

# CIVIL SOCIETY PLATFORM

## TERMS OF REFERENCE

### 1. BACKGROUND AND SUBJECT MATTER

The Civil Society Platform is a regular and structured framework for the European Commission's engagement with civil society organisations (CSOs) working to uphold EU values enshrined in Article 2 of the Treaty on the European Union (TEU), particularly on fundamental rights, democracy, equality and the rule of law. Over time, the Platform may be extended to cover other policy areas. The Platform was announced as a key deliverable of the EU Strategy for Civil Society<sup>1</sup>, aiming to address challenges faced by CSOs while strengthening their role in EU policymaking.

The Platform is a permanent structure, with agendas co-created by civil society organisations and the European Commission, designed in accordance with the 10 Guiding Principles for Dialogue with civil society set out in the Strategy.

In accordance with these Principles, the Platform is grounded in a partnership approach that recognises civil society organisations as key stakeholders, actively involved in shaping priorities, defining objectives and evaluating outcomes. It strives for meaningful engagement at every stage of policymaking, from development to implementation. The Platform will provide for regular exchanges, transparent procedures, and make relevant information easily accessible. The Platform will further strengthen accountability by providing feedback on how dialogue with civil society contributes to policy developments while guaranteeing a safe and inclusive space for participation, including respect for confidentiality and protection of personal data.

The Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers of the European Commission (hereafter 'DG JUST') is responsible for the implementation and management of the Platform, with the support of a dedicated Steering Group.

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<sup>1</sup> EU Strategy for Civil Society, COM(2025) 790 final, 12 November 2025, [8c30975d-bc1c-4415-8dcd-a71cb28f3662\\_en](#).

## 2. OBJECTIVE AND TASKS

By facilitating structured dialogue between the Commission and CSOs, the Platform will support the community of CSOs working on issues related to EU values. It will inform concrete measures and solutions through policy and issue-focused discussions, and cooperation in addressing developments affecting civic space. The Platform also aims to strengthen the protection of civil society organisations, and human rights defenders in their work.

The objectives of this Platform are to:

- a. **strengthen systematic dialogue**, cooperation, and coordination between the Commission and civil society organisations operating at EU level to promote EU values, in particular democracy, the rule of law, equality, and fundamental rights.
- b. **promote the Partnership Principle** between civil society organisations and the Commission through cooperation and ongoing dialogue.
- c. **provide support, guidance, and exchanges among CSOs** that are working to foster a thriving civic space at EU level and to promote EU values, in particular democracy, the rule of law, equality, and fundamental rights.
- d. **serve as a sounding board** for ideas and actions across the Platform's areas of work, helping to inform and inspire joint initiatives to support a thriving civic space, enhance engagement with civil society organisations, and contribute to their protection.
- e. **aim to contribute and provide feedback**, where appropriate, to relevant **policy initiatives or activities of DG JUST as well as of other Directorate-Generals** of the Commission.

The scope of activities and tasks of the Platform are to:

- a. **facilitate exchanges** on the objectives of the EU Strategy for Civil Society and contribute to its implementation across the three areas of engagement, support, and protection.
- b. **exchange views on key developments and initiatives** at EU, national, regional and local levels affecting the areas covered by the Platform, in particular with an impact on

- civic space, including trends, challenges and funding needs, with a view to identifying priorities and possible further action related to the implementation of the Strategy.
- c. **provide opportunities to exchange** experiences, good practices, including in a multi-stakeholder setting, with relevant partners.
  - d. **facilitate, develop and evaluate** practical tools and approaches to promote and protect civic space, including in cooperation with other networks and stakeholders including notably those referred to in the EU Strategy for Civil Society, leading to concrete outputs such as reports, guidance and other operational resources to support implementation and impact.

### **3. ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES**

#### **Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers of the European Commission (DG JUST)**

1. The Platform and its operation will be managed by DG JUST.
2. DG JUST shall provide secretarial services to the Platform, with support and consultation from the Steering Group and the Platform Members. Commission representatives from other services with an interest in the proceedings may attend meetings of the Platform.

