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EU FUNDING FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

WHAT THE EVIDENCE SHOWS – AND WHAT IS AT STAKE

Q&A FOR JOURNALISTS - NOV 2026



EU funding for civil society: What the evidence shows – and what is at stake

Q&A for journalists | Updated November 2026

At a glance

After nearly two years of allegations that the European Commission secretly funded environmental NGOs to lobby EU lawmakers on its behalf, no wrongdoing by the organisations concerned has been established.

Independent investigations have challenged how these allegations were presented, interpreted and amplified. Yet the controversy has continued, with conservative and far-right political actors using the allegations to justify further scrutiny of civil society funding. The EPP subsequently secured the establishment of a small working group within the European Parliament's Budgetary Control Committee, whose November 2026 working document proposes restrictions on EU-funded advocacy and operating grants – without substantiating the central allegations that prompted its creation.

This is part of a wider story about shrinking civic space in Europe. As documented by the European Civic Forum, civil society organisations face growing political pressure, challenges to their legitimacy and restrictions on their funding and participation. Weakening independent civil society risks concentrating political influence among those with the greatest resources, rather than strengthening democratic accountability and the public interest.

Five facts are important:

- **The original allegations remain unsubstantiated.** No evidence has been established that the European Commission instructed environmental NGOs to lobby EU lawmakers on its behalf. The European Court of Auditors identified shortcomings in the transparency and oversight of EU funding, but found no wrongdoing by the NGOs examined. The subsequent parliamentary scrutiny process likewise failed to substantiate the central allegations.
- **Independent investigations have challenged the allegations and how they were reported.** *Follow the Money* identified comparable provisions concerning engagement with policymakers in LIFE grant agreements involving environmental NGOs and for-profit, commercial beneficiaries. Dutch public broadcaster HUMAN documented how the allegations spread across European media, despite questions about their factual basis. The German Press Council formally reprimanded *WELT.DE* over reporting that seriously misled readers by presenting independently proposed NGO activities as instructions from the European Commission.

- **Unsubstantiated allegations were used to justify a parliamentary inquiry.** Following months of allegations promoted by EPP politicians and amplified across European media, the EPP, with support from ECR and Patriots for Europe, secured the establishment of a Scrutiny Working Group (SWG) within Parliament's Budgetary Control Committee in June 2025. Several political groups, notably S&D, Renew, Greens, and Left, boycotted the group over concerns about its political motivation and selective mandate. Its November 2026 working document, authored by EPP and ECR MEPs, does not substantiate the central allegation of Commission-directed NGO lobbying or establish wrongdoing by the organisations examined. Nevertheless, it proposes restrictions on civil society funding and advocacy.
- **The controversy is already affecting independent civil society.** A July 2026 investigation by *Contexte*, based on interviews with 27 Brussels-based NGOs, found no reports of Commission instructions to lobby lawmakers. It did, however, document pressure to remove references to advocacy from funding applications and evidence of self-censorship. Cuts to EU4Health operating grants and uncertainty over future LIFE funding illustrate wider pressures facing public-interest organisations. The European Civic Forum's *Civic Space Report 2026* places these developments in the broader context of political attacks, funding restrictions and shrinking civic space across Europe.
- **Transparency must not become a pretext for restricting independent advocacy.** Civil society organisations support rigorous oversight of EU funding, with consistent standards applying to all beneficiaries – including companies, industry associations and NGOs. But restrictions on legitimate advocacy and operating grants go beyond improving financial transparency. They raise questions about whether independent organisations will retain the resources and freedom to participate in policymaking and hold public authorities accountable.

The SWG's working document, dated 12 November 2026, was prepared by its co-authors, Carlo Fidanza (ECR) and Dirk Gotink (EPP). It does not constitute a position adopted by the European Parliament as a whole.

This Q&A examines how the allegations emerged and spread, how they were used to justify political scrutiny, what the evidence actually establishes, and what the controversy reveals about growing pressures on independent civil society across Europe.

Part I – What has actually been established?

1. What were the original allegations about NGO funding?

The controversy intensified in late 2024 and early 2025, when conservative politicians and media outlets advanced allegations that the European Commission had financed environmental organisations to lobby EU institutions in support of Green Deal legislation. These claims became the basis of a wider political controversy over EU funding for civil society, despite the absence of evidence establishing the alleged scheme of Commission-directed lobbying.

