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Civic Space Update: Enabling civil society to uphold EU values and strengthen democracy

Civil society: Support for human rights systems and defenders

Civic space is a crucial component of democracy and of societies founded on respect for fundamental rights and the rule of law. Civil society organisations across the EU face increasing pressure that limits their ability to operate. This report presents FRA opinions on how EU Member States can better protect civic space and support civil society organisations in safeguarding fundamental rights. The findings are based on data and information collected by FRANET, FRA's multidisciplinary research network, and FRA's consultation with CSOs participating in its Fundamental Rights Platform. It is complemented by desk research, interviews, stakeholder meetings and exchanges with intergovernmental organisations. It covers all EU Member States, as well as Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia.

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Key findings and FRA opinions

Civil society plays a crucial role in the functioning of a democratic society based on the rule of law and respect for fundamental rights. The contribution of civil society is also a key aspect of the whole-of-society approach that is needed to withstand the democratic, security and other societal challenges Europe currently faces. This has been recognised in numerous EU policy documents, including the EU strategy to strengthen the application of the Charter, the EU strategy for civil society the European democracy shield and the EU preparedness union strategy.

However, across the EU, civil society actors continue to face a range of challenges that obstruct their ability to work safely and freely for the promotion and protection of fundamental rights and democracy. As illustrated by the Fundamental Rights Report (FRR) research shows, this includes hurdles in the legal environment, growing difficulties in securing funding, persistent threats and attacks on civilians and people, and underdeveloped consultation and participation and consultation. Since 2018, FRA has documented challenges to civic space. The results of FRA's civic space consultation covering 2024 indicate that 75 % of responding civil society organisations (CSOs) active in the field of fundamental rights faced barriers in conducting human rights activities (18 % often, 55 % sometimes). CSOs perceive a deterioration not only at the national level but also at the EU level. In response to a question on how the conditions at the EU level for CSOs working on human rights have changed in 2024, 22 % of responding organisations said they had greatly deteriorated, 48 % said they had deteriorated, 26 % said they had remained the same and only 3 % said that conditions had improved. CSOs that defined the rights of people in vulnerable situations – such as asylum seekers, religious or ethnic minorities, Roma and or LGBTIQ+ people or homeless people – and those working on hate crime, anti-racism, and sexual and reproductive health and rights, report the most in-person threats and attacks.

This report recommends various actions at the EU and national levels to achieve a better monitoring of civic space developments, and support the development of national strategies and measures that prevent challenges to an enabling environment, protect civic space actors, secure access to funding and allow for enhanced participation and engagement in law- and policymaking.

Monitoring civic space developments

Both the 2023 European Commission recommendation on promoting the engagement and effective participation of citizens and civil society organisations in public policy-making processes (recommendation on participation) and the 2025 EU strategy for civil society underline the need for monitoring as a basis for preventive and responsive measures. The strategy calls on Member States to monitor developments in civic space using clear indicators and structured reporting frameworks. FRA research demonstrates that this is currently not being done by Member State authorities, such as ministries or parliaments. There are however a broad range of monitoring activities and sources available. European and international levels by national human rights institutions (NHRIs), Ombudsman institutions and CSOs. Member States are covered by the different monitoring efforts to varying degrees, and the criteria and indicators used are often not comparable between different monitoring initiatives. This leads to the incompatibility of findings, with reports scattered across multiple sources. This makes it difficult for other stakeholders and policymakers to access all relevant and relevant data, and to effectively benefit from the insights, experiences and know-how of diverse national, European and international actors. FRA will cooperate with the European Commission to set up a network of experts on monitoring for knowledge exchange, and an online information hub, which will serve as a one-stop shop for information on existing civic space monitoring initiatives, reports and protection resources.

There is also a need to define the terminology relating to civil society and civic space for effective policy responses and civic space monitoring. Different organisations and policy documents use the terms 'civic space', 'civil society', 'civil society actors' and 'civil society organisations' differently. In particular 'civil society' is used in a broader or more narrow definition, depending on the context. Such definitions, however, are important when rights and obligations are determined, or when the situation and challenges for different actors are being monitored, as well as to target policy measures in response to those challenges. The United Nations guidance note on the protection and promotion of civic space in the Recommendation of the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers on the protection and promotion of civil society space in Europe and the definitions contained in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Protecting civic space actors global report on civic space are relevant guiding documents for such efforts.

