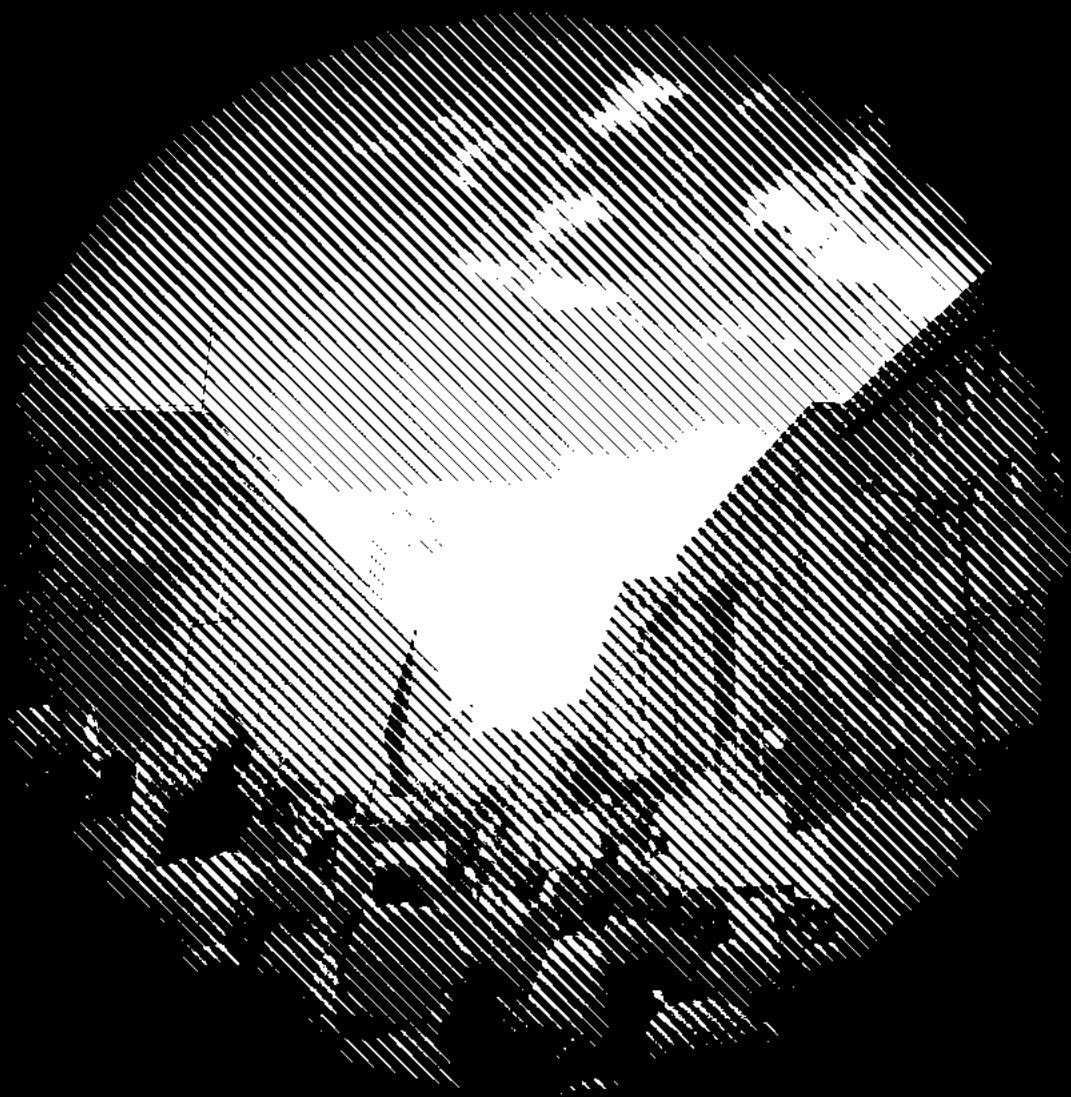


CIVIC SPACE REPORT 2026

Horizontal Analysis





ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report was published by the European Civic Forum (ECF) in May 2026, with chapters written by its secretariat, member organisations, and partner organisations. Much of the content originally appeared as part of ECF's submission to the European Commission's Rule of Law consultation, while some country reports were first published under the Monitoring Action for Civic Space (MACS) project. Each chapter reflects the views and analysis of its respective author. For more information about the European Civic Forum, please visit www.civic-forum.eu.

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Methodology and acknowledgements

This report was compiled and edited by the European Civic Forum (ECF). It is composed of a horizontal analysis, which looks at pan-European developments in civic space and was written by ECF, in addition to 13 country reports and one regional report written by civil society experts on the ground. The reports cover developments in 2025, though in exceptional cases we have drawn on relevant examples from 2026. Some of the country reports were originally published as part of the Monitoring Action for Civic Space (MACS) project in February 2026. They have undergone minor edits to align with the wider report and to reflect new developments.

The ECF uses the MACS methodology,¹ which aims to monitor the six key dimensions that shape civic space. Each dimension encompasses several standards for fulfilling state obligations under international law. The dimensions are:

1. Freedom of Association
2. Access to Funding
3. Freedom of Peaceful Assembly
4. Freedom of Expression
5. Participation in Decision-Making
6. Safe Space

The horizontal analysis draws on the findings of the country and regional chapters, ECF's Civic Space Watch platform, the CIVICUS Monitor, and on the work of civil society organisations like Climate Action Network (CAN) Europe, Corporate Europe Observatory, the Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants (PICUM), European Digital Rights (EDRI), European Network Against Racism (ENAR), and ILGA Europe.

The country reports are written by local organisations, on the basis of an ECF questionnaire. The authors choose the areas on which to focus based on their expertise and the relevance of the issues for their national context. Each chapter reflects the views and analysis of its respective author.

1. https://civicspacewatch.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/MACS-Monitoring-Methodology-28-February-2025_0.pdf

Foreword

by Natacha Kazatchkine, Secretary General, European Civic Forum

We often hear that civic space in Europe is “shrinking”. For those working within it, the diagnosis is familiar. Yet the language is passive: it suggests erosion, invites concern, but too often stops there. Civic space does not simply disappear. As this report shows, it is being actively restricted by anti-rights actors, political forces, and governments seeking to reshape it to fit their agendas, silence debate, and exclude or discriminate against groups of people — migrants first and foremost, but also sexual minorities, women, environmental defenders, and dissident voices ranging from anti-racist groups to broader social justice movements.

When institutional channels close or lose credibility, participation does not vanish; it changes form. What governments often label as “disruption” is frequently a direct response to the restrictions they have imposed. Disobedience, boycott, and direct action are signs of blockage, not excess.

At the same time, the costs of acting are rising. Defunding, criminalisation, and surveillance of civil society organisations and activists, repression of protest, and the dismantling of collective social spaces are reshaping civic engagement, making it less accessible and less safe.

But while civic space is narrowing, civic action is not. Across Europe, organisations, movements, and activists continue to hold the line. They have resisted repression, adapted under pressure, and found ways to act even as institutions limit participation. In many contexts, civil society is left carrying out functions that should never

be optional in a democracy: demanding accountability, defending human rights, and insisting that policy-making includes and serves the entire community, leaving no one behind.

Our previous report highlighted how developments at the EU level were increasingly shaping civic space across Europe, often negatively. A year later, this trend has become entrenched. The interplay between EU and national policies is clear: restrictions in member states are reinforced in Brussels, with EU-level measures legitimising crackdowns on civil society. This is visible in migration policies that criminalise solidarity, “foreign agent” laws that stigmatise civil society organisations, and funding attacks that undermine public advocacy and organisational sustainability. Such institutionalisation of pressure risks turning worrying national patterns into structural features across Europe — unless EU institutions and member states commit to securing adequate funding for civil society and embedding participation and independent civic scrutiny throughout policymaking.

For ECF, monitoring civic space cannot stop at describing its decline. It must prompt action. The purpose of our work is to detect early signs of deterioration, call out abuses, and identify civic space trends across Europe in order to determine *when, where, and how* civil society and institutional actors can intervene to restore balance, redress violations, and protect and expand an open space for action for rights and equality for all.

Horizontal Analysis

Executive Summary

In 2025, **restrictions on civil society were becoming institutionalised and mainstreamed across the continent.** Not only were these multiplying across national contexts but restrictive patterns were increasingly being taken up, legitimised, and reinforced at the EU level. **This interplay risks upscaling these dynamics structurally into European-wide policies and practice.**

There were recurring attempts by far-right parties both at national and EU level — often with the support of other mainstream parties — **to delegitimise the activities and funding of civil society through parliamentary inquiries or questions based on false premises.** Increasingly, public authorities and political actors restrict, condition, or withdraw public funding of civil society organisations (CSOs) engaged in advocacy, particularly when they are critical of government policy. The trend of targeting foreign funded civil society through negative rhetoric branding organisations as “foreign agents”, or legislative proposals (known as “foreign agents” laws) continued in 2025. Of serious concern is **the criminalisation of protest movements, which is becoming normalised across Europe. Our findings overwhelmingly demonstrate that this has become a sustained and institutionalised trend in restricting civic space.** In particular, the Palestine solidarity, climate justice, and social justice movements have faced disproportionate restrictions on the right to protest.

The ongoing **criminalisation of solidarity with migrants and refugees has become a structural trend** and is in line with Europe’s coercive migration policies. The expansion of data gathering and monitoring powers by governments — often facilitated by surveillance technologies — is increasingly shaping the environment in which civic actors operate.

Not only are public spaces for civic participation increasingly repressed, but opportunities to engage in decision-making processes are shrinking. **Civil society has raised its concerns over the EU’s deregulation agenda, which is framed around the need to boost industry’s “competitiveness” and “simplify” an overly complex and bureaucratic European regulatory framework.** There are serious concerns that these plans will weaken and dismantle rules that safeguard fundamental rights and further sideline civil society in policymaking processes.

Despite these repressions, civil society continued to hold the line by adapting, resisting, and securing measurable impacts. Initiatives like the EU Civil Society Strategy and the proposal to increase funding for CSOs through the AgoraEU programme signal a growing recognition within the EU that civil society is a democratic asset.

Context

In 2025, the conditions for civic space to thrive in Europe further deteriorated. The civic space ratings of **France, Germany, and Italy** were downgraded from “Narrowed” to “Obstructed” by the CIVICUS Monitor, a global ratings index, while **Serbia’s** rating fell from “Obstructed” to “Repressed”.¹

Wider geo-political and socio-economic developments have impacted on the space for civil society to operate. Political parties have repeatedly targeted and scapegoated civil society during electoral cycles to portray civic engagement as illegitimate interference in the public sphere and in institutional decision-making, as documented during election campaigns in the **Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, the Netherlands, Romania, and Slovenia**. This rhetoric has contributed to discrediting grassroots mobilisations and associations, while undermining participatory democracy.

