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# Shrinking Civic Space in the European Union

by Francesca De Benedetti

**ENoP**  
EUROPEAN NETWORK OF  
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Introduction:

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# THE EUROPEAN WAY OF LIFE AT RISK

For a long time, the European Union has presented itself as a pluralistic, rights-based, open social and political space which is intrinsically oriented towards the expansion of freedoms: this is what the “European way of life” should mean. The EU has also been labelled as a “regulatory power”<sup>1</sup> being able to promote rights on a global scale: in 2012, Columbia Law professor Anu Bradford coined the term “the Brussels effect” to depict the Union’s “unique power to influence global corporations and set the rules of the game”.

Today, those promises are being hollowed out from within, weakening the rights of Europeans and the EU’s regulatory influence abroad. The use of the term “European way of life” reflects that drift over the years: when it first appeared in the mandate letter of a European Commission Vice-President Margaritis Schinas – during Ursula von der Leyen’s first term – its meaning was swiftly re-framed in an exclusionary and security-oriented direction, already signalling a shift in the EU agenda and discourse. During von der Leyen’s second term, “competitiveness” became a passe-partout to dismantle rules and rights from within.

The European Union is increasingly adopting policies that narrow civic space, marginalise dissenting voices and erode the very freedoms it claims to defend. The exclusion of civil society from decision-making processes goes hand in hand with corporation-oriented politics triggered at the expense of the vulnerable, reducing inalienable rights to privileges of a few. However, it would be misleading to consider this a Brussels top-down trend only: for years now, national governments have concurred with the criminalisation of NGOs and humanitarian aid, widely attempting to repress dissent and silence protest, as well as attacking the right to strike and eroding media freedom.

Although many of these attacks were first systematically tested in countries with autocratic tendencies, they have increasingly been replicated in major EU countries: Italy, France, and Germany have recently joined Hungary in the deterioration of civic space. Chapter One offers an analysis of the repression of civil society as a pan-European trend.

What was previously considered a playbook typical of autocratic and illiberal leaders has become part of the political mainstream. An informal alliance between the traditional conservative right and far-right parties has crystallised through policy convergence and coordinated voting, both in the European Parliament and within member states. This alignment has not only normalised far-right participation in power but also marginalised progressive forces and critical civil society actors. Chapter Two identifies key political tactics and narrative strategies that have been deployed to scale up attacks on civil society at a European scale.

Fast forward to late November 2025. Members of the European Parliament to the left of the EPP (Renew, S&D, Greens and The Left) walked out of a meeting in protest when the newly created “Scrutiny Working Group” (SWG) of the Parliament’s Budgetary Control Committee – pretending to scrutinise EU funding to civil society organisations (CSOs) – was convened for the first time. The SWG case was only the latest peak in a growing series of pressures directed at European civic space. The ongoing delegitimisation of civil society is mirrored by the increasing exclusion of CSOs from EU

decision-making processes; on the contrary, corporate actors gain more and more influence. This is what Chapter Three points out: a new imbalance in the way the EU is being redesigned.

Faced with such a harsh scenario, in which the return to power of Donald Trump and the so-called “broligarchs” is further accelerating the trends described above, civil society’s counter-action can only be cross-sectoral, pan-European, and political in the broadest sense.

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Those rights that made us proud as Europeans have now been reduced to a scarce resource, triggering competitiveness at the expense of the vulnerable. Civic space is shrinking – and this, ultimately, is what really puts our European way of life at risk.

First chapter

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# THE **REPRESSION** OF CIVIC SPACE

The decline of civic space in Europe is not the result of isolated national deviations or sector-specific excesses, but the manifestation of a shared political trajectory. The downgrading of civic space ratings across the EU reflects a broader process in which restrictions on civil society organisations, limitations on protest and workers' rights, and mounting pressure on independent media reinforce one another.

These developments signal a shift in how dissent, collective organisation and public scrutiny are treated by state authorities: not as essential components of democratic life, but as risks to be neutralised. This chapter traces how civic space in Europe is being systematically narrowed across its key democratic infrastructures: civil society, organised labour, and independent media.

## 1.1 AN OVERVIEW OF A DECLINE

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“Our monitoring has shown that civic space has been steadily deteriorating in the EU space with global trends, even in what are considered to be established democracies with strong institutions”, Tara Petrović says. She leads research on Europe and Central Asia for the CIVICUS Monitor, a participatory platform that works with over 20 research partners from civil society, regularly producing up-to-date country reports as well as annual civic space scores and ratings covering 198 countries and territories. The CIVICUS Monitor ratings provide a useful entry point into the transformation of civic space, allowing national trends to be read through a pan-European lens and revealing how similar tactics, narratives and legal tools are being deployed across political contexts to dismantle democratic counter-power.

On a 5-category scale, the “narrowed” and “obstructed” ratings describe environments in which, although the state formally allows the exercise of the freedoms of expression, peaceful assembly and association, these rights are increasingly undermined, either through restrictive laws or through the harassment of civil society organisations, social movements, protesters, and critical media. Italy, Germany, and France

have now joined Hungary and Greece in the category of “obstructed”, indicating serious constraints on civic space and a substantial shift over time. In 2018, most countries in the bloc – 15 – still enjoyed the highest “open” rating; 11 were classified as “narrowed” (12 if the UK is included), and only one, Hungary, was rated “obstructed”. By 2025, among the 27 EU member states, only 12 remain “open”, while 10 are now “narrowed” and five “obstructed”. This narrowing of civic space is linked to growing restrictions on protest rights and the criminalisation of civil society activism.

In December 2025, Italy’s civic space rating was downgraded due to increasing attacks on civic freedoms, exemplified by the introduction of draconian restrictions on protests and the use of spyware against journalists and activists. Even in countries where the far right has been excluded from government, such as Germany, “these parties continue to set the agenda, as the ruling parties attempt to capture their base by conceding to them on policy and joining in the vilification of human rights defenders and progressive movements”, Petrović reports. In her view, it is no exaggeration to say that the post-World War II consensus on human rights and the international framework for their protection is under existential threat. “EU countries, which have been among its most vocal champions, have been turning their backs on some of these commitments”.

The growing support for the far right has bolstered political actors driving this erosion of fundamental freedoms: “In countries where right-wing parties

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have gained power in recent years, such as Italy, there has been significant backsliding on rights”, Petrović confirms. This backsliding does not remain confined to electoral shifts or changes in the political discourse, but is expressed through concrete legal, administrative, and policing measures that reshape the conditions under which civil society, protest and dissent can operate.



An activist in Lincoln's Inn Fields about an hour before the start of the “Kill the Bill” march in London. January 2022. By Alisdare Hickson on Wikimedia Commons — CC BY-SA 2.0

## 1.2 ATTACKS ON ACTIVISTS AND CIVIL SOCIETY

As civic space narrows across the EU, three trans-European trends emerge: the growing use of emergency frameworks to restrict civic freedoms and collective action; sustained smear campaigns aimed at delegitimising civil society; and forms of repression that undermine democratic participation itself.