FRA opinion 1

In all policy and legal contexts, terminology should be clearly defined and used consistently to accurately and effectively address the actors, rights and issues. Member States could use the definitions in the EU strategy for civil society as a basis to align the definitions of 'civic space', 'civil society', and 'civil society organisations' in order to promote a shared understanding of the diverse roles of civil society, including watchdog and advocacy functions; to enhance the comparability of findings; and to avoid gaps in the monitoring and protection of civic space.

FRA opinion 2

As set out in the recommendation on participation, Member States and candidate countries should monitor developments in civic space using clear indicators and a structured reporting framework. This requires systematic documentation and analysis of developments. To do so effectively, Member States should seek and rely on national data, reports and observations from NHRIs, Ombudsman institutions, national/multinational CSOs and international organisations. All actors that monitor civic space are invited to contribute to the online information hub to be set up by FRA under the EU strategy for civil society.

Developing national strategies

This report shows that despite ongoing pressure on civic space and civic space actors, few Member States have developed a dedicated and comprehensive response, such as a strategy or framework for national-level actions to foster a safe and enabling civic space and the effective participation of civil society organisations, as called for by the European Commission in its 2023 recommendation on participation and again in the 2025 EU strategy for civil society. Where some form of strategy exists at the national level, it may be limited in scope, such as to the volunteer sector, or to cooperation between the public administration and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). In other cases, elements of a civil society strategy may be found in more general or thematic strategies. While civic space and civil society may not be considered holistically in one single policy document, a number of Member States have introduced targeted measures supporting an enabling environment for civil society, as detailed in Section 3.1.2.

As part of the 2025 democracy package together with the EU strategy for civil society, the European democracy shield seeks to address the continuing disruptive effect of information disorder on all aspects of democracy. An online survey for the European Parliament in June 2025 found that 65 % of EU residents believe they have encountered disinformation or false news at least occasionally in a given week. At least every second online user between the ages of 16 and 29 was exposed to hostile messages online, according to a 2024 Eurostat report. In FRA's civic space consultation for 2024, 47 % of responding organisations indicated that they had experienced online verbal threats and attacks.

FRA opinion 3

Member States are encouraged to develop or update national strategies to support, protect and empower civil society, in line with the Commission's 2023 recommendation on participation and the EU strategy for civil society. As a horizontal concern, such strategies could also include proportionate measures to address challenges to information integrity, such as cooperation with civil society actors, including civil society organisations, to support societal resilience to disinformation.

Challenges to an enabling legal environment

Data collected by FRA and others indicate instances of interference with the freedoms of association, peaceful assembly and expression by the state, as well as attacks on civic space actors by third parties. CSOs and others have reported heightened pressures on the freedoms of association, assembly and expression, particularly related to four issues: criminalisation of protests, pride marches and pro-Palestinian assemblies, and support for migrants. A number of Member States have introduced, proposed or maintained legislation that risks undermining Fundamental Freedoms based on the stated aims of protecting security and ensuring administrative efficiency. Some of these measures – for example, overly restrictive rules on assemblies and protests, including preventive bans, burdensome registration or reporting requirements, and law or official rhetoric that stigmatises CSOs based on their funding or activities – whether intentionally or unintentionally contribute to an environment in which CSOs and activists encounter obstacles in carrying out human rights work.

Whenever Member States act within the scope of EU law, they are obliged to comply with the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, and this also applies in the law- and policymaking process. In its 2025 report Better Legislation – Human rights impact assessments in lawmaking, the FRA highlights the need for legislators in the EU and in the Member States to assess the impact of policy and legislation on human rights and fundamental rights before adoption. These measures reflect pressures that an open and inclusive approach to lawmaking allows stakeholders to express concerns and to provide evidence and know-how. This is not just an expression of good governance but also helps prevent legislation that might lead to a violation of human rights. Including all segments of society and representative CSOs in the decision-making process creates a more inclusive, equitable and more effective and empowering effect on marginalised groups. The report notes that Member States rarely establish an obligation to consider input from CSOs or affected groups or to provide feedback on such input. CSOs report that feedback on consultations is often inconsistent or lacks any substantial explanations of how the comments submitted by CSOs were taken into consideration. Short deadlines or accelerated procedures in the case of complex legislative proposals further hinder the participation of CSOs.

