History of Civil Society at EU Level



CIVIL SOCIETY EUROPE

Civil Society Europe is the coordination of civil society organisations at EU level.



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WHY THE HISTORY OF EU CIVIL SOCIETY MATTERS



INTRODUCTION: **WHY THE HISTORY OF EU CIVIL SOCIETY MATTERS**

In the last decades, Civil Society has organised itself across European countries and established networks at European level, covering diverse issues. It has consistently upheld values close to European society and supported the integration process of the EU. Civil Society engagement at European level has grown together with the unfolding of the integration process.

Across decades, Civil Society has contributed to strengthening European democracy, fostering citizens' participation and engagement in policy-making, bringing expertise and local knowledge necessary to EU institutions. It has contributed to shaping policies towards more inclusivity and better responsiveness in multiple fields dear to European society, including fundamental rights and freedoms, environmental sustainability, equality and social inclusion.

Yet the history of Civil Society at European level has gone mostly unnoticed, and remains vastly undocumented. Today, the role of Civil Society risks being taken for granted or put in jeopardy. To uphold its relevance for our European democracy and society, Civil Society Europe (CSE) was established in 2016 by leading EU platforms and networks as a follow up of their engagement in the European Year of Citizenship and has led to ten years of structured engagement with Civil Society actors across Europe and with EU institutions.

This booklet sheds light on the history of Civil Society organised at European level in the last seven decades, how organised Civil Society as a whole has contributed to citizen's participation in EU policies at the EU level and reflects on where we are today. From consumers' protection in the 1960s to environmental issues in the 1970s, from women's rights in the 1990s to youth, education and civic space in the 2000s-2010s. As CSE celebrates its 10th anniversary, we wish to recall the path which has led Civil Society from national to EU level, while showing its resilience and adaptation to an evolving political and institutional environment across decades.

As CSE, representing 29 European platforms and networks across Europe, we see Civil Society as a place for collective organised action. Civil Society is the sphere of uncoerced human association between the individual and the state, in which people undertake collective action for particular purposes, relatively independent by government and the market. It is distinct from the state because of its private nature, but also distinct from the market because of its non-profit nature: the organisations composing Civil Society serve a public cause, sometimes also called public interest groups, or a third sector.

Civil Society is a place where citizens can engage. It is the place where alternative political, economic, and social scenarios can be ideated, debated, and advocated for. Civil Society at EU level has acted as a carrier of concerns and aspirations from citizens and society towards EU institutions, bridging this gap. Across the decades, Civil Society has helped shape European integration by pushing to strengthen citizens' rights and to act for more inclusive and transparent decision-making. Civil Society organised across countries has seen many achievements at EU level: it has kept advocating for social inclusion and equal treatment of all people, it has kept on defending fundamental rights, it has supported European populations during economic crises. Civil Society has been instrumental towards the adoption of legislation that has improved the daily life of people living in the EU.

CIVIL SOCIETY EUROPEANISATION ACROSS DECADES

Where does Civil Society at EU level originate from? Its presence today has developed since the beginning of the integration process. We recall one of the first European networks of CSOs, the European Consumer Organisation (BEUC), created in 1962 to protect consumers' rights in the emergent economic community among the six founding states. In 1972, the youth branch of the European Federalist Movement, the Young European Federalists (JEF), saw the light, upholding federalist ideas of European youth across member states and at EU level. Many other EU-wide networks, focusing on multiple issues, were also born in the 1970s (like the ONG Liaison Committee - CLONG), and in the 1980s and 1990s particularly (like social EU-wide networks Social Platform, Centre for European Volunteering - CEV, the European Women's Lobby - EWL, or networks established by and for discriminated or excluded groups, like the European Disability Forum - EDF, the European Network Against Racism - ENAR, the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Trans and Intersex Association - Europe - ILGA-Europe, or the AGE Platform).

In many fields, Civil Society would organise under the model of umbrella organisations gathering existing organisations at national level, including in some cases one coordination of CSOs in each member state and a common secretariat, most often based in Brussels. Such a configuration would allow for representation across decision-making levels (national and European) and for information sharing, both from local/national to the European level and vice versa, on developments of different policy issues.

As this developed, so did formal engagements with Civil Society by European institutions. Let's recall the first 1987 European Parliament 'Resolution on non-profit-making associations in the European Communities', which linked a strong Civil Society sector and the strengthening of the European project. Structural funding from the European Commission (EC), embedded in different instruments in the 1990s, was then fundamental to support such developments and sustain our networks. EU Treaties and legislation increasingly recognised the relevance of organised Civil Society at EU level. From Maastricht Treaty (1993), introducing EU citizens' rights at European level, to the Treaty of Nice (2001) which used the term 'civil society' for the first time, to the Lisbon Treaty (2009) Art. 11.2 enshrining the relevance of civil dialogue, the role of Civil Society is today formally recognised. The 2001 EC White Paper on 'Governance in the European Union', also underlined the importance of involving civil society to uphold good governance principles (openness, participation, accountability, effectiveness, and coherence). It is particularly since the 1990s, then, that the Europeanisation of Civil Society has been viewed as an antidote to EU democratic deficit, and Civil Society itself as pivotal for the broader European project. Formally recognised in Art. 11.2 TEU, Civil Dialogue is the backbone of our formal relations with the EU.

CIVIL DIALOGUE AS A PRACTICE OF DEMOCRACY

In liberal societies, Civil Society is at the heart of the "public sphere", where societal issues are debated and enter the political system to become enforceable laws and policies. Citizens are able to contribute to shaping these by engaging with and being represented by civil society organizations. Article 11(2) of the Treaty on European Union establishes that "the EU institutions shall maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with representative associations and civil society". This provision has to be read in conjunction with article 1 that states that decisions must be taken "as openly as possible and as closest as possible to the citizen". Structured civil dialogue between EU institutions and civil society is essential for building trust in democratic governance yet it remains to be fully implemented in practice. According to us, Civil Dialogue is a permanent, structured, equal and meaningful interaction between institutions and civil society. It must be inclusive, transparent and result oriented, allowing for a substantive exchange of information, expertise and experience while providing room for feedback.

Despite progress, in recent years, increasing pressures are placed on Civil Society and on liberal values more broadly, at national, EU level and beyond. We have kept advocating for a fully-fledged strategy to protect and empower Civil Society, which the EC has recently released. Knowing the past is essential to better understand today's role and relevance of Civil Society. The values of human dignity, freedom of expression, democracy, equality, the rule of law, and human rights are the backbones of thriving, healthy democracies, including at the EU level. With CSE turning 10 years old, let us recall this long history of Civil Society and wish many more years of engagement ahead for Europe's future.



...1950...1960...1970...1980...1990...2000...2010...2020...

TIMELINE

1950s - 1960s

CSOs milestones

first EU-wide networks established – ex: COFACE (1958), the BEUC (1962)

EU institutional milestones

EEC (1957)

Beginning of development policy (1957) and of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) (1962)

1970s

CSOs milestones

More EU-wide networks established: WOSM European Region (1970), JEF (1974), ECRE (1974), EEB (1974), OBESSU (1975), CLONG (1976)

EU institutional milestones

Beginning of environmental policy (first Environmental Action Programme in 1973)

1980s

CSOs milestones

More EU-wide networks established, ex: Eurogroup for animals (1980), Volonteurope (1981), FEANTSA (1989)

EU institutional milestones

Beginning of social policies

Single European Act

First EP resolution links Civil Society to European integration (1987)

1990s

CSOs milestones

Many EU-wide networks established: EAPN (1990), EWL (1990), ECAS (1990), CEV (1992), EPHA (1993), WAVE (1994), EFAH (1994, became CAE in 2008), ENCC (1994), Social Platform (1995), CEV (1995), Eurodiaconia (1995), EDF (1996), YJF (1996), ILGA Europe (1997), ENAR (1998), ALDA (1999)

EU institutional milestones

Maastricht Treaty introduces citizens' rights (1993)

Proposal for a Statute for a European Association

2000s

CSOs milestones

New EU-wide networks established, ex: AGE Platform (2001), CONCORD (2003), EPF (2003) ECF (2005), International Workers' Aid - created in 1948 - becomes SOLIDAR (2005), Disability Support Europe (2005), Transparency International EU (2008)

Civil Society Contact Group (2002)

EU institutional milestones

Nice Treaty uses "Civil Society" terminology (2001)

EC White Paper on European Governance (2001) highlights relevance of Civil Society for governance principles

Convention on the Future of Europe (2002 -2004)

EESC creates the Liaison Group with Civil Society (2004)

Lisbon Treaty enshrines civil dialogue (Art. 11.2)

Lisbon Treaty creates the European Citizens' Initiative

2010s – 2020s

CSOs milestones

CSE established (2016)

CSE Reports on Civic Space (2016, 2017)

Civil Society Convention on the Future of Europe (2021)

Legacy of the Conference on the Future of Europe

EU institutional milestones

EU ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2011)

European Year of Volunteering (2011)

European Year of Citizens (2013)

Challenges to liberal democratic values and to Civil Society actors across Europe and beyond

EC COMM(2012) 492 "The roots of democracy and sustainable development: Europe's engagement with Civil Society in external relations"

EU Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) Report on Challenges facing civil society organisations working on human rights in the EU (2018) and subsequent reports (2019, 2021, 2022, 2023 and 2026)

First EC Rule of Law Report (annual) (2020)

Regulation (EC) 2021/1767, amending Regulation (EC) N° 1367/2006, which contributes to the implementation of the Aarhus Convention to the EU's institutions, bodies, offices and agencies

Conference on the Future of Europe (2021-22)

EC Report on a thriving civic space for upholding fundamental rights in the EU2022 Annual Report on the Application of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights (2022)

Proposal for a directive of the EP and of the Council on European cross-border associations (2023)

EU Strategy for Civil Society

New EU Civil Society Platform (2026)



THE ORIGINS: WHY ORGANISE AT EUROPEAN LEVEL

CHAPTER 1: THE ORIGINS: WHY ORGANISE AT EUROPEAN LEVEL (1960s–1970s)

The history of European integration and that of the Europeanisation of civil society are linked, though not always in a linear way. Civil Society organisations at European level are as old as the beginning of the integration process: an example is the creation of COFACE Families Europe (see Chapter 2), born in 1958, before social policies were established beyond member state-level. Yet the history of civil society at European level has rarely been in the spotlight. Initially focused on economic issues, in line with European priorities, CSOs progressively Europeanised itself in multiple areas. Examples of European-wide networks date back to the late 1950s, early 1960s and the 1970s. Their creation at the very beginning of the integration process shows the long-standing presence and enduring role of civil society, including in its relations with European (and later EU) institutions.