These trends do not operate in isolation. They overlap, reinforce one another, and are often tested in specific policy areas before being generalised more broadly.

### Emergency frameworks

Exception or emergency frameworks have increasingly been triggered to bypass democratic safeguards, criminalise humanitarian aid and, in some cases, restrict or effectively ban the work of NGOs and independent media. In Poland in 2021, for example, the declaration of a “state of emergency” at the border with Belarus created a legal and political blind spot, foreshadowing a broader turn towards exceptionalist governance across the EU: journalists were barred from the area, while the work of lawyers, NGOs

and activists monitoring human rights violations was obstructed, and fundamental human rights were curtailed.

Even in the absence of a formally declared state of emergency, the pattern of exception increasingly shapes governance, enabling the de facto suspension of rights through securitisation, criminalisation, and discretionary enforcement. This dynamic is particularly visible at the EU’s external borders, where humanitarian action has been reframed as a security threat or as collusion with “illegal” activity.

“The ongoing proceedings against human rights defenders from search and rescue NGOs are a darkening stain on Italy and the EU’s commitment to human rights”, said Mary Lawlor, UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, in February 2023. As CIVICUS Monitor’s Tara Petrović notes, “In Italy, Greece and Cyprus, as well as increasingly on the EU’s eastern border in Latvia, Lithuania and Poland, solidarity with refugees is criminalised and activists are being threatened with decades in prison on spurious charges”. Beyond accusations such as “aiding illegal immigration”, humanitarian workers have faced allegations of people smuggling, investigations under counter-terrorism provisions and illegal surveillance, illustrating how exception tools are normalised through migration policy.

## Delegitimation

At the same time, this trend is accompanied by sustained campaigns of vilification and delegitimation, which prepare the ground for repression by portraying civil society actors as dangerous or extremist. These patterns – especially attacks on NGOs – have been tested first and foremost in areas where the tactical alignment between the European centre-right establishment and the far right was already explicit, notably migration and environmental policy. While this drift has been underway for more than a decade, it has intensified markedly since 2021 (see Chapter Two). By 2023, a crackdown on climate protesters had become evident in various European countries and even at EU level, with Europol’s 2023 European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report explicitly referring to “concern about climate change and earth resources” as an “extremist” viewpoint. A securitising kind of narrative contributed to the stigmatisation of environmental activists and was intended to legitimise increasingly restrictive interventions.

These developments were further documented by the UN Special Rapporteur on environmental defenders, Michel Forst. Reporting on key trends observed between June 2022 and September 2025, he warned that environmental defenders were “operating in an increasingly restricted civic space, raising serious concerns regarding the ability to safely exercise their rights under the [Aarhus] Convention”. In several countries, environmental activism itself has come to be framed

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as a potential security or terrorism-related concern. Forst also refers to the adoption of legislation to prevent or interfere with peaceful protest, including new offences, harsher sentences and bans on certain forms of protest, measures adopted, for instance, in Italy and the UK.

## Repression

“The stigmatization of environmental defenders” – as the Special Rapporteur describes it – goes hand in hand with “their penalization and persecution”. However, the restriction of civic space, while tested with ferocity in the environmental field, reveals broader and more systemic trends. Italy’s far-right majority, for example, turned a controversial security bill into an emergency decree, which shows how emergency frameworks are used to compress civic space.

Approved in the summer of 2025, this so-called security decree, also known as the “anti-Gandhi law”, criminalises non-violent protests and passive resistance. While this first decree was already highly controversial, in early 2026 the Meloni government announced a further one, signalling a shift towards police state measures: taken together, these so-called “security packages” constitute “one of the most serious attacks on the right to protest and on constitutional guarantees in recent republican history, systematically weakening judicial review and curtailing fundamental rights”, civil society organisations warn.

The use of legislation to restrict the freedoms of expression, peaceful assembly and association has since expanded further. Repression has also targeted protests in solidarity with Gaza. Germany and the Netherlands have had their civic space ratings slip in recent years, reflecting crackdowns on climate protests, pro-Palestine demonstrations and, more generally, expressions of political dissent. Here, vilification, emergency frameworks and repression converge: the shaping of threat enables restrictive measures, which are then enforced through policing and administrative sanctions.

In France, which considers itself the home of human rights, anti-terrorism measures were already deployed against environmental activists at COP21 in 2015, and political attacks on NGOs have since intensified. This culminated when the then Interior minister Gérald Darmanin threatened to review public funding for the

*Ligue des droits de l'Homme* (LDH) for having acted as an observer of policing practices at Saint-Soline protests, during a period of intense socio-environmental mobilisation in the country. “The government’s threat to deprive us of funds because of the counter-power role we are playing is a scandal: it is an attack on the freedom of association”, Patrick Baudouin, president of the LDH, told me in the spring of 2023. That same year, the same minister announced the dissolution of *Les Soulèvements de la Terre*, a controversial decision that was later annulled by the Council of State.

The controversial *loi sécurité globale*, which was enacted in 2021, embodies a form of meta-repression of dissent, evident both in its content and in the repression of protests against the bill itself.

All over Europe, an arsenal of restrictive instruments – security decrees, anti-terrorism and anti-extremism laws, anti-LGBT+ legislation, as well as foreign agent frameworks – has been weaponised to the detriment of civil society, often combined with the use of surveillance technologies and violence to stifle dissent.

Hungary represents the most advanced and systematic crystallisation of these trends. Since 2016, Viktor Orbán has repeatedly invoked a state of emergency, allowing its government to rule by decree. The first time, this step was motivated by the refugee crisis – and then extended through 2020. In that same year, the Hungarian government declared a “state of danger” due



Protests against Emmanuel Macron's reforms, 2023. France.  
By Sébastien Ramage on Unsplash

to the pandemic; then came the war in Ukraine. Exception is now the norm: a state of danger has been extended until May 2026, and it will be in place during the elections.

This is not the only thing to watch out for. In 2021, legislation officially aimed at combatting paedophilia was reshaped by Viktor Orbán's parliamentary majority into an "anti-LGBT+ law", limiting *de facto* also the activities of NGOs. In 2025, Hungary's Pride ban – again justified "to protect children" – restricted the freedom of assembly and explicitly authorised the use of facial

recognition technology to fine participants, turning anti-LGBT+ propaganda into a testing ground for surveillance-based repression.

