

## **Defending the EU and democracy means supporting civil society through a standalone programme in the next Multiannual Financial Framework**

*To the attention of the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union*

Across the European Union, the EU values of democracy, the rule of law, equality and fundamental rights are facing coordinated and systemic attacks. Democratic safeguards, equality and rights of women and scapegoated minorities are being rolled back. Politically motivated attacks on civil society organisations and human rights defenders are increasing and civic space is shrinking. These are not isolated incidents — they are part of a broader pattern that threatens the very foundations of the Union.

These threats are not theoretical. They are already impacting the lives of marginalised communities, the safety of activists, and the integrity of democratic institutions. In recent years, the European Union has acknowledged<sup>1</sup> the increasing pressure faced by civil society organisations across Member States and at EU level<sup>2</sup>. If the EU is serious about defending its values, it must act now – not only with strong words, but with bold budgetary commitments.

### **Civil society stands on the frontlines of defending EU values. It must not stand alone.**

The EU rightly recognises civil society as a pillar of democratic resilience, and the importance of EU support to civil society is exemplified in the EU Treaties, European Parliament Reports, EU Fundamental Rights Agency contributions, European Commission Reports, Council Conclusions.

In the last years, the EU has put the respect of the Rule of Law as one of the key elements of its internal policy, as visible by the Rule of Law cycle and the Rule of Law conditionality for the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF). It has recently reaffirmed its determination to defend its core values, democracy, and civic space, as made evident by the announced Civil Society Strategy, Democracy Shield, and the renewal of the Union of Equality Agenda. In this context, strengthening support to civil society will be more important than ever, to ensure the EU's ambitions are realised.

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<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/03/10/fundamental-rights-council-ap-proves-conclusions-on-the-role-of-the-civic-space/>;  
[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0056\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0056_EN.html);  
[https://commission.europa.eu/publications/2022-charter-report-fra-summary-reports\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/publications/2022-charter-report-fra-summary-reports_en);  
[https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra\\_uploads/report-key-findings-fra-civic-space-consultation-covering-2023.pdf](https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/report-key-findings-fra-civic-space-consultation-covering-2023.pdf);  
<https://fra.europa.eu/en/news/2025/fra-statement-recent-developments-affecting-civil-society-and-fundamental-rights>

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<https://civilsocietyeurope.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/07.05-Civil-Society-Europe-NGO-Funding-Statement.pdf>

The *Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV)* Programme is specifically designed to support civil society in promoting and protecting fundamental rights and the Union's core values on the ground. Despite its relatively small financial size, the current programme has an outsized impact: it enables organisations to reach communities, support marginalised groups, safeguard the rule of law, strengthen democratic participation, advocate for progress, respond to national-level repression, hold institutions accountable – often in difficult and hostile environments, and deliver on the EU's legal and political commitments. The importance of such programme is explicitly recognised in the Strategy to strengthen the application of the Charter on Fundamental Rights in the EU<sup>3</sup>.

Yet, despite its success, the programme's current budget is insufficient to fulfil the scope of its ambitions<sup>4</sup> and to meet the current demand, which will only grow as CSOs face growing attacks and funding cuts. If we fail to invest now, the cost to democracy will be immeasurable.

As the European Commission prepares its proposal for the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), we, civil society organisations from across Europe, therefore call for a strengthened and future-proofed approach to civil society support.

We urge EU institutions to ensure:

### **1. A stand-alone, directly managed programme to support civil society, strengthen civic space, protect and promote democracy**

In a political context where democracy and rights are increasingly under threat, the EU needs a flagship programme to support civil society, protect democracy and ensure civic resilience. A revamped, stronger, well-funded and accessible next-generation CERV programme is not just desirable — it is indispensable to build a Europe for citizens by citizens. It is also indispensable to support different types of CSOs via the different EU funding programmes. The EU must act with resolve, and ensure that civil society has the tools it needs to safeguard the Union's democratic future.

Preserving the integrity and independence of the standalone programme for civil society is essential. It is critical that the next generation of the CERV programme in the next MFF remains a distinct, dedicated instrument. Merging programmes such as CERV into broader funding mechanisms would risk diluting its thematic priorities and reducing its dedicated budget. Direct management ensures transparency, equal access, and protection from political interference – particularly important for organisations operating in shrinking civic spaces.

The next MFF must reflect the political significance of defending the rule of law, democracy and fundamental rights and EU values against internal and external threats, as well as reinforcing it. This requires a meaningful increase in funding allocated to a standalone programme building on and extending CERV to support civil society organisations, including core and sustainable funding, increasing their capacity to respond to and be protected<sup>5</sup> from

<sup>3</sup> <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0711>

<sup>4</sup> [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=COM%3A2024%3A456%3AFIN](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=COM%3A2024%3A456%3AFIN;);  
[https://www.cerv.at/dam/jcr:dffbc544-1381-4b0f-a3a7-bb4f4560a473/CERV\\_Presentation\\_Results\\_2021-%2002.pdf](https://www.cerv.at/dam/jcr:dffbc544-1381-4b0f-a3a7-bb4f4560a473/CERV_Presentation_Results_2021-%2002.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.liberties.eu/f/p7mmqo>

emerging threats. In addition, such a programme should have a steadily allocated amount in the next MFF, therefore not subject to the flexibility clauses, in order to preserve the foreseeability of its action.

## **2. A strategic alignment with EU commitments across all thematic priorities**

The next generation of CERV should support the implementation of the EU's current and upcoming political commitments. The current thematic strands of the CERV programmes must be preserved and reinforced - to defend EU Values, citizens' engagement, equality, and combat gender-based violence. The *Union of Equality Agenda* (Strategies on gender equality, LGBTIQ+ rights, anti-racism, Roma inclusion, disability rights, and more) will continue to be a priority.

Given the increased challenges to civic space, fundamental rights and the Rule of Law, and the European Commission's renewed commitment to support civil society, strengthen democratic resilience, elections' integrity, and civic education – including through the upcoming *Civil Society Strategy*, the *Democracy Shield* - additional strands and funding will be necessary. All of these policy frameworks recognise civil society as a vital partner – but require adequate and accessible funding to succeed.

## **3. Guaranteeing adequate financial resources for civil society throughout the MFF**

Additionally, funding for civil society should be made available and accessible throughout the MFF's budgetary programmes, in terms of operating grants (that facilitate the sustainability of CSOs by covering core costs ), as well as action grants. The application procedures should be simplified in order to ensure broader access for smaller organisations. In particular, we underline how the EU Civil Protection Mechanism should have a strand to support civil resilience and the preparedness and coordination of civil society before (risk analysis, planning and coordination), during and after (recovery, reconciliation) crises. This public funding, made available to CSOs through open and transparent "Call for Proposal" mechanisms, should support the advocacy and policy development activities of CSOs in line with the priorities and concerns of their members.