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From: Secretary-General of the European Commission, signed by Ms Martine DEPREZ, Director

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To: Ms Thérèse BLANCHET, Secretary-General of the Council of the European Union

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Subject: JOINT COMMUNICATION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONSEuropean Democracy Shield: Empowering Strong and Resilient Democracies

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Delegations will find attached document JOIN(2025) 791 final.

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HIGH REPRESENTATIVE  
OF THE UNION FOR  
FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND  
SECURITY POLICY

Brussels, 12.11.2025  
JOIN(2025) 791 final

**JOINT COMMUNICATION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL,  
THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE  
COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS**

**European Democracy Shield: Empowering Strong and Resilient Democracies**

*“It is only by showing that democracy works for people and that it delivers, that we can create a stronger Union. Europe can only thrive if democracy thrives.”*

*President Ursula von der Leyen, International Charlemagne Prize*

## 1. Introduction

Democracy is the cornerstone of the European Union and is key to building **peace, security, economic prosperity, competitiveness, and social cohesion**. The foundations of democracy reside in free people, free and fair elections, free media and strong democratic institutions and processes. More than a system of governance, democracy is our way of life - it guarantees our rights and freedoms, safeguards equality before the law, promotes societies that are open and just, and ensures that those in power can be held accountable. EU citizens see democracy, human rights and the rule of law as the EU’s main strength<sup>1</sup>.

In an age of growing geopolitical confrontation, international and regional conflicts, as well as technological disruption, our democracies are under internal and external pressures. Authoritarian regimes see democracies as a threat and deploy increasingly aggressive tactics, including by relying on state or non-state proxies, to weaken them. While democracy is about bringing together different voices in society and finding common solutions, authoritarian regimes seek to create or widen divisions, instrumentalise conflicts, discredit democratic actors, in particular free media and civil society, and undermine free and fair elections. Their aim is to erode citizens’ trust in democratic institutions and in the capacity of democracy to deliver for people.

This is a pressing concern for the EU, its neighbourhood and democracies around the world. Supporting EU candidate countries and potential candidates in their efforts to strengthen and consolidate democracy is essential. Some have been targets of intense destabilisation and interference attempts. In addition to its brutal war of aggression against Ukraine, Russia is also escalating hybrid attacks, waging a battle of influence against Europe. The tactics used are reaching deep into the fabric of our societies, with potentially long-lasting impacts. By spreading deceitful narratives, sometimes including the manipulation and falsification of historical facts, they try to erode trust in democratic systems.

These threats do not come in isolation, but feed on and reinforce other important challenges democracy is facing today. These include rising extremism and polarisation, declining trust and engagement, threats to the integrity of elections and the plurality of public debate and free speech, and a deterioration of the environment in which journalists and civil society operate<sup>2</sup>. These challenges come amidst a deep digital transformation of our societies which has reshaped the way in which public debate takes place, how information flows and how citizens engage in the public sphere. This has brought significant new opportunities for people to freely access information, express their opinion and participate in public life and democratic debate. However, it has also exposed and created new vulnerabilities. People’s views are being increasingly shaped by algorithm-based, personalised sources, which limits the shared space for democratic debate. Social media platforms also impact the

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<sup>1</sup> According to Flash Eurobarometer 550 “Challenges and priorities in the EU”, of July 2024, the first EU main strength identified by Europeans was respect for democracy, human rights, and the rule of law (38%).

<sup>2</sup> 2025 Strategic Foresight Report Resilience 2.0: Empowering the EU to thrive amid turbulence and uncertainty, COM/2025/484 final; and ‘Rethinking societal resilience in a time of polycrisis’, <https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC142772>.

sustainability of media revenue models. The developments in Artificial Intelligence (AI) can also severely impact the democratic space, including electoral processes.

Protecting democracy and building the democratic resilience of citizens, societies and institutions is an urgent collective endeavour, which requires a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach. This is not only necessary to preserve the EU's values, but also to ensure Europe's security and to safeguard its independence, freedom and prosperity. The EU institutions, Member States, EU candidate countries and potential candidates, civil society and the private sector, each have a crucial role to play, guided by our shared values. Our citizens and their freedoms must be at the heart of it all.

## 2. The European Democracy Shield

There is growing awareness of the shared challenges facing democracies across the EU and globally, and action is already being taken at all levels. Member States have established new bodies and new capabilities to strengthen their national democratic resilience. Political actors and a wide community of active citizens and groups have led the call for action and are contributing to the response.

The EU has put in place a robust policy and legal framework, anchored in the 2020 European Democracy Action Plan<sup>3</sup> and the 2023 Defence of Democracy package<sup>4</sup>, to help coordinate, mobilise, complement and strengthen this collective effort.

Building on that framework, with the European Democracy Shield, the Commission and the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy are presenting a set of new measures in three priority areas, aimed at empowering strong and resilient democracies by:

- **reinforcing situational awareness and support response capacity to safeguard the integrity of the information space,**
- **strengthening democratic institutions, free and fair elections and free and independent media,**
- **boosting societal resilience and citizens' engagement.**

To support better cooperation and coordination in addressing several aspects under these priority areas, a **European Centre for Democratic Resilience** ('the Centre') will bring together expertise and capacities across Member States, EU candidate countries and potential candidates, and EU institutions, bodies, offices and agencies, including the European External Action Service (EEAS), as relevant. The Centre will facilitate **information sharing** and **support operational cooperation** and **capacity building** to withstand evolving common threats, in particular foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) and disinformation. Its aim will be to improve situational awareness and the capacity to anticipate and detect threats, develop a robust and coordinated early warning system and support rapid response capacity. It will also support the raising of awareness to prepare and empower societies and institutions, making them more resilient to information-

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<sup>3</sup> European Commission, Communication on the European Democracy Action Plan, COM(2020) 790 final.

<sup>4</sup> European Commission, Communication on Defence of Democracy, COM(2023) 630 final. As part of this Package, the Commission proposed a Directive on interest representation activities carried out on behalf of third countries, currently under discussion by the co-legislators.

manipulation and disinformation. Its work will contribute to consolidating the EU's whole-of-society approach to strengthen preparedness, increase awareness and build democratic resilience.

The **European Democracy Shield** will contribute to strengthening our democracies and empowering Europeans to exercise their rights, to freely form and express their opinions, and to have agency and participate in the democratic life of the Union actively and safely. Its actions will strengthen democratic institutions, protect the integrity of elections and support media freedom and pluralism, so that our democracies remain strong, open and plural, and built on citizens' trust. It will be implemented in synergy with the EU's agenda on security, defence, preparedness<sup>5</sup>, and in coherence with EU external action more broadly.

## **2.1. A new European Centre for Democratic Resilience: reinforcing situational awareness and strengthening societal resilience**

Building democratic resilience requires reinforced efforts at all levels of government, among EU institutions, Member States, and within society as a whole. These coordinated efforts need to **focus on improving situational awareness** and the **collective capacity to anticipate, detect and respond to threats** and on **building democratic resilience**. A great deal of work has already been done to meet these challenges, with tools and structures emerging at both national and European level<sup>6</sup> and delivering some important results.

However, many of these structures only address specific areas and communities, they use different methodologies and often offer limited response capacity and have limited links to the work of competent authorities at national and EU level. It is essential that these efforts are brought together; stronger links need to be fostered to reinforce the situational awareness and to improve the EU's collective capacity to monitor, detect and anticipate information manipulation and disinformation campaigns<sup>7</sup>.

To address these needs, the Commission will set up a **European Centre for Democratic Resilience**. The Centre will offer a framework to strengthen coordination and information sharing between EU institutions, bodies, offices and agencies and Member States and support operational cooperation and capacity building. This will facilitate a more integrated and effective approach to increasing the situational awareness and to develop a robust and coordinated early warning system that can support response capacity. The Centre's work will also contribute to raising awareness to prepare and empower citizens, society and institutions and make them more resilient.

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<sup>5</sup> European Commission 2025: White Paper for European Defence Readiness, JOIN/2025/120 final; European Preparedness Union Strategy, JOIN(2025) 130 final; ProtectEU: a European Internal Security Strategy, COM(2025) 148 final.

<sup>6</sup> Several frameworks, structures and tools already exist at EU level and national level for addressing FIMI and disinformation, as well as societal resilience more broadly. At EU level, this includes, among others, the EEAS managed EU Rapid Alert System (RAS), the Commission's internal Network against Disinformation, EUvsDisinfo, the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO), the DSA elections roundtables, work in the European Cooperation Network on Elections (ECNE). Dedicated structures exist also at national level such as Viginum in France and the Swedish Psychological Defence Agency, or the whole of society approach to democratic resilience rolled out by Finland.

<sup>7</sup> As also called in the Presidency Conclusions of May 2025 on strengthening democratic resilience - <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/05/27/presidency-conclusions-on-strengthening-eu-democratic-resilience/>.

The Centre will primarily work as a dedicated hub for exchange and operational cooperation among EU institutions and Member States. The Centre will link together existing networks and structures working on prevention, detection, analysis and response to patterns of threats in the information space, and work to develop joint approaches, practices and methodologies and exchanging relevant data and analyses. It will support trainings and capacity-building activities. It could further advise on common response tools, strategies, standard operating procedures, protocols or joint exercises. The Centre will be supported by and work in close coordination with the Rapid Alert System, which is an established mechanism to exchange information on FIMI and disinformation between EU institutions and the Member States.

A **Stakeholder Platform** for independent non-institutional stakeholders will be established to enable contributions from a broad set of relevant stakeholders and communities and to feed these contributions into the work of the Centre. This platform will bring together stakeholders such as civil society organisations, think tanks, researchers and academia, fact-checkers and media providers. In full respect of the independence of all participants, this platform will facilitate the exchange of information, expertise and advice, and will gradually build on existing stakeholder communities such as the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO), and new communities, such as the European Network of Fact-Checkers and the future common research support framework. The platform will support the dissemination of research and other outputs and encourage exchange among different stakeholders.

The Centre will **fully respect EU and national competences** and the independence of existing structures at national and EU level. Its development will be **rolled out progressively**, based on Member States' voluntary participation, and on **their input and needs for support and cooperation**, to ensure that it delivers the best support to national authorities and jointly at EU level. Building on ongoing EU support and engagement with international partners<sup>8</sup>, the Centre will also be open to associate EU candidate countries and potential candidates to support them and foster mutual learning. Cooperation with like-minded partners could also be foreseen.

