

**FROM PRINCIPLES TO PRACTICE:  
CULTIVATING A RULE OF LAW  
CULTURE IN EUROPE**

**INNOVATIVE PRACTICES OF CIVIL SOCIETY  
REGARDING THE EU RULE OF LAW TOOLBOX**



# AUTHORS

## The Hungarian Helsinki Committee



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## Executive Summary

This study examines how civil society organisations (CSOs) across EU Member States are engaging with the EU's rule of law toolbox and developing new strategies to cultivate a broader culture of rule of law protection. It seeks to understand: *what opportunities and barriers do CSOs face when interacting with EU-level instruments?; which innovative practices have emerged to respond to shrinking civic space and democratic backsliding?; and how can these practices be shared and adapted across borders?* The findings show that while CSOs play an essential role in documenting rights violations, shaping public discourse and contributing expertise to EU monitoring processes, they operate under increasing pressure. Financial insecurity, smear campaigns, legal uncertainty and constrained access to policymaking were identified as the most widespread challenges. In response, CSOs are developing creative approaches, including early-warning and coordinated alert systems, joint advocacy and reporting on the EU Rule of Law Report, strategic litigation using the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, digital security professionalisation and social media storytelling that makes rule of law issues relatable to the public. These practices demonstrate resilience and innovation, but also underline a need for stronger, sustained collaboration, more predictable funding and clearer avenues for meaningful engagement with EU institutions.

The study methodology combined a cross-European survey and semi-structured interviews with CSOs from 18 Member States, supplemented by desk research and long-term experience in the field. While the sample is not statistically representative, its analysis offers valuable insights into current trends and highlights transferable practices that can help strengthen civil society's role in safeguarding democracy and the rule of law across Europe.

## Key policy recommendations

To strengthen civil society's role in safeguarding the rule of law, the EU and Member States should prioritise sustained, meaningful engagement with CSOs and ensure that the EU rule of law toolbox remains accessible, transparent and responsive to evidence from the field. First, more predictable and long-term funding streams are essential. The shift away from short project cycles towards structural support would reduce organisational precarity, enable strategic planning and reinforce CSOs' watchdog and advocacy functions. Second, clearer and more consistent consultation mechanisms are needed. Civil society contributions to the Annual Rule of Law Report, monitoring committees for EU funds and other participatory processes should be formalised, with transparent feedback loops to demonstrate how CSO input is used. Third, cross-border

coalition-building and peer learning should be supported through EU-funded platforms to allow organisations to share innovative practices and respond collectively to emerging threats. Fourth, EU institutions should improve communication to the public by partnering with CSOs that specialise in accessible rights-based and civic education, ensuring that rule of law issues are not confined to expert circles. Finally, targeted support for organisational digital security and resilience is crucial to safeguarding activists and preventing intimidation in increasingly polarised environments.

Strengthening civil society is not only a matter of protecting independent voices; it is a structural requirement for a democratic European Union capable of upholding its foundational values.

## 1. Introduction

This report aims to strengthen knowledge-sharing and capacity building among civil society organisations across Europe. Although many civil society organisations have developed creative and effective practices to cultivate the culture of rule of law and to engage with the EU's rule of law toolbox, these experiences remain fragmented and often isolated within national borders. By collecting and analysing such practices, the report provides a platform for exchange, enabling organisations to learn from each other's experiences and to adapt successful strategies to their own contexts. In doing so, it contributes to building stronger civil society resilience across the European Union.

To situate these practices within a broader analytical framework, the study also draws on complementary sources and original research. In addition to drawing on background information from previous reports, this study incorporates insights from original research, based on survey inputs and interviews with civil society organisations in EU Member States. While not representative of the full diversity of CSOs across the EU, these contributions help to identify common trends and highlight innovative practices developed by civil society actors to protect and strengthen the rule of law.

This report was prepared within the framework of the RED-SPINEL project, supported by the Horizon Europe programme. The project examines the ongoing contestation of liberal democracy within and beyond the European Union and seeks to identify the main actors and dynamics of dissensus shaping democratic governance; it further aims to assess their implications for the EU's legal and political framework. Through collaboration between academic institutions and civil society organisations, RED-SPINEL explores how key EU policy and legal instruments contribute to or are challenged by these developments. The project's ultimate aim is to advance democratic practices by generating evidence-based insights and policy recommendations for strengthening democracy and the rule of law in Europe.

Building on this background, the structure of the report follows a logical progression. Since its central focus is on innovative civil society practices related to the EU rule of law toolbox and the broader cultivation of a rule of law culture, it first introduces the main elements of the toolbox and existing forms of CSO engagement. This provides the necessary foundation for understanding how civil society interacts with the EU's rule of law mechanisms in practice. The report then turns to the key challenges that CSOs encounter both in engaging with EU instruments and in fostering rule of law culture. Finally, it presents findings from original research, drawing on survey and interview inputs to illustrate concrete, innovative practices that have emerged across Member States, offering insights into and inspiration for strengthening civil society's role in upholding the rule of law.

## 2. Civil society engagement with the EU rule of law toolbox

In this broader context, the EU rule of law toolbox represents a key interaction point between civil society and the Union in its efforts to uphold its foundational values. The instruments that make up this toolbox not only serve as mechanisms for monitoring and enforcement but also as channels through which civil society can contribute expertise, evidence and advocacy. Understanding how CSOs engage with these instruments is therefore crucial to assessing the effectiveness and inclusiveness of the EU's rule of law framework.

The EU rule of law toolbox encompasses a comprehensive set of instruments and mechanisms aimed at promoting, protecting and restoring the rule of law within Member States and in the EU's external relations. Developed as a response to growing concerns over rule of law backsliding, it reflects the Union's determination to safeguard the values enshrined in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) and to preserve the integrity of its legal and political order. The toolbox combines preventive and corrective measures, ranging from dialogue-based instruments, such as the annual Rule of Law Report and the Rule of Law Framework, to enforcement tools including infringement procedures, the Article 7 TEU mechanism, and the conditionality regulation linking EU funds to respect for the rule of law. It also integrates funding and capacity-building programmes that support actors committed to strengthening democratic resilience and rule of law culture across Europe.

Within this framework, civil society plays a crucial role in upholding the values enshrined in Article 2 TEU, namely respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. Unlike political parties or state institutions, civil society organisations do not pursue political power for themselves but instead function as

intermediaries between citizens and decision-makers. They engage in education, advocacy, service provision and the representation of communities whose voices might otherwise remain marginalised. Owing to their close connection with society, CSOs are uniquely positioned to observe the tangible effects of public policy, to detect patterns of discrimination and social precarity, and to mobilise collective responses when rights, democratic principles, or the rule of law come under threat. The Treaties explicitly recognise this role. Article 11 TEU obliges the Union to maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with civil society, while Article 15 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) underlines the importance of participatory decision-making and transparency. These provisions make clear that civil society is not merely an adjunct, but an integral part of the EU's democratic architecture as highlighted in the European Parliament's 2022 [\*Report on the Shrinking Space for Civil Society in Europe\*](#).

Moreover, civil society forms a key pillar of the checks and balances that sustain democratic systems grounded in the rule of law. Civil society organisations are often the first to demand accountability from governments and push for policy change at both national and international levels. They also bring valuable expertise in advocating for and supporting minorities and vulnerable communities. Their proximity to citizens enables them to document concrete violations, identify systemic risks and translate complex developments into accessible advocacy. By contributing information, expertise and public pressure, CSOs not only help EU institutions monitor compliance with Union values but also make these mechanisms more responsive to realities on the ground. Without their active engagement, much of the EU's rule of law toolbox risks remaining a technical framework; with them, it becomes a living system capable of identifying pressures on the rule of law and offering effective remedial measures.

## [2.1. The Rule of Law Toolbox: key elements and CSO engagement](#)

These diverse forms of engagement show how civil society contributes to translating EU values into everyday practice. To understand more concretely how this happens, the following section introduces the main elements of the EU's rule of law toolbox and the ways in which CSOs participate in their implementation.

### **2.1.1. Annual Rule of Law Report**

The European Commission's Annual Rule of Law Report aims to give a comprehensive assessment of developments across Member States and makes recommendations for improvement. Contributions from CSOs can increase the report's credibility and depth, especially in contexts where rule of law backsliding

undermines transparency and accountability. Alongside academics, citizens and bar associations, CSOs can contribute each year through targeted stakeholder consultations, which mirror the scope of government submissions. Since 2022 the Report has included concrete recommendations to all Member States, enabling the Commission and stakeholders to assess governments' implementation from 2023 onward. Upon the Commission's invitation, a select group of CSOs can provide supplemental information to the Commission during its virtual country visits. These inputs ensure that the report reflects not only official perspectives but also evidence from the ground, thereby reinforcing accountability.

Once the Commission publishes the annual Rule of Law Report, civil society organisations often use the reports for national and international advocacy.

CSOs play a crucial role not only in identifying systemic issues but also in monitoring the implementation of the Commission's recommendations. They can share the findings through the media to foster public awareness and accountability. They can also organise events and discussions to promote dialogue.

