

Implementing the EU Strategy for Civil Society's 10 Guiding Principles for Dialogue with Civil Society

Action Plan on Civil Dialogue: Guidelines for the European Commission

September 2026

Civil dialogue at the EU level is based on article 11.2 of the [Treaty on European Union](#), which stipulates that 'The [EU] institutions shall maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with representative associations and civil society'. However, until recently no systematic policy document had been developed by the European Commission to implement it. In 2023, within the framework of the Defence of Democracy Package, the Commission published the [Commission recommendation \(EU\) 2023/2836 on promoting the engagement and effective participation of citizens and civil society organisations in public policy-making processes](#), which outlined some concrete principles on how to implement an effective civil dialogue throughout the policymaking cycle. Nonetheless, the document was aimed at the Member States, and not at the EU institutions. In 2024, Civil Society Europe developed a [blueprint](#) on the structure, the eligibility criteria, and the proceedings of a possible institutional framework for civil dialogue at the EU level.

At the end of 2025, the European Commission published the [EU Strategy for Civil Society](#), which outlined **10 guiding principles for dialogue between the Commission and civil society**. The Commission also declared the intention to establish a Civil Society Platform - expected to start its operations by the end of 2026 - to provide a regular and structured framework for engagement with civil society organisations working on promoting democracy, the rule of law, equality and fundamental rights. The aim of this paper is to reflect on how the 10 guiding principles of the Civil Society Strategy can be consistently implemented across the different Commission's internal and external civil dialogue structures, suggesting practical recommendations for their application.

Across all 10 principles, particular attention should be paid to ensuring the meaningful participation of groups that remain structurally underrepresented in EU policymaking. Equal access to civil dialogue may require proactive outreach, targeted support, and reasonable adaptations rather than formally equal treatment alone. The European Commission should, therefore, seek out and engage organisations representing affected communities, address linguistic, financial, digital, and institutional barriers to participation, and ensure that all dialogue structures are free from intersectional discrimination.

The EU Strategy for Civil Society's 10 Guiding Principles for Dialogue with Civil Society

Partnership

"Cooperation should welcome civil society's proactive contribution as a partner in shaping the dialogue, setting priorities and agendas, defining objectives or evaluating outcomes"

The partnership principle should be implemented through:

- Providing civil society with a steering role in the body governing the civil dialogue process, at least in parity with other components;
- Ensuring equal voting rights to the different members of the civil dialogue structure;
- Ensuring that civil society organisations involved in the dialogue have effective powers to shape the agenda, including - but not limited to - by giving them the possibility to propose, during meetings, draft agenda items for the subsequent meeting;
- Enabling civil society organisations to co-chair thematic discussions on which they have expertise;
- Ensuring that the mandate of the dialogue structure includes clear policy outcomes for policies within its scope, as well as the possibility to provide regular feedback on the functioning of the dialogue structure itself;
- Investment of adequate resources from the institution organising the dialogue structure (time, political or leadership support, logistical and financial resources, overall commitment) to allow a meaningful, constant and active participation of civil society actors.

Comprehensiveness

"Dialogue should seek to engage participation from civil society throughout different stages of policymaking"

The principle of comprehensiveness should be implemented through:

- Including the input of civil society organisations into the phases of policy ideation, policy development, policy implementation and monitoring & evaluation within the objectives of the dialogue structure;
- Ensuring meaningful engagement during all the different stages of policymaking, especially during the ideation phase by organising dialogue before relevant decisions have already been taken;
- Ensuring the possibility for the members of the dialogue structure to autonomously propose and develop input to initiatives throughout all the stages of policymaking.

Predictability and regularity

"Dialogue should be part of a predictable and regular process and provide adequate timeframes for contributions"

The principle of predictability and regularity should be implemented through:

- Appointing members of the dialogue structure for a period long enough to ensure a predictable, regular and structured engagement;
- Including within the Terms of Reference of the dialogue structure a minimum number of meetings per year, and whether these would take place in person, online or in a hybrid format;
- Including an indicative period around which the minimum number of meetings is to be held;
- Communicating the dates and timeframes of meetings, consultations and any other form of engagement as much in advance as possible, and sharing all relevant information and documents well in advance to allow enough time for participants to prepare;
- Creating online and offline channels for structural and systematic communication.

