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# New Approaches to Defending Global Civil Society

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# Introduction

— Richard Youngs and Elene Panchulidze

Global civil society faces increasingly severe and existential threats. The tribulations of civil society organisations (CSOs) have been multiplying over the last decade and are currently intensifying at an alarming speed and scale. A huge number of governments around the world have come to attack, assault, or more subtly impede CSOs in their autonomous operations. Regimes' tactics now go well beyond a few ad hoc funding restrictions and in many cases menace the whole notion of an independent civic sphere between individual citizens and the state. It is not just the most autocratic regimes that pursue such onslaughts but a far wider circle of governments, in what is becoming a new normal of overweening state-executive power. On top of all this, many western governments are cutting funding to civil society actors around the world; in addition to the headline-grabbing 2025 cuts in United States (US) funding, most European donors are also reducing their political aid.

Against this backdrop, new thinking is needed on how global civil society can be protected. In an era of major-power rivalry, competitive geopolitics, and security primacy, civil society is in danger of getting squeezed – in some countries, almost entirely out of existence. CSOs have been endeavouring to defend themselves for a decade and have tried many different tactics, and they have received some support from donors in doing so. Yet, the challenges now appear to have reached an altogether more startling level of danger. This report offers what we hope are original ideas for this emerging phase, in which radically different approaches will be needed to ensure that independent civil society is not hounded off the stage of global politics.

Effective responses in the future will depend on a range of factors and issues that are on policy agendas already but only to a limited extent; here we tease out where some of the most pressing and emerging themes might take this field in the future. Each has potential but severe challenges, too. Global civil society is not dead, as some argue now, and can be defended, but the scale of adaptation will require much more ambitious strategies than those considered so far. In this report, we look at:

- how to develop a broader concept of “civic diplomacy” in support of global civil society;
- how to build better civil society narratives;
- how to support civic activists in ways that do not depend on donor funding;
- how to develop more effective relocated activism;
- how to craft better support for independent media as a pillar of defending civil society;
- how to turn transparency from a problem into an advantage and;
- the importance of framing support for civil society as a political agenda that involves an increasingly fierce battle for core democratic values.

## Civil society challenges

Civic space globally suffers from widespread and accelerating weakening. According to the CIVICUS Monitor's People Power Under Attack 2025 report, over 80 countries globally now fall under the closed or repressed category, while only 7 per cent of the global population lives in countries with open civic spaces.<sup>1</sup> While citizens are increasingly mobilising against autocratisation to claim back civic rights, in 2025 improvements in civic space were registered in only a small minority of countries (3), while conditions worsened in 15, with the aggregate result being lower guarantees for civil liberties and, in some cases, shifts to repressive contexts.<sup>2</sup>

The tools of repression have expanded on the part of governments globally, both authoritarian and those with democratic features, trying to silence political opposition and dissent. Governments have more frequently passed legislation that obstructs civil society functioning and introduced or proposed laws that suppress and threaten the operational environment for pro-democracy actors. Only in 2025, governments in Azerbaijan, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Nepal, Thailand, Vietnam, Zambia and Ecuador tightened compliance requirements or imposed new types of restrictions on civil society, justifying these measures as either improving transparency or protecting national sovereignty. Some governments, such as those in Belarus, Pakistan and Sierra Leone, revised and amended their laws to expand provisions targeting civic activists and organisations.<sup>3</sup>

Governments have also become more brutal towards human rights defenders and civic activists. According to Front Line Defenders' Global Analysis 2024-2025, 324 human rights defenders were killed across 32 countries in 2024. In addition to fatal attacks, the criminalisation of civic activities has become another powerful tool in the hands of authoritarian leaders against CSOs.<sup>4</sup> Governments willing to silence dissent increasingly use defamation charges, national security prosecutions and anti-terrorism charges against defenders. A resolution adopted by the United Nations Human Rights Council in 2023 expresses grave concerns about growing attacks and unlawful harassment against individuals and organisations defending human rights.<sup>5</sup>

At the same time, citizens across the world mobilise powerfully against autocratisation to defend their rights. According to the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, in 2025 over 140 protests took place globally.<sup>6</sup> The detention of protesters was the most widespread violation against civil society in 2025, documented in over 82 countries.<sup>7</sup> 2025 started with 47 ongoing internet disruptions, while 81 new restrictions were enacted during the year. Many of these disruptions were linked or triggered by protests.<sup>8</sup>

These coordinated and accelerated attacks on civic space are further worsened by the US funding cuts for democracy and the declining financial support of European governments for development and cooperation. These cuts are profoundly affecting civil society organisations and activists across the world. Civil society organisations are suffering increased financial pressure, operational disruption and heightened strategic vulnerability. More than two-thirds of organisations surveyed by the European Union System for an Enabling Environment for Civil Society (EU SEE) reported being directly affected by financial cuts.<sup>9</sup>

Although these challenges contribute to an increasingly gloomy picture and some experts allude to the wholesale “end of the NGO era,”<sup>10</sup> this report suggests ways in which civic resilience can be made more effective. It highlights positive examples and strategies adopted by civic actors globally to protect democratic space and continue holding authoritarian leaders accountable.

## **New ideas to safeguard civil society**

Our ideas range across seven different themes.

Javier Sajuria stresses that protecting global civil society is increasingly an international issue inseparable from the corrosion of rules-based order. It is no longer sufficient to focus only on survival funding to a few individual CSOs in select countries. Rather, strategies to defend democratic civil society must tackle the international networks of anti-democratic actors that have gained strength and the way in which authoritarian values menace so many international organisations. This needs to be approached as a core foreign and security policy: a new kind of civic diplomacy.

Poonam Joshi examines why illiberal actors have been so effective in developing their regressive narratives in recent years and what liberal civil society actors can learn from this. She suggests the latter need narratives that are rooted in authentic local values, tailored to these audiences, and willing to experiment with different kinds of citizen mobilisation. Many projects now work on new pro-democracy narratives, but these still need to move beyond narrow communications exercises to develop much better justified strategies of civic power.

Ann Tsurtsumia-Zurabashvili explores how CSOs might develop alternatives to traditional external project funding as the main way of maintaining their operations. The ongoing cuts in international funding for democracy and human rights make the need for this shift ever more pressing. Civil society needs to upgrade dramatically its strategies for crowdfunding, social enterprise, volunteer mobilisation, and local philanthropic funding sources. In parallel, international actors need to develop forms of civil support beyond the mere provision of funding; in the future, an effective defence of civic society will require practices quite different from the funding grants that have dominated this space in the last two or three decades.

With increasing numbers of civil society activists being forced to relocate outside their countries, Nicolas Bouchet argues that support for this kind of de-territorialised activism needs to be expanded and approached as a core aspect of civil society operations. Part of this is about better planning and early warning to get activists out of their country ahead of dangers and to help them in this through humanitarian visas and the like. A dedicated funding mechanism would help address the specific challenges of relocated activism, including how civil society leaders can maintain effective links with activists who have stayed in-country and stave off regime attacks against democratic figures in the countries to which they have relocated.

Rostislav Valvoda argues that traditional democracy assistance models centred on nongovernmental organisations are no longer sufficient in an environment saturated with

disinformation, digital repression and transnational authoritarian coordination. Instead, he contends that independent media must be treated as critical democratic infrastructure, alongside civil society and political opposition, as they sustain civic space, counter authoritarian narratives and preserve public trust.

Wajdi Balloumi charts how governments have weaponised transparency requirements for CSOs as a means of complicating their actions. He explores how civic actors might respond in a more proactive way by developing strategies of more radical transparency as a means of turning the tables on illiberal regime tactics. He brings lessons from Tunisia to show how civil society can harness transparency as part of its counterattack against regime restrictions.

Closing with an overarching set of guidelines for the illiberal era, Anna Khakee argues that democratic governments must recast the civil society support agenda as an intensely political battle over values. Most governments around the world today challenge the notion that support for civil society is a politically neutral agenda that can be enshrined in uniformly accepted or objectively necessary legal rules. Democracy supporters need to adjust their tendency to depoliticise support for civil society and instead frame their civil society strategies as part of their own interests and battle for influence. Even if civil society supporters may disagree with Khakee's doubts over the existence of a right to receive foreign funding, they might usefully take on board the suggestion that they need to do a lot more to recognise the contested global politics of this sphere.

The thread linking the different chapters is that the defence of global civil society is entering a phase in which challenges are more complex and pressing and new kinds of strategy are needed. Threats to civil society have been mounting around the world for a decade, and CSOs and donors have already been through several cycles of trying to address them. These strategies have had some effect in giving civil society a degree of resilience, but new approaches will be required to address the changing face of authoritarian restrictions and geopolitical turmoil – especially in light of the alarming developments in the US. This report looks over the horizon to suggest what kinds of issues must be tackled in this emerging phase of civic politics. As civic activists, governments and democracy funders all concur that the whole endeavour of democracy support needs to be rethought, this report offers a menu for the kinds of qualitative changes that might help protect a free and democratic civic sphere in this ever-more repressive period.

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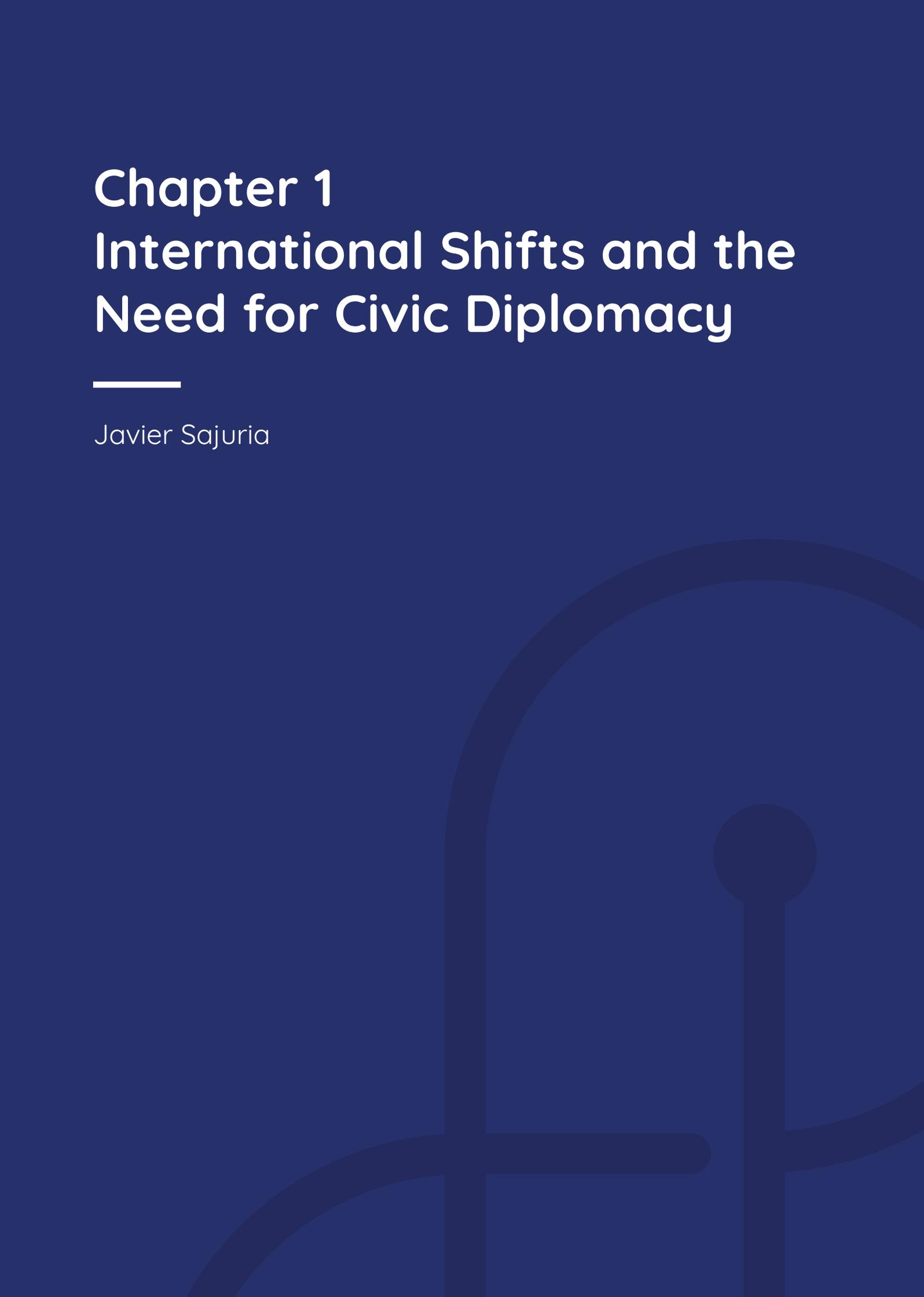
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# Chapter 1

## International Shifts and the Need for Civic Diplomacy

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Javier Sajuria



# International Shifts and the Need for Civic Diplomacy

— Javier Sajuria

To point out that democracy is retreating around the world is no longer news.<sup>11</sup> Civil society has been one of the primary losers in this process of de-democratisation, with civil society organisations (CSOs) a constant target of authoritarian regimes. Current developments in the US provide perhaps the most alarming instance of how illiberal leaders push for the closure of civic space and particularly target those engaged in democracy promotion and human rights.

With less institutional support and a reduction in the resources available to them, CSOs face a double challenge. First, they need to acknowledge that democracy is in crisis domestically and internationally. This is no longer a matter of a few bad apples but a reconfiguration of the whole international order. Second, in light of this, CSOs need more systematic coordination to pursue a civic diplomacy against authoritarian policies. Even though most authoritarian leaders today wave the flags of nativism and antiglobalism, they cooperate and coordinate among themselves, for example in the Madrid Forum or the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC). Fragmented responses to autocratisation diminish CSOs' capacity to coordinate, learn, and operate within and outside their respective countries.

Given this international context, the threat to civil society is far from being simply a domestic challenge. The fact that they treat it as such helps explain why international actors have not been able to contain the illiberal global surge. Some emerging, successful initiatives shed light on the path towards good practice in better-coordinated civil diplomacy.

