



CIVIC SPACE IN A CHANGING WORLD ORDER

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This article considers the concept of civic space and the set of rights underpinning it. It also examines how changing political, security and funding conditions are shaping and restricting civic space particularly in a changing international order.

The international order has undergone several changes in recent years. After the late twentieth century saw a period of substantial democratic expansion, current developments have raised renewed concerns about democratic backsliding and ‘illiberalisation’. In parallel, many governments appear to be placing increasing emphasis on matters of security and defence, sovereignty and countering foreign interference. These developments have occurred alongside changes in international cooperation, aid and development policies. In this context, the relationship between human rights, democratic participation and security priorities is acquiring renewed relevance. Civic space is relevant to this discussion because it concerns the conditions in which individuals and organisations participate in public life. Although civic space is a complex and evolving concept, this paper uses an operational understanding of it, focusing on the conditions that enable such participation. Among these are freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association, access to information and the ability of civil society organisations to operate - conditions which can be affected by changes in legislation, public policy and institutional practice, as well as by developments in the digital sphere. In 2025, civic space was reported as being under severe attack in 122 of 198 countries and territories (CIVICUS, 2025).

Civic space as an evolving concept

While civic space is in itself a rather evolving concept, burdened by ambiguity and normativity (Goris, 2026), for operational reasons, this paper will generally consider the most established definitions.

In 2020, United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres presented his Call to Action for Human Rights to the Human Rights Council, reaffirming the commitments set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and recalling its opening words, “We the peoples” (UNSG, 2020).

The Call to Action identified the protection and promotion of human rights and fundamental freedoms as central to the work of the United Nations. In this context, the United Nations subsequently issued its Guidance Note on Protection and Promotion of Civic Space. The Guidance Note defines civic space as “the environment that enables people and groups, or ‘civic space actors’, to participate meaningfully in the political, economic, social and cultural life of their societies” (OHCHR, 2020). Civil society can encompass a wide range of actors and forms of organisation, from informal social movements and communities to more formal organisations, including associations, non-governmental organisations, trade unions, independent media organisations, among others. It may be generally understood as self-generated, voluntarily organised and “(largely) self-supporting” (Diamond, 1994). Furthermore, the conceptualisation of civic space tends to focus on people, groups and organisations that operate legally and non-violently (Goris, 2026), whose work is widely associated with the protection or promotion of rights and freedoms. This distinction is important, as civil society is often perceived as auton-

omous from the State and corporate actors, as well as separate from groups that may use violent methods in their pursuits (Diamond, 1994; Goris, 2026). Although this understanding is disputed and can be much more simplistic than reality, it is also part of what underpins the legitimacy attributed to civic space and its recognised role within liberal democracies. It also helps explain how the human rights system, international and regional human rights mechanisms, and larger international civil society organisations understand and position themselves in relation to civic space, and how they work within and through these structures.

Civic space is therefore closely connected to a range of internationally recognised and legally protected human rights. CIVICUS, a global alliance of civil society organisations and activists, focuses primarily on three freedoms - freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association, as well as on the State’s duty to protect these rights (CIVICUS, n.d.) – See Figure 1. These are protected rights under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) (United Nations, 1948; United Nations, 1966).

FIGURE 1. THE THREE PILLARS OF THE CIVIC SPACE

Source: Elaborated by the author, based in CIVICUS. (n.d.). *What is civic space?* CIVICUS Monitor. <https://monitor.civicus.org/about/how-it-works/what-is-civic-space>.



While these freedoms remain central to civic space, the conditions in which people exercise them are rapidly changing. Increasingly, this means considering the role of digital rights and the growing importance of digital spaces for participation and access to information.

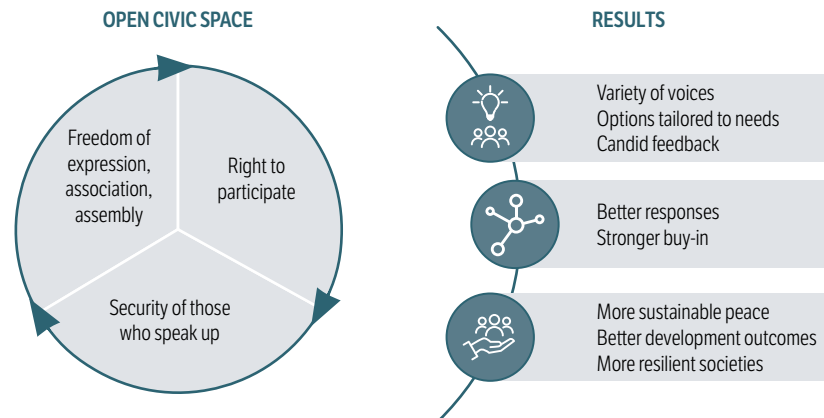
As Big Tech platforms control a large part of the spaces in which access to information and public participation take place, new risks emerge. Citizens increasingly access information and participate in digital spaces operated by companies whose ownership and decision-making structures are highly concentrated, often under the control of a small number of billionaires and shareholders. This creates new challenges for civic space, particularly in relation to attacks against civil society actors, the spread of political, health-related and other forms of disinformation, and the manipulation of electoral processes and public opinion through algorithmic strategies (EDRi, n.d.). This transfer of spaces for participation to privately controlled platforms, raises fundamental questions about the relationship between corporate power and democratic participation, and, ultimately, about the meaning and exercise of the *demos* in a digital age.