The central allegation was not simply that NGOs had received public funding or advocated for environmental protection. Both activities are lawful and legitimate, subject to applicable rules. The more serious suggestion was that the Commission had directed independent organisations to lobby lawmakers on its behalf, using EU grants to generate political support for its legislative agenda. That distinction is crucial, as receiving an EU grant, independently advocating for legislation and being instructed by a public authority to lobby on its behalf are three different things.

Despite sustained political and media scrutiny, the alleged scheme of Commission-directed lobbying has not been substantiated. Independent investigations have also challenged the selective interpretation of the grant agreements used to support the allegations.

In March 2025, *Follow the Money* compared LIFE funding agreements involving an environmental organisation and the agricultural company BayWa. The environmental organisation's work programme referred to influencing decision-making on Green Deal legislation, while BayWa's agreement referred to raising policymakers' awareness of regulations that could hinder its commercial objectives.

The comparison showed that provisions concerning engagement with policymakers were not unique to environmental NGOs. The investigation also examined the role of EPP MEP Monika Hohlmeier, who had been prominent in advancing allegations about environmental NGO funding while serving on BayWa's supervisory board.

The relevant question is therefore not whether an EU-funded beneficiary engages with policymakers, but whether the funding arrangements comply with applicable rules – and whether those rules are applied consistently to all beneficiaries.

Further reading: *Follow the Money* – Green lobby controversy backfires on EPP lawmaker, 24 March 2025.

2. What did the European Court of Auditors actually find?

In April 2025, the European Court of Auditors (ECA) published Special Report 11/2025, examining the transparency of EU funding awarded to NGOs working on internal EU policies. The auditors identified shortcomings in the EU's funding transparency and oversight systems, including incomplete information about funding recipients, weaknesses in how organisations

were classified, insufficient public disclosure of certain funded advocacy activities and shortcomings in verification procedures.

These were findings about the Commission's funding management and oversight systems – not findings of wrongdoing by the organisations receiving grants. Civil society organisations support addressing these shortcomings. Public funding should be transparent, properly accounted for and subject to effective oversight. Crucially, however, transparency and accountability should apply to all recipients of EU funding – not selectively to NGOs.

Companies, industry associations, research institutions, public authorities and civil society organisations all receive EU funding through various programmes and instruments. Appropriate financial controls, disclosure requirements and accountability standards should apply consistently across beneficiaries.

The ECA's audit did not establish the alleged scheme of Commission-directed NGO lobbying, nor did it find that environmental organisations receiving EU grants had engaged in unlawful lobbying or other wrongdoing. Its findings concerned shortcomings in the Commission's management and oversight of funding. Yet, somehow, the political controversy has continued to focus heavily on the organisations receiving these grants, rather than the administrative weaknesses identified by the auditors.

Source: European Court of Auditors – Special Report 11/2025.

3. Did the Commission instruct NGOs to lobby MEPs?

No evidence has been established that it did. The Commission has denied instructing or requiring NGOs receiving EU grants to lobby Members of the European Parliament on its behalf. It has stated that NGOs independently determine their work programmes and political positions.

Under LIFE, organisations develop and submit proposed work programmes adopted independently by their governance bodies (e.g. general assemblies), which are assessed against the programme's objectives and eligibility criteria. Once approved, these programmes form part of the grant agreement and provide the basis for reporting and monitoring. The Commission's approval of an independently proposed work programme does not establish that it instructed an organisation to undertake those activities or determined the political positions it should advocate.

Independent reporting provides further evidence. In July 2026, *Contexte* published an investigation based on interviews with 27 Brussels-based NGOs. None reported having received lobbying instructions from the Commission.

The Commission has also confirmed in written answers to parliamentary questions that NGOs were not instructed to lobby lawmakers and remain free to determine and implement their own activities, including advocacy. Its guidance on EU grant agreements also makes clear that presenting policy positions to EU institutions must remain the choice of beneficiaries, rather than a requirement imposed by the funding authority.

The SWG's November 2026 working document itself acknowledges that concrete proof of Commission requirements to undertake the advocacy activities identified was not found. Independent advocacy is not the same as Commission-directed lobbying.

