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The EU's propaganda machine

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How the EU funds NGOs to promote itself

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Contents

Executive summary

This report explores the European Commission's increasing use of its budgetary powers to promote its political agenda under the guise of advancing 'EU values'. It reveals how the EU leverages programmes like the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) programme to fund non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and think tanks, many of which are explicitly aligned with the Commission's vision of deeper European integration. Far from fostering genuine civic engagement, this strategy constitutes a systematic effort to consolidate pro-EU narratives while marginalising dissenting voices. Key findings include:

- **Propaganda by proxy**

  The European Commission channels substantial funding to NGOs and think tanks to advocate for its policies and goals. These organisations, often financially dependent on EU funding, act as conduits for promoting the Commission's agenda, blurring the lines between independent civil society and institutional propaganda – an approach that may be characterised as 'propaganda by proxy'.

- **Cultural imperialism**

  The EU's promotion of liberal-progressive norms, often at odds with the cultural and historical contexts of individual member states, exacerbates tensions and deepens resistance to EU policies in certain regions, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe.

- **Democracy undermined**

  The EU's funding practices have skewed public debates and silenced alternative perspectives, fostering a one-sided narrative that prioritises supranational integration over national sovereignty and democratic pluralism.

- **Promotion of censorship**

  Under the pretence of combating disinformation, the Commission has increasingly supported initiatives that promote censorship of dissenting opinions, limiting the diversity of public discourse and consolidating control over the flow of information in the EU.

- **Foreign interference**

  In member states governed by conservative and eurosceptic governments, the Commission's support for local NGOs has extended into interference in domestic politics, undermining or attempting to delegitimise democratically elected administrations under the pretext of defending 'EU values'.

- **Lack of transparency**

  Significant transparency gaps in the allocation and oversight of EU funds raise serious concerns about the misuse of public money, with evidence of funding being directed toward projects that serve political agendas rather than genuine civic needs.

- **Impact on genuine NGOs**

  The weaponisation of civil-society organisations for political purposes not only threatens democracy, but also undermines the credibility of genuine NGOs that play a critical role in addressing societal challenges. These organisations risk being caught in the backlash against the EU-NGO complex, further eroding public trust.

The report concludes that the EU's use of NGOs as instruments of political advocacy reflects a broader trend of anti-democratic governance. By centralising power within its supranational institutions and sidelining the sovereignty of its member states, the Commission is contributing to the dramatic erosion of democracy across Europe.

Introduction

In recent years, the European Union (EU) has increasingly wielded its budgetary powers as a means of promoting – or enforcing – compliance with its so-called 'values', particularly in member states whose governments are seen as resistant or misaligned with the EU's political agenda. The public debate so far has largely focused on the EU's development of mechanisms such as the Rule of Law Conditionality Regulation (introduced in 2020), which ties the disbursement of EU funds to member states' adherence to the 'rule of law' – as defined by Brussels, of course.

However, this report highlights an even more troubling and less-scrutinised trend: the European Commission's proactive use of the EU budget to advance its 'rights and values' agenda through a variety of 'values-oriented policy instruments'. These range from media campaigns, both online and offline, to numerous projects aimed at 'promoting the EU's values' and 'bringing the European Union closer to its citizens'. While these programmes are presented as efforts to uphold the rule of law and fundamental rights, a deeper examination reveals a pattern of using public funds to push a political agenda, often at the expense of member states' sovereignty and democratic processes.

One of the most significant examples is the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) programme, which channels vast amounts of funding to civil-society organisations, including NGOs and think tanks. Many of the projects funded through this programme support commendable and worthwhile causes. But there are also many examples of these funds being

used not only to promote a highly politicised approach to the EU's stated values, which is particularly concerning in cases where such values are misaligned with national cultural sensitivities, but also to champion the EU itself and the very principle of supranational integration. Many of the recipient organisations are explicitly committed to European federalism or integration, aligning with the Commission's political objectives.

This report argues that these efforts amount to 'propaganda by proxy', whereby the Commission finances NGOs and think tanks to advocate for its policies and goals – and even to lobby on its behalf – thus blurring the line between independent civil society and institutional advocacy. This form of covert propaganda can be compared to the way the US government channels funding to NGOs worldwide through organisations like USAID to advance its geopolitical interests – a practice that has garnered significant attention in the wake of Trump's foreign-aid freeze.

By amplifying pro-EU voices and marginalising dissenting perspectives, this strategy consolidates pro-integration narratives while discrediting or suppressing alternative viewpoints. As a result, EU funding mechanisms and NGOs themselves are transformed into tools for institutional propaganda aimed at promoting deeper supranational integration – a vision that not only lacks unanimous support across Europe, but faces growing resistance among citizens.

As the report argues, this constitutes a fundamental inversion of the purported nature and role of 'non-governmental organisations': instead of conveying the aspirations of civil society to policymakers, these supposed NGOs act as conduits for transmitting to civil society the ideas and perspectives of policymakers. Specifically, in this case, that means the ideas of the European Commission, on which these organisations are heavily (if not

entirely in some cases) reliant for their funding. They are effectively transformed into vehicles of institutional propaganda or 'self-lobbying'.

Worryingly, these initiatives often extend beyond mere advocacy and venture into interference with the domestic politics of member states. When aimed at governments critical of EU policies, such efforts can become mechanisms for undermining or even attempting to unseat democratically elected administrations. This constitutes a blatant form of 'foreign interference' in the internal affairs of sovereign nations, often through local NGOs acting as vehicles for EU influence – drawing yet another striking parallel to the activities of USAID.

This report seeks to provide the first comprehensive overview of what can be termed the EU-NGO propaganda complex – a sprawling machinery operating outside meaningful democratic oversight and largely unknown to most Europeans. Specifically, it examines how budgetary tools such as the CERV programme are used not only to address governance concerns but also to promote the EU's political vision. The findings demonstrate that these instruments represent a direct challenge to democracy, skewing public debates on key policy issues and fostering a one-sided narrative about key policy issues – and the EU itself.

By exploring concrete examples, this report reveals that the EU's actions are not merely about imposing a specific set of 'values', but also about advancing its supranational agenda while undermining national sovereignty. Under the guise of value promotion and rule-of-law enforcement, these budgetary tools are weaponised to silence dissent and consolidate the EU's authority, raising serious concerns about the troubling democratic backsliding occurring across Europe – much of which is driven by the EU itself.

1 The shifting sands of EU budgetary power

For decades, the EU budget primarily focused on the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), regional development and infrastructure projects. These were largely perceived as instruments to ensure common market conditions and promote a convergence of living standards. However, in the mid-1990s, in the face of declining public confidence in the European project – and the Danish voters' rejection of the Maastricht Treaty, in 1992 – the European Commission began to develop the idea of initiating a 'civil dialogue' with the public as a way of bolstering the EU's democratic legitimacy. The EU thus began to systematically fund campaigns aimed at fostering a sense of European citizenship and 'belonging', and boosting support for the EU, through programmes such as Europe Against Racism and Youth for Europe.

Noting the low turnout at the June 1999 European Parliament elections, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) said it was 'alarmed by "democratic disenchantment" of the EU public, who are increasingly sceptical about the workings of political parties and politicians'.[1] The following year, a European Commission discussion paper authored by the European Commission president, Romano Prodi, and one of its vice-presidents, Neil Kinnock, explicitly stated that NGOs could help politicians achieve their goal of 'ever-closer union' by acting as a proxy for public opinion and by promoting European integration at the grassroots:

> *By encouraging national NGOs to work together to achieve common goals, the European NGO networks are making an important contribution to the formation of a 'European public opinion' usually seen as a pre-requisite to the establishment of a true European political entity. At the same time, this also contributes to promoting European integration in a practical way and often at grassroots level* [...] *European NGOs and their networks and national members can serve as additional channels for the Commission to ensure that information on the European Union and EU policies reaches a wide audience*.[2]

Subsequent referendum defeats – the rejection by French and Dutch voters of the proposed European Constitution in 2005 and the Irish voters' rejection of the Lisbon Treaty in 2008 – were all met with the same response in Brussels: if citizens were voting against the European project, the only possible explanation was that they were ignorant of the self-evident benefits of EU integration. As Nicole Fontaine, former president of the European Parliament, said: 'We haven't explained enough the benefits of European construction [...] We have been too modest.'[3] Therefore, multiple new reports were released, highlighting the urgency for the European Commission to address the EU's 'communication problems' – primarily by enhancing its 'engagement' with civil society.

