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## WP4 (Taiwan) Final Report 3

Polarization, Party Line and Taiwan's dilemma  
under the shadow of China: Unified government  
with weak parliamentary oversight or divided  
government paralyzed by political showdowns?

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## **Polarization, Party Line and Taiwan’s dilemma under the shadow of China: Unified government with weak parliamentary oversight or divided government paralyzed by political showdowns?**

Taiwan was a one-party authoritarian state until 1987, when its ruling party, KMT (Kuomintang, Chinese Nationalist Party), lifted the martial law. In 2000, the young democracy experienced its first transition of power when the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), the opposition party formed in 1986 by *Tangwai* (non KMT, literally “outside of [Kuomin]Tang”) politicians and activists, won the presidential election, although KMT continued to control the legislative Yuan (Congress). Since 2000, although there have been other third parties, Taiwan has been effectively a two-party system dominated by KMT and DPP. The main dividing issues between the two parties focus on Taiwan’s relationship with China, and third parties have aligned with either KMT or DPP mainly based on their own position on China. Polarization worsened in the 2008-2016 period, when the KMT administration sought closer tie with China.<sup>1</sup> Studies have also observed polarization in Taiwan from the strong party cohesion in Congress, with DPP showing even higher levels of party cohesion.<sup>2</sup> Party cohesion is partly a result of the party negotiation mechanism for legislative bills, leading to an increase of party-line voting and a decline in roll-call voting.<sup>3</sup>

In 2016 DPP seized both the presidency and a congressional majority for the first time. Nevertheless, DPP met with a major blow in the 2018 local election (often

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<sup>1</sup> Alexander C. Tan, *Taiwan: Party System of a Young Consolidated Democracy*, in *POLITICAL PARTIES AND THE CRISIS OF DEMOCRACY: ORGANIZATION, RESILIENCE, AND REFORM* 381-400 (Thomas Poguntke & Wilhelm Hofmeister eds., 2024).  
<https://academic.oup.com/book/58013/chapter/479033031>

<sup>2</sup> Alexander C. Tan, *Party Polarization in New Zealand and Taiwan: An Exploratory Study*, paper presented at the 2020 Conference of the Taiwan Institute of Governance and Communications Research, Taipei, Taiwan (Oct. 30, 2020),  
<https://ir.canterbury.ac.nz/server/api/core/bitstreams/94ea9ccd-a0ad-41ea-bffc-7d29d3ab133c/content>

<sup>3</sup> Shing-Yuan Sheng & Shih-Hao Huang, *Party Negotiation Mechanism: An Analysis through the Lens of Institutionalization*, 35 *SOOCHOW J. POLITICAL* 37, 37-92 (2017) (citing in Alexander C. Tan, *Party Polarization in New Zealand and Taiwan: An Exploratory Study*, paper presented at the 2020 Conference of the Taiwan Institute of Governance and Communications Research, Taipei, Taiwan (Oct. 30, 2020), <https://ir.canterbury.ac.nz/server/api/core/bitstreams/94ea9ccd-a0ad-41ea-bffc-7d29d3ab133c/content>). Yen-Chieh Liao, Electoral reform and fragmented polarization: New evidence from Taiwan legislative roll calls, 50 *Legis. Stud. Quart.* 3, 3-21 (2024)  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/lsq.12459>. Zoe Lee [李又如], Does the Lack of a Majority Party Lead to Greater Legislative Diversity? Conflict and Alliances in Legislatures’ Voting Records [三黨不過半立法院會更多元嗎？從歷屆表決紀錄看國會的對抗與結盟], *READr* (Jul. 24, 2025),  
<https://www.readr.tw/post/3041>

seen as a mid-term), losing 2/3 of the municipalities to KMT. The concern about China's interference in Taiwan elections grew after the 2018 election, which further intensified the polarization (see also Final Report 4).

