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Civic Space Report
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Civic Space Report Hungary

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Hungary

Country Score: **Mixed – Enabling Leaning** Country Trend: ↔

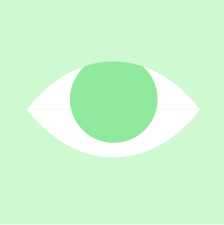
2.70



Cluster A: 2.60
A1 Equal treatment: 3
A2 Political recognition as partners: 3
A3 Refrained authorities from smearing: 3
A4 No weaponization of state powers: 2
A5 Transparent and open public institutions: 2



Cluster B: 3.00
B1 Free establishment and operation: 3
B2 CSOs enjoy a safe space: 3
B3 Liberty of resourcing: 3
B4 Enabling fiscal environment: 3
B5 Free expression of criticism: 3



Cluster C: 2.60
C1 Citizens trust: 3
C2 Present in media: 2
C3 Free engagement: 3
C4 CSOs embedded in communities: 3
C5 Freedom of assembly: 2



Cluster D: 2.60
D1 Decision-making participation: 2
D2 Timely consultations: 2
D3 Policies for cooperation: 3
D4 Free advocacy: 3
D5 Government listens: 3

Civic Space Report – Hungary

Introduction

When it comes to the civil sector, Hungary is an important case study. On one hand, Hungary was one of, if not the most hostile environments for civil sector organizations within the EU in the past decade. On the other, after April 2026 and the landslide election victory of Tisza, the new governing party, the country's political landscape is changing rapidly. In this state of constant flux must we set up the baseline for civil sector development, which is no easy task. Civil sector regulation was not a priority during Tisza's first 100 days of governance, so the baseline we now set and the score we assign to Hungary can be considered ground zero for Tisza's civil sector policy. Still, when scoring, we must at the same time take into consideration Tisza's seemingly cooperative attitude towards the civil sector and the positive outlook, and also the fact that in many areas our only reference is what Fidesz did and what largely remains unchanged, with no explicit promise of immediate change on the horizon.

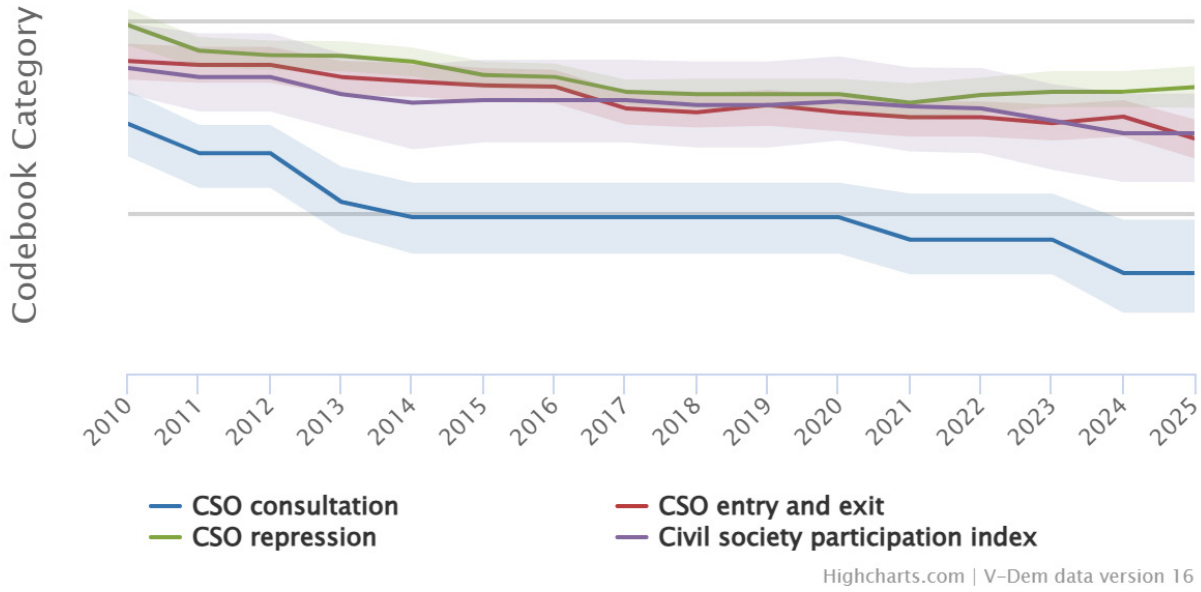


Figure 1 Hungary, civil society indicators 2010–2025. Source: V-Dem Institute (2025), Country Graph.

This assessment rests on desk research, primary legal sources, international monitoring output and five semi-structured interviews with senior CSO representatives (listed under Interviews). Because the period closes six weeks after the change of government, developments up to late August 2026 are cited where they are indispensable for establishing the direction of travel; these are dated explicitly.



Cluster A – Institutional and Political Environment and Narratives of CSOs

How do political institutions interact with and portray CSOs?

Cluster A is where the discontinuity of 2026 is most visible and also most superficial: conduct and rhetoric changed almost overnight, the architecture that made hostile conduct possible changed far less.

A1 – Equal treatment

> ***Standard.*** *The state treats all CSOs equally with regard to their establishment, registration and activities, and does not restrict organizations because they express views critical of officials or policy without privileging loyal or government-organized/funded entities (GONGOs).*

Formally, Hungarian law makes no distinction between CSOs by orientation; establishment and court registration are governed by uniform rules. The exception is Act XLIX of 2021 — the so-called Lex NGO — which subjects every association and foundation with a balance-sheet total of at

least HUF 20 million to annual State Audit Office (Állami Számvevőszék, *ÁSZ for short*) scrutiny, while exempting sports, religious, national-minority and party-linked bodies. Its trigger is size rather than conduct, but the exemptions make it selective.