## An international dynamic

Processes of democratic erosion are not purely country-specific. In Hungary's trajectory from the centre right to the far right, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party exploited the electorate's lack of democratic experience to push its idea of the nation over democratic values. Some would argue that country-level conditions would save the US – one of the oldest and wealthiest democracies – from following the same path. However, during both of Donald Trump's presidencies, things have followed a strikingly similar script: the hollowing out of the judiciary, the purge of dissenting voices from the president's party, the establishment of patronage networks across the country, and a complete disregard for the basic norms of democratic behaviour. Moreover, the continuous collaboration of far-right leaders through forums such as CPAC is a clear indication that there is an internationally coordinated attack on liberal democracy, all in the name of an exclusionary understanding of the nation and its values.

Civil society actors are aware of the international dimension of their domestic struggles. There are several examples of pro-democracy networks created by these actors across different countries or regions to foster collaboration and shared learning. Examples include the transnational networks used by CSOs from Kenya and Kyrgyzstan, and the accommodation strategies that CSOs had to develop after the closure of civic space because of Covid-19 restrictions.<sup>12</sup> However, the speed and strength of the attacks on democratic rule and civic space raise questions about CSOs' preparedness and resilience. In many countries, they have become dependent on international resources, making them an easy target for legislation that limits access to such funds.<sup>13</sup> What is more, intricate networks of interests and processes, such as the Political Network for Values, make some forms of activism, like gender-related initiatives, more vulnerable to donors' cost-cutting decisions.<sup>14</sup>

The recent rise of authoritarianism has come mostly from the far right and has a strongly internationalised component. The far right can be understood as a political force that combines authoritarian attitudes, exclusionary concepts of the nation (such as nativism), and opposition to anything that threatens the heterosexual and patriarchal model of family. The commitment of far-right actors to democracy is questionable: some promote exclusionary and majoritarian notions of democracy, while others work to dismantle it.<sup>15</sup> Although they conceptualise the nation in exclusionary terms, they have no problem in coordinating with foreign peers. Instances such as the Madrid Forum, spearheaded by the Spanish far-right party Vox, are meeting points for like-minded leaders and their followers, where they promote traditionalist values and ways to counteract the so-called liberal left.<sup>16</sup> For the same reasons, many far-right groups work together to hollow out international organisations and narrow the space for civil society.

These processes show that a large-scale change in the international rules-based order is taking place. In different countries, important political actors have stopped exercising restraint and openly attempt to subvert democratic norms. For example, Mexico and Turkey's internal struggles with authoritarianism and corruption have led to a loss of relevance in the international order.<sup>17</sup> Since these are middle powers, their democratic deterioration does not put the overall stability of the world at risk. However, what happens when democracy is not good enough for a major power? The question is increasingly relevant with what is going on in the US today and its government's attacks on international institutions. Joining forces with large autocracies, such as China and Russia, Trump has launched several attacks on key institutions. Under his leadership, the US has used its unrestricted power to undermine the work of international organisations and erode their basic norms.

## Civil society under pressure and the shift to security

Across the globe, authoritarian and democratic governments alike have enacted measures that constrain civil society, restrict their funding, and question their legitimacy. This shrinking or closing of civic space is closely linked to broad shifts in donor governments' priorities, particularly the reallocation of resources from democracy promotion and development to security and stability.

The repression of civil society is not a new phenomenon, but its characteristics have evolved. While violent crackdowns remain a tool in some contexts, the predominant trend is the use of administrative and legal measures to restrict the operation of CSOs. States have introduced laws that limit foreign funding, impose onerous registration requirements, and criminalise dissent under the guise of national security or public order.<sup>18</sup> For example, in Egypt, the prohibition of foreign funding after the Arab Spring uprisings led to the closure of international CSOs such as Africa and Middle East Refugee Assistance, which had previously operated with relative freedom.<sup>19</sup>

Democracies, too, have adopted measures that curtail the autonomy of civic space, using concerns over terrorism, extremism, or foreign interference as justifications.<sup>20</sup> The UK's Prevent counter-terrorism programme, for instance, has involved civil society actors in the implementation of state security agendas, blurring the line between independent advocacy and parastatal functions.<sup>21</sup>

At the same time, the donor-funding landscape has undergone a significant transformation. In the wake of multiple security crises, from the war in Ukraine to the ongoing instability in the Middle East, governments and multilateral institutions increasingly prioritise stability and security over governance and democratic development. Funds have been redirected from civil society support to border security, counter-terrorism, and military assistance. The recent decision by the UK government to divert a substantial portion of its development aid budget to defence is emblematic of this trend. For CSOs, this means not only a reduction in funding but also a loss of legitimacy, as their work is increasingly seen as peripheral to the priorities of state security.

The consequences of these changes are profound. First, the reduction in funding and institutional support leaves many CSOs struggling to maintain even basic operations. Organisations that relied on international grants to support their advocacy, monitoring, and service provision find themselves forced to scale back their activities, lay off staff, or close. The situation is particularly acute for those working in politically sensitive areas, such as election monitoring or minority rights, for which domestic funding is often unavailable and international support is increasingly precarious.

Second, the shift in donor priorities has a chilling effect on the broader civil society ecosystem. As funding becomes more closely tied to security objectives, CSOs may feel pressured to align their activities with donors' security agendas, potentially compromising their independence and mission.<sup>22</sup> In some cases, this leads to a form of capture, in which civil society actors become implementers of government policy rather than autonomous advocates of democratic values. The resulting loss of credibility can further erode public trust in CSOs and diminish their ability to mobilise citizens or hold power to account.

## The road ahead: successes, failures, and democracy protection

The outlook is not entirely negative, however. Poland's clean-air campaigns offer a striking case of civil society innovation in an illiberal political context. Between 2015 and 2023, environmental activists faced the green-conservative Law and Justice government, which was sceptical of climate action. Yet, CSOs achieved notable successes in raising awareness and spurring policy changes on air pollution. The efficacy of their campaigns stemmed from key strategies, such as capitalising on decentralised governance.<sup>23</sup> Polish CSOs adapted to a hostile environment through innovative framing, multilevel governance engagement, and broad grassroots mobilisation and networking, and they achieved outcomes that surprised many observers, given Poland's democratic backsliding.<sup>24</sup>

Gender activism is another area for hope. Despite repeated attacks by far-right actors on gender equality, reproductive rights, and the protection of LGBTQ+ people, gender networks have proven beneficial in monitoring the implementation of European Union policies. The imbalance of resources between rich western European countries and their counterparts in central and eastern Europe can be overcome through a combination of social capital and coordination.<sup>25</sup>

There are also examples of cross-border networks attempting to build democratic resilience. The World Liberty Congress, which brings together young activists and organisations from more than 50 countries at different stages of authoritarianism, works to create strategies to defend political prisoners across the world. Its success is, at the time of writing, limited but promising, for example with the group's publication of its Handbook for the Liberation of Political Prisoners. And the civil society alliance CIVICUS has managed to influence the debates of the United Nations Human Rights Council on arbitrary detention.<sup>26</sup>

Learning must also come from studying failures, as they usually highlight the limitations of CSOs' strategies. For example, despite their success in some areas, cross-border networks have not managed to contain the global narrowing of civic space. Cases such as Kyrgyzstan's adoption of a "foreign agents" law in 2024, despite numerous attempts by civil society to stop it, show there is a need to reflect on the challenges facing democracy support.

## Conclusion

The rise of the far right around the world, including by entering government, has had a clear impact on the domestic closure of civic space and the reorientation and hollowing out of international organisations. The combination of a lack of consensus on what constitutes democracy and increasing security threats around the world has been used to justify several negative policy decisions. Some, such as legislation against CSOs or curtailing their funding, have had a significant impact on civil society's ability to keep autocrats at bay. We are yet to see the full impact of the second Trump presidency on the international order, but we are seeing how it has emboldened his political allies in Europe.

A more positive development is the initiatives that coordinate civil society across countries. It is only through these forms of collaboration or civic diplomacy that CSOs are able to circumvent the obstacles from rising authoritarianism. With the continuous shrinking of funding and spaces for civil society, these initiatives shed some light on which responses work and which do not. Innovative ways will be needed to analyse the changing link between the changing international order, civil society, and the urgent need for democratic resilience – and this concern pervades the rest of this report.

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# Chapter 2

## New Narratives to Protect Civil Society

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Poonam Joshi



# New Narratives to Protect Civil Society

— Poonam Joshi

Civil society organisations (CSOs) need to develop new narratives to help contain the assaults against them and to regain legitimacy with society. Anti-rights movements and parties have been more effective in developing their narratives in recent years. Pro-rights CSOs can and should draw lessons in how to articulate their own narratives. New narratives will not offer a panacea for protecting civil society, but they can help and must be a more central part of the civil society support agenda.

## Anti-rights narratives on the rise

The battle for legitimacy is central to the contestation of civic space and attacks on civil society by anti-rights actors. As public opinion of civil society has worsened, fuelling online hate, intimidation, and violence, there has been growing interest in narrative change as a route for it to regain legitimacy and public support.

Inspiratorio, a training space for Latin American organisations and activists, defines a narrative as “a set of stories interconnected by common values” and hegemonic narratives as those that “most people in a society perceive as common sense”.<sup>27</sup> Narratives become dominant through being introduced in family and community settings via traditions and beliefs, and subsequently reinforced or challenged through education systems, media ecosystems, and cultural spaces. Hegemonic narratives play a critical role in enabling progressive and conservative political and social actors alike to gain and consolidate power by making their values and ideas dominant in societies.

For decades, civil society has successfully challenged a wide range of hegemonic narratives and introduced its own ones – for example, through the multigenerational struggles to end colonialism and slavery, secure universal suffrage, and create the human rights framework. Given how integral they are to who holds power, narratives are always in contestation, and civil society is not new to the practice. So how have anti-rights actors gained ascendancy in shaping narratives over the last decade? They have done so by excelling at three strategies.

## Crafting effective narratives

In the context of years of rising inequality, cuts to social protection, and dissatisfaction with mainstream political parties, anti-rights actors have been able to connect with those who feel threatened, excluded, or left behind by offering an explanation and an alternative. Their explanation is that the establishment, elites, and civil society are colluding to thwart the rights and the will of the majority by prioritising their own interests and those of groups (particularly minorities) that

pose a threat to the majority's security, cultural, or religious values, ethnic identities, and economic wellbeing. The alternative vision offered by anti-rights actors is of a future where a mythic past is restored, including conservative social values, exclusionary ethnic and national identities, law and order, and access to economic resources for the benefit of the majority.<sup>28</sup>

### **Flooding the zone**

In parallel, anti-rights actors are experts in disseminating their narratives through multiple channels. An advantage they have over pro-rights civil society is their well-resourced transnational networks that connect at every level, from political leaders to decentralised communities. In particular, globalisation and digitisation have created spaces for new virtual communities to quickly adapt core narratives to local contexts. This, in turn, provides an endless supply of toxic narratives that are widely disseminated via social media and picked up by legacy media, as both sectors and advertisers profit from the attention received by such content.<sup>29</sup>

Once in power, anti-rights actors move to control education, media, and cultural production to embed their narratives as dominant. Their strategies include:

- the capture of state media (for example, in Poland) and the control of traditional and social media by corporate allies (in Hungary, India, and, most recently, the US);
- the radical overhaul of education systems, including privatisation, curriculum reform, revisionism, the instrumentalisation of academic funding, and attacks on progressive academics (see Brazil, India, Poland, and Turkey); and
- targeted attacks on arts and cultural institutions to replace their leaderships with political appointees, cuts to funding, and smear attacks, censorship, intimidation, and violence against artists, writers, film-makers, and other cultural workers (as in Brazil, Cuba, Hungary, Poland, and, most recently, the US).

### **Embracing uncivil discourse**

Pluralism and civil discourse are cornerstones of a healthy democracy and the principles to which civil society seeks to adhere. In contrast, a growing number of anti-rights actors are willing to manufacture controversy and use false information, inflammatory language, and, more recently, fake content to achieve their goals.<sup>30</sup> In relation to civil society, this includes smear attacks that demonise CSOs and protesters as “terrorists” and “foreign agents”, often based on the type of funding they receive, and feminist and LGBTQ+ groups as “deviant” and a “threat to national security”.<sup>31</sup>

Narrative change is essential for the future of social justice and human rights, but civil society will be able to do it effectively only if given the space and resources to develop compelling visions that transcend single issues, engage in rapid experimentation to generate learning, and learn transnationally and across sectors. However, the power of the narratives of civil society and its allies will be limited unless they also tackle the capture of education systems, address the business model that allows traditional and social media to spread disinformation and hate with impunity

and for profit, and safeguard the freedom of expression and the independence and resourcing of arts and cultural institutions and spaces.

## Lessons for pro-rights civil society

While anti-rights movements have invested heavily in influencing public opinion and culture over the last two decades, pro-rights civic actors – particularly CSOs funded by philanthropy – have relied on the cultural capital they accrued in earlier decades and have focused instead on targeting policy elites to seek institutional, legal, and policy reform. This focus has led to a loss of knowledge and skill in engaging with the public.

Over the last five years, philanthropic foundations – particularly those that work on women’s rights, sexual and reproductive justice, LGBTQ+ rights, migrants’ rights, racial justice, and civic space – have sought to address that lack of expertise by funding an ecosystem of narrative-change organisations, including the Global Narrative Hive, to support civil society in learning and in building skills and connections.<sup>32</sup> Just Labs sets out the sequence of work for narrative change as: developing alternative narratives and frames and testing them through audience research (social listening and sentiment listening); developing and testing messages and identifying routes for dissemination; marketing and building brands; and improving security in case of backlash.<sup>33</sup> The current ecosystem working on narrative change is relatively new, and it is too early to point to definitive impact, but there already are promising approaches and lessons learned.

### Effective narratives are rooted in authentic values, vision, and hope

Just Labs notes that civil society often falls at the first hurdle of developing an alternative narrative by seeking to counter smear attacks, which can lead to reinforcing the hostile narrative by mirroring its language – for example, saying “human rights defenders are NOT criminals” – or mimicking the tactics of anti-rights actors by “polarising to mobilise”, which may reap short-term benefits but can push away the broader audiences whose support is needed.

Instead, narratives that are based on values and hope offer the greatest possibility for bridging differences and enabling groups with diverse perspectives to work towards common goals. The Common Cause Foundation has found that activating shared intrinsic values – the deep, internal motivations that drive people to care about others and the world around them – can make people more open to collaboration and collective action across different social and political issues.<sup>34</sup> Examples include equality and social justice (believing everyone deserves fair treatment and opportunity), compassion and empathy (caring for others’ wellbeing), community and belonging (valuing relationships and social connections), protecting nature (feeling responsible for the environment and future generations), and freedom and creativity (wanting autonomy and self-expression).

