

Civil Society in Germany 2026

Data, Political Conditions, and Key Developments

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Despite numerous challenges – e.g. increasing political pressure, growing economic pressures and intensifying competition for public and private funding – civil society in Germany remains a resilient, dynamic and reliable actor in society.

However, this resilience is currently being put to test. The state of the civic space in Germany may be described as persistently and increasingly contested. Formally, the framework and conditions remain favourable; however, the rise of the far right and the 'anti-NGO discourse' have damaged the reputation and legitimacy of civil society. The attacks follow the pattern familiar in authoritarian countries – ranging from disparaging rhetoric and harassment to tightening legislation and withdrawal of financial support. Unlike in autocracies however, in Germany this is causing a slow erosion of the scope for action.

So far, civil society has proved to be largely resilient, dynamic and adaptable. Nevertheless, its capacity to act is restricted in some areas as a result of systematic and increasing attacks. The 2026 CIVICUS Monitor assesses the space for civil society in Germany as 'obstructed'.

Civil society organisations (CSOs) are also facing a structural dilemma: While expected to defend democracy their legitimacy as political actors in the public sphere is contested. Added to this there exist challenges such as pressure to prioritise economic efficiency, demographic change and artificial intelligence, which enables efficiency gains but exacerbates disinformation and competition for attention.

It appears that a critical point in a trend that has been emerging for over five years has been reached. Civil society's scope for action therefore now requires effective and comprehensive protection as well as targeted investment, in order to secure the capacity for action and resilience of the sector in the long term.

About the report

With generous support from the Mercator Foundation, the report uses a scoping review design to bring together key quantitative and qualitative studies on the state of German civil society: its scope for action and structure, the challenges it faces, and its resources, in particular funding and civic engagement. It follows up on the Maecenata reports published in 2022 and 2024.

Read publication:



Civil society's scope for action under pressure

Disinformation and delegitimization

Since 2025, the discourse on the societal role of civil society has become highly polarised as a result of a delegitimisation campaign of the far right. The CDU/CSU group's parliamentary enquiry titled 'Political Neutrality of State-funded Organisations' tabled in February 2025 (later to be called the '551 questions', as it included 551 questions to the government) served as a turning point and catalyst for an anti-NGO discourse. E.g., the number of delegitimising parliamentary enquiries nearly doubled nationwide in 2025 and increased up to ninefold in some federal states. The proportion of questions seeking to delegitimise civil society organisations (CSOs) at federal level rose from just under 10 per cent between 2018 and 2022 to over 32 per cent between 2022 and 2025, and to almost 55 per cent since 2025 (in the current 21st parliamentary period, as of August 2026).

Violence and threats

Threats and attacks against civil society organisations and activists have mushroomed in recent years. Areas most affected include the promotion of democracy, diversity and anti-discrimination, including Jewish, migrant and queer organisations, youth clubs and socio-cultural centres. These incidents include physical violence, verbal abuse, threats and deliberate disruption, e.g. of events. In 2025, 112 attacks on civil society were recorded, 56 of which involved violence. In surveys, one third of those involved in democracy-promotion projects stated that they were insulted or threatened more than once a week, whilst around two-fifths had experienced physical violence and 8 per cent had received death threats. At CSD demonstrations in 2025, 245 attacks were documented – a record high.

Funding caught between repression, precarisation and politicization

In mid-2026, the federal funding programme "*Demokratie leben!*" (Let democracy live!) was restructured, and funding for around 200 projects was discontinued at the end of the year. Furthermore, applicants are to be vetted by the Secret Service (*Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz*) in future by way of what is termed the Haber procedure, although the parliamentary research service had established in 2020 that this had no legal basis and had cast doubt on its proportionality. Furthermore, there are signs of increasing 'politicisation' of state funding for civil society to mean that funding decisions increasingly follow political objectives and strategic policy considerations, while funding priorities are becoming more volatile.

Signs of a 'counter-civil society'

The New Right is deliberately targeting civil society as a political space through infiltration, alternative offerings and its own structures. Astroturfing initiatives such as the Transparent Democracy Initiative (*Initiative Transparente Demokratie*) feign civil society roots; foreign actors from the US and Russia exert influence via networks and funding.