Further reading:

- *Contexte* – Don't say 'lobbying': The Commission's push to soften NGO language, 16 July 2026
- EUobserver – EU Commission defends NGO funding amid far-right attacks
- POLITICO – Fact-check on European Commission funding and NGO lobbying

4. Is it illegal for an NGO receiving EU funding to engage in advocacy or lobbying?

No.

Advocacy and interest representation are legitimate parts of democratic decision-making, provided applicable funding, transparency and other legal requirements are respected. An important distinction lies in the interests being represented. Public-interest advocacy seeks to advance objectives such as environmental protection, public health, human rights and social justice, or to represent communities whose voices might otherwise go unheard. These principles are rooted in the Aarhus Convention.

Commercial lobbying, by contrast, typically seeks to advance the economic or business interests of specific companies or sectors. Such interests can sometimes conflict with broader public-interest objectives. Both can involve engaging with policymakers, presenting evidence and seeking to influence legislation. Both can fall within the EU's broad definition of lobbying or interest representation.

What distinguishes public-interest advocacy is its purpose – not the absence of attempts to influence policy. Civil society organisations routinely contribute scientific evidence, technical expertise, policy recommendations and public-interest perspectives to legislative debates. EU funding can support eligible activities and operating costs, including certain forms of advocacy. However, grant agreements must not require beneficiaries to lobby EU institutions on the Commission's behalf.

The Commission's May 2024 guidance addresses the potential reputational risks of making specifically targeted advocacy a condition of funding. It does not impose a general prohibition on lawful, independently determined advocacy, nor does it retrospectively invalidate existing agreements. Organisations receiving EU funding must remain free to develop their own positions, including positions critical of the institutions providing their funding.

5. Have the original media allegations been independently scrutinised?

Yes.

Several independent media investigations have examined how the allegations originated, how grant agreements were interpreted and how the story spread.

HUMAN / Medialogica

In July 2025, Dutch public broadcaster HUMAN's investigative programme *Medialogica* reconstructed how allegations prominently reported by *De Telegraaf* spread through European media and politics.

According to the programme, the story was reproduced more than 200 times by media outlets in almost every EU member state. Much of this reporting appeared in early 2025, before the SWG was established in June that year.

The documentary examined whether the grant documents had been interpreted correctly and why the allegations continued circulating despite questions about their factual basis. Contributors included MEPs, journalists, legal experts and representatives of civil society, including EEB's Faustine Bas-Defossez.

Follow the Money

In March 2025, *Follow the Money* reported that confidential NGO grant agreements underlying the controversy had been leaked to the press rather than initially shared with Parliament's Budgetary Control Committee through the established procedure.

The publication also compared an environmental organisation's LIFE agreement with one involving BayWa, identifying comparable provisions concerning engagement with policymakers. It reported that EPP MEP Monika Hohlmeier, a prominent critic of environmental NGO funding, sat on BayWa's supervisory board.

The investigation raised questions about why environmental organisations were singled out when comparable provisions existed in grant agreements involving for-profit,commercial beneficiaries.

Euronews

In June 2025, *Euronews* reported on the original *Welt* allegations, the Commission's response and concerns raised by Transparency International EU about the alleged leaking of confidential grant documents. These concerns about leaks were allegations at the time, rather than established findings of misconduct by individual MEPs.

German Press Council

In December 2025, the German Press Council formally reprimanded *Welt.de* over its reporting of alleged secret EU contracts for NGO lobbying.

The ruling concerned journalistic standards and the presentation of the relationship between independently proposed activities and Commission instructions. Taken together, these investigations provide important context about how the allegations emerged, were amplified and were subsequently challenged.

European Civic Forum

The European Civic Forum's *Civic Space Report 2026* places the EU NGO-funding controversy within a wider pattern of pressure on civil society. It documents how unfounded allegations about NGO funding have moved from political rhetoric into parliamentary scrutiny, alongside attempts to restrict funding and independent advocacy. The report identifies similar developments in several European countries, including Austria, Germany, Hungary and Slovakia.