At the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Taiwan had just completed its 2020 presidential and legislative elections. In response to the potential threat from China, exemplified in the preceding months in Hong Kong, Taiwan for a second time elected a unified government led by the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), a party that is adopting a more cautious stance toward China, and which was more willing to implement restrictive border control for inbound traffic from China. With Taiwan's zero-COVID policy, the DPP government gradually introduced various stringent measures. Some of these measures had been criticized for a lack of legal authorization or being overbroad in their scope, out of proportion to the need. Yet, under the unified government, Congressional checks and balances were largely inactive. Due to high social pressure, as well as the judiciary's constant deferral to administrative discretion, litigations were also seldom initiated.<sup>4</sup>

After the pandemic subsided, Taiwan completed a new round of presidential and legislative elections in 2024, leading to a divided government. A coalition congressional majority is led by the major opposition party that seeks a closer tie with China. This coalition has not only blocked bills and budget plans proposed by the government, but also enacted laws to paralyze the function of the Constitutional Court, a major avenue for addressing human rights violations. As the growing tension in geopolitics intersects with domestic political divide, congressional checks and balances can easily be hijacked and used as a battleground for political showdowns, rather than as a mechanism of oversight.

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<sup>4</sup> For more detail on the domestic check and balance system in Taiwan, see HRJust WP4 (Taiwan) Final Report: Institutional Human Rights Protection without a UN-membership: Taiwan's Domestication of International Human Rights Law. Section 2, The Domestic Check and Balance System in Taiwan.

## 1. Unified government with weak oversight during the pandemic

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Taiwan's domestic political context was characterized by a unified government, strong cooperation between the executive and legislative branches, and a broad expert-led emergency governance system focused on the Central Epidemic Command Center (CECC).

After the January 2020 presidential and legislative elections, President Tsai Ing-wen and the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) retained both executive control and a legislative majority. This significantly reduced partisan obstacles and allowed for quick policymaking. The Legislative Yuan swiftly enacted the Special Act for Prevention, Relief and Revitalization Measures for Severe Pneumonia with Novel Pathogens (hereinafter referred to as the “Special Act”) in February 2020.

This legislation, enacted to authorize prompt administrative responses to emergencies during the COVID-19 pandemic, granted the CECC the power to take all necessary actions thereby establishing broad authorization for the administration's actions. When first enacted in 2020, the Special Act contained a sunset clause, set to expire on 30 June 2021. The Act was subsequently amended in 2021 and 2022, with the sunset clause extended by one year on each occasion and ultimately remained in force until its expiration on 30 June 2023. As DPP has the congressional majority, the enactment of the Special Act and its two subsequent amendments easily flew through the legislative process.<sup>5</sup>

Against this institutional backdrop, legislative oversight was structurally weakened during the pandemic, and the Legislative Yuan became little more than a rubber stamp. While epidemiological knowledge and international standards for emergency governance had gradually evolved, legislative supervision remained largely lenient. There had not been meaningful refinement of the oversight mechanism even as knowledge about the nature of the pandemic and how to tackle it advanced over time.

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<sup>5</sup> Ming-Hsin Lin, *Revisiting the Constitutionality Controversies of Special Act for Prevention, Relief and Revitalization Measures for Severe Pneumonia with Novel Pathogens Article 7* [再論嚴重特殊傳染性肺炎防治及紓困振興特別條例第 7 條之合憲性爭議], 407 TAIWAN LAW J. 53 (2021). Chih-Wei Hsieh, Mao Wang, Natalie WM Wong, & Lawrence Ka-ki Ho, *A whole-of-nation approach to COVID-19: Taiwan's National Epidemic Prevention Team*, 42 INT. POLIT. SCI. REV. 300 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1177/01925121211012291>

A central object of debate was Article 7 of the Special Act, which provides that, for disease prevention and control requirements, the CECC Commander may implement necessary responses or measures. As a broadly-framed general clause, it had become a focal point for concerns about open-ended authorization. Article 7 was immediately criticized by a number of legal scholars and civil rights organizations. However, as the disease seemed to have been effectively controlled in the course of 2020, especially when compared to other countries, the criticisms and coverage of the debates about Article 7 and pandemic measures were only sporadically covered by the media and did not reach the general public.

