Despite concerns over freedom of expression in Belgium (see also section 1.4 above), progress has been made to enact anti-SLAPP legislation in the country and courts have protected freedom of the press, reinforcing the constitutional protection of this right in Belgium. These developments may foster a safer environment for journalists, however, whether this materialises in practice will depend on whether other pressures (e.g. threats and intimidation) are reduced.

Bulgaria (BG)

Civic space in the EU in 2025

Country: Bulgaria

Contractor: Project One / Center for the Study of Democracy

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Disclaimer

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1. CIVIC SPACE PRESSURES

1.1. Deterioration of legal environment: freedom of association

Changes to residence regimes for non-EU nationals engaged in civil society

a) Summary

On 18 June 2025, the parliament amended the Foreigners in the Republic of Bulgaria Act (*Закон за чужденците в Република България*), removing non-profit activities as grounds for non-EU citizens to obtain long-term or permanent residence.¹²¹ While non-EU nationals may still establish or work for civil society organisations under employment contracts, they can no longer secure residence solely on the basis of leading or engaging in non-profit activities without a work contract. At the same time, residence remains available for religious activities, employment or self-employment, raising concerns of unequal treatment.

Although the government justified the amendment by citing the low number of applications (486 since 2002),¹²² some members of parliament stated that the aim was to prevent foreigners from allegedly misusing civil society organisations as a pathway to residency. The civil society organisation Bulgarian Centre for Not-for-profit Law (BCNL) (*Български център за нестопанско право*, БЦНП) criticised the amendments as unjustified, noting that the low number of applications may stem from various factors, including excessive administrative burdens, limited public awareness, and the overall unfavourable environment for carrying out non-profit activities in the country.¹²³

b) Consequences

Beyond limiting residence options, the amendment narrows opportunities for civic engagement by non-EU nationals and creates legal uncertainty for those who had already obtained status under the previous framework, as no clear transitional safeguards were introduced. It also contributes to a negative public narrative that frames civil society involvement as inherently suspicious, further stigmatising civic actors and deepening the climate of distrust surrounding civil society. According to the civil society organisation Bulgarian Centre for Not-for-profit Law (BCNL) (*Български център за нестопанско право*, БЦНП), the amendment will also negatively affect volunteering by limiting

¹²¹ Bulgaria, Law on amending and supplementing the Foreigners in the Republic of Bulgaria Act (*Закон за изменение и допълнение на Закона за чужденците в Република България*), Bill No. 51-502-01-7, tabled 4 March 2025, § 9.

¹²² National Assembly (*Народно събрание*) (2025), Explanatory report to the Draft law on amending and supplementing the Foreigners in the Republic of Bulgaria Act (*Мотиви към Законопроект за изменение и допълнение на Закона за чужденците в Република България*), 4 March 2025.

¹²³ Bulgarian Centre for Not-for-profit Law (*Български център за нестопанско право*) (2025), Statement regarding the Draft law on amending and supplementing the Foreigners in the Republic of Bulgaria Act (*Становище относно Законопроект за изменение и допълнение на Закона за чужденците в Република България*), 7 March 2025.

opportunities of foreign nationals to engage in volunteer work outside the framework of the European volunteering service.¹²⁴

1.2. Deterioration of legal environment: court cases

Unsolicited political campaigning against LGBTI+ organisations

a) Summary

In 2025, the Supreme Administrative Court (SAC) (*Върховен административен съд*, ВАС) issued a decision refusing to sanction a Bulgarian politician who, during their 2019 electoral campaign for a Mayor of Sofia, publicly promised to “put an end to gay parades”. The statement referred to the annual Sofia Pride and effectively signalled an intention to restrict the freedom of expression and the right to peaceful assembly of LGBTI+ people.¹²⁵

A complaint was submitted to the electoral authorities and subsequently to the Commission for Protection against Discrimination (CPD) (*Комисия за защита от дискриминация*, КЗД). Both institutions rejected the complaints, reasoning that the statements did not constitute discrimination because they were not directed at specific individuals. The case ultimately reached the Supreme Administrative Court (SAC) (*Върховен административен съд*, ВАС), which upheld this interpretation and confirmed that no discrimination had occurred. The court accepted that a campaign promise to restrict fundamental rights does not breach anti-discrimination law when it targets an entire community rather than identifiable persons.¹²⁶ The decision was criticised by civil society organisations as violating European human rights standards and legitimising hate speech and discrimination rhetoric.¹²⁷

b) Consequences

¹²⁴ Bulgarian Centre for Not-for-profit Law (*Български център за нестопанско право*) (2025), Statement regarding the Draft law on amending and supplementing the Foreigners in the Republic of Bulgaria Act (*Становище относно Законопроект за изменение и допълнение на Закона за чужденците в Република България*), 7 March 2025.

¹²⁵ The Television of Truth (*Телевизията на истината*) (2019), ‘Siderov: If I become mayor – an end to pride parades, an end to corruption in the Ministry of the Interior, an end to the tow trucks that lift your cars!’ (*‘Сидеров: Ако стана кмет - край на гей-парадите, край на корупцията в МВР, край на паяка, който вдига колите ви!’*), 29 September 2019.

¹²⁶ Bulgaria, Supreme Administrative Court (*Върховен административен съд*), Decision No 11094 in administrative case No 9647/2023 (*Решение № 11094 по административно дело № 9647/2023*), 7 November 2025.

¹²⁷ LGBTI Deystvie Association (*Сдружение „ЛГБТИ Действие“*) (2025), ‘The Supreme Administrative Court legalises hate’ (*‘Върховният административен съд легализира омразата’*), press release, 20 November 2025.

The decision has consequences that extend beyond the individual case. The court’s decision affects not only the right to peaceful assembly, but also the broader standards governing political speech. By accepting that a campaign promise to restrict the rights of an entire community constitutes lawful political expression, the court risks normalising discriminatory and hostile rhetoric in the political arena and reinforcing a status quo in which the LGBTI community is repeatedly used as a convenient political target.¹²⁸ In doing so, the court effectively lowered the threshold of protection against discriminatory speech, signalling that calls to curtail constitutionally guaranteed freedoms may escape legal consequences if framed broadly and directed at a group rather than at identifiable individuals.

This approach reinforces an already hostile public environment. Anti-LGBTI rhetoric has long been present in Bulgarian political discourse. The adoption in 2024 of the so-called “Don’t Say Gay” law,¹²⁹ accompanied by parliamentary debates marked by stigmatising language, illustrated how political actors instrumentalise hostility towards LGBTI people to mobilise electoral support. Municipal councillors in Sofia¹³⁰ and certain society groups¹³¹ have also called for the cancellation of Sofia Pride, further demonstrating the persistence of efforts to curtail the visibility and rights of the LGBTI community.

1.3. Attempts to stifle civic engagement through violence, harassment and negative narratives

Political instrumentalisation of civil society and human rights organisations

a) Summary

In 2025, negative narratives against civil society were further institutionalised through the parliamentary debates surrounding the rejection of the yet another “foreign agents” draft law,¹³² as well as through the establishment of an *ad hoc* parliamentary “Soros committee”.¹³³

¹²⁸ Bulgarian Helsinki Committee (Български хелзинкски комитет) (2023), ‘[LGBTI people are the new target of “poisonous” media arrows](#)’, press release, 18 July 2023.

¹²⁹ Bulgaria, Pre-School and School Education Act ([Закон за училищното и предучилищното образование](#)), 1 August 2016, last amended 5 August 2025, Article 11.

¹³⁰ Bulgarian News Agency (Българска телеграфна агенция) (2023), ‘Kontrera: The controversial “Sofia Pride” must be stopped and banned’ ([‘Контрера: Скандалният „София прайд“ трябва да бъде спрян и забранен’](#)), 15 June 2023.

¹³¹ Bulgarian News Agency (Българска телеграфна агенция) (2025), ‘The civic initiative “Buditeli” calls for the immediate ban of “Sofia Pride.”’ ([‘Гражданска инициатива „Будители“ иска незабавна забрана на „София прайд“’](#)), 4 February 2025.

¹³² National Assembly (Народно събрание) (2024), Draft Registration of Foreign Agents Act ([Законопроект за регистрация на чуждестранните агенти](#)), 11 November 2024, rejected in plenary session on 5 February 2025.

¹³³ National Assembly (Народно събрание) (2025), Decision on the establishment of a temporary commission to establish facts and circumstances regarding the activities of George Soros and Alexander Soros and their foundations in the territory of the Republic of Bulgaria, financing Bulgarian natural and legal persons and non-governmental organisations, and establishing their

The Draft Foreign Agents Registration Act (*Законопроект за регистрация на чуждестранните агенти*), modelled on Russian legislation and previously introduced in several successive parliaments, was reintroduced once again in 2024. The draft proposed that individuals and organisations receiving more than €500 annually from foreign sources be labelled as “foreign agents” and envisaged broad restrictions on their access to public institutions, as well as on their participation in public life and policy debates. It was ultimately rejected during plenary session in February 2025.¹³⁴

Later in 2025, the parliament established a temporary investigative committee tasked with examining the activities of foundations associated with George Soros. Although formally presented as a transparency initiative, its mandate and public messaging reinforced claims that foreign-funded civil society organisations act on behalf of external interests rather than in the interests of Bulgarian society.¹³⁵

These narratives disproportionately target human rights organisations, particularly those working on migrants’ rights, LGBTI rights, and women’s rights, and are frequently portrayed in political rhetoric as acting “against national interests”. This framing was echoed at the executive level in 2025, when the then Minister of the Interior publicly alleged that the civil society organisation Mission Wings Foundation (*Фондация „Мисия криле“*) had been used by Russian actors to “flood Europe” with migrants, following the organisation’s criticism of state authorities after three migrant children were found dead in a forest near the Bulgarian-Turkish border.¹³⁶ In response, the Mission Wings Foundation (*Фондация „Мисия криле“*) issued a public declaration describing the allegations as untrue and

links with political parties, magistrates, educational institutions, media, business structures and state authorities (*Решение за създаване на временна комисия за установяване на факти и обстоятелства относно дейността на Джордж Сорос и Александър Сорос и техните фондации на територията на Република България, финансиращи български физически и юридически лица и неправителствени както и установяване на свързаността им с политически партии, магистрати, образователни институции, медии, бизнес структури и органи на държавна власт*), 5 November 2025.

¹³⁴ National Assembly (*Народно събрание*) (2024), Draft Registration of Foreign Agents Act (*Законопроект за регистрация на чуждестранните агенти*), 11 November 2024, rejected in plenary session on 5 February 2025.

¹³⁵ National Assembly (*Народно събрание*) (2025), Decision on the establishment of a temporary commission to establish facts and circumstances regarding the activities of George Soros and Alexander Soros and their foundations in the territory of the Republic of Bulgaria, financing Bulgarian natural and legal persons and non-governmental organisations, and establishing their links with political parties, magistrates, educational institutions, media, business structures and state authorities (*Решение за създаване на временна комисия за установяване на факти и обстоятелства относно дейността на Джордж Сорос и Александър Сорос и техните фондации на територията на Република България, финансиращи български физически и юридически лица и неправителствени както и установяване на свързаността им с политически партии, магистрати, образователни институции, медии, бизнес структури и органи на държавна власт*), 5 November 2025.

¹³⁶ Dathan, M. (2025), ‘Russian spies working with smugglers ‘to flood Europe with migrants’’, *The Times*, 19 October 2025.

harmful to the organisation's reputation,¹³⁷ while the Border Violence Monitoring Network described the case as "one of the most forceful attacks yet by Bulgarian authorities against civil society organisations".¹³⁸

b) Consequences

These developments have had tangible consequences for the public perception and operating environment of civil society. Sustained negative rhetoric by senior political figures has normalised the portrayal of civil society organisations as instruments of foreign influence, partisan interests, or hidden agendas. Rather than being recognised as independent actors contributing to public debate and the protection of rights, civil society organisations are increasingly framed as suspect and illegitimate. The term "NGO" itself has gradually acquired a pejorative connotation in political discourse, frequently used as shorthand for external interference or a lack of democratic legitimacy. This framing reinforces public distrust and weakening the social standing of rights-based organisations.

The narrative intensified further in the beginning of 2026 following a high-profile criminal investigation involving six deaths, in which some of the victims had been associated with a civil society organisation (the so-called Petrohan case).¹³⁹ Even before the facts were clarified, political actors publicly linked the case to broader claims about the harmful role of civil society organisations.¹⁴⁰ In public statements and media appearances, some party activists generalised the incident to discredit the sector as a whole and floated proposals for restrictive legal amendments.¹⁴¹

1.4. Funding reductions and restrictions

Disruptions in international funding

a) Summary

Disruptions in international funding have constrained the activities of civil society organisations. An illustrative example is the closure, at the end of 2025, of the legal aid reception unit of the Programme for Legal Protection to Refugees and Migrants run by the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee (BHC) (*Български хелзинкски комитет*, БХК). According to the organisation, one of the main reasons for the closure was the global crisis in the financing of international humanitarian agencies and their operations, including those of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, which had financially

¹³⁷ Mission Wings Foundation (*Фондация „Мисия Криле“*) (2025), '[Statement by Mission Wings Foundation, Bulgaria](#)', press release, 24 October 2025.

¹³⁸ Border Violence Monitoring Network (2025), '[Statement in support of member organisation Mission Wings](#)', press release, 11 November 2025.

¹³⁹ Bulgarian National Television (*Българска национална телевизия*) (2026), '[Police and prosecutors release more details in the "Petrohan" case involving deaths of six people in suspected murder-suicides](#)', 18 February 2026.

¹⁴⁰ Mediapool (2026), 'The "Petrohan" case led to scandal and insults in parliament (["Случаят "Петрохан" доведе до скандал и обиди в парламента"](#))', 12 February 2026.

¹⁴¹ National Assembly (*Народно събрание*), Draft law amending and supplementing the Not-for-Profit Legal Entities Act ([Законопроект за изменение и допълнение на Закона за юридическите лица с нестопанска цел](#)), 13 February 2026.

supported the programme since its establishment. Over the past three decades, the programme provided legal assistance to 209,703 refugees, asylum seekers, and forcibly displaced persons, and ensured procedural representation in 3,326 court cases.¹⁴²

b) Consequences

A direct consequence of these developments is the growing risk to migrants' access to justice in Bulgaria. Within the civic space dimension, civil society organisations face significant constraints, particularly regarding access to funding for strategic litigation. Public funding mechanisms in Bulgaria do not support such legal actions, leaving civil society organisations heavily dependent on limited external resources. This financial fragility undermines their capacity to provide effective legal assistance and to challenge systemic rights violations.

1.5. Barriers to participation in law and policy-making

Ineffective consultation mechanisms

a) Summary

In Bulgaria, civil society participation in the legislative process remains inconsistent and often ineffective.¹⁴³ In 2025, the Public Council for the National Children's Hospital (PCNCH) (*Обществен съвет за националната детска болница*, ОЧНДБ) resigned expressing growing dissatisfaction with the lack of meaningful engagement. Established to monitor transparency in the construction of a new children's hospital, the council had repeatedly clashed with the Ministry of Health (MH) (*Министерство на здравеопазването*, МЗ), with members reporting that requests for information were refused and that key developments were learned through the media. Some members were also investigated by the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) (*Комисия за противодействие на корупцията*, КПК), although not in relation to the hospital project.¹⁴⁴

Advisory councils under the government are intended to facilitate structured civil society participation in governmental decision-making and, when functioning properly, can provide a meaningful platform for dialogue, expertise, and accountability. In practice, however, councils that include representatives of civil society organisations are frequently perceived as ineffective in ensuring genuine and impactful participation.

¹⁴² Bulgarian Helsinki Committee (*Български хелзинкски комитет*) (2026), '[The BHC legal aid reception for refugees and migrants ceased its operation on 1 January 2026](#)', press release, 12 January 2026.

¹⁴³ Yankov, Z. (2026), Monitoring of the state of civic space in Bulgaria 2025 (*Мониторинг на състоянието на гражданското пространство в България 2025*), Sofia, Bulgarian Centre for Not-for-profit Law (*Български център за нестопанско право*), 16 February 2026.

¹⁴⁴ Velinova, Z. (2025), 'The Public Council for the National Children's Hospital resigns' (*'Общественият съвет за Националната детска болница подава оставка'*), *Bulgarian National Television* (*Българска национална телевизия*), 6 November 2025.

The Council for the Development of Civil Society (CDCS) (*Съвет за развитие на гражданското общество*, СРГО) has for several years prioritised the adoption of a civil society development strategy, yet tangible progress remains limited, partly due to the lack of regularity of the council's work.¹⁴⁵

Similarly, the Council for the Prevention and Protection against Domestic Violence (CPPDM) (*Съвет за превенция и защита от домашното насилие*, СПЗДН) met only once in 2025, despite repeated calls from civil society organisations and outstanding tasks resulting from its irregular work. For the second consecutive year, funds allocated to organisations supporting victims of domestic violence remained unused due to the council's slow and irregular functioning.¹⁴⁶ The composition of the council further illustrates procedural shortcomings. Although four representatives of civil society organisations are envisaged as members, the initial call for applications in 2025 – published during the Christmas holidays with a three-working-day deadline¹⁴⁷ – resulted in only two candidates. Following objections from civil society organisations, the procedure was reopened to fill the remaining positions.

Delays also affected the establishment of the advisory council to the parliamentary committee on direct citizen participation, complaints, and interaction with civil society. The procedure concluded in November 2025, more than a year after the parliamentary elections.¹⁴⁸

The adoption of the state budget for 2026 exposed additional deficiencies when it comes to barriers in participating in the law and policy-making process. In 2025, the Ministry of Finance (MF) (*Министерство на финансите*, МФ) published the main part of the draft for just one day of public consultation, and the parliament proceeded under a fast-track procedure. The second-reading vote in the parliamentary budget committee was rescheduled at the last minute, only hours before the initially announced time.¹⁴⁹

b) Consequences

These developments have tangible negative effects on civic space in Bulgaria. When participatory mechanisms operate irregularly or merely on formal basis, civil society organisations lose confidence

¹⁴⁵ Yankov, Z. (2026), Monitoring of the state of civic space in Bulgaria 2025 (*Мониторинг на състоянието на гражданското пространство в България 2025*), Sofia, Bulgarian Centre for Not-for-profit Law (*Български център за нестопанско право*), 16 February 2026, p. 22.

¹⁴⁶ Vasileva, K. (2026), 'She seeks protection but is ultimately killed: why the fight against domestic violence still does not save everyone' (*'Търси защита, но накрая е убита. Защо борбата с домашното насилие още не спасява всички'*), *Svobodna Evropa* (*Свободна Европа*), 27 January 2026.

¹⁴⁷ The Wake Up Foundation (2025), 'Regarding the selection of NGO members to the National Council for Prevention and Combating Domestic Violence' (*'Относно избора на НПО членове в Националния Съвет за превенция и борба с домашното насилие'*), press release, 27 January 2025.

¹⁴⁸ Yankov, Z. (2026), Monitoring of the state of civic space in Bulgaria 2025 (*Мониторинг на състоянието на гражданското пространство в България 2025*), Sofia, Bulgarian Centre for Not-for-profit Law (*Български център за нестопанско право*), 16 February 2026.

¹⁴⁹ Yankov, Z. (2026), Monitoring of the state of civic space in Bulgaria 2025 (*Мониторинг на състоянието на гражданското пространство в България 2025*), Sofia, Bulgarian Centre for Not-for-profit Law (*Български център за нестопанско право*), 16 February 2026, p. 22.

that their input will be genuinely considered. This discourages engagement and weakens structured dialogue between institutions and civil society organisations.

The irregular or ineffective functioning of advisory councils under the government has direct consequences. In areas such as domestic violence and Roma rights, some specialised organisations have stopped applying for membership in consultative councils due to a lack of trust in their effectiveness and practical impact. As a result, valuable expertise is excluded, and the councils risk becoming unrepresentative and ineffective.

Shortcomings in public consultation processes also contribute to heightened social tensions. For example, the absence of meaningful public consultation during the adoption of the state budget, combined with other deficiencies, triggered large-scale protests in Sofia and across the country and led to a temporary suspension of the legislative procedure.¹⁵⁰

2. CIVIC SPACE EXPANSION

2.1. Improvements in participation

Improved online infrastructure for public participation

a) Summary

At the end of 2025, the national public consultations portal [Strategy.bg](#) was comprehensively upgraded and relaunched as a modernised digital platform for participating in public policy consultations. The portal is the official portal for public consultations of the government, hosted on the government domain and administered by the government. It is used for publishing draft laws, strategic documents, and consultation processes.¹⁵¹

The update was developed and implemented by a Bulgarian technology company, which built a centralised, scalable and sustainable system designed to improve how consultations and strategic documents are published and accessed. The new version modernised the underlying architecture, improved usability, and enhanced information security. It also introduced electronic identification for users, better integration with external government systems and registries, and the capability to publish open data in machine-readable formats. The updated version has an additional participatory feature, enabling citizens to submit legislative initiatives and to support or comment on initiatives submitted by others, thereby expanding the formal avenues for civic input.¹⁵²

b) Consequences

¹⁵⁰ Kurteva, P., Ilcheva, Zh. and Kolev, M. (2025), 'Citizens protest against the 2026 budget in Sofia' (*'Граждани протестират против бюджета за 2026 г. в София'*), *Bulgarian News Agency (Българска телеграфна агенция)*, 26 November 2025.

¹⁵¹ For more information, see the Public Consultation Portal [Strategy.bg](#).

¹⁵² ASAP (2026), 'ASAP developed and implemented an updated Public Consultation Portal' (*'ASAP разработи и внедри обновен Портал за обществени консултации'*), press release, 27 February 2026.

The reform has the potential to strengthen transparency and direct civic engagement by lowering technical barriers to participation and centralising access to consultations. However, its effectiveness will depend on whether public input is meaningfully considered and reflected in final decisions. In a broader context marked by negative rhetoric towards civil society and shrinking trust in institutions, the mere existence of digital participation tools is not sufficient. Without clear feedback mechanisms, institutional responsiveness, and safeguards against exclusion, there is a risk that the platform functions primarily as a formal compliance mechanism rather than as a genuine instrument for enhancing civic participation.

Cyprus (CY)

Civic space in the EU in 2025

Country: Cyprus

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Disclaimer

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1. CIVIC SPACE PRESSURES

1.1. Deterioration of legal environment: freedom of association

Bureaucracy and onerous requirements place an undue burden on NGOs

a) Summary

The NGO Civil Society Advocates reported an increase in the use of bureaucracy during 2025 in the implementation of the law on associations,¹⁵³ in a manner that poses obstacles to NGOs. Considerable delays have been observed in the registration of NGOs whose structures involve migrants and Turkish Cypriots, as their Alien Registration Certificates and identity cards respectively are sent to the police to check about their residence status and address. In recent months, the authorities examining NGO registration applications have started circulating the applications to different governmental departments with questions, leading to unnecessary delays and requests for additional formalities.¹⁵⁴ Whilst the law requires that registration applications must be examined within three months,¹⁵⁵ in practice more than 18 months are needed, especially if there are migrants or Turkish Cypriots involved in the proposed structures. One such example is the prohibition of political activity: The definition of an association in the law precludes political parties or trade unions¹⁵⁶ and applicants are required to sign an undertaking to commit that they will not get involved in political activity; if they refuse to sign it or if their activities are perceived as political, their applications are rejected. Once rejected, the only recourse is the administrative court, which requires time and money that most NGOs do not have.¹⁵⁷

Civil Society Advocates reported that the Moneyval Report¹⁵⁸ is increasingly being used to justify strict bureaucratic measures imposed horizontally on all registered NGOs, irrespective of size and turnover, whilst Regulation 8 of the Financial Advisory Taskforce clearly requires a risk assessment to be carried out before any measures are imposed, leading to vertical measures for the specific

¹⁵³ Cyprus, Law on associations and foundations and other related matters Law of 2017 (*Ο περί Σωματείων και Ιδρυμάτων και για Άλλα Συναφή Θέματα Νόμος του 2017*), N. 104(I)/2017.

¹⁵⁴ FRANET telephone consultation with Civil Society Advocates, 01 March 2026.

¹⁵⁵ Cyprus, Law on associations and foundations and other related matters Law of 2017 (*Ο περί Σωματείων και Ιδρυμάτων και για Άλλα Συναφή Θέματα Νόμος του 2017*), N. 104(I)/2017, Article 26(4).

¹⁵⁶ Cyprus, Law on associations and foundations and other related matters Law of 2017 (*Ο περί Σωματείων και Ιδρυμάτων και για Άλλα Συναφή Θέματα Νόμος του 2017*), N. 104(I)/2017, Article 2.

¹⁵⁷ FRANET telephone consultation with Civil Society Advocates, 01 March 2026.

¹⁵⁸ Council of Europe's Committee of Experts on the Evaluation of Anti-money Laundering Measures and the Financing of Terrorism (Moneyval) (2025), *Anti-money laundering and counter-terrorist financing measures- Cyprus, 4th Enhanced Follow-up Report & Technical Compliance Re-Rating*, June 2025.

NGOs identified to be high-risk.¹⁵⁹ Instead, all NGOs are forced to follow the procedure for designation of beneficial owners, for which they must pay lawyers or accountants, because the authorities consider the NGO board members as ‘beneficial owners’ for whom information must be regularly updated. This is the case for all NGOs, including those of very small size and very little financial turnover. The bureaucracy often drives away volunteers from NGOs who are unwilling to be involved in such proceedings. Civil Society Advocates reported that the bill that was put for public consultation by the Interior Ministry for amending the law on associations¹⁶⁰ is aggravating the situation for small NGOs as it introduces additional horizontal bureaucratic hurdles unnecessary for entities with a small size and turnover. The authorities never publish the results from the data collected from the registered associations; they only send them to Moneyval and claim that they estimate that 2% of associations are at risk of financing terrorism and tax evasion. However, instead of taking targeted measures to address this risk, they impose extra provisions on all NGOs horizontally, risking to undermine civil society.¹⁶¹

Civil Society Advocates stated that the law on lobbyists¹⁶² introduced upon the recommendation of the Anti-corruption Authority, which requires NGOs to register as lobbyists in order to be able to see government ministers and other public officials, entails a highly technical and bureaucratic procedure for registration, where applicant NGOs must present clean criminal records for all beneficial owners, amongst other onerous requirements. Civil Society Advocates contrasted this process with the simplicity and ease of the EU lobbyist registration which only takes a few minutes online. Members of Parliament (MPs) have compiled a draft law proposal to exempt from this law the confederation of disability organisations KYSOA and the federation of associations of patients CYPFA, to facilitate their advocacy activities without undue bureaucracy, although in the view of the Civil Society Advocates, this should be expanded to include all NGOs working in the field of fundamental rights.¹⁶³

1.2. Deterioration of legal environment: freedom of assembly

A new law on protests is adopted

- a) Summary: In 2025 a new law on protests was adopted, with several provisions which do not comply with international human rights standards, as these were laid out in the Law

¹⁵⁹ The Financial Action Task Force (FATF) (2025), *International Standards On Combating Money Laundering And The Financing Of Terrorism & Proliferation — The FATF Recommendations*, Article 8, updated October 2025.

¹⁶⁰ Cyprus, e-consultation, The associations and foundations and other related matters (Amendment) Law of 2026 (*Ο περί Σωματείων και Ιδρυμάτων και για άλλα συναφή θέματα (Τροποποιητικός) Νόμος του 2026*), 13 February 2026.

¹⁶¹ FRANET telephone consultation with Civil Society Advocates, 01 March 2026.

¹⁶² Cyprus, The law on transparency in public decision-making processes and related matters of 2022 (20(I)/2022) (*Ο περί της Διαφάνειας στις Διαδικασίες Λήψης Δημόσιων Αποφάσεων και Συναφών Θεμάτων Νόμος του 2022*) N. 20(I)/2022.

¹⁶³ FRANET telephone consultation with Civil Society Advocates, 01 March 2026.

Commissioner's report on public assemblies.¹⁶⁴ The law requires seven days' written notification to be sent to the police and the local authority, setting out the name and contact details of the organiser, the purpose, the starting and finishing time, the location and/or the route to be followed and the manner in which traffic or the operation of businesses, public services and public benefit services may be affected, any interference with the rights of third persons and the use of cars, pickets, equipment or other objects. The law permits spontaneous gatherings which however may be dispersed by the police if the restrictions imposed are not complied with. The organiser is responsible for ensuring that the event proceeds smoothly and peacefully and for contributing to the safeguarding of public order. When the police have reasonable suspicion that the gathering may turn non-peaceful or that an offence is about to be committed by persons covering their faces, the police may request the persons to remove the face covering. The police have power to disperse the gathering when this ceases to be peaceful, when the demonstrators use explosives, fireworks, smokers, flares, firecrackers etc, when the demonstrators ignore the restrictions imposed by the police, when there is a risk of injury to a person or damage to a public or private property; the police may take 'reasonable measures' to disperse gatherings. The use of violence or incitement to violence by demonstrators carries a prison sentence of up to three years and/or a fine up to EUR 10,000. The penalty for refusing to remove face covering is up to two years' imprisonment and / or a fine of up to EUR 5,000. The law does not foresee any mechanism for handling complaints against the police.¹⁶⁵

b) Consequences

The law was met with considerable discontent from civil society and opposition MPs, who argued that its draconian provisions infringed a number of fundamental rights. Civil society groups wrote to the parliament claiming that the provisions of the law violate: the UN Human Rights Committee's recommendations on peaceful protests¹⁶⁶, which require that notification procedures should be transparent, not unduly bureaucratic, their demands on organisers must be proportionate to the potential public impact of the assembly concerned and must not be indirectly converted into an obligation to obtain authorisation; the police's wide dispersal powers and the requirement for the removal of face coverings infringe the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) jurisprudence and the UN Human Rights Committee's recommendations; and flagged the absence of an independent mechanism for reviewing appeals in cases where the authorities impose restrictions that potentially exceed the standards set by international law, which had been one of the recommendations of the Law Commissioner's report.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁴ Cyprus Law Commissioner (2023), [Το δικαίωμα του συνέρχεσθαι ειρηνικώς στην κυπριακή έννομη τάξη: Μελέτη νομοθετικού πλαισίου για δημόσιες συναθροίσεις](#) (*The right to peaceful assembly in the Cypriot legal system: Study of the legislative framework for public gatherings*), December 2023.

¹⁶⁵ Cyprus, The public gatherings and parades Law of 2025 ([Ο περί Δημόσιων Συγκεντρώσεων και Παρελάσεων Νόμος του 2025](#)) N. 151(I)/2025.

¹⁶⁶ United Nations Human Rights Committee (2020), [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights – general comment no. 37 \(2020\) on the right to peaceful assembly \(article 21\)](#), 17 September 2020.

¹⁶⁷ Cyprus Law Commissioner (2023), [Το δικαίωμα του συνέρχεσθαι ειρηνικώς στην κυπριακή έννομη τάξη: Μελέτη νομοθετικού πλαισίου για δημόσιες συναθροίσεις](#) (*The right to peaceful assembly in the Cypriot legal system: Study of the legislative framework for public gatherings*), December 2023.

In September 2025 the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of OSCE (ODIHR)¹⁶⁸ issued an urgent opinion on the Cypriot protest law, flagging the law's provisions which raise concerns as to their compatibility with Article 21 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 11 of the ECHR and Article 12 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. The provisions flagged included: the undue burden placed on persons perceived as organisers; the police wide power of dispersal and the absence of an appeal mechanism against police excesses. The ODIHR opinion was provided upon the request of the Chair of the Human Rights Parliamentary Committee.¹⁶⁹

The main opposition party demanded that the law is repealed and redrafted, taking into account the fundamental rights of peaceful assembly and free expression as these are protected by the Constitution and by European and international standards.¹⁷⁰ An opposition MP tabled a different draft proposal, which was finally adopted, purporting to bring the law in line with the recommendations of the ODIHR.¹⁷¹ The proposal however did not include the entire spectrum of ODIHR's recommendations, omitting the following recommendations of the ODIHR:

- for introducing an effective accountability mechanism for police actions;
- for removing the prison sentence;
- for affording public protests the same public space as other activities in the public sphere;
- for narrowly defining the grounds for restrictions and dispersals and for permitting face coverings except where there is no demonstrable evidence of imminent violence.

1.3. Deterioration of legal environment: freedom of expression

Arrests following a peaceful protest against police violence

In January 2025 a peaceful protest was held in Nicosia against the police shooting of a migrant inside the Buffer Zone a few days earlier.¹⁷² After the protest finished, the police arrested four participants, handcuffing two of them and leading them handcuffed through the busiest pedestrian street of the capital on the way to the police station. One of them was released after he was forced to delete content from his mobile phone that showed the police violently arresting the other protesters. The remaining three persons were released hours later, after being charged

¹⁶⁸ ODIHR (2025), *Urgent opinion on the Law 151(i) of 2025 on public gatherings and parades of the Republic of Cyprus*, Warsaw, 17 September 2025.

¹⁶⁹ ODIHR (2025), *Urgent opinion on the Law 151(i) of 2025 on public gatherings and parades of the Republic of Cyprus*, Warsaw, 17 September 2025.

¹⁷⁰ Nomoplatform (2025), The public gatherings and parades (Repeal) Law of 2025 (*Ο περί Δημόσιων Συγκεντρώσεων και Παρελάσεων (Καταργητικός) Νόμος του 2025*), 02 October 2025.

¹⁷¹ Nomoplatform (2025), The public gatherings and parades (Amendment) (No. 2) Law of 2025 (*Ο περί Δημόσιων Συγκεντρώσεων και Παρελάσεων (Τροποποιητικός) (Αρ. 2) Νόμος του 2025*), 31 October 2025.

¹⁷² Cyprus police (2025), *‘Τρεις Συλλήψεις Κατά την Εκδήλωση Διαμαρτυρίας την Κυριακή 19 Ιανουαρίου στη Λευκωσία’ (Three arrests during protest on Sunday, January 19, in Nicosia)*

with rioting, insulting the authorities, resisting lawful arrest, attacking a police officer and violating the GDPR.¹⁷³

Subsequently, the police charged three more persons who had participated in the protest with similar charges – insulting an authority, rioting and breach of the peace. One of the three persons was charged with an extra offense, that of participating in an illegal protest; this latter charge related to the fact that they continued to remain outside the police station when the other protesters were detained, after the police had told them to leave.¹⁷⁴ The ‘insult’-related charges, which were common across all cases of persons charged, related to the use of the word ‘cop’ that was used in chants. More than a year later, the protesters charged by the police have not been formally summoned to the court and have not been given any information about the progress of police investigations or any other development.¹⁷⁵

A hearing was held in the Human Rights Parliamentary Committee, where additional incidents of police violence against peaceful protesters were also mentioned, including the assault of hunger strikers. Parliamentarians accused the police of having taken a video of the entire protest in order to be able to identify protesters; that the police is selectively intervening in protests based on the content of the protest rather than issues of safety; that the trial of 11 persons who had participated in a street protest defying the Covid-19 restrictions is still on going for more than three years. The police claimed that citizens are not allowed to take videos of police officers in the exercise of their duties, alleging that there is an opinion from the Attorney General to that effect. The Commissioner for data protection stated that the taking of photos and videos is lawful where there is a purpose; the Commissioner added that, likewise the police is entitled to take photos and videos of a protest only if a problem arises and that it is unlawful for the police to ask individuals to hand over their phones in order to check the content. A representative from the Ombuds institution responded to the police allegation of insult in the case of the use of the word ‘cop,’ stating that freedom of assembly is closely knit to the freedom of expression.

The issues raised in the context of this incident, namely the content of the protesters’ chants and the right to take videos or photos of protesters or of police officers policing a protest were not addressed in the law purporting to regulate protests, which was adopted later in the year. The pressing of charges after a protest had been completed peacefully, combined with the length of time involved in adjudicating these charges, inevitably create a chilling effect on protests.

1.4. Attempts to stifle civic engagement through violence, harassment and negative narratives

Police uses violence to disperse peaceful protest, citing powers under the new law

¹⁷³ Afoa (2025), ‘Καταστολή αντί ντροπής: Ανακοίνωση για την αστυνομική αυθαιρεσία εναντίον διαδηλωτών στην πορεία για την δολοφονία του Shoaib Khan’ (*Repression rather than shame: Statement on police brutality against protesters marching in response to the murder of Shoaib Khan*), 20 January 2025.

¹⁷⁴ Politis (2025), ‘Τρεις συλλήψεις στην διαμαρτυρία για το θάνατο 24χρονου - Καθιστική εκδήλωση έξω από αστυνομικό σταθμό Λήδρας -βίντεο, φώτος’ (*Three arrests during protest over death of 24-year-old - Sit-in outside Ledra police station -video, photos*), 19 January 2025.

¹⁷⁵ FRANET consultation with the protesters charged by the police, 04 March 2026.

In October 2025, the police attacked a peaceful protest of up to two hundred people held outside the Ministry of Foreign Affairs against the war in Gaza.¹⁷⁶ According to testimonies from the participants, they had gathered on the pavement outside the Ministry of Foreign Affairs when the police asked them to step down from the pavement onto the street. They remained in the street for a while, where a few speeches were heard and as they were getting ready to leave, a special police force with anti-riot gear appeared on the scene and the police officer in charge told the demonstrators they had two minutes to disperse, without giving any reason. After 20 seconds and before the demonstrators had the chance to leave, the police started pushing, hitting the demonstrators with batons and spraying indiscriminately with chemicals.

The police claimed that everything was conducted lawfully and that the violence used was necessary and proportionate because the demonstrators were violent and there was an incident of a demonstrator attacking a police officer. The police spokesperson alleged that the incident of the demonstrator attacking a police officer had been recorded on video, however no video showing violence towards police officers was presented. The only videos made available in the public sphere confirmed the narrative of the demonstrators. The police claimed that the means used, namely the chemicals, the pepper spray and the globs, can legitimately be used when the bodily integrity of police officers is threatened and when there is a need to restore public order due to violent conduct.¹⁷⁷

The police subsequently issued a statement saying that the gathering was spontaneous and they had no prior notice, which is not against the law, but none of the participants would agree to take responsibility as organiser, which made communication difficult. According to the police statement, the police intervened to restore traffic, since the demonstrators had blocked both lanes of the street, putting themselves in danger and at the same time obstructing traffic in the wider area. The police claimed that they had asked the demonstrators to step onto the pavement and when the demonstrators refused, the police used proportionate violence and spraying because, in their efforts to move the demonstrators, they met with resistance and pushing.¹⁷⁸

The incident highlights the gaps of the law on protests, particularly the lack of clarity on the reasons for which a protest can be dispersed and the absence of an effective accountability mechanism.

¹⁷⁶ Cyprus Times (2025), [‘BΙNTEO: Ένταση μεταξύ διαδηλωτών και Αστυνομίας σε διαμαρτυρία για τη Γάζα- Διαμαρτυρία έξω από το Προεδρικό’](#) (VIDEO: Clashes between protesters and police at a demonstration for Gaza - Demonstration outside the Presidential Palace), 2 October 2025.

¹⁷⁷ Kathimerini (2025), [‘Επεισόδια Διαμαρτυρίας: Οι καταγγελίες, η Αστυνομία και η χρήση βίας’](#) (Protest incidents: Complaints, the police, and the use of force),

¹⁷⁸ Cyprus Police (2025), [‘Αστυνομική Ανακοίνωση σχετικά με τη χθεσινή διαμαρτυρία έξω από το Υπουργείου Εξωτερικών’](#) (Police statement regarding yesterday's protest outside the Ministry of Foreign Affairs), 3 October 2025.

2. CIVIC SPACE EXPANSION

2.1. Improvements in legal environment: freedom of association

NGO that was struck off the registry succeeds in annulling the strike-off decision

a) Summary

In October 2025 the Appeal Court reversed the trial court decision against the NGO KISA which had found KISA's deletion from the register as lawful and justified.

In 2020 KISA was struck off the registry of associations for failing to comply with a new formality, requiring NGOs to check if their statutes are in compliance with the new law regulating the registration and operation of NGOs.¹⁷⁹ KISA did not perform the check within the deadline, which led the Registrar of Associations and Foundations to strike it off the registry. KISA challenged the strike-off decision at the trial court, claiming that it was disproportionate and infringed their freedom of association. The trial court rejected the application stating that KISA did not comply with its obligations under the law and that the strike-off was therefore justified. KISA appealed the trial court decision on the ground, inter alia, that the trial court had failed to consider the strike-off decision in light of the principle of freedom of association, protected under the Constitution and the ECHR.

The Appeal Court cited ECtHR jurisprudence which held that the freedom of association is closely linked to freedom of expression and that interference with these rights is lawful only if it is absolutely necessary and proportionate. The Appeal Court stated that the trial court had discretion to examine the distinct circumstances of each case and to balance and protect conflicting interests; and that in this case the court's discretion had to be exercised in favour of safeguarding the fundamental rights of association and free expression, concluding that the strike off decision was unlawful.¹⁸⁰

b) Consequences

During the five year period between the strike-off and the decision of the Appeal Court, KISA had to set up a non-profit company in order to be able to continue operating. Civil Society Advocates pointed out that more than 2,500 associations were struck off the registry on the same justification as KISA, however the Appeal Court decision for KISA will not affect those NGOs, for whom no rectification measures are possible.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁹ Cyprus, Law on associations and foundations and other related matters Law of 2017 (*Ο περί Σωματείων και Ιδρυμάτων και για Άλλα Συναφή Θέματα Νόμος του 2017*), Ν. 104(I)/2017.

¹⁸⁰ Cyprus, Supreme Constitutional Court, Appeal Jurisdiction (Ανώτατο Συνταγματικό Δικαστήριο Κύπρου, Δευτεροβάθμια Δικαιοδοσία) (2025), *ΚΙΣΑ-Κίνηση για Ισότητα, Στήριξη, Αντιρατσισμό v. Κυπριακής Δημοκρατίας, μέσω Γενικού Εφόρου Εγγραφής Σωματείων, Ιδρυμάτων, Ομοσπονδιών, Ενώσεων δια του Υπουργού Εσωτερικών (KISA-Action for Equality, Support, Anti-Racism v. the Republic of Cyprus, through the General Registrar of Associations, Foundations, Federations, and Unions via the Minister of the Interior)*, 27 October 2025.

¹⁸¹ FRANET telephone consultation with Civil Society Advocates, 01 March 2026.

2.2. Improvements in legal environment: freedom of assembly

Court acquittals of persons who had participated in protests in 2020, in violation of COVID-19 restrictions

- a) In September 2025 the Appeal Court examined the appeal of a person who had participated in a mass protest in a public space in 2020, against the government's migration policy and particularly the imprisonment of asylum seekers inside the Pournara camp. He had been charged and found guilty at the trial court for the violation of a COVID-19 related decree applicable at the time prohibiting protests. The appellant admitted having participated in the protest but raised three grounds for appeal:
- He disputed the validity of the anti-protest decree, arguing that it was unconstitutional. He claimed that the trial court, which had found him guilty, had failed to interpret the government's anti-protest decree in line with the right to peaceful assembly and free expression along the standards set by the ECtHR jurisprudence.
 - The trial judge did not implement correctly the rules relating to the burden of proof as regards the necessity and proportionality of the anti-protest decree, which was on the prosecution.
 - The trial judge failed to adequately conduct a constitutionality check of the decree and a check of compatibility with the ECHR, thus arriving at the wrong conclusion.

The Appeal Court concluded that the content of the decree itself indicated that various other measures allowed gatherings of people, albeit with restrictions, demonstrating inconsistency in relation to the treatment of mass gatherings, for which an absolute ban was imposed and criminalised, even though less burdensome measures were obviously available. The Appeal Court cited a number of activities which were permitted at the time subject to compliance with protocols, such as church masses, the operation of gyms, hair and beauty salons, tattoo centres, theatres and cinemas, restaurants and hotels and wondered why protests could not have been permitted subject to protocols. The Appeal Court concluded that, at the trial court level, the prosecution had failed to prove that the measure was proportionate and it was not the duty of the defendant to provide information to the contrary. This finding led to the conclusion that there was a violation of the principle of proportionality, prompting the court to allow the appeal and reverse the trial court conviction as well as the sanction imposed.¹⁸²

- b) A similar decision was reached by the district criminal court a few months later, in a criminal prosecution against eight persons for their 2020 participation in an anti-corruption demonstration, in violation of the COVID-19 protest ban. Relying on jurisprudence which established that public health measures must be implemented with reasonable consistency and without unjustified discrimination, the District Court concluded that the burden to prove the necessity and proportionality of the prohibition was on the prosecution. The court added that in the case at hand, there was a lack of legal certainty as to the regulatory framework of the prohibition and the vague reference to guidelines made by the prosecution could not suffice in order to establish criminal liability. The obligations regarding the clarity, predictability, and transparency of criminal rules could not be said to have been lifted because of the pandemic; on

¹⁸² Cyprus Appeal Court, Criminal jurisdiction (*Εφετείο Κύπρου, Ποινική Δικαιοδοσία*), Christos Aristodimou v. Police (*Χρίστος Αριστοδήμου v. Αστυνομίας*), Criminal Appeal 182/2022, 4 September 2025.

the contrary, in times of crisis, the need to protect the rule of law becomes even more pressing. The court acquitted the accused persons.¹⁸³

The long delays seen in both these trials from the time of the alleged offences, in 2020, until their acquittal in 2025, must also be viewed through the lenses of the toll which this must have had on the accused persons and the chilling effect it may have had on the exercise of the right to peaceful assembly and free expression.

¹⁸³ Cyprus, District Court of Limassol (*Επαρχιακό Δικαστήριο Λεμεσού*) (2025), Police Director of Limassol v. 1. Angeliki Stylianidou and seven others (*Αστυνομικός Διευθυντής Λεμεσού v. 1. Αγγελική Στυλιανίδου και 7 άλλοι*), Case No. 2308 / 2021, 27 November 2025.

Czechia (CZ)

Civic space in the EU in 2025

Country: Czechia

Contractor: Institute of Sociology of the Czech Academy of Sciences

Authors: Tereza Stöckelová, Zuzana Andreska

Disclaimer

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1. CIVIC SPACE PRESSURES

1.1. Deterioration of legal environment: freedom of association

The government plans to limit and control the work of non-governmental organisations

a) Summary

In the 2025 Czech pre-election campaign, the far-right party Svoboda a přímá demokracie (SPD) and its allies prominently introduced and amplified the term “political NGOs” (“politické neziskovky”), framing certain civil society organisations as ideologically driven groups that require stricter oversight or even legal restriction. The expression then carried into public debate and was taken up by other political actors as SPD entered the governing coalition after the autumn 2025 parliamentary elections.¹⁸⁴

In 2026 the newly formed Czech government plans to introduce a registry of all public grants to non-governmental organisations, impose new disclosure duties, and require NGOs with foreign funding to label themselves as such.¹⁸⁵ Although framed as a transparency measure, the measures would target so-called “political NGOs”, a term not defined legally but used derogatorily to describe advocacy and watchdog organisations.¹⁸⁶

b) Consequences

The President of the republic,¹⁸⁷ as well as representatives of non-governmental organisations¹⁸⁸ warned against the proposed measures. They argued that such labelling of NGOs enables selective regulation, stigmatization, and pressure on groups engaged in public-interest scrutiny. The proposals duplicate existing oversight and risk chilling participation, weakening independent monitoring, and narrowing civic space.

On 12 January 2026 a coalition of more than 140 Czech NGOs published an open letter which criticizes the government’s declaration for weakening the long-standing partnership between the state and civil society.¹⁸⁹ They warn that proposed changes could restrict the ability of NGOs to provide essential services from social, health and care work to education, culture, environmental protection, community support, humanitarian and crisis assistance. This, in return, can affect millions of people and whole communities across the country. The letter underscores that a vibrant civil society is a cornerstone of democratic systems, enabling collective problem-solving and public

¹⁸⁴ Berger, V. (2025) Non-transparent “political NGOs”. SPD and others could start with themselves ([Neprůhledné „politické neziskovky“. SPD a spol. mohou začít u sebe](#)), 25 September 2025.

¹⁸⁵ Czech Republic, Government (2026), Government Policy Statement ([Programové prohlášení vlády](#)).

¹⁸⁶ Černý, F. (2026) The government is preparing measures targeting non-governmental organisations. It wants to label certain NGOs as ‘political NGOs’ ([Vláda se chystá na neziskové organizace. Chce označit „politické neziskovky“](#)), Czech Public Television ČT24, 5 January 2026.

¹⁸⁷ President of the Czech Republic (2025), The President of the Republic received Andrej Babiš, chairman of the ANO movement, at Prague Castle today ([Prezident republiky dnes přijal na Hradě předsedu hnutí ANO Andreje Babiše](#)), 12 November 2025.

¹⁸⁸ Milěřová, J. et al. (2025) Strengthening civic space in Czechia 2025 ([Posilování občanského prostoru v Česku 2025](#)), Glopolis, p. 31.

¹⁸⁹ The open letter can be accessed in Czech [here](#).

accountability, and urges legislators to uphold a cooperative relationship that preserves NGOs' capacity to work for the public benefit.

1.2. Deterioration of legal environment: freedom of expression

Proposal to abolish licence fees in public broadcasting and television – a threat to media independence

a) Summary

In 2025, a key development affecting freedom of expression and information in Czechia has been the political dispute over public broadcaster licence fees (koncesionářské poplatky).¹⁹⁰ During the 14 February 2025 parliamentary debate on their increase, then opposition MP Andrej Babiš described the proposed rise of fees as a “form of corruption”, arguing that raising mandatory payments shortly before elections benefited existing media management and political actors linked to the outgoing government.¹⁹¹ He framed the measure as a misuse of public authority to secure financial advantages for insufficiently reformed institutions.

After winning the parliamentary elections in October 2025, Mr Babiš's government proposed abolishing licence fees and replacing them with financing from the state budget.¹⁹²

b) Consequences

The proposal from the Mr Babiš's government triggered intense response from journalists and civil society. A petition signed by 2,841 media professionals warned that annual state allocations could increase political leverage over public service media and affect editorial independence.¹⁹³

1.3. Attempts to stifle civic engagement through violence, harassment and negative narratives

Gender-based violence against Czech female MPs contributes to withdrawal of women from the public space

a) Summary

In 2025, reports highlighted persistent harassment and gender-based violence targeting women in public life, including politicians and civil society actors, contributing to an environment hostile to civic engagement. A study by a non-governmental organisation Fórum 50 % documented that Czech women MPs frequently face online abuse, sexist insults, and threats of violence, particularly

¹⁹⁰ Czech Republic. Bill. No. 119/2025 Coll. amending Act No. 483/1991 Coll., on Czech Television, as amended, Act No. 484/1991 Coll., on Czech Radio ([Zákon, kterým se mění zákon č. 483/1991 Sb., o České televizi, ve znění pozdějších předpisů, zákon č. 484/1991 Sb., o Českém rozhlasu](#)).

¹⁹¹ Czech Republic, 129th Session. Bill amending Act No. 483/1991 Coll., on Czech Television, as amended, Act No. 484/1991 Coll., on Czech Radio, as amended, and other related acts /Parliamentary Press 738/ - third reading (1. [Vládní návrh zákona, kterým se mění zákon č. 483/1991 Sb., o České televizi, ve znění pozdějších předpisů, zákon č. 484/1991 Sb., o Českém rozhlasu, ve znění pozdějších předpisů, a další související zákony /sněmovní tisk 738/ - třetí čtení](#)). 14 February 2025.

¹⁹² Czech Republic, Government (*Vláda*) (2026), Government Policy Statement ([Programové prohlášení vlády](#)).

¹⁹³ See the corresponding petition in Czech [here](#).

on social media.¹⁹⁴ The report notes that such attacks often intensify around elections and controversial policy debates, with limited accountability for perpetrators. The report further indicates that online hate speech, coordinated smear campaigns and intimidation disproportionately affect women human rights defenders and gender equality advocates.¹⁹⁵

b) Consequences

According to Fórum 50 %, gender-based online harassment contributes to self-censorship, psychological distress, and withdrawal from public debate, thereby diminishing equal participation in political and civic life.¹⁹⁶ While criminal law provides tools to address threats, enforcement remains inconsistent, and 60 % of incidents go unreported.¹⁹⁷

Legal gaps in the protection of journalists

a) Summary

Czech journalists continue to face threats to their safety and civic engagement, mainly through attacks, coercion, discrediting journalistic work, or public hate speech. Based on the country report prepared within the frames of The Worlds of Journalism Study (WJS), which is a large-scale international research initiative that surveys journalists across countries to examine their professional norms, working environments, and views on the societal function of journalism, 38 % of journalists believe that those who harm journalists in the Czech Republic go unpunished.¹⁹⁸

The lack of transposition of the “Anti-SLAPP” Directive,¹⁹⁹ which aims to protect individuals and organisations (particularly journalists, human rights defenders and civil society actors) from abusive lawsuits intended to silence them, has been criticized by the Government Council for Human Rights.²⁰⁰ In light of the insufficient legal protection, a new bottom-up platform, Safe Journalism, was established by the Czech branch of the International Press Institute to provide reporting tools, legal guidance, and safety support, reflecting ongoing concerns that hostile public discourse and political pressure undermine journalists’ independence.²⁰¹

b) Consequences

These developments demonstrate persistent vulnerabilities in civic space, with consequences for media freedom, public debate, and the protection of human rights defenders.

¹⁹⁴ Kos Mottlová, M. and V. Šprincová (2025), Czech female MPs and gender-based violence. ([České poslankyně a genderově podmíněné násilí](#)), Fórum 50 %.

¹⁹⁵ Kos Mottlová, M. and V. Šprincová (2025), Czech female MPs and gender-based violence. ([České poslankyně a genderově podmíněné násilí](#)), Fórum 50 %.

¹⁹⁶ Kos Mottlová, M. and V. Šprincová (2025), Czech female MPs and gender-based violence. ([České poslankyně a genderově podmíněné násilí](#)), Fórum 50 %, p. 7.

¹⁹⁷ Kos Mottlová, M. and V. Šprincová (2025), Czech female MPs and gender-based violence. ([České poslankyně a genderově podmíněné násilí](#)), Fórum 50 %, p. 11.

¹⁹⁸ Němcová Tejkalová, A. et al. (2026), [Country Report: Czech Republic](#), Worlds of Journalism, p. 128.

¹⁹⁹ Directive 2024/1069 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 April 2024 on protecting persons who engage in public participation from manifestly unfounded claims or abusive court proceedings (‘Strategic lawsuits against public participation’), OJ L, 2024/1069.

²⁰⁰ Czech Republic, Governmental Council for Human Rights (*Rada vlády pro lidská práva*) (2025). Resolution of 18 March 2025 to protect journalists and human rights defenders from vexatious lawsuits ([Usnesení ze dne 18. března 2025 k ochraně novinářů a obránců lidských práv před šikanózními žalobami](#)).

²⁰¹ Czech Republic. Safe journalism ([Bezpečná žurnalistika](#)).

1.4. Funding reductions and restrictions

Reduction of funding for humanitarian aid delivered by non-governmental organisations

a) Summary

In the October 2025 Czech parliamentary elections, Andrej Babiš and the ANO party that he leads campaigned on expanding domestic welfare spending while reducing support for Ukraine, including cutting back on aid and ending Czech involvement in schemes supplying ammunition.²⁰²

This position was held in contrast to the outgoing government's strong backing of Ukrainian defence and humanitarian assistance. Polls showed ANO leading and likely to oust the centre-right government, with Mr Babiš explicitly saying that more resources should be devoted "for Czech citizens" and that NATO and the EU should take the lead on Ukraine support instead of Czech funds. This electoral stance was widely interpreted as a precursor to subsequent policy changes that would scale back Czech support for Ukraine after the new government formed.

Indeed, at the beginning of 2026 the newly formed Czech government proposed reducing public funding for humanitarian aid, with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs budget decreasing by 80%.²⁰³ A proposal has been put forward to cancel the continuation of the Humanitarian, Stabilisation, Reconstruction, and Economic Assistance Program for Ukraine – it has been completely cancelled, amounting to 20,000,000 EUR. The program included funding for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (11,540,000 EUR) and the Ministry of the Interior (4,950,000 EUR), which supported, among other things, medical care for civilians injured in the war, including children and the elderly.²⁰⁴

b) Consequences

Development and humanitarian NGOs underlined that the proposed cuts are considered problematic both ethically and in terms of security, the economy, and Czechia's global standing. Humanitarian programs reduce tensions, prevent conflict, and lower the risks of migration and radicalization.²⁰⁵

2. CIVIC SPACE EXPANSION

2.1. Improvements in participation

²⁰² Lopatka J. and R. Sprongl (2025) [Czechs vote as frontrunner Babis promises more spending, less Ukraine aid](#), 3 October 2025.

²⁰³ Czech Republic, Government (2026), Bill. No 94/0 Governmental proposal of State Budget for 2026 ([Sněmovní tisk 94/0, vládní návrh zákona o státní rozpočtu na rok 2026](#)).

²⁰⁴ Czech Forum for Development Coordination (2026), The government proposes drastic cuts to humanitarian aid, including support for Ukraine. Experts call for a reassessment of the cuts ([Vláda navrhuje drasticky omezit humanitární pomoc, včetně podpory Ukrajiny. Odborníci žádají přehodnocení škrťů](#)), 5 February 2026.

²⁰⁵ People in Need (2026), The government proposes drastic cuts to humanitarian aid, including support for Ukraine. Experts call for a reconsideration ([Vláda navrhuje drasticky omezit humanitární pomoc, včetně podpory Ukrajiny. Odborníci žádají přehodnocení](#)). 6 February 2026.

Policies to strengthen participation of the civil sector in decision making adopted and monitored

a) Summary

In 2025, Czechia expanded civic space by adopting policies to strengthen the non-governmental sector and its participation. In September 2025, the then outgoing government adopted a guideline for the participation of non-governmental non-profit organisations in advisory and working bodies and in the creation of government documents.²⁰⁶ Its implementation is foreseen in the Action Plan 2025–2027,²⁰⁷ which was adopted in April 2025. The Action plan builds on the findings from the monitoring report on the implementation of the previous Action Plan²⁰⁸ by introducing new measures, including long-term support for the implementation of the guideline for participation of non-governmental organisations, notably through workshops and a support campaign aimed at central government bodies, as well as training activities for non-governmental organisations.²⁰⁹

b) Consequences

According to the NGO Glopolis, participation remains uneven and mostly formal. Although the adoption of the methodological guideline is a positive step it remains non-binding, leaving ministries' practices varied, with limited inclusion of vulnerable groups, low transparency, and little follow-up on input.²¹⁰

²⁰⁶ Czech Republic. Government (Vláda) (2025), Guideline for the participation of non-governmental non-profit organisations in advisory and working bodies and in the creation of government documents (*Metodika participace nestátních neziskových organizací v poradních a pracovních orgánech a při tvorbě dokumentů státní správy*).

²⁰⁷ Czech Republic. Government (Vláda) (2025), Action Plan for 2025–2027 on the Strategy for Cooperation between Public Administration and NGOs for 2021 to 2030 (*Akční plán na léta 2025–2027 ke Strategii spolupráce veřejné správy s NNO na léta 2021 až 2030*).

²⁰⁸ Czech Republic. Government (Vláda) (2025), Monitoring report on the implementation of the first Action Plan for the Strategy for Cooperation between Public Administration and Non-Governmental Non-Profit Organisations (*Monitorovací zpráva o plnění prvního Akčního plánu ke Strategii spolupráce veřejné správy s nestátními neziskovými organizacemi*).

²⁰⁹ Czech Republic. Government (Vláda) (2025), Action Plan for 2025–2027 on the Strategy for Cooperation between Public Administration and NGOs for 2021 to 2030 (*Akční plán na léta 2025–2027 ke Strategii spolupráce veřejné správy s NNO na léta 2021 až 2030*). Measure B.1.4.

²¹⁰ Miléřová, J. et al. Strengthening civic space in Czechia 2025 (*Posilování občanského prostoru v Česku 2025*). Glopolis, p. 22.

Germany (DE)

Civic space in the EU in 2025

Country: Germany

Contractor: German Institute of Human Rights

Authors: Nele Allenberg, Dr. Roger Meyer

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1. CIVIC SPACE PRESSURES

1.1. Deterioration of legal environment: freedom of assembly

< Rising restrictions on protests >

a) Summary

In 2025, Germany saw an increasing number of police measures that interfered with fundamental rights. Criminal prosecutions were deployed against protesters and political activists.²¹¹ Particularly affected by these measures were protests by climate activists and groups expressing solidarity with Palestinians.

In its annual ratings, the CIVICUS Monitor downgraded Germany's civic space to "obstructed" in 2025, citing police actions regarding demonstrations in solidarity with Palestine as one of the reasons.²¹² Media increasingly reported about protests being prohibited.²¹³²¹⁴²¹⁵ Michael O'Flaherty, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, criticised the measurers, asking the German government to ensure the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly for all, and to refrain from measures that discriminate against persons based on their political or other opinion, religion or belief, ethnic origin, nationality or migration status.²¹⁶ In October 2025 UN experts urged Germany to halt criminalisation and police violence against Palestinian solidarity activism.²¹⁷ Michael O'Flaherty visited Germany in October to follow up on his letter to the authorities of June.²¹⁸ He again raised the issue of restrictions to various forms of

²¹¹ Human Rights Watch (2026), [World Report 2026: Germany](#), New York.

²¹² CIVICUS (2025), [Civics Monitor - Germany downgraded in global ratings report on civic freedoms](#), Johannesburg.

²¹³ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (2025), [UN experts urge Germany to halt criminalisation and police violence against Palestinian solidarity activism](#), Geneva.

²¹⁴ Human Rights Watch (2026), [World Report 2026: Germany](#), New York.

²¹⁵ Civil Liberties Union for Europe (2025), [Liberties Rule of Law Report 2025 – Germany Country Report](#), Berlin.

²¹⁶ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (2025), [Letter to the Federal Minister of the Interior Germany](#), Geneva.

²¹⁷ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (2025), [UN experts urge Germany to halt criminalisation and police violence against Palestinian solidarity activism](#).

²¹⁸ Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights (2025), [Human Rights Commissioner O'Flaherty's visit to Germany: focus on migration, freedoms of assembly and expression, antisemitism and anti-Muslim hatred](#), Geneva.

protest and reports of excessive use of force by law enforcement officers during protests, in the context of the war in Gaza.

b) Consequences

There is a risk that the right to freedom of assembly will be undermined in practice. As a result, trust in the rule of law may decrease, particularly among marginalised groups and young activists.

1.2. Attempts to stifle civic engagement through violence, harassment and negative narratives

< I Growing pressure against civil society in media >

a) Summary

In Germany, there are growing negative narratives regarding civil society.²¹⁹²²⁰ The study ‘The Anti-NGO Discourse – Attacks on Civil Society in the Media’ of the thinktank Maecenata shows that the Christian Democratic Union’s/ Christian Social Union’s (CDU/CSU) parliamentary inquiry (see chapter 1.6) acted as a catalyst, resulting in a sharp increase in NGO-related posts on the social media platforms examined, portraying NGOs in a negative way.²²¹ The central accusations in the anti-NGO discourse are: (1) dependence on the state and lack of independence, (2) undemocratic influence despite a lack of legitimacy, (3) economic interests behind non-profit status, and (4) lack of transparency and control.

b) Consequences

The developments observed mark a shift in discourse: the negative narrative about NGOs promotes a tendency for NGOs to be increasingly subjected to pressure from the wider public to justify themselves. This threatens not only to undermine the legitimacy of individual NGOs, but

²¹⁹ Hummel, S., & Schubert, P. (2025). [Das Anti-NGO-Narrativ: Wie versucht wird, die Zivilgesellschaft zu delegitimieren](#) [The anti-NGO narrative: How attempts are being made to delegitimise civil society]. Berlin: Maecenata Institut für Philanthropie und Zivilgesellschaft

²²⁰ taz (2025), Rechte Kampagnen: [Angriff auf NGOs](#) [Right-wing campaigns: Attacks on NGOs], Berlin.

²²¹ Hummel, S., Nicke, S., & Oellers, J. (2025). [Der Anti-NGO-Diskurs: Angriffe auf die Zivilgesellschaft in der medialen Öffentlichkeit](#) [The anti-NGO discourse: Attacks on civil society in the media sphere], Berlin: Maecenata Institut für Philanthropie und Zivilgesellschaft.

also to structurally erode the public perception of civil society as an independent democratic sphere.²²²

< II Loud hatred – quiet retreat: Incidents of attacks and negative rhetoric >

a) Summary

Organisations that collect data on incidents of attacks have reported sharp increases in assaults and violence in their annual reports published in 2025. This applies to anti-feminist attacks that targeted individuals – mainly women and members of the LGBTIQ community -, but also organisations such as equality and counselling centers, violence protection associations, and youth and sports clubs. The social devaluation of transgender and intersex people is lowering the threshold for open hostility.²²³ The rise of anti-feminist rhetoric is also evident.²²⁴ The representative study “Loud Hate – Quiet Retreat” highlights, for example, how online hate threatens democratic discourse. According to their own statements, people with a visible migrant history, young women, and people with a homosexual or bisexual orientation are frequently affected by online hate. As a result, respondents are less likely to express their political opinions online or participate in discussions. Those who have already been exposed to online hate are particularly likely to withdraw.²²⁵

b) Consequences

The rise in violence and online hate against marginalised groups weakens the functioning of civil society. The resulting hostile atmosphere leads to a worrying withdrawal from democratic discourse, thereby limiting the diversity of opinion in the public sphere.

1.3. Funding reductions and restrictions

< Intimidation of civil society organizations with regard to their funding >

a) Summary

²²² Hummel, S., Nicke, S., & Oellers, J. (2025). [Der Anti-NGO-Diskurs: Angriffe auf die Zivilgesellschaft in der medialen Öffentlichkeit](#) [The anti-NGO discourse: Attacks on civil society in the media sphere], Berlin: Maecenata Institut für Philanthropie und Zivilgesellschaft.

²²³ LSVD+ – Verband Queere Vielfalt (Germany) (2026), [Queerfeindliche Gewalt: Angriffe auf Lesben, Schwule, bisexuelle, trans und intergeschlechtliche sowie queere Menschen](#) [Anti-queer violence: Attacks against lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans*, intersex and queer persons], Berlin.

²²⁴ Federal Foundation for Gender Equality (Germany) (2024), [Antifeminismus](#), Berlin.

²²⁵ Das NETTZ – Gesellschaft für Medienpädagogik und Kommunikationskultur; HateAid; Neue deutsche Medienmacher*innen (eds) (2024), [Lauter Hass – leiser Rückzug. Wie Hass im Netz den demokratischen Diskurs bedroht. Ergebnisse einer repräsentativen Befragung](#) [Loud hate – silent retreat. How online hate threatens democratic discourse. Results of a representative survey], Berlin.

The eligibility of numerous civil society organisations for state funding was called into question by the CDU/CSU parliamentary group, shortly after the elections in 2025. They submitted a parliamentary enquiry, entitled 'political neutrality of state-funded organisations'.²²⁶ The inquiry asked about political influence, non-profit status and state funding eligibility of various civil society organisations. This took place shortly after protests supported by some of these organisations in connection with a parliamentary resolution on migration measures put forward by the CDU/CSU, which only obtained the necessary majority thanks to votes from the "Alternative for Germany" (AfD). An open letter from 2.342 academics subsequently criticised the parliamentary inquiry from a constitutional perspective.²²⁷ In its annual human rights report, the Geneva Institute for Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs concluded that the inquiry – although being a legitimate parliamentary control instrument – had a considerable political effect.²²⁸

b) Consequences

The impression that organisations are being specifically scrutinised for their eligibility for funding and legal basis due to critical statements can lead to uncertainty and discouragement among parts of civil society. This is particularly true for smaller initiatives whose existence is largely based on project funding.

< Failed legislative process for the Democracy Promotion Act >

a) Summary

The general trend of budget consolidation is creating a precarious situation for projects such as 'Democracy Alive!' (Demokratie Leben!).²²⁹ For many years, civil society initiatives have been calling for a democracy promotion law, with the aim of replacing short-term and uncertain project funding with a legal framework securing sustainable funding. The Democracy Promotion Act was a project of the former government with the aim of providing long-term and structural support to civil society initiatives, organisations, and associations that promote democratic values, human rights, and social cooperation. However, until now, it has not been possible to establish such a legal basis.²³⁰ The current government does not intend to enact a Democracy

²²⁶ Deutscher Bundestag (2025), Kleine Anfrage der Fraktion der CDU/CSU, Drucksache 20/15035, [Politische Neutralität staatlich geförderter Organisationen](#) [Political neutrality of state-funded organisations], Berlin.

²²⁷ Verfassungsblog (2025), [Offener Brief anlässlich der Kleinen Anfrage der CDU/CSU-Fraktion zur politischen Neutralität staatlich geförderter Organisationen](#) [Open letter concerning the parliamentary inquiry of the CDU/CSU parliamentary group on the political neutrality of publicly funded organisations]. Berlin

²²⁸ Deutsches Institut für Menschenrechte (2025), [Entwicklung der Menschenrechtssituation in Deutschland Juli 2024 – Juli 2025](#) [Development of the human rights situation in Germany July 2024 – July 2025], Berlin.

²²⁹ Die Zeit (2026), [Reichinnek kritisiert Priens Kürzungen bei Demokratieförderung](#) [Reichinnek criticises Prien's cuts to funding for democracy], Berlin.

²³⁰ ARD-aktuell (2025), [Demokratieförderprogramm: Was fehlende Verlässlichkeit bedeutet](#) [Democracy promotion programme: What a lack of reliability means], Hamburg.

Promotion Act. Additionally, the Ministry for Family Affairs announced that organisations receiving financial support from the program would be investigated by the Office for the Protection of the Constitution, the domestic intelligence service.²³¹²³² In a parting interview, the long-standing head of the Federal Agency for Civic Education, which is subordinate to the Ministry of the Interior, criticised this as a sign of mistrust.²³³

b) Consequences

Without a change in the financing structure, civil society actors are reliant on project funding, which is associated with considerable problems. Fixed-term funding periods, for example, cause discontinuity in the work of the projects and loss of qualified staff. Weakening civil society project funding plays right into the hands of those forces that seek to undermine democratic structures.

2. CIVIC SPACE EXPANSION

2.1. Improvements in legal environment: freedom of expression

< National implementation process of the EU Anti-SLAPP Directive >

a) Summary

For human rights defenders within Germany the developments concerning the implementation of the EU Anti-SLAPP Directive are of significance. In summer 2025 the Ministry of Justice presented a draft bill that went beyond the minimum standards of the directive and covered circumstances that only occurred within Germany.²³⁴ After discussion within the government the draft was amended and defines a lawsuit as SLAPP only if there are circumstances with a cross-border component in

²³¹ ntv (2025), „Anlassbezogen“ Empfänger prüfen: Prien will bei Demokratieförderprogramm „Demokratie Leben!“ Gelder kürzen [“Case-by-case” review of recipients: Prien seeks to cut funding for the “Demokratie Leben!”], Köln.

²³² Verfassungsblog (2026), Fördertheorie und Förderpraxis - Wie politische Feinsteuerung die Demokratieförderung gefährdet [Funding theory and funding practice – How political fine-tuning jeopardises the promotion of democracy], Berlin.

²³³ taz (2025), bpb-Präsident zum Zustand der Demokratie: „Das ist die Stunde der Stabilokraten“ [bpb president on the state of democracy: “This is the hour of the stabilocrats”], Berlin.