This gradual shift towards using the EU budget as a tool to enforce 'EU values' has been increasingly evident since the 2010s, particularly following the financial crisis and the subsequent decline in public confidence in the European project and the rise of anti-establishment populist parties across member states. To counter these trends, the Commission launched Europe for Citizens, a programme officially aimed at bringing citizens closer to the European Union – primarily by engaging with civil-society organisations. The programme ran from 2007 to 2013 in its first phase (with a budget

of €215 million), followed by a second phase from 2014 to 2020 (with a budget of €229 million).

However, many demanded a tougher and more proactive approach in the use of the budget to promote – and enforce – the EU's 'values', lamenting that the existing measures had proven powerless to prevent the rise to power of 'autocratic' governments in countries like Poland and Hungary.[4] This led to the introduction in 2020 of the Rule of Law Conditionality Regulation, a mechanism introduced purportedly aimed at strengthening countries' compliance with 'EU values' by allowing the European Commission to withhold funds to governments found in breach of the rule of law (as defined by Brussels).

Following the introduction of the new regulation, the EU proceeded to freeze €6.3 billion in cohesion funds to Hungary, as well as approximately €6 billion in grants from the Covid-19 Next Generation EU (NGEU) recovery fund, citing concerns over irregularities in public procurement, inefficiencies in prosecution and corruption. Meanwhile, raising similar concerns, the Commission also froze almost €140 billion in EU funds to Poland – then governed by the conservative Law and Justice (PiS) party.

At the same time, the EU's new Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) for 2021-2027 cemented the EU budget as a tool for promoting Union values by significantly increasing the budgetary allocation for the promotion of 'rights and values' – mainly through the newly created Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) programme.[5] This move was welcomed by establishment parties and left-liberal NGOs. As one such organisation put it: 'The upcoming MFF may be the last opportunity for the EU to take such bold steps to preserve its values, given the continued rising popularity of far-right parties, which will limit the EU's room for manoeuvre in the future.'[6]

2 The EU budget as a tool for 'value promotion'

The EU's 2021–2027 multiannual budget represents a significant shift in how the EU uses its budget to promote its 'values', with more than €45 billion allocated to 'Resilience and values', accounting for around five per cent of the total EU budget of over €1 trillion.

ANNEX 1 MULTIANNUAL FINANCIAL FRAMEWORK (EU-27)								Eur millions 2018 prices
Commitment appropriations	**2021**	**2022**	**2023**	**2024**	**2025**	**2026**	**2027**	**Total 2021–2027**
1 Single Market, Innovation and Digital	19 712	19 666	19 133	18 633	18 518	18 646	18 473	132 781
2 Cohesion, Resilience and Values	49 741	51 101	52 194	53 954	35 182	36787	58 809	377 768
2a Economic, social and territorial cohesion	45 411	45 951	46 493	47 130	47 770	48 414	49 066	330 235
2b Resilience and values	4 330	5 150	5 701	6 824	7 412	8 373	9 743	47 533
3 Natural Resources and Environment	55 242	52 214	51 489	50 617	49 719	48 932	48 161	356 374
of which: Market related expenditure and direct payments	38 564	38 115	37 604	36 983	36 373	35 772	35 183	258 594
4 Migration and Border Management	2 324	2 811	3 164	3 282	3 672	3 682	3 736	22 671
5 Security and Defence	1 700	1 725	1 737	1 754	1 928	2 078	2 263	13 185
6 Neighbourhood and the World	15 309	15 522	14 789	14 056	13 323	12 592	12 828	98 419
7 European Public Administration	10 021	10215	10 342	10 454	10 554	10 673	10 843	73 102
of which: Administrative expenditure of the institutions	7 742	7 878	7 945	7997	8 025	8 077	8 188	55 852
TOTAL COMMITMENT APPROPRIATIONS	154 049	153 254	152 848	152 750	152 896	153 390	155 113	1 074 300
TOTAL PAYMENT APPROPRIATIONS	156 557	154 822	149 936	149 936	149 936	149 936	149 916	1 061 058

Source: Official Journal of the European Union
'Council Regulation (EU, Euratom) 2020/2093 of 17 December 2020 laying down the multiannual financial framework for the years 2021 to 2027'

Most of these funds are earmarked for financial support for recovery and economic stability programmes ('Resilience'). However, €1.8 billion is specifically allocated to the promotion of 'Rights and values' – namely through the Justice, Rights and Values Fund (JRVF), which comprises the Justice Programme (which focuses essentially on supporting judicial cooperation and training) and the new CERV programme, introduced in 2021, specifically dedicated to the promotion of EU values. The lion's share of the JRVF – €1.5 billion – is allocated to the latter.[7] This is the largest-ever amount of EU funding dedicated to value promotion, with €236 million allocated to the CERV programme for 2025 alone.[8]

3 The CERV programme: value promotion as cultural imperialism?

The CERV programme stands out as a prime example of the EU's 'value-driven' budgetary strategy. Its declared objective is 'to support and develop open, rights-based, democratic, equal and inclusive societies based on the rule of law'.[9] The programme is divided into four strands:

1 Equality, Rights and Gender Equality – promoting rights, non-discrimination, equality (including gender equality) and advancing gender and non-discrimination mainstreaming.

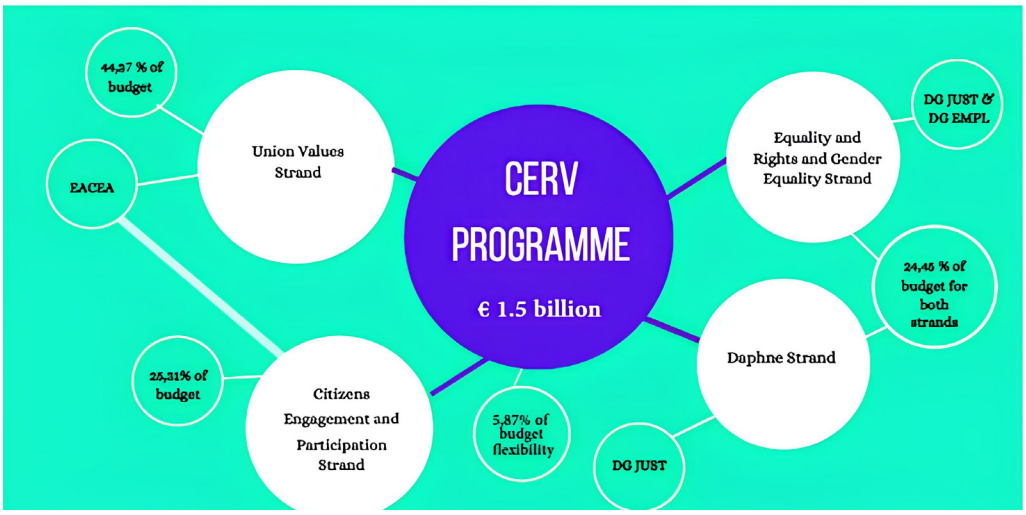
2 Citizens' engagement and participation – promoting citizens' engagement and participation in the democratic life of the Union, exchanges between citizens of different member states, and raising awareness of the common European history.

