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The Conscience of Nations

Supporting Civil Society as a
Champion of Liberty

Abstract

Civil society and civic space are increasingly being challenged as the world faces the rise of autocracy. Civil society is an essential defender, innovator, and watchdog for human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. For the liberal agenda to survive, we must empower civil society.

This policy brief is intended to inspire liberals in Europe not only to defend but also to empower civil society in the current environment in the EU and beyond. Our freedom and democracy depend on bold action now to safeguard a liberal future.

The first section focuses on reinforcing the role of civil society in civil dialogue with the EU. The second section focuses on how the EU can defend the space for civil society.



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Section 1

Strong Fabric: Civil Dialogue and the Tapestry of EU Civil Society



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Despite the crucial role civil society plays in European democracy, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and other civil society organisations (CSOs) are facing a myriad of challenges that hinder their engagement in civil dialogue, which is a treaty-enshrined concept.

Civil society plays a role in many important areas for the EU. NGOs research, innovate, litigate, document, dispel mis- and disinformation, fact-check, campaign, communicate, and give voice to a variety of interests, peoples, cultures, living beings, and perspectives. However, NGOs are not the only building blocks of civil society. According to the EU, civil society refers to all forms of social action carried out by individuals or groups who are neither connected to nor managed by state authorities (European Union, n.d.). A CSO is an organisational structure whose members serve the general interest, typically through a democratic process, and which plays the role of mediator between public authorities and citizens.

CSOs are generally characterised by their non-profit status, which is important for them to be able to serve their function and play their role in society. The treaties recognise the role of civil society in good governance and stress the need for the EU to have open, transparent, and regular dialogue with CSOs when preparing proposals for EU laws.¹ Civil society can include philanthropic foundations, think tanks of all hues, community-based local organisations, and faith-based organisations. Indeed, the plurality and diversity of civil society is one of its strengths in an increasingly difficult and polarised political environment.

Unfortunately, civil society advocacy has been falsely criticised recently for lack of transparency by some conservative actors in the European Parliament. However, the Court of Auditors' report on NGO funding indicates that the Commission's lack of interoperability and unclear definitions create transparency problems in its NGO funding, resulting in the Commission sometimes misidentifying CSOs (European Court of Auditors, 2025).

More structure, more transparency

Civil society has complained for many years about the poor quality of civil dialogue and the lack of transparency it faces in its relationship with EU institutions (Barbieri & Ulens, 2025; Renda, 2024). The poor quality of civil dialogue at the European level is often compared with the greater structure of social dialogue with employers and trade unions, as well as dialogue with regional actors through the Committee of the Regions. In contrast, the only real structured civil dialogue is the deeply flawed system of the European Economic and Social Committee, which also includes social partners. Allegations regarding the opaqueness of civil society engagement with policy-makers could easily be addressed by treating it

with the same structured approach as social dialogue. Although social and civil dialogue are inherently different, they should be treated equally. The EU should properly structure civil dialogue, moving beyond poorly written consultation surveys and creating a bottom-up process in which it engages with civil society on issues that are important to the people and the interests they represent.

A uniform, structured dialogue between EU institutions and civil society would be valuable in addressing the EU's democratic deficit.

A uniform, structured dialogue between EU institutions and civil society would be valuable in addressing the EU's democratic deficit. It is interesting that the Commission and Parliament call for more transparency from NGOs, who must submit reports and be audited if they receive Commission

grants, while the Commission and Parliament continue to reject calls for more transparency for their own institutions. In March, 2025, we were reminded about failed attempts to reform the Parliament in the face of Qatargate and a deepening investigation into influence from Huawei. This is evidenced by the delay of EU ethics body by the European People's Party (EPP) and far-right groups, which has been highlighted by the Renew Europe Group.

Ideas for better civil dialogue

This more structured dialogue could mirror efforts to strengthen social dialogue, including the Commission Communication on social dialogue and the proposal for 'Social Dialogue Coordinators' in Commission Directorates-General (DGs) (European Commission, 2023). The Council is the most opaque among the institutions, so it should develop more structured dialogue, including in advance of the adoption of Council negotiating positions. These types of dialogues

do exist, but their formation depends on the rotating Presidency's willingness to invite or arrange such dialogues. Making these sessions and engagements mandatory and routine would help increase civil dialogue with the Council. The Parliament is often cited as the institution most open to civil dialogue, and it has made progress including assigning a Vice-President for interaction with civil society. However, dialogue is often ad hoc and based on individual outreach, and more could be done to ensure that civil dialogue prior to key legislative or policy decisions is routine and transparent.

