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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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Brussels, 12.11.2025  
COM(2025) 790 final

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

**EU Strategy for Civil Society**

## 1. INTRODUCTION

An open civic space, with a vibrant civil society is at the core of our democracies. Civil society plays an essential role in our societies contributing to policymaking, partnering with governments to implement public policies, delivering social and community support and services, raising awareness about important social issues, and representing diverse groups in vulnerable situations. The contribution of civil society is critical to foster citizens' engagement and democratic participation, as well as an inclusive public debate, including by actively involving young people. Civil society also plays an important role in the democratic checks and balances, helping monitor policy and decision-making and fostering transparency and accountability.

Operating at local, regional, national and international level – both within the EU and beyond – civil society helps **promote and protect the values enshrined in Article 2 of the Treaty of the European Union (TEU) and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union** (the Charter). Recognising its important role, the European Union's founding Treaties set out that EU institutions should engage with civil society through open, transparent and regular dialogue and to conduct their work as openly as possible in order to ensure civil society's inclusive and active participation<sup>1</sup>.

**Engagement with civil society is a cornerstone of EU policymaking.** Various tools and processes at EU level enable civil society to present its views and be involved in the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of EU legislation and policy, and the Commission has established structured civil society dialogue in many policy areas. Furthermore, civil society organisations (CSOs) provide advice and expertise by participating in the work of Commission's expert groups and other relevant fora. The **European Economic and Social Committee (EESC)** also plays a key role in bringing the voice of organised civil society to the European level.

For this **engagement to be effective**, the EU has increasingly recognised that civil society needs an **enabling, safe and supportive environment** throughout the EU<sup>2</sup>. This includes **adequate protection** for CSOs and human rights defenders (HRDs) who experience an overall shrinking civic space, and who face threats and attacks in relation to their work<sup>3</sup>. Sustainable and transparent **financial support** is also essential for a thriving civil society and for ensuring that CSOs can operate independently.

Building on existing frameworks and on the commitment in the [Political Guidelines for 2024-2029](#) to step up engagement with CSOs and to ensure they are supported and protected in their day-to-day work, the EU Strategy for Civil Society sets out a series of concrete actions at both EU and national level, including as regards the EU's external action. These actions are structured around three key objectives:

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<sup>1</sup>Article 11 of the TEU; Article 15, paragraph 1 of the TFEU.

<sup>2</sup>See [2020 Charter Strategy](#) and [2022 Charter Report](#), [European Parliament 2022 Report on the shrinking space for civil society in Europe](#); [Council Conclusions on the application of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights](#).

<sup>3</sup>Articles 11 and 12 of the Charter.

- **To strengthen effective and meaningful engagement with civil society as a partner in governance**
- **To ensure an open, safe and enabling civic space by providing support and protection to civil society organisations**
- **To support civil society organisations with adequate, sustainable and transparent funding**

The Commission will establish a **Civil Society Platform**, which will provide a regular and structured framework for its engagement with CSOs in areas relevant for upholding EU values, in particular those working on promoting democracy, the rule of law, equality and fundamental rights, in line with the Political Guidelines.

The Strategy also establishes a common framework to guide and strengthen the Commission's engagement with CSOs. Acknowledging that each policy area may come with specific requirements and different mechanisms for engagement, it does not seek to standardise them. Instead, it sets out **a set of guiding principles** to serve as a shared framework for carrying out dedicated dialogues with civil society across policy sectors, focusing on key parameters for dialogue, such as partnership, transparency, representation and accountability. In setting out these principles, the Strategy takes full account and complements the institutional mechanisms that already exist, particularly through the EESC.

The Strategy aims to strengthen actions at both EU and national level, engaging closely with Member States and enlargement countries<sup>4</sup>, to promote and sustain a thriving civic space. It also aims to foster **greater coherence between the EU's internal and external activities** in this area. To achieve these aims, cooperation is crucial between EU institutions and bodies, including the European External Action Service (EEAS), the EESC, the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) and with Member States. A coherent approach and strong collaboration will foster a sense of shared responsibility, that will benefit society as a whole by reinforcing democratic participation, resilience and public trust. This Strategy complements the actions set out in the **European Democracy Shield**.

In preparing the Strategy, the Commission gathered input through extensive consultations with a wide range of stakeholders<sup>5</sup>. The Strategy was also informed by [an opinion from the EESC](#), input from Member States, and exchanges held with the FRA, the European Parliament and the European Committee of the Regions.

## **2. CIVIL SOCIETY AS A PARTNER IN GOVERNANCE: STRENGTHENING EFFECTIVE AND MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT**

Civil society contributes to more **effective, inclusive, and representative policymaking at the EU, national and local level**. Ensuring that civil society organisations can

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<sup>4</sup>Candidate countries and potential candidates for accession to the EU will be integrated into relevant actions and associated similarly to Member States in the Strategy. The Strategy recognises the civic space in Member States and enlargement countries as a continuum and shared space.

<sup>5</sup>These consultations included a public consultation survey; a Eurobarometer survey; and targeted consultation meetings with CSOs, donors, international organisations and national human rights institutions. The Commission consulted youth civil society organisation in the framework of the Commission Youth Check.

meaningfully participate in public life and contribute their views via transparent processes is an important element of a robust and inclusive policymaking process.

For the purpose of the Strategy, **civil society organisations (CSOs)** are broadly understood as all **non-State, not-for-profit, independent, non-partisan and non-violent organisations**, through which people pursue and defend shared objectives and ideals<sup>6</sup>. They are self-governing entities which are independent from government or from business interests, ranging from informal, to semi-formal and formal groups, and can be membership-based, cause-based, or service-oriented<sup>7</sup>. They can operate at the local, regional, national and international level, and be run by volunteers and/or paid staff.

**Human rights defenders** are generally understood as individuals, groups and organs of society that promote and protect universally recognised human rights and fundamental freedoms, including children's rights<sup>8</sup>.

The Strategy focuses on CSOs and human rights defenders. Engagement with social partners (e.g. representatives of employers and workers) is not covered by the Strategy due to their specific status under EU law, as recognised in Article 154 TFEU.

In line with the EU's values, **the Strategy covers accountable, independent and transparent CSOs**, which share and function according to the EU's commitment to respect for human dignity, freedoms, democracy, equality, the rule of law and fundamental rights.

Europeans clearly recognise the contributions of CSOs as 87% of respondents to the [2023 Eurobarometer survey](#) considered that these organisations play an important role in promoting and protecting democracy and other EU values, such as respect for fundamental rights, including in terms of fostering a well-informed and pluralistic democratic debate. 42% of the respondents to the [2025 Eurobarometer](#) considered exposing corruption was the most significant area of work of civil society, followed by defending individual rights (41%), delivering services (39%) and monitoring government action (28%).

