

EPD contribution to EU Call for Evidence on an EU Civil Society Strategy

Consultation period: 13 June 2025 - 05 September 2025

Across the globe, we are witnessing a trend where governments — whether in autocratic regimes or well-established democracies — are placing more restrictions on civil society. Activists and civil society organisations are targets of legal, political, and judicial tools to restrict their work. The pace and intensity of restrictions on its environment are accelerating — from the criminalisation of peaceful protest to legal systems used to silence dissent.

Many of these actors find themselves increasingly sidelined from key decision-making processes due to restrictive laws and practices. This not only limits their ability to fully exercise their rights and freedoms but can also pose significant risks, extending beyond the legislative arena and shaping the narratives pushed by dominant political and societal groups.

This situation is becoming increasingly evident in the narratives encountered at both national and international levels, whether in political discussions or societal conversations, both online and offline. The EU Civil Society Strategy offers an opportunity to address these issues, fostering an environment where voices are valued and heard, recognising and uplifting the contributions of all democratic members of the public sphere.

As a response to such trends, and since the adoption of the 2012 EU Communication *The Roots of Democracy*, the EU has deepened its commitment to address the closing of civic space and foster an enabling environment for civil society, through reinforced policy commitments and by taking significant steps both globally and in partner countries. This must continue through a vigorous promotion of an enabling environment for civil society that lives up to EU and international values and standards, and fighting back against anti-democratic models.

Crucially for any democracy, civil society needs space — not just to survive, but to pro-actively play its democratic role as watchdog of government action, partner in political and policy reform and provider of certain services to local populations. A vibrant civil society is also crucial for democratic innovation, something that is needed more than ever, given the growing disillusionment of citizens with present forms of representative democracy, both in Europe and abroad.

We welcome the Commission's increasingly comprehensive focus on democracy, including the rule of law and fundamental rights. The Civil Society Strategy, the European Democracy Shield and the rule of law approaches should comprise a coherent whole that effectively responds to the increasing challenges faced by democracy inside and outside Europe, including in civic space.

We recommend that:

1. The EU should continue to vigorously support independent civil society monitoring of civic space inside and outside of Europe, both financially and by using the information it provides in policy making and political monitoring.
2. The EU and its Member States should adopt comprehensive policies, programmes, and practices supporting an enabling environment for civil society.
3. The EU must acknowledge and promote the role of democratic institutions and political actors in ensuring an enabling environment for civil society.
4. The EU and Member States should continue to provide substantial support for civil society in external policies.
5. The EU needs to ensure that consultation of, and support to, civil society is fully integrated in all of its policies

A. Continued and improved monitoring of civic space to ensure civil society's full participation in the democratic processes

Without an enabling environment for civil society to operate, civil society actors cannot leverage their full potential to drive social innovation, foster community engagement, or advocate for marginalised populations. The resulting constraints prevent civil society from effectively channelling citizen concerns to policymakers and holding institutions accountable, thereby weakening the foundational participatory processes that sustain democratic governance and responsive policymaking.

National, regional and international actors need time-sensitive information on aspects of the enabling environment for evidence-based decision-making, and to ensure they can act quickly to protect civic space against restrictions. This improved information helps detect and respond to situations of a deteriorating or improving enabling environment, and address and contribute to structural and systemic prerequisites for such an environment.

The EU has started to support various initiatives to monitor and respond to changes in the enabling environment for civil society inside and outside Europe (projects such as the Monitoring Action for Civic Space (MACS), CSO Meter, and EU System for an Enabling Environment for Civil Society (EU SEE)). Local, national and regional CSOs and their networks need resources, strengthened capacities and support to monitor and document restrictions and changes in the enabling environment.

Bringing together relevant local and regional CSOs expands the number of civil society actors committed, skilled and able to monitor and promote an enabling environment. This increases collective impact at the national, regional and international levels. Strengthening prevention mechanisms or the ability to detect early signs of civic space deterioration will support proactive advocacy efforts, which are safer, more impactful and less burdensome for CSOs than reactive advocacy.