Work under the Centre will be complementary to and in synergy with other measures put forward to safeguard the integrity of the information space, strengthen the integrity of elections, foster media freedom and media pluralism and build overall societal resilience by empowering and engaging citizens.

## **2.2. Safeguarding the integrity of the information space**

Strengthening the integrity of the information space to support everyone in society to access reliable and trustworthy information, exercise their democratic rights and engage meaningfully with institutions and communities is essential. Transparency, accountability and integrity in the information space are key for ensuring that people's voices are heard, to empower them to be active citizens and to build and sustain their trust in democratic processes.

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<sup>8</sup> G7, NATO, the UN, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, or the Council of Europe.

Foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI)<sup>9</sup> and disinformation campaigns are precisely intended to undermine public trust in the information space and democratic institutions while amplifying societal divisions<sup>10</sup>. They are enabled by a proliferation of new online manipulation techniques. These include the inauthentic use of social media<sup>11</sup>, fake social media accounts, websites designed to mimic official sources, artificial amplification of divisive content, use of synthetic content like deepfakes and other Artificial Intelligence ('AI')- generated content. Their spread often relies on inauthentic behaviour like fake accounts, AI and bot-driven amplification and inauthentic engagements. Such coordinated operations, often part of broader hybrid campaigns, are increasingly sophisticated and decentralised, and may involve networks that operate across multiple platforms and jurisdictions, often under the veil of anonymity, which makes them particularly difficult to detect, attribute and counter effectively.

To address these issues, the EU has dedicated legislation in place. The **AI Act**<sup>12</sup> establishes transparency obligations for providers and deployers of certain AI systems, including the duty to mark and enable detection when content has been artificially generated or manipulated, and an obligation of labelling regarding deep fakes and certain other AI-generated publications on public matters. The **Digital Services Act**<sup>13</sup> (DSA) also contributes to strengthening the integrity of the information space, regulating responsibilities and requiring providers of Very Large Online Platforms (VLOPs) and Very Large Online Search Engines (VLOSEs) to mitigate systemic risks to society and democracy stemming from their services, in full respect of users' freedom of expression. The DSA enhances algorithmic transparency, empowering users to control how recommender systems influence the content they see online and enabling researchers to access platforms' data. The DSA also grants the Commission the power to scrutinise the design of the algorithmic systems, with the support of the European Centre for Algorithmic Transparency (ECAT). The implementation and enforcement of this legislation are key priorities, and several procedures related to certain providers of VLOPs on the assessment and management of systemic risks to civic discourse and electoral processes are ongoing. More broadly, the Commission will continue to monitor and enforce obligations under the DSA and will engage with stakeholders to ensure that these obligations are upheld<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> FIMI is a pattern of behaviour that threatens or has the potential to negatively impact values, procedures and political processes. Such activity is manipulative in character, conducted in an intentional and coordinated manner. Actors of such activity can be state or non-state actors, including their proxies inside and outside of their own territory.

<sup>10</sup> The replies to the open public consultation carried out by the Commission to prepare the Democracy Shield show that respondents consider the inauthentic use of social media and FIMI as some of the most important risks to democracy. Also, a special Eurobarometer [reference: EB Special 568] from 2025 revealed that respondents consider FIMI and disinformation as a major challenge for democracy, alongside growing distrust in democratic institutions and processes. The same Eurobarometer survey shows that over seven in ten Europeans are concerned that voters' decisions are based on disinformation.

<sup>11</sup> Automated software programmes designed to perform repetitive tasks over a network, often imitating real users

<sup>12</sup> Regulation (EU) 2024/1689 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 June 2024 laying down harmonised rules on artificial intelligence, OJ L, 2024/1689, 12.7.2024. It will apply from 2 August 2026.

<sup>13</sup> Regulation (EU) 2022/2065 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 19 October 2022 on a Single Market for Digital Services, OJ L 277, 27.10.2022, pp. 1–102.

<sup>14</sup> According to Article 91(2) of the DSA, by 17 November 2027, and every five years thereafter, the Commission shall evaluate this Regulation, and report to the European Parliament, the Council and the European Economic and Social Committee.

To prevent and address major incidents and interference in the information environment, together with the European Board for Digital Services, the Commission will prepare a **DSA incidents and crisis protocol**<sup>15</sup>. This will facilitate coordination among relevant authorities and ensure swift reactions to large-scale and potentially transnational information operations. This protocol takes into account and will work alongside other crisis mechanisms in place, notably the Cybersecurity Blueprint<sup>16</sup>, to ensure that actions are coordinated and coherent, and by taking into account relevant EU legislation<sup>17</sup>. Exchanges among these mechanisms may be supported by the European Centre for Democratic Resilience and its stakeholder platform.

The **Code of Conduct on Disinformation**, supported by a collaborative Taskforce, provides a robust set of commitments and detailed measures that taken together help mitigate disinformation related risks, while fully upholding the freedom of expression, for instance through enhanced tools for users to recognise, understand and flag disinformation and to empower researchers. It is also useful for determining compliance with the obligations regarding **systemic risks related to disinformation** for the providers of VLOPs and VLOSEs that adhere to and comply with the commitments under this Code<sup>18</sup>. The Commission will assess the levels of commitment of individual signatories of the Code and their implementation. If necessary, the Commission will hold regulatory dialogues under the DSA with these signatories and decide about other appropriate follow-up actions. For example, the Commission will work with signatories to strengthen their efforts as regards the **transparency of recommender systems** and to **demonetise disinformation**<sup>19</sup>, including to remove financial incentives for disinformation via advertising revenues<sup>20</sup> and to develop relevant indicators to measure platforms' efforts in this regard<sup>21</sup>.

The Commission will also explore possible further measures with the Code's signatories. These could include ways to improve the detection and **labelling of AI-generated and manipulated content** circulating on social media services<sup>22</sup> and **voluntary user verification tools**<sup>23</sup>. Such measures would be complementary to the AI Act and other relevant EU rules. The **EU Digital Identity Wallets**, which will be available for EU citizens and residents by the end of 2026, could facilitate such measures and promote trust and security in online interactions by enabling secure identification and authentication<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> Article 48 of the DSA Regulation provides for a specific procedure for the establishment of such a protocol.

<sup>16</sup> Commission Delegated Regulation of 1.7.2025 C(2025) 4340 final and Article 40 DSA.

<sup>17</sup> Such as the NIS2 Directive, the Cybersecurity Act, the AI Act, the Regulation on political advertising and the Regulation on addressing the dissemination of terrorist content online.

<sup>18</sup> See Commission Opinion - Assessment of the Code of Practice on Disinformation, C(2025) 1008 final, <https://ec.europa.eu/newsroom/dae/redirection/document/112679>

<sup>19</sup> Building on Commitment 19 of the chapter on Empowering Users and Commitment 1 of the chapter Scrutiny of Ads Placement of the Code of Conduct on Disinformation.

<sup>20</sup> To those who consistently spread disinformation.

<sup>21</sup> Building on commitment 41 of the chapter Monitoring the Code of the Code of Conduct on Disinformation related to structural indicators.

<sup>22</sup> Building on Commitment 15 and Measure 15.1 of the Code of Conduct on Disinformation.

<sup>23</sup> Solutions could be explored notably to help users to verify if they interact with a real human being (e.g. through a verification icon).

<sup>24</sup> EU Digital Identity Wallets will provide a safe, reliable, and private means of digital identification for everyone in Europe. Every Member State will provide at least one wallet to all its citizens, residents, and businesses allowing them to prove who they are, and safely store, share and sign important digital documents.



Member States efforts to ensure the integrity of the information space can be strengthened at EU level through coordination of approaches and the pooling of expertise and information building on the existing **FIMI Toolbox**<sup>25</sup>. Working with national authorities and experts, the Commission will support the preparation of a **Blueprint for countering FIMI and Disinformation**, including tools and guidance on measures to anticipate, detect and respond, as well as a dedicated mechanism for professional exchanges and team working to support national capacity-building and mutual learning.

Strengthening the capacity of the independent fact-checking community across the EU is critical for boosting the detection and monitoring of FIMI and disinformation campaigns. An independent **European Network of Fact-Checkers**<sup>26</sup> will be set up with the Commission's support and its work will contribute to the Stakeholder Platform of the European Centre of Democratic Resilience. The Network will be based on the highest ethical and professional standards and operate in the EU and in candidate countries, potential candidates and neighbouring countries associated with the **Digital Europe Programme**. It will boost fact-checking capacity in all EU official languages, especially during situations such as elections, health emergencies or natural disasters where access to reliable information is critical. The network will also create and maintain an **independent repository for fact-checking** to consolidate fact-checks issued by independent, eligible and trusted organisations, and will facilitate access by journalists, online platforms, researchers and civil society to verified information, supporting cross-border collaboration and enabling timely reactions. It will also provide access to a **protection scheme for fact-checkers** in the EU against threats and harassment, including legal and psychological protection. In supporting fact-checkers to reach a broader audience, the network will make a substantial contribution to societal resilience<sup>27</sup>.

The **European Digital Media Observatory** (EDMO) provides a pan-European, independent and interdisciplinary network of research and analysis to counter FIMI and disinformation campaigns. Under an **extended mandate**<sup>28</sup>, EDMO will be able to develop new independent monitoring and analytical capabilities to support situational awareness in particular around elections or in situations of crises. Its monitoring will cover all Member States, candidate countries (e.g. Ukraine, Moldova)<sup>29</sup> and potential candidates and also feed in the work of the Stakeholder Platform under the European Centre of Democratic Resilience.

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<sup>25</sup> This toolbox provides a framework for action: [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/information-integrity-and-countering-foreign-information-manipulation-interference-fimi\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/information-integrity-and-countering-foreign-information-manipulation-interference-fimi_en).

<sup>26</sup> As announced in the Commission President's 2024-2029 Political Guidelines. A call for proposals was open from 15 April to 2 September 2025 <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/news/commission-launches-eu5-million-call-strengthen-european-fact-checking-network>.

<sup>27</sup> Preparatory Action call for projects increasing the reach and impact of professional content produced by independent fact-checking organisations in the EU <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/funding/boosting-visibility-fact-checking-content-europe>.

