

Human Rights Centre Clinic

Resisting Foreign Agent Laws and the Shrinking of Civic Space

Partner: [Amnesty International](#)

About

Amnesty International is an international non-governmental human rights organisation and a movement of over 10 million members, activists and supporters in more than 150 countries and territories. It is independent of any government, political ideology, economic interest, or religion. Amnesty International's mission is to advocate for global compliance with international human rights law, the development of human rights norms, and the effective enjoyment of human rights by all persons. To do so, Amnesty International monitors state compliance with international human rights law and engages in research, advocacy, strategic litigation, and education to prevent and end human rights violations and to demand justice for those whose rights have been violated.

Project overview

The project will examine the use of foreign agent laws – a widespread authoritarian practice which threatens the sustenance of impactful human rights work. By designating critics of the government as “foreign agents”, such laws restrict the operation of civil society organisations, threatening the ability of individuals and groups globally to voice dissent and challenge autocracy. The aim of the project is to understand legal and non-legal strategies to respond to the threat posed by such laws, which several countries have already adopted or considered in 2025 alone. The report will analyse foreign agent laws across Europe and Central Asia. The generated research will help Amnesty International to build a campaign on resistance strategies to fight against restrictions on civic space.

Background

In 2025 alone, several countries have either adopted or considered foreign agent laws. In March 2025, [Georgia's Parliament](#) approved a new Foreign Agents Law which includes criminal sanctions. In February, the [National Assembly](#) of the Republic of Srpska adopted the law on the Special Registry and Transparency of the Work of Non-Profit Organisations and in

[Kazakhstan](#), the Parliament considered a foreign agents law proposal. This authoritarian practice is now widespread and threatens the sustenance of impactful human rights work.

Shrinking civic space globally is not a new phenomenon. Threatening the ability of individuals and groups globally to voice dissent and challenge autocracy, it is gathering alarming pace, threatening the work of human rights defenders in multiple countries. Amnesty International has felt the closure of space for human rights work directly in its own work and threats continue to exist in the field with the authoritarian resurgence, consolidation and renewal becoming a major threat to global civic space, enjoyment of rights and survival of civil society.

The Civic Space Fellowship Programme at Amnesty International was introduced with the aim of supporting local human rights defenders, academics, and human rights practitioners with lived experience to work intensively on collecting innovative grassroots strategies for tackling authoritarianism and defending civic space in their region. The Programme's work includes conducting research, organising meetings, producing a podcast, and collaborating with human rights clinics in universities to explore innovative ideas and solutions to the problem of shrinking civic space.

Project output

The Civic Space Fellowship Programme will work with a project team from Essex Human Rights Centre Clinic to produce a report (totalling approximately 10,000-12,000 words) focused on the following issues as they relate to the selected regions of Europe and Central Asia:

- What are the main features/trends across foreign agent laws that have been introduced, or have been threatened to be introduced, in the selected regions?
- How have foreign agent laws been drafted to restrict the operation of civil society organisations?
- What is the origin of foreign agent laws? To what extent are illiberal regimes [learning from and replicating](#) such laws to shrink civic space? For example, to what extent has the US Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) and equivalent legislation in Russia been replicated in, or influenced laws in, other jurisdictions?
- What arguments have lawyers used to argue against foreign agent laws? What reasoning have courts used to declare them unlawful?

Examples:

- In 2020, the European Court of Justice (ECJ) [ruled](#) that the Hungarian NGO Law on 'Transparency of Organisations Supported from Abroad' [breaches European Union laws](#) on the free movement of capital;
- In 2024, the European Court of Human Rights in [Kobaliya and Others v Russia](#) concluded that foreign agent laws "contributed to shrinking democratic space by creating an environment of suspicion and mistrust towards civil society actors and independent voices, thereby undermining the very foundations of a democracy";

- In 2022, the European Court of Human Rights in [*Ecodefence and Others v Russia*](#) ruled that Russia’s 2012 foreign agent law violated the freedoms of expression and association.
- What non-legal strategies have influenced or could potentially influence campaigning and advocacy against the introduction of foreign agent laws?

Examples:

- In [Georgia](#), people protested in huge numbers against the introduction of the foreign agent law;
- Transnational advocacy coalitions.

The report will be submitted for consideration for publication in a Special Collection titled “Resisting Illiberalism” for the [Oxford Journal of Human Rights Practice](#). The paper will be published upon approval after the review process by Amnesty and the Oxford Journal of Human Rights Practice.

The team will also submit a 1,000-2,000 word blog post in May 2026.

Timeline

Phase 1: November – December 2025:

- Preliminary research, understanding the project and developing the report outline.
- Identifying a list of experts or advocates for interviews and questionnaires.
- Securing ethical approval, if necessary.
- Outline and bibliography to be submitted to the partner organisation for comments.

Phase 2: January – March 2026:

- Carrying out the interviews online.
- Research and data gathering.
- Submission of the first full draft to the partner.

Phase 3: April – June 2026:

- Revision and finalising of the research paper.
- Blog for Amnesty International, on their site or another platform, about the main findings of the project.
- Presentation of project to the partner organisation.

Initial reading

1. Iskra Kirova, Foreign Agent Laws in the Authoritarian Playbook, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/09/19/foreign-agent-laws-authoritarian-playbook>.
2. Amnesty International, Türkiye: Withdrawal of so-called 'agents of influence' law is important victory for civil society, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/11/turkiye-withdrawal-of-so-called-agents-of-influence-law-is-important-victory-for-civil-society/>.
3. Open Society Foundations, The Troubling March of "Foreign Agents" Laws, <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/explainers/the-troubling-march-of-foreign-agents-laws>.
4. Márta Pardavi, Civil Society Must Be Equipped to Survive and Resist Foreign Agents Laws, <https://www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Civil-Society-Must-Be-Equipped-To-Survive-And-Resist-Foreign-Agents-Laws.pdf>.
5. OSCE/ODIHR, Urgent Opinion on the Law "On Transparency of Foreign Influence" of Georgia, <https://legislationline.org/sites/default/files/2024-05/30-05-2024%20Final%20ODIHR%20Urgent%20Opinion%20on%20Law%20on%20Transparency%20of%20Georgia.pdf>.
6. OSCE/ODIHR, Bulgaria: Opinion on the Draft Act on the Registration of Foreign Agents, <https://www.osce.org/odihr/593471>.
7. TVP World, Bulgaria votes down 'foreign agent' bill amid row in parliament, <https://tvpworld.com/84893482/bulgaria-votes-down-foreign-agent-bill-amid-row-between-mps>.
8. Natika Kantaria, Spread of 'Foreign Agent' Laws in Central, Eastern Europe: A Growing Threat To Civil Society, <https://ishr.ch/latest-updates/spread-of-foreign-agent-laws-in-eastern-europe-pose-increasing-threats-to-civil-society/>.
9. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), European Court of Human Rights Issues Landmark Ruling in Favor of RFE/RL Against Russia, <https://about.rferl.org/article/european-court-of-human-rights-issues-landmark-ruling-in-favor-of-rfe-rl-against-russia/>.

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