

Statement on the Democracy Shield

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Introduction

The rise of authoritarianism in the world and the rapidly shifting geopolitical alliances are making Europe realise that, while international cooperation is more necessary than ever, it cannot rely anymore on outsourcing any key factors of its security. While much discussion has happened around ‘conventional defence’, the concept of security is much broader, as the Niinisto Report shows. A human-centred approach to security must protect and respect people’s well-being, as well as individual and collective freedoms, in line with fundamental rights, and crucially must include the protection of ‘critical democratic infrastructure’ as a key priority against any authoritarian vertical power captures or gradual erosions of democratic structures, checks and balances. Also in this area, disinformation, societal polarisation, growing distrust towards the institutions, and a civil society funding crisis in several countries due to the retreat of some private philanthropic actors and USAID show that the EU has underinvested in securing its democratic infrastructure, of which a vibrant, pluralistic civil society is an essential component. In fact, even in heavily polarised societies, civil society provides services that enhance societal cohesion, acts as watchdogs against institutional abuses and violations of fundamental rights, and provides avenues to make the voices of underrepresented groups be heard, acting as a bridge between citizens and institutions. It is no coincidence that authoritarian parties, once in government, have civil society organisations as one of their first targets, starting from those that defend fundamental rights, by attacking their funding sources and labelling them as ‘foreign agents’. Protection of civil society, promotion of a robust, predictable funding environment for CSOs, and safeguards to empower them to fulfil their mission as the voice of citizens’ concerns.

We believe that the Democracy Shield must be an opportunity for the EU to secure, safeguard and promote its ‘critical democratic infrastructure’, including its rule of law institutions, fundamental rights and civil society, at the national and EU levels; strengthen citizens’ societal

and democratic resilience and empowerment; ensure consistency between the EU's external commitment to democracy, rule of law and promotion of civic space and its policies to protect and promote them within the Union. The Democracy Shield should also include legislative proposals where necessary, and build synergies with the upcoming European Strategy for civil society.

The Democracy Shield, in its design and in the implementation of its proposals, must also be a benchmark of the democratic procedures it wants to protect. That is why we urge the Commission to ensure the representation of stakeholders acting for the common interest, CSOs and grassroots movements, workers and trade unions, volunteers, wider civil society including educational institutions, the academic and education community (scholars, scientists, artists) and organisations and collectives representing the interests of people systematically excluded from democratic life, to shape the policies of the Democracy Shield. Civil Dialogue, as recognised by art. 11 TEU, is not only a key feature of EU democratic framework that must be upheld, but is also crucial to ensure that the designed policies are effective in its concrete implementation on the ground: it is a matter of democratic procedural fairness and policy efficiency.

From FIMI to transparency, independent fact-checking and a strong institutional and civic resilience of electoral processes

The call for evidence clearly indicates “disinformation and foreign information manipulation and interference” (FIMI) as one of the main targets. The “foreign interference approach” is clear also in the proposed Directive on interest representation on behalf of third countries. As we have underlined in our analyses of the Directive¹, the Directive is not only ineffective in tackling malign foreign interference and risks of being weaponised, both within and outside of the EU, as an excuse to crack down on foreign-funded civil society, but it completely misses the point that disinformation, information manipulation and interference attempts do not come only from outside of the EU, but can be also ‘domestically sourced’. Disinformation and information manipulation, furthermore, does not limit to domestic politics of Member States, but it can also reach the EU level and influence the discussion around EU legislation and policies. Similarly, the resilience of electoral processes rests on the consensus on the procedural fairness of the elections and in its results - disruption on such consensus can come both from foreign or domestic sources.

We therefore propose an approach of countering disinformation, information manipulation and interference and disruption of electoral processes axed on transparency, support of independent institutions, fact-checking, and institutional and civic electoral resilience. To this end, we propose to:

- **Withdraw the current proposed Directive on third-country interest representation and propose a Directive on transparency of interest representation.** Civil society has always been at the forefront of calling for

¹ [BRIEFING PAPER – DEFENCE OF DEMOCRACY PACKAGE](#) and [Q&A on the proposed Directive on third country interest representation](#)

transparency of interest representation, and has been crucial for the establishment of the EU Transparency Register. At the same time, we underline how a general regime of transparency, regardless of the source of funding, needs to be in line with the principles of proportionality, respect fundamental rights (including freedom of expression and association) and align itself with the Council of Europe's² understanding that civil society advocacy is different from lobbying for for-profit interests. Therefore, the proposed Directive should be preceded by an impact assessment that takes into account its effects on fundamental rights and civic space (e.g. on freedom of expression and association) the free flow of capital, the possibilities to participate in civil dialogue, as well as on the possibilities of advocacy by social movements, spontaneous or newly established citizens' coalitions.

