Transparency International EU

The global coalition against corruption

Urgent call to strengthen and shield European democracy in the upcoming MFF

Pia Engelbrecht-Bogdanov · Thursday, April 3rd, 2025

The following letter was submitted by Transparency International EU and the undersigned organisations to European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, Prime Minster of Poland Donald Tusk, and European Parliament President Roberta Metsola. Access it as a PDF file here.

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3 April 2025, Brussels

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.

- **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.[1][2] 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 contributions[4] 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.**

- **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.

- **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

1. European Civic Forum
2. AGE Platform Europe
3. All Digital
4. Balkan Civil Society Development Network (BCSDN)
5. Centre for European Volunteering
6. Civil Liberties Union for Europe
7. DYPALL Network
8. ENAR – European Network Against Racism
9. End Female Genital Mutilation European Network
10. EPA – European Parents’ Association

11. Eurochild

12. European Association for Local Democracy – ALDA

13. European Center for Not-for-Profit Law Stichting

14. EUROPEAN FEDERATION FOR INTERCULTURAL LEARNING

15. European Public Health Alliance

16. European Youth Forum

17. Fédération Européenne des Retraités et personnes Âgées (FERPA)

18. International Planned Parenthood Federation – European Network (IPPF EN)

19. Lifelong Learning Platform – European Civil Society for Education

20. RECLAIM

21. Res Publica Foundation – Visegrad Insight

22. SOLIDAR

23. Transparency International EU

24. Union of European Federalists

25. Young European Federalists (JEF Europe)

Austria

- Bündnis für Gemeinnützigkeit – Civil Society Alliance Austria
- Association of Austrian Autonomous Women’s Shelters
- ECoD gemeinnützige GmbH / European Capital of Democracy

Belgium

- Pour la solidarité
- Professional Women International Brussels
- Stand Up for Europe

Bosnia and Herzegovina

- Centar za promociju civilnog drustva

- Center for Civic Cooperation

Bulgaria

- Bulgarian Biodiversity Foundation
- Bulgarian center for not-for-profit law
- European Institute Foundation
- Infinite Opportunities Association
- Sofia Platform Foundation
- Union of Bulgarian Black Sea Local Authorities

Croatia

- Croatian Platform for International Citizen Solidarity
- Human Rights House Zagreb
- CESI – Center for Education, Counselling and Research

- Lota’s Box

Czech Republic

- Network for the Protection of Democracy
- Glopolis
- SPIRALIS
- APLA Severní Cechy,z.s.
- CeHuPo – Centrum Humanitární Pomoci, z.s.
- Czech Women’s Lobby
- FoRS – Czech Forum for Development Cooperation
- Green Circle
- GUG.cz, z.s.
- Jezevec z.s.
- Karlovarsko pro demokracii

- Kou?i pro Vás z.s.
- Letokruh z.u.
- Lumpeco
- Open society p.b.a.; Institute H21
- Pé?e bez p?ekážek, z. s.
- Platform for social housing
- Platforma pro ob?anská shromážd?ní
- Prague Pride z.s.
- Spolek Epigram
- *Spolu na Sušicku, z.s.* (*Together in Sušicko, z.s.*)
- St?edisko ekologické výchovy SEVER /Centre For Environmental Education SEVER
- Transparency International Czech Republic
- TUDYTAM, z.s.
- Ukrajinska iniciativa jizni Moravy

Denmark

- Acter Global
- Crossing Borders
- Danish Family Planning Association
- Mino Danmark
- NOAH, Friends of the Earth Denmark

Estonia

- Estonian Human Rights Centre
- Network of Estonian Non-Profit Organizations

Finland

- SOSTE Finnish Federation for Social Affairs and Health

France

- Le Mouvement associatif
- LDH (Ligue des droits de l’Homme)
- LIGUE DE L’ENSEIGNEMENT
- Maison de l’Europe de Paris
- Mouvement européen France-Vaucluse
- VoxPublic

Germany

- Bundesnetzwerk Bürgerschaftliches Engagement
- Maecenata Foundation

Greece

- European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation “EGTC Amphictyony”