### **2.1.2. Infringement procedures and preliminary references**

According to the EU treaties, the Commission may launch infringement procedures against a Member State that fails to comply with EU law, potentially referring the case to the Court of Justice, which can impose financial sanctions. Such procedures can be prompted by well-documented [complaints](#) from CSOs that allege a breach of EU law. Once the Commission has launched infringement proceedings, CSOs can follow the process through advocacy, monitoring and expert input, thereby raising public awareness of the case through communication and outreach.

In parallel, national litigation offers another entry point through the preliminary reference procedure, where national courts may refer questions on the interpretation of Union law to the Court of Justice of the EU (CJEU). Here, CSOs can play an indirect but significant role by supporting lawyers to build their understanding of legal arguments grounded in EU law, such as the Charter of Fundamental Rights. Once a national judge has made a preliminary reference request or the CJEU has delivered a ruling, CSOs can play an important role in communicating the judgment to broader audiences, helping citizens, journalists and policymakers understand its significance in shaping national or European policies.

### 2.1.3. Conditionality mechanisms

As a response to ever increasing calls to link EU funding to respect for the rule of law and fundamental rights, the [Conditionality Regulation](#), the [Recovery and Resilience Facility \(RRF\)](#) and [the Common Provisions Regulation](#) introduce safeguards to ensure that EU financial support is not undermined by systemic violations. These instruments have opened novel ways for civil society to take part in ensuring the rule of law and the Charter of Fundamental Rights continue to be upheld during the implementation of EU funding policies. CSOs can send information about threats to the EU budget due to rule of law breaches by submitting complaints through the Commission's conditionality mechanism [form](#), or by engaging in national-level monitoring committees for EU funds, or tracking the implementation of national recovery plans under the RRF. By documenting gaps between commitments and practice, CSOs help ensure that EU resources are aligned with democratic standards and not misused in ways that weaken civic space or fundamental rights. After the Commission has proposed or adopted measures under the Conditionality Regulation to protect the EU budget due to rule of law breaches, CSOs can track how governments respond to the Commission's findings and whether they address the identified breaches.

### 2.1.4. Article 7 procedure

Article 7 TEU is a process to address a Member State that seriously and persistently breaches the bloc's fundamental values, such as the rule of law and human rights. Ultimately, it can lead to the suspension of a Member State's voting rights in the Council. Given its political nature, its effectiveness with regard to improving respect for the rule of law in Poland or Hungary has been limited: these are the two Member States which thus far have been the only two subjects of the Article 7 process. However, Article 7 TEU remains a powerful symbolic and procedural tool.

Although CSOs have a very limited opportunity to engage in this process, as its political nature does not afford them any formal role, they can collect evidence, provide contextual information and feed recommendations into the deliberations of the Member States in the Council. For example, despite the lack of progress achieved in the Article 7 process concerning Hungary, which had been triggered by the European Parliament in 2018, civil society reporting helps keep violations on the EU agenda and sustains international attention on systemic backsliding. Once the Article 7 procedure has been triggered, CSOs can prepare regular updates for

hearings and joint civil society submissions summarising key developments and priority recommendations. These inputs can help the Council and Member States assess whether the government under scrutiny has taken meaningful steps to address the identified rule of law concerns.

### **2.1.5. European Semester**

The **European Semester** is the EU's key framework for coordinating economic and social policies, offering insights into governance and structural challenges that affect democracy and fundamental rights. Civil society organisations can use the Semester process to engage in policy dialogue and advocate for rights-based reforms. Some countries have developed consultation mechanisms or platforms that allow CSOs to contribute to the drafting of **National Reform Programmes** or provide feedback on Country-Specific Recommendations. By engaging in these processes, responding to **Country Reports** and using Country-Specific Recommendations in their advocacy, CSOs can help ensure that EU and national priorities reflect social realities and support democratic resilience.

In addition to enforcement and monitoring instruments, the EU also applies positive measures to strengthen the rule of law and democratic resilience in Member States. In this context, the **Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) programme** plays a particularly important role. Established in 2021 under the Justice, Rights and Values Fund, CERV provides funding for initiatives that promote open, rights-based, democratic, equal and inclusive societies grounded in the rule of law. For many civil society organisations, it offers an accessible entry point to EU funding, facilitating partnerships, cross-border cooperation and the scaling up of advocacy and community-based initiatives. Beyond financial support, CERV calls frequently encourage collaboration, innovation and the exchange of good practices, thereby helping CSOs strengthen their networks and visibility at the European level. Many of the innovative practices highlighted in this handbook were financed or supported through the CERV programme, illustrating its vital role in empowering civil society to safeguard and advance the Union's core values.

For civil society, engagement with the EU rule of law toolbox is not merely a matter of compliance or consultation, it is a strategic opportunity. By supplying data, building transnational networks and shaping narratives, CSOs enhance the Union's ability to defend its founding values. Active, sustained and innovative CSO participation ensures that EU mechanisms remain connected to realities on the ground and capable of delivering meaningful protection for the rule of law.

### 3. Current challenges and threats faced by CSOs in the EU

Civil society organisations are also uniquely positioned to provide input for the EU rule of law toolbox. Their proximity to citizens allows them to document concrete violations, identify systemic risks and translate complex developments into accessible advocacy at both national and EU levels. By contributing information, expertise and public pressure, CSOs not only help the European institutions monitor compliance with Union values, but also make these mechanisms more responsive to realities on the ground. Without active CSO involvement, much of the toolbox risks remaining a largely technical framework; with their participation, it becomes a living set of instruments capable of defending democracy and the rule of law in practice.

Despite their crucial role, civil society organisations across Europe are facing a deteriorating environment. The Fundamental Rights Agency's (FRA) [Fundamental Rights Report 2024](#), [FRA's Protecting civil society \(update 2023\) report](#) and the [2025 Civic Space Report](#) describe a dangerous rollback of civic freedoms. What was once seen as a problem limited to a few Member States with systemic rule of law concerns has now spread more widely, with restrictions being introduced even in countries with long-standing democratic traditions. This trend coincides with the rise of far-right actors, whose electoral success and influence on mainstream politics have reinforced hostile narratives about civil society and eroded support for international human rights norms.

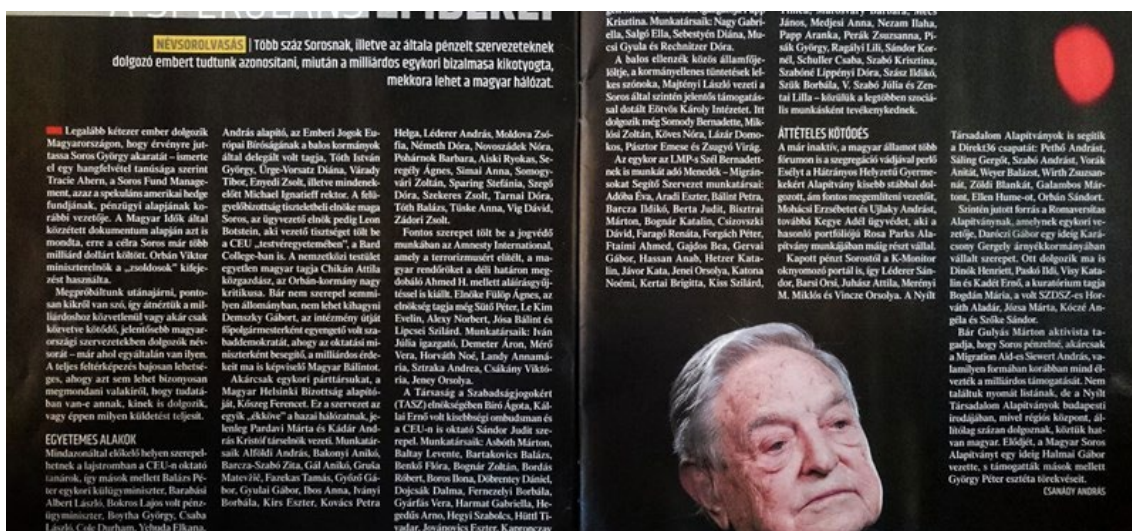
The forms of these challenges are diverse but interconnected, affecting civic space across multiple Member States. The drivers of these developments are both political and structural. The growing influence of illiberal and far-right forces across Europe has contributed to a climate in which civil society is portrayed as an adversary rather than a partner. At the same time, the authority of international human rights conventions is increasingly questioned, weakening the normative framework that protects civic space. Governments frequently instrumentalise narratives of foreign interference to stigmatise organisations critical of their policies. Economic pressures and austerity measures have reduced public resources available to CSOs, while the fragmentation and polarisation of digital spaces have facilitated disinformation and harassment campaigns. Together, these factors create a hostile environment that systematically undermines civil society's ability to fulfil its democratic role.

The main categories of restrictions include:

- [Restrictive legislation](#): restrictive legislation represents a systemic threat to civic space and democratic oversight. Despite civil society's objections, several

Member States have maintained or introduced measures constraining CSO activity under the guise of transparency or national security. These laws typically impose onerous reporting obligations, stigmatizing labels and disproportionate sanctions, undermining the ability of civil society to participate in public life and contribute to EU rule of law monitoring.

