



Contribution to the EU Call for Evidence on the EU Civil Society Strategy

Meaningful Civil Society Strategy: Anchoring Civil Space at the Heart of EU Policy Architecture

The European Union stands at a defining crossroads. The international system that once upheld rights-based governance is fracturing. A rising number of authoritarian tendencies across diverse countries accelerated the erosion of global democratic norms. Key allies are retreating from multilateralism, human rights institutions face political and financial attrition, and authoritarian regimes are exploiting this vacuum to reshape international rules in their image. We are witnessing a [Global Realignment](#). At the same time, inside Europe, civic space is purposefully eroded in several member states, while security and defence imperatives increasingly dominate the EU's agenda, sidelining human rights, development and civic space commitments. Moreover, the Commission's [recent Rule of Law report](#) lays the ground for a reinforced approach of the EU regarding civil society issues.

In this context, the European Union has a responsibility — and an opportunity — to step into a vital leadership role. It must reclaim the normative high ground by embedding human rights and rule of law, civic space and democratic resilience at the core of its internal and external strategies. Protecting and promoting the Union's fundamental values must be strongly reflected in commitment and investment for the rule of law and civic space within the current processes and frameworks, such as the Democracy Shield and Civil Society Strategy for a more resilient European civil society. The **Civil Society Strategy** is a critical step in that direction: it can serve as the expression of a broader European commitment to civic and democratic renewal at home and abroad. As the strongest global supporter of civil society, the EU must match that ambition at home.

1. Reconnecting with strategic priorities: Democracy, Security, Rule of Law

As outlined in [Europe's Real Security Challenge](#), the EU's current security paradigm remains overly focused on military capacity. Europe's security threats are however hybrid: disinformation, institutional capture, and [internal erosion](#) of



rule of law, human rights and ultimately democracies. Civil society is Europe's immune system.

The Civil Society Strategy must be meaningfully linked to:

- The Democracy Shield initiative, reinforcing commitments to create cohesion;
- The EU Rule of Law Mechanism, by meaningfully incorporating systematic input from civil society in country assessments;
- The EU Security and Defence agenda, ensuring that human security and civic space are recognised as integral components of long-term resilience;
- The new MFF, to invest in civic space formalising the role of CSOs as monitoring and accountability agents in upholding rule of law and fundamental rights;
- The EU Global Gateway, to further recognize the vital role of civil society in ensuring value-based investments implemented in a transparent and accountable manner.

2. Providing a strategic alignment

The Strategy's strength and relevance will depend on its ability to articulate not just how the EU supports civil society, but why it matters strategically to its development, economic, security, defence and other agendas. We suggest embedding the following orientations toward purpose-driven framing:

- Embed civil society as a governance, development and economic actor, not a policy beneficiary: vital for resilience, social cohesion, sustainable economy and rights enforcement;
- Articulate the added value of civil society in addressing Europe's complex challenges: managing the green and digital transitions, countering disinformation, strengthening inclusive democracy and the new paradigm of security;
- Highlight civic space and core freedoms relevant for people organizing and contribution to society as a precondition for legitimacy, participation and implementation of EU law and policy;
- Recognise that democratic resilience is not just about institutions, but about people — and civil society is the infrastructure through which people organise, act, and shape Europe's future.

This alignment should not replace operational support, but inform how support is designed, to ensure it is embedded in a vision of shared democratic ownership.

3. Vision: What civil society does EU need in 2025– 2030?

To deliver on the strategic purpose of the Civil Society Strategy, the EU must define not only the support instruments it offers, but the kind of civic infrastructure it wants to foster. This means articulating a vision of civil society as a vital component of the EU's democratic, economic and resilience architecture—one that reflects the complexity of today's challenges and the diversity of Europe's people.

Drawing on [existing](#) and emerging strategic [future thinking](#), the EU must foster a civil society that is:

- Strategic: acting not just as implementers but as co-shapers of public policy;
- Intersectional and diverse: engaging across movements (climate, gender, migration, digital rights);
- Embedded and transnational: rooted in local realities but connected across borders;
- Resilient: protected from political and financial retaliation, empowered to speak truth to power.

A gender-sensitive civil society is indispensable for an inclusive democratic future. Women's organisations and feminist movements have long been engines of democratic reform and social justice. The Strategy should recognise and invest in gender equality as both a cross-cutting value and a specific priority.