3 Daphne – fighting violence, including gender-based violence and violence against children.

4 EU values – protecting and promoting EU values in accordance with Article 2 of the Treaty on the European Union: 'respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities'.

Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme

The implementation of actions is directly managed by the Directorate-General of Justice and Consumers (DG JUST). In particular, the implementation of actions under the specific objective to promote and protect the rights of persons with disabilities is managed by the Directorate-General of Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (DG EMPL). The Commission delegates powers to implement actions in the Citizens engagement and participation strand and in the Union values stand to the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA).



Source: European Commission

'Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme – Performance' [10]

What concerns us here, in particular, is the 'EU values' strand of the programme, which makes up almost 50 per cent of the budget. It is carried out by providing financial support to NGOs, think tanks and other organisations active at the local, regional and transnational level for initiatives and projects aimed at the promotion of EU values. Crucially, CERV is implemented mostly under direct management by the European Commission, meaning that the funds are channelled directly to civil-society organisations and NGOs without the involvement of national governmental authorities. This approach has been justified on the grounds that it may 'contribute to shaping a more proactive role for the EU institutions, especially for the Commission, in empowering civil society and enabling domestic *contre-pouvoirs* to act as a bulwark against democratic decline'[11] – in other words, governments that deviate from the EU agenda.

According to the European Commission, since 2021 more than 3,000 civil-society organisations have been supported by the CERV programme[12] to carry out more than 1,000 projects among all four strands.[13] Among the top 10 main NGO beneficiaries we find the EuroCentralAsian Lesbian* Community (€6 million), the European Network Against Racism (€4.9 million), the European Women's Lobby (€4.8 million), the European Disability Forum (€4.5 million), the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA-Europe, €4 million) and Oxfam (€3.4 million).[14]

In its work programme for 2025,[15] the Commission outlines the kinds of project it aims to finance in the new year through CERV. These include ones aimed at:

- identifying ways to further strengthen the European dimension, including by 'raising awareness among European citizens of their common history, culture, cultural heritage and values, thereby enhancing their understanding of the Union, of its origins, purpose, diversity and achievements';
- increasing public trust in the EU;
- protecting EU values and rights by combating hate crime and hate speech;
- promoting equality and preventing and combating inequalities and discrimination on grounds of sex, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation;
- combating racism, xenophobia, antigypsyism, LGBTIQ-phobia, antisemitism, anti-Muslim, anti-black and anti-Asian racism, and

all forms of discrimination and intolerance, including intersectional discrimination;

- improving understanding of racism and its different forms, including structural racism as well as increased knowledge on EU policies and legislation;
- enhancing knowledge around the history and legacies of colonialism, enslavement and the slave trade and the overall historical roots of racism;
- promoting a stronger awareness of the contribution of migration, migrants and their descendants to the cultural richness, diversity and common history of Europe;
- promoting diversity management and inclusion at the workplace, both in the public and private sector;
- and countering disinformation, information manipulation and interference in the democratic debate.

Now, most of these goals may seem relatively benign. Promoting equality, combating racism and fighting violence and discrimination are commendable objectives that most people would agree with. The problem is that these policies tend to blur the line between protecting individuals from harm and promoting – or even enforcing – cultural beliefs and norms that often challenge or contradict prevailing societal values.

For instance, promoting respect for people irrespectively of their skin colour, religion, sexual orientation, etc, is one thing; enforcing 'diversity, equity and inclusion' through the imposition of specific language use, diversity quotas or mandatory training is another. The discussion about trans rights is a good case in point. It is one thing to say that individuals have

the right to identify as whatever gender they want; it is another to enforce on society – schools, institutions, companies – the adoption of language, policies and behaviours that involve radically rethinking concepts like biological sex, pronouns or gender roles, such as allowing biological males to access female-only spaces. The same with race: combating racial discrimination on an individual level is one thing; promoting the idea that racism is embedded in society at all levels as a systemic and pervasive force, and that some racial or ethnic groups bear historical responsibilities they must atone for, is another.

To make things worse, the aggressive push to impose certain worldviews often extends into public shaming, cancel culture or even censorship – today reframed as 'countering disinformation'. Moreover, concepts that most people would agree with – for example, that individuals should not be discriminated against on the basis of their skin colour – often tend to be weaponised in order to promote one-sided approaches to highly polarising topics, such as immigration and multiculturalism. It goes without saying that one may be in favour of (greater) restrictions on immigration for reasons that aren't based on race or racism, but are related, for example, to concerns about economic capacity, public safety, national security or social cohesion. Yet, such nuanced positions are often lost in public discussions that tend to frame things in oversimplified moral terms – often by appealing to benign-sounding progressive narratives such as the ones above.

In short, the entire discussion around 'values' is far more nuanced and complex than it may initially seem – even when the values in question are ones that most people would instinctively support, such as 'respect for human dignity and human rights', 'equality' and 'the rule of law'. Even if the EU confined itself to a minimalist, strictly legalistic interpretation of these principles, it would inevitably face political disagreements over their

practical application. For example, how should the rights of certain groups be balanced against those of others – such as the rights of transgender individuals versus those of women, or the rights of asylum seekers versus those of ordinary citizens? Moreover, even concepts such as the rule of law depend on the historical and societal contexts that shape different nations' legal systems.

However, in the case of the EU, the problem is further complicated by the fact that the supranational arm of the Union, the Commission, tends to leverage these values to advocate for policies and promote cultural views and norms that often diverge from the prevailing consensus, and fail to account for the diversity of cultural, religious and historical contexts among and within member states. This can be seen as a form of cultural imperialism, where certain liberal-progressive norms are prioritised over other ways of understanding human rights and social organisation.

The EU's maximalist interpretation of LGBTQ+ rights, for example, is at odds with the values of more conservative-leaning member states, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe, where EU-supported initiatives promoting gender equality and LGBTQ+ inclusivity have sparked resistance. Poland's 'LGBT-free zones' (under the previous conservative government) and Hungary's restrictions on LGBTQ+ content in schools, for example, were responses to what these governments viewed as overreach by EU institutions – which in turn, as mentioned, retaliated by withholding billions in EU funds allocated to these countries.

The purpose of this paper is not to examine these different cultural stances and related political clashes through a moral framework – the author's personal opinions on the policies in question are inconsequential – but rather to analyse them through the lens of political legitimacy. On what basis is the EU legitimated to promote views and norms that are misaligned with

the cultural sensitivities of certain countries, or even worse to (attempt to) overturn electorally legitimated government policies that reflect such sensitivities? It is often said that, by joining the EU, these countries also committed themselves to upholding the bloc's values. Yet, as noted already, these values are subject to interpretation. The EU's insistence on a single interpretation of its purported values undermines the cultural pluralism that is supposed to be a cornerstone of European integration.

This is also a question of democracy – itself one of the EU's officially proclaimed values. Attempts by unelected bureaucrats in Brussels to override the policies of governments that have been elected on platforms that reflect their constituents' cultural and religious values represent a clear challenge to democracy, and reflect the broader anti-democratic and elitist drive that underpins the entire EU project. In other words, the EU tends to apply its values rather selectively, happily sacrificing some, such as democracy, in pursuit of others.

4 Blurring the line between value promotion and pro-EU propaganda

There is, however, an even more glaring contradiction at the heart of the EU's 'value-driven' policy, and that is the way in which the promotion of so-called EU values is often conflated with the promotion of the EU project itself. The CERV programme, as noted, makes no secret of the fact that its aims include 'strengthening the European dimension' and 'increasing public trust in the EU'. CERV pursues these aims by funding third-party projects (by NGOs, municipalities, think tanks and academic institutions) aimed at reinforcing the pro-EU narrative and openly countering eurosceptic views – an approach that may be characterised as propaganda by proxy, as opposed to the EU's official promotional campaigns.