<sup>28</sup> A call for tenders for up to EUR 2.56 million was issued under the Digital Europe Programme (DEP) in July 2025. See: <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/funding/commission-launches-call-continuation-european-digital-media-observatory/>.

<sup>29</sup> A new EDMO hub, FACT, is being launched in 2025 to fight disinformation in Ukraine and Moldova with an EU grant worth EUR 1.29 million under DEP (as part of a broader call for proposals worth EUR 8.8 million). The project will run until 2027. See <https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/portal/screen/opportunities/projects-details/43152860/101226241> Link to the new EDMO tender: Commission launches call for the continuation of the European Digital Media Observatory | Shaping Europe's digital future.

The research and academic community has also developed relevant contributions, by providing independent analysis and evidence on FIMI and disinformation campaigns. The Commission will support setting up a **common research support framework** to provide access to data and advanced technology<sup>30</sup>, pooling and strengthening these independent capacities. This framework which will rely, among others on the privileged access to data under the DSA and the Regulation on Political Advertising<sup>31</sup>, will feed into the work of the Stakeholder Platform of the European Centre of Democratic Resilience. It will help deepen the understanding of how campaigns spread online and how they impact the integrity of the information space. It will support the development of tools to facilitate the detection of AI generated or manipulated audio, images and video to misrepresent facts or depict disinformation narratives (for instance deepfakes impersonating politicians). It will also help trace new forms of coordinated inauthentic behaviour, including by cross-platform coordination, the use of bots, or algorithmic amplification.

To anticipate and robustly respond to FIMI, it is important to make full use of **the FIMI toolbox**<sup>32</sup>. This toolbox includes a wide range of responses, including Union restrictive measures on non-EU individuals and entities which have engaged in FIMI campaigns targeting the EU, candidate countries and potential candidates. The scope of the EU sanctions' regime targeting Russia's destabilising activities includes the prohibition to broadcast Kremlin-backed propaganda outlets involved in FIMI. Further actions have been taken at both EU and national level to restrict the distribution of content from rogue non-EU media service providers presenting risks to public security including by suspending media licences. The European Media Freedom Act (EMFA)<sup>33</sup> allows for quick and efficient coordination of actions against such providers by EU media regulators, gathered in the European Board for Media Services. To further support these regulators, the European Board for Media Services will develop, in consultation with the Commission, **a list of common criteria to guide national media regulators** when they act to protect the EU information space from rogue non-EU media services.

FIMI and disinformation campaigns can also rely on behaviours or activities of a criminal nature, such as money laundering or organised crime. The EU criminal law acquis covers certain forms of FIMI and disinformation activities, and reinforced EU cooperation in this area can help counter them better. The planned **revision of the mandates of Europol and Eurojust will explore ways to further enhance this effort.**

In a context of geopolitical tensions and increased polarisation, it is important that the EU strengthens its efforts to build alliances with like-minded countries and regional partners. Supporting democratic actors and the integrity of information ecosystems worldwide, will benefit European democracy,

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<sup>30</sup> Such as access to shared cloud resources and software. This will complement ongoing initiatives increasing detection speed and analytical capacity of sophisticated malicious activities (e.g. coordinated inauthentic behaviours) often part of hybrid attacks.

<sup>31</sup> Regulation (EU) 2024/900 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 March 2024 on the transparency and targeting of political advertising (OJ L, 2024/900, 20.3.2024, ELI: <http://data.europa.eu/eli/reg/2024/900/oj>).

<sup>32</sup> [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/information-integrity-and-counterering-foreign-information-manipulation-interference-fimi\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/information-integrity-and-counterering-foreign-information-manipulation-interference-fimi_en).

<sup>33</sup> Regulation (EU) 2024/1083 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 April 2024 establishing a common framework for media services in the internal market and amending Directive 2010/13/EU (European Media Freedom Act) (OJ L, 2024/1083, 17.4.2024, ELI: <http://data.europa.eu/eli/reg/2024/1083/oj>).

security, and prosperity. The Commission will engage with third countries to support civic and digital education, trustworthy fact-checking initiatives, and regulatory initiatives aimed at reinforcing the integrity of the information space. The Team Europe Democracy Initiative contributes to increased knowledge-sharing and coordination on information integrity and assistance to journalists at risk outside the EU, working together with Member States, like-minded partners and civil society.

The EU will step up its efforts to counter FIMI in its external action, through the EEAS, in close collaboration with the Commission, the Member States and international partners. This will include building the capability of the EU's global presence, including the network of EU Delegations, Common Security and Defence Policy missions and Member States' diplomatic missions, scaling-up training and providing counter-FIMI instruments to staff on the ground. The EU will reinforce their cooperation with EU candidate countries and potential candidates, and partners to counter FIMI, with a particular focus on the EU neighbourhood, while advancing collective action with international partners, including the G7, NATO and in the context of the Security and Defence Partnerships. A more proactive approach to countering FIMI will be advanced, combining strategic communication activities with efforts aimed at disrupting the infrastructure which enable FIMI operations, including by stepping up efforts to deploy restrictive measures to raise the costs for perpetrators.

*Actions:*

- *In the framework of the Digital Services Act*
  - *Prepare a DSA incidents and crisis protocol*
  - *Continue its engagement with signatories of the Code of Conduct on Disinformation to strengthen measures to tackle manipulative techniques online*
- *Support the preparation of an EU Blueprint for countering FIMI and disinformation*
- *Set up a European Network of Fact-Checkers*
- *Extend the mandate of the European Digital Media Observatory*
- *Support setting up a common research support framework to strengthen monitoring of information manipulation and disinformation campaigns*
- *Development by the European Board for Media Services, in consultation with the Commission, of a list of common criteria for EU media regulators when they act against rogue non-EU media operators presenting risks to public security*
- *Reinforce capabilities of EU Delegations, CSDP missions and operations, EU Member State Embassies to counter FIMI*
- *Deploy proactive strategic communication campaigns in priority regions*
- *Provide targeted capacity building and support to EU candidate countries and potential candidates to reinforce resilience to FIMI and hybrid interferences, including through CSDP missions*
- *Leverage international partnerships for collective responses against FIMI, including through the G7 Rapid Response Mechanism, EU-NATO cooperation and Security and Defence Partnerships*

### **2.3. Stronger democratic institutions, free and fair elections and free and independent media**

Free and independent media, free and fair elections and strong and resilient democratic institutions and processes are essential to enable citizens to participate meaningfully in the political life, choose their representatives, hold them accountable and fully exercise their rights and freedoms. Recent elections, including in Romania and Moldova<sup>34</sup>, illustrated a broader escalation in interference from Russia and its proxies in the European democratic space.

### ***2.3.1. Strengthening the fairness and integrity of electoral and other democratic processes***

Elections that are universal, equal, free and based on secret and direct suffrage are part of Europe's common electoral traditions<sup>35</sup>. While the organisation and conduct of elections are the competence of the Member States, strengthened cooperation at EU level is needed to address common challenges in this field<sup>36</sup>. The Commission facilitates valuable exchanges and mutual support through the **European Cooperation Network on Election (ECNE)**, which brings together national authorities with responsibilities in electoral matters. For example, in June 2025, the Commission published a checklist on the integrity of elections and a risk-management matrix for elections, prepared with Member States in the framework of ECNE. The **joint mechanism for electoral resilience**, organised and coordinated through ECNE (in close cooperation with the Network and Information Systems (NIS) Cooperation Group and the RAS) supports the operational deployment of joint expert teams and expert exchanges, in particular in the area of online forensics, disinformation and cybersecurity of elections.

The Commission will intensify its support to Member States and stakeholders to enhance electoral integrity and preparedness, protect election-related infrastructure critical for the organisation and conduct of elections, minimise risks of foreign interference, strengthen election networks, electoral cooperation and reporting, and encourage the observation of elections by citizens and international organisations which endorse relevant international standards, which are all key aspects of the 2023 Recommendation.

To ensure free and fair elections, **election-related infrastructure** should be protected against cyber-attacks. The NIS2 Directive<sup>37</sup> and Cyber Resilience Act<sup>38</sup> strengthen the EU's cybersecurity by ensuring that both critical sectors and digital products are secure, resilient, and coordinated by design across the EU, which directly contributes to the security of electoral processes in the EU and the overall preparedness for cyber threats in the context of elections. For instance, the Compendium on Elections Cybersecurity and Resilience, updated in 2024<sup>39</sup>, was prepared by the NIS Cooperation

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<sup>34</sup> <https://www.presidency.ro/files/userfiles/Documente%20CSAT/Document%20CSAT%20SIE.pdf> and [https://www.sis.md/sites/default/files/comunicate/fisiere/Raport\\_SIS\\_Public\\_Interferenta\\_in\\_procesul\\_electoral.pdf](https://www.sis.md/sites/default/files/comunicate/fisiere/Raport_SIS_Public_Interferenta_in_procesul_electoral.pdf).

<sup>35</sup> See among others the EU Electoral Act, the 2023 Commission Recommendation on inclusive and resilient electoral processes in the EU, as well as the Code of good practice in electoral matters, European Commission for Democracy Through Law, Venice Commission, Opinion No. 190/2002, Strasbourg, 25.10.2018)

<sup>36</sup> There is a need to better protect electoral processes, including the election-related infrastructure, from attacks combining FIMI and disinformation campaigns and a range of other tools and tactics, such as cyberattacks, covert campaign financing, vote buying, attacks against political candidates, attempts to instigate social unrest or acts of violence and destabilisation.

<sup>37</sup> Directive (EU) 2022/2555 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 December 2022 on measures for a high common level of cybersecurity across the Union, OJ L 333, 27.12.2022, pp. 80–152.

<sup>38</sup> Regulation (EU) 2024/2847 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 October 2024 on horizontal cybersecurity requirements for products with digital elements, OJ L, 2024/2847, 20.11.2024.

<sup>39</sup> <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/news/new-cybersecurity-compendium-how-protect-integrity-elections-published>.

Group in coordination with the European Union Agency for Cybersecurity (ENISA) and ECNE. The Cybersecurity Reserve, established by the Cyber Solidarity Act<sup>40</sup>, is an effective tool at the disposal of Member States, as well as EU partners through external assistance, that can be used upon request to assist them in responding to significant or large-scale cybersecurity incidents.