In May 2021, Taiwan experienced its first significant community outbreak, even though its scale was very small from the global perspective. In response, on May 21, 2021, the government requested amendments to the Special Act to extend its duration and budget.<sup>6</sup> As the legislative session was drawing to a close in May,<sup>7</sup> Congress passed the proposed amendments on May 31 without much deliberation.<sup>8</sup> While legislators attached 203 “incidental resolutions” to the amendment of Articles 11 (budget) and 19 (duration and sunset), incidental resolutions lack binding force and only served to demonstrate legislators' concerns about these matters.<sup>9</sup>

In September 2021, the CECC finally responded to the criticisms of Article 7 that had persisted since the enactment of the Special Act. The CECC emphasized that only eight measures were implemented under the authority delegated by Article 7. These included orders prohibiting teachers, students, and medical workers from traveling abroad, extending the term for migrant workers to stay in Taiwan, and suspending the convening of annual shareholder meetings, among others. The CECC argued that revising individual laws would have been too time-consuming and the

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<sup>6</sup> Legislative Yuan Official Gazette, 110 (60) No. 4911, 1-2 (2022). Legislative Yuan, 13 Sittings, 10th Appointed Dates, 3th Session, Agenda Related Documents No. 1905 (2022). [https://lis.ly.gov.tw/lygazettec/mtdoc?PD100313:LCEWA01\\_100313\\_00007](https://lis.ly.gov.tw/lygazettec/mtdoc?PD100313:LCEWA01_100313_00007)

<sup>7</sup> According to Article 68 of the Constitution, the Legislative Yuan should hold two sessions each year, and should convene of its own accord. The first session lasts from February to the end of May, and the second session from September to the end of December.

<sup>8</sup> Legislative Yuan Official Gazette, 110(66) No. 4917, 223-272 (2022).

<sup>9</sup> Tsai Maw-In[蔡茂寅], *The Legal Effect of Budgetary resolution and Incidental resolution* [預算主決議與附帶決議之效力], 57 TAIWAN LAW J. 84 (2004). LEGISLATIVE YUAN ORGANIC LAWS AND STATUTES BUREAU, PRINCIPLES AND INSTITUTIONS OF LEGISPRUDENCE [立法原理與制度(增訂本)] 20 (2004).

timescales involved would have been inadequate to enable it to respond effectively to the emergency situation. Further, they contended that, under an expansive interpretation of Article 37 of the Communicable Disease Control Act,<sup>10</sup> the administration was already broadly authorized to implement measures necessary to prevent transmission of communicable disease.<sup>11</sup>

Against this backdrop, an opposition-led initiative to limit the CECC's authority failed to gain traction. In October 2021, twenty-three legislators from the opposition party, Kuomintang (KMT or Chinese Nationalist Party), the then parliamentary minority, proposed amending Article 7 to restrict the CECC's power. However, the proposal was rejected at the committee stage and did not advance to a second reading.

In addition to the weakening of legislative supervision, other separation of powers mechanisms also failed to exercise effective oversight. The Constitutional Court dismissed a petition regarding the Special Act on procedural grounds, resulting in an absence of substantive scrutiny regarding the constitutionality of the emergency measures.<sup>12</sup> In other words, the Court did not give any consideration to the legality of

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<sup>10</sup> Article 37 of the Communicable Disease Control Act:

When communicable diseases occur or are expected to occur, local competent authorities shall, by considering actual needs, take the following measures in collaboration with organizations (institutions) concerned:

- 1.regulate schooling, meeting, gathering or other group activities;
- 2.regulate entry and exit of people to and from specific places and restrict the number of people admitted;
- 3.regulate traffic in specific areas;
- 4.evacuate people from specific places or areas;
- 5.restrict or prohibit patients or suspected patients with communicable diseases from traveling by means of public transportation or entering/leaving specific places;
- 6.other disease control measures announced by government organizations at various levels.

Organizations (institutions), groups, enterprises and individuals shall not refuse, evade or obstruct the above mentioned measures.

Measures mentioned in Paragraph 1 that shall be taken by local competent authorities shall be implemented during the period when the central epidemic command center is in existence in accordance with instructions of its commander.