- **Invest in independent fact-checking platforms**, supporting cross-country and regional synergies, and providing official partnerships for elections.
- **Evaluate the legislative framework for fact-checking activities**, and propose legislation if needed to develop an enabling framework for them.
- **Reinforce the institutional dimension of the fact-checking on EU policies within the EU**, to the model of the EEAS Strategic Communications, both at the central institutional level, and within the European Commission's and European Parliament's liaison offices in the Member States.
- **Propose a regulation to transform the European Cooperation Network on Elections into an EU agency, called European Electoral Authority**. The authority would follow up the work on the implementation of the Commission recommendation on inclusive and resilient electoral processes in the Union³. The authority could pilot cross-country missions of election observation missions for national elections within the Member States.
- **Provide funding for independent civil society organisations performing independent election observation**.
- **Complement and update the European Media Freedom Act⁴ and the Political Advertising Regulation⁵ with targeted measures for limiting campaign**

² [https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD\(2014\)046-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD(2014)046-e)

³ https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=OJ:L_202302829

⁴ https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=OJ:L_202401083

⁵ https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=OJ:L_202400900

gatekeeping. Stricter campaign transparency requirements could be developed, disclosing not only spending amounts but also the use of big data and automated AI-driven outreach, explicitly categorizing and reporting AI-related expenditures.

- **Require social media platforms to open data for researchers, journalists and NGOs** and to ensure content moderation to address disinformation and hate speech towards civil society and activists.
- **Prevent social media platforms and other media actors from creating obstacles to legitimate, civil society-led campaigns** online across the EU on political topics, including before and during elections.
- **Develop a report on the obstacles to political participation for mobile citizens and residents.** The report should propose measures to facilitate the political and civic participation of mobile EU citizens and third-country nationals, including access to democratic processes, including as volunteers, at local and European levels.
- **Develop an EU report on equality, inclusiveness, representativity and transparency of elections.** The report should cover accessibility of elections and political campaigns and debates for all marginalised groups, transparency of political party and campaign finance, as well as **issuing guidelines for elections in emergency contexts such as pandemics.**

An institutional ‘firewall’ against attacks to critical democratic infrastructure and to promote democracy at the EU level

In the last decade, the EU has started to consider the state of the rule of law and fundamental rights within the Member States as a matter of EU intervention. While processes like the Rule of Law cycle and the rule of law conditionality for the EU funds are important progresses, more needs to be done to ensure that the institutions are well equipped against attacks to rule of law and fundamental rights, both at the national and EU levels. Therefore, we purpose to:

- **Propose a modification to the regulation on EU Rule of Law conditionality⁶ to strengthen its link with the Annual Rule of Law Report.** The failure to establish pathways towards the implementation of the country recommendations and the non-compliance to the rulings of the Court of Justice of the European Union (ECJ) should also be considered among the conditions for the adoption of the measures set out by the regulation.

⁶ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32020R2092>

- **Add a standalone chapter in the Rule of Law Annual country reports on civic space.** It should include sections on civic space funding, the legal status of civil society organisations, the state of civil liberties (not duplicating FRA's report on fundamental rights but integrating valuable context for country-specific recommendations), and equality issues. It should allow for further recognition and subsequent protection of specific civil society sectors e.g. women's rights, youth organisations, LGBTQI+ organisations, minority organisations. It should also monitor instances of surveillance, harassment, prosecution and criminalisation against civil society and human rights defenders. The role of the European Commission representations in the Member States on dialogue and engagement with civil society should be strengthened as a liaison for civil society organisations contributing to the rule of law reports.
- **Include a 'democracy check' for any EU legislative proposal, to ensure its compliance with fundamental rights and international human rights standards.**
- **Modify the regulation establishing the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA)⁷ in order to strengthen its mandate.** In particular, involve FRA in the 'democracy check' for the impact assessment of new EU legislation, and provide the agency with adequate financial means for it.

A commitment to make the EU a benchmark for transparency, accountability and participation in policy-making

The Democracy Shield should not be just a tool to protect the current democratic institutions and practices, but should also promote a vision of what model of democracy and democratic participation the EU aspires to. We believe that the EU can lead by example in proposing two key inter-institutional agreements to enhance inclusion, transparency, active citizenship, accountability and participation in policy-making:

- **Propose an inter-institutional framework for civil dialogue.** As per Article 11 of TEU, the civil dialogue framework should be co-designed in equal partnership with civil society and should include both the 'vertical', sectorial dimension and the 'transversal', whole-institutional dimension. It should involve agenda-setting, orientation of the policies and programmes, and co-creation of policies and joint initiatives. It should be open to EU-level civil society organisations, with a clear set of eligibility criteria. The proposed Civil Society Platform should be considered as the transversal civil dialogue structure between the European Commission and European civil society, and should follow the criteria indicated in this point⁸. The Civil Society

⁷ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:02007R0168-20220427>

⁸ For more information, read [EU Civil Dialogue: the foundations of an institutional framework](#)

Platform should also be involved by the European Commission in the monitoring and assessment of the European Civil Society Strategy.

