



Country Report on the State of Civil Society in Italy



Table of Contents

Executive Summary	3
Introduction	4
Description of the civic space in the country	4
Legal and political Environment.....	4
Summary of national legislation and regulatory environment	4
<i>Constitutional provisions in Italy.....</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>Recent legislative measures in Italy</i>	<i>7</i>
Analysis of protection measures for civil society organisations.....	13
Public discourse and societal challenges.....	15
Trends in public discourse on CSOs.....	15
Societal attitudes and their impact on civic space	17
Examples of smearing campaigns and digital threats	18
Participatory Consultations	19
Direct experiences and perceptions of CSO professionals and activists	19
Key findings from interviews and focus groups	21
Conclusions and recommendations	24
Summary of key findings.....	24
Recommendations for improving civic space and protecting CSOs.....	25
Annexes	25

Executive Summary

A new research initiative has been developed as part of WP2 of the CivicChampions project. The research consists of two main components: desk research and field research, and has been launched to provide an in-depth analysis of the environment and challenges faced by civil society organisations (CSOs) in Southern Europe, with a focus on Italy, Greece, Bulgaria and Cyprus. The combination of these two research approaches will provide a holistic understanding of the factors shaping civic space in the region.

Desk research focus:

- **Legislation and civic space:** This research will review national legislation and the regulatory environment in partner countries, analysing the state of civic space and the ability of CSOs to operate freely within their legal frameworks.
- **Trends and challenges:** Through the analysis of case studies, desk research will explore current trends and challenges faced by CSOs, providing insights into the evolving landscape in which these organisations operate.
- **Barriers and threats:** Research will identify key barriers to the protection and functioning of civil society, including socio-cultural, financial, political, legal and digital challenges faced by CSOs in these countries.

Focus on field research:

In addition to desk research, field research will provide key qualitative insights:

- **Key Informant Interviews:** Each partner will conduct five interviews with professionals working within CSOs (e.g. project managers, trainers, social workers) to understand their capacity to support civic space in relation to state influence.
- **Focus group discussions:** Two focus groups were conducted with a total of 10 activists working in different sectors (e.g., environment, women's empowerment, LGBTQI+ issues) to gain their perspectives on national civic space, including the existence of inclusive and safe spaces for discussion, freedom of expression, legal and financial support, and their capacity to support civic space.

This combined desk and field research will contribute significantly to the overall objectives of the project by providing a comprehensive basis for informed action to support and strengthen civil society organisations in Southern Europe. The findings will help to address key barriers and challenges in the legal, social and political environment in which these organisations operate. The results will lead to the development of four country specific reports, a comparative report and will guide new strategies in the later phases of the project to ensure effective responses to promote and protect civil society in Italy, Greece, Bulgaria and Cyprus.

Introduction

Description of the civic space in the country

In the context of Italy as a nation-state, the term "civic space" refers to the environment that enables individuals, groups, and organisations to come together, express their views, and engage in activities that support democratic participation and human rights. It encompasses the freedoms of association, expression, and assembly, which allow civil society organisations (CSOs), activists, and citizens to operate freely and effectively.¹

The extent to which civic space is permitted depends on the legal, political, and societal frameworks in place, which may either protect or restrict these freedoms. In Italy, the concept includes the ability of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), journalists, and activists to promote public interests, engage in policy discussions, and hold authorities to account without intimidation, unwarranted restrictions, or violence. The Italian civic space has faced several challenges, including the implementation of restrictive measures against NGOs involved in humanitarian activities, limitations on the right to protest (such as the introduction of legislation that increases penalties for certain protest actions), and attacks on media freedoms, including threats and legal actions against journalists. These developments highlight the tensions that exist between government policies and the fundamental freedoms that underpin civic space.

Legal and political Environment

Italy's Constitution of 1948 provides a robust framework that guarantees civic freedoms and upholds the principles of democracy, the rule of law, and fundamental rights. These provisions form the foundation of Italy's civic space, ensuring the legal and institutional basis for the functioning of CSOs, freedom of assembly, and freedom of expression. The following section offers a more detailed examination of the constitutional provisions relevant to civic space, highlighting their implementation and the various challenges they face in practice.

Summary of national legislation and regulatory environment

Constitutional provisions in Italy

Article 17: Freedom of Peaceful Assembly

The right to peaceful assembly is a **fundamental human right**. Article 17 of the Constitution explicitly states that all citizens have the right to assemble peacefully and unarmed. *This guarantees that individuals and groups can organise protests, demonstrations, and public gatherings without interference, provided they remain peaceful.*²

The distinction between public and private spaces is a crucial aspect of this discussion. While assemblies held in private spaces do not necessitate prior notification; however, public assemblies must be communicated to the relevant authorities in advance. This stipulation strives to strike a balance between the right to protest and the necessity of maintaining public order. The freedom to

¹ United Nations guidance note, Protection and Promotion of Civic Space, September 2020.

² The Italian Constitution, Title I - Art.17. Available at: [Titolo I - Rapporti civili | www.governo.it](#).

protect the "sociality of the person" and the right to exchange knowledge and opinions is a vital collective right. It is related to Article 2 of the Constitution because, although it stands as the "freedom of the individual," it cannot be exercised individually, but only in conjunction with others. Unfortunately, the Italian Constitution does not provide a precise definition of this right, leaving its interpretation to legal scholars and the judiciary.

In the case of public meetings, organisers are required to notify the police commissioner at least three days before the event. This enables the public security authority to determine whether intervention is necessary for preventive or supervisory purposes. In contrast, private meetings or those held in public spaces without a public character are not subject to this advance notification requirement.

Challenges and restrictions:

The issue of permits and bureaucracy is a significant challenge. Activists have reported difficulties in obtaining permits for demonstrations in public spaces. In some instances, the authorities have cited vague security concerns as a reason for denying permission.³

Selective Enforcement: It has been alleged that the authorities have been unduly selective in their application of restrictions, with demonstrators engaged in protests on politically sensitive issues, such as migration or environmental activism, being disproportionately affected.

The manner in which law enforcement agencies conduct themselves in practice is of great consequence. The use of excessive police force during protests, as documented by human rights organisations, violates the constitutional guarantee of the right to peaceful assembly.⁴

Article 18: Freedom of Association

The right to form associations is a fundamental human right. Article 18 enshrines the right of individuals to form associations without undue restriction, provided that the purposes for which such associations are formed are not prohibited by criminal law. This stipulation reinforces the existence of CSOs, advocacy groups, trade unions, and other entities that are essential for the exercise of democratic participation.⁵

The principle of non-discrimination is a fundamental tenet of human rights. The right to association is universally applicable, thereby fostering an inclusive environment for marginalised groups to organise and advocate for their rights.

Challenges and restrictions:

The targeting of NGOs is a significant challenge. Despite the constitutional safeguards in place, certain NGOs—particularly those involved in activities related to migration or environmental issues—face legal and administrative obstacles. For instance, Decree Law No. 1/2023 imposes onerous regulations on organisations engaged in migrant rescue operations, effectively limiting their scope of action.⁶

The use of surveillance and harassment tactics by state actors poses a serious threat to the ability of CSOs to operate freely and safely. Reports of state surveillance and administrative audits targeting

³ CILD, Liberties Rule of Law Report 2024 - Italy, 2024. Available at: [LIBERTIES RULE OF LAW REPORT 2024](#)

⁴ CILD, Liberties Rule of Law Report 2024 - Italy, 2024. Available at: [LIBERTIES RULE OF LAW REPORT 2024](#)

⁵ The Italian Constitution, Title I - Art.18. Available at: [Titolo I - Rapporti civili | www.governo.it](#).