<sup>11</sup> Chun-Lin Hsieh [謝君臨], *The Catch-all Provision in the Special Act Used only Eight Times in Over a Year, Says the Deputy Minister of Health and Welfare Chung-liang Shih* [防疫特別條例「霸王條款」 石崇良：1年多來僅用8次], LIBERTY TIMES (Sep. 30, 2021),

<https://news.ltn.com.tw/news/politics/breakingnews/3688759> (last visited Dec. 27, 2024)

<sup>12</sup> Taiwan Constitutional Court, 112-Hsien-Tsai-24 (2023).

<https://cons.judicial.gov.tw/docdata.aspx?fid=5498&id=349594>. In this ruling, the Constitutional Court dismissed a petition filed by a presiding judge regarding the constitutionality of Article 7 of the Special

the measures themselves. At the level of ordinary adjudication, administrative courts consistently adopted a deferential posture toward administrative discretion, including in cases involving direct restrictions on personal liberty.<sup>13</sup>

Similarly, the Control Yuan ombudsman failed to fully deploy its checks and balances. Although it explicitly pointed out that certain government pandemic measures potentially infringed upon human rights and raised concerns under the principle of the rule of law, it stopped short of exercising its power of corrective measures to rectify these violations.<sup>14</sup>

Consequently, under conditions of unified party control in the legislature, and with both the judiciary and the ombudsman exhibiting institutional restraint, the constitutional safeguards designed to restrain executive power were effectively rendered dormant.

## **2. Post 2024: divided government paralyzed by political showdowns**

After the pandemic subsided, the subsequent election reshaped Taiwan's political landscape. In the 2024 presidential and parliamentary elections, DPP retained the presidency and executive power, but lost its majority in the Legislative Yuan to a coalition formed by KMT and the Taiwan People's Party (TPP). This resulted in a divided government with intensified political confrontation, which ultimately led to political turmoil.<sup>15</sup>

It should be noted that the differences between political parties in Taiwan often come down to the divergence on the question about Taiwan's relationship with China.

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Act. The Court cited procedural deficiencies as the basis for refusal, stating that the petitioner failed to concretely demonstrate the objective unconstitutionality of the statute.

<sup>13</sup> HRJust (Jan 2024), WP4 Method Memo - How does the Taiwanese Legal System Hold the State Accountable for its Use of Human Rights Justification in its Actions During the COVID-19 Pandemic? The section 2.2.3.3 "Quarantine Measures & Court's Decisions" provided example regarding the court's deferential posture toward administrative discretion.

<sup>14</sup> CONTROL YUAN, INVESTIGATION REPORT NO. 111-SOCIAL-INVESTIGATION-0006 (2022). <https://www.cy.gov.tw/CyBsBoxContent.aspx?n=133&s=17787> Regarding "Digital Fencing," the Control Yuan confirmed the lack of legal authorization for location tracking. However, it refrained from issuing a formal "corrective measure," merely urging the administration to "review and improve" its procedures.

<sup>15</sup> Yinn-ching Lu, *The Vacuum of Constitutional Order in Taiwan: 2024-2025*, INT'L J. CONST. L. BLOG (Nov. 18, 2025), <http://www.iconnectblog.com/the-vacuum-of-constitutional-order-in-taiwan-2024-2025/> (last visited Jan. 26, 2026)

Crudely speaking, DPP is pro-independence, KMT is pro-unification. TPP seems to advocate for a middle path. Since 2024, TPP has swapped its ally from DPP to KMT. Therefore, the priority of “checks and balances” between political branches is often not about ensuring a well-functioning mechanism that protects human rights, but about Taiwan’s China policy, which can be played out in various forms.

During COVID-19, China was the major threat for Taiwan both in terms of national security and the pandemic. With a congressional majority, the DPP government was generally able to roll out pandemic measures smoothly. There had also been episodes of confrontation in Congress between political parties during the pandemic. For example, in 2021, vaccine procurement became a high-salience partisan flashpoint. Taiwan’s vaccine purchase was obstructed by China’s interference.<sup>16</sup> During the community outbreak in that Spring, KMT parliament members blamed the DPP government for vaccine shortage and took the opportunity to urge the government to make an exception for importing China-manufactured vaccines (Taiwanese law prohibits the import of Chinese biomedical products). The DPP was able to fend off these proposals to avoid playing into China’s vaccine diplomacy.