There have been good examples of this recently, including the strategic dialogue on the future of agriculture and the Critical Medicines Alliance, which has greatly improved the governance on decision-making in the field of agriculture and medicines through a balanced dialogue with a variety of actors including employers, industry, and civil society. However, there is little to no civil dialogue on the economic and competitiveness agenda, which is shortsighted and could lead to growing inequalities. Other positive steps have come in the current mandate, including a mention of establishing a 'Civil Society Platform to support more systematic civil dialogue' in the mandate letter of the EU Commissioner for Democracy, Justice, the Rule of Law and Consumer Protection, Michael McGrath and is hearing and promises to strengthen civil society through a long overdue Civil Society Strategy.

A more structured civil dialogue would assist with transparency and underline to the Commission, the Council, and the European Parliament that they can and should meet with and listen to civil society. Whether they take up recommendations would still be a matter for officials in the institutions to decide.

Important distinctions between lobbying and advocacy

There is also a key difference between the advocacy done by civil society and the lobbying done by commercial interest groups. Lobbying by business groups, for example, often focuses on securing specific economic benefits, such as tax breaks or deregulation, that directly impact their bottom line. Advocacy on behalf of minorities, nature, or other broader constituencies, in contrast, typically seeks systemic changes in policies or laws to promote social justice, environmental protection, or human rights.

These differences in objectives often shape the strategies employed, with business groups often relying on financial resources and direct access to policy-makers, while civil society groups may prioritise grassroots mobilisation, public

awareness campaigns, and legal challenges. Both are necessary for policy-makers and are legitimate forms of influence provided they are carried out in a transparent manner and do not involve corruption.

Unfortunately, there have been moves by the European Commission to hamper the vital advocacy provided by civil society, including a misjudged 'guidance note' which told beneficiaries that 'specifically detailed activities directed at EU institutions', such as letter writing or advocacy meetings with specific EU institutions, may entail a reputational risk for the Union. Writing letters explaining the impacts of legislation on people with disabilities or the environment or having meetings with specific elected MEP Rapporteurs working on reports or legislation is a vital part of civil dialogue, and without such activities the EU will not be able to grasp the full picture before it makes important decisions that affect people's lives.

Responding to immediate threats at the national level

Civil society in the EU faces increasing threats at the national level. Several Member States, including Hungary and Poland, have enacted or proposed restrictive anti-NGO laws, hindering the operation and funding of CSOs, often under the guise of national security or sovereignty. The EU's response to rule of law violations, including Article 7 procedures initiated against Hungary and Poland and the blocking of funds due to concerns about the independence of the judiciary and corruption, highlights the severity of these threats.

Hungary remains a troubling case, where the government has systematically dismantled governmental checks and balances. The recently announced draft laws in Hungary further exemplify this trend (European Center for Not-for-Profit Law, 2025), posing a severe threat to independent media and civil society by enabling the blacklisting and financial crippling of organisations deemed to

be acting against the country's interests. These developments collectively contribute to a shrinking civic space across the EU, undermining fundamental rights and democratic values.

The European Commission has blocked resources for those who have not complied with required reforms. However, Member States can now exploit their veto power in the Council to pressure other Member States as exemplified

To set a precedent to deter further democratic backsliding, the EU should leverage these new laws in Hungary as further evidence to trigger Article 7(2), ultimately leading to the suspension of Hungary's voting rights.

by Viktor Orban's weaponisation of veto power in recent Council meetings, a problem compounded by the reluctance to invoke Article 7. To set a precedent to deter further democratic backsliding, the EU should leverage these new laws in Hungary as further evidence to trigger Article 7(2), ultimately leading to the suspension of Hungary's voting rights. Such a decisive action would signal the EU's unwavering commitment to upholding its core values and deterring similar actions by other Member States.

Unlocking Europe's civil society and philanthropic potential

Civil society groups can apply for EU grants to enable them to engage in vital civil dialogue. However, funding streams vary across instruments and have different eligibility requirements. For example, environmental NGOs that receive operating grants through the Programme for the Environment and Climate Action (LIFE) have to raise 30 per cent of their grants through their own resources. At the same time, social NGOs receiving operating grants through the European Social Fund+ (ESF+) are only required to finance 20 per cent of their grants through their own resources. In an increasingly difficult global financial landscape caused by the retreat of USAID, an uncertain international economic environment, and fears about the removal of tax exemptions from philanthropic organisations (Chase-Lubitz, 2025), it is becoming increasingly difficult for NGOs to raise the requisite co-funding or own resources, which in turn limits the size of the grants they may apply for.