In a recent report on the use of narratives to shift public sentiment about civil society, the Trust, Accountability and Inclusion Collaborative also found that the most promising approaches for

addressing closing civic space involved two elements. First, civil society and movements seek to achieve social change by influencing and shifting the values of new audiences. Second, they use narratives as a relational tool to counter efforts to divide societies and/or to build a collective response to authoritarianism by building community between groups across perceived political, social, and religious differences.<sup>35</sup>

An example of this is the work of Puentes, a Latin American narratives platform, that has sought to build common cause between progressives and conservatives by reimagining concepts such as religiosity and family, which are central to cultures in the region but viewed as problematic by progressive movements because of the prevalence of discrimination and abuse in religious institutions and family structures. The Familias: Ahora project has built a network across Latin America of over 100 organisations and 200,000 people who are reimagining the concept of family based on values of “love, care, and wellbeing”.<sup>36</sup>

Civil society’s narrative also needs to be linked to a vision broader than that of its own role. The Trust, Accountability and Inclusion Collaborative found that effective narratives position civil society within a larger vision of the world that it is trying to create – and of which a healthy and active civil society is one component. By contrast, narratives that focus on civil society as such are unlikely to be successful as the term itself is obscure and, for most people, civil society is not an end but “a means through which to achieve something better”.

The International Centre for Policy Advocacy recently sought to identify narratives that could help inoculate people against extremist narratives that were leading to CSOs in Germany being accused of being “traitors” for supporting migrants and refugees as part of a “globalist” conspiracy to replace the “European” population. It found that narratives that framed the role of civil society in “promoting community well-being” and “helping all of us to weather storms” were effective in shifting perceptions away from the idea of civil society being too polarising and political.<sup>37</sup>

Finally, narratives must be context-specific. They must be informed by an understanding not only of the dominant narratives, culture, and values that shape the beliefs of the intended audience but also of marginalised cultures and values that may offer liberating alternatives. Since 2023, the Global Narrative Hive supports a community of LGBTQ+ activists in east Africa that faces rising hate, criminalisation, and violence because of the politically motivated rhetoric of political leaders who characterise feminists and LGBTQ+ activists as western and a threat to African traditions and values.<sup>38</sup> The community has sought to assert its identities as indigenous rather than western by drawing on the diversity of traditions around gender identities, family models, and spirituality that existed across Africa before colonialism and the introduction of Christianity.

### **Knowing your audience is vital**

The Social Change Initiative breaks down the audience for civil society narratives into five categories.<sup>39</sup> They are the Choir (the members and activists CSOs already work with), the Base (existing supporters), the Persuadable middle (“perhaps the most important group as they are uncertain, and often conflicted” about the issues civil society is working on), and the Opposition,

which tends to disagree with what civil society is saying and doing but is not as intransigent as the Unreachable.

Identifying a movable or persuadable segment of the population and understanding why it is receptive to hostile narratives about civil society is critical. Just Labs notes that achieving this requires empathy and curiosity, the use of tools such as social listening and sentiment analysis (for which civil society needs technical support), and a willingness to understand and engage with people with conservative values. In its recent project, the International Centre for Policy Advocacy sought to understand why some people are more prone to believing conspiracy theories. It found a difference in the level of belief and usage of conspiracy arguments between “theorists”, who are hardcore believers resistant to alternative explanations, and “talkers”, who use conspiracy theories to provide a simple explanation but are also happy to use a rational, evidence-based explanation if they have it to hand. This nuanced understanding of the persuadable middle enabled the organisation to successfully shift attitudes of the talkers towards civil society.<sup>40</sup>

While engaging with the persuadable middle requires openness and respect, engaging with the opposition needs more caution. In 2022, the Global Narrative Hive funded a series of experiments seeking to find out what can help diverse actors build common cause across movements and sectors against narratives of extremism.<sup>41</sup> One of its partners, a media outlet in Latin America, faced backlash after an anti-trans politician who participated in a closed dialogue with trans activists co-opted the experience to launch further attacks on the trans community. Lessons learned included not assuming that exposure to facts or dialogue can shift opinions and that engagement with opposition audiences should include scenario planning in case of backlash.

### **Experimentation and failures are essential for learning**

Anti-rights actors have been experimenting, adapting, and sharing lessons for almost two decades. Building narrative-change skills requires CSOs to have the opportunity to experiment, share learning, and continue to innovate. In the experience of the Global Narrative Hive and its partners, every experiment, including failures, generates new insights and, sometimes, unexpected gains. For example, between 2021 and 2023, Familias: Ahora supported Chilean civil society groups working on diverse issues, including gender equality, migrants’ rights, and the environment, to build a common agenda around a reimagined concept of family to influence the drafting of Chile’s constitution. Although this agenda was not included in the constitution, the project was viewed as a success in terms of cross-sector vision and coalition building.

### **Narrative change requires genuine connection and civic power**

Effective narrative change needs to be rooted in genuine relationships that foster trust and solidarity through coalition building and grassroots and community mobilisation around shared struggles. The LGBTQ+ activists whom the Global Narrative Hive supports in Kenya have also been impacted by tax hikes in 2023 and the government’s subsequent brutal crackdown on mass protests and dissent. These activists are playing a role in the reinvention of civic space by participating in the parallel spaces civil society now operates in, such as bars, bookshops, and festivals that host after-hours discussions about reimagining politics, culture, and the economy away from the gaze of the

authorities. Despite the heightened threat they face, the LGBTQ+ activists have also continued to show up in solidarity at mass protests. As a result, they have gone from being labelled by Kenyan President William Ruto, in his justification of the crackdown on protests, as “TikTok youth homosexuals” to “the pronouns people who really show up in the fight”.<sup>42</sup>

## Conclusion

Narratives shape the boundaries of what societies believe is possible and just. The contest over them is ultimately a contest over legitimacy, belonging, and power. Anti-rights actors have mastered the art of crafting emotionally resonant, values-driven stories that exploit fear and division. Civil society, by contrast, has too often relied on technical language and policy advocacy detached from lived experiences. Yet, emerging evidence demonstrates that pro-rights actors can begin to reclaim public sentiment when they root their narratives in authentic values, hope, and shared humanity, and when they take time to understand and engage persuadable audiences.

Narrative change is not a communications exercise but a long-term strategy for building civic power, solidarity, and imagination. It requires courage to experiment, learn from failure, and reimagine the future collectively. Ultimately, shifting public sentiment in support of civil society is part of a wider struggle for social justice and human rights that depends not only on changing laws or institutions but also on transforming the stories that define who “we” are and what kind of world we want to build together.

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# Chapter 3

## Beyond Donor Funding



Ann Tsurtsunia-Zurabashvili



# Beyond Donor Funding

— Ann Tsurtsunia-Zurabashvili

For decades, civil society organisations (CSOs) in developing countries have relied heavily on foreign assistance and international partnerships to sustain their missions and operations. As this source of support diminishes and global priorities shift, the future of civic space has become increasingly uncertain. Cuts in funding from major donors, most notably the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), compound the problems facing civil society globally. Alerts from the European Union System for an Enabling Environment for Civil Society (EU SEE) suggest that civil society has been affected by shifting donor priorities and decisions in Botswana, Cambodia, El Salvador, Indonesia, Mexico, Myanmar, Peru, and Uganda.<sup>43</sup>

These dynamics expose the vulnerabilities of grant-dependent models for CSOs and force a fundamental rethink about funding for civil society. Adverse conditions for CSOs are now widespread across regions, forcing them to reconsider their size, focus, and strategies. In many contexts, maintaining influence and credibility matters more than institutional scale. Downsizing may be inevitable, but strategic adaptation can ensure continued impact. Civil society's challenge is to move from a model of dependence to one of resilience: mobilising resources beyond traditional grants and cultivating forms of support rooted in local ownership, social trust, and innovation.

This chapter examines the evolving civic landscape amid declining donor funding and increasing political pressure. It highlights how the knowledge, expertise, and institutional legacies of donors are valuable assets, enabling CSOs to endure even when financial resources wane. Historical and contemporary patterns of donor withdrawal reveal that such moments of disruption have often catalysed new actors, networks, and approaches – proof that creativity and reinvention can emerge from constraint.

Alternative funding strategies, such as crowdfunding, social enterprise, volunteer mobilisation, and tapping into local philanthropy, offer paths towards sustainability, but this requires strategic vision and adaptability. At the same time, continued donor engagement remains essential, particularly in knowledge transfer, capacity building, and strategic guidance. Ultimately, civil society's future will depend less on the availability of funds than on its ability to leverage experience, partnerships, and purpose. Even in periods of repression and scarcity, the potential for resilience, recovery, and revival endures, reminding us that civic life, though fragile, is remarkably adaptive.

## Knowledge as a donor legacy

Over the past decade or more, donors have increasingly advised CSOs and independent media outlets to prepare for a time when their funding might decline. Drawing on historical examples from multiple countries, political contexts, and regions, donors have developed strategies, researched

domestic resource-mobilisation capacities, advocated policy changes, produced handbooks, and conducted hundreds of feasibility studies. Therefore, the options suggested below as alternatives to donor funding do not represent new knowledge. However, despite extensive funding and reporting requirements and the numerous obligations imposed by donors, CSOs and independent media frequently opted until recently to keep relying on their funding rather than implement strategies to prepare for a potential black day. At the same time, assessing the readiness of civil society worldwide to fully use options beyond donor support remains a challenging task.

While CSOs in different regions were often unprepared for severe democratic backsliding, human rights violations, and repressive legislative and administrative actions by governments, there is knowledge and capacity in civil society to adapt to worsening economic conditions and, to some extent, to political instability. This is a legacy of donors enabling civil society and independent media to survive and explore alternative paths to sustainability.

For this knowledge to be effective, a degree of political stability, democratic governance, and other domestic conditions is required. Yet in most countries, donors have tended to end their funding at the most challenging historical moments. Guided by the understanding that their funding must inherently be temporary, donors have invested considerable effort and resources to ensure that necessary knowledge and capacity are left behind, and civil society should recognise this as a resource at such a moment.

### Earlier experiences of exit

While CSOs and independent media today navigate unprecedented challenges, the sudden withdrawal of donor support is not a new phenomenon. They have faced abrupt funding losses before. But cases from Africa to Latin America illustrate that civil society is inherently adaptive.

The most prominent example from Europe is that of the Czech Republic. After 1989, Czech CSOs expanded rapidly with foreign donor and philanthropy support, primarily from the US and western Europe. By the early 2000s, as the country prepared to join the EU, many donors abruptly declared its transition to democracy complete and withdrew their support almost overnight. Thousands of CSOs faced immediate financial collapse. Despite this initial shock, parts of civil society managed to reorganise, demonstrating adaptive strategies that are instructive for other contexts.

For CSOs unable to secure alternative revenue streams, downsizing and grassroots organising became essential. Smaller, volunteer-driven associations, from cultural societies to local community initiatives, proved resilient, surviving through the trust and commitment of their immediate communities. Political engagement offered another mechanism for continuity: several CSO leaders transitioned into public administration or politics, embedding civic values in formal governance structures. Two decades later, in the context of democratic backsliding, disinformation, and Russia's war on Ukraine, Czech CSOs provide refugee assistance, human rights protection, media-literacy training, and environmental advocacy. The civic sector is now more resilient, more diverse, and less dependent on a single donor stream.

## A new ecosystem

The global civil society landscape is undergoing a profound transformation, moving away from donor dependence towards a more localised, volunteer-driven civic ecosystem. This shift is particularly visible in Africa, central Asia, eastern Europe, Latin America, and southeast Asia, where donor funding is declining and communities are taking on a greater role. This transformation does not mean preserving the civic sector as it is. It will unavoidably result in smaller, less professionalised CSOs with limited international visibility, but it will strengthen grassroots movements and deepen local ownership.

Downsizing through staff cuts, smaller offices, and lower operating costs seems to represent adaptation rather than collapse. A 2025 EU SEE study found that over two thirds of CSO representatives affected by funding cuts were actively seeking alternative donors or partnerships.<sup>44</sup> Competitive CSO salaries fade, but resilience grows. Civil society is not vanishing; it is transforming into taking smaller, locally rooted forms with deeper community ties and a sustainable, adaptive model for civic engagement.

Deprofessionalisation is a central aspect of this transformation. Over the past decades, donor-driven professionalisation turned civil society into a quasi-economic sector, staffed with salaried experts and defined by project-based logic. Yet, rather than deprofessionalisation and decline, what is emerging is new forms of professionalisation with the increasing integration of for-profit strategies and new specialist roles. Professionalisation is shifting rather than disappearing.

Civil society may shrink in size but not in impact. Evidence from diverse regions shows that it can thrive without donor dependence when certain characteristics are present: membership-based structures, such as clubs, professional unions, and, in some contexts, trade unions; strong traditions of community giving; reliance on diaspora remittances; volunteer-driven solidarity; and the pursuit of income-generating activities.<sup>45</sup> The resilience of smaller, community-rooted groups is particularly notable. Large, professionalised CSOs are more vulnerable to collapse when external resources dry up. In contrast, grassroots associations built on trust and volunteer commitment often endure better.

In contexts of political repression, the survival of civic actors also requires adaptability. This includes being less visible as part of the formal CSO industry, embedding activism in cultural or professional associations, blending advocacy with service provision, and using digital tools for low-cost mobilisation.

In this emerging ecosystem, strategy is more crucial than ever. Global uncertainty, democratic backsliding, and political turmoil increase the need for it. And the challenge is not only survival but also renewal: building a civic ecosystem that is leaner, more resilient, and more deeply anchored in communities.

In this context, although the need for alternative funding mechanisms was identified more than a decade ago, CSOs and independent media have felt the urgent need to explore such approaches

only in the past five years, reflecting a global shift in the traditional model of civil society support. Reducing dependence on donor funding has become imperative for sustainability, particularly as political and economic instability increasingly threatens conventional funding streams.