- In Slovakia, after three unsuccessful attempts to pass a so-called foreign agents law, the fourth legislative initiative was eventually transformed into a [lobbying regulation](#) in 2025. Under the final version of the bill, CSOs are required to publicly disclose detailed information about their income, expenditures and organisational structures. They must also publish the identity of their donors and provide information upon public request. CSOs now face financial sanctions for non-compliance and carry obligations comparable to those imposed on state authorities.
- **Delegitimation and intimidation:** the deliberate undermining of civil society poses a systemic challenge to the EU's fundamental values and should be treated as a key indicator of democratic backsliding. In several Member States, CSOs, activists and journalists face mounting pressure through legal intimidation, administrative harassment and smear campaigns, all of which restrict civic participation and weaken democratic oversight. State-led narratives portraying civil society as foreign-influenced or acting against national interests further erode public trust and create a hostile environment for independent voices.
  - Hungary offers a telling example of delegitimation through blacklisting. In 2018 the pro-government magazine Figyelő published a “Soros mercenary” list naming 200 civil society actors, academics and human rights defenders, casting them as enemies of the state



- In Poland, in 2021, the intimidation of rights defenders illustrated broader systemic threats to democratic governance. [Human Rights Watch](#) documented that women’s rights activists advocating for gender equality and access to abortion were subjected to police raids, confiscation of equipment and repeated interrogations following their participation in protests. Several were detained or charged in politically motivated cases, including for allegedly praising church vandalism, obstructing religious services or creating an “epidemiological threat” during demonstrations at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. Others endured anonymous threats and online abuse tolerated by authorities. Such practices demonstrate how criminal law and administrative measures can be misused to intimidate civil society and create a chilling effect.
- Financial insecurity: many civil society organisations face growing financial uncertainty. In several EU Member States, available funding has decreased, particularly for advocacy, litigation and awareness-raising activities, while support is increasingly directed toward service provision. Accessing funds is often difficult due to complex and non-transparent procedures, cumbersome reporting requirements and delays in grant payments that can cause cash flow problems. The dominance of short-term project funding, combined with limited access to long-term or structural support, undermines organisational stability. Co-financing obligations and restrictive eligibility rules, including geographical limitations in some EU programmes, further constrain participation in international advocacy. Unfavourable tax regimes and negative media campaigns targeting organisations that receive foreign funding have added to the pressure, eroding both resources and public trust.
  - In this context, the phasing out of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) funds in 2025 has also had an adverse impact on CSOs working on rule of law and human rights issues in several EU Member States. As documented by the [Review of Democracy](#), the termination of U.S. assistance was expected to result in the loss of approximately 30–35 million USD annually for civil society in Central and Eastern Europe, with Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovakia among the countries most affected.
- Exclusion from policymaking: many CSOs continue to face obstacles in contributing to law- and policy-making processes, including restricted access to information, superficial or rushed consultations and the absence of structured civic dialogue. At the national level, several governments have weakened consultation frameworks or bypassed participatory procedures altogether, leaving CSOs with little or no opportunity to influence legislation that directly affects fundamental rights. Additionally, at the EU level CSOs struggle to engage meaningfully with the rule of law toolbox when consultations are often ad hoc, technical or lack sufficient feedback loops.

- In Hungary, [public consultation](#) is obligatory only for draft laws prepared by ministries but not for legislative proposals introduced directly by individual Members of Parliament or parliamentary committees. This exemption significantly limits opportunities for meaningful public input on important pieces of legislation. The rules stipulate a minimum of eight days for public comment. However, in practice, this period is often insufficient for reviewing and commenting on complex or lengthy bills. Moreover, no legal consequences follow if consultation obligations are disregarded, meaning that laws adopted without proper consultation remain valid, further weakening transparency and civic participation in lawmaking.
- Digital threats: online spaces that once enabled participation, advocacy and cross-border cooperation are increasingly used to monitor, intimidate or discredit civic actors. CSOs face a spectrum of risks from hacking, phishing and data leaks to coordinated smear campaigns and algorithmic invisibility caused by opaque content moderation. These threats not only endanger individuals but also erode the capacity of CSOs.
  - [In Hungary](#), investigations revealed that the private intelligence firm Black Cube allegedly took part in a smear campaign against civil society organisations during the 2022 elections, using fake identities and covert recordings to gather information and manipulate public narratives. Earlier, [in Romania](#), Black Cube operatives pleaded guilty in 2022 regarding a similar operation targeting the head of the National Anti-Corruption Directorate, which involved digital surveillance and phishing techniques.

## 4. Research findings

### 4.1. Methodology

#### 4.1.1. Data collection method

This research project was designed to provide an overview of how civil society organisations engage with the EU rule of law toolbox and to collect innovative practices. Beyond the toolbox itself, the project also sought to identify practices that contribute to strengthening and cultivating a broader culture of the rule of law. A mixed-methods approach was applied, combining a survey with follow-up interviews. The survey ran from June to September 2025, while semi-structured interviews were conducted in September and October of 2025. The analysis also builds on original desk research and background knowledge accumulated through years of work in the field of rule of law at the Hungarian Helsinki Committee.

The survey was distributed through the Hungarian Helsinki Committee's contact database, drawing primarily on stakeholders active in the EU Rule of Law Report submission process and the [Recharging Advocacy for Rights in Europe \(RARE\) programme](#). Selection criteria focused on human rights organisations with rule of law-related activities, with the aim of ensuring geographic diversity by obtaining at least one response from each EU Member State. The self-administered online questionnaire included both closed and open-ended questions. Closed questions generated comparable quantitative data, while open-ended questions allowed participants to elaborate on their responses, providing qualitative insights into the experiences behind them.

Based on survey responses, selected participants were invited to take part in follow-up semi-structured interviews. The interviews served to contextualise survey results, explore specific examples of engagement with EU rule of law mechanisms in greater depth, and highlight innovative practices in more detail.

All survey respondents and interview participants remained anonymous to ensure confidentiality and encourage the open sharing of experiences. At the same time, for the sake of transparency and to support peer learning, the names of organisations are mentioned where innovative practices are publicly available. Organisation names are also shared in cases in which their practices were identified through desk research.

The study faced limitations related to sample size and distribution. Responses were not evenly spread across the EU, with some countries better represented than others and a few not represented at all. As a result, findings cannot be considered statistically representative of all CSOs across Member States. Nonetheless, the combination of survey responses, interviews and desk research provided a valuable overview of current practices, brought to the surface examples of innovation, and offered a cross-national perspective on the challenges CSOs face in engaging with the EU rule of law toolbox.

#### [4.1.2. Overview of respondents](#)

29 civil society organisations responded to the survey, including watchdog groups, research institutes and legal aid providers from 18 European countries: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, France, Finland, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Malta, the Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Slovenia, Spain and Sweden.

In total, nine interviews were conducted with organisations from eight Member States: Belgium, Czech Republic, Hungary, Ireland, Malta, the Netherlands, Poland and Slovakia. All participating organisations are actively engaged with the EU rule of law

toolbox and were selected because they demonstrate innovative practices either in engaging with EU rule of law mechanisms or in cultivating a broader rule of law culture.

The organisations in the study represent a diverse set of organisations defending human rights, strengthening the rule of law and reinforcing democratic resilience. Their mandates cover an extensive range of interconnected fields, including media freedom and pluralism, access to information, civil society empowerment, migration and asylum, anti-corruption, gender equality, environmental protection, criminal justice and LGBTQI inclusion. The participating organisations are a mix of human rights watchdogs, legal aid providers, research institutes and grantmaking foundations, ensuring a rich balance between community engagement and policy expertise. Collectively, the twenty-nine respondents draw from decades of experience in promoting justice, accountability and civic participation across Europe.

## 4.2. Analysis of findings

### 4.2.1. Challenges faced by respondents

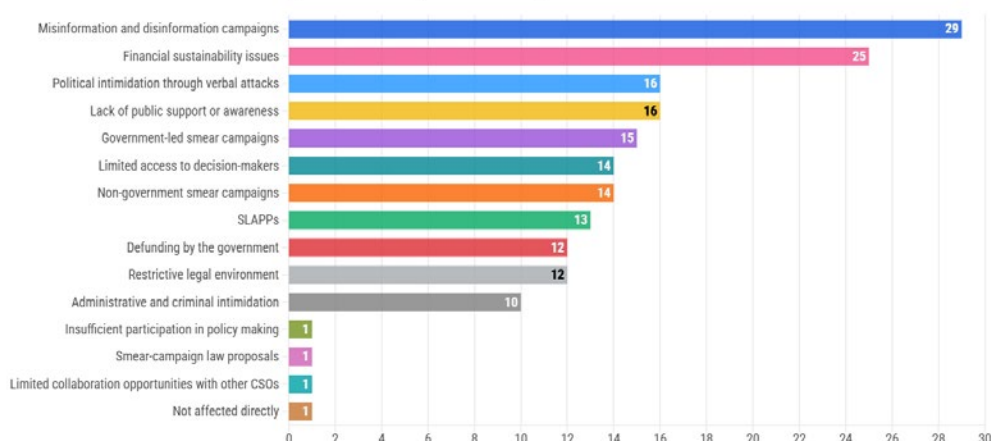
Civil society organisations across the eighteen countries reported facing serious and recurring challenges. Despite mounting pressures, civil society organisations have demonstrated resilience and innovation in defending democratic values. Many have resorted to strategic litigation to challenge unconstitutional laws, built broad coalitions to safeguard civic space and mobilised citizens in mass demonstrations and awareness campaigns. Others have deepened cross-border cooperation, recognising that threats to civic space are not confined within national boundaries. Nevertheless, shrinking civic space reduces their ability to monitor government action, influence policymaking and hold authorities accountable. As a result, the overall capacity of the EU to uphold the rule of law is diminished when CSOs are weakened or silenced.