This logic was further evident in the draft "bill on transparency in public life", introduced in the Hungarian parliament (rather symbolically, in the darkness of the night) on 13 May 2025. The draft, also known as the "Russian law", was meant to target media outlets, NGOs, civil society organisations and their representatives, to silence them. The existing Sovereignty Protection Office, which operates without oversight and whose president

is nominated by the Prime Minister, would be responsible for compiling a list of organisations suspected of receiving foreign funding and threatening sovereignty. By defining threats through challenges to government-aligned values (via constitutional references to “Hungarian democracy” and “traditional family”), the bill would enable blacklisting, financial strangulation, or closure of critical organisations, further destabilising an already fragile civil society ecosystem shaped by long-standing media capture (see Chapter 1.4).

Controversial to the point that the ruling party had to postpone its approval, this initiative functioned as a test case, indicating how sovereignty rhetoric could be operationalised to further contract civil society. Although currently on hold, the draft bill remains as a sword of Damocles, still deploying its chilling effect.

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## 1.3

## ATTACKS ON WORKERS' RIGHTS AND REPRESENTATION

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The contraction of civic space does not stop at civil society organisations and social movements; it also extends into the sphere of work, where collective organisation and the right to strike constitute a central form of democratic counter-power. Attacks on the right to strike, then, are a deliberate political strategy to neutralise collective power at a moment of social conflict and must be understood as part of the wider erosion of civic space.

At the very moment when workers tried to mobilise against the rising cost of living and the inadequacy of their wages, European right-wing and far-right governments made a series of attempts to restrict the right to strike. In the United Kingdom, 2022 was a year of unprecedented strikes. The following year, a Strikes Act was enacted, obliging workers to provide minimum service levels during strikes, while leaving the proposal of those levels to the discretion of the government. The Trades Union Congress (TUC) considered the law “undemocratic”, and it was repealed in December 2025.

In Hungary, at the end of 2022, after a Strike Act had been adopted that made the provision of “sufficient services” obligatory, teachers were left

with no option but civil disobedience, to protest for higher wages and the right to strike itself. The government subsequently dismissed some of those teachers, citing what the Ministry of Interior defined as the “unlawful refusal to work”. In Italy, Giorgia Meloni’s government has also attacked the right to strike, both by attempting to limit its duration to a few hours and by delegitimising trade union action, accusing unions of “calling strikes on Friday to get a long weekend”. The 2025 Global Rights Index, an annual study of violations of workers’ rights, shows Europe recording its worst scores since the index’s inception in 2014.

This trans-European wave of anti-strike laws should therefore be understood as part of a broader restriction in civic space, aimed at weakening collective mobilisation and social contestation. It must also be read alongside the exclusion of workers from the EU policy agenda, and, as later chapters will show, the marginalisation of European trade unions in EU decision-making and the erosion of labour protections through deregulation.

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France Workers Protests, 2019  
By Alois Moubax on Pexels

At EU level, this marginalisation already takes the form of limited or purely formal consultation, as trade unions are sidelined from key decision-making processes while corporate actors enjoy privileged access.

“From the very beginning, when Ursula von der Leyen announced her Commission’s new portfolios, we were worried: she didn’t include social rights or workers or quality jobs in the title of the Commissioner. That signalled that workers were unimportant for her policy agenda and that rights were unacceptable for the policy agenda”, says Esther Lynch, General Secretary of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC).

Von der Leyen initially designed Executive Vice-President Roxana Mînzatu’s portfolio as “People, Skills and Preparedness”, before protests pushed

the Commission to rename it “Social Rights and Skills, Quality Jobs and Preparedness”.

Months later, however, “nothing has really changed: the Commission’s programme wasn’t changed. It is the first time in years that the Commission’s work programme – its legislative roadmap – does not contain any new social leg”, the ETUC secretary told me in mid-2025. “So, there’s still no legislative agenda to deal with any of the key challenges facing workers to improve their situation”.

Far from mere inaction, we are seeing an active rollback of social rights, undermining the hard-won socio-environmental achievements of the previous EU term. A similar trend is underway with regard to environmental protection measures – both are analysed in Chapter Two.

## 1.4 ATTACKS ON MEDIA FREEDOM

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Alongside attacks on civil society and organised labour, restrictions on media freedom represent a further pillar of the shrinking of civic space, targeting the capacity for public scrutiny and pluralistic debate. When watchdogs of power can no longer freely perform their role in the public interest, a fundamental function of democracy is lost. And without pluralism, public debate is transformed from open and contested into constrained and closed.

In this sense, attacks on media freedom are not a collateral phenomenon, but a central mechanism in the contraction of civic space. By undermining journalism as a democratic counter-power and subjecting it to intimidation, control or capture, these attacks enable and accelerate repression across society, removing one of the key actors capable of exposing abuses of power.

During its previous term, the European Commission enacted new rules to protect against Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs), together with an innovative European Media Freedom Act. More recently, EU Commission president Ursula von der Leyen also stated her intention to support media freedom. Yet as the illiberal playbook spreads across

Europe, the deterioration of the media landscape seems to be outpacing the implementation of these safeguards.

Legal harassment is one of the most visible instruments in this process. In both its 2024 and 2025 reports, the Coalition against SLAPPs in Europe (CASE) noted that Italy was the country with the highest number of SLAPP cases among the monitored ones. “We have witnessed an increasingly alarming resort to this form of legal harassment by high and very high-level public officials”, says Sielke Kelner, coordinator of CASE Italia, describing it as “a worrying sign of growing intolerance on the part of the ruling coalition towards any form of criticism”.

A similar intolerance is witnessed by journalists in Slovakia. Beata Balogová, chief commentator and former editor-in-chief of SME, Slovakia’s leading daily newspaper, has experienced months of relentless attacks, even from the Prime Minister in person. “Slovak PM Robert Fico has always been an enemy of the press because it is journalists who bring to light the connections between his party and oligarchs”, she explains. “But attacks on the media and journalists have never been as intense and personal as they are today”.

“Fico started with public TV. They all do that”, Balogová points out. The prototype, she argues, is Victor Orbán, who has even sent advisors to Fico, but the model is spreading across Europe. “Since Giorgia Meloni took office as Prime Minister of Italy, the country’s public service

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broadcaster Rai has been facing an unprecedented level of political interference”, as the Media Freedom Rapid Response urgent mission to Italy reported in *Silencing the Fourth Estate: Italy’s Democratic Drift*. The capture of the media by politics is not something new. It can be traced

back decades, from the conflicts of interest that characterised Silvio Berlusconi’s governments in Italy in the 1990s to the systematic takeover of the media landscape under Orbán in Hungary since 2010. What has changed, however, is the aggressiveness of the phenomenon, as well as its scale, its speed, the reliance on invasive technological tools and the capability to replicate tactics and narratives across countries.

Attacks on journalists range from legal harassment and political interference to more intrusive forms of surveillance, illustrating how different modes of control increasingly operate in tandem. “There has been an increase in threats and intimidation against journalists, as well as several cases that reveal serious shortcomings in the protection of journalistic sources and of journalists themselves”, the 2025 *Media Pluralism Monitor (MPM)* states with regard to Italy.