²³⁴ Bundesministerium der Justiz und für Verbraucherschutz (2025), Gesetz zur Umsetzung der Richtlinie (EU) 2024/1069 über den Schutz von Personen, die sich öffentlich beteiligen, vor offensichtlich unbegründeten Klagen oder missbräuchlichen Gerichtsverfahren

[Law to implement Directive (EU) 2024/1069 on the protection of persons participating publicly from manifestly unfounded lawsuits or abusive court proceedings], Berlin.

question. In 2025, the NO-SLAPP Contact Point Protecting Journalistic Work in Germany received 48 enquiries. In 30 of these cases (62 per cent), the expert assessment found that the characteristic features of a SLAPP were present, but more than three-quarters of these were purely domestic matters.²³⁵ The parliamentary consultation on the draft will continue in March 2026.

b) Consequences

As the regulation is limited to cases with cross-border implications, many affected parties in Germany will not enjoy legal protection against intimidation lawsuits in the future.

²³⁵ NO SLAPP Anlaufstelle (2025), [Stellungnahme zum Regierungsentwurf eines deutschen Anti-SLAPP-Gesetzes](#) [Statement on the government draft of a German anti-SLAPP law], Berlin.

Denmark (DK)

Civic space in the EU in 2025

Country: Denmark

Contractor: Danish Institute for Human Rights

Author(s): Helena Stina Lautrup-Larsen

and Theis Thorbjørn Bigandt

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1. CIVIC SPACE PRESSURES

1.1. Deterioration of legal environment: freedom of expression

Draft amendment on data processing by the Danish Security and Intelligence Service (PET)

a) Summary

In April 2025, the Danish government proposed an amendment to the Danish Security and Intelligence Service Act (*Forslag til lov om ændring af lov om Politiets Efterretningstjeneste (PET)*) to establish rules governing PET's processing of large, interconnected data sets.²³⁶ Following criticism from parliamentary parties and civil society organisations, the political negotiations on the draft law was postponed until the next parliamentary assembly starting October 2025.²³⁷ The government has not presented a new version of the draft law or proposed the draft again in Parliament.

b) Consequences

Critics argued that initiatives such as the draft amendment risk placing efficiency and investigative capacity above fundamental democratic rights, including freedom of expression and right to private life.²³⁸ As a result, the Parliament decided in late December 2025 to establish a privacy commission to examine developments in surveillance, data processing and interferences with citizens' private life.²³⁹

1.2. Deterioration of legal environment: freedom of assembly

²³⁶ Denmark, Ministry of Justice (*Justitsministeriet*), Draft law no. L 218 on amendment to the Danish Security and Intelligence Service Act (2025) (*L 218 Forslag til lov om ændring af lov om Politiets Efterretningstjeneste (PET)*), 25 April 2025.

²³⁷ Danish Parliament, Committee on Legal Affairs (*Retsudvalget*), (2025), Letter concerning the processing of L 218 from the Minister of Justice (*Brev vedrørende behandling af L 218, fra justitsministeren* (L 218 – bilag 8)), 8 May 2025.

²³⁸ Danish Parliament, Committee on Legal Affairs (*Retsudvalget*), (2025), Enquiry of 6/5-25 from Justitia regarding open letter on establishing a privacy commission and halting the fast-track processing of the PET Act (*Henvendelse af 6/5-25 fra Justitia om åbent brev om nedsæt en privatlivskommission og stop hastebehandling af PET-loven*), (L 218 – bilag 225), 6 May 2025.

²³⁹ Danish Parliament, (2025), Parliamentary resolution on the establishment of an independent privacy commission (*Folketingsbeslutning om nedsættelse af en uafhængig privatlivskommission*), 19 December 2025.

Strip searches by Danish police found to violate the European Convention on Human Rights

a) Summary

In 2025, the Supreme Court of Denmark found that a strip search carried out by the police in connection with an arrest was not adequately justified under the specific circumstances and thus violated Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights.²⁴⁰ The Court held that police had not provided sufficiently specific and individualised reasons to justify the searches. Two subsequent rulings reached the same conclusion.²⁴¹ Following these cases, national media reported that multiple climate demonstrators and political activist had also been subjected to strip searches, which experts considered were likely to have been unlawful.²⁴²

b) Consequences

The Independent Police Complaints Authority has indicated that strip searches may at times have been conducted as a routine practice rather than based on individual assessment.²⁴³ Police districts have since been reminded that such searches may only be carried out in exceptional circumstances.

Individuals have stated that they experienced the conducted strip search as a form of punishment.²⁴⁴ Such experiences may negatively affect civic space if fear of improper police handling discourages participation in public debate, demonstrations or assemblies.

1.3. Attempts to stifle civic engagement through violence, harassment and negative narratives

Threats and harassment targeting local candidates and politicians during 2025 elections

a) Summary

²⁴⁰ Denmark, Supreme Court (*Højesteret*) (2025), case no. 1415/24 (U.2025.3304), ruling of 22 May 2025.

²⁴¹ Denmark, Lyngby City Court (*Lyngby Byret*) (2025), case no. BS-46772/2023-LYN, ruling of 24 June 2025; Denmark, Copenhagen City Court (*Københavns Byret*) (2025), case no. BS-44651/2020-KBH, ruling of 23 September 2025.

²⁴² Denmark, Berlingske (2025), For several years, the police have been stripping arrested persons without concrete suspicion: 'This is clearly illegal' (*I flere år har politiet tvunget tøjet af anholdte uden konkret mistanke: »Det er klart ulovligt«*), 2 November 2025

²⁴³ Denmark, Copenhagen City Court (2025), case no. BS-44651/2020-KBH, ruling of 23 September 2025, p. 11.

²⁴⁴ Denmark, Politiken (2025), Supreme Court sets limits on police use of strip searches (*Højesteret sætter grænser for politiets brug af nøgenvisitation*), 1 June 2025; Denmark, Berlingske (2025), For several years, the police have been stripping arrested persons without concrete suspicion: This is clearly illegal' (*I flere år har politiet tvunget tøjet af anholdte uden konkret mistanke: »Det er klart ulovligt«*), 2 November 2025

In November 2025, elections were held for regions and municipalities in Denmark. During the election period, there was media coverage of incidents of violence and harassment directed at the candidates.²⁴⁵ Recent studies indicate that harassment of elected representatives in Denmark has increased over the years.²⁴⁶ To address the issue, national public authorities published guidelines to candidates on how to prevent and tolerate harassment and threats.²⁴⁷

b) Consequences

Violence and harassment, or fear and threats of such acts, may discourage individuals from participating in democratic debate.²⁴⁸ This can undermine key prerequisites for civic and democratic engagement, as unhindered participation in public debate is a fundamental right.²⁴⁹

Negative narratives concerning civil society organisation working on the rights of LGBTQ+ communities

a) Summary

In December 2025, a member of a Danish right-wing party submitted a parliamentary question to the responsible minister asking whether LGBTQ+ Denmark represents or supports paedophilia.²⁵⁰ Specifically, the party asked whether the minister had carried out a thorough

²⁴⁵ Denmark, DR (2025), Researcher: 'Several episodes indicate more political harassment in this election campaign' (*Forsker: Flere episoder tyder på mere politisk chikane i denne valgkamp*), 18 November 2025.

²⁴⁶ Denmark, Danske Kommuner (2023), New study: Every second local politician has been subjected to harassment (*Ny undersøgelse: Hver anden lokalpolitiker har været udsat for chikane*), 24 March 2023; KVINFO (2025), Sexism and sexual harassment in local politics (*Sexisme og seksuel chikane i kommunalpolitik*), Copenhagen, KVINFO.

²⁴⁷ Denmark, Ministry of the Interior and Health (*Indenrigs- og Sundhedsministeriet*), Ministry of Digitalisation (*Digitaliseringsministeriet*), Ministry of Resilience and Preparedness (*Ministeriet for Samfundssikkerhed og Beredskab*), Local Government Denmark (*Kommunernes Landsforening*) and Danish Regions (*Danske Regioner*), (2025), Safety during the election campaign – Prevention and handling of harassment and threats against candidates (*Tryghed i valgkampen – Forebyggelse og håndtering af chikane og trusler mod opstillede kandidater*), Kommuneforlaget A/S.

²⁴⁸ Danish Security and Intelligence Service (PET) (2025), Assessment of the terrorist threat against Denmark in 2025 (*Vurdering af terrortruslen mod Danmark 2025*), Søborg, PET, p. 36.

²⁴⁹ Danish Security and Intelligence Service (PET) (2025), Assessment of the terrorist threat against Denmark in 2025 (*Vurdering af terrortruslen mod Danmark 2025*), Søborg, PET, p. 36.

²⁵⁰ Danish Parliament, Committee on Gender Equality, Question 5: Member of Parliament-question about whether the ministry, in connection with the grants to LGBTQ+ Denmark, has assessed the organisation's guidelines and values in relation to illegal sexual abuse, including paedophilia (*Spørgsmål 5: MFU spm. om ministeriet i forbindelse med bevillingerne til LGBTQ+ Danmark har foretaget en vurdering af organisationens retningslinjer og værdigrundlag i forhold til ulovlige seksuelle overgreb, herunder pædofili*), 2025-26, Alm. del., 5 December 2025.

assessment of whether the organisation supports paedophilia or illegal sexual violence when allocating public funding.

b) Consequence

The parliamentary question has been viewed as insinuating by multiple critics.²⁵¹ Amnesty International argue that the question links the LGBTQ+ community to paedophilia, thereby contributing to the stigmatisation of both LGBTQ+ Denmark and the wider LGBTQ+ community.²⁵² Such narratives may risk undermining the organisation's credibility, while also potentially fuelling increased hostility and violence against sexual and gender minorities.²⁵³

1.4. Funding reductions and restrictions

Public debate on expectations towards civil society organisations

a) Summary

At the beginning of 2026, a public debate arose about whether certain Danish civil society organisations had shown sufficient engagement in relation to demonstrations in Iran. Critics, including several members of Parliament, questioned why some organisations, such as ActionAid Denmark, had been more visible in other international contexts while appearing less active in this case.²⁵⁴

b) Consequence

Such debates may create uncertainty about expectations from political actors, particularly given that many civic society organisations receive public funding. In a similar debate from 2024, 35 Danish civil society organisations issued a joint statement emphasising the democratic importance of civil society

²⁵¹ Denmark, DR (2025), Question from the Danish People's Party have sparked massive criticism: 'it's a completely insane conspiracy theory' (*Spørgsmål fra Dansk Folkeparti har skabt massiv kritik: 'Det er en fuldstændig sindssyg konspirationsteori'*), 19 December 2025.

²⁵² Denmark, Information (2025), Mette Thiesen's question about LGBTQ+ Denmark is an attack on fundamental freedoms (*Mette Thiesens spørgsmål om LGBTQ+ Danmark er et angreb på fundamentale frihedsrettigheder*), 21 December 2025.

²⁵³ Denmark, Information (2025), Mette Thiesen's question about LGBTQ+ Denmark is an attack on fundamental freedoms (*Mette Thiesens spørgsmål om LGBTQ+ Danmark er et angreb på fundamentale frihedsrettigheder*), 21 December 2025.

²⁵⁴ Denmark, Berlingske (2025), Danish-Iranian accuses the left wing of failure – the Red-Green Alliance responds: 'A load of gibberish' (*Dansk-iraner anklager venstrefløj for sviqt – Enhedslisten svarer igen: »Noget qurqlende ævl«*), 17 January 2026.

actors working independently of the state, with their own mandates, priorities and freedom of expression.²⁵⁵

2. CIVIC SPACE EXPANSION

2.1. Improvements in legal environment: freedom of expression

New Act on Freedom of Expression for public employees

a) Summary

On 1 July 2025, a new Act on Freedom of Expression (*Lov om offentligt ansattes ytringsfrihed*)²⁵⁶ came into force. The act codifies in national law the rules on freedom of expression for public employees that already apply under, among other instruments, Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights.

b) Consequences

The act does not extend the existing protection of freedom of expression for public employees beyond what already applies under other regulations. However, it clarifies the legal position and signals political support for public employees' freedom of expression.

²⁵⁵ Denmark, Berlingske (2025), 35 NGOs respond to criticism in Berlingske: State funding should never be a gag (*35 ngo'er svarer på kritik i Berlingske: Statslige tilskud bør aldrig blive en mundkurv*), 11 September 2024.

²⁵⁶ Denmark, Ministry of Justice (*Justitsministeriet*) (2025), *Lov om offentligt ansattes ytringsfrihed*, Act No. 557 of 27 May 2025.

Estonia (EE)

Civic space in the EU in 2025

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1. CIVIC SPACE PRESSURES

1.1. Deterioration of legal environment: freedom of association

Securitisation, budget cuts, and administrative burdens

a) Summary

The primary pressures on Estonian civic space in 2025 emerged from a combination of systemic budget cuts, restrictive constitutional amendments, and the introduction of police-centric legislative reforms. The overarching narrative driving these changes is one of "defensive democracy," where the state has prioritised national security and the protection of the "democratic legal space" against perceived (and realistic) external influence. This has resulted in a tangible reduction in the institutional capacity of the state to engage with civil society and perhaps a more precarious environment for organisations representing non-EU nationals and stateless residents, although this view can be also contested.²⁵⁷

b) Consequences

The freedom of association in Estonia remains legally robust, yet the operational reality for CSOs has become more restrictive due to bureaucratic "securitisation" and shifts in the management of European and national funds. A critical development in 2025 is the emerging discussion regarding the redirection of EU Cohesion Policy funds toward the defence sector. Traditionally, these funds have been the primary source of support for civil society initiatives focused on social integration, language training, and community cohesion. The potential "securitisation" of these budgets suggests a future where social sustainability is deprioritised in favour of military and physical security, potentially hollowing out the financial base for organisations working on long-term societal resilience.²⁵⁸ Yet again, difficult choices need to be made, and the state usually has wide discretion in these matters.

Beyond funding, the administrative burden on associations has increased through the implementation of new strategic partnership regulations by the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications. These regulations, while intended to standardise the state's relationship with its civil society partners, have introduced more bureaucracy that delays application processes and imposes higher reporting standards. Organisations have reported that the time required to manage these administrative requirements detracts from their core mission-related activities. This led the Network of Estonian Nonprofit Organizations (NENO) to initiate a sector-wide collection of proposals aimed at reducing the administrative load, specifically targeting the

²⁵⁷ International IDEA. (2025, March). Democracy Tracker: Estonia. International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance. <https://www.idea.int/democracytracker/report/estonia/march-2025>

²⁵⁸ Hea Kodanik. (2025). Advocacy quarterly report 01/2025. Hea Kodanik. <https://heakodanik.ee/en/news/advocacy-quarterly-report-01-2025/>

requirement for every registered NGO, regardless of size or activity, to submit detailed annual reports.²⁵⁹

The legal framework for associations was further affected by debates surrounding the Political Parties Act.²⁶⁰ Legislative efforts to supervise party financing in 2025 have focused on defining "affiliated organisations". Civil society actors expressed concern that a broad or vague definition could lead to the misclassification of independent advocacy groups as political actors. Such a designation would subject CSOs to the stringent transparency and financial restrictions reserved for political parties, effectively chilling the appetite for independent policy advocacy. This trend is exacerbated by a broader European-level debate on the "foreign interference" risks posed by NGOs, which has seeped into the domestic Estonian discourse and placed CSOs under a magnifying glass.²⁶¹

1.2. Deterioration of legal environment: freedom of assembly

Lowering legal thresholds

a) Summary

The freedom of peaceful assembly faced its most significant legislative challenge of the decade in 2025 through proposed amendments to the Law Enforcement Act (LEA).²⁶² The Ministry of the Interior authored a draft bill that sought to lower the legal threshold for the Police and Border Guard Board (PPA) to impose bans on public gatherings.²⁶³ The draft introduced a "significant threat" category for pre-emptive action, allowing authorities to prohibit events if there is a perceived risk of a public order breach, even if no immediate or heightened threat is present. This move was

²⁵⁹ Hea Kodanik. (2025). Advocacy quarterly report 01/2025. Hea Kodanik. <https://heakodanik.ee/en/news/advocacy-quarterly-report-01-2025/>

²⁶⁰ Estonia, Parliament (*Riigikogu*), Political Parties Act, RT I 1994, 40, 654, <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/517012023002/consolide>

²⁶¹ Aaspõllu, H. (2024, June 29). Plans to give police more powers and ease policing restrictions in Estonia. ERR News. <https://news.err.ee/1609384949/plans-to-give-police-more-powers-and-ease-policing-restrictions-in-estonia>.

²⁶² Estonia, Parliament (*Riigikogu*), Law Enforcement Act, RT I, 22.03.2011, 4, <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/ee/504012016003/consolide/current>

²⁶³ Estonia, Parliament (*Riigikogu*), documents related to the process of the amendments to the Law Enforcement Act, available through the Parliament's legislative monitoring system: <https://eelnoud.valitsus.ee/main/mount/docList/4602ba65-8db1-4ac3-b8f9-efc63f21911a#ubmKyEyA>.

particularly controversial because it was perceived to be "artificially" bundled with a bill primarily focused on domestic violence prevention.²⁶⁴

b) Consequences

Legal experts and civil society advocates highlighted that this bundling strategy risks bypassing the thorough public debate that such fundamental rights restrictions usually require. Madis Timpson, chair of the Riigikogu (Parliament) Legal Affairs Committee, noted the intensity of the debate, emphasising that the protection of fundamental rights at public gatherings must not be overshadowed by other legislative goals.²⁶⁵ Furthermore, the Ministry of Justice conducted analyses proposing that regulations on "direct coercion", including the use of electroshock weapons and water cannons, be relaxed. The state argued that lowering the classification of such tools within the "hierarchy of coercion" would allow for earlier intervention to prevent the use of lethal force. However, from a civic space perspective, this lowering of the threshold for coercive measures in public spaces poses a risk of intimidating peaceful protesters and creating a "chilling effect" on the exercise of assembly rights.²⁶⁶ Once again, since there are almost no political protests in Estonia, these considerations remain rather abstract.

1.3. Deterioration of legal environment: freedom of expression

Media and sanctions

a) Summary

While Estonia remains a global leader in Internet freedom, the 2025 legal environment for freedom of expression was marked by a hardening of the state's stance toward media actors associated with hostile foreign interests. The June 2025 sentencing of journalist Svetlana Burceva to six years in prison for high treason and violation of international sanctions represents an example of how the state handles information-related threats. Burceva's conviction was based on her work for Russian state-owned media outlets that had been subject to sanctions by the EU. The government framed

²⁶⁴ ERR News. (2025, October 7). MP would split ministry's domestic violence and public gatherings bill in two. ERR News. <https://news.err.ee/1609822755/mp-would-split-ministry-s-domestic-violence-and-public-gatherings-bill-in-two>

²⁶⁵ ERR News. (2025, October 7). MP would split ministry's domestic violence and public gatherings bill in two. ERR News. <https://news.err.ee/1609822755/mp-would-split-ministry-s-domestic-violence-and-public-gatherings-bill-in-two>

²⁶⁶ Vanaisak, Ü. (2025). Critical issues in the use of direct coercion by law enforcement: Results from an expert focus group interview. Public Security and Public Order, 37(2). <https://doi.org/10.13165/PSPO-25-37-02-10>

the case as a national security necessity for expressive acts that can be linked to the "aggressor state".²⁶⁷

b) Consequences

The digital information landscape was also affected by the full operationalisation of the Information Society Services Act²⁶⁸, which was adopted to implement the EU's Digital Services Act (DSA). This granted the Consumer Protection and Technical Regulatory Authority (TTJA) new powers as the Digital Services Coordinator. While the DSA is designed to curb illegal online content, there are ongoing concerns within the Estonian human rights community that the administrative mechanisms for content oversight could be used excessively, particularly in the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine where the definition of "harmful" content is subject to broad interpretation.²⁶⁹

Additionally, the Estonian Human Rights Centre has consistently noted that the state has not yet updated the Equal Treatment Act²⁷⁰ to provide comprehensive protection across all areas of life. Currently, discrimination based on religion, sexual orientation, or age is prohibited primarily in the workplace, leaving individuals vulnerable in sectors such as housing, education, and healthcare. This gap in the legal environment limits the ability of members of these groups to express their identities and advocate for their rights in the public sphere without fear of social or economic exclusion. Furthermore, the high threshold for prosecuting "hate speech" under Section 151 of the Penal Code,²⁷¹ requiring concrete harm to life or property, effectively leaves victims of online harassment and targeted stigma without legal recourse, a trend that civil society groups argue silences marginalised voices.²⁷²

1.4. Deterioration of legal environment: court cases

Weaponisation of legal system

²⁶⁷ Freedom House. (2025). Freedom on the Net 2025 — Estonia. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/estonia/freedom-net/2025>.

²⁶⁸ Estonia, Parliament (*Riigikogu*), Information Society Services Act, RT I 2004, 29, 191, <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/ee/503092024004/consolide/current>.

²⁶⁹ Civic Forum. (2025). Civic space report 2025: Estonia. <https://civic-forum.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Civic-Space-Report-2025-Estonia.pdf>.

²⁷⁰ Estonia, Parliament (*Riigikogu*), Equal Treatment Act, RT I 2008, 56, 315, <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/ee/530102013066/consolide/current>.

²⁷¹ Estonia, Parliament (*Riigikogu*), Penal Code, RT I 2001, 61, 364, <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/ee/521082014001/consolide/current>.

²⁷² Estonian Human Rights Centre. (2026, February). Statement. https://upr-info.org/sites/default/files/country-document/2026-02/Estonian_Human_Rights_Centre_statement.pdf.

a) Summary

The 2025 legal landscape for civic space was significantly influenced by the rise of Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs), which are increasingly used by corporate and political actors to silence dissent. Although Estonia is in the early stages of transposing the EU's Anti-SLAPP Directive, current protections remain insufficient for the vast majority of cases, which are purely domestic and do not have the "cross-border" element required by the current EU-level framework. Data from the Coalition Against SLAPPs in Europe (CASE) shows that in Estonia, the most frequent litigants are businesspeople (45.2%) and politicians (35.5%), who use their financial resources to weaponise the legal system against individual journalists and activists.²⁷³ The asymmetry of power in these cases is particularly damaging because the plaintiffs often seek to inflict psychological and financial harm rather than a traditional legal victory

b) Consequences

The asymmetry of power in these cases is particularly damaging because the plaintiffs often do not seek a traditional legal victory; instead, the goal is to inflict psychological and financial harm that discourages the defendant from continuing their public interest work. Civil society groups have highlighted that the threat of a SLAPP often leads to self-censorship, particularly among environmental activists and local watchdogs who lack the backing of large media organisations. The lack of a robust, domestic-focused anti-SLAPP law in 2025 meant that courts often lacked the tools to quickly dismiss meritless cases, forcing defendants to undergo lengthy and expensive litigation. The self-censorship also seems to be a phenomenon growing in academic institutions.²⁷⁴

1.5. Attempts to stifle civic engagement through violence, harassment and negative narratives

Foreign influence

a) Summary

In 2025, Estonia was the target of a highly sophisticated, Kremlin-funded smear campaign that utilised international human rights mechanisms to attack the country's reputation and delegitimise its institutions. A Swiss-based NGO, *Justice pour Tous Internationale* (JPTi), submitted multiple formal complaints to the UN Human Rights Council and the UN Accreditation Committee, alleging "political persecution" and "discrimination against Russians" in Estonia. Leaked documents later revealed that this organisation was coordinating with Russian influence agents, to pressure the UN into

²⁷³ Coalition Against SLAPPs in Europe (CASE). (2024). *SLAPPs: A Threat to Democracy Continues to Grow*. Available at: <https://www.the-case.eu/>

²⁷⁴ See ref. 17 above; European Commission. (2025). *2025 Rule of Law Report: Country Chapter on the rule of law situation in Estonia*.

downgrading the accreditation of Estonia's Chancellor of Justice as a National Human Rights Institution (NHRI).²⁷⁵

b) Consequences

Within the domestic political arena, 2025 also saw continued verbal harassment of journalists and activists by far-right political figures²⁷⁶. Organisations representing the LGBTQI+ community and refugees were singled out for criticism, with some political leaders framing their activities as a threat to "national values" and cultural survival²⁷⁷. Such rhetoric has led to an increase in online harassment and doxing, particularly targeting women journalists and human rights defenders. The onslaught of negativity has contributed to a culture of self-censorship, as individuals choose to withdraw from public debate to avoid targeted abuse²⁷⁸.

1.6. Funding reductions and restrictions

Civil sector support

a) Summary

Estonian civil society experienced a severe fiscal shock in 2025 as the government implemented broad austerity measures to address fiscal imbalances and the needs of a rapidly expanding defence budget. The economic downturn, characterised by weak export markets and high input costs, led to a state budget strategy focused on "results-oriented" but highly restricted spending.

b) Consequences

For the civic sector, the consequences were twofold: a direct loss of grant funding and a collapse of the state's internal capacity to support the sector.²⁷⁹ Citations from civil society actors warn that these cuts are not merely fiscal; they represent a withdrawal of the state from its role as an enabler of civic space. Without dedicated state staff to bridge the gap between policy-making and community

²⁷⁵ BECID. (2025). HOT report — July 2025. <https://becid.ut.ee/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/HOT-REPORT-JULY-2025.pdf>

²⁷⁶ Media Freedom Rapid Response (MFRR). (2025). *Monitoring Report 2025: Europe's Media Freedom Landscape*

²⁷⁷ Estonian Human Rights Centre (EHRC). (2025). *Human Rights in Estonia 2025*; European Civic Forum (ECF). (2025). *Civic Space Report 2025: Estonia*.

²⁷⁸ European Broadcasting Union (EBU). (2026). *Europe Press Freedom Report 2025: On the Tipping Point*.

²⁷⁹ Sydor, K. (2025, July 31). Civil society warns of negative impact of funding cuts, Supreme Court acquits pro-Palestinian protesters. Civicus Monitor. <https://monitor.civicus.org/explore/civil-society-warns-of-negative-impact-of-funding-cuts-supreme-court-acquits-pro-palestinian-protesters/>

action, the distance between the government and its citizens has grown, reflected in a decline in public trust in the parliament and government.²⁸⁰

1.7. Barriers to participation in law and policy-making

a) Summary

The single most impactful barrier to civic participation in 2025 was the constitutional amendment revoking the right of third-country nationals and stateless persons to vote in local elections.²⁸¹ Passed on March 26, 2025, under an urgent procedure, the amendment targets Russian and Belarusian citizens residing in Estonia, as well as approximately 60,000 stateless residents. The decision was a necessary measure for national security, following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, to ensure that the "democratic legal space" is not influenced by citizens of "aggressor states".

b) Consequences

The practical consequence is the disenfranchisement of nearly 140,000 residents, representing more than 10% of the population in certain municipalities. This move breaks a decades-long tradition of allowing all permanent residents a voice in local affairs. Warnings that this disenfranchisement may exacerbate security risks by alienating large segments of the population and deepening ethnic divides are counterbalanced by legitimate national security considerations.

1.8. Other developments

Security prioritisation

a) Summary

The 2025 review of Estonia's human rights obligations also highlighted concerns regarding the treatment of refugees and asylum seekers. The Estonian Human Rights Centre noted a growing reliance on "public order and national security" as blanket justifications for denying residence permits or international protection to individuals fleeing conflict, particularly Ukrainian men of

²⁸⁰ Civic Forum. (2025). Civic space report 2025: Estonia. <https://civic-forum.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Civic-Space-Report-2025-Estonia.pdf>.

²⁸¹ Riigikogu. 26 March 2025. Riigikogu võttis vastu valimisõigust piirava põhiseaduse muudatuse. (*The Parliament adopted constitutional amendment restricting electoral rights*) <https://www.riigikogu.ee/komisjonide-teated/pohiseaduskomisjon/riigikogu-vottis-vastu-valimisoigust-piirava-pohiseaduse-muudatuse/>

conscription age.²⁸² This shift toward a more security-centric approach to asylum has resulted in a lack of individual assessment in some cases, raising questions about Estonia's compliance with its international human rights obligations. Furthermore, the closure of environmental education programs by the Environmental Board in 2025 has been cited as a regression in the state's commitment to fostering a long-term, ecologically conscious civic space.²⁸³

2. CIVIC SPACE EXPANSION

2.1. Improvements in legal environment: freedom of association

Whistleblower protection

a) Summary

The most significant expansion in the legal framework for association during 2025 was the full implementation and consolidation of the 'Whistleblower Protection Act'.²⁸⁴ Adopted to transpose the EU Directive, this act provides a high level of legal safety for individuals, including those within NGOs and public bodies, who report breaches of EU and national law. This legislation is a critical addition to the "safe space" for association, as it mitigates the risk of professional or legal retaliation for those acting as public watchdogs.

b) Consequences

There is no public information of the real-world impact of the whistleblower protection legislation. Meanwhile, the civil society sector initiated its own self-reform by updating the Code of Ethics for NGOs. Led by NENO, this project aims to modernise the ethical standards that have been in place for over 20 years, ensuring that CSOs maintain their legitimacy and public trust in an era of increasing scrutiny. By proactively setting higher standards for transparency and accountability, the sector has strengthened its hand in resisting calls for more restrictive state-led regulations.²⁸⁵

²⁸² Estonian Human Rights Centre. (2026, February). Statement. https://upr-info.org/sites/default/files/country-document/2026-02/Estonian_Human_Rights_Centre_statement.pdf.

²⁸³ United Nations Economic Commission for Europe. (2025). Implementation report of Aarhus Convention on access to information, public participation in decision-making and access to justice in environmental matters. Aarhus Clearinghouse, page 5. <https://aarhusclearinghouse.unece.org/sites/default/files/2025-05/2025%20clean%20eng.pdf>

²⁸⁴ Estonia, Parliament (*Riigikogu*), RT I, 30.05.2024, 1, Act on Protection of Persons Who Report Work-Related Breaches of European Union Law, <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/510062025002/consolide>

²⁸⁵ NGO Good Citizen, website: <https://heakodanik.ee/en/mission-goals-achievements/>

2.2. Improvements in legal environment: freedom of assembly

Landmark Supreme Court judgment

a) Summary

In May 2025, the Supreme Court of Estonia delivered a landmark judgment that significantly expanded the legal protections for the freedom of assembly and expression. The case centred on the use of the pro-Palestinian slogan "From the river to the sea" at a protest in Tallinn. The PPA had previously fined protesters for displaying the slogan, arguing it was a symbol associated with crimes against humanity (genocide and Hamas's actions).²⁸⁶

b) Consequences

The Supreme Court²⁸⁷ overturned these fines, establishing the "average reasonable person" test for the restriction of speech in public gatherings. The court ruled that a ban on public display is only constitutional if a symbol's meaning is "unambiguously clear to the average person in Estonia at the time of display" and poses a direct, immediate danger. Because the phrase has multiple interpretations and was not universally associated with international crimes by the general Estonian public, the court found the state's restriction to be an unlawful interference with fundamental rights. This ruling provides a precedent that prevents the "securitisation" of political language and limits the discretionary power of the police to define and punish political speech.

2.3. Improvements in legal environment: freedom of expression

Global scene

a) Summary

Estonia's leadership in the digital sphere was reaffirmed in 2025 through its chairship of the Freedom Online Coalition (FOC). In October, Estonia hosted a Ministerial Meeting in Tallinn where it launched the "Rights-Respecting Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) Principles". This initiative provides a global roadmap for building digital infrastructure that is grounded in human rights, transparency, and civic empowerment. By championing these principles, Estonia has expanded the "normative space" for

²⁸⁶ ERR News. 30 May 2025. Estonia's top court clears protester for yelling from the river to the sea. ERR News. <https://news.err.ee/1609709667/estonia-s-top-court-clears-protester-for-yelling-from-the-river-to-the-sea>

²⁸⁷ Estonian Supreme Court (*Riigikohus*), judgment of 05 March 2025, case no 4-23-4296, available: <https://www.riigikohus.ee/et/laheidid/?asjaNr=4-23-4296/32>

digital expression, advocating for a future where technology serves democratic ends rather than enabling state surveillance or authoritarian control.²⁸⁸

b) Consequences

Domestically, the continued use and improvement of digital participation platforms like *Rahvaalgatus*²⁸⁹ (People's Initiative) have allowed for a higher volume of citizen-led legislative proposals. Despite the administrative requirements, the "digital-first" nature of Estonian democracy continues to provide unique avenues for the public to influence the legislative agenda directly, a modal that remains an international benchmark for civic engagement around the globe.²⁹⁰

2.4. Improvements in legal environment: court cases

Judicial independence

a) Summary

The judiciary has remained the strongest defender of civic space in 2025. In addition to the landmark Supreme Court ruling on assembly slogans, the courts have consistently upheld the principle of judicial independence, resisting political pressures in high-profile cases. The acquittals of several activists targeted for their dissent, both in the context of pro-Palestinian²⁹¹ and environmental protests²⁹², demonstrate that the Estonian judicial system remains a functional and effective "last line of defense" for fundamental rights. Some may question this statement though.

b) Consequences

The 2025 Liberties Rule of Law Report identified Estonia (along with the Czech Republic) as a country showing genuine and systemic efforts to improve judicial independence and media pluralism, even in the face of broader regional backsliding. The state's commitment to transposing anti-SLAPP legislation, while in its early stages, is also a positive signal that the government recognises the threat of legal intimidation to the rule of law.²⁹³

²⁸⁸ Freedom Online Coalition. (2025, October). Report from the FOC SCM October 2025 — Tallinn. Freedom Online Coalition. <https://freedomonlinecoalition.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/Report-from-the-FOC-SCM-October-2025-Tallinn-.pdf>

²⁸⁹ Rahvaalgatus, website: <https://rahvaalgatus.ee>

²⁹⁰ ERR News. 28 May 2025. Feature: How two ideas from Estonia are inspiring positive change in Indonesia. ERR News. <https://news.err.ee/1609706433/feature-how-two-ideas-from-estonia-are-inspiring-positive-change-in-indonesia>

²⁹¹ Estonian Supreme Court (*Riigikohus*), judgment of 05 March 2025, case no 4-23-4296, available: <https://www.riigikohus.ee/et/lahendid/?asjaNr=4-23-4296/32>

²⁹² Estonian Supreme Court (*Riigikohus*), judgment of 11 October 2023, case no 3-20-771, available: <https://www.riigikohus.ee/et/lahendid/?asjaNr=3-20-771/103>

²⁹³ Liberties. (2025). Rule of law report 2025. https://dq4n3btxmr8c9.cloudfront.net/files/vdxw3e/Liberties_Rule_of_Law_Report_2025_v.pdf

2.5. Positive narratives

Public festivals

a) Summary

Civil society organisations have been proactive in shifting the national narrative from a focus on security to a focus on "democratic resilience". During the "Civil Society Makers of the Year" awards in early 2025, the emphasis was placed on the vital role of volunteers and NGOs in maintaining the social fabric during times of economic and geopolitical crisis. This internal narrative building has been essential in maintaining public support for the sector in a year where state funding was drastically cut.²⁹⁴

b) Consequences

The Opinion Festival (Arvamusfestival)²⁹⁵ in Paide, held in August 2025, continued to be a critical platform for high-quality civic discourse. By bringing together government officials, cultural figures, entrepreneurs, and ordinary citizens, the festival reinforces the cultural legitimacy of debate and dissent. In 2025, the festival explicitly focused on "improving debate culture and civic education," providing a visible counter-narrative to the polarisation and "hostile online environment" of social media and far-right politics.

2.6. Improvements in funding

Targeted funding

a) Summary

While the national state budget was characterised by cuts, certain targeted funding streams remained open and even expanded in focus. The "Prosperous Future" grant program, supported by the Nordic Council of Ministers, provided approximately 990,000 euro for Nordic-Baltic civil society cooperation in late 2025.²⁹⁶ These funds specifically target projects in areas like democratic development, LGBTQI+ rights, and gender equality, which are the very areas that faced domestic funding cuts.

²⁹⁴ NGO Good Citizen, website: <https://heakodanik.ee/en/mission-goals-achievements/>

²⁹⁵ Arvamusfestival website: <https://arvamusfestival.ee/en/>

²⁹⁶ Nordic Council of Ministers. Prosperous Future - Grant Programme: Civil society cooperation in the Nordic-Baltic region. <https://www.norden.org/en/information/prosperous-future-grant-programme-civil-society-cooperation-nordic-baltic-region>

b) Consequences

Additionally, the Ministry of Culture's integration program for 2022–2025 continued to provide support for activities aimed at fostering social cohesion among residents with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. While the focus has shifted toward returnees and immigrants (including beneficiaries of international protection), the continued existence of this program demonstrates a baseline state commitment to the "Cohesive Estonia" strategy²⁹⁷, even if it is currently overshadowed by defence spending.

2.7. Improvements in participation

Legislative predictability

a) Summary

There is a growing narrative to engage the general population more into local co-creation of municipal development.²⁹⁸

b) Consequences

Furthermore, the end of parliamentary obstruction – where into one legislative amendment action were included various proposals to amend laws which were not logically connected by content - in the Riigikogu in early 2025 allowed the legislative process to become more predictable. It is reported that feedback loops for draft laws have slightly improved, with stakeholders having more time to respond to proposals than in the previous year.²⁹⁹

2.8. Other developments

Grassroots

a) Summary

The successful integration of Estonian-born initiatives like "World Cleanup Day"³⁰⁰ into the international agenda, with it being named an official UN event in 2025, has provided a source of

²⁹⁷ Cohesive Estonia Strategy: https://www.kul.ee/sites/default/files/documents/2022-02/cohesive_estonia_strategy.pdf

²⁹⁸ Ministry of Rural Affairs (Estonia). Kaasamise ja kommunikatsiooni korraldus. <https://www.agri.ee/regionaalareng-uhistransport/kohaliku-ja-regionaalse-arengu-kavandamise-tooriistakast/03-kaasamise-ja-kommunikatsiooni-korraldus>

²⁹⁹ Civic Forum. (2025). Civic space report 2025: Estonia. <https://civic-forum.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Civic-Space-Report-2025-Estonia.pdf>.

³⁰⁰ Maailmakoristuspäev (World Clean Up Day), website: <https://www.maailmakoristus.ee>

national pride and civic motivation. This project, which saw over 31,000 participants in Estonia in May 2025, serves as a powerful model of how civic action can transcend national boundaries to address global challenges like waste management and climate change. The expansion of such "low-barrier" civic activities provides a vital entry point for citizens to engage in collective action, building the social capital necessary to support more traditional forms of political and human rights advocacy.

Civic space in the EU in 2025

Country: Greece

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Disclaimer

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1. CIVIC SPACE PRESSURES

1.1. Deterioration of legal environment: freedom of association

Plans for further restrictions for NGOs/CSOs active in the areas of migration and asylum

a) Summary

On 30 December 2025, the Minister of Migration and Asylum submitted a draft bill for public consultation on the OpenGov website (now enacted into law).³⁰¹ The bill contains proposals to further restrict the work of NGOs and CSOs active in migration and asylum, by criminalising their members. Specifically, the bill proposes revisions to articles 24 and 25 of the Migration Code. The new Article 24 proposes increased penalties for individuals who facilitate the irregular entry or illegal stay of third-country nationals in Greek territory. According to the proposed revision, membership or employment in a registered NGO is introduced as a distinct aggravating circumstance, increasing prison sentences to up to 10 years and more than doubling the financial penalty incurred from 20,000 to 50,000 euros. Additionally, the Minister may order the organisation's deletion from the registry as a result of the charges brought against a member - i.e., before a trial takes place. The NGO may only request renewal of its registration after an irrevocable decision on the innocence of the accused has been made, a process which may take several years given the well-established delays in the administration of justice in Greece. Furthermore, Article 25 provides for increased carrier sanctions, including for members/employees of registered NGOs. Similarly to Article 24, a prison sentence of up to 10 years may be imposed, while the financial penalty is 60,000–100,000 euros instead of 30,000–60,000 euros. It should be noted that membership/employment has been added alongside the aggravating circumstances of smuggling for profit or as a profession.

b) Consequences

The provision was lambasted by the civil society, which noted in particular the criminalisation of membership to an NGO and of humanitarian assistance, the contravention of European and international recommendations and legal obligations, the chilling effect on civil society active in this field, and the adverse consequences for the migrants/refugees themselves who are often framed as smugglers. Its full effects remain to be seen.

³⁰¹ Public online consultation on the draft law of the Ministry of Migration and Asylum entitled: "Promotion of legal migration policies, transposition of Directive (EU) 2024/1233 on a single application procedure for granting third-country nationals a single residence and work permit in the territory of a Member State and on a common set of rights for third-country workers legally residing in a Member State, amendments to the Immigration Code and other provisions" Greek text: Δημόσια ηλεκτρονική διαβούλευση για το σχέδιο νόμου του Υπουργείου Μετανάστευσης και Ασύλου με τίτλο: «Προώθηση πολιτικών νόμιμης μετανάστευσης, ενσωμάτωση της Οδηγίας (ΕΕ) 2024/1233 σχετικά με ενιαία διαδικασία υποβολής αίτησης για τη χορήγηση στους υπηκόους τρίτων χωρών, ενιαίας άδειας διαμονής και εργασίας στην επικράτεια κράτους μέλους και σχετικά με κοινό σύνολο δικαιωμάτων για τους εργαζομένους από τρίτες χώρες που διαμένουν νομίμως σε κράτος μέλος, τροποποιήσεις του Κώδικα Μετανάστευσης και άλλες διατάξεις»

<https://www.opengov.gr/immigration/?p=1985>

1.2. Deterioration of legal environment: freedom of assembly

a) Summary

N/A

b) Consequences

N/A

1.3. Deterioration of legal environment: freedom of expression

Greece maintains media freedom crisis: SLAPPs, surveillance, and press ranking

a) Summary

N/A

b) Consequences

N/A

1.4. Deterioration of legal environment: court cases

Seven-year criminal prosecution of ERCI humanitarian workers and judicial harassment of human rights defenders

a) Summary

The criminal prosecution of 24 ERCI humanitarian workers (Sara Mardini, Seán Binder, Athanasios Karakitsos and others) for their search and rescue activities on Lesbos in 2015–2018 continued with a hearing at the Mytilene Court of Appeals on 4 December 2025, seven years after the initial arrests. The defendants faced felony charges of membership in a criminal organisation, facilitation of illegal entry, and money laundering, carrying potential sentences of up to 20 years. Separately, the criminal case against Panayote Dimitras (Greek Helsinki Monitor) and Tommy Olsen (Aegean Boat Report) for exposing pushback violations at Greece’s borders remained pending. Dimitras remained under a travel ban and faced a separate investigation for alleged financial misconduct (August 2025). An Athens Three-Member Appeals Court dismissed both appeals in a civil defamation case against Dimitras on 18 September 2025, upholding a finding that his human rights reporting was libellous.³⁰²

³⁰² Front Line Defenders, “Human Rights Defenders on trial for baseless charges for assisting people on the move”, 4 December 2025, <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/case/human-rights-defenders-trial-baseless-charges-assisting-people-move-1>; OMCT/FIDH Observatory, “Greece:

b) Consequences

These prosecutions have a profound chilling effect on human rights defenders. The European Court of Human Rights confirmed Greece's "systematic practice" of pushbacks in its landmark judgment *A.R.E. v. Greece* (7 January 2025), yet the defenders who documented these violations face prosecution rather than protection. Front Line Defenders, OMCT, FIDH, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch all documented the chilling effect on humanitarian organisations. According to civil society testimony, search-and-rescue NGOs have scaled back or ceased Aegean operations due to fear of prosecution. The OMCT classified proceedings against Dimitras as a SLAPP.³⁰³

1.5. Attempts to stifle civic engagement through violence, harassment and negative narratives

Police use of force against protesters at Tempí anniversary demonstrations

a) Summary

Multiple protests in 2025 involving hundreds of thousands of people were met with the use of force by Greek police. The most significant incidents occurred around the second anniversary of the Tempí rail disaster (28 February 2023, 57 fatalities). On 26 January 2025, protests in Athens and Thessaloniki saw police riot squads (MAT) use tear gas and batons; a photojournalist and former president of the photojournalist union was injured. Credible video evidence published by Reporters United, EfSyn and Documento showed riot police hitting protesters seemingly at random, including flash-bang grenades and tear gas deployed against peaceful demonstrators, including elderly persons and children. Police also used tear gas against protesting farmers at multiple locations in November and December 2025.³⁰⁴

Continued judicial harassment against migrants' rights defender Panayote Dimitras", 2025, <https://www.omct.org/en/resources/urgent-interventions/greece-continued-judicial-harassment-against-migrants-rights-defender-panayote-dimitras-2>.

³⁰³ Refugee Support Aegean (RSA), "The State of the Rule of Law in Greece", 4 February 2025, <https://rsaegean.org/en/the-state-of-the-rule-of-law-in-greece/>; European Court of Human Rights, *A.R.E. v. Greece*, judgment of 7 January 2025; FIDH/OMCT Observatory statement, <https://www.fidh.org/en/region/europe-central-asia/greece/greece-government-systematic-constraints-and-politically-motivated>.

³⁰⁴ Govwatch (Vouliwatch), "Arbitrary police action against demonstrators during the strike for the Tempí rail disaster (28.2.2025)", 26 March 2025, <https://govwatch.gr/en/finds/astynomiki-aythairesia-kata-diadilot-ri-on-stin-apergia-gia-ta-tempi-28-2-2025/>; Hellenic Parliament, no-confidence debate and vote, 5–7 March 2025 (government survived 157–136); Hellenic Parliament, preliminary inquiry committee on the Tempí crash (convened 4 March 2025), official records at <https://www.hellenicparliament.gr>; Al Jazeera, "Mass protests across Greece to demand justice for Tempe train crash victims", 27 January 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/gallery/2025/1/27/mass-protests-across-greece-to-demand-justice-for-tempe-train-crash-victims>; Euronews, "Clashes erupt between farmers and police in Greece amid protests over EU subsidy delays", 9 December 2025,

b) Consequences

Civil society organisations, including Govwatch (run by Vouliwatch), documented extensive evidence of arbitrary and excessive police force against peaceful demonstrators, representing a potential chilling effect on public assembly. Amnesty International documented ongoing reports of unnecessary and excessive use of force in the policing of demonstrations. The repeated use of chemical agents (tear gas, flash-bang grenades) and batons against peaceful crowds, combined with inadequate accountability for police officers, risks deterring civic participation and has a broader chilling effect on freedom of assembly.³⁰⁵

Greece maintains media freedom crisis: SLAPPs, surveillance, and press ranking

a) Summary

In May 2025, Human Rights Watch published a 101-page report, “From Bad to Worse: The Deterioration of Media Freedom in Greece,” documenting the hostile environment for journalists. Greece ranked last among EU Member States in the 2025 Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index (89th globally). Key concerns identified include: use of Predator spyware against journalists (trial of Intellexa executives commenced March 2025, with the government-linked Supreme Court investigation exonerating state agencies despite documented evidence); abusive SLAPPs under civil defamation law (including retaliatory €3.3 million lawsuit by Grigoris Dimitriadis, nephew of the Prime Minister, against journalists covering the surveillance scandal); government interference with public broadcaster ERT; disproportionate allocation of State advertising to pro-government outlets.³⁰⁶

b) Consequences

Journalists face structural intimidation through abusive litigation and surveillance, creating widespread self-censorship. Ten major press freedom organisations jointly wrote to Prime Minister Mitsotakis in July 2025 demanding reforms. The June 2025 Media Pluralism Monitor found Greece performed badly across all four assessment areas. The ongoing failure to adopt anti-SLAPP legislation at national level, despite the EU Anti-SLAPP Directive (2024/1069), leaves journalists without effective protection against abusive litigation. The RSF index and HRW report both highlight that these conditions chill investigative journalism, particularly reporting on government accountability and migration.³⁰⁷

<https://www.euronews.com/video/2025/12/09/clashes-erupt-between-farmers-and-police-in-greece-amid-protests-over-eu-subsidy-delays>.

³⁰⁵ Amnesty International, Annual Report 2025: Greece, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/europe-and-central-asia/western-central-and-south-eastern-europe/greece/report-greece/>; Govwatch (Vouliwatch), op. cit. (footnote 4).

³⁰⁶ Human Rights Watch, “From Bad to Worse: The Deterioration of Media Freedom in Greece”, 8 May 2025, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2025/05/08/bad-worse/deterioration-media-freedom-greece>; Reporters Without Borders, 2025 World Press Freedom Index: Greece, 8 May 2025, <https://lab.imedd.org/en/rsf-2025-world-press-freedom-index-greece-ranks-last-in-eu/>; Media Freedom Rapid Response (MFRR), Greece Archives, <https://www.mfrr.eu/tag/greece/>.

³⁰⁷ European Centre for Press and Media Freedom (ECPMF) et al., open letter to Prime Minister Mitsotakis, 16 July 2025, <https://www.ecpmf.eu/open-letter-to-the-prime-minister-of-greece/>;

Smear campaigns and negative narratives against NGOs and journalists by government officials

a) Summary

In August 2025, Greek government officials made public statements characterising migration-related NGOs as “political opponents,” alleging “misuse of funds” without substantiated evidence. Minister of Migration Plevris publicly stated NGOs that challenge government migration policy in court should be removed from the registry. Greek Health Minister Georgiadis praised Plevris on social media for “annoying” the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders (Mary Lawlor), characterising her criticism as “tyranny.” Govwatch and Refugee Support Aegean (RSA) documented a sustained trend of smear campaigns and negative narratives by government officials and government-aligned media against NGOs working on migration. The FIDH/OMCT Observatory documented the Greek government labelling NGOs as political actors in service of migration facilitators.³⁰⁸

b) Consequences

These smear campaigns delegitimise civil society in the eyes of the public and create a climate of fear for NGO workers and volunteers. The Racist Violence Recording Network warned in July 2025 that negative public discourse on migration fuelled by political leaders and media normalises xenophobia and risks escalating racist violence. The combination of official smear campaigns with legislative restrictions and criminal prosecutions creates a hostile environment with a strong deterrent effect on civil society actors, particularly those working on migration and asylum.³⁰⁹

1.6. Funding reductions and restrictions

Restrictive funding framework for migration-related NGOs and threat of de-registration

a) Summary

The burdensome NGO registration framework for migration-related organisations, introduced by Law 4662/2020, continued to impose disproportionate financial and administrative requirements in 2025. Under the framework, NGOs must meet complex registration criteria to receive State or EU funding or access reception facilities. In October 2025, the Ministry of Migration and Asylum submitted to Parliament a detailed list of 26 NGOs and their allocated EU and State funds (totalling €191.7 million, principally from AMIF 2021–2027), in response to a parliamentary question by New Democracy MP Dimitris Natsios. The Ministry simultaneously announced plans to intensify financial audits and restrict eligibility to the NGO registry, framing these as measures to ensure “rigorous governance and financial criteria.” The Ministry also announced the appointment of a

International Press Institute (IPI), 17 July 2025, <https://ipi.media/greece-ipi-joins-open-letter-to-pm-mitsotakis-outlining-urgent-need-for-further-media-freedom-reforms/>; Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom, Media Pluralism Monitor 2025.

³⁰⁸ Human Rights Watch, “Greece’s Latest Assault on Civil Society”, 16 September 2025, op. cit. (footnote 2); Amnesty International, Annual Report 2025: Greece, op. cit. (footnote 5); FIDH/OMCT Observatory statement, op. cit. (footnote 9).

³⁰⁹ Racist Violence Recording Network, annual report 2025 (July 2025 warning); Human Rights Watch, World Report 2026: Greece, op. cit. (footnote 3).

National Coordinator for Returns and a National Coordinator for combatting migrant smuggling within its structure (November 2024, operative in 2025), reflecting a policy shift towards enforcement over protection. A new draft bill proposed by Minister Plevris in late 2025 sought to exclude NGOs from framework contracts with the Ministry of Migration and Asylum, cap State subsidies to 30% of an NGO's budget, and further tighten registration requirements. The proposed cap on State subsidies was specifically flagged by the UN Special Rapporteur as an undue restriction on the right to freedom of association under ICCPR Article 22.³¹⁰

b) Consequences

The cumulative effect of registration requirements and funding restrictions, coupled with the threat of de-registration for facilitating “illegal” entry and stay (see section 1.1), has created legal uncertainty and financial instability for civil society organisations. Smaller NGOs are disproportionately burdened. The exclusion of NGOs from framework contracts with the Ministry eliminates a key revenue stream. Civil society organisations report that these measures force them to divert resources from frontline work to administrative compliance, undermining their capacity to provide humanitarian assistance and legal aid to migrants and asylum seekers. FIDH and OMCT expressed deep concern that these measures systematically shrink NGO independence.³¹¹

1.7. Barriers to participation in law and policy-making

Limited and inadequate public consultation in law-making affecting civil society

a) Summary

Public consultations on major legislative proposals affecting civil society actors remained limited in substance and scope in 2025. The repeated amendment of laws — with provisions of the Criminal Code and Code of Criminal Procedure amended by six different laws in 2024 and again in January 2025 — indicates hasty law-making with inadequate consultation. Civil society noted that the government's engagement with NGOs on migration legislation was largely absent: the September 2025 law criminalising illegal stay (Law 5165/2025, adopted by the Hellenic Parliament on 2 September 2025) and the migration bill opened for public consultation via opengov.gr on 30 December 2025 were both advanced without meaningful consideration of civil society input. The Ministry of Interior opened a separate opengov.gr consultation on 24 December 2025 on a draft law covering “Regulations for the public sector workforce, Civil Society Organisations, strengthening of Local Government, the National Pet Registry and other provisions” (closed 8

³¹⁰ UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders, “Greece: analysis of the new law on migration and its impact on HRDs supporting migrants, refugees and asylum seekers”, published 2026 (letter sent September 2025), <https://srdefenders.org/greece-analysis-of-the-new-law-on-migration-and-its-impact-on-hrds-supporting-migrants-refugees-and-asylum-seekers/>; Refugee Support Aegean (RSA), “Draft Law Attacking Civil Society in Greece”, January 2026, <https://rsaegean.org/en/draft-law-attacking-civil-society-in-greece/>.

³¹¹ FIDH/OMCT Observatory statement, op. cit. (footnote 9); ECRE, Expert Opinion on NGO Registry, December 2021 (framework analysis remains current), <https://ecre.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Expert-opinion-NGO-Registry-final.pdf>; Dråpen i Havet, “Growing distress for NGOs in Greece”, <https://www.drapenihavet.no/en/growing-distress-for-organisations-in-greece/>.

January 2026, signed by Minister Theodoros Livanios); while the availability of an online consultation mechanism is formally consistent with transparency standards, civil society noted the windows were exceptionally short — two weeks over the Christmas holiday period — and comments were not demonstrably incorporated. RSA called for a “radical rethink of the regulatory framework” through a process respecting international, EU and constitutional standards.³¹²

b) Consequences

The exclusion of civil society from meaningful participation in law-making on issues directly affecting them undermines democratic accountability. When civil society actors are absent from consultations, the risk of laws that violate fundamental rights increases, as evidenced by the passage of measures condemned by the Council of Europe, UN special rapporteurs and the European Commission. The pattern of rapid, repeated legislative amendments affecting NGOs without consultation creates legal uncertainty and disadvantages smaller organisations that cannot easily adapt.³¹³

1.8. Other developments

September 2025 asylum law criminalising “illegal stay” and its chilling effect on civil society

a) Summary

Greece’s ECtHR conviction in *A.R.E. v. Greece* (7 January 2025) — the first finding of a “systematic practice of pushbacks” — triggered a governmental response that targeted the civil society groups that had brought the case. On 11 July 2025, the Hellenic Parliament adopted Article 79 of Law 5218/2025, suspending for three months the right to seek asylum for persons arriving from North Africa by sea and ordering their immediate deportation without registration — passed as an emergency provision following a parliamentary statement by Prime Minister Mitsotakis announcing cooperation with Libyan authorities to halt migration flows. The Greek Ombudsman, National Commission for Human Rights (NHRI), Union of Greek Administrative Judges, and Plenary of Greek Bar Associations all publicly condemned the measure. Following the ECtHR’s subsequent interim measures ordering Greece to suspend its application, Minister Plevris announced plans to restrict NGOs that use legal channels to challenge government migration policy. This direct

³¹² Refugee Support Aegean (RSA), “The State of the Rule of Law in Greece”, op. cit. (footnote 9); RSA, “Draft Law Attacking Civil Society in Greece”, op. cit. (footnote 12); Ministry of Interior (Greece), public consultation on draft law “Regulations for the public sector workforce, Civil Society Organisations...”, [opengov.gr](https://www.opengov.gr/types/?p=9593), 24 December 2025–8 January 2026, <https://www.opengov.gr/types/?p=9593>; Ministry of Migration and Asylum (Greece), public consultation on migration bill, [opengov.gr](https://www.opengov.gr/home/category/consultations), 30 December 2025, <https://www.opengov.gr/home/category/consultations>.

³¹³ European Commission, Rule of Law Report 2025, chapter on Greece; Human Rights Watch, World Report 2026: Greece, op. cit. (footnote 3).

retaliatory framing — in which legal advocacy before courts is characterised as grounds for de-registration — represents a novel and particularly severe threat to civic space.³¹⁴

b) Consequences

The retaliatory framing of legal advocacy as grounds for NGO de-registration, if enacted, would fundamentally undermine rule of law principles by deterring civil society from accessing courts. The European Commission's Rule of Law reports have noted the narrowing civic space in Greece, particularly for groups working with migrants. Human Rights Watch has called on the Commission to take a stronger stance. The combination of this development with the new migration law represents the most significant single challenge to civic space in Greece in 2025.³¹⁵

2. CIVIC SPACE EXPANSION

2.1. Improvements in legal environment: freedom of association

Not applicable

a) Summary

N/A

b) Consequences

N/A

2.2. Improvements in legal environment: freedom of assembly

Not applicable

a) Summary

N/A

³¹⁴ Human Rights Watch, "Greece's Latest Assault on Civil Society", op. cit. (footnote 2); European Court of Human Rights, A.R.E. v. Greece, judgment of 7 January 2025; UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders, joint communication, op. cit. (footnote 2).

³¹⁵ Human Rights Watch, "Greece's Latest Assault on Civil Society", op. cit. (footnote 2); Human Rights Watch, World Report 2026: Greece, op. cit. (footnote 3); Hellenic Parliament, Law 5218/2025 (Article 79), adopted 11 July 2025 (three-month suspension of asylum applications from North Africa); Hellenic Parliament, Law 5165/2025, adopted 2 September 2025 (criminalisation of irregular stay); Hellenic League for Human Rights et al., joint statement, 16 July 2025, <https://www.hlhr.gr/en/unlawful-suspension-access-asylum-greece/>.

- b) Consequences
N/A

2.3. Improvements in legal environment: freedom of expression

Predator spyware trial progresses: partial accountability for illegal surveillance of journalist

a) Summary

Following the 2022 "Predatorgate" scandal – in which the Predator spyware was confirmed to have been used to surveil at least 87 individuals in Greece including journalists, opposition politicians and senior officials – journalist Thanasis Koukakis filed a criminal complaint against Intellexa, an Athens-based surveillance consortium that marketed Predator to state clients. The ensuing trial saw charges being brought against four Intellexa executives for violation of telephone communication secrecy and unlawful access to personal data in connection with the surveillance of Koukakis and Greek-American Meta employee Artemis Seaford. The trial of the four Intellexa executives (Tal Dilian, Sara Aleksandra Fayssal Hamou, Felix Bitzios, and Giannis Lavranos) for their role in the illegal surveillance of journalist Thanasis Koukakis and others commenced before the Single-Member Misdemeanor Court of First Instance in Athens on 5 March 2025. The trial was adjourned and resumed in the autumn, with witness testimony from over 50 individuals, including investigative journalists who provided evidence of Intellexa's links to state agencies. The trial represented the only active judicial process seeking accountability for the "Predatorgate" scandal, as the Supreme Court had exonerated state agencies in July 2024. During the trial, testimony emerged that Intellexa had collaborated only with State authorities and that government-linked entities were involved in the spyware's distribution.³¹⁶

b) Consequences

Although limited in scope — the charges were misdemeanours rather than the more serious offences that critics argue were committed — the trial represented the only meaningful effort at accountability for widespread illegal surveillance of journalists and civil society actors. The International Press Institute and Reporters Without Borders welcomed the trial's progress, though they noted that no government officials or state intelligence agency personnel faced charges. The trial evidence raised ongoing questions about state involvement, potentially opening avenues for further investigation of espionage charges.³¹⁷

³¹⁶ Balkan Insight, "Greece Starts Trial of Company Executives Linked to Spyware Scandal", 10 April 2025, <https://balkaninsight.com/2025/04/10/the-high-profile-trial-of-wiretapping-scandal-started-in-greece/>; World Socialist Web Site, "The trial proceedings around Greece's spyware and phone-tapping scandal finally commenced on October 22", December 2025, <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2025/12/15/uzhh-d15.html>.

³¹⁷ International Press Institute (IPI), "Greece: Executives of spyware firm used to surveil journalist Thanasis Koukakis sentenced to prison" (conviction February 2026, trial 2025), <https://ipi.media/greece-executives-of-spyware-firm-used-to-surveil-journalist-thanasis-koukakis-sentenced-to-prison/>.

2.4. Improvements in legal environment: court cases

Not applicable

a) Summary

N/A

b) Consequences

N/A

2.5. Positive narratives

Not applicable

a) Summary

N/A

b) Consequences

N/A

2.6. Improvements in funding

Not applicable

a) Summary

N/A

b) Consequences

N/A

2.7. Improvements in participation

Athens OGP Local Action Plan 2025–2028 commits to expanded civic participation

a) Summary

The Municipality of Athens adopted an Action Plan (2025–2028) as part of the Open Government Partnership (OGP) Local initiative, following a co-creation process involving both online public consultation and four thematic in-person workshops held in May 2025. The Action Plan was developed with a multi-stakeholder working group including municipal officials and civil society representatives, with Transparency International Greece serving as co-facilitator. At national level, the OGP Independent Reporting Mechanism's Results Report 2022–2024 (September 2025) found

mixed implementation results. In March 2025, the Secretary General for Digital Governance, speaking at the WeOpenGov civil society forum, committed to establishing a legally mandated multi-stakeholder forum for the OGP process, a commitment that, if implemented, would provide a structured channel for civil society engagement with national-level policy-making. The Action Plan includes commitments on participatory budgeting, accessible open data, energy democracy, housing, accessibility and transparency. Inclusion measures were adopted for workshops, including live-streaming, sign language interpretation, and targeted outreach to groups representing persons with disabilities and persons experiencing energy poverty and housing insecurity.³¹⁸

b) Consequences

While this development is limited to the municipal level and Athens specifically, it represents a concrete example of structured civic participation in law and policy-making. The OGP framework provides an accountability mechanism for the Municipality's commitments, with regular Working Group meetings and external review. This stands in contrast to national-level patterns of inadequate consultation on major legislation.³¹⁹

2.8. Other developments

Not applicable

a) Summary

N/A

b) Consequences

N/A

³¹⁸ Open Government Partnership Local, "Action Plan – Athens, Greece, 2025–2028", <https://www.opengovpartnership.org/documents/action-plan-athens-greece-2025-2028/>; Open Government Partnership, "Greece Results Report 2022–2024", September 2025, <https://www.opengovpartnership.org/documents/greece-results-report-2022-2024/> (noting Greece's commitment by Secretary General for Digital Governance to establish a legally mandated multi-stakeholder forum, March 2025); opengov.gr official consultation platform, <https://www.opengov.gr/home/category/consultations>.

³¹⁹ Ibid.

Spain (ES)

Civic space in the EU in 2025

Country: Spain

Contractor: Instituto Universitario de Migraciones

Author: Reyes Castillo Fernández

Disclaimer

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1. CIVIC SPACE PRESSURES

1.1. Deterioration of legal environment: freedom of assembly

The Citizens Security Law awaits a reform

- a) Summary: the possible reform of the 2015 Law of Citizens Security, the so-called the gag law (*ley mordaza*)³²⁰ is still pending. The reform requested would imply to modify the penalties for disrespect for authority, reducing the crimes of disobedience from serious to minor offences; and addressing issues related to access to justice and migrants' forced returns at the Spanish frontiers from a humanitarian perspective. As far as the use of rubber bullets is concerned, it was agreed to prohibit them and replace them with less harmful means. In cases of disrespectful behaviour, it is sought that the sanction be cancelled if the sanctioned person retracts. Even though the Constitutional Court previously modified the rule on filming police, critics argue the law remains vague and still allows for sanctions if the material endangers officers. Several Spanish courts referred preliminary questions to the CJEU³²¹ to determine whether the gag law, especially for embezzlement crimes, contravenes EU regulations.
- b) Consequences: Human rights groups and media freedom coalitions³²², as well as the National Ombudsman denounced the existence of repeated cases of judicial harassment,

³²⁰ Spain, Head of State (*Jefatura del Estado*), [Organic Law 4/2015, of 30 March, on the protection of public safety](#) (*Ley Orgánica 4/2015, de 30 de marzo, de protección de la seguridad ciudadana*). 31/03/2015.

Spain, National Parliament (*Congreso de los Diputados*), [El Pleno inicia la tramitación de la Ley Orgánica de protección de las libertades y seguridad ciudadana](#), press release, 29 October 2024.

EIPais, [La reforma de la 'ley mordaza' supera un nuevo trámite en el Congreso tras un debate bronco](#), press release, 12 December 2024.

³²¹ [Official Journal of the European Union, C series, C/2024/7303, 16 December 2024, Request for a preliminary ruling from the Tribunal de Cuentas \(Spain\) lodged on 30 July 2024 – Sociedad Civil Catalana, Asociación Cívica y Cultural \(SCC\), Ministerio Fiscal v RAS et al., Case C-523/24, Sociedad Civil Catalana](#) (language of the case: Spanish).

[Official Journal of the European Union, C series, C/2025/882, 17 February 2025, Request for a preliminary ruling from the Tribunal Superior de Justicia de Cataluña \(Spain\) lodged on 10 September 2024 – Ministerio Fiscal, Administración General del Estado, Partido político VOX v NQ, DL, MU, Case C-587/24, VOX and Others](#) (language of the case: Spanish).

Court of Justice of the European Union, Case C-123/25, pending.

Paz-Ares, C. (2026), [Amnesty as seen by Advocate General Spielmann: Three counterfactual questions](#). InDret. Universidad Autónoma de Madrid.

³²² United Nations, Human Rights Council, [Written statement submitted by Genève pour les droits de l'homme : formation internationale, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status](#), 18 September 2025.

Servimedia, [ONG denuncian "seis años de bloqueo parlamentario" en la reforma de la 'Ley Mordaza'](#), press release, 31 May 2022.

Rights International Spain, [Joint petition to the ombudsman to appeal the Citizen Security Law before the Constitutional Court](#) (*Petición conjunta a la defensora del pueblo para que recurra la Ley de Seguridad Ciudadana ante el Tribunal Constitucional*), 7 May 2015.

Euskal Herriko Kontseilu Sozialista (2025), [10 years with the Gag Law](#) (*10 años con la Ley Mordaza*), June de 2025

disproportionate criminal charges, and even surveillance of Catalan politicians, civil society leaders, and journalists. They also criticised the use of this law to punish peaceful protests and restrict the work of journalists and human rights defenders. In order to prevent an arbitrary interpretation by security force agents, it is also requested the modification of the harmful offences for the right to protest, such as articles 36.6, which refers to the offences of disobedience, resistance, or refusal to identify oneself, and 37.4, which refers to disrespect to authority. All of them urged to correct the sanctions under the gag law calling for respect for freedom of expression and peaceful assembly and the full repeal of the law in line with international human rights standards and fundamental rights regulations. According to official statistics³²³, the implementation of the Gag law resulted in nearly 300,000 sanctions over the ten years since its entry into force.

1.2. Deterioration of legal environment: freedom of expression

Lack of official data on hate crimes from the judiciary

- a) Summary: Spain does not have judicial court statistics on hate crimes; instead, the reports of the Attorney General's Office and the Superior Prosecutor's Office of the Autonomous Communities remain the sole sources of information concerning hate crimes. The absence of reliable judicial statistics is a pending issue that hinders policies for the prevention and prosecution of hate speech and hate related cases. It is a challenge as there are not homogenous criteria for collecting and processing those data that allow identify the cases throughout the criminal process³²⁴. Each designated public prosecutor continues to register and monitor hate incidents manually and asymmetrically, without a uniform system.
- b) Consequences: The existing data on hate cases correspond exclusively to the activities carried out by the Public Prosecutor's Office and the judgments issued in the criminal jurisdiction. The statistics of the criminal jurisdiction include neither reports on hate and discrimination incidents that are not criminal offenses, collected by the State Security Forces and Bodies, nor the numerous discriminatory acts that do not constitute a criminal offense. At the same time, the United Nations Human Rights Committee³²⁵ also raised its concerned about the increase in complaints and the prevalence of hate speech, in particular neo-fascist hatred, and hate crimes against the Roma community, Jews, Muslims, the LGBTQ community, Catalan communities and people of African descent.

Center for Civic and Political Rights, [Spain called out by the Committee for discrimination and treatment of migrants](#), press release, 28 July 2025.

The Catalan independence movement (*Asamblea Nacional Catalana Internacional*), [Universal Periodic Review of Spain 2025](#), 6 May 2025.

³²³ Spain, Ministry of Interior (*Ministerio del Interior*), Official crime statistics portal. [Violations of Organic Law 4/2015, on the protection of citizen security](#) (*Infracciones a la Ley Orgánica 4/2015, de protección a la seguridad ciudadana*)

³²⁴ Landa Gorostiza, J et alt., (2026), [Hate Crime Court Decisions in Spain: a Case Study from 2018 to 2022](#) (*Las decisiones judiciales de delitos de odio en España: un estudio de casos de 2018 a 2022*), InDret 1.2025.

³²⁵ United Nations, Human Rights Committee, [Concluding observations on the seventh periodic report of Spain, CCPR/C/ESP/CO/7](#), 26 August 2025. (arts. 2, 19,20 and 26)

Platform in Defence of Freedom of Information (*Plataforma en Defensa de la Libertad de Información*), [Contribution submitted by the freedom of information defense platform \(pdli\) to the list of issues prior to reporting to be adopted on the kingdom of Spain](#), 127th session of the United Nations Human Rights Committee.

1.3. Funding reductions and restrictions

Will the amnesty law be limited by financial embezzlement?

- a) Summary: In 2025 and 2026, the Constitutional Court issued several resolutions³²⁶ confirming the constitutionality of the Amnesty Law (*ley de amnistía*)³²⁷, which entered into force on 11 June 2024 to address the crimes committed in relation to the 2019 Catalan independence process. Previously, the Supreme Court had considered that the Amnesty Law introduced arbitrary discrimination and undermined legal certainty, and several political parties,

³²⁶ Spain, Constitutional Court (*Tribunal Constitucional*), Judgment 137/2025, of June 26, 2025. Constitutional appeal 6436-2024. Filed by more than fifty deputies and more than fifty senators from the Popular parliamentary groups in the Congress of Deputies and the Senate, respectively, in relation to Organic Law 1/2024, of June 10, on amnesty for the institutional, political, and social normalization in Catalonia. Democratic rule of law, prohibition of arbitrariness and separation of powers, reservation of jurisdiction and obligation to comply with final judicial decisions; legislative procedure; principle of equality, rights to effective judicial protection and criminal legality: non-existence of a constitutional prohibition on granting amnesties; partial unconstitutionality of the delimitation of the objective and temporal scope of the law; interpretation in accordance with the Constitution of the provisions related to the termination of proceedings for the clarification of accounting responsibilities. Dissenting opinions (*Pleno. Sentencia 137/2025, de 26 de junio de 2025. Recurso de inconstitucionalidad 6436-2024. Interpuesto por más de cincuenta diputados y más de cincuenta senadores de los grupos parlamentarios Popular en el Congreso de los Diputados y en el Senado, respectivamente, en relación con la Ley Orgánica 1/2024, de 10 de junio, de amnistía para la normalización institucional, política y social en Cataluña. Estado democrático de Derecho, interdicción de la arbitrariedad y separación de poderes, reserva de jurisdicción y obligación de cumplir las resoluciones judiciales firmes; procedimiento legislativo; principio de igualdad, derechos a la tutela judicial efectiva y a la legalidad penal: inexistencia de una prohibición constitucional de conceder amnistías; inconstitucionalidad parcial de la delimitación del ámbito objetivo y temporal de la ley; interpretación conforme con la Constitución de los preceptos relativos a la extinción de procedimientos de depuración de responsabilidades contables. Votos particulares*), 31 July 2025.

