HUNGARIAN HELSINKI COMMITTEE

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The Hungarian Helsinki Committee (HHC), founded in 1989, is an independent human rights watchdog dedicated to protecting human dignity through legal and public activities. The Hungarian Helsinki Committee wishes to draw the attention of the Organisation for the Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) to the improvements made by the Hungarian government and the challenges which remain.

Following the change of government, the environment for civil society organisations (CSOs) has improved significantly. In his first parliamentary speech, the Prime Minister apologised to CSOs previously subjected to government attacks, while smear campaigns and stigmatisation have largely disappeared from mainstream public discourse.[1] The new government has also initiated legislative reforms to remove at least some of the regulations that contributed to the shrinking of civic space, and taken steps towards restoring dialogue with civil society.

The change is also reflected in the new institutional framework, which signals a shift towards recognising CSOs as potential partners rather than adversaries. The newly established Ministry of Social Relations and Culture includes a State Secretary for Social Relations and a Deputy State Secretary for Civil Society Relations providing dedicated institutional structures for engagement with civil society.[2]

Several legislative developments have contributed to improving civic space. In June 2026, Parliament adopted legislation abolishing the Sovereignty Protection Office, while the so-called special immigration tax, which had a significant chilling effect despite never being applied, was repealed with effect from 1 January 2027. The controversial draft law on transparency in public life, tabled in May 2025, is also no longer pending before Parliament. Nevertheless, restrictive provisions remain in force, including Section 353/A of the Criminal Code, which was originally introduced to criminalise assistance, including legal assistance to asylum-seekers, only to be amended later solely targeting legal aid providers. The State Audit Office also continues publishing annual summary reports under the 2021 legislation that replaced the Russian-style anti-NGO legislation.

[1] See: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/may/10/hungary-peter-magyar-apologises-to-those-wronged-under-orban-in-first-speech-pm

[2] See: https://kormany.hu/kormanyzat/tarsadalmi-kapcsolatokert-es-kulturaert-felelos-miniszterium

Dialogue between public authorities and civil society has also resumed, although meaningful participation remains inconsistent. In August 2026, the Ministry of Social Relations and Culture consulted numerous CSOs on reforming state funding and developing a comprehensive civil society strategy. In September, Parliament's Committee on Social Participation invited CSOs to register in a database intended to facilitate future legislative consultations. Independent civil society organisations were invited to participate as experts during parliamentary hearings of candidates to leadership positions of the newly established National Asset Recovery and Asset Protection Office. The Ministry of Justice also initiated dialogue with independent CSOs working on the rule of law, democracy and fundamental rights, including in connection with the European Commission's 2026 Rule of Law Report, on which invited CSOs developed a joint position. However, cooperation remains sporadic in key policy areas, while major reforms, including the 17th amendment to the Fundamental Law and changes to public media regulation, proceeded[3]

The government has also begun reviewing and reconsidering the operation of the National Cooperation Fund (NCF), a key mechanism for funding civil society organisations. This process has, in part, been prompted by civil society organisations' sustained advocacy calling for urgent action to address the sector's deteriorating financial situation. An important step towards greater transparency has been the publication of a map showing grants awarded during the previous government's term.[4] Consultations have also begun with CSOs working on civil society funding. However, civil society funding extends beyond the NCF, and a comprehensive review of other funding mechanisms is equally necessary to ensure the sustainability of independent CSOs, many of which have received little or no domestic funding in recent years.

Overall, the new governing majority has taken tangible steps towards improving civic space and rebuilding relations with civil society. However, important challenges remain, particularly the removal of restrictive legislation and the establishment of systematic, transparent and meaningful CSO participation in policymaking and sustainable, transparent financial schemes for CSOs. The forthcoming reforms of state funding and the development of a civil society strategy will be important tests of the government's commitment to sustained cooperation with independent civil society.

Recommendations

The HHC recommends the OSCE and Participating States to:

1. Encourage the Government of Hungary to review and repeal legislation that restricts civic space, including Section 353/A of the Criminal Code, , and the 2021 legislation on the transparency of organisations influencing public life. Ensure that the legal framework fully respects freedom of association and the work of independent civil society organisations and human rights defenders.

2. Call on the Government of Hungary to establish systematic, transparent and meaningful procedures for civil society participation in legislative and policymaking processes, including sufficiently long public consultation periods, early involvement of relevant CSOs in the preparation of legislation and policy reforms, and reasoned feedback explaining how their contributions have been considered.

[3] See: https://helsinki.hu/ujabb-alaptorveny-modositas-olykor-sok-maskor-keves-de-javithato/
[4] See: https://kormany.hu/atlathato/terkep

3. Urge the Government of Hungary to ensure that reforms of the National Cooperation Fund and other public funding mechanisms guarantee transparent, objective and non-discriminatory access to funding, safeguard the independence of civil society organisations and provide equitable opportunities for smaller and grassroots organisations.

4. Provide technical assistance, in coordination with ODIHR, to the Government of Hungary on rebuilding an enabling civic space in Hungary.