The **Regulation on political advertising**, provides common EU standards that make it easier for citizens to recognise political ads, know if they are targeted by such ads, and distinguish them from other types of content. To prevent foreign interference, the Regulation bans the provision of ads to third country sponsors in the three months before an election or referendum in an EU country. The new rules help safeguard the integrity of electoral processes and support an open and transparent democratic debate<sup>41</sup>. Information on online political ads will be available from an online repository, including about who paid for them.

To further improve preparedness around elections and the resilience of electoral processes, cooperation with Member States will be reinforced under ECNE. ECNE's capabilities will be strengthened through more systematic exchanges to support the joint development of common tools and products in areas of common interest. New thematic settings will foster exchanges on topics such as election integrity and election-related risk management and preparedness, election observation in the EU, new ways of political campaigning including regarding financing, the safety of political candidates and elected representatives and the impact and role of Artificial Intelligence and other new technologies regarding electoral processes<sup>42</sup>. Based on exchanges in ECNE, the Commission will prepare a **repository of common references and standards for electoral processes**<sup>43</sup>. The Commission will promote the use of the **joint mechanism for electoral resilience**, encourage peer-to-peer exchanges, mutual voluntary assistance, common training and tabletop exercises. It will also **promote short-term exchanges of national experts** among Member States. As EU candidate countries and potential candidates are regularly targeted by electoral interference, they will be more closely and systematically associated to the work of ECNE, including through dedicated meetings. In addition, further engagement will be sought with international organisations developing reference frameworks and methodologies on elections, including elections observations, such as the OSCE and the Council of Europe.

Building on the EU legislative framework and policy tools<sup>44</sup>, the Commission will further work with Member States and stakeholders to prepare a dedicated **guidance on the fair, transparent, human-centred and responsible use of AI in electoral processes**. Based on this guidance, to be prepared with the support of ECNE and the European AI Office, the Commission will **encourage voluntary**

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<sup>40</sup> Regulation (EU) 2025/38 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 19 December 2024 laying down measures to strengthen solidarity and capacities in the Union to detect, prepare for and respond to cyber threats and incidents, OJ L, 2025/38, 15.1.2025

<sup>41</sup> The Guidelines issued by the Commission support the application of this Regulation and help all actors falling under its scope to understand and comply with their obligations. The Commission will establish a new stakeholder expert group to monitor and collect practical feedback on the implementation of the rules. Furthermore, the Commission will support the preparation of templates and other tools to facilitate the application of the Regulation.

<sup>42</sup> Within the framework of ECNE, the Commission will also organise exchanges on election polls.

<sup>43</sup> This will be based on relevant standards and include experience gained in the context of EU Election Observation Missions.

<sup>44</sup> Beyond the AI Act, this notably includes the Regulation on political advertising and the 2023 Commission's Recommendation on inclusive and resilient elections.

**commitments on the responsible use of new technologies** (notably AI) in political activities by European and national political parties and other relevant actors and further promote the sharing of best practices on these matters, complementing existing legal obligations.

**Online platforms and search engines** have become important venues for public debate and for shaping public opinion and voter behaviour. As such, providers of VLOPs and VLOSEs have an obligation under the DSA to put in place measures to mitigate risks related to negative effects on civic discourse and electoral processes<sup>45</sup>. To support compliance with these obligations, the Commission adopted **Guidelines on the mitigation of systemic risks for electoral processes**<sup>46</sup> and cooperates with national authorities of the Member States regarding their preparedness ahead of elections<sup>47</sup>. Together with the national Digital Services Coordinators, the Commission will **update the DSA Elections Toolkit**, in cooperation with ECNE, to take into account experience from recent elections and the need to cover particular phenomena<sup>48</sup>.

The **Code of Conduct on Disinformation** will continue to play a key role in addressing election-related threats through its voluntary multistakeholder approach, in particular through the **Rapid Response System** for elections which allows non-platform signatories such as civil society organisations to swiftly report time-sensitive content or accounts that they deem to present threats to the integrity of the electoral process to the online platforms, ensuring the latter can take appropriate actions in light of their respective policies. This should be further pursued and expanded, including to crisis situations<sup>49</sup>. New election-related work under the Code will focus on mapping and analysing novel and emerging threats linked to information manipulation campaigns, that are increasingly observed during the electoral periods. Signatories of the Code are encouraged to take this forward through their work within the Code's Taskforce, identifying best practices by distilling lessons learned from previous EU and national elections.

**Influencers** play an increasingly significant role in online political campaigns. Building on the EU Influencer Legal Hub, the Commission will support the setting up of a voluntary **network of influencers** to raise awareness about relevant EU rules<sup>50</sup>, including on their responsibilities when engaging in political campaigning and promote the exchange of best practice. The Commission will also encourage ethical standards and voluntary commitments, including regarding information integrity, and support work by influencers to promote digital literacy.

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<sup>45</sup> A wide range of phenomena involving online platforms and search engines give rise to a heightened risk to election integrity. These include, but are not limited to, the proliferation of illegal hate speech online, threats linked to FIMI as well as the wider phenomenon of disinformation, the spread of (violent) extremist content and content intending to radicalise people, as well as the spread of content generated through new technologies such as generative AI.

<sup>46</sup> Communication from the Commission on Guidelines for providers of VLOPs and VLOSEs on the mitigation of systemic risks for electoral processes C/2024/3014. Within the scope of the DSA, in particular building on the DSA Elections Toolkit for Digital Services Coordinators published by the European Board of Digital Services and the Commission in February 2025, election roundtables and stress tests organised by Member State's Digital Services Coordinators have proven useful in enhancing information exchange between stakeholders on election related issues, strengthen situational awareness and to test platforms' preparedness.

<sup>47</sup> By participating in roundtables with all actors concerned as well as by organising stress tests.

<sup>48</sup> For example, the exposure of EU citizens living abroad to FIMI and disinformation campaigns during electoral periods.

<sup>49</sup> Cooperation under the Code proved to be particularly useful in the context of crisis such as the Covid pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine as well as regarding elections.

<sup>50</sup> For example, the Regulation on political advertising, DSA, AI Act, EMFA, etc.

**Transparency and accountability of funding in politics**, including campaign financing, are key to prevent interference and critical to ensure a level playing field among political parties and candidates and to maintain citizens' trust in the integrity and fairness of elections. Building on relevant EU rules and standards<sup>51</sup> the Commission will support common work with the Member States on the **transparency and integrity of funding in politics**, looking at issues of common interest such as anonymous donations and cryptocurrency, which can be used to fund activities in ways that are not transparent and difficult to detect. The Commission will bring together national experts, notably under the umbrella of ECNE and in close cooperation with other EU networks and involving stakeholders<sup>52</sup>, to **exchange best practices, prepare possible guidelines and foster joint actions**.

Societal and technological developments, especially online, provide new opportunities for political parties and candidates to reach out to voters, but they also bring new challenges. The rapid change of the information landscape, tensions and polarisation have resulted in political candidates and elected representatives, being increasingly exposed to threats, attacks and violence, online and offline<sup>53</sup>. Women in politics are a particular target of such behaviours<sup>54</sup>, which can discourage them from running for office and in some cases drive them to resign from elected positions, which has a clear negative effect on democratic representation, whereas they continue to be underrepresented in politics<sup>55</sup>. To better ensure the **safety of political candidates and elected representatives**, the Commission will adopt a **Recommendation on safety in politics**<sup>56</sup>. The Commission will also work, within the framework of the ECNE and in close consultation with relevant stakeholders, on the preparation of a **dedicated guide of best practices** and support capacity-building, practical support, collection of data and voluntary commitments (e.g. pledges and codes of conduct) and ethical standards in this field. Particular attention will be paid across this workstream to women and other groups at heightened risk of discrimination, and to the situation of local politicians.

The threats to the integrity of electoral processes are complex and multifaceted, requiring preparedness and response across a broad spectrum of policies and actors. Moldova's recent experience demonstrates that FIMI can be resisted, and its impact reduced, and that preparedness, firm political commitment, effective coordination and EU's support can significantly enhance democratic resilience to hybrid threats.

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<sup>51</sup> This will notably rely on the work to support the application of the Regulation on political advertising, the Commission Recommendation (EU) 2023/2829 of 12 December 2023 on inclusive and resilient electoral processes in the Union and enhancing the European nature and efficient conduct of the elections to the European Parliament, the proposed Directive on combating corruption, EU anti-money laundering rules and other relevant EU rules (e.g. the revision of the Regulation on European political parties and European political foundations, agreed between the co-legislators in June 2025, provides for reinforced rules on the prohibition of indirect funding and donor transparency).

<sup>52</sup> Including expertise gathered during elections observation missions.

<sup>53</sup> Threats against journalists, media professionals and politicians figure prominently among the concerns respondents to the open public consultation that the Commission conducted to prepare the Democracy Shield had with regards to the risks for democracy in the EU.

<sup>54</sup> <https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/publications/combating-cyber-violence-against-women-and-girls-developing-eu-measurement-framework>.

<sup>55</sup> <https://cdn.table.media/assets/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/07145057/Gender-Equality-Report-Chapeau-Communication.pdf>.

<sup>56</sup> Among other, this will build on the 2023 Recommendation on inclusive and resilience electoral processes, other relevant EU rules and policies (e.g. on victim rights, violence against women, racism and xenophobia and personal data protection) as well as ongoing international initiatives supported by the EU

## Examples of threats and approach to response: the Moldova case study

In 2024 Moldova held presidential elections and a referendum on whether to enshrine its EU aspirations in the constitution, amid extensive Russian disinformation, interference and vote-buying. Its September 2025 parliamentary elections saw intense Russian hybrid threats including cyber-attacks, fake bomb alerts, FIMI and disinformation<sup>57</sup> including artificially amplifying certain candidates or parties' profiles, widespread use of AI generated content, fake media sites and vote buying<sup>58</sup>.

In the context of its EU accession process, Moldova reinforced its resilience through a comprehensive and holistic approach aimed at tackling FIMI and disinformation upstream. With assistance from the EU and other partners, Moldova bolstered its cyber and internal security, judicial integrity, the capacity of investigative authorities to detect illicit financial flows - including through cryptocurrencies, strategic communication capabilities and capacity to deliver services to the population even during crises (e.g. energy and the influx of individuals fleeing Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine) to help address fault-lines in national cohesion. The national Electoral Commission took decisive action regarding violations of party financing rules. A newly established StratCom Centre has coordinated implementation of multiparty strategic communication frameworks to strengthen societal resilience against FIMI based on complex analysis and foresight.