When the Treaty of Rome was signed in 1957, establishing the European Economic Community among the six founding countries, several key policies began to develop, either immediately or in the following years. This was the case for the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), created in 1962, and for the first steps towards the Single Market, with the Customs Union agreed in 1968. It was also the case for the European Development Fund (EDF), created in 1957 to support development cooperation with former colonies that were to become independent. Later, in the 1970s, following growing international attention to the environment, European environmental policy began to take shape, with the first European Environmental Programme in 1973.

In the same period, and in similar policy fields, civil society began to organise at transnational level. Why did organisations rooted at national level choose to federate into European networks? First, to gain better access to decision-making venues: as the EEC acquired competences in an ever-widening range of fields, staying outside Brussels circuits meant losing the ability to contribute to rules that would affect European citizens. Second, to pool resources: building a European structure allowed national organisations to share technical expertise, analytical capacity and representation costs that would otherwise have been unsustainable individually. Third, to gain the strength of a common voice: European institutions, needing representatives when consulting stakeholders, progressively rewarded organisations able to speak on behalf of a plurality of actors, thereby incentivising federation at European level. We highlight below some examples to understand its evolution across time.

CONSUMER PROTECTION

Consumers' protection has been among the first fields of Civil Society action at EU level. In 1962, the European Network of Consumer Groups (BEUC) was created. It represented one of the first efforts to advocate for citizens' interests before the European institutions, in this case focusing on consumer rights. BEUC came about through the visionary initiative of small consumer organisations in the six founding member states, as well as through the EC reaching out to offer its support. These organisations decided to create an office to monitor developments at European level. Initially run by volunteers, BEUC first focused on food prices and competition in the agricultural sector. Indeed, the Common Agricultural Policy was one of the first policies shared by the six EEC member states.

The collective work of civil society organisations soon bore fruit: discussions with the Commission, particularly DG Agriculture, contributed to the creation of the Consumers Contact Committee of the European

Community (CCCCE), on which BEUC sat. This was an early example of an enabling space in which civil society could advocate for public interests with the European institutions.

BEUC has grown and amplified its voice extending its scope to many more issues and fields related to the safety, security and rights of consumers: as well as with the development of the Single Market, European Monetary Union and international trade.

Because of the relevance of consumer policy, BEUC was funded by decision of the Council and the EP, in order to counterbalance strong lobbying by private interests. Consumers' organisations like BEUC have contributed to important pieces of legislation at EU and, indirectly, national level, and for instruments that today are widespread across Europe, like Ecolabels. From the first Product Liability Directive in 1985 (which made producers liable for damage caused by defective products) to the Data Protection Directive, and the Digital Services Act which sets new obligations for online platforms... the list is long.

Behind many of these laws, consumer organisations were the spark. After the 1978 botulism outbreak revealed that national authorities were not warning each other, BEUC set up its own alert system and campaigned for an EU-wide one – the ancestor of today's Safety Gate. Its lobbying helped enshrine consumer protection as an EU objective in the Maastricht Treaty (1993); a complaint first raised by the French group UFC-Que Choisir started the ten-year campaign that ended roaming charges in 2017; and the Dieselgate scandal allowed BEUC to secure the 2020 Representative Actions Directive, finally giving Europeans the right to collective redress.

Other networks, like Euroconsumers and the European Consumer Centers Network (ECC-Net), also contribute since the 1990s to consumers' protection across Europe. Consumers' organisations help keep EU institutions' attention high on the rights and interests of consumers.

ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

In the 1970s, environmental issues appeared on the agenda with the beginnings of a European environmental policy. Ever since the first European Environmental Action Programme (EAP) in 1973, environmental organisations have advocated for important principles to be recognised (for example, the polluter-pays principle) and for key legislation to be adopted. In relation to such expansion of European competences, European-wide networks like the European Environmental Bureau (EEB) were created. Today, the EEB brings together more than 180 CSOs from 40 countries and is the largest Environmental Citizens' Organisation (ECO) in Europe, linking environmental protection with citizens' participation. EEB has had regular interactions with EU institutions: EC, EP and Council (ex: with regular meetings during each Council presidency), taking these relations as a responsibility to meaningfully represent citizens' voice in environmental issues.

Environmental issues in their complexity have been the focus of many big CSOs: in the 1970s-1980s mostly on nature conservation and against pollution; the 1990s saw a greater focus put on air pollution, chemicals etc. Since the 2000s we have had a focus on sustainable development and a just transition from fossil fuels. The nexus between environmental, social, and health issues became clearer throughout the decades, and so did cooperation among CSOs of different sectors, to ensure collaborative thinking. Environmental CSOs regrouped themselves since the 1990s in the Green10 coalition, including the EEB but also: BirdLife Europe and Central Asia, CEE Bankwatch Network, Climate Action Network Europe (CAN Europe), Friends of the Earth Europe, Greenpeace European Unit, Health and Environment Alliance, Naturefriends International, Transport & Environment, and WWF European Policy Office. Other networks are almost as old as EEB, like the Eurogroup for animals, created in 1980. With more than 110 members across Europe, the organisation advocates for animal well-being and policies respectful of animals in Europe.

The diversity of this coalition reflects the complexity and interlinkages of environmental issues, on which the 10 organisations have strived to have the attention of the EC and EP. Organisations in Green10 and Eurogroup for Animals have been influential in agenda-setting and policy-making phases of important EU legislation and strategies, such as the European Green Deal, for instance its Farm to Fork Strategy. On climate, they have also helped keep high the attention of EU policy-makers on the need for the EU to contribute to CO2 emissions reductions, in line with the international objectives agreed with the Paris Agreement.

Through their advocacy, environmental CSOs and networks like EEB and the Green10 have contributed to concrete milestones for the well-being of European populations at large. Most recent examples include: sustainability criteria, with the Eco-Design Directive (2009) for sustainable products, which establishes minimum sustainability criteria for manufacturers and labelling requirements – a framework replaced in 2024 by the Ecodesign for Sustainable Products Regulation; or repairability, with the Right to Repair Directive (2024, applicable since July 2026), which gives agency to citizens to be able to repair products rather than being obliged to buy new ones.

Environmental CSOs have also strengthened citizens' rights and defended EU nature laws. NGOs played an exceptional role in negotiating the Aarhus Convention (1998), taking part not only in plenary sessions but in every drafting group. The Convention guarantees the public's right of access to environmental information, to participation in decision-making and to access to justice, and the European Community signed it on the very day it was adopted. In 2015, when the European Commission considered revising the Birds and Habitats Directives, BirdLife, the EEB, Friends of the Earth Europe and WWF launched the Nature Alert campaign, supported by more than 90 NGOs: the public consultation received over 520,000 responses, the highest number in EU history, and the two directives were kept unchanged. More recently, the #RestoreNature coalition (BirdLife Europe, ClientEarth, the EEB and WWF EU) collected almost 1.2 million signatures in support of the Nature Restoration Law, which the Council finally adopting it in June 2024.

ASYLUM AND MIGRATION

Civil Society has played a prominent role in promoting and protecting human rights in Europe. A key example is migration and asylum. European networks on asylum and refugee policies also emerged in the 1970s, such as ECRE, the European Council on Refugees and Exiles, created in 1974. ECRE upholds the rights of refugees, asylum seekers and other forcibly displaced people within Europe and in EU external policies (e.g. cooperation with third countries on migration and return). ECRE brings together 126 CSOs in 40 countries. Its work spans advocacy, communication, legal support and litigation.

Through ELENA (a network of 500 asylum lawyers coordinated by ECRE together with national coordinators in 38 countries) and 35 national coordinators), ECRE answers over 100 legal queries a year; through the EDAL database, it documents asylum case law from 22 states, the Court of Justice of the EU and the European Court of Human Rights. Strategic litigation matters because, through legal cases, ECRE can help bring about legal change: its main priority areas include access to asylum procedures, detention, reception conditions, and family reunification.

Its advocacy focuses on shaping EU and national asylum policy, with particular attention to the Common European Asylum System (CEAS), through policy papers, direct engagement with EU institutions and the AIDA database, which provides detailed comparative reporting on asylum systems in 27 countries. Another strand of ECRE's advocacy focuses on EU external action and on monitoring the implementation of the Global Compact on Refugees in Europe.