Giorgia Meloni and Viktor Orbán at the European Council, 18 December 2024.  
@ European Union 2024



In addition to attacks and continuous political pressure on Rai, Italy has also recorded some of the most recent cases of spyware attacks against journalists in the EU. To date, no one has been held accountable for these illegal surveillance operations in Italy, mirroring a pattern of impunity for such spyware attacks elsewhere in Europe. In 2021, in Orbán's Hungary, investigative journalists were on the list of those targeted with Pegasus spyware, yet the government dodged the issue evading accountability. Greece's surveillance scandal escalated in 2022 and still lacks clear answers.

Such a hostile environment must be assessed not only in terms of its direct effects on journalists, but also for its chilling effect on public expression more broadly.

## Second chapter

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# DEMONISATION AGAINST REPRESENTATION

The attacks on civil society do not emerge in a vacuum but are enabled by the demonisation of forms of democratic representation that redefines these as threats rather than necessities. The chapter analyses how illiberal narratives are upgraded to EU level, tracing the convergence between far-right and centre-right forces as well as the political tactics that help shift the balance of power through which the shrinking of civic space in the EU is rendered legitimate and, ultimately, normalised. These processes align with a broader corporate-first and emergency-driven governing agenda. As we shall see, the delegitimisation of representation becomes a precondition for the dismantling of counter-power across the EU.

## 2.1 THE NORMALISATION OF THE FAR RIGHT AT EU LEVEL

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In 2021, the European People's Party – the leading group in the European Parliament, and the one to which Ursula von der Leyen belongs – intensified its talks with the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), building bridges with Italy's post-fascist Brothers of Italy leadership: at that time, Raffaele Fitto co-chaired the ECR group in the European Parliament and Giorgia Meloni was the president of the ECR party.

Before becoming Prime Minister in 2022, Meloni had boycotted earlier attempts to form a Europe-wide far-right alliance, as proposed by Matteo Salvini, Viktor Orbán, and Marine Le Pen. In return for this role of *saboteur*, her party became the key interlocutor for the EU's dominant conservative force, the EPP. The resulting dialogue laid the groundwork for a tactical alliance that has since developed apace.

The election of the EPP's Roberta Metsola as the President of the European Parliament in January 2022 was the first test of this alliance, granting ECR a vice-presidency and, more broadly, breaking the *cordon sanitaire* that had long isolated the far right. At national level, similar dynamics unfolded: newly appointed EPP-led governments

increasingly came to rely on far-right parties either as coalition partners or as decisive brokers in parliament – as in Finland and Sweden, respectively – not to mention Meloni's own debut as a Prime Minister in autumn 2022.

Opening the door to these kinds of alliances signalled that post-fascist and post-Nazi parties were no longer taboo partners in European political cooperation. At EU level, the tactical choice mirrored a strategic perspective: by breaking the *cordon sanitaire*, the EPP meant to keep its key player role amid changes in the balance of power at the European Parliament.

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***Illiberal narratives are  
upgraded to EU level.***

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As years have gone by, barriers have continued to erode. The EPP started testing collaboration with far-right parties through coordinated positions and voting in the European Parliament well before the 2024 European elections, notably in environmental and migration policy, two areas that have repeatedly served as laboratories for alignment between Conservatives and far-right forces. In June 2023, a joint attack on the Green Deal, including on the Nature Restoration Law, served as a prelude to the electoral campaign.



Ursula von der Leyen and Giorgia Meloni speak at a press conference following their visit to the migrant hotspot in Lampedusa, Italy. © European Union, 2026 — CC BY 4.0

This unfolded alongside the synchronisation of political priorities between centre right and far right across policy fields.

For example, this alignment contributed to the further normalisation of restrictive migration approaches, with von der Leyen aligning her agenda to Meloni's pre-summits on migration and so-called "innovative solutions", aimed at relieving member states of their responsibility to protect. In recent months, this joint venture between the EPP and the far right has also been triggered to turbocharge socio-environmental deregulation both in the European Council and at the EU Parliament.

The convergence between conservative and far-right forces at EU level has not only reshaped

political alliances but has also enabled the mainstreaming of narrative strategies that delegitimise dissent and representation. Central among these is the growing tendency to recast parts of civil society as politically suspect or socially dangerous.

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## 2.2 THE DEMONISATION OF CIVIL SOCIETY

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Demonisation becomes the key mechanism through which organisations, movements and critical voices are reframed as threats, paving the way for their exclusion. To understand how this works, it is useful to revisit what has become known as the “[Finkelstein formula](#)”, a strategy first tested in Europe by Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orbán more than fifteen years ago, before being widely replicated.

“Projecting all kinds of evil onto your opponent”: this is the principle, presenting negative campaigning as a crucial instrument for gaining power and retaining it.

After losing two general elections in Hungary in 2002 and 2006, Orbán was determined to return to power. In 2008, Benjamin Netanyahu encouraged his Hungarian ally to rely on the same election strategist that had previously helped him to oust Shimon Peres in the 1996 Israeli elections: Arthur Finkelstein, also known as “the Republicans’ invisible man”. “Just brand somebody a liberal, use the word over and over again, engage in that kind of name-calling, that’s the formula”, as [Mark Mellman put it](#). That is how the Hungarian leader imported the Finkelstein strategy into European politics, reshaping himself

from a young liberal of the 1990s to an ideologue of illiberal democracy in the 2010s.

In that election campaign that brought Orbán back to power, George Soros was identified by Finkelstein as the “perfect enemy”, unleashing an unprecedented vilification campaign with an impact far beyond Hungary.

Having proven effective under illiberal leadership, this formula has evolved into a transatlantic playbook not only to stigmatise and thereby delegitimise dissent, but also to prepare the ground for criminalisation and repression. Its circulation between Europe and the US amplifies its impact, boosting attacks on civic space on both sides of the Atlantic. Donald Trump has followed that path, threatening [to use government levers](#) (including the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act, which is used against organised crime) to explicitly target donors such as George Soros and to silence liberal organisations.

Trump’s cuts to development assistance, his demonisation of civil society and his escalating rhetoric have emboldened Europe’s illiberal leaders. In Hungary, this culminated in a public escalation in spring 2025, when Orbán [announced that](#) “the bugs have survived winter, we are dismantling the financial machine that has used corrupt dollars to buy politicians, judges, journalists, bogus civil society organisations and political activists; they have survived too much; they have received money from too many

places. The spring winds bring flood water, let it carry them off". Two months later, this announcement translated into the draft of the "Russian law" (see Chapter 1.2). This transatlantic vilification playbook has paved the way for increasingly aggressive repression of dissent, as attacks on NGOs show.