#### **The Steering Group**

1. A Steering Group is created to provide support to the Commission in the implementation of the Platform activities. The Steering Group is not a representative body of the Platform.
2. The Steering Group is composed of representatives from the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), and Civil Society Europe. These bodies and organisations are part of the Steering Group, selected on the basis of their expertise and experience in representing or engaging with civil society working in the areas covered by the Platform:
  - the EESC, in line with its Treaty-based advisory and representative role;

- the FRA, given its mandate and expertise in fundamental rights and cooperation with civil society, and to ensure synergies with FRA's Fundamental Rights Platform; and
  - Civil Society Europe, for representing the perspectives of platforms and networks which are among the most representative umbrella CSOs operating at EU level in a wide variety of areas.
3. The Steering Group will contribute through its expertise to ensure that the Platform working methods, membership composition, and operational framework fully align with its core objectives to strengthen engagement and dialogue between Platform Members and the Commission.
  4. The Steering Group:
    - a. Contributes to the preparation of working documents for the activities of the Platform, including its terms of Reference, the call for expression of interest, membership criteria, and the code of conduct/rules of procedure, as well as additional guidance documents as required.
    - b. Contributes to the preparation and follow-up of the regular meetings of the Platform and the Annual Summit.
    - c. Contributes to the preparation of agendas of the regular meetings, on the basis of what Platform Members propose as important policy issues and priorities, or any other *ad hoc* issues suggested to be discussed by Members.
    - d. Advises the Commission on the selection of Platform Members and on the application of the code of conduct/rule of procedure of the Platform.
  5. The Steering Group will operate in principle on the basis of consensus. Representatives part of the Steering Group work towards achieving a common goal and refrain from advocating individual or organisational interests. Each organisation represented in the Steering Group will coordinate internally to be represented by a single position in discussions.
  6. The activities and composition of the Steering Group can be reviewed by the Commission.

## **Members of the Platform**

1. The Members of the Platform (the ‘Members’) are independent non-governmental organisations<sup>2</sup> actively working to uphold EU values, in particular, democracy, the rule of law, equality and fundamental rights. The Members actively participate and share their expertise to advance the Platform’s objectives.
2. In accordance with the 10 Guiding Principles for dialogue with civil society<sup>3</sup>, the Members will:
  - a. Contribute as a partner in shaping the Platform’s priorities, review progress and assess challenges related to civic space and EU values, including during the Annual Summit, as well as identifying opportunities for support and protection.
  - b. Participate in the regular meetings of the Platform, with one representative per Member organisation, as well as the Annual Summit.
  - c. Contribute actively to the Platform’s regular meetings, focusing on policy issues relevant to the scope of the Platform. This includes providing input in advance and leading thematic or contributing to discussions during the meetings, as needed.
  - d. Exchange knowledge, good practices, and analyses including by sharing reports, case studies, experiences, information, updates and alerts on thematic priorities, such as restrictions on civil society, legal threats, or advocacy strategies, to inform collective learning and action.
  - e. Provide feedback on the implementation of the Platform’s objectives, including feedback on actions taken and the progress of implementation of the Strategy for Civil Society, to ensure that dialogue leads to meaningful impact.

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<sup>2</sup> This refers to the definition provided for in Article 24 (49) of the [Financial Regulation applicable to the general budget of the Union](#), 2024: ‘non-governmental organisation’ means a voluntary, independent from government, non-profit organisation, which is not a political party or a trade union”.