Crowdfunding campaigns have become a prominent tool for grassroots mobilisation and small financial support. The Lights Must Stay On, a crowdfunding initiative by Georgian independent media, is a recent example of resource mobilisation beyond traditional donor funding, particularly when restrictive laws prevent access to available funds.<sup>46</sup> In Slovakia, people have used platforms such as Donio to support independent media and journalists under pressure from the government. Effective crowdfunding, however, requires strategic communication, dedicated accounts, and online platforms. In many countries, it remains associated primarily with charitable causes, such as healthcare, homelessness, or support for conflict-affected populations. When properly managed with accountability and transparency, crowdfunding can foster solidarity, strengthen community ownership, and contribute to organisational self-sustainability.

The Orbeliani Meti platform in Georgia illustrates how crowdfunding can expand civic action beyond traditional donor funding. Initially a civic initiative and later supported by USAID, the platform became fully local in response to laws that restricted foreign funding. By enabling local actors to mobilise resources and engage community support, it has fostered ownership and accountability. Beyond financial contributions, such platforms cultivate civic participation and collective problem solving, which are essential for sustainable community development.

Economic activities have also become essential for financial resilience. Many CSOs and grassroots organisations now diversify their income through the provision of, for example, education, healthcare, training, or consultancy, or by acting as social enterprises and selling products. Such initiatives strengthen community credibility. A 2025 study in Zambia showed that such models reduce donor dependence, but it also warned of mission drift if the profit motive overtakes purpose.<sup>47</sup> Research by the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law confirms that integrating economic activities into the work of CSOs enhances their sustainability and resilience. While not a full substitute for donor aid, these efforts are crucial to financial independence and ecosystem transformation.

Volunteering is central to civil society, offering vital non-financial contributions and strengthening community ownership. Limited in some contexts by economic hardship, CSOs can expand local engagement by showcasing volunteering's many forms. Time, expertise, and strategic input are invaluable assets for organisational resilience. The 2016 Global Review on Volunteering of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies highlighted the role of volunteers in tackling social challenges and fostering community strength.<sup>48</sup> To maximise the impact of volunteering, CSOs must create inclusive, flexible opportunities that align with diverse motivations and ensure long-term sustainability.

Community ownership further enhances resilience, empowering local actors to lead initiatives and ensuring relevance, accountability, and sustainability. Corporate support for employee volunteering and workplace giving, as noted in recent studies, reflects a growing global trend towards community-driven support. Diasporas are also an important source of funding, especially

big migrant communities abroad that are willing to support democratic processes in their home country. In one recent example of this, the Freedom Fund established to support Georgia's civil society raised more than £40,000 (\$53,000).<sup>49</sup> In countries like Georgia, urgent funding needs can unite thousands of citizens, including members of the diaspora, to address pressing challenges.

### **More than resource diversification**

The constraints that civil society across the globe experiences can also be a catalyst for innovation: new actors often find ways to operate informally, leverage digital platforms, or develop hybrid structures that combine advocacy with service delivery, thereby circumventing legal obstacles while continuing to contribute to public life.<sup>50</sup> Simultaneously, the exit of donors and reductions in external funding have had a profound impact on nascent civic actors. In some cases, the experimentation with alternative resource-mobilisation strategies noted above has enhanced the resilience, autonomy, and local legitimacy of new civic actors, fostering civil society structures that are less dependent on volatile external funding.<sup>51</sup>

But adaptation alone does not guarantee survival. Civil society's endurance depends on more than resource diversification. In some countries, such as Belarus, repression has nearly suffocated independent organising. Yet, history shows such conditions are rarely permanent. Networks persist underground or in exile, preserving solidarity and capacity for renewal. As seen in contexts from Poland under martial law to Chile under the regime of the dictator Augusto Pinochet, civic life can re-emerge with remarkable vigour once political space reopens.

The Belarus case offers several key lessons. First, under conditions of comprehensive repression, civil society can be effectively erased within national borders. Second, exile-based organising is consequential by maintaining advocacy and international pressure, but it cannot substitute for the everyday grassroots presence that sustains domestic civic life. Third, dormancy is not equivalent to death, and civic spirit, though invisible at times, manifests itself when cracks appear in authoritarian rule. In Belarus, donor exit combined with state repression has proven highly destructive. This shows that what endangers civic life is not the absence of donors alone but the interaction between their withdrawal and a hostile domestic political environment.

### **Donor support to civil society: beyond funding**

While the engagement of donors has often been criticised for being seen as transactional and treating their grantees as service providers, the importance of this engagement extends far beyond funding. In the context of restrictive legislation, donors' solidarity, knowledge sharing, and documentation of survival strategies remain vital.

Donors should therefore not limit their presence to favourable environments but support civil societies that are navigating repression and scarcity. In contexts of limited domestic funding, investing in learning, capacity building, and strategic guidance is crucial to help CSOs achieve

long-term resilience and genuine self-sufficiency beyond financial aid.<sup>52</sup> A 2025 report by Forus International stressed that documenting how civil society adapts to shrinking resources is vital.<sup>53</sup> First-hand knowledge of survival and innovation helps donors refine their strategies, and it strengthens CSOs' ability to achieve independence and resilience.

A 2025 survey by the International Foundation for Electoral Systems on the aid cuts suggested the role of donors cannot be narrowly defined as that of resource providers.<sup>54</sup> It must also encompass the enabling of learning networks, mentorship, strategic guidance, and moral support. Across diverse contexts – from the Middle East and north Africa, where people use digital networks and online tools to organise when governments restrict the formal registration of CSOs, to eastern Europe and central Asia, where community-rooted projects allow for local sustainability – new civic actors are demonstrating remarkable adaptability. Their emergence under conditions of legal restriction and financial uncertainty underscores the importance of donor engagement that extends beyond funding.

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# Chapter 4

## Relocated Civic Actors



Nicolas Bouchet



# Relocated Civic Actors

— Nicolas Bouchet

A key feature of contemporary attacks on civil society is that regimes are driving civic actors out of their countries and seeking to stop them from maintaining influence from abroad. Against this backdrop, the transnational dimension of pro-democracy activism is more important than ever. Yet, relocated civic actors say the support they currently receive is insufficient, inadequate, and concentrated among small circles of well-known individuals and organisations disconnected from grassroots activism.

This chapter explores the key features of relocated civic actors, their activities, and the operating environment they face. It then offers ideas about how European and other international democracy supporters can better support this growing contingent of an increasingly hounded global civil society.<sup>55</sup>

## Relocation scale and triggers

The last decade has shown the global nature and diversity of the flight of civic actors. It is extremely difficult to establish even a broad estimate of the number of people involved, but the following examples give an idea of the scale of movement.

- In **Africa**, thousands of civic actors from Rwanda and Sudan have fled to countries including Chad, Egypt, South Africa, Tanzania, and Uganda as well as further afield to Belgium, Canada, France, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom (UK), and the United States (US).
- In **Asia**, thousands have left mainland China, Hong Kong, and Myanmar for the likes of Australia, Canada, Germany, Taiwan, the UK, and the US. People fleeing Myanmar have also headed to India, Malaysia, and Thailand.
- In **Europe**, thousands have fled Belarus and Russia for destinations such as France, Georgia, Germany, Lithuania, and Poland.
- In **Latin America**, thousands have left Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, principally for Costa Rica, Mexico, Spain, and the US.
- In the **Middle East**, thousands have fled Egypt and Syria for the likes of Jordan, Lebanon, Qatar, and Turkey as well as France, Germany, Sweden, the UK, and the US.

Gathering data on how and when civic activists left a particular country is difficult because of the challenge of isolating them within general immigration, or even within refugee or asylum data. It is even harder to identify cases in which the repressive environment was a person's sole or main reason for leaving. What is more, the introduction of laws and administrative measures to repress civil society does not provide enough indicators by which to track outflows of people over time.

What evidence there is strongly suggests that civic actors stay in their country for as long as possible, even as the environment becomes more repressive. Beyond personal circumstances, they do so out of commitment to their cause and awareness that leaving will usually diminish their credibility with their audiences. As the situation deteriorates, there is also sometimes a tendency to hope for the best rather than prepare for the worst – including for leaving. It appears that civic actors are driven out not by one or more acts of repression but by increasing threats to their safety or that of their families. In many cases, the decision to leave is based on their personal financial situation becoming vulnerable, which can be due to economic conditions in the country and their inability to keep or find a job or practise their profession because they have been victimised. In some cases, the eruption of violent conflict is also a trigger for leaving.

### **Activism in relocation**

Among the civic actors that have relocated in the last decade, prominent figures and civil society organisations (CSOs) draw the most attention, but most operate at the lightly institutionalised or grassroots level.

#### **Embracing digital technology**

A comprehensive transition to digital technology is crucial for newly relocated civic actors. It would be almost impossible for them to continue their activism without sophisticated digital approaches to connecting with their home country, advocating and raising awareness, and maintaining a sense of community. New technologies increasingly enable transnational civic activism. Relocated actors are now able to promote democratic change and collaborate with their peers in their home country – whether the latter operate openly or clandestinely – through tools such as encrypted communications and cryptocurrency as well as open platforms like social media.

#### **Supporting in-country activists**

Relocated actors continue to support activists on the ground in their home country, from providing material or financial assistance to assisting with decentralised activism when mass mobilisation is too dangerous. They also provide critical infrastructure to in-country activists, helping them to stay connected and networked while mitigating the risks of direct in-country communication.

#### **Influencing and amplifying**

Today, news and social media tools and platforms allow relocated civic actors to contribute without time lags to their home country's political life. By disseminating information, ideas, and advice, they provide political "remittances"<sup>56</sup> and intellectual "ammunition".<sup>57</sup> Within public opinion in their home country, they often act as influencers. They can be simultaneously originators and amplifiers of information, as when exiled media like the Berlin-based Azerbaijani Meydan TV use reporters in their home country and transmit their information back into it. This can make them "facilitators of oppositions".<sup>58</sup>

### Supporting new arrivals

Increasingly, relocated civic actors provide information and assistance to those who want to leave, or have recently left, their home country, enabling them to resettle quickly and continue their activism without delay. Their help for new arrivals includes psychosocial support, safety and security training, local and transnational outreach and advocacy, and help for new initiatives. In some cases, they have established structures, such as the Belarusian Solidarity Center in Warsaw, that offer a landing strip for relocators.

### Influencing new audiences

Relocated civic actors increasingly lobby governments for easier visa and residence paths for activists, alongside putting diplomatic pressure on home regimes. The likes of the Mexico-based Cuban organisation Justicia 11J document spread awareness about repression in their home country and amplify the voices of activists still there. Such groups sometimes collaborate with host-country CSOs on campaigns or crowdfunding. Relocation also gives activists new opportunities to build connections with donors. For some, like the US-based Hong Kong Democracy Council, it results in a more vocal stance against the home-country regime and a greater focus on influencing international policymakers to act, such as by issuing sanctions.

### Diversifying methods and skills

By increasing work avenues and incentivising experimentation, relocation – especially in its early stages – can diversify the focus and methods of activism. For example, in recent years, many relocated actors have taken on media and advocacy roles alongside or instead of their pre-relocation activities.

Their new location also gives them opportunities to develop new skills. Journalists and media organisations in exile are highly innovative, making the most of digital opportunities to develop new practices, produce new kinds of content, and target new and wider audiences. The Prague-based Russian outlet Verstka is one example.

Relocated actors are often at the forefront of technological innovation to improve operational security and circumvent censorship as well as collaborating through hubs and co-working initiatives, like the Exile Media Hub Brandenburg in Germany.

### Enabling factors and obstacles

Most of the civic actors that have relocated in recent years have, to varying extents, benefited from the same enabling factors and faced the same obstacles. The combination of these determines their ability to survive and have an impact.

**Host-country conditions.** Relocation to rich, democratic host countries and the presence there of earlier, strong diaspora organisations are key enablers. Understanding and support from the host-country authorities are also needed.

**Safety and security.** The availability of secure communication channels and the ability to constantly update safety measures are further essential enablers of successful relocation.

**Flexibility and creativity.** Flexibility and creativity are fundamental elements of success. CIVICUS argues that operating in networks with a movement mindset is now essential to civil society, and that many relocated actors are adept at core aspects of this: distributed leadership, nimble decision-making, a focus on shared values, and a willingness to listen.<sup>59</sup>

**Psychosocial struggles.** Displacement, especially under the circumstances that often drive activists to leave, can be traumatic. Many relocate to expensive cities – like western capitals – to continue their activism, which causes financial stress. These factors, combined with uncertainty about their residence status and loss of their social and/or professional status, create psychological stress that can limit their ability to continue their work.

**Legal and bureaucratic hurdles.** Recently relocated civic actors face several challenges beyond legal entry, from regularising their residence and employment status to accessing state and private services to fulfilling legal and administrative requirements before they can continue their work – for example, registering a new CSO and obtaining the permission to raise, receive, and disburse funds. These challenges are greater for activists who have fled regions that are subject to restrictive host-country migration policies, such as those who have left Africa or the Middle East and relocated in Europe.

Lack of access to banking services, including pre-emptively before relocation, is particularly hampering: civic actors are usually limited to using the services of non-traditional fintech companies, with risks including potential exposure to home-country authorities, should these companies later seek to operate there.

**Competition for funding.** Relocation risks replicating or worsening an issue that civic actors faced in their home country: a few trusted CSOs receiving the majority of donor support. Relocated actors also report that as relocation increases, and especially if there is a new wave from a large country, competition for funding increases, as does the likelihood of smaller or less prominent communities losing out.

**Losing connection.** Relocated civic actors navigate major obstacles to continue working with their peers and partners in their home country. In the most repressive environments, continuing to reach them – and wider audiences – requires a constant intensive effort to fight back against administrative, security, and technological measures; censorship and restrictions on internet freedom; and hostile penetration of online platforms. As a result, civic actors struggle to sustain their networks and contacts, and must constantly consider whether their methods will endanger these contacts. Over time, they also risk losing awareness of the situation on the ground, including the everyday realities for local activists.

**Digital downsides.** Heavy reliance on digital tools among relocated civic actors, and between them and their home country, has downsides.

First, the impact of these tools depends on the digital landscape of the home country being somewhat equivalent to that of the host country, as well as on the capacity of local civic actors to use activity in the digital sphere to build activity on the ground.