FRA opinion 4

Member States must ensure that the freedoms of association, assembly and expression are upheld, and that legislation does not disproportionately restrict civic space. Member States should refrain from taking legal or other measures that unduly hamper the operation of CSOs, including against those that defend the rights of people in vulnerable situations, such as asylum seekers, religious or ethnic minorities, Roma and LGBTIQ+ persons.

FRA opinion 5

Both the EU institutions and the Member States should conduct human rights impact assessments in the course of policy development and legislative processes to prevent unintended restrictions or collateral effects on civic space and ensure the proportionality of any restrictive measures. In this context, Member States should ensure that relevant CSOs, including self-representative advocacy organisations of and for people in vulnerable situations, are informed in a timely manner and given enough time to comment on proposed legislation. The impact assessment or the text accompanying the legislative proposal should show how the results of the consultation with independent fundamental rights expert bodies and CSOs were considered.

Protecting civic space actors

Over the years, FRA's annual civic space consultation has shown that civil society organisations active in the field of fundamental rights have experienced a range of incidents including threats and attacks, with the intensity of experiences varying over time, geography and depending on the topics they work on. In the most recent consultation, from a selection of possible responses, the incidents most reported to FRA were online verbal attacks and threats (67 % of respondents experienced this often or sometimes), negative media reports or campaigns (60 % often or sometimes), politically motivated funding cuts (29 % often or sometimes), excessive administrative controls or audits (36 % often or sometimes) and in-person verbal threats and attacks (36 % often or sometimes). Criminalisation of humanitarian aid (21 % often or sometimes), suspected surveillance by law enforcement (18 % often or sometimes), strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs) (10 % often or sometimes) and vandalism (10 % often or sometimes) were also perceived as key challenges. One in 10 responding organisations reported that their employees or volunteers had been victims of a physical attack in 2024.

However, FRA's consultation indicates that 61 % of CSOs that experienced incidents did not report them or make a complaint. The most frequent reason indicated for this was that nothing would happen or change (54 %). Of particular concern is the reported impact of these attacks on the organisations and individuals involved. In the latest consultation, 4 out of 5 responding organisations indicated that their staff or volunteers experienced psychological effects such as burnout, depression, anxiety and feelings of vulnerability. More than one half noted financial problems and a discontinuation or reduction of activities because of external pressures.

FRA opinion 6

Without reporting, victims cannot access justice. Member States should encourage the reporting of serious incidents faced by CSOs and human rights defenders (HRDs), and ensure that they are properly recorded, investigated and prosecuted. Reporting and documentation mechanisms should also enable the identification and analysis of recurring patterns, trends and developments, in order to capture the systemic nature of attacks against civic space actors. To ensure access to justice in practice, appropriate training should be provided to the police and other relevant officials, including public prosecutors and judges, so that they recognise and respond appropriately to incidents experienced by civic space actors. Member States are encouraged to set up structured cooperation between law enforcement agencies and civil society organisations experiencing repeated serious threats.

FRA opinion 7

The EU should explore further protection measures for CSOs and HRDs, such as emergency funding for organisations under threat, coordination of available protection measures in Member States, and training and support on administrative, legal and logistical arrangements. Member States should explore how to better ensure the protection of civic space actors, including through training for civic space actors on protection measures, legal assistance, technical and financial support for cybersecurity, psychological assistance and physical protection.

Safeguarding access to funding

Civil society is an important partner for the EU and its Member States to help ensure that people can enjoy their rights and freedoms as they are enshrined in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights in practice. Democratic and societal resilience also relies on a strong civil society and civic engagement. However, there is a significant gap between the demand for funding of projects aimed at promoting fundamental rights, democracy and civic engagement, and the available resources.

While there is a growing need for work in the areas of fundamental rights, democracy and the rule of law, related funding has been reduced in recent years. Almost one-half (44 %) of respondents to FRA's most recent civic space consultation reported that they had experienced an unexpected reduction, cut or freezing of funding in the 12 months preceding the consultation. Furthermore, FRA's consultations throughout the years have highlighted that short funding cycles create significant administrative burdens for both applicants and donors, and constrain CSOs to short-term projects that are difficult to implement sustainably in view of long-term impact.