Further reading:

- HUMAN / Medialogica – Groene lobby, grote ophef, 8 July 2025
- *Follow the Money* – Green lobby controversy backfires on EPP lawmaker, 24 March 2025
- *Euronews* – Battle over NGO financing heats up again in Brussels, 12 June 2025
- German Press Council – December 2025 decisions
- The European Civic Forum's *Civic Space Report 2026*

Part II – The consequences for independent civil society

6. Has the controversy already changed how NGOs operate?

Independent reporting indicates that it has. In July 2026, *Contexte* published an investigation based on interviews with 27 Brussels-based NGOs.

According to the investigation:

- Around half reported that Commission officials had advised or asked them to remove references to lobbying or advocacy from funding applications – even though advocacy activities are legal and legitimate.
- Around a third reported avoiding such terminology themselves amid the hostile political environment.
- Some reported being asked to acknowledge potential reputational risks associated with certain advocacy activities.

The investigation also documented uncertainty about how reputational risk would be assessed and whether activities might subsequently be deemed ineligible for funding. The Commission defended its guidance as a means of improving contractual clarity and transparency, and disputed suggestions that it was responding to political pressure.

These findings document how the wider political controversy is affecting the way independent organisations describe and approach their work. The consequences are already visible. NGOs are being asked to avoid the very language that describes part of their work, while others are choosing to censor themselves. And this is happening despite no evidence that the Commission instructed them to lobby on its behalf.

Source: *Contexte* – Don't say 'lobbying': The Commission's push to soften NGO language, 16 July 2026.

7. What does shrinking civic space mean in practice?

Civic space refers to the conditions that allow people and organisations to associate, express views, participate in public affairs and hold decision-makers accountable.

Shrinking civic space can involve restrictions on funding, disproportionate administrative requirements, legal intimidation, exclusion from consultation processes or political pressure affecting organisations' independence.

The consequences are not limited to organisations closing their doors. They can also include reduced capacity to conduct research, reluctance to challenge public authorities, difficulties retaining specialist staff and fewer opportunities for communities to make their views heard.

In May 2025, *Follow the Money* investigated the pressures facing European civil society, examining funding disputes, political developments and the resources available to different actors seeking to influence EU policymaking. The investigation also highlighted wider concerns about the operating environment for civil society across Europe, including developments in national funding policies. Separately, the European Public Health Alliance reported significant staff reductions following the removal of EU4Health operating grants in 2025. That funding decision illustrates how changes in public financing can affect organisations' capacity to contribute to policymaking.

Further reading:

- *Follow the Money* – 'Trump-style' campaign against EU civil society fuels fears for European democracy, 5 May 2025
- *Follow the Money* – How Europe's largest party made an enemy out of NGOs, podcast, 26 August 2025
- EUobserver – How NGOs die: Europe's playbook for dismantling democracy, Alberto Alemanno, 28 October 2025

8. Why does this matter beyond the organisations receiving funding?

Independent civil society organisations contribute to how European laws are developed, scrutinised, implemented and enforced. Their work includes identifying pollution, producing scientific and legal analysis, supporting communities, challenging failures to implement legislation and bringing evidence to public authorities. They also enable participation between elections, particularly for people and communities that may lack the resources to engage directly with EU institutions.

Independent reporting has documented substantial differences in the resources available to different types of interest representatives. In May 2025, *Follow the Money* analysed EU Transparency Register data and reported approximately:

- **€163 million** in annual lobbying expenditure declared by NGOs.
- **€647 million** declared by companies.
- **€491 million** declared by trade associations.

These are historical, self-reported figures and do not capture every form of political influence. Nevertheless, they illustrate substantial differences in declared lobbying resources.

The same investigation cited Transparency International EU data showing that only 1,293 of 7,517 Commission lobbying meetings recorded between December 2024 and April 2025 involved organisations without commercial interests. These figures provide context for the unequal resources and access available to different actors participating in EU policymaking.

In November 2025, senior EEB representatives examined the wider implications in an EUobserver opinion article, *What happens after Europe's NGOs are dismantled?* The article argued that weakening independent civil society would have consequences extending to public health, environmental protection, consumer safeguards, transparency and democratic accountability.