Second, relocated actors sometimes have to use risky communication platforms because these are the dominant ones in their home country – for example, Telegram in Russia and WeChat in China.<sup>60</sup> Given that transnational repression is increasing, this may increase the security risks – online and offline – facing activists and their families: risks compounded by host governments’ limited understanding of, and responses to, such repression.<sup>61</sup>

Third, if relocated actors increasingly form communities of communication, there is a risk that communication becomes almost the sum total of community.<sup>62</sup> This has negative consequences for different forms of activism: as CIVICUS points out, while technology enables connections, civil society networks cannot rely on it alone.

**Generational divides.** Recently relocated actors often join communities made up of more than one wave or generation of others who have relocated – each of which may have done so for different reasons, have different levels of politicisation, and hold diverging views about their home country and return. In some cases, this diversity is mapped out over different host locations. This divergence can create problems of intergenerational understanding and divides over methods and goals. For example, younger activists are often said to be more open to collaboration with peers from other countries and more reluctant to work with governments and international organisations.

## How can Europe better support relocated civic actors?

Democracy-supporting governments and institutions in Europe try to assist relocated civic actors. Their usual focus on prominent individuals and CSOs is understandable: it is difficult to develop a detailed understanding of large-scale relocation from several repressive environments to several host countries.

However, in many instances, the focus is on assisting with exit and resettlement, which, while crucial, should be understood as only the first stage of the support required. Democracy supporters also need to better understand how the time since activists relocated shapes the continuity and impact of their activism. The initial period is highly disruptive and time consuming, limiting activists’ opportunities and resources for continuing their work. Then, over time, there is a growing risk of deterioration in home-country connections or of demotivation. A crucial question, therefore, is whether there is an optimal time window for most productively supporting relocated actors after the exit and relocation phase, and what types of assistance are crucial at each stage.<sup>63</sup>

Support for relocated actors to continue their activism can be framed as protective (securing their position and operations in the host country), enabling (helping them to keep reaching their home country), or precautionary (helping them prepare for the contingency of relocation). The increasing repression of civic space worldwide means that more activists are likely to flee repressive contexts. There is thus a clear need for a European and global framework with longer-term support strategies. Below are four pillars of such a framework.

### **Comprehensive contingency planning and preparations**

The precautionary aspect of support can seem controversial because European democracy-support actors do not want to discourage activists from carrying on working in their home country. However, relocation often becomes unavoidable. What is more, democracy supporters are not immune to the institutional tendency to downplay worst-case scenarios for fear of fuelling defeatism – and, as noted, civic actors sometimes hope for the best instead of preparing for the worst. On both sides, there is a risk of leaving contingency planning until very late, with negative consequences for relocated actors' ability to keep operating with limited disruption.

European democracy supporters must plan and prepare more systematically for more relocations, including as part of early-warning systems about civil society restrictions. Some already provide their partners in repressive environments with training and advice on leaving, but a more comprehensive approach to contingency planning is needed. Given the legal and administrative obstacles involved in relocation, this planning should be done with civic actors that, for the most part, are small organisations or individuals and cannot easily do it on their own. Enabling exchanges of experiences and knowledge with earlier relocators from different countries would be useful; this could include informal, low-cost, moderated efforts on existing online platforms.

### **A distinct and streamlined pathway within migration policy**

While activism is becoming increasingly mobile, people's ability to move across borders is being restricted in Europe and elsewhere. In the face of this paradox, it is politically unrealistic to expect European governments to welcome a mass flight of people, including activists, from repressive environments, even in major crises. Instead, governments should consider providing clearly identified civic actors fleeing potential harm with targeted, streamlined pathways to entry and residence that are more distinct than current refugee/asylum and humanitarian strands in migration policy.

This is difficult to address for democracy-support officials who are mostly in aid, diplomatic, or human rights roles. The administrative costs of implementing such a system at scale would pose a major challenge as it would require identification, triage, and sometimes security screening. A system for separating civic activists from the administration of asylum, humanitarian, and economic migration would also be a difficult political sell in countries where immigration debates lean towards restriction and democracy support is being deprioritised. Advocacy for such a system could stress that it would involve a small number of people who need to leave their country to keep working there and who are committed to returning there at the earliest opportunity.

In the short term, European countries should at least take a broad view of the use of humanitarian visas for civic actors from repressive environments, rather than restrict their use. In this context, as one Russian activist put it, “a humanitarian visa is not only a humanitarian action, it is also a strategic foreign policy one”.<sup>64</sup>

### **A dedicated financial instrument for supporting transnational activism**

When it comes to developing a broader framework for supporting relocated civic actors, recent efforts in Canada to flesh one out provide a good overview.<sup>65</sup> They highlight the need to create an enabling environment and some ways to do so. Measures could include providing relocated civic actors with legal assistance with immigration and residence processes; delivering capacity-building programmes that give them the resources, tools, and skills to continue their activism and develop organisational resilience; and connecting activists with host-country communities. Support for relocated civic actors should place a particular emphasis on skills and secure tools for online campaigning, collaboration, network building, and peer-support groups.

The European Union (EU), European governments, and nongovernmental organisations should, collectively or individually, establish a dedicated financial instrument for supporting relocated civic actors’ transnational activism, given that funding for this work comes largely from country-specific (and sometimes region-specific) foreign-assistance budgets. One example is the multi-donor and -implementer Lifeline: Embattled Civil Society Organizations Assistance Fund, which has supported temporary relocation.<sup>66</sup> A dedicated strand of support for long-term relocated actors could be created within Lifeline, or this model could be replicated by an initial group of donors and implementers that have shown interest in this issue. This could be applied in a “friends of relocation” approach if there is resistance to, or a delay in, setting up an instrument within the EU institutions.

In addition, European donors should do more to support the many relocated civic actors based close to their home country, including through diplomatic messaging about their treatment with host governments that, in many cases, are more authoritarian than democratic. This would have the added political advantage of reducing the likelihood of follow-on relocations from such host countries to European ones. European philanthropic institutions, given their greater flexibility of focus, could also fund the creation of networks of relocated actors from different countries.

### **Greater protection against transnational repression**

The EU and European governments need to adopt a stronger stance for protecting relocated civic actors from transnational repression, including by following the recommendations of international civil society, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, and the Group of Seven (G7).<sup>67</sup> Canada and the UK have been at the forefront of recognising and taking steps to address transnational repression, even if implementation has sometimes been slow.<sup>68</sup> In 2025, the US imposed sanctions on Chinese and Thai officials for acts of transnational repression.<sup>69</sup>

A more protective approach must include stronger identification of, and warnings about, actors from repressive states operating in host countries, as well as personal safety measures for activists at risk. It must also include more engagement with not only relocated civic actors but also wider

diasporas. The digital security of relocated civic actors – accounting for their specific needs – should be included in any policy to defend against hostile foreign actors’ threats to domestic political and civic actors, as there is considerable overlap between such threats and transnational repression.

European governments need to provide relocated civic actors with legal protections against repressive regimes’ abuses of domestic and international law. Law enforcement, national security, and migration officials should receive guidance and training about the weaponisation of extradition requests, Interpol notices, and financial-integrity rules against activists, for example. It is also important to address repressive regimes’ attempts to curtail their nationals’ cross-border mobility through measures such as requiring them to return to renew their passport and other forms of identification.

## Conclusion

Debates about supporting relocated civic actors are taking place in a context of strong budgetary constraints across Europe and elsewhere and calls for resources to support democracy face strong fiscal and political headwinds. What is more, the dismantling in 2025 of US democracy-support infrastructure, including programmes that helped activists to relocate, has had a catastrophic impact worldwide, with many CSOs facing or succumbing to existential financial threats.<sup>70</sup> This makes the burden much heavier for other international actors. What is more, there is a growing debate within civil society globally as to whether the traditional donor-reliant funding model has reached its limits.<sup>71</sup>

Against this backdrop, this may seem to be an inauspicious moment to advocate elevating a neglected area of democracy support. Yet globally, many indicators of authoritarianism and repression of democratic civil society are flashing red, which strongly suggests that the phenomenon of relocated civic actors will grow. Therefore, the issue cannot be avoided, especially in a moment that calls for rethinking established models of civil society support.

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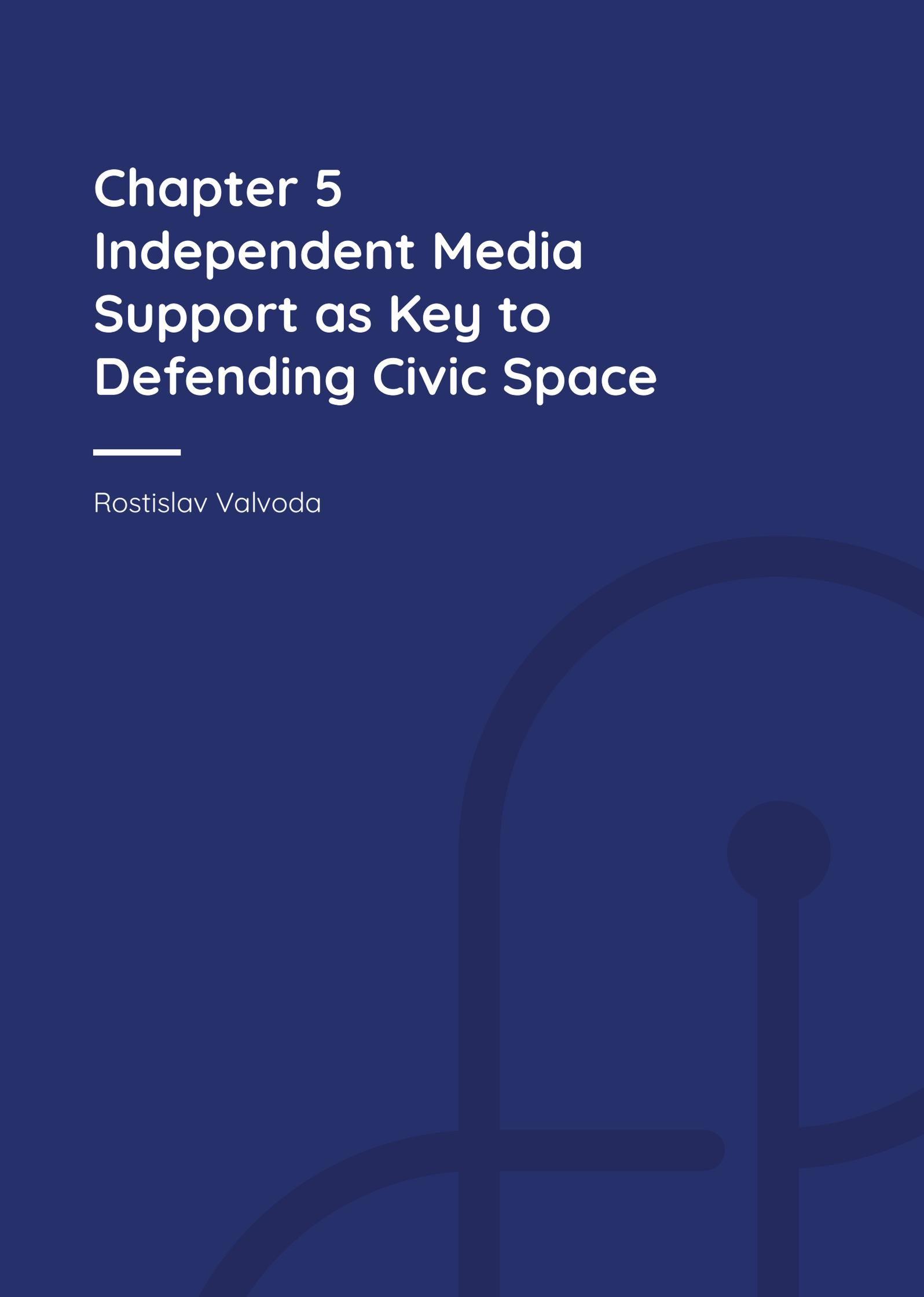
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# Chapter 5

## Independent Media Support as Key to Defending Civic Space

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Rostislav Valvoda



# Independent Media Support as Key to Defending Civic Space

— Rostislav Valvoda

The wave of repressive legislation globally is just one symptom of democratic regression and the sharpened contest for power between democracies and autocracies. Compared with the 1990s, when democracy seemed to have won this global competition and many thought its advance inevitable, today we face consolidated and powerful autocracies. They have developed economically stable models of state capitalism that give them the resources not only to crack down on domestic dissent but also to project power beyond their borders ever more aggressively. How the contest between democracies and autocracies plays out over the coming decades will affect the freedom and quality of civic space in every corner of the world.

In the information space, states such as China, Iran, and Russia have professionalised the use of propaganda, combining state media with covert social media operations to distort public debate at home and abroad. Their objective is not simply to manage public opinion but to undermine trust in democratic institutions more broadly. We are, in effect, confronting “autocrats international” – a loose but potent network of regimes, proxy actors, and digital mercenaries who collaborate in shaping narratives and suppressing dissent. What is more, these transnational efforts often exacerbate real, domestic weaknesses in democracies, boost polarisation on issues where discord occurs naturally, and exploit the social or political vulnerabilities of free societies.

At the domestic level, autocratic governments have tightened their grip on independent media. In 2025, the European Union System for an Enabling Environment for Civil Society (EU SEE) received numerous alerts of attacks on critical media. In Ecuador, Benin, Hong Kong, Venezuela, and Burundi, governments and regulators have imposed regulatory suspensions, criminal prosecutions and censorship, often justified through national security, regulatory compliance, or public order narratives.<sup>72</sup>

## The rationale for a shift in approach

Addressing the issue of closing civic space therefore requires more than a focus on a specific set of repressive legislation. It requires a rethink of the broader democracy-assistance toolkit and approach. Over the past decades, democracy assistance often had nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) at its core. The idea was that watchdog organisations are best positioned to ensure democratic change and protect civic space. While supporting watchdogs remains necessary, it is not enough when the public sphere itself is increasingly saturated with manipulated information. Defending democratic civic space now depends on strengthening the information ecosystems that underpin it. Independent media should therefore be regarded as a central pillar of any effort to counter the shrinking of civic space.

More broadly, democratic transformation depends on three interlocking elements: a vibrant civil society; a viable political opposition; and resilient, independent media. Each element reinforces the others. Civil society holds governments accountable and mobilises citizens; opposition movements translate civic energy into political alternatives; and independent media provide the shared space where facts are established, debate occurs, and those in power are scrutinised.

