

Hungary's civil sector in focus of Brussels discussion

A discussion was held about the current situation of Hungary's civil sector at the Philanthropy House in Brussels on Thursday.

Organisers that included CIVICUS, European Alternatives, European Civic Forum and the European Foundation Centre (EFC) invited speakers from Hungary to provide a perspective in light of recent developments.

Marta Pardavi, co-president of the Hungarian Helsinki Committee, said that the scope of dialogue between NGOs and decision makers had been shrinking since 2010. The opinions of civil groups are disregarded, their proposals are met with "cool suspicion" and they face political pressure, she said.

She said that Hungary had a large number of NGOs, but many of them are financially dependent on the central or local government.

As government support is limited and is provided mostly from EU funds, the independent civil sector is forced to rely on other external resources, she said. But multinational companies generally do not support civil rights initiatives since risks are attached to funding NGOs that criticise the government, she said.

Civil organisations have come into spotlight because the opposition is weak and those who express criticism against the government as independents receive a lot more attention, she said.

"Civil organisations are the very last bastions of independence," Pardavi said.

Peter Kreko, head of Political Capital, a think tank, said that developments surrounding Hungary's civil organisations fitted the model Prime Minister Viktor Orban recently outlined regarding an illiberal state.

He said the Hungarian government's strategy towards civil society follows the Russian model along three lines. These include running a smear-campaign aimed at discrediting NGOs, cutting funding for them — clearly seen in steps taken against NGOs involved in Norway Grants — and operating “sham civil organisations” whose only real activity is to organise pro-government demonstrations, he said.