

EU Civil Society Strategy - Open Public Consultation

Fields marked with * are mandatory.

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Introduction

Civil society organisations, which are frequently referred to as non-State, not-for-profit, non-partisan and non-violent structures, through which people organise to pursue shared objectives and ideals[1], play diverse roles across our society and are active in several sectors, ranging from awareness-raising, education, providing support or services, policy monitoring and advocacy. The implementation of EU law and policies on the ground is often entrusted to these actors.

Civil society organisations strengthen social cohesion and preparedness, enhance policy effectiveness, and ensure that the voices of affected communities are heard. The engagement of such organisations is also a crucial element in the system of democratic checks and balances and the promotion and defence of EU values.

The Commission uses a comprehensive toolbox to support and involve civil society organisations. In addition to dialogues in a wide range of policy areas and the Better Regulation channels of consultation, there is regular involvement in a high number of our Commission expert groups, providing extensive tools and opportunities for all interested stakeholders to contribute throughout the policy-making cycle. The European Economic and Social Committee plays a key role in the engagement with civil society.

An enabling environment, which fosters meaningful engagement and participation and provides further support, is essential for all civil society organisations to carry out their work and contribute to EU policies. A safe and enabling environment for civil society organisations means a space where their fundamental rights and those of their members are protected. They should be able to pursue their activities without interference, and with sufficient and transparent access to financial resources, and steps at EU level should be taken to promote and protect the civic space and those active within it.

The need for stepping up engagement with and protection of civil society at EU level was stressed in the Commission President's Political Guidelines for 2024-2029, and reiterated in the mission letter to the Commissioner for Democracy, Justice, the Rule of Law and Consumer Protection. The EU Civil Society Strategy builds on this

political commitment and on Recommendation 2023/2836 on promoting the engagement and effective participation of citizens and civil society organisations in public policy-making processes, adopted as part of the Defence of Democracy Package.

Acknowledging the importance of the work done by civil society organisations for the success of EU policies, the EU Civil Society Strategy would establish a framework for action, both at EU and national level; its key objectives would be to foster dialogue with civil society actors and provide them with the necessary support and protection so that they can carry out their work.

The Commission would like to consult the general public and stakeholders on the key issues that the Strategy should address, structured around:

- The role of civil society organisations in the European Union;
- Challenges and risks faced by civil society organisations in the European Union;
- Measures currently in place at national and EU level to engage with, support and protect civil society organisations;
- Further steps to be taken at EU level to engage with civil society organisations and to support and protect them in their work.

Stakeholders likely to be interested in this initiative include:

- individual citizens
- Member States' national authorities
- EU institutions and bodies, including the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee, the European Committee of the Regions, EU Agencies
- international organisations, such as the Council of Europe, OSCE-ODHIR, the OECD and the United Nations
- relevant EU-level networks
- civil society organisations (including youth organisations) and their networks/umbrella organisations
- national human rights institutions, equality bodies and their networks
- representatives of academia and researchers
- donors at national, EU and international level

[1] For the purpose of this public consultation, any reference to 'civil society organisations' should be understood as referring also to 'human rights defenders'. See also the term used in Commission Recommendation (EU) 2023 /2836 of 12 December 2023 on promoting the engagement and effective participation of citizens and civil society organisations in public policy-making processes.

About you/your organisation

* I am giving my contribution as:

- Individual
- Civil society organisation
- Network/umbrella organisation for civil society organisations
- Academic or research institute
- Business association
- Company/business
- Consumer organisation, including passenger rights' organisations
- National human rights institution or equality body
- Network of national human rights institutions or equality bodies
- Public authority in EU Member State (municipal, local, regional or national level)
- Public authority (EU level)
- Public authority non-EU Member State
- International organisation
- Trade union

* At which level do you primarily work?

