

## Civil Society Europe's Contribution to the Consultation on the EU Civil Society Strategy

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## Introduction and expected key initiatives

Civil society is an essential pillar of European democracy. Across the European Union, community groups, associations, social movements, NGOs, philanthropic actors and not-for-profit social service providers give voice to citizens, deliver essential services, defend rights, and hold decision-makers accountable. Yet in recent years, civic space in Europe has come under increasing pressure – from legal and administrative restrictions in some Member States, to growing mistrust and delegitimisation of the role of civil society organisations (CSOs) at EU level. These pressures threaten not only the organisations themselves, but also the values of participation, pluralism, and solidarity enshrined in the EU Treaties.

Over the past years, civil society as well as some institutional actors have repeatedly called for the launch of a Strategy dedicated to Civil Society. In 2022, over 340 CSOs signed a [letter](#) urging European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen to include the Strategy in the Commission's 2023 Work Programme. The European Parliament echoed this call in its 2022 [resolution on the shrinking space for civil society](#), inviting the Commission to develop a dedicated strategy. In 2024, [another letter](#) addressed to President Von der Leyen was supported by over 400 CSOs.

In light of this, Civil Society Europe very much welcomed the decision of the European Commission to include the development of an EU Civil Society Strategy in its 2025 Work Programme. This decision came at a critical moment and represents a key opportunity to reverse the trend of increasing pressure on civil society actors. The Strategy can provide a coherent, long-term framework to safeguard and expand civic space, ensure increased and better access to EU and private funding in a consistent manner across policy areas, and strengthen meaningful dialogue between institutions and civil society. Crucially, it would also reaffirm civil society as an essential partner in shaping and implementing EU policies that respond to people's needs.

The upcoming EU Civil Society Strategy should be grounded in the Charter of Fundamental Rights, aligned with the European Democracy Action Plan and the European Democracy Shield, and respond to the challenges identified in the Rule of Law Reports, seizing the opportunity to move from ad-hoc initiatives to a comprehensive, binding framework that guarantees an enabling environment for civil society in all Member States.

This submission was prepared by Civil Society Europe (CSE), including through CSE's Working Group on Civic Space and Fundamental Rights, which comprises a large number of civil society organisations from a wide variety of policy sectors. For each of the three pillars the proposed Strategy will be built on, it aims to highlight the current situation and the challenges faced by civil society actors, and most importantly, the solutions and key actions needed to address existing gaps.

In particular, we expect the following initiatives to be included in and fostered through the Strategy:

## Flagship initiatives expected of the European Commission under the upcoming EU Civil Society Strategy

### Pillar Support and overall environment

- Carry out a **systematic civic space impact assessment across all legislative and regulatory proposals**, to ensure that all EU policies support rather than restrict civic space.
- Ensure **strong structural support in the new MFF** through directly managed funding programmes dedicated to civil society in the field of equality, rights and values, as well as in external action funds and any other areas relevant to citizens. Increase the overall funding allocation to Operating Grants, ensure their predictability and accessibility, and simplify and harmonize administrative procedures across different programmes. Explicitly include advocacy as an eligible activity for all EU funding.
- Develop a **forward-looking strategy that supports an overall enabling environment for philanthropy**, including a Single Market for Philanthropy, non-discriminatory tax treatment to support cross-border giving, and facilitating partnerships between public institutions and philanthropic actors to co-invest in areas vital to democratic resilience.

### Pillar Protection

- **EU-wide Monitoring and Alert Mechanism:** a coordinated, evidence-based system to monitor civic space restrictions, identify early warning signs, and trigger a fast-track EU response. It should build on and complement civil society and FRA monitoring, and include a clear mandate for EU institutions to follow-up on registered complaints. The findings should be collected in a standalone civic space chapter within the Rule of Law Report, with country-specific recommendations.
- **EU guidelines for preventive action and response to civic space deterioration:** define clear guidelines outlining both legal and non-legal EU measures to address civic space deterioration, including structured engagement with national authorities. The guidelines should define preventive actions that can be triggered by early warning signs or before new legislation is adopted, as well as specific indicators.
- **Clear mandate for the Commissioner for Democracy, Justice, the Rule of Law and Consumer Protection to engage with – and, where appropriate, trigger legal measures against – Member States on alerts and complaints** collected through the monitoring mechanism.

- **EU-wide Protection Mechanism for HRDs and CSOs within the EU:** a flexible instrument offering emergency financial, legal and psycho-social support to defenders and organisations under attack, and coordinating national and EU-level protection efforts – including civil society protection hubs and solidarity networks.

## **Pillar Engagement**

- **Interinstitutional Agreement on Civil Dialogue:** a binding agreement between the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union to establish structured practices of engagement of civil society across all stages of the policy cycle.
- Include **specific provisions dedicated to civil dialogue within the Better Regulation toolbox**, to ensure the European Commission's engagement with civil society is meaningful and result-oriented.
- **Civil Society Platform:** a mechanism to support systematic, transversal and vertical dialogue between the EU Commission and civil society organisations and strengthen civic participation in shaping the political agenda, to be co-created with organised civil society.

## Pillar Support and overall environment

### 1) Rationale and existing needs and gaps

#### Current situation and challenges

The overall environment for civil society organisations (CSOs) in the EU has become increasingly challenging, particularly for those engaged in human rights, democratic accountability, and advocacy work. While the EU Treaties and the Charter of Fundamental Rights formally recognise and protect the freedoms of association, assembly, and expression, in practice, **many CSOs face a growing number of legal, political, regulatory and administrative obstacles that limit their ability to operate freely and effectively.** This trend is not accidental but rather the outcome of coordinated political efforts by certain actors seeking to limit the role and influence of civil society.

In recent years, CSOs across the EU have faced growing pressures at all levels, including public attacks and smear campaigns, funding restrictions, burdensome registration procedures, and legislative measures aimed at limiting their activities. In several Member States, national laws have been proposed to restrict funding – especially from foreign sources – and impose disproportionate restrictions, administrative obligations and sanctions (including dissolution and deregistration), creating an increasingly complex legal and regulatory environment. Even in Member States with strong democratic traditions, CSOs report increasing limitations to their operations, including restrictions on civil society's advocacy and "political" campaigning. These measures create a chilling effect, discouraging CSOs from engaging in certain activities, expressions, or operations.<sup>1</sup>

The right to freedom of assembly has been particularly restricted through legislation and law enforcement tactics. Civil society actors working on specific issues – such as migration, human and environmental rights, reproductive rights, women's rights, LGBTIQ rights, and the rights of under-represented and vulnerable groups generally – have been affected by the use of political and legal actions aiming to treat their activities as illegitimate and illegal, as well as by unfounded and abusive civil and criminal proceedings.

Although Article 12 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights guarantees freedom of association "at all levels," no implementing legislation exists allowing the exercise of such right at the EU level. As a result, non-profit organisations are only legally recognised in the Member State where they are established and face significant challenges when operating across borders within the EU.

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<sup>1</sup> For additional information on the restrictions to civic space and fundamental freedoms in the Member States, see the 2025 Rule of Law Reports of [Civil Society Europe](#) and [Civil Liberties Union for Europe](#), as well as the [2025 Civic Space Report](#) of the European Civic Forum.



Lastly, certain pieces of EU legislation risk contributing to the restriction of civic space. For example, restrictive interpretation and application of anti-money laundering and countering terrorism regulations often lead to disproportionate administrative burdens for CSOs, as well as cases of de-risking. The expanded requirements for obliged entities introduced by the new EU AML/CFT package, adopted in May 2024 and effective in July 2027, are expected to lead to heightened scrutiny and new challenges for CSOs and human rights defenders (HRDs) in their interactions with banks and other financial institutions. The new framework will also significantly impact public benefit crowdfunding platforms, which will be classified as obliged entities and face significant compliance burdens.

The [Directive on interest representation services on behalf of third countries](#) risks imposing excessive registration requirements and stigmatizing recipients of public funding from non-EU countries, due to its vague scope and ambiguous criteria of application.