Nevertheless, with a divided government after 2024, the parties’ different positions on China have crystallized into persistent political deadlocks. To assert and amplify their influence through Congress, the pro-China KMT-TPP coalition has deliberately obstructed mechanisms of checks and balances and blocked major channels of human rights protections, including Taiwan’s Constitutional Court (TCC).

In May 2024, KMT legislators, aligned with the TPP, passed a bill to expand legislative oversight power. Constitutional concerns surrounding the controversial revision compelled the TCC’s intervention and thus made the TCC itself a political target.<sup>17</sup> In December 2024, the KMT-TPP coalition initiated an amendment to the Constitutional Court Procedure Act (CCPA), subsequently promulgated in January 2025. The amendment raised the quorum for constitutional adjudication to ten justices

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<sup>16</sup> For more detail on how geopolitical factors affected border control and vaccine procurement, *see* HRJUST WP4 (TAIWAN) FINAL REPORT: GEOPOLITICAL TENSIONS, RISE OF A “DIGITAL DEMOCRACY” AND HUMAN RIGHTS IMPLICATIONS. Section 1, Geopolitical Factors in Border Control and Vaccine Procurement.

<sup>17</sup> Lu, *supra* note 11.

(out of a total of fifteen) and required a fixed number of nine affirmative votes to declare a law unconstitutional, regardless of the number of justices actually in office. Before the amendment, the CCPA only required participation by two-thirds of sitting justices and only a simple majority of participating justices to invalidate a piece of legislation. In short, the previous framework allowed the TCC to operate even when vacancies existed, whereas the new regulation risks paralyzing the TCC whenever the number of justices falls below ten. The revision of CCPA gives the KMT-TPP coalition significant bargaining power, which they were able to cash in on immediately as the term of seven (out of the fifteen) justices expired in Oct 2024. President Ching-te Lai (DPP) was to nominate new justices to fill the vacancies, which would have to be approved by Congress. However, in December 2024, none of Lai's 7 candidates were approved, and a second round of 7 potential appointees also failed in July 2025.<sup>18</sup> As a result, the TCC was effectively paralyzed for over one year.<sup>19</sup>

The nature and implications of political standoffs between the DPP and the KMT-TPP coalition went beyond the function of TCC. In early 2025, Congress massively cut and froze the government's general budget proposals.<sup>20</sup> Human rights institutions were specifically targeted. The operational budget for the National Human Rights Commission under the Control Yuan (ombudsman) was reduced by at least 90%; meanwhile, KMT legislators proposed cutting the gender equality operational budget to below USD 100.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Shao-Kai Yang, *Taiwan's Constitutional Grey Hole: The Constitutional Court in Paralysis*, VERFBLOG (Dec. 3, 2025), <https://verfassungsblog.de/taiwan-constitutional-court/>, DOI: 10.17176/20251203-172101-0

<sup>19</sup> In December 2025, the TCC, sitting with five out of eight justices, finally struck down the amended CCPA. However, the dispute remained, as three justices publicly disputed the decision and continued to boycott the following judgment promulgated in January 2026. For more detail, please see Ming-Sung Kuo, *Judicial Bootstrapping or Constitutional Hardball? The (Un)Conventionality of the Taiwan Constitutional Court's Invalidation of the 2025 Amendment of the Constitutional Procedure Act, Part II*, INT'L J. CONST. L. BLOG (Jan. 21, 2026), <https://www.iconnectblog.com/judicial-bootstrapping-or-constitutional-hardball-the-unconventionality-of-taiwan-constitutional-courts-invalidation-of-the-2025-amendment-of-the-constitutional-procedure-act-part-ii/>

<sup>20</sup> Brian Hioe, *KMT Budget Cuts Set up Latest Partisan Clash in Taiwan—The KMT-controlled legislature passed a budget with unprecedented reductions from the DPP government's request, raising the stakes for the political showdown*, DIPLOMAT (Jan. 30, 2025), <https://thediplomat.com/2025/01/kmt-budget-cuts-set-up-latest-partisan-clash-in-taiwan/> (last visited: Feb. 24, 2026)

