

# GLOBAL RUPTURE

## RECOMMENDATIONS TO MOVE FROM RUPTURE TO RESPONSE

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# THE CONTEXT:

## GLOBAL REALIGNMENT: ONE YEAR ON

Since Donald J. Trump's return to the White House, the extent of the [global realignment](#) and damage to human rights — both domestically and globally — can be seen with greater clarity. The speed and scale of change affecting institutions have been unprecedented.

Within months, the United States had pulled back from international human rights frameworks, signalled that democratic norms would no longer guide its foreign policy, and shifted its focus towards transactional arrangements with governments of all kinds, with a significant impact

### Weaponisation of Law, Targeting Migrants

The Trump re-election brought a shift to [weaponising](#) tariffs, technology, and law itself. In the United States, state institutions are being used to target critics. Law firms, universities, civil society and media organisations have faced financial and legal pressure designed to make [opposition](#) more costly.

The US Immigration and Customs Enforcement carried out detentions and mass deportations, including to El Salvador, where arrivals were received directly into maximum-security prisons. This creates a climate of ['homeland insecurity'](#).

### Far-Right Advances as an Organised Movement

These actions by the Trump administration are effectively inspiring other governments around the globe, which the US administration condones. Victor Orbán's electoral defeat in Hungary comes as a blow to the global far-right movement. However, the formal alliances that Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu has formed with far-right parties in Europe [illustrate](#) how illiberal actors are

### Multilateral vs Multipolar

The average level of liberal democracy worldwide has fallen back, and only [6 per cent of the world's population](#) live in a full democracy. The [2025 SDG Report](#) confirms that none of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals are on course to be achieved by 2030, with 18 per cent of targets having regressed outright since 2015.

on wider populations and international institutions.

The political alliance Donald Trump and other autocrats, anti-rights politicians and populists rely on to advance their policies has been weakened by Viktor Orbán's electoral defeat in Hungary in April 2026.

A [year](#) of "great capitulation" has indeed been met with strong resistance, offering hope and a path to change. We offer possible responses to this rupture, guided by commitment to human rights.

The effects extend well beyond US borders. Since January 2025, US immigration policy has created cascading pressure across transit regions. Thousands have become stranded in Mexican border cities after the suspension of humanitarian admission programmes, leaving them vulnerable to kidnapping, extortion, and sexual violence.

Overall, the attack on migrants in the US has contributed to the normalisation of Europe's [trend](#) of externalising migration policy, regardless of the human rights costs, as evidenced by the forthcoming [Chisinau Political Declaration](#).

building explicit political solidarity across borders. Migrants and refugees are the primary target in the far-right playbook. The assault on gender equality is also a deliberate element of this project: attacks on LGBTQ and women's rights often [precede and accompany](#) authoritarian consolidation.

In this context, the August 2025 Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit in Tianjin — [described](#) as a "showcase of a multipolar world under construction" — presented China as the alternative architect of global order, with Russia, India, and Eurasian leaders gathered around it.

The implications of the US leadership withdrawal from multilateral institutions are immediate. Whilst Europe would have the normative tradition to fill the gap in leadership, the European Union's leadership is yet to overcome a "[crisis of self-confidence](#)" in asserting its values and [leading coalitions of middle powers](#) from around the globe to jointly build a response to the rupture.

Furthermore, Europe's policies since January 2025 have generally not indicated a willingness to

counteract the effects provoked by the Trump administration around the globe; rather, foreign policies have contribute to further accelerate these effects.

The reaction of European countries, notably France, Spain, Canada, may now allow the leadership to emerge. It is a context in which Europe is expected to lead, with ambition and consistency (see, [Case Study](#)).

## Defence Spending Rises, Humanitarian Aid Shrinks

The closure of USAID has been compounded by cuts across Europe. [Sweden](#), long regarded as a model donor, redirected development funds toward security and migration control, eroding decades of principled cooperation; similarly, the [Netherlands](#) and the [United Kingdom](#) and other states have significantly reduced international aid.

The 2026 Global Humanitarian Overview [estimates](#) 239 million people in need of humanitarian assistance — a figure that reflects a narrowing of the definition of need, not an improvement in conditions.

In this "[era of global funding cuts](#)," USD 2.7 trillion was spent on defence. The humanitarian appeal raised only USD 12 billion, the lowest in a decade, leaving millions without support and undoing decades of humanitarian effort.