### ***2.1. Strengthening engagement and dialogue with civil society***

Civil society plays an important role in providing advice, support and expertise **in the development and implementation of EU legislation and policies** across a wide range sectors, such as agriculture, cohesion policy, culture, social policy, education and youth, justice and home affairs, consumer protection, competition policy, media and digital policy, migration and asylum, research and innovation, climate and environment, mobility, trade and sustainable development, humanitarian aid and international cooperation, and enlargement policy. More broadly, they help promote and protect the rights enshrined in

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<sup>6</sup>See [Commission Recommendation \(EU\) 2023/2836](#) on promoting the engagement and effective participation of citizens and civil society organisations in public policymaking processes; [Guidelines for EU support to civil society in the enlargement region 2021-2027](#); and Communication from the Commission, [On the roots of democracy and sustainable development: on Europe's engagement with Civil Society in external relations](#). The notion of 'civil society organisations' used in this Strategy is not a legally binding definition and specific requirements may apply under EU law regarding organisations referred to in this Communication, such as under the EU [Financial Regulation](#).

<sup>7</sup>Examples include community-based organisations, faith-based organisations, non-governmental organisations, charities, foundations, youth and social movements, and cooperatives.

<sup>8</sup>In the Strategy, the term 'CSOs' refers to both civil society organisations and human rights defenders, but does not include those individuals or groups who commit or propagate violence. See paragraphs 2 and 3 of the [EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders](#) and recital 11 of the [EU anti-SLAPP Directive](#).

the Charter<sup>9</sup>, preventing and countering discrimination, promoting active citizenship and encouraging young people to participate in democratic processes. They also contribute to fostering societal preparedness and resilience<sup>10</sup>. They are important partners in monitoring the implementation and progress of accession reforms and negotiations in the enlargement context.

**Various engagement mechanisms** exist at EU level, enabling CSOs to contribute throughout the policymaking cycle across all policy areas, from the initial preparation stages of initiatives to the implementation phase. For example, the Have Your Say portal acts as the entry point for all contributions to legislative proposals, evaluations, fitness checks and communications through public consultations.

The Commission uses a wide array of **consultation** means for its engagement with CSOs. In addition to the [Better Regulation tools](#), this involves formal dialogue structures such as **implementation dialogues**, **youth policy dialogues**, **advisory boards**, as well as **expert groups** and other flexible arrangements (e.g., ad hoc focus groups on specific issues, or through stakeholder platforms and networks). At the national level, the [EU Local Councillors network](#), jointly managed by the Commission and the Committee of the Regions, and the [Europe Direct centres](#) can help connect and engage with civil society on the ground. The Commission and the EU Delegations also regularly engage with CSOs in enlargement countries and third countries.

**Dedicated civil society dialogues** exist in various policy areas. For example, structured civil society dialogue in employment and social policies is ensured through the [European Semester](#) process and civil society organisations are key partners for implementing the [European Pillar of Social Rights](#). Civil society dialogues also sometimes cover specific, sectoral stakeholders. For example, organisations representing rural communities via the [Rural Pact](#) under the Vision for Agriculture and Food, or dialogue with religious or non-confessional groups, established under Article 17 TFEU. The [European Disability Platform](#) supports cooperation with Member States and civil society on implementing the [Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#), and the [EU Children's Participation Platform](#) promotes children's right to be heard in decision-making and supports civil society in fostering child engagement<sup>11</sup>.

The Civil Society Platform, which will become operational as of 2026, will reinforce **dialogue on EU values**. It will provide a **regular** and **structured framework** for dialogue on the protection and promotion of EU values, streamlining and strengthening engagement on fundamental rights, democracy, equality and the rule of law, and offering a space to address challenges faced by CSOs working in these areas<sup>12</sup>. The Platform will facilitate exchanges on the objectives of the Strategy to strengthen engagement, support, and protection, allow for timely and meaningful input to policy development, and on funding.

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<sup>9</sup>See, for example, [2022 Annual Report on the Application of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights](#).

<sup>10</sup>[Joint Communication](#) on the European Preparedness Union Strategy.

<sup>11</sup>Other examples include the [New European Bauhaus](#); the Advisory Committee on Equal Opportunities between Women and Men; [EU Youth Stakeholder Group](#); [EU Civil Society Platform against Trafficking in Human Beings](#); [Expert group on the views of migrants in the field of migration, asylum and integration](#); [Civil Society Forum on Drugs](#); [EU-NGO Human Rights Forum](#); [Trade civil society dialogue](#); [Anti-racism civil society forum](#); [EU Victims' Rights Platform](#); [European Roma Platform](#); [Consumer Policy Advisory Group](#).

<sup>12</sup>See recent data, for example [Fundamental Rights Agency, Protecting civil society – Update 2023](#); [FRA civic space consultations 2024 – key findings](#); [Factual Summary report](#) on consultations for the EU Civil Society Strategy (Factual summary report).

To enhance visibility and accessibility of information, and make engagement easier for CSOs, the Commission will set up a **website** for the Civil Society Platform where it will publish information and resources about the Platform's work as well as information about Commission dialogues with civil society across other policy areas. This will allow organisations to easily find information, dates, requirements for participation and possibilities to express interest for participating in different dialogues.

As part of the Platform, the Commission will organise an **annual summit** together with the EESC to develop synergies between ongoing dialogues and discuss strategic priorities.

The Platform will have an agile and adaptable structure, designed to respond to changing needs and priorities. In developing the functioning of the Platform, the Commission will draw on existing best practices within the Commission as well as the expertise of relevant stakeholders, in particular the EESC and the FRA's [Fundamental Rights Platform](#). Over time, the Platform may be extended to cover other policy areas.

## ***2.2 Guiding principles for an effective and meaningful dialogue with civil society***

Consultations with stakeholders have highlighted that while many important engagement structures exist, **more consistency** should be sought between them. Recognising that to be effective and meaningful, dialogue will always need to be adapted to specific objectives and sector-specific needs, the Strategy proposes **10 guiding principles for dialogue between the Commission and civil society**<sup>13</sup>.

These guiding principles are meant to serve as a shared framework for carrying out dedicated dialogue mechanisms with CSOs across policy sectors, applying to both the Commission and to CSOs. It is important that CSOs themselves ensure that their own practices and structures are **transparent, responsible and in line with EU values**, so that their engagement in such dialogue is accountable and grounded in common standards and respects the roles of the EU institutions and the guidance for receiving funding<sup>14</sup>. These principles draw on input from various consultations, EU policy documents and recommendations, existing best practices in the EU, and standards and practices developed at international level<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup>These principles should guide dialogue mechanisms with CSOs, recognising that there are many other forms of engagement, such as European citizens initiatives, public consultations, open innovation, citizen science, or representative deliberative processes.

