

CALL FOR EVIDENCE FOR AN INITIATIVE (without an impact assessment)

TITLE OF THE INITIATIVE	EU civil society strategy
LEAD DG – RESPONSIBLE UNIT	DG Justice and Consumers – unit C.2
LIKELY TYPE OF INITIATIVE	Non-legislative/Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions
INDICATIVE TIMING	Q3-2025
ADDITIONAL INFORMATION	New initiative announced in the Commission work programme 2025

This document is for information purposes only. It does not prejudice the final decision of the Commission on whether this initiative will be pursued or on its final content. All elements of the initiative described by this document, including its timing, are subject to change.

A. Political context, problem definition and subsidiarity check

Political context

Civil society organisations, including human rights defenders, play **diverse roles** across our society. They operate in several areas, such as awareness-raising, education, provision of support or services, policy monitoring and advocacy. They are often entrusted with implementing EU law and policies on the ground. They strengthen social cohesion and preparedness, enhance policy effectiveness, and ensure that the voices of affected communities are heard. Their engagement is also a crucial element in the system of **democratic checks and balances** and the **promotion and defence of EU values**.

The Commission uses a **comprehensive toolbox** to support and involve civil society organisations. In addition to dialogues in a wide range of policy areas and the Better Regulation channels of consultation, there is regular involvement in a high number of our Commission expert groups, providing extensive tools and opportunities for all interested stakeholders to contribute throughout the policy-making cycle. The European Economic and Social Committee plays a key role in the engagement with civil society.

All civil society organisations need an **enabling environment** that fosters **meaningful engagement** and provides them with **further support**, if they are to carry out their work and contribute to EU policies. They should be able to pursue their activities without interference. The EU should act to **promote and protect civic space** and those active within it.

Commission President Ursula von der Leyen stressed the need for **greater EU engagement with and protection of civil society organisations** in her political guidelines for 2024-2029, and reiterated that need in her [mission letter](#) to the Commissioner for democracy, justice, the rule of law and consumer protection.

The EU civil society strategy builds on this political commitment and on the [Recommendation 2023/2836](#) on promoting the engagement and effective participation of citizens and civil society organisations in public policy-making processes, adopted as part of the defence of democracy package.

Problem the initiative aims to tackle

The strategy will propose a **framework for action at EU and Member State level**. Its key objectives will be to **strengthen meaningful engagement with and protection** of civil society organisations working on a broad range of EU policies. The strategy responds to several calls – in particular from the [European Parliament](#) and civil society organisations themselves – for a comprehensive EU strategy that pursues those objectives.

Given that current evidence shows that **civic space** for civil society organisations and human rights defenders promoting and protecting EU values **is shrinking**, the Strategy would also propose specific measures to support, protect and empower civil society actors active on these issues. The specific obstacles they face are outlined in the [2022 Charter Report](#), a 2022 European Parliament [Fundamental Rights Committee report](#), and the Commission's Rule of Law reports. More specifically, the [2024 Fundamental Rights Agency \(FRA\) Fundamental Rights report](#) noted the lack of opportunities for meaningful consultation, in particular at national level, and found

that the environment in which civil society organisations working in the area of EU values has worsened. Three quarters of the consulted organisations **reported barriers to their activities** in protecting human rights and the rule of law. In particular, they cited:

- negative media reports and campaigns;
- online verbal attacks or harassment;
- suspected surveillance;
- strategic lawsuits against public participation (known as SLAPPs); and
- legal and physical threats.

In addition, another challenge noted concerns **difficulties in securing long-term, predictable and transparent funding** that allows them to maintain their independence.

Basis for EU action (legal basis and subsidiarity check)

Fostering effective engagement with civil society organisations and **ensuring their protection** at all levels raises challenges that cannot be addressed by interventions on an *ad hoc* basis or through national or local actions alone, due to their cross-cutting nature.

In fact, with the EU and its Member States facing similar challenges, only **coordinated action will deliver an effective and efficient response** to them.

The strategy will therefore gather existing evidence and action to provide a more streamlined approach, ensuring that actions by the EU and Member States are implemented within **a common framework**.

Action at EU level will focus on engaging with civil society organisations, as well as on protecting and supporting them. It will include dedicated actions to support, protect and empower those organisations that are a key part of the checks and balances in our democracies and who are active in promoting and protecting EU values.

Legal basis

Not applicable

Practical need for EU action

The proposed initiative addresses the need for action by the EU and its Member States. Member States play a crucial role in **promoting dialogue with civil society organisations** and in **protecting civic space** at the national, local and grassroots level. While Member States usually act as the first point of contact and action in this area, **several actions require a coordinated EU approach**. They include making it easier for civil society organisations to operate across borders within the EU. Therefore, a streamlined, coherent framework for action across the EU is needed. It should also take into account EU and national experience in supporting civil society organisations around the world.