The most pressing concern is misinformation and disinformation campaigns, identified as the leading challenge both at the national and organisational level. Respondents described these campaigns as a key obstacle in their country and a direct threat to their own work, underlining how pervasive and damaging hostile narratives and information manipulation have become for civil society actors.

In second place, respondents pointed to financial sustainability issues, again ranking this challenge among the most severe both nationally and within their own organisations. The parallel emphasis highlights the depth and persistence of long-term funding insecurity across the sector, reflecting how structural defunding and shrinking donor opportunities undermine the ability of CSOs to operate independently and sustainably.

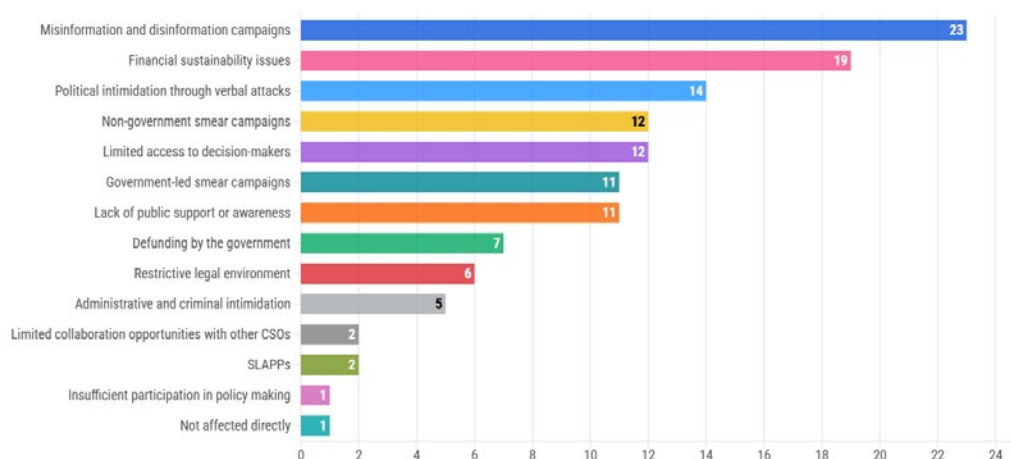
Finally, the third tier of challenges is more fragmented. Respondents described various forms of political intimidation and pressure, often manifested in verbal attacks, alongside other significant barriers such as smear campaigns by non-governmental actors, government defunding and a general lack of public support or awareness. The overlap in figures shows that while some challenges are present across the country, several respondent organisations noted that (although such threats exist in their national context) they have not been directly affected themselves, or are instead confronted with other types of difficulties in their everyday work.

### What are the main challenges CSOs in your country face?



Source: Hungarian Helsinki Committee survey.

### Has your organization been affected by any of these challenges directly?



Source: Hungarian Helsinki Committee survey.

When asked how they respond to challenges, the vast majority of organisations (27 respondents) emphasised the importance of coalition-building with other CSOs, followed by engagement with international bodies such as the UN, the Council of

Europe and the EU (20 respondents) and then running advocacy campaigns (18 respondents). These strategies show that civil society is not only defensive but actively finding strength in collaboration and visibility.

Most respondents highlighted the need to expand their funding opportunities, underlining financial sustainability as the most pressing area for improvement. They also pointed to the importance of achieving greater visibility and public awareness in order to strengthen legitimacy and public trust. Finally, many stressed the need for better access to EU institutions, recognising that stronger links at the European level are essential for amplifying their voice and influence.

The following sections present a selection of innovative practices that reflect these challenges and needs, illustrating how civil society organisations are developing creative and effective ways to strengthen rule of law culture and engage more meaningfully with the EU rule of law toolbox.

#### *Strengthening coordinated and timely responses to challenges*

##### **Traffic-Light Early Warning System**

The Network for the Protection of Democracy in the Czech Republic has created a non-exhaustive overview of rule of law and democratic backsliding threats, based on Central and Eastern European experiences and expert knowledge of the Czech institutional context, upon which a “democratic minimum” was established. These threats fall into two primary areas:

1. Weakening safeguards against the cementing of political power, including threats to the constitutional system, judiciary, Parliament, media, civil society, political rights and security institutions.
2. Illegitimate strategies to enforce government power such as curtailing parliamentary debate, misuse of emergency powers, attacking pluralism, rewriting national narratives, creating unfair political competition and undermining international rule of law safeguards.

##### **Evaluation of threats and the call to action:**

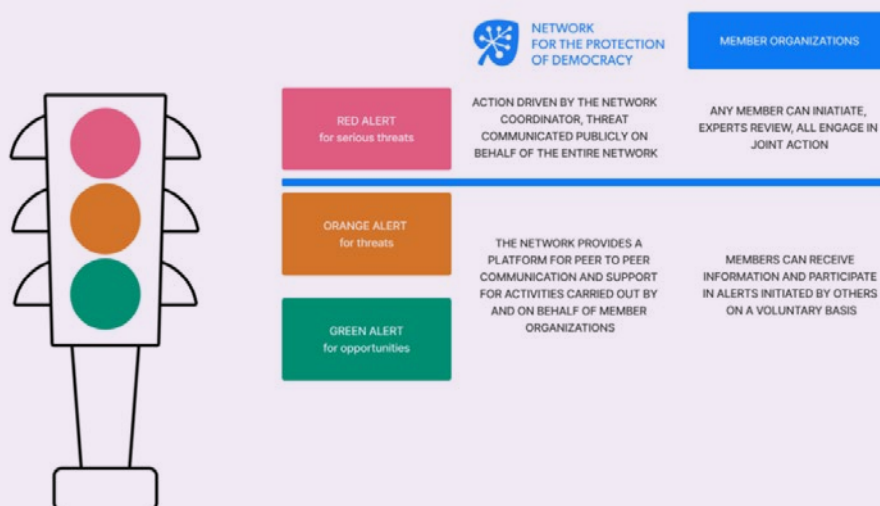
Monitoring is carried out continuously by the coordinator of the Network in cooperation with 60+ experts working across thematic areas to identify potential threats, contextualize them and assess their seriousness.

The coalition uses a “traffic light” mechanism to issue alerts:

- Red alert = serious threat (reviewed by experts)
- Orange alert = moderate threat
- Green alert = opportunity

The Network aims to connect a pool of diverse CSOs and facilitate their engagement in democracy protection activities. To this end, the Network coordinator runs awareness-raising activities to keep members informed about potential threats and operates an internal intranet platform, which allows member CSOs to access information, suggest or respond to calls to action and stay connected on a peer-to-peer basis. When a threat is identified, the system generates a notification and call to action for network members, who can then join and support the joint response. Based on a joint agreement, all members are committed to take action in case of a serious threat in (“red alert”). The Network coordinator proposes a variety of possibilities to engage depending on the overall advocacy strategy. They can vary depending on the expertise, focus and capacity of the member organisations. For instance, organisations can contribute by issuing a public statement, sharing information, mobilizing advocacy efforts, engaging on social media or even organizing or joining demonstrations.

There are two levels of membership. Some members made an agreement whereby they are contacted only when a serious threat arises (red alert), as regular engagement can be too capacity-intensive for them. Other members receive not only the red alerts but also the orange and green alerts, which serve as tools for ongoing collaboration, mutual learning and collective response. These members can also propose orange and green alerts themselves, reflecting developments in their national or thematic areas. By doing so they actively contribute to the early-warning process, ensuring that responses remain timely, well-grounded and community-driven.



**Early warning and coordinated alerts, an innovative practice under the [Monitoring Action for Civic Space \(MACS\) project](#):**

Within the framework of the MACS project, civil society has piloted a unique monitoring and early warning model to respond to civic space challenges. The project combines:

- Detailed country reports that analyse both the progress and decline of civic freedoms across six dimensions;
- Regional trends analysis, highlighting developments within the EU's sphere of competence;
- An Early Warning and Alert System hosted on the [Civic Space Watch platform](#), designed to detect restrictions at an early stage and mobilise timely action by EU institutions, international organisations, media and human rights actors. The mechanism also aims to assess the extent to which individual cases reflect broader structural problems and to convey this information to the European Commission, accompanied by recommendations on possible measures.