Spain, Constitutional Court (*Tribunal Constitucional*), Judgement 165/2025, of October 8, 2025. Constitutional appeal 6486-2024. Filed by the Cortes de Aragón in relation to Organic Law 1/2024, of June 10, on amnesty for the institutional, political, and social normalization in Catalonia. Principles of legal certainty and prohibition of arbitrariness; rights to equality, effective judicial protection, and criminal legality; reservation of jurisdiction; constitutional reform procedure: loss of object of the challenge to the legal provisions that delimit the objective and temporal scope of application of the law; constitutionality of the amnesty (STC 137/2025). Dissenting opinions (*Sentencia 165/2025, de 8 de octubre de 2025. Recurso de inconstitucionalidad 6486-2024. Interpuesto por las Cortes de Aragón en relación con la Ley Orgánica 1/2024, de 10 de junio, de amnistía para la normalización institucional, política y social en Cataluña. Principios de seguridad jurídica e interdicción de la arbitrariedad; derechos a la igualdad, a la tutela judicial efectiva y a la legalidad penal; reserva de jurisdicción; procedimiento de reforma constitucional: pérdida de objeto de la impugnación de los preceptos legales que delimitan el ámbito objetivo y temporal de aplicación de la ley; constitucionalidad de la amnistía (STC 137/2025). Votos particulares*), 8 October 2025.

³²⁷ Spain, Organic Law 1/2024, of 10 June, on amnesty for institutional, political and social normalisation in Catalonia (*Ley Orgánica 1/2024, de 10 de junio, de amnistía para la normalización institucional, política y social en Cataluña*), 11 June 2024.

institutions and regional governments filed unconstitutionality appeals^{328 329}. In November 2025, the Advocate General of the CJEU considered it as compatible with European Union law and not in violation of the principles of equality, non-discrimination, or loyal cooperation³³⁰.

- a) Consequences: Despite the Spanish constitutional endorsement, the application of the amnesty continued to generate controversy³³¹, especially regarding the crime of embezzlement. The cases of embezzlement that entail personal or property benefits will not be subject to amnesty. The Supreme Court considers that the use of public money for the process generated a patrimonial benefit, as the defendants did not use their own resources. Since the amnesty law did not apply, those leaders convicted of embezzlement in the 2019 Catalan process case maintain their disqualification and financial liability sentences³³². The final ruling of the CJEU will set the definitive guidelines for Spanish judges on the application of the law.

1.4. Other developments

Freedom of information transparency versus independence of professionals

³²⁸ Spain, Constitutional Court (*Tribunal Constitucional*), Appeal of unconstitutionality no. 6436-2024, against Organic Law 1/2024, of 10 June, on amnesty for institutional, political and social normalisation in Catalonia (*Recurso de inconstitucionalidad nº 6436-2024, contra la Ley Orgánica 1/2024, de 10 de junio, de amnistía para la normalización institucional, política y social en Cataluña*), 12 November 2024.

³²⁹ Spain, Constitutional Court (*Tribunal Constitucional*), Nota informativa nº 117/2024. El pleno del tribunal constitucional por unanimidad admite a trámite el recurso de inconstitucionalidad interpuesto por las cortes de Aragón contra la ley orgánica 1/2024 de amnistía para la normalización institucional, política y social en Cataluña

Appeals entered by: Aragon, Madrid, Galicia, Andalusia, Valencia, Extremadura, La Rioja, the Balearic Islands, Castilla y León and Castilla-La Mancha, and by the Cantabria and Murcia.

Those appeals were dismissed

El TC estima en parte el recurso de Cantabria y desestima el de Baleares contra la Ley de Amnistía SSTC n.º 137/2025, de 26 de junio, y n.º 165/2025, de 8 de octubre, SSTC n.º 10/2026, de 27 de enero.

³³⁰ Opinion of Advocate General Spielmann, delivered on November 13, 2025, Case C-666/24, Request for a preliminary ruling from the Audiencia Nacional (National High Court, Spain), November 20, 2025,

Opinion of Advocate General Spielmann, delivered on November 13, 2025, Case C-523/24, Request for a preliminary ruling from the Tribunal de Cuentas (Court of Auditors, Spain), November 20, 2025.

³³¹ Aragón, M. et alt. (2024), *Amnesty in Spain: Constitution and Rule of Law*, Colex in 2024.

³³² Persistent Human Rights Violations Against the Catalan People in Spain: An Evidence-Based Submission for the Fourth Cycle of the Universal Periodic Review GE.25-14967 (E)
A/HRC/60/NGO/29 Human Rights Council. Sixtieth session

- a) Summary: In July 2025, a draft law on Transparency and Integrity of the Media³³³ as part of the Action Plan for Democracy³³⁴ was promoted by the central government³³⁵. According to the central government, it seeks to fulfil the constitutional mandate of Article 20.1(d)³³⁶ and, to develop the right to professional secrecy in the exercise of freedom of information. Its objective is to guarantee the protection of the confidentiality of sources. It introduces specific reforms to the Criminal Procedure Law and the Civil Procedure Law so that media professionals can expressly invoke professional secrecy when testifying as witnesses. It also aims to guarantee citizens' right to receive truthful information, reinforcing transparency regarding media ownership and financing. The law provides for the creation of a public media registry managed by the National Commission for Markets and Competition (*Comisión Nacional de los Mercados y la Competencia*) so that citizens can know who the owners are and what public funds the media receive.
- b) Consequences: Several civil society organisations criticise it, stating that the law, under the guise of transparency, could limit editorial independence or fail to sufficiently protect professional secrecy, asking to strictly limit exceptions to avoid indirect risks to the freedom of information. The Association of Information Media (*Asociación de Medios de Información*)³³⁷ critically monitored its impact on informational independence considering that the imposition of a public mandatory media registry could be interpreted as a restriction on the free exercise of journalistic activity and, therefore, be contrary to the spirit of the EMFA Regulation³³⁸. Furthermore, the General Council of the Judiciary (*Consejo General del Poder Judicial*) approved a report requesting more legal certainty and assurance, to address the enabling conditions for adopting restrictive measures on the right to secrecy, to clarify whether the constitutional interest in the investigation of the facts and identification of offenders constitutes a legitimate end, and to specify when restrictions on professional secrecy should be imposed³³⁹. Also, the Council of State (*Consejo del Estado*) warned about the possible

³³³ Spain, Ministry of the Presidency, Justice and Relations with the Courts (*Ministerio de la Presidencia, Justicia y Relaciones con las Cortes*), [Draft Law on Transparency and Integrity of the Media, a regulation that is part of the Action Plan for Democracy](#) (*anteproyecto de Ley de Transparencia e Integridad de los Medios de Comunicación*), 22 July 2025.

³³⁴ Spain, Spanish Central Government (*Gobierno de España*), [Action Plan for Spanish Democracy](#) (*Plan de Acción por la Democracia*), Gobierno de España.

³³⁵ In February 2026, this was approved by the Council of Ministers; to later be open to public hearing and information and consultation to return to the Council of Ministers and receive final approval before beginning its parliamentary processing as a draft law.

³³⁶ Spain, [Spanish constitution](#), 1978.

“Article 20 (1.d). The right to freely communicate or receive truthful information by any means of dissemination whatsoever. The law shall regulate the right to the clause of conscience and professional secrecy in the exercise of these freedoms.”

³³⁷ Spain, General Council of the Judiciary (*Consejo General del Poder Judicial*), [Report on the draft organic law Regulator of the right to professional secrecy of information and service providers of Media](#) (*Informe sobre el anteproyecto de ley orgánica Reguladora del derecho al secreto de los profesionales de la información y de los prestadores de servicios de Medios de comunicación*), October 2025.

Journalism Laboratory. Luca de Tena Foundation (*Laboratorio de periodismo. Fundación Luca de Tena*), [La Asociación de Medios de Información vincula la defensa del periodismo al derecho constitucional a recibir información veraz](#), press release, 26 January 2026.

³³⁸ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32024R1083>

³³⁹ Spain, General Council of the Judiciary (*Consejo General del Poder Judicial*), Report on the draft Organic Law regulating the right to confidentiality for information professionals and media service providers (*Informe sobre el anteproyecto de Ley Orgánica reguladora del derecho al secreto de los*

illegality of some points in this draft proposal and recommended eliminating the registry and proposed, as an alternative, a public database similar to the one already maintained by the Ministry of Culture for publishers.

2. CIVIC SPACE EXPANSION

2.1. Improvements in legal environment: freedom of association

Dissolution of organisations that glorify the Franco dictatorship

- a) Summary: In June 2025, an amendment of the National Organic Law regulating the right of association was approved³⁴⁰. It sought to comply with the seventh additional provision of the 2022 Democratic Memory Law³⁴¹ by including the glorification of the Franco dictatorship as grounds for dissolution, as a step toward historical redress and social education. It also included an additional provision for dissolution based on activities that justify Franco, including praising the 1936 coup or the dictatorship, exalting its leaders, showing contempt for the dignity of the victims or inciting hatred or violence against them.
- b) Consequences: The dissolution of the associations concerned must be carried out by judicial order and may be initiated either by the Public Prosecutor's Office or by memorialist entities and associations, which may pursue criminal proceedings on grounds of offences relating to fundamental rights, especially the offence of unlawful association, when there are instances of incitement to hatred or violence. Since registration is granted only for publicity purposes, it will apply independently of the theoretical aims and activities outlined in the bylaws, regardless of whether the concerned complied with the registration requirement.

2.2. Improvements in participation

A Government Plan strengthening citizen participation

- a) Summary: A new fifth Open Government Plan of Spain 2025-2029³⁴² was approved, seeking to strengthen citizen participation, transparency, and the fight against disinformation by working with civil society through key initiatives such as digitisation, collaborative fact-checking, and integrating contributions from NGOs and citizens into its strategies.
- b) Consequences: It pursued the implementation of measures such as: the incorporation of artificial intelligence (AI) into administration, the establishment of the International Helen Darbishire

profesionales de la información y de los prestadores de servicios de medios de comunicación), press release, 22 October 2025.

³⁴⁰ Spain, Head of State (*Jefatura del Estado*), [Organic Law 3/2025, of June 27, amending Organic Law 1/2002, of March 22, regulating the right of association](#) (*Ley Orgánica 3/2025, de 27 de junio, por la que se modifica la Ley Orgánica 1/2002, de 22 de marzo, reguladora del derecho de asociación*), June 28, 2025.

³⁴¹ Spain, Head of State (*Jefatura del Estado*), [Law 20/2022, of October 19, on Democratic Memory](#) (*Ley 20/2022, de 19 de octubre, de Memoria Democrática*), 20 October 2022.

³⁴² Spain, Ministry for Digital Transformation and Civil Service (*Ministerio para la Transformación Digital y de la Función Pública*), [V Open Government Plan of Spain 2025-2029](#) (*V Plan De Gobierno Abierto De España 2025-2029*), October 2025.

Foundation, the improvement of inter-administrative cooperation, and effort related to the Government Open Forum with civil society.

In terms of civil rights, it focuses on deepening collaboration between administrations and society on the protection of digital rights, paying attention to safeguarding citizens from the risks posed by AI and the digital world. It also enhances citizen participation aiming to increase the number of persons involved in the creation of public policies and decision making processes. Furthermore, it will make public information more easily accessible while strengthening transparency as the main tenet of government action.

Finland (FI)

Civic space in the EU in 2025

Country: Finland

Contractor: Institute for Human Rights, Åbo Akademi University

Author(s): Raija Hanski

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1. CIVIC SPACE PRESSURES

1.1. Deterioration of legal environment: freedom of assembly

Law enforcement during protests and demonstrations

- a) Summary. In January 2025, Amnesty Finland issued its report on the state of freedom of assembly in the country. Amnesty finds that most demonstrations proceed without problems, but that there is room for improvement in police operations as regards legal protection and freedom of assembly. There are inconsistencies in practices among different police departments. At times, the choice of restrictive measures is disproportionate to the objective pursued, and peaceful protests involving civil disobedience are dispersed unnecessarily.³⁴³ Based on an interview survey, Amnesty reports that activists belonging to racialised groups have experienced unequal treatment by the police, as well as instances of racial profiling.³⁴⁴
- b) Consequences. Due to varying interpretations of the Assembly Act by the police, protesters in different parts of the country are not treated equally. Amnesty suggests that a human-rights-friendly interpretation of the act as well as the importance of the principle of proportionality are further emphasised in police training and guidelines.³⁴⁵ Negative experiences of law enforcement,

³⁴³ Amnesty Finland (2025), 'Finnish police does not always ensure adequate protest security — several shortcomings in police actions during Independence Day protests' ([‘Suomen poliisi ei aina turvaa mielenosoituksia riittävästi – poliisin toiminta itsenäisyyspäivänä osoittaa useita ongelmia’](#)), News release, 16 January 2025, with a link to the monitoring report (pdf); Finnish Broadcasting Company (Yleisradio/Rundradion) (2025), [‘Amnesty calls out Finnish police for disproportionate use of force at protests’](#), News release, 16 January 2025; Amnesty Finland (2025), 'Amnesty: Police used a disproportionate amount of force, but could not prevent violent attacks by protesters on May Day in Tampere' ([‘Amnesty: Poliisi käytti suhteetonta voimaa, eikä onnistunut estämään mielenosoittajien väkivaltaisia hyökkäyksiä vappuna Tampereella’](#)), News release, 11 June 2025; Finnish Broadcasting Company (Yleisradio/ Rundradion) (2025), 'Police used less-than-lethal riot gun against May Day protesters in Tampere — Amnesty criticises police for excessive use of force' ([‘Poliisi käytti paineilma-asetta vapun mielenosoittajiin Tampereella – Amnesty arvostelee voimankäyttöä liian rajuksi’](#)), News release, 11 June 2025.

³⁴⁴ Amnesty Finland (2025), [‘Barriers to participation: racism and the unequal right to protest’](#), News release, 13 November 2025.

³⁴⁵ Amnesty Finland (2025), 'Finnish police does not always ensure adequate protest security — several shortcomings in police actions during Independence Day protests' ([‘Suomen poliisi ei aina turvaa mielenosoituksia riittävästi – poliisin toiminta itsenäisyyspäivänä osoittaa useita ongelmia’](#)), News release, 16 January 2025, with a link to the monitoring report (pdf).

along with racism and discrimination in Finnish society more broadly, act as barriers to participation for minority communities.³⁴⁶

1.2. Deterioration of legal environment: freedom of expression

Smear campaign against a journalist

- a) Summary. In 2023, a journalist was subjected to an online smear campaign after writing a newspaper column critical of the right-wing Finns Party and its MPs. She filed several criminal complaints against individuals who had harassed her.³⁴⁷ In March 2025, the prosecutor dropped the investigation in the case, arguing that the journalist was partly responsible for the abuse received because of the “highly stigmatising” comments in her column. The prosecutor found that the offences were minor in nature and the plaintiff’s “contributory conduct” would be a mitigating factor when considering potential penalties. Following this decision, the Union of Journalists in Finland filed a complaint with the Prosecutor General’s Office, stating that a journalist’s normal work cannot be considered “contributory” or used to justify crimes committed against them.³⁴⁸ In April 2025, the Prosecutor General reversed the prosecutor’s decision.³⁴⁹
- b) Consequences. Harassment of journalists can hinder or even prevent reporting on certain issues. To safeguard freedom of expression and public discourse, the Prosecutor General considered it necessary to continue the investigation.

1.3. Deterioration of legal environment: court cases

National security arguments restrict public-interest reporting

³⁴⁶ Amnesty Finland (2025), [‘Barriers to participation: racism and the unequal right to protest’](#), News release, 13 November 2025.

³⁴⁷ European Centre for Press and Media Freedom, [Mapping media freedom](#), accessed 13 February 2026. Council of Europe, Safety of journalists platform, [Alert 167/2023](#), accessed 13 February 2026.

³⁴⁸ The Union of Journalists in Finland (*Suomen journalistiliitto/Finlands journalistförbund*) (2025), [‘UJF complains to the Prosecutor General concerning the case of journalist Ida Erämaa’](#), News release, 2 April 2025.

³⁴⁹ Finland, National Prosecution Authority (*syyttäjälaitos/åklagarmyndigheten*) (2025), ‘The preliminary investigation into the defamation directed at the Iltalehti journalist will continue’ ([‘Iltalehden toimittajaan kohdistuneiden kunnianloukkausten esitutkintaa jatketaan’](#)), News release, 17 April 2025.

- a) Summary. In July 2025, the court of appeal convicted two journalists to a suspended prison sentence and a fine for revealing and attempting to reveal state secrets.³⁵⁰ The case concerns an article about military intelligence services, published in 2017, and a series of planned but unpublished follow-up stories. At the time, new legislation was being prepared to grant the military security services broader intelligence-gathering powers. The reporters had access to classified information acquired by the newspaper. The court held that the article and drafts did not contribute to a public debate, as the newspaper had argued, but mainly aimed to disclose state secrets. The decision is final. The Supreme Court did not grant leave to appeal in the case.³⁵¹
- b) Consequences. The verdict was criticised because it extends punishment to unpublished articles.³⁵² This is likely to hamper public-interest reporting, if journalists must consider the risk of prosecution when drafting articles based on sensitive information. Another concern is that the journalists were charged and held liable, but not the editorial management team which made the actual publication decision. The Union of Journalists in Finland and the newspaper are considering taking the matter to the ECtHR.³⁵³

1.4. Funding reductions and restrictions

Government budgetary cuts affect CSO funding

- a) Summary. Due to budgetary cuts by the current government, discretionary government grants for CSOs have been significantly reduced. Grants awarded by municipalities and wellbeing services counties, or EU project funding, are important sources of support for CSOs but do not compensate

³⁵⁰ Finland, Helsinki Court of Appeal (*Helsingin hovioikeus/Helsingfors hovrätt*), decision R 23/1803, 1 July 2025 (not available online); Mapping Media Freedom (2025), '[Appeal court confirms conviction of two Helsingin Sanomat over military intelligence reporting](#)', accessed 19 February 2026.

³⁵¹ Finland, Supreme Court (*Korkein oikeus/Högsta domstolen*) (2025), 'The Supreme Court denied all requests for leave to appeal in the so-called Viestikoekeskus case' ('[KKO hylkäsi kaikki valituslupahakemukset ns. Viestikoekeskus asiassa](#)'), News release, 16 December 2025.

³⁵² International Press Institute (2025), '[Finland: Appeal court verdict on Helsingin Sanomat state secrets case sends a chilling message](#)', News release, 2 July 2025; Union of Journalists in Finland (*Suomen Journalistiliitto/Finlands journalistförbund*) (2025), 'The court of appeal decision in the Viestikoekeskus case is an extremely worrying precedent', ('[Hovioikeuden päätös Viestikoekeskus-asiassa on erittäin huolestuttava ennakkotapaus](#)'), News release, 1 July 2025.

³⁵³ Union of Journalists in Finland (*Suomen Journalistiliitto/Finlands journalistförbund*) (2025), 'The Union of Journalists in Finland: The Viestikoekeskus case is not wrapped up, even though the legal process in Finland ended' ('[Journalistiliitto: Viestikoekeskusjuttu ei ole tällä taputeltu, vaikka oikeusprosessi Suomessa jääkin tähän](#)'), News release, 16 December 2025; Marttinen, M. (2025), 'The verdicts in the Viestikoekeskus case remain in force — "This is a precedent in the field"' ('[Viestikoekeskustuomiot jäävät lainvoimaisiksi – "Tämä jää alalle ennakkotapaukseksi"](#)'), *Journalisti*, 16 December 2025.

for the cuts.³⁵⁴ Smaller CSOs in particular face challenges in applying for and managing funding and have limited resources to participate in funding calls, which are often considered demanding.³⁵⁵ The government's CSO Strategy 2023–2027 outlines both rapid and long-term measures to enhance CSOs' own fundraising.³⁵⁶ As a rapid measure the government proposed that, starting in 2026, private donations to CSOs organising youth, sports, physical and cultural activities and, under certain conditions, children's activities, would be tax-deductible. Regrettably, the bill containing the necessary legislative amendments was not finalised in time before the approval of the 2026 budget. The proposal has been postponed to 2027.³⁵⁷

- b) Consequences. CSOs in Finland depend to a large extent on public funds. The cuts in discretionary government grants have an immediate effect on the operating conditions of CSOs, including their staff resources and activities. The measures outlined in the CSO Strategy may help enhance CSOs' capacity to raise their own funds in the long term, but they do not offer a rapid solution to the immediate negative impact of the funding cuts.

1.5. Barriers to participation in law and policy-making

Dialogue between public administration and civil society

- a) Summary. In April 2025, Open Government Finland carried out a survey for government agencies and local and regional public administration, examining the state and promotion of open government in the country. A positive finding was that consultation with stakeholders and citizens during the preparatory phase of projects is extensive. Municipalities in particular have paid attention to hearing those in more vulnerable position.³⁵⁸ A finding of concern is that public

³⁵⁴ Finland, Ministry of Justice (*oikeusministeriö/justitieministeriet*) (2025), Civil Society Policy Requires a Common Direction and Monitoring: Final report on the 2022–2026 term of the Advisory Board on Civil Society Policy (*Kansalaisyhteiskuntapolitiikka tarvitsee yhteistä suuntaa ja seuranta: Loppuraportti kansalaisyhteiskuntapolitiikan neuvottelukunnan toimikaudesta 2022–2026*), Helsinki, Publications of the Ministry of Justice, Operations and administration 2025:5, p. 31.

³⁵⁵ Haltia-Nurmi, M., Merenheimo, T. (2026), Putting EU project funding to use: Developing the capabilities of civil society organisations (*EU-hankerahoitus käyttöön: Kansalaisjärjestöjen valmiuksien kehittäminen*), Helsinki, Publications of the Ministry of Justice, Reports and guidelines 2026:9, pp. 33–34.

³⁵⁶ Finland, Ministry of Justice (*oikeusministeriö/justitieministeriet*) (2024), *CSO Strategy 2023–2027: Government resolution on the development of civic space*, Helsinki, Publications of the Ministry of Justice, Memorandums and statements 2024:22.

³⁵⁷ Finland, Ministry of Finance (*valtiovarainministeriö/finansministeriet*), statute drafting project [VM 143:00/2025](#); Minister of Finance's response to a written question in Parliament, [KKV 366/2025 vp](#), 25 November 2025.

³⁵⁸ Open Government Finland (*Avoin hallinto/Öppen förvaltning*) (2025), Action Plan 2023–2027 (*Toimintaohjelma 2023–2027*), Open government survey 2025 (*Avoimen hallinnon kysely 2025*), pp. 54, 59, 73.

administration organisations are no longer strengthening staff contacts with civil society actors to promote participation as actively as they did at the time of the previous survey in 2023.³⁵⁹ The survey does not elaborate on the possible reasons for this negative trend.

- b) Consequences. According to the overall analysis of the survey, open government is reflected in strategies and communication, but not sufficiently in practical measures.³⁶⁰ If the active promotion of participation diminishes, there is a risk that civil society actors are merely informed rather than engaged. Hearing the views of civil society representatives is particularly important in the current situation, in which government funding cuts affect the advocacy work of CSOs.³⁶¹

2. CIVIC SPACE EXPANSION

2.1. Improvements in funding

Enhancing CSO capacity to secure funding

- a) Summary. In 2025, several reports were published as part of the implementation of the government CSO Strategy 2023–2027,³⁶² which also address CSO funding. The reports examine the development of legislation on organisational and voluntary activities,³⁶³ grants awarded to organisations by municipalities and wellbeing services counties,³⁶⁴ and the current capabilities of

³⁵⁹ Open Government Finland (*Avoim hallinto/Öppen förvaltning*) (2025), Action Plan 2023–2027 (*Toimintaohjelma 2023–2027*), Open government survey 2025 (*Avoimen hallinnon kysely 2025*), pp. 65, 73.

³⁶⁰ Open Government Finland (*Avoim hallinto/Öppen förvaltning*) (2025), Action Plan 2023–2027 (*Toimintaohjelma 2023–2027*), Interim assessment, 2025 (*Väliarviointi*, 2025), p. 10 and Open government survey 2025 (*Avoimen hallinnon kysely 2025*), p. 88.

³⁶¹ Open Government Finland (*Avoim hallinto/Öppen förvaltning*) (2025), Action Plan 2023–2027 (*Toimintaohjelma 2023–2027*), Interim assessment, 2025 (*Väliarviointi*, 2025), p. 9–10 and Open government survey 2025 (*Avoimen hallinnon kysely 2025*), p. 73.

³⁶² Finland, Ministry of Justice (*oikeusministeriö/justitieministeriet*) (2024), *CSO Strategy 2023–2027: Government resolution on the development of civic space*, Helsinki, Publications of the Ministry of Justice, Memorandums and statements 2024:22.

³⁶³ Viertola, J. (2025), Developing legislation on organisational and voluntary activities: Rapporteur's Report (*Järjestö- ja vapaaehtoistoimintaa koskevan sääntelyn kehittämisen: Selvityshenkilön raportti*), Helsinki, Publications of the Ministry of Justice, Reports and guidelines 2025:26.

³⁶⁴ Manu, S., Pihlajamäki, T., Siltanen, K., Vainio, A. (2025), Grants awarded by municipalities and wellbeing services counties to organisations and foundations: Report on grant activities and related information processes (*Kuntien ja hyvinvointialueiden avustukset järjestöille ja säätiöille: Selvitys avustustoiminnasta ja siihen liittyvistä tietoprosesseista*), Helsinki, Publications of the Ministry of Justice, Reports and guidelines 2025:31.

CSOs to apply for and utilise EU project funding.³⁶⁵ A reform of discretionary government grant practices is also being prepared.³⁶⁶

- b) Consequences. The reports propose measures that, if eventually implemented, could help reduce the administrative burden on CSOs in funding application and management. In addition, tools could be developed to help CSOs assess their own capacities, improve their operations, and enhance the quality of their funding applications.

³⁶⁵ Finland, Ministry of Justice (*oikeusministeriö/justitieministeriet*) (2025), 'Seeking ways to utilise EU funding, together with CSOs' (['Kansalaisjärjestöjen kanssa etsitään keinoja EU-rahoituksen hyödyntämiseksi'](#)), News release, 28 August 2025. An assessment report was published on 18 March 2026. Haltia-Nurmi, M., Merenheimo, T. (2026), Putting EU project funding to use: Developing the capabilities of civil society organisations ([EU-hankerahoitus käyttöön: Kansalaisjärjestöjen valmiuksien kehittäminen](#)), Helsinki, Publications of the Ministry of Justice, Reports and guidelines 2026:9.

³⁶⁶ Finnish Government (*valtioneuvosto/statsrådet*) (2025), Reform of Discretionary Government Grant Practices: Proposals for government grant authorities ([Valtionavustuskäytänteiden uudistaminen: Ehdotuksia valtionapuviranomaisille](#)). Helsinki, Publications of the Finnish Government 2025:90.

France (FR)

Civic space in the EU in 2025

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Disclaimer

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1. CIVIC SPACE PRESSURES

1.1. Deterioration of legal environment: freedom of association

Material restrictions imposed by public authorities on protesting associations

a) Summary

The year 2025 confirmed the practice of certain public authorities of imposing financial restrictions and burdens on associations that challenge their actions or policies. This phenomenon has intensified over the past few years, with new rules imposed on freedom of association.

In particular, access to state subsidies was reduced through new measures introduced by State actors. In 2021, the law reinforcing compliance with the principles of the French Republic created the Republican commitment contract (*contrat d'engagement républicain*), or *CER*, which imposed seven commitments on associations applying for financial or material public subsidies. In particular, associations must commit to comply with the laws of the French Republic and commit to “respect” the symbols of the Republic, such as the flag or national anthem.³⁶⁷ The wording and scope of the *CER* requirements have been criticized as too broad and open to interpretation.³⁶⁸ The *CER* does not change the discretionary rights that local authorities have over their subsidies, but imposes a mandatory and generalised control for subsidy applications; and introduced new reasons for which subsidies may be withdrawn.

At the time of its adoption, the *CER* was one of the tools intended to combat Islamist separatism,³⁶⁹ enabling prefects – government officials who represent the central state at the local level - to refuse applications for funding if the organisation has engaged in “anti-republican” activities. The vagueness of certain provisions and the possibility of unilaterally withdrawing a subsidy had already been criticised by the French Commission for Human Rights (*Commission nationale consultative des droits de l'homme - CNCDH*), which said that the *CER* “would give rise to a general climate of mistrust towards associations”.³⁷⁰

³⁶⁷ France, Government, The Republican commitment contract (CER) - Practical guide (*Le contrat d'engagement républicain (CER) - Guide pratique*), February 2023.

³⁶⁸ France, La Ligue des Droits de L'Homme (2022), The Republican commitment contract, local elected official must protect freedom of association (*Le contrat d'engagement républicain les élus locaux doivent protéger la liberté associative*), 14 February 2025.

³⁶⁹ France, *Le Monde* (2025), The Republican commitment contract, a tool against separatism, sometimes shifted away from its initial aim ('*Le contrat d'engagement républicain, outil contre le séparatisme, parfois détourné de son objet*'), 9 April 2025.

³⁷⁰ France, Commission for Human Rights (*Commission nationale consultative des droits de l'Homme - CNCDH*), *Compliance with fundamental freedoms must be central to compliance with the Principles of*

It is difficult to assess how often the tool has been used since it came into force, as highlighted by an assessment of the tool by the French National Assembly's law commission (*commission des lois de l'Assemblée nationale*) in 2025.³⁷¹ However, four years after its implementation, it has become clear that the *CER* has often been shifted away from its initial aim. One hundred and two associations and the voluntary association media have referred the matter of the *CER* to the High council for associative life (*Haut Conseil à la vie associative - HCVA*), asking it to rule on whether the republican commitment contract has been abused of by state officials.

Beyond the strict framework of the Republican commitment contract (*Contrat d'engagement républicain*), other associations have had their subsidies withdrawn for arbitrary or political reasons, without explicit mention of the *CER*. For example, the Rhône departmental council withdrew the annual subsidies of three associations after they sent a letter to 200 elected representatives criticising a river port project. At the departmental council meeting, the president stated: "You can't take money from the department and go against the department's projects and attack elected representatives" and "I've had enough of these associations of barefoot dancers coming to explain to us what we, as elected representatives, should be doing in our areas". The meeting approved the cancellation of subsidies ranging from €24,000 to €28,000.³⁷²

Three associations have launched a legal action to contest the refusal to award subsidies before the court of the city of Lyon, in an attempt to create a precedent that would better protect associations.

³⁷³

b) Consequences

The tendency of public authorities to arbitrarily withdraw or refuse subsidies to associations has been widely criticised. At the beginning of 2023, the Voluntary association movement (*Mouvement Associatif*), the umbrella organisation for 700,000 associations in France, had published an open letter

[the Republic](#) (*Le respect des libertés fondamentales doit être au cœur du respect des Principes de la République*), 4 February 2021.

³⁷¹ France, Committee on legislation (*Commission des lois*)(2025), Thematic control session: Assessment of the law reinforcing compliance with the principles of the French republic (*Séance thématique de contrôle : Evaluation of the law consolidating respect for the principles of the Republic*), January 2025.

³⁷² France, *Le Monde* (2025), Barefoot dancers: the chairman of the Rhône department cuts funding to three critical environmental associations ([Des danseurs aux pieds nus : le président du département du Rhône coupe les aides à trois associations environnementales critiques](#)), 15 April 2025.

³⁷³ France, Immigrant information and support group (*Groupe d'information et de soutien des immigrés*) (2025), Voluntary work for the Human Rights League ([Volunteer work for the Ligue des droits de l'Homme](#)).

to government officials calling for the repeal of this tool, denouncing its harmful effects. In particular, the letter denounced the “threat to the independence of voluntary associations”.³⁷⁴

The financial restrictions placed on associations for apparently political reasons are first and foremost evidence of a desire for control on the part of certain public authorities, which undermines associations' freedom of expression. According to a number of associations, the main reason behind the withdrawal or refusal of grants – despite the justification of non-compliance with the CER – is the associations' involvement in causes that are not endorsed by public authorities.³⁷⁵ This phenomenon spreads the idea that only associations favourable to the policy in place could receive subsidies.³⁷⁶

In this way, financial obstacles put pressure on organisations to remain neutral (“*injonction à la neutralité*”), a phenomenon documented by the Observatory of associative freedoms (*Observatoire des Libertés Associatives*), which posits that funding is becoming a political regulation tool.³⁷⁷

In addition to the consequences for the voluntary associations that are directly affected, the phenomenon of financial restrictions has a dissuasive effect on the entire voluntary association fabric. Indeed, sanctions and warnings can deter associations from carrying out actions critical to authorities, in order to protect themselves from possible consequences. According to a survey carried out in 2025 by the Observatory of associative freedoms (*Observatoire des Libertés associatives*), 41% of so-called “citizens' associations”, i.e. those involved in advocacy, organising demonstrations and debates, or taking a public stance through forums or petitions, have already censored themselves to avoid conflict with the public authorities. This percentage drops to 19% for associations that do not have any “civic” activities.³⁷⁸ The authors of the survey criticised what they describe as a political and ideological stance by the state, namely the idea that associations should refrain from taking political positions.

The CNCDH opinion on the restriction of civic space therefore concluded that the adoption of the CER and its use by public authorities has “marked a further stage in the deterioration observed for some

³⁷⁴ France, *Journal du Dimanche* (2025), Alert on voluntary association freedoms - Voluntary association movement tribune (*Alert sur les libertés associative - Tribune du Mouvement Associatif*), 21 April 2023.

³⁷⁵ World Organisation Against Torture, International Federation for Human Rights, French League for the Defence of Human Rights (*Ligue des droits de l'homme*) (2025), France: democracy on the brink (http://www.omct.org/site-resources/legacy/20250916__Rapport-OBS-FRANCE_FR_WEB.pdf); France, LDH, *Report “France, a democracy in decline”* (*Rapport “France : démocratie en décrochage”*), October 2025.

³⁷⁶ France, Monitoring Action for Civic Space (2026), *Rapport national, 2025: France*, 13 February 2026.

³⁷⁷ France, Observatory of voluntary association freedoms (*Observatoire des Libertés Associatives*) (2025), Neutralising voluntary associations - Investigating an injunction to depoliticise (*Neutraliser le monde associatif - Enquête sur une injonction à la dépolitisation*), Paris, 12 February 2026.

³⁷⁸ France, Rodrigues, C. and Talpin, J., The state of relations between voluntary associations and public authorities. A national quantitative survey (*L'état des relations entre associations et pouvoirs publics. Une enquête quantitative nationale*), ANR voluntary association freedom and citizens' initiatives (Projet ANR “Libertés associatives et initiatives citoyennes”), 30 June 2025.

time now in the relations between voluntary associations and public authorities.ve framework was eventually adopted through the law on criminal liability and domestic security, which authorises the use of drones under stricter conditions. This system came into force with decree No. 2023-283 of April 2023.³⁷⁹

Drones with image capture can therefore be used to ensure the “security of gatherings of people on the public highway (...) when such gatherings are likely to cause serious disturbance to public order”.³⁸⁰ Their use must be sanctioned by an administrative order issued by a local state representative (prefect) that details the reasons, the geographical scope under surveillance, the number of drones and the length of time the drones will be used. In five years, the size of the national fleet of drones has tripled, for a total of 965 drones for the gendarmerie and 650 for the police, according to the Ministry of the Interior.

By 2025, the use of drones at public demonstrations had become much more widespread. This development was particularly evident during the Let's block everything (“*Bloquons-Tout*”) movement, a nationwide movement organised on 10 September 2025 to protest against the government's austerity policy. The Association for the defence of constitutional freedoms (*Association de défense des libertés constitutionnelles*) has identified 82 prefectoral decrees authorising the use of drones in France.³⁸¹ Ninety-eight orders were issued for the demonstration organised a week later on 18 September.

Many appeals have contested the widespread use of drones during the autumn 2025 demonstrations on the grounds of a breach of the right to freedom of peaceful assembly by a coalition of civil liberties associations. In particular, they criticised the often late publication of orders, which makes it more difficult to contest them, and the disproportionate scope of authorisations.³⁸²

c) Consequences

The widespread use of surveillance measures is further undermining the right to peaceful assembly in France, at a time when United Nations experts have been denouncing the increasing restrictions on demonstrators' rights for several years.³⁸³

³⁷⁹ France, [Decree No. 2023-283 on the use of image processing devices installed on aircraft for administrative police purposes](#), 19 April 2023.

³⁸⁰ France, Domestic security code (*Code de la sécurité intérieure*), Article L. 242-5.

³⁸¹ France, *Libération* (2025), Security: In France, an “unprecedented” deployment of drones in the surveillance of demonstrations ([‘Sécurité : En France, un déploiement «sans précédent» de drones pour surveiller les manifestations’](#)), 18 September 2025.

³⁸² France, *Médiapart* (2025), Appeals are flying thick and fast against the “droning of the public arena” ([‘Contre la “dronisation de l’espace public”, les recours volent en escadrille’](#)), 3 December 2025.

³⁸³ United Nations (UN), Special procedures, France: UN experts denounce serious restrictions on the rights of “yellow vest” protesters ([France: des experts de l'ONU dénoncent des restrictions graves aux droits des manifestants “gilets jaunes”](#)), 14 February 2019.

Provided for by law as a last-resort tool of reserved for exceptional circumstances, drones have become commonplace. However, according to many human rights defenders, the use of drones can deter people from taking part in demonstrations,³⁸⁴ in the same way as police violence or mass arrests.

The CNCDH expressed serious concerns about the use of drones in its opinion on the bill on global security of 2020:

“The use of airborne cameras, particularly to monitor demonstrations, is likely to dissuade people from demonstrating, as they do not know what will happen to the images collected by these airborne cameras. The CNCDH also noted that these surveillance tools can also be intimidating in themselves, in particular when they are fitted with a loudspeaker. In this regard, the bill represents a threat to the effective exercise of the right to freedom of peaceful assembly”.³⁸⁵

It then repeated its warning in its 2024 opinion on Surveillance of the public space (*Surveillance de l'espace public*), noting that “airborne cameras (...) have been in widespread use since their legalisation”.³⁸⁶

According to the domestic CGT police union (*syndicat de policiers CGT Intérieur - Police*), “the widespread use of drones is part of a more general trend towards tougher policing and the criminalisation (*judiciarisation*) of demonstrations”³⁸⁷. This analysis is shared by the CIVICUS Monitor, a global research platform on civil liberties, which, in its annual assessment for 2025, downgraded France's civic space from “narrowed” to “obstructed”. To justify this setback, the report cited “a continued and systemic trampling of people’s right to protest peacefully”, and measures such as “bans, militarised police and hundreds of detentions”³⁸⁸.

³⁸⁴ France, *Le Monde* (2025), How drone surveillance became widespread in 2024: more than 1,800 authorisations throughout France ([‘Comment la surveillance par drone s’est généralisée en 2024 : plus de 1800 autorisations dans toute la France’](#)) 13 January 2025.

³⁸⁵ France, Commission for Human Rights (*Commission nationale consultative des droits de l'Homme - CNCDH*) (2020), Opinion on the bill on global security ([Avis sur la proposition de loi relative à la sécurité globale](#)), 26 November 2020.

³⁸⁶ France, Commission for Human Rights (*Commission nationale consultative des droits de l'Homme - CNCDH*) (2024), Opinion on the bill on the surveillance of the public arena ([Avis sur la surveillance de l'espace public, A-2024-5](#)), 20 June 2024.

³⁸⁷ France, *La Vie Ouvrière* (2025), Police drones: a worrying tightening of policing at demonstrations ([‘Drones policiers : un durcissement inquiétant du maintien de l’ordre en manifestations’](#)), 26 September 2025.

³⁸⁸ France, Civicus, Monitor (2025), [‘France’s civil space rated “Obstructed” as authorities clamp down on dissent’](#), 9 décembre 2025.

1.2. Deterioration of legal environment: court cases

Criminalisation of the actions of climate activists in 2025

a) Summary

In 2025, the prosecution and punishment of environmental activists intensified. Civil disobedience actions were the most targeted.

The Support movement for environmentalists (*Mouvement de soutien des défenseurs de l'environnement - MSDE*) recorded 95 legal proceedings in 2025, up from 55 in 2023. According to the MSDE, all types of legal proceedings increased, with more judicial controls, property searches, preventive arrests and trials. It should be noted that none of these proceedings involved cases of personal injury.

In September 2025, an activist was sentenced to six months in prison and was ordered to pay €163,000 in damages, the highest sentence ever handed down for an act of environmental civil disobedience in France. The activist had carried out a non-violent act of protest by spraying paint on the facade of the *Hôtel Matignon*, the building housing the Prime Minister, in 2023. The activist was convicted for “damaging classified property in a gang with deliberate violence against people acting in an official capacity” (“*dégradation de bien classé en réunion avec violences volontaires sur personnes dépositaires de l'autorité publique*”).³⁸⁹ In another case, 16 activists who had climbed on top of trees to prevent them being cut down for a new motorway project were also given suspended fines of around €500 for preventing “the execution of works in the public interest”.³⁹⁰

Many activists faced cumbersome legal proceedings due to their actions. In December 2025, 8 members of the *Extinction Rébellion* association were put on trial for painting graffiti on a bridge to protest against a plan to bury toxic waste. While the graffiti was initially categorised by the gendarmes as “paint markings”, the public prosecutor's office reclassified them as substantial, irreversible damage, meaning that the activists could be prosecuted more severely. The prosecutor called for the activists to be given a three-month suspended prison sentence, for an offence that could lead to a fine or community service.³⁹¹ The *Extinction Rébellion* group was the subject of more than 20 court cases in 2025, according to the Support movement for environmentalists (*Mouvement de soutien des défenseurs de l'environnement - MSDE*).

According to an Amnesty International report published in 2025, “France has adopted a veritable arsenal of legislation” targeting demonstrations, with a proliferation of laws governing the organisation of, or participation in, a protest.³⁹² As such, activists face a variety of legal proceedings. For example,

³⁸⁹ France, *Le Monde*, Six months in prison for throwing paint, a sentence that highlights the tougher crackdown on environmental activists ([‘Six mois de prison ferme pour un jet de peinture, une peine révélatrice du durcissement de la répression contre les militants écologistes’](#)), 1 November 2025.

³⁹⁰ France, *Ouest France*, A69 motorway: 16 environmental activists given suspended fines ([‘Autoroute A69 : 16 militants écologistes condamnés à des amendes avec sursis’](#)), 1 July 2025.

³⁹¹ France, Human Rights League (*La Ligue des droits de l'Homme*) (2026), LDH's contribution to the rule of law in France 2025 ([Contribution de la LDH pour Etat de droit en France 2025](#)).

³⁹² France, Amnesty International, France's strategy to prevent climate action (*La stratégie de la France pour empêcher l'action climatique*), 3 July 2025.

some environmental protesters were placed under judicial supervision before their trial, with a strict ban on taking part in any demonstration.³⁹³

This phenomenon is part of a trend that has been observed for a number of years, and which has been denounced by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Environmental Defenders under the Aarhus Convention. He sees a growing crackdown on environmental activists, labelled as “eco-terrorists” by government officials, and prosecuted for offences that come under the heading of anti-terrorism.³⁹⁴

b) Consequences

The repressive approach to civil disobedience is part of a more general “criminalisation” of environmental activism. According to the Human Rights League (*Ligue des Droits de l'Homme*), these prosecutions show a certain willingness on the part of public authorities, which use considerable resources to prosecute activists accused of minor offences.³⁹⁵ The strategy of criminalising environmental protests had also been adopted by the former Ministry of Justice, which recommended “specific judicial treatment” for protests against land development projects.³⁹⁶

In a number of cases, arguments based on the climate emergency, the state of necessity or freedom of expression have been rejected by the courts, although they have been recognised in European case law on the issue. Indeed, in a decision of 3 July 2025, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that even if actions involved committing offences - and can lead to limited legal consequences in the event of property damage - activists’ freedom of expression must be granted an adequate level of protection.³⁹⁷

³⁹³ United Nations (UN), UN Special Rapporteur on Environmental Defenders under the Aarhus Convention, State repression of environmental protests and civil disobedience: a major threat to democracy and human rights ([*Répression par l'État des manifestations et de la désobéissance civile environnementales : une menace majeure pour les droits humains et la démocratie*](#)), February 2024.

³⁹⁴ France, *Le Monde* (2023), In Sainte-Soline, the State's response seemed to me to be grossly disproportionate ("[*A Sainte-Soline, la réponse de l'Etat m'a paru largement disproportionnée*](#)"), 20 March 2023; United Nations (UN), UN Special Rapporteur on Environmental Defenders under the Aarhus Convention, State repression of environmental protests and civil disobedience: a major threat to democracy and human rights ([*Répression par l'État des manifestations et de la désobéissance civile environnementales : une menace majeure pour les droits humains et la démocratie*](#)), February 2024.

³⁹⁵ France, Human Rights League (*La Ligue des droits de l'Homme*) (2026), LDH's contribution to the rule of law in France 2025 ([*Contribution de la LDH pour Etat de droit en France 2025*](#)).

³⁹⁶ France, Médiapart (2022), Mobilisation against mega-basins: repressive instructions from the Minister of Justice ([*Mobilisation contre les mégabassines : les instructions répressives du garde des Sceaux*](#)), 15 November 2022.

³⁹⁷ European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), Case of Ludes and Others v. France ([*Affaire Ludes et Autres c. France*](#)), 3 July 2025.

This criminalisation weakens environmental associations, which have to devote resources to court cases, to the detriment of their action to combat climate change. Even in the event of acquittal, prosecution places a financial and human burden on individuals and organisations, ultimately lessening their capacity for action.³⁹⁸

In addition, the generalisation of legal proceedings has a strong dissuasive effect. According to activists, high-profile trials and prosecutions dissuade some activists from engaging in acts of civil disobedience³⁹⁹. According to a journalist specialising in environmental issues, such repressive measures help to undermine the legitimacy of the environmental cause.⁴⁰⁰

In conclusion, the repression of environmental activists represents “a major threat to democracy and human rights”, according to a report published in 2024 by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Environmental Defenders. It pointed out that environmental activists exercise their fundamental rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association, guaranteed by international human rights law, in peaceful acts of civil disobedience.⁴⁰¹ In addition to citizens' freedom of expression and demonstration, the fight against climate change is being undermined.

1.3. Attempts to stifle civic engagement through violence, harassment and negative narratives

Generalisation of negative rhetoric about civil society on the part of public stakeholders

a) Summary

For a number of years, statements by French authorities have been increasingly hostile towards civil society, a phenomenon that intensified in 2025. In its opinion on the restriction of civic space of 17 June 2025, the CNCDH warned of the trend towards intensifying campaigns to stigmatise and demonise [human rights] defenders (*“renforcement des campagnes de stigmatisation et de*

³⁹⁸ France, Amnesty International (2025), France's strategy to prevent climate action ([La stratégie de la France pour empêcher l'action climatique](#)), 3 July 2025.

³⁹⁹ France, *Le Monde*, Six months in prison for throwing paint, a sentence that highlights the tougher crackdown on environmental activists ([“Six mois de prison ferme pour un jet de peinture, une peine révélatrice du durcissement de la répression contre les militants écologistes”](#)), 1 November 2025.

⁴⁰⁰ France, *Le Monde* (2025), One of the reasons for the decline of political ecology is clearly the criminalisation of the environmental movement ([“Une des raisons du déclin de l'écologie politique est, à l'évidence, la criminalisation du mouvement environnementaliste”](#)), 9 June 2024.

⁴⁰¹ United Nations (UN), UN Special Rapporteur on Environmental Defenders under the Aarhus Convention, State repression of environmental protests and civil disobedience: a major threat to democracy and human rights ([Répression par l'État des manifestations et de la désobéissance civile environnementales : une menace majeure pour les droits humains et la démocratie](#)), February 2024.

*diabolisation des défenseurs [des droits]”), who re denigrated “in terms of the relevance of their commitment, presented as 'extremist', associated with the term 'terrorist' (by being described, for example, as 'eco-terrorists'), or stigmatised as factors whose actions are potentially detrimental to 'republican order' and national security”.*⁴⁰²

In fact, the year 2025 saw an increase in verbal attacks from members of the government. For example, in April, the Minister of the Interior strongly attacked the Human Rights League (*Ligne des Droits de l'Homme - LDH*), France's long-standing human rights organisation, following its campaign against the use of drones by the police. In a post on the social network X, he accused the *LDH* of “playing into the hands of drug traffickers and thugs who make a living from this trade in death”, questioning the association's motives. Back in 2023, however, the *CNCDH* drew the Prime Minister's attention to “a trend that has become systematic in the Interior Minister's rhetoric to denigrate human rights defenders and civil society organisations”.⁴⁰³

Stakeholders involved in politically sensitive issues, including migration, solidarity with Palestine and the environment, have been particularly targeted. On several occasions, the Minister of the Interior Bruno Retailleau has challenged the actions of associations in administrative detention centres, where undocumented migrants are held before being forcibly removed. In an address to the French Senate, Mr. Retailleau said that the associations were “overstepping their mandates and, in effect, turning them against the State by obstructing its action out of pure activism”⁴⁰⁴. Individuals and associations supporting Palestine are also the subject of recurrent criticism. For example, at the end of 2025, the Minister for Europe sent a letter to the European authorities questioning the integrity of European funding for humanitarian organisations working in Gaza. In response to these “suspicions”, the *CNCDH* denounced “serious and [...] unsubstantiated” accusations, which were “likely to undermine the credibility of [associations' operations] as a whole, in addition to fuelling the disinformation of which they are victims.”⁴⁰⁵

⁴⁰² France, Commission for Human Rights (*Commission nationale consultative des droits de l'Homme - CNCDH*), Opinion on the restriction of civic space: a major challenge for democracy and human rights (*Avis sur la restriction de l'espace civique : un enjeu majeur pour la démocratie et les droits humains*), 17 June 2025.

⁴⁰³ France, Commission for Human Rights (*Commission nationale consultative des droits de l'Homme - CNCDH*), Attacks by the Minister of the Interior against the *LDH*: the *CNCDH* writes to the Prime Minister (*Attaques du ministre de l'intérieur contre la LDH : la CNCDH écrit à la Première ministre*), 7 April 2023.

⁴⁰⁴ France, *Europe 1*, In Metz, Bruno Retailleau calls for better supervision of migration policy funds (*À Metz, Bruno Retailleau plaide pour un meilleur encadrement des fonds de politique migratoire*), 3 May 2025.

⁴⁰⁵ France, Commission for Human Rights (*Commission nationale consultative des droits de l'Homme - CNCDH*): Funding for humanitarian NGOs: Letter to Minister Benjamin Haddad (*Financement des ONG humanitaires : Lettre au ministre Benjamin Haddad*), 26 December 2025.

In addition to engaging in hostile narratives, the authorities have reacted in a limited way to the virulent attacks on Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) by certain media and political figures. In February 2025, following the publication by a French weekly magazine of a highly critical article about official development assistance, denouncing the “billions of aid gobbled up”, the Minister of Foreign Affairs announced the signing of a decree setting up a commission to assess official development assistance, in order to determine whether the funds are “useful to the French population”.⁴⁰⁶ Reactions of this kind give credence to the rhetoric that discredits and sows mistrust towards international solidarity associations.

Lastly, the year 2025 confirmed the rise of pejorative rhetoric towards the academic world, a central stakeholder in the civic space. A significant episode occurred at the beginning of November, when a press article criticised the forthcoming organisation of a colloquium on Palestinian history by the *Collège de France*, describing it as “pro-Hamas days”.⁴⁰⁷ The Minister for Higher Education then informed the *Collège de France*'s administrator of his concern about the effects of the conference on the institution's image. In the end, the administrator cancelled the conference, citing “security” reasons following the “violent attacks on social media”,⁴⁰⁸ but also referring to the institution's “strict neutrality with regard to political or ideological questions”. The episode highlighted the many rhetorical attacks to which researchers working on sensitive subjects are subjected, while the CNCDH also warned of the “wokism” or “Islamismo-Gauchism” actions to which several social science teachers were subjected.⁴⁰⁹

b) Consequences

The widespread rhetorical attacks by political leaders and personalities and the media are undermining the civic space and its stakeholders. In particular, the CNCDH has stressed that such deprecatory statements contribute to “the polarisation of public debate, disinformation and the increasing vulnerability of certain categories of [human rights] defenders”.⁴¹⁰

⁴⁰⁶ France, *Le Figaro*, The government announces the creation of a commission to assess official development assistance ([‘Le gouvernement annonce la création d’une commission pour évaluer l’aide publique au développement’](#)), 23 February 2025.

⁴⁰⁷ France, *Le Point*, A high-risk pro-Palestinian conference at the *Collège de France* ([‘Au Collège de France, un colloque propalestinien à haut risque’](#)), 7 November 2025.

⁴⁰⁸ France, *Le Monde* (2025), How the *Collège de France* came to cancel a scientific conference on Palestine ([‘Comment le Collège de France en est venu à annuler un colloque scientifique sur la Palestine’](#)), 11 November 2025.

⁴⁰⁹ France, Commission for Human Rights (Commission nationale consultative des droits de l'Homme - CNCDH), Opinion on the restriction of civic space: a major challenge for democracy and human rights ([Avis sur la restriction de l’espace civique : un enjeu majeur pour la démocratie et les droits humains](#)), 17 June 2025.

⁴¹⁰ France, Commission for Human Rights (Commission nationale consultative des droits de l'Homme - CNCDH), Opinion on human rights defenders ([Avis sur les défenseurs des droits de l’homme](#)), 30 November 2023.

The criminalisation narrative first has tangible dissuasive effects. It can deter citizens from taking part in peaceful protests or meetings, “for fear of being treated like criminals”⁴¹¹. More generally, it can facilitate violations of the rights to peaceful assembly and freedom of association. According to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Association and Freedom of Peaceful Assembly, “hostile and stigmatizing narratives targeting associations and assemblies, directly or indirectly, violate or facilitate violations of numerous human rights” protected under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.⁴¹²

Rhetorical attacks also serve to neutralise any challenges in advance.⁴¹³ As a result, the legitimacy and credibility of CSOs working for the rights of migrants, who are increasingly seen as a threat to public security, are gradually being undermined.⁴¹⁴ Attacks on certain social science researchers and the “alleged politicisation of science” are all external pressures that undermine the independence of the academic world.⁴¹⁵

An analysis of the many obstacles to freedom of association between 2017 and 2025 led the members of the Observatory of voluntary association freedoms (*Observatoire des Libertés Associatives*) (a group of researchers and associations working on freedom of association) to highlight the emergence of pressure for associations to be neutral over the last two years. Elected representatives often disqualify or criticise associations on the basis of their “lack of political neutrality”. According to the authors of the report, such disparaging remarks are part of a wider “repressive mechanism”⁴¹⁶ against the civic engagement of CSOs.

⁴¹¹ France, Commission for Human Rights (*Commission nationale consultative des droits de l'Homme - CNCDH*), Opinion on the restriction of civic space: a major challenge for democracy and human rights ([*Avis sur la restriction de l'espace civique : un enjeu majeur pour la démocratie et les droits humains*](#)), 17 June 2025.

⁴¹² United Nations (UN), United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Association and Freedom of Peaceful Assembly, Report A/79/263, 30 July 2024.

⁴¹³ France, Tchiombiano, S. (2026), NGOs in the dock ([*Les ONG sur le banc des accusés*](#)), AOC, 20 February 2026.

⁴¹⁴ France, Commission for Human Rights (*Commission nationale consultative des droits de l'Homme - CNCDH*), Opinion on the restriction of civic space: a major challenge for democracy and human rights ([*Avis sur la restriction de l'espace civique : un enjeu majeur pour la démocratie et les droits humains*](#)), 17 June 2025.

⁴¹⁵ France, *Le Monde*, Cancellation of "Palestine and Europe" conference sets extremely serious precedent: the opinion of professors at the *Collège de France* ([*« L'annulation du colloque "La Palestine et l'Europe" crée un précédent d'une extrême gravité » : la tribune de professeurs du Collège de France*](#)'), 12 November 2025.

⁴¹⁶ France, Observatory of voluntary association freedoms (*Observatoire des Libertés Associatives*), Neutralising voluntary associations - Investigating an injunction to depoliticise ([*Neutraliser le monde associatif - Enquête sur une injonction à la dépolitisation*](#)), 12 February 2026.

1.4. Funding reductions and restrictions

Sharp decline in public funding for civil society actors

a) Summary

2025 saw a further decline in public funding for associations, following several years of reduction of public funding by state authorities for the work of CSOs.

In February, the then-French Prime Minister François Bayrou used a constitutional tool to pass France's 2025 state budget without a vote in parliament. The budget included widespread cuts for public funding programmes for CSOs.

Funding cuts were particularly severe for associations in the development and humanitarian sectors. Official development assistance (ODA) underwent a series of budget reductions, with the overall ODA state budget falling from €6 billion euros to €4 billion in 2025.⁴¹⁷ The French public bank for development - *L'Agence Française du Développement* - which supports French NGOs acting abroad, went from a budget of 1 € billion in 2024 to 700 million euros in 2025.⁴¹⁸ Although the Agency represents only 0.2% of the state budget, it accounted for 8% of the total budgetary savings in 2025.⁴¹⁹

Feminist organisations were also affected. A study published by the Foundation for Women (*Fondation des Femmes*), a leading actor in the fight against violence against women, estimated an average 15% decline in subsidies for the feminist non-profit sector in 2025.⁴²⁰

Furthermore, many regional and departmental bodies reduced their subsidies in 2025, due to broader budgetary austerity measures at the national level. For instance, in the Loire region, the chair of the

⁴¹⁷ France, Coordination Sud, International solidarity at risk - Impact of budget cuts in official development assistance ([*La Solidarité internationale en péril - Impact des coupes budgétaires dans l'aide publique au développement*](#)), November 2025.

⁴¹⁸ France, *Carenews Info*, 'Faced with falling official development assistance, the AFD forced to be more selective about new projects supported' ([*'Face à la baisse de l'aide publique au développement, l'AFD contrainte à être plus sélective sur les nouveaux projets soutenus'*](#)), 6 May 2025.

⁴¹⁹ France, Senate (*Sénat*) (2025), Budget cuts in development aid: The risk is that we will go less to the most vulnerable countries (*'Coupes budgétaires dans l'aide au développement : "Le risque c'est que nous allions moins dans les pays les plus vulnérables"'*), 10 July 2025.

⁴²⁰ France, Women's Foundation, Budget cuts: the survival of feminist associations compromised, thousands of women in danger ([*Coupes budgétaires : la survie des associations féministes compromise, des milliers de femmes en danger*](#)), 27 August 2025.

regional assembly voted for an overall budget reduction of 82 million euros in 2025, mostly targeting subsidies for associations. The region's cultural sector saw its budget reduced by 62%.⁴²¹

The decline in state funding was set to continue in 2026, with the new government presenting its draft Finance Act in October 2025. The bill included severe cuts in support for CSOs, with a 26% decrease in funding for youth and associative life, falling from 848 million euros to 626 million euros. Other funding-sources for CSOs were set to be cut, such as a 44% decrease in the Radio Broadcasting Support Fund, a programme designed to support and promote diverse, innovative, and independent radio content.⁴²² The draft budget also included a further €700 million cut to ODA. This would result in ODA being reduced by more than 50% over a two-year period.⁴²³

b) Consequences

Throughout 2025, the civil society sector reported significant challenges resulting from cuts in public funding. On 11 October, the "Mouvement Associatif", which represents 700,000 organisations, staged a mobilisation to deliver a "wake-up call" to public authorities, to alert them of the consequences funding cuts have on the "vital role they play in society".⁴²⁴ The French network of associations also published the results of a country-wide survey on the financial health of NGOs, with 4,300 respondents. The survey found that among associations with at least one employee, more than half saw their public funding decline in 2025. For one-fifth of NGOs, the decline represented more than 20% of their funding. As a result, one-fourth of respondents reported having decreased their activities in 2025, and 40% intended to reduce their payroll.⁴²⁵ Finally, the network warned that 2025 would likely be a record year for insolvency plans and liquidation proceedings for associations.

According to a survey published on the financial health of feminist organisations, 50 % had reduced their activities and 30 % of associations dealing with women who are victims of gender-based violence

⁴²¹ France, *Ouest France*, After the cuts made in 2025, the *Pays de la Loire* is cutting its budget by fifteen million euros in 2026 ([*'Après les coupes de 2025, les Pays de la Loire rabotent le budget de quinze millions d'euros en 2026'*](#)), 10 December 2025.

⁴²² France, The Voluntary association movement (*Le Mouvement Associatif*) (2025), It's no longer possible! A finance bill that ignores the urgent needs of the voluntary association sector ([*Ca ne tient plus ! Un projet de loi de finances qui ignore les urgences du monde associatif*](#)), 17 October 2025.

⁴²³ France, Coordination Sud (2026), Budget 2026 : the government strikes again, international solidarity in agony ([*'Budget 2026 : le gouvernement frappe encore, la solidarité internationale à l'agoniecom'*](#)), 3 October 2025.

⁴²⁴ France, The Voluntary association movement (*Le Mouvement Associatif*) (2025), It's no longer possible! A finance bill that ignores the urgent needs of the voluntary association sector ([*Ca ne tient plus ! Un projet de loi de finances qui ignore les urgences du monde associatif*](#)), 17 October 2025.

⁴²⁵ France, The voluntary association movement (*Le Mouvement Associatif*), Financial health of associations : more than an alert, an emergency ([*'Santé financière des associations : plus qu'une alerte, une urgence'*](#)), 22 October 2025.

had to close their support services for abused women. In an open letter to the Prime Minister entitled “No to funding cuts putting women in danger!” around a hundred feminist NGOs wrote “due to a lack of resources, hotlines are closing, and lawyers, psychologists, and social workers are being laid off”.⁴²⁶

In particular, the CNCDH voiced concerns regarding the future of development and humanitarian civil society organisations. In a report published in June, France’s NHRI considered that “the withdrawal or reduction of funding from major international donors and cooperation and development agencies, including the French Development Agency (AFD), is causing worry, undermining the sector and increasing the risk of weakening the capacity of the associative sector to act”.⁴²⁷

More fundamentally, the state funding downturn further jeopardised the financial model of the non-profit sector. According to the Monitoring Action for Civic Space report, led by nine European organisations and funded by the European Union, the associative sector in France is undergoing an “erosion of its economic model” due to the structural decline in public subsidies, the increase of calls for proposals and public contracts, combined with inflation and budgetary instability.⁴²⁸

This risk had been flagged by the French Economic and Social council in 2024, in its report on the funding of associations. It found that the share of public funding in the overall budget of associations had seen a 41 % decline between 2005 and 2020, in favour of market-driven approaches such as calls for projects and public contracts. The report concluded that “competitive dynamics and constraints on public finances hinder [associations’] capacity for initiative and commitment and push them towards commodification at the expense of their social utility” (translation).⁴²⁹

2. CIVIC SPACE EXPANSION

2.1 Improvements in participation

A new citizens' agreement to facilitate citizen participation

⁴²⁶ France, Women's Foundation (*Fondation des Femmes*), No to budget cuts that put women at risk (*‘Non aux coupes budgétaires qui mettent les femmes en danger’*), 6 July 2025.

⁴²⁷ France, Commission for Human Rights (*Commission nationale consultative des droits de l'Homme - CNCDH*), Opinion on the restriction of civic space: a major challenge for democracy and human rights (*Avis sur la restriction de l'espace civique : un enjeu majeur pour la démocratie et les droits humains*), 17 June 2025.

⁴²⁸ France, Monitoring Action for Civic Space (2026), *Rapport national, 2025: France*, 13 February 2026.

⁴²⁹ Original version : *Or les logiques concurrentielles européennes et les contraintes pesant sur les finances publiques entravent leurs capacités d’initiative et d’engagement et les poussent vers la marchandisation aux dépens de leur utilité sociale.*

France, Economic, social and environmental council (*Conseil économique social et environnemental - CESE*), Strengthening the funding of associations: a democratic emergency (*Renforcer le financement des associations : une urgence démocratique*), May 2024.

a) Summary

The rise of innovative citizen participation schemes has been confirmed with the organisation of a Citizens' Convention on the day-to-day lives of children (*'Convention citoyenne sur les temps de l'enfant'*), which took place during 2025.

The convention opened with the selection at random of 133 French citizens, a sample which is supposed to represent the diversity of the French population. Their remit was to answer the following question: "How can we better structure the various phases of the day-to-day lives of children to ensure that they are more conducive to their learning, development and health?". The project addressed issues of equal opportunities, health and inclusion, by focusing on the day-to-day lives of children. The participants met seven times between June and November 2025⁴³⁰.

The convention was designed to ensure that the stakeholders involved were also included in discussions, i.e. teachers, head teachers (principals), parents, local elected representatives, associations and experts in the issues raised. The system also included a governance committee to oversee methodology, transparency and neutrality, and a college of guarantors to oversee adherence to the principles of the agreement: sincerity, equality, transparency and respect for the voice of the people. Stakeholders' contributions enabled legal entities and elected representatives to put forward their proposals.⁴³¹

This convention was the third of its kind initiated by French President Emmanuel Macron. The first, the Citizens' Climate Convention (*Convention citoyenne du Climat*), launched in 2019, brought together 150 citizens to propose measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 2030. This work resulted in 149 proposals, some of which were included in the Climate and resilience law (*loi Climat et Résilience*).⁴³² The French National Assembly (*Assemblée nationale*) made the system permanent by adopting Organic Law No. 2021-27 of 15 January 2021, which designated the Economic, Social and Environmental Council (*Conseil économique, social et environnemental - CESE*) as the chamber for citizens' conventions, enabling it to organise citizens' consultations on subjects within its remit. A second citizens' convention was set up in 2022, to reflect on the framework for end-of-life support and the changes needed in France. The subject was subsequently debated in parliament, and a bill is currently undergoing its second reading in the French Senate.⁴³³

⁴³⁰ Website of the [Citoyenne Cese convention on the day-to-day lives of children](#) (*Convention Citoyenne Cese sur les temps de l'enfant*).

⁴³¹ France, *Citoyenne Cese convention on the day-to-day lives of children* (*Convention Citoyenne Cese sur les temps de l'enfant*), Stakeholders's contributions (*Les Cahiers d'acteurs*).

⁴³² Website of the [Citizens' climate convention](#) (*Convention citoyenne pour le climat*).

⁴³³ France, *Le Monde*, '[End-of-life: the French National Assembly approves the bill introducing a right to aid in dying: the text is sent to the French Senate](#)', 25 February 2026.

One of the innovations of this third convention was to include children and teenagers. A panel of 20 children aged 12 to 17 met several times to share their experiences and expectations with the public. The young people then formulated ten proposals which they presented to the convention.⁴³⁴

The final report was adopted almost unanimously on 23 November 2025. The twenty proposals called for an in-depth transformation of the organisation of the day-to-day lives of children through reforms to the school system and other innovations.

b) Consequences

The main advantage of the citizens' conventions was to involve citizens in democratic life. In this case, it enabled a group of citizens, a representative sample of the French population, to examine a social issue that has in the past given rise to much debate, renewed in the light of new technologies and climate change.⁴³⁵

The question of the day-to-day lives of children raises many issues, ranging from national education, the teaching profession, parenthood and equal opportunities. The Citizens' convention gave the randomly selected citizens the opportunity to gain an overview of these issues through interviews with experts. Its conclusion opened the door to an ambitious reorganisation of the day-to-day lives of children, including social, educational, health and chronobiological aspects.⁴³⁶

This system is particularly valuable at a time when the French population has widespread mistrust in their political representatives and democracy. According to the 2026 edition of the political confidence barometer, only 22% of the French population has confidence in politics in general and 23% think that democracy works well.

However, citizens' conventions are particularly popular: 71% of citizens are in favour of organising citizens' conventions, made up of citizens selected at random, to think about and formulate proposals on important issues. As a sign of their confidence in the tool, 79% of the French population are in favour of proposals that emerge from citizens' conventions being submitted to a referendum.⁴³⁷

⁴³⁴ France, Economic, social and environmental council (*Conseil économique social et environnemental - CESE*), Report of the citizens' convention panel of children and teenagers (*Rapport du panel d'enfants et d'adolescents de la Convention citoyenne*), 7 November 2025.

⁴³⁵ France, *Le Monde*, At the citizens' convention on the day-to-day lives of children, "we planted a seed, and if it grows, so much the better" (*'A la convention citoyenne sur les temps de l'enfant, "on aura planté une graine, si elle pousse, tant mieux"'*), 22 November 2025.

⁴³⁶ France, *Le Monde*, Let's overcome all political divisions and changes of majority to allow all children to grow at their own pace: the citizens' convention members' manifesto (*"Dépassons tous les clivages politiques et les changements de majorité afin de permettre à tous les enfants de grandir à leur rythme" : le manifeste des membres de la convention citoyenne"*), 25 November 2025.

⁴³⁷ France, *Sciences Po*, Opinionway (2026), In whom and in what do the French population place their trust today? The political confidence barometer (*'En qu[o]i les Français ont-ils confiance aujourd'hui ? Le baromètre de la confiance politique'*), February 2026.

In addition, in an increasingly polarised society,⁴³⁸ tools of deliberative democracy are making it possible to overcome polarisation and bring together a cross-section of society around a common concern.

The tangible effects of the convention on the organisation of the day-to-day lives of children in France will only be measurable in a few years' time. However, a few months after the work was completed, there was little response from political leaders to the proposals made. The sectors involved in the report's proposals also criticised the lack of resources associated with the scheme, making it unlikely that all the recommended measures would be implemented⁴³⁹.

Thus, despite the limitations of the exercise, citizens' conventions are becoming an increasingly important part of French democracy and symbolise innovative ways to engage with the civic space and its actors around issues that are central to society's future.

⁴³⁸ France, *Le Monde*, *Fondation Jean Jaurès, Sciences Po, Institut Montaigne*, French fractures ([*'Fracture Françaises - 13th edition'*](#)), October 2025.

⁴³⁹ France, *Le Monde*, After the citizens' convention on the day-to-day lives of children, political silence and union opposition ([*'Après la convention citoyenne sur les temps de l'enfant, le silence politique et les oppositions syndicales'*](#)), 28 November 2025.

Croatia (HR)

Civic space in the EU in 2025

Country: Croatia

Contractor: Human Rights House Zagreb

Author(s): Tina Đaković, Ivan Novosel

Disclaimer

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1. CIVIC SPACE PRESSURES

1.1. Deterioration of legal environment: freedom of association

1.2. Deterioration of legal environment: freedom of assembly

Dispersal of two peaceful protests

a) Summary

In April, 17 people protested outside the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs in Zagreb over the Government's foreign policy towards Israel. Police arrested them for ignoring orders to stop blocking the building entrance. Protesters were taken to court for alleged public order offenses, 8 of them on the same day, while 9 were held overnight at the police detention and brought to court the next morning⁴⁴⁰. Municipal Misdemeanor Court dismissed charges against all the protestors⁴⁴¹.

