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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.

Key findings and FRA opinions
Introduction
1. How civil society helps uphold EU values and strengthen democracy
2. Challenges experienced by civil society organisations
3. Efforts to promote an enabling civic space and protect civil society
4. Framework for the effective participation of civil society organisations in policymaking processes
Conclusion
Annex: Methodology
Acronyms and abbreviations
About this publication

Introduction

Europe is in a fight. … A fight for our values and our democracies.

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen in the 2025 State of the European Union address

With these stark words, Commission President Ursula Von der Leyen opened the 2025 State of the European Union address [1]. Previously, in her political guidelines for 2024–2029, President von der Leyen spoke of 'an era of profound change' and of a 'world of adversity and uncertainty'. In the face of these challenges, Europe's future 'will depend on a strong democracy and on defending the values that give us the freedoms and rights we cherish' [2].

Faced with increasing geopolitical turmoil and technological disruption, the recently published European democracy shield calls for a whole-of-society approach – including the contribution of civil society actors – to strengthening democracy and democratic resilience. The EU strategy to strengthen the application of the Charter [3], the EU strategy for civil society [4] and EU preparedness union strategy [5] also point to the need for a whole-of-society approach to meet the challenges Europe currently faces.

Yet without a truly enabling environment, civil society organisations cannot fulfil their essential roles in our democracies, including as contributors to good law- and policymaking, watchdogs for rights and catalysts for democratic engagement. Thus, in times of profound change and uncertainty, fostering an enabling environment for civil society is not just a policy imperative, it is essential to safeguarding the future of democracy itself.

Fortunately, Europe faces these challenges from a position of relative strength. Democratic decline and rising authoritarianism are global phenomena, but the baselines from which these are measured are not universal. Despite the challenges to fundamental rights protection, the rule of law and civic space that have been documented in recent years, the EU remains a bastion of democracy. EU Member States score well above the global average in various democracy and rule of law related indexes, such as the annual Democracy Index published by the Economist Intelligence Unit and the *Freedom in the World* report published by Freedom House [6]. According to the 2025 World Justice Project Rule of Law Index that measures human rights, access to justice, corruption and authoritarianism worldwide, 8 out of the top 10 countries ranked by overall score are EU Member States [7].

Within the EU, however, the situation varies considerably between Member States, as is evident by the ranking in the Civicus Monitor. In 2025, 12 EU Member States were assessed as having an open civic space, 10 Member States were categorised as having a narrowed civic space, and five Member States were classified as countries where the civic space is obstructed. This represents a deterioration over the past years, as in 2020, the Civicus Monitor rated 13 EU Member States as open, 13 as narrowed and only one as obstructed [8].

This report is based on data and information collected by FRA's multidisciplinary research network Franet in the 27 Member States and three EU candidate countries, which participate as observers in FRA, i.e. Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia. These data were analysed and complemented through desk research by FRA experts. Finally, the report is informed by FRA's civic space consultation covering 2024 that was conducted online among civil society organisations participating in FRA's Fundamental Rights Platform. The consultation provides insight into the experiences and perceptions of civil society organisations as regards threats to civic space (for details, see Annex).

The report deals with four different yet related dimensions. Chapter 1 of the report highlights the many diverse ways in which civil society contributes to upholding the key EU values of respect for fundamental rights, the rule of law and democracy. It argues that as the EU faces a multitude of dynamic environmental, economic, security, geopolitical and demographic challenges, societal and democratic resilience will be key to safeguarding Europe's future. Despite shifting priorities, it will continue to be of the highest importance for the EU and its Member States to foster an enabling environment for civil society.

As in FRA's previous civic space updates, the report aims to provide policymakers and civil society actors with an updated picture of the current shortcomings to a truly enabling civic space (Chapter 2:).

Focus then shifts to demonstrate how Member States are already aiming to address the challenges to civic space through strategies and targeted measures. The report reveals how NHRIs, Ombudsman institutions and civil society organisations are also contributing to this effort by keeping a watchful eye on civic space and government action, and by taking their own measures to help ensure an enabling environment (Chapter 3:).

In the last chapter (Chapter 4:), the report examines one of the important ways in which civil society contributes to European democracy, which is through participation in law- and policymaking, and identifies the frameworks and structures Member States provide for participation.

Taken together, the different chapters aim to provide a basis for the implementation of the new EU strategy for civil society, with the aim of strengthening the enabling environment and civic space actors to best contribute to this 'fight for our values and our democracies'.

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