



Country Report



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Introduction:

Overview of the report's objectives and scope

This report examines the legal and policy environment in Cyprus and the 2017 law, the measures to protect CSOs Public discourse and societal challenges, the consultations conducted in Cyprus five interviews and two focus groups with ten participants and the presentation of the main findings of the research. In addition, the report presents some recommendations through interviews and focus groups.

Description of the civic space in the country

The civic space in Cyprus is described as increasingly restricted, particularly in recent years. While some areas, like Nicosia the capital, remain hubs of civil society activity, rural and peripheral regions, including Famagusta and Larnaca, experience significant limitations. One major shift has been a move away from organized CSOs to working more with informal groups or individuals, particularly in areas where organized entities are scarce. This trend reflects both the shrinking operational space for CSOs and the difficulties they face in registering and sustaining themselves.

The political and social environment has also influenced the civic space. Government policies and legislation appear to favour large, established organisations, often at the expense of smaller or grassroots initiatives, which are critical in fostering local-level civic engagement. Despite these challenges, there remains a strong interest in bicommunal efforts, especially among youth and newer activists, who view civil society as a potential avenue for addressing shared concerns across the divide.

Even though the state civic space in Cyprus is restricted is also improved significantly, with organisations having a stronger voice in decision-making. The civic space in Cyprus is being on the rise but still facing significant development difficulties.

Legal and political Environment

Summary of national legislation and regulatory environment

According to the (Expert Council on NGOs Law of the Council of Europe's Conference of INGOs et al., 2015) the legal framework of Cyprus is "ancient and reflects the high degree of regulation exercised by a colonial power". At the same time, the law does not promote the establishment of organisations that seek to undertake activities that would be of benefit to the public at large or a significant section of it, because of the present narrow scope of the activities which deems to be charitable.

Law on Associations, Foundations and other related issues (L. 104(I)/2017) is a new law and "introduces two new types of legal personalities, first federations and/or unions of organisations, and second organisations that are registered abroad but wish to operate in Cyprus" (Karaoli et al., 2018).

While the political space in Cyprus remains officially "open", challenges for civil society organisations remain. The amendment of the Law on Trade Unions in 2020 led to the de-registration of several CSOs, including KISA, an anti-racist organisation. This amendment imposes strict administrative requirements, including a short two-month compliance deadline, which leads to dissolution of the organisation if not met. The Council of Europe and the UN Special Rapporteurs, have criticised this as a disproportionate restriction on the right of association.

Furthermore, funding remains an issue for CSOs, as national banks classify NGOs' accounts as high risk, hence increasing financial constraints. Another major concern is the threat towards press freedom. These revisions criminalise media material, which shows criticism, ridicule, or dissent against the authorities with penalties up to five years in prison.

The legal and political landscape is characterised by increased regulation and control. The government has passed legislation requiring CSOs to maintain transparent accounting methods and strict operating standards, although these regulations are often perceived as being punitive rather than supportive. Smaller organisations, encounter barriers to meeting these objectives that, such as delays in government procedures or applications.

Analysis of protection measures for civil society organisations

In Cyprus the civil society organisations are faced specific issues based on the legal and political environment. Civil Society Advocates in Cyprus founded in 2018 aims to strengthen Civil Society Organisations and improve their operational framework. In a 2023 report (Civil Society Advocates, 2023) examines the challenges faced by Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in Cyprus concerning legal, financial, and administrative frameworks, while providing recommendations for creating a more enabling environment for their operation.

Some of the challenges are; legal & bureaucratic barriers and specifically compliance with Law 104(I)/2017 on Associations, Foundations, Federations, and Unions is complex, lack of clear guidelines and inconsistency in how district offices interpret the law and extensive delays in obtaining documents (e.g., approval of statutes, certificates of board members).

Additionally, the banking system issues that classified CSOs as high-risk entities by banks, leading to difficulties in opening/operating accounts, unexpected freezing of accounts without prior warning and delays in processing financial transactions, impacting funding. Moreover, the financial sustainability such as the limited and delayed state funding, high administrative costs (e.g., audits) and complex procedures for obtaining fundraising approval. Finally, the public consultation & CSO recognition is



an essential challenge as it contributes to the limitation of participation of CSOs in public consultations, lack of formal frameworks for engagement with government authorities and a general disregard for CSOs' contributions to society.

Based on the above challenges it is essential to mention that there is a lack of comprehensive protection mechanisms, both legal and physical. Current frameworks focus on regulation rather than support, leaving organisations vulnerable to harassment or undue scrutiny and law enforcement is often mistrusted by CSOs, further limiting their ability to seek assistance when faced with threats or challenges. Many organisations are having the role of the lawyer and supported of the CSOs especially with the new law of 2017 with trainings and guides on what are the procedures.