- International level
- EU level
- Transnational level
- National level
- Regional or interregional level

The role of civil society organisations in the European Union

In your view, what are the main areas in which civil society organisations contribute to society in the EU and at national level? (Please rank each option according to the importance, from 1-5, **1 =most important**)

	1	2	3	4	5
* Representing and giving voice to different communities and interest groups	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Advocating for policy change and defending fundamental rights and other common values, such as democracy and the rule of law	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Delivering services and support to communities and individuals, including victim assistance and support	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

* Acting as watchdogs and promoting transparency, accountability, and good governance	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Strengthening social cohesion	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Strengthening societal resilience and crisis preparedness	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Strengthening democratic participation, and civic engagement	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Accompanying the implementation of EU policies	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Other	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>

If Other, please specify

1500 character(s) maximum

In your view, what role do civil society organisations play in your Member State?

1500 character(s) maximum

Civil society organisations (CSOs) are essential drivers of participation, accountability, and inclusion in democratic life. They bridge the gap between people and decision-makers, amplify diverse perspectives, and help ensure that policies reflect the needs and rights of the communities they serve. Beyond advocacy, they provide expertise, monitor policy implementation, and mobilise citizens around shared values such as equality, sustainability, and human rights. By giving space to underrepresented groups, CSOs help strengthen social cohesion, resilience, and collective action in the face of emerging challenges. Within this broader landscape, public health CSOs play a particularly important role. They contribute specialised knowledge to shape health policy, monitor the impact of health-related legislation, and advocate for approaches that protect and promote well-being for all. These organisations elevate the voices of patients, health workers, and vulnerable communities, ensuring that health systems and policies address real-world needs. They also engage in public awareness, deliver services, and foster cross-sector collaboration, making them vital partners in building healthier, more equitable societies.

Challenges and risks faced by civil society organisations in the European Union

Please indicate your perception of the challenges and risks faced by civil society organisations in the European Union. You can provide examples in the field below.

	Very high	High	Neutral	Low	Very low	Do not know
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* Restrictive legal framework/legal barriers (disproportionate legislative restrictions concerning the freedom of association, access to information, loss of charitable/public benefit status etc.)	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Legal action / strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs)	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Criminalisation of the work of civil society organisations	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Subjection to disproportionate or burdensome fines	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>
* Administrative barriers (burdensome registration processes, excessive administrative requirements or controls)	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Suspected surveillance (e.g. by law enforcement)	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Verbal threats and attacks against civil society organisations offline and online (e.g. online threats or harassment, disinformation)	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Negative media reports/campaigns	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Physical threats and attacks (e.g. vandalism of premises or property, physical attacks against employees/volunteers)	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Limits on access to information	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Censorship (e.g. the suppression of public communication, other information by public authorities)	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Limited or inflexible funding, funding cuts	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Operational challenges (e.g. staffing, use of digital tools, cybersecurity, lack of specialised knowledge /training)	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Legal fragmentation within the EU and difficulties to operate in other EU Member States (e.g. due to lack of recognition, administrative burden, etc.)	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Other types of challenges (if aware, please provide examples below)	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

If relevant, please provide an example in accordance with the above identified challenges

1500 character(s) maximum

Health-focused CSOs across Europe are increasingly operating in a challenging civic space. While their work is essential to safeguarding public health, reducing inequities, and giving a voice to patients and communities, many face restrictive and challenging environments that reduce their ability to advocate effectively or respond to emerging health needs. Public health CSOs are not immune to the broader pressures facing civil society, including smear campaigns, political attacks, and efforts to discredit advocacy as “political” rather than legitimate public interest work. Funding barriers remain a major concern, with shrinking public resources and uncertainty over EU-level funding for advocacy-related activities making CSOs independence and continuity of operation vulnerable. The abrupt disappearance of EU4Health operating grants in 2025, despite organisations having signed Framework Partnership Agreements with the European Commission, exemplifies the lack of predictability and due process in EU funding. This sudden shift has left many CSOs in survival mode, undermining their ability to deliver on agreed objectives or sustain long-term work for systemic change. These challenges limit the capacity of health CSOs to meaningfully engage in policy-making, contribute their expertise, and represent affected communities.

If other types of challenges, please provide examples

1500 character(s) maximum

Why do you think it is important to protect civil society organisations?