In turn, the EU can benefit from this information for its own understanding of democratic developments inside and outside the EU. It can then better tailor measures to protect democracy inside Europe, and protect its investments outside Europe by ensuring that they are carried out in accountable and well-governed States that respond to the needs of their populations.

Since its launch in January 2025, the EU System for an Enabling Environment for Civil Society (EU SEE), which EPD is part of, has monitored and documented this global trend through its Early Warning and Monitoring Mechanism. Rooted in six interdependent principles—from the protection of fundamental freedoms to access to financial resources—the EU SEE methodology has helped capture not just isolated events but the broader architecture that influences and shapes the environment in which civil society operates.

As a complex and multifaceted concept that can only be defined in relative terms, we have broken down the enabling environment for civil society into six key enabling principles, which we would like to put forward for use in the EU Civil Society Strategy:

1. Respect and protection of fundamental freedoms
2. Supportive legal and regulatory framework
3. Accessible and sustainable resources
4. Open and responsive State
5. Supportive public culture and discourses on civil society
6. Access to a secure digital environment

B. The EU and its Member States should adopt policies, programmes, and practices for an enabling environment for civil society

To ensure civil society can fully play its role in society and engage on a sound basis with institutions, civil society needs legal support, funding, recognition, and safe spaces to thrive. Without an enabling environment, we don't just silence voices—we weaken democracy itself. When governments impose legal penalties for criticism, restrict public assembly, or create barriers to information, they effectively dismantle the accountability mechanisms that civil society organisations provide and limit engagement possibilities.

1: Respect and protection of fundamental freedoms

EU policies and initiatives like the European Democracy Shield, the Global Gateway, digital policies and legislation, and financial instruments such as AgoraEU and Global Europe should support an enabling environment where civil society can thrive, express itself freely, and actively engage in shaping its context.

Freedom of expression is indispensable in an enabling environment. Citizens must feel secure in expressing opinions and sharing information online and offline. Similarly, the freedoms of association and peaceful assembly allow individuals to pursue collective goals. Protecting human rights defenders (HRDs) and protesters is essential for creating an environment conducive to civil society's activities, and a mechanism where HRDs can safely report attacks on their freedoms and receive support must be established at the EU level. When these rights are respected and protected, we have an open civic space and citizens have space to organise, participate, and communicate effectively.

2: Supportive legal and regulatory framework

Beyond safeguarding the right to associate, the autonomy and operational freedom of civil society must be ensured. Member States (and the EU if it is to adopt a cross-border law on associations) must ensure a legal and regulatory framework that facilitates their CSOs' establishment, protects against unwarranted interference, and provides a solid legal basis for their activities.

3: Accessible and sustainable resources

Civil society cannot thrive without the means to sustain itself. Accessible and sustainable resources are not just about budgets—they are about the ability of civil society to operate independently, reach marginalised populations, and respond rapidly to crises. The recent funding cuts are a stark reminder of the precarious position civil society organisations find themselves in globally.

Without sustainable support, their ability to advocate for human rights and protect marginalised communities is severely compromised. Many organisations inside and outside Europe are struggling to continue their essential work in areas such as human rights

advocacy, environmental protection, and social justice. These cuts are part of a broader rollback of support for civil society at a time when civic actors are more essential than ever.

This moment demands decisive leadership from governments, donors, and multilateral institutions. Civil society organisations cannot be expected to weather these compounding crises alone, not when their very capacity to serve communities, protect rights, and defend democratic values is under threat. Funding must be equitable, predictable, and flexible, reflecting the real costs of social impact.

The EU and Member States should make sufficient funding available through AgoraEU, National and Regional Partnership Plans and Global Europe, but also ensure a comprehensive legal and policy support that promotes diverse funding sources, minimal bureaucratic processes, transparent financial reporting, and a tax regime that incentivises both donors (official and philanthropy) and CSO actors.

Immediate long-term financial support, flexible to needs, and led by civil society actors — without being tied to any agendas — must be mobilised to stabilise the most affected organisations. Donors must go beyond short-term fixes and invest in the long-term resilience of civil society, ensuring that support is sustained, predictable, and aligned with real operational needs.

