

Statement on Shrinking Civic Space in Europe in advance of the European Parliament Plenary discussion on 6 February 2018

Civil Society Europe is a space for the coordination of civil society organisations in Europe. Our members and allies include European platforms and networks of not-for-profit organisations across Europe from all sectors of civil society from culture to youth to environment, social inclusion, citizenship, to international cooperation and humanitarian aid that witness a shrinking space for civil society in many European countries, regardless of the sector in which they operate.

Civic freedoms are eroded through legislation, policies and political discourse, funding conditionalities or restrictions or even media campaigns as we see in Hungary, Poland, Romania, Spain, UK and Ireland just to name a few. A 2016 CSE and Civicus survey on civic space in Europe raised some critical concerns in this area, and the preliminary results of a new survey currently underway seem to confirm this trend. Civicus Civic Space Monitor has just published data that indicates that only 13 out of 28 EU countries respect civic freedoms in Europe. This is particularly worrying as a weakened civil society will lead to undermining the foundations of democracy.

In this context, we welcome the upcoming Plenary debate that the European Parliament will organise on 6 February with statements of the Commission and the Council. We hope that the European institutions will use that opportunity not only to raise awareness of this important issue, but also to develop a concrete action plan to overcome this trend.

We call for a badly needed **strategy on promoting civic space**, prepared in consultation with all relevant stakeholders, which includes proactive and positive actions. Such a coordinated EU strategy should be visible, engage civil society alongside public authorities, and be enshrined in Articles 2, 10 and 11 of the TFUE.

EU institutions should work closely with civil society organisations to achieve this. A civic space strategy should include a mechanism to exchange, monitor and coordinate. **An EU Coordinator on civic space and democracy** should be appointed by the EU with the task to coordinate EU and Member States work in this area, have a monitoring role and to whom NGOs would report incidents related to restriction to any harassment or restriction of their work.

EU institutions engagement to Civil Society in Europe must be much more visible, as it is in the framework of external or enlargement policies. **An EU wide awareness raising campaign** of EU citizens and residents on their fundamental rights, the rights and obligations deriving from the Treaties, and rights for redress, should be launched by the European Commission together with the Member States. These should include specifically freedom of assembly, of registration, and of expression.

The strategy should also include **actions to implement article 11 TEU** which defines the engagement of EU institutions with representative associations and citizens. In particular guidelines for engagement with civil society at member states level, as well as indicators on civic space, should be further developed at EU level. More specifically, the EU should adopt **a framework recognising the contribution and role of the not-for-profit sector**.

As the EESC has underlined in its recently adopted own initiative opinion on financing civil society organisations by the EU, it is critical to see how EU budget and financial rules can contribute to supporting the development of a vibrant, independent and democratic civil society. The Multiannual Financial Framework that the European Commission will present in May should address this concern, including dedicated programmes supporting civic rights and democracy both in EU internal and external policies, but also by mainstreaming civic participation within key programmes such as research and ESIF. In particular we call for the **establishment of a European Fund for Democracy in the EU and for reinforcing the current European Instrument for Democracy and Human rights** in order to maintain an independent access by civil society activists and human rights defenders to EU funds. We also believe that it is critical to ease cross-border philanthropy by ensuring free movement of philanthropic capital (no foreign funding restrictions and ensuring non-discriminatory tax treatment of cross-border philanthropy) by better coordinating tax laws and procedures.

We invite the European Parliament, the European Commission and the Council to organise **structured dialogues with civil society** on this critical matter for the future of Europe without delay.