

NON

MAPPING REPRESSION:

LEGAL TRENDS IMPACTING CIVIL SOCIETY IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA



This publication was prepared and published by the Eurasian Harm Reduction Association (EHRA), a non-profit, membership-based public organisation that unites and supports more than 300 Central and Eastern European and Central Asian (CEECA) harm reduction activists and organisations to ensure the rights and freedoms, health and well-being of people who use psychoactive substances.

For more information, visit the website: <https://harmreductioneurasia.org/>

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Your commitment to truth, rights, and solidarity—often in the face of shrinking space and growing risk—continues to inspire and guide our collective work. This report is a reflection of your resilience, and we hope it will support continued advocacy, visibility, and protection for the communities and movements you serve.

Author: Eliza Kurcevič

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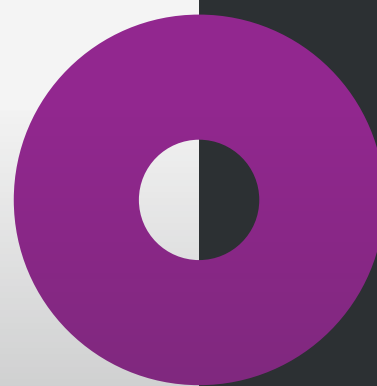
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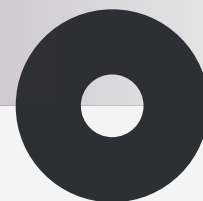
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ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

CCM - Country Coordinating Mechanism

CEECA - Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia

CSO - Civil society organization

ECOSOC - Economic and Social Council

EHRA - Eurasian Harm Reduction Association

EU - European Union

FARA - Foreign Agents Registration Act

HIV - Human immunodeficiency virus

HCV - Hepatitis C

ICCPR - International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

ICESCR - International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

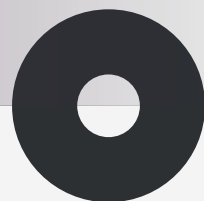
LGBTQI+ - Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning

NGO - Non-governmental organization

OSCE - Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

SDGs - Sustainable Development Goals

TB - Tuberculosis



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report, prepared by the Eurasian Harm Reduction Association (EHRA), presents a comprehensive analysis of legal and policy developments affecting civil society and marginalized communities across 29 countries in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia (CEECA). It focuses on three interrelated areas of growing concern: (1) the spread of "foreign agent" laws and similar restrictions on civil society organizations, (2) the censorship of drug-related information, particularly harm reduction education, and (3) the legal and political repression of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning (LGBTQI+) expression.

The report is based on a mixed-methods approach that combines responses from EHRA members, in-depth desk research, and verification by national stakeholders. It covers developments observed as of April 2025.

Key findings reveal that authoritarian and nationalist trends are driving a coordinated rollback of human rights and civic freedoms across the region. "Foreign agent" laws, modeled on Russia's framework, have now been adopted or proposed in over a dozen countries, stigmatizing and penalizing organizations receiving foreign funding. Meanwhile, at least seven countries have enacted or debated "drug propaganda" laws that criminalize the dissemination of factual, life-saving harm reduction information. In parallel, censorship targeting LGBTQI+ issues is spreading through both formal legislation and informal political pressure, undermining freedom of expression and visibility.

While some countries — particularly in the European Union (EU) and Western Balkans — continue to uphold legal protections for civil society and vulnerable groups, the overall regional trajectory is deeply concerning. These developments not only erode democratic governance and access to public health, but also isolate local civil society from international support and cooperation.

The report calls for renewed international attention, legal advocacy, and solidarity to counteract the shrinking civic space in CEECA, protect vulnerable populations, and support organizations working at the intersection of human rights, health, and justice.



INTRODUCTION

The CEECA region stands at a critical juncture. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, much of the region embarked on a transition toward democracy, human rights, and market economies. Civil society organizations (CSOs) emerged as key players in supporting democratization, promoting public health innovations such as harm reduction, and protecting vulnerable communities. However, the progress made over the last three decades is increasingly under threat. In many CEECA countries, recent years have witnessed a steady and deliberate shrinking of civic space (for a detailed overview, see Chapter 1, Chapter 2 and Chapter 3) characterized by mounting legislative restrictions, political hostility, and state-led efforts to undermine independent civil society.

The present report by EHRA provides a detailed analysis of these alarming trends, drawing on a robust combination of field data, desk research, and stakeholder validation. Covering developments as of April 2025, this report systematically documents how specific legislative and policy changes are eroding the operating environment for civil society, particularly organizations working on human rights, drug policy reform, harm reduction, and LGBTQI+ advocacy.

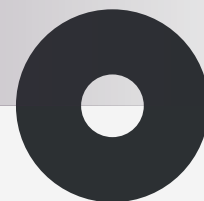
OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

The main objectives of this report are to:

- Document legislative and policy initiatives affecting civil society and human rights across the CEECA region;
- Identify and analyze patterns of restrictive governance affecting the ability of CSOs to operate freely and effectively;
- Assess the implications of these restrictions for the provision of harm reduction services and the protection of vulnerable communities;
- Inform and empower advocacy at the national, regional, and international levels.

To achieve these goals, EHRA implemented a mixed-methods approach:

1. **Online questionnaire:** Sent to EHRA members across 29 countries, yielding 35 responses from 24 countries, offering invaluable primary insights into national realities.



2. **Desk research:** Supplementing the questionnaire with a systematic review of publicly available sources, media reports, official documents, and academic studies covering all 29 countries.

3. **Validation with local experts:** Preliminary findings were reviewed and refined in collaboration with EHRA members to ensure accuracy and relevance.

Three thematic areas were the focus of inquiry:

- The spread of “foreign agent” laws and related regulations stigmatizing organizations with foreign support;
- Legislative restrictions on drug-related information under the guise of combating “drug propaganda”;
- Emerging laws and policies censoring LGBTQI+ issues, framed as protecting traditional values or public morals.

SHRINKING CIVIC SPACE: A SYSTEMIC CHALLENGE

Shrinking space for civil society refers to the deliberate and systematic erosion of the political, legal, and social environments that enable civil society organizations, activists, and communities to operate freely, safely, and effectively. In the CEECA region, this phenomenon is driven by a combination of authoritarian legal reforms—such as “foreign agent” laws, anti-LGBTQ laws, and bans on harm reduction education—and broader political strategies aimed at delegitimizing independent civic action. These restrictions manifest through stigmatizing legislation, excessive bureaucratic controls, surveillance, public smear campaigns, and criminal penalties. The result is a hostile operating environment where advocacy, public discourse, and access to life-saving information are severely constrained, particularly for marginalized and high-risk communities.

Several interrelated legal and political strategies are being deployed to shrink civic space:

- **“Foreign agent” laws** — adopted in countries like Russia, Kyrgyzstan, Georgia, and Republika Srpska (Bosnia and Herzegovina) — force civil society organizations receiving foreign funding to register under stigmatizing labels, subjecting them to burdensome reporting, state surveillance, and reputational attacks. In other countries, such as Serbia and Kazakhstan, similar laws are under discussion, while Hungary and



Belarus have adopted parallel measures without using the “foreign agent” label.