Strategic investment in media is therefore not an optional add-on to democracy support. It is the most direct way to safeguard civic space, resist disinformation, and sustain pluralism. In practical terms, that means embedding media support alongside traditional governance and civil society programming. This is even more urgent in a world where US democracy assistance has been almost zeroed out and the very existence of broadcasters such as Radio Free Europe or Voice of America is threatened.

### **The global context: authoritarian coordination**

The new challenge for democracy assistance is that the fight over truth itself has become transnational. As the Committee to Protect Journalists notes, 2024 was the deadliest year for journalists in its history.<sup>73</sup> At the same time, the world is witnessing sophisticated information operations at scale – from Russian interference in western elections to coordinated online harassment of journalists in southeast Asia and Latin America. Disinformation networks cross borders with ease, while independent media often struggle to survive within them.

Authoritarian regimes now share not just ideology but infrastructure: troll farms, censorship software, surveillance exports, and influence campaigns. Beijing's state media amplify Moscow's narratives on Ukraine, Tehran has adopted Russian digital tactics, and even small autocracies borrow playbooks for media capture. The effect is cumulative: an information environment saturated with cynicism and confusion, where truth competes on unequal terms.

For democracy-assistance actors, this presents both a crisis and an opportunity. On the one hand, traditional NGO-based programmes are easily neutralised when governments shut down public assembly or criminalise foreign funding. On the other hand, digital technology offers new entry points for engagement. Independent media – whether inside a country or in exile – can still reach audiences, build trust, and maintain the flow of verified information long after other institutions are silenced. This reality compels a strategic shift: to view the media sector not as a nice-to-have but as critical democratic infrastructure. Just as we invest in cybersecurity or election integrity, we must now invest in the integrity of the information space itself.

### **The opportunity: a new media landscape**

Fifty years ago, in repressive countries, independent journalism could be done at scale only by large, foreign-funded broadcasters transmitting across borders: Radio Free Europe, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), and others. Today, technology has decentralised that model entirely. A small team of journalists can reach millions using a mix of YouTube and other social

media and podcasting. Cloud storage and encrypted messaging have also turned exile operations into transnational newsrooms.

This shift has produced an extraordinary diversity of actors. In nearly every society, including very authoritarian ones, there exists a whole ecosystem of independent media and voices – from traditional investigative outlets to individual content creators who practise journalism through short-form video, data visualisation, or live streams. These hybrids often blur the line between reporting and advocacy, yet they embody the same democratic impulse: to inform, to question, to expose.

Take Azerbaijan, an authoritarian regime that has cracked down repeatedly, and ever harder, on political opposition, civil society, and journalists. And yet, this is the country where Meydan TV has evolved over the past decade, a pioneering Azerbaijani-language independent outlet that, while based in exile, commands audiences of millions at home across multiple platforms.<sup>74</sup> It has become a household name by consistently standing up for ordinary citizens and uncovering daily social injustices in a dictatorship.

In Belarus, a country that has never seen much political freedom since the 1990s, an entirely pro-democracy ecosystem of bloggers and Telegram channels has gradually emerged over past decade that could outcompete official state propaganda by reaching millions of users. This ecosystem of independent voices and media played a crucial role in triggering the vast pro-democracy protests in 2020 after another rigged election by Belarus's dictator.

In Kyrgyzstan, Kloop, originally established as a journalism school for students, gradually grew into the country's leading investigation outlet.<sup>75</sup> Kloop went on to partner with global media organisations such as Bellingcat and the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project and break hard-hitting stories about high-profile corruption that shook the country.<sup>76</sup>

In Russia over the last decade, a whole sector of independent investigative outlets has emerged, along with mass-audience independent media and a plethora of content creators. And before Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, many outlets built successful models that relied on audience monetisation, subscriptions, and crowdfunding, despite harassment and pressure from the authorities.

Across the board, even in the most repressive societies, these examples highlight the quiet success of the independent media sector. Despite repression and chronic underfunding, the sector continues to grow in professionalism and reach while demonstrating a mixture of creativity, innovation, and resilience. This success merits sustained and collaborative donor engagement.

Perhaps the most impressive case of the impact of collaborative donor assistance in an emergency is Ukraine, a free country where most of the media landscape, rather healthily, did not have to rely on donor support. In 2022, in the early days of Russia's full-scale invasion, experts predicted that more than half of Ukrainian outlets would disappear, undermining the integrity of the country's information space – so critical in wartime. Advertising markets, which sustained most independent

media, collapsed overnight; newsrooms lost staff because of the military mobilisation; and the economy was in freefall. Yet, the worst-case scenario never occurred.

Apart from the incredible courage and resilience of Ukrainian journalists and media themselves, another factor was at play. Within weeks, emergency funding from a multitude of donors started flowing in, and by mid-2024, Ukraine's media had received millions of euros in assistance. Not a single major national outlet collapsed, and many regained their commercial income within a year. Emergency support bought time for adaptation, and adaptation restored sustainability.

## Time to act

The European Union (EU) and other major donors have started to integrate media into democracy-support frameworks, but too often as an add-on to civil society programmes. As authoritarian regimes further restrict civic space, making previous large, sophisticated, ambitious NGO reform programmes close to impossible, there is a better option than simply cutting back on overall democracy support. Independent media, in country or in exile, represent a strategic investment in maintaining a crucial pro-democracy discourse even in authoritarian contexts.

Much, however, depends on what assistance is delivered and how. Donors and intermediaries sometimes tend to force priorities or collaboration that serves their own interests rather than those of independent media outlets. What is more, sometimes only a very small portion of the funding available actually reaches the budgets of the media outlets it is supposed to serve. That is wrong. We should recognise the independent media sector for what it has become in many countries: seasoned media professionals who maintain solid journalism standards even in propaganda-dominated environments, keep innovating on the go, and overcome censorship while engaging large audiences that many independent media in free countries could only envy.

While some amount of technical assistance, especially on visas, relocation, cybersecurity, and emergency needs, is clearly necessary, what many independent media need most – especially in repressive contexts where authorities have gone to serious lengths to defund them – is just an additional revenue stream. Donor assistance which upholds editorial independence can play a significant role. An example of this is the EU-funded Free Media Hub East, a consortium of European organisations to support independent media from Belarus and Russia in exile.<sup>77</sup> While this consortium provides critical services, such as visa support, relocation assistance, psychological help, and tailored capacity building, it also guarantees that more than 70 per cent of the overall funding is regranting directly to individual media outlets to continue producing content.

Donors can draw on a range of funding mechanisms to support independent media and civic actors. Flexible, ideally multiyear core funding remains essential as it enables outlets to plan ahead, retain staff, and invest in innovation. Alongside this, more targeted, project-based support can address specific needs, such as digital security or investigative capacity. However, as overall democracy-assistance budgets – most notably from the US – shrink, it becomes vital to ensure that resources reach those working on the ground. Donors should consider setting clear quotas or requirements for how much of each grant flows to local partners rather than being absorbed

by large implementing organisations. Only by ensuring that funds strengthen local capacity, not administrative overheads, can democracy support remain credible and effective.

Additionally, when technical assistance is needed, it can be regranted to a media outlet. The donor provides funding to the outlet's budget earmarked for technical assistance. The outlet then arranges an in-house training session with an expert suggested either by the donor or by the outlet itself. This ensures greater ownership of any technical assistance, more tailoring to the needs of specific teams, and higher chances that the programme will result in real change in the organisation – particularly in comparison to traditional implementer-led and -organised training sessions for multiple organisations.

We should also recognise that independent media are not passive beneficiaries: they are innovators. One example among many is Meduza, a major Russian independent media outlet that has recently launched its new book-publishing arm. With the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, most Russian independent media were forced into exile, as were many authors and famous literary figures who spoke out against the war, while their books were pulled from sale in the country. Meduza started publishing books that could not be published in Russia. This smart expansion has brought not just a new revenue stream but, more importantly, a chance to reach a broader audience with a pro-democracy message.

## A smarter model for democracy assistance and civic space

Independent media are not a luxury; as both guardians and platforms of civic space, they underpin democratic resilience. They amplify civil society work, counter authoritarian narratives, and sustain public trust. Watchdogs and other civil society organisations alone cannot carry the weight of democratic transition in an age of digital distortion. Independent media should stand as a key pillar in democracy assistance.

This means treating journalism as strategic infrastructure – protected, funded, and integrated into democracy policy. It means shifting from short-term training towards long-term investment, and it means acknowledging that defending independent journalism is not merely about the freedom of expression; it is about safeguarding democratic space and legitimacy itself.

The next decade will determine whether the world's democracies can resist the global tide of authoritarian influence. If we fail to secure a free information space, multiple other freedoms will falter. But if we place independent media at the core of democracy assistance – resourced to inform, connect, and empower citizens – we stand a far better chance of keeping democracy resilient and real.

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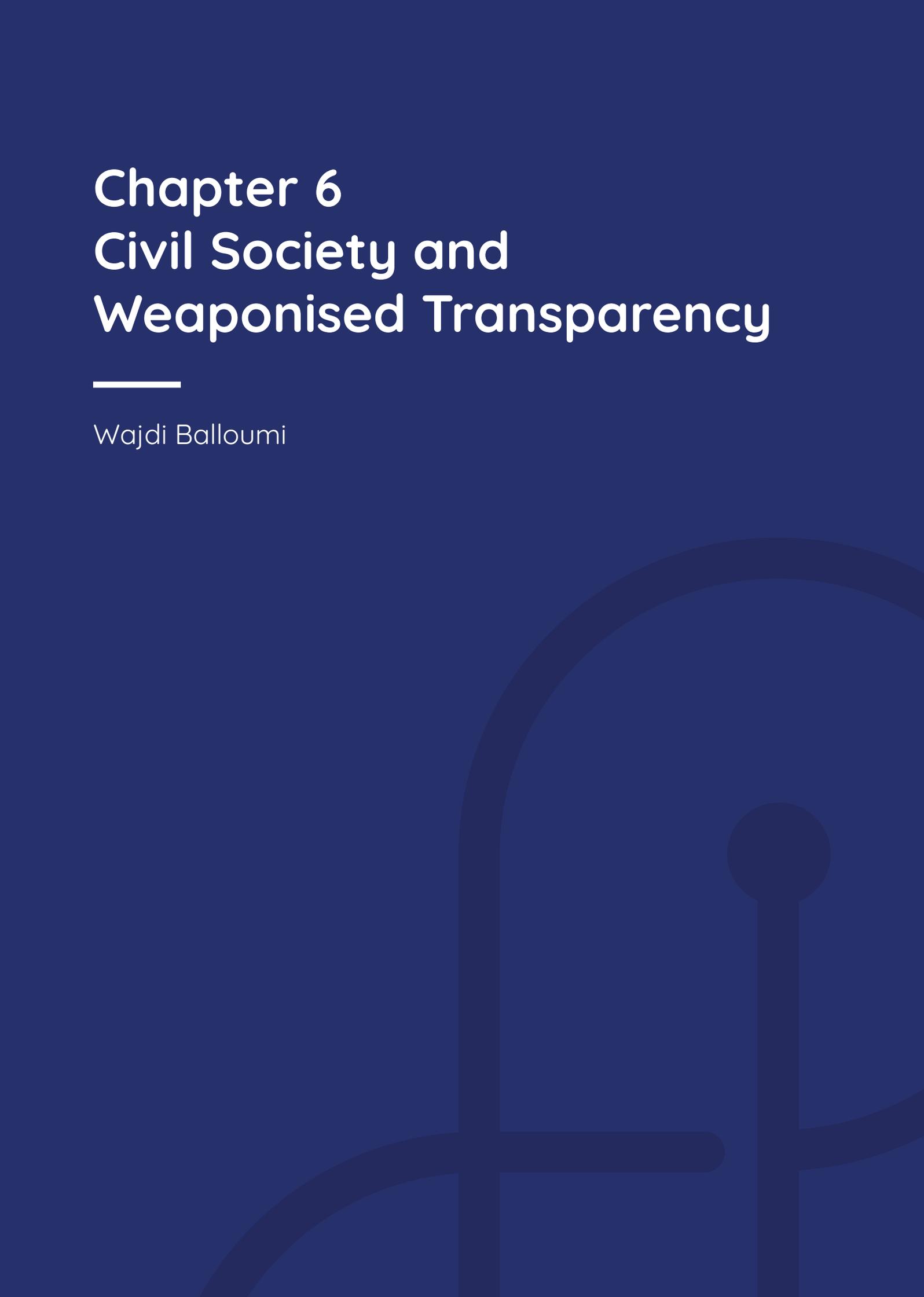
# Chapter 6

# Civil Society and

# Weaponised Transparency

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Wajdi Balloumi



# Civil Society and Weaponised Transparency

— Wajdi Balloumi

Civil society organisations (CSOs) have long pressed for transparency as a cornerstone of democratic governance and civic legitimacy. In itself, however, transparency is neither neutral nor inherently empowering; it is a contested terrain shaped by power struggles, political intent, and institutional context.

When it is strategically cultivated, CSOs can use transparency to bolster their legitimacy, build public trust in their work, and enhance their organisational resilience. Yet increasingly, authoritarian regimes worldwide are abusing demands for transparency to justify their surveillance, suppression, and discrediting of CSOs. In the face of this weaponised transparency, CSOs' current reactive approach is dangerously inadequate. Instead, civil society must urgently adopt pre-emptive transparency strategies.

This chapter sets out why and how CSOs can move from reactive to pre-emptive transparency as well as the challenges and risks this entails. It uses examples from Tunisia and other countries to show how regimes have weaponised transparency and how civil society has sought to adjust.

## Weaponised transparency

The concept of weaponised transparency describes a perversion of transparency in which states use demands for openness and disclosure not to promote accountability or the public good but to control, intimidate, and dismantle independent civil society. To do so, states deploy bureaucratic, legal, and rhetorical mechanisms that burden, delegitimise, and paralyse organisations.<sup>78</sup> These mechanisms may include:

- complex registration procedures, onerous reporting obligations, and operational requirements that drain resources and morale;
- invasive disclosure demands under the guise of oversight, such as forcing organisations to hand over donor lists, beneficiary details, or staff information; or
- baseless, politically motivated audits and prolonged investigations, including selectively targeting critical organisations that exercise oversight over government activities and leaking or distorting the findings to fuel smear campaigns.