Building on this framework, the project also aims to develop a dedicated set of indicators for Member States with generally open civic spaces. These “micro-indicators” would capture early, subtle warning signs that precede more visible restrictions, helping to identify common vulnerabilities even in countries traditionally considered resilient. This approach ensures that EU monitoring remains sensitive to emerging risks in open democracies and not only to deterioration in more restrictive contexts.

The innovative strength of this practice lies in the combination of regional trend analysis and the alert mechanism. While developed under MACS, the model is transferable to other country contexts and provides a systematic way of feeding evidence directly into EU processes.

The project is implemented by the European Centre for Not-for-Profit Law, European Civic Forum, Bulgarian Center for Not-for-Profit Law, Foreningen Nyt Europa, Le Mouvement Associatif, Ökotárs Alapítvány, Netherlands Helsinki Committee, Ogólnopolska Federacja Organizacji Pozarządowych and the Fundația pentru Dezvoltarea Societății Civile.

*Response to challenges lack of public support*

**Responding to Public Disconnect: Translating CJEU Rulings into Accessible Narratives**

To bridge the gap between complex EU jurisprudence and public understanding, civil society actors have taken on a communicative role: after the CJEU issues a judgment, a dedicated group of lawyers immediately studies and analyses its implications. They then issue public statements interpreting what the ruling means domestically, especially in terms of judicial independence, constitutional safeguards and democratic norms. This helps make highly technical CJEU decisions intelligible not just to lawyers, but to journalists, activists and the broader public. (Interview 3)



**Creative Communication on Social Media: Making the Rule of Law Relatable**

In response to limited public awareness or interest, some CSOs have turned to engaging visual storytelling on social media to bring rule of law issues closer to everyday experience. One notable example is a six-part series of one-minute animations produced by the Hungarian Helsinki Committee, titled *“Juci és Laci kalandjai nemjogállamországban”* (Juci and Laci’s Adventures in Non-Rule-of-Law Country). Released in March 2022, the short animation films tell simple, concrete stories illustrating how the concept of rule of law diverges from reality in Hungary. The films avoid abstract theory, instead using real-life-inspired examples to show how rule-of-law principles erode in practice.

### **Human Rights and Legal Awareness Education: Building Informed Citizenship**

Another strand of CSO activity focuses on human rights and civic education, aiming to strengthen democratic participation and awareness from the ground up. In Hungary, the *“Tudatos döntésért”* (“For Conscious Decisions”) pilot programme by Igazgyöngy Foundation in the village of Told promotes participatory democracy among socially excluded communities. Participants gain practical knowledge about the functioning of the European Union and the Hungarian state, elections and citizens’ rights, which they then apply in local community events simulating real elections. The programme seeks to counter blame-based attitudes through understanding and dialogue and to increase participation in upcoming municipal and European elections.

A similar approach exists in Belgium, where Amnesty International’s annual youth action *“Pas d’accord, j’assume !”* (“No Agreement, I Take Responsibility!”) invites young people aged 10–20 across Wallonia and Brussels to transform their schools into spaces of human rights activism. Each year focuses on a different theme—a recent theme was mobilising against abuses of power and mass attacks on the rule of law—combining educational materials with creative, participatory campaigns. Each year, the team selects one key issue for schools to explore and take action on. For the 2025–2026 school year, the chosen theme will be the rule of law, which is considered a global priority. As part of the campaign, students will be invited to send postcards on three specific topics in three different countries. Teachers will receive educational guides and materials to use in class, and a series of workshops will be organised in schools. In addition, various joint activities will bring students together to share experiences and strengthen their engagement.

#### *Response to restrictive legal environment*

### **Clarifying and Contesting Ambiguous Legal Provisions Affecting Civil Society**

The broad and imprecise legal terminology used in certain national laws creates uncertainty and has a restrictive effect on civil society activity. To address this, CSOs with legal expertise can begin training other organisations on how to interpret these provisions and understand their potential consequences.

The next step involves requesting official clarification from the authorities, including through public-interest data requests, to obtain authoritative interpretations.

The findings from this work could later inform amicus curiae interventions or other strategic legal actions to challenge or refine restrictive legislation. (Interview 1)

### **Using the Charter in strategic litigation**

As a response to restrictive legal environments, strategic litigation using the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights can be a powerful means of driving broader social change and strengthening the rule of law.

The [STARLIGHT](#) - Strategic Litigation for Rights in Europe project exemplifies this approach. Implemented first by the Hertie School and the Hungarian Helsinki Committee in 2022-2024 and in [2025-2026](#) by Democracy Reporting International, Hertie School and the Hungarian Helsinki Committee, this CERV-supported initiative aims to promote a more effective use of the Charter, a strong yet often underutilised instrument, before the Court of Justice of the European Union. At a time when democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights are increasingly under pressure, strategic litigation has become a powerful tool to safeguard core European values. By empowering legal professionals across the EU to use the Charter in strategic litigation, STARLIGHT 2.0 strengthens their capacity to respond to systemic challenges and achieve impact that extends beyond individual cases. Participants take part in legal training and develop practical skills in strategic litigation, documentation and evidence, legal advocacy and public communication.

Another CERV-funded and complementary initiative, the [CharterWise project](#), implemented by the Hungarian Helsinki Committee and the Hungarian Civil Liberties Union in 2023-2024, focused on embedding the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights deeper into legal practice in Hungary. Key outcomes included a training video series, a comprehensive online resource platform and five case studies demonstrating the Charter's domestic application. It also developed three regional trainings for nearly 90 lawyers, a published curriculum and a university syllabus tested in law school seminars. Complementary outputs include articles, a student essay competition and a public event on civil society monitoring of EU funds which helped connect legal professionals, academics and citizens in promoting a culture of Charter-based rights protection.

### *Response to Cybersecurity Threats*

#### **Strengthening Organisational Digital Resilience**

To address growing digital and cyber security risks, some civil society organisations have begun professionalising their IT systems and digital security practices. Instead of relying on ad hoc technical support, they now work with experienced IT service providers familiar with the specific security challenges faced by CSOs. A key measure

involves establishing a unified IT system, ensuring that all computers operate on the same platform. This approach enhances security by enabling consistent software updates, coordinated data protection and streamlined monitoring of vulnerabilities. Organisations have also introduced clear data management and anti-phishing policies, requiring staff to use only secure, organisation-provided cloud solutions and to enable mandatory two-step verification for all accounts and shared drives. (Interview 3)

#### 4.2.2 Respondents' engagement with the EU rule of law toolbox and their main difficulties

Many respondents contribute to the European Commission's annual Rule of Law Report, while others submit complaints alleging EU law breaches that may become the subject of infringement procedures. Still, a notable group (8 respondents) reported not using the EU's rule of law toolbox at all but instead only following developments.

The main obstacles to engagement are the significant resources required to prepare contributions and the uncertainty about the real impact of CSO inputs. A further constraint is the paradox whereby the more pressure an organisation faces, the more it should engage with rule of law reporting and advocacy, yet the pressure itself drains the capacity needed to do so. This reflects a tension between civil society's willingness to engage and the structural barriers that limit its effective participation in engaging with the rule of law toolbox.

*Addressing the lack of information for engaging with the EU rule of law toolbox*

##### **Peer Learning on Engaging with the EU Rule of Law Toolbox**

Ongoing awareness-raising helps CSOs better understand the EU Rule of Law Report process and identify ways to engage with it effectively. This often takes the form of internal training or capacity-building sessions organised by experienced organisations for other civil society actors, explaining how the process works, how contributions can be submitted and how findings can be used in advocacy.

A good example is the "Strengthening Civil Society's Contribution to the Rule of Law Report" project implemented by the [Aditus Foundation](#) in Malta, which equipped organisations with practical knowledge and tools to participate meaningfully in the Rule of Law Report consultation process. The project included:

providing organisations with information on the key components and indicators used in the European Commission's Rule of Law Report;

- equipping participants with the skills and knowledge to conduct rule of law assessments within their specific areas of expertise;
- guiding organisations in collecting relevant data and evidence to support their submissions to the European Commission; and
- facilitating collaboration among organisations to develop consolidated, evidence-based and impactful joint submissions.

*Addressing the limited resources available for CSO contributions to the Rule of Law Report*

### **Joint contributions**

To overcome the barrier of limited resources, CSOs in these countries have developed an innovative model of collaboration around the EU Rule of Law Report. Instead of each organisation preparing separate submissions, they pool their expertise, divide the topics according to their specific fields of work and coordinate efforts to produce a joint contribution.

This practice not only reduces the workload for individual CSOs but also results in stronger, more comprehensive inputs to the Commission, amplifying civil society's voice while making the most of scarce resources.

In [Hungary](#), for the sixth year in a row, human rights and anti-corruption CSOs have contributed jointly to the European Commission's annual Rule of Law Report within the framework of stakeholder consultation. Typically, seven to nine organisations collaborate on a single coordinated submission, combining their expertise across areas such as judicial independence, corruption, media freedom and civic space. A similar collaborative model has also been established in [Croatia](#), where, since 2024, CSOs have been preparing joint submissions to the Commission's consultation process.

