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Democracy dies in handcuffs

Governments across Europe are cracking down on NGOs. One institution, in particular, has the means to stop them

As Europe grapples with political upheaval and geopolitical crises, a subtle yet far-reaching development is unfolding: the stigmatisation and suppression of civil society organisations.

This trend is currently on full display in Georgia. By tightening its laws on NGOs, the government plans to exercise maximum control over NGO funding — a move that could effectively end the influence of independent organisations. Meanwhile, pro-government groups would benefit from state funding for the first time. In doing so, Georgia is following a pattern that has long since spread beyond the region: state control not only replaces international funding but becomes a strategic instrument of political power.

The axis of authoritarianism

Hungary, Turkey and Azerbaijan are prime examples of how state actors systematically seek to silence critical voices within civil society. Their tactics range from repressive legislation and media smear campaigns to direct threats and acts of violence.

These developments point to a calculated effort to curtail civic space — often under the pretext of national security, ostensibly to counter foreign interference. In reality, however, this is nothing but a strategic pretence. The real goal is to stifle dissent and consolidate power. The growing readiness to restrict the right of association marks a dangerous drift towards increasingly autocratic governance.

As early as January 2021, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe – an exceptional parliamentary body within an international organisation – warned of the devastating impact that restrictive measures were having on civil society in countries like Azerbaijan, Russia and Turkey. This warning was echoed by the Venice Commission, the Council of Europe's group of constitutional experts.

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But these developments not only affect countries outside of the EU; in recent years, they have also become increasingly evident within the EU itself. In March 2023, then-Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights Dunja Mijatović expressed deep concern over severe restrictions on freedom of speech and assembly during protests against the pension reform in France. Around the same time, the Italian government pushed through controversial constitutional amendments that the Social Democratic opposition has described as a 'war on NGOs'. Recognising these developments as part of a broader trend, Human Rights Commissioner Michael O'Flaherty in early 2025 stressed the pressing need to safeguard civil society across all Council of Europe member states.

This warning has proven timely, as similar trends have started to take shape in Germany. In late February 2025, Friedrich Merz's conservative parliamentary group submitted an extensive inquiry to the federal government. At the heart of this inquiry is the funding of NGOs involved in protests against the far right. The 551 questions aim to expose these organisations' financial sources and scrutinise their ties to political parties. At the same time, the inquiry emphasises that state-funded organisations must maintain political neutrality and refrain from interfering in election campaigns — otherwise, they risk losing their non-profit status. But when does such scrutiny shift from legitimate oversight to political intimidation? At least some constitutional experts view this inquiry as an abuse of the opposition's parliamentary right to pose questions, while the organisations targeted see it as a thinly veiled attempt to silence dissent.

The resilience of democracy

All the more striking is the resilience – and creativity – with which many NGOs rise to meet these challenges. They not only build strong networks but also engage in meaningful dialogue with international institutions. At the same time, they skilfully employ legal mechanisms and strategic public criticism to advance their cause. Nowhere is this more evident than in Ukraine, which serves as clear proof that a strong civil society is democracy's strongest safeguard — standing at the very heart of Ukraine's resistance against Russian aggression and its fight for democracy. This goes beyond neighbourly help and civic courage. By

mobilising volunteers, providing humanitarian aid and rebuilding destroyed infrastructure, Ukrainian civic organisations have made a significant contribution to the resilience of cities like Kharkiv and Sumy.

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What we see in Ukraine reveals a broader European reality: democracy draws its strength not only from institutions — but from civic engagement. Across Europe, NGOs are shaping this engagement by amplifying diverse voices, enabling meaningful participation and translating democratic ideals into everyday life. At the international level, they are also directly involved in shaping and implementing the Council of Europe's legal framework, leveraging their institutional ties within the organisation. Collectively, they provide a comprehensive perspective on civil society's priorities and concerns. Bridging the gap between theory and practice, they advocate for participatory democracy and connect civil society across Europe. In doing so, they shape public discourse and influence political actors throughout the continent.

Yet, civil society alone cannot withstand the systemic pressures now threatening Europe's democratic fabric. As authoritarian regimes and populist governments are on the rise, shaking the very foundations of democracy and human rights, the Council of Europe must assert itself as more than just a symbolic stronghold. Tasked with defending human rights, the rule of law and democratic space, it now faces a dual challenge: to shield civic actors — and to command the political weight that makes such protection effective. The question is no longer if — but how it can succeed.

A rare jewel of the rule of law

One key instrument in addressing the crackdown on NGOs is the European Court of Human Rights. It is the Council of Europe's sharp sword in Strasbourg and unmatched anywhere in the world. Yet, all too often, the Court's rulings fail to have their intended impact.

The European Convention on Human Rights has been ratified by all member states, making it legally binding on their governments. The Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers should therefore

enforce the Convention more rigorously: states that disregard rulings must be held accountable — using all available means, including political and institutional levers. Monitoring mechanisms should also be reinforced. The Parliamentary Assembly has demonstrated on numerous occasions that targeted monitoring can exert political pressure and drive meaningful change. The Venice Commission plays a pivotal role in this process. Its analyses are essential for detecting democratic backsliding at an early stage. But they should not remain abstract. Concrete action must follow — especially when laws, such as Georgia's, actively suppress civil society.

The future of democracy in Europe will be decided not only at the ballot box but also by the resilience of its institutions.

Tackling these highly complex tasks and coordinating the various institutions of the Council of Europe demands proper funding. Yet, there is a glaring lack of funding at present. This becomes strikingly evident when examining the Council of Europe's budget, which currently amounts to less than half a per cent of the EU's total budget.

Despite these financial issues and other challenges, the future could hold new horizons: former Swiss President and Social Democrat Alain Berset assumed office as the new Secretary General of the Council of Europe in September 2024. How Berset meets these immense challenges – and the institutional vision he brings – could reshape not only the Council's future, but Europe's overall political trajectory. Ultimately, the Council of Europe's ability to exert influence depends on whether – and how – it can translate its normative authority into concrete political action and hold member states accountable to their commitments. The future of democracy in Europe will be decided not only at the ballot box but also by the resilience of its institutions.



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