Pressures on public finances have led to an increasingly precarious situation for civil society. Several states have cut funding for civil society, including **Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, and the Netherlands**. In **Belgium**, civil society and trade unions have staged several strikes over funding cuts by the ruling coalition government.² Meanwhile, over 350 demonstrations were organised across **France** in protest against the significant deterioration in funding for associations.³ These cuts, combined with increased bureaucratic requirements associated with access to funding and organisational operations — a development covered in previous ECF reports — is increasingly leading to funding insecurity, instability, and unsustainability for the sector. In some cases, this has led to the closure of organisations. In one glaring example of this precarity, the Periferia Cimarronas, the first Black theatre in **Spain**, was forced to close after it faced repeated refusals and

withdrawals of public subsidies, resulting in serious debt and staff burnout.⁴ More recently, in March 2026, the European Network Against Racism (ENAR), the only anti-racism network at EU level, launched an urgent funding campaign after a disruption of its structural EU grant caused an acute funding crisis.⁵

The ongoing democratic backsliding in several countries has underscored the indispensable role of civil society in countering polarisation, safeguarding the rights of marginalised groups, documenting lived realities, and amplifying people’s voices. **Yet in 2025, an increasingly assertive anti-rights agenda directly targeted civil society,** while the increasing normalisation of hatred, including xenophobia, Islamophobia, antisemitism, and other forms of discrimination, continues to pose a challenge for civil society, especially those working in these areas.⁶

In **France**, structural restrictions on associations advocating for Muslim rights have been repeatedly documented, including negative rhetoric from public officials and restrictive administrative measures on Muslim associations.⁷ Political figures in **Denmark** have hardened their stance on migration and made it challenging for CSOs working on migration and anti-discrimination to operate.⁸ In **Bulgaria**, the parliament passed an amendment to the Foreigners in the Republic of Bulgaria Act, eliminating the possibility for non-EU citizens to obtain long-term residence permits based on their intention to carry out non-profit activities.⁹ Meanwhile, CSOs working on migration have been **targeted** through restrictive legislation in **Greece**.¹⁰

The targeting of associative spaces, both in the physical and organisational senses, is a revealing indicator of the state of civic space in Europe.¹¹

Political parties have repeatedly targeted and scapegoated civil society during electoral cycles to portray civic engagement as illegitimate interference in the public sphere and in institutional decision-making

1. <https://civicspacewatch.eu/alert/civicus-monitor-downgrades-six-european-countries-due-to-severe-deterioration-of-civic-space/>
2. <https://www.cncd.be/L-Arizona-limite-la-casse-mais-ne?lang=fr>
3. <https://lemouvementassociatif.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/Le-Mouvement-associatif-CP-Suites-mobilisation-11-octobre-VDiffusion.pdf>
4. <https://periferiacimarronas.es/cerramos>
5. <https://www.enar-eu.org/we-need-you-defund-racism-defend-anti-racism/>
6. <https://www.ilga-europe.org/news/equality-betrayed-commission-unilaterally-gives-up-on-anti-discrimination-law/>; <https://www.enar-eu.org/wp-content/uploads/Reimagining-Racial-Justice-Joint-Statement.pdf>; <https://ccieurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/CCIE-report-2025.pdf>; <https://fra.europa.eu/en/themes/hate-crime>
7. Structural restrictions refer to patterns of restrictions embedded in legal, policy, and institutional frameworks and implemented consistently. See: <https://civicspacewatch.eu/alert/france-a-new-witch-hunt-investigation-on-the-repression-of-associations-in-the-context-of-the-fight-against-islamism/>; <https://ccieurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/CCIE-report-2025.pdf>
8. <https://www.politico.eu/article/mette-frederiksen-denmark-migration-eu-presidency-europe/>
9. <https://civicspacewatch.eu/bulgaria-change-in-law-limits-residence-permits-for-non-eu-citizens-engaged-in-civil-society-work/>
10. <https://greekreporter.com/2025/09/03/greece-toughens-migration-law-penalties-detention/>; <https://www.hrw.org/news/2026/01/29/greek-immigration-bill-demonizes-civil-society>
11. <https://11.be/sites/default/files/2025-10/202509-Mid-term-Evaluation2024-international-program-Summary-study-civic-space.pdf>

These physical spaces include community centres, independent cultural venues, CSO offices, and other non-commercial gathering places where civic actors organise and build solidarity. In several states, these spaces have been vandalised by far-right groups, raided by the police, or pushed out by market-driven dynamics. In

Portugal, where there are early signs of deteriorating civic space, the cultural space Academia de Amadores de Música saw its rent increase by 588% after its landlord requested a revaluation, putting its continued existence at risk.¹² Additionally, between October 2024 and April 2025 police conducted four raids on the LGBTQI+ community space Planeta Manas in Loures without judicial warrants, and used physical violence and homophobic insults, ultimately leading to its closure and the eviction of the community using the space.¹³ In **Austria**, police and special forces, supported by aerial surveillance and dog units, raided and detained participants at an anti-fascist youth camp at the Peršman Homestead.¹⁴ At the same time, movements themselves are being undermined through police infiltration and surveillance.¹⁵ Such attacks are eroding the social fabric of civic organising.

Several states continued to question the credibility and applicability of international human rights conventions, raising significant concerns for the preservation of fundamental rights and the rule of law. In an open letter led by Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni and her Danish counterpart Mette Frederiksen, nine EU member states called for the re-interpretation of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) to allow for policy changes on migration.¹⁶ In **Latvia**, in late October 2025, the parliament voted to withdraw the country from the **Istanbul**

The targeting of associative spaces, both in the physical and organisational senses, is a revealing indicator of the state of civic space in Europe.

In 2025, the interplay between EU level initiatives and national political dynamics became both more visible and more consequential.

This two-way dynamic is reinforcing and normalising practices that undermine the role of civil society as a guardian of the rule of law, democracy, and fundamental rights.

Convention, Europe's leading human rights treaty on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. According to Equality Now, if this move goes ahead, Latvia will become the first EU member state to withdraw from an international human rights treaty.¹⁷

Developments at the EU level have become increasingly decisive in shaping civic space across Europe. **In 2025, the interplay between EU level initiatives and national political dynamics became both more visible and more consequential.** Legislative proposals and political priorities emerging from EU institutions are contributing to restricting civic space with direct repercussions at the national level.¹⁸ At the same time, national developments such as restrictive migration measures, smear campaigns targeting CSOs, and the adoption of "foreign agent" style legislation feed back into EU debates and policymaking. **This two-way dynamic is reinforcing and normalising practices that undermine the role of civil society as a guardian of the rule of law, democracy, and fundamental rights.** While EU institutions have become more aware of the importance of protecting civic space, their policy responses remain contradictory: initiatives such as the Civil Society Strategy and the proposed increase in funding for democracy and rights-based CSOs in the next EU long-term budget co-exist with proposals that could limit access to funding or otherwise restrict civic space.

This chapter explores eight cross-cutting trends emerging from monitoring conducted in EU member states, the United Kingdom, and the Western Balkans, and the EU level in 2025 and early 2026, as well as the findings of the country chapters of this report.

¹². <https://www.sabado.pt/portugal/detalhe/80-anos-depois-academia-de-amadores-de-musica-tera-que-deixar-instalacoes>

¹³. <https://acabine.pt/2025/02/novamente-sem-mandado-pp-faz-rusga-ao-planeta-manas/>

¹⁴. On 23 October 2025, a special task force appointed to investigate the raid concluded that the operation was partially unlawful and disproportionate.

See: <https://kaernten.orf.at/stories/3315292/>; <https://english.sta.si/3480749/task-force-finds-persman-raid-unlawful-targeting-anti-fascist-camp-not-minority>

¹⁵. Read more in the trends below.

¹⁶. <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/05/23/nine-eu-countries-seek-european-human-rights-conventions-rethink-on-migration>

¹⁷. <https://equalitynow.org/news/news-and-insights/whats-happening-in-latvia-with-the-istanbul-convention/>

¹⁸. Read more in the trends below.

CIVICUS MONITOR RATINGS BY COUNTRY IN 2025

COUNTRY	RATING 2025	CHANGE
 AUSTRIA	OPEN	
 ALBANIA	NARROWED	
 BELGIUM	NARROWED	
 BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA	OBSTRUCTED	
 BULGARIA	NARROWED	
 CROATIA	NARROWED	
 CYPRUS	NARROWED	
 CZECH REPUBLIC	OPEN	
 DENMARK	OPEN	
 ESTONIA	OPEN	
 FINLAND	OPEN	
 FRANCE	OBSTRUCTED	↓
 GERMANY	OBSTRUCTED	↓
 GREECE	OBSTRUCTED	
 HUNGARY	OBSTRUCTED	
 IRELAND	OPEN	
 ITALY	OBSTRUCTED	↓
 KOSOVO	NARROWED	
 LATVIA	OPEN	
 LITHUANIA	OPEN	
 LUXEMBOURG	OPEN	
 MALTA	NARROWED	
 MONTENEGRO	NARROWED	
 NETHERLANDS	NARROWED	
 NORTH MACEDONIA	NARROWED	
 POLAND	NARROWED	
 PORTUGAL	OPEN	
 ROMANIA	NARROWED	
 SERBIA	REPRESSED	↓
 SLOVAKIA	NARROWED	
 SLOVENIA	OPEN	
 SPAIN	NARROWED	
 SWEDEN	OPEN	
 UNITED KINGDOM	OBSTRUCTED	

RATINGS KEY
OPEN
NARROWED
OBSTRUCTED
REPRESSED
CLOSED

Source: CIVICUS Monitor: monitor.civicus.org

8 KEY TRENDS IN CIVIC SPACE

MANUFACTURING SUSPICION:

from fringe smear campaigns
to institutionalised harassment of NGOs

CONTRACTING COMPLIANCE:

advocacy delegitimised
and defunded

THE SOVEREIGNTY SCARE:

“foreign agents” laws become part of the
European authoritarian playbook

PEACEFUL ASSEMBLY UNDER ATTACK:

the repression of protest movements
becomes the norm

SOLIDARITY OUTLAWED:

the systemic criminalisation of support
for refugees and migrants

PERVASIVE SURVEILLANCE:

governments expand monitoring powers
and technologies

ACCESS DENIED:

civil society sidelined
from policy consultation processes

RESISTING REPRESSION:

civil society holds the line

Manufacturing suspicion: from fringe smear campaigns to institutionalised harassment of NGOs

In 2025, there were recurring attempts by far-right parties — often with the support of other mainstream parties — to delegitimise the activities and funding of civil society via parliamentary inquiries or questions. While formally framed as routine parliamentary scrutiny aimed at enhancing transparency, the scope of these inquiries, and the narratives used to justify them, suggest a broader attempt to exert control over civic space. This trend was exacerbated by the interplay between such actions at the **EU level** and similar attempts at the national level, with instances documented in at least five countries: **Austria, Bulgaria, Germany, Hungary,** and **Slovakia.**

In the **European Parliament**, a “scrutiny working group” to examine EU funding to NGOs was established within the budgetary control committee in June 2025, with the support of the European People’s Party (EPP), the European Conservatives & Reformists (ECR), and the Patriots for Europe (Pfe). Liberal and progressive parties in the committee decided to boycott the hearings, dismissing them as an “NGO witch hunt”.¹⁹

Civil society has condemned the working group as part of the ongoing delegitimisation of their work,²⁰ while a European Court of Auditors report found no evidence of irregularities or misuse of EU grants.²¹ Despite this, **several MEPs have used the hearings to attack the legitimacy of CSOs’ public interest advocacy, often conflating it with lobbying and “political activity”, and have questioned CSOs’ current participation and influence in policymaking.** In one example, during a hearing in

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Far-right political groups have launched repeated smear campaigns, often targeted at CSOs.