Public discourse and societal challenges

Trends in public discourse on CSOs

Public attitudes towards CSOs are mixed. While some people recognize their value, many are unaware of the critical role they play in fostering social cohesion and advocacy. Media portrayals often focus on negative stories, framing CSOs as ineffective, corrupt, or irrelevant. This has contributed to a general lack of trust and understanding among the broader public. Some of the challenges are also the promoting of participation of civil society in decision-making or in society in general and also participation from citizens in the different initiatives of the CSOs.

Even though comparing with the past the public attitudes have significantly improved they are some negative perceptions remain, particularly regarding CSO funding and transparency. There is still scepticism about whether civil society organisations serve public interests or act as extensions of foreign influence. Additionally, CSOs and civil society are confused with political parties. The organisations particularly those working on human rights, LGBT+, migration, and political issues—are viewed with suspicion and nationalist groups and conservative circles, remain hostile toward CSOs advocating for marginalized communities and express stronger skepticism toward CSOs and focusing on scandals for a few individuals that tainted the reputation of the entire sector.

Societal attitudes and their impact on civic space

Due to lingering societal perceptions that associate civic space mainly with philanthropy and social welfare rather than human rights advocacy have a greater impact on the civic space in general, society still see civil society actors as competitors for financial resources, particularly when state funding is involved. Despite these obstacles, it is acknowledging that civil society is more active than ever in policy discussions, even though some regulatory and administrative barriers persist.

The attitudes and perceptions specifically of the Turkish Cypriot community towards civil society is 59% have a positive view of CSOs, and 52% believe they have a positive impact, CSOs are mostly associated with philanthropy, voluntarism, and democracy and education, health, and social services are seen as their most successful areas. One of the biggest challenges on the attitude of CSOs in Cyprus it was in 2004 before Cyprus enter the EU and before the opening of the borders with the North side. While there has been a positive societal attitude overall, back in 2004 during the Anan plan a hostile atmosphere existed, where civil society organisations were accused of being “traitors” because of their involvement with bicomunal actions and the funding sources of the organisation that promoted those initiatives (Infakto Research Workshop, 2015).

Examples of smearing campaigns and digital threats

Social media has become the primary source of information for the public, including civil society-related issues. While it provides visibility and engagement opportunities, it also exposes CSOs to misinformation and smear campaigns. Media narratives can shape perceptions, but emphasizes that CSOs should use digital platforms strategically to build trust and counter misinformation. While there have been no direct physical threats to most CSOs or activists, some CSOs —especially those focused on migration, LGBTQ+, or political issues—face; online harassment and misinformation campaigns,

administrative pressure from government agencies and hostile public narratives that question their legitimacy.

Participatory Consultations

Direct experiences and perceptions of CSO professionals and activists

Question for interviews:

1. Can you describe the current legal and political environment affecting CSOs in your country?

The professionals and activists in the interviews experienced different perceptions on the legal and political environment affecting CSOs in Cyprus. Some of the interviewee shared perceptions that the legal and political environment is characterised by increasing regulation and control. Additionally, the legal and political environment for civil society has undergone considerable transformation, particularly with the introduction of new regulations for CSOs. These changes were largely influenced by EU pressure to establish a framework for NGO accountability. However, some aspects of the legal environment remain outdated and bureaucratically complex, making it difficult for organisations to operate efficiently.

Participants expressed their views of the complexity of the legal environment and while laws have been modernised to improve NGO accountability and transparency, their implementation is inconsistent, leading to; delays in administrative processes, ambiguous legal interpretations, making compliance difficult and heavy penalties for minor administrative errors.

Other interviewee believes that Cyprus has made significant progress in regulating CSOs, particularly through legislative reforms that have improved accountability and transparency with positive developments such as increased financial accountability, requiring CSOs to submit audited financial statements and regulations ensuring transparency, particularly for organisations receiving public funds and remaining challenges such as bureaucratic inefficiencies, leading to delays in approving NGO applications and public suspicion fuelled by past scandals, where a few high-profile cases of corruption impacted the entire sector's reputation.

2. Have you encountered specific incidents of threats or attacks against your organization? Please describe.

While physical threats are uncommon, administrative challenges are a significant source of stress for CSOs. The increased scrutiny from regulatory bodies and the risk of non-compliance with legal standards create a climate of insecurity. In some cases, CSOs have also faced negative public perceptions, particularly in politically sensitive areas. These perceptions often stem from media narratives that frame civil society efforts as politically motivated or externally influenced.