### Existing gaps in support to civil society actors

Institutions at the national, EU and international level bear the primary duty to respect, enable and defend fundamental rights and freedoms. However, in a growing number of countries **CSOs operate in an environment that lacks adequate political recognition and legal protection**. Restrictive measures targeting civil society often go unchecked, as the EU currently lacks robust enforcement mechanisms to respond when Member States violate civic space. Existing tools, such as the Rule of Law toolbox or infringement proceedings, provide limited and delayed protection. Moreover, the absence of a dedicated EU-level framework to safeguard CSOs from political interference or legal harassment leaves them vulnerable, as the EU lacks a dedicated mechanism to monitor and respond to threats against civil society within its borders.<sup>2</sup>

### Areas where there have been recent developments

- The [European Media Freedom Act](#), aiming to protect editorial independence, media pluralism, ensure transparency and fairness.
- The proposed [Directive on European Cross-Border Associations \(ECBA\)](#), which would ensure the mutual recognition and equal treatment of cross-border associations throughout the EU, and would be the first EU legislative text to recognise the non-profit sector at the level of the Single Market.
- The proposed [European Democracy Shield](#), which provides a key opportunity for supporting a vibrant, pluralistic civil society as an essential component of democratic resilience.<sup>3</sup>
- The proposed [EU Preparedness Union Strategy](#), aiming to prevent and respond to emerging threats through a whole-of-society approach. Civil society has a role to play at

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<sup>2</sup> For an overview of the existing protection landscape in Europe, see the 2024 joint civil society "[Mapping paper on Realising Protection for Human Rights Defenders and Civil Society Organisations in Europe](#)".

<sup>3</sup> See also Civil Society Europe's [Statement on the Democracy Shield](#).

all levels – from risk foresight and population preparedness to crisis response and post-crisis follow-up.

## Existing gaps in funding

A well-funded civil society is essential to democratic participation, human rights protection, and the inclusion of and support to underrepresented groups. Calls to enhance adequate, core, long-term and predictable funding for CSOs have been echoed by the European Parliament ([resolution on the shrinking civic space in Europe](#)) and the Council ([conclusions on civic space](#)) in 2022 and 2023. The latter crucially recognised that **the freedom to seek, receive, and use financial resources is integral to the right of association**.

However, civil society across the EU faces persistent funding challenges that undermine its sustainability and independence. 44% of the almost 400 CSOs that contributed to the Fundamental Rights Agency's (FRA) most recent consultation on civic space reported that they had experienced an unexpected reduction, cut or freezing of funding in 2024, particularly from national governments.<sup>4</sup> Most available resources are project-based, offering limited or no core, unrestricted funding to cover operational costs such as staff, rent, and administration. This short-term funding model hinders long-term planning and keeps civil society in a “**starvation cycle**”, which reduces their financial health and therefore their scope.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, many organisations rely on a limited number of funders, making them financially vulnerable to shifts in political priorities or the withdrawal of key donors.

In some Member States, political hostility and *ad hoc* legislation are restricting access to funding – especially from foreign or EU sources – threatening CSO independence. When available, accessing EU funds is often complicated by bureaucratic application and cumbersome – and sometimes inconsistent – reporting procedures, which disproportionately disadvantage smaller, grassroots or less experienced organisations. Ongoing attacks at the EU level targeting NGOs engaging in advocacy are intensifying pressures on these organisations while attempting to undermine their reputation. At the same time, the European Commission's decision not to include Operating Grants in the 2025 EU4Health Work Programme, despite signing Framework Partnership Agreements with over 30 health NGOs for 2025-2026, creates serious uncertainty and raises doubts on the reliability and predictability of EU public funding. On top of these challenges, shrinking civic space, the lack of protection from attacks and the need to adapt to increasingly complex regulatory requirements mean that CSOs have less means and resources to dedicate to their missions. Finally, the underdevelopment of private and philanthropic funding ecosystems in many EU countries further exacerbates the dependency on decreasing public funds.

Civil society providing legal support has been crucial to trigger redress measures, such as bringing complaints to court and raising cases to international and EU institutions when national redress mechanisms are not available. However, funding for litigation is limited. Few private

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<sup>4</sup> Reported in the FRA [Contribution to the consultation on the Multiannual Financial Framework 2028-2034](#).

<sup>5</sup> Humentum, “[New Findings Show How Funders Need to Break the NGO Starvation Cycle](#)”, 2022.

donors support this type of work, hence most often CSOs need to rely on crowdfunding and donations to support such actions. In the context of growing criminalisation and civil lawsuits, HRDs often need to give up on seeking justice due to the lack of financing for their legal costs.

**Funding for advocacy is also too limited compared to the need, and increasingly at risk.**

Recent attempts to restrict the use of EU funds for advocacy – framing such activities as posing a ‘reputational risk’ for the EU – under programmes like LIFE, coupled with political attacks in the European Parliament aimed at defunding NGOs, have raised concerns about the erosion of EU and democratic values as well as civil society independence even within EU funding frameworks, and are creating a chilling effect on CSOs. This undermines civil society's very reason to exist, its capacity to represent citizens, to engage in policy-making processes and to amplify people's voices in matters of public interest, especially when it comes to vulnerable or underrepresented groups.

Pressure on civil society funding recently increased also at the international and national level, including the reintroduction of the Global Gag Rule, cuts to US-based funding streams such as USAID and funding to UN agencies, and cuts by EU Member States' budgets. Many of these challenges also ring true for CSOs working in EU partner countries, highlighting the **need for a coherent internal and external approach**. Funding cuts by Member States<sup>6</sup> and USAID have dramatically impacted local civil society and rapidly shrunk their civic space,<sup>7</sup> as well as they also had an impact on European civil society working in the field of international cooperation. CSOs working on human rights and democracy, gender equality, sexual and reproductive health and rights, women's rights, and LGBTIQ rights have been particularly affected.<sup>8</sup> While the EU has important frameworks, commitments and tools on paper to support civil society in external relations,<sup>9</sup> it has so far had a weak response to these funding gaps, failing to seize this opportunity for strategic leadership. Overall, a shift in focus towards investments and defence is sidelining the role of civil society as an essential partner, with certain thematic priorities being underfunded for political reasons.

Some positive practices are emerging among private funders, driven by the need to look into new funding models. These include providing core support rather than only project-based grants, focusing on outcomes instead of outputs, and adopting approaches such as trust-based philanthropy and participatory grant making. While such practices have mostly been limited to the private sector, the Active Citizens Fund by the EEA and Norway Grants has experimented with some of these. However, private donors have not been immune to funding cuts, and financial resources for organisations working on democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights remain limited, leaving those organisations reliant on a narrow pool of public resources. Restrictions on

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<sup>6</sup> CONCORD Europe, “[The EU's short-sighted aid cuts are a choice – so is the way forward!](#)”, April 2025.

<sup>7</sup> For more on this issue, see Humentum's [Global Aid Freeze Tracker](#).

<sup>8</sup> EU SEE, “[The Impact of the US Funding Freeze on Civil Society](#)”, March 2025.

<sup>9</sup> These include the [DAC Recommendation on Enabling Civil Society in Development Co-operation and Humanitarian Assistance](#); the 2012 Communication “[The roots of democracy and sustainable development: Europe's engagement with Civil Society in external relations](#)” and subsequent [Council Conclusions of 2017 on EU engagement with civil society in external relations](#); the [Human Rights and Democracy Action Plan 2020-2027](#), and the CSO roadmaps at country level.



civic space further complicate the environment, and add to other barriers to philanthropy such as limitations to engage in political activities, cuts to tax incentives, cumbersome reporting requirements and foreign funding restrictions. As a result, philanthropic donors and other private funders are often discouraged from engaging, and overall private funding remains significantly below the sector's needs.

On a positive note, at the EU level the Citizens, Equality, Rights, and Values (CERV) Programme has been playing a critical role to support civil society and democratic engagement in the area of rule of law, rights and values. Core funding through four-year partnership agreements and Operating Grants, support for regranting at the national and local levels, and a wide range of eligible activities all help respond to the diverse needs of civil society. The programme operates under direct management, ensuring independence from national governments, and has demonstrated a significant impact. However, current funding levels remain insufficient to meet the growing challenges and needs of civil society actors, while co-funding requirements can pose a serious barrier for many organisations, particularly those without access to large private or national-level donors.

## 2) Key actions on support and overall environment

### **Flagship initiatives expected of the European Commission under the upcoming EU Civil Society Strategy**

- Carry out a **systematic civic space impact assessment across all legislative and regulatory proposals**, to ensure that all EU policies support rather than restrict civic space.
- Ensure **strong structural support in the new MFF** through directly managed funding programmes dedicated to civil society in the field of equality, rights and values, as well as in any other areas relevant to citizens. Dedicated thematic envelopes for CSOs working on democracy and human rights should also be included within external action funds. Increase the overall funding allocation to Operating Grants, ensure their predictability and accessibility, and simplify and harmonize administrative procedures. Explicitly include advocacy as an eligible activity for all EU funding.
- Develop a **forward-looking strategy that supports an overall enabling environment for philanthropy**, including a Single Market for Philanthropy, non-discriminatory tax treatment to support cross-border giving, and facilitating partnerships between public institutions and philanthropic actors to co-invest in areas vital to democratic resilience.