While requiring diversification in funding is an important financial principle, the European Commission and Parliament should acknowledge the shrinkage of global fundraising opportunities for NGOs as they did for some programmes during the COVID-19 pandemic, when they reduced the rate to 10 per cent. The EU could adopt a uniform co-financing rate of 5 per cent for all grantees across budgetary programmes for civil society in the EU budget in acknowledgement of the extraordinary financial situation they are facing.

In order to offset the severe reduction of NGO financing from the US, Europe will need to unleash the full potential of Europe's homegrown philanthropic community. Although the EU has acknowledged the role and value of philanthropy, there are many persistent barriers to cross-border philanthropy (Pauly, 2025). The EU has recognised the need to remove such barriers, including administrative and tax obstacles, which currently cost the sector €100 million annually.

Cutting bureaucracy and red tape for all

Cutting bureaucracy and red tape are cornerstones of the liberal agenda in the European Parliament and were key campaign promises made during the 2024 European elections. Civil society is burdened by bureaucracy in the same way that business is, requiring it to spend valuable time and resources that could otherwise be utilised to defend human rights, democracy, and other core EU values.

Despite attempts to simplify regulations, such as the European Commission's Omnibus Simplification Package, which aims to reduce reporting obligations for businesses, CSOs often encounter inconsistent implementation across Member States, leading to confusion and additional compliance burdens. This regulatory complexity, coupled with varying national interpretations, can hinder the effectiveness and inclusivity of CSOs operating within the EU. The proposed Directive on cross-border associations aimed at facilitating cross-border cooperation has progressed slowly through the legislative cycle.

Alongside this, updates to the EU Transparency Register have raised concerns within civil society over inconsistent disclosure obligations – while NGOs face detailed funding transparency rules, other actors such as trade associations and religious bodies often have looser requirements (ALTER-EU, 2022). This uneven application of transparency standards, coupled with regulatory complexity, risks creating barriers to the effective and equitable participation of CSOs in EU policy-making and civic engagement.

Liberals should adopt pro-business and pro-civil society approaches in order to defend liberal values regarding free trade and open markets, human rights, the rule of law, and democracy. This means that we should defend and improve transparent social and civil dialogue and cut red tape and bureaucracy for business and civil society alike.



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Policy recommendations

As part of the forthcoming Civil Society Strategy, the Commission should:

- Adopt a European Commission Communication on strengthening civil dialogue at EU level, which would further outline the 'Civil Society Platform to support more systematic civil dialogue', and a Proposal for a Recommendation on promoting civil dialogue in all areas of EU competence.
- Negotiate an inter-institutional framework for civil dialogue which binds all EU institutions to fully and transparently collaborate with civil society in the policy-making and legislative process. The framework should ensure civil society's timely access to information on EU processes so that it can fulfil its role in the democratic cycle of policy-making. It should also ensure that every institution assigns leadership and operational roles with specific responsibility for ensuring civil dialogue.

As for the Commission and the European Parliament, they should:

- Ensure that civil society, regional actors, trade and employers' organisations are involved in strategic discussions on economics and competitiveness using the recent positive examples of structured dialogues on the future of agriculture and Critical Medicines Alliance.
- Increase the financing for CSOs that contribute to EU policy-making through civil dialogue in the next Multiannual Financial Framework, including protecting financing programmes and specifically operating grants through LIFE; Erasmus+; EU4Health, Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV); ESF+; and other programmes.
- Create a uniform co-financing rate for civil society of 5 per cent given recent constraints in fundraising caused by the retreat of USAID and philanthropic sources.
- Promote a Single Market for Philanthropy that empowers philanthropy; facilitate cross-border giving; engage with philanthropic actors; and partner with philanthropy for the public good.
- Introduce an own-initiative report in the European Parliament to extend the simplification agenda to civil society while increasing transparency regarding financing to all recipients of EU grants and other programmes including businesses, consultancies, universities, and public bodies.

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Section 2

Where Citizens Organise: Increasing the Global Reach of Civil Society



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The global landscape for civil society is in flux. While civil society organisations (CSOs) have long navigated complex political environments, the convergence of several powerful trends has created an unprecedented moment in which civil society and the space for civic engagement may shrink significantly. This section examines the multifaceted pressures that civil society faces worldwide, with a particular focus on the impact of a resurgent China and the disruptive forces unleashed by the Trump administration and the closing of USAID.