This work has produced concrete results, with ECRE acting alongside many other organisations, lawyers and UNHCR. Together with the AIRE Centre, the

Dutch Council for Refugees and the International Commission of Jurists, ECRE set up a Litigation Task Force, and each year ECRE intervened in strategic cases, which led to life saving outcomes for asylum seekers through suspension of their transfers. ECRE's advocacy proposals were reflected in the 2019 agreement on the future of Frontex, which expanded fundamental rights monitoring, limited the agency's role in third countries and removed its role in "preparing" return decisions.

The above work has led to ECRE becoming a recognised actor in Europe regarding asylum policies.

FEDERALISM AND DEMOCRACY

Civil society demonstrated its relevance to the integration process in the aftermath of the Second World War. Ideas of integration did not come from governments alone: they also stemmed from the engagement of activists gathered in movements and civil society organisations. This is particularly true of the federalist movement, founded in 1947, whose youth section (JEF) opened a European office in Paris as early as 1949. The establishment of an international, Europe-wide section in 1972 proved useful in supporting transnational action, both with national and European institutions and with the broader public.

JEF Europe has undertaken numerous actions over the decades, in connection with the various integration steps that the EEC, and later the EU, has taken or attempted to take. As early as 1967, for instance, young federalists held mock negotiations in Brussels on a treaty for the United Kingdom's accession to the European Community.

JEF was very active on many elements of European democracy that we tend to take for granted today, one of them being the direct election of the European Parliament. In March 1969, young federalists demonstrated in the visitors' gallery of the European Parliament to demand its direct election by universal suffrage; and the first direct elections finally took place in June 1979. JEF has since continued to campaign for youth participation in these elections. Ahead of the 2024 European elections, for example, its EurHope campaign gathered more than 5,000 proposals and 1.5 million votes from young people.

Over the decades, JEF has run numerous campaigns. For example, it has repeatedly called for a truly supranational electoral system for EU elections (instead of 27 national ones), notably by proposing a renewed European Electoral Act with transnational lists headed by the candidates for President of the European Commission. It consistently advocated and campaigned for a European constitution, while pragmatically accepting and supporting the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty as a compromise: a Treaty that brought important changes in terms of democracy and civic engagement (such as the European Citizens' Initiative).

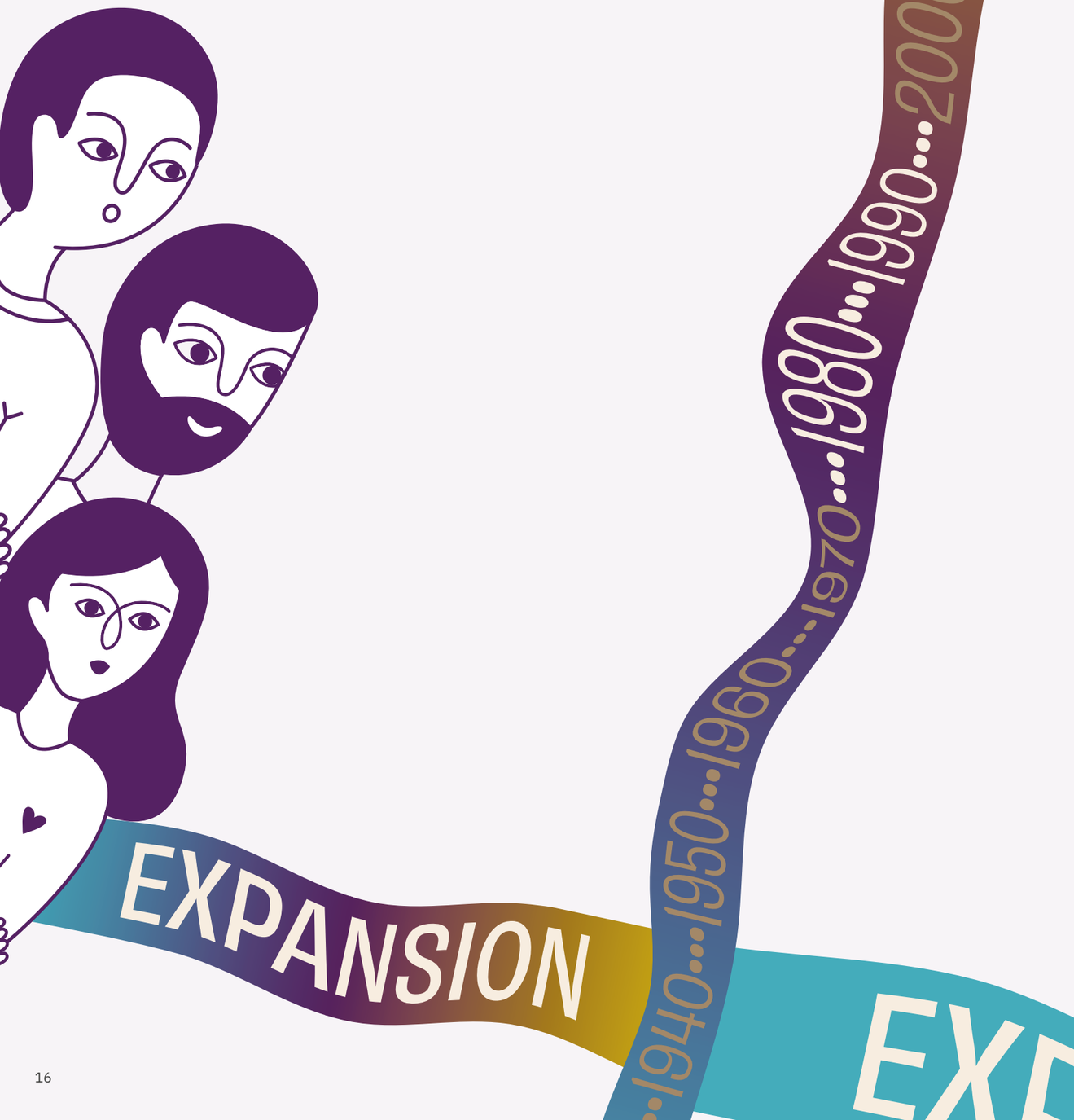
In recent years, JEF has advocated and campaigned in defence of the Schengen Agreement, to preserve the freedom of movement across countries to which we have become so accustomed: its "Don't Touch My Schengen" campaign, launched in 2016, reached over a million people on social media and brought activists onto the streets of dozens of European cities, and was relaunched in 2025 for Schengen's 40th anniversary, at a time when several Member States had reintroduced internal border controls.

DEEPENING, WIDENING AND... DEMOCRATISING?

The relevance of civil society for Europe is particular, because it relates directly to Europe's democratic character. The birth of the first European networks can be seen as a form of adaptation: as Community policies expanded in ever wider fields (from agriculture to trade, from competition to social policy), civil society Europeanised itself, reorienting its strategies and structures towards the new decision-making level, including with the support of European institutions. At the same time, the democratic character of the European political system was being debated. The first direct EP elections in 1979 marked a fundamental achievement for representative democracy. The debate on the European "democratic deficit", still developing in the 1970s, would become in later decades one of the main arguments in favour of a more structured involvement of organised civil society in EU decision-making, not as a substitute for electoral representation, but as a possible complement to it within participatory democracy.



EXPANSION



CHAPTER 2: EXPANSION: THE 1980s AND 1990s

The 1980s and 1990s were the period in which civil society's presence in Brussels steadily increased. This expansion was driven by the deepening of the integration process: the 1986 Single European Act (SEA), which laid the groundwork for the single market, and the 1992 Maastricht Treaty, which created the European Union, introduced European citizenship and greatly widened the number and scope of matters decided at EU level.

From the 1980s onwards, ideas for developing a framework for relations between European institutions and CSOs began to take shape. In 1987 the EP adopted the "Resolution on non-profit-making associations in the European Communities". Although only a soft-law instrument, this resolution openly positioned the EP in favour of freedom of association and of CSOs as democratic actors. The resolution called for the establishment of a European status for associations lawfully established in an EEC member state, and for a European fund to finance them. This proposal, however, did not materialise. EC President Jacques Delors also began to acknowledge a growing distance between decision-makers and ordinary citizens. The notion of a "Europe of the Citizens" gained ground, with the idea of involving citizens and their organisations in a more transparent way of governing – what would later be described as "good governance".

Since then, EU Treaties, legal texts and policy documents have recognised fundamental citizens' rights and the status of CSOs, and have established consultation procedures for their relations with EU institutions. As far as the Treaties are concerned, Maastricht in 1992 marked another watershed moment by introducing European citizenship and significantly widening the competences of the newly born EU.

The official birth of the EU, EU citizenship on top of national citizenship, extended competences in Community areas and extended cooperation in intergovernmental areas would be the seedbed for the creation of multiple CSO networks at EU level, particularly in the second half of the 1990s. EU institutions were seeking new sources of legitimacy to complement traditional electoral representation. The Treaty of Amsterdam (1997) would then guarantee greater institutional transparency, and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (2000) would strengthen transparency, accountability and civic rights.

The 1980s and 1990s are often associated with the EU's social dimension, including as part of the completion of the Single Market. In this period, civil society thus structured itself at EU level on many themes broadly falling under the social dimension (e.g. health, poverty eradication, social exclusion, equality and anti-discrimination on multiple grounds).