Similarly, what EDRi describes as “the near-total digitisation of our lives” has made it increasingly difficult to understand the conditions under which citizens can assemble and organise freely (EDRi, n.d.; Warthon, 2023). At its most fundamental, this raises the question of how a population might organise collectively to challenge an autocratic government or illiberal practices in an increasingly digital age, where many of the means of communication and mobilisation are mediated by technologies that may be subject to state surveillance or corporate control.

These concerns begin with the rights to freedom of assembly and association, but extend to a broader set of rights. Artificial intelligence, location services, the collection and processing of biometric data, and predictive technologies also create significant risks of reproducing and enhancing existing societal biases. These may include racial and ableist profiling, and other forms of discrimination (Council of Europe, 2025). The deployment of such technologies therefore raises concerns not only in relation to privacy and surveillance, but also to equality and

FIGURE 2. OPEN CIVIC SPACE RESULTS IN A VARIETY OF BETTER OUTCOMES

Source: Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. (2020). *UN guidance note: Protection and promotion of civic space*. United Nations. https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/CivicSpace/UN_Guidance_Note.pdf



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non-discrimination, freedom of expression, association and assembly, and the broader conditions necessary for meaningful participation in civic and democratic life (Warthon, 2023).

Civic space advocates have emphasised that States must go beyond a merely negative approach to the protection of these freedoms, and to take positive measures to promote and expand an enabling environment for civic participation (CIVICUS, n.d.). This approach is further crystallised in the UN framework on the protection and promotion of civic space through the three ‘Ps’: participation, protection and promotion (OHCHR, 2020). On the one hand, this means actively adopting legislation and policy measures to protect people and groups that monitor and document violations and advocate for rights. An increasingly important element of this approach is the co-building of policies with people and groups who have lived experience of facing diverse

and intersecting systems of oppression. Involving those directly affected in the design and implementation of policies can contribute to measures that are more responsive to lived realities and, in turn, more sustainable, lasting and equitable. On the other hand, it entails a duty to protect individuals and groups from reprisals and to refrain from engaging in reprisals themselves, whether through State authorities or through proxies (e.g. militias, paramilitary groups, among others). States must also ensure that, where rights are violated, there are appropriate independent mechanisms to investigate such violations, provide effective remedies and ensure accountability.

These obligations and principles are also supported by the work of the UN Special Procedures, including relevant Special Rapporteurs, whose mandates include monitoring and documenting human rights concerns, communicating with States, and engaging with civil society organisations and human rights defenders.

Civic space in a changing international order

While the rights set out in the previous section correspond to human rights standards, reality is more complex. As the UN Secretary General, António Guterres, observed, “*the cause of human rights faces major challenges, and no country is immune. Disregard for human rights is widespread*” (Call to Action for Human Rights, 2020).

Recent changes in the international order provide an important context for examining these challenges. Growing emphasis on defence and security, competition among major powers for strategic au-



tonomy, deregulation, and the pursuit of economic and geopolitical interests have contributed to a political environment in which securitisation attempts at shaping public policy (Karyotis and Paterson, 2025). Perceived threats, whether based on concrete developments, contested assessments or broader political narratives, can further influence approaches to sovereignty, foreign interference and domestic security. While these developments are shaped by multiple and often interacting factors, they provide a useful context for examining how changing geopolitical and economic priorities may condition civic space.

