

An analysis of  
civil society conditions  
in Denmark



# CAUGHT BETWEEN PRESSURE AND POTENTIAL



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# FOREWORD

## Civil society and democracy

**By: Anne Binderkrantz, Professor of Political Science at Aarhus University and member of the research management team for The Danish Democracy and Power Study.**

Democracy is under pressure these days. There are fewer democracies in the world today than at the turn of the millennium, and we are seeing democratic decline in countries that were previously considered stable democracies. At the same time, attacks on democracy are increasingly coming from within by democratically elected leaders who are undermining democratic norms and institutions.

Against this backdrop, it is vital that we also take a critical look at Danish democracy. In many ways, Danish democracy functions well. There is strong support for democracy, and the fundamental democratic institutions are in place. There is no immediate reason to fear a democratic setback of the kind we have seen in Hungary and the United States, for example.

However, democracy is not just about institutions. It is also about citizens' experience of democratic citizenship, their opportunity to participate in democracy, and the feeling that the challenges they consider important are actually being taken seriously. And this is where an active and well-functioning civil society plays a key role. That is why the subject of this report – the conditions for civil society in Denmark – is of crucial importance to the viability of our democracy.

If we want to strengthen democracy and civil society, we must do so on an informed basis. What is the actual state of civil society? How does civil society engage in communication with the political system? And what are the most important challenges in relation to civil society's democratic role? This report addresses these and a number of other vital questions. In doing so, it contributes new knowledge to the discussion about the democratic significance of civil society and, crucially, how we can future-proof it.

## Democratic tasks and challenges

The vast majority of Danes subscribe to democratic values and regard democracy as precious. Democracy in itself has value because it recognises the equality of citizens and their right to participate in political decision-making. Democracy is also valuable for its ability to

create solutions to the problems faced by citizens and society. It therefore makes sense to have high democratic ambitions in a relatively well-functioning democracy such as Denmark's. The Danish Democracy and Power Study 2.0 states that a healthy democracy must solve three core tasks (Binderkrantz et al., 2025):

1. Democracy must include and empower citizens. This means that citizens, regardless of their gender, social background or life situation, must have the opportunity to participate in social and political life.
2. Democracy must ensure informed and open decision-making. This requires a good framework for public debate so that differing voices can both be heard and respected.
3. Democracy must be able to make collective decisions. A healthy democracy must address the challenges and issues that concern its citizens, collectively make decisions on those issues, and critically, ensure those decisions are implemented.

In Denmark's democracy, all three of these core tasks face barriers. The task of inclusion and empowerment is challenged by, among other things, growing economic inequality and a sense of powerlessness among at least some citizens. This risks creating even greater divides between different groups of citizens. Democratic decision-making is challenged by a harsh, often fragmented debate on social media and by a political process that is difficult for many to understand. Decision-making is also challenged by a lack of clarity in the division of responsibilities. These problems, in turn, affect citizens' trust in the political system, causing some to feel that their challenges are not being taken seriously.

## Framework for democratic participation and education

An active and well-functioning civil society plays a role in solving each of these three core democratic tasks. It is essential for the empowerment of citizens that they have an opportunity to participate in democracy. In an ideal situation, each and every citizen should have the opportunity to participate in politics and have their voice heard. Regular elections are the primary way citizens engage with their democracy; however, opportunities for participation between elections are also crucial to a well-functioning democratic system. This is where civil society comes in, providing an accessible framework for citizens to engage in the democratic process.

The vast majority of Danes are members of at least one community association, and around

35 per cent of the population are active volunteers in associations and organisations (Qvist, 2024). While political parties have experienced a sharp decline in membership, associations have not seen a similar trend. The high membership figures also reflect the fact that many people are members of, for example, a trade union or a sports club without being in any way interested in or involved in the democratic part of the association. However, even participation in ordinary association activities can help citizens perceive themselves as members of a democracy and promote connections across different social groups.

Through organisations, associations, movements or activist networks, many people become familiar with what is sometimes referred to as ‘small-scale democracy’. They attend general meetings of local associations, reach consensus on decisions or participate in aspects of civil society work that are directly aimed at the political system. This builds experience with democratic processes, allowing people to acquire democratic skills and an understanding of democratic norms. This is why such organisations are sometimes referred to as ‘schools of democracy’, as citizens can gain experience and self-confidence from participating in democratic processes, thereby also increasing their support for democracy in general. There is also a clear link between participation in civil society and phenomena such as political interest, political confidence, and societal knowledge. However, this may also reflect the fact that those who are already politically interested are more likely to participate (Ibsen et al., 2024).

### **A voice in politics: civil society as a mouthpiece**

Democratic decision-making requires that many different voices have the opportunity to be heard. Without good lines of communication between citizens and the political system, political decisions will be of poorer quality and may be perceived as less legitimate. Reactions to citizens’ perceptions of not being heard can range from a general feeling of powerlessness to violent protests. Civil society’s democratic legitimacy lies in its ability to channel the interests of the population into politics – to be a mouthpiece for the views of diverse groups such as older citizens, climate activists, students, and many others.

Organisations, associations, movements and other communities in civil society create solidarity among citizens who share the same views or are in the same situation. In this way, they enable a broad spectrum of different views and interests to be channelled into politics. Of particular importance here is that civil society can act as an essential counterweight to specific interests or groups that find it easier to mobilise and make themselves heard. It is well known that economic interests play a more dominant role in the political system than civil society interests – it is easier for them to mobilise as they have greater resources at their disposal.

Developments in recent decades have likely pushed the balance further in that direction. Political work has become more professionalised, and there are many indications that having a professional secretariat and in-depth knowledge of political processes has become increasingly necessary. This poses a challenge for the part of civil society that cannot immediately match the professionalism of other interest groups. Consequently, this may push the balance between different types of interests further out of alignment.

### **A helping hand with social problems**

The final core task of democracy is to effectively make decisions and solve the problems that challenge a society and its citizens. This is an area where civil society has recently been playing an increasingly important role. After a long period in which the trend was for the state to take on ever more responsibilities, today that trend has reversed. As the public sector faces

challenges in ensuring the welfare society Denmark is famous for, the greater involvement of civil society actors is seen as an obvious solution.

This is not a new phenomenon, and in countries other than Denmark, the involvement of civil society in problem-solving has been a vital element in solving welfare challenges. Today, reaching out to civil society actors is a much more explicit problem-solving strategy, especially at the local level. At the same time, national actors such as private foundations are also becoming more proactive in making direct contributions to solving societal challenges.

## **No rose without thorns: democratic challenges**

Is civil society always a democratic asset, or are there also challenges in its role in a democratic system? This report takes a closer look at the conditions for civil society in Denmark. It examines, among other things, funding challenges and opportunities to play a role in political processes. These questions are of critical importance. The framework for civil society is crucial to its ability to fulfil the democratic responsibilities described above.

At the same time, it is also necessary to take a critical look at civil society itself. Are organisations, associations and movements capable of integrating different social groups? To what extent are these truly member-based democracies? Does the professionalisation of civil society risk leaving citizens feeling disconnected? And how can democratic legitimacy be ensured when civil society actors, such as private foundations, are increasingly involved in addressing societal challenges? The best discussion of the democratic role of civil society comes when there is both a look outward, at the frameworks that guide its activities, and an inward look at civil society itself.

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Foreningernes betydning for demokratiet. Essay from The Danish Democracy and Power Study 2.0

Qvist, Hans-Peter Y.; Elisabeth Lilleøre Holstein; Anders Bastrup Jørgensen og Lars Skov Henriksen (2024).

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# The need to collectively ensure a robust and diverse civil society

This report takes as its starting point the question of how we can ensure a strong civil society.

As Professor Anne Skorkjær Binderkrantz describes in the foreword to the report, a robust and well-functioning civil society is essential for a vibrant democracy. Civil society actors – including organisations, associations, networks, social movements and activists – play a central role as bridge builders between citizens and decision-makers, as watchdogs over those in power, and as drivers of social change, innovation and democratic participation. However, this requires a healthy and protected space for civil society. The common (self-)image of Denmark is that this is largely the case. Denmark is often regarded as a democratic pioneer with a long tradition of involving civil society in decision-making processes and allowing it to have its say, even when that means expressing criticism of the policies pursued. Denmark is often highlighted as a country where rights are well established and where everyone has equal opportunities to participate in the common democratic space, regardless of political views. This positive image is also reflected in Denmark's leading position in various international rankings such as Freedom House, Varieties of Democracy and Civicus. As the table below shows, Denmark's ranking has been stable over the years, suggesting that Danish civil society's status is generally strong and well-functioning.