- **“Propaganda” bans** — modeled after Russia’s legal framework — are increasingly used to criminalize access to information. Drug “propaganda” laws (as seen in Hungary, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan) might restrict public education on harm reduction, while LGBTQI+ “propaganda” bans (in Russia, Hungary, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, and Bulgaria) erase visibility and delegitimize queer identities in media, schools, and public discourse.
- **Administrative harassment and selective regulation** — evident in Hungary, Slovakia, Uzbekistan, and Azerbaijan — create an atmosphere of uncertainty and fear for non-governmental organizations (NGOs). These include arbitrary inspections, opaque registration processes, restrictive funding approvals, and disproportionate bureaucratic obligations that are often applied selectively to critical or independent actors.

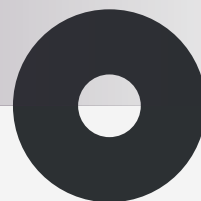
These developments are not isolated. They form part of a broader authoritarian resurgence, both regionally and globally, in which governments exploit nationalist, security-focused, and moralistic rhetoric to consolidate power and silence dissent. The language of “protecting traditional values,” “shielding children,” or “fighting foreign interference” is weaponized to justify the erosion of fundamental rights, while public health, gender equality, and democratic dialogue are sacrificed in the process.

What emerges is not merely a series of parallel legal trends, but a deliberate, systemic strategy to delegitimize civil society, restrict independent knowledge, and consolidate state control over public life.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT: FROM DEMOCRATIC ASPIRATIONS TO AUTHORITARIAN BACKLASH

The contraction of civic space in CEECA must be understood against the backdrop of the region’s post-Soviet history. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, newly independent states and post-communist countries faced the enormous task of building democratic institutions virtually from scratch. International support — including funding, technical assistance, and solidarity — was instrumental in fostering independent media, human rights watchdogs, harm reduction programs, and grassroots mobilization.

However, the democratization process was uneven. Economic hardship, corruption, unresolved national identity issues, and geopolitical tensions left



many countries vulnerable to populist, nationalist, and authoritarian narratives. Starting in the 2000s and accelerating after 2010, several governments began to reinterpret civil society not as a partner but as a threat — particularly when CSOs addressed sensitive issues such as minority rights, anti-corruption, or harm reduction for people who use drugs.

The "foreign agent" law adopted in Russia in 2012 set a precedent, providing a template for repressive legislation across the region. In subsequent years, variations of this law and associated "sovereignty protection" narratives spread across neighboring countries. Similarly, Russian-style "anti-LGBT propaganda" laws found imitators across the CEECA region. In 2015, Russia introduced the "undesirable organizations" law, granting authorities the power to ban foreign and international organizations deemed a threat to national security, without judicial oversight¹. This designation not only prohibits the operations of these organizations within Russia but also criminalizes any collaboration with them, leading to fines and potential imprisonment for individuals involved. Critics argue that the law's vague criteria enable its use as a tool to suppress dissent and restrict civil society activities.

Today, this trend is no longer isolated to Russia. Georgia's recent adoption of a "foreign agent" law in 2024, Montenegro's and Slovakia's proposals, and parallel developments in Serbia, Kazakhstan, Hungary, and that shrinking civic space is becoming a regional pattern, severely jeopardizing the progress made since the 1990s.

FOCUS ON THE MOST AFFECTED COMMUNITIES

The impact of shrinking civic space is particularly severe for vulnerable and marginalized populations:

- **People who use drugs** face reduced access to harm reduction services as organizations delivering life-saving interventions are stigmatized, underfunded, or shut down.
- **LGBTQI+ individuals** are increasingly targeted by discriminatory laws, censorship, and public smear campaigns that normalize hate speech and violence.
- **Human rights defenders, journalists, and activists** are subjected to harassment, legal persecution, and surveillance, undermining the foundations of democratic pluralism.

[1] Deutsche Welle, Juri Rescheto: Russia tightens 'undesirable organizations' law, 27 July 2024.
<https://www.dw.com/en/russia-tightens-undesirable-organizations-law/a-69780289> (accessed 17 June 2025)



The contraction of civic space thus translates directly into worsened public health outcomes, greater social exclusion, and the erosion of fundamental human rights protections.

THE URGENCY OF A COORDINATED RESPONSE

The findings of this report highlight an urgent need for coordinated action at all levels. If left unchallenged, the current trajectory threatens to reverse decades of progress in human rights, public health, and democratic governance across the CEECA region.

Through careful documentation, critical analysis, and evidence-based recommendations, EHRA seeks to:

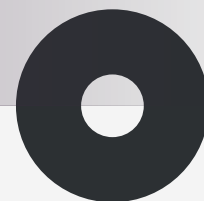
- Amplify the voices of civil society actors facing repression;
- Provide actionable insights for national, regional, and international advocacy;
- Mobilize solidarity and support for the defense of civic space, harm reduction, and human rights.

As the following chapters of this report will show, the battle for civic space in CEECA is far from over — but it remains a battle worth fighting.

CHAPTER 1

“FOREIGN AGENT” LAWS AND RELATED POLICY DEVELOPMENTS IN THE CEECA REGION





1.1. INTRODUCTION

The civic space across the CEECA region has been shrinking at an alarming pace. A key driver of this regression has been the proliferation of so-called “foreign agent” laws. “Foreign agent” laws are legal provisions that require (in most cases) civil society organizations, media outlets, or individuals receiving foreign funding and engaging in broadly defined “political activities” to register under stigmatizing labels such as “foreign agent” or equivalent terms. Originating in Russia in 2012 and increasingly adopted across the CEECA region, these laws impose burdensome reporting requirements, state oversight, and public disclosure obligations, or even criminal liability. Although often framed as transparency or national security measures, in practice they function as tools of repression—delegitimizing independent actors, restricting access to international support, enabling state surveillance, and suppressing dissent. Such laws are part of a broader authoritarian strategy to consolidate power by isolating and undermining critical voices within civil society.

This chapter provides a comparative analysis of the legal status and political dynamics surrounding “foreign agent” laws across the CEECA region as of June 2025.

1.2 SPREAD AND ADOPTION OF “FOREIGN AGENT” LAWS

Russia remains the epicenter of the “foreign agent” legislation trend. Since adopting its initial law in 2012, Russia has expanded the concept dramatically, applying the “foreign agent” label to NGOs, media outlets, individual activists, and even informal civic initiatives². The Russian model has set a powerful precedent for the region, “inspiring” governments that seek to exert tighter control over independent civic life.

Following Russia’s lead, several other countries have enacted “foreign agent” laws in recent years. In June 2024, **Georgia** enacted the controversial “Foreign Influence Law,” mandating that organizations receiving over 20% of their funding from foreign sources register as entities “pursuing the interests of a foreign power.” Initially met with widespread public protests, the law was later reinforced through the adoption of the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA), which introduced stringent criminal penalties for non-compliance.