A closer look at some of the projects supported by CERV reveals just how widespread this practice is. These are just a few examples:

- **RevivEU**, a project carried out by various European think tanks, aimed at 'combating the emerging eurosceptic narratives already promulgated by autocratic elites' and 'reviving the appeal of the EU in the minds of V4 citizens'. Budget: €645,000 (2023–2024).[16]

- **Value for EU Citizenship**, a project carried out by the Portuguese municipality of Vila de Rei to 'draw the European Union closer to its

citizens', including by making them aware of how 'the European Union has offered peace, stability and unity'. Budget: €8,500 (2024).[17]

- **Blue4EU**, a project coordinated by the Babeș-Bolyai University in Romania to 'enhance young people's critical thinking and resilience towards the current extremist and anti-EU movements' and engage them 'to commit to a European future'. Budget: €375,300 (2024–2026).[18]
- **Step by step towards European integration!**, a project coordinated by the Slovakian municipality of Zvončín in cooperation with other Eastern European municipalities to 'increase the sense of belonging in the EU'. Budget: €23,500 (2022–2023).[19]
- **EU TURN 2025**, a project carried out by the European Academy Berlin aimed at 'de-nationalising European engagement'. Budget: €415,000 (2025).[20]
- **Hold on to Europe**, a project coordinated by the Czech municipality of Ratíškovice in cooperation with other municipalities in France, Slovakia and Croatia aimed at 'raising the interest of citizens in Europe (in the EU) and their awareness of the necessity to be further integrated into the EU'. Budget: €27,500 (2023).[21]
- **Platform for challenging Euroscepticism**, a project carried out by several municipalities in Romania, Serbia, Poland, Czechia and Slovakia to counter euroscepticism. Budget: €21,000 (2022).[22]
- **Youth Embracing Togetherness**, a project coordinated by the Greek NGO Youthability in cooperation with partners in four other countries aimed at 'challenging euroscepticism', among other things. Budget: €50,700 (2024–2025).[23]

- **New Story for Europe**, a project carried out by Slovakian and Czech organisations and municipalities aimed at 'showing that the European Union is a secure association where democracy, tolerance, solidarity and common European citizenship develop'. Budget: €30,000 (2022).[24]

There are hundreds of projects like the above. Tellingly, several are explicitly aimed at 'countering disinformation', a broad and often ambiguous term that governments have increasingly employed in recent years as a means to suppress legitimate criticism of policies or dissenting viewpoints – in this case, those directed at the EU. This conflation of factually false information with critical perspectives is clearly reflected in the way many of these projects are framed. For example:

- In 2024, various NGOs and think tanks in Romania, Bulgaria and Italy – including the Romanian chapter of the US-based nonprofit Freedom House – received €270,000 for a project titled *Whos and hows: countering disinformation that pushes citizens away from the European project*.[25] The project aimed to 'identify, map, and expose those themes, discourses, actors, and vectors that promote and convey messages designed to undermine citizens' trust in EU policies'. The implication is unmistakable: any 'message' that diminishes trust in the EU is, by definition, labelled as 'disinformation'.

- Another project, titled *European Communities Against Disinformation*, received €160,000 (for 2025) to 'monitor the correct circulation of information about the European Union and EU-relevant issues', based on the premise that 'EU citizenship can only be promoted by preserving access to reliable information'.[26] Once again, the focus appears less on combating outright falsehoods and more on ensuring the 'correct' dissemination of 'reliable' information – presumably information coming from pro-EU sources or from the EU itself.

- Overall, the CERV programme has so far supported at least a dozen such projects across the EU, with titles such as *European Against Fake News*,[27] *FakeNewsBusters*[28] and *Democracy over disinformation*,[29] many of them still ongoing – for a total cost to taxpayers of nearly €1 million.

An examination of the EU's 2025 budget[30] provides further evidence of this weaponisation of the EU budget, with several initiatives specifically targeted at influencing public opinion and monitoring political discourse.

The allocation for the 'Culture, Creativity and Inclusive Society' cluster includes appropriations intended 'to strengthen democratic values, including the rule of law and fundamental rights' by 'promoting socio-economic transformations that contribute to inclusion and growth, including migration management and integration of migrants'.[31] While these seem to be neutral aims, they involve shaping policy to fit with an agenda favoured by the EU, which is increasingly at odds with the views of many European citizens who express concerns about issues such as immigration.

More concerning are specific initiatives aimed at manipulating the public debate and controlling the flow of information. Some of the 'preparatory actions' envisioned by the budget include:

- **Building a trustworthy social-media sphere: countering disinformation on social media for young Europeans**

  This initiative seeks to create social-media spaces where young people may 'share a sense of togetherness reflected in a common culture, similar lifestyle, and shared values', thereby addressing the 'continuously increasing intensity of disinformation aiming to create divisions among young Europeans'.

  The underlying assumption seems to be that young people are incapable of distinguishing between reliable information and 'disinformation', and therefore need the EU to 'guide' them towards a 'true' sense

of 'European identity'. The project will entail producing 'narratives that deal creatively with topics that are of proven interest to young Europeans' and making them 'compelling and appealing to the target group'.

In other words, the EU wants to create its own 'narratives' and 'content' specifically designed to be engaging and appealing for young people, in an effort to shape their views about the EU and to convince them about the benefits of European integration. This amounts to an explicit propaganda campaign aimed at young people disguised as a legitimate project to fight disinformation.

- **Citizen-facing European TV and Video News Portal**
  This action is aimed at producing an 'EU-approved' platform for news and information by developing a 'non-discriminatory search function' using 'algorithms that place public value at the centre'. It also foresees the development of translation systems with a high degree of 'transparency' to ensure 'trust in content'. This again seems to be a project whose aim is not simply to provide information but to shape the public narrative. By predetermining what type of content will be considered 'trustworthy' and 'in line with public value', the EU will effectively have control over the type of information European citizens will be exposed to.

But probably the most disturbing proposal contained in the 2025 budget is the pilot project titled

- **Advancing social cohesion in the face of polarized public discourse?** This project aims to 'map the current public opinion discourse on social media around salient political issues' by 'checking the language elected representatives use'. This involves scraping the social media activity of elected representatives, as well as 'comments and replies' they produce and receive in mainstream media outlets.[32]

This constitutes an unacceptable form of surveillance, which runs the risk of creating a chilling effect on free speech by turning citizens into monitors of their elected representatives' activities on social media. The project is based on a profound misunderstanding of the role of social media as a public forum where people engage in free and uninhibited discussions, which are often emotional and controversial. By framing legitimate expressions of discontent and opposition as threats to 'social cohesion' the EU is essentially creating an instrument to target dissenting voices and to portray genuine concerns about its policies as 'disinformation'. This approach, however, is consistent with the EU's broader strategy of using its budget to enforce compliance with its values and to promote the idea of supranational integration, even at the expense of national sovereignty and democratic pluralism.

As this brief and far from exhaustive overview makes clear, the European Commission spends substantial amounts of taxpayers' money, contributed by the member states to the EU budget, not merely to uphold or advocate for its own interpretation of the EU's stated values, but to engage in outright self-serving pro-EU propaganda. It does this by promoting projects that align with its own agenda of European integration, while marginalising or discrediting criticism of EU policies and structures – often under the guise of 'fighting disinformation'.

5 Funding the cheerleaders: the EU budget as a pro-EU gravy train

In light of the above, it is not surprising to learn that some of the organisations most lavishly funded by the Commission are openly committed to the cause of greater European integration or federalism. Key examples include:

- **Union of European Federalists (UEF)**

  The UEF is a pan-European NGO advocating for the creation of a federal European state. Receiving €1.2 million over the 2022–2025 period,[33] its activities are not merely educational but serve as direct advocacy for federalism.