In practice the inequality was fiscal and administrative. Interviewees reported administrative burdens imposed strategically on critical organizations, with the ÁSZ and the Sovereignty Protection Office investigating Transparency International Hungary and Átlátszó, the two most influential anti-corruption watchdogs (Gyori, 2024). On the funding side, roughly 90% of the budgets of the largest schemes went to government-affiliated organizations in the three years to 2024 (Bódis, 2024), while grant lines for human rights or democratic values did not exist (Mora, 2024).

The Tisza government contests this practice, undertaking that CSOs should receive central funding in a transparent, professionally justified and non-partisan manner; on 18 August 2026 the Prime Minister's Office published an interactive map of the roughly HUF 400 billion disbursed to CSOs between 2022 and 2026 (Miniszterelnökség, 2026; Telex, 2026). Sector bodies warn, however, that publishing recipients without examining individual decisions casts collective suspicion on locally rooted associations (Esély és Részvétel, 2026). The two-tier sector inherited from the previous era remains materially intact.

Trend. Improving in intent, unchanged in structure: the selective statutory trigger and the accumulated funding asymmetry both survive into the new period for now.

Score 3 – Mostly enabling: The legal baseline for establishment and registration is formally equal and the discriminatory funding practice has been publicly disavowed and opened to scrutiny by the government itself, but Lex NGO's selective exemptions and the funding asymmetry both still stand.

A2 – Political recognition as partners

> ***Standard.*** *Public institutions and officeholders recognize CSOs as legitimate, independent democratic actors and engage them as partners rather than adversaries.*

No general statutory duty obliges Hungarian public bodies to treat CSOs as partners; recognition depends on political will. Under Fidesz, meetings were convened periodically, primarily to satisfy reporting obligations towards the United Nations and the European Union, but interviewees described them as one-sided and futile. The Anti-Corruption Task Force supporting the Integrity Authority is the emblematic case: several independent CSOs were invited to join, yet Transparency International Hungary signalled early on that its positions were disregarded entirely (Mora, 2024).

The change of government produced an immediate change of atmosphere. The State Secretary for Civil Relations, József Pótor, convened civil society actors within weeks of the April 2026 election and undertook that CSOs would be included in decision-making; the civil portfolio was given ministerial rank under Zoltán Tarr. The first real test came in summer 2026 over the "heartbeat regulation", anti-abortion legislation adopted by the previous parliament without civil dialogue. When the Minister of Health signaled that he would consult a narrower "professional" circle excluding reproductive and women's rights organizations, eighteen CSOs sent a joint open letter requesting inclusion (Iványi, 2026); he convened a panel with all signatories by the end of July 2026.

The material effect is real but personalized: access depends on the responsiveness of individual ministers and on CSOs' capacity to press for it rather than on any institutional entitlement — a fragile basis, but a decisive improvement on adversarial framing.

Trend. Clearly improving during the reference period, though only very recently and on a case-by-case basis, not yet secured by any institutional guarantee.

Score 3 – Mostly enabling: The government began engaging CSOs as legitimate partners within weeks of taking office and responded substantively when pressed, but recognition rests on ministerial goodwill rather than on real institutional entitlement.

A3 – Refrained authorities from smearing

> ***Standard.*** *Officials and state bodies refrain from stigmatizing, vilifying, or delegitimizing rhetoric and smear campaigns against CSOs (e.g., "foreign agents," "enemies"), including in state-supported media.*

Hostile narrative was among the previous government's most consistently used instruments against democratic, human rights and anti-corruption organizations. In his nationally televised address of 15 March 2025 — inside the assessment period — Viktor Orbán described government-critical actors, CSOs among them, as "bedbugs" (Presinszky, 2025). State media categorized organizations as Soros mercenaries or threats to national sovereignty, principally because they defended minority rights or received support from the Open Society Foundation, USAID or the EU's CERV programme (Mora, 2024). The Sovereignty Protection Office, Orbán's Kremlin-style, hand-controlled anti-civil authority gave the narrative statutory backing, voicing "concerns" about critical CSOs' independence in annual reports built on fabricated conspiracy claims (Government of Hungary, 2026).

Since April 2026 the Magyar government has refrained from delegitimizing rhetoric and has not positioned CSOs as ideological targets. Its sovereignty framing is pragmatic, and financial transparency is presented as a mutual obligation binding government and sector alike; the governing party's position is that civil society is "not a burden, but a resource" (Tisza

Party, 2026). One interviewee whose organization was founded after the peak of the Soros campaigns reported that their residual self-censorship has noticeably subsided since the election.

One risk deserves recording. The framing accompanying the August 2026 funding map — that resources may have flowed disproportionately to organizations tied to the former governing parties — has been criticized as an inverted form of collective stigmatization, since the database identifies recipients without distinguishing political capture from ordinary local activity (Világgazdaság, 2026).

Trend. Strongly improving; official smearing has ceased, though the new government's transparency communication carries a stigmatization risk to monitor in the next cycle.

Score 3 – Mostly enabling: Official smearing has ceased entirely, but goodwill rests on political choice rather than on any safeguard, and disproportionate hostility towards organizations which received government funding before 2026 might hurt some legitimate CSOs down the line.

A4 – No weaponization of state powers and good governance principles

> ***Standard.*** *The state does not deploy institutional powers — audits, inspections, tax, security or law-enforcement bodies, emergency measures, or principles such as transparency and fiscal due diligence — selectively or disproportionately to pressure CSOs because of their activities or views.*

The most important development of the period is the abolition of the Sovereignty Protection Office, after a parliamentary vote on 30 June 2026 (Human Rights Watch, 2026). The Office had subjected organizations to arbitrary investigation on vague charges of serving foreign interests, with

no avenue to contest its findings; the CJEU advocate general concluded in February 2026 that its mandate infringed fundamental rights. No new targeted tax or ÁSZ audits have been reported since April 2026.