Further reading:

- *Follow the Money* – 'Trump-style' campaign against EU civil society fuels fears for European democracy, 5 May 2025
- EUobserver – What happens after Europe's NGOs are dismantled?, Patrick ten Brink, Faustine Bas-Defossez, Patrizia Heidegger, Christian Skrivervik, and Ruby Silk, 4 November 2025

Part III – The European Parliament's Scrutiny Working Group

9. Why was the Scrutiny Working Group established, and what authority does it have?

The Scrutiny Working Group did not emerge in isolation. It was established in June 2025 following months of allegations that the European Commission had secretly funded environmental NGOs to lobby EU lawmakers on its behalf. These allegations had been advanced by politicians involved in Parliament's Committee on Budgetary Control, including EPP representatives, and amplified across European media.

Independent investigations by *Follow the Money* and HUMAN subsequently challenged the interpretation of the underlying grant agreements and documented how the controversy had spread.

Nevertheless, the allegations became the basis for a formal parliamentary scrutiny process, established at the request of the EPP. The SWG operates within the European Parliament's Committee on Budgetary Control (CONT). Its mandate covered EU grant agreements involving NGOs and other entities, with particular attention to advocacy directed towards EU institutions.

The group held four substantive meetings between November 2025 and April 2026, and its mandate was subsequently extended to 26 November 2026. Its co-authors, Carlo Fidanza (ECR) and Dirk Gotink (EPP), produced a working document dated 12 November 2026.

Under the group's procedures, the document must undergo the relevant parliamentary consideration before any conclusions can be attributed to Parliament as an institution. The SWG cannot itself change EU funding rules, impose sanctions or establish legal wrongdoing. Its working document does not constitute a position adopted by the European Parliament as a whole.

Any subsequent political, legislative or budgetary action would require separate institutional decisions.

Source: European Parliament – CONT Scrutiny Working Group.

10. Why has the working group's selective focus been challenged?

The SWG's establishment, mandate and procedures have been politically contested.

S&D, Renew Europe and Greens/EFA boycotted the process, while The Left did not appoint a member. Objections raised around the inquiry included concerns about its political motivation, selective mandate and procedures.

A central criticism concerns the inquiry's focus. If the objective is to improve transparency and accountability in EU funding, scrutiny should apply consistently to all recipients of public money, including companies, industry associations, research institutions and civil society organisations.

Instead, the detailed examination concentrated on NGO funding and advocacy, following allegations that remained unsubstantiated. This is particularly relevant given independent investigations showing that comparable provisions concerning engagement with policymakers exist in grant agreements involving commercial beneficiaries.

The SWG's mandate was not formally limited to NGOs. Its working document acknowledges that the examination of other entities, including commercial beneficiaries and consultancy contracts, was opened but not completed. The investigation also relied principally on evidence provided by the Commission, executive agencies and the European Court of Auditors. The organisations whose grant agreements were examined were not invited to present their perspectives.

The non-participation of several political groups further underscores that the working document should not be presented as reflecting a broad parliamentary consensus.

11. Did the SWG establish wrongdoing by NGOs?

No wrongdoing by the NGOs examined was established in the SWG's working document.

Crucially, the investigation did not substantiate the central allegation that the European Commission instructed environmental organisations to lobby EU lawmakers on its behalf. The report acknowledges that concrete proof of Commission requirements to undertake the advocacy activities identified **was not found**.

It examined 28 LIFE operating-grant agreements, identifying references to advocacy or lobbying directed at EU institutions in 27, to European elections, the new Commission or Parliament in 19, and to implementation of EU legislation or strategies in 12. Five agreements included strategic litigation as part of beneficiaries' activities.

These findings describe activities included in work programmes. They do not establish unlawful conduct, misuse of public funds or Commission-directed lobbying.

The 28 agreements were examined in the context of the Commission's screening of grant provisions against its guidance. They should not be treated as a representative sample of all LIFE grants. The Commission's screening found no breach of the applicable legal framework in the clauses concerned. The SWG's principal findings instead concern grant design, transparency, oversight and what its authors consider institutional and reputational risks.

The working document also acknowledges that it could not reliably quantify expenditure specifically attributable to targeted advocacy or independently establish that EU funding caused a particular legislative outcome.

Nevertheless, its 23 recommendations include restricting operating grants, introducing binding restrictions on targeted advocacy, and prohibiting EU funding for lobbying directed at EU and national institutions. These are substantive political proposals, not solely technical improvements to financial oversight.