The Europeanisation of civil society happened both bottom-up, through the will of CSOs themselves, and top-down, through the incentives given by European institutions, international actors or, at times, influential individuals. By the end of the 1990s, dialogue with EU institutions, particularly the EC and the EP, was in good shape. In 1994, the EC's DG Employment and Social Affairs proposed a White Paper on Social Policy, promising to organise a Social Policy Forum to develop a genuine dialogue between EU institutions and social CSOs. The first European Social Policy Forum was held in March 1996, bringing together social NGOs, the social partners and representatives of European institutions. In this context, civil dialogue was presented as the way forward. Below are some examples of European-wide networks established during this period.

SOCIAL POLICIES AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Civil Society started to organise itself at EU level to bring many different voices to Brussels on multiple social issues, as these started to be dealt with by the EU. Over the course of the 1980s, grassroots anti-poverty organisations came to see poverty as a challenge that could no longer be tackled solely within national borders. At the same time, the EC began to acknowledge the need to involve civil society more on social issues. In the context of the European programmes to combat poverty (1975–1993), anti-poverty organisations decided to set up a European civil society network: The European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN) was created for this purpose in 1990 and is today the largest network of anti-poverty CSOs, with 31 national networks of voluntary organisations and grassroots groups and 13 European-wide organisations. EAPN campaigned for 2010 to become the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion, whose main legacy was a poverty reduction target in the Europe 2020 strategy.

In the same period, associations working to support homeless people in different European countries also decided to structure themselves at European level. The European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless (FEANTSA), was created in 1989 to bring about a focus on the problems related to homelessness in Europe. Today, FEANTSA has nearly 140 members in 26 countries ; through research, information exchange, awareness raising and dialogue with EU institutions, FEANTSA aims to influence EU-wide policies on housing and housing rights, as well as on different aspects related to precarity and homelessness, such as health, energy poverty, or migration. It developed a common European typology of homelessness, helped build support in the European Parliament, which adopted written declarations on ending street homelessness (2008) and on an EU homelessness strategy (2010). In 2021, the European Platform on Combating Homelessness was launched in Lisbon, which FEANTSA described as the greatest political attention the issue had ever received at EU level.

Similarly, organisations working on public health saw the light at EU level between between the 1990s and the early 2000s. The European Public Health Alliance (EPHA), for instance, was established in 1993 to advocate for the protection and improvement of public health in Europe both through specific health policies and in other policy areas impacting health. Other organisations like the European Patients' Forum (EPF) were established in 2003, to bring a focus on patients' interests and rights, as well as equitable, person-centred, accessible, and sustainable healthcare systems in Europe. EPF was involved in the drafting of the 2011 Directive on patients' rights in cross-border healthcare, and it has since monitored the Directive's implementation.

Other organisations have focused on social policies as they apply and impact families in Europe. One of the oldest is COFACE Families Europe, a network of more than 50 member organisations in 23 European countries, established in 1958 as a separate arm of the International Union of Family Organisations. It advocates for social policies to consider family needs and guarantee equal opportunities for all families. For years it campaigned on reconciling work and family life; according to COFACE, its advocacy contributed to the Commission's 2017 proposal for the Work-Life Balance Directive, adopted in 2019, whose transposition it has since monitored.

Social service and social justice has been seen through a religious perspective by European associations like Eurodiaconia, created in 1997 as a European network of churches and Christian NGOs that provide social and healthcare services and advocate for social justice. Its vision, driven by Christian faith, is of a Europe where each person is valued for their inherent God-given worth and dignity, and where societies guarantee social justice for all, including the most vulnerable. As an example, it has campaigned on the European Pillar of Social Rights, called with EAPN and Caritas Europa for a strong Council Recommendation on minimum income (2022), and ran an awareness campaign on mental health inclusion (2023).

Civil Society Organisations like these contribute to keeping social rights on the EU agenda, highlighting the need to support the most fragile groups in our societies.

EQUALITY AND NON-DISCRIMINATION

The 1990s saw the creation of many EU-wide networks focusing on combating different grounds of discrimination, from gender to sexual orientation, from ethnic origins and religious belief to age and disability.

In the field of gender equality, women's organisations united at EU level. The European Women's Lobby (EWL) was founded in 1990, initially composed of 12 national coordinations and 17 EU-wide CSOs or women's committees of international CSOs.The EWL aimed to inform European women, coordinate feminist action across countries and influence EU decisions.

Women's organisations advocacy has contributed to important files, for example gender mainstreaming in the Treaties, the gender pay gap, care, and violence against women. During the European Convention in 2002, for instance, the EWL called for equality between women and men to become an objective of the EU with a legal basis in the new Treaty. The EWL's 2012 report on women on company boards won the European Public Affairs Award for Report of the Year, and the organisation then campaigned for binding EU legislation, which came with the 2022 Women on Boards Directive. At the EWL's 35th anniversary in 2025, the European Commissioner for Equality credited EWL's advocacy and coalition-building for helping to deliver the directives on pay transparency, gender balance on company boards and combating violence against women. The EWL had called for an EU directive on violence against women and the first-ever EU Directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence was adopted in 2024, while EWL criticised the exclusion of the article on rape imposed by some Member States in the Council.

On violence against women more specifically, a dedicated network of women's shelters organisations was created in 1994 ahead of the 4th UN Conference on women (Beijing 1995), and held its first workshop at the NGO Forum of the Beijing Conference in September 1995. Women Against Violence Europe (WAVE) is today the largest European feminist network of Women's Specialist Services, representing around 160 member organisations – some of them networks themselves – and some 1,600 women's organisations in 46 countries. It promotes the rights of women, their children and girls, and works towards a world and a Europe free from violence against women. A key focus of WAVE's advocacy is making sure that services directed at women experiencing gender-based violence be recognised, protected by law and funded across Europe.

Other networks established in the 1990s have focused on discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity or religious belief. It is the case of ENAR, the European Network Against Racism, created in 1998 by grassroots activists to put an end to structural racism and discrimination in the EU. Since then, ENAR has worked on the topics of structural racism, racist crime, security and policing, employment, racial biases in AI, migration, climate justice and on specific forms of racism including Afrophobia and antigypsyism, islamophobia and antisemitism.

ENAR and its members have contributed to key milestones in EU anti-racism law and policy. Building on the work of civil society, which had proposed an EU anti-discrimination law and pushed for the new Article 13 of the Amsterdam Treaty, ENAR took part in the advocacy for the Racial Equality Directive and the Employment Equality Directive (2000), and it later counted the 2008 Framework Decision on combating racism and xenophobia among its achievements. In 2019 the Parliament adopted a resolution on the fundamental rights of people of African descent – the first time it publicly recognised the specific racism they face in Europe. In 2020, after the worldwide Black Lives Matter mobilisation and long-standing calls from anti-racist organisations, the European Commission adopted the first EU Anti-Racism Action Plan, recognising for the first time the structural, institutional and historical dimensions of racism in Europe, with ENAR as a key stakeholder.

The rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and intersex people in Europe are defended by civil society through networks like ILGA Europe, constituted in 1997. ILGA Europe works on issues of bodily integrity,

legal protection, safety, inclusion and equality, civil rights and freedoms of LGBTI people in Europe. It advocates towards EU institutions and contributes to broader awareness raising on the conditions of LGBTI people across Europe, for instance through its rainbow map monitoring the legislative and policy environment impacting the life of LGBTI people in each European country. The Rainbow Map now assesses 49 countries against 76 criteria, from equality and non-discrimination to family rights, hate crime, legal gender recognition and intersex bodily integrity.

ILGA-Europe's advocacy has contributed to key milestones for LGBTI rights in the EU. Its lobbying supported the inclusion of sexual orientation in Article 13 of the Amsterdam Treaty (1997) – the first time the EU recognised it as a ground for action against discrimination – and in the non-discrimination clause of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. More recently, when Hungary adopted its anti-LGBTI law in 2021, ILGA-Europe and the Hungarian organisation Háttér Society immediately alerted the European Commission that the law breached EU rules and the Treaties. The Commission brought the case before the Court of Justice of the EU, backed by 16 Member States and the European Parliament. In April 2026 the Court ruled that the law violated EU law and, for the first time, found a standalone breach of the EU's founding values set out in Article 2 TEU.

EU-wide networks were also established in the 1990s to uphold the rights of persons with disabilities. In 1997, the European Disability Forum (EDF) was born. Today, it counts 52 full members, 12 ordinary members that are organisations of persons with disabilities, and 38 associate members from organisations outside the EU. EDF campaigns for persons with disabilities to be fully included in society on equal footing, and for their human rights, as set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), to be fully respected, protected and fulfilled. The EDF played a role in the negotiations on the Convention and contributed for the EU to become the first regional inter-governmental organisation to join an international human rights treaty. EDF's campaigning and advocacy have contributed to important EU legislative files. During the 1996–97 treaty negotiations, for instance, through the "Invisible Citizens" campaign, disability organisations that went on to form the EDF called for a disability non-discrimination clause, which was eventually included in the Treaty of Amsterdam.

Another network had been founded in 1996 to represent the services that support persons with disabilities: the European Association of Service providers for Persons with Disabilities (EASPD), recently renamed Disability Support Europe (DSE). Its main objectives are the implementation of the UNCRPD, the provision of high-quality services, as well as fair working conditions for supporting services staff.

The disability movement's advocacy at EU level has supported the creation of EU disability strategies and action plans, culminating in the EU Disability Rights Strategy 2021–2030, the rights of passengers travelling by air, rail and road with specific provisions for persons with disabilities, The European Accessibility Act which sets minimum accessibility requirements for a range of products and services in the EU internal market such as computers, smartphones, payment and ticketing terminals and televisions, and the EU Disability card and parking card that can be used across the EU, adopted in 2024 after more than a decade of campaigning by the EDF.