<sup>3</sup> See, EU Strategy for Civil Society, [https://commission.europa.eu/document/8c30975d-bc1c-4415-8dcd-a71cb28f3662\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/document/8c30975d-bc1c-4415-8dcd-a71cb28f3662_en)

## **Adherence to the Code of Conduct**

1. Commission representatives, representatives of the Steering Group, all Members, and invited Experts shall adhere to the Code of Conduct of the Platform. The Code of Conduct is annexed to these Terms of Reference.
2. The Code of Conduct applies to Platform meetings, the Annual Summit, and to any mailing lists used for the Platform or other engagements taking place as part of the Platform and its activities.
3. Non-adherence will lead to exclusion from the Platform in accordance with the applicable procedure detailed in these Terms of Reference. Complaints regarding non-adherence may be submitted via email to the Commission (DG JUST).

## **4. CRITERIA FOR MEMBERSHIP AND SELECTION PROCESS**

### **Membership criteria**

1. The Platform shall be composed of up to [30] Members, in addition to the Steering Group Representatives and the Commission.
2. Members must meet all the following criteria:
  - a. They shall be independent non-governmental organisations which have a non-profit or charitable purpose.
  - b. They shall be legally established in an EU Member State, or a European Economic Area (EEA) country, or an EU candidate country or potential candidate and be registered in the EU Transparency Register<sup>4</sup>.
  - c. They shall have proven and relevant expertise and experience of at least 3 years, at national, European or international level, in areas relevant to civic space and EU values, in particular democracy, the rule of law, equality and fundamental rights.
  - d. They shall, preferably, be organisations with membership, offices or operations in either:

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<sup>4</sup> EU Transparency Register, [https://transparency-register.europa.eu/search-register-or-update\\_en](https://transparency-register.europa.eu/search-register-or-update_en)

- at least 7 Member States, or
- at least 3 candidate countries and potential candidates, or
- a combination of Member States and candidate countries and potential candidates reaching a comparable scale (e.g. 5 Member States and 2 candidate countries and potential candidates).

Organisations who may not fulfil this specific criterion (but fulfil all others) will still be considered to become a Member of the Platform based on their relevant experience and expertise in the area of civic space, spanning across several countries.

- e. They shall be organisations that operate independently, have elected internal governance structures and accountability towards their members, including procedures for the selection, renewal and exclusion of member organisations, when applicable.
  - f. They shall be organisations that respect and uphold the values enshrined in Art. 2 of the Treaty on European Union and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, other applicable EU <sup>5</sup> (and international law, including international human rights law and standards. They shall commit to respect these values and rights within the context of the Platform.
  - g. They shall be organisations that have internal processes for preventing, mitigating, detecting, reporting on and remedying reputational risks or breaches linked to the non-respect of EU values by themselves or their member organisations.
  - h. They shall be organisations that are transparent in their operations and funding through defined internal processes and/or by-laws.
3. In the event of changes in operations and structure that potentially impact fulfilling the Platform’s membership criteria, organisations must inform the Commission (DG JUST).
  4. Members will be appointed for three years following an open call for expression of interest and an assessment of the membership criteria based on the requested provision of evidence.

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<sup>5</sup> This includes Regulation (EU) 2016/679, General Data Protection Regulation (‘GDPR’).

For each term, they shall remain in office until removed or until the end of the term of office. Their term of office may be renewed as a result of subsequent calls for expression of interest.

5. The process for termination, removal or exclusion of Members is set out in the section on ‘Rules of Procedures and Operation’ of these Terms of Reference.

### **Selection process for Members**

1. Members of the Platform will apply through a public call for expression of interest. They will then be selected by the Commission (DG JUST), based on an assessment of the information provided by the applicants and following informal consultation with the Steering Group and other relevant Commission services on the overall composition of the Platform’s membership.
2. The call for expression shall outline the membership criteria in line with the Terms of Reference. The call will be published online and will remain open for a minimum of 4 weeks. The exact timeline shall be detailed in each call for expression of interest.
3. In their expression of interest, organisations should select a maximum of two priority areas of expertise listed below applicable to their field and provide a summary of their relevant activities. They shall also provide an overview of all other relevant information listed in the Membership criteria, such as their mission, values, and structure, which will serve as the basis for the assessment of their application. All organisations shall provide for a list of their members, offices or operations, as part of their application and every year, once selected as members. Further details, including the full eligibility criteria and submission requirements, will be outlined in the call for expression of interest.
4. The Commission will select Platform Members from among the applicants to ensure the Platform reflects a diverse and balanced range of expertise and scope, while taking into account existing structures of dialogue between the Commission and CSOs to ensure complementarity.

