

Recognizing Repression: How Citizens Judge Restrictions on Civil Society in Turkey, Hungary and Slovakia

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Key message

Governments often present restrictions on civil society as targeted, administrative, or necessary for national security—features that may make coercive measures appear less repressive. A survey experiment with 5,175 people in Turkey, Hungary, and Slovakia, however, finds that these legitimization cues did not systematically make restrictions appear less repressive or increase public support for them. Selectively targeting foreign-funded organizations had almost no average effect, while security-oriented justifications, if anything, made the coercive character of the measures slightly more visible. The larger divide was not how the restriction was packaged, but where respondents stood politically: people who trusted the incumbent government more tended to see the same restrictions as considerably less repressive.

The problem

Governments seeking to constrain civil society do not always shut down organizations or ban their activities altogether. Contemporary restrictions on civil society often take the form of registration and reporting duties, financial-disclosure rules, funding restrictions, permit requirements, inspections and penalties. Each of these measures can be defended individually as routine enforcement, resembling ordinary administration, even when the cumulative burden is severe.ⁱ Their political significance depends partly on how they are designed, applied, and understood.

Slovakia illustrates the difficulty. In 2025, parliament adopted new reporting and disclosure requirements for NGOs. After the Constitutional Court subsequently found the contested legislation unconstitutional, the government announced a large-scale audit of NGO financing and operations using existing administrative powers.ⁱⁱ Audits, procurement checks or data-protection investigations can of course be legitimate forms of oversight. The challenge is determining when ordinary regulatory tools are applied neutrally and proportionately and when their cumulative use places political pressure on civil society.

Cases like this create a practical difficulty for citizens, journalists, civil-society organizations, human-rights monitors and international organizations: legitimate regulation and political pressure can operate through the same administrative language and institutions.

In this environment, it is important to understand whether people interpret the measure as legitimate regulation or as an attempt to constrain independent civil society. Public recognition of repression can affect whether restrictive policies generate opposition, indifference, or acceptance. Yet we know considerably more about how governments justify restrictions than about whether those justifications actually change how ordinary citizens perceive them. The study therefore asks a straightforward question: *Can governments make restrictive measures against civil society appear less repressive simply by changing whom they target or how they justify them?*

What the study did

Between January and June 2026, I conducted a preregistered survey experiment in Turkey, Hungary, and Slovakia. The final sample consisted of 1,959 respondents in Turkey, 1,600 in Hungary, and 1,616 in Slovakia, for a total of 5,175 participants. The surveys used quota-based online samples designed to approximate key demographic characteristics of the adult population.

Participants read a short news scenario describing new government regulations on civil-society organizations. The proposed measures required organizations to disclose financial resources and obtain permission before organizing public events. Respondents were randomly shown different versions of the policy along two dimensions: who was targeted and how the restrictions were justified.

First, the regulations applied either to all civil-society organizations or only to foreign-funded organizations. Second, the government justified the measures either through administrative transparency and oversight or through national security, foreign interference, or sovereignty, with the wording adapted to each national context.

Participants then evaluated how repressive they considered the regulations, how much they supported them, and how much they thought the measures could affect the freedoms of ordinary citizens. All these outcomes were measured on 0–10 scales.

What the study found

Selective targeting did not make the restrictions look less repressive

Across all three countries, applying the restrictions only to foreign-funded organizations rather than to all civil-society organizations produced neither a clear increase in public support nor a clear reduction in perceived repression. Specifically, in the pooled three-country analysis, targeting only foreign-funded organizations changed perceived repression by just –0.03 points on the 0–10 scale.

There was, however, one country-specific pattern. In Turkey, respondents exposed to restrictions targeted only at foreign-funded organizations were less likely to believe that the policy would affect the freedoms of ordinary citizens, even though they did not consider the restrictions themselves less repressive. This pattern did not appear consistently in Hungary or Slovakia and should therefore be treated cautiously. It nevertheless raises an important possibility: selective targeting may sometimes create distance from the consequences of repression without persuading citizens that the policy itself is legitimate.

Security arguments did not legitimate the restrictions

The security and sovereignty justifications also did not make the measures look less repressive. In the pooled sample, the point estimates consistently moved in the opposite direction: towards greater perceived repression, lower support, and greater perceived consequences for ordinary citizens.

These effects are small and individually imprecise, so they should not be read as evidence that security rhetoric reliably backfires. The defensible conclusion is narrower: the security and sovereignty justifications tested here produced no evidence of making restrictions appear more legitimate. If anything, they tended to make their coercive character somewhat more salient.