General context and develop- ments in the sector

Widespread presence and social significance

Data confirms the sector's stability: according to the latest figures from 2026, there are 628,992 associations in Germany alone. The sector also has a significant role as an employer: German Caritas alone employs around 770,000 staff. The report also confirms that the sector has recovered rapidly following the Covid-19 pandemic and that organisations are increasingly turning to new models of co-operation and funding – such as joint ventures, fiscal hosting or matching funds – to actively strengthen their resilience.

Despite a decline, civic engagement remains strong

Empirical surveys show varying but comparatively high rates of voluntary engagement in Germany: E.g., the Survey of Volunteering (*Freiwilligensurvey*) reports a volunteering rate of 36.7 per cent of the population aged 14 and over for 2024 – three percentage points lower than in 2019. The intensity of this engagement is also noteworthy. Around a quarter of those involved devote three to five hours per week to volunteering, while a further 19 per cent devote six hours or more. Compared to 2019, volunteering in 2024 was both more time-intensive and carried out more regularly.

Barriers to civic engagement

Opportunities for civic engagement are unevenly distributed: 45.5 per cent of people with a high level of education are involved in civic engagement, compared with 24.6 per cent of those with a low level of education; 28.4 per cent of people with a migrant background are involved, compared with 40.1 per cent of those without. Among women aged 30 to 49 with children in their household, the rate fell from 50.4 to 43.9 per cent (see the Fourth Report on Civic Engagement / 4. *Engagementbericht*).

Unequal distribution of resources

In 2021, more than half of all civic engagement organisations (ZGO) had an annual income below 10,000 Euros. Internal funding prevails: on average, organisations receive 46 per cent of their income from membership fees, 19 per cent from donations, 17 per cent from self-generated income and 11 per cent from public funds. Only 38 per cent of ZGOs received any public funding in 2022 (see Ziviz Survey 2023).

Decline in donations

Deutsches Zentralinstitut für soziale Fragen (DZI), Germany's independent academic information and documentation centre for social issues, estimates the total value of monetary donations in 2024 around 12.4 billion euros; in real terms, this represents a further decline by 4.9 per cent, following decreases of 5.3 per cent (2022) and 7.6 per cent (2023). According to the German Donation Monitor, the donor rate fell from 53.3 per cent (2022) to 49.2 per cent (2025); Bilanz des Helfens recorded around 850,000 less donors in 2025. Higher individual donation amounts do not compensate for this. By international standards, Germans donate below average, around 0.4 per cent of their income.

Shifts and cuts in public funding

While the total volume of federal funding for civil society has remained largely stable since 2025, there have been significant shifts in the allocation of funds within the funding programmes. In the Federal German Ministry for Education, Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ) grant programme for 'Strengthening Civil Society, Family, Gender Equality and Senior Citizens' Policy' (2025: 385 million, 2026: 498 million, 2027: 496 million euros), the increases are almost entirely attributable to voluntary services. By contrast, the funding volume for the programme "Democracy Education and the Prevention of Extremism" is down from 204.5 million (2026) to 170 million euros (2027), funding to combat discrimination from 5.8 to 1.75 million euros, and funding for pilot projects to strengthen social cohesion from 6.1 to 2.6 million euros.

Recommendations

Recommendations for action to improve comprehensive civil society monitoring

- **Establish monitoring at state and federal level:** There is a need for longterm, comprehensive monitoring the scope for action available to German civil society – covering areas ranging from public discourse and the legal framework and funding and administrative conditions, to protest, security and the state's treatment of civil society. Both restrictions and opportunities should be recorded.
- **Consider the resource base:** In addition, levels of engagement, membership figures and donation volumes should be systematically monitored – using a mixed-methods approach and indicators developed in collaboration with key actors in civil society research.
- **Explore grey areas:** Greater attention must be paid to the informal civil society sector as well as anti-democratic and extremist civil society organisations.
- **Hold funders to account:** Foundations and other funding bodies should provide more comprehensive and longterm co-funding for civil society research.

Impressum

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