- **Propose an inter-institutional agreement on transparency and accountability of the EU institutions.** Coordination and strengthening of the institutional ethical frameworks should be foreseen, including for rules on conflicts of interest, side activities, revolving doors and lobbying. The EU Transparency Register should have equal reporting requirements for all ‘interest representatives’ (organisations, associations, groups and self-employed individuals) who carry out activities to influence the EU policy and decision-making processes beyond the activities under the inter-institutional framework for civil dialogue. Transparency and access to documents should be included in all phases of the co-decision procedure, including in the preparatory work of the Council, the trilogues and comitology. The EU WhoIsWho⁹ should provide the contacts of people working in the EU institutions, with clear organigrams.
- **Pilot a structure of crowdsourcing and participatory budgeting at the EU level,** using the potential of new technologies, to complement its current participatory toolbox.

A robust public support for civic resilience

Civil society organisations, such as citizens’ associations, NGOs and public-benefit foundations, and human rights defenders are instrumental to effective democratic participation and resilience, both at European and national level. Their role is key to building public spaces, upscaling participatory democracy and channeling citizens’ participation. CSOs also play a fundamental watchdog role when rights, democracy and the rule of law are under attack, including to protect from undue foreign influences and keep governments accountable. Yet, public funding to civil society is threatened at the national and even at the EU levels, either directly in the access to funds, or indirectly by putting obstacles for grantee civil society organisations to engage in advocacy activities. Furthermore, human rights defenders in the EU remain vulnerable to attacks and persecution within the EU itself. To tackle that, we propose, in coordination with the Civil Society Strategy:

- **Develop clear guidelines to protect and strengthen public funding for civil society, both at the national and EU levels, shifting away from performance-based or project-based funding towards flexible funding.** The guidelines should recognise the legitimate right of advocacy with EU funds of the grantees. Such guidelines should be applied to the EU programmes providing funds to civil society in the next Multiannual Financial Framework.

⁹ <https://op.europa.eu/en/web/who-is-who>

- **Develop funding for capacity-building activities so that civil society organisations can monitor the use of EU funds and report any detected abuse.**
- **Create a specific fund to support investigative journalism.**
- **Develop a legislative proposal to protect Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) and civil society activists in the EU** based on an institutional platform to report threats and attacks, a rapid response protection mechanism, and a coherent cycle of monitoring, early warning and reporting¹⁰.

A robust civic digital space

Information technology, including digital services and social media platforms, has been a key dimension where the EU has been reliant on foreign, for-profit technology. While EU legislation such as the DSA and the DMA are important, and should be thoroughly implemented, more needs to be done to create a European digital ecosystem that reflects EU values and is based on respect for fundamental rights. In this, civil society and civic initiatives are key allies. Therefore, we propose to:

- **Guarantee publicly funded, secure internet access for all, and increase EU investments in safe, inclusive, and accessible digital infrastructure.** Ensure full and equal participation in the digital society for every citizen, with particular attention to marginalised communities. This requires sustained EU funding for digital inclusion and prioritizes universal and free connectivity, from densely populated urban centres to remote rural areas, to bridge digital divides and ensure equitable access to essential services.
- **Invest in infrastructure and tools to build EU digital sovereignty based on European values.** Lead by example by adopting and promoting free software, open and interoperable European-developed digital technologies that respect our environment and human rights. European-developed digital technologies should also ensure ethical development and deployment of new solutions, guaranteeing high standards of fairness, transparency, explainability, safety, and security of technology, as well as data privacy standards. Europe should distinguish itself and become a pioneer in innovation in clean tech and other technologies that reflect its core values. The recent proposal of a Eurostack and the call for an European Technology Fund are good steps in the right direction.

¹⁰ For more information, read [Realising protection for human rights defenders and civil society organisations in Europe. Pathways Towards an Effective Protection Ecosystem](#)