To invest in strengthening such a civil society, responsive to current and future challenges, the Strategy should:

- Promote leadership development and civic innovation through dedicated EU programmes;
- Ensure predictable, long-term and flexible funding that prioritises mission over short term projects;
- Facilitate legal environments and infrastructures that enable cross-border cooperation, civic freedoms and inclusive participation at all levels;
- Empower communities at the margins, including youth, migrants, LGBTQ people, women and elderly, facing systemic barriers to participation, to organise and participate fully.

4. Recommendations: A strategy to match the moment

A. Anchor civil society in EU wider geopolitical strategy

Ground the Civil Society Strategy in the EU's broader response to global shifts realignment ensures it strategic significance. Civic space is not a side issue — it is essential to defending Europe's democratic integrity, economic sustainability and social cohesion.

- Define civic space as essential to European sovereignty, resilience, and economic sustainable development.
- Communicate the Strategy as part of rebuilding public trust in EU institutions and reinvigorate support for people rights and participation per Article 11 of the TEU.

B. Embed human rights and civic space into security and defence

The EU must ensure its security architecture does not repeat the post-9/11 errors of marginalising human right. Human security, civic space, and democratic oversight must be integral to EU security and defence strategies.

- Ensure that EU defence investments include provisions for democratic oversight and civil society engagement.
- Fund civic actors to contribute to hybrid threat prevention, including counter-disinformation.
- Establish a civic early warning system, linked to the Democracy Shield and Rule of Law mechanisms.

C. Safeguard and expand enabling conditions

For civic space to thrive, minimum legal and regulatory conditions must be ensured at the EU level and across all member states. The EU has a key role to play in codifying and enforcing such standards, building on existing mechanisms and tools for enabling environment.

- Highlight minimum EU standards on civic freedoms and participation, based on the EU and international fundamental rights law.
- Address regulatory and fiscal barriers to cross-border operations and philanthropy.
- Support the expansion and maintenance of a European monitoring mechanism on key civil society freedoms such as Monitoring Action for Civic Space ([MACS](#)).
- Elevate legislative framework for civil society in the EU's Rule of Law Report, to become a whole indicator, similar to media freedoms (chapter 4.3).

D. Strengthen funding ecosystems

A resilient civil society contributing to checks and balances, independence of institutions and rule of law requires funding ecosystems that are sustainable, diverse, and support mission-driven work — not just short-term projects.

- Introduce multi-year, core support to civic actors through CERV and national EU funds.
- Reform EU funding rules to support advocacy, litigation, and watchdog work.

- Encourage member states to complement EU funds with domestic support mechanisms.
- Increase administrative support to civil society funded through projects (e.g. by raising threshold for indirect support rate).

E. Institutionalise participation

Civil society participation in policymaking should not be ad hoc or symbolic. The EU must embed structured civic dialogue across its institutions.

- Establish a permanent dialogue platform with direct input into EU policymaking.
- Enable civil society to contribute to programming, implementation and monitoring of EU policies.
- In the European defence architecture, include a dialogue mechanism with civil society.
- Mandate dedicated contact points on civil society in all EU institutions and agencies.

F. Centre gender equality and feminist civic action

Feminist movements and women's rights organisations are core pillars of civic resilience. The EU Strategy must give targeted attention and support to gender equality in civic action.

- Ensure dedicated funding lines for women-led and feminist civil society organisations.
- Protect women human rights defenders and feminist activists from gender-based attacks and reprisals.

5. Conclusion: Time to Act

The Civil Society Strategy must rise to this historic moment. It must not merely protect what exists but actively rebuild a democratic infrastructure that is crumbling under internal and external pressures. It must go beyond policy tweaks to present a vision of the society, which is participatory, rights-based, pluralist, and just. ECNL calls on the European Commission to:

- Position the Civil Society Strategy as a pillar of democratic and human resilience and security;
- Integrate it into the EU's response to the Global Realignment and internal rule-of-law crises;
- Recognise civic actors as essential governance, development, economic and coherence actors;
- Co-create the Strategy with civil society, ensuring ownership and accountability.

Neglecting to strengthen civil society via cross-framework coherent approach would leave European democracies more vulnerable. Only a bold, values-driven approach will ensure that civic space in Europe expands, rather than contracts, in a decade of disruption. The EU must lead by example — starting at home.