

# One in four countries in Europe and Central Asia now seriously repressing civic freedoms

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Findings based on data released today by the [CIVICUS Monitor](#) a global research collaboration which rates and tracks respect for fundamental freedoms in 196 countries.

CIVICUS has today released [People Power Under Attack 2018](#), a new report showing that a quarter of countries in Europe and Central Asia (ECA) are seriously restricting people's fundamental freedoms of association, peaceful assembly and expression. This reflects a continuing crisis facing civil society organisations and activists in the region, with the space for civic activism most commonly undermined through censorship, harassment and intimidation of human rights defenders and attacks on journalists.

"While Europe and Central Asia is home to some of the countries with the best conditions in the world for civil society, leaders should be very concerned about a decline in respect for fundamental freedoms across the board," said Cathal Gilbert, Civic Space Research Lead at CIVICUS. "With the downgrade of Azerbaijan, there are now three countries in this region with the worst possible civic space rating."

The report, which is based on data from the CIVICUS Monitor - a global research collaboration - shows that civil society is under serious attack in 111 of 196 countries, or almost six in ten countries worldwide. In ECA, 13 of 54 countries are rated in the three worst categories on the CIVICUS Monitor. In practice, this means that repression of peaceful civic activism continues to represent a widespread crisis for civil society, with just one in five people in the ECA region living in countries where governments are properly respecting the freedoms of association, peaceful assembly and expression.

## TOP 10 VIOLATIONS: EUROPE and CENTRAL ASIA



■ Censorship ■ Intimidation ■ Harassment ■ Attack on journalist ■ Restrictive Law ■ Protest disruption  
■ HRD detained ■ Bureaucratic restriction ■ Public vilification ■ Protestors detained

Based on analysis of civic space updates published on the CIVICUS Monitor since 24th October 2016: 387 updates for Europe-Central Asia. The numbers above represent the percentage of reports in which that violation was referenced.

Civic space ratings for three ECA countries, Austria, Azerbaijan and Italy, have been downgraded in this latest update. In Austria, which was downgraded from open to narrowed, leaders in the ÖVP-FPÖ government have made a number of derogatory remarks about non-governmental organisations, funding to civil society has been drastically reduced and freedom of expression has also come under attack. In Azerbaijan, which has been downgraded to the worst rating on the CIVICUS Monitor, the legal environment for NGOs makes it almost impossible to operate an independent human rights organisation, while organisations and HRDs have also been targeted by criminal investigations and persecution. In Italy, which is now rated narrowed, civic space has come under pressure as the coalition government of the League party and Five Star Movement has pursued a hard line against civil society organisations providing humanitarian support to refugees and migrants.

“Recent developments in Italy raise serious concerns about the future protection of fundamental freedoms in the country,” said Gilbert. “The NGOs being vilified are the very ones that are saving lives and doing most to foster dialogue between local communities and refugees and migrants arriving in Italy.”

Over half of the 54 ECA countries are members of the European Union (EU), which remains the region of the world with the most countries with open civic space - 15. There are no repressed or closed countries in the EU. According to our latest data however, there are now 13 EU countries that are rated as having either narrowed or obstructed civic space. A key trend that lies behind this is an increasing willingness of some governments to impose restrictions on the so-called ‘political’ activity of CSOs. The governments of Hungary and Poland in particular have imposed restrictions on when and where CSOs can protest and passing laws restricting the operations of CSOs providing support to refugees and migrants. Outside the EU, conditions for civic space in the rest ECA are much worse, with Georgia the only non-EU country rated narrowed on the CIVICUS Monitor. All other countries non-EU in this area are rated either obstructed (three), repressed (five), or closed (three). Russia’s dominance in this region has negatively impacted on civic space, while at home, the government of Russia shows no signs of reversing course in its drive to shut down space for CSOs.

This report also contains detailed analysis of how civic space is being restricted in ECA. Over the past two years, the CIVICUS Monitor has most often documented **ensorship**, **intimidation**, **harassment**, **attacks on journalists** and the **imposition of laws** aimed at restricting civic space in this region. The disruption of protest, detention of HRDs, bureaucratic restrictions on protest, public vilification of activists and the detention of protesters round out the top 10 violations in the ECA region reported on the CIVICUS Monitor over the past two years.

“That so many governments in Europe and Central Asia are willing to blatantly interfere with the freedom of expression should be of serious concern to policy makers and the public alike. Governments must invest resources and political capital to ensure that a free and plural media space is protected, that journalists’ safety is endured and that combatting terrorism or money laundering is not used as an excuse to trample on fundamental freedoms,” said Gilbert.

[Over twenty organisations](#) collaborate on the CIVICUS Monitor to provide an evidence base for action to improve civic space on all continents. The Monitor has published more than 1,400 [civic space updates](#) in the last two years, data which is analysed in *People Power Under Attack*

2018. Civic space in 196 countries is categorised as either **closed**, **repressed**, **obstructed**, **narrowed** or **open**, based on a [methodology](#) which combines several sources of data on the freedoms of association, peaceful assembly and expression.

**For more information or to arrange an interview, please contact::**

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