While the criminalisation of sea rescue and humanitarian aid was initially driven by far-right anti-migrant rhetoric, similar attacks have more recently been launched by actors within the traditional majority of the European Parliament. The EPP, for instance, has sought to instrumentalise the QatarGate scandal – a late-2022 corruption investigation concerning alleged foreign influence on several MEPs – to argue for the criminalisation of NGOs more broadly.

The deployment of the Finkelstein strategy can also be seen in the abuse of notions such as "extreme left" or simply "the left". These terms are deliberately stretched to include a wide range of civil society organisations, social movements, and critical actors, prefiguring their delegitimisation or criminalisation.

Trump's repeated denunciations of what he calls "the radical left", followed by the designation of Antifa as "terrorists" by the US administration – where "antifa" functions as a catch-all category – have been emulated by the Hungarian leadership and far-right politicians at EU level. At the White House (and elsewhere), journalists are accused of being "left-wing activists" in

order to skip their questions. In this extreme version of demonising dissent, it no longer matters whether "the left" is an actual or alleged one, nor what is meant by "left": the term is used as an umbrella to cover any potentially non-aligned element and denigrate it.

While the alliance between centre-right and far-right forces is scaling up at EU level, the logic of the *cordon sanitaire* has actively been redirected against the Left, whether they are left-wing parties and parliamentary factions or civil society groups being labelled as left-wing in order to delegitimise them. Rather than isolating illiberal actors, these attempts at silencing also extend to social movements, climate activists, NGOs, trade unions, and, more generally, a civil society that challenges the emerging right-wing bloc and its corporation-first agenda.

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***Having proven effective under illiberal leadership, this formula has evolved into a transatlantic playbook not only to stigmatise and thereby delegitimise dissent, but also to prepare the ground for criminalisation and repression.***

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The collapse of the protective barrier against the far right, combined with the projection of the *cordon sanitaire* against the left, reflects a broader European trend. Between 2021 and 2022, a political and semantic battle against the left and social activism unfolded both at national and EU levels. In France's 2022 presidential elections, the same kind of demonisation previously used against the far right's Rassemblement National were redirected against the left side of the political spectrum, primarily targeting *La France Insoumise*.

“Liberals are going to apply the *cordon sanitaire* against the extreme left too”, former Belgian Prime Minister and current vice-president of the European Parliament Sophie Wilmès stated [in an interview](#). The label “extreme left” has become

entrenched in public discourse, acquiring negative connotations comparable to – or even more severe than – those historically associated with the far right, while the latter is being normalised.

Through this discursive reversal, the boundaries of legitimate political participation are narrowed and representation itself is recast as a threat. In doing so, demonisation functions as a critical enabling condition: it prepares the ground for exceptional measures, emergency governance, deregulation, and the exclusion of civil society from decision-making.



Freedom of speech.  
Markus Winkler on Unsplash.

## 2.3

## A CORPORATION-FIRST AGENDA, EMERGENCY MODE, AND MILITARISATION

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The normalisation of alliances between the far right and centrist forces, together with the demonisation of dissent, does not remain confined to discourse. It is linked to a governing agenda in which a corporation-first approach and the systemic use of emergency framing reinforce one another, weakening deliberative safeguards and narrowing opportunities for democratic oversight. Blatant attacks on civil society are therefore not incidental, but integral to a political project that redefines whose interests count and how decisions are made at EU level.

The deregulation, pro-business agenda has brought the centre right into open convergence with far-right forces such as Italy's post-fascist Brothers of Italy. Political groups including the EPP, ECR, Patriots for Europe and ESN increasingly unite around this agenda, as seen when the first "omnibus" package was passed by the EU Parliament. Framed as technical "simplification", omnibus packages bundle together wide-ranging rollbacks of digital rights, social and environmental protections. Deregulation, competitiveness, and simplification function as shared priorities, effectively dismantling hard-won safeguards across multiple policy fields at once.

Ursula von der Leyen has explicitly adopted Giorgia Meloni's narrative that the state "should not bother those who have a business", a refrain that has become emblematic of the Commission president's current orientation. This logic is pushed to the extreme, with business allowed to "bother" the policy process through the open legitimisation of powerful industrial lobbies as privileged interlocutors. Deregulation packages are inspired by demands from BusinessEurope, the lobby group representing European companies; von der Leyen has even publicly claimed credit for incorporating industry proposals into EU legislation. At the 2025 European Industry Summit, she announced that "more simplification is on its way" and reiterated her call to corporate actors: "If you come with good and doable suggestions, we are grateful for that, we want them, and as you see, in the first omnibuses we included already a lot of what you wrote to us".

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***Emergency governance, deregulation, and repression are not accidents — they are a political project.***

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The warm welcome given to corporate lobbyists is inversely proportional to the attention paid to those whose rights these same deregulation packages undermine. "There is a growing chill wind coming from America towards Europe, which

is that solutions for working people are no longer guaranteed in laws”, ETUC general secretary Esther Lynch had warned in mid-2025, complaining that the European Trade Union Confederation had not even been consulted on crucial policy dossiers that impact workers.

Brussels’ deregulation agenda has been loudly demanded not only by the Commission itself but also by national leaders such as Friedrich Merz, Emmanuel Macron, Donald Tusk, and Giorgia Meloni. It must be situated within a broader competitiveness agenda, increasingly framed as a matter of European sovereignty in an increasingly uncertain geopolitical setting, where the invocation of urgency is central.

In line with the Draghi report, this framing presents speed and simplification as strategic imperatives, normalising a closer reliance on industry input and compressed decision-making processes that sideline established procedures for consultation and scrutiny. The imperative of urgency is used to justify bypassing standard democratic procedures, redesigning the institutional balances to the detriment of civil society and its involvement in the process. “For the Commission, when there’s demand there’s urgency, which is a ground for not conducting impact assessments”, as Quentin Mautray of ClientEarth highlighted. Former MEP Sophie in ’t Veld is outspoken: “It is a fantasy urgency; it is a pretext”.

At the national level, emergency frameworks have long been used as tools to limit dissent and

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***The convergence between corporation-first agendas, militarised framing and permanent urgency has begun to reshape the conditions under which political participation itself takes place.***

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democratic engagement; Orbán and Trump did it blatantly. At EU level, similar dynamics are now taking shape through the construction of external threats and the mobilisation of a “rally ‘round the flag effect” – leveraging geopolitical tensions to narrow space for contestation domestically. The adoption of a permanent urgency frame has been claimed by Ursula von der Leyen at the Munich Security Conference in 2025: “When we adopt an urgency mentality, we are a force that can move mountains. We must adopt this urgency mentality more permanently”. Such language marks a decisive shift from exceptional measures to a normalised mode of governance.