- Greek Forum of Refugees
- Union of Women Association of Heraklion

Hungary

- Ökotars-Hungarian Environmental Partnership Foundation
- “I’d like to teach” Movement (Tanítanék Mozgalom)
- Alternative Communities Association
- Autonomia Foundation
- Civil Kozoktatasi Platform (CKP)
- Dialogue for Communities Association
- Emberség Erejével Alapítvány – Power of Humanity Foundation
- EMMA Association
- Energiaklub Climate Policy Institute
- European House Budapest

- Human Platform Association
- Hungarian Civil Liberties Union
- Hungarian Helsinki Committee
- Hungarian Europe Society
- Közélet Iskolája / The School of Public Life
- Magyar N?i Érdekérvényesít? Szövetség (Hungarian Women’s Lobby)
- Motivation Educational Association
- NIOK Alapítvány
- PILnet
- Power of Humanity Foundation (Emberség Erejével Alapítvány)
- Szül?i Hang
- Uccu Roma Informal Education Foundation

Ireland

1. Comhlámh

2. Irish Council for Civil Liberties

3. Redial Partnership CLG

4. The Wheel

Italy

1. ARCI

2. European Movement Italy

3. Solidarietà e Cooperazione – CIPSI ETS

4. ANCI Lazio

5. Associazione ADL Zavidovici

6. Associazione Luciano Lama ODV

7. Biosphaera s.c.s.

8. Europiamo ETS

9. Federazione trentina della cooperazione

Latvia

1. Civic Alliance – Latvia
2. “Sieviet?m 50+”
3. Ar pasaules pieredzi Latvij?
4. Donum Animus
5. Eiropas Kust?ba Latvij? / European Movement – Latvia

Lithuania

1. Open Lithuania Foundation
2. Nemun?io Radviliškio bendruomen?
3. Alytaus krašto asmen? su negalia draugija
4. Butrimoni? bendruomen?s centras

5. Center for Equality Advancement

6. Gil?s sodas NGO

7. House of Diversity education

8. Klausos negalios šeim? bendrija Aidas

9. Lietuvos agent?ros “SOS vaikai” Panev?žio skyrius

10. Lietuvos trira?i? sporto asociacija

11. Lithuanian frame Running sport association

12. Lithuanian Gay League

13. Lithuanian Young Falcon Union

14. LPF Atgaivos sala

15. Mažeiki? sutrikusios psichikos žmoni? globos bendrija “Gyvenimo spalvos”

16. Ne?gali?j? sportinink? asociacija

17. NGO Education, Health and Social Innovation Center (Svietimo, sveikatos ir socialiniu inovaciju centras)

18. onkologiniu ligoniu asociacija Viltie kelias

19. Public Institution ‘Eik’ Center

20. Senjor? pasaulis

21. Steb?k teises

22. TAURAG? WOMEN’S EMPLOYMENT AND INFORMATION CENTER (TMUIC)

23. Telsiu kriziu centras

24. Village community “Berteškiai”

25. Visaginas University of the Third Age

26. Vš? „Unikalus šokis”

27. Vš? Pab?g?li? Taryba

28. Vš? Prirašytos rankos (Inscribed Hands)

29. Vš? VAIK? LINIJA

Netherlands

1. Hivos

2. Netherlands Helsinki Committee

Poland

1. National Federation of Polish NGOs (OFOP)
2. Stefan Batory Foundation
3. Polish Robert Schuman Foundation
4. Atlas Nienawi?ci
5. Bridges of Perspectives Cooperative
6. Central Roma Council
7. Centrum Rozwoju Inicjatyw Spo?ecznych CRIS
8. Coalition Living Earth
9. Equality Factory Association
10. Federacja Znaki Równo?ci
11. Forests and Citizens Foundation