February 2026, Muslim-led organisations were accused of being “close to terrorist organisations” and CSOs working on migration faced accusations of facilitating “illegal migration”.²² These allegations reflect a broader hostile framing of civil society and echo global anti-rights narratives that depict rights-based organisations as security threats or foreign proxies. Such rhetoric contributes to the stigmatisation and delegitimisation of civil society and further constrains civic space.

Alongside these formal parliamentary mechanisms, politically-aligned actors are amplifying these narratives through a network of affiliated organisations and media ecosystems. For example, the Taxpayers Association of Europe filed a complaint to the European Public Prosecutor’s Office alleging that two former European Commissioners closely involved in the EU Green Deal — Frans Timmermans and Virginijus Sinkevičius — made “illegal” payments through “secret contracts” to NGOs to lobby over EU laws.²³ An investigation by Desmog, a factchecking platform which tackles misinformation about global warming, revealed that the association has close ties with a member of the scrutiny working group and budgetary control committee.²⁴ It also revealed that Austria’s far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ) — which has launched similar attacks against CSOs nationally — filed a separate complaint with the public prosecutor a day later.

In addition to the working group, **far-right political groups have launched repeated smear campaigns, often targeted at CSOs.** An ECR report accused leading anti-racism group the European Network Against Racism

19. <https://civicspacewatch.eu/alert/eu-meps-launch-controversial-ngo-scrutiny-group/>

20. <https://civilsocietyeurope.eu/transparency-or-ngo-hunt/>

21. <https://civilsocietyeurope.eu/no-scandal-no-misuse-of-funds-but-the-commission-needs-to-invest-in-a-more-understandable-database/>

22. https://multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/en/webstreaming/cont-scrutiny-working-group_20260211-1600-COMMITTEE-CONT

23. <https://www.politico.eu/article/taxpayer-group-demands-probe-into-eu-green-deal-architects-over-ngo-funding/>

24. <https://www.desmog.com/2025/09/11/epp-linked-tax-group-collaborated-far-right-party-criminal-complaints/>

(ENAR) and its member the Forum for European Muslim Youth and Student Organisations (FEMYSO) of being part of the Muslim Brotherhood.²⁵ In written questions, a Hungarian MEP from the Patriots for Europe group accused NGOs of being funded in an “untransparent way” and requested that the European Commission disclose a list of all NGOs funded between 2019 and 2024 and the amount they received.²⁶ However, this information is already publicly available on the EU Funding and Tenders portal.²⁷ Later that year, the far-right group created its own online directory listing NGOs that pursue “political activities,” sparking concerns that it could be used for targeted smear campaigns against Hungarian CSOs.²⁸ **Repeated unfounded accusations of the misuse of EU funds, together with reports making false allegations against well-established CSOs, are contributing to a feedback loop in which institutional scrutiny legitimises politically-motivated reputational attacks, and vice versa.**

These developments took place ahead of long negotiations over the next Multi-Annual Financial Framework (MFF), a crucial moment for civil society given the increasingly constrained funding landscape. Some MEPs have proposed amendments that attack civil society,²⁹ in particular those working on Muslim rights and Palestine solidarity. In addition, at the time of writing, there is a coordinated attempt by members of the scrutiny working group and their respective parties to propose amendments to limit NGO funding in other policy documents.³⁰ These tactics are aimed at putting pressure on the European Commission to introduce restrictions on the funding of specific activities and organisations.

Repeated unfounded accusations of the misuse of EU funds, together with reports making false allegations against well-established CSOs, are contributing to a feedback loop in which institutional scrutiny legitimises politically-motivated reputational attacks, and vice versa.

These inquiries provide fertile ground for negative narratives about CSOs to become mainstream and are early warning signs that new restrictions on civic space may soon follow.

The politicisation and control of NGO funding at EU level adds to the dynamics at national level in several states. In **Austria**, the far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ) initiated an extensive parliamentary inquiry into the funding of NGOs, submitting more than 2,000 questions to various ministries concerning over 700 organisations.³¹ In **Bulgaria**, on 5 November, the parliament adopted a decision to establish an *ad hoc* temporary parliamentary commission into funding of civil society actors by US philanthropist George Soros.³²

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and are early warning signs that new restrictions on civic space may soon follow. This can be seen in the case of **Germany**. Following the parliamentary inquiry into “political neutrality” of NGOs, launched by the governing CDU/CSU, false and distorted narratives directed against civil society were spread initially through social media and right-wing populist platforms, but have now entered mainstream debate.³³ In **Hungary**, the recently established Sovereignty Protection Office (SPO) released several reports targeting civil society, including those who are EU- and internationally-funded.³⁴

As a result of these campaigns, CSOs are forced to constantly respond to attacks, thereby detracting from their core missions and reducing their overall capacity and resources. There is a **serious risk that such accusations become mainstream, institutional repressions.**

25. https://ecrgroup.eu/files/Unmasking_the_Muslim_Brotherhood_%282%29.pdf

26. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/P-10-2025-001007_EN.html

27. <https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/portal/screen/home>

28. <https://english.atlatzo.hu/2025/08/14/database-created-by-the-ep-patriots-group-disproves-attacks-on-eu-funded-ngos/>

29. [https://oeil.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/en/procedure-file?reference=2025/0571R\(APP\)](https://oeil.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/en/procedure-file?reference=2025/0571R(APP))

30. See, for example, amendments tabled to the Special Committee on the European Democracy Shield: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/EUDS-AM-784367_EN.pdf and Discharge Procedure 2024: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CONT-AM-784512_EN.pdf

31. <https://www.derstandard.at/story/3000000285018/die-regierung-tappt-bei-ngos-in-die-falle-der-fpoe>

32. <https://civicspacewatch.eu/bulgaria-parliament-establishes-commission-targeting-soros-funded-csos/>

33. <https://www.maecenata.eu/2025/12/02/anti-ngo-diskurs-social-media-analyse/>

34. <https://civicspacewatch.eu/alert/hungary-sovereignty-protection-office-escalates-attacks-on-csos/>

Contracting compliance: advocacy delegitimised and defunded

Increasingly, public authorities and political actors restrict, condition, or withdraw public funding of CSOs engaged in advocacy, particularly when they criticise government policy.³⁵ Changes to funding rules, restrictive legislative proposals, and instances of the withdrawal of funding from NGOs that are critical of government policy have been documented in several states including in **Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Hungary, Spain**, and the **United Kingdom**, as well as at the **EU level**.

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In **Belgium**, six sociocultural organisations that have been critical of the Flemish government appealed to the Council of State after all or most of their subsidies were cut over their alleged support of civil disobedience group Code Rouge, or for not distancing themselves from “violent actions”.³⁶ In **France**, the 2021 *Contrat d’engagement républicain* (CER), which requires associations applying for public funds or subsidies to subscribe to “republican values”, has systematically been used to target associations critical of government policies. For example, at the end of December 2025, the social association AREA was forced to cease its activities after the government withdrew its funding over its reports and statements, which were viewed as too critical by government departments.³⁷ In some cases, organisations opt for toning down their messages in order to continue receiving public funding, as seen in the case of the Léo-Lagrange Club in Vienne which committed to refraining from calling on people to vote against far-right ideas, in order to unfreeze its municipal subsidy.³⁸ In the **Czech Republic**, the new coalition government has pledged to introduce restrictions on “political non-profit organisations” and plans to prevent public

Proposals to stop the funding of CSOs’ advocacy activities have also been put forward at the EU level.

money from being used for political activism.³⁹ Across the **Western Balkans**, similar patterns are evident, where public funding is often used selectively and critical CSOs face smear campaigns, administrative pressure, and funding insecurity. These dynamics contribute to a chilling effect, particularly for watchdog and rights-based organisations.

In **Denmark**, some CSOs report having had conditions tied to their funding, such as not being allowed to use their funding for advocacy or campaigns that are political in nature.⁴⁰ In the **Netherlands**, under the new govern-

ment’s funding framework, advocacy towards the Dutch government is not eligible for funding.⁴¹ This significantly affects the capacity of CSOs to continue to monitor and engage in particular with the foreign policy agenda of the country. In **Germany**, the government has failed to amend the tax-exempt status, thus the legal framework for civil society engaged in “occasional political activities” remains unclear, creating significant uncertainty.⁴² The far-right AfD party has capitalised on this by reporting CSOs to the tax authorities for alleged non-compliance with their non-profit status.