## Political support and the role of the Commissioner for Democracy, Justice, the Rule of Law and Consumer Protection

**EU institutions, particularly the European Commission, must take a proactive role in safeguarding civic space and supporting civil society actors under pressure.** The Commissioner for Democracy, Justice, the Rule of Law and Consumer Protection should lead in publicly recognising the essential role of civil society actors in upholding democratic values, addressing threats to civic space, promoting Member State compliance with EU fundamental rights obligations, championing funding for CSOs, and regularly meeting with their representatives. This includes systematically addressing violations identified through both proactive monitoring of the European Commission and alerts sent by civil society, ensuring timely follow-up to country-specific concerns, and integrating civic space indicators across EU monitoring and enforcement tools. Clear political messaging, both in public discourse and in bilateral engagement with Member States, is essential to counter the growing delegitimisation of CSOs.

## Developing a European civic space and its cross-border dimension

**The EU must strengthen the cross-border dimension of civil society and support cooperation among organisations across Member States.** The swift adoption and effective implementation of the proposed European Cross-Border Association Directive is a key step in removing legal and administrative barriers that currently hinder CSOs from operating across borders, such as the lack of mutual recognition of legal status and restrictions on cross-border funding. In parallel, the EU should enhance support for cross-border partnerships, mobility, and knowledge exchange through accessible funding schemes and dedicated platforms. Political recognition of a European civic space must also be reinforced, including through meaningful structured engagement with pan-European CSO networks and the systematic inclusion of their perspectives in policy making.

In particular, the EU should:

- Swiftly adopt and implement the [European Cross-Border Association Directive](#).
- Develop recommendations for an enabling environment for civil society at national level.
- Integrate the [Council of Europe Convention on the Recognition of the Legal Personality of International Non-Governmental Organisations](#) into EU law.
- Review tax regulations affecting civil society.
- Ensure that the European Court of Justice rulings on cross border donations are duly implemented, and remove obstacles to cross border philanthropy.

## Coherence across EU policy & preventing negative impacts

The European Commission should ensure that EU laws and policies are coherent with the aim of securing an enabling space for civil society and do not lead to negative side effects related to their implementation. This requires:

- **Civic-space-proofing EU law and policy:** to ensure that all EU policies support rather than restrict civic space, a **systematic civic space impact assessment** – grounded in international human rights standards and intersectional methodology – **should be implemented across all legislative and regulatory proposals**. This must include structured consultation with civil society organisations, particularly those representing marginalised or racialised groups. Such an ex-ante civic space assessment should be integrated into the Commission’s “[Operational Guidance on taking account of Fundamental Rights in Commission Impact Assessments](#)” (currently under revision) and be accompanied by a dedicated checklist.<sup>10</sup> This would also complement and reinforce tool #35 of the Better Regulation toolbox, ensuring that the existing impact assessments systematically address all dimensions of sustainable development. The Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) should be closely involved in the process.
- Moreover, the **Regulatory Scrutiny Board** should be better equipped – e.g: through its composition and dedicated training – to consider fundamental rights in its work. The **European Commission Inter-Service Group on Civil Society** could also play an important role in mainstreaming civic space considerations across all Commission directorates and services.
- **Addressing harmful impacts and closing legal loopholes:** EU laws must not inadvertently criminalise solidarity or hinder civic actors’ work. **The proposed Civil Society Strategy should trigger a review of legislation and national transpositions** in areas such as migration, anti-money laundering, counterterrorism, and foreign influence to assess their impact on fundamental rights and those defending them. Harmful initiatives – such as the proposed [Directive on interest representation services on behalf of third countries](#) and aspects of the Asylum and Migration Pact – should be withdrawn. Furthermore, loopholes in the AI Act and the EU Media Freedom Act that allow state abuse of national security exemptions must be closed. The use of spyware against CSOs, journalists, lawyers and HRDs must be explicitly prohibited under EU law, and reforms such as the Facilitation Directive and Europol powers must be rescinded or significantly revised to avoid systemic rights violations.

## Narratives, awareness raising and education

Strengthening the overall environment to support civil society actors requires not only political, legal and financial support but also a shift in public narratives and greater societal recognition of the role of CSOs. **Promoting positive narratives about civil society is essential to counter misinformation, stigmatisation and hostile rhetoric**, particularly against organisations working on rights-based or advocacy issues. Awareness-raising campaigns should highlight the contribution of CSOs to democracy, social cohesion, and public interest. EU institutions should actively promote communication strategies aimed at creating a more informed and supportive public discourse, and closely liaise with Member States in doing so. When implementing the European Democracy Action Plan and the Media Action Plan, the Commission should give

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<sup>10</sup> For further details, see CSE’s “[Guidance Note for Assessing the Civic Space Impact of EU legislative Proposals](#)”.

attention to the problems of reporting about and access of civil society to the media, in particular as regards EU cooperation among media regulators and self-regulatory bodies and support to greater media diversity.

Stronger integration of civic and global education and active citizenship into formal and informal education systems is also necessary to foster a culture of participation and engagement from an early age, including through volunteering. **Civic education** is a key tool in efforts to counter antidemocratic trends, promote European values and citizenship and overcome current divides. Moreover, investment in civic education with a Service Learning component contributes to build a sense of agency and commitment to public life amongst citizens. CSOs can play an important role in citizen education and awareness raising through many of their activities and projects, therefore their access to and cooperation with educational institutes and informal and non-formal education providers should be encouraged and facilitated. As current practice is very divergent across the Union, the Commissions should develop comprehensive guidance for Member States to develop educational curricula and programs based on the [Council of Europe Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education \(CM/Rec\(2017\)7\)](#). Existing initiatives in the field of education that further promote and support this effort should be coordinated on the Union level by establishing a separate agency for citizen education, as proposed by networks active in the field.

### 3) Key actions on funding

Addressing the current challenges in the EU funding landscape for CSOs requires structural reforms to streamline funding procedures, ensure consistency, increase access to core and long-term funding, promote closer donor coordination and the development of stronger private and philanthropic funding ecosystems.

#### EU funding: structural support for civil society

##### General principles of funding programmes for civil society

- Funding programmes for civil society should be developed through inclusive co-creation processes that meaningfully involve CSOs from the beginning. This includes their participation in designing funding policies and programmes, defining thematic priorities, and setting accessibility criteria, to ensure that funding effectively addresses the needs of both organisations and the communities they serve. Regular dialogue and information exchange between civil society and public donors should be strengthened throughout the implementation cycle of funding programmes.
- CSOs should have increased access to core funding in the form of **multi-year Operating Grants, ensuring long-term sustainability and independence**.
- **Funding must not be selectively reduced for CSOs engaging in advocacy and policy activities**, as long as they are compliant with EU values enshrined in Article 2 TEU.



Advocacy, watchdog work, campaigning, and participation in policymaking are core functions of CSOs and essential to the representation of marginalised groups, a vibrant civic space, and democratic resilience. As such, these activities must be eligible across all funding programmes, and CSOs undertaking them must be safeguarded against any form of retaliation or adverse consequences.

- To improve overall accessibility – especially for small, grassroots, and volunteer-led organisations – **administrative procedures should be simplified and harmonised**, and the bureaucratic burden reduced.

### **Operating Grants**

- Operating Grants (OGs) are core funding tools available under most EU programmes within the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), providing long-term support to CSOs for carrying out their missions in the public interest.<sup>11</sup> It is precisely due to the non-profit nature of CSOs and the limited availability of alternative funding sources for core activities that Operating Grants are essential for their well-functioning. OGs should contribute to operational expenses such as salaries, rent, office equipment, and day-to-day administrative costs that project-based grants can often only fund to a limited extent. **They play a vital role in ensuring European CSO networks' independence and stability, increasing the quality of their work, policy input and overall impact.** However, growing bureaucratic demands and the frequent alignment of OG requirements with procedures designed for project grants risk undermining their structural purpose. This complexity particularly disadvantages small, grassroots, and volunteer-led organisations, which already face intense competition for limited funding.
- **The European Commission should increase the overall funding allocation to Operating Grants in the new MFF and improve their accessibility and functioning procedures.** This should include:
  - Shifting the focus from a project-based approach to structural support by providing greater flexibility in the management of OGs.
  - Ensuring that advocacy is explicitly included as an eligible activity in all OGs, enabling CSOs to effectively fulfil their role in representing groups and communities – especially vulnerable ones – across EU initiatives.
  - Strengthening the capacity-building and learning components of funding programmes, particularly to support grassroots and community-based CSOs.
  - Introducing re-granting mechanisms within OGs across all programmes, as successfully implemented in the CERV programme.
  - Streamlining the application and reporting processes, avoiding duplication, redundancy and inconsistencies.

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<sup>11</sup> For further info on the Operating Grants and civil society recommendations to improve them under the new MFF, see Civil Society Europe's "[Common civil society requests for the Operating Grants \(OGs\)](#)".