⁶ CILD, Liberties Rule of Law Report 2024 - Italy, 2024. Available at: [LIBERTIES RULE OF LAW REPORT 2024](#)

CSOs critical of government policies have raised concerns about the potential for indirect restrictions on the right to association.

Article 21: Freedom of Expression

The right to communicate without restriction. Article 21 guarantees the right to express thoughts through various communication channels, including speech, writing, and other forms of expression. This is a fundamental aspect of an open civic space, as it enables public debate, advocacy, and dissent.⁷

The concept of media independence is particularly significant in the context of freedom of expression. The article explicitly safeguards press freedom, ensuring that the media can operate without censorship or interference. The second paragraph of the article prohibits the imposition of authorisation or censorship on the press, preventing public authorities from exerting prior control over printed materials (such as books, posters, magazines, and newspapers) or assessing their content before publication.

Challenges and restrictions:

Threats to Journalists. Investigative journalists, particularly those reporting on corruption or organised crime, frequently face threats, intimidation, and legal harassment. Strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs) have become a widespread tactic aimed at silencing critical voices.

The influence of political actors on public media. The political neutrality of public broadcasters such as RAI has been called into question due to allegations of bias linked to government-appointed leadership. This has led to concerns about the potential erosion of editorial independence.⁸

The regulation of online hate speech. While the Italian Constitution guarantees freedom of expression, the country has struggled to strike a balance between this right and the regulation of hate speech and misinformation, particularly on social media platforms. The risk of overregulation in this area is a growing concern, as it could hinder the free exchange of legitimate political discourse.

Other Relevant Constitutional Provisions

- **Article 2: Protection of Fundamental Rights**

This article affirms that the Republic recognises and guarantees the inviolable rights of individuals, both as individuals and within social groups. This provision reinforces the legal foundation enabling civil society organisations to function as guardians of public interest.⁹

- **Article 3: Principle of Equality**

This article establishes the principle of equality before the law, regardless of sex, race, language, religion, political opinions, or personal and social conditions. It guarantees the universal application of civic freedoms, serving as a foundation for anti-discrimination legislation and inclusive policies.¹⁰

- **Article 49: Right to Political Participation**

⁷ The Italian Constitution, Title I - Art.21. Available at: [Titolo I - Rapporti civili | www.governo.it](#).

⁸ CILD, Liberties Rule of Law Report 2024 - Italy, 2024. Available at: [LIBERTIES RULE OF LAW REPORT 2024](#)

⁹ The Italian Constitution, Fundamental Principles - Art.2. Available at: [Principi fondamentali | www.governo.it](#)

¹⁰ The Italian Constitution, Fundamental Principles - Art.3. Available at: [Principi fondamentali | www.governo.it](#)

This provision affirms that all citizens are entitled to freely associate in political parties and contribute to the democratic process. It supports broader civic engagement, which is essential for maintaining a healthy democracy.¹¹

- **Article 54: Duty to Uphold the Constitution**

This article requires citizens holding public office to faithfully observe the Constitution and laws. It provides a legal safeguard against any actions by public authorities that may infringe upon constitutional rights.¹²

Recent legislative measures in Italy

It is evident that legislative measures, in addition to the constitutional provisions that have been previously outlined, have contributed to the reduction of civic space. In particular, such measures have been a significant factor in the shrinking of civic space in recent years.

Piantedosi Decree

The Piantedosi Decree, formally introduced under the auspices of Interior Minister Matteo Piantedosi in 2023 (Decree-Law n.1/2023 amends Decree-Law n.130/2020), represents a set of legislative measures designed to regulate migration flows and address concerns pertaining to public order. The decree, named after its proponent, has attracted considerable attention due to its implications for migration policies and its broader impact on civic space in Italy. The decree was introduced in response to the perceived challenges of irregular migration, which were framed as a necessity to bolster national security and maintain public order. The decree builds upon prior legislative measures but introduces stricter controls on migration and enhances penalties for non-compliance by individuals and organisations.¹³

The measure imposes operational restrictions, including designated ports of disembarkation often far from rescue zones, and levies heavy financial penalties for non-compliance. NGOs are required to submit detailed mission reports, adding significant bureaucratic hurdles to their operations.

The decree has a significant impact on Italy's civic space, particularly with regard to the operations of CSOs. By characterizing humanitarian actions as contributing to irregular migration, the decree effectively criminalizes the lifesaving work of rescue organisations. The administrative and financial burdens imposed by the decree make it increasingly challenging for NGOs to operate, which has the effect of discouraging their presence in critical rescue zones.¹⁴

The expansion of detention facilities and the concomitant increase in prolonged detention periods have the effect of restricting migrants' freedom of movement, while simultaneously exacerbating the already deplorable conditions that prevail in detention centres. The acceleration of deportation procedures has the effect of further eroding the rights of individuals to seek asylum or to challenge

¹¹ The Italian Constitution, Title VI - Art.49. Available at: [Titolo IV - Rapporti politici | www.governo.it](#)

¹² The Italian Constitution, Title VI - Art.54. Available at: [Titolo IV - Rapporti politici | www.governo.it](#)

¹³ Figueroa D., Italy: Legislative Amendments on the Control of Migration Enter into Effect, Library of Congress, March 2023. Available at: [Italy: Legislative Amendments on the Control of Migration Enter into Effect | Library of Congress](#)

¹⁴ CILD, Liberties Rule of Law Report 2024 - Italy, 2024. Available at: [LIBERTIES RULE OF LAW REPORT 2024](#)

deportation decisions, thereby limiting their access to due process. Furthermore, the Piantedosi Decree has the effect of creating a climate of fear among those engaged in humanitarian activities and advocacy. The discourse in the public sphere, shaped by the rhetoric of the decree, presents CSOs as adversaries to national interests. This narrative has the effect of undermining public trust in civil society, which in turn reduces the ability of civil society organisations to mobilize support for advocacy or humanitarian initiatives.

Legal and international critics:

The Piantedosi Decree has been the subject of considerable criticism on the grounds that it may be in contravention of constitutional and international law. Those with opposing views assert that the decree contravenes Article 10 of the Italian Constitution, which guarantees asylum rights, as well as international obligations set forth in the Refugee Convention and European human rights law. The decree has been the subject of judicial scrutiny, with courts questioning its compatibility with fundamental rights.

At the international level, organisations such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and Amnesty International have voiced concerns regarding the restrictive measures outlined in the decree. The European Union has subjected the decree to rigorous scrutiny, prompting inquiries into Italy's dedication to shared responsibility in migration management and its conformity with EU principles of solidarity.

Social consequences: The decree has served to exacerbate societal polarization in Italy. On the one hand, some citizens endorse the decree's emphasis on security and migration control, viewing it as a necessary response to irregular migration. Conversely, humanitarian crises such as the Cutro shipwreck have served to galvanize opposition, with numerous individuals and groups voicing criticism regarding the criminalization of rescue operations.

