
HUNGARIAN
HELSINKI
COMMITTEE
From Political Opening to Lasting Change
Civic Space in Hungary Six Months into the Democratic Transition
NOVEMBER 2026 • POLICY BRIEF
HEINRICH BÖLL STIFTUNG
PRAGUE
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CIVIC SPACE IN HUNGARY SIX MONTHS INTO THE DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION

Executive Summary

Six months after the change of Hungary's government in May 2026, Hungarian civil society is operating in a markedly more open political environment following sixteen years of hostility, stigmatisation and systematic pressure under the Orbán governments. Government-led smear campaigns have receded, access to public institutions and media has improved, and several restrictive measures have been abolished or allowed to lapse, including the Sovereignty Protection Office. However, this political opening has yet to translate into lasting institutional safeguards. Some restrictive laws remain in force, public funding reform is still uncertain, and opportunities for civil society participation in policymaking remain inconsistent, often dependent on the goodwill of individual agencies rather than guaranteed by effective procedures.

The transition also presents new challenges for civil society organisations themselves, who are now expected to move from a predominantly defensive role towards more active advocacy, policy development and potential cooperation with public institutions. Many civil society organisations face depleted capacities and growing financial insecurity, as domestic funding remains unreformed, individual donations decline and international funding opportunities come under pressure. The challenge is therefore to move from political goodwill to systemic change.

The Hungarian Helsinki Committee calls on the Hungarian government, the EU and the Council of Europe to work together to secure lasting improvements in civic space through legislative reform, fair and sustainable public funding, meaningful civil society participation in policymaking, and institutional support for an independent and resilient civil society.

The current political opening offers a rare opportunity to rebuild an independent, diverse and sustainable civil society in Hungary. The next stage of the transition should focus on lasting institutional change, including comprehensive legislative reform, transparent and sustainable public funding mechanisms, and structured public participation avenues.

Budapest, 25 November 2026

Methodology and Scope

This briefing draws on desk research conducted by the Hungarian Helsinki Committee (HHC), alongside eight semi-structured interviews with representatives of domestic civil society organisations. The interviewees represented organisations working in a variety of fields, including women's rights, LGBTQI+ rights, anti-corruption and minority rights, as well as organisations focusing more broadly on the rule of law, fundamental rights and the protection of civic space.

The research examines developments affecting civic space during May-October 2026, focusing on changes in the political and institutional environment, the legal framework, access to public funding, opportunities for public participation and the broader conditions for an inclusive and independent civil society.

The structure of our analysis follows that of the Civil Minimum 2026, a set of civil society priorities for enhancing civic space developed by the Civilizáció coalition. The paper updates and complements this with findings from HHC's own research and interviews. The findings presented here therefore combine documentary and legal analysis with the experiences and perspectives of civil society organisations. Interview findings are presented in an aggregated and anonymised form, reflecting recurring experiences and concerns across the sector.

Towards an enabling legal environment

The most noticeable change since the elections has been the transformation of the political environment in which civil society operates. Under the Orbán-government, independent CSOs were typically portrayed as politically motivated actors, foreign agents or as threats to national interests. This contributed to a hostile public environment and undermined organisations' legitimacy, while also discouraged or blocked cooperation with public institutions.

The Magyar-government brought a clear departure from this narrative. The Prime Minister's powerful public apology in his inaugural parliamentary speech to previously targeted civil society organisations was an important symbolic gesture, signalling a willingness to acknowledge past political hostility. Since the elections, systematic government-led or funded smear campaigns against independent CSOs have disappeared from traditional and online media outlets and have significantly receded in mainstream public discourse.

Beyond these changes in the political environment, interviews revealed the profound emotional impact of the change of government on civil society representatives. Several interviewees described a strong sense of relief and liberation after years of working under constant pressure, uncertainty and fear of further government measures targeting their organisations. Some reflected that it was only after the elections that they fully realised how emotionally exhausting the previous period had been, as they had become accustomed to operating in a constant state of alertness and preparing for potential attacks. The removal of this pressure was described as a significant psychological burden being lifted, bringing a renewed sense of security and optimism. At the same time, some interviewees noted that recovering from the accumulated stress of previous years and adjusting to the new political environment would take time.

