

**PRESS RELEASE**

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## **Civil society is under pressure in several member states in 2022**

**Civil society is under pressure across the EU, and in some member states, the situation is alarming. Despite this, they continue to demonstrate resilience. A new report released today by the European Civic Forum (ECF), 'Fighting for Democratic Empowerment and Resilience' highlights the deterioration of civic freedoms emerging across Europe. It also demonstrates that civil society remains the bedrock for democracy and rule of law.**

**See the full report [here](#). The German chapter (see page 153-167) was contributed by the Maecenata Institute for Philanthropy and Civil Society, Berlin.**

In 2022, civil society continued to step up to challenges, despite limited means and power. In the wake of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, organisations and volunteers prioritised aid to people in need. They were often, as ever, the first to arrive and the last to leave when responding to social needs. Civil society organisations advocate for the common good and to ensure laws are not driven by corporate interest and for-profit pursuits.

But across the EU, NGOs, associations and movements are under pressure and facing challenges as a result of the erosion of democratic processes and breaches of the rule of law.

In several member states, restrictive laws continue to hamper the right to association and the activities of NGOs and associations. Following in the footsteps of **Hungary**, laws targeting NGOs receiving **foreign funding** have been discussed in **Poland** and **Bulgaria**.

But restrictions have also been observed in countries where democracy remains strong, like in France, where the "Separatism law" requires any association applying for public financing to sign a "contract of commitment to Republican principles", and **Germany**, where NGOs have been targeted for being too political.

*"Promoting a thriving European civic space requires a shared commitment of European institutions and member states. If they want to protect democracy, they must answer people's needs for public policies that work for the common good. Therefore, they have to prioritise what contributes to internal democratic resilience: this means to support and protect civil society organisations and human rights defenders that with their actions keep alive democracy every day." said Alexandrina Najmowicz, European Civic Forum, Secretary General.*

CSOs and individual activists working on democracy, rule of law and human rights as well as journalists have also faced **smear campaigns, verbal and physical attacks and legal harassment** through Strategic Litigation against Public Participation (SLAPPs). These concerns are mirrored in the **CIVICUS Monitor**'s latest findings which show an overall decline in civic space globally and in the EU. This year the civic space ratings of two member states, **Greece and Cyprus**, were downgraded.

Excluded groups, such as Muslim people, migrants, and LGBTI+, as well as women, have been particularly targeted.

In **Greece**, NGOs and humanitarian volunteers have been attacked for calling out illegal pushbacks that the Government denies are taking place. In **Romania**, LGBTIQ+ associations received several death threats, including disturbing images on multiple channels that include Nazi symbols and detailed ways to kill LGBTIQ+ people.

Today democracy in Europe is facing pressure both on its inputs, as democratic backsliding unfolds across the EU, and its outputs, as many fear for their future and increasingly mistrust national institutions' ability to deliver policies that will protect them.

*“The EU must not miss the opportunity to support and protect civil society in its upcoming Defence of Democracy package. In the longer run, the European Institutions should adopt a European strategy towards open civic space and resilient civil society”* – continued Alexandrina Najmowicz.

The **Maecenata Foundation**, with generous financial support from Porticus and the Open Society Initiative for Europe (OSIFE), has embarked on an ambitious project, based on the observation that the scope for civil society and the room for civic action and participation generally is changing and has deteriorated in many political constituencies. The **European Civic Space Observatory** (ECSO), which is implemented by the **Maecenata Institute for Philanthropy and Civil Society** (MI), should provide a theoretical and empirical contribution to the academic debate over this phenomenon, which henceforth will be referred to as ‘Shrinking Civic Space’ (SCS). ESCO is developing a monitoring system that is sensitive enough to map out the limits of civic space in European democracies and to deliver a theoretical approach, which sufficiently explains the paradox that “civic space is simultaneously growing and shrinking.” The Maecenata Institute has created a network of partners in selected European countries for this purpose and hold several roundtables, one of which was also approved to feature in the [ISTR Conference in Montreal](#) 2022. The final report will be published this summer, a third publication after two previous ones: [On the State and General Condition of Civil Society in Germany](#) (2022), [Rahmenbedingungen für die Zivilgesellschaft in Österreich](#) (German, 2021).

**Participation** in the policy-making process is also a concern, with many CSOs describing it as “ad hoc”, “informal”, or “tokenistic”. In **Croatia**, civil dialogue and participation have been hampered since the short-lived experience of the government dominated by far-right elements in 2016. In **Spain**, civil society has had very few opportunities for dialogue with the government in an open and public way to express their demands during the reform process of the Citizen Security Law (Gag Law).

Protests are a crucial venue for participation, especially when institutionalised channels for social and civil dialogue and democratic checks and balances are weakened or broken. In 2022 several protests took place across the EU including against Russia's war and in solidarity with Ukraine, against the rising cost of living and endangered labour rights, and over the environmental and climate emergencies. In **France**, over the past weeks, hundreds of thousands of people demonstrated and joined strikes against a controversial pension reform.

However, in recent years, **Spain, France, Hungary, Poland, Greece, Italy** and other member states have passed legislation **restricting the right to peaceful assembly** and toughening sanctions related to assemblies.

In several member states there have been concerning responses to protests which include the use of intimidation and harassment against protesters, detention of protesters and the use of excessive force. In **Hungary**, 14 teachers at Budapest high schools were fired by the Ministry of Interior, in a seemingly arbitrary manner with a clear goal of deterring others, in the context of protests on their worsening working conditions, after their right to strike was curtailed. In **Germany**, police searched the homes of eleven climate activists in relation to actions they staged during which oil pipelines were disrupted in the spring of 2022.

There are also positive examples amongst member states, which need to become the rule. In **Slovenia, Austria, Latvia** and the **Czech Republic**, positive steps for civil dialogue and structured participation of civil society have taken place.

The European Civic Forum (ECF) is a pan-European network that brings together nearly 100 associations and NGOs across 29 European countries. The Civic Space Report 2023 includes 14 country reports written by national organisations and experts.

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#### **INTERVIEWS:**

For more information or to arrange an interview, please contact:  
[contact@civic-forum.eu](mailto:contact@civic-forum.eu), Brussels: + 32 2 720 98 67

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*The [Maecenata Foundation](#) is a think tank that focuses on civil society, philanthropy and the civic space. Its core unit is the [Maecenata Institute](#), a research and policy centre, founded in 1997. Maecenata operates from Berlin, Germany, with a strong European and international outlook.*

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