## Measurements of civil society's status in Denmark<sup>9</sup>

Year	Cicivus Monitor	Varieties of Democracy	Freedom House
2015-2020	Open	0.96 (on a scale of 0-1)	97 (out of 100)
2021-2024	Open	0.96 (on a scale of 0-1)	97 (out of 100)

The table shows the average score over the two periods

These assessments are important benchmarks and frames of reference, but recent reports from Danish civil society point to worrying trends that do not appear to be reflected in the measurements. At first glance, the fact that almost half of the actors surveyed assess their conditions as 'good' may give the impression of a well-functioning civic space. And it is also important to emphasise that a large proportion of actors have this positive experience. However, when 30 per cent respond that conditions are neither good nor bad, this also points to a large grey area that does not necessarily express satisfaction, but rather reflects perceived uncertainty, low predictability, or weakened access to influence. At the same time, 22 per cent state that the conditions are downright poor – and among social movements, this figure reaches 57 per cent. This testifies to a fundamental tension between the general perception and the practical realities. Although the report also identifies positive experiences, the study shows that political initiatives, public discourse and structural conditions are putting pressure on the democratic foundation. Through an investigation of different types of civil society actors' experiences of their conditions and opportunities for democratic participation, it has been found that a cautiousness has emerged in civil society, extending down to the meticulous choice of words in public statements and the degree of political engagement. This is happening, among other reasons, as a reaction to the political climate and lack of support: "Everyone is under a bit of pressure in terms of their livelihood in one way or another, which is also just a weak starting point for being brave... And that is exactly what we're in the world for, that is what we can do, and that is the whole point of having a strong civil society". Behind the overall impression of satisfaction lies a more complex picture, in which the interplay among various factors reveals a pattern of

## Overall, how do you assess your conditions for operating as a civil society actor?

Actor	Good	Neither good nor bad	Bad
Organisation	57%	28%	15%
Association	45%	34%	21%
Movement	29%	14%	57%
Network	0%	50%	0%
Activist or engaged individual	0%	24%	47%
<b>Total</b>	<b>48%</b>	<b>30%</b>	<b>22%</b>

structural challenges. For example, more than one in three civil society actors report in the questionnaire that support from politicians has been poor over the past five years. The cases involving Mellemfolkeligt Samvirke and Copenhagen Pride, which attracted considerable attention in 2023 and 2024<sup>2</sup>, are not isolated incidents but part of a larger trend in which civil society's ability to act freely and independently is threatened by political interference and conditional funding, among other things. A quarter of actors report specific problems with conditional funding. Such trends can have a chilling effect. The fact that 41 per cent report they have refrained from expressing themselves or moderated their language in public statements points to this trend continuing in its worrying direction.

Several of those interviewed point to a growing tendency towards self-censorship, and that some civil society actors feel that if they receive public funding, "*there are limits to what [they] can do.*"<sup>3</sup> It is here, at the intersection of numerous different factors, that the challenges become apparent: when financial vulnerability, conditional funding, political interference, and harsh public discourse converge, a 'toxic cocktail' is created that, in practice, puts pressure on civil society's rights and ability to operate. These trends are therefore not a marginal problem, but should instead be taken as a warning sign. One must ask oneself what it says about the state of Danish democracy that so many feel pressured into silence or feel that their funding is dependent on arbitrary political conditions?

In a democratic context, where free exchange of views and the independent role of civil society are fundamental principles, even isolated cases should be taken very seriously. In this regard, it is also essential to be aware of who is particularly affected by this development. If it is mainly organisations working with controversial or politically sensitive issues – e.g. rights for vulnerable groups, minorities or criticism of authorities – then this development particularly affects some of the voices that are most important for a representative and diverse democracy. This means that certain perspectives and population groups are being pushed out of the public conversation. As has also been noted by the European Commission, the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights, and the European Civic Forum, this has been the case for climate activists, pro-Palestinian activists and certain minority groups, among others.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to the challenges already listed, the survey also reveals problems with a lack of dialogue and limited opportunities for influence in the political system, as well as a majority reporting challenges with funding and financial matters. The latter is not just an administrative problem but also impacts the ability to form an association, as it is a requirement that an association have a bank account in order to be established. The Irish Council for Civil Liberties has also pointed out that access to financial resources is a central prerequisite for, and part of, the right to form an association<sup>5</sup>. This right to form an association (*foreningsfriheden* in Danish) is not only enshrined in the Danish Constitution, but also in the international laws and conventions to which Denmark is a signatory. Understanding the interplay between rights is therefore crucial for understanding how those rights can be fully enjoyed in society. In a ruling

by the European Court of Human Rights, it was reaffirmed that the protection of opinions and the freedom to express them within the meaning of the EU Convention on Human Rights is one of the purposes of freedom of assembly and association.<sup>6</sup> More specifically, this means that if civil society cannot freely express its views, for example, on the actions and policies of the state (i.e. the right to freedom of expression), then the right to freedom of assembly and association is also de facto weakened. Similarly, the Venice Commission's 2014 Common Guidelines on Freedom of Association<sup>7</sup> emphasise that civil society must have the right to participate in political and public debates, regardless of whether the views they express are in line with government policy or proposed changes to legislation. The guidelines further point out that the state should ensure that civil society actors receiving public support remain free from interference, and that civil society loses its independence if the government has broad discretionary powers to directly or indirectly influence decision-making processes within civil society.<sup>8</sup> The study points to a development that is heading in the wrong direction and requires action now to ensure an independent and active civil society in Denmark.

### **WHY DO WE NEED THIS STUDY?**

Existing measurements are primarily based on expert assessments and secondary data sources, and seem to lack the practices and experiences that civil society actors actually navigate on a daily basis. When the focus is predominantly on the institutional and legislative frameworks, we not only lack an understanding of how these frameworks operate in practice, but also risk overlooking more subtle but nonetheless serious changes.<sup>10</sup> We have therefore seen an urgent need to supplement existing perceptions of Danish civil society and democracy with a more in-depth, context-based, and actor-based study of the conditions of civil society. Through a nationwide questionnaire and qualitative interviews with a wide range of actors – from activists and small associations to larger organisations – we document the specific conditions, experiences, and dilemmas that civil society faces on a daily basis. In the process, we highlight the tension between formal rights and the actual conditions for participation. Where global indices provide a necessary macro perspective, this report offers a micro-based and practical mapping of how civil society's ability to function is experienced and shaped in everyday life. The report thus contributes new data and perspectives that can supplement and give nuance to existing monitoring.

A well-functioning civil society requires a stable legal and institutional framework that not only guarantees fundamental freedoms, such as freedom of expression, assembly, and association, but also enforces them in practice. The authorities' respect for the rule of law and the arm's-length principle (a Danish governance principle that ensures independent decision-making in certain cultural and economic sectors is kept at a professional distance from politics) is crucial for civil society to act freely and independently. At the same time, access to political dialogue and genuine participation are essential. Civil society must not only be heard but also be involved as an active partner in political decision-making processes through transparent, structured forms of dialogue. The study shows that while many actors navigate these decision-making processes with excellent proficiency and ingenuity, others are at a crossroads where fundamental freedoms and the conditions necessary to operate are under pressure. This calls for action. If civil society is to remain a democratic force and a critical counterweight, we must take these warnings seriously. This requires that we both strengthen the good practices that already exist and purposefully address the cracks that are emerging in our democratic infrastructure. Against this backdrop, the report presents several recommendations on how to protect and strengthen civil spaces – and invites all relevant actors to engage in dialogue and take action.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE POLITICAL SYSTEM

**Develop a civil society strategy.** The strategy should be developed in close cooperation with civil society. It should include a concrete roadmap for promoting civil society's participation and protecting its independence.

**Improve civil society's access to decision-makers and consultation processes** by strengthening civil society's access to political processes through the establishment of fixed, transparent consultation frameworks, including minimum deadlines and notification practices, and by ensuring the genuine participation and contribution of qualified actors.

**Introduce a lobby register** to ensure openness and transparency in political decision-making processes and strengthen trust in the political system.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PUBLIC AND PRIVATE DONORS

**Introduce participatory grant-making practices** that actively involve civil society actors in the design and development of grants. This includes needs assessments and ongoing dialogue with grantees to ensure that funds meet the actual needs of civil society. It is important that donors allocate resources for civil society actors to participate in such processes.