From Political Opening to Lasting Change

Since the government took office on 9 May, several legislative developments have contributed to improving civic space.

- In June 2026, Parliament abolished the Sovereignty Protection Office, an institution that had played a significant role in the previous government's pressure on independent organisations and other actors, along with the constitutional provision allowing its creation.
- The special immigration tax, which could create a chilling effect on organisations supporting migration-related activities despite never being applied in practice, was also repealed, with effect from 1 January 2027.
- The May 2025 draft law on the transparency of public life, which would have had a 'starve and strangle' effect on targeted organisations lapsed from the parliamentary agenda with the end of the previous parliamentary cycle.
- The end of the general state of danger and the associated system of governing through emergency government decrees in May 2026 was an important step towards restoring ordinary democratic and parliamentary procedures.

Despite these welcome developments, the legislative legacy of the Orbán-era has not been fully erased.

1. Section 353/A of the Criminal Code; originally introduced in 2018 as part of the 'Stop Soros package' to criminalise certain forms of assistance to asylum-seekers, remains in force in an amended form. Although the provision has not been enforced, its continued existence raises concerns about legal certainty and the potential chilling effect on those providing legal assistance to migrants and asylum-seekers.
2. The 2021 law on the transparency of organisations carrying out activities capable of influencing public life (LexNGO2021) remains in force, with the State Audit Office continuing to publish annual summary reports under its provisions. Government interlocutors have stated the law will be repealed in the coming months, but legislative initiatives have not yet been made public.

Some interviewees also identified the continued existence of these provisions as an outstanding concern. While welcoming the recent legislative changes, they emphasised that repealing the remaining restrictive provisions is necessary to fully dismantle the previous restrictive legal framework.

Moreover, the general legal framework governing civil society organisations continues to impose administrative and reporting obligations that can be particularly burdensome for smaller, often volunteer-based organisations. Associations and foundations are registered by regional courts. CSOs are required to submit annual financial and activity reports, while organisations with public benefit status or receiving public funding face additional reporting obligations, including requirements concerning donations and the use of funds received through the 1 percent personal income tax designation system. These obligations serve legitimate transparency and accountability purposes; however, their complexity and the administrative resources needed for compliance can place a disproportionate burden on smaller organisations with limited administrative capacity.

Towards transparency and sustainability in public funding

Financial sustainability is among the most pressing challenges facing civil society organisations.

Since the establishment of National Cooperation Fund (NCF) in 2012, the Fund has distributed substantial public resources and has been seen as essential to supporting smaller and locally operating organisations, but its operation under previous governments was frequently criticised for favouring politically aligned organisations and reinforcing divisions between 'good' and 'bad' civil society organisations.

When the Ministry published a map showing the distribution of public grants awarded during the Orbán-governments, it revealed indications that funding may have disproportionately benefited civil society organisations with personal, organisational or political ties to the former ruling parties. Some of these organisations had limited track records or little evidence of previous community activities, while established local associations providing valuable cultural, social, sports and advocacy services received significantly less support. However, publishing the list of recipients without reviewing individual funding decisions created suspicions around all local associations. Reform should therefore address not only the composition of the fund's decision-making bodies but also the transparency of selection procedures, the independence of decisionmakers and the fairness of grant allocation.

The Ministry of Social Relations and Culture has initiated a review of the NCF, which has been the central source of public funding to CSOs, following findings of severe corruption as well as sustained advocacy sector. For example, proposals by the Civil Society on a New Foundation have called for changes to NCF's operation and composition, including a potential role for civil society representatives in its decision-making structures. However, governmental intentions to transform the funding system have not yet translated into a clearly communicated reform process. For organisations facing immediate financial difficulties, the delay creates considerable uncertainty. One interviewee described the situation as increasingly precarious, with organisations approaching a critical point while waiting for new funding opportunities and a clearer picture of the future public funding system. This illustrates the gap between the government's stated intention to reform funding mechanisms and the immediate financial needs of organisations working on the ground.