In repressive regimes, such as in Tunisia and Egypt, vague laws allow arbitrary enforcement, leaving organisations perpetually vulnerable, while compliance drains energy and resources from their core missions. In such contexts, reactive compliance is especially risky: it traps CSOs in a defensive posture of ceding the initiative to the state. Worse, bureaucratic burdens and inconclusive investigations are often framed as proof of wrongdoing, which feeds narratives that CSOs are corrupt or parasitic – even when their names have been cleared.<sup>79</sup>

In Tunisia, civil society flourished during the postrevolutionary boom; yet CSOs' transparency practices were often donor-driven and technocratic, focusing on external reporting requirements – financial statements, log frames, and monitoring and evaluation systems – rather than on local legitimacy.<sup>80</sup> Many CSOs viewed transparency as a bureaucratic hurdle instead of a mission-driven value, and sector-wide self-regulation was minimal. While some organisations developed good practices, others operated informally and with limited disclosure, assuming that democratic gains were secure.<sup>81</sup> Few invested in preparing for crises, such as digital attacks, legal harassment, or smear campaigns, leaving civil society deeply exposed when political conditions shifted dramatically in July 2021.<sup>82</sup>

Following Tunisian President Kais Saied's power grab, weaponised transparency moved from theory to practice. CSOs found themselves scrambling to meet invasive new demands for transparency without the track record of proactive openness that they needed to counter smears. Watchdogs like I Watch became prime targets, facing dozens of administrative inquiries and judicial investigations into their funding and operations.<sup>83</sup> These measures were designed less to uncover misconduct than to deplete resources, divert attention, and undermine credibility.<sup>84</sup> Similar tactics were deployed against human rights groups, migrant-support organisations, and advocates of judicial independence, embedding fear and self-censorship across the sector.

## From reactive to pre-emptive transparency

When CSOs accept standards that are imposed through state coercion, they risk being relegated to the untenable position of reactive compliance. To avoid this, CSOs need to proactively define and practise transparency, grounding it in accountability to their missions and communities. By modelling transparency as a voluntary commitment to democratic values and public trust, CSOs can reshape the narrative: from transparency as a punitive measure for silencing dissent to transparency as a marker of integrity and legitimacy. This is especially vital in environments saturated with propaganda and attacks, in which legitimacy is civil society's most valuable asset – the basis for public support, donor confidence, and moral authority.

Demonstrating financial integrity, strong governance, ethical decision-making, and measurable impact not only fortifies CSOs against accusations of corruption or mismanagement but also allows them to credibly declare: “Our books are open, our processes are sound, and our commitment is to the people.” In this way, proactive transparency becomes a shield against the recurring charges of “foreign interference” used to discredit critical voices.<sup>85</sup>

Pre-emptive transparency requires moving beyond simple disclosure to a range of integrated, strategic actions designed to proactively build resilience and legitimacy. CSOs can implement pre-emptive transparency through several measures, described below.

### **Self-regulation and voluntary codes of conduct**

One way in which CSOs can implement pre-emptive transparency is by self-regulating and adopting voluntary codes of conduct that exceed state demands. They can establish a record of openness by publishing accessible annual reports, audited financial statements, and strategic plans; they can demonstrate ethical maturity by strengthening internal governance with clear conflict-of-interest rules, oversight bodies, and whistleblower protections; and they can collaborate on sector-wide codes of ethics that set shared standards for financial management, fundraising, programme delivery, and staff conduct. Together, these practices allow organisations to claim transparency as their own, reinforcing legitimacy and trust while blunting state accusations of secrecy or misconduct.

In Tunisia, organisations that had invested in proactive transparency, like I Watch, were better able to resist state attempts to delegitimise civil society following the post-2021 political tightening. Despite facing relentless investigations, travel bans, and defamation campaigns, I Watch had a consistent record of publishing audited reports, maintaining clear governance structures, and openly communicating its activities, which provided tangible evidence that could counter accusations.<sup>86</sup> Transparency thus became not only a normative value but also a strategic safeguard, reinforcing legitimacy at home and abroad.

### **Coalition building for collective standards and defence**

Isolation increases vulnerability. To guard against this, CSOs must forge coalitions to set collective standards and strengthen their defence. Through joint declarations, shared ethical toolkits, and public campaigns, they can amplify their voices, present a united front against repression, and assert themselves as the legitimate authority on accountability. Coalitions have the potential to foster the sharing of knowledge and the pooling of resources – such as reporting templates, audit practices, training, and strategies for navigating repression – reducing duplication and enhancing collective capacity. At the regional and international levels, solidarity networks can also share their experiences, leverage advocacy, and provide moral support. When managed carefully to avoid “foreign agent” stigmatisation, these connections become crucial for risk pooling and mutual learning.<sup>87</sup>

In Tunisia, following Saied’s decision on 25 July 2021 to dismiss the government and freeze parliament, collaboration became essential for CSOs to share information, coordinate their legal defences, and defend civic space. In response to escalating threats to fundamental freedoms and human rights, the Tunisian Network for Rights and Freedoms was launched in September 2024 as a coalition of CSOs and political parties committed to protecting democracy, the rule of law, and civic space.<sup>88</sup> Its objectives include safeguarding the freedoms of expression, association, and assembly while defending activists, journalists, and human rights defenders from repression.

The coalition continues to mobilise public opinion, drive advocacy campaigns, and challenge restrictive policies while serving as a platform for resource pooling, legal coordination, and mutual protection.<sup>89</sup> These connections, coupled with building domestic coalitions and fostering context-aware approaches to transparency and security, strengthened community trust and enabled the development of collective counterstrategies to common state tactics.

### **Smart communication and public engagement**

Transparency is meaningless if information is inaccessible or incomprehensible. For this reason, strategic communication is essential. Rather than rely on data dumps or dense reports, CSOs must translate their technical information – such as financial data and impact metrics – into clear, engaging narratives through infographics, videos, social media, and community meetings. Communication should prioritise local legitimacy by explaining how transparency safeguards resources for community benefit, anchoring legitimacy at the grassroots level, and reaching communities through trusted channels like local radio, community centres, and accessible online platforms. Equally important is proactive narrative building: consistently telling the story of the organisation’s work, values, and impact, highlighting local roots and independence, and preemptively countering state disinformation with clear, factual messaging on funding, ethics, and purpose.

For instance, in Kenya, the civil society initiative Viwango focuses on promoting organisational excellence and accountability through self-regulation and voluntary certification. Using a set of eight standards with around 60 indicators, Viwango offers CSOs the opportunity to achieve certification that reflects their adherence to good governance, resource management, and stakeholder-engagement practices. It also provides self-assessment tools and capacity-building support.

Meanwhile in India, Voluntary Action Network India (VANI), a network of development organisations, promotes sector-wide accountability. It supports member organisations with training, workshops, advocacy, and guidance on regulatory compliance while enabling adoption of the Global Standard accountability principles in India. VANI serves as a bridge between grassroots organisations, national stakeholders, and international networks, helping strengthen internal governance and transparency practices across India’s diverse and complex civil society landscape.

### **Digital security and confidentiality measures**

In today’s climate of intensified surveillance online and offline, maintaining robust digital hygiene is critical to practising safe transparency – and not all information should be publicly disclosed. CSOs must regularly assess vulnerabilities in data storage, communications, and website security. Strong password policies, two-factor authentication, and encrypted communication tools – such as Signal, secure file sharing, and virtual private networks (VPNs) – should also be mandatory.

Embedding security in an organisational culture requires ongoing, practical staff training on digital threats, safe online behaviour, and sensitive information management.<sup>90</sup> Policies on data retention

(including clear deletion schedules) and data minimisation (limiting the unnecessary collection of sensitive data) are equally important for risk reduction. If CSOs are hacked, raided, or legally compelled to hand over their records, then the less potentially compromising information available for authorities to weaponise, the better.

Finally, CSOs should develop and regularly update contingency plans to respond effectively to data breaches, cyber-attacks, raids, or staff arrests. These plans should incorporate secure backups, emergency communication protocols, and designated external contacts – such as trusted lawyers, digital-security experts, allied organisations, journalists, and diplomatic or donor representatives – who can be mobilised rapidly.

In Tunisia, the post-July 2021 crackdown further underscored the centrality of digital security, prompting widespread adoption of encrypted tools, secure communication protocols, and regular staff training. For instance, I Watch introduced a set of internal measures to reduce exposure: staff were required to migrate sensitive communications to end-to-end encrypted platforms, such as Signal. The organisation also implemented tiered access controls for internal documents, ensuring that only staff with a direct operational need could view particularly sensitive files, and established “clean desk” protocols to prevent accidental disclosure during inspections. This enabled the organisation to remain operational even as the civic environment became increasingly hostile.

## Challenges and risks of pre-emptive transparency

While pre-emptive transparency is a strategic necessity, it also presents complex challenges and inherent risks that CSOs must continually navigate. These are explored below.

### Overexposure

A primary concern is the risk of overexposure: hostile actors can exploit the information that CSOs share, manipulating even ethically disclosed donor data to fuel accusations of “foreign-funded” agendas or sharing sensitive details about beneficiaries, such as political activists or victims of state violence, which can put them at risk of retaliation or harassment.<sup>91</sup> Moreover, financial transparency – though essential – can be twisted to allege corruption or misuse. Thus, striking the right balance between openness and protection demands constant vigilance and nuanced, case-by-case judgment.

### Setting coercive precedents

Compounding this risk is the potential for a state to weaponise voluntary transparency practices. Authoritarian regimes may co-opt widely adopted measures, such as publishing internal governance procedures or board minutes, by later mandating them by law, turning good-faith efforts into compulsory tools of control and surveillance.<sup>92</sup> This creates a difficult dilemma: how can organisations operate good governance without handing authoritarian regimes a blueprint for repression? Awareness of this dynamic is crucial, as are carefully calibrated disclosure practices, alongside ongoing advocacy of transparency principles.

In this context, CSOs should adopt a disciplined approach: documenting decisions, rationales, and formal motions while avoiding granular operational details, personal identifiers, political commentary, and descriptive debate transcripts. Sensitive discussions, especially those involving security, digital protection, advocacy tactics, whistleblowing, or government relations, should be summarised at a high level or, where appropriate, recorded only as outcomes – without naming individual contributors. By reframing board minutes as instruments of accountability rather than as exhaustive narrative records, CSOs can model sound governance without inadvertently producing documentation that the authorities could repurpose to undermine, intimidate, or divide them.

CSOs can also anticipate potential state responses and develop mitigation strategies in advance by continuously monitoring regulatory trends, studying past patterns of bureaucratic pressure, and preparing contingency plans for how disclosure requirements might be tightened, reframed, or weaponised over time. This forward-looking approach allows CSOs to identify early signals – such as draft legislation, administrative circulars, or rhetorical shifts in official discourse – and adjust their transparency practices before they become points of vulnerability.

### **Capacity limitations**

Another challenge lies in the inequality of transparency demands. Sophisticated transparency and security measures require substantial financial, technical, and human resources. While large international CSOs or well-established local groups may manage these demands, smaller grassroots organisations often lack the capacity to implement professional audits, maintain secure information-technology infrastructure, or provide comprehensive security training.<sup>93</sup> Without adequate support, imposing even voluntary transparency standards risks creating a two-tier system that marginalises the very community-embedded groups that are often the most vital – and the most vulnerable. Designing scalable strategies to implement pre-emptive transparency, backed by capacity building, such as training, sharing digital tools, legal guidance, and funding, is therefore essential to avoid deepening inequalities in civil society.

In Tunisia, some CSOs have already begun creating peer-to-peer mentorship networks to help smaller or newly established associations to navigate increasingly complex compliance and security expectations, including by sharing policy templates, risk-assessment tools, and communication strategies. These horizontal learning structures allow organisations with more institutional experience to support youth-led or governorate-based groups that may lack legal literacy, digital-security capacity, or familiarity with donor-reporting standards. At the same time, specialised organisations have provided critical legal support to civil society actors summoned for questioning or subject to administrative investigations, including offering lawyers to accompany them during hearings or interrogations, advising on their rights, and ensuring that due-process guarantees are respected.

### **Psychological strain**

Beyond structural challenges, there is also a significant psychological burden on CSO staff and volunteers. Operating under constant scrutiny, in an environment in which every document or

communication might be weaponised, exacts a heavy toll. The fear of misinterpretation, pressure to maintain flawless documentation, and threat of being targeted can lead to chronic stress, anxiety, self-censorship, burnout, and, ultimately, loss of talent from the sector.<sup>94</sup> Cultivating a supportive organisational culture that recognises these pressures and provides psychosocial support is critical for sustainability.

At I Watch, staff wellbeing has increasingly involved adopting flexible working arrangements that acknowledge the pressures of operating under heightened scrutiny. During periods of public visibility, online harassment, or regulatory inquiries, staff have been permitted to work remotely to reduce exposure and anxiety, and internal deadlines have been adjusted when compliance demands trigger unexpected workload spikes. Management has also adopted a more generous approach to leave requests, especially after intensive reporting or audit cycles.

### **Donor expectations**

Finally, balancing donor expectations adds another layer of complexity. International funders often impose stringent transparency and reporting requirements on CSOs, which, while important for accountability, may not always align with the safety risks and strategic realities of operating in a shrinking civic space.<sup>95</sup> Navigating this tension demands ongoing dialogue and mutual understanding between CSOs and their donors, ensuring accountability without compromising organisational security or mission effectiveness.

Tunisian associations are increasingly navigating this tension through clear, proactive communication with donors and by explaining what can realistically be executed in the current restrictive environment. As donors observe how conditions have deteriorated, many have shown willingness to adjust their expectations, allowing organisations to pivot their activities, revise their deliverables, reduce the publication of sensitive details, and/or reallocate resources towards digital security and staff wellbeing.

## **Conclusion**

For civil society actors, the imperative is clear: a passive or purely reactive approach to transparency is dangerously inadequate. Proactive, pre-emptive transparency – defined by voluntary standards and rooted in ethical values, self-regulation, smart and accessible communication, robust security, and strong internal governance – offers a pathway to survival and continued impact. It also allows CSOs to define accountability on their own terms, build crucial public trust, defend themselves against state smears, and demonstrate integrity.