The inherited apparatus nonetheless remains largely intact. The ÁSZ's Lex NGO mandate is untouched, the Office for the Protection of the Constitution retains its surveillance capacity and cyber-tooling (Bodoky, 2026), and no remedy has been offered to organizations investigated under the abolished Act. More significantly, the new majority has built rather than dismantled institutional capacity: Act XXXIV of 2026, adopted on 28 July under the Seventeenth Amendment to the Fundamental Law, created the National Asset Recovery and Asset Protection Office (NVVH) with independent investigative and prosecution powers across civil, administrative, tax and procurement proceedings (Portfolio, 2026).

It touches the sector directly: from September 2026 the Civil Act (§ 10/E(3)) and the Civil Registration Act are amended so that an association or foundation notified by the NVVH may not merge, and NVVH measures are entered in the court register (Esély és Részvétel, 2026). The stated purpose — recovering misappropriated public assets — is legitimate, but the architecture of selective institutional pressure has been added to, not retired.

Trend. Improving in practice, ambiguous in design: the abolition of one instrument coincided with the creation of another whose reach over CSOs is untested.

Score 2 – Restrictive leaning: Although the single worst instrument of institutional pressure was abolished, the ÁSZ's Lex NGO mandate, the intact surveillance apparatus and the NVVH's new powers over CSO mergers leave the machinery of selective pressure fully available and, in one respect, expanded.

A5 – Transparent and open public institutions

Standard. *Public institutions operate transparently and proactively provide access to information, enabling CSOs and citizens to scrutinize decisions and/or access to decision-making and hold authorities accountable.*

The formal framework — Act CXII of 2011 on freedom of information, alongside Hungary's Aarhus Convention obligations — is adequate on paper, but its use was systematically obstructed through cost charging, refusals invoking excessive workload and protracted litigation, and through the removal of large volumes of public spending into public-interest asset management foundations (KEKVA) beyond the reach of ordinary transparency rules.

The new government has committed to building an accessible, transparent public structure, and two steps support that commitment: the legislative dismantling of the KEKVA construction, which permitted covert control over institutions and funding streams (Márton & Csurgó, 2026), and the proactive publication of five years of civil support data (Miniszterelnökség, 2026). Ministerial responsiveness has improved, as the health portfolio's roundtable illustrates.

Access to decision-making, by contrast, remains ad hoc. Interviewees describe an environment in which CSOs must monitor parliamentary debates and individual politicians' social media channels in order to learn what is being prepared, and must proactively request inclusion whenever they judge their expertise relevant. There is no consolidated, published government agenda and no standing channel for civil feedback; sector organizations have submitted detailed proposals on precisely this point, including on linking the statutory monitoring system for state support with a public transparency interface (Esély és Részvétel, 2026). Openness is improving through disclosure, but not yet through predictable process.

Trend. Improving, driven by discrete acts of proactive disclosure rather than by any structural reform of access to information or to the policy pipeline.

Score 2 – Restrictive leaning: Openness has improved only through discrete and discretionary acts of disclosure, while the structural problem is untouched: there is no published government agenda, no standing channel for civil feedback, and no reform of the freedom-of-information practice that was systematically obstructed before 2026.



Cluster B – Legal and Financial Framework for CSOs

What formal conditions shape CSO operations and sustainability?

Cluster B records the largest formal improvement of the period — removal of the foreign-agent element — against an otherwise static statute book and an unreformed funding architecture. The direction is positive, but it is too early to treat the gains as consolidated.

B1 – Free establishment and operation

Standard. *Everyone can freely establish, join or participate in a CSO; CSOs determine their own objectives; registration is clear, simple, quick and inexpensive. The state does not interfere in internal governance, and monitoring or reporting is defined by law, proportionate and not onerous.*

Establishment is a right, not a license: associations and foundations are registered by the county courts under Act CLXXXI of 2011, free of charge and without prior authorization, and organizations determine their own objectives. The associative space is correspondingly populous: in 2023 Hungary had 18,242 foundations and 35,405 associations, making classic civil organizations 88% of all nonprofit entities (KSH, 2024). Formation has never been the binding constraint here.

The weaknesses lie in operation. Court practice is formalistic and slow, reporting is duplicated across the courts, the National Office for the Judiciary and the tax administration, and Lex NGO adds an annual layer of ÁSZ scrutiny above the HUF 20 million threshold — low enough to capture any professionalized advocacy organization while exempting comparable bodies elsewhere. Public benefit status, which unlocks the more favorable tax treatment, is conditioned on eligibility tests that many small and rural organizations cannot meet.

Interference in internal governance has not been systemic, and no politically motivated refusal of registration was reported in the assessment period. One new element requires monitoring: from September 2026 an association or foundation notified by the newly created NVVH may not merge with another; a restriction inserted into the Civil Act without sector consultation and drawn more broadly than the asset-recovery purpose requires (Nonprofit.hu, 2026).

Trend. Stable. Entry conditions are unchanged and unproblematic; the operational compliance load is unchanged and disproportionate, with one new statutory restriction added at the very end of the period.

Score 3 – Mostly enabling: Establishment is genuinely free and internal autonomy is respected, which places the standard well above the midpoint, but the duplicated reporting obligations, the low Lex NGO audit threshold and the newly inserted merger restriction are still a concern.