During the Orbán government's sixteen years in office, the distribution of public funding lacked transparency and was widely perceived as politically biased, leaving independent CSOs working on human rights, democracy and other politically sensitive issues with little to no chance of accessing domestic public funding. Hence many increasingly turned to on international and European grants to carry out their activities. This funding model is now facing additional uncertainty, further exposing the sector's financial vulnerability. In 2025, the abrupt end of USAID's Central Europe programme to support civic space, media pluralism and rule of law had significant negative impact for civil society organisations in Hungary as well. In 2026, negotiations on the EU's next 7-year budget (Multiannual Financial Framework, MFF) forecast reductions in EU funding opportunities for civil society working on promoting democracy, fundamental rights and rule of law. In particular, proposed cuts affecting the proposed AgoraEU programme could further shrink European support for civil society organisations. Private philanthropic funding to support civil society organisations in Central and Eastern Europe has not expanded in recent years despite growing challenges and needs.

A positive development in this context is the relaunch of the EEA and Norway Grants' Civil Society Fund in Hungary in 2026, following a prolonged interruption. The programme aims to strengthen independent civil society, support democratic participation and promote the protection of human rights and the rule of

law. Managed by a consortium of local fund operators, it provides funding opportunities for Hungarian civil society organisations across areas including democratic participation, media literacy, human rights, gender equality and environmental protection.

Although in January 2026 the think tank Political Capital found that the majority of Hungarians consider the work of civil society organisations to be important; they are familiar with an increasing number of such organisations, and their willingness to support them is also high, the political turn has brought about uncertainty in terms of financial support from members of the public. With the end of sixteen years of government hostility towards independent civil society organisations and independent media, a number of organisations report that individual donations, often given as a form of protest against the regime, have reduced as private donors no longer perceive an urgent need to support independent CSOs and media outlets. Interview findings point to a further consequence of this shift: the reduction in individual donations is not necessarily a sign that public support for civil society has weakened but may reflect the perception that the immediate threat to independent organisations has passed. This creates a risk that the financial support built up during years of political pressure will decline precisely when organisations need resources to strengthen their domestic advocacy efforts and contribute to the democratic transition.

Hungary's longstanding personal income tax designation system, composed of 1 percent to a civil society organisation and 1 percent to a registered church, has been also an important source of support for many CSOs. With less taxpayers making the choice, and the expansion of personal income tax exemptions for certain groups, such as mothers with two or three children, reducing the number of people whose income tax can be allocated through the scheme, intense competition for these contributions has emerged between civil society organisations and independent media outlets (with many of the latter establishing entities eligible for tax designation) was created.

Strengthening civil society participation, dialogue, and strategy

Government structures have begun to show greater willingness to engage with civil society, particularly through the establishment of the Ministry of Social Relations and Culture, including a State Secretary for Social Relations and a Deputy State Secretary for Civil Society Relations. Several CSOs reported that government representatives have become markedly more accessible and that it has become considerably easier to meet government agencies and ministries, including at state secretary level. However, our interviews suggest that the new political opening also brings additional demands on organisations that are already operating with limited capacity. One interviewee described a sense of relief following the political change, but also a growing expectation that civil society organisations should now speak up, contribute to policy discussions and help shape reforms. Without corresponding core funding or additional staff capacity, responding to these expectations risks placing further pressure on organisations.

Cooperation between ministries and civil society organisations has started to evolve in individual policy areas. Some ministries, such as the Ministry of Social Affairs and Family Affairs and the Ministry of Social Relations and Culture have demonstrated greater willingness to consult relevant organisations and engage with their expertise.

Civil society organisations have also been invited to be involved in public decision-making and consultation processes on several occasions, for example:

- The Ministry of Social and Family Affairs initiated consultations with civil society organisations and trade unions from June 2026 onwards, addressing challenges in social services, child protection and working conditions in the sector.