BRINGING EU-WIDE SOCIAL NETWORKS TOGETHER

The Social Platform, created in 1995, brings together a diverse variety of EU-wide CSO networks working in the social sector and for equality on multiple grounds. The network initially emerged as an informal gathering of EU-wide networks, including the EWL, EAPN, COFACE and SOLIDAR, following the European Commission's 1993 Green Paper on European Social Policy: these networks developed common positions on the proposed European Social Policy Forum and on the Social Action Programme 1995–1997, and then decided to give their cooperation a more permanent framework. In total, 19 organisations then became involved.

Each organisation within the Social Platform has its own sector-specific demands, but together as Social Platform they obtained formal access to EU institutions on social aspects. This meant dialogue with the Council (attending and speaking at informal meetings) and with the EC (with which they met twice a year). As EU-wide networks with large membership bases, they could legitimately claim representativeness. This made EU institutions more attentive to whom they invited to dialogue.

Today, Social Platform's members include more than 40 networks across Europe.

Important milestones for the Social Platform include: participation in the first European Social Policy Forum in 1996, its long-standing campaign for an effective civil dialogue between EU institutions and civil society – between 2007 and 2009 it ran a two-year process to recommend how Article 11 of the Lisbon Treaty, which recognises participatory democracy as a principle of the EU, should be implemented, culminating in a conference with 140 social activists from 24 countries; its contribution to the European Pillar of Social Rights, as the European Commission's proposals of April 2017 already incorporated many recommendations of the Social Platform and its members, before the Pillar was proclaimed by the Commission, the Parliament and the Council at the Gothenburg Social Summit in November 2017; and its joint campaign with the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) and allies in the European Parliament, which contributed to the adoption of the EU Directive on Adequate Minimum Wages in 2022.

The presence of an EU-wide network active on social issues favours EU institutions retaining their attention on those issues, operating for the European social model to get enhanced rather than watered-down.



CONSOLIDATION



CHAPTER 3: CONSOLIDATION: THE 2000s AND 2010s

Since the 1980s and 1990s, the role played by CSOs in EU policy-making has grown, with an acceleration in the early 2000s. In 2001, the EC issued the **White Paper on European Governance** (preceded by the discussion paper "The Commission and NGOs: Building a Stronger Partnership") as a blueprint for improving governance at EU level. In it, the EC recognised the role of civil society in governance and democracy. This had concrete significance, as civil society organisations officially came to be considered relevant partners in policy-making. The **Treaty of Nice** (2001, in force since 2003) then used the term "civil society" for the first time and marked a shift towards a "participatory turn".

With the **Lisbon Treaty**, the role of civil society at EU level was then formally recognised through "civil dialogue". Article 2 defined the founding values of the EU, including democracy, and pluralism. Article 10 establishes the principle of representative democracy and citizen participation. Article 11(2), officially enshrines the relevance of civil society, organised through its EU-wide networks, for the enhancement of European public life and policies. Adding this article amounted to recognising that representative democracy works better when complemented by participatory democracy.

This recognition was also the result of strong advocacy by the EU civil society sector itself. On the eve of the **Convention on the Future of Europe** (held in 2002), seven EU-wide networks joined forces to present the civil society sector's demands to EU institutions: Social Platform, CONCORD, EWL, HRDN, Green10, EPHA and EFAH. They called for civil dialogue to be officially recognised alongside social dialogue and political dialogue. EU policymakers received the proposals positively, as they saw that civil society could support citizens' engagement and raise awareness about Europe.

This rather informal grouping would take the name of **Civil Society Contact Group** (CSCG). It would grow over the years and eventually represent several sectors, including: environment (Green10); culture (European Forum for the Arts and Heritage – EFAH, which later became Culture Action Europe); development (CONCORD); human rights (HRDN); public health (European Public Health Alliance – EPHA); social affairs (Social Platform); and women (EWL). Its objective was to promote a transparent, accessible, inclusive, fair and structured civil dialogue, respectful of CSOs' autonomy. The group would also promote capacity building for national and regional CSOs through public events, research and the development of toolkits.

Article 11 TEU (Lisbon)

This article is found in Title II of the Lisbon Treaty, "Provisions on Democratic Principles". It contains four important paragraphs. The first recognises the relevance of representative associations for public opinion in all areas of EU action. The second states that the EU will maintain "transparent and regular dialogue" with "civil society". The third introduces broad consultations as a means of dialogue. The fourth introduces the possibility of European Citizens' Initiatives.

For us, as members of civil society at EU level, it is important to remember that our work is enshrined in the Treaty, under the provisions for the realisation of the EU's fundamental democratic principles.

The CSCG worked to define and formalise civil dialogue, as well as the distinctive, representative character of civil society as opposed to private interest groups and lobbies. As an informal gathering of a limited number of Civil Society representatives, mainly directors, and not open to add new organisations, the group had a short life and would be later replaced by Civil Society Europe.

EU-wide CSOs such as the Social Platform, European Civic Forum, and SOLIDAR also pushed for the creation of the **EESC Liaison Group with Civil Society** in 2004, with the chair shared between civil society and the EESC President. 2013 was the **European Year of Citizens (EYC)**, in continuation of which **Civil Society Europe** would be constituted in 2016 (see Chapter 4).

The 2000s and 2010s would see the expansion and formalisation of networks in the youth and education fields, the restructuring of the development sector, and the birth of networks specifically dedicated to promoting civil society as a legitimate actor at EU level. This took place within a broader trend of NGO professionalisation, to which funding and access also contributed. Civil society and EU institutions would develop a mutual relationship, in which the former provided expertise and the latter provided funding.

DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION

Development cooperation has been an objective of the EEC since the Treaty of Rome. In the 1970s, it evolved into a competence shared between member states and European institutions. Development cooperation by the EC would complement member states' diplomacy, not replace it: to this purpose the EC fostered cooperation with development NGOs as implementing actors, including through the support to the creation of the Comité de liaison de ONG (CLONG) in 1976.

Other organisations were already active transnationally for global social justice: a key example is SOLIDAR, constituted in 1948 as the International Workers' Aid. It works on social justice and just transition in Europe and worldwide with more than 50 member organisations based in 26 countries. It partners with organisations active at the international and local levels across more than 40 countries in Latin America, Asia and Africa. SOLIDAR amplifies the voices of its members and partners at the European and international level. Through SOLIDAR+, it also contributes to democratic participation of citizens and progressive education through lifelong and life-wide learning in partnership with the Lifelong Learning Platform (LLP) and Civil Society Europe (CSE). Other European development NGO networks also emerged, such as CIDSE (1967), EUROSTEP (1990) and APRODEV (1990, renamed ACT Alliance EU in 2015), alongside international confederations such as Oxfam.

On the eve of the 2000s, international organisations such as ActionAid, Plan International and Save the Children also set up small Brussels offices for lobbying, campaigning or fundraising. Many of these organisations, international, European and national, expressed the wish to merge. CONCORD was thus created after the dissolution of the CLONG, out of the development civil society sector's strong will to create a broad confederation regrouping the national and EU levels. Bringing together a multiplicity of diverse development NGOs from across the continent would give the sector legitimacy stemming from its representativeness. It brings to Brussels both the voices of the development sector and those of local populations from countries in which they had development projects. Humanitarian NGOs remain organised within VOICE ("Voluntary Organisations in Cooperation in Emergencies"), created in 1992.

CONCORD has been an influential voice on all policies which impact on Global South countries. For instance, a key milestone has been EU recognition of the principles of Policy Coherence for (sustainable) Development (PCSD), both horizontal (across policy fields) and vertical (between the EU and the national levels). This principle was strongly advocated for by CONCORD and has since its creation been closely monitored by them.

Beyond policy coherence, CONCORD has developed tools and channels to hold the EU accountable and to secure a place for civil society in EU development policy. Since 2005, its annual AidWatch report, produced by development NGOs from all EU member states, has monitored the quantity and quality of European aid, tracking the commitment to spend 0.7% GNI on official development assistance and exposing "inflated" aid, such as refugee costs in donor countries, that does not reach partner countries. CONCORD monitors how EU delegations in partner countries engage with civil society. It also took part in the Structured Dialogue launched by the European Commission in 2010–2011, which brought together more than 700 civil society organisations and local authorities from around the world. This process paved the way for the Commission's 2012 Communication on Europe's engagement with civil society in external relations and for the Policy Forum on Development, a permanent space for dialogue in which CONCORD holds two seats. More recently, CONCORD has advocated for adequate funding for civil society under the EU's NDICI-Global Europe instrument.

CONCORD continues to work on three main streams: international inequalities, civic space for civil society (both in Europe and abroad), financing and funding for the development sector). Its 26 national platforms and 25 EU-wide or international networks contribute to the impact of the confederation.

SUPPORT TO DIFFERENT AGES

A number of networks have developed since the 2000s to uphold the rights of groups of different ages. One of these was Eurochild, founded in 2004 by 13 organisations that had worked together in the European Forum for Child Welfare. Today, Eurochild has members in 42 countries, to put children's rights and well-being at the heart of policy-making. Since the beginning, Eurochild has focused on childhood education, care and poverty, meaningfully involving children in its projects and advocating for the participation of youth in decision-making.