To support situational awareness and preparedness, a new regional hub of the European Digital Media Observatory focusing on Russian disinformation and covering Moldova and Ukraine was established<sup>59</sup>. The Commission also organised, together with the EU Delegation and the EU Partnership Mission (EUPM), a Disinformation and Cyber Threat Simulation to increase preparedness related to hybrid threats in Moldova<sup>60</sup> and facilitated a temporary escalation mechanism between four major online platforms signatories of the Code of Conduct on Disinformation and local civil society actors<sup>61</sup>.

Continuous efforts by the Moldovan national authorities, civil society and independent media, as well as support from the EU, including to election observation missions, played a crucial role in exposing interference, promoting media literacy, and countering disinformation through factual communication. This experience showed that main vulnerabilities occurred in the online space and

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<sup>57</sup> The main disinformation narratives during the election campaign aimed at polarising society, undermining trust in democracy, and obstructing the country's European path. They focused on claims of political oppression and corruption by the government, electoral fraud, loss of sovereignty, as well as fear-stoking of potential armed conflicts (EDMO hub report <https://brodhub.eu/en/republic-of-moldova/report-the-observation-mission-of-the-2025-parliamentary-elections-in-the-republic-of-moldova/> n of the 2025 Parliamentary Elections in the Republic of Moldova – BROD).

<sup>58</sup> See reports by FACT (EDMO hub covering MD): <https://fact-hub.eu/moldova/> and BROD (EDMO hub covering RO and BU): <https://brodhub.eu/en/republic-of-moldova/>.

<sup>59</sup> <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/news/new-european-digital-media-observatory-hub-fights-disinformation-ukraine-and-moldova>.

<sup>60</sup> On 11 June 2015, in cooperation with Moldova's Ministry for Economic Development and Digitalisation, the Delegation of the European Union to the Republic of Moldova and the European Union Partnership Mission in Moldova, <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/news/commission-services-and-moldovan-authorities-conduct-stress-test-potential-digital-hybrid-threats>.

<sup>61</sup> Building on the successful iteration of the temporary escalation mechanism during Moldova's 2024 elections and the experience of the Rapid Response of the Code.



that continued engagement by both national authorities and the EU is necessary to ensure digital accountability in support of democracy.

Enhancing electoral integrity is also a central priority in the EU external policy. It is a strategic imperative, as many of the challenges and attacks on European democracies and electoral processes are transnational by nature and can only be truly safeguarded if the EU is surrounded by resilient democracies. Recent elections in the neighbourhood highlighted the need to respond to national authorities' requests for assistance in countering disinformation on social media. The EU will strengthen its support to international election observation missions present on the ground.

Work under the European Centre for Democratic Resilience will contribute to reinforcing the fairness and integrity of electoral and other democratic processes. Cooperation and exchanges between the Centre and relevant EU-level structures and cooperation mechanisms in this area, will fully respect applicable legal frameworks, the independence or particularities of these structures and their participants, and existing procedures (e.g. ECNE, the network of national contact points on political advertising or the Digital Services Board).

*Actions:*

- *Support reinforced cooperation with Member States under the European Cooperation Network on Elections (ECNE) to enhance electoral integrity and preparedness*
- *Prepare guidance on the use of AI in electoral processes*
- *Update of the Digital Services Act Elections Toolkit*
- *Support the setting up of a voluntary EU network of influencers*
- *Support common work with the Member States on the transparency and integrity of funding in politics*
- *Prepare a Commission Recommendation and a dedicated guide of best practices on the safety of political candidates and elected representatives*
- *Reinforce cooperation with international election observers to strengthen capacities to monitor disinformation on social media during election observation outside the EU*

### **2.3.2. Strengthening the resilience of free and independent media**

Free, independent and plural media underpin the integrity and diversity of the information space, making them essential to our democracies. They hold power to account and by providing a plurality of reliable information sources, help people form their opinions and make informed choices<sup>62</sup>. Fostering media freedom and pluralism has also been at the heart of the work of the EU, through legislative initiatives such as the European Media Freedom Act (EMFA) or the anti-SLAPP Directive<sup>63</sup>. The EU is also a strong supporter of media freedom globally, including at multilateral

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<sup>62</sup> Respondents to the open public consultation conducted by the Commission to prepare the European Democracy Shield identified as a priority for democratic resilience to ensure pluralism of free and independent media and a safe environment for journalists.

<sup>63</sup> Directive (EU) 2024/1069 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 April 2024 on protecting persons who engage in public participation from manifestly unfounded claims or abusive court proceedings, OJ L, 2024/1069, 16.4.2024.

level, and recognises the essential role of independent media and journalism in upholding democratic values and fundamental rights worldwide.

But the media sector is under strong economic pressure in a context marked by digitalisation. These changes in the information environment affect how information is produced, shared, consumed and trusted. Citizens rely increasingly on online platforms and recently on generative AI to access information and form their opinions on a wide range of issues, including politics. Online platforms are becoming the main sources of information for young people<sup>64</sup>, especially via influencers<sup>65</sup>. The algorithms that online platforms use to sort content drive engagement, often by prioritising sensational or controversial content over reliable and substantiated information. This risks amplifying disinformation, societal divisions and challenges the visibility of media content. Independent media providers and news outlets are struggling to adapt their business models when it comes to advertising revenue<sup>66</sup>, a market increasingly dominated by online platforms.

This has made it harder to sustain independent news media and the availability of quality and investigative journalistic content, based on professional and ethical standards. In several regions, and many rural areas in particular, local news outlets have been driven out of the market, creating ‘news deserts’ resulting in a decline in the availability, plurality and quality of information<sup>67</sup>, which can lead to loss of engagement and trust in democracy and greater exposure to disinformation. In addition, attacks, abusive lawsuits and other forms of intimidation are damaging the environment in which journalists work, making the safety and protection of journalists an essential priority<sup>68</sup>.

The EU has been proactive in addressing challenges to media freedom and media pluralism, putting forward several legal, policy and funding tools. The EMFA provides a new set of common rules to protect media pluralism and independence in the EU, aiming to ensure that both public and private media can operate easily in the internal market, without undue pressure and taking into account the digital transformation. The Commission supports Member States in the application of the EMFA, including through guidelines, and will ensure its enforcement. The Commission will maintain an active dialogue with relevant industry players and civil society organisations to ensure that the safeguards and mechanisms provided by the EMFA are effectively applied across the EU.

To ensure that the providers of VLOPs and VLOSEs pay due regard to media freedom and pluralism, the DSA requires that they diligently identify and mitigate any systemic risks stemming from the design or functioning of their services, including as regards freedom and pluralism of the media. The

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<sup>64</sup> According to the Social Media Survey 2025, for youth aged between 15 and 24, the most used source for content on social and political current affairs is social media platforms (65%). Source: <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3592>.

<sup>65</sup> European Media Industry Outlook. See: <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/2025-european-media-industry-outlook-report>. The 2024 Reuters Institute Digital News Report shows that 57% of TikTok users and 53% of Instagram users declare that influencers are their primary source of news, ahead of journalists and print media (41% and 34% respectively).

<sup>66</sup> Insert latest market share stats from Eurostat.

<sup>67</sup> <https://cmpf.eui.eu/local-media-for-democracy-research-results/>.

<sup>68</sup> In its 2025 Rule of Law report the Commission found that increasing attention is given to the safety and protection of journalists, amidst continuing threats, with Member States setting up or continuing to operate support structures or strengthening the legal protection of journalists. [https://commission.europa.eu/publications/2025-rule-law-report-communication-and-country-chapters\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/publications/2025-rule-law-report-communication-and-country-chapters_en)

Commission will continue to monitor and enforce these obligations and will engage with relevant stakeholders to ensure that they are upheld in the digital sphere.

Safeguarding the free flow of information in our democracy needs vibrant and contestable markets for free and independent media. The Commission will continue to enforce EU **antitrust rules** in the digital sector to help promote a fair and diverse media landscape and combat practices that can undermine media pluralism, including by protecting independent media providers against anticompetitive behaviours in online advertising. In addition, protecting competition can also foster media plurality and diversity, not only in traditional media sectors but also in fast-moving sectors such as AI. In the **revised Merger Guidelines**<sup>69</sup>, the Commission will provide more guidance on how it preserves competition on quality and how this may foster media plurality and diversity, to the benefit of consumers and citizens. Under the **Digital Markets Act**<sup>70</sup>, the Commission will include amongst its priorities enforcement actions that promote an independent and diverse media landscape, including by increasing transparency of online advertising. Emerging challenges, such as the rollout of AI-powered services, is also having an impact on fair and contestable digital markets for media. The Commission is holding regulatory dialogues on these issues with the concerned gatekeepers. This is also part of the ongoing DMA review, which will report on the issues identified and potential future steps.

To further support the economic viability of the sector, in the context of the current evaluation and upcoming review of the **Audiovisual Media Services Directive**<sup>71</sup> (AVMSD), the Commission will assess ways to **strengthen the prominence of media services of general interest and modernise advertising rules with a view to foster the sustainability of EU media**. The **role of influencers** will also be considered in the review of the AVMSD<sup>72</sup> and in the forthcoming Digital Fairness Act, complementing existing EU rules.

**Public financing for public service broadcasting** aims to allow them to fulfil the democratic, social and cultural needs of society and to guarantee pluralism, including cultural and linguistic diversity. The EMFA requires Member States to put in place funding procedures guaranteeing that public service media providers have adequate, sustainable and predictable financial resources corresponding to the fulfilment of and the capacity to develop within their public service remit. The ongoing evaluation of the 2009 Broadcasting Communication<sup>73</sup> aims to assess whether the existing state aid

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<sup>69</sup> Guidelines on the assessment of horizontal mergers under the Council Regulation on the control of concentrations between undertakings, 2004/C 31/03 and Guidelines on the assessment of non-horizontal mergers under the Council Regulation on the control of concentrations between undertakings, 2008/C 265/07.

<sup>70</sup> Regulation (EU) 2022/1925 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 September 2022 on contestable and fair markets in the digital sector, OJ L 265, 12.10.2022, pp. 1–66.