*CSO follow-up on the findings of the EU Annual Rule of Law Report*

### **Organising national follow-up and dialogue on the EU Rule of Law Report findings**

After the European Commission publishes its Annual Rule of Law Report, civil society can play a key role in keeping the findings visible and encouraging national dialogue. These initiatives demonstrate how post-publication discussions of the Annual Rule of Law Report can help mainstream its findings, promote institutional dialogue and turn EU-level assessments into national reform debates.

In the Czech Republic, organisations such as Glopolis, the Network for the Protection of Democracy and Lobbio worked with the Office of the Government to discuss the report's conclusions and include CSO perspectives in the country's official response. They co-organised the event "[\*Rule of Law in the Czech Republic: Opportunities for 2025\*](#)" to translate the report's findings into concrete policy discussions.

[\*In Romania, the Rule of Law Forum\*](#) (8–9 October 2025, Bucharest) provided a national platform to debate the Annual Rule of Law Report findings and their implementation challenges. Organised by the University of Bucharest Faculty of Law, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation and the European Commission Representation in Romania, the event brought together public authorities, academia, the judiciary and CSOs to generate policy recommendations and raise awareness of EU standards. A synthesis report will summarise the Forum's outcomes.

In Croatia, the event "[\*Report on the Rule of Law: Civil Society and Participation in Decision-Making Processes\*](#)" (29 January 2025, Zagreb) was organised by the Human Rights House and the Miko Tripalo Center for Democracy and Law, with participation from the Deputy Ombudswoman Tatjana Vlašić, officials from the European Commission, DG JUST and the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA). The discussion focused on the report's section on checks and balances, particularly the role of civil society in law and policy development.

### **Measuring impact**

Understanding the impact of your work is essential for guiding where civil society invests its limited resources. However, it remains extremely difficult to determine whether and how CSO contributions shape the outcomes of the EU rule of law toolbox or influence concrete follow-up actions by EU institutions. Some organisations therefore rely on pragmatic, informal indicators, such as the number of mentions in parliamentary debates, media coverage, or references to their work in the Annual Rule of Law Report or related EU policy documents. While these are imperfect measures, they help CSOs gauge visibility and engagement levels and enable them to refine their advocacy strategies and identify where their input resonates most effectively. (Interview 2)

#### 4.2.3. Collaborations to enhance impact

A resilient civil society depends on solidarity, cooperation, and the ability to act collectively in defence of shared democratic values. In an increasingly restrictive

environment, it is essential for organisations to build strong alliances within and beyond the civic sector. Such collaborations not only strengthen advocacy capacity and mutual support but also help safeguard the fundamental freedoms of expression, association and assembly that underpin civil society's work.

This commitment to collaboration is reflected in the responses gathered for this study. The majority of respondents reported that they collaborate actively with other actors mostly in the form of networking and coalition building, joint communication activities and joint advocacy campaigns. Most partnerships are with fellow CSOs, umbrella organisations or research institutes, reflecting strong horizontal networks within civil society. In a few cases, respondents also mentioned collaborations that go beyond the usual circles, including with the media, trade unions and even businesses. These less common alliances show that, while cooperation within the CSO sector is the norm, there is also a growing openness to building broader coalitions that can amplify impact and reach new audiences.

*Joining efforts among transnational CSOs for capacity building and developing joint action*

#### **Recharging Advocacy for Rights in Europe (RARE) Programme**

An example of an innovative practice is the Recharging Advocacy for Rights in Europe programme, a capacity- and alliance-building initiative launched in 2020. Through its three cohorts, RARE now brings together 70+ human rights defenders (HRDs) and civic space advocates from across Europe, creating a firm and reliable community of human rights professionals and their national-level CSOs working together to promote and protect civic space, human rights and the rule of law in the EU.

The programme responds to a growing need for national human rights CSOs to broaden their portfolios and become active advocates not only at home but also vis-à-vis the governments and parliaments of other European countries and multilateral organisations. Over the course of a series of camps held in different European cities, participants gain the skills, resources and European networks their organisations need to counter increasingly challenging national operating environments. Among other things, RARE provides advanced training in public speaking, persuasion techniques, strategic management and risk assessment, using a comprehensive approach to advocacy and security.

Moreover, the programme serves as a platform for networking, mutual learning, and collective European cooperation. It enhances the visibility of participating organisations in the international public sphere and at official, media-covered events, while opening

opportunities for joint advocacy campaigns and lobbying. Throughout the duration of the project, HRDs jointly develop a strategic action plan that strengthens their collective capacity to defend democracy and the rule of law.

As a solidarity alliance, RARE is co-organised by partners from academia and civil society: the Hertie School, the Hungarian Helsinki Committee, the Netherlands Helsinki Committee, the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights in Poland and Oxfam Novib.

### **Stronger Roots Project**

The Stronger Roots Project aims to reinforce supporter communities and networks of civil society organisations, making them more embedded, effective, sustainable and resilient. It supports organisations working in diverse fields from environmental protection and education to social inclusion, providing not only financial resources but also participation in a comprehensive capacity-building and mentoring scheme. Within this framework, organisations receive expert guidance, attend training events and take part in peer-learning exchanges on topics such as communication, fundraising and volunteer management.

The program builds on a joint initiative of [Open Society Foundations Prague and Bratislava](#), [NIOK Foundation](#), and [Glopolis](#), responding to growing pressures on democracy, equality, active civic space and other EU fundamental values in today's polarized societies. By providing financial, expert and peer support to approximately 75 individual CSOs and 20 networks in Hungary, Slovakia and Czech Republic, the project seeks to increase the effectiveness, inclusiveness and accountability of pro-democracy civil society actors. Its core concepts of social base building and network collaboration are designed to strengthen CSOs' social capital and community embeddedness from local to national levels, across different thematic and political contexts.

### **The PROSECO Project**

The PROSECO – Empowering Civic Space project, launched in April 2024 under the EU's CERV programme, strengthens civil society in Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia and Croatia. It is implemented by Little Berlin, the Network for the Protection of Democracy, Crosol and the Peace Institute.

The project connects over 1,000 CSOs and 50 umbrella networks to improve the resilience and coordination of the civic sector. Its key activities include:

- Civic space monitoring: joint data collection and analysis in each country, using shared indicators to produce comparable reports;
- Methodology development: creation of a common framework for assessing civic space conditions, ensuring evidence-based advocacy;
- Network coordination: regular strategic meetings of national CSO networks to align priorities and share tools;
- Policy dialogue: structured roundtables with national and EU policymakers on civic space and rule of law support.

By combining regional data, comparable indicators and coordinated advocacy, PROSECO provides a replicable model for strengthening civic infrastructure across borders

#### *Coalition building and creating informal networks within Member States*

##### **Civilizáció**

In 2017 more than thirty Hungarian CSOs came together to establish Civilizáció, an informal coalition responding directly to the government's anti-CSO rhetoric and restrictive legislation, such as the 2017 law on foreign-funded CSOs. By 2025 the coalition's membership has grown to over 50 organisations.

Civilizáció's innovation lies in its flexibility and speed: as an informal network, it enables rapid, coordinated responses to attacks on civic space. Its activities, from joint protest actions and press conferences to public advocacy and research on CSO perceptions, combine grassroots mobilization with early warning functions, making visible attempts to delegitimize civil society while building resilience among its members. It operates based on internal guidelines that define how the coalition and its members make collective decisions. Two part-time coordinators support this process and ensure smooth coordination without overburdening member organisations.

By fostering solidarity, shared learning and joint campaigns, Civilizáció not only strengthens civil society's ability to resist political pressure but also broadens public awareness of its democratic value. This bottom-up coalition illustrates how, even in hostile environments, CSOs can turn collective vulnerability into collective power.

### **Civic Platform for Democracy**

A similar spirit of solidarity and cooperation in Slovakia led to the establishment of the Civic Platform for Democracy, which was co-founded by VIA IURIS and other Slovak civil society organisations. Bringing together around 60 member organisations at a time when civic space in the region began to shrink, the Platform was established with the shared mission of protecting freedoms inherent to democratic societies. Its members work across diverse areas from conflict prevention and environmental protection to education, youth engagement and the defence of democracy and the rule of law. United by the goal of ensuring that “people aren’t powerless against the powerful and that all are equal before the law,” the Civic Platform for Democracy leverages legal, advocacy and public mobilisation tools to safeguard the independence of the civil sector and to defend democratic values in Slovakia.

### **Network for the Protection of Democracy**

In the Czech Republic, the Network for the Protection of Democracy represents an innovative, cross-sectoral approach to safeguarding democratic principles. Unlike traditional CSO coalitions, the Network brings together companies, non-profit organisations, informal groups and individuals united by a shared commitment to defending the democratic rule of law. By intentionally including actors from diverse backgrounds, the Network avoids professional or ideological silos and builds a broad, society-wide alliance for democracy.

