

Civil society for EU

2024 EU ELECTIONS

MANIFESTO

FOR BETTER CIVIC SPACE AND CIVIL DIALOGUE

Civil society is an essential part of healthy democracies. We play a key role in promoting and protecting the rule of law and **fundamental rights**. We provide crucial and empowering services that enable people and societies to be more resilient in times of crisis, and more inclusive overall. We provide a platform for people - especially marginalised groups - to connect with policy-makers and participate in decisions that affect them.

Yet, civic space - the political, legislative, social and economic environment that enables people and civil society actors to play their role in shaping our societies - is shrinking all over the world, with **growing restrictions at all levels**. The EU and its Member States are no exception to this trend. Moreover, civil dialogue - the essential exchange between civil society and policy-makers - is not sufficiently open, transparent or regular, leading to a democratic deficit which means that many people living in the EU are uncatered for.

We envisage a European Union where civic space is strengthened and civil dialogue is valued and encouraged, so that we as civil society - including the philanthropy sector – can continue to exercise our vital role in achieving **positive social outcomes** and increased wellbeing for all.

We call on European political parties and groups to make civic space and civil dialogue central topics in the 2024 European elections, and on the future European Parliament and European Commission to take concrete steps during the next five years to better recognise, protect and engage civil society at all levels.

A EUROPEAN CIVIL SOCIETY STRATEGY

While some encouraging measures have been taken at European level in support of civic actors, these will have limited impact in countering the shrinking space trend if there is no comprehensive EU strategy dedicated to civil society. To fill the gaps in existing policies and to mainstream positive practices, we call on the EU institutions to develop a Civil Society Strategy aimed at **strengthening civil society organisations (CSOs) and human rights defenders and at protecting them** from attacks and smear campaigns, with the following key areas:

A SAFE AND ENABLING ENVIRONMENT FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

- An open, safe, accessible and enabling regulatory and political environment is a prerequisite for civil society to thrive and meaningfully play its fundamental role. All restrictions to civic space and barriers to action must be removed, and freedom of association, assembly and expression must be guaranteed at any time in all civic matters, as enshrined in EU and international law.
- We call on decision-makers and institutions at EU and national level to commit to the formal recognition of the role, value, and specificity of civil society, and to speak up to promote them. They should also commit to protect and support CSOs through different regulatory and policy measures, as well as ensure that all policies impacting the civil society sector are in line with EU fundamental rights.
- As societal challenges have an increasingly European or even global dimension, it is critical to enable full transnational cooperation among CSOs. Existing obstacles to civil society cross-border activities - e.g. legal and fiscal uncertainties - should be addressed.

AN EU MECHANISM TO PROTECT CIVIL SOCIETY, ACTIVISTS AND DEFENDERS

- Civil society staff and volunteers, human rights and environmental activists and defenders, as well as the communities they represent, must be protected from all forms of discrimination on any ground, and from judicial or other forms of harassment, violence or ill-treatment. Special attention should be placed on minorities, marginalised groups and those who defend them, who are more frequently under attack.
- We call on the EU to develop a mechanism that allows CSOs, activists and defenders to report on an ongoing basis all forms of attacks, threats, smear campaigns and limitations of civic space, and to address such reports in a timely manner. This mechanism should include an early warning system to help prevent such threats from arising.

ADEQUATE FUNDING

- As civil society actors we need proper human, material and financial resources to carry out our role effectively. Access to multi-annual, consistent, and flexible structural funding for CSOs should be guaranteed to respond to operational needs and ensure stability, long-term planning and independence.

- Civil society should be involved from the beginning in the design of funding policies and programmes, including the definition of thematic priorities and accessibility criteria. A structured mechanism should be put in place to ensure adequate and regular dialogue and information flow between civil society and public donors on the implementation of funding programmes.
- Overall accessibility to funding should be increased, especially for small-size, grassroots and volunteer-run organisations, by simplifying administrative procedures and reducing the overall bureaucratic burden. CSOs should also be guaranteed increased access to core funding in the shape of grants, to carry out their policy and advocacy work on behalf of the groups and communities they represent.
- EU and national policies should remove regulatory and fiscal obstacles to access funding and donations, including across borders, and facilitate cross-border philanthropy.

A CIVIL DIALOGUE AGREEMENT

Civil dialogue should be organised on an equal footing to social dialogue along the entire policy-making cycle and treated as distinct and complementary to forms of citizen engagement. We call on the EU institutions to conclude a civil dialogue agreement, **recognising civil dialogue as an essential element of European participatory democracy**. This agreement should be developed in cooperation with civil society, to ensure it fully reflects its needs. It should aim to harmonise standards for civil dialogue across EU institutions and Member States, so that every opportunity for civil dialogue leads to quality engagement. It should also provide space for cross-sectoral dialogue on transversal developments and strategic priorities.