**Create greater flexibility in the use of funds** so that grant models reflect the current state of civil society, with particular regard to the way new social movements and young activists organise themselves. This requires fewer extensive administrative procedures, as well as more flexible documentation requirements.

**Create stable, transparent funding models in dialogue with civil society** by rethinking existing funding processes to ensure equal access for civic organisations.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

**Establish a civil society observatory** to serve as a collective, independent body to continuously document pressure on civic spaces. Such an observatory should support existing monitoring of civil society's scope for action. It should do this by coordinating and gathering civil society knowledge and experience, and by continuously contributing new data and analyses to document civil society's scope for action in Denmark.

**Strengthen solidarity, dialogue and cooperation across civil society** by seeking out partnerships and exploring common strategic goals and positions in order to enhance political impact and collaboration between activities. To this end, civil society actors should initiate internal discussions on the challenges they face within the civil society ecosystem regarding self-regulation, self-censorship, and economic dependence. This will support a common knowledge and experience base that can be used in monitoring activities.

## OTHER RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TRADITIONAL MEDIA AND SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

**Strengthen democratic and respectful public discourse.** Media and social media platforms – in collaboration with civil society, citizens and decision-makers – should develop concrete strategies and binding guidelines that promote constructive and inclusive public debate. The strategies and guidelines should focus on counteracting polarisation, creating space for disagreement, and strengthening the culture of dialogue in democracy.

# Framework for the rights of civil society

**Denmark is a democratic society based on the rule of law, where rights are guaranteed by both national and international legislation.**

Denmark's Constitution is central to the Danish legal system and establishes most of the fundamental rights and principles for democratic participation. In addition, Denmark has international obligations, particularly through its membership of the European Union, the Council of Europe, and its accession to UN conventions, which together form a broad and robust framework for the protection of civil and political rights and the right to participate in society. These rights are crucial to civil society's ability to function and act freely and critically, and further ensure that when rights are violated, civil society actors have legal access to the judiciary and other complaint mechanisms.

## RIGHTS IN THE DANISH CONSTITUTION

The Constitution of 1953 contains several rights that support democratic participation and the functioning of civil society. Particularly relevant here are the rights referred to in Danish as the Three Fundamental Freedoms (tre frihedsrettigheder):

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### **Freedom of expression** (Section 77):

Everyone has the right to express themselves publicly, forming the basis for public debate and criticism.

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### **Freedom of association** (Section 78):

The right to form and participate in associations, including political parties and NGOs.

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### **Freedom of assembly** (Section 79):

Citizens, meaning all persons residing in the country, have the right to assemble unarmed.

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In addition to the Danish Constitution and European legislation, there are also a number of other international recommendations and conventions that govern civil society in Denmark. Of particular relevance is the Council of Europe's CM/Rec (2007) recommendation, which emphasises the state's obligation to ensure that civil society can participate effectively and without discrimination in public dialogue and consultations, so that the great diversity of parties with a stake in society's functioning can exchange their views freely. This includes promoting participation and cooperation through ensuring appropriate access to or publication of information.<sup>11</sup> Participation in and access to public affairs is also referred to in the UN Convention on Civil and Political Rights, ratified by Denmark in 1971, where citizens have the right to exert influence 'through public debate and dialogue with their representatives or through their ability to organise themselves' as supported by the three fundamental freedoms mentioned above.<sup>12</sup>

## RIGHTS IN EUROPEAN LEGISLATION

Denmark is bound by several European legal frameworks that supplement and strengthen the provisions of the Danish Constitution. This applies in particular to the European Convention on Human Rights, incorporated into Danish law in 1992, and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, which, since the entry into force of the Treaty of Lisbon in 2009, has been legally binding on Member States when implementing EU legislation.

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### European Convention on Human Rights

- Article 10: Freedom of expression.
- Article 11: Freedom of assembly and association.
- Article 6: Right to a fair trial – a prerequisite for the rule of law.
- Article 13: Right to an effective remedy.
- Article 14: Prohibition of discrimination.
- Article 16: Restrictions on the political activity of aliens.

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### Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union

- Article 11: Freedom of expression and information.
- Article 12: Freedom of assembly and association.
- Article 47: Right to an effective remedy and to a fair trial.

# THEME #1

## Political dialogue and influence



## A strong democracy requires that civil society has real access to the political system.

Civil society contributes knowledge, experience, and perspectives from many layers of society that politicians and civil servants do not always have access to, strengthening the quality and legitimacy of the policies pursued. It is therefore crucial that a diverse civil society is involved in the legislative process and consulted on the implementation of policies. Furthermore, civil society's participation in political dialogue protects against marginalisation and ensures that different groups and interests – especially the most vulnerable – have a voice in the political process.

This study shows that access to the political system is not consistent across Denmark's civic space. Some actors emphasise that they have had positive experiences with collaboration, that they are invited to participate in political discussions and hearings, and that their professional knowledge is sought after by both civil servants and politicians. Established organisations and certain associations in particular report effective cooperation and constructive dialogue: *"We feel neither pressured nor bound to uncritical behaviour in relation to the granting authorities."*<sup>13</sup> This emphasises that Danish democracy continues to have well-functioning structures for civil society involvement and that dialogue is recognised and prioritised by some. As one interviewee says: *"Our experience is that there is a reasonably good level of responsiveness to civil society."*<sup>14</sup>

However, these experiences contrast with an equally significant part of civil society, for whom access to political influence today is characterised by inequality, unpredictability and exclusivity. As Theme 2 will illustrate in more detail, this is happening alongside increasing political interference, which often takes the form of one-way communication and negative public statements. As one interviewee said: *"I don't feel that politicians listen to civil society... However, I do feel that they interfere in a lot of things through their communication platforms."*<sup>15</sup>

### How do you view the development in politicians' (first table) and authorities' (second table) attitudes towards civil society over the past five years?

Actor	Good	Neither good nor bad	Bad
Organisation	29%	45%	26%
Association	17%	45%	38%
Movement	0%	20%	80%
Network	0%	100%	0%
Activist or engaged individual	0%	25%	75%
<b>Total</b>	<b>19%</b>	<b>43%</b>	<b>38%</b>

Actor	Good	Neither good nor bad	Bad
Organisation	20%	62%	18%
Association	18%	49%	32%
Movement	0%	40%	60%
Network	0%	100%	0%
Activist or engaged individual	0%	47%	53%
<b>Total</b>	<b>16%</b>	<b>55%</b>	<b>29%</b>

## Unequal access to the political system and more closed doors

For many actors – especially those who are less activist or whose agendas are critical of systems and norms – an increasingly closed-off picture is emerging. 42 per cent of respondents indicate that it is difficult to get in touch with politicians, and 21 per cent report the same with public authorities. This indicates a significant barrier to dialogue with key decision-makers. Several interviewees confirm this trend and describe how political contacts who were previously open and accessible no longer accept meeting requests or seek dialogue. As one interviewee put it:

“ We have politicians whom we cannot get meetings with, but with whom we have had meetings before”<sup>16</sup>

This points to a worrying trend where civil society is increasingly encountering closed doors and political dialogue is not only becoming more difficult to establish, but also more dependent on changing will. This makes it challenging to plan political advocacy and build relationships.

Access to the political system is also significantly unevenly distributed, with smaller and newer actors in particular experiencing great difficulties. 81 per cent of the activists surveyed and 67 per cent of social movements indicate that it is difficult to get in touch with politicians, compared to 30 per cent of organisations. This points to a structural imbalance, where access depends largely on resources, organisational maturity and personal networks. As one actor describes:

“ If you don't have anyone who can help open doors for you, it's a bit of a jungle”<sup>17</sup>

The political system is perceived as opaque, and many would like to see more transparency about how to actually gain access and influence.