B. What does the initiative aim to achieve and how

Acknowledging the importance of the work done by civil society organisations in making EU policies a success, the EU civil society strategy will set up **a framework for EU and national action**. Its **key objectives** at EU level will be (i) to **promote dialogue with civil society organisations** so that they are effectively involved in developing and implementing EU policies, and (ii) **provide them with the support and protection** they need to carry out their work, in a whole-of-society approach.

As regards EU action, the framework will systematise and improve existing EU mechanisms offering meaningful engagement and support, while also making them more transparent. It would notably complement the institutional mechanisms already existing in the European Economic and Social Committee. It would also recognise the important principles of transparency and accountability in engaging with civil society organisations, and for civil society actors themselves, including as concerns the respect for EU values when implementing EU programmes. In this way, the framework will provide **a coordinated approach** to certain challenges faced by civil society organisations.

As regards national action, the strategy will follow up on implementation of the 2023 Recommendation on civic engagement, which calls on Member States to **set up effective participation and protection mechanisms for civil society organisations**. It will also provide for **similar mechanisms at EU level**, taking into account existing efforts in the EU's external work.

The strategy will include dedicated actions to support, protect and empower those civil society organisations and human rights defenders that play an important role as part of the **checks and balances in our democracies**, and that actively **promote and protect EU values**.

These particular organisations and defenders face specific challenges. They are challenges around (i) protection, (ii) a lack of sustainable, flexible and transparent financing, and (iii) difficulties in engaging with public authorities, particularly in areas concerning the rule of law, democracy and fundamental rights. The strategy will propose initiatives to support an enabling environment, with actions at EU level to prevent civic space from shrinking. It will also propose actions for better dialogue between public authorities and civil society organisations on democracy, the rule of law and related issues. At EU level, this will include engagement through a **Civil Society Platform**.

Likely impacts

The strategy is expected to have positive social impacts, thanks to a more effective and more open participation of these actors in EU and national decision-making processes. Greater alignment of actions and structured mechanisms at EU and national level will also help address civic space challenges more systematically. This, in turn, will promote equality, inclusivity and trust in public decision-making.

Through support for civil society organisations, the strategy will also bolster protection of fundamental rights, democracy and the rule of law. In providing a coherent framework for protection, it will improve safeguards for organisations facing threats and attacks. Those safeguards will benefit the fundamental rights of the individuals concerned and make them better able to advocate for the fundamental rights of others and for related values. The strategy will encourage accountability and ensure that civil society organisations have access to the necessary resources and suitable channels of dialogue.

Moreover, closer cooperation with Member States will promote a shared responsibility in protecting civil society organisations. The resulting boost for democratic resilience, critical thinking and public trust will ultimately benefit society as a whole. In developing the strategy, also the external dimension will be considered to ensure a coherent and comprehensive approach to civil society, thereby fostering internal-external policy coherence.

Future monitoring

The contribution of the Strategy to protecting, supporting and fostering engagement with civil society organisations can be monitored through various mechanisms, including through sector-specific monitoring mechanisms, and more generally, with respect to civic space, monitoring carried out by the FRA and the Commission's annual rule of law reports, in particular the pillar on checks and balances.

C. Better regulation

Impact assessment

No impact assessment is planned. The proposed initiative, a Commission Communication, does not imply any binding commitments or financial impact for Member States or other stakeholders.

Consultation strategy

Broad consultation and public engagement will be essential in creating this initiative. The consultation process, taking place in **the second and third quarters of 2025**, will gather evidence and input from stakeholders, with a particular focus on the identified priority areas.

The process will comprise:

- This call for evidence, alongside an open public consultation (lasting 12 weeks).
- A Eurobarometer on democracy.
- Consultations with Member States, also in the Council.
- Targeted exchanges with the European Parliament, the Committee of the Regions and the European Economic and Social Committee.
- Targeted consultation activities with key stakeholders via focus groups and dedicated questionnaires, across EU policy areas.
- Targeted consultations with European, international and national civil society organisations and human rights defenders active on promoting and protecting EU values, including via channels like the FRA fundamental rights platform.
- Exchanges with relevant international organisations (including the Council of Europe, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights).

The consultation will be promoted (i) via the Commission's social channels, (ii) by informing beneficiaries of projects and (iii) via existing platforms (such as the FRA fundamental rights platform).

A factual summary report will be published on the consultation page after the public consultation has closed.

Why we are consulting?

This consultation aims:

- to gather views, information and analysis from a broad range of stakeholders;
- to understand the concrete challenges that civil society organisations face; and
- to identify and shape possible actions to be taken by the EU and its Member States to address those challenges.

Moreover, it is designed as a transparent and participatory means of putting together a comprehensive stakeholder perspective that the Commission can draw on when proposing specific initiatives to protect, support and promote engagement with civil society organisations – and, more generally, to support an enabling environment.

Target audience

The consultation targets a wide range of stakeholders, including members of the public, civil society organisations (operating in Member States, the EU and internationally), national human rights institutions and equality bodies, national authorities, academia, youth groups, media representatives and international organisations.