- CSOs in all their diversity need to be given a real seat at the table to contribute meaningfully to all steps of policy-making - at both EU and national level - on behalf of the groups and communities they represent, going beyond box ticking exercises and consultations. CSOs should be involved as key strategic partners in the co-creation of policies, programme development, policy debates and agenda-setting exercises, among others.
- Openness and transparency of EU and national policy processes should be increased, ensuring effective access to decision-makers and to documents - including legislative preparatory works - and making all relevant information available in an accessible, clear and timely manner.
- The mandate of the Vice President of both the European Parliament and the European Commission in charge of dialogue with civil society needs to be confirmed and further strengthened. It should be developed to ensure a more structured civil dialogue, as well as to assess overall coherence of EU policies impacting on civil society, with the aim of supporting a thriving civic space. The mandate should also include proactive support for civic actors under pressure.
- Permanent civil dialogue structures should be created at the appropriate level in each relevant Member State and EU institution - including the European Council - ensuring overall consistency and coordination within and among institutions. CSOs taking part in such structures should receive adequate support in terms of funding and resources to ensure the operational capacity to meaningfully participate in such dialogues.

ABOUT THE MANIFESTO PROPONENTS

Civil Society for EU is a broad and diverse coalition of civil society and philanthropy organisations at the EU and national level, working in fields such as human rights, social policies, international cooperation, democracy support, environment, health, youth, children, women and girls, and the representation of marginalised groups. We collectively represent millions of people living in the EU and are independent of any political party.

For all matters regarding the manifesto and campaign, please contact Social Platform and Civil Society Europe at: platform@socialplatform.org or info@civilsocietyeurope.eu

Initial list of endorsers:

1. ACODEV
2. ACT Alliance EU
3. Alcohol Action Ireland
4. Alzheimer Europe
5. Amnesty International - European Institutions Office
6. Asociación Española de Deficit de Lipasa Acida Lisosomal (AELALD)
7. Association des Femmes de l'Europe Méridionale (AFEM)
8. Association for Natural Medicine in Europe (ANME)
9. Associazione Italiana Medici per l'Ambiente (ISDE)
10. Bundesnetzwerk Bürgerschaftliches Engagement
11. Caritas Europa
12. Centre for European Volunteering (CEV)
13. Civic Alliance - Latvia
14. CIVICUS
15. Civil Liberties Union for Europe
16. Civil Society Europe
17. Clean Air Action Group
18. CNCD-11.11.11
19. CONCORD Europe
20. Corporate Europe Observatory
21. Democracy Reporting International
22. Ekopolis Foundation
23. EU4Health Civil Society Alliance
24. Eurochild
25. Eurodiaconia
26. European Association for Local Democracy (ALDA)
27. European Association of Service
28. Providers for People with Disabilities (EASPD)
29. European Center for Not-for-Profit Law Stichting
30. European Civic Forum
31. European Council of Associations of General Interest (CEDAG)
32. European Disability Forum
33. European Forum of Muslim Women
34. European House
35. European Liver Patients' Organisation (ELPA)
36. European Movement Italy
37. European Network for Smoking and Tobacco Prevention
38. European Patients' Forum
39. European Public Health Alliance (EPHA)
40. European Roma Grassroots Organisations (ERGO) Network
41. European Students' Union (ESU)
42. European Youth Forum
43. EURORDIS - Rare Diseases Europe
44. Friends of the Earth Europe
45. Fundatia Pentru Parteneriat
46. Health Action International
47. International Federation of Social Workers Europe
48. International Planned Parenthood Federation European Network (IPPF EN)
49. International Sport and Culture Association (ISCA)
50. Latvian Network of Patient Organizations
51. Lifelong Learning Platform
52. Ligue de l'Enseignement
53. Make Mothers Matter
54. Malta Health Network
55. Nyt Europa
56. Ökotárs - Hungarian Environmental Partnership Foundation
57. Ómnium Cultural
58. Partnership Fund
59. Philea
60. Plataforma Portuguesa das ONGD
61. Réseau Euromed France (REF)
62. Roots and Wings Foundation
63. Sanca Pre Pecen
64. Social Platform
65. SOLIDAR
66. The Good Lobby
67. Transparency International EU
68. Women Against Violence Europe (WAVE) Network
69. YES Forum

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