<sup>14</sup>See the Commission's published [guidance](#).

<sup>15</sup>[Factual summary report](#); Commission Recommendation (EU) 2023/2836; EESC opinion SOC/840-EESC-2025; [CoE Secretary General's Roadmap](#) on the Council of Europe's Engagement with Civil Society 2024-2027, SG/Inf(2023)28; CoE Conference of INGOs, [Code of Good Practice](#) for Civil Participation in the Decision-Making Process; [Open Government Partnership Participation and Co-Creation Standards](#); [OECD Working Paper on Public Governance No. 81](#).

### **10 guiding principles for dialogue with civil society**

- 1) **Partnership**: Cooperation should welcome civil society's proactive contribution as a partner in shaping the dialogue, setting priorities and agendas, defining objectives or evaluating outcomes.
- 2) **Comprehensiveness**: Dialogue should seek to engage participation from civil society throughout different stages of policymaking.
- 3) **Predictability and regularity**: Dialogue should be part of a predictable and regular process and provide adequate timeframes for contributions.
- 4) **Transparency**: Clear communication should be ensured about procedures, objectives, timelines and participation criteria, along with timely and adequate access to relevant documents, in compliance with applicable legal requirements.
- 5) **Representation**: The selection of participants should be based on the organisations' independence, legitimacy, representativeness and expertise, as well as their adherence to EU values.
- 6) **Inclusivity**: The dialogue should strive to include an adequately broad spectrum of organisations, reflecting a sectoral and geographical balance and with due account to organisations representing groups that are underrepresented, marginalised or in vulnerable situations.
- 7) **Accessibility**: Dialogues, whether taking place online or offline, should be designed and implemented with appropriate technological tools with a view to remove accessibility barriers and enable full and equal participation.
- 8) **Accountability**: Feedback on how dialogue contributes to policy advancements should foster mutual responsibility and trust.
- 9) **Resourcing**: Where applicable, financial or logistical support should be made available to enable participation, taking into account the needs of grassroots and community-based organisations to ensure that they are not excluded due to limited means.
- 10) **Safety**: Safeguards should be in place to ensure that organisations can participate safely in dialogue, including through appropriate measures to protect personal data and confidentiality.

These principles mirror the key parameters for civic engagement set out in [Commission Recommendation \(EU\) 2023/2836](#), which also calls on Member States to create greater opportunities for citizens and CSOs to participate effectively in public policymaking processes at local, regional and national level. In response to the Recommendation, several Member States have taken steps to ensure its implementation, including by establishing new institutional frameworks and platforms for dialogue with civil society, preparing guidance on consultations during the decision-making process, having regular engagement with civil society across policy areas and more systematically ensuring civil society participation in consultation processes<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup>For example, in Czechia, Denmark, Germany, Ireland, France, Portugal, Latvia, and Finland, several consultative bodies that include CSOs have been set up to advise the government in different areas (e.g. children's rights, the rights of older people, national minorities and LGBTIQ+ equality).

**Important progress has been made**, but CSOs still report some shortcomings and, after almost two years since the adoption of this Recommendation, there is a need for **further data collection** and **follow-up** on its implementation. The Commission will therefore further **support capacity-building at the national level** for the implementation of the Recommendation and organise exchanges with Member States, in cooperation with the EESC and the FRA. These will focus on strengthening engagement, support and protection for civil society at national level.

The Commission plans to also increase its collaboration with civil society through different platforms and initiatives. It will involve young people and organisations in various youth forums, encourage civil society participation in debates on the Citizens' Engagement Platform, and connect civil society with citizens' input from the European Citizens' Panels to help shape EU policies.

Civil society is an essential actor in the enlargement agenda. For an aspiring EU Member State, a vibrant civil society contributes to the process of accession. The involvement of civil society in the enlargement process can contribute to deepening citizens' understanding of the reforms needed in order to meet the conditions for accession. With a view to strengthen civil society participation in these processes, the Commission will steer work to institutionalise and standardise in-country consultation of CSOs in the preparation of meetings of relevant bodies under the association agreements and their follow up and monitoring.

***The Commission will:***

- Establish a Civil Society Platform to step up its engagement with CSOs active in the promotion and protection of EU values, with the possibility to expand to other policy areas over time.
- Organise an annual summit of the Civil Society Platform together with the EESC.
- Promote the use of the 10 guiding principles for dialogue with civil society.
- Engage with civil society through the Commission President's Youth Advisory Board, the EU Youth Stakeholders Group, the EU Youth Dialogue and the Youth Policy Dialogues and promote the participation of civil society in the debates promoted on the Citizens' Engagement Platform.
- Engage with civil society around European Citizens' Panels as a way to create a bridge between CSOs and engagement with citizens in the shaping of EU policies.
- Support national capacity-building and organise exchanges with Member States on Commission Recommendation (EU) 2023/2836 concerning civil society participation, in cooperation with relevant actors, including the EESC and FRA.
- Institutionalise and standardise in-country consultation of CSOs in the preparation of meetings of relevant bodies under the association agreements and their follow up and monitoring.

***Member States are invited to:***

- Strengthen engagement mechanisms and policies in accordance with the principles identified in the Strategy, including by taking further steps to fully implement Commission Recommendation (EU) 2023/2836, as regards the effective participation of civil society organisations.

### 3. PROVIDING SUPPORT AND PROTECTION: ENSURING AN OPEN, SAFE AND ENABLING CIVIC SPACE

A thriving civic space<sup>17</sup> requires an **enabling legal, administrative, and regulatory environment**, where CSOs are supported and empowered, and where they are protected and can operate freely. According to a [2024 Eurobarometer](#) survey on the rule of law, 86% of Europeans consider it important that media and civil society organisations across Member States are able to operate freely and without pressure. Maintaining such a free and enabling environment requires **monitoring** and **effective responses** when threats or attacks arise.

Support for a vibrant civil society remains central to the Commission’s work across all policy areas - a commitment that is reflected in various strategies and policy documents<sup>18</sup>. The [2022 annual report on the application of the Charter](#) focused on civic space, mapping existing measures and identifying gaps and areas for improvement, and was complemented by Council conclusions on the topic<sup>19</sup>.