War framing, emergency narratives and the appeal to unity under threat – as a political tool – to silence critics are increasingly used as levers to militarise the public discourse, leaving little room for democratic debate or civil society intervention, while elevating rearmament and



A sign opposing the “Great Reset” in Vienna, Austria.  
By Ivan Radic on Wikimedia Commons — CC BY 2.0

industrial scale-up as priorities. This logic was made explicit when von der Leyen announced to the EU Parliament that the Commission would bypass it by resorting to emergency procedures under article 122: “And this is exactly what we need right now: speed and scale. This is why we have chosen the emergency procedure under Article 122: we need a surge in European defence, and we need it now”.

The convergence between corporation-first agendas, militarised framing and permanent urgency has begun to reshape the conditions under which political participation itself takes place. Civil society is increasingly confronted with a political environment in which the space for contestation, deliberation and organised counter-power is structurally constrained. For example, by bundling multiple rollbacks into packages and accelerating decision-making, the Commission narrows

the space for civil society organisations to scrutinise proposals, mobilise expertise or coordinate responses across policy fields.

Participation is not formally abolished, but it is hollowed out, rendering critical voices and expressions of public interest marginal and structurally disadvantaged, with substantial consequences for civil society’s role in the European project.

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***Participation is not abolished,  
but it is hollowed.***

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## Third chapter

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# A NEW IMBALANCE

A new balance of power is reshaping the European Union's governance and, ultimately, its institutional architecture. On the one hand, civil society organisations, trade unions and other public-interest actors are increasingly constrained, with their space for participation narrowed; on the other, decision-making processes are becoming more arbitrary and less transparent, favouring the interests of large corporations at the expense of European citizens and workers' rights. The result is a structural imbalance, which does not stem from a single reform, but from the cumulative effect of procedural changes, funding choices and legislative techniques that are quietly redefining how power is exercised in the EU.

### 3.1

## AN EXCLUSIONARY PLAYBOOK

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The rebalancing of power within the EU is increasingly reflected in concrete institutional practices that restrict access to political participation.

The EPP's attack on NGOs can be traced back to the first Pieper report, which was voted down in 2016. In 2023, however, its author Markus Pieper succeeded in having a "Report on the transparency and accountability of non-governmental organisations funded from the EU budget" adopted. More recently, members of the Committee on Budgetary Control have argued that the EU should not provide funding to NGOs if they take action on EU policies or legislation. In May 2024, a few weeks before the European elections, the Commission issued guidance on funding for activities related to the development, implementation, monitoring and enforcement of Union legislation and policy. Shortly thereafter, NGOs receiving LIFE funding were asked by the Commission to amend their grant contracts – despite no violation of existing rules – to remove any deliverables associated with lobbying, as those "may entail a reputational risk for the Union".

Then came the newly created "Scrutiny Working Group" (SWG) of the Parliament's Budgetary

Control Committee. "The SWG, whose working methods and composition violate basic democratic and parliamentary norms, was initiated by conservatives and the far right, claiming to investigate alleged opaque or improper financing of NGOs by the European Commission. Main targets are organisations working on environmental and climate issues. The working group is manufacturing a scandal where none exists", Green MEP Daniel Freund stated.

Efforts to prevent some NGOs and public figures from participating actively in the EU's political life and pressures to limit parts of civil society are much more pervasive than demands for corporate lobby transparency. "Conservatives have even argued that recipients of EU funding should no longer be allowed to advocate their interests towards the EU: this would amount to a de facto professional ban for NGOs. Lobbying would then be reserved only for well-resourced business associations and industry representatives", Freund warned.

The far right has amplified the illiberal playbook by projecting the *cordon sanitaire* against civil society, framing them as ideologically captured. References to "funds channelled to ultra-environmentalist NGOs" and "the left defending their vast network of associations", as voiced by Carlo Fidanza, head of the Brothers of Italy delegation and ECR co-rapporteur in the Working Group, contribute to legitimising restrictions on civic participation. The EPP, meanwhile, has taken a lead in institutionalising this logic, planning to expand

the Working Group's probe "to think tanks, consultancies and others dealing with migration". Combined, the removal of barriers against the far right and the imposition of an exclusionary logic against civil society reinforce one another, with devastating results.

The effects of this playbook extend beyond NGOs. Alerts have also come from prominent academics and journalists that have been disinherited from European Parliament committees, suggesting that the procedures for involving external expertise are themselves being reshaped by the ongoing war against civil society, too. Alberto Alemanno (Jean Monnet Professor of European Union Law at HEC Paris, founder of The Good Lobby and currently a Democracy Fellow at Harvard University) describes this pattern as "brutally efficient: fabricate a scandal, delegitimise and defund organisations into dependency on philanthropic support, then criminalise their new funding as foreign influence, all while continuing to demand NGOs services for consumer protection and digital rights enforcement that governments refuse to fund themselves".

These measures operate less through formal legislative change than through political and administrative discretion, making them harder to contest and less visible to public scrutiny. Their cumulative effect is to weaken civil society's capacity to act as an independent watchdog, while maintaining the appearance of procedural neutrality.

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***Efforts to prevent some NGOs and public figures from participating actively in the EU's political life and pressures to limit parts of civil society are much more pervasive than demands for corporate lobby transparency.***

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## 3.2 THE EUROPEAN MULTIANNUAL FINANCIAL FRAMEWORK (2028-2034)

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Beyond formal rules of participation, the rebalancing of power within the EU is also taking place through budgetary choices. The next EU budget, or Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), which will come into effect in 2028, does not merely allocate resources: it shapes the European Union's priorities across a wide range of policy areas over a seven-year period, including support for civil society and democracy both within and beyond the EU. It therefore plays a decisive role in determining whose interests are prioritised and whose voices are constrained.

In July 2025, the European Commission published its draft of the EU budget, introducing significant changes to the previous framework. These include an increase in the overall budget (from €1.07 trillion to €2 trillion) alongside a reduction in the number of programmes (from 52 to 16). The proposal is now being negotiated with the member states and the European Parliament, which is expected to last until 2027. Within this framework, *AgoraEU* (internal dimension) and *Global Europe* (external dimension) are portrayed as the two main instruments for democracy support.

The shrinking space for civil society is reflected in several core features of the budget proposal. Presented by von der Leyen as the most ambitious MFF ever proposed, it relies heavily on the language of “flexibility”, repeatedly justified through urgency, crisis preparedness and the need for rapid response. In practice, this flexibility functions as an emergency logic applied to long-term governance. Over 400 billion euros of the total sum can only be activated through a “crisis mechanism”, while 451 billion euros (a quarter of the overall budget) is channelled into a competitiveness fund aimed at businesses and innovation, including more than 130 billion euros allocated to boost defence. In this context, what the Executive Vice-President Roxana Mînzatu defends as “a minimum investment of 100 billion for social objectives” appears as a last resort.