### KEY STATEMENT

Several civil society actors describe a trend in which it has gradually become more challenging to participate meaningfully in political processes – especially regarding consultations. One actor explained that deadlines have become shorter and that it is now often only a brief summary that is presented, unless one actively requests the background material. There is also rarely any notification or confirmation that the consultation response has been received. In the actor's own words, “*It all happens in a way that makes you feel like you're going straight into the trash bin on their computer.*” It is perceived as a systematic dismantling of civil society's opportunity to influence – a development that, according to the actor, has emerged gradually over the past two to three years. As access routes have become less clear and formal processes less transparent, some organisations have tried to adapt by building internal political capacity. One organisation chose to hire an employee with in-depth knowledge of the political system and experience with decision-making processes. “*It has really made a big difference*”, they explain. This insight has been crucial to understanding the dynamics and navigating the political landscape, because “*otherwise you always get left behind a bit*”, as they put it. Together, these two experiences point to a system in which civil society's access does not necessarily depend on objectivity or relevance, but on strategic insight, relationships, and resources. For those without these prerequisites, it is becoming increasingly difficult to be heard.

## Are consultations merely a pseudo-exercise?

The consultation process is a central part of Danish democracy, designed to ensure a thorough legislative process that takes all relevant factors into account. Despite this, the consultation process is not regulated by law but is governed by guidelines for civil servants. The study shows that the democratic potential of the consultation process is limited due to the lack of a clearly defined framework. Specifically, more than one in three respondents find the circumstances surrounding consultations difficult, and for many, the process appears to be a pseudo-exercise. Several describe consultations as ‘performative’ or ‘a mere formality’ where input rarely leads to real influence. As one interviewee describes:

“ We can probably count on one hand, or perhaps half a hand, how much of what we have written in our consultation response will actually lead to changes in the bill that has been proposed. It is a vanishingly small amount.”<sup>18</sup>

This perception of the consultation system seems to be particularly prevalent among actors outside the established network of professional civil society organisations with close ties to civil servants and politicians. Specifically, social movements (80 per cent) and activists (69 per cent) experience greater difficulties than organisations and associations. The widespread perception is that their voices are only taken into account to a limited extent. As one interviewee points out: *“I have said several times that we are happy to contribute, but we have not been invited to participate in anything.”*<sup>19</sup> At the same time, half of all respondents indicated that the process is neither easy nor difficult. In a democracy such as Denmark’s, participation should not be perceived as a grey area, but as a real and predictable opportunity to exert influence. The Secretary General of the Danish Bar and Law Society, Andrew Hjuler Crichton, has even described the current practice as a problem from a rule-of-law perspective.<sup>20</sup>

Several interviewees point to specific structural problems in consultation practices: very short deadlines, submissions sent out on weekends and public holidays, insufficient background information, and incomplete consultation lists. The accelerated pace of legislation is another concern, which adds pressure to consultation processes and creates a lack of information about the consultations taking place. As one interviewee put it: *“That these consultations are taking place at all is not something that is advertised very much.”*<sup>21</sup> These problems are not isolated. Several other studies and reports, including those from Justitia<sup>22</sup> and CEPOS, have documented an increase in consultations with very short deadlines – some as short as 5 days – and a general lack of a systemic process for selecting consultation parties.<sup>23</sup> CEPOS has specifically found that the number of consultations with deadlines of five days or less doubled in 2021 compared to the period 2016-2019.<sup>24</sup> Concerns such as these have also been raised by the European Commission in its Rule of Law reports from both 2023 and 2024.<sup>25</sup> These circumstances make it challenging for many actors – especially smaller or resource-constrained ones – to produce qualified responses within the deadline.

One interviewee puts it this way: *“You can just sit there and think, ‘I’ve spent several days, or a whole weekend, or a whole evening, or several evenings in a row writing a consultation response and doing it properly, but I know full well that it will end up in the pile of consultation responses, and they probably won’t read it’”*.<sup>26</sup>

## How do you view the circumstances surrounding public consultations e.g. access, deadlines, follow-up, background information, etc.?

Actor	Good	Neither good nor bad	Bad
Organisation	27%	50%	23%
Association	12%	55%	33%
Movement	0%	20%	80%
Network	0%	50%	0%
Activist or engaged individual	0%	31%	69%
<b>Total</b>	<b>17%</b>	<b>50%</b>	<b>34%</b>

## Selective responsiveness and declining political support

The study paints a picture of a politically unbalanced dialogue:

“ I feel that we are being heard, but I don't feel that anyone is listening to those all the way at the back”.<sup>27</sup>

While some actors have access and experience cooperation, others feel systematically excluded or only invited under conditions that reduce their opportunity for real influence. It is not just a matter of lack of access, but also of unpredictability, selectivity and a growing perception that involvement is often formal rather than real. 44 per cent feel that politicians are unwilling or only slightly willing to cooperate with civil society actors who represent political views other than their own. This points to a worrying trend of political selectivity, where willingness to cooperate depends on political agreement rather than content or objectivity.

One interviewee put it this way: “There are lots of issues we might like to raise, but we can't get them through.” Another interviewee went further, saying, “Politicians have never been my goal, because I know it's a lost cause; they have their own agenda”.<sup>29</sup>

This trend is further confirmed by the respondents' assessment of political support over time. Here, 22 per cent believe that support from politicians – e.g., in the media or public statements – has improved over the past five years, while 36 per cent believe that it has deteriorated. Social movements and activists in particular express a clear negative development: 80 per cent of social movements and 65 per cent of activists assess that support has declined. This development is not only problematic for civil society but for democracy as a whole. When political responsiveness and recognition are only given to those who confirm the existing political agenda, pluralism is undermined. This not only weakens the legitimacy and influence of civil society but also the quality of political decision-making, as it loses access to relevant experiences, critical perspectives, and necessary corrective measures. To ensure an open and vibrant democracy, civil society's access to political dialogue must not depend on resources, relationships or political conformity. The study shows that there is a need for strengthened structures for participation – both formally through consultations and informally through ongoing dialogue – so that the diversity of civil society can truly be expressed and make a difference in political decision-making.

**To what extent do you feel that politicians are willing to cooperate with civil society actors who have different views from their own?**

<b>Actor</b>	<b>Good</b>	<b>Neither good nor bad</b>	<b>Bad</b>
Organisation	35%	42%	23%
Association	43%	43%	14%
Movement	60%	40%	0%
Network	50%	0%	50%
Activist or engaged individual	81%	13%	6%
<b>Total</b>	<b>44%</b>	<b>39%</b>	<b>17%</b>

**How do you view public support from politicians (e.g. in the media, statements or otherwise) towards civil society over the past five years?**

<b>Actor</b>	<b>Good</b>	<b>Neither good nor bad</b>	<b>Bad</b>
Organisation	28%	43%	28%
Association	21%	45%	34%
Movement	20%	0%	80%
Network	0%	100%	0%
Activist or engaged individual	0%	29%	65%
<b>Total</b>	<b>22%</b>	<b>42%</b>	<b>36%</b>

# THEME #2

## Rights in Practice



**The role of civil society in a democracy requires that actors can express themselves, organise and assemble, and participate in public debate freely and without fear.**

The role of civil society in a democracy requires that actors can express themselves, organise and assemble, and participate in public debate freely and without fear. Denmark is internationally renowned for having a strong formal framework of rights for civil society, something that the surveyed actors themselves largely confirm: 79 per cent feel that to a large extent they are able to express themselves freely, 79 per cent say they can assemble freely, and 67 per cent believe they have good opportunities to form associations. This testifies to a rights framework that formally supports the role of civil society in democracy.

However, when one takes a closer look at how actors experience these civil liberties in practice – especially among smaller actors and activists who increasingly feel that their rights are under pressure – this picture is significantly nuanced:

**””** *This is the first time I have ever seen freedom of expression being challenged in Denmark. And I think that’s insane”.*<sup>30</sup>

As also highlighted by the European Civic Forum, certain actors active in Europe are experiencing “growing anti-democratic tendencies in public debate and among political initiatives that challenge certain freedoms and rights”.<sup>31</sup> The fact that 22 per cent of civil society actors in this study consider their overall conditions to be definitively poor, rising to 47 per cent of activists and 57 per cent of social movements, raises serious questions about whether formal equality of rights translates into legitimate equality of access and protection. If large groups of actors feel that they are being systematically marginalised from our shared democratic space, this is a democratic problem because it undermines the principle of equal participation. A democracy cannot function effectively if access to rights depends on who you are or what agendas you represent. As one interviewee pointed out:

**””** *It is somewhat unnoticed that we are getting more and more people to conform to political pressure. It is very much an invisible influence”.*<sup>32</sup>

**To what extent do you feel that you can express yourself freely in relation to your work?**

Actor	Not at all or to a low degree	To a moderate degree	To a high or very high
Organisation	4%	16%	79%
Association	6%	15%	79%
Movement	29%	0%	71%
Network	0%	0%	100%
Activist or engaged individual	18%	24%	59%
<b>Total</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>16%</b>	<b>77%</b>