Several measures were put forward to safeguard civic space. For instance, by addressing systemic barriers that hinder cross-border collaboration between CSOs the [Social Economy Action Plan](#) (SEAP) and the [Council Recommendation on developing social economy framework conditions](#) aim to strengthen CSOs by boosting their capacity, visibility and impact in the social economy. The Commission has also taken concrete steps to create a more supportive environment for civil society, including measures to ensure fair taxation for charitable organisations and to safeguard their access to financial services. For example, under the recently adopted [Regulation on anti-money laundering](#), measures have been introduced to ensure that CSOs are not denied financial services, such as bank accounts, solely because they operate in countries considered to present a high risk of money laundering<sup>20</sup>.

#### *3.1. Understanding barriers and threats: monitoring the civic space*

Stakeholders report about measures that in their view **restrict the environment** in which CSOs and HRDs operate<sup>21</sup>. These may include disproportionate and burdensome registration requirements, unfair tax or financial reporting rules, shortcomings in accessing funding, undue obstacles to receiving financial services, and legal requirements that restrict cross-border operations.

Some CSOs also increasingly report about facing a range of **threats and attacks** including attacks on their staff or premises, smear and disinformation campaigns, or strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs). Attempts to unduly dissolve associations, the dismantling of dialogue structures, discretionary freezing or cutting of funding or

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<sup>17</sup>Civic space refers to ‘the environment that enables people and groups – or “civic space actors” – to participate meaningfully in the political, economic, social and cultural life in their societies’ ([UN Guidance Note on Protection and Promotion of Civic Space](#)) or ‘the set of legal, policy, institutional and practical conditions non-governmental actors need to access information, express themselves, associate, organise and participate in public life’ (OECD, [the Protection and Promotion of Civic Space](#)).

<sup>18</sup>See the [2020 Strategy to strengthen the application of the Charter of Fundamental Rights in the EU](#), the [2020 European Democracy Action Plan](#), and specific examples such as the [Union of Equality Strategies](#); the [New European Bauhaus](#), and the [Consumer Agenda 2025-2030](#).

<sup>19</sup>[Council Conclusions on the application of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights](#).

<sup>20</sup>Article 21(3) and recital 53 of [Regulation \(EU\) 2024/1624](#).

<sup>21</sup>[FRA civic space consultations 2024 – key findings](#); [Factual summary report](#).

illegal surveillance measures are also raised as a concern by civil society. Transnational repression from third countries is a growing phenomenon that particularly affects HRDs<sup>22</sup>. The cross-border nature of such repression creates significant obstacles for affected HRDs when filing complaints, seeking protection, or pursuing justice. In that respect, they often face specific obstacles related to travel documents and visa requirements<sup>23</sup> as well as administrative hurdles and delays.

This can have a **knock-on effect**, leading CSOs to limit their engagement and discouraging them from fully exercising their roles. Furthermore, they disproportionately affect CSOs working on topics related to democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights, and groups that are underrepresented, marginalised and in vulnerable situations<sup>24</sup>. Addressing these challenges requires a coherent and comprehensive approach from the EU and Member States.

An effective **monitoring of the civic space** is essential for supporting and protecting CSOs in their work. A clear identification of risks and threats can result in concrete follow-up actions by those actors that are equipped to provide support – both **preventative** (in response to early warning signs) and **reactive** (in the face of actual threats or attacks). Such measures may include public statements condemning harmful developments and expressing support to the work of CSOs, funding for psychosocial support, legal advice, and emergency funding.

The Commission has developed its own monitoring and assessment tools that also focus on aspects related to civic space. Under the [Rule of Law reports](#), the Commission monitors developments in all the Member States and some enlargement countries, highlighting both positive and negative developments in relation to the civic space, and issues specific recommendations where relevant. For enlargement countries, such information is also monitored as part of the annual enlargement package<sup>25</sup>.

The Commission also receives information on challenges faced by CSOs on an ad hoc basis through its own engagement with civil society. In addition, the Commission provides financial support under programmes to several projects led by consortia of CSOs that carry out civic space monitoring, in the EU and beyond<sup>26</sup>.

The Commission further relies on monitoring activities carried out by other actors, including NHRIs and international organisations<sup>27</sup>. The **FRA** plays a crucial role in this area by [publishing reports on civic space](#), highlighting promising practices, supporting exchanges among international and national actors, and issuing recommendations in this area.

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<sup>22</sup>The term ‘transnational repression’ refers to a type of political repression conducted by a state outside its borders, see, for example, [UN OHCHR brief on transnational repression](#).

<sup>23</sup>See, for example, the EU [Visa Code Handbook](#) which provides specific guidance to assist HRDs.

<sup>24</sup>See, for example, [Resolution 2021/2103\(INI\)](#) of the European Parliament, [FRA, Protecting civil society – Update 2023](#).

<sup>25</sup>See, [EU enlargement package](#), covering Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine and Türkiye.

<sup>26</sup>See, for example: the [Monitoring Action for Civic Space \(MACS\)](#) project; the [annual report on the state of play in relation to the Guidelines for EU Support to Civil Society in the Enlargement Region](#); the [CSO Meter](#); and the [EU System for an Enabling Environment for Civil Society](#).

<sup>27</sup>See, for example, the State of the [rule of law in Europe database](#) maintained by the European Network of National Human Rights Institutions; the global monitoring carried out by [Civicus](#); the [2024 Report of the UN OHCHR on Civil Society Space](#); the Open Government Partnership [independent reporting mechanism](#); and the [CoE Platform for the Safety of Journalists](#).

### ***3.2. Providing responses at EU level***

Several pieces of EU legislation directly contribute to the protection of CSOs in the EU. For example, the [Anti-SLAPPs Directive](#) and [Recommendation](#) provide procedural safeguards to protect persons who engage in public participation, including CSOs, from manifestly unfounded claims or abusive court proceedings. To support implementation, the Commission will support **training for justice practitioners** on SLAPPs targeting CSOs and litigation on the Charter, in particular as regards freedom of association, expression and assembly.

The Commission supports several protection measures that are carried out by dedicated CSO-led initiatives. A key EU-funded measure under the [Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values \(CERV\) Programme](#) is the use of **financial support to third parties (FSTP)**, allowing CSOs that receive EU funds to act as intermediaries, that can build capacity and distribute funds to smaller or grassroots CSOs, including those that may need to respond to urgent or unexpected situations or emergencies. The EU has also recently launched a call to strengthen the European Fact-Checking Network, including a protection scheme against harassment, recognising that the fact-checking community is increasingly attacked, accused of censorship and facing intimidation.