[2] Human Rights Watch, Iskra Kirova: Foreign Agent Laws in the Authoritarian Playbook, 19 September 2024. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/09/19/foreign-agent-laws-authoritarian-playbook> (accessed 17 June 2025)



Under FARA, failure to register as a “foreign agent” or to submit required information can result in a criminal fine of 10,000 GEL (approximately US\$3,600) and/or imprisonment for up to five years. Additionally, violations related to financial reporting or labeling requirements may incur fines up to 5,000 GEL (about US\$1,800) or imprisonment for up to six months³. **Kyrgyzstan** followed suit, enacting its own “foreign agent” law in 2024⁴, which, like Russia’s, imposes broad and vaguely defined obligations on CSOs involved in “political activity” and has led to significant closures among human rights organizations. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, while there is no national-level “foreign agent” law, the **autonomous entity of Republika Srpska** adopted its own version in early 2025⁵, requiring foreign-funded organizations to register in a special registry and labeling them as agents of foreign influence.

1.3 COUNTRIES DEBATING OR PROPOSING “FOREIGN AGENT” LAWS

Elsewhere in the region, legislative initiatives inspired by the “foreign agent” model are gaining traction. In **Serbia**, a draft law introduced in November 2024⁶ proposes mandatory registration for organizations receiving significant foreign funding, drawing widespread condemnation from civil society. In **Montenegro**, political forces have been openly advocating for similar legislation⁷, although no bill has been formally adopted as of April 2025. **Bulgaria**, too, has seen repeated attempts by the far-right Revival party to push “foreign agent” legislation⁸, though these efforts have so far been blocked in parliament.

Moldova and Kazakhstan have both witnessed legislative proposals in 2025 that echo the Russian-style “foreign agent” framework. In **Moldova**, opposition

[3] International Federation for Human Rights: Georgia: Adoption of the new Foreign Agents Registration Act, 30 April 2025. <https://www.fidh.org/en/region/europe-central-asia/georgia/georgia-adoption-of-the-new-foreign-agents-registration-act> (accessed 17 June 2025)

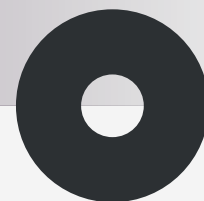
[4] Committee to Protect Journalists: Kyrgyzstan president signs Russian-style ‘foreign agents’ law, 2 April 2024. <https://cpj.org/2024/04/kyrgyzstan-president-signs-russian-style-foreign-agents-law/> (accessed 17 June 2025)

[5] Council of Europe: Bosnia and Herzegovina: The authorities of Republika Srpska should repeal the “foreign agent” law, 28 February 2025. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/bosnia-and-herzegovina-the-authorities-of-republika-srpska-should-repeal-the-foreign-agent-law> (accessed 17 June 2025)

[6] Center for Research, Transparency and Accountability: “Foreign Agents” Law Initiative in Serbia – Comparative overview with legislation in Russia, Georgia, and Hungary, 4 December 2024. <https://cрта.rs/en/foreign-agents-law-serbia-overview/> (accessed 17 June 2025)

[7] Human Rights Action: “Foreign agents law” initiative by the coalition “for the future of Montenegro” is a potential threat to human rights and Montenegro’s EU integration, 10 October 2024. <https://www.hraction.org/2024/10/10/foreign-agents-law-initiative-by-the-coalition-for-the-future-of-montenegro-is-a-potential-threat-to-human-rights-and-montenegros-eu-integration/?Lang=en> (accessed 17 June 2025)

[8] The Sofia Globe: Bulgaria’s Parliament again rejects pro-Kremlin party’s ‘foreign agents’ bill, 5 February 2025. <https://sofiaglobe.com/2025/02/05/bulgarias-parliament-again-rejects-pro-kremlin-partys-foreign-agents-bill/> (accessed 17 June 2025)



members of Parliament submitted a draft law imposing registration and disclosure requirements on foreign-funded organizations⁹. Since 2017, **Kazakhstan** has mandated that NGOs receiving foreign funding report this information to tax authorities, with the data published in a public register¹⁰. In September 2023, the government expanded this measure by releasing a list of 240 organizations and individuals receiving foreign support, a move widely criticized for stigmatizing civil society actors and equating foreign funding with disloyalty¹¹. Building on this, in early 2025, members of parliament proposed a “foreign agent” law targeting NGOs and media outlets funded from abroad. The proposed legislation would require these entities to disclose their funding sources and could impose additional restrictions, raising concerns about further limitations on civil society and media freedom¹². Slovakia presents a more nuanced case: while its recent NGO law amendments do not use the stigmatizing term “foreign agent,” they impose disproportionate financial disclosure burdens specifically on foreign-funded organizations, effectively achieving similar chilling effects¹³.

Other countries, including Armenia and Ukraine, have experienced significant political debate around the possibility of introducing “foreign agent” laws. In **Armenia**, opposition forces, emboldened by developments in Georgia and Russia, have increasingly called for such measures¹⁴. In **Ukraine**, legislative proposals mirroring “foreign agent” frameworks have surfaced intermittently since 2014¹⁵, but none have been adopted due to strong domestic and international opposition, especially given Ukraine’s European integration trajectory.

[9] CSO Meter: Moldova: Opposition introduces draft Foreign Agents Law in Parliament, 7 April 2025. <https://www.csometer.info/updates/moldova-opposition-introduces-draft-foreign-agents-law-parliament> (accessed 17 June 2025)

[10] Center for Civil and Political Rights: KAZAKHSTANI HR NGOs COMMENTS to the Information provided by the Republic of Kazakhstan on Follow-up to the Concluding Observations on the Second Periodic Report of Kazakhstan, 6 June 2017. https://ccprcentre.org/files/documents/NGO_follow-up_report_June2017.pdf (accessed 17 June 2025)

[11] World Organization Against Torture: Kazakhstan: Civil society organisations face pressure over receiving foreign funding, 29 September 2023. <https://www.omct.org/en/resources/statements/kazakhstan-civil-society-organisations-face-pressure-over-receiving-foreign-funding> (accessed 17 June 2025)

[12] Jurist News, Darina Boykova: Kazakhstan parliament considers law that would identify foreign funded organizations, 13 February 2025. <https://www.jurist.org/news/2025/02/kazakhstan-parliament-considers-law-that-would-identify-foreign-funded-organizations/> (accessed 17 June 2025)

[13] Politico, Ketrin Jochecova: Slovakia adopts Russian-style law targeting NGOs, 17 April 2025. <https://www.politico.eu/article/slovakia-adopts-russian-bill-targeting-ngos/> (accessed 17 June 2025)

[14] Heinrich Boell Foundation, Tigran Amiryan: Spring Will End in October: Armenia’s Reaction to the “Russian law” in Georgia, 1 August 2024. <https://ge.boell.org/en/2024/08/01/spring-will-end-october-armenias-reaction-russian-law-georgia> (accessed 17 June 2025)

[15] Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group, Halya Coynash: Ukrainian legislators plan ‘foreign agent’ bill analogous to repressive law in Russia, 20 September 2028. <https://khpg.org/en/1537397623> (accessed 17 June 2025)



1.4 EQUIVALENT RESTRICTIONS WITHOUT FORMAL „FOREIGN AGENT“ LAWS

In several CEECA countries, while no formal “foreign agent” law exists, civil society faces similarly restrictive environments through alternative legal and administrative mechanisms. **Belarus** has long enforced severe controls on foreign funding through its legislation on humanitarian aid, requiring government approval for all external grants and penalizing unauthorized funding with criminal liability^[16]. **Tajikistan**^[17] and **Turkmenistan**^[18] both maintain highly restrictive environments for CSOs, where receiving foreign support entails overwhelming bureaucratic hurdles and risks of state retaliation.