Political alignment mattered far more than presentation

A much stronger pattern concerned respondents' existing relationship with government. Across Turkey, Hungary, and Slovakia, people who expressed greater trust in the incumbent government tended to perceive the same civil-society restrictions as less repressive. In the pooled sample, moving from the 25th to the 75th percentile of government trust was associated with 1.55 points lower perceived repression on the same 0–10 scale.

This comparison is, however, observational: the experiment does not show that government trust causes these differences. Nor did politically aligned respondents consistently react more strongly to the experimental messages. Instead, the findings suggest that substantial political differences in how citizens judge restrictive policies can already exist before a particular justification or framing is introduced.

Why the findings matter

The results challenge a simple assumption about contemporary repression: that attaching the right justification or narrowing the target will necessarily make restrictive policies acceptable to the public.

At least in these experiments, citizens were not easily persuaded by short descriptions portraying restrictions as security measures or as interventions aimed only at foreign-

funded organizations. This suggests limits to the immediate persuasive power of such legitimization strategies.

But this should not be read as evidence that legal, administrative, or selective forms of repression are politically unimportant. If evaluations are already structured by political alignment before any justification is offered, restrictive measures may retain substantial support without persuading government skeptics. Where many citizens already trust the government, justificatory language may matter less because it converts opponents than because it provides a vocabulary through which existing supporters can understand or defend the measure. This is one possible interpretation of the findings rather than something the experiment directly tests.

Besides, administrative and legal instruments can still constrain and impose substantial burdens on civil society through their operation, regardless of how citizens evaluate them. Government justifications may also matter cumulatively, through repeated political communication, partisan media, legal institutions, or audiences outside the domestic public, which is beyond what a one-shot survey experiment can test.

The findings also underline the difference between recognizing a restriction as repressive and believing that its consequences extend to oneself. The Turkish result suggests that selective targeting can potentially make repression appear socially or politically distant even when citizens recognize its coercive character.

These findings do not establish that governments deliberately adopt particular regulations in order to conceal repression. Nor should they be read as evidence about the motives behind any specific law, audit or investigation. The experiment only shows conditions under which citizens are more or less likely to perceive state action as repressive and identifies how specific features of hypothetical policies affect public perceptions; it does not identify governments' intentions.

Policy implications

- **Assess what a policy does, not only how it is labeled.** The limited short-term effects of framing provide little reason to treat an official administrative or security justification as evidence that a restriction is proportionate or politically neutral. Journalists and monitors should examine the observable record: which organizations are inspected, how often, according to what criteria, with what findings, and with what cumulative compliance burden.
- **Recognize that political polarization shapes interpretation.** Differences associated with prior government trust were much larger than the experimental effects of the policy cues tested here. For international organizations and human-rights bodies, levels of public support or opposition should therefore be interpreted alongside political alignment rather than treated as straightforward evidence of how citizens assess the legal or substantive merits of a restriction.

- **Track cumulative administrative pressure.** Individual inspections, reporting requirements, or funding controls may each appear routine. Human-rights monitors and democratic institutions should therefore also examine patterns across agencies and over time: whether enforcement is disproportionate, concentrated on particular organizations, or cumulatively constraining civil-society activity.
- **Distinguish recognition from perceived personal stake.** Citizens may recognize a restriction as repressive without believing that it affects them. When restrictions apply to a narrow category of organizations, civil-society groups, journalists and monitors should therefore communicate not only what happens to the immediate targets, but also whether and how the measures could affect the broader environment for civil society.
- **For researchers, separate the outcomes.** Perceived repressiveness, support, and perceived consequences for oneself moved differently in these data. Studies that measure only tolerance of repression will miss the distinction between citizens who fail to recognize a measure and citizens who recognize it but see no stake in it.

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ⁱ See Chaudhry (2022), [The Assault on Civil Society: Explaining State Crackdown on NGOs](#), for a more detailed discussion.

ⁱⁱ See the following sources:

Council of Europe Expert Council, expert opinion on NGO Law: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/ingo/-/expert-council-on-ngo-law-publishes-addendum-to-its-opinion-on-the-slovak-republic-s-ngo-framework-regulation-introducing-the-concept-of-organisations-supported-from-abroad->

The Slovak Spectator, on the court ruling: <https://spectator.sme.sk/politics-and-society/c/the-government-wanted-to-police-ngos-slovakia-s-top-court-said-no>

Government Office of the Slovak Republic, press release on the audit: <https://www.vlada.gov.sk/tlacove-spravy/vlada-vykona-velky-audit-fungovania-a-financovania-mimovladnych-organizacii-na-slovensku/>