Other participants mentioned that their organisation has not faced direct physical threats, but they experienced; criticism and pushback from politicians who feel threatened by civil society's growing influence, online harassment and misinformation, particularly when advocating for transparency and government accountability, social media backlash from groups opposed to their policy work and hostile public narratives that question their legitimacy.

3. What are the main challenges your organisation faces in sustaining civic space?

The main challenges the organisations face in sustaining the civic space are:

- **Access to Funding:** Securing funding remains a critical issue, particularly for smaller organisations that struggle to meet the complex requirements of government or EU grants. Many CSOs face difficulty navigating funding streams, which are often inaccessible without specialised expertise or external consultancy support.
- **Restrictive Legal Framework:** Recent legislative changes have imposed significant administrative and bureaucratic hurdles. Organisations are now required to provide audited financial reports, comply with complex governance standards, and update their operational statutes annually. These requirements disproportionately burden smaller organisations, leaving many unable to comply and, in some cases, forcing them to shut down.
- **Public and Political Challenges:** CSOs are often viewed with suspicion, particularly in politically sensitive areas like bicommunal work. Public and media narratives sometimes frame them as ineffective, corrupt, or driven by external agendas, making it harder for organisations to build trust and legitimacy.
- **Geographical Disparities:** Organisations in Nicosia (capital) benefit from proximity to resources, networks, and infrastructure, but those in rural areas lack these advantages, making it harder for them to thrive or even survive.
- **Limited resources:** The shortage of financial and human resources is a significant obstacle, especially for smaller organisations that struggle to sustain their operations. Many ministries lack personnel dedicated to civil society engagement, further complicating the landscape.
- **Perception of CSOs:** Some believe that civil society organisations are merely conduits for foreign influence or state-funded welfare programs, which undermines their broader advocacy efforts.

4. What strategies and practices have been effective in overcoming these challenges?

The strategies or practices to overcome the above challenges are:

- **Grassroots Engagement:** Working directly with local communities to build trust and address specific needs and engaged directly with policymakers, avoiding confrontational tactics.
- **Collaboration with Individuals:** Since formal organisations face many challenges, collaboration with individuals or informal groups has been a successful approach, especially in rural areas.

- Social Media Outreach: Investing in digital platforms to share success stories and promote transparency, although this remains a challenge for smaller organisations due to resource limitations.
- Build trust: Social media campaigns debunking myths about CSOs, engaging in public debates and discussions to raise awareness and participating in policymaking processes to ensure their voices are heard in legislative discussions.
- Legal compliance, coalition-building, and strategic advocacy as key tools for navigating restrictions and strengthening NGO legitimacy.
- Implemented transparency measures, including publishing financial reports.
- Build credibility: Used digital advocacy tools, such as public petitions and policy research reports.

5. How does the state and the national legal framework influence your organization's activities and operations?

The state and the national legal framework influence organisation's activities and operations in the following ways:

- The introduction of a transparency registry requiring organisations to register lobbying activities and disclose meetings with public officials.
- More stringent financial oversight, which has helped maintain credibility but also added administrative burdens.
- Mandatory reporting of internal governance changes, requiring CSOs to update authorities on board members and financial records within days.
- Fines for late compliance, which disproportionately affect smaller organisations.
- Increased state intervention in NGO activities, particularly concerning funding and operational autonomy.
- Organisations must meet strict compliance requirements to be eligible for funding, which is challenging for smaller CSOs with limited administrative capacity. The interviewees also points out that the modernization of legislation has been slow, leaving certain outdated laws in place that hinder CSO operations.
- Administrative workload: Submit audited financial statements annually, provide detailed beneficiary reports and regularly update organizational statutes to comply with evolving laws.

Questions for Focus Groups:

1. Can you share a personal experience where you faced a significant challenge while working in the civic space?

Participants described challenges in organising bicomunal events, where they faced bureaucratic delays and administrative obstacles that made implementation difficult. Authorities did not outright reject initiatives but created unnecessary hurdles, forcing activists to limit activities to areas with fewer restrictions. Another participant encountered political pushback when organizing a cultural exchange between Cyprus and Palestine. They received discouraging phone calls from officials advising them to avoid mentioning government involvement, highlighting how sensitive

topics face indirect suppression. Moreover, activists working with migrants faced attacks on their office.

Activists working on environmental issues also faced challenges, particularly non-responsiveness from government agencies when seeking permits or collaboration. Requests were often ignored or met with negative responses, reflecting bureaucratic inefficiencies rather than outright opposition.