1500 character(s) maximum

CSOs are essential pillars of democratic life. They connect citizens with decision-makers, promote accountability, defend rights, and ensure policymaking reflects diverse perspectives. Protecting CSOs requires safeguarding the freedoms of association, assembly, and expression that allow them to operate independently and in the public interest. In the health sphere, CSOs are particularly vital. They deliver services that reach communities often missed by mainstream systems, respond rapidly to emerging health threats, and support continuity of care and public health communication in times of crisis. They support governance by contributing independent evidence, sharing lived experience, and monitoring the fairness and effectiveness of health policies. As advocates, they champion equitable access to healthcare, stronger public health systems that meet people’s needs, and prevention-focused approaches that put people’s well-being before commercial or political interests. When health CSOs are free to operate, they protect the right to health and strengthen societal resilience and trust in institutions. Restricting their space undermines both democracy and public health outcomes.

In your view, are some civil society organisation facing particular challenges/more at risk than other civil society organisations (e.g. working on different topics or providing different services)?

- Yes
- No

If YES, in which areas are these civil society organisations active? And which particular challenges / risks are they facing?

1500 character(s) maximum

CSOs working in areas where the public interest directly conflicts with powerful commercial interests are particularly at risk. In health, organisations advocating for stronger regulation of harmful products, greater transparency, and equitable access to care face lobbying pressure, reputational attacks, and attempts to curtail their influence. These pressures are compounded by cuts and uncertainty in EU4Health funding, threatening both service delivery and advocacy. Environmental NGOs encounter similar challenges in the LIFE programme, alongside opposition from industries with vested interests. Such conditions undermine the ability of these organisations to act in the public good. The European Union has a legal and moral obligation, under the Charter of Fundamental Rights and the EU Treaties, to safeguard freedom of expression, association, and participation, and to ensure that civic actors can operate without undue interference, delivering fully on its commitments to citizens' rights and the advancement of the common good.

What is your overall assessment of how these challenges for civil society organisations have evolved over the last 5 years?

- Significantly improved
- Somewhat improved
- Stayed the same
- Somewhat worse
- Much worse

(Optional follow-up): Please briefly describe how the situation has worsened/improved.

1500 character(s) maximum

Across Europe, organisations face restricted access to public funding and more complex compliance obligations, or risk deregistration for administrative reasons. Groups working on issues where public interest and powerful commercial or political agendas collide are particularly vulnerable. They report smear campaigns, excessive scrutiny, and even legal intimidation, all of which drain resources and discourage participation. For health CSOs, these pressures have grown sharper. The shift in EU4Health from stable operating grants to short-term, project-based funding has created uncertainty, forcing some organisations to cut staff or reduce core activities. This undermines their ability to sustain long-term advocacy, provide consistent input into policymaking, or maintain essential community-based services. Similar trends in other EU programmes, such as environmental funding under LIFE, point to a wider risk: without predictable support and freedom from undue interference, CSOs cannot fully act in the public good, weakening both democratic accountability and outcomes.

Existing measures to support and create an enabling environment for civil society organisations

In your view, how effectively does your country support an enabling environment for civil society organisations to operate freely and independently?

- Very effectively
- Somewhat effectively
- Not very effectively
- Not at all effectively
- Do not know

Which of the following measures do you think are most important to ensure a safe and supportive environment for civil society organisations in your country?

Maximum 3 selection(s)

- Legal protections for freedom of association, assembly and expression
- Access to predictable, transparent and sustainable funding
- Clear rules and transparent criteria for participation in policymaking and public consultations, and effective mechanisms to enable such participation (e.g. access to information, regular feedback cycles)
- Protection from threats, harassment or attacks
- Public recognition and awareness of civil society organisation's work
- Impact assessments on the impact of laws on civil society organisations
- National policies or strategies on civil society
- Other

Dialogue / Participation

Are you aware of existing rules or structure in **your country** (EU Member State(s)) concerning how public authorities engage with civil society organisations, in particular to allow them to meaningfully participate in the decision-making process? If so, please provide examples, in particular of any relevant best practices.

