

A THRIVING CIVIC SPACE FOR UPHOLDING FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS IN THE EU: LOOKING FORWARD

SEMINAR 1: Protection

THEME: Protecting civil society organisations and human rights defenders

CO-ORGANISERS: The European Commission and Swedish Council Presidency

WHEN: 10 May 2023 from 9:30 to 15:00

WHERE: Albert Borschette Conference Centre

CONCEPT NOTE

The seminar will focus on the protection of civil society organisations (CSOs) and human rights defenders from the challenges they face when working in the EU. It will be co-organised with the Swedish Council Presidency.

As the 2022 Annual Report on the Application of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights¹ highlights, civil society actors within the EU are increasingly facing challenges linked to the narrowing of civic space with 61% of respondent CSOs reporting that they have faced obstacles that limit their 'safe space'². Specific groups are particularly vulnerable to threats, such as CSOs and human rights defenders working to uphold the rights of women, LGBTIQ+ and ethnic and other minorities.

As hate speech and misinformation spread online, the work of CSOs and human rights defenders becomes more challenging and tailored protection is strongly needed. The 2022 Charter report highlights issues such as digital attacks, breaches of data protection and obstacles related to the ethical use of technology and artificial intelligence. Other emerging and increasing digital threats include doxing, online censorship, and surveillance³.

The Council of the European Union adopted Council conclusions on 10 March 2023, highlighting, among other things, the responsibility of Member States to protect the civic space from unnecessary or arbitrary restrictions, as well as CSOs and human rights defenders from threats, attacks, persecution of critical voices and smear campaigns targeting the organisations, their staff and volunteers. Additionally, the Council invites Member States to protect safety of CSOs and human rights defenders and act independently also in the digital space, for example by finding ways for technology to be an enabler for engagement and democratic action, and not be used to restrict the space of civil society actors.

The purpose of the seminar is to advance the discussion beyond outlining the challenges that exist towards concrete and feasible measures that the EU and Member States can take to promote and protect the fundamental rights of civil society actors and ensure that their essential work can take place in a safe environment, online and offline. Examples of such measures mentioned in the 2022 Charter report include ensuring the availability of reporting mechanisms, developing digital tools, and providing training to CSOs and human rights defenders, law enforcement authorities and support service providers, increased dedicated funding, engaging with IT companies and ensuring their accountability, and focusing advocacy on what is needed to fight attacks and threats.

Among the participants will be representatives from the Member States, CSOs and human rights defenders, international organisations, and representatives of EU institutions.

¹ [A thriving civic space for upholding fundamental rights in the EU](#). 2022 Annual Report on the Application of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, COM(2022) 716 final.

² [2022 FRA Charter consultation](#): Question (G) Obstacles under 'safe space and protection'. See also FRA survey on Civic space – experiences of organisations in [2018](#) and [2019](#).

³ OECD (2022), [The Protection and Promotion of Civic Space: Strengthening Alignment with International Standards and Guidance](#), OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/d234e975-en>.



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STRUCTURE

The discussion will be organised in two sessions, one focused on the protection of CSOs and human rights defenders in general, and the second one on the challenges faced in the digital civic space and the type of protection needed in that context.

In session 1, there will first be a general scene setter, where the current challenges that civil society actors face across the EU will be explored. The rest of the session will take the discussion towards concrete measures that can be taken to ensure a safe environment for CSOs and human rights defenders. Speakers will highlight what mechanisms exist to effectively protect civic space. Participants will be encouraged to contribute to the discussion with additional best practice examples.

In session 2, the discussion will focus on the protection of CSOs and human rights defenders in the digital civic space. The session will begin with a scene setter on the unique challenges that civil society actors face online in the EU, looking at emerging and increasing digital threats that prevent the existence of a safe online environment. Following this, civil society actors share their experiences and elaborate on concrete actions that have been taken or could be taken to tackle these challenges.

The final part will be based on a harvesting of ideas format and will invite all participants to develop suggestions for further action based on the discussions, including on whether the measures showcased could be replicated in national or European contexts or propose concrete additional measures to increase the safety of the European civic space.



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Programme:

Moderator: The European Commission / DG JUST

9:00 – 09:30 **Registration** (morning coffee)

Session 1: *Protecting CSOs and human rights defenders - best practices*

09:30 – 10:00 *Introduction – setting the scene*

Introduction and welcome – **Marie-Hélène Boulanger**, Director for Rule of Law, Fundamental Rights and Democracy, DG Justice and Consumers

Setting the scene – **Martin Andreasson**, State Secretary to Paulina Brandberg, Minister for Gender Equality and Working Life of Sweden

Lessons learned from the OECD's global report on the protection of civil space – **Claire McEvoy**, Policy Analyst, Observatory of Civic Space, Open Government and Civic Space Unit, OECD

10:00 – 11:00 *Protection that works: panel discussion*

The protection of human rights defenders in the EU: the insights and roles of national human rights institutions – **Katrien Meuwissen**, Team Leader – Human Rights, European Network of National Human Rights Institutions

Experience of a regional monitoring mechanism: the Council of Europe Platform for the Safety of Journalists – **Florent Duploux**, Legal Advisor, Council of Europe

EU external action mechanisms to protect civil society actors – **Samantha Chaitkin**, Directorate-General for International Partnerships

Monitoring the narrowing civic space in the EU: CSO perspective – **Balázs Dénes**, Executive Director, The Civil Liberties Union for Europe (Liberties)

Open discussion to extract other best practices



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11:00 – 11:15

Break

Session 2:

Protection of civil society actors in the online civic space

11:15 – 12:15

Threats in the digital civic space: panel discussion

*Threats against civil society actors in the digital civic space – **Birgit Kainz**,
Head of Civic Space Unit, OHCHR, United Nations*

*Digital threats, attacks and measures to protect civil society actors in the EU –
Waltraud Heller, Project Manager, Fundamental Rights Agency*

*What is needed to protect civil society actors from online threats –
Fanny Hidvegi, Europe Policy and Advocacy Director, Access Now*

*What is needed to protect civil society actors from online threats – **Asha Allen**,
Advocacy Director for Europe, Online Expression & Civic Space, Center for
Democracy and Technology*

Open discussion to extract other best practices

12:15 – 13:15

Lunch

13:15 – 15:00

*Stepping up the protection of civil society in the EU – **extracting
recommendations for further EU-level work***

13:15 – 14:45

*Harvesting of ideas with all seminar participants to extract recommendations for
further work*

14:45 – 15:00

*Closing words – reflection on the way forward: **The European Commission***