**To what extent do you feel that you can assemble, for example, through demonstrations/protests?**

Actor	Not at all or to a low degree	To a moderate degree	To a high or very high degree
Organisation	11%	20%	69%
Association	5%	12%	83%
Movement	0%	17%	83%
Network	0%	0%	100%
Activist or engaged individual	6%	18%	76%
<b>Total</b>	<b>7%</b>	<b>16%</b>	<b>77%</b>

**To what extent do you feel that you can form an association, for example, the possibility of registering as an association, access to banks, bureaucratic requirements, etc.?**

Actor	Not at all or to a low degree	To a moderate degree	To a high or very high degree
Organisation	8%	20%	72%
Association	13%	18%	69%
	14%	14%	71%
Network	50%	50%	0%
Activist or engaged individual	31%	31%	38%
<b>Total</b>	<b>13%</b>	<b>20%</b>	<b>67%</b>

## Parts of civil society are experiencing tacit pressure and self-censorship

The study paints an interesting picture where, although the general perception in civil society is that conditions are predominantly good, a different picture emerges when you scratch beneath the surface of this self-perception. This seems to be particularly driven by a significant difference in conditions between types of actors, with activists and social movements in particular reporting experiences of self-censorship and tacit pressure – especially when their statements address controversial issues or political trends: *“It’s as if people have been gagged... One thing is the right to say something. We also have a human right to be heard and listened to. It’s not that people have to agree, but everyone should have a say. And unfortunately, I don’t experience that to be the case for everyone.”*<sup>33</sup> Even if they are not outright bans, experiences such as these point to a situation in which not all voices feel safe to speak out, which undermines democratic space and pluralism in public debate. Others also report cases where demonstration permits have been rejected without clear justification, where politically sensitive issues are met with arbitrary control and surveillance from authorities, or problems with police violence during protests. One interviewee recounts:

**”** *What we have been told by our lawyers is that, in cases which involve the search of private houses, have been handled by four investigators from the Vestegnen homici-*

de department. So these actions have been very, very high on the police's list of priorities. So it points very strongly in the direction of it being politically motivated".<sup>34</sup>

### Have you experienced harassment or hate campaigns in response to your work?

Actor	Total "Yes"	Total "No"
Organisation	32%	68%
Association	18%	82%
Movement	83%	17%
Network	0%	100%
Activist or engaged individual	41%	59%
<b>Total</b>	<b>28%</b>	<b>72%</b>

### Have you received hate speech/hate messages in response to your work?

Actor	Total "Yes"	Total "No"
Organisation	44%	56%
Association	26%	74%
Movement	67%	33%
Network	0%	100%
Activist or engaged individual	53%	47%
<b>Total</b>	<b>37%</b>	<b>63%</b>

A report published by NOAH on the restriction of climate activists' rights paints a similar picture.<sup>35</sup> Such experiences of control and pressure, both tacit and explicit, effectively restrict actors' fundamental rights and their ability to function within the civic space.

A significant proportion of the study's civil society actors experience negative consequences as a result of their public engagement and activities. For some, this takes the form of hate campaigns or hate speech, being particularly prevalent among social movements and activists. One interviewee describes: "We have had politicians write about us, we have had a researcher and opinion maker write about us, and it is just really intense. I just think that right now there is a lot going on, and you are just trying to figure out what is happening, and these are some ideas that are really radical. And when you also know what has been happening elsewhere in Europe, then you can, at least I can, start to feel a little uneasy about where we are heading".<sup>36</sup>

This issue is also highlighted in the European Civic Forum's Civic Space Report on Denmark, which has emphasised that marginalised groups, as well as civil society organisations and activists who protect and fight for the rights of these groups, have increasingly been 'the target of verbal, physical and digital attacks, assaults and harassment'.<sup>37</sup> Although the majority of civil society actors have not been exposed to this kind of backlash, it is a worrying trend in a democratic society where participation in public debate should be protected and recognised. Other respondents feel that their funding or activism has been threatened because of

public statements. More specifically, a full quarter of all actors in the questionnaire survey report having experienced this kind of threat.

This is worrying in a democracy, where the right to express oneself freely and criticise those in power should be inalienable. Threats to financial stability based on statements can have a strong deterrent effect and lead to self-censorship, especially among smaller players without access to alternative sources of funding. If democratic engagement comes at too high a cost for those involved, there is a risk of a culture of silence that weakens democracy's ability to accommodate disagreement and bring about change through pluralistic dialogue:

” Freedom of assembly, freedom of expression, as I said earlier, I feel that it is under pressure because I can see that there is a change in me in how I feel about what I can participate in freely without risking that it could have consequences for my right to be in Denmark.”<sup>38</sup>

**To what extent do you feel that your funding or activism is threatened, or has been threatened within the last five years, due to public statements?**

Actor	Not at all or to a low degree	To a moderate degree	To a high or very high degree
Organisation	72%	15%	13%
Association	76%	14%	10%
Movement	100%	0%	0%
Network	0%	0%	0%
Activist or engaged individual	29%	47%	24%
<b>Total</b>	<b>75%</b>	<b>14%</b>	<b>11%</b>

## Political interference and lack of arm's-length principle

Data shows that just under half of civil society actors (47 per cent) experience a moderate to very high degree of inappropriate political interference. Activists and movements are particularly vulnerable, with 53 and 60 per cent respectively reporting a high degree of perceived political interference. Simultaneously, however, 54 per cent of all respondents report no or only a low degree of such experiences. This points to a differentiated civil society, where the degree of political interference depends on the type of actor, sector and profile. For larger and more established organisations that primarily work in less politically sensitive areas, the arm's-length principle and cooperation with decision-makers still appear to function well. For these actors, political interference seems to be a marginal problem.

Conversely, the study suggests that actors with a critical or activist agenda – particularly within areas such as climate change or Palestine – are much more likely to be exposed to political pressure and encounter barriers. This is summed up by one interviewee when outlining the more vulnerable areas which includes ‘our human rights<sup>39</sup> and recently more specifically work related to solidarity with Palestine’. The difference in experiences across civil society indicates a structural imbalance. When half experience unproblematic cooperation, while the other half experience political pressure, demands and interference, this creates a civil society space where the rules of democracy apply to some but not to all.

## To what extent do you experience inappropriate political interference in civil society?

Actor	Not at all or to a low degree	To a moderate degree	To a high or very high
Organisation	64%	16%	19%
Association	55%	27%	18%
Movement	20%	20%	60%
Network	50%	0%	50%

Several actors point specifically to financing as a point of vulnerability and describe how conditions are attached to funding – e.g., indirect requirements to adapt language use and problem understanding to the political agenda. In particular, budget negotiations and the SSA reserve (a politically negotiated fund for social, health, and labour-market initiatives) are highlighted as areas where the arm’s length principle has been weakened. According to several respondents, the funding process is driven more by politicians’ individual preferences than by objective, transparent criteria, as is the case, for example, with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ RAM model. This creates uncertainty and limits the possibility of real, independent social criticism.

## Online space under pressure from algorithms

The space in which civil society operates is increasingly digital – and the digital landscape has become a central arena for freedom of expression, organisation and mobilisation. Nevertheless, the study shows that the conditions for civil society actors online are characterised by significant challenges. While half of actors rate their digital conditions as good, 13 per cent report them as downright poor – a proportion significantly higher among social movements (29 per cent) and activists (24 per cent). This reflects a reality where not all civil society actors have equal access to act freely in the digital space.

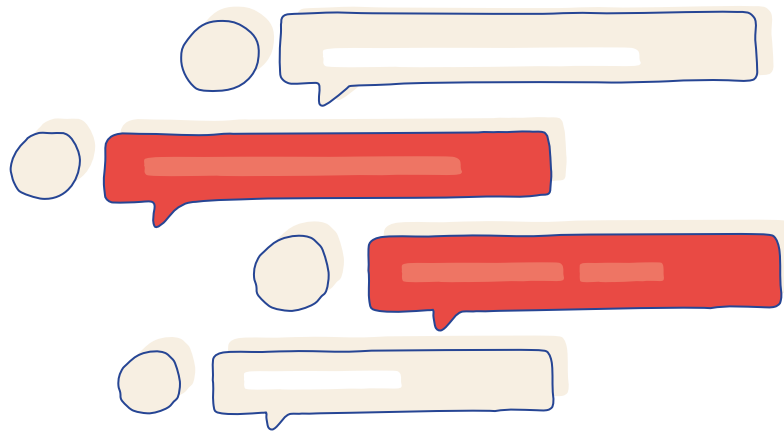
## Overall, how do you rate your conditions for operating as a civil society actor online?