Transparency

“Clear communication should be ensured about procedures, objectives, timelines and participation criteria, along with timely and adequate access to relevant documents, in compliance with applicable legal requirements”

Transparency takes two different dimensions: “internal transparency” towards the members of the dialogue structure, and “external transparency” towards the wider public on the proceedings and the outcomes of the dialogue structure.

Regarding internal transparency, this principle should be implemented through:

- Clearly indicating in the Terms of Reference of the dialogue structure the objectives, timelines, participation criteria, selection process, procedures and how decisions are taken, along with clear deadlines with reasonable timeframes;
- Providing clear information on how final participants to the dialogue structure are selected; where relevant, providing information on how diversity and inclusion considerations were taken into account in the process, including what outreach was undertaken towards groups that are traditionally underrepresented in EU civil dialogue;
- Including in the invitation to meetings and consultations the proposed draft agenda, sufficient background information, preparatory documents, as well as clear purposes and expected outcomes of the session.

As per external transparency, this principle should be implemented through:

- Making the most relevant information about the dialogue structure publicly available - including the objectives, list of members, and key documents as meeting agendas, summaries and conclusions;
- Clearly delimiting the exceptions to the publicity of documents and information on the grounds of safety of participants, protection of personal data, sensitive information and other legal requirements, while indicating the procedures to request access to the information.

Representation

“The selection of participants should be based on the organisations’ independence, legitimacy, representativeness and expertise, as well as their adherence to EU values.”

The principle of representation should be implemented through:

- Ensuring that the organisations participating in the dialogue structure fully comply with the criteria of non-profit status, independence, internal democracy and respect of EU values in line with the Charter on Fundamental Rights of the EU;
- Ensuring that the organisations represent a cause of public interest relevant to the scope of the dialogue structure, based on their expertise, and are recognised as entitled to speak and act on behalf of their constituency;
- For European-level organisations, ensuring that they are membership-based and have members in a significant number of Member States and/or have as members European-level networks that in turn have relevant national membership, and that they have democratically elected structures and mandates derived from their membership, providing a clear basis for their representative legitimacy;
- Applying representativeness criteria in a proportionate manner, taking into account that organisations representing marginalised or minority communities may have more limited geographical coverage, membership or institutional capacity while nonetheless enjoying strong legitimacy within the communities they represent;
- Ensuring that the organisations are transparent in their operations and funding through defined internal processes or by-laws, in compliance with international standards;
- Ensuring adequate representation of organisations led by and representing structurally marginalised groups, including organisations rooted in the communities concerned and able to bring lived experience into the dialogue;
- Any decision on the modalities for selecting the participating organisations should take into account the degree of structuring of the sector involved in the dialogue mechanism, and avoid fostering its fragmentation.

Inclusivity

“The dialogue should strive to include an adequately broad spectrum of organisations, reflecting a sectoral and geographical balance and with due account to organisations representing groups that are underrepresented, marginalised or in vulnerable situations”

The principle of inclusivity should be implemented through:

- Explicit consideration of sectoral, geographical and size balance in the overall composition of the membership of the dialogue structure;
- Where candidate and potential candidate countries fall within the mandate of the dialogue structure, ensuring designated seats for organisations operating in those countries; in particular, whenever EU policies directly affect accession countries, ensuring that organisations from those countries participate on an equal footing rather than being merely consulted externally;

- Explicit recognition and active inclusion of underrepresented, racialised, and other vulnerable groups and organisations with an intersectional approach, ensuring that input from these groups is not confined to equality-specific issues, but is meaningfully considered across all policy areas affecting them; where appropriate, reserving dedicated seats;
- Proactively identifying and reaching out to civil society organisations representing racialised communities, ethnic minorities and other groups that are structurally underrepresented in EU policymaking, rather than relying exclusively on open calls or on organisations already engaged with the Commission;
- Assessing periodically whether the dialogue structure is effectively reaching and involving underrepresented and marginalised groups, and identifying measures to address these gaps.