In February 2026, EUobserver quoted SWG co-author Dirk Gotink as saying:

> “The problem that we’re pursuing here is not to establish whether things are illegal, it is to establish whether politically it is undesirable.”

Gotink's statement is revealing. The investigation was not primarily about proving that NGOs had broken the law. It was about deciding whether their advocacy should receive public funding at all. And that is precisely what makes the SWG's recommendations so significant. After nearly two years of allegations, no wrongdoing by NGOs has been established. Yet the proposed response is to restrict their funding and advocacy.

This raises a fundamental question: why has an investigation that did not establish wrongdoing by NGOs resulted in recommendations to restrict civil society funding and advocacy?

Further reading: EUobserver – Why right-wing inquiry into Europe's NGOs was never about transparency.

12. Has the wider European Parliament already taken a position?

On 29 April 2026, a majority of MEPs rejected amendments targeting civil society funding during Parliament's budget discharge proceedings. This demonstrates that related proposals have not secured majority support across Parliament.

Thus, the SWG's recommendations should not be presented as representing the European Parliament as a whole. This distinction is key because a working document produced by

members of a scrutiny group is not equivalent to a position adopted by the Parliament. It is rather an indicator of political preference by some.

Further reading: EEB – European Parliament rejects renewed attacks on civil society.

Part IV – EU funding, transparency and participation

13. Why does the EU fund civil society organisations?

EU funding supports a wide range of activities delivered by civil society organisations, including research, public participation, environmental protection, consumer rights, social inclusion and monitoring the implementation of EU legislation.

Unlike funding tied to individual projects, operating grants help organisations maintain the expertise, networks and institutional capacity needed to contribute consistently to EU policymaking. This includes bringing together evidence from members and communities, monitoring the implementation of legislation and responding to emerging challenges.

Civil society participation is also grounded in European and international law. Article 11 of the Treaty on European Union requires EU institutions to give citizens and representative associations opportunities to make their views known and to maintain open, transparent and regular dialogue with civil society.

The LIFE Regulation explicitly recognises the contribution of environmental NGOs to developing, implementing, monitoring and enforcing EU environmental legislation. It provides for operating grants to support non-profit organisations working towards these objectives.

The Aarhus Convention, to which the EU and its Member States are parties, establishes rights relating to environmental information, public participation and access to justice.

Environmental organisations play an important role not only in shaping environmental laws, but also in ensuring they are properly implemented and enforced, including through legal action where appropriate. The fact that operating grants support an organisation's functioning rather than a single project is a deliberate feature of this funding instrument. It does not remove beneficiaries' obligations to comply with grant conditions, maintain appropriate financial records or undergo applicable checks and audits.

Importantly, funding is not an automatic entitlement. Organisations must meet eligibility requirements, comply with their grant agreements and account for how public money is used. At the same time, supporting independent civil society is about enabling meaningful democratic participation and public accountability, ensuring that decisions affecting citizens are informed by a plurality of voices and public-interest perspectives.

Sources:

- Article 11 TEU – EUR-Lex
- LIFE Regulation (EU) 2021/783 – EUR-Lex
- Aarhus Convention – UNECE

14. Are NGOs subject to transparency and financial reporting requirements?

Yes.

NGOs receiving EU grants must comply with applicable eligibility, reporting, financial management and audit requirements. Organisations carrying out activities covered by the EU Transparency Register are also subject to its applicable disclosure requirements, many of which NGOs pushed to establish in the first place.

The register treats different categories of interest representatives differently. Non-commercial organisations generally report financial information differently from companies, consultancies and commercial interest representatives. These differences should not be confused with an exemption from transparency.

NGOs support transparency and accountability. Public funding should be subject to appropriate oversight, reliable reporting and effective financial controls. The same principles should apply consistently to all recipients of EU funding, including for-profit, commercial beneficiaries.

The ECA's 2025 findings identified areas where the EU's funding transparency and oversight systems should improve. Improving transparency across EU funding is a shared objective. Singling out NGOs for disproportionate scrutiny is a different matter.