<sup>71</sup> Directive (EU) 2018/1808 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 November 2018 amending Directive 2010/13/EU on the coordination of certain provisions laid down by law, regulation or administrative action in Member States concerning the provision of audiovisual media services (Audiovisual Media Services Directive) in view of changing market realities, *OJ L 303*, 28.11.2018, pp. 69–92.

<sup>72</sup> In the review of the audiovisual media rules, the Commission will focus on ways to ensure a fairer media ecosystem, where viewers – particularly younger ones – are adequately protected when they consume audiovisual content online, including content made available by influencers.

<sup>73</sup> European Commission, Communication on the application of State aid rules to public service broadcasting, 2009/C 257/01 on which the Commission launched a public consultation in October 2025 seeking input from public authorities, businesses, and citizens.

rules for public service broadcasting are still fit for purpose in light of market developments - from new technologies to new ways of watching and new players in the sector.

The development of generative AI, while bringing opportunities, presents various challenges to the media ecosystem. Online piracy and the use of copyrighted material to train AI models without permission remains a significant threat to the media sector, eroding revenues and impacting on quality and diversity of media. The Commission will **review the Directive on copyright in the Digital Single Market**<sup>74</sup> and consider how to improve its effectiveness in the context of these developments.

The Commission will also deploy its financial tools to support the economic resilience of the media sector in the EU and beyond. The **Media Resilience Programme** will bridge current support to the media with funding programmes proposed in the new Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF)<sup>75</sup>, preparing the ground for the successful deployment of the next MFF. This Programme will support independent journalism and media literacy, underlining the Commission's efforts to strengthen sustainable news media sector, including local journalism, also in EU candidate countries and potential candidates. The Commission will ramp up the support provided to local media through **Creative Europe**, by fostering projects focusing on the viability of independent and local journalism<sup>76</sup>. Creative Europe will also expand its existing calls for proposals on skills in 2027, by adding a new action on upskilling news media professionals. A new action under **Horizon Europe** will further support the digital transformation of the media industry by, inter alia, designing new innovative tools for media to reach new users and revenue sources.

**Private investment in the media** remains relatively low and requires new tailor-made investment solutions, focusing on long-term returns on investment. **Private equity** should be enabled to support quality independent media. The Commission will promote impact investments in the news media sector and start engaging with potential investors alongside the EIB Group.

The Commission has committed, as part of its support to the uptake of AI in the cultural and creative sectors, to help the development of **pan-European platforms** to make available real-time news and information from professional media outlets to wider audiences across the EU, in multiple languages<sup>77</sup>. The Commission will also step up its support to innovative media projects providing new formats and content to audiences across the Union and beyond<sup>78</sup>. In addition, the Commission will explore future pathways for the EU's tech environment, with an initial focus on future social networking/social media platforms, supporting EU **digital sovereignty**.

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<sup>74</sup> Directive (EU) 2019/790 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 April 2019 on copyright and related rights in the Digital Single Market, OJ L 130, 17.5.2019, pp. 92–125.

<sup>75</sup> Notably the proposed AgoraEU programme.

<sup>76</sup> The Commission also supports independent local journalism and contributes to the training of aspiring journalists through measures focusing on specific topics, such as under EU cohesion policy. Its locally oriented information measures and capacity-building actions help tackle the 'news deserts'.

<sup>77</sup> AI strategy COM(2025) 723 final.

<sup>78</sup> Actions supporting the news media sectors are available at: <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/news-initiative>. Noteworthy cooperation initiatives have also been launched at the initiative of Member States. New examples of such cross-border initiatives include ARTE+ and the "informational shield" project launched by Deutsche Welle and France Médias Monde.

Ensuring the **safety and protection of journalists** remains a key priority, including in the EU external action<sup>79</sup>. To intensify its efforts to protect journalists against undue pressure, threats and attacks, the Commission will update its **Recommendation on the safety of journalists**<sup>80</sup> to support a stronger safety and enabling environment for journalists and for quality news reporting (primary source journalism) in society and will organise a **high-level event on combating SLAPPs** to support the review of its anti-SLAPP Recommendation<sup>81</sup>. In addition, to promote safe harbours for journalists, researchers and civil society organisations active in analysing the information environment and its evolutions (e.g. the impact of AI), the Commission will adopt guidelines to support the implementation of relevant EU rules<sup>82</sup>.

To contribute to the overall goal of supporting media freedom and pluralism, the Commission will also continue to fund mechanisms to monitor press freedom in EU Member States and candidate countries<sup>83</sup>.

The Commission is also supporting quality independent media and journalism internationally, in particular in the EU neighbourhood and EU candidate countries and potential candidates. Core funding to sustain independent media operations is an effective and efficient means in countering authoritarian regimes' disinformation operations both domestically and abroad. Independent, high quality investigative and entertainment formats help prevent FIMI narratives from taking hold and can limit dissemination into the EU and EU partner countries<sup>84</sup>. Furthermore, the European Endowment for Democracy and the Commission's ProtectDefenders.eu mechanism offer support to journalists at risk as human rights defenders from outside the EU. In 2024, at least 943 media workers were supported through the latter mechanism. The Commission will continue to provide core support to exiled independent journalists and media outlets, including from Russia and Belarus and other countries, who are working from within the EU and its neighbourhood, as well as helping to sustain high quality independent media outlets in key partner countries. The Commission will scale up the rapid response work with trusted partners to ensure that digital censorship circumvention, anti-surveillance and anti-shut down solutions are made available to citizens, civil society actors and journalists under authoritarian regimes. The Commission has also proposed to prioritise support to media freedom under the new MFF Global Europe.

*Actions:*

- *Review the Audiovisual Media Services Directive*

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<sup>79</sup> Support to independent and pluralistic media, access to information and the fight against disinformation, as well as safety of journalists and media workers online and offline are key priorities under the EU Action plan for Human Rights and Democracy, and includes actions such as EU's Human rights defenders mechanism: ProtectDefenders.eu and EU support to the European Endowment for Democracy (EED) who supports democracy actors, including independent media platforms and journalists . <https://democracyendowment.eu/>.

<sup>80</sup> Commission Recommendation (EU) 2021/1534 of 16 September 2021 on ensuring the protection, safety and empowerment of journalists and other media professionals in the European Union, C/2021/6650.

<sup>81</sup> The Commission will also renew the mandate and composition of the expert group against SLAPPs to foster support for victims and review EU private international law rules to assess the possible need to include SLAPP-relevant aspects.

<sup>82</sup> Such as the DSA, the Regulation on political advertising or the AI Act.

<sup>83</sup> See for instance projects in receipt of funding from the Creative Europe programme such as Media Freedom Rapid Response.

<sup>84</sup> EU core support to independent media, delivered via the European Endowment for Democracy has reached an audience of at least 36 million via social media channels, in Russia alone. Since 2022, the EU supported outlets have increased their audience by at least 15 to 20 %.

- *Address challenges to the media ecosystem in the context of the review of the Directive on copyright in the Digital Single Market*
- *Provide guidance to maintain competition and foster media plurality and diversity in the context of the revision of the Merger Guidelines*
- *Assess the fitness of existing State aid rules for public services broadcasting in the evaluation of the 2009 Broadcasting Communication*
- *Launch a Media Resilience Programme to support independent journalism and media literacy*
- *Reinforce measures on the safety of journalists and combating abusive litigation (SLAPP)*
- *Support quality independent media and journalism beyond EU borders*

## 2.4. Boosting societal resilience and citizens engagement

Engaged and empowered citizens and an active civil society are the backbone of democracy. Promoting citizenship education, including media, digital literacy and critical thinking strengthens awareness of risks and threats and empowers citizens of all ages across all communities to navigate the information environment, access reliable information, exercise their democratic rights and engage in democratic processes. Promoting citizens' engagement in the democratic life, through support to participatory and deliberative tools, is also needed to reinforce ownership, empowerment and public trust. These are key for building overall societal resilience.

### 2.4.1. Citizenship education and skills for democracy

Citizenship skills, including media and digital literacy are critical for democracy. A broad range of projects support such skills under various EU programmes, for example Erasmus+ and the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) and Horizon Europe.

#### *Measures in education*

Schools and educational institutions play a key role in developing citizenship skills to enable people to act responsibly, by fostering critical thinking, inclusivity, freedom of speech and active civic engagement. By nurturing these skills, educational entities at all levels empower informed and engaged citizens, thereby building more resilient democratic societies.

As part of the Union of Skills, the **Action Plan on Basic Skills** considers both citizenship skills, and digital skills as basic skills that are fundamental to enable citizens to thrive, both in their professional and personal lives. The 2026 **Education package** will include a **Basic Skills Support Scheme for schools** to support children and young people to acquire literacy, mathematics, science, digital and citizenship skills. As part of this package, the Commission will present a 2030 Roadmap on the future of digital education and skills, building on the review of the Digital Education Action Plan, focusing on digital skills, AI literacy and critical thinking and boosting democratic resilience in the digital world.

The Commission will provide recommendations for school leaders and policymakers. This will include updated **Guidelines for teachers and educators on tackling disinformation and**

**promoting digital literacy** through education and training<sup>85</sup>, to strengthen the pedagogical expertise of teachers and the critical thinking skills of young people, to promote the responsible use of digital technologies and to support informed choices online. These will cover developments such as generative AI, information manipulation<sup>86</sup> and the role of social media and influencers. The Commission is also developing guidelines to support the acquisition of basic skills on preparedness, including relevant elements of media literacy, as a key for active and informed citizenship and fighting disinformation and information manipulation. The Commission will develop an **EU citizenship competence framework**<sup>87</sup>, along with the **guidelines to strengthen citizenship education in schools**. This will inform the development of curricula and training programmes.

### *Media literacy actions beyond education*

Complementary to measures in the field of education, actions in support of media literacy including digital literacy across the EU need to be scaled up inclusively and efficiently, to reach people of all ages and socioeconomic background, especially people beyond education and training settings.

The Commission will roll out a **package of measures on media literacy**. The **Media Resilience Programme** will include new actions to support media literacy reaching all age categories (youth, adults, seniors), across rural and urban areas. It will address new and existing challenges of information integrity, linking media literacy to preparedness and focusing on new trends in terms of media consumption<sup>88</sup>. Potential actions to improve existing mechanisms under the Audiovisual Media Services Directive on media literacy will also be part of the evaluation and review of these rules. Priority will be placed on supporting Member States that face particular challenges and needs, as well as candidate countries and potential candidates<sup>89</sup> and groups facing barriers in engaging in democratic life<sup>90</sup>.