This trend of defence spending at the expense of soft-power and preventive spending has been exacerbated in Europe by Trump's threats to leave NATO and ambivalence towards Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

## A Global Storm for Civil Society

Financial coercion, legal restriction, digital surveillance, and state-led delegitimation, operating simultaneously in a tense global context, create a [global storm for civil society](#).

Proposals emerge in established democracies to restrict public debate by narrowing the definition of permissible "political activity" — terminology

that is drawn directly from authoritarian playbooks.

This normative contagion — the idea that if the United States and other Western states abandon their standards, others may follow suit — is one of the most significant yet overlooked aspects of the current situation.

## Emerging Response and Civic Mobilisation

"International law is not broken; it's our states' commitment to and defence of it that has faltered," [argues](#) Alex Neve, a prominent Canadian human rights leader.

The UN Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Geneva Conventions are structural pillars. The international human rights system also remains functional yet needs more active leadership. "The great capitulation" of 2025, whereby foreign governments, institutions and corporations quietly yielded to pressure in the hope of protecting elements of the previously order, brought few results.

One year on, across multiple societies and geographies, there is a growing recognition that

the most effective response to authoritarian efforts to consolidate is the powerful combination of [solidarity](#) and the continued exercise of individual agency.

Public protests and organising brought over 8 million people to the streets at "No Kings" protests in 2026. For over 500 days, protestors continue to denounce the power grab in Georgia. Bangladesh saw its first credible national election in almost two decades in February 2026. There is no shortage of [evidence](#) that whilst autocracies have grown, "democratic resistance is growing too," with civil society mobilisation being "a key potential for democratic renewal."

# RECOMMENDATIONS: FROM RUPTURE TO RESPONSE

The following recommendations are the result of the Human Rights Compass Convening of over 25 leading international human rights defenders and experts, which was held on 31 March 2026. The brief and recommendations reflect the discussions at the Convening and complemented by additional research. The policy brief has been reviewed by an editorial committee of Human Rights Compass.

## » Reframe Human Rights as a Security and Stability Imperative

**Parliaments and governments should ensure that human rights are embedded in the security and defence conversations now reshaping European and global policies. Governments and international institutions must recognise that protecting human rights is not a constraint on security — it is a precondition for it.**

Authoritarianism poses a security threat. States that criminalise dissent, undermine the rule of law, and dismantle civil society become unpredictable and dangerous. Framing human rights protection as a key component of European and democratic security is a politically necessary.

Defence spending in Europe is rising quickly: the political reasoning is valid with states facing real threats, including from Russia. However, if left unchecked, this logic prioritises military spending over investing in civil society, democratic institutions, the rule of law, and civic freedoms, which are crucial for long-term societal resilience. A narrowly militarised security approach creates the conditions it aims to prevent.

Civil society organisations should actively engage with security sector actors, build sustained relationships with defence ministries and parliamentary defence committees, and develop the expertise to speak credibly in these forums.

## » Expose and Contest the Authoritarian, Illiberal and Populist Playbook

**Human rights organisations should build the capacity to show — quickly and publicly — where restrictive measures targeting civil society originate and who else has used them. Naming the playbook is a form of resistance.**

The normative contagion is now playing out visibly and rapidly: foreign agents laws, restrictions on foreign funding for civil society, anti-LGBTQ legislation, rollbacks of gender equality protections and attacks on migrants and refugees. These are coordinated policy patterns adapted from a shared authoritarian template.

Authoritarian and illiberal actors share infrastructure, language, and political strategy across borders through forums such as the Conservative Political Action Conference, the Madrid Forum, and informal networks of advisers and model legislation. The pro-democracy response remains far more fragmented.

The human rights community needs the analytical infrastructure, media relationships, and networking and digital communication capacity to deploy it systematically. These structural elements should be part of the new [European Democracy Shield](#).

## » Prepare Western Civil Societies for the Closing of Space at Home

**Civil society organisations in established democracies, supported by their donors and governments, must urgently prepare for the legal, political, and reputational attacks already reaching them and name those attacks as part of the same coordinated authoritarian movement they have long documented elsewhere.**

One of the most striking developments of 2025 was the extent to which the tools and tactics used to restrict civic space restriction have spread into countries where they were not expected, including to target environmental rights defenders and those working on migration issues.