<sup>21</sup> Hollie Younger, *LGBTQ+ groups oppose proposed cuts to gender equality budget*, TAIPEI TIMES (Jan. 16, 2025), <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2025/01/16/2003830318> (last

### 3. Taiwan's Impossible Choice in the Shadow of China

With hindsight, it would be fair to say the unified government that came into power in 2020 allowed Taiwan to navigate smoothly through the early days of the pandemic. Nevertheless, as the pandemic progressed, the excessive measures during the prolonged zero-COVID period also raised concerns about violations of individual rights and other perils common in times of concentration of power. Nevertheless, had the 2020 election resulted in a divided government like the current one, Taiwan's COVID-19 pandemic trajectory is likely to have been considerably more chaotic from the outset. This note reminds readers that pandemic policies were contingent on the larger political context, but the gains are not without their human costs.

With or without a pandemic like COVID-19, Taiwan's liberal-leaning voters often face the impossible choice between a unified government that is more cautious about China but with weak oversight under DPP's strong party cohesion, and a divided government with a major opposition party that may be willing to play into the hands of its aggressive neighbor. With the growing geopolitical tension, the second option risks allowing the political deadlock to weaken not only the long-fought for human rights mechanism but also the normal functioning of the State. Yet, the first option further risks endorsing the prioritization of security over all other issues, the danger of which was shown during the pandemic.

Civil Society has played an important role in Taiwan's democracy. In addition, given Taiwan's precarious international status, international pressure has been a pivotal source of support for human rights causes. As the Post-WWII World Order weakens and security becomes more and more prioritized, Civil Society worldwide faces an uphill battle in defending civil liberties and human rights. By mobilizing fear, asserting national security interests or reinterpreting human rights, governments could dismiss legitimate concerns raised by Civil Society. During the zero-COVID period, Taiwan was praised for its successful control of the pandemic,

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visited: Feb. 24, 2026). In addition to targeting gender equality operational budget being targeted, Congress amended the law to weaken the Council of Indigenous Peoples by turning the representatives of indigenous nations into unpaid positions. *See* Chen Chien-chih & Jake Chung, *Legislative Yuan passes amendments regarding Council of Indigenous Peoples*, TAIPEI TIMES (Dec. 14, 2024), <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2024/12/14/2003828491> While this move does not officially change the mandate of the Council, the de-facto downsizing seems to have affected its function, including the operation of an advisory committee that advises courts on indigenous traditional norms and practices.

ignoring local Civil Society's criticism of the pervasive use of digital surveillance, which may have emboldened the Taiwan government to push for more excessive data access and requests. Western democratic allies may have an interest in juxtaposing Taiwan and China in regional geopolitics. Nevertheless, the international society should be aware of the domestic political dynamics and be watchful of whether such international support could be manipulated to suppress dissent. With strong international support, local NGOs will be empowered to offer alternative narratives and observations from the ground. These authentic voices will also better serve external partners like the EU when it is forming its their regional strategies.

**Recommendations:**

1. EU should continue to recognize the opportunities for its own external relationships and for the promotion of human rights globally through engagement with Civil Society. In light of "Taiwan's Dilemma under the shadow of China", Civil Society has played an indispensable role in safeguarding human rights. This function is further reflected in the annual EU–Taiwan Human Rights Consultations (convened seven times since 2018), one of the few forums where foreign representatives openly affirm human rights commitments and the government is formally obligated to issue official statements on human rights matters.
2. EU should continue to demonstrate its commitment to human rights by continuing to engage Taiwan Civil Society. As reported by many local NGOs, the EU has persistently engaged with Civil Society in the preparatory stage of the Consultations, and by doing so, the EU has demonstrated itself to be a partner of human rights advocates and has made a substantive contribution to advancing human rights governance reforms in Taiwan's policy landscape.
3. NGOs that are focused on direct service delivery — particularly those serving marginalized communities such as migrant workers — often lack the capacity to engage meaningfully in EU consultations on strategy. consultations. To avoid risking the exclusion of critical frontline perspectives from local and regional policymaking, the EU should consider how to meaningfully engage with these NGOs - e.g. allocating dedicated funding or offering capacity-building support, to ensure their views are included in the EU's consultative processes.