- **Young European Federalists (JEF)**

  As the youth wing of the UEF, JEF received €1.2 million over the 2021–2025 period[34] to mobilise young Europeans in support of federalism. By focusing on younger generations, JEF seeks to shape future political attitudes in favour of greater integration, a goal clearly aligned with the Commission's overarching narrative.

- **European Movement International (EMI)**

  The EMI, presided over by prominent pro-EU politician Guy Verhofstadt, received more than €15 million over the 2021–2025 period across its various national chapters.[35] With its explicit mission to 'promote European integration' and 'contribute to the establishment of a united, federal Europe', this organisation functions as a lobbying group advocating for

policies that align with the Commission's vision of deeper unity and centralised governance.

- **Friends of Europe**

  This think tank received more than €15 million over the 2014–2024 period. This included €350,000 for a single project aimed at enhancing the visibility of EU 'values and opportunities' at local and national levels.[36] By actively promoting the EU's narrative in diverse regions, the project exemplifies the Commission's efforts to shape public opinion in favour of the Union's policies and priorities.

- **European Youth Forum**

  The Brussels-based organisation, which boasts of being 'the biggest regional youth platform in the world', says that one of its mains goals is to 'work to deepen European integration'. It has received nearly €40 million since 2014.[37]

- **Robert Schuman Foundation**

  The foundation, a pro-EU French think tank linked to the European People's Party (EPP), received nearly €10 million from 2014 to 2025.[38] This included €1.2 million to counter 'eurosceptic and national-populist mythology' and €1.6 million for routine lobbying under the banner of the project 'Pour l'Europe' ('For Europe') over the 2022–2025 period.

- **European Policy Centre (EPC)**

  A Belgian think tank 'dedicated to fostering European integration', the EPC received nearly €30 million over the past decade.[39] Its commitment aligns directly with the Commission's priorities, further illustrating how public funds are channelled toward organisations promoting integrationist policies.

- **Institut für Europäische Politik (IEP)**

  The German think tank, affiliated with the pro-EU German European Movement, received around €14 million over the same period.[40] Its projects contribute to embedding integrationist perspectives in German political discourse.

- **European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR)**

  As its website reads, the European Council on Foreign Relations was launched in 2007 'to promote a more integrated European foreign policy in support of shared European interests and values'. It received €6 million in just two years, between 2022 and 2023 – alongside funding from several EU governments, the US government and numerous foundations such as the Open Society Foundations and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

- **Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS)**

  Since its founding, in 1983, the well-known Brussels-based think tank has consistently argued for greater EU integration. Incredibly, it received €250 million – one quarter of a billion – just over the past 10 years.[41] Needless to say, its reports are highly supportive of the Commission's policies. CEPS's first director, Peter Ludlow, described it as 'part of the Brussels policy process'.

The list is by no means exhaustive. There are hundreds of similar pro-EU groups, all of which likely receive EU funding. The ones listed above are simply the largest and best-known ones. The substantial financial support directed at these organisations (and many others like them) – not just through CERV but also through other programmes such as Horizon Europe – underscores how the EU Commission, under the guise of promoting 'EU values', actually uses the EU budget to advance its own policies and political objectives, thereby justifying its own existence in the process.

More specifically, by amplifying pro-EU voices and perspectives aligned with its integrationist agenda, the Commission is, in effect, covertly subsidising political advocacy – or more plainly, propaganda – for its project of deeper supranational integration. This is a vision that not only lacks unanimous support across Europe, but is increasingly contested by EU citizens.

This reflects the Commission's broader pattern of using public resources to entrench pro-EU sentiment and promote liberal-progressive narratives, while suppressing or openly discrediting alternative perspectives. Indeed, it goes without saying that euro-critical or conservative organisations are hugely underrepresented among EU-funded projects – even though they reflect the views of a substantial portion of the EU population. Conversely, '[i]t is difficult to find organisations that have been granted financial support by the EU whose activities do not include efforts to support a growing European cooperation', as two researchers put it[42] – just as it is difficult to find strongly pro-integrationist lobby groups that have not received money from the EU.

It needs to be emphasised that what we have covered so far represents just the tip of the iceberg of the Commission's sprawling propaganda machine. Compiling a comprehensive list of all the campaigns, projects and organisations funded by the Commission with the sole aim of promoting the EU project is virtually impossible, given the lack of easy access to data, the scale of the funding and the fact that this occurs across multiple (and sometimes cross-cutting) budgetary headings and programmes. On top of CERV, there are Erasmus+ (which includes countless pro-EU programmes targeting teachers and students), Horizon Europe, official communication and outreach activities (which generally fall under the 'European Public Administration' heading), as well as sub-programmes for specific policy

areas (such as 'Natural Resources and Environment' or 'Single Market, Innovation and Digital').

For the same reason, it is also virtually impossible to determine the exact amount of the EU's propaganda budget, especially considering that there's often no way of knowing exactly how a lot of the money is spent (see below for more on this lack of transparency). However, once official self-promotion communication campaigns as well as 'covert' propaganda efforts (funding third parties to promote the EU on the Commission's behalf) are taken into account, the overall costs are likely to amount to several hundreds of millions of euros per year.[43] According to the EU Financial Transparency System, the European Commission spent more than €1.8 billion on 'Communication & Publications' over the past decade alone. Here the line between official and covert propaganda is not always easy to discern. Most of the funds in question, for example, were handed out to marketing and PR agencies such as ICF Next (€92 million), GOPA Com. (€85 million), Kantar (€80 million), Scholz & Friends (€79 million) and Havas (€76 million).

It would appear that at least some of these funds were used for covert propaganda operations. For instance, the Italian newspaper *Il Fatto Quotidiano* revealed that the €130 million allocated to the private advertising agency Havas was then sub-awarded to various European news outlets in the run-up to the 2024 European elections – presumably to boost mainstream pro-EU parties and narratives.[44] In some instances, news outlets were paid directly by the Commission to provide coverage of the EU elections[45] – a form of covert advertising.

And what about those outlets that receive regular funding from the Commission? For instance, over the past decade, the European Commission has provided nearly a quarter of a billion euros to the pan-European news network Euronews – an average of €25 million a year.[46] Although the network

describes itself as 'unapologetically impartial and independent', one cannot help but question whether, and to what extent, this funding has influenced its editorial stance, which often appears closely aligned with the dominant narratives emanating from Brussels. The same could be asked about numerous other news companies financed by the Commission, such as Thomson Reuters, *The Guardian* and many others. Answering these questions, however, is beyond the scope of this paper.

This study focuses exclusively on activities that can legitimately be described as propaganda by proxy – a practice that undeniably constitutes a gross misuse of public funds. Furthermore, it is also profoundly undemocratic. As two researchers put it:

> *This is essentially a constraint on democracy – a huge and concerted campaign to stifle real debate about the future of the EU. The Commission is only interested in debating one side of the argument – it is willing to accept an 'exchange of views' only to the extent that this takes place solely within the parameters of an acceptance that EU integration is to be broadly supported.*[47]

It is important to note that, beyond its overarching and ongoing objective of promoting deeper integration, the European Commission also leverages NGOs to lobby on its behalf on specific policy issues. It was recently revealed, for example, that some of the grant agreements signed by the Commission obliged NGOs to lobby members of the European Parliament, the body that is supposed to oversee the Commission, to get them to demand tougher 'green' policies from the Commission itself – a textbook example of self-lobbying.[48]

The significant funding the Commission allocates to security and defence think tanks can be seen as another form of self-lobbying. Many of these organisations actively promote narratives that align with the Commission's policies

— such as its hawkish approach to the Russia-Ukraine conflict — and are in turn relied on by both the Commission and national governments as justification for their policies. Examples include:

- Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) and RUSI Europe: €30 million 2014–2023
- Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI): €235 million 2014–2023
- EGMONT – The Royal Institute for International Relations: €22 million 2016–2022
- Carnegie Endowment for International Peace: €3.5 million 2018–2021
- International Crisis Group: €7.5 million 2016–2023[49]

6 From propaganda to interference: the cases of Poland and Hungary

Brussels's 'concerted effort' to influence public opinion through (largely covert) propaganda poses a significant challenge to democracy and undermines the pluralistic debate that democracy relies upon even when it targets the citizens of countries governed by pro-EU forces. However, it poses an even greater challenge to democratic principles when it occurs in nations governed by eurosceptic forces. In such cases, it amounts to nothing less than an attempt to undermine or even remove, through electoral or other means, the elected government – a clear example of foreign interference in the internal affairs of the member states involved, ultimately aimed at achieving regime change.

