

No More Box-Ticking: Civil Society's Demands for a Stronger Rule of Law Report

Article text

The undersigned 37 civil society, human rights, journalism and media support organisations urgently call on the European Commission to take more direct and verifiable measures to uphold, protect and restore the rule of law within the European Union and in the candidate countries.

On 17 July 2026, the European Commission will publish its seventh annual Rule of Law Report. The political and institutional landscape has changed significantly: at a time of geopolitical turbulence and security threats at the EU's borders and abroad, debates on the rule of law in Europe appear to have been sidelined. This situation is set against a backdrop of a continuing democratic backsliding and increasing restrictions on civic space in various Member States, as demonstrated by the Rule of Law Reports of previous years. The European Democracy Shield recognises the explicit need to bolster the internal protection of the EU's democracies and the rule of law. Yet the Rule of Law Reports appear to be drafted in a routine manner, in isolation from other EU instruments that seek to protect democratic pillars, and as a mere stock-taking exercise, without meaningful follow-up or conditionality imposed on Member State or candidate country governments.

The credibility of the EU's rule of law agenda depends in part on the EU holding itself to the same standards it demands of its Member States. The Commission, the Council, the Parliament and the agencies must operate transparently, respect judicial powers and avoid measures that circumvent legal norms or democratic accountability in the name of political expediency.

As part of the ongoing negotiations on the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2028–2034, it will be essential to incorporate rule of law conditionality into all EU funds. The lack of follow-up on the recommendations made in previous Rule of Law Reports, as well as the full and effective implementation of the Digital Services Act, the European Media Freedom Act, and the Anti-SLAPP Directive, remains a cause for major concern.

In order to improve the quality and effectiveness of the Rule of Law Report and to collaborate more effectively with stakeholders in this process, we call on the Commission to:

1. Make rule of law conditionality a top priority in the next MFF.
2. Strengthen the link between the Rule of Law Report and the Rule of Law toolbox, and enhance its visibility, follow-up, and judiciary-related recommendations.
3. Increase civic space coverage in the Rule of Law Reports to detect early signs of civic space restrictions.
4. Take firm and systematic action against the non-implementation of court rulings.
5. Protect media freedom by enforcing EU laws, combating political and judicial harassment, and encouraging stronger national safeguards.
6. Assess the rule of law recovery and challenges in Member States to shape targeted support and a clear roadmap against backsliding.
7. Integrate all candidate countries into the Rule of Law Report and meaningfully connect the implementation of recommendations to EU pre-accession funding.

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Signatories

1. ALDA — European Association for Local Democracy
2. Amnesty International
3. Association for International Affairs (AMO)
4. ARTICLE 19 Europe
5. Avocats Sans Frontières Belgium
6. CaraDem
7. Center for Reproductive Rights
8. Committee to Protect Journalists
9. CRTA (Centre for Research, Transparency and Accountability - Belgrade, Serbia)
10. Democracy International
11. Democracy Reporting International (DRI)
12. European Centre for Research, Transparency and Accountability (EUCRTA)
13. European Federation of Journalists
14. European Implementation Network (EIN)
15. European Partnership for Democracy
16. European Policy Institute- Skopje
17. FIACAT : Fédération internationale des ACAT / International Federation of ACAT
18. FIDH (International Federation for Human Rights)

19. Free Press Unlimited
20. Glopolis
21. Humanists International
22. Human Rights House Foundation
23. Human Rights House Zagreb
24. Hungarian Helsinki Committee
25. Ifex
26. ILGA-Europe
27. International Commission of Jurists
28. International Planned Parenthood Federation - European Network (IPPF EN)
29. Lobbio
30. Netherlands Helsinki Committee
31. Open Society Fund Czechia
32. Our Rule of Law
33. Political Parties of Finland for Democracy – Demo Finland
34. Reporters Without Borders (RSF)
35. South East Europe Media Organisation (SEEMO)
36. The Good Lobby
37. The Good Lobby Profs