To achieve this, Members will be selected to cover the following priority areas:

- a. Fundamental rights, including children’s and victims’ rights;

- b. Democracy including transparency and democratic participation;
  - c. The Rule of law;
  - d. Civic space, including protection of human rights defenders;
  - e. Media, journalism, and press freedom;
  - f. Equality and non-discrimination; or
  - g. Digital rights and freedoms.
5. Consideration will be made in the selection process of Members to ensure diversity and representativeness in the geographical scope covered by the selected organisations and balance in the size of selected Members.
  6. In line with these priorities, the composition of the Platform should aim to ensure the representation of underrepresented and vulnerable groups and organisations. The Strategy for Civil Society recognises that EU Member States, candidate countries and potential candidates are part of a shared, interconnected and continuous civic space. Accordingly, the Platform shall include Members covering candidate and potential candidate countries, with two seats explicitly reserved for organisations active in these contexts.
  7. The selection process will be conducted in line with the European Commission's principles of transparency, equal treatment, and proportionality.
  8. The list of Members is made public online.
  9. The call for expression of interest will reopen periodically, at least every three years, to update the membership. More frequent re-openings may occur if decided by the Platform.

## **5. ANNUAL SUMMIT**

1. The European Economic and Social Committee and the Commission will co-organise an Annual Summit of the Platform. The Summit will take place alongside the EESC's annual Civil Society Week.
2. The Annual Summit will be a high-level meeting comprising of a public event, followed by a regular meeting of the Platform.

The public event will be an opportunity to present the work of the Platform, fostering transparency and providing for an opportunity for feedback while engaging in civic space priorities with a broad audience. The Platform will present and reflect on its achievements and activities of the previous period. In doing so, the Summit and the Platform will take stock of the implementation of the different objectives of the Strategy for Civil Society. These reflections will be used by the Platform in its meeting to formulate future priorities, actions and steps, including a progress review on the priorities and activities of Platform.

3. Conclusions from the Annual Summit shall be prepared and adopted by the Platform and made publicly available. These conclusions should include a list of key priorities for the Platform to focus on in the period until the next Annual Summit.

## **7. EXPERTS**

1. The Commission or at least six Members of the Platform, in consultation with the Steering Group, may suggest inviting external experts whose specific expertise or knowledge aligns with the Platform's thematic discussions. Such experts may be invited to contribute to specific meetings on an *ad hoc* or regular basis.
2. Invited experts may be asked to provide training, present analysis, host workshops, provide advice or support for the development of guidance or other materials.
3. Formal invitations to experts shall be sent out by the Commission (DG JUST).

## **8. RULES OF PROCEDURE AND OPERATION**

### **Operation of the Platform**

1. The Platform's activities shall be conducted in accordance with these Terms of Reference.
2. Meetings shall be held in-person on premises designated by the Commission. Hybrid meetings can be organised if needed. If the circumstances do not allow for physical meetings, a meeting can be organised virtually.

3. The Platform will hold a minimum of three meetings per year in addition to the Annual Summit. The agenda will be co-developed by the Commission , the Steering Group, and the Members, in accordance with jointly identified priorities.
4. Each Member will designate one official contact person for organisational purposes (e.g., contact point for mailing lists and for administrative purposes).
5. For each meeting, each Member shall designate and announce in advance one representative to attend Platform meetings. Only one representative per organisation participates in any single meeting.
6. The Commission, Members and the Steering Group may agree to set up temporary thematic sub-groups for the purpose of examining clearly identified issues. Sub-groups shall operate in compliance with the horizontal rules of these Terms of Reference and shall report to the Platform. They shall be dissolved as soon as their mandate is fulfilled.