Yet, as one might imagine, it is precisely these countries that are most heavily targeted by the EU's propaganda by proxy. Poland (under the previous conservative government) and Hungary are the two most obvious examples. In recent years, the EU has channelled huge sums of money to NGOs and other organisations in these countries – €38 million and €41 million respectively just through the CERV programme – for hundreds of projects. These are aimed not only at promoting ideologies potentially misaligned with prevailing local cultural sensitivities, such as broad interpretations of LGBTQ+ rights, but also, predictably,

at promoting the EU itself. Even more controversially, several of these projects openly targeted the government.

Thus, alongside the usual projects aimed at 'raising awareness of the importance of strengthening the European integration',[50] 'strengthening the European identity among citizens, especially among the young people'[51] and 'promoting EU values',[52] we find projects specifically aimed at 'challenging euroscepticism',[53] countering the 'deteriorating process in the field of human rights in the whole CEE region, especially in Hungary',[54] 'ensuring "democratic security" as a means of countering democratic backsliding'[55] and 'conducting special research to focus on the external and internal threats to European democracy'[56] – clear references to the conservative and eurosceptic governments in Poland (until recently) and Hungary.

Indeed, some of the NGOs involved in these projects played a leading role in mobilising civil society against their respective governments. There is, of course, nothing inherently wrong with this. The right to criticise the government is a fundamental pillar of democracy, one that should be both defended and encouraged. However, when a 'civil-society organisation' accepts funding from a foreign institution explicitly aiming to influence government policies – or even to undermine or remove it from power for its own political interests – the boundary between legitimate democratic advocacy and external subversion becomes alarmingly blurred. What should be a tool to give voice to the organic and spontaneous expression of legitimate grievances within society, a core democratic right, is transformed into an instrument of external influence aimed at destabilising a democratically elected government. This, in contrast, constitutes a deeply undemocratic practice.

Western countries, primarily the US, have a long and well-documented history of using local 'NGOs' as a Trojan horse to interfere in the domestic politics of third countries and promote policies that align with Euro-Atlantic economic and geopolitical interests – including, if needed, fomenting political destabilisation and unrest to facilitate regime change. Western-funded NGOs, for example, often kept on life support by US-based entities like USAID and the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), played a key role in fostering several 'colour revolutions' in the early 2000s – mostly non-violent protests that swiftly led to pro-Western changes of government – especially in post-Soviet states like Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004–5) and Kyrgyzstan (2005). They also played a significant role in laying the groundwork for the Euromaidan protests in Ukraine in 2014, which escalated into an armed insurrection that led to the ousting of the government – a de facto coup.

The extent to which many supposedly independent NGOs are, in reality, fully dependent on foreign funding became strikingly evident when Trump recently imposed a 90-day freeze on all US foreign aid, much of which is channelled through USAID. Almost instantly, countless NGOs and media organisations, from the Balkans to Latin America, announced they would be halting all operations. This revelation laid bare the fact that many of these organisations function as little more than extensions of US foreign policy.

It is therefore unsurprising that foreign-funded NGOs have become a focal point of intense political debate in countries targeted by these policies. Last year, for example, Georgia ignited widespread discussion by passing its controversial 'foreign agent' law, officially titled the Transparency of Foreign Influence law. This legislation requires any NGO receiving 20 per cent or more of its funding from foreign sources to register as an organisation 'pursuing the interests of a foreign power'. Defending the law, a prominent

politician from Georgia's ruling party characterised the NGO sector as a 'pseudo-elite cultivated by foreign powers', [57] reflecting a growing awareness of how Western countries have long weaponised NGOs to interfere in the domestic affairs of third countries.

More recently, the Slovakian president Robert Fico denounced the fact that USAID, NED and Soros-backed NGOs had poured millions into the country to manufacture protests, destabilise the government and force a pro-Western regime change – and announced his own crackdown on foreign-funded NGOs. Many of these NGOs also received support from the European Commission.

When it comes to the EU, however, the examples of Poland and Hungary (and to a lesser extent Slovakia) show that this practice is not limited to third countries but extends to member states as well. Indeed, how is the EU's interference in the domestic politics of these countries, via the support for local anti-government NGOs and civil-society organisations, any different, say, from USAID funding NGOs to destabilise governments perceived as hostile to US interests?

For instance, the Ökotárs Foundation in Hungary – the recipient of a massive €3.3 million grant by the European Commission in 2022[58] – has been involved in several long-running disputes with the Orbán government. The latter accuses the foundation of being the 'local distribution centre' of a foreign-funded 'political pressure network' since 1994 – of taking money not only from the European Commission, but also from American funders like the Ford, Rockefeller and Open Society Foundations, as well as from the US embassy, and then distributing it to hundreds of Hungarian organisations to pursue a foreign-driven agenda.[59] The Ökotárs Foundation, for its part, accuses the Orbán government of wanting to dismantle civil society in order to 'achieve boundless power'.[60]

In late 2023, the Hungarian government adopted a law that created a new authority with powers to investigate political activities carried out by NGOs or other organisations on behalf of, or funded by, a foreign interest. It said this was meant to protect the will of voters from undue foreign interference. The Commission responded by starting an infringement procedure against Hungary.

Whether one is more aligned with or sympathetic to the Hungarian government or to local NGOs like Ökotárs is irrelevant for the purpose of our argument. What matters is that a clear political dispute existed between the two parties. By financially supporting the foundation while simultaneously publicly criticising the Orbán government, the Commission has been, ipso facto, interfering in Hungary's domestic politics – with the broader, long-term objective of facilitating regime change in the country.

Indeed, following the defeat of the conservative Law and Justice (PiS) party in the 2023 Polish elections, which led to the formation of a left-liberal, pro-EU coalition led by Donald Tusk, Wojciech Przybylski, the editor-in-chief of *Visegrad Insight* at the Res Publica Foundation – an NGO which had received significant EU funds in the preceding years to counter 'democratic backsliding' in Poland[61] – wrote an article celebrating 'the end of Poland's illiberal experiment' and the key role played by 'EU pressure' and 'civil-society organisations' like Res Publica itself.[62] This is an explicit admission – indeed, celebration – of foreign interference in Poland's democratic process.

Poland is also a good example of how the European Commission's insistence on values and the rule of law is, more than anything, a convenient pretext for targeting dissenting governments that resist aligning with the EU's expanding supranational authority and broader political agenda – including on matters largely unrelated to the rule of law, such as economic

and foreign policy. This is why the EU is happy to ignore rule-of-law violations when pro-Brussels governments are involved, so long as they comply with Union policy on the issues that really matter.

Within a year of coming to power in Poland, the pro-EU coalition led by Donald Tusk has launched an unparalleled attack on the rule of law – seizing control of public media and the judiciary, sidelining constitutional norms and undermining institutional independence.[63] Yet all this has been met with silence in Brussels – and even cheered on. Indeed, the European Commission's reaction was to unblock up to €137 billion in frozen funds, highlighting the hypocrisy of the whole rule-of-law debate.