- Reducing and harmonising the co-funding rate across all programmes to reflect the overall financial realities of CSOs, considering the current strain on access to funding.
- Continuing to allow in-kind contributions (e.g. volunteer time, non-financial resources) to count toward the co-financing requirements.

## **MFF**

The future Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) should be the **key instrument to address the current gaps in funding for civil society**, aligning with the provisions set out in the Civil Society Strategy. The initial proposal for the new MFF includes some important improvements. For example, in the NRPs objectives it refers to building the capacity of civil society to uphold Union values, promote citizenship education, and foster youth participation. However, overall, the proposal appears to fall short of meeting civil society's expectations and needs.<sup>12</sup> In particular, the new MFF should:

- Keep the objectives regarding civil society in the current NRPs regulation, and expand them to include the promotion of equal opportunities, social inclusion, and targeted support for marginalised groups.
- **Continue and strengthen the civic engagement, equality, rights, and values strands of the current CERV Programme** as clearly identifiable actions within the AgoraEU programme, and confirm and expand the proposed increase in AgoraEU's dedicated budget. CERV has proved to be critical to support civil society, strengthen civic space, protect and promote EU values, fundamental rights, the rule of law, democracy and equality. The thematic scope of CERV should be maintained to defend EU values holistically. **Direct management should be equally maintained** to ensure transparency, equal access, and protection from political interference, which is particularly important for organisations operating in shrinking civic spaces. A wide range of activities, including policy, advocacy and watchdog activities should be funded. The programme should be re-designed in a way to help respond flexibly to emerging needs of beneficiary CSOs.<sup>13</sup>
- Additionally, reinstate the LIFE programme for nature, climate and biodiversity; reinstate the EU4Health Programme; increase the minimum quota of National and Regional Partnerships (NRPs) allocated to social policies so that funding matches the levels guaranteed under the current ESF+; and maintain the increased Erasmus+ budget proposed for the next MFF. While standalone programmes remain the preferred option for LIFE, EU4Health, ESF+, and CERV, **the new MFF should at least preserve the related strands and ensure they are clearly identifiable and equipped with adequate budget.**

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<sup>12</sup> For an assessment of the initial MFF proposal, see [Civil Society Europe's analysis](#).

<sup>13</sup> See Civil Society Europe's [Statement on the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme in the Next EU Budget](#).

- Ensure strong and structural support for civil society through **increasing the overall funding allocation to multiannual Operating Grants, decreasing and harmonizing the co-funding requirements, increasing the OGs accessibility** to include smaller and grassroots organisations, **and explicitly including advocacy as an eligible activity**. In this regard, it is crucial to address the shortcomings of the initial proposal for the new MFF, which appears to eliminate much of the structural support currently provided to EU-wide civil society networks through OGs.
- Extend funding periods to a multiannual framework aligned with the lifespan of the MFF while maintaining regular calls to allow other NGOs to apply for funding on a rolling basis.
- In consultation with civil society experts, ensure that all EU funding programmes include transparent, flexible and user-friendly grant mechanisms by decreasing administrative burdens on applicants, also taking into account capacity building and institutional development needs of target CSOs, and further simplify regranting (Financial Support to Third Parties).
- Ensure funding for civil society participation in policy making in all relevant thematic programmes, and develop a strong accountability mechanism engaging civil society and other stakeholders.
- Strengthen the involvement of CSOs in the management of the programmes, which has been reduced in the proposal compared to the current MFF.
- Embed the partnership principle in all the shared management funding and equip CSOs to monitor the use of funds through direct access to technical assistance programmes, ensuring realistic timelines for civil society involvement.
- Foresee adequate funding for civil society to strengthen societal resilience and contribute to crisis response and post-crisis follow-up, as a key pillar of the implementation of the EU Preparedness Union Strategy.
- Allow CSOs from the accession countries to participate in the different EU programmes when suitable agreements with sufficient checks and balances with the relevant States are established.

### **Funding for external action**

- It is essential that the EU preserves **dedicated thematic envelopes for civil society, human rights and democracy in external action**, in order to counter anti-democratic and anti-rights trends globally, as well as to support organisations working in severely restricted contexts.

- In external action funding instruments, the EU should<sup>14</sup>:
  - Allocate 15% of the EU international cooperation budget for direct implementation by CSOs, recognising their expertise and proven ability to lead, shape, and deliver impactful international cooperation policies and programmes.
  - Guarantee CSO access to funding under indirect management modality and Global Gateway initiatives by mandating CSO involvement, sub-grants and partnerships with pillar assessed entities.
  - Improve transparency and access to information by publishing disaggregated data on funding for CSOs, both as direct grant recipients or as sub-grantees through other implementing partners.
  - Expand direct, simplified, and flexible funding for local CSOs by introducing more accessible small-granting schemes with streamlined eligibility and compliance requirements to reduce administrative burden.
  - Adapt CSO funding mechanisms in line with new initiatives such as Team Europe and Global Gateway strategy, to ensure equitable access and meaningful participation of a diverse range of CSOs in the implementation of EU external action.

### EU market for philanthropy and strategy on philanthropy for democracy

The EU should develop a **forward-looking strategy that supports an overall enabling environment for philanthropy and a vibrant cross-border philanthropic sector**. A key priority is the establishment of a **Single Market for Philanthropy**, enabling foundations and donors to operate freely across Member States without facing discriminatory tax treatment or legal obstacles. This includes removing legal and fiscal barriers that currently hinder cross-border giving, ensuring non-discriminatory tax treatment, recognising public-benefit status across Member States, and simplifying registration procedures for non-profit entities.

The EU should further promote structured engagement with the philanthropic sector, creating dedicated spaces for dialogue and co-creation of funding policies together with civil society. This includes **facilitating partnerships between public institutions and philanthropic actors** to co-invest in areas vital to democratic resilience, such as independent media, civic education, and participatory governance. Additionally, the EU must safeguard the freedom to give and associate, addressing undue restrictions stemming from counterterrorism or anti-money laundering rules, and ensuring a safe and enabling environment for foundations and donors.

Finally, the EU should strive to remove – and refrain from putting in place – undue obstacles, such as eliminating the subsidiarity principle, regarding the regulatory frameworks for other critical funding channels for civil society at the Member State level, including charity and national lotteries supporting civil society, or public-benefit crowdfunding.

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<sup>14</sup> CONCORD Europe, [“Stepping up EU international cooperation through the next Multiannual Financial Framework”](#), April 2025.



## Donors dialogue and coordination

To enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of civil society across Europe, as well as coherence and synergies in supporting civic space and civil society in external action, the EU should take active steps to promote stronger donor dialogue and coordination based on shared principles of transparency, complementarity, and long-term support. **Public and private donors** – including EU institutions, Member States, and philanthropic actors – **should be encouraged to align their priorities, share knowledge, coordinate more effectively to reduce fragmentation and funding gaps, and build partnerships.** Civil society organisations must be meaningfully involved in this dialogue as strategic partners who can inform priorities, identify emerging needs, and co-design effective responses. Their direct engagement would help ensure that coordinated approaches remain grounded, inclusive, and responsive to realities on the ground. The EU can play a facilitating role by fostering strategic co-funding approaches, promoting greater data-sharing, and supporting evidence-based funding practices that enhance the overall impact of civil society support. Additionally, it is important to strengthen the capacity of smaller donors, enabling more diverse and inclusive participation in the funding ecosystem.

## Pillar Protection

### 1) Rationale and existing needs and gaps

#### Current situation and challenges

Civic space across the EU is under increasing strain. According to the [CIVICUS Monitor](#), which rates the conditions of civic space globally, since 2018, the number of EU Member States rated “open” has decreased from 15 to 12, while in 2024 2 Member States are rated as “obstructed”. This reflects a global trend of shrinking civic space worldwide, with remarkably similar tactics used against civil society across regions as part of an anti-rights agenda that seeks to undermine democracy and human rights globally. In this context, physical, verbal, and legal threats against civil society organisations (CSOs), human rights defenders (HRDs) and environmental defenders<sup>15</sup> have become systemic. In Europe, qualitative evidence collected since the launch of the [Civic Space Watch](#) monitoring tool in 2018 and European Civic Forum first Civic Space Report in 2019 shows that **threats and attacks have shifted from being an issue on the fringes to a systemic concern across Europe, entrenched in both policy and practice.**<sup>16,17</sup>

Data collected by the EU Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) through its civic space survey shows that the vast majority of respondents from EU Member States faced some form of threats and attacks in 2023.<sup>18</sup> These particularly affect CSOs and HRDs working with minority groups, migrants and refugees, anti-racism organisations, those working to promote women’s rights, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and LGBTIQ+ rights. Moreover, smaller or grassroots organisations - particularly those focusing on the rights of underrepresented groups - are particularly vulnerable to the increasing challenges that impact their ability to conduct their activities.