B2 – CSOs enjoy a safe space and protection from arbitrariness

Standard. *CSOs are protected against arbitrary or politically motivated suspension, dissolution or sanction; such measures rest on clear legal grounds, proportionality and independent judicial review.*

Dissolution and suspension are reserved to the courts under the Civil Code and the Civil Act, on enumerated grounds and subject to appeal, and no CSO was dissolved or suspended on political grounds in the period. The threat operated instead through investigation and exposure: the Sovereignty Protection Act allowed the Office to compel cooperation, threaten summonses before the National Security Committee and publish findings that targeted organizations had no means of contesting (Government of Hungary, 2026) — a sanction in substance without the safeguards attaching to one in form.

That instrument was removed on 30 June 2026, its assets and mandate passing to the Ministry of Justice (Human Rights Watch, 2026). The courts also produced protection: after the Court of Justice struck down the 2021 "child protection" legislation on 21 April 2026, prosecutors dropped the criminal proceedings against the organizers of the 2025 Budapest Pride, who had faced up to a year's imprisonment (France 24, 2026).

Two issues still hinder the final score. No remedy or review has been offered to organizations investigated under the abolished Act, and the disposition of the data gathered on them remains unresolved. Nor has any prompt, impartial investigation followed into alleged privacy and surveillance violations affecting civic actors, despite credible reporting on the use of state and private intelligence capacity against political targets (Bodoky, 2026). Protection improved because the threat was withdrawn, not because the safeguards were strengthened.

Trend. Improving decisively at the level of exposure to arbitrary measures, while the remedial and investigative dimension of the standard remains unaddressed.

Score 3 – Mostly enabling: The main source of arbitrary pressure was removed by law and the courts actively protected civic actors during the period, while the complete absence of remedy, review or investigation for those already targeted prevents a higher score.

B3 – Liberty of resourcing

> ***Standard.*** *CSOs are free to seek, receive and use financial and material resources from domestic, foreign and international sources, public or private, with no distinction in treatment between foreign/international and domestic resources, and without stigmatization.*

Hungary no longer has a foreign-agent directive in force. Act LXXVI of 2017 on the transparency of foreign-supported organizations was repealed in 2021 after the Court of Justice found it incompatible with EU law, and its replacement shifted the statutory trigger from the origin of funding to balance-sheet size (Act XLIX of 2021). The decisive event of the period was the defeat of the attempt to reinstate the model: the "Transparency of Public Life" bill of 13 May 2025 would have permitted blacklisting of any entity receiving foreign funds, including even EU grants, obliged the tax authority and banks to screen every foreign transfer, and enabled sanctioning, defunding and dissolution of listed organizations (ECNL, 2025). It drew an open letter from 347 organizations to the European Commission and was withdrawn from the parliamentary agenda (Liberties, 2025).

With the Sovereignty Protection Office abolished, foreign and international funding carries neither a legal penalty nor an official stigma (Human Rights Watch, 2026). This matters disproportionately in Hungary, where the

independent sector's dependence on CERV, EEA and Norway Grants and private international donors is a direct consequence of its exclusion from domestic public funding.

The remaining constraint is economic rather than legal. The 2025 withdrawal of USAID funding removed a significant funding opportunity for relevant civil actors at short notice -- though it is not something the Hungarian government, rather the US administration decided -- and Lex NGO still marks larger foreign-funded organizations for annual audit. Freedom to resource is restored; the resource base is not.

Trend. Markedly improving: an attempted major restriction was defeated within the subject period and the principal enforcement body was abolished at its close.

Score 3 – Mostly enabling: Hungary now has no foreign-agent regime, with the one remaining reservation, Lex NGO's audit trigger for larger foreign-funded organizations being too narrow to justify a score of 2 but still ever present.

B4 – Enabling fiscal environment

Standard. *CSOs and their donors enjoy a favorable and stable tax environment that supports CSO resourcing and encourages philanthropy. Anti-money laundering and counter-terrorism measures, and sanction regimes, are applied to CSOs proportionately and on a risk basis.*

Hungary's flagship fiscal instrument is the 1+1% personal income tax designation, which allows every taxpayer to direct one per cent of income tax to a qualifying nonprofit. It reaches small and rural organizations more evenly than budgetary support does and is the most widely used form of civic support in the country (see C3). Beyond it the incentive structure is thin: corporate donations are deductible, but individual donations attract

no income tax relief, so private philanthropy has no fiscal encouragement outside the designation mechanism, and public benefit status is gated by tests that exclude much of the sector.

The structural consequence is visible in the aggregate data: classic civil organizations are 88% of nonprofit entities but command only 32% of nonprofit revenue (KSH, 2024), leaving the associative sector dependent on state schemes whose allocation was politically steered throughout the previous period.

On the AML/CFT limb the period contains a warning rather than a realized harm. The May 2025 bill would have converted anti-money-laundering supervision into a political screening mechanism, obliging banks and the tax authority to assess every foreign transaction by reference to its anticipated influence on public life (ECNL, 2025). It was not adopted, but it showed how readily the framework can be repurposed and left banks cautious about foreign-funded clients; no risk-based assessment of nonprofit exposure has been published. A review of the National Cooperation Fund and of civil financing was ordered for 1 August 2026 (Economx, 2026); no fiscal measure had followed by the close of the period.

Trend. Unreformed. Major rework is needed to improve and diversify CSO funding opportunities, more just and equal treatment is needed on the regulation side, as well as the encouragement of active participation and philantrophy. Many CSOs face immense loss of funds after the elections as citizens thought about philanthropy as a temporary need, a way to fund a regime change, not a tool to build a more resilient and active society.

Score 3 – Mostly enabling: The 1% designation mechanism, while criticized, is stable and widely available and there is no fiscal instrument deployed against CSOs during this period, but it is the weakest score 3 in the assessment: philanthropy incentives remain thin, AML supervision came close to being repurposed in 2025, and the announced financing review has yet to produce anything.