- Pursuant to a legal provision in the new law on asset recovery and protection, watchdog and anti-corruption CSOs were invited to participate in the selection hearings concerning candidates for the positions of President and Vice-Presidents of the newly established National Asset Recovery and Protection Office. The Ministry of Justice has initiated dialogue with organisations working on the rule of law, democracy and fundamental rights, including in connection with the European Commission's Rule of Law Report, for which invited CSOs prepared a joint submission.
- In August and November, the Civilizáció Coalition met with the state secretary and the deputy state secretary of the Ministry for Social Relations and Culture discussing the repeal of restrictive legislation concerning CSOs, fair and sustainable public funding, and the development of a comprehensive civil society strategy through broad public consultation.

In September 2026, Parliament's Committee on Social Participation launched a call inviting Hungarian CSOs to voluntarily register in a newly established Civil Society Organisations Register. The initiative aims to strengthen dialogue between Parliament and civil society by facilitating contact with organisations willing to share their expertise, contribute to policy discussions and identify practical problems requiring legislative intervention. While this initiative is a welcome step towards greater parliamentary engagement with civil society, the establishment of a register does not in itself guarantee meaningful participation. Questions remain as to how registered organisations will be involved in legislative processes.

In early October, the government established the Fundamental Rights Forum, which as a multi-stakeholder consultation platform is intended to facilitate dialogue with civil society organisations on fundamental rights. The Platform's civil society membership will be selected after an open call, and its work will be carried out through thematic working groups. Many civil society organisations working in the human rights field had advocated for an effective structure. Yet its legal framework was adopted without prior consultation with the civil society sector.

However, the increased willingness to engage does not yet amount to a systematic and structured framework for civil society participation. Engagement in public decision-making remains uneven and inconsistent, varying across policy areas and ministries and often depending on the willingness of individual officeholders to engage. The ability to participate is also uneven across the civil society sector itself. One interviewee highlighted tension between larger, more institutionalised organisations and smaller, locally rooted organisations. The latter often have fewer financial and human resources and less capacity to follow policy developments, prepare submissions and maintain regular contact with decisionmakers.

Interviews also highlight that improved access does not automatically translate into meaningful or equal participation. Organisations often need to take the initiative themselves, identify relevant decisionmakers and repeatedly seek opportunities to contribute.

When civic groups left out of consultation processes were successful in publicly raising their voice, the government often changed course.

- This happened for example in the summer of 2026 in the public debate about the so-called heartbeat decree, which requires pregnant women seeking to terminate their pregnancy to listen to the foetal heartbeat before the procedure, adopted in 2022 without public consultation. When the Minister of Health intended to consult a narrower "professional" circle excluding reproductive and women's rights organisations, eighteen CSOs submitted a joint open letter requesting their inclusion. Following this intervention, the Minister invited all signatories to meet at the end of July.

Concerns remain related to the timeframe of consultations, and interview experiences illustrate how short consultation periods can undermine meaningful participation in practice. One organisation interviewed was given only a weekend to review and comment on a draft legislative proposal, while another decided not to prepare a new submission because the time available was insufficient, instead referring to findings it had already produced.

The legal framework for public consultation on draft laws prepared by the ministries, which in practice means publishing draft laws on a government website where anyone can submit comments via email, has not changed since the elections. This leaves room for abuse, and problems such as the excessively broad scope of exemptions from the obligation to consult and the too short, 8-day minimum consultation period remain. Failure to consult is not subject to any genuinely deterring legal consequence, and it still happens that public consultation is circumvented when members of parliament table draft legislation that is part of government policy, since then consultation is not prescribed. For example, this happened in the case of the 16th Amendment to the Fundamental Law and an amendment to the Media Act. Instead of a consultation, a 5-day "public dialogue" took place regarding the 17th Amendment to the Fundamental Law.

In addition, the consultation interface on www.kormany.hu presents accessibility challenges: e.g., draft legislation is published through separate sections for general and selected consultations, without sufficient clarity about the distinction between them, and the website lacks an effective search function that would allow users to identify relevant consultations by policy area or topic. Even though meaningful public participation cannot be reduced to publishing a draft law for the statutory eight-day consultation period, the public consultation framework remains an important avenue, and, accordingly, it should be reviewed to ensure effectiveness and transparency.