Globally and in the EU, most common threats and attacks against civil society and human rights defenders are underpinned by legislation restricting or even criminalising human rights and environmental rights actions, including the right to freedom of association and assembly. This includes legislation stigmatising CSOs receiving funding from abroad under the guise of transparency, which contributes to the negative public discourse and smear campaigns; legal harassment and criminalisation of human rights defenders; surveillance and threats emerging from new technologies.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, in some cases, EU policies have contributed to shrinking

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<sup>15</sup> Throughout this document, the term human rights defenders (HRDs) will also refer to environmental human rights defenders.

<sup>16</sup> [Civic Space Watch Report 2019 - Activizenship](#)

<sup>17</sup> European Civic Forum, [Civic Space Report 2024](#)

<sup>18</sup> FRA, Protecting civil society – Update 2024, upcoming.

<sup>19</sup> European Civic Forum, [Civic Space Report 2024](#).

civic space, through legislation which criminalises migration and migrants' rights defenders,<sup>20</sup> as well as counter terrorism and anti-money laundering legislation.

### Existing gaps in the European protection toolbox

Despite growing threats to CSOs and HRDs, **protection efforts across the EU remain fragmented, underfunded, and unevenly accessible.** A 2024 joint civil society report "[Mapping the Protection of HRDs and CSOs in Europe](#)" found a scattered ecosystem with pockets of mostly civil society-led initiatives, and most support targeted to HRDs from outside the EU. Within the EU, there is considerable expertise and resources but no institutional mechanism to document restrictions and attacks, nor an overarching framework to ensure access to support for HRDs and CSOs across the region. In particular, there is:

- **No regional protection mechanism for HRDs and civil society within the EU.** The [EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders](#) and initiatives such as the platform [ProtectDefenders.eu](#) or the [EU System for Enabling Environments \(EU SEE\)](#) focus exclusively on the protection of HRDs outside the EU. While ProtectDefenders.eu supports some initiatives taking place in EU countries, such as temporary relocation programmes, advocacy activities, or training, these are addressed to HRDs and CSOs coming from outside the EU.
- No rapid response funding for HRDs and CSOs in the EU to support urgent protection measures.
- No follow-up on reprisals by Member States related to engagement with EU institutions.
- No connection between reporting and concrete action.

As a result, EU-based HRDs and CSOs at risk are left without established support - particularly in emergencies - and can rely only on ad-hoc mobilisation.

### Areas where there have been recent developments

- The [EU annual Rule of Law reports](#), which document and make recommendations in four key areas. However, civic space is only partly included under the pillar on checks and balances, with limited coverage for example on freedom of association, freedom of peaceful assembly and the protection of HRDs.
- The [EU Anti-SLAPP Directive](#), providing protection for civil society actors who are engaged in cross-border public interest reporting through procedural safeguards, support in court proceedings and early dismissal of unfounded claims.

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<sup>20</sup> In particular, the Facilitators' Package (comprising Facilitation Directive 2002/90 and Framework Decision 2002/946). See also PICUM, [Migrant smuggling: why we need a paradigm shift](#), 2022.

- Projects supported under the CERV programme, including projects monitoring civic space and alerting EU institutions to restrictive measures and incidents.
- The [EU Directive on Violence Against Women](#), which considers it an aggravating circumstance when an offence is committed against a person because that person is a public representative, a journalist or a human rights defender.
- The [EU Artificial Intelligence Act](#) includes provisions that promote transparency and accountability, but fails to adequately protect from surveillance and biometric technologies, particularly in policing and migration contexts.<sup>21</sup>

## 2) Key actions on protection

### **Flagship initiatives expected of the European Commission under the upcoming EU Civil Society Strategy**

- **EU-wide Monitoring and Alert Mechanism:** a coordinated, evidence-based system to monitor civic space restrictions, identify early warning signs, and trigger a fast-track EU response. It should build on and complement civil society and FRA monitoring, and include a clear mandate for EU institutions to follow-up on registered complaints. The findings should be collected in a standalone civic space chapter within the Rule of Law Report, with country-specific recommendations.
- **EU guidelines for preventive action and response to civic space deterioration:** define clear guidelines outlining both legal and non-legal EU measures to address civic space deterioration, including structured engagement with national authorities. The guidelines should define preventive actions that can be triggered by early warning signs or before new legislation is adopted, as well as specific indicators.
- **Clear mandate for the Commissioner for Democracy, Justice, the Rule of Law and Consumer Protection to engage with – and, where appropriate, trigger legal measures against – Member States on alerts and complaints** collected through the monitoring mechanism.
- **EU-wide Protection Mechanism for HRDs and CSOs within the EU:** a flexible instrument offering emergency financial, legal and psycho-social support to defenders and organisations under attack, and coordinating national and EU-level protection efforts – including civil society protection hubs and solidarity networks.

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<sup>21</sup> European Digital Rights (EDRI), Protect Not Surveil, [The EU AI Act fails migrants and people on the move](#), 2024.



## **Actions against Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs)**

The adoption of the Anti-SLAPP Directive (EU 2024/1069) marked an important step toward protecting civic space and safeguarding public participation. The Directive introduces crucial protections, including early dismissal of manifestly unfounded claims, cost-shifting measures making those who file abusive lawsuits to pay the legal costs, and safeguards against enforcement of SLAPP judgments issued outside the EU. It also encourages support mechanisms such as legal aid and assistance for those targeted.

To ensure its effectiveness, the European Commission should prioritise **consistent and timely transposition across Member States** by the 2026 deadline, provide clear implementation guidance, and support awareness-raising, capacity-building, and judicial training.

## **Safeguarding an enabling environment**

The EU is uniquely positioned to establish a coherent, rights-based framework to safeguard civic space internally. It can act as both a standard-setter and enforcer, particularly where national governments fall short, and based on international human rights standards.

### **Develop an enabling regulatory and political framework**

Provide a framework or guidance for creating an enabling environment, grounded in standards from the Council of Europe, OECD, and other international and regional human rights bodies – particularly standards related to freedom of expression, access to information, peaceful assembly and association, and participation in public affairs. This guidance should place special emphasis on rights that are currently under attack, such as the right of CSOs to receive public funding to engage in critical advocacy. The guidance should also decriminalise the right to protest and protect civil disobedience. Additionally, the guidance should look at civil society not as a monolith entity but as a diverse range of actors, experiencing intersectional forms of discrimination. **The guidance should particularly seek to give visibility, recognition and protection to the movements and organisations representing discriminated groups**, and to address the tactics used against them, including delegitimisation, unfounded claims and the misuse of legislation. This includes in particular those working with migrants and refugees, those who are themselves undocumented or with precarious residence status, those working to combat racism, and those working to promote women's rights, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and LGBTIQ+ rights.

### **Monitor, document and analyse**

- Building on the projects piloted under the CERV CIVIC grants, **establish an EU monitoring mechanism collecting alerts and resources from the national and local level** (HRDs, civil society organisations, National Human Rights Institutions) through a coherent and systematic methodology. This bottom-up approach, grounded in national expertise, would enable accurate tracking and contextual understanding of shrinking civic

space, while also highlighting pan-European trends. Long-term funding support is required to ensure monitoring is continuous and not reliant on project funding.

- Monitoring should build upon CSO-led methodologies that are already existing, and be structured around six essential dimensions: freedom of association, freedom of peaceful assembly, freedom of expression, access to funding, participation in decision-making, and safe space. Each dimension should include concrete indicators assessing both legal frameworks and their implementation in practice, such as the ease of CSO registration, access to national and international funding, law enforcement conduct before, during and after protests, civil dialogue mechanisms, and protections against threats and harassment. Particular focus should be placed on systemic restrictions, attacks on marginalised defenders, and new threats emerging from digital and biometric technologies – including those that are likely to disproportionately affect HRDs with disabilities.<sup>22</sup>

### **Linking monitoring to action**

- **Monitoring** must not be a static reporting exercise, it **should actively trigger early intervention**. The monitoring system should be funded and facilitated by the EU institutions and foresee their active engagement in responding to the complaints vis a vis Member States, following the example of the [Council of Europe Platform for the Safety of Journalists](#). Alerts gathered through the monitoring and alert mechanism should feed into a fast-track process within the Rule of Law framework, enabling swift EU response, including recommendations, dialogue, and legal action. To ensure consistency and predictability, the system should be accompanied by clear guidelines outlining the actions that the EU will take in response to varying levels of civic space deterioration. The European Commission, and particularly the Commissioner for Democracy, Justice, the Rule of Law and Consumer Protection, must be mandated to not only acknowledge the receipt but also follow up with Member States on complaints, seek clarification on government actions, and apply the full Rule of Law toolbox where necessary.
- The European Commission should ensure a more strategic approach to infringement proceedings.<sup>23</sup> This should include:
  - The prioritisation of rights-based cases, including an expedited procedure and request for interim measures. Systemic breaches of fundamental rights should be regarded as extremely difficult to repair, justifying these steps.
  - Launching systemic infringement actions when a series of violations show a pattern of unlawful activity. In these instances, several violations should be grouped in a single infringement action. There should be a formal and systematic process engaging rights holders and CSOs.