Uzbekistan, too, although lacking a formal “foreign agent” law, imposes extensive registration requirements and state oversight on NGOs with foreign links, creating a de facto system of civic control^[19]. **Azerbaijan** presents another case of functional equivalency: though the term “foreign agent” is absent from its laws, grant registration requirements, financial controls, and administrative barriers effectively stifle independent civil society activities funded from abroad^[20].

In **Hungary**, although the 2017 foreign funding transparency law was overturned by the European Court of Justice in 2020^[21], its political effects persist. A replacement law adopted in 2023 established a new public authority empowered to oversee the operations of NGOs and assess whether they act in the “public interest”^[22]. While no formal “foreign agent” label is used, the practical effect of these laws has been to chill civil society activity and stigmatize foreign-funded organizations. Civil society groups continue to report hostile rhetoric, regulatory harassment, and exclusion from public dialogue, placing Hungary among countries that replicate foreign agent-like restrictions without formally adopting such a law.

[16] Lawtrend: Foreign funding in Belarus: Some trends and possible legal novelties. <https://www.lawtrend.org/english/foreign-funding-in-belarus-some-trends-and-possible-legal-novelties> (accessed 17 June 2025)

[17] Institute for War and Peace Reporting, Yosuman Jamshed: Restrictive NGO Law on the Way in Tajikistan, 27 November 2014. <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/restrictive-ngo-law-way-tajikistan> (accessed 17 June 2025)

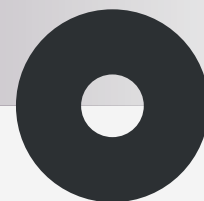
[18] Human Rights Watch, Iskra Kirova: Foreign Agent Laws in the Authoritarian Playbook, 19 September 2024. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/09/19/foreign-agent-laws-authoritarian-playbook> (accessed 17 June 2025)

[19] The Diplomat, Umida Niyazova and Lynn Schweisfurth: New Regulations in Uzbekistan Effectively Impose Government Control on NGOs, 26 August 2022. <https://thediplomat.com/2022/08/new-regulations-in-uzbekistan-effectively-impose-government-control-on-ngos/> (accessed 17 June 2025)

[20] Climate Action Network EECA: CAN EECCA statement on the Law on Foreign Agents, 1 May 2024. <https://caneecca.org/en/positions/law-on-foreign-agents/> (accessed 17 June 2025)

[21] Institute for Development of Freedom of Information: Law on Agents of Foreign Influence: European Practice and Georgia, 15 February 2023. https://idfi.ge/en/law_on_agents_of_foreign_influence_european_practice_and_georgia_ (accessed 17 June 2025)

[22] Euractiv: Hungary passes contested laws against foreign influence, 13 December 2023. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/hungary-passes-contested-laws-against-foreign-influence/> (accessed 17 June 2025)



1.5 COUNTRIES WITHOUT „FOREIGN AGENT“ LAWS OR DISCUSSIONS

A number of countries in the region have resisted the “foreign agent” trend so far. **Czechia, Slovenia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Croatia, Albania** and **Kosovo** have not adopted „foreign agent“ laws and, as of early 2025, there are no active legislative initiatives targeting foreign-funded civil society actors. In Czechia, legislative developments have focused on anti-espionage measures rather than civil society regulation^[23], and the government remains committed to protecting civic freedoms. Slovenia and the Baltic States maintain open environments for NGOs, aligning with broader European Union norms. In **North Macedonia**, despite attempts by pro-Russian parties to introduce foreign agent-like rhetoric, no formal proposals have materialized into law^[24].

While **Poland** does not have a “foreign agent” law per se, recent debates around NGO transparency and funding trace a worrying trajectory^[25]. Although legislative proposals have so far stopped short of introducing “foreign agent” language, concerns remain about potential spillovers into civil society regulation.

1.6 IMPACT OF “FOREIGN AGENT“ LAWS AND RESTRICTIONS

The expansion of “foreign agent” laws and equivalent regulatory frameworks across the CEECA region has had profound and multifaceted consequences for civil society. These laws disproportionately target organizations working on human rights, drug policy reform, harm reduction, LGBTQI+ rights, and media freedom.

By stigmatizing foreign-funded NGOs and subjecting them to hostile rhetoric, public smear campaigns, and burdensome legal obligations, these laws erode public trust, marginalize independent voices, and suppress civic engagement. Organizations face administrative hurdles, criminal penalties, and, in many cases, forced closure. Additional restrictions include exclusion from domestic funding mechanisms and formal/informal bans on participation in decision-making bodies.

[23] Euractiv: Czechia steps up fight against Russian espionage, 9 January 2025. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/czechia-steps-up-fight-against-russian-espionage/> (accessed 17 June 2025)

[24] Lakmusz, Fülöp Zsófia: Others have recently been tempted to copy the Russian Foreign Agents Act, August 27 2024. <https://www.lakmusz.hu/others-have-recently-been-tempted-to-copy-the-russian-foreign-agents-act/> (accessed 17 June 2025)

[25] European Council on Foreign Relations, Piotr Buras: How the fight against Russian agents in Poland could destroy democracy, 6 June 2023. <https://ecfr.eu/article/how-the-fight-against-russian-agents-in-poland-could-destroy-democracy/> (accessed 17 June 2025)



Key impacts on civil society:

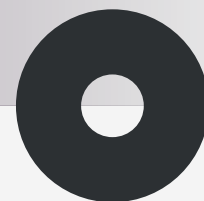
- **Barriers to registration:** Civil society organizations, especially those advocating for human rights, face increased difficulty registering, particularly in countries like Uzbekistan and Belarus. In Georgia, people who use drugs organizations' registration was obstructed through informal and bureaucratic hurdles.
- **Exclusion from decision-making:** Organizations labeled as “foreign agents” are often barred from participating in national and international policy forums (e.g., local councils, country coordinating mechanisms (CCMs), Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). Russia’s law, for example, prevents such groups from receiving domestic funding or disseminating public communications without prominently disclosing their “foreign agent” status.
- **Surveillance and data intrusion:** These laws permit extensive state oversight of NGO operations. For example, Georgia’s legislation requires NGOs to report personal data of all beneficiaries, exposing clients to privacy risks and penalizing organizations that refuse to comply—up to 2,500 GEL per unreported individual.
- **Financial pressure:** Heavy fines, protracted legal battles, and restrictive audit requirements deplete limited organizational resources. Russia and Georgia exemplify how fines are used as punitive tools to silence dissent.
- **Stigmatization and operational disruption:** Labeling as a “foreign agent” excludes NGOs from local funding opportunities and public partnerships, and often triggers commercial bans on support and advertising.
- **Reduced donor confidence:** International donors are increasingly hesitant to fund work in high-risk environments, leading to diminished external support and financial insecurity for NGOs.

Impact on the HIV, TB, and HCV response in CEECA

Civil society organizations play a critical role in providing services, outreach, and advocacy for human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), tuberculosis (TB), and hepatitis C (HCV) responses—especially among marginalized populations. The rise of “foreign agent” laws directly undermines this public health infrastructure.