The Commission will support Member States in developing, extending or implementing **national or regional action plans on media literacy**<sup>91</sup>.

The Commission will also **reinforce the media literacy community**, to increase coordination and strengthen links between actors involved. This will include strengthening the Commission's **Media Literacy Expert Group** (MLEG) of Member States authorities, by fostering exchanges of best practices, offering new cooperation tools and expanding its mandate to cover aspects of societal resilience and preparedness. To complement the efforts of MLEG, the Commission will also establish

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<sup>85</sup> European Commission: Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, Guidelines for teachers and educators on tackling disinformation and promoting digital literacy through education and training, Publications Office of the European Union, 2022, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/28248>.

<sup>86</sup> Including the possible differentiated targeting of boys and girls.

<sup>87</sup> Taking into account among others EU citizenship rights as explained in the Guide to EU Citizenship: [https://commission.europa.eu/publications/guide-eu-citizenship\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/publications/guide-eu-citizenship_en) and the upcoming EU democracy guide for citizens.

<sup>88</sup> Actions to improve the AVMSD mechanism on media literacy will also be part of its evaluation and review.

<sup>89</sup> Which are particularly exposed to FIMI and disinformation due to their proximity with Russia and Belarus.

<sup>90</sup> The latter could be based on existing indicators such as the Media Pluralism Index which contains a sub-indicator on the level of media literacy.

<sup>91</sup> The EU Preparedness Union Strategy called to step up work on digital and media literacy, including in the context of the European Democracy Shield and 2030 Roadmap on the future of digital education and skills to enhance critical thinking and build resilience against disinformation and cyber threats from an early age. Several Member States have national programmes to achieve these objectives. For example, LU adopted a national action plan for digital inclusion in 2021 and MT has a digital education strategy for 2025-2030.

a new **independent expert network for media literacy**, bringing together independent experts from various fields (e.g. preparedness, FIMI and disinformation, data analysis, information integrity risks, behavioural sciences, etc.) to provide independent inputs and insights to meet new challenges. Media literacy efforts will also build on the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO) media literacy community, further growing the repository of best practices and use cases based on the EDMO Guidelines for Effective Media Literacy Initiatives<sup>92</sup> and by scaling-up success stories developed and deployed by **EDMO regional/national hubs**, for instance for outreach to vulnerable and rural communities and to seniors or collaboration with the media.

The Commission will present an **EU democracy guide for citizens**, to promote citizens' awareness of their democratic rights under EU law and policy frameworks and how to exercise them<sup>93</sup>. Particular emphasis will be put on young people.

To involve citizens in framing these measures on democracy, citizenship and media and digital literacy skills the Commission will organise a **European Citizens' Panel on democratic resilience**.

*Actions:*

- *Develop the 2026 Basic Skills Support Scheme for Schools, including citizenship and digital skills*
- *Update the Guidelines for teachers and educators on disinformation and digital literacy*
- *Develop an EU citizenship competence framework along with guidelines to strengthen citizenship education in schools*
- *Support Member States in developing, extending or implementing national or regional action plans on media literacy*
- *Roll out measures on media literacy, with new priorities and a reinforced media literacy community*
- *Prepare an EU democracy guide for citizens*
- *Organise a European Citizens' Panel on democratic resilience*

#### **2.4.2. Promoting citizens' engagement and participation**

New and meaningful methods of citizen participation, deliberation and engagement, across all generations<sup>94</sup>, provide additional ways for citizens to get involved in democratic debates and in public policymaking, enriching deliberations with diverse perspectives – as demonstrated by the Conference on the Future of Europe - and reinforcing representative democracy based on elections.

At EU level, the Commission uses several tools to involve EU citizens in its policymaking, starting with the European Citizens' Initiatives, a unique agenda-setting tool allowing citizens to put forward their ideas for EU action. The **European Citizens' Panels** and the **Citizens' Engagement Platform**, have become important assets to inform and support policymaking, build democratic resilience and foster European citizenship and their use at EU level and in the Member States will be encouraged.

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<sup>92</sup> See: <https://edmo.eu/areas-of-activities/media-literacy/raising-standards-the-edmo-guidelines/>.

<sup>93</sup> Focusing on rights under the Digital Services Act, the AI Act, the Audiovisual Media Services Directive, the Regulation on political advertising, EU electoral rights and other relevant frameworks.

<sup>94</sup> These include intergenerational citizens' panels, citizens' assemblies, participatory budgeting, participatory planning or new digital civic tech tools and platforms, complementing practices such as public consultations or surveys.



The Commission will explore possibilities to open its Citizens Engagement Platform or to enable its interoperability with national, regional and local public administrations.

The Commission will work closely with relevant bodies and entities, such as the European Committee of the Regions, the European Economic and Social Committee and stakeholders<sup>95</sup> to reinforce a **network of national authorities on citizens' participation**, with national focal points, building in particular on the Commission's virtual Competence Centre on Participatory and Deliberative Democracy<sup>96</sup>. The work of this network will focus on the local level, youth empowerment and intergenerational dialogue, providing practical support and promoting relevant tools to national authorities. Within this framework, the Commission will support the preparation of a **training package** for Member States on citizens' participation in all EU official languages.

The Commission will ensure wider access to information about citizens' participation through a **multilingual portal** for resources at EU level, to disseminate tools and information on democratic participation more widely, for use at all levels across the EU, including public administrations, stakeholders and citizens, centralising information gathered through the network of national authorities on citizen's participation and under the Competence Centre on Participatory and Deliberative Democracy.

Innovative digital tools should be promoted to complement and support personal exchanges. The Commission will stimulate innovation in online platforms that enable participation in democracy (civic tech<sup>97</sup>), including local digital platforms supporting democratic engagement, leveraging AI for participatory purposes. To launch engagement with the civic tech sector, the Commission will organise a **civic tech hackathon** to showcase innovative projects and will set up a European **civic tech hub**<sup>98</sup>, which will provide a comprehensive, multilingual focal point for information, resources and tools on the civic tech.<sup>99</sup> The Commission will support pilot projects in this area under relevant EU funding programmes, involving local authorities, communities and tech start-ups to develop scalable solutions, also in rural areas<sup>100</sup>. Across these work-strands, particular attention will be paid to the accessibility and interoperability of civic tech tools.

**Youth participation** and consultation at all levels ensures that policies and decisions consider the perspectives and needs of the younger generation, who will live with their long-term consequences. Engaging young people, in an inclusive manner, also fosters a sense of civic responsibility, encouraging lifelong participation in society and democracy. Young people play a central role in the

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<sup>95</sup> The EU Strategy for Civil Society will propose measures to work with Member States to strengthen the engagement of civil society organisations, also following up to the 2023 Recommendation when it comes to these actors, whereas actions under the Democracy Shield focus on citizens' participation.

<sup>96</sup> This Centre supports participatory and deliberative projects at EU level and involving candidate countries and potential candidates, with a variety of resources, trainings, in-person events, citizens' labs and a community of practice with multidisciplinary expertise from across the EU.

<sup>97</sup> Civic tech can be defined as the use of digital technologies to reinforce democracy by enabling the public to be informed, participate in decision- and policymaking, and increase governments' responsiveness and accountability (see OECD Public Governance Policy Papers No. 72 of 2025).

<sup>98</sup> It will be connected to the Interoperable Europe Portal, which was established through Regulation 2024/903 and gives access to interoperability solutions and open-source solutions used by public administrations in Europe. It already hosts examples of open-source tools for citizen participation.

<sup>99</sup> As such, it will support the visibility of civic tech tools and the share sharing of expertise and knowledge across the civic tech ecosystem, and foster awareness of this sector among national and local authorities.

<sup>100</sup> Building on the European Interoperability Framework, an assessment model will be created to evaluate the maturity level of interoperability of civic tech platforms and help online platforms identify areas for improvement.

Commission's efforts to involve citizens in its policymaking, including through the President's Youth Advisory Board. **Youth Policy Dialogues** between Commissioners and young people will be organised **on the implementation of the European Democracy Shield**. The **EU Youth Dialogue Participation Toolkit**, created with national youth councils, **will be adapted** to reach more young people and will be promoted via the European Youth Portal to boost youth engagement more broadly. The **Voices of the Future initiative** will aim to create a European Forum for Intergenerational Fairness in Democracy, as an inclusive space where people of all ages can meet to shape Europe's long-term choices.

*Actions:*

- *Promote citizens' and youth participation, including by reinforcing a network of national authorities on citizens participation, with a training package and a multilingual portal for resources at EU level*
- *Set up a European civic tech hub to support the civic tech sector*

### **2.4.3. Strengthening democracy through whole-of-society actions**

To further strengthen democracy, it is necessary to provide sustained support to engaged actors and communities, recognise and amplify their initiatives, and showcase best practices that demonstrate innovative approaches. Particular focus is necessary on regions affected by low civic and political engagement.

To address growing challenges such as social fragmentation, digital isolation, and declining trust in public institutions, the Commission will foster community-building approaches. Together with local authorities and networks across the EU – including the **EU Network of Local Councillors** – the Commission will encourage and support grassroots initiatives that bring together people of different ages and backgrounds and strengthen local connections and inclusive public spaces, including through sports, music, storytelling and collaboration.

Local democracy, inclusion and participatory approaches are among the core values and principles of the New European Bauhaus. It will support local democracy through concrete initiatives that promote innovative approaches to community engagement at the level of neighbourhoods. This includes strengthening community participation and intergenerational connections, as well as advancing collaborative approaches for inclusive public spaces and neighbourhoods.

The Commission's EUROPE DIRECT centres will act as local micro-hubs of democracy – open, lived-in spaces where communities meet, exchange and act together, supporting inclusive dialogue rooted in their everyday realities. In partnership with local authorities, they can host activities that turn discussion into shared experience – from community evenings to neighbourhood skill-shares or local podcasts<sup>101</sup>.

To encourage more exchanges and synergies between stakeholders active on democratic innovation, the sharing of best practices, and the visibility of their projects the Commission will organise a **High-Level Event** on democracy and grant an **annual award for democratic innovation**<sup>102</sup>. Showcasing

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<sup>101</sup> The Citizens' Engagement Ambassadors, alumni of the European Citizens' Panels, could share their experience and help promote citizen participation.

