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Open letter: Ensuring a vibrant civic space in the European Union – civil society’s expectations for the next five years

Pia Engelbrecht-Bogdanov · Friday, October 4th, 2024

The following letter was submitted by Transparency International EU and the undersigned civil society organisations. It can be accessed as a PDF file [here](#).

Brussels, 16 September 2024

To:

Mr Donald Tusk, for the upcoming Polish Presidency of the Council of the European Union

Ms Mette Frederiksen, for the upcoming Danish Presidency of the Council of the European Union

Mr Nikos Christodoulides, for the upcoming Cypriot Presidency of the Council of the European Union

Ms Roberta Metsola, President of the European Parliament

Ms Ursula Von der Leyen, President Elect of the European Commission

Honourable Presidents and Prime Ministers,

In the perspective of the upcoming five-year mandate, together with 415 civil society organisations —from 26 Member States and 4 candidate countries— deeply committed to the promotion of democracy, human rights, and civic engagement across Europe, we call on you to prioritise actions that foster a vibrant civic space, uphold democracy, and safeguard fundamental rights.

Civil society plays a pivotal role in advancing civil, political, economic, social, cultural, and environmental rights. It empowers marginalised voices, promotes active participation in governance, and holds authorities accountable.

Despite the invaluable contributions of civil society, we are witnessing a decline in respect for civic freedoms, the rule of law and democracy in the European Union, as evidenced by the field, research and the findings of the European Commission rule of law report. The challenges faced by

civil society, including restrictive laws, funding constraints, legal harassment, and physical attacks, threaten the very foundation of democracy.

While the European Union has taken crucial steps in the past five years to address democratic “backsliding” and promote civic space, major gaps and challenges must be addressed. In the upcoming legislative term, the EU must build on the legacy of the past five years – particularly the European Commission’s 2022 report on the application of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights and follow-up consultations, and 2023 Council conclusions on civic space – to build a more coherent and strategic cooperation and support framework, as requested by the European civil society manifesto endorsed by over 240 CSOs across Europe.

Moreover, all European laws and policies should facilitate the actions of civil society without negative side effects. This involves conducting ex-ante fundamental rights impact assessments of all EU policies, incorporating intersectional evidence from diverse civil society to ensure policies support the exercise of fundamental rights.

We call to take up the following priorities in the next five years:

- **A European Civil Society Strategy**, integral to a broader European Democracy Agenda. This strategy should acknowledge the indispensable role of civil society in all its diversity in fostering democratic engagement and safeguarding human rights. The strategy should provide a robust and coherent policy framework that enables, supports and protects civil society.
- **A strong mandate for a Commission Vice President responsible for democracy, civic space and dialogue with civil society.** The role should involve appropriate means to initiate, spearhead and oversee the implementation of the strategy, and ensure coherence between internal and external approaches to civil society. The mandate should also include proactive support to civic actors under pressure and timely follow-up on civil society complaints on attacks. This should include support for the development of initiatives aimed at **protecting civil society and human rights defenders – including those in exile – from harassment, intimidation, and attacks**, such as the establishment of civil society-led early warning mechanisms and protection mechanisms offering rapid emergency support.
- **Reinforcing intermediary bodies and adopting a Civil Dialogue Agreement:** Intermediary bodies have a crucial role in organising and channelling people’s needs and aspirations. Civil dialogue should be understood as permanent, structured, and meaningful interaction between institutions and organised civil society leading to the co-creation of just, inclusive, and sustainable policies. A civil dialogue agreement with the EU institutions should clearly define the scope, venues, instruments, and outcomes.
- **Empowering Funding Policies:** Funding programmes for civil society should be developed through inclusive, co-creation processes, ensuring they address the needs of civil society organisations and the communities they serve, and reducing administrative burdens. The future Multiannual Financial Framework should reflect the need to further support civil society within the different policy areas through both operating grants and project grants, including by increasing the budget of the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme (CERV).
- **A European Democracy Semester:** Building on the European rule of law cycle, the EU should establish a European Democracy Semester, open to candidate countries for accession, looking at the interplay between economic and social policies, and democracy. The annual review must include a stand-alone chapter on civic space and should be more clearly and transparently linked to both enforcement and reform mechanisms.
- **A stronger role of the Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) as the European human rights**

institution. This includes enabling the FRA to issue its own opinions on EU policies and systematically involving the agency in the impact assessment.

In order to make the support to for civil society effective, the EU institutions need to adopt a coherent approach to democracy inside and outside of the EU, as well as strengthen the democratic legitimacy of the European policies that must create inclusive societies for all.

These recommendations, building on the work of civil society actors at the national and European level, need to guide the action of the European Union in the next five years.

We stand ready to collaborate with all EU institutions and political forces committed to advancing these proposals. Together, we can build a Europe where civil society thrives, democracy flourishes, and fundamental rights are protected.

This document has been prepared in the context of the Civil Society Forum organised in Warsaw on June 26th, 2024. It outlines the imperative actions EU institutions must undertake in the upcoming five-year legislative term to ensure a vibrant civic space. It builds on the work done over the years by civil society at the national and European level.

We invite other civil society organisations to continue using and building on these proposals. We are committed to working with institutions and political forces willing to make this agenda a reality.

Yours sincerely,

Gabriella Civico, President of Civil Society Europe

together with 415 Civil Society Organisations

This entry was posted on Friday, October 4th, 2024 at 12:09 pm