1. Stigmatization and reduced access to services

- NGOs labeled as “foreign agents” face public distrust, reducing uptake of services among vulnerable groups such as people who inject drugs, people living with HIV, TB patients, and LGBTQI+ communities.
- Surveillance requirements compromise confidentiality, deterring individuals from accessing essential health services.



2. Threats to funding and program stability

- “Foreign agent” registration requirements jeopardize relationships with international donors, including the Global Fund, as governments may block or restrict funding.
- This leads to service disruptions, program closures, and diminished national capacity to respond to health threats.

3. Decreased coverage and service availability

- Legal threats and bureaucratic burdens discourage NGOs from operating, especially in outreach-heavy or rights-based fields.
- Resulting gaps in harm reduction, testing, treatment adherence, and psychosocial support increase the risk of infections, treatment dropouts, and mortality.

4. Broader public health and human rights consequences

- Civil society's diminishing role weakens health policy advocacy and efforts to combat stigma and discrimination.
- Violations of rights to association, expression, and privacy undermine commitments under international frameworks such as the Council of Europe and Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).
- Progress toward regional and global health goals, including Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) related to HIV, TB, and HCV elimination, is threatened.

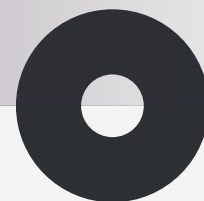
1.7 CONCLUSION

“Foreign agent” laws have become a powerful tool of repression in the CEECA region. While some countries continue to uphold protections for civil society, the overall trend points toward the normalization of legal harassment and stigmatization of independent organizations. Defending civic space requires coordinated action—domestically and internationally—through legal challenges, diplomatic pressure, solidarity networks, and the amplification of the voices of those most affected. In the face of expanding authoritarianism, the resilience of civil society remains both a vital resource and a frontline defense for human rights and democratic values.

CHAPTER 2

DRUG PROPAGANDA LAWS AND RESTRICTIONS ON HARM REDUCTION INFORMATION IN THE CEECA REGION





2.1 INTRODUCTION

Access to factual, harm-reduction-oriented education about drugs is essential for safeguarding public health and advancing human rights. However, in the CEECA region, the past decade has seen a worrying trend: several governments have introduced or discussed measures that restrict such information under the guise of protecting youth, public morals, or national security. These measures threaten the effectiveness of public health interventions and erode the rights of vulnerable communities.

This chapter provides a comparative analysis of how different countries across the CEECA region regulate—or restrict—the dissemination of drug-related education and harm reduction information as of April 2025.

2.2 COUNTRIES WHERE LEGAL RESTRICTIONS EXIST

In some countries, explicit legal restrictions prohibit or significantly limit the dissemination of harm reduction information. **Russia** has long set a troubling example through its adoption of Federal Law No. 436-FZ (2010)^[26], which prohibits dissemination to minors of information deemed to encourage drug use. In practice, the broad interpretation of this law means that harm reduction information is effectively censored for the entire public, not just for minors. Similarly, in **Hungary**, a constitutional amendment passed in 2025²⁷ bans the "promotion" of illicit drugs without offering a clear definition of "promotion". This vagueness has led to widespread suppression of harm reduction education, especially within school-based prevention programs.

Montenegro and **North Macedonia** have also introduced restrictive criminal provisions. In Montenegro, the Criminal Code criminalizes the "incitement" or "enabling" of drug use²⁸, while North Macedonia's legislation similarly penalizes activities perceived as encouraging drug use²⁹. Although these laws ostensibly target drug dealers, they create legal risks for organizations offering evidence-based harm reduction information. Similarly, in **Kazakhstan** although there is no formal "drug propaganda" law, the Criminal Code criminalizes propaganda or illegal advertising of drugs, which affect work of

[26] The Turkish Journal on Addictions, Safa Koçoğlu, Ministry of Youth and Sports, Ankara, Türkiye: A Review of the Russian Federation's Main Legal Regulations on Drug Abuse and Their Impact on Prevention, 25 November 2024. <https://www.addicta.com.tr/Content/files/sayilar/42/81-87.pdf> (accessed 17 June 2025)

[27] Drug Reporter, Péter Sárosi: Orbán's New War on Drugs Turns Into a Major Crackdown on Political Freedoms, 22 March 2025. <https://drogriporter.hu/en/orbans-new-war-on-drugs-turns-into-a-major-crackdown-on-political-freedoms/> (accessed 17 June 2025)

[28] Information provided by national partners in Montenegro.

[29] Information provided by national partners in North Macedonia.



civil society organizations³⁰.

In **Kyrgyzstan**, dissemination of content "harmful to the development of children," explicitly including drug-related material, has been banned, putting public health efforts at risk³¹. **Tajikistan** maintains strict administrative and criminal prohibitions against the "propaganda of narcotics," which have long curtailed harm reduction education³².

Uzbekistan demonstrates a similar pattern. It has adopted drug propaganda law online³³. The country's drug policy emphasizes abstinence-only approaches. Harm reduction organizations operate under difficult conditions, facing bureaucratic hurdles and suspicion from authorities, making full public access to harm reduction information extremely limited.

Turkmenistan, while lacking an explicit ban on harm reduction messaging, operates under such extreme restrictions on independent activity that public harm reduction initiatives are virtually non-existent³⁴.

2.3 COUNTRIES WITHOUT FORMAL DRUG PROPAGANDA LAWS

In a number of countries across the CEECA region, there are no formal legal restrictions prohibiting harm reduction education. However, the degree to which harm reduction is supported or challenged varies significantly.

Some countries maintain a fully supportive environment. Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, and Ukraine allow civil society organizations to engage freely in harm reduction education and incorporate harm reduction principles into their national drug strategies. In **Armenia**, educational efforts aimed at prevention and harm reduction operate without interference, despite a legal prohibition on commercial promotion of narcotics. **Bosnia and Herzegovina** integrates harm reduction into its public health frameworks, while **Georgia's** national policies continue to support harm reduction despite recent political

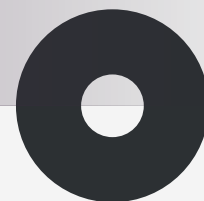
[30] Criminal Code of Kazakhstan: Article 299-1. Propaganda or illegal advertising of narcotic drugs, psychotropic substances or their analogues, precursors, 3 July 2014. https://kodeksy-kz.com/ka/ugolovnyj_kodeks/299-1.htm (accessed 17 June 2025)

[31] Ministry of Justice of the Kyrgyz Republic: Law of Kyrgyz Republic On measures to prevent harm to the health of children, their physical, intellectual, mental, spiritual and moral development in the Kyrgyz Republic, 9 August 2023. <https://cbd.minjust.gov.kg/111229/edition/1273540/ru> (accessed 17 June 2025)

[32] Drug Control Agency under the President of the Republic of Tajikistan: Illegal advertising and propaganda of narcotic substances <https://akn.tj/ru/2021/07/06/illegal-advertising-and-advertising/> (accessed 17 June 2025)

[33] The President of Uzbekistan has signed a law imposing criminal liability for online drug propaganda, 5 October, 2024. <https://aktualno.uz/ru/a/13993-prezident-uzbekistana-podpisal-zakon-ob-ugolovnoi-otvetstvennosti-za-onlain-propagandu-narkotikov> (accessed 17 June 2025)

[34] Pomicidou Group of the Council of Europe, by Alex Chingin and Olga Fedorova: Turkmenistan Drug Situation and Drug Policy, December 2014. <https://rm.coe.int/drug-situation-and-drug-policy-by-alex-chingin-and-olga-fedorova-decem/168075f300> (accessed 17 June 2025)



tensions in other sectors. **Ukraine** has significantly expanded harm reduction efforts over the past decade, embedding them in broader public health reforms. Similarly, **Albania, Bulgaria and Moldova** maintain generally positive environments.

