

“Shrinking space” in Europe

Pressure on civil society spaces

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Bonn, 2 March 2026. **The space for civil society action is shrinking in Europe as well. This development must be opposed with determination.**

“Shrinking space”, the shrinking of spaces and opportunities for civil society to exert influence, has been an ongoing topic in foreign and development policy for years. Data from the Varieties of Democracy Initiative (V-Dem) shows that the repression of civil society organisations (CSOs) has also gradually increased in Europe since 2010, albeit at a rather low level so far. As early as 2022, the EU Parliament discussed the shrinking of civil society spaces in the EU.

Research on “shrinking space” in non-OECD countries has long emphasised the efforts of governments to restrict and delegitimise the “political activities” of

CSOs. While CSOs often fulfil the task of highlighting social and political grievances, their political neutrality is the subject of increasingly heated debate – including in Europe. In principle, the political neutrality requirement for CSOs in a democracy is primarily intended to ensure that CSOs recognised as non-profit organisations do not act in a party-political manner. Among other things, this is intended to ensure fairness in the distribution of state funds. However, both the targeted questioning of the political neutrality of certain CSOs and the use of mechanisms for creating transparency are increasingly being instrumentalised to delegitimise unwanted criticism. For example, after years of state interference, the Fidesz government in Hungary introduced another restrictive bill in 2025, which addressed the alleged threat to national sovereignty and the alleged “influencing of the democratic debate” by CSOs.

However, criticism of CSOs’ alleged lack of political neutrality and transparency is not limited to countries such as Hungary. It also comes not only from governments, but also from non-governmental actors, above all from right-wing populist parties. In Germany, there was a massive increase in critical parliamentary inquiries about CSOs in 2024 and 2025. The majority came from the AfD parliamentary group (Alternative for Germany), which uses democratic procedures to weaken democratic institutions. In January 2026, the AfD parliamentary group set up a working group on “NGO investigation” and advertised a position for a policy officer to, among other things, build up a database on CSOs and their funding in order to develop further parliamentary inquiries on this basis.

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However, an initiative from the democratic spectrum, which was launched one year ago, on 24 February 2025, also made headlines. In its brief inquiry “Political neutrality of state-funded organisations”, the CDU/CSU parliamentary group called on the Federal Government of the time to examine whether 15 CSOs met the criterion of political neutrality. It argued that “some voices” viewed the CSOs as a “shadow structure that indirectly pursues politics with state funds”, referring to polarising reporting in the newspaper

“Welt”. The CSOs named in the brief inquiry had demonstrated against the CDU/CSU parliamentary group’s decision to vote with the AfD on migration-related issues in the German parliament. In November 2025, “Die Linke” countered by asking for information about any state funding of the right-wing conservative think tank “R21” in a brief inquiry. On both occasions, the respective government rejected far-reaching requests for information regarding the non-profit status and finances of specific CSOs, also invoking the separation of powers.

A debate on CSO funding was initiated in the EU Parliament in January 2025 under the leadership of CSU MEP Monika Hohlmeier. The occasion for this was criticism of CSOs’ alleged “lobbying” in an EU-funded project on climate issues. The EU Commission was accused of paying CSOs to convince the EU Parliament to adopt a more ambitious climate policy. Although the European Court of Auditors found no waste of taxpayers’ money, a working group was set up to scrutinise the funding of CSOs by the EU. In the vote on the establishment of the working group, the European People’s Party allied itself with the right-wing populist Patriots for Europe, among others.

Such initiatives not only have an impact on public perception, but also create uncertainty for politically active CSOs. Research on Europe as well as on other parts of the world in this connection refers to a “chilling effect”, whereby CSOs limit their political activities or adapt their communication in anticipation of future repression. In order to preserve civic space in Europe, initiatives to delegitimise CSOs and restrict political freedoms must be opposed at an early stage.

In times of increasing autocratisation, German and European policy should recognise and promote the important role of a politically active democratic civil society. In addition to a reform of non-profit law, this requires an open debate between all democratic camps on the role of civil society. In times of increasing polarisation, governments, political parties, CSOs and citizens need to be ready to expose themselves to opposing views and – if necessary – to argue about them. Red lines exist where the democratic system and fundamental values such as human dignity are violated.