7 The EU-NGO propaganda complex: the weaponisation of 'civil society'

There's no clear definition of civil society, civil-society organisations or NGOs – and that is part of the problem. However, civil society is generally described as the collective space of voluntary associations, groups and institutions that operate independently of the government and the private sector to advocate for shared interests, values and causes. It includes a broad spectrum of actors such as NGOs, think thanks, community groups and activist movements. Civil society, in short, serves as a bridge between individuals and the state, enabling them to organise, express their views and hold governments accountable. It is, without a doubt, a key aspect of democracy.

Civil-society organisations, such as NGOs, are the formalised institutional components of civil society. These are structured, registered entities that engage in activities related to a wide range of topics, such as human rights, social services, environmental protection, humanitarian aid and policy advocacy. There is no doubt that many NGOs – in Europe and globally – fit the description, and play an essential role in standing up for the rights of the most vulnerable, fighting against discrimination, protecting the environment, promoting intercultural dialogue, civic engagement and public participation, and holding governments and elected representatives accountable to citizens. These NGOs play a vital role in enhancing the democratic quality of public life by providing oversight of political power

and serving as a conduit for articulating and conveying to policymakers the aspiration of (sections of) society.

However, as this report has demonstrated, many so-called NGOs serve a fundamentally opposite purpose: rather than conveying the aspirations of civil society to policymakers, they act as conduits for transmitting to civil society the ideas and perspectives of policymakers – specifically, in this case, those of the European Commission, on which they are heavily (if not entirely in some cases) reliant for their funding. They are effectively transformed into vehicles of institutional propaganda or 'self-lobbying'.

This constitutes a fundamental inversion of the purported nature and role of 'non-governmental organisations'. Even though these 'civil-society organisations' tend to misrepresent themselves as 'independent', they cannot legitimately be described as such – or even as representatives of 'civil society' – insofar as much of their work amounts to, and their financial survival depends on, promoting the agenda of their funders, namely the European Commission.

Since the publication of its White Paper in 2000, the Commission has sought to enhance its democratic legitimacy by engaging with 'civil society', deliberately equating 'civil-society organisations' with 'the will of the people'. However, these organisations cannot realistically be said to represent the views of the general public and often advocate for policies – such as deeper EU integration – that are at odds with the sentiments of significant segments of the population. As one researcher argued, 'it is certain interests, rather than the citizens to which they belong, that are being represented'.[64]

As early as 1997, some were arguing that the Commission's 'dialogue' with EU-funded civil society groups 'creates a new political class and merges EU and national actors in a political process that is increasingly distant from the ordinary citizen'.[65] Moreover, European institutions prefer to deal

with umbrella groups, usually based in Brussels, which are still further from ordinary citizens. The latter are not consulted directly but rather 'ventriloquised through NGOs, think tanks and charities which have been hand-picked and financed by the Commission'.[66]

In other words, the Commission has leveraged NGOs to construct a fictional representation of public support, effectively substituting real citizens, 'guilty' of not sufficiently endorsing its policies and goals. In this fabricated narrative, the involvement of civil-society groups is portrayed as fostering a more participatory democracy. In reality, it has empowered EU-funded special-interest groups – to all intents and purposes organic to the EU's institutional machinery – to shift even more authority to the unelected European Commission, further marginalising the average citizen. Far from increasing the democracy legitimacy of the EU, this has exacerbated its fundamentally elitist and technocratic nature.

Indeed, it has resulted in the rise of an EU-NGO propaganda complex of vast proportions that operates outside of any meaningful form of democratic oversight. As noted, the exact size of this complex is unclear as it is virtually impossible to track all the propaganda-oriented projects the EU funds, or the overall money spent on them. According to a European Parliament report, EU financial commitments to NGOs, excluding EU programmes in the field of education and research, amounted to at least €2.6 billion in 2022, under direct management, across all EU programmes and funds. However, the total amount of grants awarded to NGOs is likely to be higher (approximatively €3.7 billion in 2022), due to the absence of an NGO definition and due to the lack of clear differentiation between NGOs and not-for-profit organisations in the EU's Financial Transparency System (FTS).[67]

Not all EU-funded projects fall under the umbrella of propaganda, of course, but many of them do. As this report has shown, huge amounts

of money are channelled into projects aimed not only at promoting a specific set of 'values' but at promoting the EU itself, and the very principle of supranational integration. This includes supporting organisations openly committed to the cause of greater European integration or federalism, to the tune of tens of millions of euros.

Although the Commission and the NGOs themselves often frame these activities in the rhetoric of democracy, there is nothing remotely democratic about this covert (self-)lobbying apparatus. In fact, this outsourcing of propaganda, or propaganda by proxy, represents a nefarious influence on democracy, insofar as it artificially skews the public debate. This is done not just by funding organisations that openly lobby for 'more Europe', but also by overwhelmingly, if not exclusively, funding organisations that align with the Commission's political priorities and ideological inclination, often to lobby on the Commission's behalf, at the expense of huge swathes of the population. As two researchers aptly pointed out as early as 2009:

> *Interest groups should be able and free to promote the EU if that is what they believe in, but there is no justification for using taxpayers' money to fund them. Groups which do not share the EU's 'vision' suffer a double blow, in that, on the one hand, they tend not to be recipients of EU funds, and must therefore privately fundraise; and, on the other (and as a result of that need to privately fundraise) they find themselves in the minority and therefore less able to propel their views through the torrent of pro-integration propaganda that dominates the mainstream in Europe* [...] *It is not in the public good for groups on one side of the argument only to be heavily supported by public funds, because it ends up stifling debate, and prevents citizens from seeing both sides of the argument fairly.*[68]

This is even more problematic when it occurs in those countries governed by eurosceptic governments, where these NGOs effectively become tools for internal destabilisation and regime change.

The EU-NGO complex relates to the so-called Iron Triangle theory, which posits that politics is fundamentally based on a mutually beneficial relationship between three key actors in policymaking: bureaucratic agencies (government institutions responsible for policy implementation); legislative committees or politicians (who create policy and control funding); and interest groups (such as NGOs, lobbyists or private corporations). These three entities form a self-reinforcing cycle where each benefits from the other, often at the expense of broader democratic accountability or public interest. Bureaucratic agencies receive funding and legitimacy, legislators gain political support or electoral backing, and interest groups secure policies or funding that align with their goals rather than fostering genuine civic engagement.

The European Commission's financial support for NGOs that align with EU policy goals exemplifies this concept. The European Commission plays a pivotal role as the bureaucratic arm of this triangle. It allocates funding to NGOs through various programmes targeting issues such as human rights, climate action, migration and the rule of law – or, more often than not, promoting the EU itself. These funds are often channelled to organisations that act as implementers of EU policies or advocates for EU narratives. By strategically funding NGOs that align with its priorities, the Commission builds a network of organisations that legitimise and promote its policies. This ensures that EU goals are amplified by 'independent' actors, creating a veneer of impartial support for its initiatives.

Legislators, including members of the European Parliament and national policymakers, use NGO activities as evidence of 'civil-society support' for EU policies. These politicians often endorse or expand funding programmes

under the pretence of supporting grassroots initiatives, though many of the recipient organisations are heavily reliant on EU funding rather than genuine public contributions. This well-funded NGO sector creates a feedback loop, where legislators cite NGO reports and advocacy efforts as independent validation of EU policies. In reality, these organisations often mirror the priorities of the institutions funding them, undermining the authenticity of their purported independence.

The third pillar of the triangle consists of the NGOs and activist organisations themselves. These entities benefit from financial support provided by the EU, gaining political access and legitimacy in return. Many of these organisations, once funded, advocate for 'more Europe' – policies that call for stronger EU governance, expanded regulations and additional funding mechanisms.

However, this dynamic creates a skewed playing field. Funding disproportionately favours organisations that support EU priorities, effectively marginalising dissenting voices.