One way this happens is through changes in the funding environment. International funding is fundamental for organisations working on human rights, development and humanitarian assistance, particularly formal organisations, where domestic sources of funding are limited or inappropriate. The transformation of United States foreign assistance after the return of Donald Trump to the US presidency in January 2025 provides an important example. On 20 January 2025, the administration ordered a 90-day pause on new obligations and disbursements of US foreign development assistance pending a review of its consistency with US foreign policy (Gedeon & Tait, 2025). The effects of these changes have been felt across the aid system, from local civil society organisations and international NGOs to multilateral and UN-funded programmes. It also has individual consequences, including loss of employment and, in a sector already characterised by short-term and project-based work, further precarisation and loss of expertise. As an example, a survey led by UN Women in March 2025 across 44 countries and involving 411 organisations found that funding reductions were financially affecting 90% of respondents, with nearly half expecting to cease operations within six months (UN Women, 2025).

This was particularly significant given the large scale of assistance provided by the United States (US): in 2024, the US was the largest provider of official development assistance among the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Development Assistance Committee members (OECD, 2025). The wider funding environment has also deteriorated. OECD data show that Official

Development Assistance (ODA) fell by 23.1% in 2025, the largest annual decline on record, with the United States accounting for around three quarters of that overall reduction (OECD, 2026). Core contributions to the UN system also fell by 27%, the largest annual drop ever recorded, greatly weakening the UN capacity to respond to ever-growing challenges (OECD, 2027). Since then, at least eleven OECD DAC members, among which France, Germany and the United Kingdom, have announced cuts to their ODA budgets, reflecting a wider contraction in international support for development and human rights work (OECD, 2025). The importance of these developments for civic space lies in the fact that the in-

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frastructure supporting human rights and accountability is becoming more fragile.

Funding can also become the subject of restrictive laws. In recent years, so-called “foreign agent” or “foreign influence” laws have appeared in different forms, often forcing organisations into compulsory registration, disproportionate reporting requirements, disclosure of funding sources, restrictions on activities and administrative sanctions. The discourse around these laws is important, as stigmatisation of human rights tends to proceed or accompany restrictions. Georgia provides a prominent example. Since 2024, a series of legislative measures, including the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence, the Foreign Agents Registration Act and amendments to the Law on Grants, have introduced additional registration and reporting requirements, restricted access to foreign funding and exposed

organisations to administrative and criminal sanctions, contributing to the stigmatisation of civil society organisations and shrinking the space for human rights defenders and independent organisations (OMCT-FIDH, 2025). At EU level, alleged concerns about foreign interference have also led to new policy initiatives, including the European Commission’s 2023 proposal for a directive on transparency requirements for organisations carrying out activities on behalf of third-country interests, causing NGOs to sound the alarm (Tidey, 2023).

Peru provides another example. Law No. 32301, reforming the framework governing the Peruvian Agency for International Cooperation, introduced additional reporting requirements and sanctions for organisations receiving international funding. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights raised concerns about its effects on civic space and freedom of association, particularly because the law criminalises the use of international cooperation resources for judicial actions against the State (IACHR, 2025). This is particularly significant in a country where civil society organisations have played an important role in supporting victims and pursuing accountability for serious human rights violations, namely those committed during the internal armed conflict (1980-2000) and, more recently, in the context of peaceful protests. The law therefore does not only threaten the ability of civil society organisations to operate, but also to pursue accountability for human rights violations.

Restrictions on peaceful protest also provide another important indicator of civic space, as demonstrations are a central mechanism through which individuals participate in public affairs. Restrictions to peaceful protest may take the form of administrative obstacles, arbitrary arrests, criminalisation, surveillance or the use of force, among others. More broadly, it should be noted that the excessive or disproportionate use of force by law-enforcement authorities in the context of protest can amount to torture or other forms of ill-treatment (UATC, 2025).

France provides a relevant example. In 2025, a report by the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, a joint programme of FIDH and OMCT, together with the *Ligue des droits de l’Homme*, documented restrictions affect-

ing environmental movements, including mass arrests, abusive detention, intrusive surveillance and disproportionate use of force in protests against the A69 motorway and *méga-bassines* (FIDH-OMCT & LDH, 2025). Another example are peaceful demonstrations in support of Palestine - in 2024, rights organisations reported that, in at least 12 EU Member States, authorities had taken measures against pro-Palestinian protests, including pre-emptive bans based on apparent risks to 'public order' and 'security' (Solidar, 2024). Such practices restrict the immediate exercise of peaceful assembly, and may have a broader 'chilling effect' effect of dissuading individuals and organisations from participating in public life (Aston, 2024).