B5 – Free expressions of criticism

> ***Standard.*** *CSOs, activists and journalists can express opinions and criticism freely, online and offline, and are protected from SLAPPs, legal intimidation and disproportionate sanctions.*

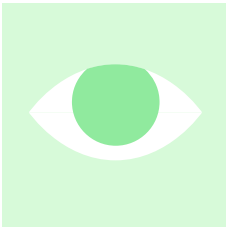
Freedom of expression is protected by Article IX of the Fundamental Law, and Hungarian law contains no restriction on CSO criticism of government as such. The pressure operated through other channels: investigations by the Sovereignty Protection Office, sustained campaigns in state-controlled media, and the reputational cost of being named in the Office's annual reports. Criminal defamation and "scaremongering" provisions remain on the statute book and are available for use, and Hungary has no dedicated anti-SLAPP protection, notwithstanding that the transposition deadline for the EU Anti-SLAPP Directive (2024/1069) fell inside the assessment period in May 2026.

Practice has improved sharply. With the Office abolished and state-media campaigns discontinued, the principal sources of legal and reputational intimidation have been removed, and the government has submitted legislation to restructure public media around pluralism and diversity of opinion (Magyar, 2026). Interviewees report that the self-censorship they practiced throughout the previous period has substantially receded since April 2026, which is the clearest available indicator that the standard is now being met in substance.

The material effect on CSOs is therefore positive but under-secured. Nothing in the legal framework would prevent a future government from resuming the same pattern, and organizations facing abusive litigation still have no procedural protection specific to public participation. Watchdog output continued unimpeded through the period and into the new one, including investigative reporting on intelligence activity directed at political actors (Bodoky, 2026).

Trend. Improving, but on the basis of forbearance rather than legal guarantee; the protective gap identified by the Anti-SLAPP Directive remains open.

Score 3 – Mostly enabling: Criticism can now be voiced without legal or reputational penalty and interviewees confirm that self-censorship has receded, yet the absence of anti-SLAPP protection and the survival of criminal defamation and scaremongering provisions leave the improvement unsecured.



Cluster C – Public Engagement and Perceptions towards the Work of CSOs

How are CSOs perceived, and how do citizens engage with them?

Cluster C is the weakest of the four and the one least affected by the change of government: attitudes and participation patterns are sedimented, media structures change slowly, and the assembly framework has not been amended at all.

C1 – Citizens' trust

> ***Standard.*** *Citizens broadly trust CSOs and regard them as legitimate, valuable contributors to public life.*

The most recent representative evidence, from Political Capital and the Civilisation Coalition, found that around three-quarters of respondents

consider the work of CSOs important. Education is the strongest predictor: the more educated the respondent, the more likely they were to regard civil work as crucial. Partisanship matters too — Tisza voters were nearly twice as likely as Fidesz supporters to express sympathy for the sector (Political Capital & Civilisation Coalition, 2025). Legitimacy, in other words, survived sixteen years of official hostility largely intact.

Belief in effectiveness is a different matter. Asked to rate the civil sphere's effectiveness on a five-point scale, respondents clustered on the midpoint, and here neither demographic nor partisan factors were of particular importance (Political Capital & Civilisation Coalition, 2025). The Hungarian public thus holds CSO work in high regard in principle while remaining sceptical about what it achieved in practice under the previous regime; a distinction that reflects the sector's real exclusion from resources and decision-making rather than a judgement on its competence.

No known polling has been conducted under the new government. One interviewee from Háttér Society reported a marked increase in societal expectation since the election, theorizing that in a newly opened political system the public expects rapid change and now looks to CSOs to advocate on its behalf. If representative, the sector faces rising demand and reputational exposure without any corresponding increase in capacity.

Trend. Stable, with a plausible but as yet unmeasured post-election increase in expectation; the legitimacy–effectiveness gap is the durable feature. As mentioned before, according to CSO leaders, people are less keen on funding CSOs since the election, but this is not a trust issue, rather than a result of the regime change.

Score 3 – Mostly enabling: Consistently high regard for CSO work found across roughly three-quarters of respondents, but the public assessment of the sector's effectiveness is unfavourable.

C2 – Pluralistic presentation in media

> ***Standard.*** *CSOs are represented in the media fairly and pluralistically, with access to diverse, independent outlets that report on their work without systemic bias.*

The United Nations Human Rights Council raised repeated concerns about the absence of media pluralism in Hungary, and the deficit transmitted directly into CSO representation (Gerő et al., 2023). Government-critical and non-GONGO organizations were either absent from state-controlled outlets altogether or subject to sustained smear campaigning; the majority responded by shifting their communications to social media platforms and building direct audiences there (Gerő et al., 2023). Structurally, the concentration of the commercial media market achieved through the KESMA conglomerate, and the long fixed terms of media-regulator appointments made under the previous rules, were unaffected by the election.

The new government has not addressed CSO media representation as such, but has submitted legislation restructuring public service media around restored pluralism and diversity of opinion (Magyar, 2026). It is reasonable to expect wider coverage of civil society actors to follow, though at the close of the assessment period no precedent had been set and no change in coverage patterns could be measured.

The material effect on CSOs is significant and persists: outside the independent online outlets and their own social media channels, most organizations still have no reliable route to a general audience. This constrains fundraising, volunteer recruitment and the public legitimacy on which advocacy depends, and it is the principal mechanism by which the high abstract regard recorded under C1 fails to convert into engagement. Due to the regime change, as Fidesz's media was funded largely through the problematic appropriation of public funds, media outlets that

would often feature the previous government's anti-CSO messages are disappearing due to lack of funding, which decreases misrepresentation of CSOs in media.

