

Task force on "civic space monitoring"
Report of the 2nd meeting
Strasbourg, 13 October 2025 (hybrid)

The participation of some 60 people in the meeting on Monday 13 October 2025 (40 in the room and 20 online) reflects a collective awareness of growing dangers and increasing attacks on the rights and freedoms of associations, as well as challenges to civil society, whose place and role are being undermined.

These obstacles, manipulations and weakening of associations take various forms and are part of a worrying trend in the political landscape throughout Europe. Not to mention, of course, the alarming reports we have recently received from Serbia, Georgia and other countries.

At the beginning of the meeting, the role played by the Council of Experts on NGO Law was highlighted. The Council provides irreplaceable legal expertise and its reports are always eagerly awaited and indispensable. This is the case with the ongoing study on "Recent national developments that effectively or potentially compromise the capacity of NGOs to act". I therefore reiterate the call made yesterday by Jeremy MacBride to complete the questionnaire that has been sent to you.

The approach taken by the Task Force is different from and complementary to that of the Committee of Experts.

Monday's meeting confirmed the specific nature of the Task Force, which aims to bring together and mobilise, first and foremost of course the civil society associations that make up our Conference, but also institutions that work towards the same goals, particularly within the European Union: representatives of the European Economic and Social Committee and the European Agency for Fundamental Rights took part in Monday's meeting. The Secretary General of the European Union Social Platform provided us with a relevant and lucid analysis of the situation as seen from Brussels and shared her own concerns, as the association itself is particularly exposed.

On the side of the major networks, we received feedback from CIVICUS – an organisation present on several continents – and from the European Civic Forum, which, as part of the MACS (Monitoring Action for Civic Space) project, aims to set up a preventive early warning system in conjunction with the European Commission's DG Justice.

During the meeting, testimony was given on the scale and diversity of the attacks affecting associations: ranging from LGBTQIA+ associations being targeted in several countries, to the negation of associations and mutual societies in Italy, subjecting this third sector to market forces, to the debate in Germany around a so-called duty of "neutrality" for associations, failure to comply with which would deprive some of them of public funding!

The presentation of the Citizen Observatory's report "Between commodification and decommodification: an associative model at a crossroads" (following on from an initial report presented last April) had the advantage of outlining some avenues for reflection. Among these avenues, we believe that research at European level into a more protective legislative framework for associative freedoms and to counter the effects of

an unfavourable competitive environment is particularly important. At the same time, this avenue opens up prospects for joint work to which the Task Force could contribute.

Finally, part of the meeting chaired by the President of our Conference of INGOs was devoted to the follow-up to the recommendations contained in the "Recommendation on the shrinking civic space and current political developments" which the Conference unanimously adopted last April.

Although the inventory of all violations of the rights and freedoms of associations must continue, the urgent need today is less to observe what is happening – because we already know a great deal – than to respond, take action and provide support to associations and civil society.

This means putting in place mechanisms capable of supporting associations and ensuring a sufficient level of recognition and security for associations and civil society.

The role that the Council of Europe can play here is crucial.

In this context, the recent formation of a group of "friends of civil society", composed of representatives from a dozen countries within the Committee of Ministers, offers a unique opportunity to work together to move in this direction.

I would conclude by saying that this meeting has strengthened the Task Force:

- in its role as a think tank (ongoing work on commodification/decommodification),
- and also as a regular forum, held every six months in line with the Conference sessions, bringing together the main players involved in defending associations and promoting a civil society that safeguards democracy
- as a forum designed to mobilise energies, encourage collaboration, seek complementarities and create maximum synergies.

Conclusion of the conclusion:

Join us!

It is to be feared that the worst is yet to come,

Let us resist together!

Thank you

Jean Louis Durand Drouhin
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