In July, during a military parade marking the 30th anniversary of Operation Storm organized by the Ministry of Defense, 4 protesters jumped a security fence and laid in front of military vehicles. They were arrested and detained for a day. The Municipal Misdemeanor Court fined 4 activists in total with more than 9,000 EUR for misdemeanors against public order and peace⁴⁴².

b) Consequences

The actions of the police were contrary to previous positive non-restrictive practices towards unregistered protests of up to 20 citizens⁴⁴³. The court decision of fining protesters narrows the civic space⁴⁴⁴, having a chilling effect on the right to peaceful protest and expression.

⁴⁴⁰ Croatia, Zagreb Police Department (*Policijska uprava Zagrebačka*) (2025), '[Privodenje u Centru](#)' (Arrest at the Center), press release, 15 April 2025.

⁴⁴¹ Croatia, Municipal Misdemeanor Court in Zagreb (*Općinski prekršajni sud u Zagrebu*), [Pp-5682/2025-18](#), 16 May 2025.

⁴⁴² Croatia, Municipal Misdemeanor Court in Zagreb (*Općinski prekršajni sud u Zagrebu*), [Pp-10194/2025-23](#), 16 October 2025.

⁴⁴³ Croatia, Kuća ljudskih prava Zagreb (*Human Rights House Zagreb*) (2025), '[Aktivistice i aktivisti imaju pravo na mirno okupljanje i slobodu izražavanja ispred MVEP-a](#)' (Activists have the right to peaceful assembly and freedom of expression in front of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs), press release, 15 April 2025.

⁴⁴⁴ Croatia, Inicijativa za Hrvatsku slobode (*Croatia for Freedom Initiative*) (2025), '[Za Hrvatsku slobode izražavanja – u kojoj sudovi tu slobodu brane, a ne gaze!](#)' (For a Croatia of freedom of expression – in which the courts defend that freedom, not infringe it), press release, 27 October 2025.

1.3. Deterioration of legal environment: freedom of expression

Restrictions on freedom of expression in cases of displaying Palestinian flags during protests

a) Summary

During the peaceful “Night March” on International Women’s Day in Rijeka, as well as during a protest opposing a public religious gathering of men organized by the Brotherhood of the Knights of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, police intervened against participants who were displaying a Palestinian flag. In the first case, one protester holding a flag was taken to a police station and was served with a misdemeanour warrant⁴⁴⁵, while in the second case three protesters were taken to the police station and fined 200 EUR each⁴⁴⁶, all for the alleged violation of Article 26 of the Law on Offenses Against Public Order and Peace, which concerns the display of a foreign state’s flag.⁴⁴⁷

b) Consequences

The actions of the police are contrary to previous positive non-restrictive practice and interpretation of the Article 26 of the Law on Offenses Against Public Order and Peace. Restrictive interpretation of Article 26 of the Law on Public Order and Peace by the police unreasonably restricts freedom of speech.

1.4. Deterioration of legal environment: court cases

1.5. Attempts to stifle civic engagement through violence, harassment and negative narratives

Shrinking spaces for culture and spaces for critical public dialogue

a) Summary

In Benkovac in 2025, the “Nosi se” cultural festival, which was supposed to open with a program on the deconstruction of war and the promotion of nonviolence, was cancelled after a group of war veterans disrupted its start with protests and threats against organizers and participants, including attacks on a journalist who was trying to report from the spot⁴⁴⁸. In Šibenik, the “FALIŠ”

⁴⁴⁵ Fiuman news portal (2025), [‘Policija potvrdila: Riječanin je kažnjen zbog isticanja palestinske zastave’](#) (Police confirmed: Rijeka resident fined for displaying Palestinian flag) , 9 March 2025.

⁴⁴⁶ Novosti news portal (2025), [‘Kazne za palestinsku zastavu u Rijeci’](#) (Fines for Palestinian flag in Rijeka), 6 October 2025.

⁴⁴⁷ Croatia, Law on Misdemeanors Against Public Order and Peace (*Zakon o prekršajima protiv janog reda i mira*), 15 May 2023

⁴⁴⁸ Nacional news portal (2025), [‘BENKOVAC ‘Branitelji’ i huligani prekinuli festival. Policija nije reagirala’](#) (BENKOVAC ‘War Veterans’ and Hooligans Stop Festival. Police Didn’t React), 22 August 2025.

Festival faced organized protests and public pressure from nationalist groups who opposed its critical discussions of war, nationalism, and social justice⁴⁴⁹. In September, the "Oglede" festival in Velika Gorica was canceled due to pressure and attempts to censor the performance of artist Siniša Labrović⁴⁵⁰. In Split, the opening of the Days of Serbian Culture was violently obstructed by nationalist groups who used intimidation and threats to disrupt the event⁴⁵¹. In Zagreb, a group of masked men gathered in front of the Serbian Cultural Center during an exhibition related to the Days of Serbian Culture event, singing nationalist songs before dispersing, an incident that police later said they intervened to prevent from escalating further⁴⁵².

b) Consequences

The incidents contributed to erosion of trust in law enforcement tasked with protecting freedom of expression and assembly, creating a chilling effect for cultural and civil society initiatives, especially those involving minority rights or critical historical reflections, undermining pluralism and democratic participation at the local and national level. As a reaction to the named events, a number of organizations, associations, unions and institutions and individuals requested the Government and politicians to take responsibility for the situation and climate in society, which threaten democracy, human rights and artistic freedoms.⁴⁵³

1.6. Funding reductions and restrictions

Delay in announcing funding on national level for civil society organizations

a) Summary

⁴⁴⁹ Slobodna Dalmacija news portal(2025), '[Branitelji se nakon 13 godina sjetili da im smeta festival, prijetje 'benkovačkim scenarijem': 'Hvala Plenkoviću!](#)' (After 13 years, the war veterans remembered that the festival bothered them, threatening a 'Benkovac scenario': 'Thank you Plenković!'), 27 August 2025.

⁴⁵⁰ Ravno do dna pop culture magazine (2025), '[Oglede festival otkazan zbog pritiska da se izbacili ili cenzurira performans Siniše Labrovića](#)' (Oglede festival canceled due to pressure to remove or censor Siniša Labrović's performance), 21 September 2025.

⁴⁵¹ Institut Saveza za tranzicijska istraživanja i nacionalnu edukaciju STINE (*Institute of the Alliance for Transitional Research and National Education STINE*) (2025), '[Nasilno onemogućeno otvaranje Dana srpske kulture u Splitu](#)' (The opening of the Day of Serbian Culture in Split was forcibly prevented), November 2025.

⁴⁵² Index news portal (2025), '[Policija se oglašila o okupljanju maskiranih muškaraca u Zagrebu](#)' (The police made an announcement about the gathering of masked men in Zagreb) , November 2025.

⁴⁵³ Croatia, Inicijativa za Hrvatsku slobode (*Croatia for Freedom Initiative*) (2025), '[Ustav vrijedi za sve: Vlada mora spriječiti svako ugrožavanje umjetničkih i novinarskih sloboda](#)' (The Constitution applies to everyone: The government must prevent any threat to artistic and journalistic freedoms), press release, 27 October 2025.

One of the activities of the Action plan for combating discrimination for 2023⁴⁵⁴ and 2025⁴⁵⁵ is preparation of the open Call "Prevention of Discrimination and Support for Victims" worth 8,000,000.00 euros directed at civil society organizations, local and regional self-government units, educational institutions, adult education institutions, and scientific organizations and ombudsman institutions as potential applicants. Even though the call opening was indicated for December 2025,⁴⁵⁶ it was not opened during 2025, and its opening is now indicated for April 2026.

b) Consequences

Un-opening the call for civil society organisations on prevention of discrimination in 2025 leaves civil society another year without national funding available for anti-discrimination activities, continuing the trend of lack of funding on national level for civil society organizations⁴⁵⁷. Because this support is lacking, organizations rely on short-term project funding that is poorly suited to sustained advocacy work aimed at long-term social change on a national level. The absence of national public funding also reduces their capacity to apply for EU calls, which are essential for the work of human rights organizations in Croatia.

1.7. Barriers to participation in law and policy-making

1.8. Other developments

Nine years without a civil society strategy

a) For the last 9 years, Croatia is without a fundamental civil society strategy, which has been in development since 2021. There is no clarity on when it will be finalised and adopted.⁴⁵⁸

b) Consequences

⁴⁵⁴ Croatia, Government Office for Human Rights and Rights of National Minorities (*Ured Vlade RH za ljudska prava i prava nacionalnih manjina*) (2023), [Akcijski plan suzbijanja diskriminacije za 2023. godinu](#), 30 March 2023.

⁴⁵⁵ Croatia, Government Office for Human Rights and Rights of National Minorities (*Ured Vlade RH za ljudska prava i prava nacionalnih manjina*) (2025), [Akcijski plan suzbijanja diskriminacije za 2025. godinu](#), January 2025.

⁴⁵⁶ Croatia, Central internet portal for information on EU funds and EU programmes available in the Republic of Croatia (*Središnji internetski portal za informacije o EU fondovima i EU programima koji su dostupni u Republici Hrvatskoj*) (2025), [Indikativni godišnji plan objave poziva](#).

⁴⁵⁷ Croatia, Human Rights House Zagreb (*Kuća ljudskih prava Zagreb*) (2025), [European Civic forum Civic space report: Croatia](#).

⁴⁵⁸ Croatia, Human Rights House Zagreb (*Kuća ljudskih prava Zagreb*) (2025), [European Civic forum Civic space report: Croatia](#).

Without policy that would address the civic space issues, there are no directions for coordination and cooperation between public institutions and civil society organizations. Lack of a civil society strategy makes the national funding more unstable and unpredictable. As a result, civil society becomes less effective and less able to participate in policymaking.

2. CIVIC SPACE EXPANSION

Hungary (HU)

Civic space in the EU in 2025

Country: Hungary

Contractor: Milieu Consulting SRL

Author(s): Balázs Majtényi

Disclaimer

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1. CIVIC SPACE PRESSURES

1.1. Deterioration of legal environment: freedom of association

Registration, CSOs deemed “sovereignty risks”, fight on terrorism, excessive inspections

a) Summary

Hungary’s legislation continues to reflect a discourse in which transparency does not refer to the visibility of the functioning of public institutions, but to the functioning of non-governmental organisations (NGOs). In June 2025, the **Act on the registry of legal entities**⁴⁵⁹ was adopted, which will enter into force in January 2027. The Act provides for the transfer of the **registration process** of civil society organisations (CSOs) from the courts to “a yet undetermined authority”. Earlier restrictive “transparency” laws remain in force. These include, among others, the Stop Soros legislative package of 2018, which contains provisions targeting NGOs and individuals funded from abroad, who are deemed to “support” illegal migration.⁴⁶⁰ Similarly, Act XLIX of 2021 on the transparency of organisations carrying out activities capable of influencing public life⁴⁶¹ still authorises the State Audit Office to conduct audits of CSOs, raising concerns about the possibility of arbitrary inspections. Act LXXXVIII of 2023 on the protection of national sovereignty⁴⁶², which is currently subject to infringement action before the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU)⁴⁶³, also remains in force. Under the disputed legislative provisions, the Sovereignty Protection Office (SPO, *Szuverenitásvédelmi Hivatal*) was established and authorised to investigate, on the one hand, specific activities allegedly “carried out in the interest of another State or a foreign body, organisation or natural person, allegedly liable to violate or jeopardise the sovereignty of Hungary” and, on the other hand, “organisations whose activities using foreign funding allegedly influence the outcome of elections or the will of voters”.⁴⁶⁴ The Advocate General in its opinion in the CJEU case

⁴⁵⁹ Hungary, Act LIX of 2025 on the registry of legal entities (*2025. évi LIX. törvény a jogi személyek nyilvántartásáról*), 11 June 2025.

⁴⁶⁰ Hungary, Act VI of 2018 on the amendment of certain acts in relation to the measures taken against illegal migration (*2018. évi VI. törvény egyes törvényeknek a jogellenes bevándorlás elleni intézkedésekkel kapcsolatos módosításáról*), 20 June 2018.

⁴⁶¹ Hungary, Act XLIX of 2021 on the transparency of organisations carrying out activities capable of influencing public life (*2021. évi XLIX. törvény a közélet befolyásolására alkalmas tevékenységet végző civil szervezetek átláthatóságáról*), 18 May 2021.

⁴⁶² Hungary, Act LXXXVIII of 2023 on the protection of national sovereignty (*2023. évi LXXXVIII. törvény a nemzeti szuverenitás védelméről*), 12 December 2023.

⁴⁶³ Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU), *Case C-829/24, Commission v Hungary*.

⁴⁶⁴ European Commission (2024), *The Commission decides to refer HUNGARY to the Court of Justice of the European Union considering its national law on the Defence of Sovereignty to be in breach of EU law*, Press release 3 October 2024.

concerned stated that the legislation interferes with freedom of association because the potential investigations make organisations' activities and funding more difficult.⁴⁶⁵

In addition, in May 2025, a new **Bill on the transparency of public life** was introduced.⁴⁶⁶ It envisages authorising the SPO, which operates under close governmental control, to blacklist CSOs or independent media outlets deemed to pose "sovereignty risks", without appropriate legal remedies. Under Article 3(1) of the Bill, the scope of the proposed Act would extend to "any legal entity" or "any other organisation without legal personality" that "threatens Hungary's sovereignty by engaging in activities aimed at influencing public life with the support of foreign funding". Activities threatening Hungary's sovereignty comprise "any activity or endeavour financed by foreign support and aimed at influencing public life that violates, portrays in a negative light, or supports action against" certain values defined in the Fundamental Law (Article 3(2)). Pursuant to Article 4 of the Bill, it is the task of the SPO to compile a list of such organisations that threaten Hungary's sovereignty. These organisations may not receive "foreign funding" without authorisation and would be subject to complex and lengthy control procedures conducted by the "authority against money laundering" in cooperation with the SPO. The authorities and banks would be under an obligation to monitor and "follow" the path of foreign funding (see, e.g., Article 7(b) and Articles 9–12). Meanwhile, such organisations may not accept donations from the 1% of taxpayers' personal income tax, which would otherwise be available to NGOs as an important domestic funding source (Article 7(c)). There is no legal remedy against being placed on the list. Appeals against the decisions of the anti-money laundering authority may only be filed with the Supreme Court, which cannot revise those decisions (Article 9(4)). NGOs claim that, based on the Bill, the Government could "block or hinder to the extent of practical impossibility their funding from outside of Hungary while imposing administrative limitations on receiving domestic funding as well; monitor bank accounts, impose fines; and suspend or dissolve targeted entities."⁴⁶⁷

Government Decree 297/2025. (IX. 26.) on the emergency rules for action against certain persons and organisations in the fight against terrorism⁴⁶⁸, endorsed by Act CXXV of 2025⁴⁶⁹, established a "**national anti-terrorism list**" threatening to apply financial sanctions, like the freezing of assets or

⁴⁶⁵ Advocate General, [Advocate General's Opinion in Case C-829/24 | Commission v Hungary \(Protection against foreign political interference\)](#), February 12, 2026.

⁴⁶⁶ Hungarian Parliament, [Bill T/11923. on the Transparency of Public Life](#), 13 May 2025.

⁴⁶⁷ [Contributions of Hungarian CSOs to the European Commission's Rule of Law Report \(January 2026\)](#), 27 January 2026, p. 98. For an academic legal commentary on the Bill, see Uitz, R. (2025), [A Threat to the Core: Why the New Hungarian Transparency Bill is an Attack on the Foundations of the European Union](#), *VerfBlog*, 2025/5/21.

⁴⁶⁸ Hungary, Government Decree 297/2025. (IX. 26.) on the emergency rules for action against certain persons and organisations in the fight against terrorism ([297/2025. \(IX. 26.\) Korm. Rendelet a terrorizmus elleni küzdelem érdekében egyes személyekkel és szervezetekkel szembeni fellépés veszélyhelyzeti szabályairól](#)), 26 September 2025.

⁴⁶⁹ Hungary, Act CXXV of 2025 on the amendment of certain laws aimed at strengthening public order and public security, fighting terrorism and upkeeping the unity of the legal system ([2025. évi CXXV. törvény egyes törvényeknek a közrend védelmét és a közbiztonság megerősítését, valamint a terrorizmus elleni fellépést szolgáló, továbbá a jogrendszer egységét fenntartani hivatott módosításáról](#)), 10 December 2025.

prohibition of financial transactions against enlisted CSOs. Government Decree 297/2025 is specifically aimed at groups aligning themselves with the “Antifa ideology”, which the government decree leaves unspecified. Its preamble only refers to certain groups, like the *Hammerbande* or the *Offensive Révolutionnaire Antifasciste*, and also enumerates violent acts and attacks allegedly committed by these and similar “Antifa” groups (para. 3-5). The preamble of government decree also refers to the violent acts committed by “Antifa” groups from 2023 in Hungary or against establishments and buildings related to Hungary (para. 7-12).⁴⁷⁰

In 2025, **excessive inspections by authorities** only concerned the **Oltalom Charitable Association (OCA)**, which has been targeted by the authorities for years.⁴⁷¹ OCA supports homeless people, refugees, and vulnerable families, and it has been targeted by the Hungarian government due to political conflicts with its founder, Methodist pastor Gábor Iványi, over church recognition and state funding.⁴⁷²

b) Consequences

In relation to the **Act on the registry of legal entities**, Hungarian CSOs claim that the amendment may give rise to “fears of political interventions” in the registration process.⁴⁷³

The **Bill on the transparency of public life** resulted in widespread criticism both in Hungary and abroad.⁴⁷⁴ Although its adoption was postponed in June 2025, it remains pending.⁴⁷⁵

Based on **Government Decree 297/2025. (IX. 26.)** on the emergency rules for action against certain persons and organisations in the fight against terrorism (see above), “Antifa” group (“*Antifa*” *csoportosulás*) and Hammerbande / Antifa Ost were put on the national list of terrorist groups.⁴⁷⁶

The **OCA’s licence** to operate homeless shelters was withdrawn in 2025 on alleged grounds of “inadequate conditions.” The OCA had been subject to similar measures in 2024 concerning its schools, but some of these were overturned by the court in March 2025.⁴⁷⁷

⁴⁷⁰ On related controversial criminal procedures see also: Fürstenau, M. (2026), [Court in Hungary declares German anti-fascist Maja T. guilty](#), Deutsche Welle, 02 April 2026.

⁴⁷¹ [Contributions of Hungarian CSOs to the European Commission’s Rule of Law Report \(January 2026\)](#), 27 January 2026, p. 97-98.

⁴⁷² [Ward, B. \(2025\), Hungary: Pastor Supporting People in Poverty Faces Charges](#), Human Rights Watch, 6 November 2025.

⁴⁷³ [Contributions of Hungarian CSOs to the European Commission’s Rule of Law Report \(January 2026\)](#), 27 January 2026, p. 97.

⁴⁷⁴ See e.g. Civilisation Coalition (2025), [No Country Was Built On Blacklists](#), joint statement signed by over 260 CSOs and trade unions and over 50 media outlets, 14 May 2025; or OSCE (2025), [OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media discusses importance of media freedom and independent journalism during official visit to Hungary](#), press release 4 June 2025.

⁴⁷⁵ The bill is listed as pending on the Parliament’s website as T/11923.

⁴⁷⁶ [Contributions of Hungarian CSOs to the European Commission’s Rule of Law Report \(January 2026\)](#), 27 January 2026, p. 97.

⁴⁷⁷ [Contributions of Hungarian CSOs to the European Commission’s Rule of Law Report \(January 2026\)](#), 27 January 2026, p. 97.

1.2. Deterioration of legal environment: freedom of assembly

Restrictions in the name of child protection

a) Summary

In 2025, the **Fifteenth Amendment of the Fundamental Law** (in force since 15 April 2025)⁴⁷⁸ amended Article XVI (1) of the Constitution placing children's right to protection and care "above all other rights" (except for the right to life).⁴⁷⁹ Based on this amendment, which was presented as aiming to protect children's right to an adequate physical, intellectual and moral development, a new ground to ban assemblies was introduced into the **Act on the freedom of assembly**⁴⁸⁰ through its Article 13/A, prohibiting any assembly which would violate Article 6/A of the **Act on the protection of children**⁴⁸¹. Article 6/A of this latter Act, introduced by the much-debated 2021 Propaganda Law⁴⁸², prohibits making pornographic content available to minors, as well as content that portrays sexuality in "a self-serving" manner, or that depicts or promotes deviation from one's birth gender, gender reassignment or homosexuality.

b) Consequences

Organising, holding or participation to Pride marches or similar events became punishable acts. Under Article 217/C. of the **Penal Code**⁴⁸³, "A person who organises a prohibited assembly or announces such an assembly (...) is guilty of a misdemeanour and shall be punished by imprisonment for up to one year, unless another criminal offence is established". Certain acts of organisers and the participation at assemblies banned by authorities may also be considered a

⁴⁷⁸ Hungary, Fifteenth amendment to the Fundamental Law of Hungary (*Magyarország Alaptörvényének tizenötödik módosítása*), 14 April 2025.

⁴⁷⁹ For opinions see Mészáros, G. (2025), *We the Bugs - Constitutionalizing "Enemies"*, Verfassungsblog, 23 May 2025; or European Commission for Democracy Through Law (Venice Commission), *Hungary – Opinion on the compatibility with international human rights standards of the Fifteenth Amendment to the Fundamental Law of Hungary*, CDL-AD(2025)043, 13 October 2025.

⁴⁸⁰ Hungary, Act LV of 2018 on the freedom of assembly (*2018. évi LV. törvény a gyülekezési jogról*), 20 July 2018.

⁴⁸¹ Hungary, Act XXXI of 1997 on the protection of children and guardianship administration (*1997. évi XXXI. törvény a gyermekek védelméről és a gyámügyi igazgatásról*), 22 April 1997.

⁴⁸² Hungary, Act LXXIX of 2021 on taking more severe action against paedophile offenders and amending certain Acts for the protection of children (*2021. évi LXXIX. törvény a pedofil bűnelkövetőkkel szembeni szigorúbb fellépésről, valamint a gyermekek védelme érdekében egyes törvények módosításáról*), 15 June 2021.

⁴⁸³ Hungary, Act C of 2012 on the Penal Code (*2012. évi C. törvény a Büntető Törvénykönyvről*), 25 June 2012.

petty offence under Article 189 of the **Act on infractions**⁴⁸⁴ and are punishable with a fine of up to HUF 200 000 (€ 500).⁴⁸⁵

In March 2025, Hungary adopted Act III of 2025 amending the Act on the Freedom of Assembly⁴⁸⁶ to enable the **use of facial recognition technology** (FRT) in proceedings related to participation in banned assemblies, including Pride events.

CSOs consider the **new limitations on freedom of assembly** “a significant regression in the protection of LGBTQI+ rights and the rule of law in Hungary”.⁴⁸⁷ These new restrictions were **widely criticised** as specifically directed against the LGBTQI community.⁴⁸⁸ Prime Minister Viktor Orbán also made it clear that the new legal provisions were intended to prevent the holding of such assemblies, as the Budapest Pride.⁴⁸⁹ However, despite the Government threatening to prohibit and sanction the Budapest and Pécs Prides, both events have been organised with great success and no immediate police intervention.⁴⁹⁰ Misdemeanour proceedings, however, have been initiated, for instance against Gergely Karácsony, the Mayor of Budapest, for organising the Budapest Pride.⁴⁹¹ The police summoned the organiser of Pécs Pride for questioning as a criminal suspect and recommended that the prosecutor press charges.⁴⁹²

1.3. Deterioration of legal environment: freedom of expression

Intimidating sanctions and procedures to deter free speech

⁴⁸⁴ Hungary, Act II of 2012 on infractions, infraction procedure and the infraction records system (*2012. évi II. törvény a szabálysértésekről, a szabálysértési eljárásról és a szabálysértési nyilvántartási rendszerről*), 23 December 2011.

⁴⁸⁵ See also Hungarian Helsinki Committee, Hungarian Civil Liberties Union, Street Lawyers Association (2025), *Kérdések és válaszok a 2025-ös Pride-dal kapcsolatban*, 14 April 2025.

⁴⁸⁶ Hungary, Act III of 2025 on Amending Act LV of 2018 on the freedom of assembly in relation to the protection of children and on the amendment of related acts (*2025. évi III. Törvény a gyülekezési jogról szóló 2018. évi LV. törvénynek a gyermekek védelmével összefüggő, valamint az ehhez kapcsolódó törvények módosításáról*).

⁴⁸⁷ *Contributions of Hungarian CSOs to the European Commission’s Rule of Law Report (January 2026)*, 27 January 2026, p. 97.

⁴⁸⁸ Amnesty International Hungary – Háttér Society – Hungarian Civil Liberties Union – Hungarian Helsinki Committee (2025), *Legislating Fear: Banning Pride is the latest assault on fundamental rights in Hungary*, 21 March 2025.

⁴⁸⁹ Hvg.hu (2025), Orbán Viktor: *A Pride szervezői ne bajlódjanak az idei felvonulás előkészítésével*, 22 February 2025.

⁴⁹⁰ See e.g.: Cole-Schmidt, G. (20225) *The success of Budapest Pride hurt Orbán – but be warned, Europe’s far right is coming for all of our rights*, The Guardian, 1 July 2025.

⁴⁹¹ González Cabrera, C. (2025), *Budapest Mayor Charged for Holding Pride March, Prosecution Underscores Hungary’s Rule of Law Crisis*, Human Rights Watch, 28 January 2026.

⁴⁹² Telex (2025), *Vádemelést javasolnak a Pécs Pride szervezője ellen*, 7 November 2025.

a) Summary

In 2025, several **criminal proceedings** were initiated supposedly to intimidate activists or persons speaking out, like a former leader of a child protection institution criticising the deplorable state of the childcare system, who currently faces charges on account of slander. The police also searched the house and seized electronic devices belonging to an activist who had revealed suspected abuse in another children's home.⁴⁹³ Meanwhile, the main organisers of the Budapest and Pécs Pride are facing criminal charges for organising the assembly⁴⁹⁴ (see also above Section 1.2 on freedom of assembly).

Activists were also **condemned** for damage to property: an activist in Pécs was cautioned by the court for overwriting billboards carrying the Government's propaganda messages,⁴⁹⁵ while members of "The City is for All" group (*A Város Mindenkié*) grass roots organisation were condemned for painting slogans on sidewalks.⁴⁹⁶ The 4/2022. uniformity decision of the Curia classifies the alteration, covering up, or defacement of posters as "graffiti" in all cases. This means that, regardless of the amount of damage caused to the advertiser, this form of political expression is also considered a criminal offense of vandalism.⁴⁹⁷ The Hungarian Helsinki Committee maintains that the initiation of related criminal proceedings aims to protect government-related propaganda billboards and posters and may be a suitable tool of intimidation. The Hungarian Helsinki Committee also draws attention to the fact that stealing a poster is only a misdemeanour, while placing a graffiti on a billboard constitutes a criminal act. Trials initiated because of political graffiti so far ended up in "mild" punishments, however, especially as a repeated offender, one may also face imprisonment. Meanwhile, being convicted for a crime punishable for more than 2 years of imprisonment is an incompatibility ground for many positions, like that of an MP, local representative or mayor. Such persons may not serve as party officials or lead NGOs either. The "qualified" cases of the relevant Article 371 on vandalism of the Act C of 2012 of the Criminal Code (such as cases involving larger damage or protected objects) are punishable by 3 years of imprisonment.⁴⁹⁸ Similarly, state and municipal employees may be **threatened or suffer workplace sanctions** for expressing their opinion. In 2024–2025, three ministry staff members were dismissed or demoted for supporting a colleague who had been dismissed for "speaking out publicly against power abuse in heritage protection."⁴⁹⁹ The government chief counsellor concerned gave an interview to an opposition-related portal in which he claimed that the state-governed cultural heritage protection

⁴⁹³ *Contributions of Hungarian CSOs to the European Commission's Rule of Law Report (January 2026)*, 27 January 2026, p. 100.

⁴⁹⁴ Amnesty International Hungary – Háttér Society – Hungarian Civil Liberties Union – Hungarian Helsinki Committee (2025), *It Couldn't Happen in the EU, Until it Did: Pride Organiser Under Criminal Investigation, Facing One Year in Prison*, 28 October 2025.

⁴⁹⁵ Hungarian Helsinki Committee (2025), *Elítélték a már hulladék gyűlöletplakátot „kijavító” pécsi aktivistát*, 10 April 2025.

⁴⁹⁶ Kreatív (2025), *A közvécekéért kampányoltak, most elítélik őket*, 20 November 2025.

⁴⁹⁷ Curia, Uniformity Complaint Council, *4/2022. Uniformity decision*, (Jpe.IV.60.012/2022/12. szám).

⁴⁹⁸ Presshelsinki, *A falra festett ördög viagyora*, 28 February 2025.

⁴⁹⁹ *Contributions of Hungarian CSOs to the European Commission's Rule of Law Report (January 2026)*, 27 January 2026, p. 101.

system did not operate according to professional considerations, but instead served private or political interests rather than the public interest, even in breach of the law. He maintained that the corruption-related “destruction of cultural heritage” is taking place with state assistance. He was dismissed with immediate effect.⁵⁰⁰

University employees also protested against anti-LGBTQI legislation and the Pride ban, starting in April with staff members at ELTE University.⁵⁰¹ In June 2025, Péter Pázmány Catholic University (a partly publicly funded institution) initiated disciplinary proceedings against three professors for publishing a supportive article in HVG on LGBTQI+ issues and same-sex family research following the Pride ban. Although the proceedings did not formally result in dismissal, the pressure and consequences ultimately led all three to resign.⁵⁰²

b) Consequences

CSOs emphasise the **chilling effect** of “restrictive laws, ill-founded measures and stigmatisation”, which undermine the effective operation of CSOs and have “a detrimental psychological impact” on their staff, while partnership building becomes difficult.⁵⁰³ They also report that some CSOs have already ceased certain activities or “limited their communication critical of the Government”.⁵⁰⁴

1.4. Deterioration of legal environment: court cases

Ambivalent court cases

a) Summary

Reference to certain controversial court cases that indicate the deterioration of legal environment in relation to the protection of freedom of speech may be found under section 1.3.

b) Consequences

See section 1.3.

1.5. Attempts to stifle civic engagement through violence, harassment and negative narratives

⁵⁰⁰ Bódog, B. (2026), Lefelezték a Partizánnak nyilatkozó kormányfőtanácsos munkatársának a fizetését, ezért felmondott, 444.hu, 26 February 2026.

⁵⁰¹ HVG (2025), A Pride betiltása ellen tiltakoznak az ELTE oktatói és kutatói: megvédik a hallgatókat a gyűlölelettől, April 2025.

⁵⁰² HVG, Egy keresztény szellemiségű egyetem oktatóiként és pszichológusként valljuk: minden szeretetre épülő kapcsolat egyenértékű, 20 June 2025.

⁵⁰³ Contributions of Hungarian CSOs to the European Commission’s Rule of Law Report (January 2026), 27 January 2026, p. 100.

⁵⁰⁴ Contributions of Hungarian CSOs to the European Commission’s Rule of Law Report (January 2026), 27 January 2026, p. 100.

Increasingly intimidating government rhetoric

a) Summary

At the beginning of 2025, **government rhetoric** intensified against CSOs deemed as “mercenaries” of foreign powers and members of the so-called “Soros Network”, further restraining the remnants of “safe space” for CSOs who are critical of government policies or represent vulnerable groups. The **smear campaigns** and “vilification” are regularly promoted by “governmental figures and the pro-government propaganda machinery.”⁵⁰⁵ In January 2025, the Prime Minister declared pushing “the Soros Empire out of Europe” to be “the most important foreign policy goal for 2025” together with the dismantlement of “the foreign networks that threaten Hungarian sovereignty”.⁵⁰⁶ He also advised Pride organisers not to “bother” with the preparations of the Pride in 2025.⁵⁰⁷

In February 2025, the **SPO published a report** on the operations of the so-called “Soros Network” in Debrecen.⁵⁰⁸ The report maintained that certain local and civil society organisations used foreign funding to influence politics. The report singled out and stigmatised specific NGOs, including the Mikepércsi Mothers (*Mikepércsi anyák*), who organised protests against battery factories in Debrecen.

In his **speech of 15 March 2025**, the Prime Minister also promised an “Easter cleansing” by saying: “The bugs have survived winter. We are dismantling the financial machine that has used corrupt dollars to buy politicians, judges, journalists, bogus civil society organisations and political activists. We will disperse the entire shadow army.”⁵⁰⁹

b) Consequences

The **smear campaign** initiated by leading government officials have been magnified in the pro-government media, resulting in an increasing stigmatisation of CSOs. The related **SPO’s reports**, by marking CSOs and persons as “threats to national sovereignty” further reduce their space to manoeuvre, to the extent that e.g. critical CSOs can, especially in the countryside “hardly access community spaces.”⁵¹⁰ Meanwhile, not only the most established “critical” NGOs are under scrutiny

⁵⁰⁵ *Contributions of Hungarian CSOs to the European Commission’s Rule of Law Report (January 2026)*, 27 January 2026, p. 99.

⁵⁰⁶ Cabinet Office of the Prime Minister, [Prime Minister Viktor Orbán on the Kossuth Radio programme “Good Morning Hungary”](#), 17 January 2025.

⁵⁰⁷ Cabinet Office of the Prime Minister, [Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s “State of the Nation” address](#), 17 January 2025.

⁵⁰⁸ Hungarian Sovereignty Protection Office (2025), [Report on the Operations of the Soros Network in Debrecen - Foreign-Funded Network Building in Hungary’s Second Largest City \(Jelentés a soros-hálózat debreceni működéséről - Külföldről finanszírozott hálózatépítés Magyarország második legnépesebb városában\)](#), 11 February 2025.

⁵⁰⁹ Cabinet Office of the Prime Minister, [Speech by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán on the 177th anniversary of the Hungarian Revolution and War of Independence of 1848–49](#), 15 March 2025.

⁵¹⁰ *Contributions of Hungarian CSOs to the European Commission’s The Rule of Law Report (January 2026)*, 27 January 2026, p. 99.

and attack, but the SPO's reports or smear campaigns may select CSOs "in a haphazard manner, including some working on child protection or in social care."⁵¹¹

1.6. Funding reductions and restrictions

Intimidating governmental rhetoric, funding restrictions imposed by the new Transparency Bill and within the framework of fight against terrorism

a) Summary

As reported above under section 1.5, at the beginning of 2025, CSOs deemed as "mercenaries" of foreign powers and members of the so-called "Soros Network" were increasingly targeted by government rhetoric, see e.g. the **15 March 2025 speech** of the Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, in which he promised an "Easter cleansing" labelling his political adversaries, judges, journalists and NGOs as "The bugs have survived winter".⁵¹²

The intimidating rhetoric of the government and the PM provided the background of and the foundation for the measures proposed in May 2025, in the **Bill on the transparency of public life** (later suspended), which planned to block or hinder the "foreign" funding of CSOs (i.e., funding from outside of Hungary), while it aimed at limiting domestic funding as well. The envisaged measures also included the monitoring of bank accounts, the imposition of fines; and suspension or dissolution of targeted entities.⁵¹³ **Government Decree 297/2025. (IX. 26.)** established a "national anti-terrorism list", foreseeing **financial sanctions** for the CSOs on it. These measures are described in more details under Section 1.1.

b) Consequences

In 2025, **SPO "investigations" and "reports"** targeted various EU funding programmes, such as Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV), Horizon Europe and the Asylum and Migration Integration Fund (AMIF), selectively listing some of their Hungarian beneficiaries. In March 2025, a Hungarian member of the Patriots group in the EP called on the European Commission⁵¹⁴ to disclose the list of CSOs funded in the period 2019 - 2024 and the amount of financial support these CSOs received, claiming that the Commission's funding of CSOs is "carried out in a non-transparent way".⁵¹⁵

⁵¹¹ *Contributions of Hungarian CSOs to the European Commission's Rule of Law Report (January 2026)*, 27 January 2026, p. 99.

⁵¹² Prime Minister's Office, *Speech by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán on the 177th anniversary of the Hungarian Revolution and War of Independence of 1848–49*, 15 March 2025.

⁵¹³ Hungarian Parliament, *Bill T/11923. on the Transparency of Public Life*, 13 May 2025.

⁵¹⁴ European Parliament (2025), *Disclosure of the list of non-governmental organisation contracts*, Priority question for written answer to the Commission by Csaba Dömötör, P-001007/2025, 7 March 2025.

⁵¹⁵ *Contributions of Hungarian CSOs to the European Commission's Rule of Law Report (January 2026)*, 27 January 2026, p. 102.

The **Bill on the transparency of public life** sparked widespread criticism both in Hungary and abroad,⁵¹⁶ and although its adoption was suspended,⁵¹⁷ it nevertheless had tangible effects. A survey conducted among CSOs on the impacts of the Bill indicated that some donors postponed or cancelled support; grant processes were suspended; board members and other representatives stepped down at certain CSOs; and staff members experienced a considerable mental burden.⁵¹⁸ A research published by the Hungarian Helsinki Committee (*Magyar Helsinki Bizottság*) in 2025 showed that some CSOs have already given up on applying for certain foreign funds to avoid potential attacks, while others even renounced previously awarded foreign funding.⁵¹⁹

Based on **Government Decree 297/2025. (IX. 26.)** on the emergency rules for action against certain persons and organisations in the fight against terrorism, “Antifa” group and Hammerbande/Antifa Ost were put on the list of terrorist groups and thus became subject to financial sanctions (see also Section 1.1).⁵²⁰

2. CIVIC SPACE EXPANSION

2.1. Positive narratives

a) Summary

Despite the legal prohibition, the **Budapest Pride** march on 28 June 2025 went ahead with approximately 200 000 participants and broad support from civil society. Framed by municipal organisers as a city event, it became the largest march in Budapest Pride’s thirty-year history, symbolically expressing public resistance to discriminatory legislation.⁵²¹

In **Pécs**, the annual **Pride** march was officially banned by the police, a decision later upheld by the Hungarian Supreme Court. Nevertheless, activists and local participants proceeded with the fifth Pécs Pride on 4 October 2025, bringing people into the streets despite the prohibition. When the

⁵¹⁶ See e.g. Civilisation Coalition (2025), *No Country Was Built On Blacklists*, joint statement signed by over 260 CSOs and trade unions and over 50 media outlets, 14 May 2025; or OSCE (2025), *OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media discusses importance of media freedom and independent journalism during official visit to Hungary*, press release 4 June 2025.

⁵¹⁷ The bill is listed as pending on the Parliament’s website as T/11923.

⁵¹⁸ NIOK Alapítvány, *Elemzés „a közélet átláthatóságáról” szóló törvénytervezet civil szervezetekre gyakorolt hatásairól*, 6 August 2026, quoted in *Contributions of Hungarian CSOs to the European Commission’s Rule of Law Report (January 2026)*, 27 January 2026, p. 102.

⁵¹⁹ Hungarian Helsinki Committee, *Kutatás a szuverenitás védelmi törvény hatásairól*, 12 February 2025.

⁵²⁰ *Contributions of Hungarian CSOs to the European Commission’s Rule of Law Report (January 2026)*, 27 January 2026, p. 97.

⁵²¹ Amnesty international, *Urgent Action Outcome: Pride March Went Ahead Despite Restrictions*, 9 July 2025.

march was disrupted by counter-protesters, the police intervened to protect the participants of the Pride March in what was described as a professional and proportionate measure.⁵²²

b) Consequences

Human rights NGOs underlined the significance of the peaceful assembly while also documenting the authorities' threats of fines and criminal prosecution against the organisers.

⁵²² Hungarian Helsinki Committee (2025), *A szabadság és az elfogadás örömnépe volt a Pécs Pride*, 6 October 2025.

Ireland (IE)

Civic space in the EU in 2025

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Disclaimer

This document was commissioned under contract as background material for a comparative analysis by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) for the project '[Civic space](#)'. The information and views contained in the document do not necessarily reflect the views or the official position of FRA. The document is made publicly available for transparency and information purposes only and does not constitute legal advice or legal opinion.

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1. CIVIC SPACE PRESSURES

1.1 Deterioration of legal environment: freedom of association

Restrictions Affecting Civil Society Advocacy

a) Summary

The Irish Council for Civil Liberties (ICCL) reported that state funding practices are restricting civil society advocacy, with evidence that funders use implicit and explicit threats of funding withdrawal to silence dissent.

b) Consequences

The ICCL report found that 37% of organisations curtailed advocacy for fear of impacting funding and 48% of organisations working in homelessness and addiction reported similar curtailment, while concerns were also raised about lack of transparency and failure to consider civil society contributions in policy making.⁵²³

1.2 Deterioration of legal environment: freedom of assembly

Removal of face coverings

a) Summary

The proposed amendment of section 8 of Criminal Justice (Public Order) Act 1994 will explicitly grant An Garda Síochána (Irish Police Service) the power to ask someone to remove a face covering in a public space. The power can only be exercised if a An Garda Síochána member suspects, with reasonable cause, that the person is acting in a way which jeopardises the safety of persons, property or the public peace and is wearing the face covering for the purpose of intimidation or to facilitate the commission of an offence or hinder the investigation or prosecution of an offence.⁵²⁴

b) Consequences

Assessing a potential threat to safety, intimidation, or commission of a crime rests on the individual judgement of An Garda Síochána (reasonable cause). This enables wide discretion of An Garda Síochána as there is currently no definition of reasonable cause in Irish law which could lead to misuse and inconsistent application.⁵²⁵

Arrests and Criminal Charges to Protests

a) Summary

⁵²³ Irish Council for Civil Liberties (2024), [“That’s Not Your Role” State Funding and Advocacy in The Irish Community Voluntary and Nonprofit Sector](#), 30 April 2024.

⁵²⁴ Irish Council for Civil Liberties (2025), [Submission on the General Scheme of Criminal Law and Civil Law \(Miscellaneous Provisions\) Bill 2025](#), 27 June 2025.

⁵²⁵ Irish Council for Civil Liberties (2025) [Submission on the General Scheme of Criminal Law and Civil Law \(Miscellaneous Provisions\) Bill 2025](#), 27 June 2025.

Three protestors were charged with trespassing under Section 11 of the Public Order Act and interfering with the operation, management and security of an airport under Section 47 of the Air Navigation and Transport Act 1998 after a peaceful protest in which they allegedly entered the runway of Shannon Airport to raise awareness of the airport's use by the US military on 30 March 2024.⁵²⁶ The case was subsequently transferred to Ennis Circuit Court and their trial is scheduled to commence in November 2025. Accordingly, as confirmed by Front Line Defenders and reported by Irish Times, no conviction has been recorded and the proceedings have been adjourned pending further determination by the court⁵²⁷.

On 31 March 2025, members of the Mothers Against Genocide group were forcibly removed from the front gates of the parliament buildings and arrested, during an overnight Mother's Day vigil outside Leinster House. The demonstrators had arranged a visual display including children's shoes, teddy bears and pillow babies, symbolising children killed in Gaza, as well as 70 images representing the estimated daily child deaths. According to An Garda Síochána sources, 11 individuals were detained under the Criminal Justice (Public Order) Act 1994 and released with formal warnings. The protestors allege that they were subjected to strip and cavity searches while in custody, a claim subsequently denied by the Garda Commissioner, who stated that an internal investigation found that no such searches took place⁵²⁸.

b) Consequences

Protesters were charged and detained under public order and aviation legislation following protest actions, with court proceedings ongoing in one case and formal warnings issued in another, while allegations regarding treatment in custody were raised and subsequently denied following an internal investigation.

Police Response to Protests

a) Summary

Housing activists reported that members of An Garda Síochána using violence or threats of arrest during housing related protests in the Ireland⁵²⁹.

The Irish Network of Legal Observers reported on a series of violations of Garda policies and Ireland's international human rights obligations when Gardaí, without justification, restrained and dispersed peaceful (but disruptive) protestors using force and double-strength Sabre Red incapacitant (pepper) spray. The protest on East Wall Road was an offshoot from an Ireland Palestine Solidarity Campaign (IPSC) national demonstration. Approximately 150 protestors were involved. Reported incidents included the deployment by the Public Order Unit of long shields and pepper spray while advancing against protestors. This included a number of people already affected by pepper spray, who were either

⁵²⁶ Front Line Defenders (2025) [Human rights defenders charged for peaceful protest action at Shannon Airport](#), 3 November 2025.

⁵²⁷ Irish Times (2026) [Case over Shannon Airport protest adjourned as clarity on common law defence awaited](#), 10 Feb 2026; Front Line Defenders (2026), [Human rights defenders' trial for peaceful protest at Shannon Airport on hold pending Supreme Court ruling](#), 10 February 2026.

⁵²⁸ CIVICUS (2025) [Mothers Against Genocide vigil forcibly dispersed, allegations of ill-treatment](#), 30 June 2025.

⁵²⁹ Irish Council for Civil Liberties (2024), [The policing of protest: a shifting landscape?](#) Presentation, Irish Council for Civil Liberties Policing of Protest seminar, Dublin, 14 March 2024.

sitting or lying on the ground receiving first aid or who were being supported to evacuate the area, and so were unable to move away quickly.⁵³⁰

Following the 2023 Dublin riots, the Garda Commissioner committed to increasing Tasers available to the Public Order Unit for use in protest situations.⁵³¹ A Taser pilot was rolled out in December 2025 for use beyond the Public Order Unit.

Concerns about proportionality and fair trial were raised in relation to An Garda Síochána publication of images of 99 persons of interest following the Dublin riots, particularly in light of the presumption of innocence and risks of public stigmatisation⁵³².

b) Consequences

Concerns about the Taser pilot have been raised by the Irish Council of Civil Liberties and a number of experts about their likely use in protest situations, lack of safeguards governing taser use and non-publication of the protocol or overarching Use of Force policy.⁵³³

The UN Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association and the Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment wrote to the Irish Government to express concern over the acquisition and use of less lethal weapons for crowd control and protest management by An Garda Síochána, noting that it carries serious risks of human rights violations, including the absolute prohibition of torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.⁵³⁴

1.3. Deterioration of legal environment: freedom of expression

Access to Information

a) Summary

Ireland's Freedom of Information (FOI) system continues to operate with a high grant rate, with approximately 4 out of every 5 requests granted and only a small percentage proceeding to internal or independent review. However, concerns have been raised regarding refusals, extensive redactions, and instances where initial decisions were overturned on appeal.

b) Consequences

⁵³⁰ Irish Council for Civil Liberties(2025) [Irish Network of Legal Observers Report - Dublin Port Tunnel Protest Saturday 4 October 2025](#), 15 October 2025

⁵³¹ Houses of the Oireachtas (2023) [Policing Matters](#). Joint Committee on Justice debate, 29 Nov 2023.

⁵³² Civil Liberties Union for Europe (2025), [Liberties Rule of Law Report](#), 17 March 2025.

⁵³³ Irish Council for Civil Liberties (2026) Letter to Acting Deputy Commissioner of An Garda Síochána Re: [An Garda Síochána taser pilot](#), 18 February 2026.

⁵³⁴ UN Office of the High Commissioner (2026) [Ireland: Garda less-lethal weapon expansion poses grave human rights risks, warn UN experts](#), 18 February 2026

Although the FOI system is formally accessible, issues remain regarding consistency and transparency in practice⁵³⁵. There is an increasing number of FOI requests every year, mostly in the areas of health and social welfare. Requests to public bodies increased by 11 percent in 2025. Appeals to the FOI Commissioner increased by 16 percent, with acceptance rates up 27 percent. Affirmations of public body decisions fell by 6 percent.⁵³⁶ While the Minister for Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform has confirmed that a comprehensive review of the FOI regime is nearing completion, the debate suggests that there are issues with certain public bodies refusing requests or redacting large volumes of information.⁵³⁷

1.4. Attempts to stifle civic engagement through violence, harassment and negative narratives

Hate-Motivated Intimidation and Violence Against Civic Actors

a) Summary

ICCL reported violence intimidation and threats directed toward election candidates, canvassers and campaign workers because of their gender, race, sexuality and other personal characteristics highlighting concerns about the safety of civic space actors in Ireland⁵³⁸.

The Coalition Against Hate Crime, representing 22 civil society organisations in Ireland have warned of a growing and deeply concerning threat of hate driven extremism, violence, racism, intolerance, and harassment, noting that hate, intimidation and violence targeting vulnerable groups have become an alarming feature of public life⁵³⁹.

A convicted rapist who had threatened and harassed three journalists was sentenced to 11 years in prison by the Dublin Circuit Criminal Court for sending threatening messages and emails, including sexual and death threats.⁵⁴⁰

b) Consequences

There is a growing and deeply concerning threat of hate driven extremism, violence, racism, intolerance, and harassment was warned of, with hate, intimidation and violence targeting vulnerable groups described as an alarming feature of public life.

Accountability for Threats and Police Conduct

a) Summary

⁵³⁵ Houses of the Oireachtas (2025) [Freedom of Information](#), Dáil Éireann Debate, 3 April 2025.

⁵³⁶ Office of the Information Commissioner (OIC) [Annual Report 2024](#), 2 July 2025

⁵³⁷ Houses of the Oireachtas (2025) [Freedom of Information](#), Dáil Éireann Debate, 3 April 2025.

⁵³⁸ Irish Council for Civil liberties (2024) [ICCL Statement on Violence, Intimidation and Threats Directed Towards Election Candidates, Canvassers and Workers](#), 4 June 2024.

⁵³⁹ Doras (2025) [Civil Society Warns of Escalating Hate and Violence: Calls for Coordinated, Human Rights-Based National Action](#), 10 November 2025.

⁵⁴⁰ Civicus (2025) [Watchdogs warn of hardening stance towards civil disobedience, multiple arrests at pro-Palestine protests](#) 30 June 2025.

On June 2025, the Dublin Circuit Criminal Court sentenced a man to 11 years' imprisonment for the harassment of three Sunday World Journalists, he had pleaded guilty to sending repeated violent and sexually threatening emails in August 2023, including a threat to put a bullet in one of the journalists, and had attended at the newspaper's offices on Talbot street, where he was found by An Garda Síochána drafting a further message. Full custodial sentence imposed after he refused to enter a bond suspending the final 12 months and ordered that he have no direct or indirect contact with the women and not go within 10 miles of their homes or workplaces for life⁵⁴¹.

In December 2025, The Dublin District Court sentenced a woman to 6 months' imprisonment for sending online threats to the Tánaiste under the Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Act 2020. The court heard that the messages were of a threatening nature and were investigated by An Garda Síochána before being prosecuted. A custodial sentence was imposed, demonstrating that the matter was subjected to criminal investigation and resulted in a conviction⁵⁴².

37 referrals from Garda Síochána of matters where it appeared 'the conduct of a member of the Garda Síochána may have resulted in the death of or serious harm to a person'. 21 of these related to fatalities. 11 public interest investigations opened (these are investigations undertaken in the absence of a complaint or referral from the Garda Commissioner). 26 were closed⁵⁴³.

b) Consequences

Custodial sentences were imposed following criminal investigations into harassment and threats, resulting in convictions, and referrals were made concerning matters where it appeared that the conduct of a member of the Garda may have resulted in death or serious harm, with public interest investigations opened and closed.

2. CIVIC SPACE EXPANSION

2.1.Improvements in legal environment: freedom of association

Human Rights as a Charitable Purpose

a) Summary

The Charities (Amendment) Act 2024 introduced for the first time 'the advancement of human rights' as a charitable purpose. The section was enacted in January 2025.⁵⁴⁴

b) Consequences

This legislative expansion allows human rights organisations to register with the Charities Regulator, strengthening the sector, enhancing accountability, and aligning Irish law with international standards. The existing Charities Act from 2009 did not allow organisations who

⁵⁴¹ Irish Times (2025), [Rapist who threatened three Sunday World journalists jailed for 11 years](#), 5 June 2025.

⁵⁴² RTE (2025), [Woman jailed for 6 months over online threats to Tánaiste](#), 18 December 2025.

⁵⁴³ Office of the Police Ombudsman (2025), [2024 GSOC Annual Report has been published today](#), 1 October 2025.

⁵⁴⁴ Irish Statute Book (2024) [S.I. No. 10/2025 - Charities \(Amendment\) Act 2024 \(Commencement\) Order 2025](#), 24 January 2025.

promote human rights to register as charities for that purpose. It has also meant that some funders did not offer grants to human rights organisations as they required organisations to be registered as charities.⁵⁴⁵ However the Act did not contain a definition of “advancement of human rights”, which was the cause of some parliamentary debate⁵⁴⁶, and the Charities Regulator now will engage with the charity sector and other key stakeholders on a definition to prepare and publish updated guidance documents.⁵⁴⁷

2.2.Improvements in legal environment: freedom of expression

Defamation Amendment Bill 2024

a) Summary

On 19 February 2026, the Defamation (Amendment) Act 2026 was signed into law.⁵⁴⁸ This Act partially implements Directive (EU) 2024/1069 (the “Anti-SLAPP Directive”) by a new Part 4A of the Defamation Act 2009 (inserted by Part 7 of the Defamation Act 2026) and allows defendants to seek early intervention from a court to dismiss or manage claims that appear designed to silence public participation rather than to vindicate a genuine legal right.⁵⁴⁹ It is however the only part of the Act at 1 April 2026 yet to have a commencement order signed by the Minister.⁵⁵⁰

b) Consequences

The section allows defendants such as journalists, NGOs, or campaigners, sued for defamation on foot of their engagement in public participation, to apply to the court to strike out “manifestly unfounded” claims. The onus is on an applicant to inform the court of their belief that the proceedings may constitute a SLAPP.⁵⁵¹ The measures recognise that the threat of litigation can by itself achieve a person’s or organisations’ objective of suppressing criticism, even where the underlying defamation claim lacks merit.⁵⁵²

The Act also introduces a single statutory defence of fair publication on a matter of public interest. It is a defence for a defendant (i) to show that the statement concerned was on a matter of public interest; (ii) that the defendant reasonably believed publication was in the public interest; and (iii) that the statement was published in good faith. This part of the Act abolishes the common law

⁵⁴⁵ Irish Council of Civil Liberties (2022) [ICCL welcomes inclusion of human rights in draft Charities Bill](#), 29 April 2022.

⁵⁴⁶ Houses of the Oireachtas (2024) [Charities \(Amendment\) Bill 2023: Second Stage](#), Seanad Éireann debate, 25 June 2024.

⁵⁴⁷ Charities Regulator Ireland (2025) [Charities \(Amendment\) Act 2024](#) . 27 January 2025.

⁵⁴⁸ Irish Statute Book (2026) [Defamation \(Amendment\) Act 2026](#).

⁵⁴⁹ McCann Fitzgerald Solicitors (2026) [Ireland’s Anti-SLAPP Framework: The 2026 Act and General Scheme Explained](#), 26 February 2026.

⁵⁵⁰ Irish Statute Book (2026) [Defamation \(Amendment\) Act 2026, No. 2 of 2026, Updated to 1 April 2026 \(Act No. 6 of 2026 and S.I. No. 118 of 2026\)](#)

⁵⁵¹ Irish Statute Book (2026) [Section 34C of the Defamation Act 2009 \(inserted by section 19 of the Defamation Act 2026\)](#). 2 November 2026.

⁵⁵² McCann Fitzgerald Solicitors (2026) [Ireland’s Anti-SLAPP Framework: The 2026 Act and General Scheme Explained](#), 26 February 2026.

“Reynolds defence” that exists as a defence for responsible journalism, consolidating public interest reporting into a single statutory defence to provide clarity and certainty for journalists and publishers.

Several omissions of key components of the Directive were noted, including provision for third-party interventions in support of SLAPP defendants (Article 9), security for damages (Article 10) and a reversal of the burden of proof (Article 12), as well as protections against SLAPPs initiated in non-EU countries (Articles 16 and 17).⁵⁵³ However, there are further proposals for further implementation contained in the recently published General Scheme of the Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation Bill, and the above omissions from the Directive are all addressed within the Heads of Bill.⁵⁵⁴

The defamation legislation also missed adopting the Council of Europe’s Recommendation on countering the use of SLAPPs, including automatic stay of proceedings while an early dismissal motion is being heard.⁵⁵⁵

While defamation is one of the most common forms of SLAPP, SLAPPs can also come in a variety of forms including data protection, privacy, intellectual property and harassment claims. The mechanisms proposed in the General Scheme of the Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation Bill will apply anti-SLAPP measures to all civil and commercial proceedings other than defamation, mirroring safeguards in the new Part 4A of the Defamation Act 2009.⁵⁵⁶ Heads of Bill were approved in December 2025, and the legislation is listed on the Government Legislation Programme for Spring 2026.⁵⁵⁷

2.3. Positive narratives

Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission increases support for civil society

a) Summary

The IHREC Strategy 2025-2027 committed to strengthening the enabling environment for civil society participation in international human rights mechanisms and called on the State to fund participation in treaty body processes.⁵⁵⁸ IHREC also awarded 350,000 euro in its annual Grants Scheme for civil society with a specific focus on applying the Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty, and tackling misinformation, disinformation, hate, poverty and the climate crisis in line with the IHREC Strategy 2025-27.⁵⁵⁹

⁵⁵³ Houses of the Oireachtas Library and Research Service (2025) [Strategic Litigation Against Public Participation \(SLAPP\), L&RS Note](#), 23 September 2025 ; Index on Censorship (2025) [‘Ireland’s Defamation \(Amendment\) Bill fails to protect public interest speech’](#), 9 July 2025

⁵⁵⁴ Government of Ireland (2025) [General Scheme Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation Bill](#).

⁵⁵⁵ National Union of Journalists Ireland (2025) [NUJ expresses concern over Ireland’s Defamation \(Amendment\) Bill](#), 9 July 2025.

⁵⁵⁶ McCann Fitzgerald Solicitors (2026) [Ireland’s Anti-SLAPP Framework: The 2026 Act and General Scheme Explained](#), 26 February 2026.

⁵⁵⁷ Government of Ireland (2026) [Government Legislation Programme Spring 2026](#), 13 January 2026.

⁵⁵⁸ Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (2025) [Strategy 2025-27](#), 26 February 2025.

⁵⁵⁹ Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (2025) [Grants Scheme 2025-26](#), 30 September 2025.

b) Consequences

The strength of the statement from IHREC in its strategy statement reflects rising concerns about the pressure on civil society organisations to address increasing social conflict and impacts of poverty.⁵⁶⁰

2.4.Improvements in funding

Incremental improvements in state funding

a) Summary

The Government Budget 2025 included increased funding for the community and voluntary sector, including €1.6 million for volunteering and philanthropy, a €1 million boost to the Community Centre Investment Fund, and a 12% increase in funding for the Charities Regulator to improve the infrastructure of regulation. Additionally, the Charitable Donations Scheme has been expanded, meaning charities will no longer have to have been established for at least two years to access the scheme, and will have a longer timeframe from the date of a donation to use the funds raised. Looking toward 2026, the State has committed to scaling these priorities, specifically increasing the Community Centre Investment Fund by €3 million to a total of €20 million.⁵⁶¹

b) Consequences

The increased investment in the community and voluntary sector is a positive development, as well as the regulatory changes around the Charitable Donations Scheme. However, funding for the sector has yet to reach pre-recession levels. While nominal spending through some channels has grown well beyond 2008 levels in cash terms, the structural legacy of austerity, particularly the pay and staffing conditions in the Section 39 sector, and the absence of multi-annual, sustainable core funding, means that in practice, the community and voluntary sector was still operating well below the *real* pre-recession baseline in 2025.

The Wheel⁵⁶² and Social Justice Ireland⁵⁶³ warn that without a sustained increase in core funding; frontline charities will be unable to meet the growing demand. This lack of long-term security prevents effective strategic planning and risks the closure of vital community services that are already struggling with rising compliance costs. In addition, failure to achieve full pay parity with the public sector has led to a split-level workforce. Organisations are losing experienced staff to state agencies, directly resulting in reduced service hours and longer waiting lists for vulnerable users.

2.5.Improvements in participation

⁵⁶⁰ Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (2025) [Strategy 2025-27](#), 26 February 2025.

⁵⁶¹ The Wheel (2024) [Key Highlights of Budget 2025 & Its Impact on the Community and Voluntary Sector](#), 4 October 2024.

⁵⁶² The Wheel (2024) [Pre-Budget 2025 Submission for the community & voluntary sector](#), 16 June 2024.

⁵⁶³ Social Justice Ireland (2024) [Pre-Budget submission Submission to the Joint Committee on Social Protection, Community and Rural Development and the Islands on Budget 2025](#), 19 July 2024.

Participation of Disabled People

a) Summary

The National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People 2025-2030 was developed with significant input from disability groups and their advocates. The Government also agreed to establish a strategic focus network summit on the cost of disability led by the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht as a cross-government project.

b) Consequences

The strategy has been broadly welcomed by civil society. The strategy was co-designed and co-created with the DPO Network (ASIAM, Disabled Women Ireland, the Irish Deaf Society, ILMI, and the Platform of Self Advocates), marking a significant step in policy development and reflecting the UNCRPD's requirement for the full involvement of DPOs in shaping policies that affect disabled people. Monitoring will involve the Cabinet, Oireachtas, a Delivery and Monitoring Committee, and an Annual Forum for stakeholders and DPOs.⁵⁶⁴

The strategy's accessibility commitments (transport, built environment, communications) indirectly support political participation but more broadly support participation in civic space. The absence of specific targets on political representation is a notable gap.

IHREC cautioned that a clear plan for implementation is still needed to ensure Ireland complies with its UNCRPD obligations, particularly in respect of deinstitutionalisation. The Commission also emphasised that it is imperative that DPOs are properly resourced, since DPO capacity to engage meaningfully is itself a precondition for the strategy working as intended.⁵⁶⁵

⁵⁶⁴ Disability Federation of Ireland (2025) [DFI Brief on Ireland's National Human Rights Strategy](#). 6 November 2025.

⁵⁶⁵ Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (2025) [Publication of Disability Strategy a Significant Step Forward – But further detail on implementation urgently needed](#). 3 September 2025.

Italy (IT)

Civic space in the EU in 2025

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Disclaimer

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1. CIVIC SPACE PRESSURES

1.1. Deterioration of legal environment: freedom of association

Public authorities allegedly used spyware on journalists and activists

a) Summary

In February 2025, the case emerged about the use of surveillance systems, including the spyware Graphite, produced and distributed by Israeli cyber intelligence company Paragon Solutions, on seven phone users, including those of journalists and operators of an NGO involved in rescuing migrants at sea. The Italian government was therefore directly called upon by media and members of Parliament to explain whether it was among the purchasers of the software and which government's departments had used it and for what purposes. In fact, given the type of professions carried out by the individuals spied on, the danger of serious violations of fundamental rights and possible improper and abusive conduct on the part of state apparatus would emerge, with obvious prejudice to the democratic stability of the legal system.⁵⁶⁶

b) Consequences

It is worth stressing that the concerned technology appears to be distributed under license, as a matter of express company policy, only to institutional clients, governments of countries considered democratic, and their intelligence and police forces, with the primary aim of ensuring national security and combating terrorism and organized crime. This became a crucial element in the public debate since it led to exclude that private subjects could have used Graphite to spy on journalists and activists, but rather Italian public authorities did. When the case emerged The Citizen Lab – a research centre of the University of Toronto – analysed the devices confirming that they had been infected by the software⁵⁶⁷.

On 4 June 2025, the Italian government's parliamentary committee overseeing Italy's intelligence services (*Comitato Parlamentare per la Sicurezza della Repubblica - Copasir*) published the report⁵⁶⁸ of their inquiry into the Paragon affair. The report acknowledged that the Italian government had used the software to spy on the two NGO's activists; however, the report stated that they were unable to determine who might have targeted one of the journalists whose mobile phone had been analysed by the research centre.

⁵⁶⁶ Pupo, V. (2025), The Paragon Solutions case: spyware and secrets (*Il caso Paragon Solutions: spyware e segreti*), in *Osservatorio Costituzionale AIC*, No. 04/2025, 1st July 2025.

⁵⁶⁷ The Citizen Lab (2025), *Graphite Caught. First Forensic Confirmation of Paragon's iOS Mercenary Spyware Finds Journalists Targeted*, 12 June 2025.

⁵⁶⁸ Italy, Parliamentary Committee on the Security of the Republic (*Comitato Parlamentare per la Sicurezza della Repubblica – Copasir*) (2025), Report on the use of the spyware Graphite by Italian intelligence services (*Relazione sull'utilizzo dello spyware «Graphite» da parte dei servizi di informazione per la sicurezza della Repubblica*), 4 June 2025.

On 9 June 2025, the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz*⁵⁶⁹ reported that Paragon had offered to assist the Italian government in investigating the case of one of the journalists, an offer that they say was rejected by the Italian government. Paragon also suggested that they had unilaterally terminated Italy's contracts. In response later that day, the Italian Department of Security Intelligence (*Dipartimento delle Informazioni per la Sicurezza* - DIS), which coordinates Italy's internal intelligence services, stated⁵⁷⁰ that it had rejected Paragon's offer because of national security concerns with exposing their activities to Paragon. They stated that providing Paragon such access would impact the reputation of Italy's security services among peer services around the world. They denied that the contract termination was unilateral. Later the same day, the COPASIR committee stated⁵⁷¹ that they had chosen not to proceed with Paragon's offer, but instead chose to directly query the Paragon databases, having deemed the approaches to be equivalent. More specifically, during the on-site inspections carried out at the premises of the Italian intelligence services on 7 May 2025, in the exercise of the powers conferred by law, the COPASIR directly examined both the databases and the audit logs, which cannot be unilaterally deleted by the client-user. The committee also stated a willingness to declassify Paragon's testimony to the committee: this has not happened so far.

The case caused crucial concerns among civil-society organisations (CSOs). In February 2025, the Digital Human Rights Network (*Rete Diritti Umani Digitali*) – whose members are some of the most well-known CSOs in this field, such as Amnesty International, Hermes Center, Period Think Tank, Privacy Network, Strali and The Good Lobby Italia – called for the disclosure of information regarding the relationship between Italian government agencies and Paragon Solutions, including the reasons that led to the termination of these contractual relationships, in order to ensure transparency and accountability in institutional decisions. They also called on the Italian government to report on this matter in Parliament, in a public session, rather than entrusting the urgent and necessary discussion of the case to closed-door hearings at Copasir. The Network also contested the government's decision to entrust the investigation into the incident to a government agency such as the National Cybersecurity Agency and called for an investigation to be opened by the competent authorities, including the Personal Data Protection Authority and Copasir, in order to shed full light on the matter⁵⁷². A similar call to transparency was also expressed by the Italian journalists' association in June 2025⁵⁷³.

Eventually, in February 2025 the Italian DPA issued a press release⁵⁷⁴ warning all users about the negative externalities for privacy and data protection of the use of the Graphite software, outside the

⁵⁶⁹ Haaretz (2025), [Israeli Spyware Scandal in Italy: Paragon Questions Probe Into Journalist Hack After Contract Canceled](#), 9 June 2025.

⁵⁷⁰ Italy, ANSA (2025), 007, 'Paragon did not unilaterally terminate the contract' ([007, 'Paragon non ha rescisso unilateralmente il contratto'](#)), 9 June 2025.

⁵⁷¹ Italy, Agenparl (2025), Copasir. Public note ([Nota Copasir](#)), 9 June 2025.

⁵⁷² Italy, Amnesty Italia (2025), Caso Paragon: la Rete Diritti Umani Digitali chiede trasparenza ([Paragon case: the Digital Human Rights Network calls on transparency](#)), 18 February 2025.

⁵⁷³ Italy, National Council of the Journalists' Association (*Consiglio Nazionale Ordine dei Giornalisti*) (2025), Paragon: truth and transparency on the increasingly disturbing spyware affair. Who is lying? ([Paragon: verità e trasparenza su vicenda spyware sempre più inquietante, chi mente?](#)), 9 June 2025.

⁵⁷⁴ Italy, Data Protection Authority (*Garante per la Protezione dei Dati Personali*) (2025), Press release – Paragon, Italian DPA: forbidden the use of the software against the rules ([Comunicato](#)

specific purposes it is meant to. Following press reports and reports from concerned citizens about the possible indiscriminate use of the spyware, the Authority warned that the interception of electronic communications that do not fall within the scope of national security and the prevention, investigation, detection, and prosecution of crimes must comply with personal data protection legislation.

1.2. Deterioration of legal environment: freedom of assembly

The latest Italian Security Decree undermines the right to peaceful protest

a) Summary

In April 2025, Italy adopted a Law-Decree⁵⁷⁵ on security and public order – converted into ordinary Law in June 2025 -, which has come to be known as “anti-Ghandi bill” and described as the most serious attack on the right to protest in decades. The wide-ranging legal provision significantly expanded police powers and introduced dozens of new criminal offences and harsher penalties under the pretext of public security, criminalising non-violent civil disobedience with severe prison sentences. The adoption of the Law-Decree was the main reason the CIVICUS Monitor downgraded the Italian civic space from narrowed to obstructed in 2025.⁵⁷⁶

b) Consequences

The Law-Decree – which is not the first adopted by this Government since it took office in October 2022 – increase penalties for participation in unauthorized demonstrations with prison sentences of up to seven years for individuals who block traffic or are deemed to use “threats of violence” in protest against infrastructure projects; make it a crime to engage in protests in prisons, migrant detention centres, and reception centres, including through passive resistance to orders or rules (passive resistance to orders or rules covers acts such as non-cooperation with public officials); and increase sanctions for offenses against public officials.⁵⁷⁷ The Draft version of this Law provision had already caused concerns expressed by the UN Human Rights Commissioner⁵⁷⁸ who in April 2025 called on the Government to rescind the Decree since it includes provisions that are not aligned with international human rights law. Already in December 2024, the Commissioner for Human Rights of

[*stampa - Paragon, Garante privacy: no all'utilizzo dei software spia fuori dalle regole*](#)), 14 February 2025.

⁵⁷⁵ Italy, Law-Decree No. 48 of 11 April 2025 on “Urgent provisions on public safety, protection of personnel on duty, victims of usury, and the prison system” ([*Decreto-Legge 11 aprile 2025, n. 48, “Disposizioni urgenti in materia di sicurezza pubblica, di tutela del personale in servizio, nonché di vittime dell'usura e di ordinamento penitenziario”*](#)).

⁵⁷⁶ CIVICUS Monitor tracking civic space (2025), [Italy](#), 9 December 2025.

⁵⁷⁷ Human Rights Watch (2026), [World Report 2026. Italy: Events of 2025](#), 2026.

⁵⁷⁸ United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner (2025), [Italy: UN experts concerned by administrative enactment of problematic security bill](#), 14 April 2025.

the Council of Europe addressed a letter to the President of the Italian Senate⁵⁷⁹ asking to refrain from adopting the Decree as it would introduce offences that are defined in vague terms, criminalising, among others, acts such as traffic disruption with one's own body and protests resorting to passive resistance in prisons and detention centres. The Commissioner expressed concern at the potential impact of the bill, creating room for the arbitrary and disproportionate application of relevant penalties and restrictions, which would not be consistent with the Council of Europe human rights standards. According to a researcher working for CIVICUS Monitor⁵⁸⁰, the Law-Decree is a severe attack on rights in Italy, but it is just one step in a series of growing restrictions on dissent: "Italy could have supported those strengthening its society but instead has chosen to target them. Journalists, human rights defenders, and activists are waking up in a country every morning that is becoming less and less open."

