

WHO GETS THE SEAT, WHO GETS THE TEAR GAS

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The European Commission prides itself in its support for civil society in candidate countries, mainly in the form of provision of funds, as well as in giving civil society organisations (CSOs) a seat at the table at certain steps of the enlargement process. Without going into a debate on whether this is enough or what more could be done, this commentary focuses on a more core question: are we really reaching the people that are on the frontline of pro-European Union (EU) protests and drive public sentiment forward?

A divide with a name

In many candidate countries ([Serbia](#) being a prime example, but also Georgia, [Moldova](#), [Ukraine](#) and others) there is sometimes a divide between “official,” well-structured CSOs and the grassroots movements, usually youth- and student-led, that form the beating heart of democratic resistance and work every day to push pro-EU sentiment forward. These grassroots movements are crucial for the success of the enlargement process: they protect the EU’s image against attacks from malign actors and lay the groundwork for EU-driven reforms to take root and be supported by the population.

At the same time, these movements can mistrust institutionalised CSOs, sometimes seen as a continuation of the political elites, with former politicians revolving between official posts and civil society seats. In the Western Balkans, this has been referred to as [“NGOization”](#). In some post-socialist transition countries, the directors and managers of nongovernmental organisation (NGO) and donor-funded projects became part of a new

“comprador bourgeois elite,” acting as agents of Western democracy promotion rather than as local society-rooted actors. A similar diagnosis emerged in Ukraine before 2022, where analysts coined the term [“NGO-cracy”](#) to describe professional NGO leaders who use their access to donors and policy-makers to shape public policy without building real grassroots support. This gives rise to the idea that what exists, in some places, are [“NGOs without civil society.”](#)

In contexts where the distrust is not as pronounced, CSOs are still often suffocated by a shrinking civil space and “foreign agent” laws, making the distinction between CSOs and grassroots movements more blurred, as all actors become equally targeted and pushed towards deinstitutionalisation. This even more strongly calls for the EU to find new avenues of support when all actors are prevented from accessing official EU funding streams.

A funding model built on a trickle-down that does not trickle

Given the frameworks in which the EU must operate to ensure transparency and avoid misuse of funds, it is the traditional CSOs that get a seat at the table and access to EU funding schemes. The EU’s own theory of change largely assumes this is working fine: [official guidance](#) describes grassroots organisations and civic initiatives as gaining “increased access to financial resources, in-kind contributions or expertise” through established CSOs and CSO networks.

However, evidence suggests this trickle-down does not consistently happen. [A 2025 study](#) examining the EU’s civil society dialogue across Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine found an overreliance on large, capital-based CSOs, while smaller, grassroots and youth-led organisations often lack the resources or even the awareness

to engage with the process at all. Part of the explanation is technical: EU funding application and reporting requirements are notoriously complex, and because the paperwork burden on the EU's side is practically the same whether a grant is worth EUR 5 000 or EUR 500 000, [there is little institutional incentive](#) to disburse the smaller grants that informal groups could absorb.

Within this system, the more unstructured grassroots movements are often left outside the room and with little financial support. This is not to say that the EU ignores them, as institutions like the [European Endowment for Democracy \(EED\)](#) exist for this purpose, but there seems to be an insufficient number of specific instruments to address their needs and truly accompany them in their fight for a European future.

Serbia: The formal and informal tiers, both running out of patience

Serbia illustrates both sides of the problem at once. Since the deadly collapse of Novi Sad's railway station canopy on 1 November 2024, Serbia has seen a historic wave of student-led mobilisation. By February 2025, [protests had spread](#) to 419 locations and students had occupied more than 80 faculties. Even the formal CSO tier ran out of patience with the EU's ambiguity: roughly 700 Serbian CSOs publicly suspended cooperation with political decision-makers within the EU accession process, demanding a clearer stance from Brussels on the government's rule of law crackdown. At the same time, the student movement itself has [deliberately avoided pro-EU framing](#), and pro-EU and progressive civil society actors have at points been marginalised within the protests themselves.

More than a year after the Novi Sad tragedy, observers increasingly describe the students' refusal to frame their struggle in explicitly pro-EU terms as a generational divide; [a divide that EU passivity may be exacerbating further](#). Even the European Parliament has now formally acknowledged this access problem, calling on the Commission to "ensure adequate and accessible funding [...] for civil society actors" in the country.

Georgia: Two different forms of exposure, neither protected

Georgia offers another strong call to action. Following the protests of 2024, recent analysis argued that it was time for the EU to move away from reliance on "elitist, outdated post-Soviet entities" and instead empower grassroots movements as the [true catalysts for change](#). What followed shows why this matters in very concrete terms: Georgia's foreign agent law, requiring any organisation receiving more than 20% of its funding from abroad to register as an agent of foreign interests, [has frozen the bank accounts of established CSOs and pushed several toward closure](#) since the Foreign Agents Registration Act came into force in April 2025. Meanwhile, the founder of Dafioni, a grassroots pro-European youth movement, [has been held in arbitrary pre-trial detention](#) since December 2024.