12. Foundation Humanity in Action Poland

13. Free Courts Foundation

14. Fundacja “Pro Aperte”

15. Fundacja Artonomia

16. Fundacja Czas Kobiet

17. Fundacja Diabeciaki

18. Fundacja Dom tam gdzie Ty

19. Fundacja Inicjatywa Dom Otwarty

20. Fundacja Interakcja

21. Fundacja Koper Pomaga Copernicus Group

22. Fundacja Kultura Liberalna

23. FUNDACJA MALINOWY GEST

24. Fundacja Matecznik

25. Fundacja NieOdk?adalni

26. Fundacja Po Mojemu w Krakowie

27. Fundacja Równo??.org.pl

28. Fundacja Rozwoju Demolracji Lokalnej im. Jerzego Regulskiego

29. Fundacja Transgresja

30. Fundacja W Stron? Dialogu (Foundation Towards Dialogue)

31. Fundacja Widzialne

32. Fundacja Wolno?ci

33. Fundacja Wspomagania Wsi

34. Green REV Institute

35. Habitat for Humanity Poland

36. Homo Faber Association

37. Information Society Development Foundation

38. Inicjatywa “Nasz Rzecznik”/ “Our Ombudsman” Initiative

39. Institute for Sustainable Development Foundation

40. Institute for Sustainable Development Foundation

41. Jewish Association Czulent

42. Kampania Przeciw Homofobii / Campaign Against Homophobia

43. Klub Inteligencji Katolickiej (Club of Catholic Intelligentsia)

44. Love Does Not Exclude Association

45. Marsz Równo?ci Bydgoszcz

46. Migration Consortium

47. Mind & Gravity Foundation

48. My, Rodzice (We The Parents) – stowarzyszenie matek, ojców i sojuszników osób LGBTQIA

49. Nauka dla Przyrody (Science for Nature)

50. Neutral Language Council (Pronounce.page)

51. niebinarnosc.pl

52. Ocalenie Foundation

53. Open Republic Association against Anti-Semitism and Xenophobia

54. Panoptykon Foundation

55. Polish Association of the Deaf – ?ód? Division

56. Polish Donors Forum

57. Polish Migration Forum Foundation

58. Polska Akcja Humanitarna

59. Polski Klub Ekologiczny Okr?g Mazowiecki

60. Queerowy Maj

61. Queerpol Fondation

62. SOK Foundation (Fundacja Samodzielno?? od Kuchni)

63. Stowarzyszenie Egala

64. Stowarzyszenie Grupa Stonewall

65. Stowarzyszenie Inicjatywa Obywatelska Pro Civium

66. Stowarzyszenie ?ódzkie Dziewuchy Dziewuchom

67. Stowarzyszenie Mudita

68. Stowarzyszenie na rzecz Dzieci i Doros?ych z Mózgowym Pora?eniem Dzieci?cym “?URAWINKA”

69. Stowarzyszenie na rzecz imigranckich rodzin osób z niepe?nosprawno?ciami “PATCHWORK”

70. Stowarzyszenie T?czowe Opole

71. Stowarzyszenie T?czówka / T?czówka Association

72. The Association for “Our Ombudsman” Initiative

73. The KARTA Center Foundation

74. To Proste Foundation

75. Tychy Osiedle Q

76. Visegrad Insight

77. We are Together Association

78. Workshop for All Beings

79. Zielone Mazowsze

Portugal

- Academia Cidadã

Romania

- Funda?ia pentru Dezvoltarea Societ??ii Civile
- Apulum Forum Association
- Asociatia eLiberare
- Association for Social Integration and Environmental protection Feedback Brasov
- Association of Ecotourism in Romania
- Átlátszó Erdély
- Bra?ov Community Foundation
- Center for Public Innovation (Romania)
- Center for the Study of Democracy
- Centre for Legal Resources
- Centrul pentru Studiul Comparat al Migra?iei

- Civic Radauti Association
- CIVICA Association
- E-Romnja Association
- Federa?ia Organiza?iilor Neguvernamentale pentru Copil – FONPC
- Funda?ia Comunitar? Bucure?ti
- Funda?ia Comunitar? Buz?u
- Funda?ia Comunitar? Cluj
- Fundatia Comunitara Galati
- Fundatia Comunitara Iasi
- Fundatia Comunitara Oradea
- Fundatia Comunitara Sibiu
- Fundatia Comunitara Tara Fagarasului
- Funda?ia Comunitar? Timi?oara/Timi?oara Community Foundation
- FUNDATIA COMUNITARA VALCEA (VALCEA COMMUNITY FOUNDATION)

