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Joint Letter calling for AgoraEU budget increase

Marthe Jansen · Thursday, April 9th, 2026

Together with over 500 organisations from across Europe and beyond, Transparency International EU submitted the following joint letter to President Ursula von der Leyen, Prime Minister Donald Tusk, and President Roberta Metsola.

You can read the full letter in PDF format [here](#).

Subject: Strengthening and shielding European democracy with the upcoming MFF

Eighty years ago, the defeat of Nazi fascism and the end of World War II gave rise to a vision of a united Europe built on peace, democracy, equality, and the rule of law. The foundation of new democratic states committed to social welfare and fundamental rights for all set the stage for decades of unprecedented economic and social developments, and peace. This model, while not perfect, gave hope to those in Europe still under authoritarian regimes and acted as the basis for our common and shared security in the region. All along these decades, civil society has been a driving force behind historical moments of democratic transformation. From the struggles for democracy in Spain, Portugal, and Greece in the 1970s to movements like Solidarnosc in Poland and Charter 77 in Czechoslovakia, civic actors have played a critical role in shaping a shared European future. The lessons of these struggles remain deeply relevant today.

As Europe grapples with complex and interconnected crises — including climate change, widening economic precarity, and eroding trust in democratic institutions — the very fabric of our democracies is at risk. Growing social divisions and declining trust in institutions leave societies vulnerable to forces seeking to weaken democracy. These vulnerabilities create fertile ground for external factors — like Putin’s Russia and the Trump administration — and internal forces seeking to dismantle democratic principles, challenging the very notion that rights are universal. A democracy that does not actively protect and advance equality and the wellbeing of all ceases to be

a democracy in the true sense of the word.

In this context, the strength of our democracies vis a vis these challenges depend on a robust civil society. Organised civil society has played a crucial role in responding to crises, from the COVID-19 pandemic to the displacement of Ukrainians fleeing war and the response to environmental disasters. With few means and little direct power, they are often the first ones to arrive and the last ones to leave where people are in need, and when democracy is under stress. Poland serves as a recent example of how civil society played a critical role in restoring the rule of law and democracy when they were undermined.

Recognising the gravity of these challenges, you have made a firm commitment to “A free and democratic Europe” and to support, empower, and protect civil society. We now ask that this vision be fully reflected in the upcoming Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), including by strengthening the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) programme financing as one of the crucially needed tools of the European democracy shield, the Civil Society Strategy and the European Equality Strategies.

Four reasons to strengthen the CERV programme to defend democracy:

1. CERV is a key EU instrument to promote democracy, equality, and fundamental rights for all.

Since 2020, the CERV programme has been a lifeline for civic organisations’ interventions across Europe, particularly through multiannual core funding and outreach to remoted areas via the regranting scheme. It has led to tangible improvements in democratic participation, legal protections for women, LGBTQI+ people, racialised groups, people with disabilities, children, older persons, and survivors of violence. Yet, despite its impact, the CERV budget remains less than 0.2% of the total MFF — providing wholly insufficient means given the scope of issues to be addressed in supporting the foundations of European democracy.

2. Increasing support to civil society means investing in democratic resilience.

Despite its successes, CERV remains severely underfunded, leaving up to 92% of aligned initiatives without financial support.¹² A 2023 survey by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights found that 75.4% of CSOs working on fundamental rights and democracy fear that funding shortages threaten their work.³ The recent freeze on USAID contributions⁴ and the reinstatement of the Global Gag Rule further highlights the urgent need for MFF discussions to decisively address the funding needs for democracy resilience-building and human rights protection.

3. New challenges require new tools and expanded resources.

Increased investment is crucial for advancing civic and democratic education and critical thinking, fostering right-based narratives and policies, enabling multi-stakeholder collaborations, ensuring broad-based democratic participation and providing essential support to human rights defenders and civil society under attack. Furthermore, as equality in the access to fundamental rights is increasingly attacked, there is a growing need of support for those who act to protect marginalised and excluded groups, and gender equality, as well as to ensure their voices are heard in policy-making. Addressing these challenges requires not only strong policy decisions but also the necessary budgetary commitments for effective support.

4. Opponents of European democracy and fundamental rights — both within and beyond EU borders — are investing unprecedented resources to attack civil society and democracy.

Authoritarian regimes and radicalised groups are using vast financial and technological means in spreading disinformation, fuelling polarisation, and shaping anti-rights narratives and policies that undermine dignity and fundamental rights — targeting in particular racialised groups, migrants, refugees, women and LGBTI+ people. At the same time, from inside the political sphere, far-right forces but also part of the representatives of mainstream parties are actively delegitimising and attacking funding for democratic CSOs, including the CERV programme itself. By proactively investing in robust support for democratic resilience, the EU can strengthen European democracy and counteract those seeking to undermine it.

Our call to action: make a historic commitment to democracy!

To strengthen democracy and rights for all, we need to put our money where our mouth is. In 2020, the European Parliament and European Council played a key role in championing the CERV by nearly tripling the CERV budget compared to the initial proposal by the European Commission. Now the challenges are broader and greater — and so must be our collective response from the European institutions and civic actors. Allocating 0.5% of the MFF to the CERV – as a stand-alone programme managed by the European Commission – would send a strong signal about the EU's commitment to defending democracy and would be an invaluable investment in our shared future.

This investment must be accompanied by:

- A strong and structural support for civil society and its participation in policymaking in all relevant thematic programmes;

- Strategic dialogue among public institutions, philanthropy groups, and civil society on how to meet the needs of civil society actors that defend fundamental rights;
- A robust legal and tax framework for financial tools that support the sustainable funding of organised civil society, at the EU and national levels, including matching funds for the CERV grants;
- A strong stance against attacks on CSOs and their funding in the EU.

Europe's democracy is only as strong as its commitment to equality and fundamental rights. If we fail to protect and invest in those fighting for fundamental rights, social justice, and inclusion, in coherence with the European treaty provisions, we risk undermining the very essence of democracy itself. Now is the time to act decisively to ensure that democracy in Europe remains not just a system of governance, but a true reflection of equality and dignity for all.

Yours sincerely,

European and international organisations

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