The network is very informal in terms of structure and lacks formal legal status; however, its operations are well organised. Members hold regular, structured meetings, including coordination lunches for in-depth discussions and presentations on key issues, followed by strategic debates. Once a year, the Network holds a two-day evaluation and planning meeting to reflect on progress and set future priorities. In addition, annual satisfaction surveys gather members’ feedback on the Network’s functioning, main achievements and challenges.

Working in close cooperation with legal and academic experts, the Network monitors and evaluates long-term democratic trends and informs members, the media and the wider public about developments affecting the health of Czech democracy. When potential risks are detected, such as possible violations of the Constitution or the Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms, experts assess the situation and, if necessary, issue a “red alert” to mobilise members (the Traffick-Light Early Warning System is discussed in chapter 4.2.1.). The Network then rapidly disseminates verified information, suggests ways to respond and encourages members to spread awareness within their own communities. Beyond crisis response, the Network also fosters dialogue, learning and collaboration.

### **Netherlands Democracy Coalition**

The Netherlands Democracy Coalition unites a diverse range of organisations dedicated to strengthening democracy and democratic culture in the Netherlands by promoting domestic democratic renewal and addressing challenges related to civic space, media freedom, corruption and participatory democracy. Founded around 2020–2021, as democratic backsliding deepened in Hungary and Poland, Dutch CSOs recognised the need to start discussing democracy and rule of law issues before a crisis hit at home. Although there was no immediate rule of law crisis in the Netherlands, there was a shared sense of vulnerability, i.e., an understanding that “today it’s fine, but tomorrow it can go wrong.” The founding members therefore sought to create a national democracy agenda to foster dialogue, cooperation and preparedness in response to worrying European and global trends.

The Coalition currently consists of core group organisations, ranging from small local initiatives promoting citizen participation to national-level human rights, anti-corruption and press freedom organisations. It operates as an informal network. The Coalition has no dedicated staff, but two part-time coordinators from member organisations ensure day-to-day operations.

The Coalition combines local and national perspectives. Its work revolves around regular monthly meetings where members discuss emerging democratic challenges, coordinate joint action and share expertise. Joint advocacy and communication is a core output of the Coalition’s work. Its proactive approach and cross-sectoral composition demonstrate how, even in established democracies, civil society can build early-warning capacity and resilience before democratic erosion escalates into crisis.

### **National Federation of Polish NGOs (OFOP)**

In Poland, OFOP has developed an innovative internal coordination model to enhance civil society’s participation in the monitoring committees of EU funds. Representing over 160 member organisations, OFOP operates as both a structural advocate (focusing on overarching frameworks and the partnership principle) and as a facilitator (connecting its members who sit on 37 monitoring committee seats). This network-based approach allows for real-time exchange among CSO representatives, ensuring consistent positions across committees and enabling members to address horizontal principles such as gender equality, accessibility and environmental protection in a coherent

manner. A particularly effective aspect of this model is OFOP's active engagement in the subcommittee of the Committee of the Partnership Agreement, dedicated to the development of partnership. The subcommittee's secretariat defines the agenda for its work, which allows OFOP and other CSO representatives to propose discussion topics, influence priorities and sustain meaningful dialogue with the Ministry for Funds and Regional Development beyond formal meetings. Through this mechanism, OFOP and its members can jointly shape committee discussions, contribute to policy planning and ensure that the EU's partnership principle remains embedded in implementation practice. This model illustrates how sustained coordination and strategic organisation within a CSO network can transform technical committee work into a meaningful exercise in participatory governance.

### *Realising new allies to build coalitions*

#### **Recognizing trade unions as key allies**

In some contexts, trade unions are powerful partners for CSOs. In Belgium and Ireland natural alliances have formed on issues like the right to protest or social rights, where both sectors are affected. A strong example is Amnesty International Belgium's [\*The Right to Protest is Under Attack campaign\*](#), developed with Catapult and trade union partners, which framed protest as both a human right and a workers' freedom, broadening support and public legitimacy. The campaign emerged in response to a government proposal that would have allowed judges to ban individuals from participating in demonstrations if they had committed violent acts during protests. As a response, an ad hoc coalition of trade unions and civil society groups quickly formed to counter the proposal, which they ultimately succeeded in blocking before it was adopted. Originally formed as an ad hoc response, the coalition has since endured and stands ready to react to new restrictive proposals.

#### **Partnering with the media to strengthen public understanding**

CSOs have also collaborated with journalists on in-depth investigative articles that explore the broader implications of their work. These partnerships help translate complex legal or policy issues into accessible narratives for wider audiences. To support this, many organisations maintain a database of journalists and media contacts for distributing press releases, while approaching selected reporters directly for specific stories or interviews. They also work proactively, inviting journalists to meetings or to public actions they organise to build relationships and foster sustained engagement with key media actors.

### **Partnering with the business sector**

In the Netherlands, innovative partnerships have emerged between civil society and the private sector to promote integrity, transparency, and anti-corruption values. A notable example is the Fraud Film Festival, an annual two-day event that brings together businesses, banks, public institutions and CSOs to discuss fraud, corruption and ethical governance through films, debates and networking. In 2023 [the Netherlands Helsinki Committee](#) participated as an invited CSO, offering a civil society perspective traditionally absent from such corporate spaces. The initiative illustrates how engaging the business community can both broaden audiences and generate tangible improvements in civic space and accountability.

Similarly, in the Czech Republic the Network for the Protection of Democracy has recognised the importance of partnering with socially and environmentally responsible businesses, several of which are themselves members of the network. In some contexts, platforms dedicated to socially, and environmentally responsible enterprises provide useful entry points for CSOs to connect with like-minded business actors. Such collaborations demonstrate how business engagement, when grounded in shared democratic and ethical commitments, can strengthen both civic resilience and corporate accountability.

## **5. Conclusion**

This study demonstrates that civil society organisations are indispensable actors in safeguarding the rule of law across the European Union, especially in environments where institutional checks and balances are strained. CSOs provide monitoring, legal expertise, documentation and public engagement that EU institutions increasingly rely on to understand national developments and assess democratic backsliding. Yet their capacity to perform these functions is uneven and often undermined by structural challenges such as financial precarity, delegitimisation campaigns, legal uncertainty and limited avenues for meaningful engagement with EU mechanisms.

Despite these pressures, CSOs across Member States continue to adapt with resilience and creativity. Three cross-cutting patterns emerged from our research:

First, coalition-based action, whether through joint submissions to the Annual Rule of Law Report, transnational advocacy networks, or informal solidarity platforms, amplifies voice and reduces the resource burden on individual organisations.

Second, linking domestic advocacy with EU-level instruments proves most effective when organisations translate complex legal processes into clear public narratives, making rule of law issues relatable to broader audiences.

Third, investment in internal capacity and organisational resilience, digital security, legal training on EU instruments and long-term strategic planning enables CSOs to sustain engagement even in hostile environments.

However, these adaptive strategies cannot be a substitute for structural support. The EU rule of law toolbox is most effective when embedded within a supportive civic ecosystem. Where civic space is shrinking, consultation channels are ad hoc and funding is short-term or politically conditioned, CSOs struggle to participate meaningfully. Strengthening the rule of law in the EU therefore requires not only relying on civil society expertise, but ensuring that CSOs have the resources, protection and access needed to contribute effectively.

Based on these findings, the way forward involves both strategic action by CSOs and institutional responsibility:

- Strategic calm and proactive planning allow organisations to respond to crises without sacrificing long-term goals.
- Coordination and shared capacity-building improve the quality and impact of engagement with EU mechanisms.
- Building alliances within and beyond traditional civil society networks, including with public officials, media, academia and responsible businesses, broadens democratic resilience.
- Creative communication and public-facing narratives help translate abstract legal concerns into lived meaning and public support.

Supporting civil society is not merely an ancillary element of EU rule of law protection, it is one of its core pillars. Strengthening the enabling environment for CSOs is therefore essential for the credibility, effectiveness and future resilience of the EU's rule of law architecture.

