



SUPPORTING
AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT
FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

Enabling Environment Snapshot

Costa Rica

March 2025



This document has been produced by the Integra Costa Rica

Context

Costa Rica is recognised as a full democracy, with a [score](#) of 8,29 out of 10 on the 2024 Democracy Index. It is [considered](#) as a democratic and participatory republic, multiethnic and multicultural, with a system of government based on the separation of powers, periodic elections, and a strong social and environmental rule of law. Its legal and institutional system [recognizes](#) international human rights instruments, even if they have not been ratified by the Legislative Assembly. This is because the Constitution incorporates the principle that international human rights treaties are directly applicable in domestic law, without the need for a specific law to ratify them.

However, over the past years, Costa Rica has undergone difficult political turmoil, including a [crisis](#) in political representation, which has fostered the election of non-traditional parties and breaking the bipartisan system.

The current government, which came into power in May 2022, has been characterised as having [authoritarian](#) undertones. The administration remains in [constant conflict](#) with [some of the media](#), [Congress](#), the [Judiciary](#), and oversight bodies such as the [Public Prosecutor's Office](#) and the [Comptroller General of the Republic](#). Relations with civil society have also deteriorated, [with journalists](#), non-governmental organisations ([NGOs](#)), and [LGBTQ+](#) advocates facing stigmatisation and reduced institutional support.

This situation has deepened the country's polarisation, particularly regarding discourse on respect for public oversight institutions and the system of checks and balances, which is fundamental in a democratic system. The government's goal is to promote far-reaching structural changes with the aim of recentralising power in the Executive Branch, such as [creating a Third Republic](#) through a Constituent Assembly or, at the very least, substantially modifying the current system of checks and balances. Despite this, public institutions, especially the Constitutional Chamber (ruling [2022-025167](#) and others) and the [Comptroller General](#), have acted to uphold democratic limits, resisting government attempts to weaken oversight mechanisms.

1. Respect and protection of fundamental freedoms

The rights to freedom of association, assembly, petition, expression, and free access to public interest information are constitutionally protected by Articles [25](#)- [30](#) of the Political Constitution of the Republic of Costa Rica.

Although traditionally a regional benchmark for freedom of expression and the press, Costa Rica has experienced a [marked decline](#) in this area during the administration of President Rodrigo Chaves (2022-2026). According to the [World Press Freedom Index](#), the country dropped from 8th place in 2022 to 36th in 2025. Among the factors explaining this decline is the decision by the Costa Rican Electricity Institute (ICE), a state-owned entity, to [remove the commercial break from a television programme](#) critical of the government in 2024, an act classified as censorship by the Institute for Press and Freedom of Expression (IPLEX). This is compounded by [the closure of a company](#) that financed a media outlet, previously ordered by the government. During this period, the president has also maintained a confrontational attitude toward certain critical media outlets and journalists, whom he has repeatedly verbally attacked.

Freedom of assembly is also under threat. In 2020, the so-called “[Anti-Strike Law](#)” was passed, declaring political strikes illegal and allowing only single strikes of up to 48 hours if they affect the economic or social interests of workers. It also prohibits strikes in essential sectors such as health, security, and transportation, thereby restricting and criminalising the right to protest. This law has been used to curtail peaceful protests, with a latest example being on 5th February 2025, when activists and students reported [police persecution](#) after a peaceful march to the Presidential House protesting budget issues, education, security, health, and the environment.

The CIVICUS Monitor categorises Costa Rica’s civic space as “Narrowed”, and there have been [reports](#) on various threats against Indigenous activists and protesters. In February 2024, a landowner [threatened](#) a member of the Bribri community with death, while in [China Kichá](#), eleven arson attacks were reported, allegedly carried out by opponents of Indigenous land recovery efforts. Additionally, in March 2024, nine people were [arbitrarily detained](#) during a protest over the lack of potable water, prompting condemnation from civil society organisations.

On a positive note, in January 2023, the Constitutional Chamber ruled against the Municipality of San Ramón for [blocking the Facebook account](#) of a citizen who criticised the mayor's administration. The court established that the plaintiff was exercising their freedom of expression and that the block was unjustified.

2. Supportive legal framework for the work of civil society actors

In Costa Rica, the legal framework recognises two legal entities for civil society organisations (CSOs): [associations](#), which can be established for any lawful purpose that does not have a predominantly economic nature, and [foundations](#), which are defined as private entities of public utility and non-profit in nature. To operate legally, these organisations must [register](#) their statutes, directors, and legal representatives with the Registry of Legal Entities, a department of the National Registry under the Ministry of Justice and Peace. The [administrative oversight](#) of associations falls under this Registry, while foundations are supervised by the Office of the Comptroller General of the Republic when they receive public funds.