Eurochild's contribution to EC 2013 Recommendation "Investing in Children" is a major achievement. From 2013 to 2019, it coordinated the "Opening Doors for Europe's Children" campaign with partners in 16 countries, pushing for EU funds to support the transition from institutional to family- and community-based care for children. In 2021, together with other child rights organisations and the EC, it helped consult some 10,000 children to inform the new EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child, which created an EU Children's Participation Platform. The same year, after 6 years of advocacy by Eurochild and its partners in the EU Alliance for Investing in Children, EU Member States unanimously adopted the European Child Guarantee, which aims to ensure that children in need have access to key services.

Youth policy expanded at European level mainly in the 2000s and saw the further development of youth organisations. The European Youth Forum (YFJ) was born in 1996 . It has contributed to EU policy-making through advocacy on many topics of interest to young people, including education and employment and democratic participation. From the early 2000s the Council rotating presidencies started holding informal meetings of youth ministers with youth delegates. From 2010, the YFJ was closely involved in designing and coordinating the EU's Structured Dialogue with young people, which brought young people and policy-makers together in regular cycles of consultation, although the Council did not always follow up on recommendations; the process has since become the EU Youth Dialogue. The YFJ has also campaigned against unpaid internships: following its collective complaint against Belgium, the CoE ruled in its favour in 2022, and in 2024 the EC proposed a directive on traineeships. Over the same period, youth gained a more stable place in the EU institutions, alongside the YFJ's advocacy: the EC began to have Commissioners with youth policy in their portfolios**,** the Council adopted an EU Youth Strategy (2019–2027), and in 2021 the Commission appointed its first EU Youth Coordinator.

Other EU-wide networks focus on other ages of the life-spectrum: for example, the AGE Platform, created in 2001. AGE works to bring the perspectives of older people at EU level on policies that affect them. It advocates for an age-friendly environment, on healthy ageing, on income, social inclusion and employment.

EMPOWERMENT THROUGH EDUCATION

In the 2000s, the EU added education to its fields of action, through structured cooperation among EU member states. Students' and education networks established EU-level offices to advocate in favour of education as empowerment.

Some students' organisations were already existing since the 1970s, like OBESSU, the Organising Bureau of the European School Student Unions. OBESSU regroups national school student unions active in general secondary and secondary vocational education in Europe, founded in Ireland in 1975. It aims to represent young students' interests and needs through democratic, representative, and inclusive processes, encouraging cooperation and solidarity among students and student unions in Europe. OBESSU supported the creation of school student unions in Central and Eastern Europe from the mid-1990s and in the Baltic states from 1999. It adopted a Declaration of School Student Rights as a common standard for education systems, and in 2011 the EESC awarded it its Civil Society Prize for its "Light on the Rights" bus tour. More recently, together with the YJF, it has co-chaired the European Apprentices Network, advocating for quality apprenticeships and the rights of apprentices as both students and workers.

The scout movement also structured itself at European level since the 1970s. Today, the World Organisation of the Scout Movement (WOSM), European Region supports 47 National Scout Organisations across Europe in delivering youth-led education programmes to more than 2 million Scouts. Its European Region was part of the civil society alliance that campaigned for the European Year of Volunteering (2011), and that alliance drafted the Policy Agenda for Volunteering in Europe, presented to the EC at the end of that year.

Other organisations structured themselves at EU level to contribute to the educational sector from a holistic perspective: in 2001, several NGOs joined forces to contribute to the consultation on the European Commission's Memorandum on Lifelong Learning (2000), which led to a Council Resolution on lifelong learning in 2002. In 2005 following a proposal made in 2004 by six NGOs (AEGEE Europe European Students' Forum, The European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA), The European Forum of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (EfVET), EURO-WEA, European Vocational Training Association (EVTA) and SOLIDAR), CSOs created a consultation platform for CSOs in the field of education and training: the European Civil Society Platform on Lifelong Learning (EUCIS-LLL). In 2009, the EC acknowledged it as a "unique representation" of lifelong learning at EU level. EUCIS-LLL soon enhanced its cooperation with MEPs, launching with them and with the European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA)the LifeLong Learning Interest Group1 focused particularly on adult education. In 2015, the organisation took its current name: Lifelong Learning Platform (LLLP). Since 2014, it has monitored the implementation of Erasmus+ through an annual survey, and in 2016 it co-founded an Erasmus+ Coalition with the YJF. With them and Eurodesk, it later called for a tenfold increase in the programme's budget: the 2021–2027 budget was roughly doubled, well short of the campaign's call. Today, LLLP represents more than 40 organisations covering all actors in education: networks of parents, educators, teachers, schools heads and learners, as well as all sectors and levels of education from primary to higher education, from Vocational Education and Training (VET) to non-formal and adult education.

LifeLong Learning Interest Group (https://www.lll-interestgroup.eu/)

CITIZENS' PARTICIPATION

EU-wide networks specifically devoted to the democratic character of our societies, and to citizens' participation in political and social life have been created throughout the last decades, particularly since the 2000s.

Local democracy: Local democracy and active citizenship have been the focus of ALDA, the European Association for Local Democracy. In 1999, ALDA was established at the CoE's initiative as an umbrella organisation to coordinate a network of Local Democracy Agencies (LDAs).

The mission of ALDA today is to promote good governance and citizen participation at local level in the EU, its Neighbourhood and beyond. ALDA has over 300 members, including local authorities, associations of local authorities and civil society organisations, from more than 45 countries in Europe, with more than 80 staff working from offices in Strasbourg, Brussels, Vicenza, Skopje, Chișinău and Tunis. ALDA has received funds under the EC Europe for Citizens and Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) programmes, on top of its longstanding cooperation with the CoE. All throughout its life, ALDA has developed more than 500 projects and reached almost 25 million citizens.

EU-level democracy: One network established at EU level to uphold the rights of citizens to participate and be heard by EU institutions is the European Citizen Action Service (ECAS). ECAS was founded in 1990. Its members include NGOs, think tanks, citizen advice services and universities, mostly from EU and other European countries. It is an independent citizens' watchdog campaigning for the right of individuals and NGOs to be heard by the EU institutions.

Its current mission is to empower citizens through promoting and defending citizens' rights; developing and supporting mechanisms that increase the democratic participation of citizens and citizen organisations in the EU. Contracted by the EC, ECAS manages the "Your Europe Advice" (YEA) service, free online legal advice by 60 lawyers answering questions on EU rights in all 24 official EU languages, receiving around 21,000 enquiries a year. The service has handled more than 210,000 cases since 1996, and its regular feedback reports to the Commission help identify obstacles citizens face in exercising their EU rights. ECAS also operates, on behalf of the EC, the European Citizens' Initiative Forum to support ECI organisers.

Civic space: Citizens' participation is also the focus of the European Civic Forum (ECF), founded in 2005 in Strasbourg. ECF is a pan-European network of nearly 100 associations and NGOs across 30 countries. It advocates to protect civic space, enable civic participation and build civil dialogue for more equality, solidarity and democracy in Europe. It engages directly with policymakers, taking part in consultations and working through alliances. Its advocacy aims to ensure that EU policies respect fundamental rights for all and to obtain an enabling environment for civil society and genuine civil dialogue, as set out in Article 11 TEU. It also monitors civic space through its Civic Space Watch platform and an annual Civic Space Report, and contributes regular updates to the CIVICUS Monitor. In 2013, its president co-chaired the European Year of Citizens Alliance, which led to the creation of Civil Society Europe in 2014. Since 2010, it has advocated for the possibility to establish European Associations: the campaign resulted in a European Parliament resolution calling for European statutes for associations, foundations and mutuals. In 2018, ECF launched Civic Space Watch, now holding more than 1,000 alerts.

Volunteering: Volunteering organisations are today regrouped in the Centre for European Volunteering (CEV). CEV was founded in 1990 and officially registered in 1992 as an international non-profit organisation under Belgian law. CEV's purpose is to promote and support volunteers and volunteering in Europe at European, national and regional level. It helps volunteers and volunteer organisations bring a European dimension to their work and strengthen links between them. Today CEV is a network of over 60 organisations with strategic priorities including: recognition of quality volunteering as an expression of solidarity and European values; policies and programmes that support quality volunteering; and mutual learning among its members.

CEV has contributed to European society by putting the focus of EU institutions on volunteering. For instance, it

achieved the first European Day for Volunteering (1995), with the active support of the European Parliament, the European Commission, the Council of the EU and UNESCO. CEV's initiative and facilitating role were crucial to the civil society campaign that achieved the European Year of Volunteering 2011, leading the "EYV 2011 Alliance". The structure and type of relations held with the EC during the EYV would be subsequently impactful also for the creation of the European Year of Citizens (2013).

Another volunteering association at European level is Volonteurope, created in 1981: a European, globally focused, non-profit network working for social justice in Europe and beyond. With 51 members in 30 countries, it was founded as a European network to promote volunteering and active citizenship. Its current mission is to foster civic engagement, social action and volunteering, in order to build inclusive, tolerant, diverse and resilient communities, upholding values of social justice, solidarity, inclusion and active participation.