But the figures alone do not tell the whole story – the real devilish detail for the fate of European civic space lies in the arbitrariness with which funding will be allocated. And here, loosening earmarking, merging programmes and expanding discretionary allocation, risk undermining stable and predictable funding for democracy and civil society, replacing structural guarantees with contingent and revocable support, however much this is presented as “flexibility”.

A first cause for concern relates to the redesign of budgetary governance. In the Commission's first budget proposal, Ursula von der Leyen introduced the so-called national envelopes, a move that de facto strengthens the president's transactional

relationship with governments and risks regressing the EU to a sum of national instances (the “great reset” illiberal forces have always dreamt of). Moreover, von der Leyen announced the use of milestones and targets – a mechanism tested during the pandemic to push for digital and environmental reforms – now repurposed to monitor the level of military expenditure in line with NATO commitments agreed at the Hague. This also raises questions of treaty compatibility, as it shifts the use of EU budgetary instruments away from cohesion and integration objectives – which are enshrined in the treaties – towards defence priorities, which are not.

The resulting governance model increases discretionary power in the allocation of funds, also making the distribution of resources more arbitrary for governments. It is likely to marginalise institutions closest to citizens, notably regional and local authorities, and replicate a pandemic emergency scheme in which public scrutiny and institutional monitoring mechanisms end up being weakened. As a result, the proposed framework concentrates power and ties access to resources more closely to political alignment and compliance.

Subnational actors have been particularly outspoken about this dynamic. Commenting on the preparation of the MFF draft proposal, the president of the European Committee of the Regions, Kata Tüttö, criticised in an interview with me in October what she described as a highly centralised and opaque process, arguing

that it weakens democratic accountability and pits regions, municipalities and social priorities against each other in competition for shrinking resources.

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***The real devilish detail for the fate of European civic space lies in the arbitrariness with which funding will be allocated.***

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Her warning directly concerns cohesion as a core EU policy, explicitly anchored in the treaties to improve development and inclusion all over the Union so that inequalities are reduced, and integration is fostered – and which is now at stake. “In the long term, cohesion policies are at risk of disappearing, and democracy itself is suffering”, Tüttö says. “While allowing governments free rein with the complexity of allocation processes, the EU Commission president focuses on managing investments for industries under the slogan of competitiveness and the urgency mode”. In recent years, there has already been a noticeable shift away from core EU principles, for example when von der Leyen paved the way for the use of cohesion funds for industrial giants (in the defence sector, to begin with).

European Union flags in front of the Berlaymont building in Brussels, Belgium. By Christian Lue on Unsplash



For civil society organisations, the consequences of this drift are particularly acute: the so-called “flexibility” triggered by an emergency-oriented budgetary framework, the merging of programmes and the discretion in allocation translate into a potentially lethal funding uncertainty. These risks are already visible in the Commission’s treatment of the LIFE programme, the EU’s main funding instrument for environmental protection, biodiversity and environmental civil society. In September 2025, the European Environmental Bureau together with WWF, Birdlife, T&E and CAN warned that the proposal would eliminate LIFE as a standalone programme with a ring-fenced budget, absorbing it instead into the new Competitiveness Fund primarily geared towards industrial policy; this threatens to dismantle one of the few remaining funding structures guaranteeing independent support for environmental civil society.

Against this backdrop, the eight-billion euro AgoraEU programme is likely to function more as a sweetener to calm the anxieties of a civil society under pressure rather than a structural guarantee for civic participation. Similarly, the newly-announced European Democracy Shield – framed around protecting democratic systems from external interferences and internal “threats” – and EU Strategy for Civil Society – which recognises civil society’s role but offers limited safeguards against the structural restrictions described above – reflect a broader drift towards securitisation. This framing shifts the focus of democracy from internal vitality to defence against perceived threats.

### 3.3

## A DEREGULATED EUROPE

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The same logic of urgency, simplification and discretion that reshapes the EU's budgetary architecture is increasingly transforming the way legislation itself is produced. Deregulation is no longer confined to specific policy choices, but has become embedded in the legislative process, with far-reaching consequences for democratic participation and civil society oversight.

In 2021, more than 700 civil society groups, trade unions and academics mobilised to advance corporate accountability at EU level, calling for binding due-diligence rules on human rights and environmental impacts. Three years later, on the 11th anniversary of the Rana Plaza tragedy, which killed over 1,100 garment workers in Bangladesh and became a symbol of the abuse and human rights violations embedded in European supply chains, the EU Parliament adopted the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD). Within weeks, the directive, which was the result of long battles between civil society and governments, was significantly watered down through the first “simplification omnibus”, following an active push from the EPP and the far right in the European Parliament, with the German Chancellor openly calling for the law to be scrapped altogether.

A similar fate befell other cornerstone regulations. Take the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which Mario Draghi described in September 2025 as “a cost” for businesses, despite its role in enhancing privacy rights (especially after the DataGate scandal) and being a symbol for the EU's regulatory capacity at the global level. Even the AI Act, adopted only recently, was called into question again before it could be meaningfully implemented, with the “digital omnibus”. In each case, legislative achievements secured through years of civil society mobilisation have been reopened, diluted, or bypassed under the banner of simplification.

This trend culminates in the European Commission's 2026 work programme, launched under the slogan “Europe's Independence Moment”, which turns out to be the most deregulatory in EU history. One after another, social, environmental, and digital safeguards are being rolled back. While some pressure comes most blatantly from across the Atlantic, it is from the heart of the EU institutions that this agenda is being driven. To advance it, the legislative process itself is reconfigured through omnibus packages, compressed timelines, and reduced consultation, formally preserving procedures while hollowing out their democratic substance. What is deregulated – by way of a sort of meta-deregulation – is not only policy content but the conditions under which lawmaking takes place.

What was once presented as an exceptional legislative technique is increasingly becoming a

governing norm. Alberto Alemanno calls this “a constitutional drift”, whereby “competitiveness” is elevated from a political preference to an urgent justification that overrides ordinary democratic safeguards. “Once limited to technical consolidation, the omnibus has become a vehicle for substantive policy change. The result is a pattern: omnibus legislation functions as a procedural bypass”. The omnibus is becoming the default method for legislation in Europe.

This assessment is echoed by civil society watchdogs, who see these procedural changes as part of a broader redesign of the EU around corporate interests. “I can 100 per cent confirm that

corporate groups are more and more privileged, while civil society is pushed out through different ways: cuts in funding, banning access to meetings which it was typically allowed in”, Kenneth Haar of Corporate Europe Observatory (CEO) told me. He points to the Commission’s use of so-called “implementation dialogues” and “reality checks”, many of which are reserved for industries or business groups, as emblematic of this shift.