In June 2025, the party introduced a bill in the German parliament to ban the public financing of “political” NGOs.⁴³

Proposals to stop the funding of CSOs’ advocacy activities have also been put forward at the EU level. Civil society has raised concerns about the European Commission’s 2024 policy guidelines on funding lobbying activities, which state

that entities receiving EU funding should ensure that their lobbying and advocacy activities “avoid reputational risk”.⁴⁴ **There are growing concerns that this vague definition of “reputational risk” could be**

35. The Venice Commission emphasised that CSOs have the “right to participate in matters of political and public debate, regardless of whether the position taken in accord with government policy or advocates a change in the law. See: [https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD\(2019\)002-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD(2019)002-e)

36. <https://vrede.be/nl/nieuws/zes-geveiserde-sociaal-culturele-organisaties-stappen-naar-raad-van-state-tegen-beslissing>

37. <https://civicspacewatch.eu/alert/france-funding-for-social-support-association-withdrawn-due-to-criticism-of-government-actions/>

38. <https://www.ledauphine.com/politique/2025/06/23/apres-la-polemique-le-club-leo-lagrange-retrouve-finalement-sa-subvention-municipale>

39. <https://vlada.gov.cz/vlada/programove-prohlaseni/programove-prohlaseni-vlady-224629/>

40. Focus group held by Nyt Europa with Danish CSOs 16 December 2025. https://www.nyteuropa.dk/_files/ugd/3d7754_0d3b1bd599384246a682298bd60437c5.pdf

41. <https://www.government.nl/topics/grant-programmes/femfocus-2026-2030>

42. To be recognised as an NPO, an association must fulfil one of the 26 charitable purposes outlined in the German Fiscal Code. Since 2019, a ruling by Germany’s highest court for tax matters, the Federal Fiscal Court (BFH), established that the political engagement of charitable associations is subject to strict limits. For example, NPOs may only engage in political activity to further its charitable purpose. See: <https://www.bundesfinanzhof.de/de/entscheidung/entscheidungen-online/detail/STRE201910035/>; <https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/gemeinnuetzige-vereine-politisch-afd-anzeige-100.html>

43. <https://www.bundestag.de/dokumente/textarchiv/2025/kw26-de-nichtregierungsorganisationen-1084814>

44. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/290965/Guidance_funding%20to%20lobbying%20activities_final%20Ares%282024%293320196-%2007052024.pdf

used to restrict CSOs' advocacy and critical engagement in policymaking. For instance, in late

November 2024, several NGOs receiving operating grants under the LIFE programme were invited to screen their existing grant agreements against the new guidance and to then request amendments to their grant agreements, if necessary, after most of the year's activities had already been carried out by beneficiaries. The NGOs concluded that such changes were neither necessary nor possible under the EU's Financial Regulation or contract law in general.⁴⁵

CSOs feel they must choose between toning down their messages, strategically taking fewer public positions, or simply reducing the visibility of their work to avoid being attacked.

Concerning proposals related to funding of civil society advocacy have surfaced at the European Parliament within the context of negotiations of the long-term

EU budget (the MFF) and the activities of the scrutiny working group described above. For instance, several MEPs from the far-right ECR group proposed restrictions on the eligibility of advocacy activities under EU funding.⁴⁶

As in the first trend, there is a concerning interplay between national and EU level. **The repeated delegitimisation of civil society advocacy and the increasing restriction of funding is contributing to a severe chilling effect.** CSOs feel they must choose between toning down their messages, strategically taking fewer public positions, or simply reducing the visibility of their work to avoid being attacked.

⁴⁵. <https://eeb.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/Shared-NGO-funding-Transparency-updated-QA-October-2025.pdf>

⁴⁶. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1GrqiwL57nx9H9Dv-AibRc9OzxCicHYsh/view>

The sovereignty scare: “foreign agents” laws become part of the European authoritarian playbook

In several states, including in **Bosnia and Herzegovina's** Republika Srpska, the **Czech Republic**, **Hungary**, the **Netherlands**, **Serbia**, and **Slovakia**,⁴⁷ foreign funding of civil society was targeted under the guise of transparency, either through negative rhetoric branding organisations as “foreign agents”, or legislative proposals (known as “foreign agents” laws). These laws have posed a significant challenge for cross border philanthropy and foreign donors.⁴⁸

In yet another escalation of the sustained attacks on civil society in **Hungary**, a controversial draft law titled “On the Transparency of Public Life” would give a broader mandate to the recently established Sovereignty Protection Office (SPO) to determine whether a foreign-funded organisation’s activities threaten Hungary’s sovereignty, which could result in an organisation being placed on an official blacklist and be effectively cut off from all major funding sources.⁴⁹ In the **Netherlands**, where there are early warning signs of shrinking civic space, the Civil Society Organisations Transparency Act (WTMO) gives local mayors, the public prosecutor, and other designated government agencies broad powers to make targeted inquiries about foreign donations to CSOs and risks being used to target specific religious groups.⁵⁰ In **Bulgaria**, there have been repeated attempts to propose a Russian-style foreign agents law,⁵¹ which in 2025 was once again on the parliament’s agenda.⁵² Additionally, the far-right, pro-Russian Vazrajdana party proposed amendments to the Pre-School and School Education Act, introducing fines of between €5,000 and €10,000 for legal entities that are registered abroad

In some states, while draft “foreign agent” laws were stalled or shelved, their stigmatising effect continued to shape public discourse.

or receive at least half of their funding from foreign sources if they carry out trainings, surveys, or research involving children, students, or school personnel.⁵³

More broadly across the **Western Balkans**, wide smear campaigns have been launched to discredit CSOs and independent media by branding them as “foreign agents”, including in the context of narratives surrounding the withdrawal of USAID support.⁵⁴ **In some states, while draft “foreign agent” laws were stalled or shelved, their stigmatising effect continued to shape public discourse.** In **Serbia**, the draft foreign agents law from 2024 is regularly referenced by individual MPs during periods of intensified smear campaigns against CSOs. The narrative is further reinforced by repeated references to the potential reintroduction of such legislation by the current deputy prime minister.⁵⁵

This trend is gaining traction and risks being legitimised at the **EU level**. Civil society has repeatedly raised concerns over the foreign funding directive proposed as part of the Commission’s 2023 Defence of Democracy package.⁵⁶ While the European Parliament and the Council of the EU under the Polish and Danish presidencies have improved the proposal,⁵⁷ the draft directive risks being used as a tool to stigmatise CSOs that receive foreign funding and has already been referenced by some national actors to justify their more dangerous foreign agents acts. CSOs continue to call for the withdrawal of the package and a thorough fundamental rights impact assessment.⁵⁸

47. <https://www.predemokraciu.sk/2025/04/16/parlament-schvalil-rusky-zakon-vyzyvame-prezidenta-sr-na-veto/>

48. Information received from Philea.

49. <https://civicspacewatch.eu/hungary-new-transparency-legislation-targets-foreign-funded-csos/>

50. <https://civicspacewatch.eu/the-netherlands-legislative-proposals-risk-stigmatising-csos-expanding-censorship-and-granting-more-powers-to-authorities/>

51. The latest FARA proposal available here: <https://www.parliament.bg/bg/bills/ID/165804>

52. The FARA was proposed between 2022 and 2025 in four parliaments

53. <https://civicspacewatch.eu/bulgaria-proposed-ban-on-foreign-funded-cso-activities-in-schools/>

54. See the Western Balkans chapter of this report.

55. <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/vulin-porucio-ne-odustajem-od-zakona/>

56. <https://civic-forum.eu/press/press-release-european-commission-adopts-problematic-foreign-funding-directive-ignoring-civil-society-warnings>

57. <https://civilsocietyeurope.eu/parliament-approves-position-on-foreign-interest-representation-could-it-harm-civil-society/>

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

Peaceful assembly under attack: the repression of protest movements becomes the norm

Across Europe, the freedom of peaceful assembly is under attack. **There is an alarming normalisation of repressive laws and practices to criminalise peaceful protest movements. Our findings overwhelmingly demonstrate that this has become a sustained trend in restricting civic space.**

In 2025, governments have not only maintained existing restrictive legislation but introduced new laws that further constrain peaceful assembly. Restrictive laws were proposed or passed in **Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Slovenia, and the United Kingdom.**

In **Italy**, the controversial security decree, which CSOs say is the greatest attack on protest rights in the history of the country, introduces new criminal offences and expands police powers to restrict protests.⁵⁹ In **Cyprus**, the parliament approved a law which introduces a mandatory seven-day advance notification requirement for protests, penalties for wearing face coverings during demonstrations, and expands police powers to disperse assemblies.⁶⁰ In the **United Kingdom**, the new Crime and Policing Bill — the third major piece of legislation in recent years to restrict the right to protest — would criminalise the use of face coverings and restrict protests near places of worship.⁶¹ In **Serbia**, following massive anti-government protests, amendments to the Criminal Code sought to criminalise blockades with up to a year imprisonment.⁶² Meanwhile, existing restrictive legislation

There is an alarming normalisation of repressive laws and practices to criminalise peaceful protest movements.

Several states are taking explicit steps to criminalise movements by portraying them as “terrorists” or a threat to national security.

has also been used to **limit the right to protest** as demonstrated in **Spain** with the gag law,⁶³ in **Italy** with the use of *foglio di via* (expulsion orders),⁶⁴ and in the **United Kingdom**, with the Policing, Crimes, Sentencing and Courts Act.⁶⁵

Several states are taking explicit steps to criminalise movements by portraying them as “terrorists” or a threat to national security. In **Belgium**, a proposed law includes plans to ban “radical organisations”, leaving broad discretion to authorities to decide which organisations qualify as such.⁶⁶ The proposal comes in the context of increased repression on protest movements in the country. Anti-fascist (Antifa) movements have faced threats of criminalisation in the **Netherlands**,⁶⁷ while in **Hungary**, the Orbán government added “Antifa” to the national terrorism list and further blurred the line between peaceful democratic civic engagement and national security threats.⁶⁸ Attacks on movements have also been mirrored at the **EU level**. For example, several MEPs from the Patriots for Europe group suggested in questions to the Council of the EU that persons affiliated with the anti-fascist movement should be added to the EU terrorist list and subject to sanctions,⁶⁹ while an MEP from the same party proposed a motion to declare “Antifa” a terrorist organisation.⁷⁰

In line with findings of previous years, **the use of excessive force, arbitrary detentions, and**

59. <https://www.politico.eu/article/giorgia-meloni-security-decree-anti-protest-law-italy/>

60. https://www.cylaw.org/nomoi/arith/2025_1_151.pdf

61. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/crime-and-policing-bill-2025-factsheets/crime-and-policing-bill-overarching-factsheet>, <https://www.bond.org.uk/news/2025/10/what-the-crime-and-policing-bill-means-for-protest-rights/>

62. <https://www.serbianmonitor.com/en/what-is-changing-in-the-criminal-code-and-does-it-have-anything-to-do-with-the-protests-in-serbia/>

63. The “gag” law grants broad powers to authorities and imposes high fines for a range of acts, including resisting or disrespecting authorities, refusing to identify oneself to the authorities, and the unauthorised dissemination of images of police officers during operations: <https://www.es.amnesty.org/en-que-estamos/noticias/noticia/articulo/ley-mordaza-diez-anos-de-vulneraciones-de-derechos-humanos-y-promesas-incumplidas/>

64. *Foglio di via* a preventive administrative measure which requires individuals to stay away from a specific municipality for public order reasons and has been frequently used against protesters: <https://www.amnesty.it/fogli-di-via-strumento-di-prevenzione-o-di-repressione/>

65. The Policing, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act gives authorities unprecedented power to impose noise-based restrictions on protests, greater powers to restrict static assemblies and limit protest outside parliament: <https://civicspacewatch.eu/alert/united-kingdom-policing-bill-about-to-become-a-very-damaging-piece-of-legislation-for-human-rights-defenders/>

66. <https://www.amnesty.be/infos/blogs/blog-paroles-chercheurs-defenseurs-victimes/carte-blanche-loi-quintin>

67. <https://www.tweedekamer.nl/kamerstukken/moties/detail?id=2025Z17241&did=2025D40130>

68. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/oct/12/european-far-right-follows-trump-in-calling-for-antifa-to-be-declared-terrorists>

69. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-10-2025-003804_EN.html

70. <https://www.politico.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/22/ANTIFA-Terrorist-Organization-Resolution.pdf>

harassment was a sustained pattern in 2025, and was documented in **Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Denmark, France, Italy**, the **Netherlands, Portugal, Serbia, Spain**, and the **United Kingdom**.