In the context of **enlargement and accession**, fostering an enabling environment and ensuring a stronger, more meaningful role for CSOs remains essential. When assessing the Functioning of Democratic Institutions (FDI), the environment in which CSOs operate is also examined. The 2020 adoption of the [revised enlargement methodology](#) underlines that all key reforms in the enlargement countries should be carried out in a fully transparent and inclusive way, with the stakeholder involvement. Under this revised methodology, candidate countries are required to draft a Roadmap on FDIs, that outlines specific actions to strengthen the enabling environment for civil society.

### ***3.3. Protecting the civic space at the national level***

**Member States play a crucial role in enabling and protecting civic space** at the national, local and grassroots' levels, and are often the first to provide concrete support to CSOs that are at risk. Working with Member States to promote a safe, supportive and enabling environment for CSOs throughout the EU is therefore an important priority for the Commission.

Commission Recommendation (EU) 2023/2836 calls on Member States to monitor developments in civic space using clear indicators and structured reporting frameworks. It encourages Member States to promote cooperation and coordination between all relevant stakeholders, facilitate access to special procedures or channels to report threats and attacks, and systematically document and analyse the operating environment in which CSOs work. Several Member States have responded to the Commission Recommendation by adopting **measures to strengthen civic space at national level**. These include setting up dedicated national strategies to strengthen civic engagement cooperation between citizens, CSOs and local authorities. Some have set up projects to reduce the administrative burden when exercising the right to assembly and association, or have put in place specific tax and other incentives for CSO financing<sup>28</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup>See, for example, Czechia's National [Strategy](#) for Cooperation Between Public Administration and Non-governmental Non-profit Organisations 2021-2030 and its Government Council for Non-Governmental Non-Profit Organisations; Germany's Federal Civic Engagement [Strategy](#) and its Foundation for Civic

Several Member States have also introduced **measures to protect CSOs**, including through the general system of legal remedies available in the national administrative, civil and criminal justice systems. Some have set up or support **dedicated counselling services**, focusing specifically on (online) hate and discrimination<sup>29</sup>. National independent bodies and institutions – particularly NHRIs, equality bodies and ombudspersons – can play a vital role in protecting CSOs at the national level, by amplifying their voices, raising public awareness, and supporting capacity-building efforts. These actions are **a clear investment** in ensuring an enabling environment for civil society and providing responses when they are at risk.

### ***3.4 Strengthening support and protection***

While important progress has been made at both EU and national level, stakeholders call for a more coordinated approach to CSO protection, and stronger more coordinated action is needed at Member State, EU and international level to monitor developments affecting CSOs, implement preventative measures in response to early-warning signs of shrinking civic space, and to protect CSOs against such threats and attacks. To that end and to map existing monitoring initiatives at local, national, EU and international level, the Commission will create, in cooperation with FRA, an **online knowledge hub on civic space**. This hub will facilitate access to existing monitoring and protection projects, tools and activities, including available protection measures.

By consolidating information, the hub will help identify trends and gaps in civic space monitoring and inform relevant actions to address such developments. On this basis, **further protection measures could be explored**, such as urgent assistance to organisations under threat, coordination of available protection measures in Member States, training and support on administrative, legal and logistical arrangements. Having an evidence-based knowledge of the situation on the ground is crucial to be able to ensure adequate response to the specific needs of CSOs and HRDs.

It is important to ensure that EU and national policies and legislation promote an enabling environment for CSOs and to strengthen actions on monitoring and protection for CSOs. For example, impact assessments and implementation dialogues are important structured processes that help identify and evaluate the effects and consequences of planned policies and legislations. The Commission will continue assessing the **impacts of its initiatives for civil society in impact assessments and evaluations within the Better Regulation framework**.

To support Member States in the further implementation of Recommendation (EU) 2023/2836, the **Commission will organise exchanges with Member States to further strengthen support and protection of CSOs**, between relevant public authorities and stakeholders and support training at national level for justice professionals on SLAPPs and the Charter. In the **enlargement** context, the Commission will **strengthen its early warning systems**, to allow for stronger responses on emerging threats.

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Engagement and Volunteer Work; Denmark's 2022-2025 Civil Society [Strategy](#); Finland's Civil Society [Strategy](#) and Advisory [Board](#) on Civil Society Policy; and Portugal's Platform of Civil Society Organisations/Citizens' House.

<sup>29</sup>See, for example, Germany's federally funded projects REspect! and Hate Aid; cooperative alliances; federal infrastructure '[toneshift – Network against Online Hate and Disinformation](#)'.

***The Commission will:***

- Support the creation of an online knowledge hub on civic space that documents existing civic space monitoring initiatives, reports and protection resources, at national, EU and international level, in cooperation with FRA.
- Explore possibilities to strengthen and coordinate available protection measures for CSOs and HRDs at risk in the EU.
- Support training for justice professionals on SLAPPs that target CSOs and litigation on the Charter, in particular as regards freedom of association, expression and assembly.
- Support national capacity-building and organise exchanges with Member States on Commission Recommendation (EU) 2023/2836 concerning protection and support, in cooperation with relevant actors, including the EESC and FRA.
- Strengthen the EU's early warning systems for detecting emerging signs of shrinking civic space in the enlargement countries.

***Member States are invited to:***

- Develop or update dedicated national strategies or action plans to support, protect and empower civil society organisations and foster a safe and enabling civic space, in line with Commission Recommendation (EU) 2023/2836.

***The EU Agency for Fundamental Rights is invited to:***

- Continue its monitoring and reporting on civic space, and to create a network of representatives from national and EU institutions and bodies, CSOs, and international organisations that work on civic space monitoring and protection, so that they can exchange data, experience, and best practices.

#### **4. ADEQUATE, SUSTAINABLE AND TRANSPARENT FUNDING FOR CIVIL SOCIETY**

As part of an overall enabling environment, CSOs need **adequate and sustainable support** to carry out their vital work, effectively engage with decision-makers, and continue making meaningful contributions to our societies. In this respect, **long-term, predictable, and sufficient funding is key** so as to provide the stability that CSOs need to operate independently and effectively.

CSOs rely on funding from a combination of **public and private sources** to finance their activities. In the EU, the Commission and Member States support CSOs in different ways, including through operating grants and project-based funding. CSOs may also receive funding through individual donations and grants from private foundations, philanthropic organisations, or companies and businesses. Additional funding support can come from allocation schemes, which are operated by a few Member States, and allow taxpayers to designate directly through their income tax return a fixed percentage or amount of their income tax to be paid to a qualifying entity<sup>30</sup>.

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<sup>30</sup>Italy, Lithuania, Hungary, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia and the Slovak Republic operate such systems.