The formal and informal tiers face two different kinds of exposure: legal suffocation for the structured organisations and physical danger for the grassroots ones, and neither is adequately protected under the EU's current frameworks. Here, the CSO - grassroots divide might not be as pronounced as in the Serbian case, but the overall suffocation of civil space still calls for new and innovative instruments to be set up so that those at the forefront of the battle are not left alone.

The wider Neighbourhood, a similar story

The same pattern repeats across the wider Neighbourhood. In Moldova, EU officials acknowledge the power and role of civil society: [“The EU counts a lot on your work at grassroots level”](#). Nevertheless, in practice, [capital-based CSOs still dominate the consultation mechanisms](#), leaving the rhetoric of inclusion largely theoretical.

In Ukraine, the “NGO-cracy” phenomenon took root after the 2013 Euromaidan revolution. The grassroots momentum grew increasingly reliant on foreign donors and [slowly distanced itself from the core of the civil society](#) it was supposed to represent. This opened the door [for the oligarchic elites to regain influence](#). Since Russia’s full-scale invasion in 2022, [this gap quickly closed](#), with an estimated 60-80% of Ukrainians taking part in some form of civic resistance and formal CSOs operating in close coordination with spontaneous volunteer networks. [The Ukrainian example](#) shows us both what can happen when there is overreliance on formal CSOs and neglect of grassroots levels, as well as the potential for civil society to become a true driving democratic force when this gap is dimmed.

While not a candidate country, the situation in Belarus is also noteworthy, as [more than 1 500 NGOs have been forcibly liquidated](#) since the 2020 crackdown, a reminder of what is ultimately at stake when civic space closes entirely and informal, underground activism becomes the only form of resistance left standing.

Closer to home: The EU’s own inward-looking work

It would be too easy to treat this as a problem confined to the accession countries, or something that will resolve itself once a country joins the EU.

In fact, the same legal playbook used to suffocate Georgian civil society is already in place inside the Union. Hungary’s 2017 law on the transparency of foreign-funded NGOs ([eventually struck down by the European Court of Justice](#)) found an almost identical copy in a 2025 government proposal in [Slovakia](#), requiring any CSO receiving EUR 5 000 or more a year from abroad to declare itself as having “foreign support.” Moreover, funding delegitimation and advocacy-defunding tactics [have been documented](#) in at least seven Member States.

To take this even further, the EU’s proposed 2028–2034 budget shifts a larger share of civil-society funding through national governments rather than direct EU lines. For CSOs in Member States with hostile governments, [this could create the same access problem](#) that grassroots groups in candidate countries already live with. If the EU is serious about treating grassroots democratic forces as driving democratic forces abroad, it cannot treat the erosion of civic space within its borders as a peripheral issue.

Closing the gap: What can the EU do?

None of this is an argument for completely changing the EU’s CSO funding model. Accountability and monitoring exist for good reasons, especially in environments where malign actors are actively looking for funding channels to capture and co-opt. But it has been widely argued that the current model is not

sufficient, and that [doing more of the same will not close the existing gap](#). Russia and Belarus are the cautionary tale of what happens when this divide is never addressed and civic space is allowed to disappear almost entirely: formal civil society gets erased, with informal and underground activism becoming the only form of resistance left, and by the time anyone wants to re-engage with it, there is often nothing left to engage with. Candidate countries and the wider neighbourhood are where the EU still has a chance to get ahead of that trajectory rather than repeat it.

This means, first and foremost, prioritising youth engagement individually, and not as a sub-category of general civil society support. It needs to be a line of work in its own right, since the movements actually driving pro-EU sentiment forward are [for the most part young, informal, and structurally invisible](#) to instruments built for institutionalised CSOs. It also means recognising that channelling money to truly informal groups is hard, by design: it is harder to monitor, harder to report on, and harder to justify to auditors than a grant to an established CSO with a legal personality and a multi-year track record. That is precisely the gap the EED already exists to fill: fast, flexible, able to support unregistered groups and individuals where standard instruments cannot. The EED (or mechanisms modelled on it) deserves a far larger role, alongside other organisations built for exactly this kind of risk tolerance. The EU does not need to reinvent the wheel, but to strengthen and complement the tools that already exist for this purpose at a scale that matches the problem.

Finally, there is an additional issue that needs to be taken into account: protection. Funding informal youth movements more visibly, without thinking carefully about how this happens, risks making them bigger targets for their own governments. Georgia's foreign agents law is a clear illustration of how a funding line can become a liability the moment a government decides to weaponise transparency requirements. Any serious EU strategy here has to be built around discretion and security, and a great deal of institutional learning still needs to happen on what that looks like in practice. There are no ready-made answers, but continuing to fund mainly those who already have a seat at the table is no longer a sufficient one.

This matters not only because it is the right thing to do, but also for what is at stake on the ground. A post or a tweet of support while student protests are happening in Belgrade might get a like from people sitting in Brussels, but it impacts very little the situation of the students being beaten, arrested and killed while they put their bodies and minds on the line to ask for freedoms that are, for us, a given. Let's not forget that life is a biological lottery. That same student, that same activist, could have been any of us, but they were just (un)lucky enough to be born on one side of an imaginary line rather than the other.

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