Civil Society participation: Networks for the upholding of democratic principles are active throughout Europe. The Civil Society Forum is a network of 155 CSOs from 21 countries in Europe, founded in 2011 as the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum. Its members work on diverse topics such as human rights, environmental protection, historical memory, gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights. CSF acts as a bridge between grassroots movements and official bodies. It engages with EU institutions and national governments and advocates for policies that protect democracy, human rights and the rule of law. A Solidarity team of human rights experts supports civil society actors and human rights defenders at risk, from raising awareness to direct assistance, including emergency aid, psychological support and safe spaces. Its Berlin Hub for Human Rights Defenders offers a meeting space for civil society actors, including those in exile. CSF also advocates towards the CoE: in December 2025, for instance, the CSF was among 32 organisations that signed a joint appeal asking CoE member states to adopt a convention against transnational repression. By 2023 it had grown to around 190 member organisations. In April 2023 the Russian authorities declared it an "undesirable organisation", a decision strongly condemned by the European Union. The network then continued its work from Berlin as the Civil Society Forum, extending its scope to the whole of wider Europe.

Transparency: it is part of the democratic character of institutions to ensure that they work in a transparent manner, away from any corruption. The EU office of Transparency International has been active since 2008 to ensure this at EU level. Part of Transparency International (the global anti-corruption movement with more than 100 chapters worldwide), the EU office leads EU advocacy, cooperating with the 22 national chapters and two national contact points in EU member states. TI EU's mission is to prevent corruption and promote integrity, transparency and accountability across EU institutions, policies and legislation, making sure EU decision-making is open, fair and free from undue influence.

It focuses on three main domains of advocacy: political integrity (transparency and integrity in the EU institutions, and the fight against corporate capture and undue influence in EU policymaking); financial integrity (fight against money laundering and grand corruption at EU level); civic space and rule-of-law (a firmer EU response to rule-of-law backsliding, and an end to attacks on civil society and the media). On political integrity, for instance, TI EU's key project is the Integrity Watch EU: online tools that let citizens, journalists and civil society monitor the integrity of EU politicians' decisions.

Several milestones show the impact of TI EU's work. Launched in 2014, Integrity Watch EU helped push the EU institutions towards greater lobby transparency: the publication of lobby meetings became mandatory for all MEPs, and in 2022 the Commission started publishing its lobby meetings in a centralised open-data format, while the platform itself grew into 19 versions covering 17 countries. As part of a broad coalition of CSOs, trade unions and journalists, TI EU campaigned for EU-wide whistleblower protection, achieved with the adoption of the Whistleblower Protection Directive in October 2019. After the Qatargate scandal in December 2022, TI EU called for an independent EU ethics body: an agreement creating one was signed by eight EU institutions in May 2024, although TI EU criticised it as lacking real independence. Finally, together with dozens of other CSOs, it pushed for a strong EU Anti-Corruption Directive, adopted in April 2026 as the first EU law harmonising anti-corruption rules across Member States.

CULTURE

The cultural sector at European level started to develop in the 1990s and extended in the 2000s, through cultural cooperation across countries. One of the first networks in the sector has been the European Network of Cultural Centres (ENCC), created in 1994. ENCC unites today 181 socio-cultural organisations in 39 countries in Europe and beyond, from small grassroots initiatives and municipal cultural houses to networks covering regions or countries. They promote social cohesion through culture and the arts.

Since its foundation, ENCC has worked to map and connect cultural centres across Europe, publishing one of the first surveys of cultural and arts centres in Europe. Over time it has grown from a small group of founders into a network reaching around 6,000 cultural centres, many of them in rural areas. Recognised and supported by the EU's Creative Europe programme as a European network, ENCC has also helped its members access European funding directly, for instance through its "Incubator" programme, which supports cultural centres in developing cooperation projects for Creative Europe and Erasmus+.

Culture Action Europe (CAE), founded in 1994 as the European Forum for the Arts and Heritage (EFAH), was created to bring together cultural networks and organisations from across Europe and to provide the cultural sector with a collective voice in European policymaking. From the beginning, EFAH was conceived as a "network of networks", connecting organisations working in different areas of culture, to create a dialogue between the cultural sector and European institutions.

Throughout the 1990s and the early 2000s, EFAH consolidated its position as an intermediary between cultural organisations and European policymakers. It developed information and communication activities, produced policy analysis and position papers, and helped cultural actors understand and engage with European policy and funding processes.

A significant turning point came in the middle of the 2000s. Between 2006 and 2007, EFAH undertook a major strategic review of its mission, priorities and ways of working. In 2008, the organisation was thus relaunched under a new name: Culture Action Europe.

Already as EFAH, the organisation ran the "70 Cents for Culture" campaign, calling for the EU's culture budget to rise from about 7 cents to 70 cents per citizen a year. Together with the EP, CAE has long called for the budget of Creative Europe, the EU's culture programme, to be doubled: for 2021–2027 it rose from €1.46 billion to around €2.5 billion, a substantial increase. During the COVID-19 crisis, CAE launched with the European Cultural Foundation and Europa Nostra the campaign "A Cultural Deal for Europe" (2020), and coordinated an open letter by over 110 European cultural networks asking that at least 2% of national recovery plans be devoted to culture, as the EP had also requested. According to CAE's own mapping, around €12 billion was eventually allocated to culture across the national recovery plans, although the 2% target was not reached everywhere.

CAE has consistently argued for a wider perspective on culture, one that sees culture as connected to democracy, citizenship, participation, social inclusion and sustainable development.

CIVIL SOCIETY AT EU LEVEL TODAY



CHAPTER 4: CIVIL SOCIETY AT EU LEVEL TODAY

The last decade has seen European civil society confronted with a rapidly evolving institutional landscape. While the EU has maintained its democratic foundations and right to participate, the political context has deteriorated. From difficulties in accessing sustainable funding to administrative obstruction, and, in the most serious cases, direct attacks against organisations, civic space is under constraint in member states and at EU level.

At the same time new instruments of direct participation at EU level were further developed, which however had mainly focused on individual citizens' engagement: among those the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI), the Conference on the Future of Europe, and EU-level citizens' panels. However, the impact of such tools has been mixed at best: for instance, successful ECI campaigns, which reached the threshold of one million signatures from across Member States, had until now a limited follow up by the European Commission.

A stronger impact was achieved when civil society managed to be structurally involved: this was the case of the European Year of Citizens, held in 2013 and prolonged for 2014, and later on the Conference on the Future of Europe, held between 2021 and 2022, which aimed at directly involving citizens in a deliberative process on the EU's future. Civil society organisations were each time involved to concretise these initiatives and to monitor the implementation of their outcomes. However these welcome initiatives have not been complemented with instruments to structure meaningful engagement of the participation of citizens through civil society. In particular, article 11 (2) of the Treaties on civil dialogue still lacks a legal framework.

The urgency of a structured dialogue with civil society has become increasingly evident, as the most recent decade has seen growing concern about democratic backsliding and shrinking civic space. Against this backdrop, and in response to recommendations by civil society, the EC has in 2025 issued an EU Strategy for Civil Society. This comes as a big achievement for civil society and Civil Society Europe in particular: its implementation can be a milestone for meaningful engagement of civil society with EU institutions and for the protection of our civic space. Crucially, the Strategy foresees the development of a Civil Society Platform for the high level dialogue with the Commission: while initially limited to fundamental rights and democracy, it has the potential of paving the way for a broader framework for civil dialogue between the EC and broader civil society, as well as set the example for other EU institutions.

CIVIL SOCIETY EUROPE: TEN YEARS OF REPRESENTATION

In 2011, the EC announced the European Year of Volunteering, in reply to strong demands from civil society across Europe. During that year, the EC worked closely with a consortium of CSOs, and continued to do so in the 2012 European Year of Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations (2012). In 2013, the European Year of Citizens (EYC) was proclaimed. A coalition of CSOs was formed by the European Civic Forum for this purpose: the European Year of Citizens Alliance (EYCA). Any CSOs respecting criteria of representation and fundamental EU values could join, following an established procedure: 62 European networks and 20 national platforms joined and worked together through an agreed governance structure.

This coalition was recognised by EU institutions as an interlocutor for the EYC. After two years of common work, many of the participating networks decided to formalise their cooperation. Civil Society

Europe (CSE) was launched in Rome in December 2014 and then officially established in Belgium as an international non profit association in 2016. The establishment of CSE marked a milestone: for the first time, the multifaceted, pluralistic, and sometimes competitive civil society at the EU level had a single, coordinated voice vis-à-vis EU institutions, strengthening the sector as a pillar of European democracy. The European Civic Forum, a founding member of CSE, provided for initial seed funding, to enable staff acquisition and the opening of an office in Brussels; its President, Jean-Marc Roirant, was elected as first CSE President, followed by Gabriella Civico from the Centre for European Volunteering in 2023. Since then, CSE has been supported via membership fees, funding from foundations and EU funding (first a research grant, followed by an operating grant).

Over the first ten years, CSE has worked to strengthen coordination, promote structured dialogue within Article 11 TEU, and bring to the attention of European institutions the most pressing challenges facing the sector. Such work has been recognised by broader civil society: since its foundation, CSE membership has reinforced its representation of civil society to further sectors, with environmental, animal rights, health, transparency, anti racism and women organisations joining. CSE has contributed to raising institutions' awareness on the importance of civil society in Europe, at EU level, and on the difficulties faced by the sector. For instance, its initial reports on Civic Space (2016, 2017) led the EU Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) to start its own institutional reports on the issue since 2018 (see FRA Report on Challenges facing civil society organisations working on human rights in the EU, 2018, and subsequent reports). CSE has also contributed to the annual EC Rule of Law Reports through joint civil society submissions focusing on civic space. In light of the Conference on the Future of Europe (2021-2022), CSE managed to obtain seats at the table for civil society next to social partners and EU advisory bodies and organised a convention to organise civil society responses and participation gathering 82 networks and platforms. Today, it maintains a watchdog role on the implementation of its recommendations (the legacy of the CoFoE), notably through the Civil Society State of the Union report that has been published by CSE every two years since 2023 as a contribution to the work programme of the European Commission; implementing a consistent bottom up approach in the preparation of the proposals addressing key areas such as democracy, fundamental rights and civic space in the EU and the world, freedom of movement, social justice, addressing climate change and protecting the environment, an inclusive digital transformation of the EU, human centred security and readiness policies.