The rise of China presents a unique challenge to traditional models of civil society engagement. China's state-centric approach to development, coupled with its increasing global influence, offers an alternative vision of governance that

often marginalises independent civil society. As China expands its economic and political footprint, it is also exporting its model of tightly controlled civic space, creating dilemmas for CSOs operating in countries that are increasingly within China's orbit. This challenge is not only about direct repression, but also about the shaping of norms and expectations regarding the role of civil society.

Concurrently, the Trump administration's 'America First' policies have destabilised the international order and undermined the multilateral institutions that have historically provided a degree of protection and support for civil society. The sudden decision to retreat from international agreements, the questioning

of human rights norms, and the imposition of unilateral sanctions have created a more precarious environment for CSOs and activists, particularly those working on issues related to human rights, environmental protection, and global development. This has emboldened authoritarian regimes and created a vacuum in global leadership, leaving civil society more vulnerable to state repression.

As China expands its economic and political footprint, it is also exporting its model of tightly controlled civic space.

There is a risk that in its search for hard power through increased defence spending and capacity, the EU will be presented with a false choice to reduce international cooperation and development spending. Liberals should resist characterising the current moment as a choice between hard and soft power and instead underline the unique opportunity to reinforce both hard and soft power simultaneously in this multipolar world. If the EU also shrinks its support for civil society globally, we are likely to find ourselves increasingly confronted by autocrats and unfree actors.

Cost of closure in our neighbours

In the face of these global challenges, civil society in EU accession countries is impacted in three distinct ways. Firstly, CSOs are central to the EU enlargement process, serving as catalysts for reform and as bridges between citizens and institutions. However, their effectiveness is increasingly challenged in candidate countries by both internal pressures such as restrictive laws and political hostility, and external pressures from authoritarian influences such as Russia and China. USAID funding cuts have weakened or effectively dismantled many previously influential CSOs in candidate countries, especially those supporting reforms tied to the EU enlargement process and chapters such as rule of law, anti-corruption, and democratic governance (Bajrami & Semini, 2025). Some now operate only nominally or from abroad, despite having once played crucial roles in advancing local reforms.

The EU must prioritise the protection and empowerment of CSOs through sustained funding, capacity-building, and their regular inclusion in enlargement dialogues. Particular attention should be given to reconnecting or reintegrating formerly active USAID-funded organisations that contribute to reforms under the EU accession chapters with local CSOs on the ground in candidate countries. This would help sustain civic engagement and reform-oriented partnerships despite shifting donor landscapes. To address financial barriers, the EU could increase or adopt differentiated indirect cost rates by creating a dedicated fund to support high-impact non-governmental organisations (NGOs) facing structural

funding gaps. Additionally, simplified partnership models that allow international NGOs to engage in advisory or technical roles could ease administrative burdens while leveraging their expertise.

Moreover, fostering partnerships between US-based and EU-based organisations could facilitate access to EU funding while ensuring that the financial requirements of all partners are adequately addressed. Targeted support should also prioritise cross-border initiatives that link

Targeted support should also prioritise cross-border initiatives that link civil societies in the EU with those in candidate countries

civil societies in the EU with those in candidate countries through structured dialogues, public consultations, and citizen assemblies, which can help build mutual trust, address public scepticism, and maintain democratic momentum.

Secondly, despite aiming to promote democracy, the EU's enlargement process often lacks democratic legitimacy. In candidate countries, reforms are frequently imposed without sufficient grassroots engagement and with minimal involvement from citizens, national parliaments, local authorities, and civil society. Enlargement-related reforms should be more participatory, rooted in local consultation, and backed by inclusive mechanisms that build public ownership. This includes adopting a youth-centred approach to counter rising Euroscepticism among young people in candidate countries. The EU should prioritise policies on education, employment, and mobility by expanding access to programmes such as Erasmus+ and support youth participation and cooperation across the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership regions (European Movement International, 2024).

Finally, current participatory tools such as public consultations, citizens' dialogues, petitions to the European Parliament, local debates, and town halls are fragmented and poorly integrated into decision-making. A more coherent, user-friendly platform that consolidates these mechanisms could help make engagement more transparent and impactful. As Prof. Giselle Bosse (2025) argues, national referendums, while offering direct input, often become platforms for broader anti-EU sentiment rather than focused debates on enlargement. Overall, this top-down approach undermines trust and fuels populist and Eurosceptic sentiments, especially as public concerns over social and economic impacts grow.