Participants described facing challenges on a daily basis, particularly in their work within civil society organisations. One of the key areas of difficulty was interacting with state institutions, as bureaucratic inefficiencies and government resistance sometimes created obstacles for their activities. For example, members of a CSO highlighted how government agencies can present difficulties in cooperation, making it harder for them to provide services for domestic violence victims. Even though the Ministry of Social Welfare funds them, there are still challenges in maintaining collaboration with different government bodies.

Additionally, the introduction of new advocacy terms, such as “obstetric violence”, led to initial resistance from medical professionals and healthcare institutions. The term was misunderstood as an attack on doctors and hospitals, leading to pushback from medical professionals. However, over time, civil society efforts raised awareness about the issue, and some healthcare professionals eventually acknowledged the problem and supported the movement.

2. How safe and empowered do you feel in your civic activities?

Participants felt relatively safe but noted concerns regarding harassment from nationalist groups, particularly when advocating for migration and bicomunal cooperation. Some activists avoided certain protests and demonstrations due to fears of violent confrontations with extremist groups, especially given past cases where police failed to intervene against aggressors. However, those affiliated with larger CSOs or international organisations felt a greater sense of security, as institutional backing provided legitimacy and protection.

Participants generally expressed a sense of safety and empowerment, largely because their organisations have strong institutional backing and established reputations. Some activists working in specific organisations has a well-developed support system and maintains good relationships with government agencies, allowing it to operate effectively without facing serious risks.

However, there are exceptions, especially when introducing controversial or unfamiliar topics. In the case of obstetric violence awareness, there was initial backlash from healthcare institutions, but strategic engagement helped shift public perception over time. One key takeaway from the discussion was that having allies and institutional support plays a crucial role in feeling safe while conducting civic activities. Participants emphasized that being part of a larger network provides legitimacy and protection.

3. What types of legal and financial support have you received, and how effective have they been?

Participants noted significant gaps in support structures for civic activism. For financial support the government funding is limited and favours service-oriented organisations rather than advocacy groups.

International funding exists but requires complex paperwork, making it inaccessible for smaller initiatives. Some of the participants indicated that their organisation had received financial support from the government, particularly through public funding for social services. A key observation was that while funding exists, it is often tied to specific types of work. Organisations focused on social welfare may have better access to government support, whereas advocacy-based CSOs may struggle to secure funding.

For legal support, no structured legal aid for activists facing harassment or legal challenges and CSOs facing administrative obstacles must navigate bureaucracy without state-provided guidance. Other participants mentioned that legal support was less clear. While participants acknowledged that legal mechanisms exist, they did not mention using legal resources extensively. Instead, they relied on partnerships with institutions and state actors to navigate regulatory challenges. Participants explain that authorities sometimes use legal technicalities as a deterrent, imposing administrative barriers rather than outright bans.

4. Have you ever felt that your freedom of expression has been compromised? How did you deal with it?

Participants did not experience direct government censorship but faced indirect forms of suppression, including; online harassment and social stigma for discussing controversial topics, state reluctance to support certain civic initiatives, discouraging open advocacy and algorithmic suppression on social media, limiting the reach of activist posts.

One activist received aggressive online responses leading them to withdraw from digital debates. Others noted that hate speech laws were inconsistently enforced, allowing misinformation and hostility to spread unchecked. Some chose to engage selectively, avoiding public confrontations while focusing on educational campaigns with trusted audiences.

Participants did not report direct censorship or suppression of speech. However, some challenges related to public perception and institutional resistance were discussed. For instance, the introduction of new advocacy language, such as "obstetric violence", initially led to resistance from healthcare professionals and government agencies. This resistance was not a direct restriction on freedom of expression, but it did create a hostile environment for discussing the issue openly. To address such challenges, organisations focused on strategic communication, ensuring that their messages were scientifically backed and framed in a way that encouraged dialogue rather than confrontation.

Additionally, participants emphasized the importance of having allies in civil society and academia to legitimize their work. By involving researchers, policymakers, and professionals, they were able to counter negative perceptions and strengthen their credibility.

5. What digital tools do you use for your activism, and what challenges have you faced?

Participants primarily used Facebook, Instagram, and online petitions for outreach, education, and event organization. Some of the challenges are; misinformation and hostility, making constructive discussions difficult, censorship through platform algorithms, reducing visibility for activist content and surveillance concerns, particularly in politically sensitive activism.

Some activists preferred private digital spaces, such as Telegram or closed group chats, to organize activism away from public hostility and misinformation campaigns. Participants highlighted the central role of social media in their advocacy efforts. Platforms like Facebook and organizational websites were used to promote campaigns and awareness-raising activities, share research findings and policy recommendations and organise public engagement efforts such as surveys and petitions. One example mentioned was the use of social media to promote the concept of "obstetric violence", which helped reach a wider audience and change public perception over time.