Tug-of-war between government and unions over the right to strike

a) Summary

In recent years, the Italian Government – i.e., the Ministry of Infrastructures and Transports – has used several times its power of stopping the strikes (*precettazione*) called by workers' unions, causing harsh protests among these organisations. The national Strike Guarantee Commission – the administrative authority in charge of balancing the right to strike with the other fundamental rights enshrined in the Italian constitution – is increasingly backing the Ministry's decision, which already led to judicial courts intervening in this dispute.

b) Consequences

Preliminarily, it is worth recalling that the ministerial power to stop the strikes is governed by the legislation and can be enforced only in case of substantial and urgent threats to constitutionally protected rights. These threats cannot be generic and must be thoroughly explained by competent ministerial authorities. However, this has not been always the case with the Ministry invoking a generic right to free movement of passengers of public transports whose functioning might be impeded or made more difficult by the strikes. This occurred at the beginning of 2026, on the occasion of the Winter Olympics Games. On 11 February 2026, the Strike Guarantee Commission sent a note to the Ministry⁵⁸¹, pointing out that the called strike of the flight sector of 16 February and 7 March 2026 might impede the smooth holding of the Olympic Games, due to worrying impediment of people's right to movement. Workers' union at first decided to reject the request of postponement. However, the Ministry decided to stop the strikes⁵⁸² which was later on accepted by

⁵⁷⁹ The Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights (2024), [The Commissioner asks the Italian Senate to amend the 'security bill' to safeguard human rights](#), 20 December 2024.

⁵⁸⁰ CIVICUS Monitor tracking civic space (2025), [Italy](#), 9 December 2025

⁵⁸¹ Italy, Strike Guarantee Commission (*Commissione Garanzia Sciopero*)(2026), Milano-Cortina, Guarantee Commission: postponement of the flight strike of 16 February and 7 March outside the Olympics calendar ([Milano-Cortina, Garante: spostare scioperi trasporto aereo 16 febbraio e 7 marzo fuori da calendario olimpico](#)), 11 February 2026.

⁵⁸² Italy, Ministry of Infrastructures and Transports (*Ministero delle Infrastrutture e dei Trasporti*), [Ordinance No. 203T of 13 February 2026](#).

the unions that decided to postpone the strike of 16 February of the flight sector to 26 February, to comply with the Commission's request.⁵⁸³

1.3. Deterioration of legal environment: freedom of expression

1.4. Deterioration of legal environment: court cases

1.5. Attempts to stifle civic engagement through violence, harassment and negative narratives

Violent attack on an Italian investigative journalist

a) Summary

On the night between 16 and 17 October 2025, an explosive device was placed and detonated under the car of a well-known Italian investigative journalist, in front of his private dwelling. The explosion destroyed the car and damaged his daughter's vehicle, but there were no injuries. The act, deemed intimidating, is being investigated by the Italian Police Special Operations Unit and the Public Prosecutor's Office, with suspicions pointing to criminal organizations.

b) Consequences

The public prosecutor in charge of the case belongs to the Anti-mafia prosecutor department of Rome and is currently initiating an investigation for damage with the aggravating circumstance of the mafia method. On 22 October, the Ministry of the Interior urgently informed the Chamber of Deputies of the Italian Parliament about the attack, stating that the level of protection of the journalist would be further increased⁵⁸⁴. The episode is considered a serious leap in the quality of intimidation against investigative journalism, comparable to mafia-style or subversive acts. Investigators suspect the involvement of local crime clans or mafia-type criminal organizations, in response to the journalist's investigations which are broadcasted in a TV show. The journalist was already under police protection since 2020 due to mafia threats. All political parties, public institutions and also CSOs and press organisations have expressed their solidarity with the

⁵⁸³ The postponement decision is available at the [website](#) of the trade union CUB.

⁵⁸⁴ Italy, Chamber of Deputies (*Camera dei Deputati*) (2025), [Report of the Assembly Session of 22 October 2025](#).

journalist⁵⁸⁵. The National Federation of the Italian Press expressed its utmost concern⁵⁸⁶, stating that attacking journalists represents a pivotal democratic backsliding. The Federation expressed its solidarity with the journalist and his family but also warned about the possible negative consequences of a public and political climate aimed at discouraging journalists from doing their job when challenging political power and economic interests.

1.6. Funding reductions and restrictions

1.7. Barriers to participation in law and policy-making

1.8. Other developments

Italian civic space downgraded according to relevant international reports

a) Summary

In December 2025, the CIVICUS monitor in its annual report on civic space decided to downgrade the Italian situation from narrowed to obstructed, after years of registered democratic backsliding⁵⁸⁷. Additionally, in March 2026 the Liberties Rule of Law Report 2026⁵⁸⁸ highlighted a serious, deliberate erosion of the rule of law in five countries — Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Italy, and Slovakia — confirming their inclusion in the category of “Dismantlers”, that is governments that consistently and intentionally weaken the rule of law across most areas.

b) Consequences

According to CIVICUS Monitor the Italian civic space is dramatically shrinking due to several different factors⁵⁸⁹. These include: expanding police powers, the stigmatisation of activists, and weakening protections for journalists and defenders. Not only the Law-Decree described in previous sections, but also other provisions raised the CIVICUS monitor’s concerns, such as the harassment and

⁵⁸⁵ Italy, Lavalibera (2025), A car bombing targeted Sigfrido Ranucci. The latest attack on Report & Co. (*Un'autobomba contro Sigfrido Ranucci. Ultimo degli attacchi verso Report & Co*), 17 October 2025.

⁵⁸⁶ Italy, National Federation of the Italian Press (*Federazione Nazionale Stampa Italiana – FNSI*) (2025), Costante: "The attack on Sigfrido Ranucci turns back the clock on democracy" (*Costante: «L'attentato a Sigfrido Ranucci riporta indietro l'orologio della democrazia»*), 17 October 2025.

⁵⁸⁷ CIVICUS Monitor (2025), *People power under attack. 2025*, December 2025.

⁵⁸⁸ Liberties (2026), *Liberties Rule of Law Report 2026*, 30 March 2026.

⁵⁸⁹ Net4Defenders (2025), *Civic Space Report 2025. Italy*, 2025.

degrading treatment of climate and Palestine solidarity activists⁵⁹⁰, continuation of attacks against migrant rights groups, the establishment of “red zones”⁵⁹¹ restricting access to public spaces, and expanding surveillance concerns following several confirmed cases of the use of spyware against journalists described above, further highlighting the shrinking space for independent media⁵⁹².

⁵⁹⁰ Front Line Defenders (2025), [Human rights defenders filed a complaint against Brescia Police Precinct for deprivation of liberty, degrading search and private violence](#), 2025.

⁵⁹¹ Italy, Il Fatto Quotidiano (2025), Urban red zones and security as top priority: why it is a dangerous game (*Le zone rosse nelle città e la sicurezza al primo posto: perché è un gioco pericoloso*), 4 February 2025.

⁵⁹² International Press Institute (2025), [Meloni’s Italy puts media freedom under pressure, regardless of EU rules](#), 29 October 2025.

Lithuania (LT)

Civic space in the EU in 2025

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Disclaimer

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1. CIVIC SPACE PRESSURES

1.1. Deterioration of legal environment: freedom of association

New eligibility requirements for NGOs to receive 1.2 % personal income tax donations in Lithuania

- a) Summary: In 2025, changes to Lithuania's Law on Charity and Sponsorship introduced new eligibility conditions for organisations seeking to receive the 1.2 % personal income tax (GPM) donation allocated by taxpayers. Under the revised rules, only entities officially registered with a specific "NGO status" (NVO žyma) in the Register of Legal Entities may receive such donations. Organisations must apply for this status through the Register Centre and ensure the label is registered before the relevant deadline (e.g. 1 May 2025 for donations allocated in 2025). According to the State Tax Inspectorate, this donation scheme is a major funding source for civil society: in 2024, approximately 464 000 taxpayers allocated about €33.9 million to nearly 24 000 beneficiaries.⁵⁹³
- b) Consequences: The reform may create administrative barriers for civil society organisations that have not yet obtained the official NGO status or do not fully meet the legal definition of an NGO. As a result, some organisations risk losing access to an important funding stream, potentially reducing financial sustainability and limiting their ability to carry out activities supporting public participation and social initiatives. Given the significant volume of donations distributed through the 1.2 % mechanism, restrictions on eligibility could disproportionately affect smaller or newly established organisations. Furthermore, organisations of which one third or more members are legal entities that are not NGOs may not be considered an NGO and thus will not be eligible to receive donations.⁵⁹⁴

1.2. Deterioration of legal environment: freedom of assembly

Intensified policing and identity checks during Baltic Pride march in Vilnius

- a) Summary: Ahead of the Baltic Pride 2025 march in Vilnius, police announced reinforced security measures to maintain public order during the event. Officers were deployed in increased numbers and were authorised to check individuals who raised suspicion and inspect personal belongings to ensure that participants were not carrying dangerous or prohibited items. Police officials stated that officers would work with strengthened forces and respond strictly to any violations of law during the event. The measures were introduced in the context of a large public gathering, with

⁵⁹³ Lithuania, European Social Fund Agency (2025), 'Important changes regarding the 1.2% personal income tax support: what non-governmental organisations need to know' (*Svarbūs pokyčiai dėl 1,2 proc. GPM paramos: ką privalo žinoti nevyriausybinės organizacijos*), 11 February 2025.

⁵⁹⁴ Lithuania, Seimas (2013), Law on the Development of Non-Governmental Organisations of the Republic of Lithuania (*Lietuvos Respublikos nevyriausybinų organizacijų plėtros įstatymas*), No. XII-717, 19 December 2013, last amendment No. XV-318, 19 June 2025.

thousands of participants expected to attend the equality march organised as part of the Baltic Pride festival.⁵⁹⁵

- b) Consequences: Although justified as a public-safety measure, intensified policing and discretionary checks of “suspicious persons” during public demonstrations may raise concerns regarding proportionality and equal treatment. Such practices can create a chilling effect on participation in assemblies, particularly for minority groups organising public events, if participants fear being subject to searches or identity checks.⁵⁹⁶

1.3. Deterioration of legal environment: freedom of expression

Proposed amendments affecting governance of Lithuania’s public broadcaster (LRT) and concerns over political influence

- a) Summary: In late 2025, draft amendments to the Law on Lithuanian National Radio and Television sought to modify procedures for appointing and dismissing the Director General, including lowering the voting threshold, removing the requirement to prove public interest in dismissal procedures and introducing secret ballots⁵⁹⁷. Parliament also approved a multi-year freeze of LRT’s budget at the 2025 level, with reduced funding planned thereafter⁵⁹⁸. These changes triggered mass protests of thousands in Vilnius and petition campaigns with over 100 000 signatures. Presently, a working group had been formed to review the amendments.
- b) Consequences: According to statements by the European Broadcasting Union, the Council of Europe’s Platform for the Protection of Journalism, journalists’ associations and international observers, the changes could weaken structural safeguards of independence and increase the risk of political influence over editorial leadership⁵⁹⁹. Such changes may undermine pluralism and reduce public trust in the independence of public service media. Observers further warned that

⁵⁹⁵ Lithuania, TV3 (2025), ‘Police officers will work with reinforced forces during “Baltic Pride”, suspicious persons will be checked’ (*„Baltic Pride“ metu pareigūnai dirbs sustiprintai, tikrins įtartinus asmenis*), 7 June 2025.

⁵⁹⁶ Juozapaitis, L. (BNS) (2025), ‘Enhanced security during “Baltic Pride”: officers will check suspicious persons’ (*„Baltic Pride“ metu – sustiprinta apsauga: pareigūnai tikrins įtartinus asmenis*), *Diena.lt*, 7 June 2025.

⁵⁹⁷ Samoškaitė, E. (2025), ‘Social Democrats propose new amendments to the LRT law: easing the dismissal of the director again’ (*Socialdemokratai teikia naujas LRT įstatymo pataisas: vėl lengvina direktoriaus atleidimą*), *LRT.lt*, 10 December 2025.

⁵⁹⁸ Skėrytė, J. (BNS) (2025), ‘Lithuanian lawmakers vote to freeze LRT’s budget for three years’, *LRT.lt*, 27 November 2025.

⁵⁹⁹ European Broadcasting Union (2025), ‘EBU Central and Eastern European broadcasters call on Lithuanian parliament to safeguard LRT independence’, 5 December 2025; European Broadcasting Union (2025), *Safeguarding the Independence of LRT – Appeal from the Public Service Media of Central and Eastern Europe*, open letter to the Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania, 5 December 2025; LRT.lt (2025), ‘Media watchdogs raise alarm over efforts to politicise LRT’, 24 November 2025.

financial pressure and governance instability could indirectly encourage self-censorship, limit investigative journalism, and narrow space for critical scrutiny of public authorities. Concerns were also raised that rapid legislative changes without broad consultation may weaken institutional checks and balances protecting media freedom. However, alternative assessments contend that oversight reforms addressing transparency and management issues do not inherently restrict speech and fall within democratic governance mechanisms.⁶⁰⁰

Party “Nemuno aušra” resolution accusing media of propaganda and social division

- a) Summary: In November 2025, the Lithuanian political party Nemuno aušra adopted a resolution at its congress warning about what it described as threats to the country’s constitutional order. The document alleged that certain political forces were creating internal tensions and claimed that media outlets influenced by opposition parties had abandoned their public-information role and had become instruments of “information concealment,” “open propaganda,” and “incitement of society.” The resolution also referred to findings of an audit of the public broadcaster LRT as evidence of alleged problems in the media sector⁶⁰¹. The statements were widely reported by Lithuanian media and triggered political reactions and criticism from government representatives.
- b) Consequences: The Inspector of Journalist Ethics, Dainius Radzevičius, criticised the resolution for lacking evidence and warned that such allegations may cause reputational harm to independent media. He noted that unsubstantiated claims about political influence over the media can “deal a significant blow” to its credibility and may be perceived as attempts to interfere with media independence. He further cautioned that such statements are monitored by international actors and could negatively affect Lithuania’s image as a democratic state, including its standing in media freedom rankings⁶⁰².

Communication practices of the Prosecutor General’s Office raise concerns among journalists

- a) In 2025, a group of journalists raised concerns regarding the practices of the Prosecutor General’s Office of the Republic of Lithuania in responding to requests for information⁶⁰³. According to their

⁶⁰⁰ Meškauskaitė, L. (2025), ‘Prof. Dr. Liudvika Meškauskaitė. On the LRT crisis: what, why, and how (Part 1)’ (*Prof. dr. Liudvika Meškauskaitė. Apie LRT krizę: kas, kodėl ir kaip (1 dalis)*, *Laikmetis.lt*, 15 January 2026; Meškauskaitė, L. (2026), ‘Liudvika Meškauskaitė. The European Parliament is mistaken on the LRT issue’ (*Liudvika Meškauskaitė. LRT klausimu Europos Parlamentas klysta*), *15min.lt*, 3 February 2026.

⁶⁰¹ Perminas, P. (BNS) (2025), “Nemuno aušra” adopted a resolution accusing the media and speaking about a “threat to the constitutional order of the state” (*„Nemuno aušra“ paskelbė rezoliuciją: kaltina žiniasklaidą, kalba apie „grėsmę valstybės santvarkai“*), *KasVykstaKaune.lt*, 8 November 2025; Perminas, P. (BNS) (2025), ‘Warnings about usurpation of power and accusations against the media in the resolution adopted by “Nemuno aušra”’ (*„Aušriečių“ priimtoje rezoliucijoje – perspėjimai dėl valdžios uzurpavimo, kaltinimai žiniasklaidai*), *15min.lt*, 8 November 2025.

⁶⁰² Lithuania, Alfa (2025), ‘Alfa point: A resolution by the “Aušra” group lacking evidence encourages distrust in the media and may harm the country’s image’ (*Alfa taškas. Įrodymų stokojanti „aušriečių“ rezoliucija skatina nepasitikėti žiniasklaida ir pakenks šalies įvaizžiui?*), *Alfa.lt*, 10 November 2025.

⁶⁰³ Lithuania, Baltic News Service (BNS) (2025), ‘Journalists’ appeal regarding harmful and unethical communication practices of the Prosecutor General’s Office’ (*Žurnalistų kreipimasis dėl*

public statement, responses to media inquiries were often delayed or incomplete, with the authorities frequently relying on the ground of pre-trial secrecy to refuse disclosure. Journalists also reported instances where information obtained at their request was later published by the Prosecutor General's Office without attribution⁶⁰⁴, as well as cases where the Prosecutor General's Office provided inaccurate information. They referred in particular to a case concerning an investigation into suspected planned attacks involving incendiary devices in parcel deliveries, where information obtained through media inquiries was subsequently published by the institution as its own communication without attribution⁶⁰⁴.

- b) Consequences: Journalists have stated that these practices are systemic and hinder the ability of journalists to gather and verify information, thereby affecting the quality and accuracy of public reporting. They noted that such communication may contribute to the misunderstanding of facts by the public by limiting access to timely and accurate information, and raise concerns regarding transparency, accountability and trust in public institutions.⁶⁰⁵

1.4. Barriers to participation in law and policy-making

Pre-screening of referendum initiatives limits citizen-led participation

- a) Summary: In 2025, the Supreme Administrative Court of Lithuania upheld a number of decisions of the State electoral authority (VRK) to refuse to register several citizen-initiated referendum groups at the initial stage. The initiatives concerned proposed constitutional amendments, including the abolition of state funding for political parties⁶⁰⁶, a prohibition on taxing citizens'

Generalinės prokuratūros žalingos ir neetiškos komunikacijos praktikos), *sc.bns.lt*, 22 September 2025.

⁶⁰⁴ Lithuania, Bernardinai (2025), 'After the announcement on the investigation of shipments, 72 journalists ask the Prosecutor General to review communication' (*Po pranešimo apie siuntų tyrimą 72 žurnalistai prašo generalinės prokurorės peržiūrėti komunikaciją*), *Bernardinai.lt*, 22 September 2025.

⁶⁰⁵ Lithuania, Baltic News Service (BNS) (2025), 'Journalists' appeal regarding harmful and unethical communication practices of the Prosecutor General's Office' (*Žurnalistų kreipimasis dėl Generalinės prokuratūros žalingos ir neetiškos komunikacijos praktikos*), *sc.bns.lt*, 22 September 2025.

⁶⁰⁶ Lithuania, Supreme Administrative Court of Lithuania (2025), Decision on refusal to register a citizens' referendum initiative group (*LVAT: VRK pagrįstai nusprendė neregistruoti piliečių referendumo iniciatyvinės grupės dėl privalomojo referendumo paskelbimo dėl Konstitucijos pakeitimo*), *lvat.lt*, 11 July 2025.

immovable property⁶⁰⁷, and changes to the threshold for mandatory referendums⁶⁰⁸. The Court confirmed that the VRK may assess not only formal requirements but also the substantive compatibility of proposed amendments with the Constitution, and refuse registration where inconsistencies are identified. Initiative groups had challenged the decisions of the VRK, invoking the principles of good administration, impartiality and legitimate expectations.

- b) Consequences: These developments show that referendum initiatives may be discontinued before signature collection through substantive pre-screening by the electoral authority, subject to judicial review. Media reporting indicates that applicants have challenged such decisions, arguing that the electoral authority had acted with bias and violated the principles of good administration and legitimate expectations.⁶⁰⁹ At the same time, The court decisions confirm that the electoral authority may exercise not only procedural but also material legal control over initiatives, including assessing their compatibility with the Constitution. This framework introduces a higher legal threshold at the initial stage of participation and may affect the practical use of citizen-initiated referendums.

Conditions for access to Centre of Registers data raise transparency concerns

- a) Summary: in Lithuania on public data access indicate that certain registry information remains accessible primarily through extracts ordered from or paid data services provided by the Centre of Registers. The institution's data portal explains that users typically obtain registry information through formal requests or paid services rather than unrestricted access to full datasets⁶¹⁰. At the same time, policy debates on open data have continued in Lithuania, with authorities gradually expanding access to high-value datasets while maintaining restrictions for some categories of registry information⁶¹¹.
- b) Consequences: Although such rules are intended to regulate personal data protection and data reuse, reliance on formal requests or paid extracts may create practical barriers for journalists, researchers and NGOs seeking to analyse ownership structures or monitor economic and governance issues. These administrative and financial requirements can slow or discourage evidence-based civic oversight and advocacy.

⁶⁰⁷ Lithuania, Supreme Administrative Court of Lithuania (2025), Decision on refusal to register a referendum initiative concerning a constitutional amendment on prohibiting taxation of immovable property (*LVAT: VRK pagrįstai atsisakė registruoti referendumo iniciatyvą dėl Konstitucijos papildymo draudimu apmokestinti piliečių nekilnojamoji turta*), *Ivat.lt*, 12 June 2025.

⁶⁰⁸ Lithuania, LRT (2025), 'Supreme Administrative Court: the Central Electoral Commission lawfully refused to register a group seeking to lower the referendum threshold' (*LVAT: VRK pagrįstai neregistravo grupės, siekusios mažinti referendumo karteles*), *LRT.lt*, 19 December 2025.

⁶⁰⁹ Lithuania, LRT (2025), 'Supreme Administrative Court: the Central Electoral Commission lawfully refused to register a group seeking to lower the referendum threshold' (*LVAT: VRK pagrįstai neregistravo grupės, siekusios mažinti referendumo karteles*), *LRT.lt*, 19 December 2025.

⁶¹⁰ Registry centras (2025), 'Open data and statistics' (*Atviri duomenys ir statistika*), *Registry centras*.

⁶¹¹ Venckutė, A. (2024), 'Registry centras opened new open data datasets' (*Registry centras atvėrė naujus atviry duomenų rinkinius*), *vz.lt*, 1 October 2024.

2. CIVIC SPACE EXPANSION

2.1. Improvements in legal environment: court cases

Lithuanian court dismisses strategic lawsuit against investigative reporting

- a) Summary: On 4 April 2025, the Vilnius City District Court dismissed a defamation lawsuit filed by the company SKR Baltic against the news portal Delfi. The company had sought to have information published by journalist Tomas Janonis recognised by the court to be false and damaging to its reputation, and requested €10,000 in damages. The court concluded that the action displayed the characteristics of a SLAPP (strategic lawsuit against public participation) because it appeared that it was intended to pressure the media and discourage further reporting on an investigation concerning the planned acquisition of valuable state-owned land in Vilnius. The ruling stated that the lawsuit could have a “deterrent effect” on the media’s activities and was therefore dismissed.⁶¹²
- b) Consequences: Observers note that recognising and dismissing a SLAPP-type lawsuit strengthens safeguards for freedom of expression and investigative journalism. By acknowledging the potential chilling effect of litigation aimed at silencing public-interest reporting, the decision reinforces the role of courts in protecting media from intimidation through legal proceedings and supports broader European efforts to counter SLAPPs against journalists and civic actors.⁶¹³

⁶¹² ELTA (2025), ‘Media report: court decided not to examine the lawsuit by “SKR Baltic” against “Delfi”, recognised as strategic’ (*Žiniasklaida: teismas nusprendė nenagrinėti strateginiu pripažinto „SKR Baltic“ ieškinio prieš „Delfi“*), *lrytas.lt*, 7 April 2025.

⁶¹³ BNS (2025), ‘After recognising the company’s lawsuit against the portal “Delfi” as strategic, the court left it unexamined’ (*Pripažinęs įmonės ieškinį portalui „Delfi“ strateginiu, teismas jį paliko nenagrinėti*), *LRT.lt*, 7 April 2025.

Luxembourg (LU)

Civic space in the EU in 2025

Country: Luxembourg

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Disclaimer

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1. CIVIC SPACE PRESSURES

1.1. Deterioration of legal environment: freedom of association

New Financial Governance Parliamentary Bill entails Limitations on the Freedom of Association

a) Summary

The opposition Socialist political group (*Groupe politique socialiste*) submitted a bill to the Chamber of Deputies (*Chambre des Députés*) in October 2024 concerning the financial governance of organisations and foundations managing public funds.⁶¹⁴ The bill proposes, among others, to introduce stricter rules concerning the approval and signing of payment orders and acts entailing obligations that exceed certain thresholds. It follows the misappropriation of € 61 million at Caritas revealed in July 2024 and aims to respond to a crisis of confidence in the voluntary and charitable sector, which it considers essential to help the most vulnerable.⁶¹⁵

b) Consequences

According to an opinion issued by the Council of State (*Conseil d'État*) in December 2025, the parliamentary bill could, in a broad interpretation, encompass most non-profit organisations and foundations. This would entail an excessive governance effort for small and medium-sized associations and foundations and, as a consequence, a disproportionate limitation of their freedom of association enshrined in the Constitution.⁶¹⁶

⁶¹⁴ Luxembourg, Parliamentary bill No 8447 concerning the financial governance of organisations and foundations managing public funds and amending:– the Act of 7 August 2023 on associations and foundations;– the amended Act of 19 December 2002 on the commercial and companies register and on the accounting and annual accounts of companies, and amending certain other legal provisions (*Proposition de loi No 8447 concernant la gouvernance financière d'organisations et fondations gérant des deniers publics et modifiant :– la loi du 7 août 2023 sur les associations et fondations ;– la loi modifiée du 19 décembre 2002 concernant le registre de commerce et des sociétés ainsi que la comptabilité et les comptes annuels des entreprises et modifiant certaines autres dispositions légales*), 10 October 2024. To access all documents concerning the parliamentary bill, see the webpage of the Chamber of Deputies on <https://www.chd.lu/fr/dossier/8447>.

⁶¹⁵ Luxembourg, Parliamentary bill No 8447 concerning the financial governance of organisations and foundations managing public funds and amending:– the Act of 7 August 2023 on associations and foundations;– the amended Act of 19 December 2002 on the commercial and companies register and on the accounting and annual accounts of companies, and amending certain other legal provisions - Filing document (*Proposition de loi No 8447 concernant la gouvernance financière d'organisations et fondations gérant des deniers publics et modifiant :– la loi du 7 août 2023 sur les associations et fondations ;– la loi modifiée du 19 décembre 2002 concernant le registre de commerce et des sociétés ainsi que la comptabilité et les comptes annuels des entreprises et modifiant certaines autres dispositions légales - Document de dépôt*), 10 October 2024, p. 1.

⁶¹⁶ Luxembourg, Council of State (*Conseil d'État*) (2025), Parliamentary bill concerning the financial governance of organisations and foundations managing public funds and amending:– the Act of 7 August 2023 on associations and foundations;– the amended Act of 19 December 2002 on the commercial and companies register and on the accounting and annual accounts of companies, and amending certain other legal provisions - Opinion of the Council of State (*Proposition de loi concernant la gouvernance financière d'organisations et fondations gérant des deniers publics et modifiant : la loi du 7 août 2023 sur les associations et fondations ; la loi modifiée du 19 décembre 2002 concernant le*

1.2. Deterioration of legal environment: freedom of assembly

No development.

1.3. Deterioration of legal environment: freedom of expression

No development.

1.4. Deterioration of legal environment: court cases

Highest Court of the Judicial Order confirms Ruling qualified as a Dangerous Precedent by the European Federation of Journalists

a) Summary

In a judgement from November 2025, the Court of Cassation (*Cour de cassation*) confirmed a decision from the Court of Appeal (*Cour d'appel*) that prohibits the RTL media outlet, under penalty of a € 7,000 fine per breach, from mentioning the name and publishing the image of a former trade unionist convicted of embezzlement. To that effect, it concluded that this restriction to the freedom of expression was justified by compelling reasons arising from the protection of the trade unionist's current privacy.⁶¹⁷

b) Consequences

In its conclusions regarding the case, the Principal Public Prosecutor's Office (*Parquet général*) took a divergent position, stating that the Court of Appeal had failed to indicate any compelling reasons justifying a restriction to the freedom of expression of RTL.⁶¹⁸ In a reaction to the judgement, a legal representative of RTL qualified the decision as censorship, claiming that it had wrongly equated the identity of a historical figure convicted of embezzlement — information of general interest — to the private life of the individual concerned.⁶¹⁹ In support of the Luxembourg Association of Professional Journalists (*Association luxembourgeoise des journalistes professionnels - ALJP*) and the Luxembourgish Press Council (*Conseil de Presse Luxembourg*), the European Federation of Journalists

registre de commerce et des sociétés ainsi que la comptabilité et les comptes annuels des entreprises et modifiant certaines autres dispositions légales - Avis du Conseil d'État, 2 December 2025, p. 2.

⁶¹⁷ Luxembourg, Court of Cassation (*Cour de cassation*), Judgement n.º 166/2025 (anonymised judgement), 27 November 2025, pp. 27-33.

⁶¹⁸ Luxembourg, Court of Cassation (*Cour de cassation*), Judgement n.º 166/2025 (anonymised judgement), 27 November 2025, pp. 47-48.

⁶¹⁹ Luxembourg, *Le Quotidien* (2025), RTL/Nickts case: 'This is nothing less than censorship' (*Affaire RTL/Nickts* : «Ce n'est ni plus ni moins qu'une censure»), 28 November 2025.

had previously criticised the decision from the Court of Appeal confirmed by the Court of Cassation, stating that it constituted a dangerous precedent and amounted to censorship.⁶²⁰

1.5. Attempts to stifle civic engagement through violence, harassment and negative narratives

Negative Rhetoric and Risks of Intimidation within Civic Engagement in Luxembourg

a) Summary

Luxembourg maintained a generally open civic space, but concerns emerged regarding harassment and intimidation. In 2025, the National Action Plan for the Safety of Journalists (2025–2028) was adopted,⁶²¹ acknowledging threats, online abuse and the growing risk of SLAPPs targeting public-interest reporting.⁶²² CSOs, including Greenpeace also warned against abusive lawsuits and urged swift implementation of EU anti-SLAPP rules.⁶²³

The 2025 report of the ENNHRI similarly highlighted harassment of journalists and increased SLAPP risks.⁶²⁴ The report further provided an example, where an MP from the Alternative Democratic Reform Party (ADR) publicly attacked the CCDH President online without facing formal consequences.⁶²⁵

Public debate also intensified after the Minister for Foreign Affairs filed a complaint against a satirical activist.⁶²⁶ The case raised concerns about the impact of legal action by senior officials on freedom of expression.⁶²⁷

b) Consequences

Although the research did not reveal any major physical attacks, online abuse, legal pressure and political smears risk contributing to a potentially hostile environment for journalists and civic actors.⁶²⁸ Combined with public vilification, these trends risk discouraging critical reporting and civic

⁶²⁰ European Federation of Journalists (2025), Luxembourg: EFJ and IFJ condemn preventive censorship against RTL (*Luxembourg : la FEJ et la FIJ condamnent la censure préventive à l'encontre de RTL*), 29 January 2025.

⁶²¹ Luxembourg, Luxembourg Government (*Gouvernement luxembourgeois*) (2025), *National Action Plan on the Safety of Journalists 2025-2028*, Journalists Matter, Council of Europe Campaign for the Safety of Journalists, 20 June 2025.

⁶²² Luxembourg, Luxembourg Government (*Gouvernement luxembourgeois*) (2025), *National Action Plan on the Safety of Journalists 2025-2028*, Journalists Matter, Council of Europe Campaign for the Safety of Journalists, 20 June 2025, p. 6.

⁶²³ Luxembourg, Greenpeace (2025), Defend Greenpeace and freedom of expression! (*Défendez Greenpeace et la liberté d'expression !*)

⁶²⁴ The European Network of National Human Rights Institutions (ENNHRI) (2025), *Luxembourg*.

⁶²⁵ The European Network of National Human Rights Institutions (ENNHRI) (2025), *Luxembourg*.

⁶²⁶ Luxembourg, RTL Today, *FM Bettel files complaint over meme shared by activist group*, 05 November 2025.

⁶²⁷ Luxembourg, land (2025), “The price to pay” (*« Le prix à payer »*), 14 November 2025.

⁶²⁸ Luxembourg, Luxembourg Government (*Gouvernement luxembourgeois*) (2025), *National Action Plan on the Safety of Journalists 2025-2028*, Journalists Matter, Council of Europe Campaign for the Safety of Journalists, 20 June 2025, p. 6.

engagement, highlighting the need for stronger safeguards and clear political leadership to protect civic space.

1.6. Barriers to participation in law and policy-making

Barriers to Participation in Policymaking

a) Summary

Luxembourg maintained its formal participation mechanisms for CSOs and advisory bodies, and no consultation procedures were suspended. However, civil society actors reported that participation was increasingly procedural rather than substantive, with consultations often taking place at a late stage in the policy process.⁶²⁹ The CCDH indicated that several of its substantive recommendations were not reflected in final legislation and that feedback mechanisms lacked transparency.⁶³⁰ Similar concerns emerged during the 2025 pension reform, where trade unions criticised the process as not being respectful of a balanced social dialogue.⁶³¹ Although stakeholder meetings and online feedback processes were organised, trade unions publicly criticised this as a “sham debate”, arguing that key outcomes had been predetermined and that their input had not influenced the decisions.⁶³² In April, 28 organisations formed the “Voêo” collective, explicitly calling for stronger recognition of civil society as a genuine policy partner.⁶³³

b) Consequences

While the participatory framework remained intact, limited incorporation of stakeholder input and insufficient justification when advice was not followed risked weakening trust in consultation processes. This could reduce the effectiveness and credibility of civic engagement, further reinforcing the perception that consultation mechanisms function more as formal procedure rather than a substantive engagement.

⁶²⁹ Luxembourg, Ecological Movement (MECO) (*Mouvement écologique*) (2025), Press release Voêo: a voice for the defense of civil society (*Communiqué de presse Voêo: une voix pour la défense de la société civile*), 24 April 2025

⁶³⁰ Luxembourg, The Consultative Human Rights Commission (CCDH) (*Commission Consultative des Droits de l'Homme*) (2025) Activity Report 2024 (*Rapport d'activités*), pp. 32-33.

⁶³¹ Luxembourg, Chamber of Employees (*Chambre des Salariés*), (2025), Pension reform: the CSL welcomes some measures but rejects the main part of the project (*Réforme des pensions : la CSL salue certaines mesures mais rejette l'essentiel du projet*), 28 November 2025.

⁶³² Luxembourg, The General Confederation of Civil Servants (CGFP) (*Confédération Générale de la Fonction Publique*) (2025) Press release : CGFP calls for a protest rally in front of Parliament on June 25 (*Pressemitteilung : CGFP ruft am 25. Juni zu einer Protestkundgebung vor dem Parlament auf*), 03 June 2025.

⁶³³ Luxembourg, Ecological Movement (MECO) (*Mouvement écologique*) (2025), Press release Voêo: a voice for the defense of civil society (*Communiqué de presse Voêo: une voix pour la défense de la société civile*), 24 April 2025

2. CIVIC SPACE EXPANSION

2.1. Improvements in legal environment: freedom of association

No development.

2.2. Improvements in legal environment: freedom of assembly

No development.

2.3. Improvements in legal environment: freedom of expression

Luxembourg intends to extend Scope of the Anti-SLAPP Directive to Purely National Disputes

a) Summary

The Minister of Justice (*Ministre de la Justice*) submitted a bill to the Chamber of Deputies in January 2026 aimed at the transposition of Directive (EU) 2024/1069 on protecting persons who engage in public participation from manifestly unfounded claims or abusive court proceedings. The bill is currently under discussion in the Committee on Justice (*Commission de la Justice*).⁶³⁴ The High Court of Justice (*Cour supérieure de Justice*) issued an opinion on the bill in February 2026.⁶³⁵

b) Consequences

⁶³⁴ Luxembourg, Bill No 8696 transposing Directive (EU) 2024/1069 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 April 2024 on protecting persons who engage in public participation from manifestly unfounded claims or abusive court proceedings ('Strategic lawsuits against public participation') (*Projet de loi No 8696 portant transposition de la Directive (UE) 2024/1069 du Parlement européen et du Conseil du 11 avril 2024 sur la protection des personnes qui participent au débat public contre les demandes en justice manifestement infondées ou les procédures abusives (« poursuites stratégiques altérant le débat public »)*), 28 January 2026. To access all documents concerning the bill, see the webpage of the Chamber of Deputies on <https://www.chd.lu/fr/dossier/8696>.

⁶³⁵ Luxembourg, High Court of Justice (*Cour supérieure de Justice*) (2026), Opinion of the High Court of Justice on bill No 8696 transposing Directive (EU) 2024/1069 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 April 2024 on protecting persons who engage in public participation from manifestly unfounded claims or abusive court proceedings ('Strategic lawsuits against public participation') (*Avis de la Cour supérieure de Justice sur le projet de loi No 8696 portant transposition de la Directive (UE) 2024/1069 du Parlement européen et du Conseil du 11 avril 2024 sur la protection des personnes qui participent au débat public contre les demandes en justice manifestement infondées ou les procédures abusives (« poursuites stratégiques altérant le débat public »)*), 17 February 2026.

According to the explanatory memorandum of the bill, the Luxembourg Government (*Gouvernement luxembourgeois*) proposes to extend the application of the procedural safeguards and remedies provided in the Directive to purely domestic disputes that do not have cross-border implications. Furthermore, it also intends to opt into the possibility provided in Directive (EU) 2024/1069 for national courts to adopt measures on procedural safeguards ex officio. The bill sets a civil fine of a maximum amount of € 15,000 for any claimant who initiates abusive court proceedings against public participation.⁶³⁶ In its opinion, the High Court of Justice supports the introduction of a civil fine, while calling for an increase of its maximum amount to € 100,000 in order to ensure its deterrent effect.⁶³⁷

2.4. Improvements in legal environment: court cases

No development.

2.5. Improvements in participation

Institutionalising Social Sector Dialogue through a Memorandum of Understanding

a) Summary

In response to the 2024 Caritas scandal and the structural gaps it revealed, the government and FEDAS (*Fédération des Acteurs du Secteur Social*), an umbrella organisation for social sector NGOs, signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in June 2025.⁶³⁸ Co-signed by seven ministries,⁶³⁹ the MoU formalises structured, cross-ministerial dialogue with civil society and establishes working groups on

⁶³⁶ Luxembourg, Bill No 8696 transposing Directive (EU) 2024/1069 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 April 2024 on protecting persons who engage in public participation from manifestly unfounded claims or abusive court proceedings ('Strategic lawsuits against public participation') - Filing document (*Projet de loi No 8696 portant transposition de la Directive (UE) 2024/1069 du Parlement européen et du Conseil du 11 avril 2024 sur la protection des personnes qui participent au débat public contre les demandes en justice manifestement infondées ou les procédures abusives (« poursuites stratégiques altérant le débat public ») – Document de dépôt*), 28 January 2026, pp. 4, 10, 15 and 18.

⁶³⁷ Luxembourg, High Court of Justice (*Cour supérieure de Justice*) (2026), Opinion of the High Court of Justice on bill No 8696 transposing Directive (EU) 2024/1069 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 April 2024 on protecting persons who engage in public participation from manifestly unfounded claims or abusive court proceedings ('Strategic lawsuits against public participation') (*Avis de la Cour supérieure de Justice sur le projet de loi No 8696 portant transposition de la Directive (UE) 2024/1069 du Parlement européen et du Conseil du 11 avril 2024 sur la protection des personnes qui participent au débat public contre les demandes en justice manifestement infondées ou les procédures abusives (« poursuites stratégiques altérant le débat public »)*), 17 February 2026, pp. 1 and 7.

⁶³⁸ Luxembourg, FEDAS (*Fédération des Acteurs du Secteur Social*) (2025), Signing of the Memorandum of Understanding (*Signature du Protocol d'entente*), 27 June 2025.

⁶³⁹ Luxembourg, FEDAS (*Fédération des Acteurs du Secteur Social*) (2026), A memorandum of understanding with the government: a shared commitment to strengthening the social sector (*Un protocole d'entente avec le gouvernement : un engagement commun pour un secteur social renforcé*), 20 February 2026.

inter alia funding, digitalisation and governance,⁶⁴⁰ reflecting recommendations from the Caritas inquiry.⁶⁴¹

By early 2026, six action plans, covering each working group, had been finalised and approved by the FEDAS's board, addressing transparency, funding and control, digitalisation, harmonization, governance and structured dialogue.⁶⁴² These action plans were scheduled for consideration by the Government in Council (*Conseil de Gouvernement*) on 27 February 2026, however, the official summary of the meeting does not explicitly record their formal approval.⁶⁴³

b) Consequences

The MoU and resulting action plans mark a tangible expansion of participatory civic space. They institutionalise CSO engagement in shaping social policy and oversight, addressing long-standing sectoral concerns raised during the Caritas crisis. While government approval is pending formal confirmation, the process demonstrates a strengthened partnership and commitment to inclusive decision-making.

⁶⁴⁰ Luxembourg, FEDAS (*Fédération des Acteurs du Secteur Social*) (2025), Signing of the Memorandum of Understanding (*Signature du Protocol d'entente*), 27 June 2025.

⁶⁴¹ Luxembourg, the Chamber of Deputies (*Chambre des Députés*) (2025), A debate on the "Caritas" report in public session (Thursday afternoon) (*Un débat sur le rapport « Caritas » en séance publique (jeudi après-midi)*), Policy debate on the report of the Special Committee on Caritas – Report of the Special Committee on Caritas, No. 8477 (*Débat d'orientation sur le rapport de la Commission spéciale « Caritas » - Rapport de la Commission spéciale « Caritas », No 8477*), 02 July 2025.

⁶⁴² Luxembourg, FEDAS (*Fédération des Acteurs du Secteur Social*) (2026), A memorandum of understanding with the government: a shared commitment to strengthening the social sector (*Un protocole d'entente avec le gouvernement : un engagement commun pour un secteur social renforcé*), 20 February 2026.

⁶⁴³ Luxembourg, Government in Council (*Conseil de Gouvernement*) (2026), Summary of proceedings on February 27, 2026 (*Résumé des travaux du 27 février 2026*), 27 February 2026

Latvia (LV)

Civic space in the EU in 2025

Country: Latvia

Contractor: Baltic Human Rights Society

Riga Graduate School of Law

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Disclaimer

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1. CIVIC SPACE PRESSURES

1.1. Deterioration of legal environment: court cases

Judgment in a Criminal Case Concerning Humanitarian Assistance at the Latvian Border

a) Summary

On 20 August 2025, the Latgale District Court in Rēzekne announced an abbreviated judgment (full text still pending⁶⁴⁴) finding Ieva Raubiško, an employee of the NGO “I want to help refugees”, guilty of organizing the illegal crossing of the Latvian border by a group of Syrian nationals and sentenced her to 200 hours of community service.⁶⁴⁵

b) Consequences

In their letter to the highest state officials, “I want to help refugees” collectively with many other civil society organisations and individuals maintained that Raubiško had acted to save lives and asked not to criminalise selfless humanitarian aid on the border to people in emergency situations, as well as to ensure the access to asylum procedures.⁶⁴⁶ Raubiško herself expressed that the most worrying aspect of this sentence is the creation of a precedent that providing humanitarian aid to those whose lives are in danger will be criminally punished.⁶⁴⁷

1.2. Attempts to stifle civic engagement through violence, harassment and negative narratives

Online Harassment and Disruption of Support Services Targeting Women’s Rights NGO

a) Summary

⁶⁴⁴ Information received from the defendant via electronic communication on 6 March 2026.

⁶⁴⁵ Latvia, District (City) Courts and Regional Courts (2025), *‘Tiesa Ievai Raubiško par nelikumīgas robežas šķērsošanas atbalstīšanu piespriež 200 stundu sabiedrisko darbu’*, press release, 20 August 2025.

⁶⁴⁶ Collective Letter to President of the Republic of Latvia Edgars Rinkēvičs, Prime Minister Evika Siliņa, Speaker of the Saeima Daiga Mieriņa, and Members of the Saeima: Open Letter from Civil Society on the Court Judgment in the Criminal Case against Ieva (*Kolektīva vēstule Valsts prezidentam Edgaram Rinkēvičam, Ministru prezidentei Evikai Siliņai, Saeimas priekšsēdētājam Daigai Mieriņai, Saeimas deputātiem: Pilsoniskās sabiedrības atklātā vēstule par tiesas spriedumu kriminālprocesā pret Ievu Raubiško*), 23 August 2025.

⁶⁴⁷ LSM.lv Ziņu redakcija, Dinija Jemeljanova, Iveta Čigāne, *‘Organizācijas “Gribu palīdzēt bēgļiem” darbiniecei Ievai Raubiško par nelikumīgas robežas šķērsošanas atbalstīšanu Latgales rajona tiesa Rēzeknē trešdien, 20. augustā, piesprieda 200 stundu sabiedrisko darbu’*, LSM.lv, 20 August 2025.

The civil society organisation on women's rights MARTA Centre was among the lead actors organising protests and campaigns against a proposal by the members of the Latvian parliament to denounce the Istanbul Convention.⁶⁴⁸ During this time, MARTA Centre and its employees experienced online harassment and threats by non-state actors with opposing views.⁶⁴⁹ In addition, members of society called MARTA Centre's victims support line to ridicule and provoke the support team, thus possibly blocking the line for those in need for help against violence.⁶⁵⁰

b) Consequences

As a result, MARTA Centre has expressed that their work to help victims has been hindered.⁶⁵¹ Additionally, the organisation has experienced that they have fallen a victim in a pre-election campaign of those political forces that have chosen to use the Istanbul Convention to boost their popularity.⁶⁵²

1.3. Barriers to participation in law and policy-making

Restrictions on Civil Society Participation During Parliamentary Consideration of the Draft Law on Withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention

a) Summary

On 24 September 2025, 14 Members of the Latvian parliament (Saeima) initiated the draft law on the withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention which had only entered into force in Latvia on 1 May 2024. On 30 October 2025, the Saeima, using the urgent procedure, adopted the draft law in its second and final reading.⁶⁵³ During the examination of the draft law by the Saeima's Foreign Affairs

⁶⁴⁸ LSM.lv Ziņu redakcija, Ieva Rūtiņa, Jolanta Plauka, Agnija Lazdiņa, *'VIDEO: Vismaz 10 000 cilvēku Doma laukumā protestē pret Latvijas izstāšanos no Stambulas konvencijas'*, LSM.lv, 6 November 2025.

⁶⁴⁹ Social media [entree on Facebook](#) by an employee of MARTA Centre, 27 October 2025; Social media [entree on Facebook](#) by MARTA Centre, 27 October 2025. Information confirmed also by the representative of MARTA Centre during an in-person meeting on 27 February 2026.

⁶⁵⁰ Social media [entree on Facebook](#) by MARTA Centre, 12 November 2025. Information confirmed also by the representative of MARTA Centre during an in-person meeting on 27 February 2026.

⁶⁵¹ Social media [entree on Facebook](#) by MARTA Centre, 12 November 2025. Information confirmed also by the representative of MARTA Centre during an in-person meeting on 27 February 2026.

⁶⁵² Social media [entree on Facebook](#) by MARTA Centre, 27 October 2025. Information confirmed also by the representative of MARTA Centre during an in-person meeting on 27 February 2026.

⁶⁵³ Latvia, Draft law No 1058/Lp14 On Withdrawal from the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (*Likumsprojekts Nr. 1058/Lp14 "Par izstāšanos no Eiropas Padomes Konvencijas par vardarbības pret sievietēm un vardarbības ģimenē novēršanu un apkarošanu"*), 2025.

Committee, several key non-governmental organisations were present but the consultations with them were blocked by a negative vote of the majority of the Committee members.⁶⁵⁴

b) Consequences

The vote to block the non-governmental organisations from expressing their opinion was viewed as having a negative impact on democratic participation and meaningful consultation with civil society.⁶⁵⁵ In their letter to the said Committee, Latvian Civic Alliance expressed a regret that the Declaration on the Saeima's cooperation with civil society,⁶⁵⁶ which recognises proactive consulting on political initiatives and the pluralism of opinions, was ignored.⁶⁵⁷

1.4. Other developments

Proposal to Reorganise the Society Integration Foundation and Concerns Raised by Civil Society

a) Summary

As part of the adoption of the state budget for 2026, a group of the members of the Latvian parliament proposed to reorganise the Society Integration Foundation, so that the implementation of its goals and tasks would be entrusted to the competent ministries and consequently would save 1.19 million euros from the state budget.⁶⁵⁸ The Foundation is the main state instrument

⁶⁵⁴ Latvia, Foreign Affairs Committee of the 14th Saeima (*Ārlietu komisija (14.Saeima)*), Protocol of the Meeting of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the 14th Saeima of the Republic of Latvia No 141.1.9/1-30-14/25 (*Latvijas Republikas 14. Saeimas Ārlietu komisijas sēdes protokols Nr.141.1.9/1-30-14/25*), 29 October 2025, pp. 5-6, 9.

⁶⁵⁵ Latvian Civic Alliance (*Latvijas Pilsoniskā Alianse*) (2025), '*LPA: Saeimas Ārlietu komisijas rīcība pārkāpj demokrātiskas līdzdalības principus*', press release, 30 October 2025.

⁶⁵⁶ Latvia, Presidium of the Parliament of the Republic of Latvia (*Latvijas Republikas Saeimas Prezidijs*), Decision on the Approval of the "Declaration on the Saeima's Cooperation with Civil Society" (*Lēmums Par "Deklarācijas par Saeimas sadarbību ar pilsonisko sabiedrību" apstiprināšanu*), 22 February 2024.

⁶⁵⁷ Latvian Civic Alliance (*Latvijas Pilsoniskā Alianse*) (2025), Letter No 1.8.-17 to the Presidium of the Parliament and the Committee of Foreign Affairs of the Parliament On the Actions of the Saeima Foreign Affairs Committee Restricting Democratic Participation (*Vēstule Nr.1.8.-17 Saeimas Prezidijam un Saeimas Ārlietu komisijai Par Saeimas Ārlietu komisijas rīcību, ierobežojot demokrātisku līdzdalību*), 30 October 2025.

⁶⁵⁸ Latvian Farmers' Union, '*Zaļo un Zemnieku savienība aicina 2026.gada budžeta izskatīšanas gaitā nopietni diskutēt par Sabiedrības Integrācijas fonda (SIF) reorganizāciju, lai tā mērķu un uzdevumu izpildi nodotu kompetentām ministrijām*', homepage entree, 2025; The proposal was not supported by the Cabinet of Ministers and thus not proposed to the Parliament for the second reading, see, Latvia, Proposals to the Draft Law "On the State Budget for 2026 and the Budget Framework for 2026, 2027 and 2028" (No. 1130/Lp14) on Changes to Revenues and Expenditures (*Priekšlikumi likumprojektam "Par valsts budžetu 2026. gadam un budžeta ietvaru*

administering programs for civil society, the diaspora, the media, support for Ukrainian civilians and young people.⁶⁵⁹

b) Consequences

In letters to the Latvian Parliament and the Cabinet of Ministers, Latvian Civic Alliance stated that the liquidation of the Foundation would negatively affect the support system to the civil society.⁶⁶⁰

Additionally, a large group of civil society organisations defined the said proposals as an attack on civil society and a direct reduction of the civil society's capacity. According to them, abolishing SIF would replace independent, expertise-based support and evaluation of NGOs and media projects and initiatives with politically controlled decision-making, turning funding into a tool of influence and thereby undermining civil society capacity and media independence.⁶⁶¹

2. CIVIC SPACE EXPANSION

2.1. Other developments

Civil Society Mobilisation in Response to the Proposed Withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention

a) Summary

2026., 2027. un 2028. gadam" (Nr. 1130/Lp14) par izmaiņām ieņēmumos un izdevumos), 2025., p.26.

⁶⁵⁹ Latvia, Law on the Society Integration Foundation (Sabiedrības integrācijas fonda likums), 5 July 2001; Latvian Civic Alliance (*Latvijas Pilsoniskā Alianse*) (2025), Letter No 1.8.-19 to the Cabinet of Ministers: LPA Position on the Liquidation of the Society Integration Foundation (Vēstule Nr. 1.8.-19 Ministru kabinetam: LPA nostāja par Sabiedrības integrācijas fonda likvidēšanu), 10 November 2025.

⁶⁶⁰ Latvian Civic Alliance (*Latvijas Pilsoniskā Alianse*) (2025), Letter No 1.8.-18 to the Members of the 14th Saeima and to the Budget and Finance Committee: LPA Position on the Liquidation of the Society Integration Foundation (Vēstule Nr. 1.8.-18 14. Saeimas deputātiem un Budžeta un finanšu komisijai: LPA nostāja par Sabiedrības integrācijas fonda likvidēšanu), 8 November 2025; Latvian Civic Alliance (*Latvijas Pilsoniskā Alianse*) (2025), Letter No 1.8.-19 to the Cabinet of Ministers: LPA Position on the Liquidation of the Society Integration Foundation (Vēstule Nr. 1.8.-19 Ministru kabinetam: LPA nostāja par Sabiedrības integrācijas fonda likvidēšanu), 10 November 2025.

⁶⁶¹ Collective Letter to the President of the Republic of Latvia, the Cabinet of Ministers, and the Saeima of the Republic of Latvia: On the Threats to Civil Society and Media Freedom, Against the Liquidation of the Society Integration Foundation (Kolektīva vēstule Latvijas Republikas Valsts prezidentam, Latvijas Republikas Ministru kabinetam, Latvijas Republikas Saeimai: Par pilsoniskās sabiedrības un mediju brīvības apdraudējumu, Pret Sabiedrības integrācijas fonda likvidāciju), 23 November 2025.

On 24 September 2025, 14 Members of the Latvian parliament (Saeima) initiated the draft law on the withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention which had only entered into force in Latvia on 1 May 2024.⁶⁶² In protest, civil society organisations and members of the public actively mobilised by organising two large protests at the Parliament building in Riga on 29 October and 6 November, gathering thousands of people.⁶⁶³ In addition, more than 60 000 unique votes were collected on the digital democracy platform ManaBalss.lv calling upon the President to use his constitutional right to return the law to the parliament for a second review (which he conceded to),⁶⁶⁴ making it the most supported initiative in the platform's history.⁶⁶⁵

⁶⁶² Latvia, Draft law No 1058/Lp14 On Withdrawal from the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (*Likumsprojekts Nr. 1058/Lp14 "Par izstāšanos no Eiropas Padomes Konvencijas par vardarbības pret sievietēm un vardarbības ģimenē novēršanu un apkarošanu"*), 2025.

⁶⁶³ LSM.lv Ziņu redakcija, Ieva Rūtiņa, Jolanta Plauka, Agnija Lazdiņa, *'VIDEO: Vismaz 10 000 cilvēku Doma laukumā protestē pret Latvijas izstāšanos no Stambulas konvencijas'*, LSM.lv, 6 November 2025; LSM.lv Ziņu redakcija, Agnija Lazdiņa, Vita Anstrate, *'Pie Saeimas tūkstoši protestē pret Latvijas izstāšanos no Stambulas konvencijas'*, 29 October 2025. Smaller scale protests were also convened in other Latvian towns and abroad, see, LSM English, *'On the evening of 6 November, protests against Latvia's intention to withdraw from the Istanbul Convention took place in at least 13 European cities, as well as in the USA and Canada, according to the diaspora portal Latviesi.com and LSM.lv.'*, eng.LSM.lv, 7 November 2025; TV Kurzeme, Latvijas Radio, *'Liepājā ap 600 un Cēsīs aptuveni 270 cilvēku aicina Latvijai palikt Stambulas konvencijā'*, LSM.lv, 6 November 2025.

⁶⁶⁴ Latvia, President of the Republic of Latvia (*Latvijas Republikas prezidents*) (2025), Letter No. 391 to the Speaker of the Saeima of the Republic of Latvia, Daiga Mieriņa (*Vēstule Nr. 391 Latvijas Republikas Saeimas priekšsēdētājai Daigai Mieriņai*), 3 November 2025.

⁶⁶⁵ Request to the President Not to Sign the Law on Withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention (*Lūgums prezidentam neparakstīt likumu par izstāšanos no Stambulas konvencijas*), public initiative published on ManaBalss.lv, 31 October 2025. The live vote count is visible on the portal. See also LSM.lv Ziņu redakcija, *'Lūgums prezidentam neparakstīt Stambulas konvencijas denonsēšanu – atbalstītākā iniciatīva «ManaBalss.lv» vēsturē'*, 3 November 2025.

b) Consequences

Civil society's mobilisation attracted broad international media attention to the issue.⁶⁶⁶ Civil society also demonstrated its competence to use lawful means – peaceful protests⁶⁶⁷ and democratic participation through the collection of votes⁶⁶⁸ – in defence of common values.

Commencement of Work on the Latvian Civil Society Development Strategy

a) Summary

On 15 September 2025, the forum of the Council for the Implementation of the Memorandum of Cooperation between Non-Governmental Organizations and the Cabinet of Ministers convened to advance the Civil Society Development Strategy and agreed on key directions for sustainable civil society development.⁶⁶⁹ The Minister of Culture announced that together with the Latvian Civic Alliance they have elaborated a further action framework for the development of the Strategy which was also presented during the Forum.⁶⁷⁰ Currently, the work on the Strategy is continued by a specialised Working Group established by the Ministry of Culture.⁶⁷¹

⁶⁶⁶ See, for example, Anne-Françoise Hivert, *'Latvia: Public mobilization grows in support of treaty for preventing violence against women'*, lemonde.fr, 6 November 2025; Paul Kirby, *'Latvian vote to pull out of treaty on protecting women from violence prompts outcry'*, bbc.com, 31 October 2025; Gavin Blackburn, *'Thousands protest against Latvia's potential withdrawal from Istanbul Convention'*, euronews.com, 6 November 2025; John Silk, *'Latvia votes to exit treaty opposing violence against women'*, dw.com, 31 October 2025.

⁶⁶⁷ LSM English, Agnija Lazdiņa, *'On Thursday evening, protests "Let's Protect Mother Latvia" against the withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention in several cities of Latvia passed without any significant incidents; two persons were detained in Riga, the State Police said'*, eng.LSM.lv, 7 November 2025.

⁶⁶⁸ Request to the President Not to Sign the Law on Withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention (*Lūgums prezidentam neparakstīt likumu par izstāšanos no Stambulas konvencijas*), public initiative published on ManaBalss.lv, 31 October 2025. The live vote count is visible on the portal. See also LSM.lv Ziņu redakcija, *'Lūgums prezidentam neparakstīt Stambulas konvencijas denonsēšanu – atbalstītākā iniciatīva «ManaBalss.lv» vēsturē'*, 3 November 2025.

⁶⁶⁹ Latvia, Cabinet of Ministers (2025), *'Memoranda padomes forumā būs Pilsoniskās sabiedrības attīstības stratēģiju'*, entry on the homepage, 15 September 2025.

⁶⁷⁰ Latvia, Council for the Implementation of the Memorandum of Cooperation between Non-Governmental Organizations and the Cabinet of Ministers (2025), Forum "Civil Society Development Strategy – What Do We Want It to Be?" (*forums "Pilsoniskās sabiedrības attīstības stratēģija – kādu to vēlamies?"*), Speech of the Minister of Culture, [event recording](#), 00:39:52, and presentation of the Director of the Latvian Civic Alliance, [event recording](#), at 00:41:11.

⁶⁷¹ Information received from a representative of the Latvian Civic Alliance via email on 8 April 2026; see also Latvia, Working Group on Public Participation and Open Government of the Council for the Implementation of the Memorandum of Cooperation between Non-Governmental Organizations and the Cabinet of Ministers (2025), Meeting Protocol No.1 (No.5.3.6./1) (*Protokols Nr. 1 (Nr. 5.3.6./1)*), 16 January 2026, pp.4-5.

b) Consequences

Organised civil society as a sector is currently addressed and regulated as part of civic cohesion policy.⁶⁷² The Civil Society Development Strategy will be a medium-term sectoral strategy for organised civil society. It will serve as a key policy document that can provide a foundation for future policy planning and strategic development.⁶⁷³

⁶⁷² Latvia, Cabinet of Ministers decree No 72 of 5 February 2021 "Guidelines for the development of a cohesive and civically active society 2021-2027" ("Par Saliedētas un pilsoniski aktīvas sabiedrības attīstības pamatnostādņēm 2021.–2027. gadam"), 5 February 2021; Latvia, Council for the Implementation of the Memorandum of Cooperation between Non-Governmental Organizations and the Cabinet of Ministers (2025), Forum "Civil Society Development Strategy – What Do We Want It to Be?" (*forums "Pilsoniskās sabiedrības attīstības stratēģija – kādu to vēlamies?"*), Speech of the Minister of Culture, [event recording](#), 00:37:50.

⁶⁷³ Latvia, Working Group on Public Participation and Open Government of the Council for the Implementation of the Memorandum of Cooperation between Non-Governmental Organizations and the Cabinet of Ministers (2025), Meeting Protocol No.1 (No.5.3.6./1) (*Protokols Nr. 1 (Nr. 5.3.6./1)*), 16 January 2026, p.4.

North Macedonia (MK)

Civic space in the EU in 2025

Country: North Macedonia

Contractor: European Policy Institute – Skopje

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Disclaimer

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1. CIVIC SPACE PRESSURES

1.1. Deterioration of legal environment: freedom of association

No restrictive developments affecting freedom of association in 2025

1.2. Deterioration of legal environment: freedom of assembly

Stable assembly rights with persistent LPA gaps

1.3. Deterioration of legal environment: freedom of expression

Media monitoring tender alongside online portal regulation

a) Summary

Freedom of expression in North Macedonia saw no meaningful legal advancements in 2025, with practices continuing to pose challenges for CSOs and journalists.

On 11 March 2025, the Government adopted and submitted to Parliament draft amendments to the Law on Media⁶⁷⁴, marking the first comprehensive legal framework to regulate online news portals that deliver information to over 70% of the Macedonian public through internet platforms. Government officials justified the move by noting the growing dominance of digital media and the need to integrate it into existing audiovisual regulations, aiming to foster self-regulation in journalism, enhance market competitiveness, and ensure greater transparency in the sector as part of the EU Chapter 23 (Judiciary and Fundamental Rights) accession roadmap obligations. The draft establishes explicit rules for the founding, registration, and operation of online portals, including requirements for editorial transparency and dispute-resolution mechanisms, following extensive public consultations on the ENER electronic portal, during which diverse stakeholders provided input.

During the same month, the Government tendered⁶⁷⁵ for a media clipping service to monitor print, electronic, and internet media, as well as social networks, 24/7. Specifications require software for tonality assessment (positive/negative/neutral), keyword tagging, AI analytics, reports, and mobile access. Officials framed it as policy support via public reaction tracking, but journalists, CSOs, and experts raised alarms that its capabilities—author identification, real-time sentiment analysis, and source tracking—resemble surveillance tools more than neutral clipping, risking pressure on critical outlets and self-censorship amid fragile media independence.

⁶⁷⁴ North Macedonia, Official Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia no. 87/25 (*Службен Весник на Република Северна Македонија бр.87/25*), [Law on Amending the Law on Media \(Закон за изменување и дополнување на Законот за медиуми\)](#), 29 April 2025.

⁶⁷⁵ SDK.mk (2025), [The Government will evaluate positive, negative and neutral news: Tender for press clipping announced \(Владата ќе оценува позитивни, негативни и неутрални вестии: Рашпишан тендер за прес клипинг\)](#), 27 March 2025.

b) Consequences

This media monitoring tender deepened concerns over state overreach into freedom of expression, as its surveillance-like capabilities—real-time tonality tracking, author profiling, and sentiment analysis—threaten independent journalism and CSO advocacy. Journalists and civic actors fear targeted pressure on critical coverage, fostering self-censorship even without direct legal changes. The opacity of how data will be used amplifies chilling effects on public discourse, particularly when the government already dominates media narratives, further eroding trust in institutions and limiting the reach of civic voices in policy debates. On the other hand, online portal regulation formalises digital media access for most citizens but risks administrative burdens on smaller outlets through registration requirements, potentially favouring established players while fragmenting independent digital pluralism essential for CSO advocacy and counter-narratives amid EU expression standards.

1.4. Deterioration of legal environment: court cases

High-profile CSO fraud case sentence reductions

a) Summary

The high-profile "International Union"⁶⁷⁶ case targeted the CSO led by Bojan Jovanovski (Boki 13). Jovanovski was accused of organised fraud and money laundering by soliciting donations from individuals and firms for non-existent elderly homes and social projects, amassing illicit gains laundered through various channels. The 2022 initial verdict imposed heavy sentences (e.g., nine years for Jovanovski). Still, the Appellate Court in April 2024 partially upheld the convictions and ordered a retrial. In 2025, the sentences were reduced: five years for Jovanovski on fraud and laundering charges, conditional terms for associates such as Jasna Ercegovic (two years), and an MKD one million fine on the NGO. This judicial leniency amid retrial highlights persistent risks for CSOs in high-stakes financial probes.

b) Consequences

The reduced "International Union" sentences signal selective judicial mercy in CSO-related financial crimes, potentially emboldening misuse of civic structures while deterring legitimate fundraising amid fears of politicised probes and asset freezes. This erodes donor confidence, as NGOs face heightened scrutiny and compliance requirements, stifling innovative social initiatives.

1.5. Attempts to stifle civic engagement through violence, harassment and negative narratives

Repressive Narratives Across Civic Arenas

a) Summary

⁶⁷⁶ SDK.mk (2025), [Sentences reduced for Boki 13 and other defendants in the repeated "International Alliance" case: Instead of nine, five years in prison for Jovanovski \(Намалени казните за Боки 13 и останатите обвинети во повторената постапка за „Меѓународен сојуз“: Наместо девет, пет години затвор за Јовановски\)](#), 13 October 2025.

In 2025, several waves of public protest emerged in response to high-profile incidents and perceived institutional shortcomings. In February, rallies in Skopje followed the death of a pedestrian in an accident, with participants calling for judicial accountability and improved road safety. In Kochani, the “March of Angels” vigils were organised after the Pulse nightclub fire, as families sought accountability for alleged regulatory failures. Industrial accidents in the Vardariste⁶⁷⁷/Usje⁶⁷⁸ area also prompted demonstrations focused on environmental safety concerns. At the same time, some protest movements and activists were subject to critical narratives in parts of the public discourse, including claims that they were politically motivated or that they were supported by external actors. Online commentary by unidentified social media users included allegations directed at initiatives such as “Koj e sleden?” (“Who’s Next?”), as well as reports of pressure on students and parents involved in local mobilisation efforts.

In the context of the USAID funding cuts⁶⁷⁹ in 2025, the rhetoric of USAID being a “democracy saboteur” fuelled harassment and smear campaigns towards journalists, particularly misogynistic online threats against women reporters. One prominent instance of online threats involved a columnist for *Vecer*, who launched a violent four-hour Facebook barrage against two investigative journalists⁶⁸⁰. In retaliation for their investigation that reportedly implicated the columnist himself, he used doxing, rape incitement, and WWII-era slurs to intimidate the reporters. His posts triggered a broader hate campaign online, framing the reporters as agents of “subversive USAID/NATO funding”. In another instance, the Coalition for the Protection of Children, which is an organisation that claims to defend minors from “gender ideology in education”, launched a campaign on X targeting journalists from the investigative journalism platform 360 Stepeni, labelling them as “foreign mercenaries” allegedly using USAID funds to promote “gender ideology”. This triggered criticism from the Journalists’ Association of Macedonia, which warned against the spread of hate speech directed at journalists because of their previous USAID funding.⁶⁸¹

Smears and threats continued during the election candidacy period in August. Eleven hours after announcing her independent candidacy for mayor of the municipality of Centar in Skopje, the former president of the Anti-Corruption Commission⁶⁸² received a summons from the Basic Public

⁶⁷⁷ Okno (2025), [Citizens of Aerodrom on the streets: "Vardarište is a cancer, we are looking for a solution now and immediately" \(Граѓаните на Аеродром на улица: „Вардариште е канцер, бараме решение сега и веднаш“\)](#), 4 September 2025.

⁶⁷⁸ Radio Free Europe (2026), [Citizens protest again against the Usje cement plant \(Граѓани повторно протестираа против цементарница „Усје“\)](#), 31 January 2026.

⁶⁷⁹ North Macedonia, Association of Journalists of Macedonia (ZNM), Association of Journalists and Authors (AJM), and Independent Union of Journalists and Media Workers (SSNM) (2025), [Condemnation of the campaign to defame independent media and threats against journalists \(Осуда за кампањата за оцрнување на независните медиуми и закани кон новинари\)](#), 12 February 2025.

⁶⁸⁰ Investigative Reporting Lab - IRL (2025), [What is Latas afraid of when he urges you to rape and lynch us? \(Од што се плаши Латаш кога ве поттикнува да не силувате и линчувате?\)](#), 27 February 2025.

⁶⁸¹ Balkan Insight (2025), [USAID Shutdown Empowers Online Attacks on NGOs and Free Media](#), 31 March 2025.

⁶⁸² Libertas (2025), [Ivanovska 11 hours after announcing her candidacy: police arrive at her door with an invitation from OJO for a conversation on August 19 \(Ивановска по 11 часа од објавата на](#)

Prosecutors' Office, Skopje. Although the summons related to a private criminal complaint filed weeks earlier, its timing triggered public controversy and a dispute between the Ministry of Interior and the Prosecutor's Office. The candidate denounced the move as retaliation intended to intimidate reform candidates, echoing the "foreign agent" narratives used against journalists and activists. While the Public Prosecutors' Council later offered to postpone the interview until after the elections, this situation nevertheless raised concerns about the use of legal procedures in politically sensitive moments.

b) Consequences

The developments that include public threats, reputational campaigns, coordinated online attacks, and the timing of legal proceedings contribute to an environment that drives self-censorship among activists, journalists, and civic candidates addressing corruption and other sensitive issues. Moreover, the engagement of anti-gender rhetoric has been strategically deployed to mobilise public distrust toward rights-based CSOs. Rights-based organisations are increasingly framed as "anti-national"⁶⁸³ across North Macedonia, contributing to a hostile environment for oversight actors.

1.6. Funding reductions and restrictions

Systemic Underfunding and Biased Grant Provision

a) Summary

The Ministry for Political System and Inter-Community Relations' 2026 programme allocated only MKD 18,113,000 MKD in grants (up to MKD 500,000 each) toward the long-standing Ohrid Framework⁶⁸⁴ priorities such as equality, anti-discrimination, multiculturalism, and community language rights. Civil society organisations have indicated that both the limited initiative and the proposed guarantee fund may not fully address the sector's broader financial needs. Some stakeholders have also raised concerns regarding the equitable distribution of support.

This systemic shortfall manifested starkly in February 2025 when Tiiiit! Inc., an association promoting women's activism in Skopje, publicly condemned the Ministry of Culture and Tourism for excluding the 13th edition of the feminist culture and action festival PRVO PA ŽENSKO⁶⁸⁵ from receiving funding. Tiiiit! Inc. accused the Ministry of disregarding marginalised groups, including women, LGBTQ+ communities, and feminists, and criticised the decision as discriminatory. The festival, internationally recognised for 12 years as the only interdisciplinary event promoting feminist culture and activism, faced funding cuts despite its pivotal role in advancing gender equality and critical cultural discourse.

кандидатурата: полиција ѝ на врата покана од ОЈО за разговор на 19 август), 15 August 2025.

⁶⁸³ Balkan Civil Society Development Network (BCSDN) (2025), [Enabling Environment for Civil Society & Enlargement Package 2024 - Background Analysis 2025](#), November 2025.

⁶⁸⁴ Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) (2001), [Ohrid Framework Agreement](#), 13 August 2001.

⁶⁸⁵ Tiiiit! Inc. (Facebook) (2025), [Public condemnation of Ministry of Culture funding denial for PRVO PA ŽENSKO](#), 2025.

Similarly, the National Youth Council of Macedonia (NYCM)⁶⁸⁶ expressed serious concern over the Ministry of Social Policy, Demography, and Youth's public call for financial support to associations and foundations, announced on August 4, 2025, with an application deadline of 6 August—just under three working days—criticising the lack of transparency, consultation, and fairness that disadvantages most youth organisations amid summer slowdowns and ahead of local elections.