### **Operation of meetings**

The meetings of the Platform shall be conducted in English and operate according to the following rules:

#### *1. Convening a meeting*

- a. the Commission in consultation with the Members and the Steering Group will set the date and format of meetings.
- b. the Commission shall send out invitations to the Members and the Steering Group, preferably no later than 20 calendar days before the date of the meeting.
- c. the Commission shall send out all relevant working documents to Members and the Steering Group, preferably no later than 5 calendar days before the date of the meeting.

#### *2. Chairing of meetings*

- a. Platform meetings shall be co- chaired by the Commission and a representative of the Steering Group, on a rotating basis per meeting.
- b. The Annual Summit of the Platform will be chaired by the Commission.

### 3. *Agenda*

- a. The draft agenda and discussion points shall be jointly developed by the Commission, the Steering Group, and the Members through a collaborative process. Members are encouraged to proactively propose agenda items and topics to ensure that the agenda remains timely, relevant, and member-driven. The Steering Group shall assist the Commission in finalising the agenda.
- b. The agenda shall be adopted at the beginning of each meeting.
- c. At the conclusion of each meeting, the Platform shall agree on draft agenda points for the next meeting.

### 4. *During meetings*

- a. Meetings will be moderated by the co-chairs in a way that allows for balanced participation by all participants.
- b. Members may be invited to present and lead on relevant agenda items.
- c. At each meeting, the Commission shall draw up an attendance list also specifying, where appropriate, to which organisations or other entities the participants belong.

### 5. *Meeting summaries*

- a. A summary shall reflect the discussions and decisions taken. It shall be drafted by the Commission, approved by the Members and the Steering Group.

## **Feedback**

1. The Platform shall ensure regular and transparent feedback and information-sharing between its governance structures and Members, with a view to fostering accountability, mutual responsibility, and trust.
2. Appropriate feedback mechanisms shall be developed to ensure that all participants are informed and have timely and adequate access to relevant information and documents necessary for meaningful participation in the Platform's activities, in compliance with applicable legal, confidentiality, and data protection requirements.
3. The Members and representatives of the Steering Group shall contribute to maintaining an open and constructive feedback loop, including through the timely sharing of relevant updates, outcomes, and follow-up actions.
4. A brief update on the Platform activities and progress shall be provided at the annual general meeting of FRA's Fundamental Rights Platform (FRP). Where appropriate, and where consultation on thematic issues addressed by the Platform is required, FRA's FRP may be called upon to gather feedback and input from a broad range of civil society organisations and stakeholders. This aims to ensure the inclusion of additional national and local perspectives, as well as to increase representation of the views of underrepresented organisations across EU Member States and candidate countries.

## **Decision-making**

1. As far as possible, the Platform shall adopt decisions by consensus. All Members shall endeavour to seek consensus and constructive decision-making in all aspects related to the work and operation of the Platform.
2. In particular, the Platform shall, as far as possible, adopt its work programme, recommend conclusions and other documents, and take decisions on inviting experts by consensus.
3. Where consensus cannot be reached, a vote may be called by the Commission (DG JUST). In such cases, decisions shall be adopted by a two-thirds majority of Members present.