By characterizing migration as a security concern, the decree has contributed to the intensification of societal divisions, leading to an increase in xenophobic attitudes and the stigmatization of migrants. Furthermore, this narrative has also resulted in the deterioration of community relations in areas that host detention facilities or disembarkation ports. This is due to the fact that the increased responsibilities that these areas are required to undertake are not matched by adequate state support.¹⁵

The measure was recently examined by the Court of Brindisi, which suspended the effectiveness of the order to detain the vessel Ocean Viking. On October 10, 2024, the court transmitted the relevant documents to the Constitutional Court, which is tasked with determining whether the measure is unconstitutional. Indeed, the court has indicated that the measure may be in conflict with international law, particularly the Hamburg Convention, as well as with Articles 2, 3, 10, 25, and 117 of the Constitution.

DDL Eco-Vandali (Eco-Vandals Decree)

The Anti-Vandalism Law (DDL Eco-Vandali) represents another significant piece of legislation that impacts the freedom of protest and activism. It was introduced with the intention of increasing penalties for individuals involved in environmental protests and civil disobedience. The objective of

¹⁵ Giordano A., No security for rights. Human Rights Watch's World Report 2025 flunks Italy, *Altraeconomia*, January 2025.

this legislation is to deter what has been termed "eco-vandalism," a term that has been the subject of criticism for its vague and overly broad scope.

Key provisions of the legislation:

The legislation introduces increased penalties for those engaging in non-violent protest. *The DDL Eco-Vandali proposes a substantial escalation in penalties for activists who engage in acts of civil disobedience, particularly those who obstruct roads, disrupt public services, or undertake symbolic actions such as the use of paint or glue to protest environmental issues or social causes.*¹⁶

The legislation in question introduces the possibility of substantial fines and even imprisonment for those who engage in prohibited activities. The legislation could result in fines of up to €50,000 and prison sentences of up to six years for individuals participating in such protests. The legislation encompasses minor forms of protest, including the act of affixing oneself to a wall or obstructing access to institutions and highways. Consequently, it is regarded as one of the most stringent anti-protest measures in Europe.

The legislation is perceived as being particularly aimed at environmental activists. The legislation is perceived as being principally directed towards environmental activists, particularly those engaged in demonstrations against projects involving fossil fuels, deforestation, and other ecological crises. The legislation has a particular impact on movements such as Extinction Rebellion, Fridays for Future, and local environmental activists who engage in non-violent civil disobedience with the aim of drawing attention to the climate crisis.

The Decreto Cutro (Cutro Decree)

It was introduced as a response to growing public pressure regarding irregular migration. Named after the municipality where a tragic shipwreck in early 2023 claimed the lives of dozens of migrants, the decree's context and objectives are as follows: The government justified this measure on the grounds that it was necessary for the maintenance of public order and the management of migration flows. Nevertheless, the decree has prompted considerable concern regarding its potential impact on human rights and the capacity of humanitarian organisations to operate effectively.

The decree imposes restrictions on the provision of humanitarian protection. *The decree restricts the criteria for the granting of humanitarian protection permits, thereby narrowing the legal pathways available to migrants seeking to regularize their status.*¹⁷

The acceleration of deportations is a further consequence of this decree. Furthermore, the decree includes measures to expedite the deportation process, such as the expansion of the use of detention centres for migrants awaiting removal.

The decree also introduces new regulations governing the operation of non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Similarly, Decree Law No. 1/2023 intensifies the monitoring of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) engaged in activities related to migrants, particularly those involved in search and rescue operations. This is achieved through the imposition of supplementary administrative and operational requirements.

¹⁶ CILD, Liberties Rule of Law Report 2024 - Italy, 2024. Available at: [LIBERTIES RULE OF LAW REPORT 2024](#)

¹⁷ CILD, Liberties Rule of Law Report 2024 - Italy, 2024. Available at: [LIBERTIES RULE OF LAW REPORT 2024](#)

The implications for civic space are twofold: firstly, there is an erosion of humanitarian rights, and secondly, there is a restriction on the ability of NGOs and other organisations to provide assistance to migrants. The decree's curtailment of protections for migrants indirectly impedes the capacity of NGOs and advocacy groups to provide assistance without encountering legal or procedural obstacles.

The decree has the potential to have a chilling effect on advocacy. Those engaged in efforts to promote the rights of migrants may be dissuaded from their work by concerns of government retaliation, particularly in light of the decree's characterization of NGOs as contributors to "irregular migration."

The decree has been the subject of international criticism. The decree has been the subject of criticism from organisations such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), who have asserted that it undermines Italy's obligations under international refugee law, thereby further straining Italy's alignment with human rights norms.¹⁸

Decreto Caivano (The Caivano Decree)

The Caivano Decree, named after the Neapolitan suburb associated with youth violence and social unrest, was introduced as part of the government's crackdown on juvenile delinquency and organized crime. Although the decree was designed to address significant societal issues, it has prompted concerns about potential overreach and its impact on vulnerable populations.

The decree introduces several key provisions, including an extension of penal responsibility. The legislation lowers the age of criminal responsibility for minors involved in specific crimes, particularly those associated with gang-related violence. An increase in surveillance is also anticipated. The decree expands the use of surveillance technologies, such as closed-circuit television (CCTV), in public spaces, particularly in urban areas with high crime rates.

The decree also addresses the issue of parental accountability. The legislation introduces penalties for parents of minors involved in criminal activities, including fines and potential loss of custody in cases where the offence is deemed to be particularly egregious.¹⁹

Impact on Youth Activism: The extension of penal measures may have a deterrent effect on youth participation in activism or protests, particularly in marginalized communities where the risk of profiling is higher. The erosion of privacy is a significant concern. The heightened utilization of surveillance technologies gives rise to concerns pertaining to the infringement of privacy rights and the possibility of data misuse for the purpose of monitoring and suppressing civic activities, including peaceful protests.

Social Inequities: The decree has a disparate impact on low-income and immigrant communities, which may result in the stigmatization of these groups and a reduction in their capacity to engage in civic activities.

Legge Bavaglio (Gag Law)

The Legge Bavaglio, or "Gag Law," is a controversial legislative proposal in Italy that aims to limit the dissemination of specific types of information, particularly through the media. The legislation has been

¹⁸ Ibidem.

¹⁹ Bartoli L., Il processo al minore nel decreto "Caivano", La Legislazione Penale, May 2024.

the subject of considerable criticism on the grounds that it could impinge upon the right to freedom of expression and constraint the independence of the journalistic profession.

The term "Legge Bavaglio" has been used in different contexts to describe laws or proposals that threaten press freedom. The most prominent example is associated with legislative initiatives in the 2000s and 2010s to regulate wiretapping and the dissemination of judicial documents.²⁰

Those who advocate for such legislation frequently cite concerns related to privacy or the necessity of protecting ongoing investigations. Nevertheless, detractors contend that the underlying objective is to insulate prominent figures and influential entities from public scrutiny.

Similar restrictions have been proposed once more, with the intention of limiting the activities of journalists, whistleblowers, and civil society actors who disseminate sensitive information, including details of corruption cases and political scandals. The legislation places limitations on the utilisation of wiretaps in judicial investigations, particularly in cases involving public officials. The legislation restricts the publication of transcripts or summaries of intercepted communications, even in instances where such material forms part of a public trial.