Civil society organisations in established democracies have become accustomed to operating in an environment that is supportive or at least neutral, with an assumption of government cooperation, public funding and secure civic space. That assumption is no longer valid.

In practice, Western civil society organisations need the capabilities that their counterparts in autocratic and illiberal environments have had developed under pressure: legal preparedness, digital security, organisational contingency planning, and readiness to continue operating when government support is withdrawn or becomes hostile. These capabilities take time to build.

The response must also be analytical and political: the legal and rhetorical tools being used against civil society in consolidated democracies are the same tools documented in authoritarian contexts — because they come from the same source.

## » Invest in Civil Society’s Capacity to Help Shape the Public Sphere

**Human rights organisations and civil society donors should invest in their capacity to shape public debate and build civic constituencies, recognising that such engagement is itself a form of rights protection and that a posture of studied neutrality can no longer substitute for it.**

In authoritarian contexts, civil society is explicitly framed as political opposition by the state, which means that their “neutrality” and/or self-censorship does not protect organisations from being targeted. In democratic contexts, the far right is developing a systematic approach to undermine and attempt to defund organisations that engage in civic life — often by inferring that the latter engage in “political activities.”

Human rights advocates should engage consistently in the public conversations that shape what societies consider acceptable, necessary, and just; communicate compellingly across audiences; build knowledge-exchange programmes between civil society and parliamentarians, etc.

The rise of Gen Z as a civic force — driving mobilisation on climate, gender justice, and digital rights — demonstrates that new constituencies are forming. Civil society must meet them where they are: in communities, schools, digital platforms, and the informal spaces where opinions are shaped. The knowledge and credibility that human rights organisations have built through decades of documentation and analysis is exactly what public debate needs. That asset is wasted when it reaches only the like-minded.

## » Build Broad Agile Coalitions and Engage Non-Traditional Actors

**Human rights organisations and their donors must build coalitions that deliberately engage actors from feminist movements, climate justice organisations, trade unions, youth networks, diaspora communities, and private sector. The current moment calls for investing in networks.**

The intersectional insight that has run through the analysis made by human rights organisations — that gender equality, climate justice, economic justice, and civic rights are inseparable — must now be operationalised in coalition-building. The scale and speed of the current attack on civic space makes fragmented responses insufficient: far-right networks connect anti-gender activism with anti-immigration politics, climate scepticism, and attacks on civil society — because they understand that power is consolidated through broad coalition. The pro-rights response must be similarly broad.

Building such coalitions requires a deliberate approach: it starts with clarity about shared values and a focused, common agenda — broad enough to attract diverse partners, specific enough to drive action. It

requires sustained investment in relationships and accepting the fact that the most important partners may not look like traditional human rights allies. Trade unions, diaspora associations, youth movements, faith communities, and private sector organisations (law firms, technology companies, and others who have demonstrated willingness to act on civic values) are all potential coalition members.

Such coalitions should be able to form quickly around a specific issue, pool resources, achieve a defined objective, and then regroup around the next one. Under pressure, such flexibility might be as valuable as a permanent institutional structure.

## » **Defend the Rights, Speak Out and Support Migrants and Refugees**

**Human rights organisations and democratic governments must treat the assault on migrants and refugees as a deliberately engineered political strategy and challenge it accordingly, while holding the line on international protection obligations.**

Anti-migrant rhetoric is a political tool, created and amplified to normalise the use of coercive state power against the most vulnerable and to pave way for the wider erosion of human rights.

Inspired from Hungary's civil society, the human rights movement must say so clearly and invest in values-based counter-narratives that speak to fairness and shared humanity, through legal rebuttals and campaigns that reach audiences.

Democratic governments, particularly those in Europe, must stop treating the reduction of humanitarian budgets and the expansion of border enforcement as a neutral policy adjustment: these are choices to abandon people in danger. They can also backfire as the states in the Global South — hosting most of the world's displaced people — consider closing their borders.

The international protection framework (refugee law, non-refoulement, the right to asylum) must be actively defended. Civil society organisations supporting migrants must be protected from the legislative pressure, modelled on authoritarian templates, that seeks to frame humanitarian work as politically suspect.