Regarding their autonomy, civil society organisations enjoy a relatively favourable environment, with the freedom to organise, receive funding, and operate without excessive government restrictions. However, in 2024, the country implemented stricter regulations through the Central Bank of Costa Rica’s [Transparency and Ultimate Beneficiaries Registry](#) (RTBF), raising concerns about the impact of these requirements upon the cost of this new regulation for the CSOs because this imposes new obligations that increase administrative burden and compliance costs. The requirement to disclose donors, beneficiaries, and financial statements may affect privacy and freedom of association, especially for small or community-based organisations with limited resources. In addition, penalties for non-compliance and the lack of institutional support could hinder their operations and discourage organised civic participation.

Despite these changes, Costa Rica continues to provide significant protection against state interference in civil society operations. There are no recent cases of arbitrary governmental

attempts to dissolve organisations, and no pending legislative proposals that pose a threat to the existing legal framework.

3. Accessible and sustainable resources

One of the main challenges faced by CSOs is the difficulty in obtaining funding for their projects, as Costa Rica is a democratic, middle-income country. This limits their possibilities for non-reimbursable cooperation because it is not a priority for international donors. Although their work is of vital importance, many CSOs are forced to struggle continuously to obtain the necessary resources to carry out their missions.

Access to funding for CSOs varies depending on their nature and objectives. CSOs can receive resources through private donations—tax-deductible if they have been [declared of public utility](#) by the Ministry of Justice and Peace. This applies to international cooperation from embassies, multilateral organisations, foreign foundations, public funds, as well as fundraising activities or contributions from their own members – as long as their purpose is social welfare.

However, accessing government funding can be challenging due to administrative [requirements](#) such as obtaining a declaration of eligibility to manage public funds from each public entity you intend to collaborate with. This process lacks a single, standardised procedure, as each institution defines its own requirements, forcing organisations to adapt their documentation to multiple formats and demands, increasing the administrative burden. Requirements often include audited financial statements, tax and employment certifications, current legal documentation, and proven experience, which can be especially difficult for small or community-based CSOs with limited resources. Furthermore, many institutions do not establish defined deadlines for issuing a response, which can delay the process of obtaining funds by several months.

In cases where the funds come from the Social Development and Family Allowance Fund (FODESAF), a [social welfare declaration](#) issued by IMAS is also required. Added to this is the competition for increasingly scarce funds and the obligation to submit to the oversight of the Comptroller General of the Republic, which makes the management of these resources even more rigorous.

Despite these challenges, some CSOs have successfully established strategic alliances with the private sector, the State, and local governments to strengthen their operational capacity and ensure the execution of social and environmental impact projects, albeit with very limited sustainability.

4. State openness and responsiveness

Administrative transparency is recognised in jurisprudence as an implicit constitutional principle derived from Article 30 of the [Political Constitution](#). Since 2015, Costa Rica has had the [Public Sector Transparency Index](#), created by The Office of the Defender of the Inhabitants, as an evaluation tool.

However, it was not until the end of 2024 that the Framework [Law on Access to Public Information](#) came into force. This law guarantees every person's right to access public information proactively, promptly, completely, and in an accessible manner. It strengthens

administrative transparency in public functions, reinforces accountability from authorities, and ensures the proper publicity of governmental actions. The law applies to both public entities and private organisations that manage information of public interest.

According to [V-Dem](#), Costa Rica is among the top 10 countries in the 2025 Liberal Democracy Index (LDI). However, on the Participatory Components Index (PCI), the country obtained a score of 0.64, which demonstrates a substantial and statistically significant downward trend over the past ten years. This situation has brought Costa Rica to 24th place worldwide on this index. This decline is particularly worrying for civil society, as the PCI assesses active citizen participation in political processes, including the existence and functioning of civil society organisations (CSOs), direct democracy mechanisms, and participation in local and regional governments.

Regarding citizen participation, although Article 9 of the Constitution establishes that Costa Rica is a participatory democracy, there is no general law that promotes participation beyond voting mechanisms. While the Constitution and other laws provide instruments for participation, such as referendums and public assemblies, these mechanisms have serious design flaws that hinder their effective implementation. Additionally, setbacks have been recorded in the constitutional guarantee of public participation, either due to rulings by the Constitutional Court or the refusal of political authorities to ratify the [Escazú Agreement](#), which, among other things, protects human rights defenders in environmental matters.

At the municipal level, although there are valuable experiences such as the formulation of Municipal Local Human Development Plans, citizen audits, and participatory budgets, the application of these mechanisms is limited. In many cases, Municipal Councils have not issued the necessary regulations to facilitate [public consultations](#), despite their legal mandate. Furthermore, when practices such as participatory budgeting are implemented, participation is often restricted to digital media or consultations without real guarantees of influencing decision-making.

At the national level, some public policies—such as minimum wage regulation and salary adjustments—are defined through consultation with organised sectors of workers and employers. Similarly, when new laws are enacted or existing ones are reformed, legislative committees routinely hear from organised representatives of the affected sectors. However, these good practices have not been consolidated as a systematic standard of participatory governance.