It imposes more severe penalties for defamation, particularly when the accused is a public figure or institution; It also requires the removal of online content that is deemed defamatory without the benefit of clear judicial oversight. Furthermore, the legislation includes provisions that could result in the suspension or revocation of the licenses of media organisations found to have repeatedly violated the relevant regulations.

Italy - Albania agreement on migration management

The recent migration agreement between Italy and Albania, initiated in 2023 under the leadership of Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni and Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama, represents a notable shift in Italy's approach to managing migration flows. The agreement was designed to address irregular migration in the Mediterranean and permits Italy to establish two processing centres on Albanian territory for asylum seekers intercepted at sea. Nevertheless, the agreement has been the subject of considerable criticism on account of its potential for human rights violations, legal challenges, and the questionable efficacy of its provisions.

The five-year agreement allows Italy to transfer specific categories of asylum seekers to facilities in Albania, where their applications are processed in accordance with Italian law. Migrants who are eligible for transfer are adult males from countries that Italy has designated as "safe," who travel without family. The objective is to alleviate the burden on Italy's domestic reception system and accelerate the processing of asylum applications. Albania consented to serve as the host country for these centres as part of a broader gesture of solidarity with Italy and to reinforce its ties with the European Union in the context of its candidacy for EU membership. Nevertheless, the financial and administrative burden of this arrangement has prompted concerns in both countries.²¹

Challenges and critics: The agreement has been the subject of criticism from human rights groups, who argue that it jeopardises the rights of migrants. The processing centres in Albania are purported to be deficient in terms of their capacity to assess vulnerability, provide legal representation, and

²⁰ CILD, Liberties Rule of Law Report 2024 - Italy, 2024. Available at: [LIBERTIES RULE OF LAW REPORT 2024](#)

²¹ De Leo A., Op-ed: Does the Rome court's refusal to validate the detention order of the first asylum seekers brought to Albania mark the end of the Italy-Albania deal?, EU Council on Refugees and Exiles, October 2024.

ensure humane detention conditions. This has resulted in the contravention of international standards, including the prohibition of prolonged detention and the right to seek asylum without discrimination. For example, Italian courts have overturned decisions to detain migrants in Albania, determining that their rights were inadequately protected and that countries of origin designated as "safe" were not universally so.

Italian courts have consistently questioned the constitutionality of relocating migrants to Albania. In two separate rulings, the courts ordered the return of asylum seekers from Albania to Italy, citing concerns about procedural fairness and the safety of their countries of origin. The European Court of Justice is currently engaged in evaluating the agreement's conformity with EU law, which has resulted in further delays in its implementation.²²

Operational and Financial Issues: The centres in Albania remain underutilised, with local infrastructure delays and logistical challenges hindering operations. The financial costs, estimated at over €670 million over five years, have been the subject of criticism on the grounds that they are disproportionately high in comparison to the limited number of migrants processed under the scheme. This has given rise to doubts about the cost-effectiveness and long-term sustainability of the agreement.

The agreement has also given rise to a certain degree of *diplomatic and societal tension* in Albania, with critics questioning the extent to which it offers tangible benefits to the host country. Many Albanians perceive the agreement as serving primarily Italian political interests, rather than addressing shared challenges in a manner that is perceived as equitable. Italian public opinion is similarly divided on the matter, with some supporting stricter migration controls and others viewing the policy as a failure of humanitarian responsibility.

Final considerations: The Italy-Albania migration agreement is indicative of broader trends in Europe, wherein an increasing number of countries are outsourcing the processing of asylum requests to non-EU states. Although Italy has defended the agreement as groundbreaking and indispensable, its critics contend that it establishes a perilous precedent for transferring accountability for migrants to third countries devoid of adequate safeguards.

Albania's involvement is regarded as a strategic manoeuvre to fortify its aspirations for EU membership. However, it carries the potential to intensify domestic political challenges, including allegations of corruption and deficiencies in public services. Concurrently, Italy is facing mounting pressure from human rights organisations and judicial bodies to align its migration policies with international and EU standards.

To address criticism of the Italy-Albania migration agreement on human rights and procedural fairness, both countries should take the following measures: Legal safeguards and fair processing procedures are vital for all asylum seekers, regardless of location. Enhancing oversight is crucial to ensure accountability and transparency. Independent monitoring mechanisms are needed to assess Albanian centre conditions and compliance with international standards. It is essential to enhance Albania's infrastructure to address delays and ensure humane conditions. Transparency is the key, so that governments must engage in a public dialogue to rebuild trust and justify the agreement's goals

²² Giordano A., No security for rights. Human Rights Watch's World Report 2025 flunks Italy, *Altraeconomia*, January 2025.

and costs. Advocating EU solidarity is vital: Italy and Albania should seek broader EU support to manage migration.²³

Analysis of protection measures for civil society organisations

Italy's **Constitution** serves as a fundamental basis for the protection of CSOs, establishing foundational rights that support their existence and activities. *Article 18* guarantees the right to association, thereby safeguarding CSOs from unwarranted dissolution and facilitating their ability to organize freely for lawful purposes. *Article 21* guarantees the freedom of expression, thereby empowering organisations to advocate for their causes and engage in public discourse. Furthermore, *Article 17* safeguards the right to peaceful assembly, thereby enabling CSOs to mobilize protests, demonstrations, and public gatherings.

These constitutional rights are reinforced by Italy's commitments to international human rights frameworks, including the **European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR)** and the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)**. Italy's adherence to these instruments underscores the significance of freedom of association, expression, and assembly, aligning the country's legal obligations with global standards for the protection of civil society.

Furthermore, the legal framework for CSOs includes straightforward registration processes, which enable organisations to gain official recognition and access benefits such as tax exemptions. Registered CSOs are eligible to receive public funding, while donors are entitled to tax incentives for contributions. These measures facilitate the establishment and growth of CSOs, particularly those working in areas such as social services, education, and healthcare.²⁴

Despite the robust constitutional protections in place, the practical implementation of these measures has been found to reveal **systemic inefficiencies and inconsistencies**. The registration process is, on the whole, accessible; however, it can be time-consuming and bureaucratic, particularly for smaller grassroots organisations with limited administrative capacity.²⁵ Furthermore, regional disparities in administrative practices result in disparate experiences for CSOs across the country, with some encountering more significant impediments to registration and compliance.

Despite the availability of public funding, there has been a notable decline in recent years, particularly for organisations engaged in politically sensitive endeavours such as migration or environmental advocacy. This reduction is indicative of broader austerity measures and a shift in political priorities. Smaller organisations frequently encounter difficulties in obtaining funding due to a dearth of technical expertise in navigating the intricacies of grant application processes, which serves to further exacerbate existing inequalities within the sector.²⁶

A further concern is that of financial sustainability. Although tax incentives for private donations are intended to supplement public funding, they tend to favour larger, more established organisations. It is often the case that grassroots movements and advocacy groups lack the visibility and networks that are necessary to attract consistent private support, which in turn limits their operational capacity.

²³ De Leo A., Op-ed: Does the Rome court's refusal to validate the detention order of the first asylum seekers brought to Albania mark the end of the Italy-Albania deal?, EU Council on Refugees and Exiles, October 2024.