Trend. Early positive signals from the public media reform, with the underlying ownership and regulatory structures unchanged and no substantial, measurable improvement in coverage yet.

Score 2 – Restrictive leaning: Not enough has changed yet, the structural causes of misrepresentation, such as market concentration and fixed-term regulator appointments remain, and independent news outlets who rely on crowdfunding notice a downtick in contributions after the regime change, making their position, in some cases, more difficult than before.

C3 – Free engagement

> ***Standard.*** *Citizens can engage freely and safely in civic activities — volunteering, activism, donating, protest — and such participation is socially accepted and not penalized.*

Participation is broad but shallow. In the Political Capital and Civilisation Coalition study, 82% of respondents had engaged with or helped a CSO in the preceding three years, but most did so through the 1% tax designation. Direct monetary or in-kind donation was reported by 31%, while personal engagement was markedly rarer: 13% had volunteered, 6% were current members and 5% former members of an organization (Political Capital & Civilisation Coalition, 2025). Official statistics point the same way, with the number of volunteers in classic civil organizations declining from 381,000 to 373,000 (KSH, 2024).

Part of this hesitance is attributable to the reduced social appeal of the sector after years of smear campaigning: 13% of non-helping respondents identified lack of trust as their reason for inaction (Political Capital & Civilisation Coalition, 2025). Interviewees, however, consistently

reported that local engagement is stronger than national figures suggest. The EMMA Association, for example, runs a programme built on an extensive network of local volunteers in a small village near Miskolc.

Legally, civic participation is neither penalized nor conditioned, with one significant carve-out: participation in assemblies contravening the child protection provisions carries administrative fines and, for organizers, criminal exposure (see C5). For the LGBTQI+ community and those who publicly support it, participation therefore continued to carry legal risk throughout the assessment period, even where that risk was not enforced.

Trend. Stable. Neither the volume nor the character of civic participation shifted materially during the period, and the single legal restriction on participation remains in force. Civil engagement is free but relatively low.

Score 3 – Mostly enabling: Participation is legally unimpeded and very widely practised, while the shallowness of that participation and low volunteer numbers still pose a problem.

C4 – CSOs embedded in communities

> ***Standard.*** *CSOs are embedded in their communities and able to mobilize grassroots support, public solidarity and cross-sector backing in defense of civic space.*

Hungarian CSOs are generally well embedded in their immediate environments and their work is well regarded, but mobilization capacity is limited, because the dominant form of support — the tax designation — creates no relationship that can be activated. The membership and volunteering figures under C3 are the constraint: with only six per cent of the population as CSO members across the entire sector cannot readily convert public approval into widespread solidarity.

Interviewees reported that cooperation with local decision-makers — mayors, municipalities, local entrepreneurs — was highly dependent on

individual attitudes during the previous era, with hostile stances gravely hindering outreach. Notably, most Fidesz-affiliated local stakeholders were welcoming towards CSO projects so long as the work remained local and no counter-instruction arrived from the national party office. That configuration has now inverted: the national government has changed while most municipalities remain Fidesz-affiliated, so the pressure from above has lifted without any settled new pattern having emerged.

There is countervailing evidence of latent mobilization capacity. The 2025 Budapest Pride drew between 100,000 and 200,000 participants in defiance of a police ban, becoming the largest anti-government demonstration in years, with many first-time attendees mobilized by the democratic stakes rather than by the specific cause. This demonstrates that solidarity can be mobilized in defence of civic space; it does not demonstrate that individual CSOs command constituencies of their own. Finally, the rise of Tisza could be interpreted as a sign of innate civic reflexes, seeing how one of the biggest novelties of Tisza's campaigning were the quasi-grassroots "Tisza-islands". These locally embedded activist groups resembled the Civic circles of early Fidesz, but within this argument lies the counterargument itself, as Fidesz's Civic circles all but dispersed eventually, and already, Tisza islands struggle with a lack of direction and a kind of identity crisis post election victory. It is fair to conclude that these groups are more part of the party system than the civil sector.

Trend. Stagnant, with a structural opportunity opening at local level that had not translated into measurable change by the end of the period.

Score 3 – Mostly enabling: CSOs are genuinely rooted in their immediate communities and that solidarity in defence of civic space can be mobilised at scale when it is needed, while the thin membership base and the unsettled relationship with Fidesz-held municipalities keep the standard short of a score of 4.

C5 – Freedom of assembly

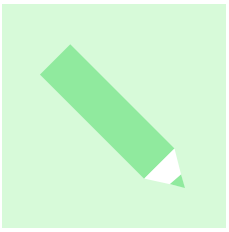
Standard. *Everyone can freely enjoy the right to freedom of peaceful assembly, organizing and participating in assemblies (including online), without unwarranted interference.*

The legal position is unchanged from the Orbán era. The amendment of 18 March 2025 prohibits holding or attending assemblies that contravene the child protection legislation — those depicting or promoting divergence from birth sex, gender reassignment or homosexuality — with fines up to HUF 200,000 for participants, up to a year's imprisonment for organizers, and express authorization for facial recognition (Fazekas, 2025). The Fifteenth Amendment entrenched the prohibition constitutionally. Both remain in force; the new government has criticized the legislation without repealing it.

Practice diverged sharply from law. The 2025 Budapest Pride was held on 28 June despite the police ban, drawing 100,000 to 200,000 people, and police brought no proceedings against participants; weekly protests ran unimpeded from March to July 2025. After the Court of Justice struck down the underlying 2021 legislation on 21 April 2026, Budapest police approved the 2026 Pride on 29 May, prosecutors dropped the charges against the 2025 organizers, and the march took place on 27 June 2026. Assembly outside this carve-out was not restricted at any point.