Costa Rica has a [considerable number](#) of civic associations, unions, solidarist associations, cooperatives and community development associations in the country. This suggests a fairly high level of voluntary and autonomous organisation in Costa Rican society. But the degree to which individuals engage themselves with those organisations does not appear to be great. This suggests that, despite a legal framework and positive experiences, a more determined effort on the part of the State to foster active and meaningful civil society participation is still needed. Most social mobilisations are staged by organised workers, of which public sector unions are decidedly the dominant group. They are followed in importance by neighbourhood and family associations and other civic groups.

Accountability is usually [limited](#) to annual reports presented by some public authorities, but not all obligated entities comply with this duty. Furthermore, these reports are often delivered in [written form](#), with little public dissemination and few opportunities for citizen participation, which authorities tend to avoid.

Regarding social dialogue, the current government decided not to promote [the decree](#) that had created the Economic and Social Advisory Council, in which civil society had representation, thereby disregarding a valuable tool that emerged from social dialogue tables in 2020.

5. Political Culture and Public Discourses on Civil Society

Costa Rica traditionally upholds sovereignty and freedom for Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), but tensions between the government and certain groups - LGBTQ+ activists, women's collectives, and unions - have intensified.

In January 2025 the government [eliminated](#) the position of the LGBTQ+ commissioner and repealed the decree aimed at eradicating discrimination against this group within public institutions. This same month it was also announced that the Ministry of Public Education (MEP) would eliminate the protocol for addressing [bullying against the LGBTQ+ population](#) and annul the declaration of the MEP as a discrimination-free space. These actions contribute to a growing discourse against the LGBTQ+ community, which may also encourage negative narratives and hostility towards LGBTQ+ groups and organisations in the country.

The president has frequently [attacked](#) some union leaders in his press conferences. Historically, unions have coordinated and led important social and political struggles beyond the labour sphere. There has been use of offensive terms against journalists such as “political hitmen”, “damned” and “scumbag press” by the president and senior officials, which the Constitutional Court confirmed as [disrespectful and offensive](#).

Regarding political equality and inclusion, significant progress has been made, such as legal reforms to [guarantee both vertical](#) and [horizontal gender parity](#) in elected positions. However, there are also significant challenges. Some groups consider the [President's discourse to be misogynistic and violent](#) due to his inaction in addressing the rise in [gender-based violence and femicides in](#) the first quarter of 2025, which has been considered [the most violent start to a year against women in the last decade](#). Additionally, the [elimination](#) of comprehensive affectivity and sexuality education programmes in the educational system in January 2025, could worsen the situation by depriving younger generations of tools to prevent violent relationships, unwanted pregnancies, and sexually transmitted infections. This issue is further compounded by the introduction, on 27th February 2025, of bill [number 24.864](#), which proposes increased [penalties for abortion](#). These conditions have created an uncomfortable environment for civil society actors working on gender and reproductive rights in the country, with the risk of encouraging negative narratives and hostility towards them.

6. Access to a secure digital environment

Access to telecommunications and the internet in Costa Rica is a [fundamental right](#) which was added to article 24 of the [Constitution](#) in 2023. It is worth noting that Costa Rica ranks fifth in the region in terms of the highest percentage of internet users, according to [the International Telecommunication Union](#), with more than 82% of its population having access to the Internet.

Additionally, Costa Rica has a [Law on the Protection of Individuals Regarding the Processing of Their Data](#), which guarantees the right to informational self-determination concerning the automated processing of personal data.

No reports have been identified from civil society actors indicating that they are being spied on in the digital environment or that they have suffered attacks on the Internet—whether on their websites, social media, or applications—by public authorities, whether police or administrative entities.

Challenges and Opportunities

Challenges

Domestically, there is an unfavourable political climate for the approval of the Escazú Agreement, which would protect human rights defenders in environmental matters, due to [opposition from business sectors](#). This is limiting space for promotion of the approval, and there is need for more coordinated calls by civil society actors for reopening public debate on this matter.

The next national elections are scheduled for February 2026, and there is a danger of the current government attempting to further consolidate its power with a significant parliamentary majority, which might come with major risk of abuse and concentration of power that would shrink civic space in the country.

Opportunities

Given this polarised political and electoral scenario, civic initiatives are being developed to train congressional candidates as well as young people, such as the [+Costa Rica](#) leadership incubator, so that this population can play a more active role in the electoral process. This represents a positive opportunity to strengthen alliances within civil society.

The recent approval of the Framework Law on Access to Public Information, after decades of waiting, presents an opportunity for civil society to strengthen its role in oversight of public management, demand greater transparency in government decision-making, and promote a culture of accountability. With resources, there is space for civil society actors to work on initiatives to support and monitor implementation of the law.

This publication was funded/co-funded by the European Union. Its contents are the sole responsibility of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union.



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