## Annexes

### Annex 1. Survey questions

#### Section 1: General Information

**1. The name of the organisation, your name and your position at the organisation and your email address will be only used for the purpose of potential follow-up regarding the questionnaire.**

- Name of the organisation:
- Seat of the organisation (country):
- Your name and your position at the organisation:
- Your email address:

**2. Type of organisation: (Select all that apply)**

- Human rights organisation
- Legal aid organisation
- Watchdog organisation
- Research institute
- CSO umbrella organisation
- Think tank
- Other (please specify)

**3. Main area(s) of work: (Select all that apply)**

- Human rights
- Rule of law
- Freedom of information
- Civil society empowerment
- Anti-corruption
- Migration
- Gender equality
- LGBTQI rights
- Environment
- Public policy
- Other (please specify)

## Section 2: Challenges Faced by Civil Society Organisations (CSOs)

### **4. What are the main challenges CSOs in your country face? (Select all that apply)**

- Restrictive legal environment (e.g., anti-NGO laws)
- Political pressure and intimidation manifesting in administrative, criminal, etc. procedures
- Political pressure and intimidation manifesting in verbal attacks
- SLAPPs
- Limited access to decision-makers and authorities
- Financial sustainability issues
- Defunding by the government
- Lack of public support or awareness
- Misinformation and disinformation campaigns, smear campaigns initiated by the government or government actors
- Misinformation and disinformation campaigns, smear campaigns initiated by non-government actors
- Limited collaboration opportunities with other CSOs
- Other (please specify)

### **5. Has your organisation been affected by any of these challenges directly? (If yes, select all that apply)**

- Restrictive legal environment (e.g., anti-NGO laws)
- Political pressure and intimidation manifesting in administrative, criminal, etc. procedures
- Political pressure and intimidation manifesting in verbal attacks
- SLAPPs
- Limited access to decision-makers and authorities
- Financial sustainability issues
- Defunding by the government
- Lack of public support or awareness
- Misinformation and disinformation campaigns, smear campaigns initiated by the government or government actors

- Misinformation and disinformation campaigns, smear campaigns initiated by non-government actors
- Limited collaboration opportunities with other CSOs
- Other (please specify)
- No
- Prefer not to say

**6. How has your organisation responded to these challenges? (Select all that apply)**

- Strategic litigation
- Advocacy campaigns
- Coalition-building with other CSOs
- Engaging with international bodies (e.g., EU, UN, CoE)
- Strengthening digital security and resilience
- Awareness raising campaigns
- Other (please specify)

**Section 3: CSOs and the EU Rule of Law Toolbox**

**7. To what extent do you engage with the EU rule of law toolbox? (Select all that apply)**

- We submit contributions to the European Commission's annual Rule of Law Report
- We contribute to infringement procedures (e.g., through complaints to the EU Commission)
- We contribute to preliminary ruling requests to the CJEU
- We advocate for launching and/or engage with the conditionality mechanism (e.g., through advocacy, report writing)
- We advocate for launching and/or engage with the Article 7 procedure (e.g., through advocacy, report writing)
- We do not engage directly but follow developments
- We are not familiar with these mechanisms
- We engage in other ways (please specify)

**8. What challenges have you encountered in engaging with the EU rule of law toolbox?**

**(Select all that apply)**

- Lack of knowledge about opportunities for engagement
- Limited resources to prepare contributions, reports, complaints, etc.
- Unclear impact of CSO contributions
- No direct contact with relevant institutions
- Other (please specify)

**9. Are you a member of any of the monitoring committees monitoring the use of EU funds in your country?**

- Yes
- No

**Section 4: Innovative Practices & Collaboration**

**10. Has your organisation developed innovative practices to address rule of law challenges? (E.g., new advocacy tools, “early warning” mechanisms, new types of collaborations and platforms, online campaigns, community-led initiatives, litigation strategies)**

- Yes (please specify and briefly describe them, provide website if applicable)
- No

**11. Do you believe the innovative practices developed in your country can be transferred to other CSOs in the EU?**

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

**12. If yes, what aspects of your practice could be replicated in other countries?  
(Open question)**

**13. Do you collaborate with other actors (e.g., other CSOs, trade unions, businesses) to enhance your impact?**

- Yes, regularly
- Occasionally
- No

**14. If yes, what type of actors do you collaborate with?**

- Other CSOs
- Trade unions
- Businesses
- Research institutes
- CSO umbrella organisations
- Media (beyond press releases or giving interviews)
- Other

**15. If yes, what type of collaboration do you engage in? (Select all that apply)**

- Joint advocacy campaigns
- Legal actions or strategic litigation
- Sharing resources and expertise
- Joint monitoring and reporting
- Capacity-building and training programs
- Networking and coalition-building
- Joint communication activities/campaigns
- Other (please specify)

**Section 5: Impact and Future Perspectives**

**16. Which of the following best describes the impact your organisation has had in protecting the rule of law? (Select all that apply)**

- Successfully challenged restrictive laws or policies through litigation
- Influenced government decision-making through advocacy
- Increased public awareness and engagement on rule of law issues
- Strengthened partnerships with other organisations to address rule of law challenges
- Secured international attention for or support in challenging rule of law violations
- Other (please specify)

**17. What areas need improvement to enhance the role of CSOs in rule of law protection? (Select all that apply)**

- Better legal protections for CSOs
- More funding opportunities
- Greater visibility and public awareness
- More access to EU institutions
- Enhanced collaboration among CSOs
- Other (please specify)

**18. What lessons have you learned from your work that could help other CSOs facing similar rule of law challenges? (Open question)**

**19. What lessons have you learned from your work that could help other CSOs facing similar challenges regarding the operational environment of CSOs? (Open question)**

### Section 6: Next Steps

**20. Would you be open to a follow-up interview to discuss your responses in more detail?**

- Yes
- No

**21. Would you like to receive a copy of the final report based on this survey?**

- Yes
- No

## Annex 2. Interview guide

The following interview guide provided a general structure for the semi-structured interviews. It was subsequently adapted for each interviewee, taking into account their survey inputs and organisational background.

*Introducing the project, the aim of the “Innovative practices of civil society” material and myself.*

*Please briefly introduce yourself and the organisation you are representing and your role in it.*

### Challenges Faced by CSOs & Responses

**1. You indicated in your response to the survey that the main challenges you face as a CSO in your country are XXX.**

*[For each of the challenges the respondent identified in the survey:]*

- How does this manifest in your country specifically, what form does it take?
- How does your organisation respond to or cope with these?
- Has your organisation developed any innovative responses to address this problem?
- How effective are the strategies you have employed in your view?
- Are you cooperating (formally or informally) with allies in public administration and/or do you participate in advisory bodies? If not: why not? If yes, how does this work in practice and what are the main drawbacks/risks and the main benefits??

### Engagement with the EU Rule of Law Toolbox

**2. You indicated in your response to the survey that the main challenges you face when engaging with the EU Rule of Law Toolbox are XXX.**

- How have you responded to these challenges?
- How does your organisation manage its resources when contributing to these tools?
- How do you try to measure or evaluate your impact in this field?
- *[For organisations participating in a domestic monitoring committee monitoring the use of EU funds:]* In the survey you responded that you participate in a domestic monitoring committee monitoring the use of EU funds. What kind of influence have you been able to exercise through these committees? Could you share concrete steps or actions where your organisation had an impact?

- *[For organisations not participating in a domestic monitoring committee monitoring the use of EU funds:]* In the survey you responded that you do not participate in a domestic monitoring committee monitoring the use of EU funds. What are the reasons behind this, and what potential benefits and/or drawbacks do you see?

### Innovative Practices

**3. In the survey you indicated that your organisation has developed innovative practices to address rule of law challenges.**

- Could you describe this practice in more detail?
- What motivated you to develop it?
- How did the process start and evolve?
- At this stage, what are you most proud of?
- What remains to be done? If you could start again, what would you do differently?

**4. You also mentioned that your practice could be transferred to other countries.**

- Could you elaborate on this?
- Which aspects of your practices are transferable?
- What recommendations would you give to organisations that want to adopt it?
- What resources or capacities would they need?

**5. Is there an innovative practice in your country, developed by another organisation, that you think would be useful for us to include in the material and follow-up on with the respective organisation for that purpose?**

### Coalition Building & Collaboration

**6. You reported working with xxx**

- What methods have worked best in your collaborations? (Are they formal or informal, ad-hoc or long-term?)
- *[For those who mentioned working with the media:]* You reported that you collaborate with the media beyond giving interviews. How do these collaborations work in practice, what inputs do you provide, and why is it worth the effort? What kind of CSOs would benefit most from engaging with the media?
- Would collaboration with lawyers/attorneys (in private practice) be useful in your case? Why or why not?

- Would collaboration with trade unions be useful in your case? Why or why not?
- Would collaboration with the business sector be useful in your case? Why or why not?

### Impact of Your Organisation

7. When asked about your impact in protecting the rule of law, you highlighted XXX

- *You responded that your organisation successfully challenged restrictive laws or policies through litigation.* Could you walk us through the process and the key factors behind your success?
- *You responded that your organisation influenced legislative change in parliament.* What strategies were most effective, and what conditions enabled this success?
- *You responded that your organisation influenced government decisions through advocacy.* How did you achieve this, and what lessons can others draw from your experience?
- *You responded that your organisation was successful in public awareness-raising.* What were the key factors behind your success, what approach would you recommend in this regard to other CSOs?
- *You responded that your organisation strengthened partnership with other organisations to address rule of law challenges.* What forms of collaboration proved most impactful, and how did you ensure effective coordination and trust among partners?
- *You responded that your organisation secured international attention or support in challenging rule of law violations.* Which channels or actors were most helpful in mobilizing international backing, and what advice would you give to other CSOs seeking to attract such attention?

### Looking Ahead

8. **Thinking about the future:**

- How could the EU or other international actors better support your work?
- What would help CSOs like yours engage more effectively with the EU rule of law toolbox?
- Do you see a role for transnational cooperation among CSOs in strengthening rule of law protection, and if yes, what?

**Closing:** Is there anything else you would like to share regarding the topics we touched upon?