The EU-NGO relationship illustrates the self-reinforcing nature of the Iron Triangle: the European Commission funds NGOs, which, in turn, generate reports, advocacy campaigns and public narratives that justify and reinforce the need for EU policies and action, and then politicians and legislators cite these NGOs as 'independent voices of civil society', using their output to validate further policies and funding decisions. This cycle repeats, ensuring a continuous stream of favourable narratives about the EU's role while alternative perspectives remain underfunded and marginalised.

This system also creates a tendency towards rent-seeking, where NGOs have an incentive to lobby for the overall EU budget, and thus their own budgets, to be systematically increased. This epitomises the concept of the self-licking ice-cream cone, a metaphor used to describe a self-perpetuating

system or bureaucratic process that exists primarily to sustain itself, often without delivering meaningful value or outcomes to its original purpose. This may result, for example, in NGOs inventing or exaggerating problems – such as 'the threat of the far right' – simply to perpetuate their own existence and continue to receive public funding.

The problems surrounding the EU-NGO complex are further exacerbated by the severe lack of transparency in the allocation and use of EU funds – an issue that has gained traction in recent years after the Qatargate scandal,[69] where it was revealed that an NGO was used to cover for a criminal organisation and to channel bribes from third countries to influence the European decision-making process.

As the aforementioned European Parliament report noted, 'the analysis of the framework surrounding the implementation of the EU budget by NGOs reveals major shortcomings in terms of public transparency and accountability', noting that it is often hard to ascertain the detailed allocation of their funds, including the identity of the final recipients and the source of their funding.

Since only the funds directly awarded to NGOs are subject to monitoring and reporting by the Commission, the EU funds reallocated in the form of sub-granting, sub-contracting or shared within a consortium are difficult to track and are not published on public websites such as the FTS. As a result, control mechanisms aimed at ensuring that EU funds are used effectively, efficiently, and in accordance with the EU's objectives, policies and financial rules are made difficult to implement, if not ineffective.[70]

The report further noted that 'the Commission's IT systems are not user-friendly and use different conventions to identify beneficiaries of projects and grants, resulting in differing data, making it difficult to reconcile information from different publicly accessible Commission portals and

databases', leading to 'significant inconsistencies in the content and extent of the information displayed on project websites, including on the distribution of funds received among partners and on the connection to pertinent Commission databases'.

Moreover, many of the EU-funded projects often have very loosely defined goals, such as 'strengthening civil-society organisations' and 'protecting EU values', meaning that it's often hard to assess what these NGOs are actually doing with these funds, even when the recipients are easily identified. This is not a recent development; it has persisted for years. In a 2018 report, for example, the European Court of Auditors found a severe transparency deficiency in EU funding to civil-society organisations.[71] The report noted that the EU 'was not sufficiently transparent regarding the implementation of EU funds by NGOs' and 'does not have comprehensive information on all NGOs supported' by taxpayer funds.

More recently, for example, it was revealed that various advertising campaigns asking centrist and left-wing politicians to fight against 'far-right' political groups had the backing of state-funded organisations.[72] One example is that of the Good Lobby, an NGO which aims to 'shift public policies through a combination of strategic advocacy advice, training and unconventional alliances'. It received more than €100,000 for a project aimed at 'develop[ing] a process to increase the transformative potential of democratic innovations to address particular areas of the European Green Deal'.[73] However, the NGO also engages in many activities that aren't directly related to the 'green' issues, such as various campaigns against the 'far right'. Were funds intended to promote the European Green Deal redirected to campaign against certain political parties? There's simply no way to know.

Conclusion

The European Commission's systematic use of NGOs as a vehicle for advancing its political objectives poses a dual threat. On one hand, it undermines democracy by skewing public debate and marginalising dissenting voices, while promoting a one-sided agenda under the guise of 'civil-society engagement'. By leveraging its budgetary tools, the EU has effectively weaponised civil-society organisations, turning them into instruments of institutional propaganda under the pretence of promoting shared 'values' such as democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights.

By positioning itself as the ultimate arbiter of values, the EU has placed itself above democratic accountability, using its financial and institutional resources to impose a singular vision of governance and integration across a continent marked by diverse histories, cultures and political systems. Rather than fostering genuine pluralism, the EU's approach has fostered a top-down, technocratic model that prioritises conformity to its own agenda over respecting the will of the people in individual member states. Moreover, as we have seen, the Commission doesn't limit itself to promoting a highly politicised approach to the EU's stated values, but also uses civil-society organisations to promote the EU itself and the very principle of supranational integration – all at the taxpayers' expense. We have characterised this approach as 'propaganda by proxy'.

Even more troubling is the EU's willingness to weaponise these tools against member states whose governments challenge its authority. By financially supporting local NGOs to pressure or delegitimise democratically elected governments, the EU has effectively engaged in foreign interference within its own union.

This reveals a broader and deeply concerning trend of anti-democratic governance within the EU. This is not an isolated phenomenon but part of a calculated strategy to centralise power within its supranational institutions, particularly the European Commission, at the expense of the sovereignty and democratic processes of its member states, as the author has outlined in previous reports.[74]

On the other hand, the EU's systematic use of NGOs as tools to promote its agenda jeopardises the credibility and work of genuine NGOs that provide critical services and advocacy, as these organisations risk being swept up in the inevitable backlash against the EU-NGO complex.

By blurring the lines between independent advocacy and institutional propaganda, the Commission compromises the trust and legitimacy that civil-society organisations depend on to carry out their missions effectively. In the long run, this approach risks not only alienating citizens, but also weakening the vital democratic role of NGOs, turning them into collateral damage in the Commission's broader political strategy. A recalibration is urgently needed to ensure that NGOs remain independent actors working in the public interest, rather than tools of undemocratic supranational agendas.

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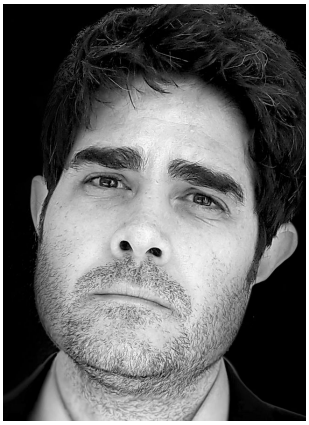
Thomas Fazi is an independent researcher, writer and journalist based in Rome. He is the author of several books, including: *The Battle for Europe: How an Elite Hijacked a Continent – and How We Can Take It Back* (Pluto Press, 2014); *Reclaiming the State: A Progressive Vision of Sovereignty for a Post-Neoliberal World* (co-authored with Bill Mitchell; Pluto Press, 2017); and *The Covid Consensus: The Global Assault on Democracy and the Poor—A Critique from the Left* (co-authored with Toby Green; Hurst, 2023). He is a columnist for *UnHerd* and *Compact*.



About MCC Brussels

At a time of unprecedented political polarisation, MCC Brussels is committed to providing a home for genuine policy deliberation and an in-depth exploration of the issues of our time.

MCC Brussels is committed to asking the hard questions and working with people of goodwill from all persuasions to find solutions to our most pressing problems. An initiative of MCC (Mathias Corvinus Collegium), the leading Hungarian educational forum, MCC Brussels was founded in the autumn of 2022 to make a case for celebrating true diversity of thought, diversity of views, and the diversity of European cultures and their values.

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This report explores the European Commission's increasing use of its budgetary powers to promote its political agenda under the guise of advancing 'EU values'. It reveals how the EU leverages programmes to fund non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and think tanks, many of which are explicitly aligned with the Commission's vision of deeper European integration.

This 'propaganda by proxy' is fundamentally undemocratic. In effect, many EU citizens who are opposed to 'more Europe' as the answer to every problem are funding the promotion of greater federalism. More conservative voters and countries, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe, are facing EU-funded promotion of liberal-progressive values they do not share. Elected national governments are coming under attack from groups funded by Brussels.

The report concludes that the EU's use of NGOs as instruments of political advocacy reflects a broader trend of anti-democratic governance.

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