While social media has been a valuable tool for advocacy, participants also acknowledged certain challenges such as misinformation and resistance – New advocacy topics can face public backlash and scepticism, particularly when they challenge existing norms, the risk of online harassment – Activists discussing controversial issues may face negative reactions from online users and resource limitations – Maintaining an effective online presence requires expertise and effort, which can be challenging for small organisations with limited budgets. Despite these challenges, digital tools were viewed as essential for modern activism, allowing organisations to amplify their messages and engage with the public more effectively.

Key findings from interviews and focus groups

The number of people who participated in the interviews in Cyprus is five people from different backgrounds, age groups and genders and their role and work in the field ranged from lawyers to members of organisations and employees of public institutions. However, due to GDPR details about the names of the participants, place of work etc. will not appear in this report. In addition, we are unable to share screenshots and consent forms in this report due to GDPR.

The focus group included 10 activists from all over the island, the participants were of different age groups but most of them were young, from different genders and most of them work in human rights-oriented organisations on the island etc.

The aspects in which the political space is most pronounced are through limited funding, restrictive legal framework, public and political challenges, geographical inequalities, limited resources and social perceptions of CSOs. In addition, based on the activities of the respondents, the legal and judicial sphere affects their activities in terms of workload and sanctions they may face due to strict regulations.

Conclusions and recommendations

Recommendations for improving civic space and protecting CSOs

In the report (Civil Society Advocates, 2023) are presented the following recommendations for improving civic space on the functionalities on CSOs. On legal and administrative reforms, it needs to standardized guidelines and procedures and for the district offices to develop a manual that can ensure consistent implementation of CSO regulations. Also, the development of capacity building for CSOs and public authorities that includes training sessions accessible in multiple languages. Furthermore, the digitalization of administrative processes that can centralized online registry for CSOs to update documents and communicate with authorities easier.

In the report the recommendations on banking reforms should separate classification for CSO to ensure they are not treated like businesses, improved communication and transparency and banks must inform CSOs of account updates and provide clear compliance guidelines. Furthermore, on

funding and financial sustainability of CSOs some recommendations are the review of State funding mechanisms to ensure timely disbursement of grants, reduction of bureaucratic hurdles for fundraising and simplify the procedures for fundraising event approvals. Finally, in order to strengthening public consultation & CSO recognition, it needs to institutionalized participation in policy-making by establish a legal framework mandating CSO involvement in consultations and create and implement public awareness campaigns to highlight CSOs' contributions to society.

Some recommendations for the improvement of awareness in the island is to educate government bodies on CSOs' role and impact, increase government recognition of CSOs through public campaigns, highlight volunteerism and social engagement benefits in career development and encourage CSOs to improve transparency and communication through public reports and ethical standards.

In 2025, Civil Society Advocates prepared a document with recommendations and share them with the Minister of Home affairs for the Act of 2017 of associations in Cyprus. The document contains several suggestions, some of them are presented below:

- In the law Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and Non-Profit Organisations (NPOs) presented as the same, which could lead to disproportionate oversight.
- There is a risk of excessive government intervention in CSO operations, particularly regarding their legal recognition, dissolution procedures, and financial reporting.
- Comment on the inclusion of FATF term in the law, while Cyprus is not a member of it.
- Comment for changes in the reasons why an association is illegal based on the article 4 of the law.
- Comment on the small and essential violations in article 12(3).
- Possibility of imprisonment in this Act can be reviewed.
- With regard to the subsection of article 7(2) the association does not need to have property in order to register, only foundations.
- CSOs oppose increased financial reporting obligations, arguing they place an undue burden on small and medium-sized organisations.
- Provisions allowing government access to CSO bank records without a court order are deemed excessive and a violation of privacy rights.
- The amendments should align with international best practices to prevent over-regulation and ensure financial transparency without criminalizing civil society activities.
- They call for clearer definitions and safeguards to ensure that organisations are not arbitrarily dissolved or denied registration due to political or bureaucratic discretion.

Annexes

Additional data and references

- Expert Council on NGOs Law of the Council of Europe's Conference of INGOs, Cyprus NGO Initiative, & Office of the Commissioner for Volunteerism and Non-Governmental Organizations, (2015). Civil Society in Cyprus: Building for the future. In Civil Society in Cyprus: Building for the future. https://civilsocietyadvocates.org/images/Publications/Civil_Society_PolicyPaper_2015_FINAL_ENG.pdf
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