- **Revise the Digital Decade's¹¹ legal base to include Articles 11 TEU and article 165 TFEU, enabling structured civil society participation—especially within the Skills pillar.** Civil society must be recognised for its crucial role in reaching underserved groups and fostering critical digital literacy, yet current indicators overlook this. Stronger and structured involvement in governance, and dedicated support for training and civic initiatives, including those that are volunteer based and/ or led is essential.
- **Ensure the application of the European Declaration on Digital Rights and Principles¹² to protect internet users.** Ensuring the application of this declaration prevents harms such as misinformation and disinformation, surveillance abuse, digital divide, and the unethical use of AI and data. The implementation of the European Declaration on Digital Rights and principles must ensure transparency, accountability, equity and inclusion, while safeguarding fundamental rights and freedoms online, to contribute to a human-centred, ethical digital transformation in Europe.
- **Promote technology for social good, including tools for democratic participation by people with disabilities and permanent citizen mechanisms for engaging with and monitoring policymakers.** The EU should reinforce the European public domain and structured repositories such as the Common European Data Space for Cultural Heritage (DS4CH)¹³. This ensures (G)AI training respects the legal and cultural integrity of European assets and promotes diversity. EU programmes (Digital Europe/Horizon Europe/Creative Europe) should launch a large-scale, EU-funded digitisation campaign for cultural and heritage data.
- **Ensure long-term funding for e-participation.** Guarantee sustained investment in digital inclusion and digital civic engagement initiatives, with a strong focus on accessibility, equity, and accountability across all digital policy frameworks. Every citizen must be empowered to participate fully and equally in the digital society, not only as users of digital services, but as active contributors to democratic life through inclusive and accessible e-participation channels.

¹¹

https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/europe-fit-digital-age/europes-digital-decade-digital-targets-2030_en

¹² [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32023C0123\(01\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32023C0123(01))

¹³ <https://www.dataspace-culturalheritage.eu/en>

- **Scale up the Joint Cyber Unit by continuing the implementation of the Cyber Resilience Act¹⁴, the Cyber Solidarity Act¹⁵ and approve the Cyber Blueprint¹⁶, while safeguarding civic space from unintended surveillance.** The implementation and approval of these instruments should safeguard the civic space, as well as prevent cyber and anti-discrimination laws from being misused to limit media freedom. Civil society organisations remain strategic partners to deliver digital literacy programs and counter disinformation, especially among more vulnerable groups of the population.
- **Provide non-digital alternatives to leave no one behind.** Ensure that information and essential services remain accessible through non-digital means, particularly in crisis situations, to guarantee access to vital information and resources, such as payment options, for all individuals, regardless of their digital skills or access to technology. These measures should be complemented by comprehensive digital literacy programs tailored to the needs of vulnerable populations, to prevent digital exclusion and foster long-term inclusion.

A European citizenry equipped with the civic skills for today's democracy

While the EU has only supportive competences on education, civic skills are today as critical as institutional structures to protect and promote democracy, combat disinformation and defuse polarisation. Therefore, we propose to:

- **Promote global citizenship education and civic education at all levels and in all spheres of learning (formal, non-formal and informal learning).** The European Commission should issue guidelines for Member States on the minimum standards and best practices of citizenship and civic education on the national level based e.g. on the Council of Europe Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education¹⁷. Ensure access to independent and nonpartisan Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights (EDC/HRE). Invest in mainstream quality citizenship education with particular attention to the most marginalised or underrepresented groups in society, with programmes designed also in cooperation with civil society organisations such as Service Learning programmes.
- **Incentivise Active Citizenship Education in tertiary education, VET and adult education** as a pillar in all initiatives and funding instruments under the Union of Skills and other education related programmes of the EU.

¹⁴ https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=OJ:L_202402847

¹⁵ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:02025R0038-20250115>

¹⁶

https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:9d3b96ee-f29d-11ef-981b-01aa75ed71a1.0001.02/DOC_1&format=PDF

¹⁷

<https://www.coe.int/en/web/edc/charter-on-education-for-democratic-citizenship-and-human-rights-education>

- **Launch a European plan for establishing Community Lifelong Learning Centers.** These centres, should be based on community-based learning and service-learning, should promote partnerships between education providers, communities and civil society actors, including volunteer-involving organisations, and should bolster democratic and citizenship competences, such as critical thinking, democratic participation & engagement, as well as empower citizens to navigate digital democracy, harness technologies, and respond to ethical and societal challenges of AI in all aspects of life, including family, education, volunteering, employment, leisure etc.
- **Use the ongoing revision of the EU DigComp¹⁸ 3.0 framework to boost Europeans' digital critical thinking.** Empower European users in the choice of digital tools, the understanding of their digital rights, the identification of courses of actions to safeguard digital rights and promoting digital sobriety where appropriate.
- **Develop a roadmap for the implementation of the Porto Santo Charter¹⁹ on the role of culture and cultural education in democratic societies.** In line with the EU Commission's priorities, the role of culture and cultural education for safeguarding and strengthening democracy should be explicitly emphasised and underpinned with concrete measures that recognise and value diversity. This includes, above all, measures that promote cultural participation and intercultural dialogue and empower people to act as cultural citizens in free self-determination. A cultural and creative sector that is based on the idea of cultural citizenship and is itself democratically constituted can be a driving force in the fight against disinformation, social polarisation and the undermining of the rule of law.

¹⁸

https://joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu/projects-and-activities/education-and-training/digital-transformation-education/digital-competence-framework-citizens-digcomp/digcomp-framework_en

¹⁹ <https://portosantocharter.eu/the-charter/>