Actor	Good	Neither good nor bad	Bad
Organisation	55%	36%	9%
Association	48%	40%	12%
Movement	57%	14%	29%
Network	0%	50%	0%
Activist or engaged individual	0%	35%	24%
<b>Total</b>	<b>50%</b>	<b>37%</b>	<b>13%</b>

Many actors report specific limitations that undermine their digital presence. 29 per cent have been subjected to hate speech or hate campaigns, and 26 per cent have experienced so-called 'shadow banning' (downgrading of content) and blocking of content by digital platforms and their algorithms: *"When we share something about inequality and transgender rights, it's just completely cut off from the social media profiles owned by Meta (social media services, edited.)"*.<sup>40</sup> Among movements and activists, the proportion is significantly higher. Additionally, these actors are reporting cases of removal of profiles, posts, and groups, often without justification or the possibility of appeal. According to NOAH's report, several activists, particularly in the climate and environmental field, report 'doxxing' (sharing personal information without consent), surveillance and automated content restriction.<sup>41</sup>

### Have you experienced shadowbanning?

Actor	Total "Yes"	Total "No"
Organisation	21%	79%
Association	22%	78%
Movement	67%	33%
Network	50%	50%
Activist or engaged individual	53%	47%
<b>Total</b>	<b>26%</b>	<b>74%</b>



This means that in some cases, civil society actors lose access to their most important communication and mobilisation tools in a matter of moments. These practices weaken civil society's digital freedom of expression and assembly, creating an opaque space where algorithms and platform policies effectively act as gatekeepers to participation in the public sphere. At a time when the digital space is an indispensable resource for civil society's work, these conditions pose a structural threat to democratic participation. This calls for increased transparency, legal certainty and political awareness of civil society's digital rights.

## Strategic self-moderation is spreading

A notable trend in the study is the strategic self-moderation of civil society actors. 41 per cent of respondents report that they have chosen to moderate or completely refrain from publicly stating certain opinions, with 96 per cent saying this is a conscious adaptation strategy. This means that self-censorship does not arise spontaneously but rather as a calculated response to perceived political and institutional pressure. As one interviewee emphasised:

“ I also don't think it's positive that I have to tell some employees that they have to act in a certain way, because I know what is going to happen if they don't: we will probably lose funding, or end up in a sh\*tstorm that we cannot handle”.<sup>42</sup>

The proportion is particularly high among social movements and activists – 57 and 59 per cent, respectively – indicating a bias in which less established voices feel particularly compelled to adapt.

Self-censorship is not driven by a desire for strategic impact, but by fear of economic sanctions, loss of legitimacy or political backlash. One interviewee emphasised:

### Have you refrained from expressing your opinions or moderated your statements in your work?

Actor	Total "Yes"	Total "No"
Organisation	40%	60%
Association	38%	62%
Movement	57%	43%
Network	0%	100%
Activist or engaged individual	59%	41%
<b>Total</b>	<b>41%</b>	<b>59%</b>

### Has it been a proven adaptation strategy?

Actor	Total "Yes"	Total "No"
Organisation	96%	4%
Association	94%	6%
Movement	100%	0%
Network	NA	NA
Activist or engaged individual	100%	0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>96%</b>	<b>4%</b>

“ There are some of my international colleagues, and here in Denmark, who have also decided that we will not say anything about this conflict today – because then our funding will be gone”.<sup>43</sup>

This may mean that actors choose not to comment on certain topics – e.g. Palestine – or avoid using specific terms in order to ensure continued access to funding and cooperation: “There

*have certainly been times when we have been very careful about how we express ourselves.”<sup>44</sup>* This development poses a real threat to civil society’s role as a critical watchdog and democratic corrective. When actors are forced to weigh their statements against the risk of reprisals, this creates a civil society characterised by caution and, in the long run, silence.

### KEY STATEMENT

Several civil society actors describe a reality where it is no longer possible to speak freely without consequences – especially when their work touches on politically sensitive issues such as climate change and Palestine.

One organisation states: *“We have to censor ourselves.”* *“It’s just one push of a button, and then our funding is gone,”* explains another respondent, referring to municipal support that they risked losing. Another actor describes how internal work within the organisation has changed. Employees are instructed to refrain from certain opinions, not for professional reasons, but to avoid coming into conflict with funding opportunities or public criticism. Several actors experienced a particularly significant shift in the wake of the escalation of the conflict in Gaza.

Actors with ties to, or solidarity with, Palestine describe an atmosphere characterised by surveillance, control and fear. One person recounts how the police conducted searches over several weeks and confiscated phones without clear justification: *“They spread it out over several weeks. As soon as we were done, they would come back. Instead of just doing it all at once ... they use it to map out which of us are in contact with each other in the Palestinian movement, and who is talking to whom”.* The same activist goes on to describe: *“It is f\*cking problematic that the police have been weaponised in this way to go after Palestinian activists”.*

For some, the pressure has been so great that they have withdrawn from public activities altogether: *“I don’t get involved in demonstrations and actions like that so much anymore, because I want to protect my right (residence permit, edited.) to be here,”* says a climate activist with a foreign background.

*Excerpts from interviews 2, 3 and 9*

# THEME #3

## Financing and economics



## The ability of many civil society actors to function as democratic players today depends on their access to sustainable and independent funding.

Financial resources are crucial for these organisations to maintain their operations, carry out their core tasks, and engage in political and social change. Even for those parts of civil society that are primarily driven by volunteers and have no fixed funding, there has been an increasing demand for financial support. The Fundamental Rights Initiative was established against this backdrop, with the aim of making funds more readily available to grassroots movements and activists. However, for many civil society actors in Denmark, funding is not only a practical challenge but also a structural barrier, both in terms of the availability of funds and the fact that access to them is increasingly linked to extensive administrative requirements and the expectation of adapting to politically prioritised themes. To put into perspective, 57 per cent of respondents in this survey have experienced an increase in funding over the past five years, while 42 per cent have experienced cuts in their funding.

The survey shows that access to core funding – i.e. funds that finance wages and operations – appears to be in critical shortage. Although a slight majority of participating actors have experienced an increase in funding, the overall financial outlook remains mixed. Only 5 per cent of respondents report a high availability of core funding, while as many as 69 per cent indicate that availability is limited or completely absent. For smaller actors in particular, this can mean a constant struggle for survival rather than being able to focus on creating change and activities for their target group. As one interviewee pointed out: *"We don't have enough [paid] hours for all our employees, and we don't really know how to continue."*<sup>45</sup> Without sufficient funding, the ability of civil society organisations to fulfil their democratic role is being eroded:

**”** *We are in a situation where up to half of the applications that are approved cannot be funded because there is not enough money. Today, we are facing a significant loss in levels of engagement abroad and as a result sees Denmark's global reputation declining, simply because there is not enough money for the highly skilled work being done by up to 300 small and medium-sized organisations. And this is a development we have seen over the last 3-4-5 years. If you want to strengthen the impact and contribution that Danish civil society organisations can make in relation to Danish development policy, then it is a question of more money. There is enormous competence, enormous capacity, and a very high level of ambition, but this cannot be realised, implemented, or put into practice because there is a lack of money. And we are not talking about billions in our case. We are talking about perhaps an extra 50 million [DKK] a year."*<sup>46</sup>

### Have you experienced cuts in your funding in the last five years?

Actor	Total "Yes"	Total "No"
Organisation	40%	60%
Association	48%	52%
Movement	40%	60%
Network	0%	100%
Activist or engaged individual	29%	71%
<b>Total</b>	<b>42%</b>	<b>58%</b>

## Core funding shortages weaken civil society’s ability to pursue long-term initiatives

The survey indicates that funding poses a structural challenge for large parts of Danish civil society. The lack of stable operating funds means that many actors – especially smaller organisations and social movements – work under conditions of short-term planning and financial uncertainty. This limits their ability to cover basic operating costs, retain staff and plan strategically. Resources that could be used to build expertise, organisational capacity and sustainable partnerships are instead tied up in temporary projects and ongoing fundraising.