<sup>102</sup> Which could be open to concrete projects in EU candidate countries and potential candidates.

democracy-related projects increases their visibility to private donors and philanthropic organisations which are encouraged to play an increasing role.

The Commission will roll out dedicated **awareness-raising campaigns** to articulate why democracy matters and how all citizens, including young people, can exercise their democratic rights and make their voices heard<sup>103</sup>.

The **private sector** also has a role to play in promoting and upholding democracy, which is fundamental to a fair and well-functioning business environment and economic prosperity. In turn, a prosperous economy is essential for democracy to thrive. The Commission will encourage private companies and business associations to share best practices, undertake voluntary commitments in this area and to build a **business coalition for democracy**<sup>104</sup>.

*Actions:*

- *Organise a High-Level Event on democracy and an annual award for democratic innovation*
- *Roll out dedicated awareness-raising campaigns by the Commission*
- *Support building voluntary commitments of the private sector to build a business coalition for democracy*

#### **2.4.4. Safeguarding evidence-based decision making**

Evidence-informed policymaking ensures that institutions, debates and decision-making are rooted in factual, transparent and accountable processes and impartial data based on freedom of scientific research, fostering trust and legitimacy in governance. To guarantee effective and democratic scientific advisory processes and scientific support to public policies, it is necessary to promote adherence to the highest research ethics and integrity standards. It is also essential to enable the involvement and trust of citizens in science and to ensure robust and independent advisory systems. In this view, the Commission will adopt a **Recommendation on supporting scientific evidence and its use in public policymaking**.

Freedom of scientific research is a crucial part of academic freedom and is essential for generating trustworthy knowledge and reliable data. By protecting researchers' and academics' independence to explore, question, and innovate, they ensure that evidence used in policymaking is credible and unbiased. These values are also a prerequisite for higher education institutions to achieve their academic and societal mission, nurturing and promoting public discourses by offering expertise and evidence, and essential to democratic resilience. The forthcoming **European Research Area Act** will reaffirm the freedom of scientific research in EU law, as an essential part of academic values. Freedom of arts, and protecting artists and cultural institutions, as addressed in the Culture Compass for Europe, is also an important component of the democratic fabric and resilience.

Building on the 2024 Council Recommendation on Enhancing Research Security<sup>105</sup>, the Commission is also assessing the options for the setup of a **European Centre of Expertise on Research Security**

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<sup>103</sup> The Citizens' Engagement Ambassadors, alumni of the European Citizens' Panels, could share their experience and help promote citizen participation.

<sup>104</sup> Supported by a starting workshop and by a study on options for business community contributions.

<sup>105</sup> Council Recommendation of 23 May 2024 on enhancing research security, C/2024/3510.

to strengthen the evidence base for research security policymaking and foster a cross-EU community of practice.

More broadly, the European Centre for Democratic Resilience could also facilitate **exchanges of experience on democratic resilience building**, such as **best practices for community building**, **media literacy** initiatives and **preparedness** actions.

*Actions:*

- *Adopt a Commission Recommendation on supporting scientific evidence and its use in public policymaking*
- *Enshrine the freedom of scientific research in EU law under the European Research Area Act*
- *Assess options for the set-up of a European Centre of Expertise on Research Security*

### **3. Investing in democracy is investing in our future**

Financial support is key to achieving the priorities of the European Democracy Shield in the immediate and long term. Several EU funding programmes are relevant in this regard. **Creative Europe** provides funding to support the media, journalism and digital and media literacy. **Digital Europe** supports multidisciplinary collaborations to counter disinformation via its funding of EDMO, including its regional hubs, and the European Network of Fact-Checkers. **Horizon Europe** supports research, innovation and experimentation to strengthen democracy and governance and develop democratic innovation. The **Citizens Equality, Rights and Values (CERV)** programme protects and promotes Union values and promotes citizens' engagement and citizens' participation in the democratic life of the Union.

The rapid response pillar under Neighbourhood and Development and International Cooperation Instrument supports independent journalism and builds countering FIMI capacities in crisis situations. Other programmes, such as the **Justice programme** and **Erasmus+**, strengthen democracy by achieving their main objectives. The facilities for Ukraine, the Western Balkans and Moldova allow to disburse funding based on the fulfilment of structural reforms, aiming to strengthen democracy, with support to civil society organisations, independent media, media literacy and resilience against FIMI and hybrid threats. The Commission will consider with priority democracy-related aspects when programming these funds for the remaining time under the current Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF). Innovative funding should be considered, such as micro-grants for local initiatives, financial instruments such as guarantees, loans and equity, and encouraging and streamlining crowdfunding.

Private funding should be incentivised. For instance, private equity funding can already be used for de-risking creative projects in the audiovisual sector by funding development and distribution of films, media content or cultural initiatives. Such de-risking could be applied to future projects supporting independent media and journalism. Fundraising events could stimulate philanthropic contributions and collaborations with private foundations to strengthen the financial support for the European Democracy Shield.

As part of the next **MFF for 2028-2034**, the Commission has proposed a number of programmes to contribute to the objectives of the European Democracy Shield. The proposed funding would cover support across a broad spectrum of priorities and actors, including free and independent media, the

work of civil society organisations, education and overall democratic resilience. In particular, **AgoraEU** is intended to promote shared values, including democracy, and to support the European cultural diversity, its audiovisual and creative sectors, media freedom as well as the involvement of civil society. The new **MEDIA+** strand under **AgoraEU** would provide holistic support to free and independent journalism and news media, protect and promote media freedom; enhance the financial viability of the media, support media literacy and the detection and countering of disinformation. The **CERV+** stand of **AgoraEU** intends to support the implementation of the Democracy Shield by fostering free, fair and inclusive electoral processes and by strengthening citizens' participation and engagement in the democratic and civic life of the Union. Other important support actions would be funded through **the Justice Programme**<sup>106</sup>, **Horizon Europe**<sup>107</sup>, **Erasmus+**<sup>108</sup>, **the European Competitiveness Fund**<sup>109</sup>, **the Global Europe Instrument**<sup>110</sup> and **the National and Regional Partnership Plans**<sup>111</sup>.

Democratic resilience and defence reinforce each other. **Defence spending** could also be regarded as a means to support democratic resilience, for instance by investing in cybersecurity, prevention against hybrid threats or protection of critical infrastructure and democratic institutions from external interference. EU defence resilience and actions on countering hybrid threats reinforce democratic resilience, including through strengthening Europe's technological excellence in cyber defence and the development of cutting-edge technologies. EU financial support under the **European Defence Fund**, **Horizon Europe**, **Digital Europe**, the **SAFE instrument** (Security Action for Europe) and in the future MFF under the proposed **European Defence Industry Programme** is essential in this regard.

## 4. Conclusions

This Communication on the European Democracy Shield provides a strategic approach to safeguard, strengthen and promote democracy in the EU in the long run. It highlights the Commission's strong

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<sup>106</sup> The proposed next Justice programme aims to strengthen democracy by promoting and supporting training for the judiciary and judicial staff with a view to promoting democracy and ensuring the consistent and effective implementation of relevant EU legal instruments.

<sup>107</sup> The next Horizon Europe programme proposed by the Commission will continue to support research aiming to strengthen democracy and democratic values, by promoting civic engagement, fostering resilient, pluralistic societies and the integrity of the information space and of the media landscape and countering disinformation.

<sup>108</sup> The next Erasmus+ programme proposed by the Commission would put particular emphasis on supporting citizenship education and civic engagement, EU values, societal resilience and media literacy, in full respect of the competence of the Member States in defining schools and academic curricula and the organisation of their education structures, including through non-formal and informal learning activities supporting youth participation and young people's learning how to participate in democracy.

<sup>109</sup> The proposed European Competitiveness Fund would support the civil security industry in areas such as the fight against hybrid threats.

<sup>110</sup> In the enlargement and neighbourhood east regions, the proposed Global Europe instrument will provide tools to promote democracy, good governance, the rule of law and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. In addition, Global Europe will support candidate countries and potential candidates' progress towards EU standards in line with a 'fundamentals first' to enlargement. In this context, particular attention will also be given to strengthening independent media and media literacy, as well as to enhancing resilience against foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) and hybrid threats.

<sup>111</sup> National and regional partnership plans, implemented in respect of the principles of multi-level governance and partnership, can support Member States' capabilities in countering serious and organised crime, notably linked to hybrid threats such as FIMI, and measures that strengthen democratic governance for instance by improving transparency, fostering civic dialogue, supporting civil society and strengthening rule of law.

commitment to enhancing democratic resilience across the Union and its readiness to work together with other EU institutions and bodies, the EU Member States, partners from the EU neighbourhood, relevant stakeholders, as well as citizens, to address the challenges that democracy is facing.

Under this strategic approach, a series of actions are announced, that will be gradually rolled out by 2027. Member States will play a key role to achieve these objectives, and the Commission will pursue its efforts to ensure joint ownership.

To ensure the political follow-up regarding the implementation of this Communication, the Commission will regularly update the European Parliament and the Council. The Commission will organise an annual high-level Ministerial Forum to take stock of the actions rolled out under the European Democracy Shield and facilitate the sharing of best practices, through the engagement of both institutional and non-institutional actors. The Commission will also engage with interlocutors and stakeholders at national and local levels. By the end of the mandate, the Commission will take stock of the implementation and impact of the actions included in this Communication.

The European Democracy Shield is an integral element of the proactive approach the Commission takes to defend and uphold EU values. The Commission has taken strong actions to safeguard and promote the rule of law and fundamental rights in the EU, notably through the annual **Rule of Law Report** and the annual reports on the application of the **EU Charter of Fundamental Rights**. Protecting and promoting human rights and democracy is also a key priority of the EU's external actions, as highlighted in the **Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020-2027**. The **EU Strategy for Civil Society**<sup>112</sup> complements these efforts by promoting a stronger engagement with civil society organisations and fostering a thriving civic space across the EU.

Democracy is a daily commitment that we must protect, nurture and never take for granted. The EU remains firmly committed to defending democracy and promoting democratic values, institutions, and processes, in the face of growing external and internal challenges. What we have is worth preserving and we will do so with full strength and unity, building strong and resilient democracies.

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<sup>112</sup> European Communication, Communication on EU Strategy to Support, Protect and Empower Civil Society, COM(2025) 790 final.