Below are some key areas of CSE's work:

THE CONFERENCE ON THE FUTURE OF EUROPE (COFOE - 2021–2022) AND ITS LEGACY

Launched by the EC in 2021-2022, the CoFoE received important input from citizens' panels. enabling the EC to understand what citizens want from Europe and to gather concrete recommendations. It initially did not include CSOs, however, CSE advocated towards key institutions to include civil society organisations next to social partners and EU advisory bodies. CSE ensured a wide reaching and self governed representation of civil society by setting up the Civil Society Convention on the Future of Europe, bringing together more than 80 European networks. The Civil Society Convention engaged in scrutinising the democratic functioning of the CoFoE itself, ensuring that citizens would be genuinely involved.

The CoFoE resulted in 49 recommendations, diversely appropriated by EU institutions. The Civil Society Convention contributed to the works by developing a set of further and more in depth recommendations. CSE ensured the legacy of the Convention by creating a working group, engaged in the drafting of the Civil Society State of the Union (CS-SOTEU) biennial reports, which are the main agenda-setting documents developed by civil society across sectors to provide its priorities for the EC work programme.

AN EU STATUS FOR EU-WIDE CSOS?

In 2023, following two decades of mobilisation of civil society, the EC proposed a Directive to establish "European Cross-Border Associations" (ECBAs), which would create a new legal form with common European features across Member States based on the principle of mutual recognition. CSE has been at the forefront to support such a proposal, which would allow for registered NGO entities with cross-country members to operate across borders. While the European Parliament has adopted a very favourable position, discussions were stalled at Council level and the Commission initiated a proposal for withdrawal. CSE continues to call on EU institutions to put the directive back on the agenda.

AN INTEREST GROUP TO DISCUSS WITH THE PARLIAMENT

CSE has kept operating towards EU institutions to raise awareness about democratic engagement. Our 2024 EP election campaign "Civil Society for EU" together with our member Social Platform aimed at raising awareness among candidates to the European Parliament to better recognise, support and engage with civil society through signing a pledge. As a follow up, the "Interest Group on Civil Society", was created after the last elections to allow for MEPs and CSOs to discuss civic space challenges, facilitate exchanges, promote support, and react against attacks. Today, 40 MEPs from several EU member states and across the political spectrum are regularly exchanging with civil society organisations.

CIVIL DIALOGUE, EU STRATEGY FOR CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE NEW CIVIL SOCIETY PLATFORM

One of the key areas of CSE's work is civil dialogue: CSE has been at the forefront in theorising how art. 11 TEU could be implemented, thanks to several documents and guidelines prepared with its members. It also ensured the dissemination of this concept among the EU institutions, notably via a training manual which led to a capacity-building workshop with the Commission, as well as via the Civil Dialogue Award, aimed at raising awareness of good practices of dialogue within EU institutions, which had its first edition in 2025.

All this work has been crucial for the making of the Civil Society Strategy. In fact, since 2022, CSE has supported the call for a Civil Society Strategy at EU level. Ahead of the 2024 EP elections, CSE advocated for such a strategy as an integral part of a broader European Democracy Agenda, in order to acknowledge the indispensable role of civil society in all its diversity in fostering democratic engagement and safeguarding human rights. CSE also asked to reinforce intermediary bodies, to channel people's needs and aspirations, and for an official Civil Dialogue Agreement, which would formalise civil dialogue.

The EU Strategy for Civil Society was effectively issued in 2025 after wide consultation with civil society: CSE coordinated the input process and co-facilitated focus groups with the European Commission. It contains three main pillars: the first pillar announces more and better engagement of EC and other institutions with CSOs as partners in EU governance; the second pillar acknowledges increasing difficulties and threats to CSOs and proposes different monitoring tools; the third pillar focuses on funding for CSOs, acknowledging the importance of long-term financing.

One of the flagships of the Strategy is the creation of a Civil Society Platform to enhance civil dialogue. CSE is part of the steering group of the platform, together with the European Union Agency for Fundamental

Rights and the European Economic and Social Committee.

While the Civil Society Strategy focuses on the relations with the Commission, CSE worked also to strengthen civil dialogue vis a vis the European Parliament. An important result was the appointment of two Vice Presidents responsible for civil society. As part of their mandate, a first Civil Dialogue Forum was hosted by the European Parliament and European Commission, with contribution from CSE. The Vice President also hosted the presentation of the Civil Society State of the Union 2025 report in the Presidential Salon of the European Parliament.

CSE has issued several documents and guidelines on Civil Dialogue prepared with its members, as well as a training manual for EU institutions which led to a workshop with the Commission. In 2025 we organised a Civil Dialogue Award to raise awareness of good practices of dialogue within EU institutions

An enabling condition for civil society involvement is the transparency and openness of policymaking processes. This is why CSE has monitored the transparency of EU institutions and in particular the accessibility of information available on the websites of Member States' Permanent Representations to the EU and of the European Parliament committees, as well as the access to the position of national governments in the preparatory works of the Council, which was also the object of a European Ombudsman enquiry and recommendation.

MAKING THE EU BUDGET WORK FOR CITIZENS

CSE has worked to ensure that the EU budget would further support civil society at all levels.

CSE has tirelessly represented civil society towards the EU institutions when discussing EU budget and budget control, including by addressing undue attacks against funding of NGOs, while supporting transparency for all beneficiaries of EU funding. CSE has also coordinated work towards the upcoming EU multiannual budget 2028-2034, calling for an ambitious budget. CSE also prepared a joint proposal across civil society based on the recommendations of the Civil Society State of the Union 2023. Following the presentation of the proposal by the Commission, CSE has then focused its work on AgoraEU, the new programme funding culture, media and CSOs working on fundamental rights, democracy and equality, on funding for civil society and the implementation of the partnership principle of civil society involvement in all programmes. In cooperation with its members and the different thematic civil society "MFF hubs", CSE has organised several webinars to inform and allow exchanges and coordinations among national civil society organisations on the whole MFF, the National and Regional Partnership Plans and on AgoraEU. We have also worked in forming alliances with national organisations in key Member States to provide support to an ambitious budget backed by a strong package of EU new own resources

VOICES OF MILLIONS CAMPAIGN

CSE launched its 'Voices of Millions' campaign in 2026, which raises awareness about the positive role and representative impact of civil society organisations and networks at EU level. It showcases how CSOs contribute to policy-making, agenda setting, and the implementation and monitoring of policies across the EU, especially by amplifying the voices of marginalised and discriminated communities. So far, the campaign has highlighted positive stories from civil society on social media through its 'The Power of Many' series, and has produced infographics on the state of civil society funding and what's needed in the next EU long-term budget.

TAKING STOCK AND LOOKING FORWARD

Today, we can look with pride at the path that led civil society to develop and organise itself at EU level alongside the European integration process: it has contributed to assert democratic principles, strengthened rule of law, and brought changes that concretely bettered the condition of people living in Europe, including marginalised groups, and that strengthened the safeguards for Europe's environment and biodiversity.

Still challenges for organised civil society at European level remain. The first concerns financial sustainability: public funding for civil society must be considered as part of the investments in democracy; a truly independent Civil Society sector needs diversified funding sources that allow organisations to have the means to work while retaining its independence. Public and long-term funds for civil society allow the field to be fully capable of its role as watchdogs and advocates for public good.

The second challenge concerns the processes of disintermediation between citizens and institutions: while instruments of direct citizen participation multiply, civil society organisations still remain a bastion for democratic discussion, aggregation of citizens' preferences and advocacy on issues of public interest. This is an important feature distinguishing civil society from other non-governmental entities: its citizen-led character and its internal decision-making processes that allow for its position to be representative of citizens.

The third challenge concerns the defence of civic space itself: safe, predictable working conditions for civil society, free from administrative or regulatory undue burden and political pressure. This space has been in decline across many Member States, as the most recent reports on shrinking civic space show. At EU level, while the legal recognition of EU-level civil dialogue enshrined in Article 11 TEU represents an achievement, it has not directly led to the establishment of a formal civil dialogue framework. In this sense, the Civil Society Platform has the potential of setting a gold standard.

Europe proudly calls itself the cradle of democracy, but today democratic principles and practices are in decline in Europe too. In a period of shrinking civic space in Europe, as well as internationally, it is important to recall that European integration has benefited from the work, commitment and upholding of fundamental values by civil society organisations and the individuals engaged in them. The history that we have briefly retraced in this booklet is a testimony to the everyday work of citizens engaged in civil society organisations, as an often untold constitutive element of the EU.

CONCLUSIONS

With this booklet, we took a look at the diversity of fields in which civil society has Europeanised itself across the decades, following and contributing to the European integration process. This has shown the contributions it has made to Europe and its democratic governance.

European civil society has never been merely an actor reacting to European integration: it has been a part of it since its beginning. How this relationship continues to develop in the coming years is a concern not only for the organisations involved, but for the democratic quality of the entire European project. The history retraced in these pages recalls European civil society's capacity to reorganise, adapt and continue to claim its own institutional space. It remains, today, a valuable resource on which to build the next chapters of Europe's democracy.

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