Equally urgent is stronger donor coordination at the civil society level as well. Fragmented funding landscapes are leaving gaps that authoritarian actors are quick to exploit. The EU, Member States and other international partners should work together to ensure that core areas such as democracy, human rights, media freedom, and civic participation are not deprioritised in times of crisis but instead protected as pillars of stable, inclusive societies.

European civil society must be assisted in providing support to international civil society at a time when foreign funding laws attempt to limit international cooperation, and the EU and Member States must push back against attempts by governments to limit civil society's access to genuine and legitimate international solidarity.

4: Open and responsive State

Inclusive policy dialogue is one of the most suitable tools available to promote, consolidate and maintain a democratic culture. Crucially for any democracy, civil society needs space to proactively play its democratic role as watchdog, partner in policy dialogue or provider of certain services to local populations.

A constructive engagement between the state and civil society plays a pivotal role in fostering an enabling environment, as both types of actors (public bodies and civil society actors) converge in the formulation, implementation and evaluation of public policies. This engagement should thus be characterised by transparency, accountability and meaningful,

inclusive collaboration in policy-making and governance processes. This is key for all internal and external EU policies.

The EU and Member States should ensure they better support access to public information, including clear procedures, for critical information such as laws, budgets, audits, parliamentary proceedings, etc. Policymakers should consult civil society on relevant policies and ensure inclusive participation without discrimination. To this end, it would be beneficial for the EU to create a set of guidelines for Member States on ways to structure and conduct their consultations with civil society. The EU and Member State governments should provide comprehensive feedback to civil society on the utilisation of their input in decision-making processes.

In Europe and abroad, the EU should support networking and exchange among like-minded civil society actors to promote mutual learning and cross-fertilisation of initiatives in international fora and support joint advocacy.

For policy dialogue to be meaningful and effective, it needs to be inclusive and allow for real participation among the largest possible number of stakeholders and build a first step towards setting up proper mechanisms of accountability.

5: Supportive public culture and discourses on civil society

Acknowledging civil society's contributions cultivates public support and inclusivity toward their initiatives and accomplishments, thereby strengthening their environment and eventually triggering a virtuous circle of mutual trust and recognition. Civil society needs more than financial lifelines—it needs political backing and narrative support. The EU and Member States must stand publicly with CSOs facing disinformation and delegitimisation campaigns. This includes supporting efforts to strengthen advocacy, amplify success stories, and counter false narratives that portray civil society as threats rather than essential allies in development and peacebuilding.

6: Access to a secure digital environment

The EU can help shape the online and offline space to create a safe and welcoming environment for civil society organisations and democratic actors, allowing for access to, and sharing of, information. Issues of access, rise in sophisticated digital attacks from both state and non-state actors, rapid technological advancements, and the risk of spreading online disinformation make the promotion of an inclusive and empowering digital civic space more crucial than ever.

Civil society actors should have access to digital technologies and be able to operate freely and securely in the digital space, without the threat of censorship, online manipulation, disinformation, or disruption of digital rights. Around the world, civil society organisations continue to be essential partners in governance, development and crisis response. Yet, they are increasingly facing challenges—ranging from digital restrictions to legal and financial barriers—that threaten the enabling environment in which they operate.

The EU should ensure that civil society can operate freely in the digital space, with access to information and the ability to express critical views without fear of government censorship or surveillance, and that civil society has the necessary tools to engage effectively in the digital space.

C. Promotion of the role of democratic institutions in protecting and expanding civic space

Although the State is the main duty bearer in protecting civic space, democratic actors other than the executive also interact with civil society. Political parties, whom civil society helps overcome electoral fault lines by forging consensus around key societal issues; the legislative, with whom it regularly engages to ensure laws take the needs of vulnerable groups into account; the judiciary, where CSOs play a crucial role in protecting the Rule of Law and in securing access to justice for those who lack the necessary means and resources.

Political participation at the local level is assisted by the involvement of civil society actors and grassroots movements that mobilise their communities in the decision making process, while independent media — which in many cases are non-profit and can take the legal form of CSOs — have become a beacon of civic journalism by conducting investigative reporting, fighting disinformation, and raising awareness among the population on human rights and the situation of marginalised or disadvantaged groups.