As a new initiative, the *Közhang* platform was launched to facilitate dialogue between citizens and the government. However, concerns have been raised about its operation from private funds and by a private company rather than a public institution, the storage and processing of participants' personal data, and the lack of clarity regarding how the contributions collected will be incorporated into government decision-making. The relationship between the two channels also remains unclear, raising questions about potential duplication and the overall coherence of the consultation system.

The TISZA-government appointed a government commissioner responsible for "a functioning and humane Hungary" whose duties include examining domestic and international best practices in social participation and establishing an Institute for a Functioning and Humane Hungary with a view to strengthen professional and social dialogue. However, no public consultation was held when in November the commissioner and other members of parliament submitted the draft law on the Institute to the Parliament.

Towards a Governmental Civil Society Strategy

The Civilizáció Coalition's *Civil Minimum 2026* had called for a comprehensive civil society strategy and welcomed when the Ministry of Social Relations and Culture confirmed that it has decided to design one. Such a strategy can provide an important framework for defining the government's long-term approach to the sector and establishing more predictable conditions for cooperation, public funding and legal and policy initiatives. The strategy is not expected to be launched until late 2027.

At a meeting with representatives of the Civilizáció Coalition on 28 October, the Ministry for Social Relations and Culture confirmed its intention to develop a government-wide civil society strategy, envisaging a planning and consultation process of approximately 18 months. The strategy is intended to establish a ten-year vision for the sector, developed through broad civil society participation and with strong legitimacy and support from CSOs. The government plans to publish the proposed process of the Civil Strategy for consultation in December, offering three levels of participation: written submissions, targeted surveys, and consultations and forums.

In the interim, the government is open to temporary measures to address urgent issues affecting the sector, including adjustments to the National Cooperation Fund and minor amendments to the legislation governing civil society. It has invited CSOs to identify pressing concerns and submit proposals, acknowledging that some issues require more immediate action than the longer-term strategy can deliver. More substantial reforms are expected to follow from the strategy.

Reopening Public Space for Civil Society

Beyond new opportunities to interact with government representatives, one of the most visible changes has been the increased presence of independent civil society organisations in the renewed public-service media. This change was also reflected in the experiences of interviewed civil society representatives. One interviewee reported that their organisation had been able to appear in public-service media for the first time in more than a decade. Interviewees also noted that civil society issues appear to be receiving greater attention in the media more broadly, extending beyond the public broadcaster as well.

Prior to the elections, Hungary's media environment, including its public broadcaster, was characterised by severe political imbalance, pervasive government influence over news coverage, and systematic advantages for the governing Fidesz party. Independent and critical NGOs were routinely portrayed in government-aligned media as politically motivated, foreign-funded actors serving foreign interests rather than the public good. Smear campaigns, stigmatising narratives and personal attacks were constant, with CSOs carrying out policy advocacy and social mobilisation work and credibility misrepresented or deliberately discredited. This contributed to a hostile public environment for independent civil society and undermined its ability to communicate its work, reach wider audiences and participate in public debate.

With new interim management in the public broadcaster focusing on balanced and credible programming, CSO representatives are increasingly invited to participate in television and radio programmes, providing them with opportunities to reach wider audiences and bring issues that were previously marginalised into public debate. This marks a significant departure from their earlier exclusion from public-service media and is one element of the broader, ongoing reform of public-service media.

Positive developments have also taken place regarding freedom of assembly. Criminal charges against the organisers of the 2025 Budapest and Pécs Pride events were dropped, and Pride events could take place without interference during the summer of 2026. Nevertheless, some restrictions introduced in 2025 remain part of the legal framework, and further legislative changes are needed to ensure that assemblies cannot be prohibited on discriminatory grounds.

Responding to publicly funded hate-inciting political campaigns frequently deployed in the Orbán-era, Act XX of 2026 introduced restrictions on political advertisements that violate human dignity, stigmatise minorities or incite hatred.