- Intercultural Institute Timisoara
- Migrant Integration Center Brasov, Romania
- Mioritics Association
- MozaiQ LGBT Association
- Mures Community Foundation
- Novapolis Association – Center of Analysis and Initiatives for Development
- Odorheiu Secuiesc Community Foundation
- Organiza?ia Umanitar? CONCORDIA
- Prahova Community Foundation
- Resource Center for Roma Communities Foundation
- Respiro Human Rights Research Centre
- Romanian Federation Of Community Foundations
- Save the Children Romania
- Society for Feminist Analyses

- The Ecotourism Association Tara Dornelor (AETD)

- The Federation of Nongovernmental Organisations for Social Services-FONSS

Slovakia

- Centrum pre výskum etnicity a kultúry (Center for the research of ethnicity and culture)

- Ekopolis Foundation

- Iniciatíva Inakos?

- Kompromis – Kompromisszum

- MEMO 98

- Možnos? vo?by/Freedom of Choice

- Partners for Democratic Change Slovakia

- People in Peril

- Volunteer Center Banska Bystrica

Slovenia

- CNVOS – Centre for information service, co-operation and development of NGOs
- ADRA Slovenjja
- Alpe Adria Green, International organisation of protection of Environmental and nature
- Association Legebitra
- Celiac Slovenija – društvo bolnikov s celiakijo (Celiac Slovenia – Celiac Disease Patients Association)
- Center za trajnostni razvoj podeželja Kranj
- Danes je nov dan, Inštitut za druga vprašanja
- Društvo prijateljev mladine ob?in Postojna in Pivka
- Društvo Svit Koper
- Društvo za razvijanje prostovoljnega dela Novo mesto
- Društvo za strpne odnose Eksena
- Državljan D / Citizen D
- Forum za enakopraven razvoj

- Global Water Partnership Slovenia
- Institute Meta’s list
- Ljubljanska kolesarska mreža
- Local development foundation for Pomurje region
- Maribor Cycling Network
- Mesto žensk, Društvo za promocijo žensk v kulturi
- Morigenos – Slovenian Marine Mammal Society
- Muzej norosti, Trate
- Planet to the 3rd Power, Institute for Interdisciplinary Sustainable Development
- Slovene Philanthropy
- Slovenian Third Age University
- Transparency International Slovenia
- VARNA POT zavod za pomo? žrtvam prometnih nesre?, preventivo, vzgojo in izobraževanje
- Zavod Aspira

- Zavod Etnika
- Zavod Igrivi svet
- Zavod PIP
- Zavod Radio Študent
- Zavod ZON.si
- Združenje ONA VE
- Zveza društev Mladinski center Postojna (Youth Center Postojna)

Spain

- NOVACT
- ASOCIACION CULTURAL BAIZARA
- Asociación Mundus – Un mundo a tus pies
- Districte 11 – City to City
- Fundación Platoniq

- Irídia – Human Rights Defence Centre

Candidate countries to the EU

- Center for European Policy Studies on Regional and Local Development – Albania
- Partners Albania for Change and Development – Albania
- Urban Research Institute – Albania
- Kosovar Civil Society Foundation (KCSF) – Kosovo
- Reproductive Health Training Center – Moldova
- Macedonian Center for International Cooperation – North Macedonia
- Civic Initiatives – Serbia
- Ecumenical Humanitarian Organization – Serbia
- Initiative for Development and Cooperation – Serbia
- Association of Ukrainian Civic Initiatives – Ukraine
- NGO LDAM – Local democracy agency of Mariupol – Ukraine

Ministries and local authorities

1. Roskovec Municipality (Albania)

2. City of Vimercate – COMUNE DI VIMERCATE (Italy)

3. RISORSE PER ROMA SPA/CITY OF ROME (Italy)

4. Ministry of Culture in Latvia

5. Cimi?lia City Hall (Moldova)

6. Chernihiv City Council (Ukraine)

7. Odesa Rayon Council (Ukraine)

8. Slavutych Town Council (Ukraine)

9. The Executive Committee of Zelenodolsk City Council (Ukraine)

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[1] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=COM%3A2024%3A456%3AFIN

[2] https://www.cerv.at/dam/jcr:dffbc544-1381-4b0f-a3a7-bb4f4560a473/CERV_Presentation_Results_2021-%202.pdf

[3] report-key-findings-fra-civic-space-consultation-covering-2023.pdf

[4] Global Aid Freeze Tracker

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