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<sup>22</sup> ECNL, “[Monitoring Action for Civic Space - Methodology](#)”, February 2025.

<sup>23</sup> Civil Liberties Union for Europe, “[Ensuring Effective Litigation Strategies Brief](#)”

- The infringement process has a built-in period of dialogue with the concerned Member State – this should be mirrored by a corresponding process with affected rights holders and CSOs.<sup>24</sup>
- Infringement proceedings should be depoliticised and made more transparent to enable civil society to monitor the process at all stages.
- **The Rule of Law Report must include a standalone civic space chapter** with country-specific recommendations and follow-up mechanisms, making it an effective accountability and prevention tool.

### Supporting the establishment of an effective protection ecosystem

A holistic protection ecosystem must combine two key elements: (1) strengthening institutional protection duties across governance levels, and (2) enhancing civil society resilience and solidarity mechanisms.

### Strengthening a comprehensive and inclusive protection framework

**The EU and its Member States must establish a structured, coordinated, and adequately resourced system to ensure the safety, well-being, and operational capacity of civil society actors.** This requires both urgent, rapid response measures and sustained, long-term support. Legal assistance to defend against smear campaigns, criminalisation, and arbitrary restrictions must be readily available, alongside secure, independent, and sustainable funding to maintain operations free from political interference.

### Key protection needs and gaps

Protection must be holistic. In addition to legal and financial support, CSOs and HRDs urgently need psychosocial services to address burnout, trauma, and mental health impacts from ongoing harassment or violence. Capacity-building - particularly in physical and digital security, advocacy, and organisational resilience - is essential to bolster civil society's ability to respond to threats. Protection measures must also explicitly address gendered and intersectional vulnerabilities. Defenders from racialised groups, environmental movements, migrant and LGBTIQ+ communities, and women are disproportionately targeted, face specific risks, and require tailored, context-sensitive and nuanced responses. This includes HRDs with disabilities, who often encounter unique barriers and necessitate inclusive and adapted protection strategies. Tailored measures should be put in place for people who are undocumented or with precarious status, with reporting mechanisms adapted to ensure confidentiality and protection from disclosure to migration enforcement authorities. Support systems are often concentrated in urban centres, leaving remote and rural defenders more exposed.

The EU should:

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<sup>24</sup> Civil Liberties Union for Europe, "[Ensuring Effective Litigation Strategies Brief](#)"

- **Provide financial support for sustaining and expanding protection services, especially at national and local level, and establishing coherent protection infrastructure** with the aim to unify fragmented efforts, creating a structured and comprehensive support system for CSOs and HRDs.
- **Support the development of national protection hubs:** these hubs would serve as centralized points offering legal aid, financial assistance, capacity building, and psychosocial support, tailored to the specific needs of each country.
- **Develop an EU-wide protection and rapid response mechanism:** by facilitating quick mobilization of resources and support, the mechanism should address immediate threats and emergencies faced by HRDs and CSOs. The protection mechanism should be established by consortiums of diverse CSOs.<sup>25</sup> A mechanism should enable rapid response to support HRDs and CSOs that face immediate risk. A 24/7 hotline, run by independent civil society organisations financed by the EU institutions, could disburse emergency funding and provide CSOs and HRDs under attack a wide range of measures, including legal representation, medical costs, physical and digital protection measures, communication and psychological support, and relocation. It is crucial that this action, whether through a mechanism or protection hubs, is completely independent from interference from Member States and EU institutions and not subject to a restrictive understanding of who can benefit from such protection on the basis of vague notions of “national security” or “European values”.
- **Warrant systemic approach to the inclusion of exiled HRDs and CSOs within the enabling environment for HRDs and civil society within the EU:** exiled HRDs and CSOs from third countries often stay and work within the EU long-term, or permanently, and need sustainable and equal access to support. Their concerns and threats – in particular retaliation by the third countries they escaped from – should be structurally reflected within the EU policy for HRDs and CSOs based within the EU territory. In particular, the European Commission should ensure uniform implementation of the [2024 Implementing Decision about the EU Visa Code Handbook](#), spelling out flexible and supportive procedures for HRDs, allowing them to apply outside their habitual place of residence, including from the EU Member States. Specific solutions should be found for non-EU HRDs who are in need of long-term protection, undocumented or with precarious residence status, including support in accessing available permits - for example on the basis of their status as victims of crime.

### 3) Model for a protection mechanism

The 2024 joint civil society report “[Pathways Towards an Effective Protection Ecosystem](#)” explored different models and identified several key elements and prerequisites to improve the protection landscape in Europe.

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<sup>25</sup> See opinion 5, “[Protecting Civic Space in the EU](#)”, FRA, 2021.



Firstly, there is a need for a system that integrates several core elements around **Reporting, Rapid Response and Reform**. HRDs and CSOs must be able to officially report attacks, triggering investigations and **follow-up by state authorities**. They also need to be able to access a rapid response system that can provide them with appropriate and timely support. In the longer term, the system must include a feedback loop that drives **structural reforms**, helping to prevent similar attacks in the future.

For such a system to work there are several prerequisites to ensure the rapid response element:

- Support needs to be timely, in many cases within 2-3 days.
- The system needs to be sustainable and long-term, meaning that it cannot be project driven.
- It needs to be independent from governments, including the EU and Member States, and ensure safety and security.
- It should be closely linked to ongoing monitoring and data collection to inform responses.
- Importantly, it needs to be rooted in international and regional human rights standards, including the principle of non-discrimination and a recognition of the pressing and intersectional challenges of many HRDs.



## A potential model

A potential EU model should be designed and co-created with HRDs and CSOs, drawing on existing knowledge and expertise. A **two-layered approach** is envisioned incorporating and interlinking a central hub with national protection hubs.

### **A central coordination hub**

A central EU-level secretariat or core consortium, composed of leading civil society organisations (thematic networks, civic space and protection organisations...), would act as the nerve center of the protection system, with the primary function to disburse emergency funds and coordinate with subregional and/or national protection hubs. Responsibilities would include:

- Coordinating access to existing (but dispersed) legal, financial, and psychosocial support for at-risk HRDs and CSOs.
- Facilitating the distribution of emergency funding and resources (legal costs, relocation, digital security...) for HRDs and CSOs facing threats or protection organisations facing an escalation of cases.
- Advocacy and liaising with international institutions (UN, Council of Europe, OSCE) and EU institutions for political and legal action against attacks and to strengthen the enabling environment.
- Coordination, capacity building and sharing of knowledge aiming to strengthen national organizations and hubs to enhance local protection mechanisms. This would include training programs to equip HRDs and CSOs with skills in advocacy, physical and digital security, legal defence and resilience, as well as workshops and peer exchanges to strengthen collaboration among national and EU-level organizations.

### **Subregional/national protection hubs**

The central hub would coordinate with subregional and/or national protection hubs, coalitions or fund operators. These hubs would act as sites of information and referral linking HRDs and CSOs with those able to provide direct support, for example with lawyers with relevant expertise or organisations providing digital protection and psycho-social support. The national hubs would:

- Consist of anchor organisations or existing coalitions.
- Be independent from national governments.
- Coordinate existing national advocacy, solidarity, legal aid, emergency grants, and psychosocial support.
- Collaborate with National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs), equality bodies, and CSO networks.
- Referral and connection between national and EU protection, where needed.



## **Funding**

- Drawing on the experience with ProtectDefenders.eu, the EU should fund a similar system ensuring long-term support and an independent management structure. The model should be open to co-funding from other donors.
- The initiative should be designed to complement existing regranting schemes under CERV and the EEA/Norway Grants.

## **Key operational principles and considerations**

- **Responsibility of States and addressing impunity**  
A foundational principle is that States carry the primary responsibility to reduce risks to HRDs. The mechanism should support but not replace this obligation. It must also support addressing impunity by identifying aggressors and supporting legal and political action to prevent repeated attacks.
- **Who should be supported?**  
Support should be available to both individuals and organisations/movements based on international and regional human rights law and standards. Access will be voluntary. Anonymity and confidentiality for recipients of support must be guaranteed.
- **Types of support provided**  
Include collective protection measures, tailored risk analysis and protection plans, precautionary actions, and, where necessary, relocation within or beyond the EU (e.g., Norway, Canada). HRDs and CSOs need to be actively involved in defining protection responses, as well as in participating in risk analysis. On the example of ProtectDefenders.eu, emergency grants may vary, with considerations for families of

HRDs included in the funding envelope. A gendered and intersectional approach should be adopted and the specific needs of groups at risk should be met.