²⁴ CILD, Liberties Rule of Law Report 2024 - Italy, 2024. Available at: [LIBERTIES RULE OF LAW REPORT 2024](#)

²⁵ Ibidem.

²⁶ Ibidem.

The topic of **judicial oversight** and **the strategic challenges** it presents will be discussed. The Italian judiciary plays a pivotal role in safeguarding CSOs from unwarranted dissolution and other forms of state-led constraints. However, it would be remiss not to acknowledge that judicial mechanisms are not immune to challenges. The occurrence of politically motivated audits or legal actions against organisations that are critical of government policies serves to illustrate how administrative and judicial tools can be utilized as instruments of intimidation or silencing directed towards CSOs.²⁷

Another significant issue is the emergence of Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs). These lawsuits, often initiated by wealthy individuals, corporations, or political figures, are used to target CSOs and activists with the aim of forcing them into costly and prolonged legal battles. The Italian legal system allows for procedural delays, which are exploited by these actors to create financial and psychological pressures that hinder the ability of CSOs to advocate effectively.

The **public's attitudes** towards CSOs have a significant impact on the operating environment in which they operate. A significant proportion of the Italian population holds a favourable view of the part played by civil society in addressing social and humanitarian issues, particularly in periods of crisis. For instance, during the course of the 2019-2020 Coronavirus pandemic, CSOs garnered considerable public support for their role in the provision of essential services and the assistance of vulnerable communities.

However, attitudes towards specific sectors of civil society, particularly those focused on migration or environmental justice, are more polarised. Negative narratives, frequently propagated by political rhetoric, portray organisations as facilitators of illicit migration or disruptors of public order. Such narratives erode public trust in CSOs, thereby impairing their capacity to garner support for their initiatives.²⁸

Italy's civic space is the **subject of close examination** by international organisations and human rights bodies. The Council of Europe and United Nations Special Rapporteurs have identified a discrepancy between Italy's constitutional guarantees and the restrictive measures imposed on certain CSOs. Additionally, the European Union has expressed reservations about Italy's alignment with the shared principles of solidarity and human rights, particularly with regard to its migration policies.

International advocacy has been instrumental in drawing attention to the difficulties encountered by Italian CSOs, thereby exerting pressure for legislative and policy reforms. Nevertheless, the extent to which these efforts result in concrete protections is contingent upon the existence of domestic political will and the strength of civil society coalitions.

It is recommended that **a multi-pronged approach** be adopted in order to strengthen the protection measures for CSOs in Italy. Legislative reforms should prioritize the repeal of restrictive legislation and the assurance of compliance with constitutional and international standards. The simplification of administrative processes and the provision of targeted support for smaller organisations would serve to reduce the bureaucratic barriers that currently impede the sector, thereby promoting inclusivity.

Public funding mechanisms should be expanded, with an emphasis on ensuring an equitable distribution across the various types of CSOs. Capacity-building programs could assist grassroots organisations in identifying and securing funding, thereby enhancing their operational sustainability.

²⁷ OpenGov, Difesa dello spazio civico, 2023. Available at: [Difesa dello spazio civico | Italia Open Gov](#).

²⁸ CILD, Liberties Rule of Law Report 2024 - Italy, 2024. Available at: [LIBERTIES RULE OF LAW REPORT 2024](#)

It is imperative that public awareness campaigns be implemented to counteract negative narratives and to highlight the contributions of CSOs to Italian society. The fostering of trust and the encouragement of broader public engagement can be achieved through the establishment of collaborative initiatives between civil society organisations, the media and local communities.²⁹

Public discourse and societal challenges

The public discourse surrounding CSOs in Italy has undergone notable shifts in recent years. This reflects a dynamic interaction between the increasing political polarization, societal needs, and the changing relationship between CSOs and the government. The following section presents an analysis of the key trends that are influencing this discourse.

Trends in public discourse on CSOs

The public opinion landscape is becoming increasingly polarised

This is evident in the positive perceptions that are being expressed about the role that CSOs play in humanitarian crises. A significant proportion of the Italian population acknowledges the pivotal role played by civil society organisations (CSOs) in addressing a range of social issues, including migration, disaster relief and poverty alleviation. To illustrate, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) engaged in search-and-rescue operations in the Mediterranean are perceived by many as playing a crucial role in saving lives and fulfilling moral and legal obligations. Organisations such as Caritas Italia and Emergency are held in high esteem by the general public for their humanitarian endeavours.

Advocacy for Vulnerable Groups CSOs that advocate for women's rights, LGBTQ+ rights, and environmental justice are commended for their progressive stance and commitment to addressing systemic inequalities.

Negative perceptions of NGOs and Advocacy Groups: Some segments of society perceive CSOs, particularly those engaged in migration or environmental activism, as politically biased or excessively critical of government policies. Migration-focused NGOs are accused by critics of facilitating irregular migration and of undermining national security.

Furthermore, environmental advocacy groups have been the subject of criticism for engaging in disruptive protests or for pursuing what is perceived to be radical activism.³⁰

The Role of Digital Culture in Shaping Attitudes

Opportunities for engagement: digital platforms have facilitated the ability of CSOs to connect with younger audiences, raise awareness, and organize campaigns in an effective manner. Movements such as Fridays for Future have employed these tools to engage and energize public support.

The challenge of countering misinformation: Civil society organisations have utilized digital platforms to dispel misinformation and disseminate factual data, particularly on contentious matters such as migration and climate change.

²⁹ CILD, Liberties Rule of Law Report 2024 - Italy, 2024. Available at: [LIBERTIES RULE OF LAW REPORT 2024](#)

³⁰ CILD, Liberties Rule of Law Report 2024 - Italy, 2024. Available at: [LIBERTIES RULE OF LAW REPORT 2024](#)

The dissemination of misinformation online presents a significant challenge. The proliferation of hostile narratives is a particularly concerning phenomenon. It is not uncommon for disinformation campaigns to target CSOs, portraying them as foreign-funded or aligned with hidden agendas. This has contributed to a climate of public scepticism and hostility.

Online harassment is a significant challenge that CSOs face in the digital age. Those engaged in activism and organisational work frequently encounter cyberbullying, which has the effect of reducing their capacity to engage in digital advocacy in an effective manner.³¹

Shifts in Media coverage

A notable aspect of media coverage is the tendency to highlight success stories. This is exemplified by the following: Media outlets frequently highlight the role of CSOs in providing assistance during crises, such as the distribution of relief supplies in the aftermath of natural disasters or the distribution of aid during the ongoing pandemic.

It is recommended that focus be placed on local initiatives. Local grassroots organisations that operate within underserved communities are often commended for their capacity to address specific, localized issues in an effective manner.

Negative Coverage: the sensationalist presentation of scandals: The media often dedicates significant attention to isolated incidents of mismanagement or corruption within CSOs, which can contribute to a general perception of scepticism about the sector. The portrayal of activism as a disruptive force: At times, media narratives portray environmental protests and civil disobedience campaigns as mere nuisances, thereby obscuring the underlying issues they seek to address.³²

Evolving relationship with the Government

The relationship between CSOs and the government is evolving. Some local and regional governments have adopted supportive policies and recognize the value of CSOs, actively involving them in policymaking and service delivery. The National Strategy for Sustainable Development (SNSv) identifies civil society as a principal stakeholder, encouraging collaboration on climate change objectives and social integration.