Finally, civic space can be affected through stigmatisation and the securitisation of civil society, particularly where counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency frameworks are used to construct particular actors as security threats. Securitisation theory draws attention to the ways in which political actors frame certain issues or groups as threats to security, potentially creating a basis for exceptional or intensified measures beyond ordinary political processes (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998). In this context, the fabrication of security narratives can be used to portray activists and organisations as politically motivated, foreign-controlled, extremist or connected to terrorism, thereby shifting their perceived status from legitimate participants in public life to security threats. In the Philippines, it is well documented how repressive counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency policies have been used against human rights and environmental rights defenders, lawyers, journalists and trade unionists - 'red-tagging', arbitrary detentions, enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings are among the most common forms of attacks against defenders in the country (FIDH-OMCT, 2026). This illustrates the importance of distinguishing legitimate and proportionate security measures from the misuse of security frameworks to stigmatise, criminalise or constrain dissent.

Human rights defenders (HRDs) and land and environmental defenders are among those most directly affected by restrictions on civic space. In many parts of the world, defenders face reprisals, stigmatisation,

police repression, torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment, undue criminalisation, arbitrary detention and, in some cases, assassination. In Colombia alone, the UN Human Rights Office recorded 972 killings of human rights defenders and social leaders between 2016 and 2025 - figures that illustrate the extent of the risks faced by people defending human and environmental rights (OHCHR, 2026). Globally, these risks are often linked to the work HRDs carry out, particularly when challenging government policies, economic interests, exposing human rights violations or defending marginalised communities. The documentation of these threats against human rights defenders has led to the development of specific international frameworks for their protection, starting with the 1998 UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders (UNGA, 1998). Another example of the recognition of the duty to protect human rights defenders is the European Union's mechanism for their protection, Protect-Defenders.EU (PDEU, n.d.).

Civic space and fundamental freedoms are never fully guaranteed, and restrictions should not be understood as a feature limited to illiberal democracies or authoritarian regimes.

The risks faced by HRDs are not limited to State actions or responsibilities. They can also arise in connection with corporate interests and business activities, particularly large infrastructure, extractive and development projects affecting land, natural resources and local or Indigenous communities. One of the best-known cases is that of Berta Cáceres, a Honduran Indigenous and environmental activist who opposed the Agua Zarca hydroelectric project and was murdered in 2016. An independent investigation highlighted the relationship between the State, companies and international financiers, attributing the murder to Honduras' *"weak institutions, susceptible to corruption and oriented towards prioritising investment over the protection of human*

rights" (GIEI Honduras, 2026). The case therefore highlights the relevance of corporate accountability and the business and human rights framework, as well as the need to consider how private actors and economic interests can affect the conditions in which communities and HRDs exercise their rights. In this regard, the Aarhus Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters also plays an important role, by establishing rights of access to information, participation and justice in environmental matters, summarised in the concept of 'environmental democracy' (UNECE, 1998).

Civic space and fundamental freedoms are never fully guaranteed, and restrictions should not be understood as a feature limited to illiberal democracies or authoritarian regimes. Illiberal practices and tendencies can also emerge within established democratic systems, often affecting particular or more vulnerable groups before becoming visible to wider society. The 2026 Civic Space Report of the European Civic Forum documents restrictions across a range of European countries, including Austria, Belgium, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain and the United Kingdom, for instance, the stigmatisation and delegitimisation of civil society organisations, increased surveillance and the criminalisation of solidarity with migrants and refugees (European Civic Forum, 2026). Portugal is an illustrative example. Although CIVICUS classifies its civic space as "Open", the national organisation *Academia Cidadã* reports a deterioration in civic freedoms, including pressure on climate activists, anti-racist groups and organisations defending migrants' rights, as well as attacks on LGBTQIA+ spaces (Academia Cidadã, 2026).

Conclusion

Civic space may be an evolving and disputed concept, but its core conditions remain closely connected to fundamental rights and the ability of individuals and organisations to participate in public life. The examples discussed in this paper show that restrictions on civic space are not limited to authoritarian or illiberal contexts, but can also occur within established liberal democracies, and are

often connected to broader restrictions on rights and democratic participation. Changes in political, security and economic priorities can affect civic space in different ways, including through funding decisions, restrictive legislation, restrictions on peaceful protest, and the securitisation and stigmatisation of civil society. At the same time, digitalisation creates new challenges for civic space, while also amplifying existing risks related to surveillance, discrimination, access to information and corporate control.

These developments do not follow a single pattern, nor do they establish a direct causal relationship between changes in the international order and restrictions on civic space, but they illustrate how broader political and geopolitical shifts can affect the conditions in which human rights are exercised and people participate in public life. Civil society remains at the frontline of defending these rights, and also often carries the risks when those rights come under attack. ●

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