Accessibility

“Dialogues, whether taking place online or offline, should be designed and implemented with appropriate technological tools with a view to remove accessibility barriers and enable full and equal participation”

The principle of accessibility should be implemented through:

- Consulting relevant civil society partners, including organisations representing affected communities themselves, to identify and reflect on ways to overcome accessibility barriers;
- While in-person meetings should be preferred, providing the possibility of hybrid or fully online meetings if circumstances do not allow all participants to attend at a venue;
- In case of in-person meetings, budgeting for accessible venues, cost of travel (trip, reasonable accommodation), personal assistance - including all related costs - and other required support, as needed;
- Usage of technological and any other tools needed to remove accessibility barriers and enable full and equal participation, as well as sharing of information;
- Addressing linguistic and communication barriers by providing, where necessary, interpretation and translation, including through online tools, as well as plain-language materials and avoiding unnecessarily technical or institutional language;

Accountability

“Feedback on how dialogue contributes to policy advancements should foster mutual responsibility and trust”

The principle of accountability should be implemented through:

- The adoption of publicly available Terms of Reference or Rules of Procedure governing the civil dialogue structure;
- The inclusion, in the Terms of Reference or Rules of Procedure of the dialogue structure, of clear and timely feedback mechanisms between the institution managing the civil dialogue structure and its members;

- The inclusion of a specific duty for the institution organising the dialogue to ensure timely access to documents, as well as to relevant updates, outcomes, and follow-up actions;
- Clearly communicating the expected outcomes of the dialogue structure from the start, as well as how civil society input will be collected and what policies or processes it will contribute to shape;
- Sharing to what extent the input provided by civil society members has been taken into account, including by providing information on why there was no progress or follow-up on certain proposals or recommendations;
- The co-development of a code of conduct applicable to all participants in the dialogue structure, together with clear and transparent procedures for addressing any breaches.

Resourcing

“Where applicable, financial or logistical support should be made available to enable participation, taking into account the needs of grassroots and community-based organisations to ensure that they are not excluded due to limited means”

The principle of resourcing should be implemented through:

- Reimbursement of travel, accommodation and other expenses related to participation to in-person meetings, prioritising support to organisations with limited financial resources;
- Budgeting financial coverage for the necessary provisions for persons with disabilities;
- Ensuring that reimbursement and financial support mechanisms are straightforward, timely, flexible and accessible to small grassroots and community-based organisations with limited administrative capacity or cash flow.

Safety

“Safeguards should be in place to ensure that organisations can participate safely in dialogue, including through appropriate measures to protect personal data and confidentiality”

The principle of safety should be implemented through:

- Explicit confidentiality rules to ensure the safety of participants;
- Ensuring that all dialogue spaces are free from intersectional discrimination, as well as hate speech, harassment, and all other forms of intimidating, degrading, or prejudicial treatment, through the co-development of a code of conduct applicable to all participants, together with clear and transparent procedures for addressing any breaches;
- Providing accessible and confidential mechanisms for participants to report discriminatory, racist, or otherwise unsafe behaviour occurring in the context of the dialogue, together with clear procedures for follow-up and redress;
- The handling of the publication of documents and of personal data according to legislation;

- Additional precautionary provisions to be assessed on a case-by-case basis to ensure safety of all participants, especially in the case of vulnerable actors (e.g. human rights defenders, journalists, representatives of marginalised communities, etc.).

Documents consulted

- Civil Society Europe - [“EU Civil Dialogue: the foundations of an institutional framework”](#)
- European Commission - [EU Strategy for Civil Society](#)
- CONCORD Europe - [“The Meaningful Engagement Handbook: Civil Society Perspectives on EU Delegations Consultations”](#)
- DG INTPA - [“Civil Society Consultations in Partner Countries - 2024 Report on EU Delegations’ Engagement with Civil Society”](#)
- European Economic and Social Committee - [“Mapping civil dialogue practices in the EU institutions”](#)
- European Youth Forum - Guidance Document for the Youth Policy Dialogues

About Civil Society Europe

[Civil Society Europe](#) is the coordination of 28 civil society organisations at EU level. Through its membership, CSE reaches out to millions of people active in or supported by not-for-profits and civil society organisations across the EU. Civil Society Europe was created by several civil society organisations as a follow-up to the European Year of Citizens and was established as an international not-for-profit under Belgian law in 2016. Since then, Civil Society Europe has become the point of reference for EU institutions on transversal issues concerning civil dialogue and civic space.



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