

# 416 civil society organisations call for a vibrant civic space in the European Union

## 416 civil society organisations call on EU leaders to safeguard democracy and civic space over the next five years

Brussels, 16th September 2024 – **The European Union must prioritise actions that foster a vibrant civic space, uphold democracy and safeguard fundamental rights in the upcoming legislative term, as urged by a coalition of 416 civil society organisations on the occasion of the International Day of Democracy (15 September).**

In an open letter published today by Civil Society Europe (CSE), 416 civil society organisations (CSOs) belonging to 26 Member States and 4 EU candidate countries warn about a decline in respect for civic freedoms, the rule of law and democracy in the EU<sup>1</sup>. Addressing the upcoming Presidencies of the Council of the European Union, the President of the European Parliament and the President of the European Commission, the CSOs outline concrete actions to promote democracy, enable, support and protect civil society, strengthen civil dialogue and protect human rights.

In particular, the signatories call to take up the following priorities to guide the action of the European Union in the next five years:

- **A European Civil Society Strategy, integral to a broader European Democracy Agenda**, to provide a robust and coherent policy framework that enables, supports and protects civil society.
- **A strong mandate for a Commission Vice President responsible for democracy, civic space and dialogue with civil society.**
- **Reinforcing intermediary bodies and adopting a Civil Dialogue Agreement.**
- **Empowering Funding Policies for civil society.**
- **A European Democracy Semester** building on the European rule of law cycle.
- **A stronger role of the Fundamental Rights Agency** as the European human rights institution.

Civil society plays a pivotal role in advancing civil, political, economic, social, cultural, and environmental rights. It empowers marginalised voices, promotes active participation in governance, and holds authorities accountable. Despite this, we are witnessing increasing challenges faced by civil society actors, including restrictive laws, funding constraints, legal harassment, and physical attacks, which threaten the very foundation of democracy.

Gabriella Civico, President of CSE, stated: “While the EU has taken crucial steps in the past five years to address democratic ‘backsliding’ and promote civic space, organised civil society believes major gaps

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<sup>1</sup> As evidenced by the field ([Liberties Rule of Law Report 2024](#) and the [Civic Space Watch report 2024](#)), [research](#) and the findings of the [European Commission rule of law report](#).

and challenges must be addressed. In the upcoming legislative term, the EU must build on the legacy of the past five years to develop a more coherent and strategic cooperation and support framework for civil society. This was a demand made by over 250 civil society organisations across Europe that endorsed our [European Civil Society Manifesto](#) for the European elections”.

Read the open letter:

<https://civilsocietyeurope.eu/open-letter-ensuring-a-vibrant-civic-space-in-the-european-union-civil-societys-expectations-for-the-next-five-years/>

## **Background information**

### **About Civil Society Europe**

Civil Society Europe (CSE) is the coordination of civil society organisations at the 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. Since its foundation in 2016, CSE has become the point of reference for EU institutions on transversal issues concerning civil dialogue and civic space.

### **What is civic space?**

“Civic space is the environment that enables people and groups – or ‘civic space actors’ – to participate meaningfully in the political, economic, social and cultural life in their societies. Vibrant civic space requires an open, secure and safe environment that is free from all acts of intimidation, harassment and reprisals, whether online or offline. Any restrictions on such a space must comply with international human rights law.” (UN Guidance Note on Protection and Promotion of Civic Space).

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