The Baltic States—**Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania**—as well as **Czechia, Slovenia, Croatia, Romania, and Kosovo**, provide robust legal protections for harm reduction education. In these countries, comprehensive harm reduction information is embedded in national prevention strategies and public health policies.

However, even among countries without formal restrictions, some face notable practical and political challenges. In **Serbia**, while harm reduction education is legally permitted, political narratives promoting abstinence and traditional values sometimes limit public support for comprehensive drug education. In **Slovakia**, despite the absence of legal prohibitions, national drug prevention programs have shifted towards abstinence-only approaches, marginalizing harm reduction efforts.

Poland, too, does not legally restrict harm reduction information, but the strong dominance of abstinence-only models in public education policies has effectively marginalized comprehensive harm reduction approaches. Although NGOs continue to deliver harm reduction services, they operate with minimal state support and under political pressure favoring abstinence narratives.

Similar obstacles exist in **Azerbaijan**, where although there is no formal ban on harm reduction education, the operating space for NGOs is severely restricted. Administrative burdens, limited access to critical interventions such as naloxone, and police harassment significantly hamper harm reduction initiatives. **Belarus** also presents a difficult environment: despite the absence of an explicit "drug propaganda" law, state-controlled education campaigns emphasize abstinence and criminalization, while NGOs working in harm reduction face political repression and surveillance.

Thus, although many CEECA countries formally protect harm reduction education, the practical space for effective, well-supported harm reduction programming remains highly uneven, depending heavily on political climate, public attitudes, and access to resources.



2.4 BROADER IMPLICATIONS OF RESTRICTING DRUG EDUCATION

The consequences of restricting harm reduction information are profound. When access to factual drug education is curtailed, the risks of overdose, HIV transmission, and hepatitis infections escalate dramatically among people who use drugs. Criminalizing public health information also strengthens social stigma, discourages people from seeking help, and entrenches cycles of marginalization.

Moreover, the suppression of harm reduction information is closely tied to broader authoritarian dynamics across the region. Just as “foreign agent” laws are used to silence independent civil society, drug propaganda laws and restrictive public narratives aim to control the flow of evidence-based health information, reinforcing moralistic and punitive state ideologies over scientific public health principles.

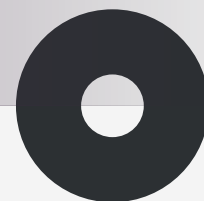
2.5 CONCLUSION

While some CEECA countries maintain open, rights-respecting environments for harm reduction education, an increasing number have moved toward censorship, practical suppression, or political marginalization of harm reduction, with serious human rights and public health consequences. Protecting and expanding access to harm reduction information must therefore be an urgent priority for regional and international advocacy, recognizing that the right to health includes the right to receive and share life-saving knowledge.

CHAPTER 3

ANTI-LGBTQ LAWS IN THE CEECA REGION





3.1 INTRODUCTION

Across CEECA, laws targeting LGBTQI+ communities has intensified in recent years. Legal bans on so-called “gay propaganda,” restrictions on LGBTQI+ content in media and education, and rising political hostility toward sexual and gender minorities increasingly threaten human rights, public health, and freedom of expression. The spread of such restrictions is often driven by appeals to traditional values and national identity, with Russia’s legal framework serving as a model for neighboring states. This chapter provides a comparative analysis of anti-LGBTQ laws and their broader impact on civic space across the region as of April 2025.

3.2 COUNTRIES WITH FORMAL LGBTQI+ “PROPAGANDA” LAWS OR EQUIVALENT LEGAL BANS

Russia remains the most prominent and influential example in the region. Its federal “gay propaganda” law, first adopted in 2013 and significantly expanded in 2022³⁵, criminalizes the dissemination of information about “non-traditional sexual relations” to both minors and adults. This framework effectively bans LGBTQI+ representation in media, advertising, literature, education, and public events, and has fueled a surge in hate speech and violence against LGBTQI+ individuals. In 2023, the Supreme Court declared the “International LGBT Movement” an extremist organization and banned it. Under Article 282.2 of the Russian Criminal Code, participation in an extremist community carries up to six years’ imprisonment, and organizing one—up to ten years. There have already been cases where this article was applied to people “participating in the LGBT movement.”³⁶ Consequently, mere LGBT identity in Russia can be grounds for criminal prosecution.

Kyrgyzstan adopted a similar law in 2023³⁷, prohibiting the “promotion of non-traditional sexual relations” to minors. Though more narrowly applied than Russia’s, the law has created significant legal risks for human rights organizations and educators, especially those working with youth or in online spaces. In **Georgia**, the 2024 “Law on the Protection of Family Values and Minors” introduced broad restrictions on LGBTQI+ visibility under the pretext

[35] Deutsche Welle: Russia: Duma tightens LGBTQ law amid war in Ukraine, 27 October 2022. <https://www.dw.com/en/russia-duma-tightens-lgbtq-law-amid-war-in-ukraine/a-63570996> (accessed 17 June 2025)

[36] Human Rights Watch: Russia: First Convictions Under LGBT ‘Extremist’ Ruling, 15 February 2024.

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/02/15/russia-first-convictions-under-lgbt-extremist-ruling> (accessed 17 June 2025)

[37] Ilga-Europe (International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association): Statement: Kyrgyzstan targets LGBTI communities in a new law, 23 August 2023. <https://www.ilga-europe.org/news/statement-kyrgyzstan-targets-lgbti-law/> (accessed 17 June 2025)



of protecting minors, banning content in public discourse and education that is deemed to contradict “traditional family structures”³⁸.

In **Hungary**, the Child Protection Act adopted in 2021, reinforced in 2025, prohibits the portrayal of homosexuality and gender diversity to minors³⁹. This law has led to bans on children’s books, advertisements, and educational materials featuring LGBTQI+ characters or themes, contributing to an increasingly hostile environment. **Bulgaria** followed with a 2024 law reportedly banning LGBTQI+ “propaganda,” which restricts educational curricula and limits public events such as Pride marches⁴⁰.

Kazakhstan has escalated censorship through targeted restrictions: in 2024, several LGBTQI+ educational websites were blocked, and social media content promoting LGBTQI+ rights was flagged for removal under newly broadened morality provisions^{41,42}. **Turkmenistan** has not adopted formal propaganda laws, but the extreme criminalization of same-sex relations and total absence of LGBTQI+ visibility amount to near-total censorship⁴³.