The triple challenge

These trends are not operating in isolation – they are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. The weakening of international institutions makes it easier for states to disregard international norms and suppress dissent. An increasingly powerful China, especially in the context of diminished US support, offers a powerful alternative model for those seeking to restrict civic space. The emboldening of authoritarian regimes creates a more hostile environment for civil society operations.

In this context, civil society faces a triple challenge:

Shrinking space and impunity: governments around the world are increasingly enacting laws and policies that restrict the ability of CSOs to operate, including limitations on funding, increased surveillance, and restrictions on public assembly. Human rights defenders face more and more threats in an environment where impunity is growing and trust in global institutions is shrinking.

- **Contested values:** the universal values that underpin civil society action, such as human rights, democracy, and the rule of law, are being challenged by competing narratives and alternative models of governance.
- **Resource constraints:** CSOs are facing growing difficulties in accessing funding as traditional donors shift their priorities and new restrictions are imposed on cross-border funding.

With the US vacating its role in funding CSOs, the EU will need to provide a counter-balance to this emerging shift in order to protect civil society as a pillar of the rules-based order and democracy. If the EU does not act swiftly, many CSOs will be forced to close their doors during Trump's second term, and rebuilding capacity globally will be difficult.

Policy recommendations

While still in development, the EU Civil Society Strategy is long overdue. The strategy should be aimed at defending civil society in Europe and globally and creating an empowering environment for civic space. It should include the following objectives:

- Civil society should be empowered through enlargement.
 - The EU needs to empower CSOs both in EU candidate countries and in EU Member States. It should increase funding and capacity-building for CSOs in candidate countries and regularly include them in enlargement discussions. It should help reconnect previous USAID-funded NGOs that strengthen the enlargement process with local groups and explore more flexible funding models, such as adapting indirect cost limits or promoting partnerships between US and EU NGOs. Regular, institutionalised consultation between EU bodies, national governments, and CSOs should be established. Cross-border initiatives linking civil societies across Europe can build trust and counter external authoritarian pressure.

- Civil society participation in EU candidate countries needs to be strengthened. Enlargement reforms must involve citizens, parliaments, and local authorities through inclusive consultations and public debates. A youth-centred approach is key, prioritising education, employment, and mobility and expanding programmes such as Erasmus+ to reduce Euroscepticism among young people. Enlargement criteria should also address external threats to democratic norms, focusing on media freedom, political integrity, and protection of civil society space.
- Participation and accountability tools in EU candidate countries must be improved. Existing engagement tools are fragmented and need consolidation into a single, accessible platform for better transparency and impact. The EU should adopt a 'Copenhagen Plus' that emphasises participatory governance and deep democratic reforms as core to enlargement.
- Any recasting of the Regulation that governs European political foundations (EPFs) must continue to allow membership of non-EU political foundations from (potential) candidate countries to allow them to continue to access support through the networks of EPFs.
- The EU should adopt a human rights defender visa regime (Alesina, 2024).
- The EU must work with civil society affected by the retreat of USAID and maintain funding streams for civil society engagement in Brussels, Member States, (potential) candidate countries, and other partner countries. The Strategy should be accompanied by a robust defence in the next Multiannual Financial Framework of the funding streams that empower civil society globally, including the thematic programmes on civil society, human rights and democracy in the Neighbourhood, the International Cooperation and Development Instrument, the European Endowment for Democracy, and the Civil Society Facility in the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance.
- The strategy should engage several DGs including:
 - DG JUST (Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers): this DG is responsible for EU policies on justice, fundamental rights, the rule of law, and equality. Given that a strong civil society is essential for upholding these values, DG JUST should play a central role in the strategy.
 - DG INTPA (Directorate-General for International Partnerships): this DG is responsible for the EU's international cooperation and development policy. CSOs are important partners in development efforts, so DG INTPA's involvement is essential.
 - DG TRADE: this DG is responsible for EU trade policy. Since trade policy can have significant impacts on social and environmental issues, engaging with civil society is crucial to ensure that these concerns are taken into account.

- DG ENEST (Directorate-General for Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood): this DG is responsible for EU enlargement policy and for managing relations with countries in the Eastern Neighbourhood. Civil society is essential to DG ENEST's mission, as it supports democratic reforms, strengthens the rule of law, promotes accountability, and fosters public participation in both accession and neighbourhood countries.

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