Police infiltration and surveillance (see trend 6) have also been used to restrict protests. In particular, the Palestine solidarity, climate justice, and other social justice movements have faced disproportionate restrictions on the right to protest, as outlined in the case studies below.

Case Study 1: Palestine solidarity movement

Restrictions on peaceful protests expressing solidarity with the Palestinian people and opposing Israel's actions in Gaza, which amount to genocide according to a UN Commission of Inquiry⁷¹ and multiple Palestinian, Israeli, and international human rights groups,⁷² has become a sustained trend in Europe,⁷³ documented in several states including in **Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Spain, Sweden, and the **United Kingdom**.⁷⁴**

In **Germany**, authorities have imposed prohibitions on chanting in Arabic and displaying certain symbols, like the watermelon or Keffiyeh scarf, deployed excessive force and extensive surveillance measures, and carried out criminal prosecutions to target participants and organisers.⁷⁵ In **Belgium**, Palestine solidarity protests have been dispersed with excessive force, including the disproportionate use of tear gas and water cannon in Brussels.⁷⁶ In **Denmark**, police arrested around 20 activists and used tear gas and batons during a non-violent protest at the Maersk

Restrictions on peaceful protests expressing solidarity with the Palestinian people and opposing Israel's actions in Gaza, which amount to genocide according to a UN Commission of Inquiry and multiple Palestinian, Israeli, and international human rights groups, has become a sustained trend in Europe,

Organisations and individuals participating in protests have faced intimidation, harassment, surveillance, and threats of dissolution

headquarters in Copenhagen, where demonstrators attempted to block the entrance in opposition to the company's alleged involvement in transporting arms

to Israel.⁷⁷ In the **United Kingdom**, almost 900 people were arrested for supporting the activist group Palestine Action in September 2025, after it was proscribed as a terrorist organisation in July of that year, making membership or support for the organisation a criminal offence.⁷⁸ Ahead of the decision, UN experts urged the UK government to not proscribe the group, arguing that it would "criminalise legitimate actions" by members of the group.⁷⁹

Around two thousand people are facing criminal charges for showing support for the group during demonstrations.⁸⁰ In 2026, the High Court ruled that the government's decision to proscribe the group was "disproportionate" and unlawful.⁸¹

Organisations and individuals participating in protests have faced intimidation, harassment, surveillance, and threats of dissolution, with cases documented in **Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Latvia, the Netherlands, Portugal, Slovenia, and Spain**. In **Belgium**, an activist is facing prosecution following their participation in direct action to denounce the complicity of arms companies.⁸² In **Sweden**, a German student who was active in the 2024 university encampments was fined for "disobedience against public authority", and in 2025 was deported to Germany and given a five-year entry ban.⁸³ In **France**, the interior minister announced the dissolution of Urgence Palestine, under the internal security code. However, the dissolution decree has not yet been published.

71. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/09/israel-has-committed-genocide-gaza-strip-un-commission-finds>

72. See, for example: https://www.alhaq.org/cached_uploads/download/2023/11/15/briefing-note-genocide-third-state-responsibility-14-november-2023-1700041879.pdf, <https://www.mezan.org/en/post/46444/Israel%E2%80%99s-Genocide-in-Gaza-The-Latest-Episode-in-the-Ongoing-Nakba-Against-the-Palestinian-People>, https://www.btselem.org/publications/202507_our_genocide; <https://www.phr.org.il/en/genocide-in-gaza-eng/>; <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/12/amnesty-international-concludes-israel-is-committing-genocide-against-palestinians-in-gaza/>; <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/12/19/israels-crime-extermination-acts-genocide-gaza>

73. <https://civic-forum.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Civic-Space-Report-2025-ECF.pdf>; <https://civic-forum.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/CIVIC-SPACE-REPORT-2024-RESTRICTIONS-ON-PALESTINE-SOLIDARITY.pdf>

74. Since October 2023, many member states have violated international human rights standards on the freedoms of peaceful assembly, expression, and association. See: <https://civic-forum.eu/press/repression-on-protests-in-solidarity-with-flotilla-and-palestinian-people-ngos-demand-eu-council-action>; <https://civic-forum.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/CIVIC-SPACE-REPORT-2024-RESTRICTIONS-ON-PALESTINE-SOLIDARITY.pdf>

75. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/10/un-experts-urge-germany-halt-criminalisation-and-police-violence-against>; <https://www.tni.org/en/publication/solidarity-under-siege>; <https://www.index-of-repression.org/de/platform>

76. <https://www.brusselstimes.com/belgium/1780646/questions-raised-over-police-brutality-at-gaza-flotilla-protests-in-brussels>; <https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/en/2025/11/04/antwerp-police-use-water-cannon-and-pepper-spray-against-pro-pal/>

77. https://www.nyteuropa.dk/_files/ugd/3d7754_22fd8cbcc8dd4ffda465a80329476038.pdf

78. <https://civicspacewatch.eu/uk-mass-arrests-for-supporting-palestine-action-and-second-appeal-for-the-ban/>

79. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/07/un-experts-urge-united-kingdom-not-misuse-terrorism-laws-against-protest>

80. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c051g2q5651o>

81. <https://www.itv.com/news/2026-02-13/high-court-ruling-what-is-palestine-action-and-why-was-it-banned>

82. <https://www.lavenir.net/regions/wallonie-picarde/tournai/2025/09/10/proces-danuna-de-wever-a-tournai-des-actions-pour-denoncer-la-complicite-des-entreprises-darmement-avec-le-genocide-en-cours-en-palestine-BAKYG54KXRDKJW3KXLLMMVCD5M/>

83. <https://www.sydsvenskan.se/lund/polisen-tvingar-tysk-demonstrant-fran-palestinagard-att-lamna-sverige/>

Furthermore, there have been several reported cases of police infiltration of the movement documented in **Spain** and **Italy**.⁸⁴

Repeated restrictions on the freedom of expression, which is closely tied with the freedom of peaceful assembly, has been documented in several states. Cases include cancellation of events and the banning of Palestinian symbols such as the watermelon, the Palestinian flag, the Keffiyeh scarf, and the chant “from the river to the sea”.⁸⁵ **In several states, legitimate critical speech, protected by the freedom of expression under international law, has been labelled as antisemitic.** For example, a report by the local Amnesty chapter raised such concerns in **Austria** where the conflation of antisemitism with criticism of the Israeli state has led to a chilling effect for the Palestinian solidarity movement and civil society advocacy, while undermining efforts to combat actual antisemitism.⁸⁶ Similarly, other countries such as **Denmark** and **Italy** proposed legislation which threatens to conflate criticism of Israeli state policies with antisemitism and is likely to impact on civic actors expressing solidarity with Palestine.⁸⁷

2025 saw a “renewed criminalisation” of LGBTQI+ people, including their right to protest

Case study 2: Climate Justice movement

Environmental and climate justice groups continue to face sustained repression, including excessive force, legal harassment, surveillance, harsh sentences, and disproportionate financial penalties, including in **Belgium, France, Italy, Serbia, Spain, Sweden,** and the **United Kingdom**.

In **France**, an environmental activist was sentenced in November 2025 to six months in prison for spraying water-based paint on the façade of the prime minister’s office — the harshest sentence ever handed down for an act of environmental civil disobedience.⁸⁸ In **Sweden**, five activists involved in peaceful direct action at the Finnish Embassy in Stockholm were ordered

to pay disproportionate fines, with three of them also receiving prison sentences.⁸⁹ These convictions illustrate the harshening of penalties for civil disobedience — a form of protest that is recognised as legitimate and protected by international human rights law.⁹⁰ Movements have also faced Strategic Lawsuits against Public Participation (SLAPPs). In **Italy**, energy company Fox Petroli filed a defamation lawsuit against two activists seeking €2 million in damages after they criticised environmental conditions at an oil storage site linked to a planned methane liquefaction plant.⁹¹ In **Romania**, the state-owned energy company Romgaz filed a case to dissolve Greenpeace Romania for opposing a gas extraction project.⁹²

Case study 3: Social justice movements

A wide range of social justice movements and activists — including anti-austerity, workers’ rights, anti-fascist, housing rights, feminist, migrant’s rights, and LGBTQI+ rights movements — have faced escalating repressions on their right to protest.