Recently, however, democratic actors themselves are undermining civil society's work and eroding its reputation. Foreign Agents Laws are being passed by parliaments and championed by political groups that accuse CSOs of meddling in the legislative process, while still abiding by pressures from other interest groups. Political parties with nationalist agendas accuse civil society of promoting foreign interests by framing basic human rights as exported impositions instead of State obligations resulting from international treaties. Judicial systems often lack the necessary safeguards to protect human rights advocates from being silenced through SLAPPs, with costly legal procedures tilting the scales of justice towards the most powerful players. Harassment and intimidation play out at the local level, especially when big investments are involved. And the role of media in building narratives that scapegoat and stereotype civil society activists has become common practice in many parts of the world.

The EU's partnership support has allowed for the design, implementation and testing of democracy support methods that now inspire work to shield the EU's own democracy against attacks from within and abroad. The EU Civil Society Strategy should make the most of this expertise and create the conditions for it to be successfully deployed in Member States through a combination of financial incentives and dedicated resources linked to the strengthened conditionality foreseen in the Multiannual Financial Framework.

D. The need for continued support to civil society abroad

The European Commission has made “Protecting our democracy, upholding our values” a core priority of this mandate. Despite some narratives to the contrary, citizens worldwide aspire to the same principles that European citizens do, and live in societies defined by inclusive values, media freedom, equality of rights for all, and independent institutions: principles that are inherent to democracy. Supporting democracy means nurturing reliable partnerships and supporting the EU’s global influence, while serving the EU’s self-interest.

Ensuring civil society can play its role is crucial for the success of policies such as the Global Gateway. The EU has stated its desire to uphold democratic values and standards in the Global Gateway, by adhering to the rule of law, upholding high standards of human, social, and workers’ rights and respecting norms of transparency, accountability and financial sustainability¹.

It is crucial for the EU to streamline this approach into its Global Gateway strategy by using civil society enabling environment assessments to understand the civic space conditions in the countries it will operate in, as risk factors for its projects, but also as bases for furthering dialogue. These can be integrated into the Civil Society Roadmaps at the country level, which should be discussed with civil society to identify dialogue mechanisms, challenges in the enabling environment to be addressed by the EU with the authorities, and support to civil society. Concrete commitments by recipient governments to an open civic space are also good guarantees for accountability, transparency and societal monitoring to ensure the most impactful and sustainable results for EU support.

By implementing dialogue processes, the EU can help lower the barriers of entry to the ‘market’ of policy-making for civil society in the complex areas that it will address under Global Gateway — from digital to infrastructure, climate, education and health — and facilitate contacts between civil society and government. Those most involved in EU projects — local communities, businesses and partners — must have their say, directly or through civil society representatives, so that new infrastructures can have a positive impact on their livelihoods and trigger the virtuous cycle of development that those investments have the potential to unleash.

E. The EU needs to ensure that consultation of, and support to, civil society is fully integrated in all of its policies.

Mainstreaming civil society in all policies involves the systematic inclusion of civil society in all stages of policymaking, from consultation and dialogue to partnership in implementation. This approach leverages CSOs’ on-the-ground expertise, ensures policies meet people’s needs, and fulfils the “leave no one behind” commitment, while promoting

¹ [Joint Communication](#) to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee, the Committee of the Regions and the European Investment Bank: “The Global Gateway »

democratic governance and resilience. Civil society's input should feed into sectoral policies' intervention logic, selection of indicators, etc., to ensure that the interests of all sectors of society, particularly of vulnerable and marginalised groups, are considered and foster ownership of their own development. CSOs should be allowed to supply a full range of services to the population within sectors or programmes, working with grassroots communities, developing their capacities, conducting fact-finding, and working with the public and private sectors. The EU and its Member States should allow civil society to play its watchdog role, monitor the performance of the specific policies, provide alternative data, evidence, and analyses to complement policy discussions, and present independent views and findings. Civil society should be supported and protected in carrying out this work, and, in third countries, the EU should press partner governments to do the same.