

# The EU's propaganda machine

## New report out on how the EU funds NGOs to promote itself and lobby for "more Europe"

by Thomas Fazi\*



Thomas Fazi. (Photo <https://unherd.com>)

(CH-S) Independent journalist Thomas Fazi works his way through the jungle of EU-funded "non-governmental organisations" (NGOs) to find that the EU uses taxpayers' money to fund propaganda for its own ends, often in contradiction to the EU states themselves.

Fazi's article is also of interest to Switzerland, which is increasingly coming under fire from the EU and where various lobby organisations have been deliberately pursuing a rapprochement with Brussels for years.

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I've just published a new report with the think tank "MCC Brussels",<sup>1</sup> where I look at the EU-NGO propaganda complex and how the European Union, in recent years, 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, the 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 programs 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 programme *Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values* (CERV), which channels vast amounts of funding to civil society organisations, including *Non-governmental organisations* (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. Here are just some examples:

- *RevivEU*, a project carried out by various European think tanks, aimed at "combating the emerging euro-sceptic narratives already promulgated by autocratic elites" and "reviving the appeal of the EU in the minds of V4 citizens". Budget: €645,000 (2023–2024).
- *Blue4EU*, a project coordinated by the *Bages-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).
- *EU TURN 2025*, a project carried out by the *European Academy Berlin* aimed at "de-nationalising European engagement". Budget: €415,000 (2025).

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- *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).

- *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).

Many of the recipient organisations are explicitly committed to European federalism or integration, aligning with the Commission’s political objectives.

- *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. 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*

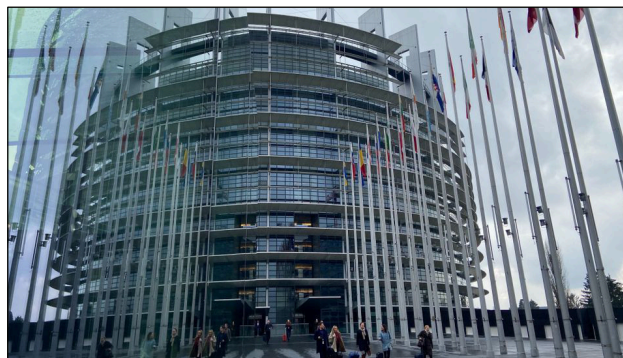
The Brussels-based organisation, which boasts of being “the biggest regional youth platform in the world”, says that one of its main goals is to “work to deepen European integration”. It has received nearly €40 million since 2014.

- *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. 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. Its commitment aligns directly with the Commission’s priorities, further illustrating how public funds are



The EU uses NGOs to put pressure on ‘non-aligned’ Member States – notably by using taxpayers’ money. (Picture ma)

channelled toward organisations promoting integrationist policies.

The 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, 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”.

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 policy-making: 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.

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.

The 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 European. 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 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 organisation to promote the EU itself and the very principle of supranational integration – all at the taxpayers' expense. I characterise this approach as “propaganda by proxy”.

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.

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 I have outlined in previous reports.<sup>2</sup>

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.

*Source: <https://www.thomasfazi.com/p/the-eus-propaganda-machine>, 17 February 2025*

<sup>1</sup> <https://brussels.mcc.hu/publication/the-eus-propaganda-machine-how-the-eu-funds-ngos-to-promote-itself>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.thomasfazi.com/p/the-silent-coup-the-european-commissions?utm\\_source=publication-search](https://www.thomasfazi.com/p/the-silent-coup-the-european-commissions?utm_source=publication-search)