## » **Address the Gender Backlash as a Systemic Threat**

**Human rights organisations, civil society funders, and policymakers in democratic states must treat gender equality as a central concern and actively contest the global rollback of gender rights, which is part of the broader authoritarian agenda.**

Attacks on gender rights are part of a coordinated political project, operating through the same transnational networks as other authoritarian and illiberal movements, often serving as a mobilising force. It must be recognised and contested.

Funding for gender rights initiatives must be explicitly protected from the “life-saving only” filter. The consequences of defunding programmes addressing women's health, gender-based violence, and LGBTQ rights are life-threatening in themselves — and withdrawal of political support for this work exacerbates the harm. Democratic governments must resist the expansion of measures modelled on the US Global Gag Rule, which has already decimated programmes across Africa and Latin America. They must also fill the gap left by this withdrawal with committed, unconditional support.

Rather than being invited partners in coalitions, gender equality organisations should be their architects. The feminist policy framework, which is intersectional, people-centred, and focused on redistributing power, offers the human rights movement a model for engaging with wider audiences without compromising on accuracy.

## Case Study

### **A Context in Which Europe is Expected to Lead, with Ambition and Consistency**

**The European Union, its member states, along with their democratic partners including Canada, Norway and Switzerland cannot replace what the United States has withdrawn. However, they can and must lead differently by providing more ambitious and flexible funding, holding themselves to the same standards they expect of others, and forming coalitions capable of sustaining the human rights system during a period of US disengagement.**

The expectations being placed on Europe are real and widespread, and not unreasonable. Governments, human rights defenders, and communities around the world are watching to see whether Europe will rise to the challenge. The risk of a vacuum is very real: if democratic governments do not actively challenge the direction of multilateral institutions, of humanitarian frameworks, and of the normative standards that govern state behaviour, others will do so instead. China has invested systematically in multilateral influence and bilateral relationships centred around development funding without democratic conditionality. It has also developed alternative normative frameworks that exclude independent civil society, free media, and accountability mechanisms. The void created by the United States' political and funding withdrawal presents an opportunity for this approach.

Europe must act on three levels simultaneously:

1. In its foreign policy, Europe must actively contest the authoritarian takeover of multilateral institutions. This involves defending UN human rights bodies, the OSCE, the International Criminal Court, and other such mechanisms, as well as building new alliances with democratic actors from around the globe, who are ready to join and are waiting for leadership. Europe should demonstrate its willingness to lead. Building genuine partnerships with democratic governments and civil society all around the world is both an ethical and a strategic necessity;
2. In terms of funding, the EU and its member states, as well as Canada, Norway, and Switzerland — whose track record in development cooperation and democratic credibility make them essential partners — must accept that the post-USAID world requires a different level of ambition. This does not mean replicating the USAID model, which had its own structural distortions and dependency risks. Rather, it is about funding more strategically and flexibly, and with genuine respect for local ownership. Multi-year core funding, reduced administrative burden, and direct support for frontline civil society organisations are the minimum requirements. As with its commitment to reinforce its defence architecture, Europe's commitment to defending democracy and civic space must be reflected in budget lines, not only in political declarations;
3. In terms of domestic policy, Europe should be held to the same standards it applies externally. Foreign influence laws in democratic member states that restrict civil society's participation in public debate are incompatible with the EU's foundational commitments. Canada, Norway, and Switzerland face equivalent pressures and must resist them with equal firmness. Governments that defend civic space abroad while restricting it at home provide authoritarian governments with a significant rhetorical weapon, as they are quick to point out double standards. The EU's rule of law mechanisms and fundamental rights conditionality attached to EU funds must be applied consistently and without political exception.

**The window for leadership is open. However, given the speed at which the current realignment is moving, this opportunity will not remain open indefinitely.**



## **GLOBAL RUPTURE**

### **Recommendations to Move from Rupture to Response**

Human Rights Compass serves as a platform for real-time human rights policy analysis and strategic coordination through:

- » Convening key human rights stakeholders for coordinated policy advice and action.
- » Publishing policy briefs and analysis about the Top Human Rights Trends to inform and guide advocacy.
- » Promoting principled responses to systemic challenges that undermine international human rights frameworks.

Human Rights Compass's Convenings brought together over 120 human rights defenders, policy analysts and multilateral actors to examine how the ongoing changes affect international justice, foreign aid and human rights protection, and to promote appropriate solutions.

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#### **Cover picture:**

Demonstrators celebrate in front of the Parliament building in Budapest on 12 April 2026.

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