Restrictive policies and hostility: A review of national policies, such as Decree Law No. 1/2023 and Decreto Cavano, reveals a shift towards restricting the operational space for certain CSOs. On occasion, government officials have employed hostile rhetoric, characterizing specific NGOs as "threats to national sovereignty" or "unpatriotic," thereby creating a challenging environment for organisations whose activities are primarily focused on advocacy.³³

Themes in Advocacy and Public Support

³¹ Milo D., Resilient Together: How Civil Society Organizations Can Counter Disinformation and Build Stronger Communities, Hive Mind, December 2024.

³² CILD, Liberties Rule of Law Report 2024 - Italy, 2024. Available at: [LIBERTIES RULE OF LAW REPORT 2024](#)

³³ CILD, Liberties Rule of Law Report 2024 - Italy, 2024. Available at: [LIBERTIES RULE OF LAW REPORT 2024](#)

Increased Focus on Social and Environmental Justice: Campaigns such as Plastic Free and Stop Global Warming have attracted considerable attention, with CSOs assuming a prominent role in these initiatives.

Human Rights Advocacy Under Pressure: CSOs that focus on human rights, particularly those that advocate for the rights of migrants and minorities, are facing intense scrutiny and limited public support in some areas. The public's growing fatigue with migration issues has influenced attitudes, making it increasingly challenging for these organisations to maintain their momentum.

The public discourse on CSOs in Italy evinces a complex array of attitudes, encompassing support, scepticism, and politicization. Although Italians tend to view the work of civil society organisations positively, the prevalence of divisive narratives and policy shifts has made it challenging for these organisations to operate freely and effectively. By addressing these challenges and capitalizing on opportunities for collaboration and outreach, civil society organisations can enhance their capacity to serve as cornerstones of democratic governance.³⁴

Societal attitudes and their impact on civic space

Politicisation of civil society

The politicisation of civil society has given rise to a number of supportive narratives, which in turn have led to a greater degree of collaboration with the state. A number of CSOs have been able to form successful collaborative relationships with local governments, enabling them to provide social services such as housing, healthcare, and education. Such collaborative endeavours have been lauded in public discourse as illustrative of the constructive role that civil society can play.

Protests as a Form of Democratic Expression Such movements as Fridays for Future and anti-corruption campaigns have been lauded for their capacity to mobilize public action and prioritize critical issues.

Critical Narratives: the representation of NGOs by the Government: In recent times, there has been a noticeable shift in political rhetoric, with certain CSOs, particularly those with a focus on migration or anti-government advocacy, being increasingly positioned as adversaries rather than partners.

Notable politicians have levelled accusations against NGOs, claiming that they function as "enablers" of illicit migration and thereby eroding their credibility and engendering public distrust. This discourse frequently coincides with the implementation of policies such as the Decree of Cutro, which impose limitations on the operational activities of NGOs.

Attitudes Towards Migration and Human Rights

Migration as a polarising issue: a subset of the population acknowledges the contributions of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in providing assistance to migrants in distress at sea and advocating for the rights of refugees. Campaigns such as #IoAccolgo (I Welcome) are illustrative of this supportive attitude.

³⁴ CILD, Liberties Rule of Law Report 2024 - Italy, 2024. Available at: [LIBERTIES RULE OF LAW REPORT 2024](#)

Sentiments antithetical to migration: a considerable proportion of the population, shaped by nationalistic and security-oriented narratives, perceives migration as a threat. This has resulted in a hostile attitude towards organisations engaged in the field of migrant issues, including those undertaking search-and-rescue operations in the Mediterranean.

Hostility Towards NGOs: The societal divisions over migration have led to an increase in government restrictions on NGOs, such as Decree Law No. 1/2023, which criminalizes certain humanitarian actions.

A reduction in the level of donations from the general public has also been observed. Migration-focused CSOs have indicated a reduction in public funding and donations, which appears to correlate with an increase in polarization on the issue.³⁵

Examples of smearing campaigns and digital threats

In Italy, CSOs are confronted with mounting practical challenges that jeopardise their capacity to operate effectively. The emergence of smear campaigns and digital threats represents a significant obstacle, particularly for organisations engaged in the areas of migration, environmental advocacy, and human rights work. Such tactics not only damage the reputation of CSOs but also create an environment of fear and self-censorship, thereby undermining public trust and discouraging participation.

Smearing campaigns are deliberate efforts to discredit CSOs by portraying them as adversaries to national interests. These campaigns are frequently initiated by politicians, media outlets, and interest groups, particularly when the organisations in question challenge government policies or corporate practices. For example, migration-focused NGOs have been accused by political leaders of encouraging irregular migration. In particular, prominent officials have framed their search-and-rescue operations in the Mediterranean as contributing to a "pull factor" for migrants. Such rhetoric has been further amplified by the dissemination of sympathetic media narratives, which have served to foster public scepticism and hostility towards these organisations. The impact of these circumstances is further compounded by the implementation of restrictive measures such as Decree Law No. 1/2023, which imposes significant operational and financial constraints, thereby undermining the capacity of these NGOs to save lives.

Environmental CSOs and activists advocating for climate justice are also subjected to analogous smearing tactics. Organisations such as Fridays for Future or Extinction Rebellion, which are known for their civil disobedience actions, are frequently labelled as eco-terrorists or vandals. The focus of attention shifts from their environmental concerns to the disruption that is perceived to be caused by their protests. Legislation such as DDL Eco-Vandali serves to reinforce these narratives, portraying activists as a threat to public order. This framing has the effect of reducing public sympathy for environmental advocacy and exposing activists to legal and social repercussions.

Furthermore, organisations that work on labour rights, anti-corruption, or minority protections also encounter defamation campaigns. For instance, labour advocacy groups that support migrant workers in the agricultural sector are occasionally accused of impeding business operations by advocating for more rigorous labour regulations. The promotion of these narratives by corporate lobbies serves to

³⁵ Emergency, Joint Statement: Italy's obstruction of search and rescue activities in endangering people's lives, Press room, February 2024. Available at: [Joint Statement: Italy's obstruction of search and rescue activities is endangering people's lives | EMERGENCY](#)

diminish public support for the work of these organisations, further isolating them from mainstream discourse.³⁶

Digital Threats: While digital platforms are indispensable for advocacy, they have also become vulnerable sites for CSOs. The prevalence of cyberattacks targeting NGOs is on the rise, particularly those engaged in work related to politically sensitive matters, such as migration. It has been reported that organisations engaged in the coordination of rescue missions or the provision of support to migrants have been subjected to phishing attempts and ransomware attacks. Such attacks not only compromise sensitive data but also result in the depletion of financial and technical resources, which hinders smaller organisations in particular.

Another pervasive issue is online harassment. Those engaged in environmental or social justice movements frequently encounter coordinated trolling campaigns, misogynistic and racist abuse, and explicit threats of violence. For example, climate activists affiliated with global movements like Fridays for Future have been the subject of vitriolic personal attacks, which have dissuaded them from engaging in public advocacy. Similarly, misinformation campaigns targeting CSOs have been observed to disseminate false claims that migrant rescue NGOs are profiting from human trafficking or that environmental groups are backed by foreign adversaries. The dissemination of false narratives has the effect of eroding public confidence and reducing the ability of CSOs to mobilize support or secure funding.