3.3 COUNTRIES WITHOUT FORMAL CENSORSHIP LAWS BUT FACING SYSTEMIC RESTRICTIONS

In many CEECA countries, formal bans are absent, but LGBTQI+ communities still face systemic barriers to visibility and expression. In Ukraine, no legal restrictions exist on LGBTQI+ content, and LGBTQI+ civil society is vibrant. However, societal stigma, right-wing attacks, and inconsistent state protection continue to create a climate of fear for activists and events, particularly outside major cities.

Serbia, too, lacks formal censorship laws, yet LGBTQI+ visibility is undermined by political manipulation and conservative narratives. For example, school textbooks were quietly revised to reduce LGBTQI+ content following political

[38] Reuters, Felix Light: Georgian parliament approves law curbing LGBT rights, 18 September 2024. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/georgian-parliament-approves-law-curbing-lgbt-rights-2024-09-17/> (accessed 17 June 2025)

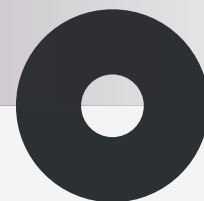
[39] Human Rights Watch, Cristian González Cabrera: Hungary Bans LGBT Pride Events, 20 March 2025. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/03/20/hungary-bans-lgbt-pride-events> (accessed 17 June 2025)

[40] Ilga-Europe (International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association): Bulgaria passes anti-LGBTI propaganda law, 7 August 2024. <https://www.ilga-europe.org/press-release/bulgaria-passes-anti-lgbti-propaganda-law/> (accessed 17 June 2025)

[41] EQUALDEX: LGBT Rights in Kazakhstan. <https://www.equaldex.com/region/kazakhstan> (accessed 17 June 2025)

[42] Article 19: Don’t Provoke, Don’t Challenge” The Censorship and Self-Censorship of the LGBT Community in Kazakhstan, 2015. https://www.article19.org/data/files/KZ_LGBT.pdf (accessed 17 June 2025)

[43] Transgender Europe: The lives of LGBT people in Turkmenistan, the most closed-off country in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, 20 March 2024. <https://tgeu.org/the-lives-of-lgbt-people-in-turkmenistan-the-most-closed-off-country-in-eastern-europe-and-central-asia/> (accessed 17 June 2025)



pressure⁴⁴. In **Montenegro**, while some progress has been made in anti-discrimination law, cultural backlash and slow institutional reforms limit meaningful visibility for LGBTQI+ communities⁴⁵.

Armenia does not legally censor LGBTQI+ information, but widespread social stigma, lack of legal protections, and frequent hate speech leave LGBTQI+ individuals vulnerable⁴⁶. Civil society groups operate with caution, and LGBTQI+ topics are largely excluded from public education or media. **Moldova** also lacks formal censorship laws, but reports show LGBTQI+ expression remains limited in many regions, particularly due to local political resistance and social conservatism⁴⁷.

Belarus has not passed a propaganda law, but political rhetoric and state ideology strongly discourage LGBTQI+ advocacy. In April 2024, the Belarusian Culture Ministry amended its decree on “erotic materials” to classify depictions of same-sex relationships and transgender identities as “non-traditional sexual relationship or behavior.” These are now legally considered a form of pornography, alongside necrophilia and pedophilia⁴⁸. LGBTQI+ organizations are not recognized, and activists risk detention, particularly during public events. **Tajikistan**⁴⁹ and **Azerbaijan**⁵⁰ reflect similar dynamics: no formal bans exist, but LGBTQI+ discourse is repressed through administrative harassment, surveillance, and systemic media exclusion.

Uzbekistan criminalizes same-sex relationships and has publicly discussed further crackdowns on LGBTQI+ expression. While a propaganda law has not yet been adopted, the mere existence of anti-LGBTQI+ speech from public officials has had a chilling effect on activism, media coverage, and community organizing⁵¹.

[44] CIVICUS: Serbia: LGBTQI+ people the latest target of repression, 19 October 2022. <https://lens.civicus.org/serbia-lgbtqi-people-the-latest-target-of-repression/> (accessed 17 June 2025)

[45] Information provided by national partners.

[46] Global Campus of Human Rights, Salome Abuladze: Life of sexual minorities in the realm of Armenia, 20 February 2025. <https://www.gchumanrights.org/preparedness/life-of-sexual-minorities-in-the-realm-of-armenia/> (accessed 17 June 2025)

[47] Balkan Insight, Madalin Necsutu: Moldovans Still Intolerant Towards LGBT Community, Study Shows, 1 March 2024. <https://balkaninsight.com/2024/03/01/moldovans-still-intolerant-towards-lgbt-community-study-shows/> (accessed 17 June 2025)

[48] Human Rights Watch, Anastasiia Kruope: Belarus Calls LGBT Lives ‘Pornography’, 12 April 2024. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/04/12/belarus-calls-lgbt-lives-pornography> (accessed 17 June 2025)

[49] International Partnership for Human Rights: RIGHTS FOR ALL? LGBTIQ PERSONS IN TAJIKISTAN SYSTEMATICALLY DENIED HUMAN RIGHTS, February 2024. <https://iphronline.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/tajikistan-lgbt-report-2024-eng.pdf> (accessed 17 June 2025)

[50] Human Rights Watch: Azerbaijan Events of 2024. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2025/country-chapters/azerbaijan> (accessed 17 June 2025)

[51] Transgender Europe: Uzbekistan’s LGBT community is under threat: Escalating human rights violations continue amid legal and social repression, 8 August 2024. <https://tgeu.org/uzbekistans-lgbt-community-is-under-threat-escalating-human-rights-violations-continue-amid-legal-and-social-repression/> (accessed 17 June 2025)



North Macedonia⁵² and **Slovakia**⁵³ constitutionally restrict marriage to heterosexual couples and have resisted inclusion of LGBTQI+ content in public education. While not outright censored, LGBTQI+ rights are politically contested and often delegitimized in public discourse. **Poland**, despite judicial reversals of local “LGBT-free zones,” continues to present a hostile environment marked by political scapegoating, educational restrictions, and defunding of inclusive initiatives⁵⁴.

3.4 COUNTRIES WITH LEGAL PROTECTIONS FOR LGBTQI+ EXPRESSION

A small number of countries in the CEECA region continue to uphold the rights to LGBTQI+ expression and information. **Czechia** provides a supportive environment, with legal protections against discrimination, freedom of LGBTQI+ representation in media and education, and no government interference in LGBTQI+ visibility⁵⁵. **Slovenia** is similarly progressive, having legalized same-sex marriage and ensured constitutional protections for LGBTQI+ individuals⁵⁶.

Lithuania has made notable progress: although previously criticized for using its “Law on the Protection of Minors” to suppress LGBTQI+ content, a 2024 court ruling overturned the censorship of LGBTQI+ educational materials, setting an important precedent⁵⁷. Further progress was marked in April 2025 when the Constitutional Court ruled that the existing Civil Code's limitation of partnerships to opposite-sex couples was unconstitutional⁵⁸. **Albania** has adopted a national LGBTQI+ action plan and includes LGBTQI+ content in education and awareness efforts, offering a legal and political framework that protects expression and visibility⁵⁹.