One interviewee describes: *“Some of the biggest challenges are related to the lack of financial support that allows you to continue the work, improve capabilities, and carry out some of these [core tasks], which in reality are mostly about improving people’s well-being. [...] This creates a reality where organisations’ energy and focus are increasingly tied to short-term project funding and uncertain grants.”*<sup>47</sup>

### How would you describe the availability of funding that finances wages and operations, also known as core funding?

Actor	Very high or high availability	Moderate availability	Limited or no availability
Organisation	6%	35%	59%
Association	4%	19%	77%
Movement	0%	0%	100%
Network	0%	0%	100%
Activist or engaged individual	NA	NA	NA

When funding is predominantly short-term project funding, the focus shifts away from continuity and impact towards financial survival. Several actors describe how financial pressure not only limits development but threatens their very existence. This not only hinders civil society actors’ capacity to act, but also weakens their ability to build the long-term legitimacy and trust that are often necessary for political impact. This problem seems to affect smaller actors in particular. On the other hand, larger and more professionally organised associations and organisations typically find it easier to navigate the complex funding system and ensure continuity in their work. The result is a structural imbalance in which certain voices, perspectives and strategies are favoured, while others are squeezed out: *“We are really small and never have the muscle for long-term efforts, among other things, because we hardly know if we will still be here next year. I think the conditions for creating change are... Well, the environment is fine, but the problem is our basic conditions for even existing; we spend a disproportionate amount of resources just fighting to exist.”*<sup>48</sup> This weakens civil society pluralism and undermines democratic space.

## Bureaucracy as a barrier to a diverse civil society

In addition to the financial uncertainty described above, a majority (60 per cent) of respondents feel that access to funding is associated with complex and often opaque administrative requirements: *"We're just a tiny little project, and when it comes to getting in and applying for larger funds, it's often a long and heavy process where you have to do things in a very specific way where I've also encountered some barriers."*<sup>49</sup> For some civil society actors, bureaucracy and language become a real barrier, with more than one in four experiencing problems when applying for funding.

As one interviewee pointed out: *"I have also found the language to be quite elitist – and that is generally the case. If I had not attended university, I believe there are many things I simply would not understand. So I don't feel that it's particularly accessible, especially for grassroots movements in civil society. Because it requires you to be familiar with their jargon and understand what they want, both theoretically and methodologically. When you haven't worked theoretically and methodologically at such a high level of education, it's very challenging. So I feel that many people are being excluded."*<sup>50</sup> Many also feel that reporting requirements and documentation obligations in practice hinder support and divert resources away from core tasks. Some of the interviewees point out that *'there is a very exciting dialogue going on in the world of foundations,'* where attempts are being made to develop new forms of financing that can address these issues.

### Have you encountered any challenges regarding funding and finances?

Actor	Total "Yes"	Total "No"
Organisation	56%	44%
Association	62%	38%
Movement	100%	0%
Network	NA	NA
Activist or engaged individual	47%	53%
<b>Total</b>	<b>60%</b>	<b>40%</b>

It is particularly problematic when technical barriers – such as difficulties in setting up bank accounts, handling international transfers or suspicion in connection with foreign aid – hamper civil society's ability to operate. 15 per cent of respondents report having experienced problems transferring funds to partners abroad, and just as many have had problems opening a bank account. Interview data shows that this particularly affects actors with a minority background or organisations that collaborate with partners in countries such as Afghanistan or Palestine.

Several describe how they encounter disproportionate checks and documentation requirements: *"We have a sister organisation in Palestine... So we have to present all kinds of documentation to prove that we are not breaking the law and so on."*<sup>52</sup> When actors encounter resistance solely because of their cause, geography, or background, it not only raises questions about discrimination but also limits their ability to operate and their right to organise. As one interviewee recounts:

” It has been a challenge, where you feel stigmatised as a Dane with a foreign background, because you are kind of shut out from access to real dialogue with the bank and things like that.”<sup>53</sup>

These technical and administrative barriers are not only significant for civil society’s ability to take action, but also for diversity within civil society.



## Does access to financial resources influence actors’ voices and actions?

Several of the civil society actors in the study feel that it has become more challenging to raise funds for political work, as funding is increasingly tied to the implementation of specific political agendas. As one interviewee points out:

” When we start talking about politics, it becomes really difficult to raise money. So when you start to be disruptive, activist or political in that way, there is a certain reluctance among foundations in Denmark.”<sup>54</sup>

This is particularly true in strategic partnerships, where the framework for cooperation is primarily defined by the government’s overall objectives. This creates a dilemma: strategic partnerships offer considerable potential to secure more stable, long-term funding – and thus support the functioning of civil society. But at the same time, several actors feel that the partnerships actually limit the space they have to operate and their ability to criticise the system: *”It is clear that the framework has been created not for us, but to promote the government’s understanding of the climate crisis. And we disagree with the way the government is doing it. But the money that is allocated is, of course, based on the government’s own understanding.”*<sup>55</sup>

On the one hand, partnerships can secure resources and ensure continuity. On the other hand, many feel that the financial framework requires a certain degree of adaptation and fidelity to the political agenda. This creates a difficult balancing act for many civil society actors, especially those who depend on financial support to, among other things, pay employees and carry out activities. This weakens civil society’s fundamental function as a critical counterweight and democratic watchdog. The same picture is also described by some in relation to funding from private foundations: *”If you work politically in Denmark – for example by looking at the responsibility of Danish companies, their social responsibility when they operate in the Global South, or something similar – then it also becomes much harder to get funding from those very same companies.”*<sup>56</sup>

## KEY STATEMENT

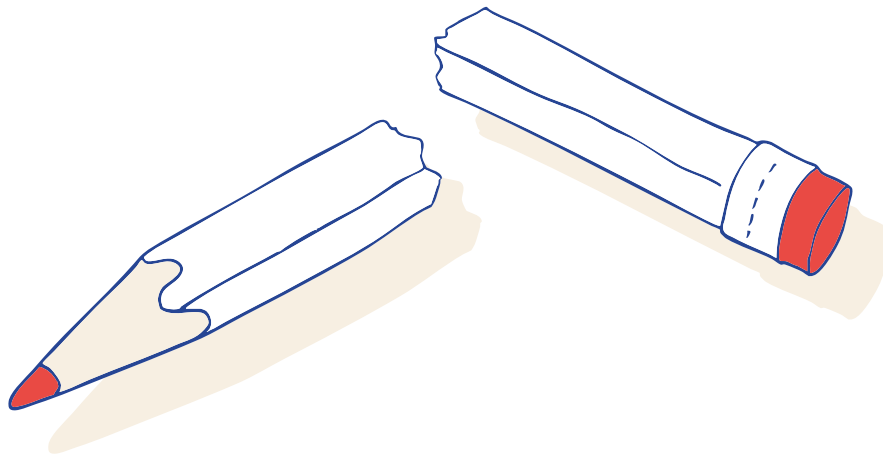
Several civil society actors describe how the desire for economic stability and access to funds can lead to a gradual alignment with the political agenda – not necessarily out of professional conviction, but as a strategic necessity. One actor recounts how internal discussions within the organisation have centred on how far they can go in their criticism before it risks jeopardising funding: *“We have also adopted a concrete strategy to diversify our funding as much as possible, because it (the situation, edited.) feels risky... [it] is up for internal discussion about where to draw the line. And there are many different opinions on this, so it also becomes a negotiation about how much to scale back political criticism, how much to scale back a campaign, because...there is real nervousness about having one’s support withdrawn.”* This is not out of the ordinary.

Another actor explains how strong and principled associations eventually begin to adjust their language and thematic focus. Not because they have changed their stance, but because they are trying to secure access to state funding. *“We find that there are strings attached, and we have also seen some associations that really have a great starting point and a good project, and then suddenly we can see how they are increasingly beginning to echo the politicians’ narrative,”* they say. *“And that’s because they want to remain state funded – and so you have to talk your way into the issues that the government is focused on.”*

This adaptation is not necessarily an expression of agreement with those particular policies, but rather a calculated strategy. Funding is sought for issues that are already the focus of political attention, rather than for those that the association itself considers most urgent. When everyone is talking about ‘negative social control’ [A person’s actions or choices being repressed to adhere to community norms] you tailor your projects accordingly – it’s not necessarily because it is the most pressing problem, but because there is money in it. *“And then you sign up to it,”* explains the actor, *“not necessarily because you see a problem there, but because you know there is money in saying that you are doing projects around it.”* In this way, civil society becomes part of a circular narrative in which politicians can point to projects that confirm their agenda – and where several actors have sought funding by confirming it. According to the actor, this creates a dangerous slippery slope.