At the same time, legislation aimed at ensuring transparency or security has in some cases (partially inadvertently) resulted in various challenges, such as imposing disproportionate obstacles to access to funding for CSOs, stigmatising them as 'foreign agents', or creating a chilling effect for advocacy and activism. For example, rules that exclude political activity or advocacy from eligibility for public funding may become problematic if the definitions of 'political activity', 'advocacy' or 'political advertising' are too broad or vague, and potentially encompass tasks such as public campaigns, policy research or even routine engagement with policymakers. This has led to self-censoring of advocacy activities due to fears of losing funding. In some contexts, CSOs that engage in activities deemed 'political' risk losing their charitable status, with a subsequent loss of tax benefits. CSOs also report (often unintended) consequences of anti-money laundering or counter-terrorism financing laws.

In addition, foreign funding laws can be problematic due to disproportionate fees for receiving funds from abroad. Twenty-seven percent of CSOs responding to FRA's civic space consultation reported having encountered difficulties often or sometimes due to 'foreign funding' or 'foreign agent' rules during 2024.For instance, one such law in an EU Member State stipulates that organisations that receive foreign funding and fail to comply with reporting and disclosure obligations can face administrative fines from EUR 1 000 to EUR 10 000 and even dissolution.

FRA opinion 8

EU institutions and the Member States should ensure that the legal and policy environment is conducive to CSOs having access to diverse sources of funding, including funds that cover the full range of activities carried out by civil society organisations, including advocacy and watchdog functions and efforts to support democratic and societal resilience. Member States and EU institutions should engage in structured dialogue with relevant stakeholders, including CSOs, financial institutions and oversight bodies, to identify and address obstacles related to disproportionate reporting, due diligence, or access to financial services rules. Rules for access to funding from domestic or foreign sources must be aligned with international standards and EU law relating to non-discrimination and freedom of association.

Improving the engagement and participation of civil society in law- and policymaking

The European Commission has called on the Member States to promote and facilitate a transparent and inclusive framework for participation that enables civil society actors to participate in policymaking in a meaningful way. This report shows that at the end of 2024, the situation in the Member States varies significantly. Few Member States have legally binding rules for consultation with civil society, and most make use of non-binding guidelines and practices. The scope and effectiveness of both binding and non-binding frameworks is inconsistent. The report identifies a number of promising practices across the Members States that may inspire and help other Member States overcome barriers to meaningful participation, such as a comprehensive approach to all legislation, regardless of whether it is proposed by the government or parliament or by popular initiative, and the application of binding, easily accessible consultation guidelines.

The report shows that throughout the EU and in FRA observer countries, the development of a model of representative democracy that is complemented effectively by a participatory democracy framework remains a work in progress. In the EU strategy for civil society, the Commission notes that there is a need for further data collection and follow-up to the 2023 recommendation on participation. The Commission announced its intention to support capacity-building at the national level for the implementation of the recommendation, in cooperation with the European Economic and Social Committee and FRA.

FRA opinion 9

To enable the consistent and meaningful participation of civil society organisations in policymaking, Member States should review their legislation and practices, as encouraged by the Commission in the 2023 recommendation on participation. Rules on public participation should provide clear procedures and timelines, and encourage CSOs to submit their views. National law- and policymakers should apply these rules in a consistent, non-discriminatory and transparent manner. Member States should also ensure that CSOs are enabled to participate in the development of national positions on EU-level policies and legislation, so that their perspectives inform both national and EU decision-making processes.

FRA opinion 10

Public consultations should be widely publicised, and the participation of all members of society promoted, including people in vulnerable situations and their representative organisations. Sufficient time should be given for civil society organisations and other actors to respond to legislative and policy initiatives in a meaningful manner, and authorities should inform participants of the outcomes of consultations.

FRA opinion 11

The EU and the Member States should examine challenges to the engagement of civil society in practice and on this basis develop training and tools for meaningful participation in policymaking. In this regard, both the EU institutions and the Member States should ensure appropriate processes, budgeting and training for both officials and civil society actors on public participation.

Introduction