“Our protection is being sold for profit”: this is the “*j’accuse*” that CEO and 470 civil society, trade unions and public interest groups signed last September, warning that “the Commission plans an unprecedented wave of drastic cuts to

There is no Planet B. By Markus Spiske on Unsplash.



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***What was once presented as an exceptional legislative technique is increasingly becoming a governing norm.***

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regulations that protect labour and social rights, human rights, digital rights, and the environment”, using simplification slogans and omnibus packages as deregulation tools.

Industry-dominated consultation processes are compounded by an intense lobbying imbalance. A search on the [IntegrityWatch website](#) shows the Commission held at least 605 meetings with lobbyists on its “simplification” agenda between December 2024 and late 2025. According to CEO, some of the minutes “lack any details on ‘main points raised and positions expressed’, whereas this information is required according to the Commission’s own transparency rules”. Corporate Europe Observatory has filed a [complaint](#) to the European Ombudsman over the opacity of these exchanges.

In November, EU ombudsman Teresa Anjinho confirmed these concerns, finding “maladministration” in how the Commission prepared urgent legislative proposals. In particular, she found that the Commission adopted a broad interpretation of “urgency” but failed to justify the urgency; it also did not put in place a transparent, evidence-based, and inclusive preparation of those so-called “urgent” legislative proposals, limiting inter-service consultation time, and failing to act in an accountable manner. “Principles of good law-making cannot be compromised even for the sake of urgency”: the ombudsman alerted on the need to clarify the Commission’s stakeholder consultation rules for urgent proposals, so that a public debate is enabled before the legislation is adopted.

In practice, however, urgency has become the rule rather than the exception, consolidating a legislative environment in which civil society is structurally disadvantaged or excluded from shaping the laws.

Perspectives

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# **FREEING UP SPACE: HOW TO COUNTERACT**

The attack on civil society is neither accidental nor inevitable. It reflects identifiable political choices and responsibilities, and a deliberate vision of Europe as a project tailored to corporate priorities and executive control. As the preceding chapters have shown, shrinking civic space is produced through coordinated narratives, institutional exclusion, and structural re-engineering. Counteracting it therefore requires more than defensive reactions: it demands a strong political will, a strategic perspective, and a clear democratic horizon.

It may be too late to retrospectively assess whether progressive forces in the European Parliament could have acted more effectively to stop the drift that unfolded over several years, postponing political confrontation in the hope of preserving the status quo. But one thing is clear: to confront what is a deliberate political project aimed at undermining civic space, a coordinated political strategy is required; and, above all, political will. There are no technical checklists or procedural fixes that can reverse this trajectory on their own. Countering the shrinking of civil society requires an alternative vision of Europe, coupled with renewed analytical capacity, strategic coordination, and political mobilisation.

Attacks on civil society in the EU should not be seen as isolated or sectoral issues: they reflect a systemic crisis that affects democratic participation, media freedom and the role of public-interest actors as watchdogs of power. These developments are reinforced by pressure from

within national governments' and EU institutions' ruling class.

The global context, marked by the resurgence of authoritarian politics and the growing influence of concentrated economic power, further amplifies these dynamics and expands the resources available to those seeking to weaken civic space. Images of the world's wealthiest men, tech titans and business moguls getting a front-row seat at the US President's last inauguration spoke louder than words; one year later, they are even richer.

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***Illiberalism has a transnational playbook, does civil society have one?***

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Civil society nonetheless retains a critical resource: broad public support. As pro-corporate governance exacerbates social and economic inequalities, the sections of the population affected by these developments continue to expand. Illiberalism has a transnational playbook, does civil society have one?

An essential starting point for counteraction lies in the systematic monitoring and the development of pan-European analytic tools to recognise a common playbook. Such tools must be cross-sectoral, use multi-faceted skills as a powerful tool

and foster structured cooperation between academia, media, NGOs, and trade unions, enabling collective analysis and coordinated responses in defence of a pluralistic and open society.

Civil society actors have called on EU institutions to include systematic reporting on civic space in the EU Civil Society Strategy. Monitoring institutional processes and safeguarding meaningful participation are critical. At the same time, awareness of how institutional structures are being unevenly reshaped underscores the role of political pressure beyond formal decision-making arenas, requiring building a critical mass capable of influencing outcomes within them. Networking initiatives provide an important foundation for this work. Existing platforms that facilitate coordination among civil society organisations at EU level demonstrate how horizontal exchange, shared analysis and joint campaigning can strengthen collective capacity.

Both cross-sectoral and pan-European cooperation is crucial. Experience across policy fields shows that attacks on civic space rarely remain confined to a single-issue area. Measures initially targeting organisations working on migration, environmental protection or social rights tend to spread across sectors, gradually destabilising the broader democratic balance.

While maintaining a diversity of approaches and areas of expertise, effective resistance depends on recognising these shared dynamics and articulating a common democratic horizon. Pan-European media cooperations also play a pivotal role in fostering a shared public sphere at EU level, which is essential to democratic governance. Clear and accessible reporting can help connect institutional developments to their concrete implications, showing how the erosion of civic space affects social rights, public services, and everyday democratic participation across Europe.

Faced with the increasing scale of attacks and resources that are being deployed to undermine democracy, the democratic response should scale up too. Freeing up civic space is not a sectoral defence, but an essential condition to relaunch a European way of life: a way of life that is grounded in pluralism, rights, and democracy.

THE AUTHOR

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De Benedetti writes columns about European politics at Vanity Fair and in-depth analysis for Jacobin (USA). She co-founded the European Focus newsletter, a cross-border, pan-European editorial production (Balkan Insight, Delfi, Domani, El Confidencial, Gazeta Wyborcza, HVG, Libération, n-ost, Tagesspiegel). Her fight for media freedom results in her name being mentioned in international publications such as Le Monde, Politico Europe and the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

Her journalistic and analytical work focuses on Central Europe, the surge of the far right in Europe, the illiberal playbook, and the rule of law issue. Her academic path includes studies in International Relations and Semiotics.

**About the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung**

The Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung (RLS) is a German political foundation affiliated with Die Linke, promoting democratic socialism through education and critical engagement. Since 1990, it has advanced internationalist, anti-capitalist, and emancipatory ideals rooted in the workers', women's, anti-fascist, and anti-racist movements. RLS works globally to foster reflection, analysis, and alternatives for just and transformative social change.

**About the European Network of Political Foundations**

The European Network of Political Foundations (ENoP) serves as an umbrella network and information hub for political foundations on topics related to democracy and development cooperation. ENoP brings together 42 political foundations from 20 European countries, active in Europe and with over 130 local offices in partner countries. Although independent in nature, ENoP is a cross-party network, and its broad spectrum of affiliation corresponds to the political representation in the European Parliament. As such, the Network reflects the political diversity of the European democratic landscape and gives ENoP a unique approach.

# ENoP

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