- **Vetting and decision-making**

Vetting of cases should be a collaborative effort between national organizations and the EU-wide consortium, ensuring transparency and sensitiveness to local contexts.



## Pillar Engagement

### 1) Rationale and existing needs and gaps

#### About civil dialogue as a component of public participation in mature democracies

A significant challenge faced by contemporary democracies is the disconnection between the general public, political institutions and decision-making bodies. **Organised civil participation through civil society offers an avenue for people to express their perspectives, contributing to bringing the decision-making process closer to them.** Civil participation for inclusive policy-making includes different forms and levels of engagement. From least to most participatory, these are: **information, consultation, dialogue, and partnership.**

The purpose of **civil dialogue** is to ensure public policies address people's needs, concerns and aspirations. As such, civil dialogue is to be intended as a permanent, structured and meaningful interaction between institutions and organised civil society. To be relevant, it must be inclusive, transparent and results-oriented, allowing for a substantive exchange of information, expertise, and experience, as well as providing room for feedback. It entails the co-creation of solutions and long-lasting partnerships between public authorities and civil society organisations (CSOs). Such dialogue should be designed to take place at all stages of the political decision-making cycle, from the framing of positions and priorities to monitoring and evaluation.<sup>26</sup>

At the EU level, three complementary forms of civil dialogue have been identified:

- Sectoral civil dialogue between CSOs and their interlocutors within the legislative and executive authorities, referred to as "**vertical dialogue**".
- Structured and regular dialogue between EU institutions and all of these CSOs, on cross-cutting issues, referred to as "**transversal dialogue**".
- Dialogue between CSOs themselves on the development of the European Union and its policies, referred to as "**horizontal dialogue**".

#### Current situation and challenges

**Civil dialogue and the right to participation should be integral components of EU and national policy-making**, as enshrined in [Article 11 of the Treaty on European Union \(TEU\)](#) and international standards. Article 11 TEU mandates that EU institutions "maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with representative associations and civil society. The

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<sup>26</sup> EESC opinion [Strengthening civil dialogue and participatory democracy in the EU: a path forward](#), 2024.

[European Commission's 2023 recommendations on civic participation](#) call on Member States to “establish structured dialogues with civil society organisations on specific topics related to public policy-making processes,” and to “ensure that such dialogues go beyond consultations for specific policy or legislative proposals, and are regular, long-lasting and result-oriented.”

**In practice, forms of civil society participation are implemented inconsistently.** The first two stages of participation – access to information and consultation – are regulated at the EU level. In response to the FRA survey on civic space in 2023, CSOs reported better quality of the consultation processes at the EU level – which is regulated by the [Better Regulation guidelines](#) – than at the national level.<sup>27</sup> The majority of respondents described the quality of EU consultations as very high, high, or at least acceptable. Various mechanisms indeed exist – such as online consultations, public hearings and stakeholder events – although mostly on specific thematic issues, leaving transversal dialogue uncovered. However, deeper levels of participation, namely civil dialogue and partnership, lack a legal framework and harmonised structure for implementation across European governance and decision processes. This means that participation of civil society often remains at the level of information sharing or consultation, both through the online platforms and exchanges with decision makers.

As a result, engagement of civil society actors in EU policy making remains largely disparate and fragmented. CSOs are too often treated as information providers rather than strategic partners, with their input at times collected but seldom meaningfully integrated into legislative or policy outcomes. Moreover, the European Commission often sets policy direction before consultations begin, leaving limited space for meaningful contribution. Short advance notice, lack of draft guidelines for targeted input and restrictive formats further hinder engagement. Limited transparency on how input is used and the absence of clear feedback mechanisms undermine trust in the process.

CSOs from smaller Member States, less well-resourced sectors or EU partner countries face particular barriers in accessing EU processes, due to capacity limitations, language barriers, or lack of representation in Brussels. Additionally, engagement is uneven across EU institutions – with the European Parliament generally more accessible than the Commission and the more opaque Council – which creates unequal opportunities and perpetuates democratic deficits at the EU level.

At the national level, some good practices exist, including support to national civil society platforms with advocacy as part of their mandates, and participatory budgeting – mainly at the local level. Yet, there is a lack of systematic approaches, clear frameworks and adequate resources and investments. Structured civil dialogue remains largely insufficient across EU countries, with many Member States failing to establish regular and meaningful engagement channels. As a result, civil society voices are often excluded from key decision-making processes, particularly in politically sensitive areas such as social rights, migration, gender equality, and environmental justice.

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<sup>27</sup>[Report on key findings from FRA's civic space consultation covering 2023.](#)

At the EU Delegation (EUD) level, the 2012 [EU Communication on the Roots of Democracy](#) laid the foundation for the Civil Society Roadmaps to strengthen dialogue with CSOs in partner countries. However, local and smaller organisations in these countries still face major barriers in accessing EUDs, including lack of information about the EU priorities and strategies, complex documentation and bureaucratic processes, and a lack of accessibility and inclusion measures. Grassroots CSOs often note a preference for well-established or less critical organisations in consultations. The planned restructuring of EUDs may also result in more centralised decision-making and reduced access to consultations and funding, creating uncertainty for the future of the Civil Society Roadmaps and thematic focal points.

At the headquarters level, while structured mechanisms exist, they often fall short of meaningful engagement. For example, on the Global Gateway CSO advisory platform there are growing concerns about little information being shared and civil society not being in a position to play its advisory role or to have a say on the agenda. Similarly, the Policy Forum for Development is often principally used as an information forum rather than a true engagement space impacting policy, which is reinforced by the lack of feedback loops.

Finally, the shortcomings in meaningful civil society engagement in policymaking must be seen in the broader context of increasing pressure on physical and digital spaces for political participation. Online harassment discourages participation among certain groups, while shrinking press freedom in traditional media limits access to diverse and critical information. At the same time, public spaces are becoming more controlled, with increased surveillance and restrictions on peaceful assembly and expression. Across the EU civil society actors, journalists, and human rights defenders are increasingly targeted by Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs) – abusive legal actions aimed at silencing criticism and deterring public engagement.

### Existing gaps in engagement of civil society actors

One of the key gaps is the **absence of an institutionalised and binding framework for civil dialogue at the EU level**, aiming to set, improve and harmonise standards for civil dialogue across all EU institutions, Member States, and policy areas.

Both in terms of CSO engagement inside the EU and in EU partner countries, the **lack of adequate funding and resources allocated for the organisation of civil dialogue** poses a significant barrier to participation, particularly for excluded or marginalised groups. This is especially true when such groups face economic precarity, accessibility challenges, or their representative organisations rely primarily on volunteers. The lack of adequate resources includes dedicated staffing and training in the institutions involved, addressing accessibility needs (e.g. of persons with disabilities), and investment in capacity building.

In addition, **funding for advocacy is scarce for CSOs and increasingly at risk**, including at the EU level where recent attempts to restrict the use of EU funds for advocacy have framed such activities as posing a ‘reputational risk’ for the EU. This undermines civil society’s capacity to

meaningfully engage in policy-making processes, represent people's voices in matters of public interest, and provide their expertise.

Addressing these gaps requires a **clear EU policy and legal framework that guarantees regular, structured, inclusive, and impactful civil dialogue at all levels of governance**. The ultimate goal is for civil dialogue to be organised on an equal footing with social dialogue along the entire policy-making cycle, and treated as distinct and complementary to forms of direct citizen engagement.

## 2) Key actions on engagement

### **Flagship initiatives expected of the European Commission under the upcoming EU Civil Society Strategy**

- **Interinstitutional Agreement on Civil Dialogue:** a binding agreement between the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union to establish structured practices of engagement of civil society across all stages of the policy cycle.
- Include **specific provisions dedicated to civil dialogue within the Better Regulation toolbox**, to ensure the European Commission's engagement with civil society is meaningful and result-oriented.
- **Civil Society Platform:** a mechanism to support systematic, transversal and vertical dialogue between the Commission and civil society organisations and strengthen civic participation in shaping the political agenda, to be co-created with organised civil society.

### **Interinstitutional Agreement on Civil Dialogue**

To transform fragmented consultation practices into a truly structured and meaningful civil dialogue, the EU should develop a **binding interinstitutional agreement** between the European Parliament, the Council of the European Union and the European Commission to establish **structured engagement across all stages of the policy cycle**, clearly defining roles, standards, and procedures for civil society engagement. Such an agreement should build on Article 11 TEU and the [Conference on the Future of Europe's recommendations](#). The [Interinstitutional Agreement on a mandatory Transparency Register](#) shall be used as a model.