In 2025, the Safe House shelter⁶⁸⁷ centre in North Macedonia temporarily suspended its operations and the provision of social services for victims of gender-based violence following a careful evaluation of its current circumstances; despite the closure, Safe House committed to continuing support for the most marginalised members of the LGBTQ+ community, and maintained its helpline and active social media presence.

b) Consequences

Chronic underfunding exposes civil society organisations to operational crises, as evidenced by Safe House's 2025 suspension of gender-based violence services and Tiiiit! Inc.'s inability to host the PRVO PA ZHENSKO festival. Opaque funding calls, such as the NYCM-criticised youth grant with its mere two-day deadline, fuel perceptions of political favouritism ahead of local elections, eroding trust in institutions and diminishing CSO legitimacy in government processes. This reduces collaboration and public confidence in state commitments to the Ohrid Framework⁶⁸⁸ goals and EU-aligned strategies, with women, feminists, and LGBTQ+ communities suffering most, losing critical services and platforms amid anti-discrimination pledges, as festival denials and shelter closures signal systemic bias against progressive initiatives that contradict national strategies and hinder EU accession benchmarks on civic space.

1.7. Barriers to participation in law and policy-making

Information Blackouts Cripple Civic Input

a) Summary

In 2025, CSO participation in law and policy-making was hampered by a deepening crisis in public information access, exacerbated by institutional paralysis and restrictive proposals. The Agency for Protection of the Right to Free Access to Public Information became non-functional for a full month due to expired mandates of its director and deputy, leaving it unable to adjudicate the surging 500

⁶⁸⁶ North Macedonia, National Youth Council of Macedonia (NYCM) (*Национален младински совет на Македонија*) (2025), [Youth support without transparency and vision – another alarm for young people \(Поддршка за младите без транспарентност и визија – уште еден аларм за младите\)](#), 4 August 2025.

⁶⁸⁷ Safe House shelter centre (Facebook) (2025), [Temporary suspension of operations \(Временско суспендирање на работењето\)](#), 17 February 2025.

⁶⁸⁸ *This assessment is based on information gathered through consultations conducted in 2025 with representatives of civil society organisations active in North Macedonia. During these consultations, stakeholders reported concerns that project funds allocated by the Ministry for Political System and Inter-Community Relations lacked sufficient transparency and that a disproportionate share of funding appeared to have been directed to organisations representing the Serbian community, raising questions regarding impartiality and funding criteria. No publicly available official sources providing detailed allocation data were identified at the time of reporting.*

complaints (by late September 2025) against institutions' non-responses, up from 354 for all of 2024, undermining enforcement of the 20-day response rule.⁶⁸⁹ The Platform of CSOs Against Corruption urgently called on Parliament to appoint leadership,⁶⁹⁰ stressing the Agency's vital role in enabling citizen oversight, anti-corruption probes, and civic input via access to data on public spending and decisions. Yet, this plea coincided with government-proposed amendments to the Law on Free Access to Public Information, requiring prior permissions to reuse open data from public bodies, a direct compounding of the crisis by granting officials discretionary veto power over previously freely available datasets essential for analysis and advocacy. Investigative platforms like BIRN lambasted it as a blatant transparency rollback that would cripple CSOs' and journalists' core accountability tools, from aggregating public spending data for anti-corruption probes to environmental exposés and policy input, precisely when the Agency's paralysis left even basic access unenforced. The draft, pushed by the Ministry of Information Society amid stalled reforms, echoed BIRN's 2025 FOI Report warnings of weakening implementation trends, including administrative silence and over-classification, further isolating civic actors reliant on open data portals.

b) Consequences

The Agency's leadership vacuum paralysed complaint resolutions, amplifying institutional stonewalling and crippling CSOs' capacity to gather evidence for policy advocacy, corruption exposés, or public consultations, directly fueling non-participation in decision-making. This signals deliberate weakening of transparency pillars, disconnecting civic actors from oversight roles and eroding trust in governance. Open data permission requirements would institutionalise gatekeeping, stifling independent analysis and media scrutiny, while unaddressed vacancies highlight political neglect of civic enabling tools, ultimately contracting policy-influence spaces amid EU scrutiny of accountability.

1.8. Other developments

Sustained online targeting and harassment of gender equality and LGBTI+ activists

a) Summary

In 2025, sustained and targeted online harassment of LGBTI+ and gender equality activists was observed. As of 6 July 2025, activist Irena Cvetković⁶⁹¹ was referred to negatively in at least 13 posts

⁶⁸⁹ Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) (2025), [Erosion of access to public information rights in North Macedonia](#), 10 August 2025.

⁶⁹⁰ Metamorphosis Foundation for Internet and Society / Platform of Civil Society Organizations Against Corruption (2025), [The Platform of Civil Society Organizations for the Fight against Corruption demands the immediate appointment of a leadership in the Agency for the Protection of the Right to Free Access to Public Information \(Платформата на граѓански организации за борба против корупцијата бара итно именување на раководство во Агенцијата за заштита на правото на слободен пристап до информации од јавен карактер\)](#), 26 January 2026.

⁶⁹¹ Irena Cvetković is an activist in North Macedonia engaged in gender equality and LGBTI+ rights work. Her public professional profile includes involvement with organisations active in advocacy and support for marginalised groups, including Coalition Margini (Margini – LGBTI Support Centre) and related civil society initiatives.

on the Facebook page⁶⁹² “Преземи одговорност” (Take Responsibility).⁶⁹³ The posts frequently associated her and the organisations Coalition Margins⁶⁹⁴ and HERA (Health Education and Research Association)⁶⁹⁵ with allegations of harming children, promoting sexual abuse, “destabilising” the country, or acting under foreign influence.

The content was systematically reposted across multiple Facebook groups using identical or near-identical framing, thereby expanding its reach. In several instances, comment sections contained degrading language that may qualify as hate speech. Certain comments included explicit calls for violence, such as suggestions that activists should be physically harmed. The repeated naming of specific individuals and organisations, combined with hostile and violent rhetoric in user comments, indicates a pattern of coordinated public targeting rather than isolated expressions of opinion.

b) Consequences

Although no formal legal measures were introduced, the documented pattern of repeated delegitimisation and violent rhetoric may have increased risks to the safety, reputation, and well-being of those targeted. The continued public availability of such content, combined with the absence of visible moderation or condemnation, may contribute to a broader perception of tolerance towards harassment and hate speech in the online sphere. This dynamic risk discouraging civic engagement and may have a chilling effect on participation in public debate, particularly for activists working on gender equality and LGBTI+ rights.

2. CIVIC SPACE EXPANSION

2.1. Improvements in legal environment: freedom of association

Council Reactivation Strengthens Civic Dialogue

The most significant 2025 developments for freedom of association were the drafting of amendments to the Law on Associations and Foundations⁶⁹⁶, with substantial input from the newly operationalised Council for Cooperation between Government and Civil Society, and the adoption of the Government Strategy for Cooperation with Civil Society 2025–2028. The Law amendments, published for public consultation by the Ministry of Justice, aim to align with EU and Council of Europe standards by regulating state financial support (co-financing for EU and international projects), enhancing CSO roles

⁶⁹² Преземи Одговорност (2026), [Facebook page \(Facebook страница\)](#), 2026.

⁶⁹³ “Преземи одговорност” (Take Responsibility) is a publicly accessible Facebook page based in North Macedonia that states its objective as the “protection of children from transgender ideology and equality between men and women”. The page regularly publishes content related to gender equality, LGBTI+ issues and civil society organisations, frequently framing these topics in a critical or oppositional manner, with a significant online following.

⁶⁹⁴ Coalition MARGINS (2026), [Homepage](#), 2026.

⁶⁹⁵ HERA (2026), [Homepage \(Насловна страна\)](#), 2026.

⁶⁹⁶ North Macedonia, Council for Cooperation between the Government and Civil Society (*Совет за соработка меѓу Владата и граѓанското општество*) (2026), [Draft minutes from 8th session \(Нацрт записник од 8-ма седница\)](#), 10 February 2026.

in decision-making, enforcing non-profit principles, promoting self-sustainability, and standardising accountability/transparency, while legally embedding the Council's role.

The Strategy, developed through consultations led by the Council, sets out a four-year framework (2025–2028) to strengthen sustainable partnerships between public institutions and CSOs. It prioritises improvements to the legal framework, funding mechanisms, participatory decision-making processes, capacity-building measures, enhanced open data transparency, and the introduction of monitoring tools, including benchmarks such as the CSO Sustainability Index.

a) Consequences

These reforms institutionalise CSO-government dialogue, ease access to EU funding and policy influence, and counter gaps in the enabling environment noted in the European Commission's progress reports for North Macedonia. The Council's pivotal role ensures inclusive input, enhancing legitimacy and reform sustainability, though effective implementation through action plans will determine real gains in civic space.

2.2. Improvements in legal environment: freedom of assembly

No improvements to the legal framework governing freedom of assembly in 2025

2.3. Improvements in legal environment: freedom of expression

SLAPP Working Group Signals Expression Safeguards

a) Summary

Towards the end of 2025, the Government initiated consultations with civil society organisations to nominate representatives to a new national working group on strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs), acknowledging growing concerns from journalists and CSOs about abusive litigation used to silence criticism. On 27 January 2026, the Government formally established⁶⁹⁷ this working group, tasking it with designing a mechanism to protect against misuse of SLAPPs and explicitly framing the move as part of its EU accession obligations and commitment to safeguarding freedom of expression and the public interest. This step responds to long-standing demands from the media community and signals readiness to address systemic pressures on journalists and other public watchdogs through a more structured policy response.

b) Consequences

The creation of a SLAPP-focused working group, with civil society representation, offers an opportunity to translate long-standing advocacy into concrete safeguards against abusive lawsuits that chill investigative reporting and public criticism. If it delivers effective legal and procedural reforms such as early dismissal mechanisms, protective cost rules, or clearer criteria for identifying abusive claims, it

⁶⁹⁷ North Macedonia, Macedonian Information Agency (MIA) (*Медиумска информативна агенција*) (2026), [The Government forms a working group to establish a mechanism for protection against abuse of so-called strategic lawsuits against participation in public debates \(Владата формира работна група за воспоставување механизам за заштита од злоупотреба на т.н. стратешки тужби против учество во јавни дебати\)](#), 27 January 2026.

could significantly reduce pressure on journalists, activists, and CSOs and strengthen jurisprudence aligned with European standards on freedom of expression. However, at this stage, the impact remains prospective, as the group has only just been formed; its effectiveness will depend on the inclusiveness of its composition, the ambition of proposed measures, and the Government's willingness to adopt and implement them beyond declarative commitments to democratic values and EU integration.

2.4. Improvements in legal environment: court cases

Constitutional Court Restores Electoral Access

a) Summary

North Macedonia's Constitutional Court delivered a landmark ruling annulling amendments to the Electoral Code that had sharply raised the signature-collection threshold for independent candidates and lists to participate in elections, effectively restoring accessible pathways for non-partisan civic participation. The amendments had been adopted without public consultation or an impact assessment. The Court found that this approach violated constitutional principles such as legal certainty, predictability, the hierarchy of norms, and political pluralism. Civic activists from the Chance for Centar⁶⁹⁸ (Shansa za Centar) movement, who had actively opposed the changes as a deliberate tactic to deter independent candidacies and consolidate established parties' control over electoral contests, hailed the decision as a vital judicial correction. The decision reaffirms the Court's role in protecting electoral access and ensuring that citizens and grassroots initiatives, including smaller civil society actors without party infrastructure, can compete under fair and transparent conditions.

b) Consequences

This Constitutional Court decision serves as a critical judicial counterweight to legislative restrictions, directly protecting civic actors' ability to engage in electoral politics without facing engineered administrative hurdles that favour incumbents and large parties over independent voices. Restoring lower signature thresholds reduces barriers to participation for diverse civic groups, enhancing political pluralism and enabling underrepresented communities to field candidates aligned with local priorities rather than national party agendas. For advocacy CSOs like Chance for Centar, the outcome validates sustained pressure on electoral fairness. It reinforces courts as an effective recourse mechanism against civic space contractions, signalling progress toward EU standards on inclusive democratic processes while boosting public confidence in judicial independence as a civic safeguard.

2.5. Positive narratives

No significant initiatives promoting positive narratives on civil society in 2025

2.6. Improvements in funding

⁶⁹⁸ North Macedonia, Constitutional Court of the Republic of North Macedonia (*Уставен суд на Република Северна Македонија*) (2025), [U.br 186/2024 \(У.бр.186/2024\)](#), 20 May 2025.

No improvements to the funding framework for civil society organisations in 2025

2.7. Improvements in participation

Council Reactivation Strengthens Civic Dialogue

a) Summary

In early 2025, the Government of North Macedonia reactivated the Council for Cooperation with Civil Society through a process coordinated by the General Secretariat's Department for Cooperation with NGOs. On 5 February, the Department issued a public call inviting civil society organisations to nominate candidates⁶⁹⁹. Voting took place until 27 February, allowing organisations to elect members and deputy members through electronic or postal ballots. Following its reconstitution, the Council became operational and held several meetings, including its inaugural session⁷⁰⁰, the adoption of rules of procedure⁷⁰¹, activity planning⁷⁰², and the establishment of working groups⁷⁰³. The Council also contributed to the drafting of the Draft Law on Associations and Foundations⁷⁰⁴, as well as to the preparation of the newly adopted Civil Society Strategy and Action Plan. In addition, on 16 June, the

⁶⁹⁹ North Macedonia, Government of the Republic of North Macedonia - Department for Cooperation with NGOs (*Влада на Република Северна Македонија – Одделение за соработка со невладините организации*) (2025), Report on registered organizations with candidates and Public call for voting for election of members and deputy members of the Council for Cooperation between the Government and Civil Society (*Извештај за пријавени организации со кандидати и Јавен повик за гласање за избор на членови и заменици членови на Советот за соработка меѓу Владата и граѓанското општество*), 12 February 2025.

⁷⁰⁰ North Macedonia, General Secretariat of the Government – Unit for Cooperation with NGOs, *Constitutive session of the Council for Cooperation between the Government and Civil Society (Конститутивна седница на Советот за соработка меѓу Владата и граѓанското општество)*, 7 April 2025.

⁷⁰¹ North Macedonia, General Secretariat of the Government – Unit for Cooperation with NGOs, *Fourth session of the Council for Cooperation between the Government and Civil Society (Одржана Четврта седница на Советот за соработка меѓу Владата и граѓанското општество)*, 25 June 2025.

⁷⁰² North Macedonia, General Secretariat of the Government – Unit for Cooperation with NGOs, *Third session of the Council for Cooperation between the Government and Civil Society (Одржана Третата седница на Советот за соработка меѓу Владата и граѓанското општество)*, 25 June 2025.

⁷⁰³ North Macedonia, General Secretariat of the Government – Unit for Cooperation with NGOs, *Fifth session of the Council for Cooperation between the Government and Civil Society (Одржана Петтата седница на Советот за соработка меѓу Владата и граѓанското општество)*, 27 November 2025.

⁷⁰⁴ North Macedonia, Civil Society Resource Center (RCGO) (*Граѓански Ресурсен Центар*) (2025), Strategy for Cooperation between Government and Civil Society 2025-2028 (*Стратегија за соработка меѓу Владата и граѓанското општество 2025-2028*), 6 August 2025.

Department, in cooperation with the Civil Society Resource Centre, concluded consultations on the Draft Strategy for Government Cooperation and Civil Society Development and the Action Plan 2025–2028⁷⁰⁵. These steps indicate renewed institutional dialogue and a structured approach to government–civil society cooperation.

b) Consequences

The Council's swift reactivation and multiple 2025 meetings restored a vital advisory platform, enabling CSOs to influence policy on diverse issues from rights to development, fostering inclusion of marginalised voices previously sidelined. Finalised strategy consultations promote a long-term enabling environment through the 2025–2028 Action Plan, potentially unlocking better access to funding and reducing administrative hurdles, aligning with EU accession demands for civic participation. This boosts CSO legitimacy and government accountability, countering contraction trends and enhancing overall civic space resilience per monitoring reports.

2.8. Other developments

Public solidarity campaign: Kochani fire support, volunteer, and fundraising

a) Summary

In 2025, the deadly nightclub fire in Kochani triggered visible nationwide solidarity and civic mobilisation, reflected in coordinated fundraising and volunteer initiatives. Civil society organisations and philanthropic platforms launched structured donation mechanisms, including a dedicated solidarity fund established by Konekt⁷⁰⁶ to support affected families, while the Macedonia2025 initiative “Hope for Kochani” mobilised diaspora and domestic donations through the Red Cross. These organised campaigns were accompanied by widespread public mourning, community support actions, and large-scale civic reactions documented in international reporting, illustrating a pattern of spontaneous citizen mobilisation around social crises and reinforcing the role of civil society as a channel for collective solidarity and assistance.

b) Consequences

The Kochani fire response showcased civil society's agility in crisis mobilisation, channelling public empathy into tangible aid via trusted platforms like Konekt and the Red Cross, thereby bolstering CSO credibility and public trust amid institutional gaps. This outpouring of solidarity highlighted NGOs' role as vital intermediaries for diaspora funds and volunteer coordination, strengthening community resilience and setting a model for future emergencies while countering narratives of civic apathy.

⁷⁰⁵ North Macedonia, Civil Society Resource Center (RCGO) (*Граѓански Ресурсен Центар*) (2025), [*Consultations on Draft Strategy and Action Plan 2025-2028 \(Спроведени консултации за предлог-стратегијата на Владата за соработка со и развој на граѓанското општество и акцискиот план 2025-2028\)*](#), 16 June 2025.

⁷⁰⁶ KONEKT (2025), [*Announcement: Open campaign of the Konekt donor fund to deal with the consequences of the tragedy in Kocani \(Соопштение: Отворена кампања на донаторскиот фонд на Конект за справување со последиците од трагедијата во Кочани\)*](#), 18 March 2025.

Malta (MT)

Civic space in the EU in 2025

Country: Malta

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Disclaimer

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1. CIVIC SPACE PRESSURES

1.1. Deterioration of legal environment: freedom of association

Changes to the In Genere Inquest procedures under the Criminal Code

a) Summary

In 2025 the Government rushed through a crucial amendment to the Criminal Code that would amend Article 546 of the Criminal Code⁷⁰⁷ that had allowed private individuals to request the opening of an investigation into serious crimes by an inquiring magistrate. This procedure has been key in leading to the investigation of major corruption scandals⁷⁰⁸ in Malta where the police had failed to prosecute in recent years. It was reported that 25 magisterial inquiries were launched by private complaints since 2017⁷⁰⁹ on possible crimes of corruption, fraud and misuse of public funds.

In January 2025, without any public consultation, the Minister for Justice tabled a motion to introduce a bill to amend the criminal code to parliament's agenda. By February the text of the Bill was made public and it had already passed on to the 2nd reading stage in Parliament. The amendment crucially removed the right for citizens to directly petition for a magisterial inquiry. This process has now been replaced by a requirement to file a report with the police, requesting the initiation of the inquiry resulting in a higher threshold for a petitioner to prompt an inquiry. However, it was exactly the lack of police action to investigate major corruption cases that had pushed activists to use Article 546 in the past.

Furthermore, the individual complainants would also be expected to identify and name a suspect, note the acts committed, flag the alleged offence and present evidence before the inquiry even begins, effectively forcing them to assume the role of investigator and prosecutor. The new amendments introduced the deterrent that if at the termination of the inquest and at the request of the suspected person the inquiring magistrate considers the complaint to have been unfounded, frivolous, vexatious or abusive of the judicial process then the complainant could be condemned to pay the costs of the inquest. The bill also introduced transitory provisions designed to produce retroactive effect in relation to inquiries already commenced before the new law entered into force.

⁷⁰⁷ [Criminal Code](#), CAP 9 of the Laws of Malta.

⁷⁰⁸ Times of Malta, [Electrogas partner company, Nexia BT bosses set to face 17 Black charge](#), 2025, Times of Malta, [Vitals inquiry: AG files charges against Muscat, Mizzi, Schembri and others](#), 2024, Daphne Caruana Galizia Foundation, [Malta Government's legal reforms should serve justice, not impunity](#), 16 January 2025.

⁷⁰⁹ Newsbook, [25 magisterial inquiries launched at citizens' request since 2017](#), 2025.

In spite of a huge public outcry⁷¹⁰, the Bill was passed and made into law with fascinating efficiency by the first week of April⁷¹¹ 2025.

b) Consequences

The amendment to the *in genere* inquest proceeding removed the exceptional right that was available to private individuals to find recourse where the police or prosecution fail to act. The new law severely restricts the rights of any person to petition with the judiciary directly and this has a particular impact in the Maltese context with its institutional challenges in the fight against corruption⁷¹². Furthermore, it was felt that the high standard of proof required and the possibility of facing uncapped financial penalties create a chilling effect on whistleblowers and journalists investigating corruption⁷¹³.

However, it is still too early for there to be an analysis of the effects that this amendment had on magisterial inquiries and the investigation and prosecution of corruption cases. However, it should be noted that an appeal relating to a dismissal of an original inquiry request was turned down on the basis of the new legislation⁷¹⁴.

Proposed Amendments to Malta's Planning Laws

a) Summary

A 2025 controversial environment planning reform saw two Bills⁷¹⁵ being tabled in Parliament without prior consultation with stakeholders. One of the many proposed reforms relates the curtailment of national courts' powers and as a result of such they will be precluded from annulling permits outright and will instead only be able to send them back to the Planning Authority's appeals tribunal for reconsideration⁷¹⁶.

⁷¹⁰ Chamber of Advocates (2025), [press release](#) of 8 February 2025. Repubblika, [Memorandum on the Right of Individual Petition for Magisterial Inquiries](#), 4 February 2025. Malta Chamber of Commerce, ['Quest for Truth and Justice'](#), 10 February 2025. European Commission (2025), [2025 Rule of Law Report Country Chapter on the rule of law situation in Malta](#), SWD(2025) 918 final, Brussels, 8 July 2025.

⁷¹¹ aditus foundation, [Bill 125 - In Genere Inquests - Key Aspects](#), February 2025; Repubblika, [Detailed Response to Bill 134 To Amend the Constitution](#), May 2025.

⁷¹² aditus foundation, Daphne Caruana Galizia Foundation, Moviment Graffiti, Fondazione Falcone, Repubblika, [Raising our concerns on magisterial inquiry reform with the EU, Council of Europe](#), 24 February 2025.

⁷¹³ Newsbook, [Court cites new inquiry law to halt Jason Azzopardi appeal against Gozo minister](#), 15 April 2025.

⁷¹⁴ Ibid.

⁷¹⁵ Parliament of Malta, [Bill 143 – Development Planning Bill 2025](#) and [Bill 144 – Environment and Planning Review Tribunal Bill 2025](#).

⁷¹⁶ Times of Malta, [Appeal deadlines relaxed, controversial changes remain in planning law overhaul](#), Times of Malta, 2/10/2025

Objectors appealing a Planning Authority decision will only be able to argue points they raised in front of the Planning Authority. Furthermore, the Planning Authority's appeals board – the Environment and Planning Review Tribunal – will have the power to approve applications without hearing objectors if it believes the required changes are not “*material*” in nature. Furthermore, the bill proposes that the Tribunal would be able to impose a fine of up to five thousand euro (€5,000) on the appellant in those cases where it declares an appeal frivolous or vexatious and, in such cases, the decision of the Tribunal would be final without any remedy before the Court of Appeal.

It should be noted that the members of the Environment and Planning Review Tribunal are directly appointed by the Prime Minister and such appointment system have been deemed to be problematic by the European Commission⁷¹⁷ and the Venice Commission⁷¹⁸.

b) Consequences

Civil society⁷¹⁹ and academics have criticised the Bills on a number of issues, however most prominently on the undermining of the rule of law in Malta. It was felt that the proposals undermine good governance, the right to public participation and access to justice enshrined in our Constitution and also in the Aarhus Convention, ratified by Malta⁷²⁰. Urban planning and the construction industry represent a corruption⁷²¹ and conflict-of-interest risk in Malta, given the close relationship between this industry sector and political decision-makers⁷²². In particular, many of the objections and legal challenges to big planning projects are spearheaded by a

⁷¹⁷ European Commission (2025), [2025 Rule of Law Report Country Chapter on the rule of law situation in Malta](#), SWD(2025) 918 final, Brussels, 8 July 2025; Council of the European Union (2025), [ANNEX to the Proposal for a COUNCIL IMPLEMENTING DECISION amending the Implementing Decision of 5 October 2021 on the approval of the assessment of the recovery and resilience plan for Malta {SWD\(2025\) 371 final}](#), Brussels, 18 November 2025.

⁷¹⁸ Venice Commission [Opinion No. 940/2018 CDL-AD \(2018\)028](#), 2018; [Opinion CDL-AD\(2020\)006](#), 2020; and [Opinion CDL-AD\(2020\)019-e](#), 2020.

⁷¹⁹ Ġustizzja Għal Artna [Campaign](#).

⁷²⁰ Chamber of Advocates, [PA Bills Statement from the Chamber of Advocates](#), August 2025, Dr. M. Camilleri, Times of Malta, [Planning reforms, environmental democracy and the rule of law](#), 25 August 2025; Prof. Aquilina, The Malta Independent, [The rule of law and government's planning bills](#), 10 August 2025; Times of Malta, [Planning reform 'dismantles the rule of law', law professor warns](#), 4 October 2025; MaltaToday, [Claire Bonello – 'Planning bills take Malta back to feudal times'](#), 3 August 2025.

⁷²¹ Munster B., Politico, [The boom that broke Malta](#), 13 November 2025.

⁷²² Repubblika NGO, Submission to the 2026 Rule of Law Report – Malta Chapter, January 2026.

coalition of environmental NGOs active in Malta that feel that such proposals would weaken their right of recourse to the courts and benefit developers⁷²³.

1.2. Deterioration of legal environment: court cases

Activist taken in for questioning after Court orders investigation

a) Summary

In 2022, the NGO Repubblika had filed a challenge against the Commissioner of Police for his refusal to file money laundering charges against the officials of the now defunct Pilatus Bank⁷²⁴. The challenge was based on the information given to President of Repubblika, Robert Aquilina, which included the conclusions of a magisterial inquiry that allegedly contained orders for the police commissioner and the attorney general to institute proceedings against a number of persons connected to Pilatus on money laundering charges. The NGO also claimed that the inquiry established clear indications of trading in influence between Pilatus owner and the ex-Prime Minister's Chief of Staff.

After a long-drawn out case, during which NGO Repubblika unsuccessfully challenged the appointment of an allegedly politically connected Magistrate⁷²⁵, their request was finally dismissed by the same Magistrate Lia on the basis of insufficient evidence⁷²⁶. Instead, Magistrate Lia ordered that all the witness testimonies and evidence be sent to the Police Commissioner in order for him to immediately start investigating how and by whom direct and physical access to the confidential inquiry was given to third parties, in particular to Mr. Aquilina. It should be noted that conclusions of magisterial inquiries are confidential and cannot be accessed by the complainant or the public. Repubblika NGO filed an appeal which was dismissed by the Criminal Court on the basis of the fact that due to the seriousness of the crime it is only the Attorney General and not the police that could prosecute⁷²⁷.

In the course of his work, Robert Aquilina also published a book *Pilatus – A Laundromat Bank in Europe*⁷²⁸, which is based on the information and documentation, which he had received from various confidential sources.

⁷²³ Zammit J., MaltaToday, [Environmental NGOs launch campaign against planning bills](#), 5 September 2025.

⁷²⁴ The Shift, [Repubblika asks courts to intervene in police chief's 'refusal to act on orders by magistrate' on Pilatus Bank](#), 24 June 2022.

⁷²⁵ Newsbook, [Magistrate Lia's recusal: Constitutional Court dismisses Repubblika's rights breach case](#), 31 May 2023.

⁷²⁶ Times of Malta, [Court orders investigation into Pilatus Bank inquiry leaks](#), 16 January 2025.

⁷²⁷ Times of Malta, [Appeal court confirms decision to reject Repubblika's Pilatus Bank challenge](#), 13 February 2025.

⁷²⁸ Dr. Robert Aquilina, [Pilatus – A Laundromat Bank in Europe](#), 2023. Prof. Kevin Aquilina, The Malta Independent, [Analysis of Pilatus: A Laundromat Bank in Europe](#), 2023.

On the 2nd June 2025, the police summoned Dr. Aquilina for questioning over what he revealed in his book and on the basis of the order issued by Magistrate Lia in January 2025⁷²⁹. On the 3rd June Dr Aquilina attended the Police Headquarters with his legal advisors and was questioned with the aim for the police to identify the sources through which he had access to Pilatus Bank inquiry. Aquilina confirmed that he did not give any information relating to his sources and exercised his right to protect their identity⁷³⁰. He also stated that the police confirmed the accuracy of the book's findings, which precisely matched the conclusions in the inquiry⁷³¹. The summons came just two days after Aquilina was facing separate questioning for a domestic violence allegation, which raised questions amongst civil society activists on whether the timing was coincidental⁷³².

b) Consequences

The NGO Repubblika issued a statement in response to the police summons and reiterated the importance of whistleblowers and the legal obligation to protect them under European and national law. Furthermore, they stated that it is the right of all journalists to have their sources protected and that the attempt by the police to force the revelation of the identities of whistleblowers breaches the fundamental rights of journalists and citizens⁷³³.

It was reported that such an order imposed by the Court of Magistrates on the police to investigate the source of leaks could have a chilling effect on whistleblowers in the public sector⁷³⁴.

1.3. Attempts to stifle civic engagement through violence, harassment and negative narratives

Pattern of Intimidation and Harassment by Public Figures

a) Summary

⁷²⁹ MaltaToday, [Police summon Robert Aquilina for interrogation over Pilatus Bank revelations](#), 3 June 2025.

⁷³⁰ Times of Malta, [Robert Aquilina claims police wanted him to name his sources for Pilatus book](#), 3 June 2025.

⁷³¹ Newsbook, [Police attempt to force disclosure of Robert Aquilina's sources](#), 3 June 2025.

⁷³² Ibid. The domestic violence charges were dropped at the request of Aquilina's wife a few days later, see Malta Independent, [Court accepts request by Robert Aquilina's wife to stop domestic violence case](#), 12 June 2025.

⁷³³ Repubblika, [Do Not Use Intimidation To Silence Whistleblowers](#), PR 41/2025.

⁷³⁴ The Critical Angle Project, [Judge rejects Robert Aquilina's Pilatus Bank appeal to avoid duplicate prosecutions](#), 13 February 2025.

The context in which civil society organisations and human rights defenders work remains strained and actors in the field have reported being targets of verbal attacks, threats and intimidation. The report found that HRDs especially those on anti-corruption, migration, environment, and reproductive rights, face hostile rhetoric from politicians. Their work is often portrayed negatively and is subject to smear campaigns by political figures and other persons in authority⁷³⁵.

On the 8th anniversary of Daphne Caruana Galizia's assassination, an official employed in the Office of the Prime Minister discarded tributes left on her memorial by activists, family members and various embassies⁷³⁶. After shocked reactions by the public, the Office of the Prime Minister stated that the employee acted in his personal capacity but that he had the right to freedom of expression⁷³⁷. This same employee later resigned due to anti-LGBTI rhetoric and was recently found to have benefitted from an illegal visa scheme facilitating medical transfers from Libya to Malta⁷³⁸. Mr. Gafa routinely uses his personal blog to conduct personal attacks against activists, journalists and members of the judiciary⁷³⁹. Similarly, other public figures continue to publicly bully and attack activists which shows a worrying pattern of intimidation⁷⁴⁰.

In previous years a number of reports filed by civil society activists, individuals and ex-Opposition MPs under the old in-genere inquests under Article 546 of the Criminal Code triggered the openings of magisterial inquiries involving of high-level corruption and financial crime⁷⁴¹. Further to such, the Government carried out a reform of the inquiry procedures to avoid "political persecutions"⁷⁴² and "extremist factions"⁷⁴³ through the individual complaint system. The Prime

⁷³⁵ OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, [The Situation of Human Rights Defenders in Malta: Good Practices and Protection Gaps](#), September 2025.

⁷³⁶ Times of Malta, [Watch: Neville Gafa filmed clearing Daphne memorial as embassies condemn move](#), 17 October 2025.

⁷³⁷ MaltaToday, [Office of the Prime Minister: Neville Gafa acting in personal capacity](#), but we don't mind, 17 October 2025.

⁷³⁸ The Malta Independent, [Labour's Strategy – personal attacks](#), 30 November 2025, MaltaToday, [Neville Gafa illegally received medical visa payments from Libyans, court ruling reveals](#), 26 February 2026.

⁷³⁹ [Neville Gafa](#).

⁷⁴⁰ Newsbook, [Jason Micallef's bullying tactics against Trudy Kerr widely condemned](#), 4 September 2025; The Malta Independent, [Stop harassing journalists for doing their job, IGM, PEN tell Jason Micallef](#), 18 December 2025.

⁷⁴¹ Daphne Caruana Galizia Foundation, [Malta Government's legal reforms should serve justice not impunity](#), 16 January 2025.

⁷⁴² Times of Malta, [Minister warns of 'fishing expeditions' as inquiry reform remains under wraps](#), 2025.

⁷⁴³ Times of Malta, [PM reacts to Jason Azzopardi claims by ordering reform of magisterial inquiries](#), 2025.

Minister vowed not to let people abuse the justice system due to political hatred and to protect his ministers from a “legal framework which mimics the inquisition”⁷⁴⁴.

The attacks relating to the opening and conclusions of a particular magisterial inquiry, following a complaint by NGO Repubblika which resulted in the ongoing prosecution of ex-Prime Minister Muscat⁷⁴⁵, continued towards the Magistrate Vella who conducted such inquiry. Labour party media and labour party officials had made frequent use of the Magistrate’s photo and continued a campaign of negative reporting of the magistrate’s work⁷⁴⁶. Later in the year, the Justice Minister commented that in the selection of judges the Judicial Appointments Committee should avoid appointing persons who are at the centre of controversies, hinting that Magistrate Vella who had applied for the role should not be chosen as a judge⁷⁴⁷. Vella was subsequently not promoted to the role of judge.

b) Consequences

The continuous harassment has a chilling effect on civic participation, particularly for individuals engaged in sensitive or critical advocacy and this also interfered with their mental wellbeing, private and family life. It was reported that some activists feared voicing their opinion in public activities because of their fear of retaliation at work, of loss of access to public funds or of fear of being engulfed in the polarised Maltese political contest⁷⁴⁸. Some also felt unsafe and exposed to danger as a result of such targeting and harassment⁷⁴⁹.

1.4. Other developments

Conscience incident – Freedom Flotilla

a) Summary

In the early morning of 2nd May 2025, the Gaza-bound *Conscience*, a Freedom Flotilla Coalition ship, was reportedly attacked by drones just outside Malta’s territorial waters⁷⁵⁰. The ship was heading towards Malta in order to pick up activists, including Greta Thunberg, who were meant

⁷⁴⁴ MaltaToday, [‘The line has been completely crossed’ - Abela vows to defend ‘targets of political hatred’](#), 12 January 2025.

⁷⁴⁵ Times of Malta, [Mizzi, Muscat and Schembri prime targets for Vitals prosecution](#), 1 May 2024.

⁷⁴⁶ Neville Gafa, [Exposing Gabriella Vella: From Inquiry to Vendetta\(1\)](#), November 2025; Neville Gafa, [Exposing Gabriella Vella: From Inquiry to Vendetta\(2\)](#) October 2025; Repubblika, [Defending State Officials from Fascist Attacks by Criminals in Politics](#), PR 30/2025, 28 March 2025.

⁷⁴⁷ MaltaToday, [Justice minister hints Magistrate Gabriella Vella shouldn't be made judge due to ‘controversy’](#), September 2025; Repubblika, [We defend the independence of the judiciary from government interference](#), PR 54/2025, 30 September 2025.

⁷⁴⁸ OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, [The Situation of Human Rights Defenders in Malta: Good Practices and Protection Gaps](#), September 2025.

⁷⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁵⁰ The Guardian, [Gaza humanitarian aid ship ‘bombed by drones’ in waters off Malta](#), 2 May 2025.

to board the ship. Prior to the attack the ship was not permitted to enter Maltese territorial waters as Palau, the vessels flag state, revoked its flag shortly before the attack⁷⁵¹. The Palau authorities did not cite a reason for the delisting of the vessel from their registry, although the country's close relationship with Israel caused speculation that this was a planned assault by powerful actors⁷⁵². Online flight tracker ADS-B Exchange showed that an aircraft spent three hours in Malta's airspace on Thursday before returning to Israel⁷⁵³.

The Maltese authorities refused to allow the vessel to enter port although it suffered extensive damage to the hull, although a tug was directed to aid the vessel and put out the fire. Although the Maltese government offered rescue to the people on board and to send a maritime surveyor to assess the damage in order to repair any damage to allow the ship to sail to its destination, it categorically refused the captain's request to enter three to four miles into Maltese waters for safety⁷⁵⁴. The Maltese government reported that the crew refused to leave the ship or to allow the surveyor on board. It was reported that volunteers who tried to reach the ship from Malta after the attack were intercepted by the Maltese military, which had forced them back to Malta under threat of arrest⁷⁵⁵.

The Prime Minister stated that concerns about Malta's harbours and people and the impossibility of confirming the vessel's cargo was the basis of Malta's refusal to allow entry⁷⁵⁶ in spite of requests to allow entry⁷⁵⁷.

Malta eventually carried out repairs on the vessel in international waters⁷⁵⁸. In the aftermath of the incident 6 activists were disembarked in Malta under police escort and flew out to Turkey, whilst the remaining crew members stayed aboard the vessels for several weeks⁷⁵⁹.

⁷⁵¹ Newsbook, [PM cites security concerns as he insists Gaza aid vessel will not be let in](#), 4 May 2025.

⁷⁵² Times of Malta, [Why was a Gaza-bound aid ship attacked near Malta?](#) 6 May 2025.

⁷⁵³ Times of Malta, [Israel military plane circled Malta, hours before flotilla 'drone attack'](#), 2 May 2025.

⁷⁵⁴ Times of Malta, [Gaza activists plead for Malta vessel entry; government says crew refusing help](#), 3 May 2025.

⁷⁵⁵ Reuters, [NGO says Malta blocking access to Gaza-bound aid ship hit by drones](#), 4 May 2025.

⁷⁵⁶ Newsbook, [PM cites security concerns as he insists Gaza aid vessel will not be let in](#), 4 May 2025.

⁷⁵⁷ Times of Malta, [Gaza activists plead for Malta vessel entry; government says crew refusing help](#), 3 May 2025, aditus foundation, [Malta, step up your action for the Freedom Flotilla!](#), 4 May 2025, Moviment Graffiti, [Attack on Gaza Flotilla Near Malta – Maltese Government Must Act Without Further Delay](#), 2 May 2025, Malta Independent, [NGOs want government to allow entry to humanitarian ship](#), 3 May 2025.

⁷⁵⁸ Reuters, [Malta to repair aid ship reportedly bombed by drones](#), 6 May 2025, Newsbook [Conscience can be repaired at sea, government announces](#), 6 May 2025.

⁷⁵⁹ Times of Malta, [After drone attack, Freedom Flotilla plans fresh Gaza mission with new boat](#), 16 May 2025. Freedom Flotilla Coalition, [Airstrike on 'Conscience' Confirmed; Crew Evacuated; FFC Still Denied Investigation](#), 20 May 2025.

b) Consequences

The lack of responsiveness to both the Flotilla crew's and Maltese NGO demands for entry into Malta of the stricken vessel, threats of interception and police escorts on disembarkation demonstrates a pattern of behaviour that leans toward securitisation and limited support for civil society activism.

Furthermore, the ADPD green party stated that this was yet another attack on activists for human rights⁷⁶⁰, whilst Momentum was concerned about the lack of transparency and silence in the face of an attack on civilians⁷⁶¹.

2. CIVIC SPACE EXPANSION

2.1. Improvements in legal environment: court cases

Access of Journalists to Prison and Detention Centres confirmed on appeal

a) Summary

Journalist and activist Emanuel Delia sought access to Corradino Correctional Facility and immigration detention centres in 2019 in order to investigate and report on the allegations of maladministration, abuse, torture and inhuman and degrading treatment on detainees and inmates of the respective facilities. After a number of denied requests to visit the prison, Delia was granted access. However, the visit to CCF was so restricted that at no time could Delia investigate allegations of overcrowding, conditions of the facilities, and on the treatment of such inmates.

The first Court found that the refusal to granted access to prison and detention centres was a breach of the right to freedom of expression, under Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) and Article 41 of the Maltese Constitution⁷⁶².

The Constitutional Court, in its appeal judgement, confirmed that refusal to allow access to prisons and immigration detention for journalists in the public interest constitute a breach of Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) and Article 41 of the Maltese Constitution⁷⁶³. Whilst confirming the finding of a violation, the Constitutional Court refined conditions of access specifying the areas that the journalist can visit, and the security conditions that he must adhere to during the visit. In essence, correctional and immigration facilities are allowed to set proportionate logistical and security measures that need to be adhered to but

⁷⁶⁰ TVM News, [The Conscience case: no vessel or aircraft entered Maltese territory](#), 2 May 2025

⁷⁶¹ MaltaToday, [Activists urge government to allow Gaza aid ship to dock in Malta after drone attack](#), 3 May 2025.

⁷⁶² [Delia Emanuel vs L-Onorevoli Byron Camilleri Et](#), 201/2020, Qorti Ċivili Prim'awla (Ġurisdizzjoni Kostituzzjonali), 11 December 2023, ECLI:MT:KOST:2023:143021.

⁷⁶³ [Delia Emanuel vs L-Onorevoli Byron Camilleri Et](#), 201/20/1, Qorti Kostituzzjonali, 20 October, 2025, ECLI:MT:KOS:2025:156341.

cannot indefinitely block or delay visits. Furthermore, the administration of such centres must act in good faith to protect the “watchdog” role of journalists.

b) Consequences

The appeal judgement confirms the right of access to prisons and immigration detention centres which were traditionally kept out of the public eye. The judgement confirms with finality that journalists have a public interest watchdog role and the state must facilitate their access to places where individuals are being held in prison and detention. Furthermore, the court clearly outlined the conditions of such visits, giving much needed direction and clarity.

Netherlands (NL)

Civic space in the EU in 2025

The Netherlands

Contractor: Art.1 - Dutch Knowledge centre on discrimination

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Disclaimer

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1. CIVIC SPACE PRESSURES

1.1. Deterioration of legal environment: freedom of association

Dutch NHRI concludes that civic space is shrinking, especially about freedom of association

a) Summary

In September 2025, the Netherlands Institute for Human Rights published two studies on civic space in the Netherlands in which it concludes that the civic space is shrinking. One study is the 2025 edition of the Institute's annual human rights report, in which the Institute analyses recent legal, legislative, and policy developments.⁷⁶⁴ The other is an empirical study, conducted through a questionnaire among 133 CSOs and two focus groups in which representatives of CSPs participated in which 86 percent of CSOs state that the situation for civil society has deteriorated over the past two years.⁷⁶⁵

b) Conclusions

The Institute substantiates its assessment for example with reference to proposed legislation that could restrict the right to demonstrate, and the diminishment of time and opportunity for dialogue during consultations on legislation and policies. The Institute calls on the government to take steps to facilitate civil society rather than hinder it.

Two new bills have chilling effect on CSOs

a) Summary

On 1 April 2025, the House of Representatives passed the bill for the Transparency and Countering Subversion by Civil Society Organisations Act (*Wet Transparantie en tegengaan*

⁷⁶⁴ The Netherlands Institute for Human Rights (*College voor de Rechten van de Mens*) (2025), Dissent under pressure: Human rights and the civic space in the Netherlands (*Tegenspraak onder druk: Mensenrechten en de ruimte voor het maatschappelijk middenveld in Nederland*).

⁷⁶⁵ Coenders, M., Burggraaf, D. & Yenga, M. (2025), The experienced civic space for civil in the Netherlands. An exploration of the perceptions and experiences of civil society organizations (*De ervaren ruimte voor het maatschappelijk middenveld in Nederland. Een verkenning van de percepties en ervaringen van maatschappelijke organisaties*), Utrecht, Verwey-Jonker Instituut.

ondermijning door Maatschappelijke Organisaties)⁷⁶⁶. The bill was until 23 March 2026 under consideration in the Senate⁷⁶⁷ On 24 March 2026 the Senate rejected this bill.⁷⁶⁸

The Act aims to prevent undesirable foreign influence on CSOs by giving mayors, public prosecutors, and other designated government agencies the authority to make targeted inquiries about foreign donations from a CSO.

On 7 January 2025, the internet consultation for the draft bill for the Supervision of informal Education Act (*Wet toezicht informeel onderwijs*)⁷⁶⁹, was closed. Currently the government is considering sending the bill to parliament. The bill aims to give the Dutch government greater powers to regulate what children learn outside school. It aims to introduce an administrative supervisory and sanctioning system to act against “informal education” that incites discrimination, hatred or violence. Informal education includes weekend schools, tutoring and religious lessons.

b) Conclusions

In its position paper⁷⁷⁰ to the Senate, the Netherlands Institute for Human Right criticises the bill for the Transparency and Countering Subversion by Civil Society Organisations Act (*Wet Transparantie en tegengaan ondermijning door Maatschappelijke Organisaties*). The bill provides a basis for restricting the exercise of various human rights, such as the protection of privacy, freedom of expression, freedom of association and the right to peaceful assembly. The combination of a broadly formulated standard such as “undermining”, the possibility of a court injunction and the obligation to report and retain information on donors can, in practice, have a chilling effect on the exercise of fundamental rights.

⁷⁶⁶ The Netherlands, Senate (*Eerste Kamer der Staten-Generaal*) (2025), ‘Transparency and Countering Subversion by Civil Society Organisations Act’ ([‘Wet transparantie en tegengaan ondermijning door maatschappelijke organisaties’](#)), Webpage.

⁷⁶⁷ The Netherlands, Minister of Justice and Security (*Minister van Justitie en Veiligheid*) (2025), Amended bill. Transparency and Countering Subversion by Civil Society Organisations Act ([\(*Gewijzigd wetsvoorstel. Wet Transparantie en tegengaan ondermijning door Maatschappelijke Organisaties*\)](#)).

⁷⁶⁸ The Netherlands, Senate (*Eerste Kamer der Staten-Generaal*) (2025), Vote on the bill for the ‘Transparency and Countering Subversion by Civil Society Organisations Act’ ([\(*Stemming ‘Wet transparantie en tegengaan ondermijning door maatschappelijke organisaties’*\)](#)), Webpage, 24 March 2026.

⁷⁶⁹ The Netherlands, Minister van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap (*Minister of Education, Science and Culture*) (2024). Draft bill for Supervision of informal Education Act ([\(*Conceptwetsvoorstel. Wet toezicht informeel onderwijs*\)](#)).

⁷⁷⁰ The Netherlands, Netherlands Institute for Human Rights (*College voor de Rechten van de Mens*) (2025), Position paper. Contribution to the expert meeting on the Transparency and Countering Subversion by Civil Society Organisations Act ([\(*Inbreng voor de deskundigenbijeenkomst Wet transparantie en tegengaan ondermijning door maatschappelijke organisaties*\)](#)

In a letter to the State Secretary for Primary and Secondary Education, the same Institute⁷⁷¹ advises against the draft bill for the Supervision of informal Education Act in its current form. While the objective is legitimate, the bill infringes on freedom of expression, freedom of religion, freedom of association and freedom of education. Civic space for CSOs will be restricted by this law, mainly due to the repressive supervision of informal education providers.

1.2. Deterioration of legal environment: freedom of assembly

New bills that may have a negative effect on the right of freedom of assembly

- a) Summary In 2025, three bills have been initiated that may restrict the freedom of assembly. On 15 June 2025, the bill for the “Act on Online-Incited Public Order Disturbances” (*Voorstel wet. Wet online aangejaagde openbare-ordeverstoring*)⁷⁷² was submitted to the House of Representatives. This bill aims to grant mayors a new power to impose a removal order on people posting online messages that disrupt public order (during a demonstration for example). On 4 July 2025, the draft bill for the “Public Order Data Collection Act” (*Wet gegevensvergaring openbare orde*)⁷⁷³ was published for internet consultation. This bill establishes two powers for mayors that enable the police to collect personal data from publicly accessible sources concerning an (imminent) serious disturbance of public order (during a demonstration for example). On 19 December 2025, the draft bill for the “Act amending the Public Manifestations Act in connection with the criminalisation of wearing face-covering clothing during demonstrations” (*Wijziging van de Wet openbare manifestaties in verband met de strafbaarstelling van het dragen van gezichtsbedekkende kleding bij demonstraties*).⁷⁷⁴ This bill introduces a ban on face-covering clothing during demonstrations, except when it is genuinely necessary to protect someone’s safety or when there are other

⁷⁷¹ The Netherlands, Netherlands Institute for Human Rights (*College voor de Rechten van de Mens*) (2025), Legislative advice Act (*‘Wetgevingsadvies Wet toezicht informeel onderwijs’*), Letter to the State Secretary for Primary and Secondary Education, 30 October 2025.

⁷⁷² The Netherlands, Minister of Justice and Security (*Minister van Justitie en Veiligheid*) (2025), Bill. Act on Online-Incited Public Order Disturbances (*Voorstel wet. Wet online aangejaagde openbare-ordeverstoring*).

⁷⁷³ The Netherlands, Minister of Justice and Security (*Minister van Justitie en Veiligheid*) (2025), Draft bill. Public Order Data Collection Act. (*Conceptwetsvoorstel. Wetsvoorstel gegevensvergaring openbare orde*).

⁷⁷⁴ The Netherlands, Minister of Interior and Kingdom Relations / Minister of Justice and Security (*Minister van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties / Minister van Justitie en Veiligheid*) (2025), Draft bill. Act amending the Public Manifestations Act in connection with the criminalization of wearing face-covering clothing during demonstrations (*Conceptwetsvoorstel. Wijziging van de Wet openbare manifestaties in verband met de strafbaarstelling van het dragen van gezichtsbedekkende kleding bij demonstraties*).

compelling personal reasons. This specifically concerns situations in which demonstrators fear repercussions from abroad.

- b) Conclusions The
Nederlands Juristen Comité voor de Mensenrechten (*Dutch section of the International Commission of Jurists* or NJCM) has voiced criticism on all three bills. The NJCM considers the “Act on Online-Instigated Public Order Disturbances” undesirable for two reasons:⁷⁷⁵ the standard it sets is vague and broad and the removal order is not effective or feasible since a message cannot be prevented from being reposted. Therefore, the law is not deemed necessary, suitable, and proportionate to justify such a far-reaching restriction of fundamental rights.

Regarding the “Public Order Data Collection Act”, the NJCM states⁷⁷⁶ that there is a risk of far-reaching, potentially large-scale and automated infringement of privacy rights, and it is unclear what legal protection is available to those concerned.

Regarding the draft bill for the “Act amending the Public Manifestations Act in connection with the criminalisation of wearing face-covering clothing during demonstrations” the NJCM states⁷⁷⁷ that this Act and the proposed ban affect the exercise of several human rights (not only the right to demonstrate, but also the right to private life and potentially freedom of religion).

1.3. Deterioration of legal environment: freedom of expression

Bill criminalising glorification of terrorism may have chilling effect

- a) Summary

⁷⁷⁵ Dutch section of the International Commission of Jurists (*Nederlands Juristen Comité voor de Mensenrechten (NJCM)*) (2025), ‘The NJCM responds to the bill for the Act on Online-Instigated Public Order Disturbances’ (*‘NJCM reageert op het wetsvoorstel online aangejaagde openbare-ordeverstoring’*), Webpage, 18 May 2025.

⁷⁷⁶ Dutch section of the International Commission of Jurists (*Nederlands Juristen Comité voor de Mensenrechten (NJCM)*) (2025), ‘The NJCM responds to the bill for Public Order Data Collection Act’ (*‘NJCM reageert op het wetsvoorstel Gegevensvergaring openbare orde’*), Webpage, 12 September 2025.

⁷⁷⁷ Dutch section of the International Commission of Jurists (*Nederlands Juristen Comité voor de Mensenrechten (NJCM)*) (2026), ‘Call by the NJCM to the incoming cabinet not to unnecessarily and disproportionately restrict the right to demonstrate’ (*‘Oproep van het NJCM aan het aanstaande kabinet om het demonstratierecht niet onnodig en disproportioneel te beperken’*), Letter, 2 February 2026.

From 20 June 2025 to 16 August 2025, the Minister of Justice and Security submitted a draft bill⁷⁷⁸ for internet consultation that makes glorifying terrorism and openly expressing support for terrorist organisations a criminal offence.

The bill provides for three criminal offences. First, it will become a criminal offence to publicly praise or glorify — for example, in a speech, text, or image — a terrorist offence for which a life sentence can be imposed, such as a terrorist attack resulting in death or injury. The distribution of material glorifying terrorist violence, such as a video of an attack accompanied by laudatory comments, will also be made a criminal offence. Finally, publicly expressing support for banned terrorist organisations will become a criminal offence. This could include publicly waving flags of banned terrorist organisations or wearing clothing with certain symbols or logos of such organisations, thereby contributing to others sharing that organisation's goal of committing terrorist offences. Expressing support on social media will also be made a criminal offence.⁷⁷⁹

b) Consequences

The Netherlands Institute for Human Rights (*College voor de Rechten van de Mens*) observes that, in its current form, the bill does not meet the requirements of the ECHR.⁷⁸⁰ If the legislature nevertheless considers an additional criminalisation necessary, a more precise delineation and justification are required. The Institute states that the core concepts are not clearly defined. In particular, the definitions of “glorification” and “expressing support” lack sufficient clarity, making it insufficiently foreseeable which behaviours fall within the scope of the criminal offence and to which crimes it relates. An overly broad or vague formulation may have a chilling effect and lead to self-censorship. This may translate into greater reluctance within society to express itself critically, creatively, or politically. As a result, there is a risk that the exercise of fundamental rights will come under pressure. This could have harmful consequences for the safe public debate that is essential in a democratic society.

The Dutch section of the International Commission of Jurists (NJCM) calls for the withdrawal of this bill, for the same reasons stated by the Institute.⁷⁸¹ The NJCM is seriously concerned about the consequences of these new criminal offences for the rule of law and the protection of human rights in the Netherlands.

⁷⁷⁸ The Netherlands, Minister of Justice and Security (*Minister van Justitie en Veiligheid*) (2025), Draft bill to criminalise glorification of terrorism and expressions of support for terrorist organisations (*Conceptwetsvoorstel. Strafbbaarstelling verheerlijken van terrorisme en openbare steunbetuiging aan terroristische organisaties*).

⁷⁷⁹ The Netherlands, Ministry of Justice and Security (*Minister van Justitie en Veiligheid*) (2025), 'Bill to criminalize glorification of terrorism before Council of State' (*'Wetsvoorstel om verheerlijken van terrorisme strafbaar te stellen naar Raad van State'*). News release, 19 December 2025.

⁷⁸⁰ The Netherlands, Netherlands Institute for Human Rights (*College voor de Rechten van de Mens*) (2025), 'Bill to criminalise glorification of terrorism and expressions of support for terrorist organisations' (*'Wetsvoorstel Strafbbaarstelling verheerlijken van terrorisme en steunbetuiging terroristische organisaties'*). Letter to the Minister of Justice and Security, 26 August 2025.

⁷⁸¹ Dutch section of the International Commission of Jurists (Nederlands Juristen Comité voor de Mensenrechten (NJCM)) (2025), 'NJCM Criminal Law Working Group warns: new bill on glorification of terrorism threatens fundamental freedoms' (*'Werkgroep Strafrecht NJCM waarschuwt: nieuw wetsvoorstel over verheerlijken van terrorisme bedreigt fundamentele vrijheden'*), Webpage, 14 August 2025.

1.4. Attempts to stifle civic engagement through violence, harassment and negative narratives

Violence against journalists is increasing

a) Summary

For the third consecutive year, the number of reports of threats or violence against journalists filed under the “PersVeilig” protocol has increased: from 249 in 2024 to 262 in 2025.⁷⁸² There were 106 (one-off) threats, 67 cases of systematic intimidation or harassment (including stalking), and in 55 cases physical violence occurred. Most incidents took place in the street while a journalist or photographer was at work. In 86 cases, they were verbally threatened or harassed. The low point in 2025 was the far-right anti-migration demonstration in The Hague on 10 September, during which seven photographers and camera operators were injured, two of whom had to be taken to hospital.

b) Consequences

The figures for 2025 and the recent incidents show that the number of reports of threats or violence against journalists continues to rise. This trend indicates increasing pressure on journalists and suggests that the civic space for journalists is becoming smaller.

⁷⁸² PersVelig (2026), ‘262 incidents reported to PersVeilig in 2025, violence against journalists on the rise’ ([‘262 incidenten gemeld bij PersVeilig in 2025, geweld tegen journalisten neemt toe Datum’](#)). News release, 2 January 2026.

2. CIVIC SPACE EXPANSION

2.1. Improvements in legal environment: freedom of association

Senate voted against a bill that would have introduced the possibility for an administrative ban on CSOs

a) Summary

On 27 May 2025, the Senate⁷⁸³ voted against the Administrative Prohibition of Organisations undermining Public Order Act (*Wet bestuurlijk verbod ondermijnende organisaties*)⁷⁸⁴. The aim of this bill was to provide the government with supplementary measures when criminal law is insufficient against organisations actively undermining public safety. This bill dates to 2018 and was originally conceived to tackle so-called Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs (OMGs) more effectively and quickly.

b) Conclusions

The Netherlands Institute for Human Rights (*College voor de Rechten van de Mens*) was highly critical of this bill. Its implications could have been far-reaching for civil society organisations.⁷⁸⁵ The bill would have introduced an administrative ban, allowing the responsible minister to prohibit and dissolve an organisation immediately, without prior judicial review. Under the current legislation, it is precisely review by an independent and impartial judge that constitutes an important safeguard against arbitrariness in banning organisations. Moreover, the proposed prohibition criterion, “culture of lawlessness,” was so vague and subjective that a wide range of organisations could have been banned under this legislation. Although political parties, trade unions and religious communities were explicitly excluded, the bill would have granted broad powers to ban other civil society organisations.⁷⁸⁶ By voting against this bill the Senate prevented a further shrinking of civic space.

⁷⁸³ The Netherlands, Senate (*Eerste Kamer der Staten-Generaal*) (2025), Administrative prohibition of organisations undermining public order Act (*Wet bestuurlijk verbod ondermijnende organisaties*), ‘Initiative bill by Boswijk, Van Eijk and Diederik van Dijk for Administrative prohibition of organisations undermining public order Act’ (*‘Initiatiefvoorstel-Boswijk, Van Eijk en Diederik van Dijk Wet bestuurlijk verbod ondermijnende organisaties’*), Website.

⁷⁸⁴ The Netherlands, Minister for Legal Protection (*Minister voor Rechtsbescherming*) (2025), Amended bill. Administrative prohibition of organisations undermining public order Act (*Gewijzigd voorstel van wet. Wet bestuurlijk verbod ondermijnende organisaties*).

⁷⁸⁵ The Netherlands Institute for Human Rights (*College voor de Rechten van de Mens*) (2025), Dissent under pressure: Human rights and the civic space in the Netherlands (*Tegenspraak onder druk: Mensenrechten en de ruimte voor het maatschappelijk middenveld in Nederland*), p. 31-32.

⁷⁸⁶ The Netherlands Institute for Human Rights (*College voor de Rechten van de Mens*) (2025), Dissent under pressure: Human rights and the civic space in the Netherlands (*Tegenspraak onder druk: Mensenrechten en de ruimte voor het maatschappelijk middenveld in Nederland*), p. 31-32.

Poland (PL)

Civic space in the EU in 2025

Poland

Contractor: Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights

Author(s): Carolyn Hammer, Maciej Kalisz

Disclaimer

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1. CIVIC SPACE PRESSURES

1.1. Deterioration of legal environment: court cases

Continued prosecution of humanitarian support at the Poland/Belarus border

a) Summary

In 2025, the Polish government continued to initiate criminal proceedings against civic space actors providing humanitarian aid at the Poland/Belarus border, despite court judgments ruling in favour of the right to provide such assistance. In September 2025, the district court in Bielsk Podlaski acquitted the “Hajnówka Five”, who had been charged under Art. 264 (a) of the Criminal Code of Poland (enabling or facilitating illegal stay on the territory of Poland for material or personal gain) for helping migrants on the Poland/Belarus border.⁷⁸⁷ However, in December 2025, another activist was charged with allegedly facilitating illegal border crossing.⁷⁸⁸

b) Consequences

Prosecutions of humanitarian support at the Poland/Belarus border have the potential to have a chilling effect on the engagement of civil society in activities related to migration, refugee and asylum issues. Such prosecutions also have the potential to contribute to negative narratives about the work of civic space actors, as well as to stigmatisation of refugees and migrants.⁷⁸⁹

1.2. Funding reductions and restrictions

Changes in funding landscape

a) Summary

In 2025, the landscape of funding of civil society organisations in Poland continued to shift. In particular, funds from individual and institutional philanthropy increased in importance for civil society organisations, while the share of public funds (local, national and EU) decreased.⁷⁹⁰ The share of public funds in the budget of the entire social sector is reported to have fallen from 55%

⁷⁸⁷ Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights (2025), [“Hajnówka Five” acquitted \(„Piątka z Hajnówki” uniewinniona\)](#), Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights.

⁷⁸⁸ Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights (2025), [Statement of charges against a person involved in humanitarian aid \(Oświadczenie w sprawie zarzutów dla osoby zaangażowanej w pomoc humanitarną\)](#), Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights.

⁷⁸⁹ Siegień P. (2025), [‘When the state violates elementary human rights, it does not want to have witnesses \[interview\]’ \(‘Gdy państwo łamie elementarne prawa człowieka, nie chce mieć świadków \[rozmowa\]’\)](#), *Krytyka Polityczna*, 10 September 2025.

⁷⁹⁰ Klon/Jawor, [The Capacity of NGOs in Poland 2024 Key facts](#), Warsaw, Klon/Jawor.

to 44%. A multi-year trend of increased diversity of revenue sources was also observed.⁷⁹¹ The impact of a freeze and subsequent withdrawal of funds from the United States of America in early 2025 had significant programmatic and operational consequences, with activities targeting vulnerable groups assessed as having been particularly impacted.⁷⁹²

b) Consequences

The consequences of a longer-term shift toward diversification of funding of civil society organisations in Poland are yet to be seen. The consequences of sudden withdrawal of U.S. funds led many civil society organisations to reduce services and decrease their operational capacity with little advanced warning or opportunity to plan.⁷⁹³

1.3. Barriers to participation in law and policy-making

Problems within legislative process related to public consultation

a) Summary

Notwithstanding some positive improvements, barriers to participation for citizens and CSOs within the legislative process persisted in 2025. In particular, despite changes to the Rules of Procedure, a significant number of bills still passed through the Sejm in accelerated procedure.⁷⁹⁴ One particularly problematic example relates to the draft law on the extinguishment of solutions resulting from the Act on Assistance to Ukrainian Citizens in Connection with the Armed Conflict on the Territory of this State. The bill was sent to a selected group of non-governmental organisations on 23 December 2025 in the late afternoon with a deadline for consultations of 2 January 2026. This deadline allowed just four working days, during the Christmas and New Year period, for public consultations on the document, which regulates the legal status of almost one million Ukrainians residing in Poland and amends nine laws in force.⁷⁹⁵

b) Consequences

Civil society organisations in Poland continue to advocate for changes to the legislative process which would make public consultations more open, transparent and meaningful. In the case of the above example, 66 civil society organisations filed a letter of appeal to the Minister of

⁷⁹¹ Klon/Jawor, [The condition of non-governmental organisations \(Kondycja organizacji pozarządowych\)](#), Warsaw, Klon/Jawor.

⁷⁹² Mapuj Pomoc Network (2025), [The Impact of the Freeze on U.S. Funding on the Activities of Non-Governmental Organizations Working in the Field of Migration and Integration in Poland](#).

⁷⁹⁴ Batory Foundation (2025), A small step [forward](#). XVI report of the Civic Forum of Legislation ([Mały krok do przodu. XVI raport Obywatelskiego Forum Legislacji - Fundacja im. Stefana Batorego](#)), Warsaw, Batory Foundation.

⁷⁹⁵ Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights (2025), [A very misplaced Christmas gift: apparent public consultations – an appeal from 66 NGOs \(Bardzo nietrafiony prezent świąteczny: pozorne konsultacje publiczne – apel 66 organizacji pozarządowych\)](#), Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights.

Internal Affairs and Administration.⁷⁹⁶ In this appeal, the civil society organisations requested extension of the consultation period to comply with the regular statutory norm, notification of all interested entities about the possibility of making comments, and if the shortened period of consultation was maintained, to provide a detailed justification. Despite this appeal, on 20 January 2026, the bill was submitted by the government to the parliament (Sejm), with request for further expedited work.⁷⁹⁷

1.4. Other developments

Lack of reform of civil society legislative framework

a) Summary

Initiated reforms of the legislative framework related to the activities of civil society in Poland did not yield large scale results in 2025. In particular, while some amendments were introduced in September 2025⁷⁹⁸, civil society organisations have additionally requested⁷⁹⁹ comprehensive changes to the Act on Public Benefit Activities and Volunteering, including public finance procedures at the local level. The post of Minister of Civil Society was eliminated during the July 2025 cabinet reshuffle, contributing to a perception of de-prioritisation on a political level of issues related to this portfolio.

b) Consequences

Given the limited scale of amendments to the Act on Public Benefit Activities and Volunteering which were enacted in 2025, political pressure for further amendments is high. In particular, it is expected that future amendments would address cooperation between the public administration and the civil sector, simplify procedures related to grants and competitions, and strengthen the transparency and stability of the functioning of non-governmental organisations.

Status of anti-SLAPP legislative proposals

c) Summary

⁷⁹⁶ Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights (2025), [A very misplaced Christmas gift: apparent public consultations – an appeal from 66 NGOs](#) ([Bardzo nietrafiony prezent świąteczny: pozorne konsultacje publiczne – apel 66 organizacji pozarządowych](#)), Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights.

⁷⁹⁷

<https://orka.sejm.gov.pl/Druki10ka.nsf/0/27DA8101D63CC882C1258D850072ED2E/%24File/2172.pdf>

⁷⁹⁸ Redakcja ngo.pl (2025), [The amendment to the benefit is disappointing. We present the positions](#) ([Nowelizacja pożytku rozczarowuje. Prezentujemy stanowiska](#)), ngo.pl.

⁷⁹⁹ Polish Donors Forum (2025), [We appeal to the government to simplify regulations concerning civil society organizations](#), Polish Donors Forum.

In January 2025, Poland's Civil Law Codification Commission unveiled a draft anti-SLAPP law, aiming to transpose EU Directive 2024/1069⁸⁰⁰ on protecting persons who engage in public participation from manifestly unfounded claims or abusive court proceedings. This draft (amended in April after consultations) was Poland's first legislative proposal explicitly addressing SLAPPs. Civil society organisations welcomed the initiative as a "promising step" toward shielding journalists, activists and others who speak out on matters of public interest. The bill introduced tools like early dismissal of manifestly unfounded lawsuits and other safeguards. However, experts also warned that, as written, the law might fall short of its promise. Article 19 and a coalition of Polish NGOs cautioned that overly narrow criteria and procedural hurdles could render key safeguards ineffective in practice.⁸⁰¹ In a July 2025 analysis, the Polish anti-SLAPP working group urged lawmakers to strengthen the bill before passage – recommending clearer SLAPP criteria, more "realistic" early-dismissal rules, a true reversal of the burden of proof, and the ability for defendants to seek compensation within the SLAPP proceeding. Crucially, they also advocated barring public authorities (state or local) from suing individuals for defamation, and pairing the civil-law reform with changes to criminal law. These improvements, they argued, are needed to ensure the anti-SLAPP law will be effective in practice.

d) Consequences

As of the end of 2025, the draft law had not yet been submitted for parliamentary proceedings.

2. CIVIC SPACE EXPANSION

2.1. Improvements in funding

New philanthropic support for institutional development of civil society organisations

a) Summary

The changes in the funding landscape for civil society organisations which occurred in 2025 (see above) also fed into some positive opportunities for civic space expansion. In particular, some new philanthropic support for the institutional development of civil society organisations emerged. In September 2025, PKO Bank Polski Foundation, established by Poland's largest bank, initiated the grant competition "Korzenie Jutra" ("The Roots of Tomorrow").⁸⁰² This initiative will allocate 15 million PLN (approximately 3.5 million EUR) to support the institutional development of civil society organisations, with the goal of strengthening their stability, resilience and longevity.

⁸⁰⁰ [Directive \(EU\) 2024/1069 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 April 2024 on protecting persons who engage in public participation from manifestly unfounded claims or abusive court proceedings \('Strategic lawsuits against public participation'\), OJ L, 2024/1069.](#)

⁸⁰¹ Article 19, Civic Network Watchdog Poland, Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights (2025), [Proposed Anti-SLAPP Legislation in Poland Requires Further Changes](#), Article 19.

⁸⁰² [„The Roots of Tomorrow” – PKO Bank Polski Foundation grant competition launches \(„Korzenie jutra” – rusza konkurs grantowy Fundacji PKO Banku Polskiego\)](#)

b) Consequences

In its focus on institutional development rather than individual initiatives, PKO Bank Polski Foundation's initiative may be seen as part of a broader possible future trend in private domestic funding of civil society. It is also likely to contribute to ongoing discussion and debate regarding the role of private capital in funding civil society in Poland.⁸⁰³

⁸⁰³ Dobranowska-Wittels M. (2025), [Maciej Kuziemski: „We want philanthropy to become as everyday in Poland as brushing your teeth” \[interview\]](#) (Maciej Kuziemski: „Chcemy, by filantropia stała się w Polsce taką codziennością, jak mycie zębów” [wywiad]), ngo.pl

Portugal (PT)

Civic space in the EU in 2025

Country: Portugal

Contractor: Centro de Estudos Sociais

Author: João Paulo Dias

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1. CIVIC SPACE PRESSURES

1.1. Deterioration of legal environment: freedom of association

Public actions of environmental associations turned into lawsuits

a) Summary

The 2024 Annual Report on Internal Security (RASI – *Relatório Anual de Segurança Interna*), published in 2025, refers to the environmental movement as a concern for national security, given its struggle for climate justice and the public impact of its actions, which sometimes resort to acts of vandalism.⁸⁰⁴ The Climáximo, one of the more active associations in the contest for climate justice (together with *Greve Climática Estudantil* / Student Climate Strike), has been facing multiple lawsuits stemming from its public actions. Over the last two years (2023 to 2025), Climáximo's legal team has accompanied almost 100 people who have carried out public actions at risk of arrest, in a total of 72 actions. Of these, 8 were dismissed, 3 were acquitted, and in 10 cases the activists were convicted. This association has already paid 28,140 euros in fines (paid or unpaid), and the activists have already completed 5,525 hours of community service (or will do so in the near future). A total of 11 people received suspended prison sentences, totalling 234 months (i.e. 19 years and 6 months).⁸⁰⁵ The actions of Climáximo often involve blocking roads or other forms of public disturbance, without violence, to achieve greater public impact and media coverage.^{806/807} These actions are considered illegal because they are promoted without a previous request for authorisation or any other formality. The unexpected and surprising nature of the actions is one of the main objectives, to create greater public disruption.

b) Consequences

The environmental protests, especially those involving civil disobedience and direct action tactics such as road blockades and painting on monuments, have had mixed public effects. They have ranged from bringing the issue to the centre of public debate to polarising opinions, with some asserting that these acts are unacceptable forms of protest. Activists choose these methods because they believe that institutional and normalised dialogues with the government have been exhausted and have failed to yield new public policies for the environment and climate.

⁸⁰⁴ System of Internal Security (*Sistema de Segurança Interna*) (2025), Annual Report on Internal Security – RASI 2024 (*Relatório Anual de Segurança Interna – RASI 2024*), page 30.

⁸⁰⁵ Climaximo (2025), With more than 40 cases ahead and up to 250,000 euros in fines in the future, climate resistance remains the only way out of climate collapse ([Com mais de 40 casos à frente e até 250 mil euros em multas no futuro, a resistência climática continua a ser a única saída do colapso climático](#)).