Trend. Improving in practice and through litigation, unchanged in law; the reversal is administrative and revocable, not legislative.

Score 2 – Restrictive leaning: De jure restricted, de facto non-enforced. Discriminatory statutory and constitutional restriction on a defined category of assembly remains in force and unrepealed, while its non-enforcement, its defeat in litigation and the otherwise unimpeded exercise of assembly rights make the score a strong 2.



Cluster D – CSOs as Policy Makers

To what extent do CSOs influence and shape public policy?

Cluster D captures the defining tension of the period: a government that engages willingly but has not built the machinery through which engagement becomes influence. All interviewees expressed patience about the transition while insisting that structured consultation mechanisms remain essential.

D1 – Right to participate in decision-making including in the policy cycle

> ***Standard.*** *Everyone has the right to participate in decision-making, and authorities use mechanisms ensuring meaningful public and CSO participation, with redress for non-compliance, across the whole policy cycle and without discrimination.*

Act CXXXI of 2010 on public participation in the preparation of legislation obliges ministries to publish draft legislation for general consultation and to publish a summary of the opinions received. Its weaknesses are structural: the obligation binds ministries but not individual members of parliament, it admits broad exemptions for urgent legislation, and it provides no redress whatsoever for non-compliance. The private member's bill was accordingly the standard route for circumventing consultation — both the March 2025 assembly amendment and the May 2025 "Transparency of Public Life" bill were submitted by individual MPs and escaped public consultation entirely (ECNL, 2025).

Under the new government, participation has become real but remains case-by—case and informal. Access depends on CSOs identifying relevant processes themselves and requesting inclusion, which favours organizations with the staff to monitor parliament, ministries and politicians' communications continuously. Participation across the later phases of the policy cycle — implementation and monitoring — is essentially absent, and no mechanism exists through which an excluded organization could obtain inclusion as of right.

The material effect is a sector in which a small number of well-connected organizations now have genuine access, while the rest depend on being invited. The heartbeat regulation episode is instructive in both directions: eighteen organizations obtained a ministerial hearing, but only by writing a joint open letter to secure what a functioning mechanism would have provided automatically (Iványi, 2026).

Trend. Improving substantially in practice from a very low base, with the formal guarantees and the redress gap unchanged.

Score 2 – Restrictive leaning: See A2. Statutory right to participate binds only ministries, admits broad exemptions and carries no redress whatsoever, so that the real improvement in practice since April 2026 depends on invitation and self-mobilisation rather than on any enforceable entitlement. CSOs are referred to as partners but real influence over policy is low.

D2 – Timely consultations and equal participation

Standard. *Consultations are launched early, allow adequate time, and supply the information needed for substantive input. Participation is adequately resourced and accessible, so that grassroots and under-resourced CSOs are not excluded due to limited means.*

Consultation timelines are the most consistently reported obstacle in the interviews conducted for this assessment. One interviewee was given a single weekend to review draft legislation falling squarely within their organization's field of expertise. Another withdrew from a consultation altogether, judging the timeframe too short to produce a comprehensive submission, and instead forwarded findings from an earlier report; a rational response that nonetheless converts consultation into a formality.

The formal framework does not remedy this. Act CXXXI of 2010 sets no effective minimum period, and the general consultation obligation is routinely satisfied by publication windows too short for organizations without dedicated policy staff. Nothing in Hungarian law or practice resources participation: there is no support for travel, staff time or expert input, no systematic provision for online participation designed around under-resourced organizations, and no accessibility requirement. The predictable result is that participation defaults to professionalized, Budapest-based organizations; a pattern consistent with the concentration of nonprofit revenue documented under B4.

The character of the constraint has changed with the government, but not its magnitude. Where exclusion was previously by design, it is now a by-product of transition and administrative capacity. CSO representatives were explicit that they need transparent agendas, identified points of contact and an established feedback mechanism, and equally explicit that they regard the absence of these as a long-term risk rather than a short-term inconvenience.

Trend. Stagnant. Timeframes and resourcing did not improve during the assessment period, and no procedural reform has been announced.

Score 2 – Restrictive leaning: Consultation windows remain too short for substantive input, as the interviews document, and nothing in law or practice resources participation, so under-resourced and non-Budapest organizations are effectively excluded regardless of the government's intentions.

D3 – Policies encourage cooperation with CSOs

> ***Standard.*** *State policies actively facilitate cooperation with CSOs: there is a strategy/policy on cooperation, and transparent consultative bodies that genuinely feed into decision-making.*

Hungary has no national civil society strategy. The institutional infrastructure that exists derives from the Civil Act: the National Cooperation Fund (NEA) with its sectoral colleges, which include delegates elected by CSOs themselves, the Civil Information Portal and the network of Civil Information Centres. On paper this is a genuine cooperation framework; in practice the colleges' composition and the Fund's allocation were politically steered, and the participatory element functioned as legitimation rather than as influence.

The new government has made cooperation an explicit organizing commitment. The civil portfolio was given ministerial rank alongside a dedicated State Secretariat for Civil Relations; the government adopted a formal decision published in the Hungarian Gazette requiring a full review of the NEA and of the civil financing system, with a new support-policy concept due by 1 August 2026 (Economx, 2026); and it legislated the dismantling of the KEKVA construction (Márton & Csurgó, 2026). Sector organizations have responded with detailed submissions on how the support system should be made transparent (Esély és Részvétel, 2026).