The confluence of smear campaigns and digital threats has the effect of eroding the civic space in Italy, leading to a decline in public participation and a concomitant weakening of trust in civil society. Many individuals are reluctant to engage with organisations that are perceived as controversial, due to concerns about potential reputational damage or harassment. CSOs frequently must redirect resources from their core missions to address misinformation or repair reputational harm, which can diminish their overall effectiveness. This hostile environment has the effect of polarising public discourse and hindering constructive dialogue on critical societal issues.³⁷

Participatory Consultations

Direct experiences and perceptions of CSO professionals and activists

Breakdown of respondents' profile

Interview	Age group	Gender	Role/profession	Field of work
1	55-65	Male	Lawyer and civic activist	Child protection, refugees protection
2	25-35	Female	Disseminator, activist, trainer, writer	Anti-racism and anti-discrimination education, social inclusion

³⁶ Chiodi L., Epis S., Italian civil society: from target to antidote to the crisis of democracy?, CILD, October 2024.

³⁷ Chiodi L., Epis S., Italian civil society: from target to antidote to the crisis of democracy?, CILD, October 2024.

Interview	Age group	Gender	Role/profession	Field of work
3	35-55	Male	Director of a voluntary association	Volunteering, restoration of vandalised and degraded public property, civic education
4	35-55	Male	Founder and director of a social enterprise and an NGO	Refugees integration, social and labour inclusion
5	25-35	Female	Activist and project manager	Rewilding, nature conservation

Focus Group 1	Age group	Gender	Role/profession	Field of work
1	25-35	Male	Activist and trainer	Inclusion through cultural activities, social farm
2	35-55	Female	Activist and volunteer	Digital education and participative processes
3	35-55	Male	Activist and trainer	Responsible tourism, anti-mafia movement
4	55-65	Male	Project manager	Environmental education
5	25-35	Male	Project manager and activist	Social inclusion, environmental education

Focus Group 2	Age group	Gender	Role/profession	Field of work
1	25-35	Female	Project manager and activist	Rescuing migrants, human rights advocate
2	35-55	Female	Activist, volunteer	Rescuing migrants, human rights advocate
3	35-55	Male	Journalist, trainer	Digital education
4	25-35	Male	Activist and Project manager	Urban regeneration and environmental education

5	18-25	Male	Activist, volunteer	Participatory education practices
6	25-35	Male	Project manager	Digital education

Key findings from interviews and focus groups

Social context

From the interview responses and the debate that developed during the focus groups, it emerges that civic space in Italy is characterised by a strong presence of civil society organisations (CSOs), which play an active role in filling the gaps left by institutions, particularly at the local level. In many areas, civic engagement is seen as an essential resource for the community, providing services and interventions that public administrations are not always able to guarantee.

However, the perception of civic space is highly polarised: on the one hand, local associations are growing, thanks to small grassroots initiatives operating in a widespread manner; on the other hand, there has been a slight decline in activism and civic initiatives over the past three years, accompanied by a gradual political delegitimisation of those who engage with social issues and civil rights. The context appears chaotic and lacking in transparency, with a well-regulated third sector that is nonetheless hindered by excessive bureaucracy and difficulties in accessing the necessary information to obtain public funding. Moreover, the failure to implement European measures at a national level limits the effectiveness of local initiatives.

Although some grassroots movements remain strong, there is a sense of disillusionment in constantly having to address the same issues without real institutional support. Another critical element is the increasing politicisation of civic space, which is often dominated by ideological agendas. For many interviewees, civic engagement should go beyond mere solidarity and emergency interventions and should be recognised as having a broader responsibility in promoting structural and cultural change. However, as long as CSOs avoid direct political debate, public opinion generally remains positive towards them. Conversely, when issues such as institutional racism or the rights of "Italians without citizenship" are addressed, the response from the government and part of society becomes hostile, with measures that risk criminalising activists and restricting freedom of expression.

In this scenario, digital tools and social media play a crucial role. Online platforms have expanded the space for mobilisation and helped to construct a counter-narrative to the dominant discourse, allowing CSOs to connect, find partners, and raise funds. However, their influence is ambivalent: while they enhance democracy and give visibility to civic causes, they are also subject to political dynamics, smear campaigns, and the polarisation of public opinion. This phenomenon has led to growing distrust towards activists, who are often perceived as troublemakers rather than agents of change.

Despite these challenges, civic engagement continues to have a strong presence in local communities, particularly when it delivers concrete solutions to community needs. The main challenge remains to strengthen the sustainability of initiatives, encourage generational renewal, and consolidate more stable institutional recognition to ensure that civic space not only endures but also expands and has a structural impact on Italian society.

Tendenze del restringimento dello spazio civico in Italia

From the interviews conducted, as well as from the focus groups, it has emerged that the trend of shrinking civic space in Italy primarily affects specific aspects of society. These aspects mainly concern migrants, environmental activists, and forms of protest and demonstration, even when peaceful.

Regarding migration, it is important to highlight how legislative measures such as the Piantedosi Decree (No. 130/2023), the Cutro Decree, and the Italy-Albania agreement on the transfer of migrants to Albanian “hubs” are all aimed at the criminalisation of NGOs operating in this field and the restriction of migrants’ rights. The current government appears to be waging a veritable battle against NGOs engaged in sea rescue operations, making their work as difficult as possible through excessive bureaucratisation of decision-making and action processes, ultimately limiting their impact. The pre-designation of disembarkation ports is a clear example of this. These NGOs are often portrayed as having vested interests when, in reality, their sole objective is to save human lives.

Beyond this, the shrinking of civic space is also evident in the area of freedom of expression and the right to peaceful protest. The so-called “Gag Law” is a striking example of these restrictions, as it seeks to limit the dissemination of certain types of information, particularly through the media. It also introduces harsher penalties for defamation, especially when the accused is a public figure or institution. At the same time, the Caivano Decree extends the use of surveillance technologies, such as closed-circuit television (CCTV), in public spaces, particularly in urban areas with high crime rates, which inevitably infringes on the right to privacy (Article 2 of the Constitution). The expansion of criminal measures may also have a further deterrent effect on young people’s participation in activism or protests, particularly in marginalised communities where the risk of profiling is higher.

As for environmental activists, the so-called “Eco-Vandals Bill” increases the penalties for those engaging in acts of civil disobedience, such as blocking roads and railways or using paint and glue to protest against environmental and social injustices.

In addition to these concerns, there is widespread apprehension about the potential implications of the “Security Bill” (currently under discussion in the Senate), which has been openly criticised by the Council of Europe and the Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe. They have highlighted its disproportionate restrictions on the right to freedom of expression and peaceful protest. In particular, criticism has been levelled at Article 13 (which extends urban exclusion orders, known as “Daspo urbano”), Article 14 (which criminalises road and railway blockades carried out with one’s body), and Article 24 (which increases penalties for defacing public property, with the threat of imprisonment for up to three years).

Impact of the legal and judicial sphere on respondents' activities

Based on the findings from the interviews and focus groups, it is clear that the civic space in Italy is experiencing a heavy and restrictive atmosphere. For some volunteer-based organisations, such as RETAKE, the impact of legal and judicial measures has been minimal. However, other CSOs, like Rewild Sicily, are experiencing negative consequences from such decisions, expressing frustration over the lack of national implementation of certain European reforestation measures.