⁸⁰⁶ Observador (2025), Four arrested and two identified at the Climáximo protest at Lisbon airport. Remaining activists taken to Olivais police station ([Quatro detidos e dois identificados no protesto da Climáximo no aeroporto de Lisboa. Restantes ativistas seguem para a esquadra dos Olivais](#)), 1 June 2025.

⁸⁰⁷ ECO (2025), Climáximo activists invade Galp headquarters... against 'heatwave' ([Ativistas da Climáximo invadem sede da Galp... contra "onda de calor"](#)), 16 July 2025.

In general, several positions point out the positive and negative aspects of this form of activism, in contrast to other, more formal approaches developed by traditional environmental associations.^{808/809/810} The analysis focuses regularly on topics such as visibility, reaching media channels and newspapers, putting climate urgency on the public agenda, and strategies for exerting political pressure, mobilisation and engagement. On the other hand, their actions emerge as issues themselves in public debate, due to public backlash, disruptive tactics, such as blocking roads or the criminalisation of the actions, leading to repressive reactions by police forces, based on the of laws against civil disobedience. Often the media coverage, as well as social media, emphasises the disruptions caused instead of enhancing the content of the environmental claim, leading to misinformation about what is really at stake.⁸¹¹

Effectively, current environmental protests are successful at drawing attention, but face difficulties in translating this visibility into direct political change, generating both support and strong resistance. In this sense, there are some legal and formal restrictions on public protests of climate activists when they involve public disturbances. Therefore, the use of the law, the courts and the police forces by public authorities can reduce the public capacity of climate and environmental associations to make public protests. Nevertheless, it can be considered a restriction of civic space due to the use of state legitimacy to reduce the capacity to protest for climate justice.

1.2. Deterioration of legal environment: freedom of assembly

Labour reform foresees the reduction of the rights of unions to assembly and restrictions on minimum services

a) Summary

In 2025, the Government launched a public discussion on the reform of labour legislation, proposing several major changes⁸¹². This reform, which was not indicated in the Electoral Programme of AD⁸¹³ (*Aliança Democrática* – the centre-right coalition that won the elections in 2025) or in the

⁸⁰⁸ Thomas-Walters, L., Scheuch, E. G., Ong, A., and Goldberg, M. H. (2025), The impacts of climate activism. *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences*, Vol. 63, 101498. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cobeha.2025.101498>

⁸⁰⁹ Castro, M. (2024), *Emergência Climática e Ativismos da Juventude: Um Estudo de Caso em Lisboa*. *Revista Lusófona de Estudos Culturais*, Vol. 11, N.º 1, 2024, 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.21814/rlec.5459>

⁸¹⁰ Basto, R. F. (2025), *Desobediência Civil do Ativismo Climático em Contexto de Acrasia Coletiva: A Problemática da Não-violência*. *RELACult - Revista Latino-Americana de Estudos em Cultura e Sociedade*, 11, 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.23899/ver9j931>

⁸¹¹ Observador (2025), *WWF says climate misinformation is on the rise amid uncertainty and is an obstacle to action (WWF diz que desinformação climática aumenta em contexto de incerteza e é obstáculo à ação)*, 6 August 2025.

⁸¹² Idealista/News (2025), *Changes to labour law: a guide to the main changes involved (Alterações à lei laboral: um guia com as principais mudanças em causa)*, 9 December 2025.

⁸¹³ AD (*Aliança Democrática*) (2025), *Electoral Programme (Programa Eleitoral)*.

Programme of Government⁸¹⁴, ignited a polarised public discussion that led to a general strike, in December 2025, joining together the two Portuguese collective trade unions (UGT and CGTP), something that did not happen in 12 years⁸¹⁵.

Among the proposed changes by the government, there are two measures that will limit union activities. The first involves introducing restrictions on calling union meetings in small, medium, and large companies where there are no unionised workers. Unions will be allowed to organise workers' meetings outside working hours, provided the companies are within the union's geographical and professional scope. Moreover, unions will also face restrictions on distributing and posting information if there are no unionised workers in the company; they will need to obtain the company's previous permission, and only if the subject and location align with the company's interests.

The second proposed change to labour legislation concerns the extension of minimum services to care for the elderly, children, and people with disabilities (by broadening the concept of "essential social needs") during a strike, as well as in the food supply sectors and private security services for essential goods or equipment. This expansion aims to lessen the impact of strikes by maintaining the operation of services involved in caring for workers and reducing the need for workers, especially those with children, to stay home, given that schools are typically among the sectors most affected by strikes.

These two concrete proposals are part of a broader set of measures that the government aims to approve in order to promote changes that most other political parties consider to have negative impacts on workers, while favouring companies. Even legal experts have doubts about measures that might be deemed unconstitutional, such as the re-employment of workers who were illegally dismissed.⁸¹⁶

b) Consequences

These two measures, if approved, can contribute to reducing the exercise of unions' rights to promote their activities and increase the number of unionised workers, while simultaneously imposing additional limitations on assemblies and the dissemination of union information. During 2026, the government intends to approve the labour reform, with or without agreement with the social partners (unions and associations of companies) in the ongoing social dialogue.⁸¹⁷

1.3. Deterioration of legal environment: freedom of expression

Nationwide distribution of newspapers at risk due to companies' financial problems

⁸¹⁴ Government (2025), Programme of the XXV Constitutional Government ([Programa do XXV Governo Constitucional](#)).

⁸¹⁵ Público (2025), The first general strike in 12 years – the film of the day ([A primeira greve geral em 12 anos – o filme do dia](#)), 11 December 2025.

⁸¹⁶ SIC Notícias (2025), Legal experts explain the changes to labour law that 'raise questions' ([Juristas explicam as alterações à lei laboral que "levantam dúvidas"](#)), 10 December 2025.

⁸¹⁷ RTP Notícias (2026), Labour reform. Government will present proposal even without agreement ([Reforma laboral. Governo apresentará proposta mesmo sem acordo](#)), 23 February 2026.

a) Summary

Funding constraints and the resulting logistical restructuring of VASP – Distribution and Logistics (*Distribuição e Logística*) have placed the daily distribution of newspapers and magazines at risk in approximately eight inland districts of Portugal as of January 2026. This situation undermines access to information, territorial cohesion and democratic life, with the most affected districts primarily located in the regions of Beira Alta, Beira Baixa, Alentejo and Trás-os-Montes (namely the cities of these regions, such as: Beja, Évora, Portalegre, Castelo Branco, Guarda, Viseu, Vila Real and Bragança). These regions are already the most vulnerable, in terms of human desertification, ageing, and public services, among other impacts that have occurred over the last few decades.

VASP, the only company currently distributing newspapers in Portugal, announced in late 2025 that, after a planned decline of public funding for distribution of newspapers inscribed in the proposed State budget for 2026, it was going to reassess its distribution routes due to financial unsustainability, proposing a reduction in daily delivery to these areas, a move described as creating a “news desert”.⁸¹⁸ The government affirms that any future solution cannot be achieved through direct funding of a single company and must follow market rules, opening opportunities for other service providers.

The Portuguese Regulatory Authority for the Media (ERC – *Entidade Reguladora da Comunicação Social*), in addition to following developments based on the company's public announcement, convened a meeting with VASP to ensure it is fully aware of any actions that may endanger nationwide access to newspapers. Although ERC do not have competencies in matters related to distribution, it has highlighted that universal access to information is a constitutional right. On that meeting, it pointed out that the Action Plan for the Media (*Plano de Ação para a Comunicação Social*)⁸¹⁹, an initiative of the Government, includes two measures that can have positive impacts to solve this problem, namely: Measure 20, providing support for the distribution of newspapers to areas with low population density; and Measure 21, which guarantees the distribution of newspapers in all municipalities in the country.⁸²⁰ The positions of the different political parties differ, with left-wing parties defending public funding to ensure distribution, and right-wing parties defending alternative solutions that do not impose an excessive financial burden on the State.⁸²¹ The Portuguese government has sought to prevent the cuts, including announcing two public tenders to secure distribution in inland areas and attempting to involve municipalities in a sustainable solution.⁸²²

⁸¹⁸ TSF (2025), ‘Regions with less and less voice, it's a vicious cycle.’ Eight inland districts no longer receive daily newspapers (["Regiões cada vez com menos voz, é um ciclo vicioso." Oito distritos do interior deixam de receber jornais diariamente](#)), 4 December 2025.

⁸¹⁹ Government (2024), Action Plan for the Media ([Plano de Ação para a Comunicação Social](#)).

⁸²⁰ ERC (2026), ERC meets with VASP regarding possible reduction in routes for distribution of newspapers ([ERC reúne com a VASP sobre eventual redução de rotas da distribuição de publicações periódicas](#)), 4 February 2026.

⁸²¹ Público (2025), Crisis in newspaper distribution: Government and IL refuse ‘dependencies’, left wing says State should provide support ([Crise na distribuição de jornais: Governo e IL recusam “dependências”, esquerda diz que Estado deve dar apoios](#)), 17 December 2025.

⁸²² Jornal de Notícias (2026), Minister of the Presidency considers VASP's requirement excessive and anticipates alternatives for bringing publications to low-density areas. Public service is a priority. ([Ministro da Presidência considera exigência da VASP elevada e antecipa alternativas para levar publicações a territórios de baixa densidade. Serviço público é prioridade.](#)), 28 January 2026.

b) Consequences

The situation is particularly critical in inland Portugal, where the physical distribution of printed newspapers remains essential for social cohesion, as digital penetration does not fully replace printed newspapers for many local communities, due to several limitations, including the ageing population, which is one of the main reasons. The impact on the right to information and to be informed was immediately highlighted by the Union of Journalists^{823/824} and affected local authorities, who expressed strong concerns about the growing isolation of these regions⁸²⁵. The reduction in the distribution of newspapers would, therefore, endanger democratic vitality, limiting several constitutional rights, such as the rights to information and equality. This would also negatively impact the public debate and the civic space.

1.4. Attempts to stifle civic engagement through violence, harassment and negative narratives

Attacks by extreme-right members on volunteers of associations distributing food to homeless people

a) Summary

Two men making the Nazi salute attacked two volunteers of the association CASA (*Centro de Apoio ao Sem Abrigo* / Centre for Homeless Support) that were distributing food for homeless people in the city of Porto.^{826/827} According to the news, the aggressors claimed to be supporters of the extreme-right political party Chega and accused the volunteers of, through the distribution of food, being responsible for the increase in the numbers of immigrants. Several associations that work with homeless people in Porto promoted a meeting to discuss the environment to proceed their mission, as the extreme-right actors increased their activities. In this sense, a municipal deputy affirmed that these extreme-right actors were in the streets, following the same routes of the associations, distributing food only to Portuguese homeless people, while encouraging hatred against immigrants, an action confirmed by the leader of the extreme-right Group 1143. This aggression happened just

⁸²³ Union of Journalists (*Sindicato de Jornalistas*) (2025), VASP leaves several districts without newspapers ([VASP deixa vários distritos sem jornais](#)), 4 December 2025.

⁸²⁴ Union of Journalists (*Sindicato de Jornalistas*) (2026), Union urges Government to act to ensure nationwide newspaper distribution ([Sindicato insta Governo a agir para garantir a distribuição de jornais em todo o país](#)), 8 January 2026.

⁸²⁵ Público (2025), Revolt in the inland regions without newspapers: ‘The people who live here are also first-class Portuguese citizens.’ ([Revolta no interior sem jornais: “As pessoas que cá vivem também são portuguesas de primeira”](#)), 6 December 2025.

⁸²⁶ Jornal de Notícias (2025), Neo-Nazis attack volunteers while distributing food to foreign homeless people in Porto ([Neonazis agredem voluntárias quando distribuíam comida a sem-abrigo estrangeiros no Porto](#)), 12 June 2025.

⁸²⁷ ZAP (2025), Neo-Nazis attack volunteers and police in Porto. They are distributing food (and hatred) to Portuguese homeless people ([Neonazis agredem voluntárias e polícia no Porto. Estarão a distribuir comida \(e ódio\) pelos sem-abrigo portugueses](#)), 12 June 2025.

on the same day as another violent attack on an actor in Lisbon, perpetrated also by extreme-right members based on racial discrimination.⁸²⁸ This occurs in a context where the constant growth not only in hate speech but also in physical aggressions and other similar actions is a matter of great concern for associations of immigrants, academics, public authorities and forces, among others, as it is recognised in European and national reports made by independent entities.^{829/830/831}

b) Consequences

This attack on social activists is considered in a wider context of an increase in activities of extreme-right groups, in Porto and across the country, several of them with physical violence, besides the hate speeches, following the increase of the political party Chega in recent elections for the Parliament.⁸³² Therefore, the association working with homeless people in Porto decided to organise a meeting to evaluate the situation and adopt the necessary measures to protect its volunteers while continuing its mission. This context contributes to the rise and normalisation of hate and discrimination speeches in Portugal, while several public competent authorities and bodies have difficulties in actively performing their role⁸³³, as is the case with the Commission for Equality and Against Racial Discrimination (CICDR – *Comissão para a Igualdade e Contra a Discriminação Racial*) that is still not functioning.⁸³⁴ Additionally, it may deter civil society organisations (CSOs) working with immigrants due to fear of retaliation, thereby reducing the civic space in which they operate.

1.5. Funding reductions and restrictions

Unstable funding endangers the support for gender and domestic violence victims

a) Summary

⁸²⁸ SIC Noticias (2025), Actor attacked by neo-Nazi: what happened outside the theatre “A Barraca”? ([Ator agredido por neonazi: o que aconteceu à porta do teatro “A Barraca”?](#)), 11 June 2025.

⁸²⁹ Council of Europe (2025), [ECRI Report on Portugal \(sixth monitoring cycle\)](#).

⁸³⁰ House of Brazil in Lisbon (*Casa do Brasil em Lisboa*) (2025), Monitoring Hate Speech, Racism and Xenophobia in Portugal ([Monitoramento do Discurso de Ódio, Racismo e Xenofobia em Portugal](#)).

⁸³¹ SAPO (2026), 36 cases of racism in Portuguese sport brought to court in 2025 ([Instaurados 36 processos por racismo no desporto português em 2025](#)), 19 February 2026.

⁸³² SIC Noticias (2025), Portuguese Primeiro, 1143 and Blood & Honour: who are they and how do extreme-right groups operate in Portugal? ([Portugueses Primeiro, 1143 e Blood & Honour: quem são e como atuam os grupos de extrema-direita em Portugal?](#)), 11 June 2025.

⁸³³ SAPO (2025), Neo-Nazi crime concerns authorities and gains prominence in Portugal ([Crime neonazi preocupa autoridades e ganha expressão em Portugal](#)), 29 June 2025.

⁸³⁴ Publico (2026), Blockage in the commission for racism: president says he cannot hire, AR claims to have already said that nothing prevents her from doing so ([Bloqueio na comissão de racismo: presidente diz que não pode contratar, AR alega já ter dito que nada a impede](#)), 21 February 2026.

The National Support Network for Victims of Domestic Violence has more than 130 support structures, around 40 shelters and 26 residential units for emergency accommodation, according to the Commission for Gender Equality (CIG – *Comissão para a Igualdade de Género*).⁸³⁵ The Portuguese State, through protocols, delegates support for victims of domestic and gender-based violence to civil society associations, as it does not have its own support structures. The state, therefore, has the responsibility of ensuring the necessary means for the regular functioning of social responses to support victims by funding CSOs.

APAV (*Associação Portuguesa de Apoio à Vítima* – Portuguese Association for Victim Support), the main association providing support to victims in Portugal, has been highlighting in recent years the continuous and significant increase in demand for services in the context of domestic and gender-based violence.⁸³⁶ The substantial growth in requests for support and persistent violence, which translates into an increased need for specialised responses, shows that associations face challenges in maintaining their response capacity without structural and sustainable reinforcement of human and, above all, financial resources.

Despite recent reinforcements, the dependence on project-based funding has been criticised as unsustainable in ensuring stable responses, especially when there are peaks in demand and permanent needs that are not compatible with changes in funding cycles or diversification of sources and formulas for obtaining the necessary funding, such as European funds, social gaming revenues or the state budget itself.⁸³⁷ CSOs consequently regularly draw attention to the need for stable sources and amounts of funding that do not entail high bureaucratic costs, through the constant preparation of applications for submission to irregular tenders to different entities under diverse administrative and financial rules. For example, programmes such as PESSOAS 2030 finance parts of the network — including specialised shelters, tele-assistance and emergency support — with more than 1,400 victims supported in the first quarter of 2025.⁸³⁸ Revenues from social games, on the other hand, involve signing protocols with CIG and the Holy Mercy of Lisbon (*Santa Casa da Misericórdia de Lisboa*), which manages this activity. As Sofia Fernandes, from the Portuguese Platform for Women's Rights (*Plataforma Portuguesa para os Direitos das Mulheres*), pointed out, 'The State establishes protocols with civil society, which has to seek funding, submit applications, report back, and is still penalised with delays.'⁸³⁹ In the same news article, Manuela Tavares, from UMAR (*União de Mulheres Alternativa e Resposta* – Union of Women Alternative and Response), stresses that 'this area should

⁸³⁵ LIVRE (2025), Draft Law 37/XVII/1st for the Budget 2026 ([Proposta de Lei n.º 37/XVII/1ª para o Orçamento de 2026](#)).

⁸³⁶ Radio Renascença (2026), APAV supported more than 18,500 victims in 2025. Most suffer from domestic violence ([APAV apoiou mais de 18.500 vítimas em 2025. Maioria sofre de violência doméstica](#)), 19 February 2026.

⁸³⁷ Público (2025), Shelters concerned about funding changes that could force them to close their doors ([Casas de acolhimento preocupadas com mudança no financiamento que pode fechar portas](#)), 14 May 2025.

⁸³⁸ Portugal2030 – Programme PESSOAS (2025), PESSOAS 2030 helped to shelter more than 1,400 victims of domestic violence ([PESSOAS 2030 ajudou no acolhimento de mais de 1400 vítimas de violência doméstica](#)), 13 August 2025.

⁸³⁹ Público (2026), Domestic and gender-based violence: funding model leaves associations in uncertainty ([Violência doméstica e de género: modelo de financiamento deixa associações na incerteza](#)), 12 January 2026.

be entirely funded by the state budget, via social security. She emphasises that the work carried out by CSOs is not only essential but also corresponds to commitments made by the state.”

Although there has been an increase in funding for victim support in the state budget for 2026 – including an additional €5.3 million for the prevention and combating of domestic violence and the expansion of specialised responses — the approval of these measures came after parliamentary proposals and debates on the need for stable funding for victim support services, signalling that there were previously shortcomings that were of concern to support organisations.⁸⁴⁰

b) Consequences

One of the major recommendations of the latest report from GREVIO (Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence), concerning Portugal, released in 2025, states that the government must “ensure appropriate long-term and sustainable funding for women’s rights organisations providing specialist support services for women victims of any form of violence covered by the Istanbul Convention and their children, throughout the country, based on transparent and accessible procedures.” (p. 47)⁸⁴¹

The non-existence of a stable, reliable and substantial funding to CSOs, to tackle this enduring structural problem of Portuguese society, means that the government is not ensuring the resolution of the problem, nor is it providing the necessary support to CSOs that replace the responsibility of the state, as decided by the state itself.

The consequences are diverse, as it affects the capacity to maintain stable, qualified human resources and to ensure the necessary structures to provide support to victims, from information provision to specialised shelters and residential units. In this sense, it limits the civic space of CSOs providing support to fulfil fundamental rights of the victims of gender and domestic violence.

2. CIVIC SPACE EXPANSION

2.1. Improvements in participation

Studies on strengthening civil society for a more resilient future

a) Summary

Two studies on the relevance and role of CSOs were carried out and presented with the support of two funding entities that recognise the importance of strengthening CSOs in fostering democracy, the rule of law and human rights, and that acknowledge the CSOs’ role in tackling multiple social vulnerabilities is crucial through their on-the-ground action. In this sense, the making of the studies is a positive action that supports the existence of a strong and resilient civic space, despite the changes that occurred in the last political elections with the rise of extreme-right parties.

⁸⁴⁰ TSF (2025), ‘Largest investment ever.’ Prevention and combating of domestic violence with a €5.3 million increase in funding (["Maior investimento de sempre." Prevenção e combate à violência doméstica com reforço de 5,3 milhões de euros](#)), 4 November 2025.

⁸⁴¹ Council of Europe – GREVIO (2025), [Building trust by delivering support, protection and justice – Portugal - First thematic evaluation report](#), 27 May 2025.

JUNTOS! Porto is a collaborative initiative by the Aga Khan Foundation Portugal and the 'la Caixa' Foundation, aiming to strengthen CSOs through capacity-building and inclusive participation. This partnership developed a baseline study, conducted in 2024 by the Transversal Area of Social Economy (ATES – *Área Transversal de Economia Social*) at the Portuguese Catholic University (*Universidade Católica Portuguesa*), covering 195 CSOs in Porto, shedding light on their strengths, challenges, and the urgent need for strategic planning, leadership renewal, and financial sustainability. With most CSOs relying on public funding, the study emphasises the importance of training and partnerships to build a more resilient and proactive civil society.⁸⁴² The results highlighted CSOs' positive perception of the functioning of their executive bodies, although they identified challenges related to leadership renewal and the need for more robust strategic planning. Additionally, CSOs expressed a need for training, particularly in strategic management and fundraising, and favoured formats like short-term workshops. The challenges faced by CSOs are considerable, with financial sustainability a primary concern.

During 2025, the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation (*Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian*), with partnership with the European Media and Information Fund (EEA Grants), established the Active Citizens Programme providing grants, on a competitive basis, to Portuguese CSOs to promote their sustainability and capacity, with a view of strengthening their role in empowering vulnerable groups and in fostering democratic participation, active citizenship and the defence of human rights.⁸⁴³

Among other activities, this programme funded the Portuguese Platform of Non-Governmental Organisations for Development (NGDO) (*Plataforma Portuguesa das ONGD*) to develop a study, resorting the Platform's members, with 41 organisations participating, aimed at supporting CSOs in accessing human resources, skills, tools, and information to strengthen their work and impact within their communities, ensuring evidence-based activities and attracting and retaining volunteers.⁸⁴⁴ This also contributed to raising awareness of the role of CSOs in building a more tolerant, just, and solidarity-based society, which deserves greater recognition. Consequently, the programme backed a comprehensive, systematic, and up-to-date analysis of organisations represented in the Portuguese Platform of Non-Governmental Development Organisations, exploring their characteristics, strengths and potential, governance and operations, interventions, capacities, and the organisational, financial, and technical challenges they face both internally and externally.

b) Consequences

These studies are relevant because they show a context in which the need for future improvements has emerged as an urgent priority for the ecosystem of CSOs, including policymakers, stakeholders, and funding entities. In disturbing times, with the identification of multiple difficulties in developing CSOs' regular work and actions, it is relevant that different entities decided to fund these studies, on the one side, to map problems, limitations and obstacles and, on the other hand, to advance new strategies to face new challenges and overcome the identified weaknesses.

The study JUNTOS! Porto has the potential to drive significant transformation in Porto's civil society by strengthening CSOs, fostering collaboration and innovation, and advancing sustainability. The study's recommendations include strengthening training in the identified areas and promoting

⁸⁴² Pinto, F. B., Abreu, L., Pires, H., Vareta, M., & Mendes, A. C. (2024). [Baseline de caracterização das organizações da sociedade civil do distrito do Porto](#). Fundação Aga Khan Portugal & Fundação "la Caixa".

⁸⁴³ Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation (2025), [Democracy and Civil Society – Strengthening civil society and active citizenship and protecting democracy](#).

⁸⁴⁴ Portuguese Platform of NGDO (2025), [As ONGD Portuguesas Face aos Desafios Atuais: 40 anos depois, um olhar sobre as ONGD Associadas da Plataforma](#).

partnerships that encourage collaboration between CSOs, aiming for a more cohesive and resilient civil society. Therefore, the collected information is highly valuable for the programme's success, providing a solid foundation for future actions and ensuring that interventions are aligned with the real needs of organisations.

The study of the Portuguese Platform of NGDO provided insightful information on two main areas: “i) externally, it provided an accurate description of these organisations, highlighting their skills, the impact of their work and the contribution they make to the communities with which they work; ii) internally, it enabled the Platform to update its knowledge of its members, creating an essential information base for improving strategic planning, aligning responses with real needs and identifying opportunities for collaboration and sharing.”⁸⁴⁵

Both contributions are important for enhancing the capacity and quality of CSOs as well as consolidating their public recognition and role in fostering a better society and addressing complex and enduring social issues.

⁸⁴⁵ Portuguese Platform of NGDO (2025), *Between Crises and Hope: the role of NGDOs in the future of the world* ([Entre as Crises e a Esperança: o papel das ONGD no futuro do mundo](#)), 18 November 2025.

Romania (RO)

Civic space in the EU in 2025

Country: Romania

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Disclaimer

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1. CIVIC SPACE PRESSURES

1.1. Deterioration of legal environment: freedom of association

New Government initiated legislation may add excessive administrative burden to the activity of the non-governmental organisations

a) Summary

The Romanian Government (*Guvernul României*), through the Ministry of Development, Public Works and Administration (MDLPA - *Ministerul Dezvoltării, Lucrărilor Publice și Administrației*) announced the intention to adopt an Administrative Procedures Code. The new legislation will re-write all interactions between various actors in the administrative processes. Among other provisions, the draft legislation is proposing to assimilate non-governmental organisations to public institutions as subjects of the requirements under the freedom of information legislation, regardless of the size of the organisation and if they received public funding or not. The updated draft bill was published for public debate in March 2025, and, again, in November 2025, and it is now in the process of inter-institutional consultation, the final step prior to being adopted by the Government and sent to the Parliament for debate⁸⁴⁶.

b) Consequences

By including civil society organisations, including independent media institutions registered as NGOs in the scope of the future Code, they will be subject to the same obligations as public authorities in terms of access to information. They will be forced to employ dedicated personnel for handling and archiving information and for registering and answering third-party requests in due time. The administrative burden is excessive and, in most cases, unnecessary, and it will likely affect smaller organisations disproportionately⁸⁴⁷. Alternative options suggested during the public debate, such as imposing additional transparency requests only to organisations that receive public funds, were rejected during the public debate⁸⁴⁸.

Anti-money laundering regulations adding administrative burden to civil society organisations

a) Summary

⁸⁴⁶ Romania, Ministry of Development, Public Works and Administration (MDLPA - *Ministerul Dezvoltării, Lucrărilor Publice și Administrației*) (2025), Draft law for the approval of the Administrative Procedure Code (*Proiect de lege pentru aprobarea Codului de procedură administrativă*), 3 November 2025.

⁸⁴⁷ Civil Society Development Foundation (FDSC - *Fundația pentru Dezvoltarea Societății Civile*) (2025), '*Proiect de lege care riscă să transforme ONG-urile în instituții publice*',

⁸⁴⁸ Centre for Public Innovation (ACIP – *Centrul pentru Inovare Publică*) (2025), '*Recomandări privind proiectul de lege pentru aprobarea Codului de procedură administrativă*', 11 March 2025.

In September 2025, the National Office for the Prevention and Combating of Money Laundering (ONPCSP - *Oficiul Național de Prevenire și Combatere a Spălării Banilor*) adopted a new mechanism for supervising the activity of associations and foundations in order to implement the law on combating money laundering and preventing the financing of terrorism⁸⁴⁹. The mechanism includes additional administrative tasks for CSOs: the CSO board of directors must adopt an internal procedure to prevent terrorist financing, the verification of which is required annually.

b) Consequences

According to civil society organisations, the new mechanism generates a recurring verification obligation (correlated with the annual approval of financial statements) and may require documentation, internal audit or review processes that many NGOs do not have the capacity to implement.⁸⁵⁰

1.2. Deterioration of legal environment: freedom of assembly

Outdated legislation and abusive practices may limit the freedom of assembly

a) Summary

The framework legislation regulating the organisation and conduct of public assemblies in Romania⁸⁵¹ is over 30 years old and no longer corresponds to contemporary social and civic realities⁸⁵².

A recent report from the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) shows that, in Romania, the general legal framework is failing to guarantee the right to freedom of assembly, to all citizens, in all circumstances, without discrimination. Among the flaws of the

⁸⁴⁹ Romania, National Office for the Prevention and Combating of Money Laundering (ONPCSP - *Oficiul Național de Prevenire și Combatere a Spălării Banilor*) (2025), The mechanism for supervising the activity of associations and foundations established under Government Ordinance No. 26/2000 on associations and foundations (*Mecanismul de supraveghere a activității asociațiilor și fundațiilor înființate în baza Ordonanței Guvernului nr. 26/2000 cu privire la asociații și fundații*), 18 September 2025.

⁸⁵⁰ Civil Society Development Foundation (FDSC - *Fundația pentru Dezvoltarea Societății Civile*) (2025), '*Monitoring Action for Civic Space. Country Report – Romania*', December 2025.

⁸⁵¹ Romania, Law No.60/1991 on the organisation and conduct of public assemblies, republished (*Legea nr.60/1991 privind organizarea și desfășurarea adunărilor publice, republicată*), 14 March 2014.

⁸⁵² Coalition NGOs for Citizens (*Coaliția ONG-uri pentru Cetățean*) (2025), '*The State of Democracy 2025*', 26 June 2025.

legislative framework, the report is mentioning the authorisation system, which can be abused, the excessive administrative requirements imposed to organizers, and the fact that spontaneous assemblies are not protected by law and authorities have reported that any assembly not approved in advance would be banned and dispersed. The report is also noting the existence of potential 'blanket prohibitions' because the legislation prohibits assemblies taking place in the immediate vicinity of specific places such as, for example, railway stations, airports, metro stations or hospitals⁸⁵³.

A legislative proposal having the potential to improve the existing framework is blocked in the Parliament since 2021⁸⁵⁴.

b) Consequences

In 2025, several civil society organisations have drawn attention that the imprecise legislative mechanism was used to limit the right to peaceful assemblies or to harass participants.

It was the third consecutive year that the Oradea City Hall (*Primăria Oradea*) banned public demonstrations for the rights of the LGBT community. According to media reports⁸⁵⁵ and the organisations involved⁸⁵⁶, the local public authorities banned the organisation of the Oradea Pride march, scheduled for July 26, 2025.

In Bucharest, the MozaiQ Association's request for authorisation for the 'Our Tradition is Love' March (*Tradiția noastră este iubirea*) was rejected on the ground that another public gathering had already been authorised at one of the points on the announced route in Bucharest. MozaiQ is one of the leading LGBTI+ rights organisations. The march was authorised only after MozaiQ submitted 17 other authorisation requests for different dates and routes⁸⁵⁷.

During a peaceful march to commemorate the victims of a tragic fire (the Colectiv fire), the organizers were fined RON 3,000 (€600), allegedly for continuing the assembly after 22:00, an

⁸⁵³ OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (2025), '[Report Monitoring of Freedom of Peaceful Assembly in Selected OSCE Participating States \(May 2022 – June 2024\)](#)', 7 February 2025.

⁸⁵⁴ Romania, Chamber of Deputies (2021), Draft Law amending and supplementing Law No. 60/1911 on the organisation and conduct of public assemblies ([Proiect de Lege pentru modificarea și completarea Legii nr.60/1991 privind organizarea și desfășurarea adunărilor publice](#)), 1 February 2021.

⁸⁵⁵ Hotnews.ro (2025), '[Primăria Oradea interzice organizarea Marșului Pride pentru al treilea an la rând, acuză organizatorii. Au fost propuse 11 posibile trasee, niciunul nu a fost acceptat](#)', 24 July 2025.

⁸⁵⁶ Association Ark Oradea (2025), [Facebook page](#), 10 December 2025.

⁸⁵⁷ Conversation with Mr. Vlad Vischi, President of MozaiQ Association, 2 March 2026.

outdated provision of the law⁸⁵⁸. Facing the public's outrage, the riot policy, Gendarmerie (*Jandarmeria*) issued an apology⁸⁵⁹.

The watchdog organisation ActiveWatch has documented several instances where potential participants to peaceful assemblies condemning the war in Gaza were intimidated and harassed by the state authorities, in an attempt to prevent them from joining the protests⁸⁶⁰.

1.3. Deterioration of legal environment: freedom of expression and information

New draft legislation threatening free access to public information

a) Summary

A legislative proposal submitted in September 2025 introduces a series of sanctions and limitations for citizens who behave aggressively or impolite in their relationship with public institutions, including the rejection of requests for access to information⁸⁶¹. The bill is supported by the Government of Romania (*Guvernul României*), and it was adopted by the Senate (*Senat*), as the first chamber. The parliamentary process continues in the Chamber of Deputies (*Camera Deputaţilor*), as deciding chamber.

Another legislative proposal, submitted in November 2025, introduces a category of "special information", at the discretion of the heads of public institutions, which would be exempted from communication⁸⁶². The bill is under debate in the Senate (*Senat*), as the first chamber.

⁸⁵⁸ Hotnews.ro (2025), '[Filmarea momentului în care organizatorul marşului Colectiv a fost amendat de jandarmi pentru „depăşirea orei de comemorare”, când 25 de persoane au continuat să ţină un moment de veghe](#)', 13 October 2025.

⁸⁵⁹ Libertatea.ro (2025), '[Şeful Jandarmeriei şi-a cerut scuze după ce Marian Rădună, organizatorul marşului de comemorare Colectiv, a fost amendat pentru „depăşirea orei de comemorare”](#)', 2 November 2025.

⁸⁶⁰ ActiveWatch (2025), '[Fantomele miliţiei şi securităţii bântuie Poliţia şi Jandarmeria](#)', 22 May 2025.

⁸⁶¹ Romania, The Senate (*Senatul*) (2025), Legislative proposal to supplement Law No. 61/1991 on sanctioning acts of violation of certain norms of social coexistence, public order and peace - Republished as well as supplementing Law No. 544/2001 on free access to information of public interest ([Propunere legislativă pentru completarea Legii nr.61/1991 pentru sancţionarea faptelor de încălcare a unor norme de convieţuire socială, a ordinii şi liniştii publice - Republicată precum şi completarea Legii nr.544/2001 privind liberul acces la informaţiile de interes public](#)), 2 September 2025.

⁸⁶² Romania, The Senate (*Senatul*) (2025), Legislative proposal for amending and supplementing Law No. 544/2001 on free access to information of public interest ([Propunere legislativă pentru modificarea şi completare Legii nr.544/2001 privind liberul acces la informaţiile de interes public](#)), 13 November 2025.

b) Consequences

Both legislative proposals introduce limitations to the right to access public information that allow a large degree of arbitrary decision for the heads of institutions.

In the first case, the terms used in the text (“disrespectful”, “provocative”, “intimidating”, “aggressive”, “recalcitrant”) lack clarity and introduce an imprecise notion, the content of which depends on a subjective interpretation⁸⁶³.

In the second case, the legislative amendment would give the leaders of public institutions arbitrary powers to decide what information is of a special nature, so it would be protected from citizen scrutiny. In Romania, the mechanism for protecting sensitive information at the institution level is already regulated by law⁸⁶⁴.

1.4. Deterioration of legal environment: court cases

The anti-SLAPP Directive is not yet transposed, while civil society is drawing attention to a number of ongoing cases

a) Summary

Romania is yet to transpose the EU Anti-SLAPP Directive. The legislative proposal was submitted by the Government (*Guvern*) in February 2026, and it will be debated by the Parliament (*Parlament*) in regular procedure⁸⁶⁵.

The Romanian Institute for Human Rights (IRDO - *Institutul Român pentru Drepturile Omului*) has been designated as the National SLAPP Focal Point since 2023 and is expected to conduct research, outreach and coordination on SLAPP issues. However, its capacity is limited by underfunding and

⁸⁶³ Association for the Defense of Human Rights in Romania – Helsinki Committee (*APADOR-CH - Asociația pentru Apărarea Drepturilor Omului în România – Comitetul Helsinki*) (2025), ‘[Recomandările APADOR-CH cu privire la Propunerea legislativă pentru completarea Legii nr. 61/1991 pentru sancționarea faptelor de încălcare a unor norme de convietuire socială, a ordinii și liniștii publice, republicată, precum și completarea Legii nr. 544/2001 privind liberul acces la informațiile de interes public](#)’, 9 September 2025.

⁸⁶⁴ Coalition NGOs for Citizens (*Coaliția ONG-uri pentru Cetățean*) (2025), ‘[Propunerea legislativă pentru modificarea și completarea legii privind liberul acces la informațiile de interes public trădează dispreț profund față de cetățeni și nesocotește caracterul fundamental al dreptului la informare](#)’, 19 November 2025.

⁸⁶⁵ Romania, Chamber of Deputies (*Camera Deputaților*) (2026), Draft Law on Protection against Manifestly Unfounded Claims or Abusive Judicial Proceedings Directed Against Persons Involved in Public Mobilisation Actions ([Proiect de Lege privind protecția împotriva cererilor vădit neîntemeiate sau a procedurilor judiciare abuzive îndreptate împotriva persoanelor implicate în acțiuni de mobilizare publică](#)), 11 February 2026.

institutional gaps and it currently does not function as a dedicated protection mechanism with enforcement authority⁸⁶⁶. IRDO is not accredited as an Independent National Human Rights Institution (INHRI) under the UN Paris Principles. According to the evaluation of the European Network of National Human Rights Institutions, “no additional resources were given to the IRDO, even though the staff shortage struggle is a known fact, as well as the additional mandate entrusted to the Institute along with being appointed Anti-SLAPP Focal Point in Romania⁸⁶⁷”.

b) Consequences

In the absence of a law transposing the Anti-SLAPP Directive, there is no definition of SLAPPs to be used in court. Because of IRDO’s limited capacity, there is currently no comprehensive official inventory of cases that could meet the criteria for classification as SLAPP⁸⁶⁸. An ongoing independent monitoring by the non-governmental organisation Leaders for Justice has identified at least 36 potential SLAPP cases in the last five years, with at least 12 cases initiated in 2024-2025. Another independent report, published by the watchdog ActiveWatch is analysing 17 recent SLAPP cases, out of which four were initiated in 2025. The report is mentioning that the list is not exhaustive⁸⁶⁹. The Courts do not have any legal means to dismiss the cases on the basis of anti-SLAPP legislation, as there is no such legislation⁸⁷⁰.

1.5. Barriers to participation in law and policy-making

The excessive use of emergency legislation remains a barrier to public participation

a) Summary

In Romania, the ineffective public consultations process before the adoption of legislation remains a structural issue, as emphasised by international partners, including the European Commission⁸⁷¹, and civil society organisations⁸⁷².

⁸⁶⁶ Civil Society Development Foundation (FDSC - *Fundația pentru Dezvoltarea Societății Civile*) (2025), ‘[Monitoring Action for Civic Space. Country Report – Romania](#)’, December 2025.

⁸⁶⁷ European Network of National Human Rights Institutions (ENNHRI) (2025), ‘[Independence, effectiveness and establishment of NHR](#)’, 2025.

⁸⁶⁸ Civil Society Development Foundation (FDSC - *Fundația pentru Dezvoltarea Societății Civile*) (2025), ‘[Monitoring Action for Civic Space. Country Report – Romania](#)’, December 2025.

⁸⁶⁹ ActiveWatch (2026), ‘SLAPPs și libertatea de exprimare în România’, 9 March 2026.

⁸⁷⁰ Conversation with Mr. Luca Ciubotaru, from Leaders for Justice, on 2 March 2026. The monitoring is ongoing, aiming at publishing the results in the second quarter of 2026.

⁸⁷¹ European Commission (2025), ‘[2025 Rule of Law Report. Country Chapter on the rule of law situation in Romania](#)’, 8 July 2025.

⁸⁷² Coalition NGOs for Citizens (*Coaliția ONG-uri pentru Cetățean*) (2025), ‘[The State of Democracy 2025](#)’, 26 June 2025.

In March 2022, the Government of Romania (*Guvernul României*) amended, through emergency ordinance, the legislation on transparency in decision-making. The new provisions are expanding the exception to the general procedures on transparency when adopting new legislation, for „emergency situations”. Civil society organisations warned that the new definition is giving arbitrary power to any public institution to classify new legislation as „urgent”, thus avoiding the public consultation process. The Ombuds office (*Avocatul Poporului*), at the request of the civil society organisations, has challenged the Ordinance before the Constitutional Court (*Curtea Constituțională*). By the end of December 2025, the Court has not progressed in any way with the case⁸⁷³.

On the other hand, independent research is showing that, at the beginning of 2025, the Parliament had on its agenda, pending, no less than 2.415 legislative proposals, and the oldest were from 2000. The length of the parliamentary debates on a specific bill can be anything between 3 days and 26 years, which becomes a deterrent for the Government to use the regular legislative process⁸⁷⁴.

b) Consequences

Legislative unpredictability, the frequent use of Government Emergency Ordinances, problems with the quality of legislation and regulatory burden, remain primary concerns for businesses and civil society organisations⁸⁷⁵. Because of the Parliament’s inefficiency, political control of the agenda, and lack of clear procedures, sometimes it is a lottery if a proposal will be debated within a relevant timeline. Thus, the Government often prefers using ordinances, which is enforcing the vicious circle⁸⁷⁶.

Earlier research shows that the very low participation in the formal decision-making process can also be related to the fact that in 2022, only 20% of the normative acts put up for public debate by ministries received recommendations from civil society and only 12% were improved. At the local level, only 10% of the regulations put forward for debate received recommendations and only 5% included some recommendations in their final form. Only one in five NGOs requested public information or contributed to public debates. Researchers are linking the decrease in public participation to the ineffectiveness of the process itself⁸⁷⁷.

⁸⁷³ Coalition NGOs for Citizens (*Coaliția ONG-uri pentru Cetățean*) (2025), ‘[The State of Democracy 2025](#)’, 26 June 2025.

⁸⁷⁴ Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (2025), ‘[Warning! Democracy collapse. How do we combat the democratic regression in Romania in the long term?](#)’, Chapter 19, 26 March 2025.

⁸⁷⁵ European Commission (2025), ‘[2025 Rule of Law Report. Country Chapter on the rule of law situation in Romania](#)’, 8 July 2025.

⁸⁷⁶ Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (2025), ‘[Warning! Democracy collapse. How do we combat the democratic regression in Romania in the long term?](#)’, Chapter 19, 26 March 2025.

⁸⁷⁷ Civil Society Development Foundation (FDSC - *Fundația pentru Dezvoltarea Societății Civile*) (2024), ‘[Romania 2024. The non-governmental sector. Profile, trends, challenges](#)’, 22 April 2024.

1.6. Other developments

The lack of any official report following the annulled elections is undermining the trust in democracy

a) Summary

In December 2024, the Constitutional Court (*Curtea Constituțională*) cancelled the first round of the Presidential election. In its decision of 6 December, the Court concluded that the electoral process had been tampered with, due to multiple irregularities and violations of the electoral law, which distorted equal opportunities and the freedom to vote and affected the transparency of the campaign process⁸⁷⁸. On this basis, Presidential elections were repeated in May 2025.

Since the decision of the Court, the public authorities did not provide any report on the deeper causes of the annulment, including alleged foreign interferences. In November 2025, the President proposed and the Parliament approved the National Defence Strategy 2025-2030 (*Strategia Națională de Apărare a Țării pentru perioada 2025-2030*)⁸⁷⁹. The document is not mentioning the annulled elections, and it is not proposing any measures to avoid a similar incident in the future⁸⁸⁰.

b) Consequences

Following the annulment of the elections, the Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index has downgraded Romania to the status of hybrid regime⁸⁸¹. Opinion research shows that the trust in democratic institutions is on the negative trend⁸⁸², and some researchers consider that the lack of accountability on the elections annulment is an important cause for this trend⁸⁸³. There is a legitimate expectation of the citizens to receive a comprehensive explanation, and the trust in democracy is decreasing with every day that that explanation is not provided⁸⁸⁴.

⁸⁷⁸ Romania, Constitutional Court (*Curtea Constituțională*) (2024), Decision No. 32/2024 regarding the cancellation of the electoral process regarding the election of the President of Romania in 2024 ([Decizia nr.32/2024 privind anularea procesului electoral cu privire la alegerea Președintelui României din anul 2024](#)), 6 December 2024.

⁸⁷⁹ Romania, Presidential Administration (*Administrația Prezidențială*) (2025), National Defence Strategy 2025-2030 ([Strategia Națională de Apărare a Țării pentru perioada 2025-2030](#)), 26 November 2025.

⁸⁸⁰ Centre for Public Innovation (ACIP – *Centrul pentru Inovare Publică*) (2025), '[Recomandări privind Strategia Națională de Apărare 2025-2030](#)', 20 November 2025.

⁸⁸¹ Economist Intelligence Unit (2025), '[Democracy Index 2024](#)', February 2025.

⁸⁸² Inscop Research (2026), '[Încrederea în instituții naționale](#)', 29 January 2026.

⁸⁸³ Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (2025), '[Warning! Democracy collapse. How do we combat the democratic regression in Romania in the long term?](#)', 26 March 2025.

⁸⁸⁴ Coalition NGOs for Citizens (*Coaliția ONG-uri pentru Cetățean*) (2025), '[The State of Democracy 2025](#)', 26 June 2025.

2. CIVIC SPACE EXPANSION

2.1. Improvements in participation

New digital tools for transparency and participation

a) Summary

In April 2025, a Strategy for Open Government in Romania 2025-2030 was adopted by the Government, in line with its obligations as OECD accession candidate⁸⁸⁵. The Strategy makes a number of recommendations to address different issues related to the civic space, such as improving transparency, accountability and participation using digital tools.

Romania has introduced new regulations for the management of ethics and rules on lobbying for Government officials⁸⁸⁶, and minimal rules on lobbying for the members of the Parliament⁸⁸⁷. The second, adopted at the end of November, will be enacted in June 2026.

b) Consequences

The main instrument for the new lobbying rules is the Single Registry of Transparency of Interests (RUTI - *Registrul Unic al Transparenței Intereselor*), which is already implemented for government officials⁸⁸⁸. The platform is minimalist and it lacks basic functionality, such as search, filtering, mechanisms to follow easily certain topics or decision-makers, but it does allow the export of the data. A civic-tech group has quickly built a search and visualisation independent interface, using AI tools⁸⁸⁹.

⁸⁸⁵ Romania, Government Decision no.358/2025 on the approval of the Strategy for Open Government in Romania 2025-2030 ([*Decizia nr.358/2025 privind aprobarea Strategiei pentru guvernare deschisă în România 2025-2030*](#)), 15 April 2025.

⁸⁸⁶ Romania, Law no.49/2025 for amending and supplementing Government Emergency Ordinance no. 57/2019 on the Administrative Code and for amending art. 1 para. (1) of Law no. 251/2004 on certain measures relating to goods received free of charge on the occasion of protocol actions in the exercise of the mandate or function ([*Legea nr.49/2025 pentru modificarea și completarea Ordonanței de urgență a Guvernului nr. 57/2019 privind Codul administrativ și pentru modificarea art. 1 alin. \(1\) din Legea nr. 251/2004 privind unele măsuri referitoare la bunurile primite cu titlu gratuit cu prilejul unor acțiuni de protocol în exercitarea mandatului sau a funcției*](#)), 14 April 2025.

⁸⁸⁷ Romania, Law no.197/2025 for the amendment of art. 12 of Law no. 96/2006 on the Statute of Deputies and Senators ([*Legea nr.197/2025 pentru modificarea art. 12 din Legea nr. 96/2006 privind Statutul deputaților și al senatorilor*](#)), 28 November 2025.

⁸⁸⁸ Single Registry of Transparency of Interests (RUTI - *Registrul Unic al Transparenței Intereselor*), <https://fo-ruti.gov.ro/>.

⁸⁸⁹ AIParte, RUTI Visualisation, <https://aiparte.ro/examples/ruti/>.

At the end of December 2025, as part of the new Open Government Strategy, the Government has launched the upgraded platform for access to information and transparency in decision-making, called *E-consultare*. The platform aims to become the single-entry portal for access to information requests and public consultation on draft normative acts. By the end of February 2026, a growing number of central and local public authorities and institutions have enrolled in the platform. The project was funded by the European Union under Romania's Recovery and Resilience Facility Plan⁸⁹⁰.

⁸⁹⁰ Romania, the E-consultare platform, <https://e-consultare.gov.ro/>.

Serbia (RS)

Civic space in the EU in 2025

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Disclaimer

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1. CIVIC SPACE PRESSURES

1.1. Deterioration of legal environment: freedom of association

Police Entry into Civil Society Organisations' Premises

a) Summary

On 25 February 2025, police officers entered the premises of four civil society organisations (Civic Initiatives, Crta, Center for practical policy and Trag foundation), stating that they had a prosecutor's order to review the organisations' activities, but reportedly did not present a search warrant.⁸⁹¹ The Higher Public Prosecutor's Office in Belgrade stated that the action was prompted by suspicions concerning the alleged misuse of USAID funds.⁸⁹²

The organisations concerned maintained that the investigation conducted by Higher Public Prosecutor's Office in Belgrade was unrelated to USAID or the use of donations by civil society organisations. They argued that references to USAID were being used as a pretext for exerting pressure and financial control over their work.⁸⁹³

b) Consequences

The unannounced entry of police into the premises of civil society organisations without presenting a warrant, combined with extensive reporting by pro-government media on the investigation, constitutes a pressure on fundamental rights and civil society in Serbia.⁸⁹⁴

⁸⁹¹ Civic Initiatives (2025), "Statement: Police raid at Civic Initiatives", ([*Saopštenje: Policijska racija u Građanskim inicijativama*](#)), press release, 26 February 2025.

⁸⁹² Lawyers Committee for Human Rights (YUCOM) (2025), "NGOs: The authorities in Serbia are using the opportunity to target civil society organisations that have for years pointed to corruption, violations of the law and human rights", ([*Nevladine organizacije: Vlast u Srbiji koristi priliku da se obračuna sa nevladinim organizacijama koje godinama unazad ukazuju na korupciju, kršenje zakona i kršenje ljudskih prava*](#)), press release, 26 February 2025.

⁸⁹³ Lawyers Committee for Human Rights (YUCOM) (2025), "NGOs: The authorities in Serbia are using the opportunity to target civil society organisations that have for years pointed to corruption, violations of the law and human rights", ([*Nevladine organizacije: Vlast u Srbiji koristi priliku da se obračuna sa nevladinim organizacijama koje godinama unazad ukazuju na korupciju, kršenje zakona i kršenje ljudskih prava*](#)), press release, 26 February 2025.

⁸⁹⁴ Lawyers Committee for Human Rights (YUCOM) (2025), "NGOs: The authorities in Serbia are using the opportunity to target civil society organisations that have for years pointed to corruption, violations of the law and human rights", ([*Nevladine organizacije: Vlast u Srbiji koristi priliku da se obračuna sa nevladinim organizacijama koje godinama unazad ukazuju na korupciju, kršenje zakona i kršenje ljudskih prava*](#)), press release, 26 February 2025.

The police entry into civil society organisations was followed by the submission of a draft “Law on the Special Register of Foreign Influence Agents” by a member of parliament in November 2024. The draft law provides for the establishment of a special register of non-profit organisations founded in the Republic of Serbia which, due to being financed or supported by foreign entities for the purpose of political influence, may be designated as “foreign influence agents”.⁸⁹⁵

1.2. Deterioration of legal environment: freedom of assembly

Proposal for amending Criminal Code

a) Summary

In September 2025, the Ministry of Justice published a draft amendment to the Criminal Code proposing that “placement of obstacles on roads and the stopping of vehicles in traffic contrary to regulations” be classified as a criminal offence (Article 290).⁸⁹⁶ The proposal introduces criminal liability for conduct in traffic that does not result in any harmful consequences other than the stopping of vehicles.⁸⁹⁷ This proposal could criminalise a common form of peaceful protest, namely traffic blockades, and thus deter citizens from participating in public assemblies for fear of criminal sanctions, even when no harmful consequences occur beyond traffic disruption.

b) Consequences

The proposed provision is a repressive measure intended to deter citizens from participating in protests involving the blocking of traffic. It implies that any street assembly causing traffic disruption may be treated as a criminal offence, even in the absence of a genuine threat. As street blockades became a symbol of demands for accountability and justice following the railway station canopy collapse in Novi Sad on 1 November 2024, representatives of the professional community have expressed concerns that this approach may unduly restrict the right to freedom of assembly.⁸⁹⁸

⁸⁹⁵ Serbia, National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia (2024), Law on the Special Register of Foreign Influence Agents (*Predlog Zakona o posebnom registru agenata stranog uticaja*), 29 November 2024.

⁸⁹⁶ Serbia, Ministry of Justice (2025), Draft Law on Amendments to the Criminal Code (*Nacrt zakona o izmenama i dopunama Krivičnog zakonika*)

⁸⁹⁷ National Convention on the European Union (NKEU) (2025), Consolidated comments of the NCEU Working Group for Chapters 23 and 24 (*Zbirni komentar Radne grupe NKEU za Poglavlje 23 i 24*), Belgrade, National Convention on the European Union.

⁸⁹⁸ National Convention on the European Union (NKEU) (2025), Consolidated comments of the NCEU Working Group for Chapters 23 and 24 (*Zbirni komentar Radne grupe NKEU za Poglavlje 23 i 24*), Belgrade, National Convention on the European Union.

“Sonic weapon”

a) Summary

At a mass student and citizens’ protests protest held on 15 March 2025 in Belgrade, a strong sonic signal, reportedly resembling a “sonic weapon”, was emitted, causing panic and injuries among participants, and resulting in a stampede. More than 3,500 individuals subsequently reported consequences to the CSOs. Although the competent authorities initially denied the existence of such devices, the Minister of Interior later stated that LRAD (Long Range Acoustic Device) systems had indeed been procured, but maintained that they had not been used during the protest. The First Basic Public Prosecutor’s Office in Belgrade initiated proceedings in relation to the incident, but civil society organisations have expressed concerns about significant pressure on the judiciary and questioned the prospects for an independent and effective investigation.⁸⁹⁹ The European Court of Human Rights issued an interim measure on the alleged use by the authorities of a sonic weapon for crowd control at demonstrations in Belgrade.⁹⁰⁰

Moreover, group of students from the Faculty of Medicine, University of Belgrade publicly alleged that individuals seeking medical assistance at the Emergency Centre were specifically targeted, with their intake forms reportedly marked “PROTEST”. According to these statements, some citizens were informed that they could not be examined if they reported symptoms allegedly experienced during the protest.⁹⁰¹

b) Consequences

The analysis of the public assembly indicates that the State failed to fulfil its positive obligations under domestic and international law to safeguard the right to peaceful assembly. Rather than ensuring a safe and enabling environment, statements and actions by competent authorities and state officials contributed to a hostile atmosphere, potentially discouraging individuals from exercising their rights. The organisation of counter-demonstrations, allegations regarding the use of sonic devices, and biased reporting by pro-government media intended to deter participation raise broader concerns about the authorities’ approach to the protection of peaceful assemblies. Such practices may have lasting adverse effects on civic space.⁹⁰²

⁸⁹⁹ Lawyers Committee for Human Rights (YUCOM) (2025), Monitoring Report 4/25 ([Monitoring izveštaj 4/25](#)), Belgrade, YUCOM, p. 2 and 11.

⁹⁰⁰ European Commission (2025), [European Commission Report for Serbia for 2025](#), Brussels, SWD(2025) 755 final, p. 6.

⁹⁰¹ Students in Blockade of the Faculty of Medicine, University of Belgrade (2025), "Statement of the Students of the Faculty of Medicine", ([Saopštenje studenata Medicinskoj fakulteta, objava na društvenim mrežama](#)), social media post, 17 March 2025.

⁹⁰² Lawyers Committee for Human Rights (YUCOM) (2025), Monitoring Report 4/25 ([Monitoring izveštaj 4/25](#)), Belgrade, YUCOM, p. 2 and 11.

Torture

a) Summary

While freedom of assembly was generally ensured and protests were allowed to take place, the safety of participants was not always guaranteed, several cases of excessive use of force by the police were reported.⁹⁰³

Reports on freedom of assembly indicated instances of excessive force by the police against demonstrators, particularly students,⁹⁰⁴ and arbitrary arrests during demonstrations.⁹⁰⁵

Disproportionate use of force against protesters who were not resisting was also recorded, including arrests by plainclothes officers and denial of the right to a lawyer of one's choice and to notify family members.⁹⁰⁶ Among those detained were high school pupils and students, while in some cases information on the whereabouts of detained persons was not provided.⁹⁰⁷

Concerns were raised about violence during protests across Serbia and reports of disproportionate use of force by law enforcement officials, including against minors, journalists, and women.⁹⁰⁸ In one reported case, a police officer allegedly threatened a detained female student with rape. Namely, the student stated that, while being detained with other protesters, she was physically assaulted and threatened with rape by the commander of the Government Security Unit in the Government garage. She was subsequently subjected to retaliatory actions, including the publication of private explicit photographs in pro-government media. Of particular concern is that the photographs published had formed part of a criminal complaint she had previously submitted privately to protect her right to privacy, and that among the first to disseminate them publicly was a former State

⁹⁰³ European Commission (2025), [*European Commission Report for Serbia for 2025*](#), Brussels, SWD(2025) 755 final, p. 6.

⁹⁰⁴ YUCOM – Lawyers' Committee for Human Rights (2025), Monitoring Report 7/25 – Novi Sad ([*Monitoring izveštaj 7/25 – Novi Sad*](#)), Belgrade, YUCOM, p. 4.

⁹⁰⁵ Amnesty International (2025), [*Amnesty International Report 2025: The State of the World's Human Rights*](#), Amnesty International, p. 55.

⁹⁰⁶ YUCOM – Lawyers' Committee for Human Rights (2025), Monitoring Report on Public Assembly "See You on Vidovdan", 28 June 2025, Belgrade ([*Monitoring izveštaj javnih okupljanja 6/25 – Javno okupljanje „Vidimo se na Vidovdan“, 28. jun 2025. godine*](#)), YUCOM, Belgrade, p. 2.

⁹⁰⁷ YUCOM – Lawyers' Committee for Human Rights (2025), Monitoring Report on Public Assembly "See You on Vidovdan", 28 June 2025, Belgrade ([*Monitoring izveštaj javnih okupljanja 6/25 – Javno okupljanje „Vidimo se na Vidovdan“, 28. jun 2025. godine*](#)), YUCOM, Belgrade, p. 2.

⁹⁰⁸ Lawyers Committee for Human Rights (YUCOM) (2026), Report on Attacks Against Human Rights Defenders in Serbia in 2025 ([*Izveštaj o napadima na branitelje ljudskih prava u Srbiji za 2025. godinu*](#)), Belgrade, YUCOM.

Secretary at the Ministry of the Interior.⁹⁰⁹ The Commissioner for the Protection of Equality strongly condemned such conduct and warned that such actions fall outside the framework of the Constitution and applicable laws. The Commissioner called on the Ministry of Interior to ensure equal treatment of all citizens and recalled that the police have a duty to guarantee equal conditions for the exercise of constitutionally protected rights and freedoms.⁹¹⁰

b) Consequences

The conduct of the police was widely condemned by domestic and international actors for excessive use of force and raised concerns about the protection of the rights to peaceful assembly and freedom of expression. Such incidents may undermine public trust in law enforcement and discourage individuals, particularly students and journalists, from participating in public protests.⁹¹¹

1.3. Deterioration of legal environment: freedom of expression

Surveillance of journalists and activists using spyware and forensic tools

a) Summary

In 2024 and 2025, concerns were raised regarding the use of spyware and mobile phone forensic tools by Serbian police and intelligence authorities against journalists, activists and human rights defenders. According to findings by Amnesty International and investigative reporting by BIRN, the police and the Security Information Agency (BIA) allegedly used Cellebrite forensic extraction tools to unlock mobile phones during detention or police interviews and subsequently installed a bespoke Android spyware system known as *NoviSpy*.⁹¹²

⁹⁰⁹ Lawyers Committee for Human Rights (YUCOM) (2026), Report on Attacks Against Human Rights Defenders in Serbia in 2025 (*Izveštaj o napadima na branitelje ljudskih prava u Srbiji za 2025. godinu*), Belgrade, YUCOM, p. 21.

⁹¹⁰ Commissioner for Protection of Equality (2025), "Commissioner: Last moment to stop violence and return within the framework of the Constitution and the law", (*Poverenica: Poslednji trenutak da se zaustavi nasilje i vratimo u okvire Ustava i zakona*), press release, 16 August 2025.

⁹¹¹ YUCOM – Lawyers' Committee for Human Rights (2025), Institutional Response to Freedom of Assembly and Freedom of Expression (2019–2024) (*Institucionalno postupanje prema slobodi okupljanja i slobodi izražavanja 2019–2024*), Belgrade, YUCOM, p. 17.

⁹¹² Amnesty International (2024), *Serbia: Authorities using spyware and Cellebrite forensic extraction tools to hack journalists and activists*, 16 December 2024 and Balkan Investigative Reporting Network – BIRN (2025), Student detained, phone hacked using spyware (*Student priveden, telefon hakovan špijunskim softverom*), 28 February 2025.

Devices were accessed without the owners' passcodes while in police custody. The spyware enabled the extraction of sensitive personal data and provided remote access to microphones and cameras. The Ombudsperson and the Commissioner for Information of Public Importance and Personal Data Protection announced the opening of cases concerning these allegations; however, no outcomes have been reported.⁹¹³ In addition, the personal data of participants in student protests and of judges who ruled in favour of repeating certain local elections were disclosed in tabloid media, without effective accountability measures.⁹¹⁴

b) Consequences

Civil society organisations report that such surveillance practices, combined with smear campaigns and verbal attacks by high-level officials, contribute to a hostile operating environment. Such surveillance produces a chilling effect on the exercise of freedom of expression and peaceful assembly and may lead to self-censorship. The disclosure to tabloids of the personal data of participants in the student protests and on social networks has remained unpunished.⁹¹⁵

Sustained smear campaigns against students and protesters

a) Summary

Throughout the year, students and protesters were subjected to sustained hostile media campaigns. Pro-government tabloids and online outlets depicted activists and organisations as agents of foreign influence and accused them of participating in an alleged attempt to overthrow the President. Protest participants were regularly labelled with derogatory terms such as "terrorists", "Ustaše", "idlers", and "foreign mercenaries". These campaigns were amplified through coordinated reporting across multiple pro-government media outlets, special television programmes, quasi-documentary content and statements by senior public officials. At the beginning of the year, some students were individually targeted through the publication of personal data, including passport photographs, the dissemination of explicit private photographs and lists containing the names and personal details of students from the Faculty of Technical Sciences. Allegations of a "colour revolution" and foreign intelligence involvement, particularly by the Croatian SOA, were a recurring part of these narratives.⁹¹⁶

⁹¹³ European Commission (2025), [*European Commission Report for Serbia for 2025*](#), Brussels, SWD(2025) 755 final, p. 40.

⁹¹⁴ European Commission (2025), [*European Commission Report for Serbia for 2025*](#), Brussels, SWD(2025) 755 final, p. 40.

⁹¹⁵ European Commission (2025), [*European Commission Report for Serbia for 2025*](#), Brussels, SWD(2025) 755 final, p. 40.

⁹¹⁶ Lawyers Committee for Human Rights (YUCOM) (2026), Report on Attacks Against Human Rights Defenders in Serbia in 2025 ([*Izveštaj o napadima na branitelje ljudskih prava u Srbiji za 2025. godinu*](#)), Belgrade, YUCOM, p. 24.

b) Consequences

The coordinated reporting by tabloids, reinforced by statements from senior public officials, had an intimidating effect and contributed to a broader climate in which pressure against students and activists was normalised. Its effect extended beyond individual targeting, as it also risked discouraging wider solidarity and public support for the students' demands.⁹¹⁷

1.4. Deterioration of legal environment: court cases

Extensive Legal Proceedings Targeting Protest Participants

a) Summary

In 2025, numerous activists, students participating in protests, professors and other citizens were arrested and subjected to criminal proceedings. Many were charged with the offence of “inciting violent change of the constitutional order,” a serious offence carrying a prison sentence of up to five years. In a number of cases, this charge appeared to be applied without clear evidence of the legal elements required under the Criminal Code. Protesters were often encouraged to accept plea agreements in order to avoid detention, and some agreements reportedly lacked sufficient factual detail to substantiate the offence.⁹¹⁸

Pre-trial detention was frequently used at an early stage of proceedings, often without detailed reasoning or with limited justification, raising concerns about the proportionality of judicial responses to peaceful assemblies.⁹¹⁹

One example concerns a meeting of the activist group STAV, organised in connection with participation in a protest, which was secretly recorded and later broadcast by pro-government television channels with national coverage. Participants in the meeting were detained on suspicion of preparing a criminal offence against the constitutional order, while some avoided arrest as they were outside the country, where they remain to date. One of them was subjected to months of tabloid attacks and was publicly described by the President as a promoter of an “anti-Serbian ideology” and

⁹¹⁷ Lawyers Committee for Human Rights (YUCOM) (2026), Report on Attacks Against Human Rights Defenders in Serbia in 2025 (*Izveštaj o napadima na branitelje ljudskih prava u Srbiji za 2025. godinu*), Belgrade, YUCOM, p. 24.

⁹¹⁸ YUCOM – Lawyers’ Committee for Human Rights (2025), Institutional Response to Freedom of Assembly and Freedom of Expression (2019–2024) (*Institucionalno postupanje prema slobodi okupljanja i slobodi izražavanja 2019–2024*), Belgrade, YUCOM.

⁹¹⁹ YUCOM – Lawyers’ Committee for Human Rights (2025), Institutional Response to Freedom of Assembly and Freedom of Expression (2019–2024) (*Institucionalno postupanje prema slobodi okupljanja i slobodi izražavanja 2019–2024*), Belgrade, YUCOM.

as someone who “hates the Serbian people”. After spending two months in pre-trial detention, the activists were placed under house arrest, which was lifted only in October 2025, after five months.⁹²⁰

Police also regularly initiated misdemeanour proceedings related to the organisation of protests, even where basic procedural requirements appeared not to be met. Courts rarely rejected such requests at the outset and generally proceeded with the cases. Although many proceedings ended in acquittals or were discontinued due to statutory limitation periods, they prolonged legal uncertainty for those concerned. Police commonly appealed acquittals, despite limited prospects of success, further extending proceedings and contributing to a chilling effect on the exercise of the right to peaceful assembly.⁹²¹

b) Consequences

The lack of effective disciplinary and judicial oversight of police conduct contributes to a climate of impunity and undermines the rule of law.⁹²² At the same time, the repeated initiation of criminal and misdemeanour proceedings without clear evidence or proper procedural grounds raises concerns that legal mechanisms are being used to discourage public participation.

Six activists remain in exile outside Serbia, making this case one of the most prominent examples of the criminalisation of political dissent and pressure on civic activism.⁹²³ In this context, young activists from Serbia are facing brutal politically motivated media and judicial persecution.⁹²⁴ The proceedings are being conducted with the aim of deterring citizens from participating in protests and publicly expressing critical views.⁹²⁵ At the same time, repeated physical attacks and excessive use of

⁹²⁰ Lawyers Committee for Human Rights (YUCOM) (2026), Report on Attacks Against Human Rights Defenders in Serbia in 2025 (*Izveštaj o napadima na branitelje ljudskih prava u Srbiji za 2025. godinu*), Belgrade, YUCOM, p. 23.

⁹²¹ YUCOM – Lawyers’ Committee for Human Rights (2025), Institutional Response to Freedom of Assembly and Freedom of Expression (2019–2024) (*Institucionalno postupanje prema slobodi okupljanja i slobodi izražavanja 2019–2024*), Belgrade, YUCOM.

⁹²² YUCOM – Lawyers’ Committee for Human Rights (2025), Institutional Response to Freedom of Assembly and Freedom of Expression (2019–2024) (*Institucionalno postupanje prema slobodi okupljanja i slobodi izražavanja 2019–2024*), Belgrade, YUCOM.

⁹²³ Lawyers Committee for Human Rights (YUCOM) (2026), Report on Attacks Against Human Rights Defenders in Serbia in 2025 (*Izveštaj o napadima na branitelje ljudskih prava u Srbiji za 2025. godinu*), Belgrade, YUCOM, p. 23.

⁹²⁴ Youth Initiative for Human Rights (YIHR) (2025), *Urgent: End the Political Persecution of Activists from the STAV Youth Group and Members of the PSG*, press release, 17 March 2025.

⁹²⁵ Lawyers Committee for Human Rights (YUCOM) (2026), Report on Attacks Against Human Rights Defenders in Serbia in 2025 (*Izveštaj o napadima na branitelje ljudskih prava u Srbiji za 2025. godinu*), Belgrade, YUCOM, p. 24.

force, combined with selective or absent responses by the competent authorities, have further deepened the mistrust in institutions.⁹²⁶

1.5. Attempts to stifle civic engagement through violence, harassment and negative narratives

Smear campaigns

a) Summary

In 2025, pro-government media and public officials actively engaged in smear campaigns targeting civil society organisations, journalists, human rights defenders and citizens participating in protests. Protesters and activists were publicly labelled as “foreign agents,” “terrorists,” “traitors,” and “extremists,” contributing to their stigmatisation and delegitimisation in public discourse.⁹²⁷ The Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights noted in his 2025 report that civil society actors and demonstrators in Serbia were subjected to stigmatising narratives, including accusations of acting as “foreign agent”.⁹²⁸ In addition, reports indicated the disclosure of personal data of activists and protest participants in media and online platforms, further increasing their exposure to harassment and intimidation. Amnesty International also reported smear campaigns, and noted that protesters and journalists were subjected to intimidation and harassment.⁹²⁹

b) Consequences

Such smear campaigns and public stigmatisation contributed to a hostile and unsafe environment for civil society organisations and citizens participating in protests. As a consequence, they led to the relativisation of violence and fostered an atmosphere of fear, humiliation and impunity.⁹³⁰

⁹²⁶ Lawyers Committee for Human Rights (YUCOM) (2026), Report on Attacks Against Human Rights Defenders in Serbia in 2025 ([*Izveštaj o napadima na branitelje ljudskih prava u Srbiji za 2025. godinu*](#)), Belgrade, YUCOM, p. 24.

⁹²⁷ Commissioner for Protection of Equality (2025), "Commissioner: Last moment to stop violence and return within the framework of the Constitution and the law", ([*Poverenica: Poslednji trenutak da se zaustavi nasilje i vratimo u okvire Ustava i zakona*](#)), press release, 16 August 2025.

⁹²⁸ Council of Europe, Commissioner for Human Rights (2025), [1st Periodic Activity Report 2025 by Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights \(1 January – 30 April 2025\)](#), Strasbourg, 9 July 2025, p. 8.

⁹²⁹ Amnesty International (2025), [Amnesty International Report 2024/25: The State of the World's Human Rights](#), Amnesty International Ltd., London, Index: POL 10/8515/2025, p. 324.

⁹³⁰ Commissioner for Protection of Equality (2025), "Commissioner: Last moment to stop violence and return within the framework of the Constitution and the law", ([*Poverenica: Poslednji trenutak da se zaustavi nasilje i vratimo u okvire Ustava i zakona*](#)), press release, 16 August 2025.

1.6. Funding reductions and restrictions

Public Funding of Civil Society and Transparency Concerns

a) Summary

Available research does not explicitly confirm formal funding reductions or restrictions. However, findings indicate that public funds are frequently allocated to so-called “phantom” organisations or entities widely perceived as government-organised non-governmental organisations (GONGOs).⁹³¹

The overall public funding process remains highly non-transparent, particularly in relation to project evaluation and scoring. Evaluation criteria often exclude or significantly downplay the prior experience and proven expertise of CSOs in the relevant field.⁹³² This enables the allocation of funds to newly established organisations or entities lacking demonstrable capacity.