1500 character(s) maximum

Are you aware of existing measures **at EU level** to engage with civil society organisations, in particular to allow them to meaningfully participate in the decision-making process? If so, please provide examples, in particular of any relevant best practices.

1500 character(s) maximum

The EU has established multiple channels for engaging with civil society—such as consultations, expert groups, thematic forums, and programme-specific dialogues, but these operate in a context where there is a widening imbalance in resources and access to decision-makers between CSOs and well-resourced commercial actors. This unequal playing field means civil society input often struggles to compete with the reach and influence of vested interests. Opportunities for engagement are also often irregular, narrowly framed, or designed to validate pre-determined policy options. Short deadlines, inaccessible formats, and limited feedback on how contributions are used further weaken the process. Lack of training and financial support to prepare for and attend meetings is also an obstacle to CSO meaningful participation. The lack of a binding EU-wide framework for civil dialogue results in uneven participation across institutions and policy areas. In health, CSOs bring critical expertise from service delivery, community engagement, and patient advocacy, yet are too often confined to late-stage consultations rather than sustained policy co-creation. This underuses their ability to strengthen prevention, equity, and resilience in health systems.

* What further measures could be considered by the EU to engage with civil society organisations to ensure they can meaningfully participate in the decision-making process at EU level?

1500 character(s) maximum

To make civil society participation meaningful, the EU should adopt a binding Interinstitutional Agreement on Civil Dialogue under Article 11 TEU. This must guarantee structured, inclusive engagement at every stage of policymaking and assign clear responsibilities within each institution. Dedicated CSO contact points, sufficient staffing, and genuine feedback loops are essential to meaningful engagement and participation. Above all, predictable, accessible funding is critical, as without it, many organisations, especially those in health, cannot maintain the sustained preparatory work and presence needed to contribute expertise across all issues addressed at EU level. Financial support must be paired with capacity-building support, especially for smaller and grassroots CSOs, and for the EU staff who work with them. Inclusivity should be cornerstone, with multilingual processes and plain-language outputs, accessible formats and venues, targeted outreach and consultations on issues of particular relevance to CSOs, hybrid options, and participation supports. The proposed Civil Society Platform should be co-created with CSOs, integrated into a permanent framework, and ensure diverse representation, regular high-level dialogue, and follow-up on outcomes. Civil dialogue should be recognised as distinct from, citizen and social dialogue, but also complementary to it, with the same institutional backing, transparency, and accountability.

In your view, in which policy areas should civil society participation be further strengthened?

1500 character(s) maximum

Civil society participation should be strengthened across all policy areas, but health stands out as an urgent priority. CSOs working in health promotion, disease prevention, service delivery, community engagement, and patient advocacy bring essential expertise that should inform EU action on crisis preparedness and emergency response, climate and environmental action, digital transformation, social inclusion, and fundamental rights. Investment in public health is a precondition for the well-functioning of our society and economy. This makes it a natural focal point for deeper, more consistent civil society involvement in EU policymaking.

Protection

Are you aware of existing measures **in your country** to protect civil society organisations that are at risk? If so, please provide examples, in particular of any relevant best practices.

1500 character(s) maximum

Are you aware of existing measures **at EU level** to protect civil society organisations that are at risk? If so, please provide examples, in particular of any relevant best practices.

1500 character(s) maximum

Please indicate which of the following measures, to be taken at EU level, would in your view be most important to protect civil society organisations in the EU (ranking from 1 to 5, 1=most important)

	1	2	3	4	5
* Gather, consolidate and report information on the situation of civil society organisations across the EU	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

* Introduce specific protection measures for civil society organisations facing threats and attacks at national level (e.g. hotlines, dedicated complaint mechanisms within police structures, psychological support, safe housing, relocation, etc.)	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Strengthen the role of National Human Rights Institutions to protect civil society organisations	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Specific protection measures for civil society organisations facing threats at EU level	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Funding for civil society organisations promoting democracy and common values	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Funding for civil society for protection measures, including legal, cyber, physical and psychological protection	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Funding for capacity building and training of civil society organisations, including on holistic protection	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Work with international organisations to strengthen the protection for civil society organisations	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Reinforce regular dialogue with civil society organisations at national level	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Support to EU Member States to put in place participation frameworks for civil society organisations	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Reinforce regular dialogue with civil society organisations at EU level	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Facilitate cross-border activities of civil society organisations in the EU	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

What further measures could be considered by the EU to better protect civil society organisations that are at risk?