Equally, there is a widespread sense of disillusionment regarding the possibility that public administrations might engage with these initiatives, even in the form of active listening or basic support. Accessing public funds remains a complex process, mainly due to bureaucratic delays and a lack of transparency, leading most CSOs to rely on private funding or grants to sustain their activities.

Additionally, many members of these organisations have reported being targeted by social media attacks or even legal complaints, sometimes from individuals with ties to public administrations. Regarding the use of strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs), direct or even indirect awareness of this practice appears to be very limited among interviewees.

Although no specific legal or judicial measures have directly impacted the activities of those who participated in the interviews and focus groups, they have nonetheless contributed to the perception of a hostile environment towards the growth and work of such organisations.

Impact of government or local policies on respondents and society

Regarding government and local policies and their influence on society, the responses indicate that their impact on the work of CSOs is highly significant. In fact, these policies tend to hinder rather than support the work of CSOs. Many actors avoid relying on public resources due to bureaucratic complexity and the lack of real institutional support, instead depending on private funding and European funds to ensure the continuity of their activities. The judiciary and law enforcement, which should serve as protective mechanisms, are perceived by almost all respondents as ineffective. Rarely do reports filed by CSOs, especially in cases of discrimination or abuse, lead to concrete results, leaving a sense of vulnerability and distrust in the institutions.

Politically, the current government reflects a value system that is far removed from the one promoted by CSOs, particularly concerning the protection of human rights and minorities. Some organisations, especially those involved in migrant rescue operations, have been subjected to restrictive policies and hostile media campaigns that portray them as entities with vested interests, rather than recognising their humanitarian role. This negative narrative has led to an atmosphere of distrust and hostility that further limits their ability to operate.

The impact of these policies is also reflected in society, contributing to a growing polarisation of public opinion. Issues such as racism and the rights of migrants struggle to find a balanced space for debate, as this is conditioned by a political context that often delegitimises progressive and anti-discriminatory positions. The lack of proper institutional education on these matters reinforces stereotypes and prejudices, making it even harder for CSOs to carry out their work without facing obstructions or regulatory hurdles.

Despite these challenges, CSOs continue to seek strategies to bypass the restrictions, relying on solidarity networks and legal support. However, for their impact to be truly effective, a shift in perspective is necessary—one that fosters greater dialogue between civil society, local administrations, and institutions, recognising the social value of activism rather than hindering it.

Conclusions and recommendations

Summary of key findings

The analysis conducted through both bibliographic and field research underscores a growing concern about the shrinking of civic space in Italy, despite its strong constitutional foundation and the vital role played by CSOs in upholding democratic principles and human rights. While Italy's civic space has long been supported by key constitutional safeguards and international obligations, including Articles 17, 18, and 21 of the Constitution, and oversight from bodies such as the United Nations, the Council of Europe, and the European Union, recent developments present significant challenges to the functioning of CSOs. These challenges are exacerbated by a combination of legislative restrictions, bureaucratic hurdles, public opinion polarization, and rising societal distrust, particularly towards organisations advocating for contentious issues like migration and environmental justice.

Legislative measures, including the Piantedosi Decree, the Decree Law No. 1/2023, and the DDL Eco-Vandalì, have targeted migration-focused NGOs and environmental activists, effectively criminalizing humanitarian work and protest. These laws, compounded by increased digital threats such as cyberattacks, online harassment, and disinformation campaigns, have significantly hindered the capacity of CSOs to operate freely and effectively. In this environment, CSOs are often seen as partisan rather than neutral actors promoting the common good, a narrative that further isolates them and diminishes public support.

Despite these mounting constraints, CSOs remain resilient, particularly in local contexts where they continue to address institutional gaps, provide essential services, and foster community cohesion. However, their efforts are often hampered by the lack of institutional protection, bureaucratic complexity, and financial barriers. The effectiveness of the judicial system in providing protection to CSOs is also limited, further contributing to a sense of vulnerability and disillusionment among activists. Public support remains strong at the local level, particularly during crises, which demonstrates the enduring importance of civil society in fostering democratic engagement and social progress.

The future of Italy's civic space hinges on the ability of civil society, institutions, and the public to work together to ensure its preservation and expansion. It is imperative to repeal restrictive legislative measures and streamline administrative processes that currently hinder CSOs' activities. Legal protections such as anti-SLAPP legislation should be enacted to safeguard activists from malicious lawsuits aimed at silencing them. Additionally, the allocation of more public funding and equitable access to financial resources are essential for ensuring the sustainability and growth of CSOs, particularly smaller organisations.

Furthermore, it is crucial to tackle misinformation and rebuild trust in civil society by promoting greater transparency, fostering public awareness campaigns, and strengthening support networks. By enhancing the legitimacy and visibility of CSOs and encouraging collaboration with public institutions, Italy can create a more inclusive and robust civic space. This collaboration should also extend to the digital realm, where CSOs can leverage platforms to amplify their impact and mobilize support.

In conclusion, while Italy's civic space faces significant challenges from restrictive legislation, societal polarization, and operational constraints, the resilience and adaptability of CSOs continue to ensure their importance in addressing the country's most pressing social and political issues. Strengthening

legal protections, reducing bureaucratic burdens, and fostering a more supportive public narrative are crucial steps towards safeguarding and expanding Italy's civic space. Only through concerted efforts from all sectors of society can Italy ensure that its civic space remains open, resilient, and capable of responding to the evolving needs of its citizens.

Recommendations for improving civic space and protecting CSOs

In conclusion, several recommendations can be made to strengthen civic space and protect CSOs:

- **Strengthen communication and promote cultural and institutional change:** CSOs should focus on clear and transparent communication, using both social media and direct contact with citizens to credibly and consistently present their activities. A participatory approach and direct community involvement increase trust and legitimacy in their work. It is also necessary to ensure that institutions recognise the social value of CSOs and support their role in shaping more inclusive public policies. Civic education and the promotion of an anti-discriminatory narrative should be integrated into the country's educational and communication policies to counter public opinion polarisation.
- **Leverage digital tools to amplify impact:** The strategic use of digital platforms allows CSOs to overcome geographic and institutional limitations, ensuring national dissemination of initiatives and greater grassroots mobilisation. CSOs and institutions should invest in training on the effective use of digital tools to increase public engagement and raise awareness.
- **Build alliances and strengthen support networks:** Collaboration between associations, local institutions, and citizens is crucial to strengthen civic space and counter political and administrative restrictions. Creating dialogue platforms between CSOs and public administrations can facilitate the co-design of more inclusive and functional policies.
- **Ensure legal protection and defence mechanisms:** Ideally, CSOs should have access to adequate legal resources, with the support of experts and networks of lawyers specialising in civil rights protection. CSOs should promote awareness of relevant regulations to better defend themselves against repressive or discriminatory actions. This comes in the context of a judicial system that, although present, is unfortunately slow and ineffective.
- **Support active participation:** Civic activism should be strengthened through training and involving new generations to ensure sustainable growth over time. Even in difficult times, it is important to maintain a constructive approach, highlighting the positive aspects of one's work and staying true to core values.

Annexes

Additional data and references

Signed consent forms from participants

Signed Focus Groups attendance lists

Additional evidences (photos, screenshots from online meetings)

