



A thriving civic space for upholding fundamental rights in the EU: looking forward

Follow up to the 2022 Report
on the Application of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights

FINAL REPORT

March 2024



Main outcomes and key recommendations

Civil society organisations (CSOs) and human rights defenders (HRDs) play a key role in protecting and promoting the EU common values of fundamental rights, rule of law and democracy. They are a crucial element in the system of checks and balances, serving as vigilant watchdogs. They draw attention to threats to the rule of law, to democracy and to the conduct of free and fair elections, thereby contributing holding decision-makers accountable. They contribute to overcoming challenges our democracies are facing, including by combating discrimination, hate speech and disinformation. Moreover, they provide additional input and expertise in the identification and drafting of feasible policy measures, as well as supporting the implementation of current policies. Given the wide range of diverse interests that CSOs and HRDs can represent and voice, their active engagement enhances the effectiveness and representativeness of policy and decision-making.

Yet, there is evidence that the space for civil society is shrinking in the EU. CSOs and HRDs are currently encountering persisting obstacles and a hostile environment, prompting the EU institution to intervene. According to the 2023 annual report on civic space by the Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA), three-quarters of the organisations consulted on the matter have reported barriers in conducting their activities for protecting human rights and the rule of law. In particular, they refer to negative media reports and campaigns, online verbal attacks or harassment, suspected surveillance, as well as legal and physical threats.

The Commission has taken action to ensure an enabling environment for independent civil society organisations, human rights defenders, national human rights institutions and equality bodies so that they are able to fulfill their roles in accordance with EU values and without being subject to interferences. Within this environment actors should be protected, supported and effectively engaged, while having their own fundamental rights respected in the first place.



The Commission's 2022 report on the application of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights¹ focused on mapping the state of civic space in the EU. It aimed to identify gaps and challenges, recognising the value of the work of CSOs and HRDs in upholding fundamental rights. Following the Charter Report endorsed by the Council in March 2023², the Commission organised in May and June 2023 three thematic seminars on safeguarding an open and enabling civic space in the EU. The seminars were set up in partnership with the Swedish Presidency of the Council of the EU, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), and the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA).

By presenting initiatives, and sharing data and good practices, the seminars' goal was to discuss in depth how to empower and support CSOs and HRDs within the domestic and Union spheres, all while ensuring their safety and protection. These multi-stakeholder seminars addressed the following themes:

- How to **enhance the protection** of CSOs and HRDs exposed to threats and attacks in both online and offline environments;
- How to **secure adequate funding and capacity** for CSOs and HRDs to exercise their role and support their communities;
- How to **empower CSOs and HRDs** to actively participate in policy and decision-making processes by fostering their meaningful engagement.

The seminars fed into a final conference jointly organised in November 2023 by the Commission and the Spanish Presidency of the Council of the EU and were attended by national authorities, representatives of European and national civil society organisations, human rights defenders, EU agencies, donors and international organisations. The conference endeavored to identify concrete recommendations and possible ways forward on how to protect, support and enable a thriving civic space in the EU.

A comprehensive list of organisations and institutions that participated in the cycle of seminars and the final conference is available in Annex 1.

The participants in the seminars and the final conference identified several areas where actions by both Member States and EU institutions, including the European Commission, would be recommended. They also identified overarching principles that are regarded as fundamental preconditions for an effective approach to promoting and protecting a thriving civic space.

¹ COM(2023) 786 final "A thriving civic space for upholding fundamental rights in the EU, 2023 Annual report on the application of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights"

² Council Conclusions on the application of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights; [The role of the civic space in protecting and promoting fundamental rights in the EU](#) (7388/23 JAI 310 FREMP 74)

Overarching principles:

- Relevant public institutions, including Member States, EU institutions and agencies, and international organisations should indicate a clear policy commitment to the protection, promotion and support of civic space in the EU, as well as the prevention of any interferences with the full enjoyment of fundamental rights of HRDs and individuals working in CSOs at EU, national and grassroots levels;
- Relevant public institutions, including Member States and EU institutions and agencies, and international organisations should develop, through a multi-stakeholder approach, a common, multi-level, institutionalised framework for actions to foster a safe and enabling civic space and meaningful participation of CSOs and HRDs.