**Funding is essential across the full spectrum of CSO activities.** Furthermore, civil society's involvement in the development, implementation, monitoring and enforcement of EU legislation and policies is also a specific funding objective of several EU programmes. Several EU programmes support activities carried out by civil society organisations in different policy areas<sup>31</sup>. These include Horizon Europe, including the New European Bauhaus Facility, European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), the CERV programme, Erasmus+, the Single Market Programme, the Asylum Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF), the Justice Programme, Links between actions of rural development (LEADER), the Union Anti-Fraud Programme and the LIFE programme. In the enlargement region, the EU provides support to CSOs, including through the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA III). Complementary to EU funding is the European Economic Area and Norway Grants, which support CSOs in Europe, through the [Active Citizens Fund](#).

**Partnership and transparency** are key principles for EU funding. The **European Union's partnership principle** requires close cooperation between public authorities and a wide range of partners, including social partners and CSOs, throughout the lifecycle of EU-funded programmes. This principle ensures that diverse stakeholders are involved in the preparation, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of EU funds to improve their effectiveness, efficiency, and accountability<sup>32</sup>.

**Transparency**, in line with existing legal requirements, remains the guiding principle in the management of the EU's budget. There are specific safeguards and procedures in place to ensure that EU funding to any type of beneficiary (from businesses to CSOs and individuals) is **transparent and accountable**, and to ensure **respect for EU values**, including by publishing information about recipients of EU funding in direct and indirect management<sup>33</sup>.

Under the applicable rules, particularly the EU [Financial Regulation](#), as well as contractual frameworks for grants, strong safeguards are in place to ensure that **any entities and projects whose objectives are incompatible with EU values do not receive support**. To further strengthen these safeguards and requirements, the Commission has committed to consider the feasibility of adding risk indicators to strengthen EU values compliance checks, as part of the development of the [Arachne](#) risk scoring tool, if technically possible and legally compliant, and to explore the feasibility of increasing the frequency of updates made to publicly available data on its Financial Transparency System<sup>34</sup>. In addition, the Commission published a note providing [guidance](#) on the type of activities that the Union

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<sup>31</sup>These programmes can be run under direct, indirect or shared management. Approximately 80% of EU funding sources for NGOs are managed by EU countries themselves. Each country provides [detailed information about funding](#) and application procedures on the websites of the managing authorities. The award of EU funds under direct management follows publicly available calls. Based on the rules established in the [EU Financial Regulation \(EU, Euratom\) 2024/2509](#), including the key principles of transparency and equal treatment, all valid funding applications are assessed against the eligibility, exclusion, selection and award criteria specified in the calls. For an overview, see [Funding opportunities for NGOs](#).

<sup>32</sup>The principle was strengthened by including the possibility to allocate an appropriate percentage of resources coming for the administrative capacity building of social partners and CSOs and by highlighting the role the [European Code of Conduct on Partnership](#) in all stages of programming and implementation.

<sup>33</sup>This information is publicly available on the Commission's [Financial Transparency System \(FTS\) website](#). The recent revision of the Financial Regulation introduced more ambitious transparency provisions, as from the post-2027 MFF period.

<sup>34</sup>See Commission's replies to the [European Commission to ECA Special report 11/2025](#).

should not require as condition for funding as part of policy and legislation development, policy implementation, monitoring and enforcement.

Further efforts are needed to ensure the **accessibility of public funding across the EU**. CSOs report that public funding is often directed primarily to state institutions, with limited and inconsistent access for CSOs, especially grassroots and smaller organisations<sup>35</sup>. In addition, CSOs working on topics related to groups that are underrepresented, marginalised, and in vulnerable situations often struggle to access long-term funding.

The Commission has already taken several steps to **simplify** applicable procedures, **reduce administrative burden** and **align** those procedures with the needs of CSOs on the ground (e.g. through the use of lump sum payments and multiannual work programmes). The increased use of financial support to third parties, where EU funds are disbursed to smaller organisations by larger CSOs, has allowed EU funding to reach small and grassroots organisations that would not otherwise have been able to access EU funding, and in turn contributes to supporting a diverse range of civil society. It has, for example, been instrumental in supporting CSOs working to protect and promote EU values under programmes such as the [EU DEAR](#) and the CERV<sup>36</sup>.

With an overall budget of over **EUR 1.5 billion for the 2021-2027 period**, the **CERV programme** occupies a unique space in the CSO funding landscape as it is often the only source of funding available to CSOs working on fundamental rights and values in the EU. Since 2021, the programme has supported more than 6 000 CSOs across all Member States and eligible non-EU countries. In the first four years of implementation, CSOs were the main beneficiaries of CERV having received 77% of the awarded funds. The Commission will continue providing financial support to CSOs and HRDs at risk, including by exploring the possibility of **further expanding the use of financial support to third parties'** schemes across relevant EU funding programmes.

The Commission's proposal for the **Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2028-2034**<sup>37</sup>, adopted on 16 July 2025, makes it clear that financial support for CSOs will remain a priority for the years ahead, across a range of policy areas. The new **AgoraEU programme** will build on the success of the current Creative Europe and CERV programmes with an **increased total indicative budget of almost EUR 9 billion**. By consolidating support for culture, media, and civil society, AgoraEU will enhance the protection and promotion of fundamental rights, encourage democratic participation and resilience, promote cultural diversity and artistic freedom, and foster a free and diverse information landscape.

The proposed [Erasmus+ programme](#) will integrate the [European Solidarity Corps](#), with an indicative budget of **EUR 40.8 billion**, and in addition to supporting the acquisition of skills, it will promote resilience, participation in democratic life and civic engagement, through formal, non-formal and informal learning paths. The [Horizon Europe programme](#) will continue to support research aiming to strengthen democracy, including by promoting civic engagement.

As part of the MFF proposal, the proposed **National and Regional Partnership Plans** aim also to support reforms and investment to build civil society and social partners'

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<sup>35</sup>Factual summary report.

<sup>36</sup>[Report on the interim evaluation of the CERV programme](#); and [2024 Charter Report](#).

<sup>37</sup>See [here](#) for more information regarding the EU's proposal for the 2028-2034 MFF.

capacities to uphold EU values, citizenship education and youth participation. The MFF proposal also recognises and reaffirms the principle of partnership with CSOs, building on a **multi-level governance approach**. The **EU Facility** also proposed as part of this fund provides, among other actions, funding for environment and climate actions, including to support and empower civil society organisations. More generally, once adopted, the MFF 2028-2034 will further harmonise and simplify procedures, thereby reducing the administrative burden for CSOs on the ground. The Commission therefore invites the European Parliament and the Council to consider the essential role of funding for CSOs in the upcoming negotiations on the 2028-2034 MFF.