2025 saw a “renewed criminalisation” of LGBTQI+ people, including their right to protest.⁹³ Bans or partial bans and restrictions on Pride parades occurred across Europe, including in **Bulgaria,**⁹⁴ **France,**⁹⁵ **Germany,**⁹⁶ **Hungary,**⁹⁷ and **Romania.**⁹⁸ In **Hungary**, despite the parliament passing a law to ban Pride, a massive march was staged in Budapest.⁹⁹ In Pécs, Géza Buzás-Hábel, a gay Roma teacher and long-time organiser of the local march, became the first person in the EU known to face criminal charges for organising a Pride march (under the 2025 amendment of the Assembly Act), which could lead to up to one year in prison.¹⁰⁰ In **France**, the president of the Île-de-France region cancelled two €25,000 subsidies awarded to the Inter-LGBT Association, the organiser of the Paris Pride march, due to a poster which it claims incited

84. <https://www.napolitoday.it/cronaca/proteste-federico-ii-agente-infiltrato.html>, <https://directa.cat/un-policia-espanyol-sinfiltra-dos-anys-en-lactivisme-de-lleida/>, <https://www.elsaltodiario.com/repression/directa-destapa-una-policia-infiltrada-movimiento-palestina-izquierda-independentista>

85. <https://archiveofsilence.org/>, <https://www.ldh-france.org/gilles-platret-apres-les-atteintes-aux-libertes-fundamentales-les-injures/>, https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2025/12/18/un-mois-apres-l-annulation-du-colloque-sur-la-palestine-l-unite-reste-fragile-au-college-de-france_6658473_3224.html

86. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2026/03/austria-crackdown-on-palestinian-solidarity-has-triggered-significant-chilling-effect/>

87. <https://www.fidh.org/en/issues/freedom-of-expression/fidh-publishes-a-report-on-the-repression-of-the-solidarity-movement>

88. <https://libertesassociatives.org/entrevue/157-apres-une-action-symbolique-de-jet-de-peinture-devant-matignon-une-militante-de-derniere-renovation-est-condamnee-a-6-mois-de-prison-ferme/>

89. <https://www.sverigesnatur.org/aktuellt/fangelse-for-klimataktion-vid-finlands-ambassad-i-stockholm/>

90. https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2025-10/Aarhus_SR_EnvDef_Guidelines_Right%20to%20Peaceful%20Environmental%20Protest_Civil%20Disobedience_ENG_0.pdf

91. <https://www.articolo21.org/2025/10/due-attivisti-citati-in-giudizio-da-una-potente-compagnia-energetica-la-causa-riconosciuta-comeslapp/>

92. <https://www.greenpeace.org/romania/articol/10798/romgaz-bahamas-renunta-la-dizolvarea-greenpeace-si-au-dat-seama-ca-pierd/>

93. <https://www.ilga-europe.org/press-release/europe-reaches-new-low-as-lgbti-people-face-renewed-criminalisation/>

94. <https://novini.bg/article/2025031002012984943>

95. <https://france3-regions.franceinfo.fr/bourgogne-franche-comte/cote-d-or/dijon/pride-2025-interdite-dans-le-centre-de-dijon-la-polemique-continue-d-enfler-a-la-veille-de-la-marche-des-fiertes-3170109.html>

96. <https://www.lgbtqnation.com/2025/07/germanys-parliament-banned-the-pride-flag-it-backfired-spectacularly/>

97. <https://www.amnesty.hu/hungary-banning-lgbti-march-for-resembling-budapest-pride-a-deeply-disturbing-development/>

98. <https://www.forbidden-colours.com/2025/07/23/second-pride-banned-in-eu-in-2025/>

99. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/03/20/hungary-bans-lgbt-pride-events>

100. <https://civicspacewatch.eu/hungary-teacher-faces-eu-first-criminal-charges-for-organising-pride/>

violence. The poster depicted seven figures, including a trans person, a woman wearing a headscarf, and another woman with a Palestinian flag pin, and the corpse of a white man hanging by his tie.¹⁰¹

In **Belgium**, 13 complaints were filed to police oversight bodies due to the use of tear gas and water cannon against protesters during the biggest national strike in decades against pension reforms.¹⁰² In **Portugal**, during a general strike by major trade unions against the government's new labour package, police

used rubber bullets to disperse a crowd gathered near the parliament.¹⁰³ In **Serbia**, authorities deployed sonic weapons against anti-corruption and anti-government protesters in Belgrade.¹⁰⁴ In **Spain**, a record number of police infiltrations into activist groups, including the youth, independence, climate, Palestine solidarity, and housing rights movements, have raised serious concerns about their potential chilling effect on civic organising.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰¹. <https://libertesassociatives.org/entrave/149-la-region-ile-de-france-retire-50-000-euros-de-subvention-a-linter-lgbt-apres-la-publication-dune-affiche-contre-linternationale-reactionnaire-pour-la-marche/>

¹⁰². <https://www.politico.eu/article/police-clash-with-protesters-huge-strikes-rock-brussels-belgium/>

¹⁰³. <https://indymedia.pt/229685/>

¹⁰⁴. <https://crt.rs/en/the-european-court-of-human-rights-statement-regarding-the-alleged-use-of-sonic-weapons-during-the-protest/>

¹⁰⁵. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/06/italy-new-case-of-journalist-targeted-with-graphite-spyware-confirms-widespread-use-of-unlawful-surveillance/>; <https://directa.cat/una-policia-espanyola-sinfiltra-durant-dos-anys-al-moviment-per-palestina-i-a-lesquerra-independentista/>

Solidarity outlawed: the systemic criminalisation of support for refugees and migrants

The criminalisation of solidarity with migrants and refugees has become a structural trend in Europe. In 2025, CSOs, volunteers, and activists

assisting migrants continue to face legal harassment, public vilification, and criminal prosecution. Monitoring by the Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants (PICUM), found that at least 110 individuals faced judicial proceedings for acting in solidarity with migrants in the EU in 2025. At least 11 CSOs and other entities have been subject to administrative fines and sanctions. Moreover, at least 33 cases of non-judicial harassment, such as intimidation and smear campaigns that targeted both individuals and civil society actors were documented.¹⁰⁶

This trend is closely linked to the broader tightening of Europe’s migration policies, a phenomenon known as the “criminalisation of migration”, as irregular migration is increasingly addressed through security-oriented enforcement and frameworks. In this context, assistance or support to migrants is increasingly more narrowly regulated, limiting permitted activities and who can carry them out, with tougher criminal or administrative sanctions for failure to comply.

This approach is becoming embedded in legal, policy, and institutional frameworks developed at the **EU level. In recent years, several pieces of legislation have contributed to the criminalisation of solidarity and migration itself** including the EU’s Pact on Migration and Asylum,¹⁰⁷ the package “to prevent and combat migrant smuggling”,¹⁰⁸ and the Returns Regulation¹⁰⁹ — dubbed the “deportation regulation” by civil society and still under negotiation at the time of writing.¹¹⁰ The latter proposal was issued without a formal human rights impact assessment or formal

The criminalisation of solidarity with migrants and refugees has become a structural trend in Europe.

In recent years, several pieces of legislation have contributed to the criminalisation of solidarity and migration itself

consultations.¹¹¹ If passed the regulation would expand the digital surveillance infrastructure targeting racialised communities and solidarity groups. The

final law could also include the Council proposal to legalise police raids of private homes and humanitarian shelters, further repressing solidarity and assistance.¹¹²

Furthermore, a proposed revision of the EU Facilitation Directive — presented as part of the package “to prevent and combat migrant smuggling” — could broaden the definition of smuggling in ways that risk further enabling the prosecution of solidarity with migrants.¹¹³

A mutually reinforcing pattern is becoming entrenched: **in line with member states’ harsh approach, EU policies are contributing to the normalisation of the criminalisation of migration and solidarity.** This, in turn, provides political and legal cover for stigmatisation and repression of migration-related civil society organisations at both national and EU level.

Restrictive laws, administrative barriers, criminal prosecutions, and SLAPPs targeting organisations and activists working with migrants have been documented in **Bulgaria, France, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Poland, and Spain.**

In **Greece**, the government has systematically targeted migration organisations. The government proposed an immigration bill which introduces measures that explicitly link non-governmental groups and humanitarian workers with criminal conduct.¹¹⁴ Similarly, in **France**, a legislative proposal aims to prevent CSOs from providing information and support to migrants held in detention centres.¹¹⁵

¹⁰⁶. https://picum.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/Criminalisation-of-solidarity-with-migrants-in-the-EU_2025.pdf

¹⁰⁷. <https://www.accessnow.org/press-release/joint-statement-eu-migration-pact-a-dangerous-regime-of-migrant-surveillance/>

¹⁰⁸. <https://www.equinox-eu.com/towards-a-safer-migration-ending-the-criminalisation-of-migration-and-solidarity/>

¹⁰⁹. <https://www.equinox-eu.com/more-than-200-organisations-inhumane-deportation-rules-should-be-rejected/>

¹¹⁰. <https://euobserver.com/206195/eu-moves-to-allow-two-years-jail-for-families-facing-deportation/>

¹¹¹. <https://picum.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/Ombudman-complaint-RR.pdf>

¹¹². <https://odi.org/en/insights/europes-surveillance-deportation-regime-is-here-and-its-expanding-fast/>

¹¹³. <https://civic-forum.eu/publications/open-letter/eu-stop-criminalising-migration-in-the-facilitators-package-law>

¹¹⁴. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2026/01/29/greek-immigration-bill-demonizes-civil-society>

¹¹⁵. <https://www.senat.fr/leg/exposes-des-motifs/pp124-472-expose.html>, <https://www.informigrants.net/en/post/64593/french-senate-votes-to-exclude-associations-from-migrant-detention-centers>

In **Bulgaria**, the interior ministry announced an investigation into activists from the volunteer group Mission Wings, accusing them of obstructing authorities by issuing false calls for help in a case of three migrants dying in the Bulgarian mountains.¹¹⁶ Later, the minister publicly claimed that the organisation had been misused by Russian spies aiming to “flood” Europe with migrants.¹¹⁷ In **Latvia**, in August 2025, Ieva Raubiško from refugee rights organisation “I Want to Help Refugees” was found guilty of aiding, but not of organising, an illegal border crossing, after assisting five Syrian asylum seekers, and sentenced to 200 hours of community service.¹¹⁸ In **France**, the president of Germà — an association supporting undocumented

people and asylum seekers in the Pyrénées-Orientales department — was taken into police custody on suspicion of “forgery and use of forged documents” and “aiding the irregular entry, stay, and movement of persons.”¹¹⁹

The criminalisation of migration by EU governments and institutions is steadily delegitimising support for migrants and contributing to their dehumanisation.

By investigating, prosecuting, or publicly delegitimising organisations that assist migrants, authorities create an environment of fear, uncertainty, and stigmatisation, making it challenging for migrant rights organisations to operate. Furthermore, **the criminalisation of migration by EU governments and institutions is steadily delegitimising support for migrants and contributing to their dehumanisation.**

¹¹⁶. <https://www.segabg.com/hot/category-bulgaria/mvr-razsledva-aktivisti-za-neverni-signalni-za-bedstvashti-migranti>; https://www.facebook.com/MissionWingsStaraZagora/posts/pfbid0365sU1VBbC5y4Ap89WF43YaR48xnvS7Gd1bHTWHcEFcaWjTp4dyxdoYFcNLMg4XX8l?_rdc=1&_rdr#

¹¹⁷. <https://bnrnews.bg/starazagora/post/358988/fondacia-misia-krile-otgovori-na-vatreshnia-ministar-za-obviniata-pred-britansko-izdanie>

¹¹⁸. <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/society/society/20.08.2025-refugee-rights-activist-raubisko-given-community-service.a611098/>

¹¹⁹. https://picum.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/Criminalisation-of-solidarity-with-migrants-in-the-EU_2025.pdf

Pervasive surveillance: governments expand monitoring powers and technologies

Across Europe, **governments are expanding data gathering and monitoring powers — often facilitated by surveillance technologies — which are increasingly shaping the environment in which civic actors operate.** Documented cases across countries including **Finland, France, Italy**, the **Netherlands, North Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, Spain**, and the **United Kingdom** show how such tools have been used to monitor civic activism, watchdog organisations, investigative journalism, and public dissent. This raises significant concerns about the erosion of privacy of those exercising their fundamental rights; the potential use of data to harass, fine, and prosecute civic actors; and the overall chilling effect of mass surveillance.