When it becomes necessary to act within the boundaries set by donors and political agendas, civil society loses some of its autonomy. What was supposed to be an independent voice and a democratic corrective, instead risks legitimizing the framework it was originally put into place to challenge.

The current funding structure not only creates practical challenges but also affects how civil society actors prioritise, develop, and carry out their work. This situation is confirmed by the questionnaire survey, which shows that a quarter of all participating actors state that they have had to conform to donors’ expectations in the last five years – for example, by refraining from commenting on specific issues. For networks, the figure is as high as 50 per cent, while



30 per cent of organisations and 25 per cent of the activists surveyed have experienced similar pressure to conform.

One interviewee describes: *"We're about to rewrite our strategy, and this has come up in our discussions: how much should we use certain words, and how much should we avoid certain words, if we want to maintain our system-critical profile while still trying to apply for certain funding."*<sup>57</sup>

When certain forms of organisation and strategies – typically the more professional, consensus-seeking and less system-critical ones – are favoured in the funding system, the overall voice of civil society is altered. In this context, funding becomes not just a technical matter but an important factor in determining which voices are heard. As highlighted by the European Commission and the Council of Europe, a pluralistic civil society is an indispensable part

**Within the last five years, have you had to adjust to donors' expectations? For example, an expectation that you should refrain from commenting on specific topics.**

Actor	Total "Yes"	Total "No"
Organisation	30%	79%
Association	20%	80%
Movement	17%	83%
Network	50%	50%
Activist or engaged individual	25%	75%
<b>Total</b>	<b>25%</b>	<b>75%</b>

# A call for joint action

**The report's findings paint a complex picture of a civil society with both strengths and real challenges.**

Many actors feel that their general conditions are favourable and that Denmark continues to offer a framework in which civil society can operate, collaborate and engage. In particular, the broad confidence in formal rights and the positive experiences highlighted by several of the more established organisations and associations testify to a foundation with strong democratic qualities. At the same time, however, the report also shows that these positive experiences are far from being shared by everyone and that some actors instead stand on fragile ground. For parts of civil society – especially among smaller, critical, and activist actors – everyday life is characterised by a balancing act between the ideal of democratic participation and a sense of limitations in their work, even when formal rights are intact. The seriousness of the report becomes clear in its mapping of how, in practice, freedom of action is not equally accessible to all, and how fundamental rights are gradually being eroded for certain actors through conditional funding, political interference, and an increasingly polarised public discourse. In the face of these pressures, civil society risks losing its role as an independent democratic actor.

The report subsequently raises a vital warning: even in a well-functioning democracy such as Denmark, the conditions for civil society must not be taken for granted. In order to protect and strengthen democracy, it is crucial that we take both the positive experiences and the growing concerns seriously and act on them. A well-functioning democracy requires more than rights on paper – it requires real opportunities to participate, challenge, and be heard. If civil society is to play its role as a critical and democratic actor, better and more equal access to both resources and the decision-making process must be created. A fair and equal playing field for the whole of civil society is a collective responsibility and requires a joint call to action. The report's recommendations are therefore directed at the political system, public and private donors, the media, and civil society itself, calling on us to work together to strengthen democracy by strengthening the place of civil society within it.



# Methodology and data basis for the study

The study is based on data collected and processed in the period 2024-2025 by Nyt Europa with support from Global Focus.

The data basis consists of an online questionnaire and interviews. Specifically, 24 interviews were conducted and 178 questionnaire responses were obtained, all of which are anonymised. Data from interviews and questionnaire responses have been supported by 'desk research' and systematic document analysis. Supplementary data sources include: text and comments in the financial budgets of the Danish state from 2013-2024, and a wide range of documents, such as agreement texts, website texts, reports, and other written statements from ministries and agencies. In addition, the data is supplemented by reports, comments, articles and debate contributions from civil society actors.

## Participating civil society actors

Organisations, associations, networks, social movements and activists participated in the study. Of the questionnaire respondents, the size of the actors was distributed as follows:

	1-5	6-10	11-25	26-50	Over 50
Full-time employ-	42 %	24 %	11 %	14 %	9 %
Volunteers	14 %	17 %	24 %	13 %	32 %

The geographical distribution and primary focus areas are as follows:

Location	Number of actors
Capital Region	117
Central Denmark Region	24
North Denmark Region	16
Region Zealand	10
Region of South Denmark	11
<b>Total</b>	<b>178</b>

Primary focus area	Number of actors
European	6
International	51
Denmark, local	34
Denmark, national	87
<b>Total</b>	<b>178</b>

The respondents' primary core areas were distributed as follows:

Primary core area	Number of actors
Other	4
Construction and urban planning	1
Children and young people	35
Civil society	2
Democracy and rights	22
Refugees	1
Peace	2
Climate, environment and/or biodiversity	33
Culture	1
Women's rights	7
LGBTI+	5
Emergency aid and development	1
Rule of law and courts	2
Rights of ethnic, cultural and/or religious minorities	13
Rights of persons with disabilities	3
Social, cultural and/or economic rights	17
Sport	1
Health	10
Transport	1
Education	1
Global Goals	15
<b>Total</b>	<b>178</b>

## QUESTIONNAIRE

The questionnaire consisted of five categories that, collectively, examined the experiences of various civil society actors in their engagement with civil society, as shown in the table below. Actors had the option of skipping questions for which they did not have a proper basis for answering. The questionnaire was accessible online via the Jotform platform and distributed to organisations, associations, movements, and activists. The questionnaire was available from November 2024 to March 2025. For distribution, a distribution list was compiled by obtaining contact information from member organisations, umbrella organisations, activist networks, and the like, as well as by sharing via actors' internal mailing lists, networks, and online channels, including Nyt Europa and Global Focus' own channels. A total of 178 responses to the questionnaire were received.

Category 1	Information about the civil society actor, including core areas, main activities, geographical location, focus, and level of political engagement
Category 2	The structure of the civil society actor, including number of employees/volunteers and year of
Category 3	Funding and finances
Category 4	Democratic space, including online
Category 5	Political culture and climate

## INTERVIEWS

In parallel with and as an extension of the questionnaire, individual interviews were conducted. Interview participants were identified through the questionnaire, which allowed them to indicate their willingness to be interviewed. In addition, the distribution email included a question asking whether participants would like to participate in an interview in addition to or instead of the questionnaire. A total of 24 interviews were conducted, all of which were transcribed. The transcribed interviews were coded based on the code list below and grouped into the corresponding categories.

<b>Funding and financing</b>	F1	Funding conditions, including developments in the availability of funding and, for example, the need for stratification of funding
	F2	Experience of conditional funding
	F3	Specific circumstances surrounding the budget negotiations
<b>Economics and administration</b>	E1	Economic conditions such as project financing, operating funds
	E2	Financial and administrative matters such as setting up a bank account
<b>Political dialogue and lobbying</b>	P1	Dialogue or lack thereof with the political system and/or, the public system, municipalities
	P2	Conditions and experiences regarding the possibility of political influence and political lobby-
	P3	Experiences with censorship, including self-censorship
<b>Democratic participation and exercise of rights</b>	D1	Participation in public debate (including online), including experiences with hate speech and shadow banning, as well as democratic discussion
	D2	Exercise of rights, particularly freedom of assembly, association and expression, including police violence and (online) surveillance
	D3	The need for adaptation strategies and moderation of activism
	D4	Cooperation and solidarity among civil society actors

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# Caught between pressure and potential: Civil society conditions in Denmark

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**Nyt Europa** is an organisation that works for more sustainable and humanistic development at local, national and European level. Nyt Europa believes in democracy across borders and is committed to strengthening the society democratic participation of citizens and civil in order to create a world with social, economic and environmental balance.



**Globalt Fokus** is a unifying platform for civil society organisations based in Denmark that are engaged in international development, peacebuilding, humanitarian efforts and the green agenda.



**The report has been prepared as part of the Fundamental Rights Initiative**, which aims to strengthen civil society's capacity, cooperation and rights work in Denmark. The focus is on information, advocacy and support for specific projects. The initiative addresses pressure on rights and restrictions on civil society with the aim of protecting and promoting rights – nationally and in the EU.



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