Possible future actions suggested by participants:

- To elaborate **guidance** on defining and supporting an “enabling environment” for CSOs and HRDs;
- To develop **a tool for monitoring the civic space** at EU and national dimensions with the support of the FRA, National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs) and equality bodies as well as their networks at EU and international levels, and involving civil society;
- To consider the set-up of an **early warning system and emergency response mechanism** both at the EU and national levels, in case of threats and attacks against CSOs and HRDs, with a particular focus on the possibility of activating a timely and targeted support to ensure immediate protection and long-lasting assistance for the actors within the civic space;
- To **support CSOs and HRDs from facing digital, physical and legal threats and attacks** and to mitigate their impact;
- To give specific consideration to the particular civic space challenges faced by **organisations defending the rights of those most at risk of exclusion and marginalisation**;
- To provide for the creation of physical and digital **platforms for multi-stakeholder exchange**, allowing for open dialogue and mutual learning in a safe space;



- To **provide funding for capacity building, resilience and holistic protection**, especially to CSOs and HRDs under attack through Union funds and funds at national, regional or local levels;
- To foster a regular **dialogue among donors** in order to ensure complementarity and diversification of funding and increase accessibility and flexibility of available funds for CSOs and HRDs. Besides, the dialogue would permit to learn from each other's experiences, especially from civil society on how to better support CSOs under pressure;
- To ensure that **legislation** does not invertedly have a negative (side) effect on the civic space, through proper consultation and impact assessments;
- To develop a **framework for the participation** of and **dialogue** with CSOs and HRDs in public policy-making, at EU and national levels;
- To deliver **training** for national and EU civil servants on civic space and meaningful participation and dialogue.
- To **establish and support independent NHRIs** in all EU Member States and reinforce the support role of the NHRI networks within the EU context.

With a view to respond to some of the aforementioned points, first and foremost the need to empower and enhance the protection of CSOs and HRDs, substantial measures have already been taken by EU institutions. Notably, on 12 December 2023 a Commission Recommendation on promoting the effective participation of citizens and civil society organisations to public policy-making processes³ was adopted. In addition, the 2024 Call for proposals for civil society organisations active on protecting and promoting Union values⁴ has a specific focus on supporting CSOs, including through capacity-building activities to develop resilience, monitor and react to threats and attacks.

³ [Commission Recommendation on promoting the engagement and effective participation of citizens and civil society organisations in public policy-making processes](#), C(2023) 8627 final.

⁴ Call 'CERV-2024-CITIZENS-VALUES'



Annex I – participants to the series of seminars and final conference

Representatives from the following Member States:

- Belgian
- Czech Republic
- Germany
- Spain
- Finland
- France
- Croatia
- Hungary
- Ireland
- Italy
- Luxembourg
- Lithuania
- Latvia
- Netherlands
- Poland
- Portugal
- Sweden

International organisations and foundations

- UN Human Rights (OHCHR)
- OECD
- Council of Europe
- EESC
- FRA
- EACEA
- EEA and Norway Grants, EFTA Financial Mechanism Office
- USAID
- Philea
- ENNHRI
- Equinet

Civil society organisations:

- Academy for European Human Rights Protection
- Access Now
- Active Citizens Fund, Latvia
- Agir ensemble pour les droits humains
- Amnesty International
- Bodossaki Foundation
- Centre For Democracy and Technology
- Civic Alliance, Latvia
- Civil Liberties Union for Europe
- Civil Society Development Foundation, Romania
- Civil Society Europe
- Civitates
- CNVOS, Slovenia
- Corruption kills
- Democracy International
- ECAS
- Euromed Rights
- European Center For Not-For-Profit Law (ECNL)
- European Civic Forum
- European Network Against Racism
- European Partnership for Democracy
- European Union of Jewish Students
- European Women's Lobby
- European Youth Forum
- FIDA-Fédération Internationale de la Diaspora Afar
- FIDH (International Federation for Human Rights)
- Fundacja Rozwoju Demokracji Lokalnej
- Háttér Society
- Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights
- Human Rights House Zagreb
- Hungarian Helsinki Committee
- IDSN
- ILGA-Europe
- Indigo Rights
- Institute of Public Affairs / Instytut Spraw Publicznych
- International Planned Parenthood Federation - European Network (IPPF EN)
- Irish Council for Civil Liberties
- KISA



- Netherlands Helsinki Committee
- Ökotárs - Hungarian Environmental Partnership Foundation
- Ombudswoman of the Republic of Croatia
- Omnium Cultural
- Open Society Foundations
- Oxfam international
- PICUM/ECRE
- Pivotbrigade
- Protection International
- Slovak National Centre for Human Rights
- Station Europe
- Stefan Batory Foundation
- Transparency International EU
- Veto! Für den Rechtsstaat e.V