Plans to expand legal and technical frameworks enabling surveillance and large-scale data processing are advancing in several countries, including in Austria, Belgium,¹²⁰ Denmark, France, Ireland,¹²¹ Italy, and

the **Netherlands**. Rights groups raised concerns over a new narcotics law in **France**, aimed at tackling drug trafficking, as it would have authorised the use of new mass surveillance technologies that could affect activists and other civic actors.¹²² Introduced on the grounds of security and the fight against terrorism, a draft law in **Austria** would give enforcement authorities the power to install spyware on private devices to monitor people’s encrypted communications.¹²³ Similarly, amendments to the traffic regulation law could enable comprehensive surveillance across city centres.¹²⁴ In the **Netherlands**, a proposal seeks to extend police powers to conduct large-scale surveillance of individuals in response to “public order” disruptions. Such approaches to surveillance risk creating a climate of constant observation in public

spaces and restricting civic freedoms and could result in a chilling effect.

At the **EU level**, parallel developments reinforce these national trends by expanding interconnected data infrastructure and surveillance practices, particularly in migration policy. Europol and Frontex have seen continuous increases in mandates, budgets, and surveillance roles,¹²⁵ with further reforms expected in 2026 under the ProtectEU agenda.¹²⁶ These changes build on two decades of creating an EU-wide “interoperable” system linking EU and national

police and migration databases, enabling authorities to exert extensive control over migrants and those associated with them,¹²⁷ all increasingly treated as alleged criminals — a category that has, in practice, come to include human rights defenders working on migrant and refugee rights (see above trend).¹²⁸

Civil society groups describe this as the construction of “technological infrastructures to further surveillance and criminalisation” of racialised communities, migrants, and those who support them.¹²⁹

There have been several documented cases illustrating how civil society is impacted by the expansion of surveillance. In **Italy**, two new cases of the deployment of unlawful spyware against journalists and activists were uncovered in 2025.¹³⁰ A parliamentary report argued that the surveillance of the staff of a sea rescue organisation was warranted on national security grounds due to the group’s suspected involvement in facilitating irregular migration.¹³¹ In **Finland**, media investigations revealed that police conducted phone surveillance against climate activists.¹³² In **Spain**, authorities increasingly deployed drones equipped with cameras to

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120. https://www.liguedh.be/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/EDH_2025_WEB.pdf

121. <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-justice-home-affairs-and-migration/press-releases/minister-jim-oconnor-strengthens-lawful-interception-powers/>

122. <https://www.laquadrature.net/en/warondrugslaw/>

123. https://www.parlament.gv.at/aktuelles/pk/jahr_2025/pk0661

124. <https://www.amnesty.at/presse/geplante-stvo-novelle-bedroht-recht-auf-meinungs-und-versammlungsfreiheit-kundgebung-am-27-november/>

125. https://protectnotsurveil.eu/uploads/ProtectNotSurveil-Europol_Paper.pdf

126. <https://edri.org/our-work/protectnotsurveil-coalition-raises-alarm-about-eu-frontex-expansion-plans/>

127. <https://www.statewatch.org/media/3725/frontex-and-interoperable-databases-report.pdf>

128. <https://www.euractiv.com/opinion/it-is-time-to-tear-down-this-wall/>

129. <https://ainowinstitute.org/publications/from-infrastructure-power-to-redistribution-how-the-eus-digital-agenda-cements-securitization-and-computational-infrastructures-and-how-we-build-otherwise>

130. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/06/italy-new-case-of-journalist-targeted-with-graphite-spyware-confirms-widespread-use-of-unlawful-surveillance/>

131. https://documenti.camera.it/_dati/leg19/lavori/documentiparlamentari/IndiceETesti/034/004/INTERO.pdf

132. <https://www.hs.fi/tutkiva/art-2000011394660.html>

monitor public demonstrations.¹³³ Similarly, in **Serbia**, authorities used facial recognition tools, deployed drones during protests, and weaponised both in-house and commercial spyware and Cellebrite forensic extraction tools against activists and civil society.¹³⁴ In the **United Kingdom**, authorities deployed digital surveillance capabilities for “public order” policing of protests. Online spaces, including social media content and digital activity have also become sites for intelligence-gathering.¹³⁵

Police infiltration has generated a profound chilling effect and can cause serious personal harm, including psychological trauma, violation of privacy, and erosion of trust.

Another concerning form of surveillance impacting civil society is police infiltration.

In **Italy**, university students engaged in Palestine solidarity and housing rights movements in Naples reported police infiltration into their assemblies.¹³⁶ In **France**, agents infiltrated the protest movement

opposing the construction of the A69 highway.¹³⁷ In **Spain**, there were severe cases of prolonged police infiltration documented in several movements such as the Palestine solidarity, Catalan independence, and climate movements.¹³⁸ **Police infiltration has generated a profound chilling effect and can cause serious personal harm, including psychological trauma,**

violation of privacy, and erosion of trust.¹³⁹

¹³³. <https://novact.org/es/publicacio/diagnostico-del-derecho-a-la-protesta-en-espana-2024/>

¹³⁴. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/P-10-2025-000686_EN.html

¹³⁵. https://netpol.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/WEB_HowRepressionBecameRoutine.pdf

¹³⁶. <https://www.napolitoday.it/cronaca/proteste-federico-ii-agente-infiltrato.html>

¹³⁷. <https://monitor.civicus.org/explore/national-human-rights-institution-warns-that-civic-space-in-france-is-under-threat/>

¹³⁸. <https://www.elsaltodiario.com/madrid/nieves-otra-policia-infiltrada-movimiento-ecologista-madrid>; <https://directa.cat/una-policia-espanyola-sinfiltra-durant-dos-anys-al-moviment-per-palestina-i-a-lesquerra-independentista/>; <https://directa.cat/un-policia-espanyol-sinfiltra-dos-anys-en-lactivisme-de-lleida/>

¹³⁹. Information received from NOVACT, 2025.

Access denied: civil society sidelined from policy consultation processes

In 2025, participation through public consultation processes, access to information, and structured dialogue remained uneven across Europe. Evidence from several countries shows that **participation is often inconsistent, time-constrained, and in some cases limited, rather than systematically guaranteed.**

Not only are public spaces for civic participation increasingly repressed, but opportunities to engage in decision-making processes are shrinking. In **France**, for example, a proposed bill aims to reduce the number of state advisory bodies and targets in particular the High Council for Associative Life, a consultative body responsible for formulating proposals relating to the financing, operation, and organisation of associations, and the French Chamber of Social and Solidarity Economy, an association representing the social and solidarity economy sector.¹⁴⁰ The proposals constitute an attack on intermediary bodies and consultative democracy, and risk undermining public participation in decision-making for organised civil society.¹⁴¹ The shift in attitudes towards CSOs who engage in advocacy in the **Netherlands** has resulted in more selective engagement with the government, which sidelines those CSOs deemed too critical, in favour of politically aligned and less controversial voices.

In some cases, ongoing attacks against CSOs discourage their active participation. In **Germany**, uncertainty over the political neutrality of CSOs has led to questioning their role in public participation processes. In **Denmark**, some CSOs report that their formal consultation response is used against them, which further discourages participation.¹⁴² Across the **Western Balkans**, participation in decision-making remains largely procedural,

Not only are public spaces for civic participation increasingly repressed, but opportunities to engage in decision-making processes are shrinking.

A coalition of nearly 500 civil society organisations and trade unions have defined this as a wave of deregulation aimed at weakening and dismantling rules that safeguard fundamental rights.

with consultation mechanisms often limited to formal compliance rather than meaningful engagement, contributing to declining trust in institutional dialogue. In **Serbia**, civil society representatives suspended participation in the Civil Society Council and other formal cooperation mechanisms with legislative and executive authorities, pointing to sustained attacks, shrinking space for independent voices, and the instrumentalisation of consultation processes, which undermined the credibility and purpose of institutional engagement.¹⁴³

There are growing concerns over the right to participation at the EU level.

Civil society has expressed serious concerns about the EU's deregulation agenda, which is framed around the need to boost industry's "competitiveness" and the "simplification" of an overly complex and bureaucratic European regulatory framework.

In 2025, the European Commission launched ten "Omnibus" packages on issues ranging from corporate sustainability and digital rights to food safety.¹⁴⁴ These packages bundle multiple legislative amendments into single procedures. **A coalition of nearly 500 civil society organisations and trade unions have defined this as a wave of deregulation aimed at weakening and dismantling rules that safeguard fundamental rights.**¹⁴⁵

These major proposals have been developed by the European Commission without standard impact assessments and with limited consultation of civil society. On the contrary, they have been

shaped via closed door dialogues and consultations with targeted industry actors. A report by Corporate Europe Observatory found that all 13 European Commissioners who introduced Omnibus proposals

¹⁴⁰. <https://civicspacewatch.eu/alert/france-two-bills-proposed-by-mp-attack-on-consultative-democracy-and-organised-civil-society/>

¹⁴¹. <https://civicspacewatch.eu/alert/france-two-bills-proposed-by-mp-attack-on-consultative-democracy-and-organised-civil-society/#:~:text=Civil%20dialogue-FRANCE:%20Two%20bills%20proposed%20by%20MP%20attack%20consultative%20democracy%20and,social%20and%20solidarity%20economy%20sector.>

¹⁴². Reported by several CSOs at a dialogue meeting on 16 December 2025. The meeting was organised by Nytt Europa.

¹⁴³. <https://n1info.rs/english/news/serbian-civil-society-breaks-ties-with-authorities>

¹⁴⁴. <https://cloud.corporateeurope.org/s/RjrwkPITmmZM5BG?dir=/&editing=false&openfile=true>

¹⁴⁵. <https://corporateeurope.org/sites/default/files/2025-09/Deregulations%20Statement%20September%202025%20ENG.pdf>

met overwhelmingly with business groups, with seven Commissioners only meeting with civil society groups less than 7% of the time.¹⁴⁶ The legislative process has also been fast tracked using the “urgent procedure”¹⁴⁷ which leaves no room for a democratic debate in the European Parliament. Rather than representing an isolated case, this signals a broader erosion of the rule of law at the EU level.

