

Title: Democratic backsliding through attacks on freedoms of expression, association and assembly

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My name is Daniyar Orsekov, and I work at the international organisation TGEU - Trans Europe and Central Asia. My intervention focuses on freedom of association and trans organising.

Across Europe and Central Asia, freedom of association for trans people is under growing pressure through legal, political, and social restrictions. Trans and LGBTI organisations face deregistration, forced informality, or closure, limiting their ability to access funding, build partnerships, advocate for their communities, and provide essential services. In some countries, participation in online groups, trainings, or humanitarian activities is increasingly restricted, cutting communities off from national and cross-border support networks.

Vague laws and rhetoric related to so-called “propaganda,” “extremism,” “foreign agents,” or “public morality” are frequently used to target both formal and informal groups. Activists face raids, police questioning, device confiscation, doxxing, SLAPP lawsuits, digital harassment, and physical attacks. Trans human rights defenders, particularly trans women, are often among those most at risk.

Restrictions on foreign funding further undermine organisational sustainability, while the sudden defunding in 2025 significantly weakened the capacity of many trans and LGBTI organisations across the region.

We are seeing a dramatic increase in the persecution of trans and LGBTI activists, particularly in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Activists from the region, with whom I have worked for many years, are burning out and planning to leave the country. As there are very few trans activists, and new people are struggling to get involved in activism, we are losing activists – and with them, knowledge, memory and connections.

As governments increasingly use trans people in particular as political scapegoats, community-led organisations often become the only spaces providing support, information, and opportunities for collective action. Restrictions on freedom of association therefore have consequences far beyond civic participation: they directly affect access to healthcare, education, justice, work, political participation, and social inclusion.

At the same time, trans organisations play a crucial role in advancing human rights and strengthening democratic societies. Across Europe, trans communities have secured landmark victories before the European Court of Human Rights, creating legal protections that benefit thousands of people.

Several European countries continue to support civil society through public funding mechanisms that respect organisational independence. This support enables organisations operating in hostile environments to continue defending rights and providing essential services, including shelters and community support programmes.

Regional solidarity networks have helped organisations relocate, continue operating in exile, and maintain services despite repression. In Eastern Europe and Central Asia a number of organisations have joined forces to work on HIV; this has enabled them to pool their resources and voices and to promote human rights and democracy far beyond the scope of HIV.

Where organisations are free to register and operate, communities become trusted partners in addressing social challenges and are often among the first to respond during humanitarian or public health crises. Moldova offers an important example of how meaningful progress can be achieved when civil society is able to operate freely and governments choose to uphold international human rights standards.

Even in highly restrictive environments across Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and the Caucasus, trans groups continue to create online communities where people can find support, information, friends, and love.

We therefore call on States and international institutions to protect access to registration and legal status, protect access to funding, protect human rights defenders and organisations from violence, ensure that digital spaces are safe for civil society. We recommend recognising trans people as vulnerable but also a protected group, supporting trans human rights defenders facing attack through humanitarian visas, rising the issue in diplomatic channels and including an explicit reference to trans people in resolutions, reports and agendas.

I would like to conclude with a reflection. We often used to say: “First they come for us, and then they come for you,” urging others to stop attacks on LGBTI communities before they spread further. Today, however, we see a more complex reality. States and other powerful actors do not first target trans people and only later target women, migrants, journalists, or human rights defenders. Anti-trans measures are often conceived from the outset as part of broader political projects aimed at weakening rights and freedoms for everyone.

By singling out minority groups, these projects create fear, divide societies, erode solidarity, and establish precedents for further restrictions. Trans people often become the most visible target, but the objective is much broader: to weaken democratic institutions, concentrate power, and shrink the space for independent civic participation.

Protecting freedom of association is therefore not only about safeguarding one particular community. It is about protecting democracy itself and preserving society's ability to organise, defend its rights, and resist authoritarianism.