

SLOVENIA ADDED TO CIVICUS MONITOR WATCHLIST

OVERVIEW OF RECENT RESTRICTIONS TO CIVIC FREEDOMS





INTRODUCTION

A rapid decline in civic space has been noted in Slovenia, particularly when Janez Janša's government came into power in March 2020, prompting a [ratings change](#) to 'narrowed' in December 2020 by the CIVICUS Monitor. Since its establishment, the government has tried to pass several measures which affect basic human rights under the guise of the COVID-19 pandemic. There has also been a deterioration in the rule of law and the right to participation. In the last year, the government [has passed](#) many decrees that restrict various fundamental freedoms, without justification or an end date, under the Communicable Diseases act, which was recently found to be unconstitutional. Almost all decrees passed include articles that deal with regulated issues not related to the pandemic and these laws were passed through an emergency procedure without consultation. The government has also [repeatedly targeted](#) civil society organisations (CSOs) and media freedom is on the decline. Journalists have been [repeatedly harassed](#) by the Prime Minister and the ruling Slovenian Democratic (SDS) party.

THREATS TO CIVIL SOCIETY

Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in Slovenia are increasingly becoming the target of the Slovenian government's restrictive measures and hostile rhetoric. The current government has especially [directed](#) its hostility towards Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) which work on independent cultural production, defending human rights, media freedom and the environment.

Since it took office, the Government has repeatedly attempted to curtail NGOs' access to funding. As one of the first moves, 15 NGOs [were notified](#) by the Government Communication Office that their contracts for public grants for 2020 projects had been terminated. The government stated that this money would be redirected to tackle the pandemic. Similarly, the budget for NGOs working on culture was also significantly [reduced](#) to deal with the pandemic. Furthermore, in December 2020 the Janša government was unsuccessful in its [attempt to](#) introduce an amendment abolishing the state's fund for NGOs through its 7th anti-corona stimulus package.

In what is seen as a politically motivated [attempt to](#) silence NGOs, in October 2020, 18 NGOs, who have been operating from No. 6 Metelkova Street in Ljubljana since the 1990's, received an eviction notice from the Ministry of Culture, which owns the building. The organisations, who opposed the eviction, have managed to successfully litigate to preserve their rights via a complaint to a court. In addition, a vocal critic of Janša's government, musician Zlatan Čordiĉ, had his legal status of «self-employed culture worker» unlawfully [canceled](#) by the Ministry of Culture in November 2020 due to his political activity. Upon appeal, the courts recognised that the removal of his status was against the law.

The work of environmental rights NGOs has also been made more challenging through legislative amendments which [will restrict](#) their participation in environmental impact assessments and exclude them from key relevant procedures. These amendments come as environmental rights NGOs increasingly face smear campaigns and harassment for advocating against the environmental impacts of construction projects.

ABOUT THE CIVICUS MONITOR

The [CIVICUS Monitor](#), an online platform that tracks threats to civil society in countries across the globe, rates civic space – the space for civil society – in Slovenia as “**Narrowed**”.

The data provides the basis for civic space ratings, which are based on up-to-date information and indicators on the state of freedom of association, peaceful assembly and expression. Countries can be rated as:

CLOSED

REPRESSED

OBSTRUCTED

NARROWED

OPEN



Trade associations have also faced challenges in their engagements. In May 2021, trade unions [left](#) the Social-Economic Council, the country's main industrial relations forum, due to the government's violations of rules and procedures of the council, resulting in a complete breakdown in social dialogue.

THREATS TO MEDIA FREEDOM

Over the last few years, media ownership by political parties, high-level public figures and state-controlled companies [has grown](#) increasingly problematic. While recent years saw some improvements in transparency - with news outlets openly stating their affiliation - there has been growth in politically-partisan and commercially-influenced newspapers, online news platforms and television stations.

In this context, the SDS Party has widened its grip over the Slovenian media landscape, with financial support from Hungarian corporations close to Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán who are financing the party's media networks: Nova24TV and web portal Nova24. More recently, in October 2020, the third most viewed TV station in Slovenia, Planet TV, [was sold](#) to Hungarian media company TV2 Media, which is also [owned by](#) a Hungarian businessman linked to Orbán's Fidesz Party.

The Slovenian Press Agency (STA) has also [faced](#) significant threat. In an attempt to exert political and economic pressure, funding to the agency has been suspended by the government to date, despite a warning from the EU against this attempt to pressure public media outlets. The agency has survived primarily due to a crowdsourcing campaign.

Journalists have [continuously](#) faced attacks, both in person and online. As a consequence, the International Press Institute (IPI) recently stated that some journalists anonymously [reported](#) that they are beginning to self-censor to avoid being targeted by online smear campaigns.

PEACEFUL ASSEMBLY DURING COVID19

The right to peaceful assembly [has been](#) disproportionately restricted during the COVID-19 pandemic as the government imposed a complete ban. In addition, earlier this year when COVID-19 measures [were eased](#), the government allowed gatherings of up to 10 people, but not for the purposes of political expression. However, in April 2021 the Constitutional Court ordered the government to come up with a new decree, which must give due consideration for the right to gatherings as a fundamental human right.

Weekly Friday anti-government protests have taken place in Slovenia since Janša took office. However these protests have been subject to intense police scrutiny, with police [using](#) excessive force against protesters on some occasions. Protesters have also faced disproportionate and unlawful [sanctions](#) through fines totalling over 10,000 EUR.



RECOMMENDATIONS:

To the Slovenian government

- Respect the right to freedom of association by refraining from harassing NGOs.
- Refrain from taking any actions that seek to remove NGOs from the premises where they operate and publicly affirm the contributions which NGOs make to the social and economic development of Slovenia.
- Reverse all decisions taken to curb funding for NGOs, particularly those taken under the pretext of addressing the COVID-19 pandemic and renew all contracts of NGOs which were terminated in 2020.
- Allow NGOs including those working on independent cultural production, human rights, media freedoms and the environment to carry out their activities freely without fear of reprisals, harassment and intimidation.
- Respect the rights of freedom of expression and independence of the media and stop exerting pressure (including financial pressure) on media outlets and independent agencies like the STA.
- Protect the rights of journalists by ensuring that all those who subject journalists to smear campaigns and other forms of harassment, including those carried out online, are held to account and brought to justice.
- Respect the right to peaceful assembly and allow peaceful protesters to demonstrate in a safe and enabling environment without the threat of violence and harassment.

To the International community

- The European institutions must take immediate action to address fundamental rights violations, including violations of the right to peaceful assembly, expression and association and the overall declining civic space in Slovenia.
- The European Union and its leaders must firmly condemn the economic restrictions on associations under the guise of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The European Union and its leaders must firmly condemn repeated attacks against independent media, journalists and other public watchdogs.
- The EU must engage with Slovenian authorities to ensure that the government restores funding to the Slovenian Press Agency.
- The European Union should recognise the decline of civic space in several member states and take a more strategic approach towards reversing this negative trend.
- The European Commission should adopt a comprehensive approach for the rule of law, fundamental rights and democracy; and a European strategy on enabling civil society.
- The European Commission should establish an alert mechanism to allow civil society actors to promptly signal serious issues and/or threats regarding civic space. Such an alert mechanism should lead to a rapid (re)assessment of the situation, allowing for timely and concrete reaction at the EU level.