15. How much EU funding goes to NGOs?

The ECA reported that approximately €7.4 *billion* was awarded to NGOs across selected EU internal policy areas during 2021–2023, including funding managed by the Commission and Member States. The auditors cautioned that this figure should be treated carefully because the underlying data were incomplete and inconsistent.

It is important not to confuse that multiannual figure with the much smaller sums allocated to operating grants for environmental organisations. For example, *Contexte* reported that approximately €17 *million* was allocated to 31 environmental organisations in 2026. The SWG's November 2026 working document examined 28 LIFE operating grants with a combined value of approximately €13.08 *million* – a mere 0.0066% of the 2025 annual EU budget.

Moreover, that €13.08 million represents the total value of the agreements examined – not an established amount spent on lobbying. The SWG itself acknowledged that the available evidence did not permit reliable quantification of expenditure specifically attributable to targeted advocacy.

Operating grants are one funding instrument among many. They should not be conflated with the entire LIFE programme or with project grants across other EU programmes. Also, not every organisation receiving EU funding is primarily engaged in advocacy. Many deliver research, services, social programmes, environmental projects and other activities.

Sources: European Court of Auditors – Special Report 11/2025; *Contexte*, 16 July 2026; SWG working document, 12 November 2026.

16. Do NGOs support greater transparency and accountability in EU funding?

Yes.

Civil society organisations support transparency, accountability and effective oversight of public expenditure.

They have also proposed practical improvements to EU funding transparency, including better integration of the Financial Transparency System with other EU funding databases, clearer classification of beneficiary types, and comparable disclosure requirements for grants and procurement contracts.

These improvements would make it easier to scrutinise how public money is allocated and spent across the EU funding system – not just funding awarded to NGOs. EU funding should be subject to clear reporting requirements, reliable public information, appropriate financial controls and effective audits. Where shortcomings are identified, they should be addressed.

But transparency and accountability must apply to all recipients of EU funding, not just NGOs. Companies, industry associations, research institutions, and civil society organisations should all be subject to appropriate, consistently applied standards. And there is no contradiction between rigorous financial oversight and independent advocacy. Receiving public funding does not mean an organisation should lose its ability to scrutinise public authorities, challenge legislation or advocate for different policy choices. Nor should the application of transparency rules depend on whether a beneficiary's political positions are welcomed by those in power.

This distinction is particularly relevant to the SWG's recommendations. Measures such as better-connected funding databases, clearer beneficiary classifications, accessible grant information and proportionate financial controls can strengthen accountability across all recipients of public funding.

Restrictions on advocacy or operating grants raise a completely different question: whether they would limit the ability of independent organisations to participate in policymaking, scrutinise public authorities and represent public-interest concerns. The Commission's November 2025 Civil Society Strategy provides an additional benchmark for protecting meaningful civil society participation.

Fundamentally, the issue is not whether NGOs should be accountable. They already are, and support stronger transparency. The issue is whether accountability is applied consistently or selectively used to constrain independent civil society.

Questions worth asking

The controversy raises important questions for policymakers, journalists and the public:

1. After nearly two years of allegations, what evidence has actually been established that environmental NGOs acted unlawfully or were instructed by the Commission to lobby on its behalf?
2. Why were comparable provisions in grant agreements involving commercial beneficiaries not subjected to the same level of political and media scrutiny?
3. How did allegations that were subsequently challenged by independent investigations become the basis for a formal parliamentary scrutiny process?
4. Why did such a small share of the EU budget become a political priority? The SWG examined 28 LIFE operating grants worth approximately €13.08 million – equivalent to just 0.0066% of the EU's €199.4 billion 2025 annual budget. What justified this level of political attention, particularly when the central allegations remained unsubstantiated? Were comparable levels of scrutiny applied to larger funding streams and other beneficiaries?
5. Why were the organisations whose grant agreements were examined not invited to present their perspectives to the SWG?
6. Why did the working group's detailed analysis concentrate on NGOs while its examination of other funding recipients remained incomplete?
7. Which of the SWG's recommendations address shortcomings in the Commission's funding administration, and which would introduce new restrictions on civil society participation?
8. What would restrictions on operating grants and independently determined advocacy mean for organisations working on environmental protection, public health, consumer rights and democratic accountability – and for society and democracy more broadly?
9. How will EU institutions ensure that funding transparency and oversight apply consistently to companies, industry associations, consultancies and civil society organisations?