What does not yet exist is the framework itself. There is no cooperation strategy, no reconstituted consultative body and no published outcome of the financing review. The score reflects a settled and institutionally expressed policy commitment moving in a positive direction, not an operational framework; if the review does not produce one during the next assessment period, the score should fall rather than rise. Instead of focusing on establishing stable working relations with the civil sector, the new government is for now more interested in the dismantling of "His Royal Highness' Civil Sector" – the alternative civic space built and funded entirely by Fidesz to achieve goals of Fidesz.

Trend. Improving, on the strength of institutional signals and a formal review process rather than dependable structures.

Score 3 – Mostly enabling: Institutionally expressed commitment to cooperation (ministerial rank for the civil portfolio, a promised review of the entire financing system), but no delivered framework yet, score should fall to a 2 if that review yields nothing in the next assessment period.

D4 – Free advocacy and watchdogging

> ***Standard.*** *CSOs can freely conduct advocacy, watchdog and campaigning activities to influence policy and opinion, without these being restricted, taxed or reclassified as prohibited "political" activity.*

Hungarian law does not tax advocacy or treat it as prohibited political activity. The Civil Act bars public benefit organizations from direct political activity, but the term is defined by reference to party activity and to nominating candidates, and does not extend to policy advocacy, campaigning or watchdog work. There is no lobbying registration barrier applicable to CSOs and no licensing requirement for campaigning.

Restriction operated instead through parallel channels. The Sovereignty Protection Office investigated precisely the organizations whose function is watchdogging, and the ÁSZ pursued Transparency International Hungary and Átlátszó, the country's two leading anti-corruption watchdogs (Gyori, 2024). Both instruments have now been withdrawn or defanged: the Office was abolished on 30 June 2026 (Human Rights Watch, 2026), and no new targeted audits have been reported. Watchdog output continued throughout the period notwithstanding the pressure;Átlátszó's investigation into private intelligence activity directed at political actors is itself evidence of an operative watchdog sector (Bodoky, 2026).

Two residual constraints qualify the assessment. Lex NGO's balance-sheet trigger still marks larger advocacy organizations for annual scrutiny

under a statutory label (organizations "capable of influencing public life") designed to delegitimize them, and it has not been repealed. And the capacity to advocate remains conditioned by the resource asymmetries recorded under B3 and B4. Advocacy is free; it is not yet resourced or destigmatized in law.

Trend. Improving. The principal instruments of restriction were removed within the period while the stigmatizing statutory classification survives.

Score 3 – Mostly enabling: Advocacy and watchdog work are neither restricted, taxed nor reclassified in law, and the instruments used to harass watchdogs have been withdrawn, but Lex NGO's stigmatising classification of organizations "capable of influencing public life" remains.

D5 – Government listens

> ***Standard.*** *Public authorities give CSO and public input genuine consideration and provide reasoned, traceable feedback on how contributions affected the final decision.*

The previous government's record on this standard was the weakest in the cluster: consultation existed, but the Anti-Corruption Task Force experience — where an independent member's positions were disregarded from the outset (Mora, 2024) — is the representative case rather than the exception. The statutory duty under Act CXXXI of 2010 to publish a summary of the opinions received and the reasons for their rejection was honored inconsistently and unenforceably.

Since April 2026, demonstrable responsiveness has replaced formal consultation. The heartbeat regulation case shows input producing a change in the government's conduct within weeks: a joint letter from eighteen organizations resulted in a ministerial panel to which all signatories were invited (Iványi, 2026). The publication of the civil funding database likewise answered a long-standing sector demand

(Prime Minister's Office, 2026). Ministries respond to approaches, and CSO representatives across the interviews acknowledged this as a genuine change.

What is missing is the feedback loop in its methodological sense. No published account exists of how submissions influenced any final decision, the statutory summary obligation remains inconsistently applied, and there is no traceable record connecting input to outcome. The score therefore reflects a government that listens and responds without yet being able to demonstrate what it did with what it heard; a moderately favorable state moving in a positive direction, and one that will require institutionalization to be sustained beyond the goodwill of individual ministers.

Trend. Improving from a very low base, driven by political responsiveness rather than by any procedural guarantee of reasoned feedback.

Score 3 – Mostly enabling: Ministries now demonstrably act on CSO input, as the heartbeat regulation case shows, while the absence of any traceable record connecting submissions to outcomes means the standard is being met through responsiveness rather than through the reasoned feedback it actually requires.

Conclusion

Hungary at the close of the assessment period is best described as a hostile legal architecture inherited largely intact by a government that does not intend to use it. Every standard on which conduct alone is decisive — recognition, smearing, expression, responsiveness — improved sharply within the final quarter of the period. Every standard anchored in statute (the Lex NGO classification, the assembly restriction and its constitutional entrenchment, the absence of consultation guarantees and philanthropy incentives) is where it was in January 2026. The composite score of 2.7 sits

almost exactly on the boundary between “restrictive leaning” and “mostly enabling”, which is an accurate description of a country in transition rather than an artefact of averaging.

Three questions will determine the direction of the next cycle. (1.) Whether the government legislates: repeal of the assembly amendment and of Lex NGO, and transposition of the Anti-SLAPP Directive, would convert practice into protection. (2.) Whether the financing review produces a transparent, criteria-based allocation system rather than a redistribution once again based on political preferences and goals. And (3.) whether the new NVVH, whose powers over CSO mergers take effect in September 2026, is exercised proportionately. Until those are answered, the improvements recorded here rest on forbearance, and forbearance is revocable.

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Interviews

Five semi-structured expert interviews conducted for this assessment:

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- → Zsirka Hella — Háttér Társaság (Háttér Society)
- → Mester Zoltán — Emberség Alapítvány, Aspektus Csoport
- → Szeles András — Greenpeace Magyarország
- → Ligeti Miklós — Transparency International Magyarország

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