Concerns about these practices are supported by findings from the European Ombudswoman. In a preliminary outcome to a complaint filed by civil society, the ombudswoman found that the European

Commission violated fundamental principles of good administration, including transparent, inclusive, and evidence-based law making in preparing the Corporate Sustainability and Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD) Omnibus proposal.¹⁴⁸ In early 2026, the European Commission launched a review of its Better Regulation guidelines. There are concerns that the review may restrict civil society participation and limit the need for fundamental rights impact assessments.¹⁴⁹

Taken together, there are early signs of a consolidation of this approach at EU level, although it is not yet fully embedded across all legislative processes.

¹⁴⁶. https://corporateeurope.org/sites/default/files/2026-03/REPORT_CORPORATE%20CAPTURE.pdf

¹⁴⁷. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/agenda/plenary-news/2025-03-31/9/sustainability-and-due-diligence-rules-meps-set-to-fast-track-postponement>

¹⁴⁸. <https://corporatejustice.org/news/joint-press-release-eu-watchdog-slams-commissions-undemocratic-environmental-rollbacks/>

¹⁴⁹. <https://eeb.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/Better-Regulation-Open-Letter-vf5.pdf>

Resisting repression: civil society holds the line

Despite the overall deterioration of civic space across Europe in 2025, civil society continued to adapt, resist, and secure measurable impacts. **These positive developments are not isolated; they point to a consistent pattern of civic resistance and resilience across multiple countries and governance levels, particularly through advocacy, strategic litigation, and sustained mobilisation.**

At the **EU level**, the European Commission published its first-ever **European Civil Society Strategy**, a long-term demand of many CSOs.¹⁵⁰ The strategy is an important step in formally recognising civil society as a core pillar of European democracy, and sets out a framework for supporting, funding, and protecting CSOs and human rights defenders (HRDs) at the national and EU levels, as well as in the enlargement candidate countries.

The Commission also launched anti-racism,¹⁵¹ LGBTQI+,¹⁵² and gender equality¹⁵³ strategies, thanks to sustained civil society advocacy.

Aligning the Civil Society Strategy with these documents would help address structural discrimination, a major factor in the shrinking of civic space for excluded groups.¹⁵⁴

In an increasingly financially precarious environment, European civil society has been calling for more resources and funding for the promotion of democracy and fundamental rights. As a result, the European Commission launched the new AgoraEU funding programme as part of its 2028-2034 budget proposal, aimed at supporting civic engagement, democracy, culture, artists, and independent media. CSOs welcome

this proposal as a valuable resource for civil society that must be secured in the next EU budget.¹⁵⁵

Other actors are also stepping in. The launch of the European Economic Area (EEA) and Norway Grants Civil Society Fund, with a total allocation of €327 million for the 2021–2028 period across 15 countries, represents a significant investment in civil society.¹⁵⁶ Particularly important, following years of absence, is a new funding cycle that will deliver nearly €23 million to civil society organisations in **Hungary**.¹⁵⁷ Notably, private donors, foundations, pooled funds,¹⁵⁸ and lotteries¹⁵⁹ are also gaining traction in some states, including **Austria**, the **Czech Republic**, **Denmark**, **France** and **Germany**.

On the national level, civil society advocacy continues to produce tangible outcomes, particularly in preventing or mitigating restrictive measures. In **Italy**, search and rescue missions in the Mediterranean Sea managed to operate and save the lives of hundreds of migrants, despite the increased legal

and bureaucratic attacks against their work.¹⁶⁰ In several countries, public pressure and civil society mobilisation have led to the withdrawal, amendment, or halting of harmful policies. In **Montenegro**, amendments to the Law on Public Assemblies explicitly banning all road blockades were withdrawn after public pressure.¹⁶¹ In **Poland**, a new measure that removes CSOs' right to challenge final court rulings was removed from a draft law after civil society voiced their concerns.

Strategic litigation is growing as an effective tool for civil society. For example, in **Spain**, environmental groups won a landmark lawsuit against Spanish authorities who breached people's fundamental rights by failing

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¹⁵⁰. <https://civic-forum.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/ECF-Briefing-Civil-Society-Strategy.pdf>; <https://civic-forum.eu/press/european-commission-publishes-long-awaited-civil-society-strategy-in-positive-step-forward>

¹⁵¹. <https://www.enar-eu.org/the-new-eu-anti-racism-strategy-a-missed-opportunity-to-confront-the-structural-violence-experienced-by-racialised-communities/>

¹⁵². <https://www.ilga-europe.org/press-release/eu-publishes-new-lgbtiq-equality-strategy-but-is-it-fit-for-purpose/>

¹⁵³. <https://europe.ippf.org/resource/ippf-ens-contribution-eu-gender-equality-strategy-beyond-2025>

¹⁵⁴. <https://www.enar-eu.org/the-new-eu-anti-racism-strategy-a-missed-opportunity-to-confront-the-structural-violence-experienced-by-racialised-communities/>

¹⁵⁵. <https://civic-forum.eu/publications/new-briefing-strengthening-democracy-in-times-of-crisis-why-the-eu-must-invest-in-agera>

¹⁵⁶. <https://eeagrants.org/en/fmo/news/new-civil-society-fund-launched-iceland-lictenstein-and-norway-unprecedented-commitment-strengthen-democracy-and-human-rights-europe>

¹⁵⁷. <https://civic-forum.eu/members-corner/okotars-new-cycle-of-eea-civil-soicety-fund>

¹⁵⁸. <https://fondspourlademocratie.org/en/home/>

¹⁵⁹. <https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/partner/article/lotteries-as-a-pillar-of-eu-civil-space>

¹⁶⁰. <https://sea-watch.org/en/auroras-rescues-in-may/>

¹⁶¹. <https://institut-alternativa.org/en/proposed-amendments-to-the-law-on-public-assemblies-represent-a-serious-violation-of-human-rights-and-a-bypass-of-democratic-procedures/>

to address pollution caused by industrial animal farming.¹⁶² In the **Netherlands**, the Friends of Extinction Rebellion (XR) Foundation filed a lawsuit demanding that the police stop making home visits to peaceful demonstrators, resulting in the police changing their guidelines on house visits.¹⁶³ In the **Netherlands**¹⁶⁴ and **Germany**,¹⁶⁵ CSOs helped to take legal action against discriminatory measures based on people's expressions of solidarity with Palestine, leading to significant legal victories.

An inspiring example comes from Italy, where diverse organisations and grassroots movements have joined forces to establish an infrastructure of coordinated local protection hubs.

In some states, courts have safeguarded civic freedoms, alongside continuous civil society campaigning. In **Poland**, the District Court in Hajnówka acquitted five activists accused of aiding migrants at the Polish-Belarusian border, recognising that humanitarian assistance cannot be equated with criminal activity.¹⁶⁶ Similarly, in **Greece**, humanitarian workers who faced a sentence of up to 20 years were acquitted of all charges.¹⁶⁷

Despite increasing legal and administrative barriers, 2025 saw large civic mobilisations. Despite the attempts to ban the pride march in **Hungary**, resulting in a chaotic and uncertain legal situation for organisers, Budapest Pride was one of the largest protests in Hungary's history.¹⁶⁸ Similarly, the Global Sumud Flotilla sparked a widespread global movement, attempting to break Israel's illegal blockade on the

Across the continent, there is a growing move towards international solidarity, which is becoming a crucial in how civil society responds to attacks.

Gaza Strip and deliver essential food, water, and medical supplies for civilians. In **Spain** and **Italy**, millions of people mobilised across the countries as part of a global solidarity with the people of Gaza and Israel's illegal capture of the flotilla.¹⁶⁹

CSOs are also developing innovative and collaborative strategies to counter growing attacks. **An inspiring example comes from Italy, where diverse organisations and grassroots movements have joined forces to establish an infrastructure of coordinated local protection hubs.** These hubs serve as platforms for documentation, rapid response, legal support, and collective advocacy locally and nationally. By being connected to European-level networks, these initiatives also elevate local and national challenges, enabling cross-border learning, solidarity, and more coordinated responses to shared threats.¹⁷⁰

Across the continent, there is a growing move towards international solidarity, which is becoming a crucial in how civil society responds to attacks.

Despite the growing number of restrictions, civil society in Europe is still well placed to host, support, and strengthen democratic resistance.

¹⁶². <https://www.clientearth.org/latest/news/spanish-in-court-against-authorities-for-not-acting-against-industrial-livestock-pollution/>

¹⁶³. <https://www.politie.nl/nieuws/2025/mei/30/00-politie-verduidelijkt-werkwijze-huisbezoek-rondom-demonstraties.html>

¹⁶⁴. <https://elsc.support/dutch-labour-court-confirms-firing-of-palestinian-employee-by-dutch-company-over-solidarity-with-palestinian-resistance-was-discriminatory-large-compensation-is-due/>

¹⁶⁵. <https://elsc.support/legal-victory-german-federal-constitutional-court-ends-separation-of-baby-and-parents-over-palestine-solidarity/>

¹⁶⁶. <https://hfhr.pl/aktualnosci/-piatka-z-hajnowki-uniewinniona>

¹⁶⁷. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2026/01/greece-sean-binder-acquitted-of-all-charges/>

¹⁶⁸. https://hvg.hu/itthon/20250628_Budapest-Pride-Buszkeseg-Menet-LMBTQ-Karacsony-Gergely-rendorseg-elo-kozvetites-ebx

¹⁶⁹. <https://civic-forum.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/OINT-STATEMENT-Wave-of-civic-activism-in-support-of-Global-Sumud-Flotilla.pdf>; <https://apnews.com/article/italy-gaza-protests-meloni-2-million-0fcc2fc85f53209100beb3dbff1256a9>; <https://www.aljazeera.com/gallery/2025/10/3/global-protests-erupt-over-israeli-interception-of-gaza-aid-flotilla>

¹⁷⁰. <https://www.arci.it/campagna/net4defenders/>

CIVIC SPACE REPORT 2025



About European Civic Forum

The European Civic Forum (ECF) is a pan-European network of more than 100 associations and NGOs across 30 European countries. Founded in 2005 by our member organisations, we have spent nearly two decades working to protect civic space, enable civic participation and build civil dialogue for more equality, solidarity, and democracy in Europe.

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About Civic Space Watch

CivicSpace Watch is an online platform that gathers data and reports on developments in civic space at the national and EU levels, and analyses trends. Powered by the European Civic Forum, it collects findings through regular contact and interviews with a strong network of members and partners on the ground and alerts European and international institutions when rights are at risk.

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