1500 character(s) maximum

The EU should act on two fronts: Enabling environment & quality of participation – Institutionalise civil dialogue across the policy cycle with clear mandates and ‘you said–we did’ uptake – Provide predictable, multi-year core funding and ring-fenced budgets for participation costs – Build capacities on both sides: tailored support for CSOs (especially smaller/grassroots) and guidance/training for EU and national officials – Guarantee equitable access with practical enablers: multilingual materials, accessibility, and travel support – Monitor and evaluate participation quality and outcomes, and publish feedback on how inputs shaped decisions – Keep a youth lens with dedicated spaces and resources for youth organisations Protective armour & enforcement when civic space is under attack – Create an EU Civil Society Protection Mechanism as a single entry point with 24/7 help, rapid micro-grants, legal and psychosocial support – Set minimum legal safeguards for civic space, with ex-ante civic-space checks and early-warning triggers linked to infringement action – Strengthen anti-SLAPP in practice with fast-track dismissal, penalties for abusive litigants and pooled defence funds

Funding

* How important do you think it is to provide public funding at EU and national level for civil society organisations' activities to support them in the various roles they play in society (e.g. advocacy, support services, watchdog function, awareness raising, etc.)

- Very important
- Important
- Moderately important
- Slightly important
- Not important
- Do not know / no opinion

Do you think that public funding provided in your country for the work of civil society organisations is sufficiently accessible and transparent?

- Yes, it is generally transparent and accessible
- It is somewhat transparent and accessible, but improvements are needed
- No, it lacks sufficient transparency and accessibility
- I am not aware of how funding is managed
- Do not know / No opinion

What are the main obstacles preventing civil society organisations from fully benefiting from public funds at national or EU level?

1500 character(s) maximum

Civil society organisations face long-standing obstacles in fully accessing public funds at EU level, with health actors among the most affected. Funding remains largely short-term and tied to specific projects, lately with no provision for core, flexible support needed for staffing, operational stability, and long-term planning. The removal of operating grants under EU4Health, despite the signature of Framework Partnership Agreements for operating grants for 2025-2026 has created financial uncertainty, reduced capacity, and made sustained engagement in prevention, service delivery, and health policy directly affecting vulnerable communities impossible to maintain. In addition, the EU4Health Work Programme for 2025 was significantly delayed, which prevented health NGOs from preparing for significant budget reductions. Restrictive and retroactive eligibility criteria limit NGOs' ability to apply and diversify their funding sources. Administrative complexity in applications and reporting disproportionately impacts smaller and community-based organisations. At the same time, restrictions on using public funds for legitimate, independent, and public-good oriented advocacy, recently introduced in both health and environmental programmes, undermine the ability of CSOs to influence policy in the public interest. Delay, lack of transparency, and unpredictability in funding cycles and budget reallocations further disrupt operations.

* Do you think that the current legal frameworks in the EU sufficiently allow for cross-border funding (e.g. donations made from a donor in one Member State to a civil society organisation based in another Member State)?

- Yes
- Improvements are needed
- No, there are barriers
- Do not know / No opinion

Are smaller, grassroots or marginalised community-based civil society organisations adequately supported by existing funding mechanisms?

1500 character(s) maximum

Smaller, grassroots and marginalised community-based CSOs face high barriers to EU funding. Evidence points to complex calls and portals, tight timelines, heavy reporting and co-financing that favour larger players with dedicated admin teams. The European Parliament has flagged that small NGOs struggle with cumbersome administrative procedures and urged simplification and proportionate reporting.

Contact

[Contact Form](#)