Despite the more open public environment, some challenges remain for civil society organisations seeking to maintain a critical and independent voice. One interviewee reported facing strong negative reactions on social media from supporters of the new government when publicly criticising some of its specific policies. This suggests that, while systematic government-led hostility has receded, civil society organisations may still face pressure and polarised public reactions when expressing critical positions.

Recommendations

Based on the foregoing, the Hungarian Helsinki Committee recommend the following actions

To the Government of Hungary

To remove remaining restrictions on civic space:

- Initiate a comprehensive review and repeal of legislation that unduly restricts civic space. This should include Section 353/A of the Criminal Code, which criminalises legal assistance to asylum-seekers, and Act XLIX of 2021 on the Transparency of Organisations Carrying out Activities Capable of Influencing Public Life.

Publish a timetable for public funding reform:

- Continue the reform the National Cooperation Fund and other public funding mechanisms for CSOs. As a minimum first step, publish a reform roadmap setting out planned stages, responsible institutions, opportunities for civil society participation and indicative deadlines. The eventual system should ensure transparent, fair and politically impartial access to funding, involve CSOs in decision-making processes and bodies, and ensure that reporting, monitoring and evaluations mechanisms not only require compliance with rules but also encourage learning across beneficiary organisations.

Advocate for EU funding for civil society:

- Support the AgoraEU programme, which aims to provide funding for civil society, culture and media, in negotiations on the EU's next Multiannual Financial Framework, and oppose reductions to its proposed budget.

To enhance public consultation and structured dialogue:

- Ensure that the Fundamental Rights Forum's operations are transparent and inclusive, and its membership is selected based on clear, publicly available criteria.
- Involve CSOs in defining the Fundamental Rights Forum's operating procedures and thematic priorities. Their participation should extend beyond a merely formal advisory role and provide genuine opportunities to influence policymaking.
- Move forward with other avenues and platforms for public engagement, and include civil society organisations, particularly those with requisite experience in public participation, in the design process in a participatory manner.
- Review the legal framework and the practice of public consultation to ensure meaningful public consultation on all draft laws, with adequate timeframes, user-friendly, platforms, proper consideration of and feedback to input received, and effective safeguards against circumvention.
- Review and improve the implementation of the requirements set out in OSCE ODIHR's Guiding Principles of Democratic Lawmaking and Better Laws.

Develop a clear timeline and participatory process for the civil society strategy:

- Publish a roadmap outlining the key steps, responsibilities and deadlines for developing a comprehensive civil society strategy. The roadmap should also specify how and at which stages CSOs will be involved, ensuring meaningful participation in defining priorities, drafting the strategy and monitoring its implementation.

Reduce administrative barriers to the operation of civil society organisations:

- Review the administrative framework governing CSOs, including court registration and reporting procedures, to reduce delays, formalistic requirements and duplicated reporting obligations. The review should make use of best practices of civil society organisations on publishing additional accessible, informative reports about their activities and funding beyond the legally required formats and mechanisms.

To the European Union institutions

- Ensure that the next EU Multiannual Financial Framework provides adequate and predictable support for independent civil society organisations, including organisations working on democracy, fundamental rights, anti-corruption and the rule of law. Funding instruments should provide opportunities for core and institutional support, alongside project-based grants, to help organisations retain staff, maintain and improve expertise and engage in long-term advocacy and partnerships across the EU.

To the Council of Europe

- Provide technical assistance to the Hungarian Parliament and to the Ministry of Justice as the ministry responsible for law making in creating and sustaining effective and inclusive public participation in the legislative process.
- Offer an independent review of the proposed National Cooperation Fund reforms before they are adopted.

Acknowledgements

The Hungarian Helsinki Committee gratefully acknowledges the support and cooperation of the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung Office in Prague in conducting the research and preparing this policy brief. We also extend our sincere thanks to the civil society representatives who generously shared their time, experiences and insights and contributed to this research through interviews and consultations.

Budapest, 25 November 2026

Hungarian Helsinki Committee