It has also been observed that grants are regularly awarded to organisations established shortly before, or even after, the publication of a call for proposals. The coincidence between the date of establishment and the launch of the call may indicate that such organisations were created primarily to access specific funding rather than to pursue genuine public-interest objectives.⁹³³

b) Consequences

The growing number of GONGOs undermines the independence and credibility of civil society. By allocating public funds to these organisations and presenting them as legitimate actors, the authorities create a parallel system that serves governmental interests. This diminishes public trust in independent CSOs, makes it more difficult for organisations working on anti-corruption and human rights to operate, and undermines transparency, democratic accountability and the rule of law.⁹³⁴

⁹³¹ Civic Initiatives (2025), Public Funds for Gender Equality: Non-transparent Financing and Institutional Disinterest (*Javna sredstva za rodnu ravnopravnost: netransparentno finansiranje i institucionalna nezainteresovanost*), Civic Initiatives, Belgrade, pp. 3-4.

⁹³² Civic Initiatives (2025), Public Funds for Gender Equality: Non-transparent Financing and Institutional Disinterest (*Javna sredstva za rodnu ravnopravnost: netransparentno finansiranje i institucionalna nezainteresovanost*), Civic Initiatives, Belgrade, pp. 3-4.

⁹³³ Civic Initiatives (2025), Manual for Identifying and Monitoring GONGO and Phantom Organizations (*Priručnik za prepoznavanje i praćenje GONGO i fantomskih organizacija*), Civic Initiatives, Belgrade, p. 9.

⁹³⁴ Transparency Serbia (2025), From the State Budget to Party Coffers through Phantom Citizens' Associations (*Iz budžeta u stranačke kase preko fantomskih udruženja građana*), Transparency Serbia, Belgrade.

1.7. Barriers to participation in law and policy-making

Suspended cooperation with the legislative and executive branches

a) Summary

The Council for Creation of an Enabling Environment for the Development of Civil Society is a consultative governmental body tasked to monitor the participation of civil society organisations in the process of creating public policies.⁹³⁵ However, on 27 January 2025, the CSOs' representatives in the Council unanimously decided to suspend their participation and attendance at Council meetings until the circumstances that led to the endangerment of civil society in Serbia and violations of national and international laws and policy documents in this area are identified and addressed. This decision was taken in light of “numerous incidents indicating a deteriorating environment for civil society, such as: persistent smear campaigns against CSOs, lack of response by government representatives in the Council to alarming reports of pressure, intimidation and attacks on human rights defenders, activists and students”.⁹³⁶ It is also stated that the actions of the competent authorities have violated the fundamental rights to freedom of association, freedom of assembly and freedom of expression and pose a direct threat to civil society in Serbia. Furthermore, on 4 February 2025, 28 leading Serbian CSOs suspended cooperation with the legislative and executive branches and ended their participation in formal and informal working groups within ministries, as well as in all other permanent and *ad hoc* working groups, councils and similar mechanisms of public institutions that require direct participation of CSOs..⁹³⁷

b) Consequences

These developments undermine structured dialogue between the authorities and civil society and weaken participatory policy-making mechanisms.

1.8. Other developments

⁹³⁵ Serbia, Government of Serbia, Decision on the establishment of the Council for the creation of an enabling environment for the development of civil society, Official Gazette RS N. 83/2023, 72/2024 (*Odluka o obrazovanju Saveta za stvaranje podsticajnog okruženja za razvoj civilnog društva*), 23 August 2024.

⁹³⁶ Belgrade Open School (2025), Civil Society Organizations have frozen their membership in the Government Council (*Organizacije civilnog društva zamrzle članstvo u vladinom Savetu*), press release, 27 January 2025.

⁹³⁷ Civic Initiatives (2025), Suspend cooperation with the legislative and executive authorities in Serbia (*Obustava saradnje sa zakonodavnom i izvršnom vlašću u Srbiji*), press release, 4 February 2025.

Escalating Threats to Media Freedom and Journalist Safety

a) Summary

Throughout the 2025, 317 incidents on violations of press freedom were documented, more than double the number of cases (127) recorded in 2024 by SafeJournalists Network.⁹³⁸ Sixteen attacks were attributed to police, over 90% occurring during protests, with five resulting in injuries.⁹³⁹ High-ranking public officials, including the President, publicly discredited journalists and media outlets, contributing to hostile narratives and increased threats.⁹⁴⁰ Moreover, several foreign journalists were denied entry to Serbia before the protests.⁹⁴¹

b) Consequences

In 2025, Serbia's media environment continued to deteriorate at an alarming speed.⁹⁴² These developments created a hostile environment for journalists, undermining their safety and independence.

2. CIVIC SPACE EXPANSION

2.1. Improvements in legal environment: freedom of association

No improvements identified

There is no evidence of improvement in civic space in Serbia in 2025, on the contrary, multiple indicators point to continued pressure and further deterioration.

2.2. Improvements in legal environment: freedom of assembly

No improvements identified

⁹³⁸ SafeJournalists Network (2024), [Database of Incidents Against Journalists](#), SafeJournalists Network.

⁹³⁹ Media Freedom Rapid Response (MFRR) (2025), [Monitoring Report 2025](#), (MFRR), p. 43.

⁹⁴⁰ Media Freedom Rapid Response (MFRR) (2025), [Monitoring Report 2025](#), (MFRR), p. 44.

⁹⁴¹ European Commission (2025), [European Commission Report for Serbia for 2025](#), Brussels, SWD(2025) 755 final, p. 40.

⁹⁴² Media Freedom Rapid Response (MFRR) (2025), [Monitoring Report 2025](#), (MFRR), p. 45.

There is no evidence of improvement in civic space in Serbia in 2025, on the contrary, multiple indicators point to continued pressure and further deterioration.

2.3. Improvements in legal environment: freedom of expression

No improvements identified

There is no evidence of improvement in civic space in Serbia in 2025, on the contrary, multiple indicators point to continued pressure and further deterioration.

2.4. Improvements in legal environment: court cases

No improvements identified

There is no evidence of improvement in civic space in Serbia in 2025, on the contrary, multiple indicators point to continued pressure and further deterioration.

2.5. Positive narratives

No improvements identified

There is no evidence of improvement in civic space in Serbia in 2025, on the contrary, multiple indicators point to continued pressure and further deterioration.

2.6. Improvements in funding

No improvements identified

There is no evidence of improvement in civic space in Serbia in 2025, on the contrary, multiple indicators point to continued pressure and further deterioration.

2.7. Improvements in participation

No improvements identified

There is no evidence of improvement in civic space in Serbia in 2025, on the contrary, multiple indicators point to continued pressure and further deterioration.

2.8. Other developments

No other improvements identified

There is no evidence of improvement in civic space in Serbia in 2025, on the contrary, multiple indicators point to continued pressure and further deterioration.

Sweden (SE)

Civic space in the EU in 2025

Country: Sweden

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Disclaimer

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1. CIVIC SPACE PRESSURES

1.1. Deterioration of legal environment: freedom of association

Statutory democracy conditions for state funding

a) Summary

On 1 January 2025, statutory democracy conditions governing state support to civil society organisations and religious communities entered into force in Sweden. This was the consequence of the government introducing a uniform democracy requirement and new statutory frameworks governing state support to religious communities and other forms of state-regulated support to civil society.⁹⁴³ The reform introduced a new act to replace the previous framework on state grants and support to religious communities.⁹⁴⁴ It also introduced statutory democracy condition (*demokrativillkor*) provisions into the Act on the Swedish Inheritance Fund (*Lag (2021:401) om Allmänna arvsfonden*)⁹⁴⁵, regulating circumstances in which support by the Fund must not be granted.

Under these provisions, support may not be granted to an organisation if the organisation, or a representative acting within the framework of its activities, exercises violence, coercion or threats, discriminates or otherwise violates the principle of equal human value, promotes such conduct, or counteracts the democratic system of governance. The assessment may, under specified conditions, also extend to cooperating organisations.⁹⁴⁶

Under the reform, democracy conditions are defined as requirements relating to an organisation's purpose, governance structure and activities. The preparatory works clarify that the assessment is not limited to formal statutes but may extend to how the organisation operates in practice. They further specify that conduct by representatives acting within the

⁹⁴³ Sweden, Government Bill 2023/24:119 State support to religious communities and civil society – uniform and legally certain conditions (*Statens stöd till trossamfund och civilsamhället – enhetliga och rättssäkra villkor*), 27 March 2024.

⁹⁴⁴ Sweden, Act (2024:487) on State Grants to Religious Communities (*Lag (2024:487) om statsbidrag till trossamfund*)

⁹⁴⁵ Sweden, Act (2021:401) on the Swedish Inheritance Fund (*Lag (2021:401) om Allmänna arvsfonden*).

⁹⁴⁶ Sweden, Act (2024:492) amending the Act (2021:401) on the Swedish Inheritance Fund (*Lag (2024:492) om ändring i lagen (2021:401) om Allmänna arvsfonden*), Chapter 2, Section 4a–4b; see also Government Bill 2023/24:119, pp. 268–269.

framework of the organisation's activities may be attributed to the organisation when determining eligibility for state support.⁹⁴⁷

The Government emphasised that it regarded it as a matter of serious concern that certain Swedish organisations, including religious communities that had received state funding, had been found to have connections to organisations or regimes with views and values incompatible with fundamental rights and the democratic system of governance in Sweden. Against this background, the reform was presented as necessary to ensure that public funds are not allocated to actors whose activities or affiliations conflict with core democratic principles.⁹⁴⁸ The preparatory works also address the constitutional implications of the reform. The Government examined the relationship between democracy conditions and the protection of freedom of association under the Instrument of Government (*Regeringsformen*). It concluded that conditioning access to public financial support on compliance with democracy requirements does not constitute a restriction of the constitutional right to form or belong to an association, as the reform does not prohibit the establishment or operation of organisations, but instead only regulates eligibility for public funding. The assessment emphasised that the reform concerns the distribution of state resources and that organisations remain free to operate without state support.⁹⁴⁹

b) Consequences

The entry into force of statutory democracy conditions on 1 January 2025 has had tangible effects on civil society actors who are dependent on public funding. In October 2025, the Swedish Agency for Support to Faith Communities (*Myndigheten för stöd till trossamfund*)⁹⁵⁰ determined that Jehovah's Witnesses no longer fulfilled the statutory democracy requirements and therefore denied continued eligibility for state support. The authority's assessment referred to internal practices considered incompatible with the statutory criteria concerning respect for fundamental democratic values and equal human worth.⁹⁵¹ Other applications from religious communities were also rejected under the new framework.⁹⁵²

⁹⁴⁷ Sweden, Government Bill 2023/24:119 State support to religious communities and civil society – uniform and legally certain conditions (*Statens stöd till trossamfund och civilsamhället – enhetliga och rättssäkra villkor*), 27 March 2024, pp. 60-63.

⁹⁴⁸ Sweden, Government Bill 2023/24:119, p. 63.

⁹⁴⁹ Sweden, Government Bill 2023/24:119, pp. 71-72.

⁹⁵⁰ As of 1 January 2026, the Swedish Agency for Support to Faith Communities (*Myndigheten för stöd till trossamfund*) has been merged into the Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society (*Myndigheten för ungdoms- och civilsamhällesfrågor*). References to the Swedish Agency for Support to Faith Communities in this report relate to the authority as it existed during the 2025 reporting period.

⁹⁵¹ Sweden, Swedish Agency for Support to Faith Communities, ref. no SST 2025-168, 24 October 2025.

⁹⁵² See Sweden, Swedish Agency for Support to Faith Communities, ref. no SST 2025-193, 24 October 2025 and ref. no SST 2025-179, 1 December 2025.

1.2. Attempts to stifle civic engagement through violence, harassment and negative narratives

Reported threats and harassment against civil society organisations

a) Summary

In 2024, Swedish civil society organisations continued to report exposure to threats, harassment and violence linked to their activities. According to the Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society (*Myndigheten för ungdoms- och civilsamhällesfrågor*), one in four associations report having been subjected to threats, harassment, violence or theft during 2024.⁹⁵³ Exposure was reported across different types of organisations. The Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society notes that religious organisations were among those reporting comparatively higher levels of exposure.⁹⁵⁴ Another report on behalf of the Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society states that seven in ten religious associations have been subjected to crime. Burglary is more common in the Church of Sweden and the Catholic Church in Sweden, which may partly be explained by their open access to the general public and the presence of valuable objects in church buildings. Graffiti, by contrast, more often targets Jewish, Muslim and Orthodox organisations. Desecration of graves is more frequently directed at Jewish and Muslims burial sites, as well as at the Church of Sweden which bears the primary responsibility for cemeteries. Buddhist and free church associations show lower exposure to property crimes in comparison to other faith communities. Jewish and Muslim associations generally perceive the motives behind these crimes as more linked to underlying hate. Other faith communities such as the Church of Sweden view burglary and vandalism against their buildings as less connected to their religious affiliation.⁹⁵⁵

While four in ten congregations in Sweden report having experienced at least one violent incident, exposure is unevenly distributed. Jewish and Muslim congregations are the most affected. All four Jewish congregations in Sweden reported more than six violent incidents during the year. Among Muslim congregations, about two in ten reported six or more incidents, while more than four in ten reported no violent crime at all. A similar pattern appears in relation to threats of violence. Three out of four Jewish congregations reported such threats, often occurring more than ten times during the year. More than four in ten Muslim congregations reported similar experiences, and in most of these cases the threats were repeated at least six

⁹⁵³ Sweden, Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society (*Myndigheten för ungdoms- och civilsamhällesfrågor*), Threats and Hate against Civil Society – Short Report 2025 (*Hot och hat mot civila samhället – Kortrapport 2025*), 5 June 2025, p. 5.

⁹⁵⁴ Sweden, Threats and Hate against Civil Society – Short Report 2025 (*Hot och hat mot civila samhället – Kortrapport 2025*), p. 4.

⁹⁵⁵ Sweden, Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society (*Myndigheten för ungdoms- och civilsamhällesfrågor*), Threats and Risks in Religious Communities – A national survey of local congregations' exposure and vulnerability to crime and other risks (*Hot och risker i trossamfund – en nationell kartläggning av lokala församlingars utsatthet och sårbarhet för brott och andra risker*), 24 April 2025, p. 8 f.

times. Threats of violence were also reported by some Church of Sweden and Orthodox congregations, but of a less systematic nature. Physical assaults, such as pushing, hitting, and kicking, were again more commonly reported by Jewish and Muslim congregations, and often on a recurring basis.⁹⁵⁶

b) Consequences

Documented exposure to threats and harassment has led to behavioural adaptations among civil society organisations. In 2024, 8.6 per cent of associations reported that they had either changed or refrained from activities or public engagement due to exposure or fear of exposure to violence, threats or harassment. More specifically, 4.1 per cent reported refraining from expressing opinions on specific issues, and 1.3 per cent reported refraining from conducting certain activities.⁹⁵⁷ No statistically significant increase compared to previous years was recorded. Still, the Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society underlined that repeated exposure or fear of exposure to violence, threats or harassment contributes to stress, insecurity and risks of self-censorship.⁹⁵⁸

1.3. Funding reductions and restrictions

Additional budgetary developments affecting civic society financing

a) Summary

In addition to the revised statutory framework governing eligibility for state grants, developments in Sweden's national budget have affected the overall financial framework within which certain civil society organisations operate.

According to the Budget Bill for 2026, expenditure under Expenditure Area 7 (International Development Cooperation) is expected to decrease during the period 2024–2026. The proposed allocation for 2026 amounts to SEK 43,653 million, compared to SEK 45,814 million in the 2025

⁹⁵⁶ Sweden, Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society (*Myndigheten för ungdoms- och civilsamhällesfrågor*), Threats and Risks in Religious Communities – A national survey of local congregations' exposure and vulnerability to crime and other risks (*Hot och risker i trossamfund – en nationell kartläggning av lokala församlingars utsatthet och sårbarhet för brott och andra risker*), 24 April 2025, p. 49-50.

⁹⁵⁷ Sweden, Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society (*Myndigheten för ungdoms- och civilsamhällesfrågor*), Threats and Hate against Civil Society – Short Report 2025 (*Hot och hat mot civila samhället – Kortrapport 2025*), 5 June 2025, p. 6.

⁹⁵⁸ Sweden, Threats and Hate against Civil Society – Short Report 2025 (*Hot och hat mot civila samhället – Kortrapport 2025*), p. 8.

forecast and SEK 49,604 million in the 2024 outcome.⁹⁵⁹ The reduction forms part of a broader reprioritisation within development cooperation policy. At the same time, other expenditure areas, including defence and security-related appropriations, are proposed to increase substantially.⁹⁶⁰

b) Consequences

Although the budget adjustments do not alter the legal right of organisations to operate, the reduction in the overall aid framework affect Swedish civic society organisations that rely on development cooperation funding. An independent analysis by CONCORD Sweden, an umbrella organisation for Swedish development NGOs, has described the budgetary adjustments as a continued contraction of Sweden's development assistance framework and noted that the reduced development aid budget narrows the financial space available for civic society actors engaged in international cooperation.⁹⁶¹

Reductions in state funding to adult education

a) Summary

Through the budget proposition for 2024, the Government introduced a multi-year reduction of state funding to study associations (*studieförbund*). The allocation was reduced by 250 million SEK in 2024, followed by further reductions of 100 million and 150 million in 2025 and 2026 respectively. The measures correspond to a reduction of slightly more than ¼ of the previous funding level, from approximately 1.8 billion to 1.3 billion SEK.⁹⁶² The reductions have required extensive adjustments across the adult education sector.

In its 2025 follow-up report, the Swedish National Council of Adult Education (*Folkbildningsrådet*) assesses the consequences of the reduced appropriations for both study associations and folk high schools (*folkhögskolor*). According to the Council's findings, 96 per cent of responding local branches of study associations reported implementing cutbacks during 2023–2024. The most frequently reported cost-saving measures was reductions in staff with approximately 84 per cent of respondents reporting that they had reduced the number of employees. Other areas of operation were also affected, including support to member associations, fewer cultural

⁹⁵⁹ Sweden, Government Bill 2025/26:1 Budget Bill for 2026 (*Budgetpropositionen för 2026*), 18 September 2025, p. 127 (see expenditure area 7, table 7.3).

⁹⁶⁰ Sweden, Government Bill 2025/26:1 Budget Bill for 2026 (*Budgetpropositionen för 2026*), 18 September 2025, p. 131 f.

⁹⁶¹ Sweden, CONCORD Sweden, Analysis of the Autumn Budget 2025 (*Analys av höstbudgeten 2025*), 22 September 2025.

⁹⁶² Sweden, Swedish National Council of Adult Education (*Folkbildningsrådet*), The Consequences of Reductions – An Initial Analysis of How Reduced Appropriations and Strained Finances Affect Adult Education (*Nedskärningarnas konsekvenser – En initial analys av hur minskade anslag och ansträngd ekonomi påverkar folkbildningen*), 2025, p. 6; Sweden, Government Bill 2023/24:1 Budget Bill for 2024 (*Budgetpropositionen för 2024*), 15 September 2023, p. 199-200 (see expenditure area 17).

programmes and reduced support to study circles.⁹⁶³ Among folk high schools, 90 per cent reported having reduced operations during 2023-2024.⁹⁶⁴

An independent consequence analysis conducted in 2024, based on survey responses from study associations, similarly identified reduced rural presence, diminished outreach capacity and increased participant fees as likely effects of the funding cuts.⁹⁶⁵

b) Consequences

The Swedish National Council of Adult Education highlights that study associations and folk high schools fulfil a democracy-supporting function, particularly in areas with limited access to alternative educational or cultural infrastructure. The contraction of local presence reduces access to educational activities, meeting places and cultural events in many parts of the country.

Furthermore, activities for groups requiring additional support such as persons with disabilities or persons in socioeconomically vulnerable situations, require more resources and are therefore particularly affected by the reductions.⁹⁶⁶

Many participants report increasing difficulties in acquiring and keeping adequate premises for cultural activities. Music groups are particularly affected due to a shortage of rehearsal rooms and studios which have led to overcrowding or loss of access. Study associations have also had to terminate lease agreements and move to smaller premises, thereby reducing the availability of facilities provided. In addition, rising rental costs have made it financially difficult for theatre and dance groups to continue operating in their previous venues. Participants also report declining standards of existing facilities due to reduced resources, lacking equipment and inadequate maintenance. The reduced public funding and consequent increased participation fees has also

⁹⁶³ Sweden, Swedish National Council of Adult Education (*Folkbildningsrådet*), The Consequences of Reductions – An Initial Analysis of How Reduced Appropriations and Strained Finances Affect Adult Education (*Nedskärningarnas konsekvenser – En initial analys av hur minskade anslag och ansträngd ekonomi påverkar folkbildningen*), p. 23 f.

⁹⁶⁴ Sweden, Swedish National Council of Adult Education (*Folkbildningsrådet*), The Consequences of Reductions – An Initial Analysis of How Reduced Appropriations and Strained Finances Affect Adult Education (*Nedskärningarnas konsekvenser – En initial analys av hur minskade anslag och ansträngd ekonomi påverkar folkbildningen*), p. 11 f.

⁹⁶⁵ Sweden, Swedish National Council of Adult Education (*Folkbildningsrådet*), The Consequences of Reductions – An Initial Analysis of How Reduced Appropriations and Strained Finances Affect Adult Education (*Nedskärningarnas konsekvenser – En initial analys av hur minskade anslag och ansträngd ekonomi påverkar folkbildningen*), p. 6; Sweden, Martin Rynoson, A Quieter Sweden – Impact Assessment of the Reduced State Grants to Study Associations (*Ett tystare Sverige – Konsekvensanalys av de minskade statsbidragen till studieförbunden*), Tankesmedjan Tiden and Fores, Report No. 4/2024, 2024, pp. 10–17.

⁹⁶⁶ Sweden, Swedish National Council of Adult Education (*Folkbildningsrådet*), The Consequences of Reductions – An Initial Analysis of How Reduced Appropriations and Strained Finances Affect Adult Education (*Nedskärningarnas konsekvenser – En initial analys av hur minskade anslag och ansträngd ekonomi påverkar folkbildningen*), p. 42 ff.

made recruitment more difficult, which in turn limits opportunities for new initiatives and in-person cultural programmes.⁹⁶⁷

1.4. Barriers to participation in law and policy-making

Limited capacity and unequal conditions for participation

a) Summary

The Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society reported in its follow-up on the conditions for non-profit associations that many associations face structural constraints that affect their capacity to engage in dialogue and consultation processes with public authorities.⁹⁶⁸

Associations for children and young people report to a lower degree than associations for older persons that representatives within the public sector listen to them. Similarly, associations for older persons more frequently report that they are treated equally compared to other organisations, compared with associations for children and young people and associations for adults.⁹⁶⁹ The report further highlights differences depending on organisational role. Associations acting primarily as service providers report easier access to public officials compared to organisations acting as voice-bearers or advocacy actors.⁹⁷⁰

The Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society further notes that policy ambitions to increase civil society's role as service providers within the welfare sector may give rise to tensions between the role as an implementer and of the role as an independent advocacy actor. The preparatory works relating to the policy for civic society caution that extensive public assignments may create dependency relationships that risk affecting organisations' independence and willingness to freely express opinions vis-à-vis public authorities.⁹⁷¹

⁹⁶⁷ Sweden, Swedish National Council of Adult Education (*Folkbildningsrådet*), *The Consequences of Reductions – An Initial Analysis of How Reduced Appropriations and Strained Finances Affect Adult Education* (*Nedskärningarnas konsekvenser – En initial analys av hur minskade anslag och ansträngd ekonomi påverkar folkbildningen*), p. 40.

⁹⁶⁸ Sweden, Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society (*Myndigheten för ungdoms- och civilsamhällesfrågor*), *Stable steps despite difficulties – Follow-up of the conditions for non-profit associations 2024* (*Stabila steg trots svårigheter – Uppföljning av ideella föreningars villkor 2024*), 2024, pp. 45–48.

⁹⁶⁹ Sweden, Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society (*Myndigheten för ungdoms- och civilsamhällesfrågor*), *Stable steps despite difficulties – Follow-up of the conditions for non-profit associations 2024* (*Stabila steg trots svårigheter – Uppföljning av ideella föreningars villkor 2024*), 2024, p. 42 f.

⁹⁷⁰ Sweden, *Stable steps despite difficulties – Follow-up of the conditions for non-profit associations 2024* (*Stabila steg trots svårigheter – Uppföljning av ideella föreningars villkor 2024*), 2024, p. 44.

⁹⁷¹ Sweden, *Stable steps despite difficulties – Follow-up of the conditions for non-profit associations 2024* (*Stabila steg trots svårigheter – Uppföljning av ideella föreningars villkor 2024*), 2024, p. 44;

b) Consequences

The identified differences suggest unequal practical conditions for participation in policy dialogue and consultation processes. Associations for children and young people, advocacy-oriented organisations and organisations operating at national level report comparatively weaker experiences of influence and equal treatment.⁹⁷²

In addition, The Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society notes that financial vulnerability, reliance on voluntary work and administrative demands constrain some organisations' ability to allocate time and expertise to policy engagement.⁹⁷³ Resource limitations may therefore function as indirect barriers to effective participation, particularly for smaller or advocacy-focused organisations.

2. CIVIC SPACE EXPANSION

2.1. Improvements in legal environment: freedom of association

Strengthened security for civic society organisations

a) Summary

In January 2025, the Government adopted Regulation (2025:8) amending Regulation (2018:1533) on State Grants for Security-Enhancing Measures to Organisations within Civil Society.⁹⁷⁴

Under the amended Regulation, state grants may be provided not only to non-profit associations and foundations, but also to registered religious communities and congregations within such communities.⁹⁷⁵ The Regulation specifies that support may be granted where an organisation's activities are affected by fear of threats, violence or harassment linked to, inter alia, ethnicity,

and Sweden, Government Bill 2009/10:55 A policy for civil society (*En politik för det civila samhället*), 26 November 2009, p. 51.

⁹⁷² See above.

⁹⁷³ Sweden, Stable steps despite difficulties – Follow-up of the conditions for non-profit associations 2024 (*Stabila steg trots svårigheter – Uppföljning av ideella föreningars villkor 2024*), 2024, p. 45 f.

⁹⁷⁴ Sweden, Regulation (2025:8) amending Regulation (2018:1533) on State Grants for Security-Enhancing Measures to Organisations within Civil Society (*Förordning (2025:8) om ändring i förordningen (2018:1533) om statsbidrag för säkerhetshöjande åtgärder till organisationer inom det civila samhället*).

⁹⁷⁵ Sweden, Regulation (2018:1533) on State Grants for Security-Enhancing Measures to Organisations within Civil Society (*Förordning (2018:1533) om statsbidrag för säkerhetshöjande åtgärder till organisationer inom det civila samhället*), as amended by SFS 2025:8, Section 6–7 a.

religion, sexual orientation or the organisation's work against racism.⁹⁷⁶ Similarly to the amendments in the Act (2021:401) on the Swedish Inheritance Fund⁹⁷⁷, provisions on ineligibility based on violence, discrimination or actions counteracting the democratic system of governance were introduced as well as strengthened reporting, audit and follow-up requirements.⁹⁷⁸

b) Consequences

The 2025 amendment expands access to state-funded security measures for organisations that face threats due to their identity, activities or advocacy. By explicitly including registered religious communities and congregations among eligible recipients, the Regulation strengthens the protective framework for faith-based actors operating in a context marked by increased security risks.

By providing financial support for security-enhancing measures, the Regulation reduces the economic burden on organisations exposed to threats. This contributes to safeguarding their right to exercise freedom of association and religion without disproportionate security costs, which is important in a context where civil society actors report exposure to threats and harassment.⁹⁷⁹

⁹⁷⁶ Sweden, Regulation (2018:1533) on State Grants for Security-Enhancing Measures to Organisations within Civil Society (*Förordning (2018:1533) om statsbidrag för säkerhetshöjande åtgärder till organisationer inom det civila samhället*), as amended by SFS 2025:8, Section 6.

⁹⁷⁷ See Section 1.1 of the report.

⁹⁷⁸ Sweden, Regulation (2018:1533) on State Grants for Security-Enhancing Measures to Organisations within Civil Society (*Förordning (2018:1533) om statsbidrag för säkerhetshöjande åtgärder till organisationer inom det civila samhället*), Section 8 a–8 b and 15 a, 16–16 b and 17 a.

⁹⁷⁹ See Section 1.2 of the report.

Slovenia (SI)

Civic space in the EU in 2025

Country: SLOVENIA

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Disclaimer

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1. CIVIC SPACE PRESSURES

1.1. Deterioration of legal environment: freedom of assembly

1. Šutar Law

a) Summary

The Law on Urgent Measures to Ensure Public Safety (Zakon o nujnih ukrepih za zagotavljanje javne varnosti – ZNUZJV; so-called “Šutar Law”)⁹⁸⁰ is a package of legislative measures adopted in November 2025 after the killing of Aleš Šutar in Novo mesto by members of the Romani community. The law is intended to curb violent crime and the use of illegal weapons. It temporarily expands police powers to enter premises and seize weapons in situations of serious and immediate threat, increases the use of surveillance mechanisms (photo/video/audio recording, the use of drones) in high-risk areas, and tightens criminal sanctions by enabling prosecution of certain violent acts *ex officio* and imposing stricter penalties for repeat offenders. It also introduces social safeguards, particularly for the protection of children and vulnerable minors.

b) Consequences

The Šutar Law specifically targets the Romani community, with a denser concentration of its members residing around Slovenia’s south-eastern town of Novo mesto. While the law was specifically intended to curb crime committed by members of this community, it nonetheless applies generally to all Slovene citizens. Following its legislative mandate, the Government declared two high-risk areas: Novo mesto and an area in Ljubljana city centre – Metelkova street, entirely unrelated to the Romani issues. Metelkova is an autonomous cultural zone, established in the 1990s, and has become Slovenia’s major hub for alternative culture, social initiatives, political activism and artistic freedom. Declaring it a high-risk zone, subject to increased surveillance and police presence, is bound to negatively impact freedom of expression and freedom of assembly.

2. Proposal for the Act Amending the Public Gatherings Act (ZJZ)

a) Summary

⁹⁸⁰ Slovenia, Act on Urgent Measures to ensure Public Security, (*Zakon o nujnih ukrepih za zagotavljanje javne varnosti*, ZNUZJV), 18 November 2025.

Following expert consultation,⁹⁸¹ the government adopted a draft amendment to the Public Gatherings Act (*Zakon o javnih zbiranjih* – ZJZ)⁹⁸² and submitted it to the Parliament for consideration. The amendment aims to enhance safety and ensure a more effective order at rallies and events.⁹⁸³ Key changes include expanding certain definitions (such as dangerous objects or substances), introducing additional requirements and responsibilities for event monitors, requiring organisers to provide more detailed information when registering a gathering or event (including the route), and increasing fines, as current penalties are considered insufficiently deterrent.⁹⁸⁴

b) Consequences

The proposal prioritises order and safety at events while neglecting protections for the right to peaceful assembly. Existing regulation has proven to be problematic due to normative ambiguities and inconsistencies, which, during the COVID-19 pandemic, allowed for disproportionate restrictions.⁹⁸⁵ Rather than a comprehensive reform to strengthen the right to assembly,⁹⁸⁶ the amendment narrows it by imposing additional obligations on event monitors, increasing fines and authorities' powers. It also increases the personal data organisers must provide when registering an event, a measure that may discourage gatherings, especially those critical of the authorities.

1.2. Deterioration of legal environment: freedom of expression

Draft Amendment to the Act on the Slovenian Intelligence and Security Agency (ZSOVA)

⁹⁸¹ Text of the Act Amending the Public Gatherings Act (*Zakon o javnih zbiranjih*, ZJZ), available at <https://e-uprava.gov.si/si/drzava-in-druzba/e-demokracija/predlogi-predpisov/predlog-predpisa.html?id=17677&lang=si>.

⁹⁸² Slovenia, Public Gatherings Act (*Zakon o javnih zbiranjih*, ZJZ), 20 June 2002, and subsequent modifications.

⁹⁸³ Text of the Act Amending the Public Gatherings Act, available at <https://e-uprava.gov.si/si/drzava-in-druzba/e-demokracija/predlogi-predpisov/predlog-predpisa.html?id=17677&lang=si>.

⁹⁸⁴ *A proposal to amend the Public Gatherings Act is under public review*, GOV.SI, 19 March 2025: <https://www.gov.si/novice/2025-03-19-v-javni-obravnavi-je-predlog-sprememb-zakona-o-javnih-zbiranjih/>.

⁹⁸⁵ During the anti-government protests amid the COVID epidemic, the act proved problematic due to its inadequate and unclear provisions, which allowed the authorities to exert various forms of pressure on protesters. Mladina weekly journal: <https://www.mladina.si/215338/protivladni-shodi-so-spontani-in-neorganizirani/>; <https://pravna-mreza.si/objave/zahteva-po-posredovanju-stevilnih-osebnih-podatkov-ima-odvracalni-ucinek-na-izvrsevanje-pravice-do-protesta/>.

⁹⁸⁶ This concern has been largely raised by civil society organizations, e.g. the Legal Network for the Protection of Democracy (*Pravna mreža za varstvo demokracije*), available at: <https://pravna-mreza.si/objave/odziv-na-predlog-sprememb-zakona-o-javnih-zbiranjih/>.

a) Summary

The Slovene Parliament is currently reviewing a draft amendment to the Slovenian Intelligence and Security Agency Act (*Zakon o Slovenski varnostno-obveščevalni agenciji – ZSOVA*)⁹⁸⁷, which the government has proposed to be adopted under an urgent legislative procedure on the grounds of national security.⁹⁸⁸ The amendment expands the scope of intelligence activities to include the processing of data from abroad or related to foreign entities, aligning the conditions for data collection in both intelligence and counterintelligence operations. It introduces two new data-gathering measures: the use of IMSI catchers to monitor mobile phone signals and direct access to telecommunications traffic data on communication devices (spyware). It also broadens the categories of personal data that may be processed to include biometric data.⁹⁸⁹

b) Consequences

The new data-gathering measures represent a highly invasive interference with communication and information privacy⁹⁹⁰, potentially restricting the rights to expression, assembly, and association. Despite safeguards, key terms defining permissible use remain broad and unclear⁹⁹¹, reducing legal certainty and increasing the risk of excessive rights infringements, raising proportionality and necessity

⁹⁸⁷ Slovenia, Slovenian Intelligence and Security Agency Act (*Zakon o Slovenski obveščevalno-varnostni agenciji*, ZSOVA), 7 April 1999, and subsequent modifications.

⁹⁸⁸ Procedure for adopting and the text of the Act Amending the Slovenian Intelligence and Security Agency Act, available at: https://www.dz-rs.si/wps/portal/Home/zakonodaja/izbran!/ut/p/z1/jY_BCoJAFEW_xYVb31OxrJ0SGGMRapLNjSmUVBHximhr09oVZT4dvdyzoUHFDKgbf6oeK4q0eb1mM90cSGr0CNhYGLgBC5Gx_AQk62Prr-E0xdgxQ5GG8vfJ2hjkphA5_j45zyc508AdHqeAOW1KN6vem1huxyoZDcmmTTucqxLpbb-raOOwzAYXAheM-MqGh1_KaXoFWSfJHRNmmbPHTt5mvYCC9LReA!/dz/d5/L2dBISEvZ0FBIS9nQSEh/?uid=82B9D062A47BD199C1258D3F004D9222&db=pre_zak&mandat=IX.

⁹⁸⁹ *Proposed amendments to the Slovenian Intelligence and Security Agency Act*, Uradni list, 5 November 2025: <https://www.uradni-list.si/novice/pogled/kako-bo-novela-zakona-o-sovi-spremenila-pridobivanje-in-obdelavo-podatkov/kako-bo-novela-zakona-o-sovi-spremenila-pridobivanje-in-obdelavo-podatkov>.

⁹⁹⁰ IMSI catchers and spyware cannot target only the intended individual and inherently risk infringing the rights of others. *Why we believe that the proposed Slovenian Intelligence and Security Agency Act is dangerous*, Danes je nov dan, 25 November 2025; <https://danesjenovdan.si/zakon-o-sovi/>.

⁹⁹¹ The text of the the Act Amending the Slovenian Intelligence and Security Agency Act, available at: https://www.dz-rs.si/wps/portal/Home/zakonodaja/izbran!/ut/p/z1/jY_BCoJAFEW_xYVb31OxrJ0SGGMRapLNjSmUVBHximhr09oVZT4dvdyzoUHFDKgbf6oeK4q0eb1mM90cSGr0CNhYGLgBC5Gx_AQk62Prr-E0xdgxQ5GG8vfJ2hjkphA5_j45zyc508AdHqeAOW1KN6vem1huxyoZDcmmTTucqxLpbb-raOOwzAYXAheM-MqGh1_KaXoFWSfJHRNmmbPHTt5mvYCC9LReA!/dz/d5/L2dBISEvZ0FBIS9nQSEh/?uid=82B9D062A47BD199C1258D3F004D9222&db=pre_zak&mandat=IX.

concerns.⁹⁹² State possession of such tools may have a chilling effect on citizens. Rules on the acquisition, purpose, and retention of biometric data remain unclear, as noted by the Information Commissioner.⁹⁹³ The use of the urgent legislative procedure for the amending act is also concerning, as it introduces changes that intrusively interfere with certain fundamental rights of citizens.

1.3. Deterioration of legal environment: court cases

Judgment affecting the balance between the right to protest and editorial independence of the press

a) Summary

The first-instance District court in Ljubljana, in a case⁹⁹⁴ concerning judicial review of a misdemeanour decision, ruled in favour of the appellant, one of 20 protesters who, in 2021 during the pandemic, entered the premises and studio of the national broadcaster (RTV Slovenija) to protest what they viewed as one-sided reporting on the safety and efficacy of COVID vaccines, from which they were removed by authorities. The court ruled that the appellant acted in justified necessity, which excludes the unlawfulness of her actions, reasoning that she sought to protect the highest good—life and health—through the right to information, even at the expense of the lesser goods of (un)peaceful assembly and (non)compliance with oral orders of officials. Consequently, the misdemeanour proceeding against her was discontinued.

b) Consequences

The judgment broadens the interpretation of the rights to assembly and association, as well as freedom of expression, through the criminal-law doctrine of necessity. It links these rights to the right to information, which, in the case of vaccines, is further connected to the right to life and health, signalling that without accurate and complete information, individuals cannot make free decisions

⁹⁹² The legitimacy of the use of IMSI catchers was already decided in 2022 by the Slovenian Constitutional Court (*Ustavno sodišče RS*), which ruled that the use of IMSI catchers constitutes a disproportionate interference with the right to protection of personal data. At that time, the Constitutional Court repealed the provisions of the Criminal Procedure Act (*Zakon o kazenskem postopku*, ZKP) that allowed the police to use such means. See: Slovenia, Constitutional Court of the Republic of Slovenia (*Ustavno sodišče RS*), [Judgement U-I-144/19-46](#), 1 December 2022. ECLI:SI:USRS:2022:U.I.144.19.

⁹⁹³ Slovenia, Information Commissioner (Informacijski pooblaščenec), Act Amending the Slovenian Intelligence and Security Agency Act – proposal for consideration (EVA 2025-1524-0001) – OPINION ([Zakon o spremembah in dopolnitvah Zakona o Slovenski obveščevalnovarnostni agenciji – predlog za obravnavo \(EVA 2025-1524-0001\)](#)) – MNENJE, no. 007-76/2025/2 from 9 October 2025.

⁹⁹⁴ Slovenia, District Court in Ljubljana (*Okrajno sodišče v Ljubljani*), Judgement ZSV 440/2023, 25 August 2025.

about their health. The court also criticised RTV Slovenia as a public institution for failing to fulfil its legal duty to provide truthful, comprehensive, and impartial reporting during the pandemic. The judge provided extensive reasoning, situating the protester's actions in extraordinary circumstances (comparing them to wartime), legitimising civil disobedience via natural law imperatives and the pursuit of the common good, and citing historical resistance movements that advanced social justice and equality. The appellant's actions were deemed an appropriate and necessary measure to protect the public.⁹⁹⁵ The ruling raises important legal questions about interpreting assembly and expression rights, and the balance between individual rights and journalistic autonomy. Due to the significance of these issues, an extraordinary legal remedy has been filed with the Supreme Court of Slovenia (*Vrhovno sodišče RS*).

1.4. Other developments

New Mass Media Act (ZMed-1)

a) Summary

The new Mass Media Act (*Zakon o medijih*, ZMed-1),⁹⁹⁶ adopted in September 2025, is the first comprehensive overhaul of Slovenian media law in over two decades, aligning national legislation with European standards and the digital media environment. It introduces new schemes for state support to journalism, including financial assistance for the digital transition of print media. The law also includes provisions aimed at curbing the spread of hatred and intolerance in media content by prohibiting encouragement of violence or hate (Art. 51) and creating mechanisms for removing such content (Art. 53). Critics of the legislation, mostly from the political right, have raised concerns about clarity and potential impacts on freedom of expression due to broad or vague definitions. Nonetheless, the prohibition of hate speech in the media law can be seen as a positive contribution against the spread of violence and hate online.

b) Consequences

The adoption of the new law followed reports earlier in the year of journalists being laid off at one of the larger media houses, Večer, with journalists and their associations calling for a legislative improvement of the media financing scheme, which would safeguard their employment. Based on ZMed-1, the open call for state co-financing of media outlets prohibits publishers from laying off editorial staff while receiving state funds. The Slovenian Journalists' Association (*Društvo novinarjev Slovenije*, DNS) welcomes this safeguard but has long advocated multi-year state aid to journalism, primarily to co-finance the costs of journalistic production and to directly co-finance part of the salaries of journalists and other media workers. While the financing scheme under ZMed-1 is an improvement, DNS still considers it a missed opportunity for solutions that would have brought more substantial change.

⁹⁹⁵ Slovenia, District Court in Ljubljana (*Okrajno sodišče v Ljubljani*), Judgement ZSV 440/2023, 25 August 2025.

⁹⁹⁶ Slovenia, Mass Media Act (*Zakon o medijih*, ZMed-1), 3 September 2025.

2. CIVIC SPACE EXPANSION

2.1. Improvements in legal environment: freedom of expression

Adoption of the anti-SLAPP law

a) Summary

Slovenia's anti-SLAPP law (*Zakon o zaščitnih ukrepih zoper strateške tožbe za onemogočanje javnega udejstvovanja*, ZZUSTOJU)⁹⁹⁷ to protect people and organisations from abusive lawsuits aimed at silencing public participation was published on September 1, 2025, and entered into force on February 25, 2026. It implements the provisions of the EU Anti-SLAPP Directive 2024/1069 into national law with protective measures like security for costs, support and assistance to beneficiaries, expedited proceedings and early dismissal, reimbursement of full costs, compensation for damages, and financial penalties. The Slovenian Ministry of Justice (*Ministrstvo za pravosodje*) is also preparing to establish a contact point (Article 15 ZZUSTOJU), which, together with the statutory mechanisms, will represent an important element in combating SLAPP suits.

b) Consequences

In line with the Directive the purpose of the national law is to ensure protection for natural and legal persons like journalists, commentators, media organizations, whistleblowers and human rights defenders, as well as civil society organizations, NGOs, trade unions, artists, researchers, and academics engaged in public participation against court proceedings initiated against them with the aim of deterring them from public participation. Although the Directive is intended to provide protection only in cross-border civil cases, the Slovene Ministry of Justice decided – using the option allowed by the Directive – to extend the application of the proposed law to all cases, including purely domestic SLAPP lawsuits (Article 3 ZZUSTOJU). It additionally extends the use of security for costs to criminal proceedings in private prosecution cases for criminal offences against honour and reputation committed through public publication (Article 20 ZZUSTOJU), thereby further strengthening the law's preventive effect. The latter is reported to be a direct consequence of multiple private prosecution cases against journalists initiated by a known tax consultant, who publicly boasted about spending public funds, including free legal aid, in about 60 open court cases.⁹⁹⁸

⁹⁹⁷ Slovenia, Act on Protective Measures Against Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (*Zakon o zaščitnih ukrepih zoper strateške tožbe za onemogočanje javnega udejstvovanja*, ZZUSTOJU), 28 January 2026.

⁹⁹⁸ Lovšin, P. (21 January 2026). The end of Snežič's legal maneuvers (*Konec Snežičevih pravnih manevrov*), Daily journal Dnevnik, available at: www.dnevnik.si/novice/slovenija/kmalu-konec-snezicevih-pravnih-manevrov-2779829/.

Slovakia (SK)

Civic space in the EU in 2025

Slovakia

Contractor: Centre for the Research of Ethnicity and Culture

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1. CIVIC SPACE PRESSURES

1.1. Deterioration of legal environment: freedom of association

1.1.1 Change in the legal framework governing the functioning of CSOs

a) Summary

In April 2025, the National Council of the Slovak Republic approved an amendment to the law on non-profit organisations⁹⁹⁹, which contains provisions that fundamentally change the legal framework for the functioning of non-governmental non-profit organisations.

The amendment was intended to introduce the following obligations for NGOs in particular:

- Civil society organisations must include and therefore disclose the identification details of donors in their reports. This applies to individuals who donate more than €5,000 to the organisation and, in the case of legal persons, all contributors regardless of the amount donated. The law also revoked donors' previous right to request anonymisation of their data. Civil society organisations would thus be required to disclose donors' personal data.
- Civil society organisations that receive public funds (more than €3,300 in a single payment or €10,000 per year) become obligated entities under the Freedom of Information Act. They must respond to requests for information from the public about how they have used public funds. This measure could lead to bureaucratic overload for civil society organisations that do not have the capacity to handle a large number of requests for information.
- Civil society organisations must report so-called lobbying activities that "directly or indirectly influence the decision-making" of public officials. However, the definition of lobbying is unclear, which creates room for arbitrariness on the part of state authorities.

In December 2025, the Constitutional Court declared the amendment to the law on non-profit organisations unconstitutional¹⁰⁰⁰ (please see section 2.1 of this report).

b) Consequences

⁹⁹⁹ Slovakia, [Act No. 109/2025 Coll. of April 16, 2025, amending Act No. 213/1997 Coll. on non-profit organisations providing generally beneficial services, as amended, and amending certain acts](#) (Zákon č. 109/2025 Z.z. zo 16. apríla 2025, ktorým sa mení a dopĺňa zákon č. 213/1997 Z. z. o neziskových organizáciách poskytujúcich všeobecne prospešné služby v znení neskorších predpisov a ktorým sa menia a dopĺňajú niektoré zákony), 16 April 2025.

¹⁰⁰⁰ Slovakia, Constitutional Court of the Slovak Republic (Ústavný súd SR), Decision of the Constitutional Court PL. ÚS 11/2025 dated 17 December 2025 ([Rozhodnutie Ústavného súdu PL. ÚS 11/2025 zo 17.12.2025](#)).

According to the Public defender of rights¹⁰⁰¹, who submitted this amendment to the Constitutional Court, and analysts from VIA IURIS (NGO)¹⁰⁰², this legislation could have devastating consequences for civil society organisations: mandatory disclosure of donors could lead to their loss due to fear of stigmatisation, political attacks, or harassing inspections, which threatens the financial stability and independence of NGOs. Administrative errors in reporting lobbying activities could result in crippling fines of up to €10,000 or even the dissolution of the organisation. New obligations, including compliance with the Information Act, impose an excessive bureaucratic burden that paralyses their activities. The amendment also disproportionately interferes with the right to privacy and freedom of association.

1.1.2 Increased state controls on CSOs

a) Summary

In September 2025, the National Council of the Slovak Republic adopted a resolution requesting the Government of the Slovak Republic to conduct a comprehensive audit of the use of funds in central government bodies for the period from 2020 to 2025. The audit was to verify whether, during that period, state administration bodies had provided subsidies, grants, and other forms of financial support in cases where there was duplicate financing, wastefulness, or unauthorised use of funds¹⁰⁰³. As noted in the Liberties Rule of Law report 2026, this audit failed to substantiate the government's narrative of widespread misconduct by CSOs¹⁰⁰⁴.

Twenty-six entities were selected for the audit, which were assessed as having an increased risk of deficiencies in the use of funds. Of these 26 entities, 16 were CSOs, while the others included companies, local governments, churches, and educational institutions.

The results of the audit, which were submitted to the Slovak government for discussion¹⁰⁰⁵, revealed certain shortcomings in the form of duplicate use of funds, failure to comply with co-financing conditions, and violation of the prohibition on financing a single project from multiple subsidies. These shortcomings concerned a total of six recipients, of which only three were civil society organisations, and in the case of civil society organisations, these shortcomings concerned an amount of approximately EUR 215,000.

¹⁰⁰¹ Slovakia, Public Defender of Rights (*Verejný ochranca práv*)(2025), [Podanie na Ústavný súd SR – zákon o mimovládnych organizáciách](#).

¹⁰⁰² VIA IURIS (2025), [Analýza pozmeňujúceho návrhu k zákonu o neziskových organizáciách](#).

¹⁰⁰³ Slovakia, National Council of the Slovak Republic (*Národná rada SR*)(2025), [Uznesenie č. 1148 Národnej rady Slovenskej republiky z 30. septembra 2025 k vykonaniu auditu a k prijatiu systémových riadiacich a kontrolných opatrení pri čerpaní dotačných a grantových finančných prostriedkov v ústredných orgánoch štátnej správy za obdobie rokov 2020 – 2025](#).

¹⁰⁰⁴ Civil Liberties Union for Europe (2026), [Liberties Rule of Law report 2026](#), p. 731.

¹⁰⁰⁵ Slovakia, Government of the Slovak Republic (*Vláda SR*)(2026), [Information on the results of the audit and the status of implementation of measures adopted for the period 2020–2025 pursuant to Resolution No. 508 of the Government of the Slovak Republic of 15 October 2025](#) (*Informácia o výsledkoch vykonaného auditu a o stave plnenia prijatých opatrení za obdobie rokov 2020 – 2025 v zmysle uznesenia vlády Slovenskej republiky č. 508 z 15. októbra 2025*).

One of the organisations concerned, Divadlo Pôtoň, stated in their response¹⁰⁰⁶ that in their case, the audit revealed shortcomings in compliance with the co-financing condition, which concerned documents totalling EUR 1,780 (the total amount of funds audited was more than EUR 880,000). However, the audit result requires the organisation to return the entire approved subsidy amount of more than EUR 27,000, which the organisation considers disproportionately severe and plans to defend itself using legal means. Refunding the entire amount would currently be ruinous for the organisation¹⁰⁰⁷. Other organisations where irregularities were found were Projekt Fórum and Post Bellum.

In response to the Constitutional Court's ruling¹⁰⁰⁸ that the amendment to the NGOs Act is unconstitutional, in February 2026, the Slovak government decided to carry out extensive inspections on NGOs in the coming period¹⁰⁰⁹.

b) Consequences

According to the Platform for Democracy (brings together more than 80 NGOs), most of the civil society organisations audited passed without any problems, and the results did not reveal any systematic misuse of subsidies, uneconomical use, or unauthorised drawing of funds¹⁰¹⁰. However, the audit results have a negative impact on the audited organisations in the form of bureaucratic burden (all grants and subsidies had already been audited previously), damage to reputation, and disproportionate financial penalties.

¹⁰⁰⁶ Divadlo Pôtoň (2026), 'Statement on the findings of the Government audit for 2020–2025' ('[Vyjadrenie k záverom vládneho auditu za roky 2020 – 2025](#)').

¹⁰⁰⁷ SME Daily (2026), 'The Pôtoň Theater also faced a government audit. Having to return the entire grant could be devastating, says Ditte' ('[Aj Divadlo Pôtoň čelilo vládneho auditu. Vrátenie celej dotácie by mohlo byť likvidačné, hovorí Ditte](#)'), 22 January 2026.

¹⁰⁰⁸ Slovakia, Constitutional Court of the Slovak Republic (*Ústavný súd SR*), Decision of the Constitutional Court PL. ÚS 11/2025 dated 17 December 2025 ([Rozhodnutie Ústavného súdu PL. ÚS 11/2025 zo 17.12.2025](#)).

¹⁰⁰⁹ Slovakia, Government of the Slovak Republic (*Vláda SR*)(2026), [Proposal to increase the effectiveness of control activities vis-à-vis non-governmental non-profit organisations in the context of the ruling of the Constitutional Court of the Slovak Republic PL. ÚS 11/2025-116, with regard to increasing the transparency of the financing of non-governmental non-profit organisations and their activities](#) (Návrh na zvýšenie účinnosti kontrolnej činnosti voči mimovládny neziskovým organizáciám v kontexte nálezu Ústavného súdu Slovenskej republiky PL. ÚS 11/2025-116, s ohľadom na zvýšenie transparentnosti financovania mimovládnych neziskových organizácií a ich činnosti), approved on 18 February 2026.

¹⁰¹⁰ Platforma pre demokraciu (2026), '[Vládne audity nepreukázali systémové zlyhanie MNO](#)', 20 January 2026.

1.2. Attempts to stifle civic engagement through violence, harassment and negative narratives

Negative narrative and bullying of CSOs

a) Summary

The reinforcement of negative narratives about CSOs and their harassment took various forms during 2025. In addition to legislative changes, restrictions on access to public funds, and tighter oversight of NGOs, these manifestations took the form of criticism and defamation of specific civil society organisations or their representatives.

One example is the organisation Projekt Fórum, led by a civic activist who is the mother of the opposition leader and chair of the political party Progressive Slovakia. Government officials repeatedly accused this organisation of misusing public subsidies, publishing this information in August–September 2025 which was prior to the publication of the results of the governmental audit focused on the control of public funds in January 2026 (mentioned in section 1.1 of this report). According to the Liberties Rule of Law report 2026, Slovak Government portrays key civil society organisations not as independent watchdogs, but as politically engaged actors deeply entrenched in conflicts of interest. Furthermore, the Government also challenges the credibility and methodology of the data provided by these NGOs, describing their reports as incomplete, inaccurate, or methodologically unsound¹⁰¹¹.

Following specific examples that happened throughout 2025 involve:

- Government officials questioned the results of the negative trend in the Corruption Perceptions Index, arguing that Transparency International Slovakia is a politically active NGO funded by grants from USAID.¹⁰¹²,
- Mier Ukrajine was questioned and discredited by government officials for organising protests “Slovakia is Europe” which took place in response to the foreign policy of the Slovak government¹⁰¹³,
- According to the Mental Health League (Liga za duševné zdravie), government officials made unsubstantiated accusations against them for the way it implements publicly funded projects and other cases¹⁰¹⁴.

b) Consequences

In spring 2025, Amnesty International Slovakia conducted a survey among civil society organisations in Slovakia aimed at documenting specific experiences between January 2024 and April 2025 with

¹⁰¹¹ Civil Liberties Union for Europe (2026), [Liberties Rule of Law report 2026](#), pp. 730-731.

¹⁰¹² Slovakia, Office of the Government of the Slovak Republic (Úrad vlády SR)(2025), [FB post from 19 February 2025](#). The reaction of the organisation Transparency International Slovakia is available here: [FB post from 20 February 2025](#); Civil Liberties Union for Europe (2026), [Liberties Rule of Law report 2026](#), p. 731.

¹⁰¹³ Mier Ukrajine (2025), [FB post from 21 January 2025](#).

¹⁰¹⁴ Slovak Spectator (2025), [‘Slovakia, passes NGO law, civil society fears a chilling new era’](#), 27 May 2025.

measures taken by the state, such as legislative changes targeting CSOs, restrictions on access to financial resources, increased bureaucratic oversight, and various manifestations of demonisation, defamation, and stigmatisation of civil society organisations. The survey was conducted in the form of a questionnaire and involved more than 120 civil society organisations from all regions of Slovakia operating in various fields¹⁰¹⁵.

According to the survey findings, 35% of organisations reported that they had experienced harassment or threats in the online space (social networks, websites, etc.) primarily from the public, but also from politicians and disinformation media. Almost one-fifth of organisations (18%) encountered harassment in the "offline space," i.e., in person, on the street, in offices, or on public transport, specifically in the form of vulgar language, threats, personal attacks, including physical harm, video recording, stalking, or damage to property. In response to various forms of harassment, 31% of the organisations surveyed were forced to take additional measures to protect themselves. In terms of funding challenges, civil society organisations experienced mainly a reduction in government grants or subsidies (37%) and increased operating costs (37%) during the period in question. More than a third of organisations are also considering limiting their activities or reducing their staff for financial reasons.

During the reporting period, non-governmental organisations faced increased oversight and monitoring by state institutions, for example in the form of unplanned audits and inspections (15%), requests for additional documentation (32%), other monitoring/control activities (39%), and threats of sanctions (3%).

1.3. Funding reductions and restrictions

Restricting access of non-governmental organisations to public funds

a) Summary

During 2025, state authorities continued to implement measures aimed at reducing public funding for civil society organisations. According to a detailed report published by the Open Society Foundation and the Platform for Democracy¹⁰¹⁶, in 2024 and 2025 there was a significant reduction in public funding for civil society organisations of approximately €15 to €16 million, particularly in the areas of human rights, culture, the environment, and development aid.

The reduction in funding for CSOs was mainly achieved through:

- administrative cuts in grant amounts – In 2025, the Art Fund did not provide funding to civil society organisations in the cultural sector, or reduced funding by a total of approximately 3.5 million

¹⁰¹⁵ Amnesty International Slovensko (2025), '[Démonizácia očierňovanie a vyhrážanie – čomu čelia MVO na Slovensku v dôsledku autoritárskych praktík](#)', 7 July 2025.

¹⁰¹⁶ Blaščák, F. – Strečanský, B. (eds)(2026), Cutting funding for non-governmental non-profit organisations 2024–2025 ([Defunding mimovládnych neziskových organizácií 2024 - 2025](#)), Nadácia otvorenej spoločnosti/Platforma pre demokraciu.

EUR¹⁰¹⁷. The Ministry of Justice reduced funding under the human rights support scheme to 569,000 EUR for 2026, which is approximately 200,000 EUR less than the amount allocated in previous years¹⁰¹⁸

In the area of development aid, 1.2 million EUR was transferred from grants for NGOs to business projects in 2025, and the umbrella organisation Ambrela was not supported for the first time despite its high score, citing the need for consolidation¹⁰¹⁹.

- the politicisation of decision-making bodies – In June 2024, an amendment to the law¹⁰²⁰ was adopted that changed the procedure for nominating members of the Council of the Art Fund. Under the new rules, these members are nominated directly or indirectly (through institutions established by the Ministry of Culture) by the Minister of Culture. The amendment also entrusted the Fund's Council with the final decision on project funding, which had previously been decided by expert committees established within the Fund. Gradually, the members of the Council of the Art Fund were replaced; currently, it consists solely of members nominated by the Minister of Culture. During 2025, the Fund Council revised the decisions of the expert committees regarding project support and the amount of funding to a greater extent than in the past.

- and changes in the rules governing grant schemes – In June 2024, an amendment to Decree No. 322/2016 Coll.¹⁰²¹ was adopted, regulating the composition of the evaluation committee and the

¹⁰¹⁷ Blaščák, F. – Strečanský, B. (eds)(2026), Cutting funding for non-governmental non-profit organisations 2024–2025 (*Defunding mimovládnych neziskových organizácií 2024 - 2025*), Nadácia otvorenej spoločnosti/Platforma pre demokraciu.

¹⁰¹⁸ Slovakia, Ministry of Justice of the Slovak Republic (*Ministerstvo spravodlivosti SR*)(2025), Call for applications for grants pursuant to section 2(a) of the act on the provision of grants for the promotion, support, and protection of human rights and freedoms and for the prevention of all forms of discrimination, racism, xenophobia, anti-semitism, and other manifestations of intolerance (*Výzva na prekladanie žiadostí o poskytnutie dotácie v zmysle § 2 písm. a) zákona o poskytovaní dotácií na presadzovanie, podporu a ochranu ľudských práv a slobôd a na predchádzanie všetkým formám diskriminácie, rasizmu, xenofóbie, antisemitizmu a ostatným prejavom intolerancie*).

¹⁰¹⁹ Blaščák, F. – Strečanský, B. (eds)(2026), Cutting funding for non-governmental non-profit organisations 2024–2025 (*Defunding mimovládnych neziskových organizácií 2024 - 2025*), Nadácia otvorenej spoločnosti/Platforma pre demokraciu, p. 43.

¹⁰²⁰ Slovakia, Act No. 169/2024 Coll., amending Act No. 284/2014 Coll. on the Art Fund and amending Act No. 434/2010 Coll. on the provision of subsidies within the competence of the Ministry of Culture of the Slovak Republic, as amended by Act No. 79/2013 Coll., as amended (*Zákon č. 169/2024 Z.z., ktorým sa mení a dopĺňa zákon č. 284/2014 Z. z. o Fonde na podporu umenia a o zmene a doplnení zákona č. 434/2010 Z. z. o poskytovaní dotácií v pôsobnosti Ministerstva kultúry Slovenskej republiky v znení zákona č. 79/2013 Z. z. v znení neskorších predpisov*), 11 June 2024.

¹⁰²¹ Slovakia, Decree No. 129/2024 Coll. of the Ministry of Justice of the Slovak Republic of June 7, 2024, amending Decree No. 322/2016 Coll. of the Ministry of Justice of the Slovak Republic on the composition, decision-making, the organisation of work, and the procedure of the commission in evaluating applications for grants, and on the criteria for evaluating applications

process for evaluating projects submitted under the Ministry of Justice's grant scheme for the promotion of human rights. Compared to the original text of the decree, the 2024 amendment weakened the participation of civil society organisations in project evaluation (previously, CSO representatives were members of the evaluation committee) and altered the two-stage evaluation process, in which organisations that scored at least 60 points in the first round of evaluation previously were guaranteed the right to present their project orally before the evaluation committee (presentation before the committee is not obligatory anymore). According to CSO representatives, this resulted in a shift from a participatory and relatively open support mechanism to a centralised model under the control of government officials. These new rules were also applied in 2025¹⁰²².

- Denying support to certain organisations or excluding civil society organisations from grant programs - During 2025, the Council of Art Fund reduced or stopped subsidies for 513 projects carried out mainly by independent theatres, civically active cultural organisations, and projects related to LGBTI+ people¹⁰²³. In September 2025, the fund's priorities for 2026 were approved, completely excluding support for entire areas such as digital games, the creative industry, independent cultural centres, specialised events organised by museums, galleries, and libraries, the City of Culture program, and others¹⁰²⁴.

In the call for proposals under the 2025 human rights grant scheme under the Ministry of Justice, only one of the 12 organisations that had been stable partners in previous years was successful. Under the Ministry of Justice's grant program to support victims of crime, the minister refused to sign grants for the organisations Iniciatíva inakosť (Initiative for Diversity) and Liga za ľudské práva (League for Human Rights), even though their projects met the legal requirements and were approved by the evaluation committee¹⁰²⁵.

for grants, as amended (Vyhláška 129/2024 Z.z. Ministerstva spravodlivosti Slovenskej republiky zo 7. júna 2024, ktorou sa mení a dopĺňa vyhláška Ministerstva spravodlivosti Slovenskej republiky č. 322/2016 Z. z. o zložení, rozhodovaní, organizácii práce a postupe komisie pri vyhodnocovaní žiadostí o poskytnutie dotácie a o kritériách pre vyhodnocovanie žiadostí o poskytnutie dotácie v znení neskorších predpisov), 7 June 2024.

¹⁰²² Blaščák, F. – Strečanský, B. (eds)(2026), Cutting funding for non-governmental non-profit organisations 2024–2025 (*Defunding mimovládnych neziskových organizácií 2024 - 2025*), Nadácia otvorenej spoločnosti/Platforma pre demokraciu, pp. 24-26.

¹⁰²³ Blaščák, F. – Strečanský, B. (eds)(2026), Cutting funding for non-governmental non-profit organisations 2024–2025 (*Defunding mimovládnych neziskových organizácií 2024 - 2025*), Nadácia otvorenej spoločnosti/Platforma pre demokraciu, pp. 28-29.

¹⁰²⁴ Slovakia, Art Fund (*Fond na podporu umenia*) (2025), Zásady a priority podpornej činnosti Fondu na podporu umenia na rok 2026.

¹⁰²⁵ League for Human Rights (Liga za ľudské práva)(2025), FB post from 20 March 2025.

In the area of environmental protection, civil society organisations were excluded from applying for funding for environmental education projects starting in 2024, and this exclusion persisted into 2025, adversely affecting their situation¹⁰²⁶.

b) Consequences

This development has a significant negative impact on civil society organisations. They face negative organisational impacts such as the dismissal of key employees, program cancellations, decreased competitiveness, damage to their reputation, and self-censorship in the form of not applying for public funding.

At the systemic level, there is a reduction in the protection of human rights and nature, the cancellation of cultural events and activities, and restrictions on humanitarian aid. There is also a loss of access to EU funding, the risk of international isolation, and the erosion of the partnership between civil society organisations and the state¹⁰²⁷.

1.4. Barriers to participation in law and policy-making

a) Summary

Several events during 2025 indicate a deterioration in the situation regarding the participation of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in public policy-making and decision-making processes in Slovakia.

In January 2026, more than 120 representatives of civil society organisations called on the Slovak government's plenipotentiary for the development of civil society to resign from her post because she had participated in the preparation and actively promoted a controversial amendment to the law on non-profit organisations, which had the potential to harass and stigmatise NGOs¹⁰²⁸. According to the signatories of the appeal, the Plenipotentiary publicly defended the amendment even after the Constitutional Court declared it unconstitutional in December 2025¹⁰²⁹. In doing so, she acted contrary to the tasks that the plenipotentiary is supposed to perform, namely to protect the space for active citizens, promote trust between the state and the civil sector, and prevent interventions that threaten democratic principles.

¹⁰²⁶ Blaščák, F. – Strečanský, B. (eds)(2026), Cutting funding for non-governmental non-profit organisations 2024–2025 (*Defunding mimovládnych neziskových organizácií 2024 - 2025*), Nadácia otvorenej spoločnosti/Platforma pre demokraciu, p. 36

¹⁰²⁷ Blaščák, F. – Strečanský, B. (eds)(2026), Cutting funding for non-governmental non-profit organisations 2024–2025 (*Defunding mimovládnych neziskových organizácií 2024 - 2025*), Nadácia otvorenej spoločnosti/Platforma pre demokraciu.

¹⁰²⁸ Nadácia otvorenej spoločnosti (Open Society Foundation)(2026), 'Call for the resignation of the Government Plenipotentiary in light of the unconstitutionality of the NGO Act' (*Výzva na odstúpenie splnomocnenkyne vlády vo svetle protiústavnosti zákona o MVO*), 9 February 2026.

¹⁰²⁹ Slovakia, Constitutional Court of the Slovak Republic (*Ústavný súd SR*), Decision of the Constitutional Court PL. ÚS 11/2025 dated 17 December 2025 (*Rozhodnutie Ústavného súdu PL. ÚS 11/2025 zo 17.12.2025*).

Another example is the report by the Slovak National Centre for Human Rights (Slovenské národné stredisko pre ľudské práva - SNSĽP)¹⁰³⁰, which maps, through a survey conducted between November 2024 to April 2025, the experiences of environmental advocates and environmental NGOs with harassment and restrictions on access to environmental policy-making, and draws attention to the unfavourable conditions in which these organisations operate.

An example of declining participation is also the adoption of the amendment to the law on non-profit organisations in April 2025, which was pushed through without thorough analysis and without the involvement of civil society organisations. The amendment was submitted to parliament as a parliamentary bill, which does not allow for the standard participation of the public, civil society organisations, and other stakeholders¹⁰³¹.

c) Consequences

According to the aforementioned SNSĽP report, insufficient participation of environmental NGOs in processes related to environmental protection can lead to long-term and irreversible damage to natural heritage and population health. Shortening legislative processes does not allow for the necessary expert discussion¹⁰³².

Insufficient participation of NGOs in the preparation of legislation that defines the basic framework for their functioning resulted in a law of poor quality, which was ultimately declared unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court (see Part 2.1 of this report)¹⁰³³.

1.5. Other developments

¹⁰³⁰ Slovakia, Slovak National Centre for Human Rights (*Slovenské národné stredisko pre ľudské práva*)(2025), *Keď je ochrana životného prostredia rizikom: skúsenosti obhajcov a obhajkýň*.

¹⁰³¹ Via Iuris (2025), *Analysis of the amendment by member of the National Assembly of the Slovak Republic, Adam Lučanský, to the bill submitted by members of the National Assembly of the Slovak Republic, Rudolf HULIAK, Dagmar KRAMPLOVA, Milan GARAJ, and Adam LUČANSKÝ, on the enactment of a law amending and supplementing act no. 213/1997 Coll. on non-profit organisations providing services of general public interest, as amended, and amending other laws (print 245)*.

¹⁰³² Slovakia, Slovak National Centre for Human Rights (*Slovenské národné stredisko pre ľudské práva*)(2025), *Keď je ochrana životného prostredia rizikom: skúsenosti obhajcov a obhajkýň*.

¹⁰³³ Slovakia, Constitutional Court of the Slovak Republic (*Ústavný súd SR*), Decision of the Constitutional Court PL. ÚS 11/2025 dated 17 December 2025 (*Rozhodnutie Ústavného súdu PL. ÚS 11/2025 zo 17.12.2025*).

2. CIVIC SPACE EXPANSION

2.1. Improvements in legal environment: freedom of association

The Constitutional Court ruled that the amendment to the NGO Act was unconstitutional

a) Summary

The Constitutional Court of the Slovak Republic ruled that Act No. 109/2025 Coll, amending Act No. 213/1997 Coll on non-profit organisations providing services of general interest, was inconsistent with the Constitution of the Slovak Republic and international conventions¹⁰³⁴. This law was supposed to fundamentally change the legal framework for the functioning of non-governmental organisations by introducing new obligations (see section 1.1 of this report) as of 1 June 2025. The Constitutional Court found that the law disproportionately interferes with the right to privacy of donors (information self-determination) and freedom of association.

The Constitutional Court argued that:

- NGOs retain their private law status even when acting in the public interest. The Court rejected the analogy with political parties because NGOs do not seek a mandate in elections and do not exercise public power.
- Although transparency and the fight against crime are legitimate goals, the law was not necessary to adopt. State authorities already had access to data on donors under the previous legislation; therefore, the widespread disclosure of data to the general public was not necessary.
- The court ruled that the inclusion of NGOs under the Information Act was unconstitutional because NGOs are not public authorities. Such a burden could lead to "information filibustering" and the harassment of organisations, which would jeopardise their primary activities and very existence. According to the court, the contested law could have a deterrent effect on donors, create an atmosphere of general mistrust towards civic organisations, and lead to their stigmatisation.

b) Consequences

The decision of the Constitutional Court of the Slovak Republic has fundamental legal and social significance, as it represents a constitutional brake on interference in the functioning of civil society. With this decision, the Constitutional Court has protected the space for civil society and defined the limits of state interference in the functioning of non-governmental organisations. The Constitutional Court's decision means that once the decision is published in the collection of laws, the law will no longer have force and civil society organisations will no longer be required to fulfill the obligations

¹⁰³⁴ Slovakia, Constitutional Court of the Slovak Republic (*Ústavný súd SR*), Decision of the Constitutional Court PL. ÚS 11/2025 dated 17 December 2025 ([Rozhodnutie Ústavného súdu PL. ÚS 11/2025 zo 17.12.2025](#)).

arising from it. If lawmakers do not amend the law within six months to bring it into line with the Constitutional Court's decision, it will definitively lose its force of law¹⁰³⁵.

¹⁰³⁵ Platforma pre demokraciu (2025), [‘Ústavný súd zrušil “ruský” zákon proti mimovládkam’](#), 18 December 2025.