[52] EQUALDEX: LGBT Rights in North Macedonia <https://www.equaldex.com/region/macedonia> (accessed 17 June 2025)

[53] Amnesty International: Slovakia: Proposed constitutional amendments would crush the rights of LGBTIQ+ people and be a backward step for gender equality, 8 April 2025. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2025/04/slovakia-proposed-constitutional-amendments-would-crush-the-rights-of-lgbtiq-people-and-be-a-backward-step-for-gender-equality/> (accessed 17 June 2025)

[54] EQUALDEX: Entry #10120: Censorship of LGBT issues in Poland. 23 April 2025. <https://www.equaldex.com/log/10120> (accessed 17 June 2025)

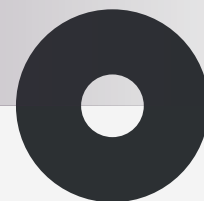
[55] Wikipedia: LGBTQ rights in the Czech Republic. https://www.wikiwand.com/en/articles/LGBT_rights_in_the_Czech_Republic (accessed 17 June 2025)

[56] EQUALDEX: LGBT Rights in Slovenia. <https://www.equaldex.com/region/slovenia> (accessed 17 June 2025)

[57] ILGA-Europe (International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association): Lithuanian Court Declares anti-LGBTI law unconstitutional, 19 December 2024. <https://www.ilga-europe.org/news/lithuanian-court-declares-anti-lgbti-law-unconstitutional/> (accessed 17 June 2025)

[58] Lithuanian National Radio and Television, Aistė Valiauskaitė, Skirmantas Jankauskas: Top court's same-sex partnership ruling puts Lithuanian lawmakers on the spot, 29 April 2025. https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/2547599/top-court-s-same-sex-partnership-ruling-puts-lithuanian-lawmakers-on-the-spot?srltid=AfmBOopinF4eUzLR6M6Zaul-gtQjxCvyKZM7_AhpE2eVxGZRRbjrz7LZ&utm (accessed 17 June 2025)

[59] Council of Europe Office in Tirana, Albania: Albania's LGBTI National Action Plan 2021-2027 presented, 14 February 2022. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/tirana/-/albania-s-lgbti-national-action-plan-2021-2027-presented> (accessed 17 June 2025)



Bosnia and Herzegovina also maintains an open environment, with legal protections and increasing societal acceptance, especially in urban centers⁶⁰. Public events such as Pride marches occur without censorship, although security concerns remain. **Estonia, Croatia, Kosovo, Latvia, and Romania** similarly allow LGBTQI+ advocacy and education without formal censorship, although implementation may vary locally.

3.5 BROADER IMPLICATIONS OF ANTI-LGBTQ LAWS TRENDS

The rise of anti-LGBTQ laws and hostile rhetoric in the CEECA region mirrors broader authoritarian tactics of social control. Laws banning LGBTQI+ “propaganda” not only violate the rights to freedom of expression, association, and equality, but also send powerful signals legitimizing stigma, exclusion, and violence. The notion of protecting national identity or traditional values is frequently deployed to silence minority voices and undermine pluralism, with LGBTQI+ communities among the first targets.

Moreover, censorship fuels harmful misinformation, blocks access to health services, and exacerbates mental health risks among LGBTQI+ youth. It also isolates local civil society from international partners, undermining regional cooperation and integration. Conversely, where LGBTQI+ expression is protected, public understanding improves, rights-based policymaking is possible, and resilience against authoritarianism is strengthened.

3.6 CONCLUSION

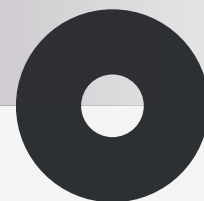
While some countries in the CEECA region maintain open environments for LGBTQI+ rights and visibility, an alarming number are adopting or replicating Russia-style anti-LGBTQ laws or suppressing LGBTQI+ issues through informal means. The right to freely express sexual and gender identities, to access inclusive information, and to advocate without fear is a cornerstone of democratic society. Reversing the trend of censorship and reaffirming these rights must be a priority for human rights defenders, donors, and regional coalitions alike.

[60] EQUALDEX: LGBT Rights in Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. <https://www.equaldex.com/region/federation-of-bosnia-and-herzegovina> (accessed 17 June 2025)



KEY FINDINGS

- **"Foreign agent" laws are spreading and deepening repression.** A growing number of CEECA countries have adopted or proposed "foreign agent" laws that stigmatize and criminalize civil society organizations receiving foreign funding. These laws, modeled primarily on Russia's legislation, are increasingly used to target NGOs working on human rights, harm reduction, LGBTQI+ issues, and independent media.
- **Drug propaganda laws threaten access to life-saving information.** At least seven countries have adopted legal or policy frameworks that restrict public access to harm reduction education under the pretext of preventing "drug propaganda." These laws jeopardize public health by limiting essential information on HIV prevention, overdose response, and safer drug use practices.
- **Anti-LGBTQ laws expanding regionally.** LGBTQI+ communities face rising legal and political attacks, with formal "gay propaganda" laws now in place in Russia, Hungary, Kyrgyzstan, Georgia, Bulgaria, and others. Elsewhere, informal restrictions and societal stigma effectively suppress LGBTQI+ expression and limit access to inclusive education and health services.
- **Authoritarian narratives are undermining rights and civic space.** Across all three themes, governments increasingly justify repression through rhetoric about protecting "national identity," "traditional values," or "children." This framing fosters public hostility, isolates targeted communities, and undermines international human rights norms.
- **Regional variation persists, but risk of policy imitation remains high.** While some countries — particularly within the EU — maintain strong legal protections and open civic space, others face escalating pressure to adopt restrictive laws under regional influence. The risk of legal mimicry remains high where democratic institutions are weak or politicized.



RECOMMENDATIONS

□ For international donors and human rights organizations:

- Prioritize **core, flexible funding** for organizations working in repressive environments, especially those supporting harm reduction and LGBTQI+ rights.
- Strengthen **legal defense mechanisms** and emergency support for NGOs, activists, and journalists affected by “foreign agent” laws or censorship.
- Increase **diplomatic pressure** and conditionality in bilateral and multilateral relations to oppose repressive legal reforms.
- Prioritize funding, for **community-led organizations** representing the most affected groups, including people who use drugs, LGBTQI+ communities, and sex workers. These groups are often most targeted and least resourced, yet play a critical role in sustaining frontline services and grassroots advocacy.

□ For governments and policymakers in the CEECA region:

- Immediately repeal or suspend laws that violate **freedom of association, expression, and access to health information**.
- Align national legal frameworks with international obligations, including International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (**ICCPR**), International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (**ICESCR**), and **United Nations declarations on human rights defenders**.
- Ensure that drug education and LGBTQI+ content remain **evidence-based, inclusive, and accessible**, particularly for youth.

□ For civil society and advocacy coalitions:

- Build cross-sectoral alliances linking **harm reduction, LGBTQI+, and civic freedom** advocacy under a shared defense of rights-based governance.
- Monitor and document legal developments systematically to resist **policy mimicry and regional contagion**.
- Develop **digital security and legal literacy** tools for frontline organizations facing state surveillance and regulatory pressure.



□ **For European institutions and UN agencies:**

- Actively monitor the implementation of “foreign agent” laws and censorship measures as indicators of **democratic backsliding**.
- Integrate harm reduction and LGBTQI+ rights into **rule of law, health, and anti-corruption conditionalities**.
- Support regional **peer-learning** and **exchange** among countries resisting authoritarian rollback.