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International Conference
Shaping democratic renewal: civic space and the path to a
New Democratic Pact for Europe

Speech by Michael O'Flaherty
Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights

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Secretary General, Ambassador Cujbă, dear friends, thank you very much for the invitation to address this important conference.

I speak to you just a few days after I visited a Nazi concentration camp, the one at Struthof here in Alsace.

It's a horrific place. I started my visit at the gas chamber, I finished it at the crematorium and between each of these two dreadful places, horror after horror was explained to me in terms of the callous disregard for and taking of the lives of innocent men, women and children. But Struthof also in a curious way is a negative reminder of something wonderful, a negative reminder in its horror of all that we have achieved since it was shut down.

Modern Europe can be very proud of the manner by which it has established strong laws, institutions and even cultures in support of democracy, rule of law and human rights. Many actors can be given the credit for establishing the modern-day Europe but among them, at their very core, has to be acknowledged the role of civil society, and of course by civil society I mean the entire non-governmental world in all its breadth and diversity. And given the nature of my work I see its essential role just about everywhere I go.

I see it in the extent for instance to which our countries depend on civil society for the delivery of essential services including to those most on the margins and in need.

I see it in the manner in which civil society organisations feed discussion around policy for our countries and how they play an essential role in the direction of our societies for the good. Coming back here to Strasbourg I see the role of civil society in, for instance, the annual Strasbourg refugee week, a period during which a collaboration of the city and many organisations aim to change perceptions of forced migration by challenging stereotypes and prejudices about refugees and migrants. I see how during that week they encourage social inclusion, how they promote human rights and dignity.

More generally and right across Europe I see today the essential role of civil society in engaging and in taming that most consequential of advances, the digitalisation of our world. Time and time again it's civil society, not industry, not states, that has been the first to identify risks in the digital space and as well as the means by which they can best be engaged. It was civil society that was first to alert us to the risks of algorithmic discrimination.

More recently it is civil society that has pointed to the actual and potential abuse of technology in the area of law enforcement.

One further feature of contemporary civil society that is noteworthy is the extent to which it is populated by and driven by young people. It is organisations of and led by young people that are at the forefront of vital social change for the good.

Just look for example at the roles played by Black Lives Matter or Fridays for Future.

Friends it is one of the ironies of 2026 that we can on the one hand, speak of the essential role of civil society and at the same time have to acknowledge the extent to which it is put under pressure as it seeks to do its work. The 2025 CIVICUS Monitor reported that just 18 out of 46 Council of Europe member states have an open civic space.

CIVICUS further reported that the civic space of 13 member states has been downgraded since 2018.

The pressure on civil society takes multiple forms. A crisis of funding for instance has been in development for a number of years and was brought into sharp relief with the decision of the US administration early in 2025 to suspend international aid.

The situation has worsened since then and is badly impacting humanitarian actors, human rights defenders and others. National governments are reducing their public funding as priorities shift, budgets are cut and austerity measures are implemented, while we see increasing obstacles to philanthropic giving. In my work I see the impact of budget cuts across the continent but this afternoon I think in particular of the plight of Ukrainian civil society.

A second dimension of the contemporary pressure on civil society concerns the extent to which they are limited in their ability to do their jobs by excessive regulatory oversight. I see a type of legislative copycatting where foreign agent laws pioneered by such authoritarian states as Russia are being swiftly replicated not just in policy but in language and form.

These laws form a blueprint for bureaucratic silencing that moves faster than international protections can respond.

One more of the many dimensions of the ways in which the pressure on civil society is manifesting itself has to do with the closing of the possibility of access to policy makers. Consultations, public forums and even crisis coordination are increasingly excluding dissident or minority voices through fast-tracked legislative procedures that allow for procedural loopholes, tokenistic gestures and outright bans.

In such cases and when the most critical actors on sensitive topics are kept out of the room, the result frankly is an engineered and a pre-ordained outcome.

And so then my friends the question arises of what needs to be done. But before getting to action points I believe it's important that we place the pressure on civil society in its proper context.

The first dimension of context is to keep in mind that the pressure on civil society is not primarily about the organisations themselves. It's about all of us. It's about rights holders and above all it's about the rights holders most on the periphery, the margins of our societies.

The limiting of or the making impossible of the capacity of organisations to do their jobs is compromising the lives of millions of people across our continent.

A second dimension of context is to recall again that concentration camp I referred to and to remember how the evils of Nazism did not happen overnight. They were made possible through a gradual deterioration of society.

And I suggest to you that any attack today on the essential role of civil society looks like one of those steps in the erosion of human rights, democracy and rule of law. All of that with possible future horrific and unimaginable consequences.

I even find myself asking if and when that day were to come what group would be the first to be targeted. I can't help but conclude that it's most likely, if the current patterns of hate and marginalisation continue, it's most likely to be the group of irregular migrants.

But turning now to actions. In the first place it's important to learn from and appreciate the recent important initiatives, including by the European Union where critical steps have been taken to strengthen the role of civil society through the adoption of a strategy on the topic with numerous related initiatives. And in this regard, I welcome the impending establishment of a civil society platform to operate across the EU and the recognition of the need to put aside substantial funds to support the work of civil society within the European Union itself.

Staying at the interstate level and referring not only to the EU but to all Council of Europe member states, I believe that it is high time now to establish some form of civil society protective capacity to operate across the continent. A capacity, a machinery that would serve to monitor the situation of civil society, draw attention to problems and issues of risk and which would respond as appropriate to attacks on the organisations.

Turning then to states more specifically and keeping in mind that it is states that have got us to where we are in terms of creating a problem, it is now essential for them working separately and jointly to fix what they can. Not only through supporting continent-wide initiatives such as the protective capacity that I've mentioned but also by looking at their own national law policy and practise to make sure that it is fit for purpose in terms of allowing civil society to play its role.

And finally dear friends, again if you would allow me to refer to the camp at Struthof.

I recall that it is just a 45 minute drive away from here and the awful incidents that took place there were less than 90 years ago. These facts recall to me how very fragile is all that we have achieved. We could lose it, including through our negligence. A sturdy defence of – an investment in our civil society – is all the more important for that.

Thank you.