#### ***4.1. Mobilising actors and pooling resources***

EU funding is key to empowering CSOs, but it is clear that the funding needs of CSOs across the EU and the candidate countries can only be met through funding from different sources. Beyond public donors at national, EU and international level, there is also an increasing role for **private donors** (including businesses) and **philanthropic organisations** (individual foundations, pooled funds and networks). Donors must themselves be able to operate in an enabling legal and regulatory environment that protects philanthropic freedoms and facilitates (cross-border) donations. This includes a legal framework that recognises foundations and associations (including across borders), as well as ensuring that CSOs and donors can benefit from tax incentives for donations that Member States wish to provide<sup>38</sup>.

CSOs report that it is often difficult to find information on the different types of funding that are available and the entities that provide them. There is a need for more information sharing, dialogue and collaboration both between donors, and between donors and CSOs, to decide more strategically on the various ways to provide support and avoid duplication. The **Commission will therefore facilitate dialogue between donors**, and between donors and CSOs, including via the Civil Society Platform, in order to exchange experiences, identify funding gaps and better ensure complementarity of funding sources.

CSOs often require other types of support such as **in-kind assistance**, which can be provided by professionals or volunteers. In particular, navigating the current legal, administrative, regulatory and technological environment in which CSOs operate increasingly requires not only having the necessary financial means, but also to have specific skills and expertise. Legal support provided by **pro bono lawyers** can play a key role in this regard<sup>39</sup>. They can support with legal and compliance questions (e.g. on applicable employment and tax obligations), giving CSOs more space to carry out key activities, as well as supporting those core tasks (e.g. through advocacy research, capacity building and training, and strategic litigation).

Pro-bono lawyers can also support CSOs address threats and attacks, such as smear campaigns and SLAPPs, including by representing CSOs in court and providing legal advice. The Commission will therefore **work to connect communities of pro bono lawyers with CSOs** across sectors and in need of support, so as to facilitate support on administrative, mobility, legal and financial matters.

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<sup>38</sup>The non-discrimination principle establishes that Member States may not limit tax benefits to domestic charitable organisations or donations/bequests made to domestic entities, while excluding from such benefits comparable foreign charities or donations/bequests to comparable foreign charities. See Council Recommendation C(2023) 1344 on developing social economy framework conditions and related Staff Working Documents.

<sup>39</sup>See, for example, the services provided by [PILnet](#).

***The Commission will:***

- Facilitate dialogue between donors, and between donors and CSOs, including via the Civil Society Platform, in order to exchange experience, identify funding gaps and better ensure complementarity of funding sources.
- Work to connect communities of pro bono lawyers with CSOs across sectors and in need of support, as to facilitate support on administrative, mobility, legal and financial matters.
- Explore the possibility of further expanding the use of financial support to third parties schemes across relevant EU funding programmes, where appropriate.

***Member States are invited to:***

- Establish and maintain an enabling legal and regulatory environment for CSOs and donors, including philanthropy, including through the implementation of the non-discrimination principle and the broader Council Recommendation on developing social economy framework conditions.
- Complement EU funds for CSOs with domestic support mechanisms, in line with Commission Recommendation (EU) 2023/2836.

## **5. CIVIL SOCIETY IN EU EXTERNAL ACTION**

The EU's commitment to engage with, protect and support civil society is also reflected in its external action. The EU works closely with civil society to **advance the realisation of human rights for all** – by applying universal norms, guided by international human rights law. CSOs provide important contributions to strengthening democracy and resilient societies globally. For example, they often act as implementing partners for EU-funded projects in development cooperation, humanitarian aid, and capacity-building programmes, and monitor trade and association agreements to ensure that human rights and sustainable development clauses are upheld.

### ***5.1. Engaging with CSOs internationally***

CSOs are regularly invited to share their expertise on the EU's external policies and contribute to Human Rights Dialogues that the EU conducts on a regular basis with partner countries and regions. At country-level, EU delegations play a crucial role in engaging with CSOs and HRDs, and can monitor the situation of democracy, human rights and civic space locally.

The [EU NGO Human Rights Forum](#) has for decades provided a regular opportunity for CSOs and human rights defenders to discuss international partnerships, human rights issues, and address challenges to civic space globally, directly with EU counterparts. The [Policy Forum on Development](#) and the two Civil Society Facilities for the Southern and Eastern Neighbourhood also provide fora for engagement with CSOs across a range of EU policies. The Commission is committed to strengthen its support to civil society across the world, including to enable the participation of civil society in multilateral fora.

The EU is engaging with CSOs on the roll-out of the EU's [Global Gateway](#) strategy and has set up the [Global Gateway CSOs and Local Authorities Advisory Platform](#) to this end. CSOs also play an important role in the monitoring and implementation of trade agreements, in particular through Domestic Advisory Groups. The EU has, together with

Member States and civil society, developed **Roadmaps for engagement with civil society** at partner country level, with the aim of establishing sustained and structured dialogue between these actors. In that respect, the Commission remains committed to supporting and promoting [locally-led CSO responses and equitable partnerships](#) in humanitarian settings. This will be done through supporting and strengthening CSOs capacities, through increasing the amount of humanitarian funding to local CSOs and by progressively devolving more authority to local responders, including civil society.

Across these mechanisms, the engagement with CSOs and HRDs takes a security-sensitive approach that considers the particular circumstances of interlocutors, to ensure that the engagement itself does not expose the organisations to additional risks.

## ***5.2. Protecting and supporting CSOs globally***

The EU maintains a long-standing commitment to protecting and supporting civil society and civic space globally and at country level. This is reflected, for example, in the [Communication on Europe's engagement with Civil Society in external relations](#), the [EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020-2027](#)<sup>40</sup>, the [EU Guidelines on Human Rights](#), and on [Human Rights Defenders](#), and the [2019 Council Conclusions on Democracy](#), as well as in the application of the human-rights based approach in international partnerships<sup>41</sup>. Supporting CSOs and HRDs, and enhancing participation in public and political life, especially of women and youth, are core priorities of EU foreign policy.

To further advance these objectives, the EU cooperates with international organisations and fora that develop norms on civic space. These include the Council of Europe, the United Nations, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights.

The EU's [Annual Reports on Human Rights and Democracy](#) is an important instrument to monitor the situation of CSOs and civic space globally. Other mechanisms, such as the Election Observation Missions, enable the EU to assess the electoral environment, including conditions for domestic civil society observation, and it engages broadly with civil society throughout these missions.