This Civil Dialogue Interinstitutional Agreement would serve three overarching purposes:

1. Institutionalise civil dialogue by creating a shared, enforceable framework.



2. Improve policy outcomes by ensuring inclusive, transparent, and representative co-creation processes.
3. Strengthen democratic legitimacy through sustained partnerships between public authorities and CSOs.

Key elements of the Agreement should include:

- **Legitimacy of civil society engagement and civil society mission:** the Agreement should clearly affirm the legitimacy of representative and democratic CSOs to engage with policy makers, recognising civil society advocacy as an important component of a healthy democracy. It should also include provisions to protect CSOs against any harmful or unlawful measure related to exercising their participation rights.
- **Clear institutional recognition:** designate dedicated leadership roles in each institution (e.g. Civil Society Coordinators, Vice-Presidents for Dialogue) to champion and oversee engagement processes.
- **Enhanced institutional support:** equip the EU Commission, Parliament, Council and national offices with adequate staff, training, and funding to effectively engage with civil society. Other EU institutions, consultative bodies, independent bodies and agencies should also apply measures to implement civil dialogue.
- **Vertical and transversal dimensions of civil dialogue:** the Agreement should include both dimensions, i.e. civil dialogue on both sectoral and cross-cutting issues.
- **Internal regulations and structured engagement mechanisms:** each institution should adopt internal enforceable regulations embedding civil dialogue in every policy making phase, including agenda setting, framing of priorities, policies and programmes, monitoring, evaluation and review of implemented policies.
- **Standardised criteria:** ensure transparency, inclusiveness, and accessibility with consistent common guidelines on methodology, eligibility criteria, agenda publication, and participation of marginalised groups.
- **Participation:** for transversal dialogue at the EU level, representative European CSOs should always be involved. National organisations, local organisations and grassroots movements should be involved by European CSOs to gather specific input.
- **External dimension:** the Civil Dialogue Agreement should complement and reinforce the platforms already existing for the engagement of civil society regarding external policies; CSOs from the EU's partner regions and countries concerned should always be included.
- **Complementarity:** civil dialogue needs to be treated as distinct and complementary to forms of direct citizen engagement. The initiatives under the Civil Dialogue Interinstitutional Agreement should complement and not substitute the current stakeholder engagement practices provided in the Better Regulation framework. The

Agreement should also reinforce – and not undermine or interfere with – social dialogue and the role and prerogatives of social partners, as defined by the Treaties.

- **Accountability and monitoring:** foresee a regular assessment cycle to review and strengthen the effectiveness of the dialogue processes put in place, in collaboration with civil society actors.

By enshrining these elements in a formal binding agreement, the EU would uphold Treaty commitments, bridge consultative deficits, strengthen democratic dialogue and empower civil society as equal partners rather than mere informants. This would mark a decisive step toward a more legitimate, resilient, and participatory European Union.

Specific measures of structured civil dialogue to be implemented within each institution could include:

- Focal points for civil dialogue in each institution unit (Committees, DGs, Working Parties etc.).
- Annual dialogues on thematic issues and high-level Civil Society Summits on key transversal issues.
- An interservice group on civil dialogue.
- Civil dialogue mechanisms at the national level involving the EC Representation Offices and the EP Liaison Offices.
- Regular, tailored training on civil dialogue for staff, including on addressing accessibility needs.

### Promoting intersectionality and intra-institutional cooperation

When consultation mechanisms are in place, civil society actors working on different issues – such as social rights, gender equality, anti-racism, disability rights, environmental justice, and democratic participation – are often siloed in separate processes. This limits opportunities for integrated approaches and often results in relevant civil society input being overlooked, especially on cross-cutting issues that span multiple policy areas. To ensure inclusive and effective policy making, the EU should mainstream intersectionality in all vertical and transversal civil dialogue and participation mechanisms, ensuring that engagement opportunities are inclusive of diverse voices and systematically involve organisations composed of persons from underrepresented, discriminated and excluded groups from diverse backgrounds. An intersectional approach recognises the interconnection of different lived experiences and ensures that policies are designed with the complexity of social challenges in mind.

This should go hand in hand with strengthening coordination within EU institutions, as well as national governments. Civil dialogue practices vary significantly between different units of the same institution – for example, across European Commission DGs, Council formations, or EP

committees – leading to inconsistencies that weaken the overall effectiveness of civil dialogue efforts.

### 3) Civil Society Platform

The European Commission's proposal to establish a 'Civil Society Platform to support more systematic civil dialogue', as stated in the [mission letter to the Commissioner-designate for Democracy, Justice, the Rule of Law and Consumer Protection Michael McGrath](#), is welcomed by civil society as an important step towards the establishment of structured civil dialogue between the Commission and civil society.

The proposed Civil Society Platform should serve as a structured, inclusive mechanism to ensure that the voices of organised civil society are integrated into the EU's democratic processes in a systematic and meaningful way. To ensure it is an effective and inclusive tool, the Platform needs to be co-created with organised civil society and be integrated in a comprehensive civil dialogue framework.

#### **Purpose and scope**

The Civil Society Platform should not be a stand-alone initiative, but **a foundational step toward a comprehensive civil dialogue framework** based on Article 11 TEU. Its primary purpose should be to support direct and systematic **transversal dialogue** between the EU Commission and independent values-based civil society organisations and strengthen civic participation in shaping the political agenda. To this end, the Platform should not be restricted to, but rather complement, sectoral dialogue on fundamental rights, civic space, the rule of law and democracy.

The Platform should also play a key role in reinforcing the **vertical dialogue** between the different DGs and CSOs, by promoting guidelines and practices for an open, regular and structured civil dialogue in all Commission services and fostering the creation of an interservice group on civil dialogue.

The Platform should not replicate but rather complement existing processes, initiatives, and platforms that provide avenues for dialogue with other institutions, advisory bodies and agencies, such as the Fundamental Rights Platform, the EESC Civil Society Week, the EESC Liaison Group with Civil Society Organisations and Networks, the Human Rights Forum organised by EEAS, as well as any other engagement opportunities which are also key to building partnerships between the EU and civil society.

If well designed, the Platform can be a model for the implementation of a transversal civil dialogue between independent civil society organisations and each institution, contributing to closing participation gaps.

## **Membership**

The Platform should be a permanent structure, with a stable membership composed of European-level civil society organisations (NGOs) that reflect the diversity of sectors, population groups, and geographical backgrounds across the EU. To this end, membership should:

- Be based on transparent and objective eligibility criteria, co-designed with organised civil society.
- Ensure diversity and inclusion, particularly of underrepresented groups and minority voices.
- Be subject to regular review.

## **Governance**

The Platform should be guided by a Steering Committee, composed equally of organised civil society representatives and European Commission officials. Its functions should include:

- Preparing and following up on the Annual Meeting of the Platform.
- Presenting outcomes to relevant Commission services and interservice groups.
- Holding an annual dialogue with the Commissioner for Democracy, Justice and the Rule of Law to take stock of the results and discuss the way forward.

## **Functioning and outcomes**

The Platform should envision:

- A High-Level Annual Meeting between the CSOs and EC members of the Platform, the Commissioner for Democracy, Justice, the Rule of Law and Consumer Protection, and high-level representatives of the relevant DGs and of the Secretariat-General. The Annual Meeting should be organised every year around the period April-June, and shall:
  - Provide a space for discussion, exchange and targeted recommendations on overarching policy issues.
  - Review the implementation of the different pillars of the Civil Society Strategy, the impact of EU policies on civil society, as well as the implementation and follow up of the [Recommendation on participation of citizens and civil society organisations in policy making](#) at the national level.
  - Adopt a resolution on the policy priorities for the Commission's Work Programme and the State of the Union (SOTEU) speech.
- In addition to the Annual Meeting, the Platform should provide a regular space for CSOs to express their views on the strategic orientation of the European Union related to democracy, values and fundamental rights, in dialogue with high-level Commission representatives.



- The exchanges held within the framework of the Platform should lead to the adoption of a public report on an annual or biannual basis, to be shared with other institutions and key stakeholders at all levels.
- To allow for closer participation of civil society at the national and subnational level, an annual meeting or other dialogue opportunity between national CSOs and the Commission representatives shall be organised. National and subnational CSOs would be selected following the same criteria adopted for European-level CSOs.

## About Civil Society Europe

Civil Society Europe (CSE) is the coordination of civil society organisations at EU level. Through its membership, CSE unites EU-level membership-based organisations that represent millions of people active in or supported by not-for-profits and civil society organisations across the EU. CSE 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, it has become the point of reference for EU institutions on transversal issues concerning civil dialogue and civic space.



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