### **Procedure for handling Code of Conduct incidents**

1. Any incident or concern regarding non-adherence to the Code of Conduct shall be reported as soon as possible to the European Commission (DG JUST). Information shared in relation to an incident shall be handled on a strict need-to-know basis.
2. The Commission, in consultation with the Steering Group, shall assess the incident, taking into account its severity and the safety of the parties involved, including anonymity where appropriate. If a member of the Steering Group is a party in the incident, they will be removed from this process.
3. Based on this assessment, the Commission, with the advice of the Steering Group, may apply appropriate measures, including:
  - a. warnings;
  - b. asking for an apology and/or retraction;
  - c. removal from one or more meetings of the Platform; or
  - d. exclusion from the Platform.
4. In case removal or exclusion of Member are being considered, the party under scrutiny should have the right to be heard by the Steering Group and DG JUST during the assessment.
5. The Commission will conclude and communicate on the applicable measure to the party concerned. In exceptional cases, where a breach is clear, immediate removal from a meeting may be decided to ensure the safety and well-being of participants, pending further assessment.
6. To ensure a safe environment, a well-being delegate shall be designated, and all Members and participants shall be informed. For in-person meetings, the delegate or another appointed individual shall be available to address urgent incidents.

### **Voluntary resignation and termination of participation**

1. Members or other participants who resign or are no longer willing or able to contribute shall no longer be invited to meetings.

2. They shall be removed from all mailing lists and communication tools used by the Platform.

## **9. CONFIDENTIALITY**

1. The Commission, the Members of the Platform, the Steering Group, as well as invited experts and any other participants, shall respect confidentiality rules that may apply to discussion, in particular for the safety of participants<sup>6</sup>.
2. Should participants fail to respect these obligations, the Commission may take all appropriate measures in consultation with the Steering Group, including considering temporary removal or exclusion of parties.

## **10. TRANSPARENCY**

1. Relevant adopted documents concerning the Platform, including its list of Members, the agendas, summaries, and Annual Summit conclusions, shall be made available online.
2. Exceptions to publication shall only be foreseen where it is deemed that disclosure of a document would undermine the protection of a public or private interest as defined in Article 4 of Regulation (EC) N° 1049/200139.
3. Personal data shall be collected, processed and published in accordance with Regulation (EC) No 45/2001.

## **11. ACCESS TO DOCUMENT**

Applications for access to documents held by the group shall be handled in accordance with Regulation (EC) No 1049/200179<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> All participants are subject to the obligation of professional secrecy, which by virtue of the Treaties and the rules implementing them applies to all members of the institutions and their staff, as well as to the Commission's rules on security regarding the protection of Union classified information, laid down in Commission Decisions (EU, Euratom) 2015/44336 and Commission Decision (EU, Euratom) 2015/443 of 13 March 2015 on Security in the Commission (OJ L 72, 17.3.2015, p. 41).

<sup>7</sup> Regulation (EC) No 1049/2001 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 30 May 2001 regarding public access to European Parliament, Council and Commission documents (OJ L 145, 31.5.2001, p. 43).

## **12. ACCESSIBILITY**

1. Meetings of the Platform, whether taking place online or offline, will be designed and implemented with appropriate technological tools with a view to remove accessibility barriers and enable full and equal participation.
2. Accommodation to facilitate the full participation of all individuals shall be ensured, including provisions for personal assistance or other required support, as needed.

## **13. MEETING EXPENSES**

1. Participation in the Platform, Steering Group, the Annual Summit and other forms of contribution shall be on a voluntary basis. No remuneration shall be provided for activities undertaken within the scope of the Platform.
2. Attendance to Platform meetings by Members may be reimbursed by the Commission. This would cover travel and accommodation expenses incurred by one representative of Members to attend in-person. Appropriate accommodation provisions shall be applied to participants with disabilities. Reimbursement shall be made in accordance with the provisions in force within the Commission and within the limits of the available appropriations allocated to the Commission departments under the annual procedure for the allocation of resources.

## ANNEX

### **The Code of Conduct of the Civil Society Platform**

Members and all participants of the Platform's activities are expected to treat each other with respect, regardless of differences in opinion or perspective.

Values of human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights enshrined in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union as well as rights and principles enshrined in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union shall be respected and upheld.

In particular, any form of harassment, bullying, or discrimination, including but not limited to, digital, physical or verbal abuse, violence, threats, sexual misconduct, offensive language, or behaviours that seek to belittle, marginalise, or humiliate individuals or groups is strictly prohibited.