

## Holding the line: A call for the EU's Civil Society Strategy to safeguard democracy and climate action

CAN Europe welcomes the European Commission plan for an EU Civil Society Strategy and its intended objectives to strengthen meaningful engagement with and protection of civil society organisations. We value the acknowledgement from the Commission on the vital and indispensable role that civil society organizations have in many aspects of society - from enhancing policy effectiveness and climate action; to strengthening cohesion, inclusion and community resilience; promoting gender equality and women's rights; defending victims of intersecting discrimination; and, ultimately, in the promotion and defence of EU's democratic principles.

We furthermore value the acknowledgment that, regardless of these diverse and staple roles that civil society organizations have, they have however recently been faced with obstructions and barriers, stemming from a concerning trend of shrinking civic space and democratic backsliding. We underline the gravity and seriousness of the potential impacts of the ongoing challenges for CSOs, including misrepresentation in the media, smear campaigns that discredit their work, uncertainty regarding funding and access to policy-makers and general growing criminalization of climate activism<sup>1</sup>. This context of shrinking civic space and democratic decline in the EU are concerning and unfavorable to the ability of the EU to also respond to major challenges, such as the urgency to act on climate action.

The latest Eurobarometer statistics re-confirmed that a large majority of Europeans continue to view climate change as a serious global threat, with 85% of citizens identifying it as a major problem. Support for EU climate policy remains strong: 81% back the EU-wide goal of climate neutrality by 2050<sup>2</sup>. **Achieving climate goals is not possible without the active involvement of civil society actors.** Historically, CSOs have been among the most vocal advocates for more ambitious climate targets and for ensuring that climate and energy policies are fair and inclusive. They play a critical role in monitoring and holding governments accountable for their commitments under the Paris Agreement, particularly through the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) process. Moreover, CSOs are essential partners in making climate policies both effective and implementable, thanks to their close ties with citizens and local communities. Their contribution is indispensable to ensuring a just transition—one that places people at the centre of the decarbonisation of the

---

<sup>1</sup> **Guarding the Foundations: EU civil society in a changing geopolitical environment**, European Policy Centre (EPC), April 2024;

**Fundamental Rights Report 2025**, European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), June 2025;

**Civic Space Report 2025**, European Civic Forum (ECF), Spring 2025

<sup>2</sup> **Special Eurobarometer 565 – Climate Change**, European Commission, Spring 2025

economy, amplifies the voices of workers and affected communities, and embeds social justice throughout Europe's climate action.

Therefore, we want to amplify the message that there cannot be climate action and social justice with no respect for basic civic freedoms and human rights. An open civic space is a prerequisite for individuals and civil society actors to express their concerns on climate and the environment.

In this context, CAN Europe calls for the CSS to act as a safeguard for CSO operations, particularly in climate, environmental, development and human rights fields. The EU must take decisive action to protect civil society, including:

### **Institutional Recognition and Protection**

EU institutions must formally recognise CSOs' role in safeguarding democracy and improve mechanisms for continuous dialogue, access, and cooperation. This includes clarifying CSO definitions to avoid equating industry associations with genuine CSOs. Definitions should include informal actors such as citizen assemblies and grassroots movements. Disinformation campaigns must be countered with measures that defend CSOs' legitimacy.

### **Uphold Basic Civic Freedoms**

The EU must stand firmly against restrictions on freedom of expression and assembly, including legal and administrative barriers. Civic freedoms must be proactively enabled through a robust EU-wide protection framework that offers timely support. Member States must be reminded of their fundamental rights obligations. Protection frameworks must also extend to human rights and environmental defenders beyond EU borders.

### **Strengthen the Frameworks for Security and Wellbeing of Activists**

Recent reports on the state of civil society point out that CSO staff and activists, especially youth, are increasingly exposed to emotional strain and various forms of intimidation related to their climate advocacy. They should have access to legal, financial, and psychosocial support. The EU must ensure their safety via a sustainable and independent protection mechanism, linking national alerts and monitoring with rapid EU responses and pressure on Member States.

### **Balanced Transparency and Reporting**

New transparency rules should be carefully balanced and guided by proportionality so that introduced rules and processes for transparency do not overburden or defer NGOs (administrative) capacities from their programme implementation and general operations. Such measures must be co-developed with civil society and applied equally across stakeholders, including corporations and lobby groups.

### **Safeguard open dialogue between CSOs and decision-makers**

While the proposed Civil Society Platform is welcome, we would like to highlight that it must not be a stand-alone initiative, but a first step toward a comprehensive framework. It should include diverse voices, regular high-level meetings and dialogue, and binding

follow-up and inclusion in policymaking processes. It cannot replace specialised or ad hoc CSO dialogues, nor restrict CSO contributions in other decision-making spaces. Open communication channels, especially for climate policy, with European and national policy and decision-makers must be guaranteed.

### **Financial Stability**

The EU must protect core CSO funding and ensure that funding for civil society is not reduced in the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF). National-level CSO funding cuts must be addressed by securing minimum budget lines for civil society. To improve access, funding requirements should be proportional to grant size, and CSOs should be regularly consulted to adjust schemes. Support for subgranting is also essential to reach grassroots groups.

### **National Engagement Frameworks**

Member States should establish transparent, formal frameworks for civil society engagement to build democratic resilience. The EU must act early to prevent democratic backsliding through diplomacy and infringement procedures. This will also enable that democratic values to be upheld in different contexts and are more resilient to political shifts in MS.

### **Protection Within and Beyond EU Borders**

Acknowledging the EU's role and impact in its neighbouring countries and globally, the CSS should specify how the EU is going to promote democratic values and civil society protection within and beyond its borders. One method is to refer to the enlargement process of the European Union and the protection of civil society as closely intertwined. It has been always clear that the EU sees the enlargement process also as a way to bring larger social standards to accession countries, including the participation of civil society in policy making and the democratic reforms, protection of human rights and the rule of law. When it comes to the global dimension, it is often the case that especially in authoritarian regimes, climate, environmental and human rights defenders are threatened with their lives.

The EU should mainstream to ensure the protection of civil society as a precondition to engage in any kind of project/agreement with countries beyond its borders. The CSS should include measures to protect and strengthen civil society in those countries, via at least two ways: a) conditioning partnerships to fulfilment of certain values, establishing rigorous monitoring and enforcement mechanisms and b) direct support to civil society in those countries, through programs that would empower and help national and local CSOs to build and maintain their structures.

A vibrant and strong civil society is the cornerstone of democracy in the EU. Policies, including the CSS, should reflect this, supporting the vital role CSOs have, and not pose any additional burden or gateway to further limitation to freedom of assembly and other basic civic rights and democratic freedoms in the EU.