Supporting the capacity and the resilience of CSOs, especially grassroots organisations, to meaningfully engage in policy-making processes is a priority in the **Eastern Neighbourhood**, particularly in the context of a shrinking civic space<sup>42</sup>. The [Pact for the Mediterranean](#) underlines the importance of maintaining a vibrant civil society in the Southern Neighbourhood, and aims to empower civil society, youth and local communities, to build their capacities and to foster their participation in local or regional dialogues.

The EU has stepped up its action to protect civic space and human rights defenders, including when they are targets of transnational repression offline and online. For example,

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<sup>40</sup>The extension of the Action Plan for Human Rights and Democracy was accompanied by [Council conclusions](#) reaffirming EU support to civil society and human rights defenders as a key priority in the EU's foreign policy.

<sup>41</sup>Commission Staff Working Document, [Applying the Human Rights Based Approach to international partnerships](#).

<sup>42</sup>This includes support to CSOs, in particularly grassroots' organisations, in some countries within the Eastern Partnership (EaP) region.

the EU has launched the EU System for Enabling Environment (EU SEE)<sup>43</sup> for civil society, which supports CSOs in over 80 countries to monitor their civic space, give early warnings of restrictions, and contribute to responses.

The Commission has also provided guidance via its [Visa Code Handbook](#), including on issuing visas for HRDs, and provides training on this<sup>44</sup>. Together with Member States, it will continue promoting the Handbook and its implementation, in particular in relation to the guidance on the particular needs of HRDs.

### **5.3. Providing funding, building partnerships**

Since 2013, the EU has supported the [European Endowment for Democracy](#) (EED)<sup>45</sup>, which provides crucial support and protection for CSOs and HRDs in crisis and repressive environments. A specific EU-funded protection mechanism is the EU's **Human Rights Defenders Mechanism**, which has been set up to support human rights defenders in third countries<sup>46</sup>, providing various forms of support (e.g. physical and digital protection; legal and medical support; trial and prison monitoring; capacity building; advocacy; and temporary relocation).

Funding is provided to CSOs through the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI), for example, by grants provided through the thematic programmes on Human Rights and Democracy and Civil Society.

Under the Commission's **MFF proposal for 2028-2034**, cooperation with and support to CSOs in partner countries remains a priority under the proposed [Global Europe Instrument](#). This includes the continued commitment to upholding human rights and democracy globally.

### **5.4. Looking ahead, developing resilience**

**The EU will continue to support civic space and an enabling environment** for civil society worldwide, and monitor human rights, democracy, and civic space through existing mechanisms. It will also continue to provide support and protection to CSOs and HRDs at risk, including from transnational repression, through initiatives such as ProtectDefenders.eu and the European Endowment for Democracy.

The EU is scaling up its engagement at global and regional levels with civil society around key processes such as **regional Summits**. The EU will continue to engage in regular dialogue with CSOs as key partners in its human rights, democracy, and foreign policy work, and will consult them and human rights defenders in preparing the next **EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy**. It will also organise **joint high-level civil society Structured Dialogues** in partner regions, for example in the framework of the African Union-EU Summit.

Under the **Pact for the Mediterranean**, several initiatives will empower key actors to concretely support their communities, notably by establishing a Youth Parliamentary

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<sup>43</sup>The EU SEE is a partnership programme that seeks to support civil society to thrive globally by preventing efforts to restrict civic space.

<sup>44</sup>The training courses are conducted notably through a project co-financed by the European Commission under the [Border Management and Visa Instrument](#) (BMVI) and developed by the Swedish Migration Agency.

<sup>45</sup>The EED is an independent, grant-making organisation, established in 2013 by the EU and its member states as an autonomous International Trust Fund to foster democracy in the European Neighbourhood, the Western Balkans, Turkey and beyond.

<sup>46</sup>The mechanism has supported over [85,000 HRDs since 2015](#).

Assembly for the Mediterranean; supporting the development of a Mediterranean civic service; empowering women-led organisation as pivotal influencers within their communities; and enhancing cooperation mechanisms at local level to promote social inclusion including for people in vulnerable situations.

***The Commission will:***

- Strengthen engagement with civil society across all policy areas of EU external action, including through EU Delegations.
- Consult CSOs on an enabling environment for civil society in the context of the preparations of the next EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy.
- Strengthen its support to civil society across the world, including to enable civil society participation in multilateral fora.
- Organise a joint high-level civil society Structured Dialogue with at the African Union-EU Summit and continue promoting such joint dialogues with its regional partners.
- Strengthen its engagement under the Team Europe Democracy Initiative to discuss emerging and evolving threats to civic space.
- Conclude new Framework Partnership Agreements to build capacity and connect CSOs through targeted initiatives in its partner regions.

***Member States are invited to:***

- Coordinate with EU Delegations on the ground to ensure effective implementation of the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy and of the EU Guidelines on human rights, and to support the roll-out of the new generation (2025-27) of Country Roadmaps for engagement with CSOs.
- Raise awareness of and provide capacity building, including through new trainings, on the Visa Code Handbook guidance on visa facilitation for human rights defenders seeking protection in the EU territory.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

Civil society is a cornerstone of democracy across the EU and beyond. Civil society contributes to policymaking, partnering with national government and EU institutions in the implementation of policies and delivering a broad range of support and services across all sectors of society. The active participation of civil society in an enabling civic space, free from threats and attacks, helps promote and safeguard the values on which the EU is founded.

The EU Strategy for Civil Society lays the groundwork for strengthened engagement, support and protection and an empowered civil society. It puts forward a coherent and mutually reinforcing set of measures to effectively improve the protection of and support for civil society, and to allow effective and meaningful engagement with decision-makers at both EU and national level, as well as in the EU's external action.

The implementation of this Strategy requires efforts at all levels. EU institutions, bodies and agencies as well as Member States and enlargement countries, all need to contribute. The Strategy recognises that civic space in Member States and enlargement countries forms a continuum and shared democratic space, and a vibrant civil society in an enabling civic space are essential for progress towards accession. At global level, the EU will

continue cooperating with its partner countries and with international organisations to create an enabling environment for civil society and foster stronger engagement, protection and support to CSOs across the world.

The Commission will regularly convene discussions with Member States, civil society, the European Economic and Social Committee, the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights, international organisations, and other relevant actors to support the implementation of the actions put forward and take stock of progress.

The Commission invites the European Parliament and the Council, as well as the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of Regions, to support the implementation of this Strategy. Support for civil society organisations will need to remain strong in the next MFF, with efforts to simplify funding processes, reduce administrative burdens, and improve access through user-friendly digital tools.