10. What responsibility do political actors and media organisations have when allegations that have not been substantiated continue to shape public debate and institutional decisions?

About this document

This background Q&A draws on European Court of Auditors findings, European Commission statements, the European Parliament's SWG working document dated 12 November 2026, EU legislation and independent media investigations.

The SWG working document reflects the co-authors' findings and recommendations. Its status should be distinguished from any subsequent decisions by the Committee on Budgetary Control or the European Parliament as a whole.

Last updated: 14 November 2026.

Selected sources and further reading

Background resources on EU funding for civil society, the allegations surrounding environmental NGOs, the European Parliament's Scrutiny Working Group and the wider implications for democratic participation.

1. Origins of the controversy and establishment of the SWG

These sources document how allegations about Commission-funded NGO lobbying emerged, spread through European media and politics, and contributed to the establishment of a parliamentary scrutiny process.

Political and institutional sources

- EPP Group – EPP Group proposes new parliamentary structure to scrutinise NGO funding, 19 June 2025
- European Parliament – CONT Scrutiny Working Group
- European Parliament – Scrutiny Working Group working document, Carlo Fidanza (ECR) and Dirk Gotink (EPP), 12 November 2026. *Primary document; attach the working document alongside this bibliography.*

Independent investigations and reporting

- Follow the Money – Green lobby controversy backfires on EPP lawmaker, Hans Wetzels and Simon Van Dorpe, 24 March 2025
- HUMAN / Medialogica – Groene lobby, grote ophef, 8 July 2025
- Euronews – Battle over NGO financing heats up again in Brussels, 12 June 2025
- POLITICO – Fact-check on European Commission funding and NGO lobbying
- EUobserver – EU Commission defends NGO funding amid far-right attacks
- EUobserver – Why right-wing inquiry into Europe's NGOs was never about transparency

2. EU funding, transparency and accountability

Institutional sources

- European Court of Auditors – Special Report 11/2025: Transparency of EU funding granted to NGOs, April 2025
- EU Financial Regulation (EU, Euratom) 2024/2509
- EU Transparency Register – Interinstitutional Agreement (2021)
- European Commission – Parliamentary answer on NGO lobbying instructions
- European Commission – Parliamentary answer on NGO advocacy activities
- European Commission – Guidance on funding activities related to EU legislation and policy, May 2024
- European Parliament – Resolution (EU) 2026/1577 on the 2024 EU budget discharge, adopted 29 April 2026. *See particularly paragraphs 14–16 and 157–160 on civil society, LIFE funding and consistent scrutiny across beneficiaries.*

Independent reporting and media accountability

- EUobserver – EU auditors criticise lack of transparency in NGO funding
- German Press Council – December 2025 decisions

3. Independent advocacy and democratic participation

Legal and institutional sources

- Article 11 of the Treaty on European Union – Democratic participation and dialogue with civil society
- LIFE Regulation (EU) 2021/783 – Legal framework for EU environment and climate funding, including operating grants for non-profit organisations
- Aarhus Convention – UNECE – Access to environmental information, public participation and access to justice
- European Commission – EU Civil Society Strategy, November 2025

4. Shrinking civic space and the consequences for independent organisations

Independent investigations and reporting

- Contexte – Don't say 'lobbying': The Commission's push to soften NGO language, Louise Guillot, 16 July 2026
- Follow the Money – 'Trump-style' campaign against EU civil society fuels fears for European democracy, Hans Wetzels and Lise Witteman, 5 May 2025
- Follow the Money – How Europe's largest party made an enemy out of NGOs, **podcast, 26 August 2025**

Analysis and opinion

- EUobserver – How NGOs die: Europe's playbook for dismantling democracy, Alberto Alemanno, 28 October 2025
- EUobserver – What happens after Europe's NGOs are dismantled?, Patrick ten Brink, Patrizia Heidegger, Faustine Bas-Defossez, Christian Skrivervik and Ruby Silk, 4 November 2025
- European Civic Forum – *Civic Space Report 2026*

This reading list brings together primary institutional documents, independent investigations, reporting and opinion pieces. The sources reflect different perspectives and should be read in their original context.