However, this approach demands constant vigilance and sophisticated navigation. The risks of overexposure, setting coercive precedents, capacity limitations, psychological strain, and donor expectations are real and must be actively managed. Transparency must be inclusive, avoid marginalising smaller grassroots actors, adapt to changing threats, and – above all – be rooted in the local context and community legitimacy.

Ultimately, strategic transparency needs to transcend mere information disclosure. It is not about revealing everything; it is about demonstrating unwavering integrity, reclaiming the narrative from those who seek to demonise independent voices, and defending the fundamental rights to exist, associate, and advocate freely. By proactively shaping transparency norms and making transparency a voluntary expression of values rather than a coerced act of compliance, civil society can build resilience, maintain legitimacy, and continue its essential work – even as the space around it constricts.

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# Chapter 7

## Reframing the Politics of Civil Society Support

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Anna Khakee

The background of the page is a solid dark blue. In the lower half, there is a large, faint, abstract graphic composed of thick white lines. It features a large arch on the right side, a vertical line extending downwards from the center of the arch, and a horizontal line crossing the vertical one. The overall impression is that of a stylized architectural or structural element.

# Reframing the Politics of Civil Society Support

— Anna Khakee

In recent decades, many donors have argued that there is an international legal right to foreign funding, but this has not been effective in halting the assault on civil society organisations (CSOs). This approach now faces stronger headwinds because of the shift away from a liberal world order as norm competition deepens between democratic and illiberal or nondemocratic regimes. At the same time, many western democratic states have tightened funding rules for their civil society to defend themselves against destabilisation efforts by Russia and other powers. As Javier Sajuria notes in this report, other countries accuse western governments of double standards and the foreign funding of civil society has become further politicised.

It is time to move away from the longstanding framing of civil society and democracy support as largely apolitical. Donors need to be more upfront about the political nature of civil society support and the fact that democracy support is about politics and not only, or even primarily, legally enshrined rights – even more so now when the liberal order is increasingly contested. Civil society activists do politics by other means, and democracy supporters should make no bones about this.

Being clear about why and when democracy support is provided – that is, only when it is in a donor’s enlightened self-interest to do so – could also make life easier for recipients. To build on Poonam Joshi’s argument in this report, this can enable the latter to move from a defensive, reactive argument to a proactive, positive one: “We share the same values, we fight for the same causes and against the same adversaries, and our partnership involves the sharing of know-how and resources.” It also tackles the longstanding and well-known fact that democracy support is targeted unevenly, depending on the political and strategic priorities of the states providing it.

## An international legal right to foreign funding?

As noted in several chapters of this report, there are increasing restrictions on, as well as stigmatisation of, civil society actors that receive foreign funding. Donors have reacted by defending the right of CSOs to do so. However, in international law, the case for this is far from watertight. What is more, in the current political climate, pushing for such an expansive reading of human rights when the core of the agenda is threatened is a risky strategy.

The freedom of association is firmly enshrined in international law. It is reiterated in all the major international human rights instruments, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and thematic conventions, such as

those on the rights of women, children, and people with disabilities.<sup>96</sup> The three most relevant International Labour Organization (ILO) instruments, including the Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise Convention, reiterate the freedom to associate.<sup>97</sup> But apart from one of the ILO conventions, which restricts employers' right to finance trade unions, these international instruments are silent on the issue of funding for civil society in general and foreign funding in particular. Whether a right to foreign funding can be deduced from the general right to associate freely remains debated.<sup>98</sup>

This is reflected in soft law, too. The United Nations (UN) Declaration on Human Rights Defenders states the right "to solicit, receive and utilize resources for the express purpose of promoting and protecting human rights and fundamental freedoms" in accordance with domestic law but does not mention foreign funding.<sup>99</sup> Similarly, whether the freedom to "solicit and receive voluntary financial and other contributions from individuals and institutions" mentioned in the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief includes foreign sources is not spelled out.<sup>100</sup>

Interpreting international conventions is complex. In his report to the UN Human Rights Council in 2012, then UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and of Association Maina Kiai stated that "the right to freedom of association not only includes the ability of individuals or legal entities to form and join an association but also to seek, receive and use resources human, material and financial – from domestic, foreign, and international sources".<sup>101</sup> He also deemed bans on foreign funding to be contrary to international human rights law. A decade later, his successor, Clément Nyaletsossi Voule, made a similar case.<sup>102</sup>

Human Rights Council resolution 22/6 of 2013 and later ones have called on states to ensure that reporting requirements they introduce "do not discriminatorily impose restrictions on potential sources of funding" and that "no law should criminalize or delegitimize activities in defence of human rights on account of the origin of funding thereto".<sup>103</sup>

However, the legal standing of such documents is weak. UN special rapporteur statements and Human Rights Council resolutions are heavily disputed, including by western democracy-promoting states. Kiai's report was strongly contested by several non-western countries.<sup>104</sup> As noted by Annika Elena Poppe and Jonas Wolff, the right to self-determination is prominently emphasised in article 1 of the ICCPR, making it a fundamental human right on a par with the freedom of association.<sup>105</sup> Self-determination and sovereignty are often used to justify restrictions on foreign funding. As a consequence, from the perspective of international human rights law, it seems difficult to maintain, as some have attempted to do, that there is a legal right to foreign funding.<sup>106</sup>

The situation is somewhat different at the European level. The European Court of Human Rights (ECrHR) and the European Court of Justice have ruled against bans on foreign funding. The 2014 Joint Guidelines on Freedom of Association of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe and the Council of Europe's Venice Commission also include favourable language on foreign funding for CSOs.<sup>107</sup> At the same time, the ECrHR has emphasised in one of its rulings that "foreign involvement in some sensitive areas – such as elections or funding of political movements

– may justify stricter regulation or restrictions by the State, as to ensure the transparency of [nongovernmental organisations] receiving substantial foreign funding is a legitimate aim”.<sup>108</sup>

In the current geopolitical landscape, it is highly unlikely that states would agree to enshrine a right to foreign funding at the international level. And, as there are many current and looming battles over protecting already established fundamental human rights, picking foreign funding as an additional fight probably will not help safeguard the international human rights order.

### Political versus civil society

It is no longer convincing to frame civil society support as apolitical. While clearly many types of CSOs operate primarily outside the political space and are fundamentally different from political movements, this is not the case for advocacy-oriented CSOs. Taking part in political debate is the very essence of the latter’s mandate. Many have noted that foreign-supported CSOs are often closer, and sometimes very close, to certain political forces and parties while opposing others.<sup>109</sup> Similarly, democracy support has sometimes been criticised for going to “government-organized non-governmental organizations”, which are part of the political space. In short, it is not uniformly easy to draw a line between political and civil society.<sup>110</sup>

Key democracy-promoting actors are also cases in point. The National Democratic Institute and the International Republican Institute are usually labelled as nongovernmental organisations, but they are directly affiliated to the two main political parties in the United States and, until recently, were mostly publicly funded.<sup>111</sup> They were modelled on Germany’s political foundations, which are also largely funded by the country’s public purse.<sup>112</sup> These have traditionally worked with like-minded parties abroad as well as collaborating with CSOs.

It is generally accepted that in a democratic society, political parties should not receive any type of support, including financial or in kind, from foreign governments, companies, or individuals.<sup>113</sup> Restrictions on foreign funding for religious associations are also increasingly perceived as legitimate. Banning foreign funding for political parties is common across the world and across regime types.<sup>114</sup> There is also broad agreement that doing so is good practice. For instance, the Venice Commission – a leading intergovernmental advisory body on constitutional matters in democracies – states that enacting such restrictions “is in the interest of avoiding undue influence of foreign interests in domestic political affairs”. As noted above, the ECtHR came to a similar conclusion.<sup>115</sup> In a 2023 report, Voule also excluded such funding for political parties.<sup>116</sup>

Governments use overlaps between civil and political society to justify restrictions on foreign funding for CSOs, including in democracies. Instead of denying this reality, democracy supporters would gain from accepting and owning it. After all, how the fight for democracy should be structured, how rights should be prioritised and interpreted, and what strategies and alliances should be built in the process are deeply political decisions.

## Foreign-funding regulations in democracy-supporting states

Since at least the early 2010s, there has been a movement in democratic states to restrict foreign funding for CSOs, sometimes in the context of broader controls on civil society.<sup>117</sup> This is, at least in part, linked to increased norm competition at the international level and to the attempts by some authoritarian and illiberal powers to destabilise democracies.

Concerns about protecting democracy from such attempts are not new, however. In the US, the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) was passed in 1938 to target Nazi propaganda. It was quite narrowly interpreted between the late 1950s and 2016, but recently civil society advocates have called for reform of the law's "broad" language.<sup>118</sup> Since the revival of its application in 2016 in the context of attempted foreign electoral interference, "nonprofits in the US that receive foreign funding face new uncertainty about whether they need to register and whether the government may use the Act as a tool against those with which they disagree".<sup>119</sup> The precedent of FARA has been used to justify similarly worded laws in much more repressive contexts. For example, according to the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law, "significant sections of [Nicaragua's 'foreign agent' law] seem to be copied verbatim from FARA".<sup>120</sup>

Registration is often the method of choice for ensuring control and transparency of foreign funding. Under the United Kingdom's National Security Act of 2023, CSOs involved in some types of "political influence activities" have to register when receiving funds from foreign governments.<sup>121</sup> The European Union (EU) Defence of Democracy Package proposed in 2023 – particularly the directive on interest-representation services on behalf of third countries – includes registration, reporting, and disclosure requirements for CSOs that receive funding from foreign governments and are involved in certain types of lobbying and other activities.<sup>122</sup> Some 230 CSOs have decried the directive as "an EU FARA law" and raised fears that it will lead to a shrinking of civic space in Europe.<sup>123</sup> A similar proposal is under consideration in Canada.<sup>124</sup>

Other laws go further. In Ireland, CSOs are not allowed to accept donations from individuals (other than Irish citizens) residing outside the country that are made for "political purposes". The relevant law has been heavily criticised and is currently under review. In Australia, CSOs that are not registered as charities or trade unions technically fall under the 2018 Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme Act, which bans donations from foreign sources.<sup>125</sup> In Austria, Muslim associations are singled out in law and are not allowed to solicit or receive any foreign funding, unlike actors from other faiths.<sup>126</sup>

Many democratic governments have come to believe that CSOs and faith groups can become targets of undue foreign-influence attempts. Because civil society structures political and societal debate, these governments have concluded that foreign funding must be subject to specific regulation. Authoritarian governments have used the existence of such domestic regulation in several democracy-supporting states as proof of double standards.

## Making a different case for foreign funding of CSOs

There is overwhelming evidence in the academic and think tank literature of how democracy support is subservient to political, economic, and strategic or security interests. This is not lost on leaders, and possibly also publics, in target countries for democracy support. That autocrats, as well as some democratically elected leaders, have found accusations of foreign funding a useful way of scapegoating CSOs indicates that they believe this works – that there is an undercurrent of opposition to, or at least suspicion of, foreign funding.

However, while there has been research on perceptions of democracy promotion among various donor publics and, to a lesser extent, recipient publics, there have been few analyses of perceptions of foreign funding for civil society in recipient countries.<sup>127</sup> The existing studies are mostly not encouraging reading for democracy-supporting actors.<sup>128</sup> This is a crucial point to bear in mind for those who hope to spread a political system based on popular will, and considerably more research on this would be welcome.

Democracy promoters stress that their activities are about the free flow of ideas and not about interests or illegitimate interference. However, when it comes to democracy support by governments, the line between foreign interests and foreign ideas will always be hard to draw. As Thomas Carothers wrote two decades ago, it was perhaps only during a brief period in the 1990s that such democracy promotion was widely seen as detached from conflictual geopolitical frameworks.<sup>129</sup> Since then, there has been a need to “decontaminate” democracy promotion, to decouple it from the geopolitics that makes it suspicious in the eyes of many.

The fact that Carothers’s call to decontaminate democracy support by governments rings equally true today – or even truer given its role in current global normative struggles – begs the question of whether doing so is possible.<sup>130</sup> Perhaps it is better to acknowledge that democracy support, even though couched in international human rights, is more political than rights-based in its implementation, and that it will be subservient to other considerations and pursued when this is in the donor states’ interest – as well as in recipients’ interest to accept it.

## Engaging in values competition overtly

The global illiberal turn has made more urgent the project of democracy and human rights for all those who yearn for it. It has also made this project overtly political. Democracy is no longer, if it ever was, the only game in town, the natural end goal of human societies, or straightforwardly about the apolitical implementation of human rights norms.

There is now a fierce global competition over values, and major nondemocratic and illiberal powers try to weaken liberal democracies and contest many basic human rights. The issue of foreign funding has become a flashpoint in this battle.<sup>131</sup> In the current international context, European states and organisations would do well to reduce their focus on it. They should drop legalistic justifications, since international human rights law does not mention a right to foreign funding

similar to the right to the freedom of association, and the former cannot be easily derived from the latter. Additionally, autocratic states have seized on the enactment of or proposals for foreign-funding regulations in key democracy-promoting states to decry double standards.

European donors should acknowledge openly that they support democracy and human rights not primarily because this is in line with international human rights law but when it is in their enlightened self-interest to do so. Just as democracy support during the cold war was more about defeating communism than about fighting for the peoples under dictatorship, so democracy support today is, in no small measure, about countering old and new adversaries.

Acknowledging openly the political nature of democracy support would take the edge off the accusations of double standards levelled against states that provide it. It would also, albeit partly, address more recent concerns about democracy-supporting states restricting the freedom of expression of some of their partner CSOs in the global south: it will be clearer to recipients of support that, for better or for worse, they are to align with the political outlooks of the donor states.<sup>132</sup>

What about the repressive CSO laws that, beyond clamping down on foreign funding, stymie the freedoms of speech and association, threaten human rights defenders, and hollow out democracy? As Ann Tsurtsumia-Zurabashvili argues in this report, CSOs face serious challenges that touch the heart of the right to the freedom of association. Liberal democracies should take a strong stance, politically and diplomatically, when civil society is thus targeted. As noted by Chrystie F. Swiney, the closing-space literature “heavily focuses on foreign funding laws to the exclusion of all [other restrictions]”.<sup>133</sup> This risks making what should be about those fighting for democracy in difficult environments about the donors instead, which is not a solid premise for supporting democracy.

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# Notes

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## New Approaches to Defending Global Civil Society