

Budapest, 11 November 2021

Commissioner for Justice Didier Reynders

Call to the European Commission to adopt a civic space strategy

The European Commission should recognise the essential role civil society plays in the EU and adopt a dedicated strategy to protect and strengthen civil society. Key policy goals of the EU, including the European Green Deal, digital transformation and safeguarding the rule of law, can only be achieved with the help of civil society. Civic actors are subject to increasing pressure in many EU member states. We call on the European Commission to take a strategic approach to support civic space.

Civil society is the immune system of our democracy and a genuine promoter of values and fundamental rights that underpin EU policies. Without civil society organisations (CSOs), activists and informal community groups, the EU could not have made such progress on gender equality, digital rights, climate change awareness and other crucial issues.

Increased funding for the Citizens Equality Rights and Values programme and scrutinising civil society's situation in the Commission's yearly Rule of Law Report are welcome. Nevertheless, political and financial support remains fragmented and limited. This has facilitated the erosion of democratic standards and the rule of law in member states. In many countries, civil society has become vulnerable to legal, administrative and political pressure.

The European Commission should openly acknowledge civil society as an essential element of democracy, and its role in upholding EU rights and values in an official strategy. Existing measures should be unified and strengthened to form a new coherent policy. The strategy should propose a set of concrete measures that will increase and ensure consistent civil society access to policy debates and processes at the European level, as well as to sustainable funding. It would commit the EU to better protect freedoms essential to healthy civic space, including the freedom of association, assembly, speech and access to information.

The strategy would help prevent democratic backsliding and complement EU actions to defend the rule of law in member states. EU priorities like combating climate change, digital transformation, and recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic will be impossible to achieve without strong civic space and civil society organizations, which ensure that communities' interests and rights are respected. Without this strategy, civil society will become even more vulnerable to increasing threats and key EU policies will be undermined. You have a unique opportunity to give citizens the support they need to enforce common European values and interests. We look forward to answering any questions you may have and helping prepare the strategy.

Amnesty International (Hungary)

Citizen Network Watchdog (Poland)

Democracy Reporting International (Germany)

epicenter.works – for digital rights (Austria)

Expert Forum (Romania)

Gender Alternatives Foundation (Bulgaria)

Hertie School (Germany)

Human Rights House Zagreb (Croatia)

Hungarian Helsinki Committee (Hungary)

Legal Network for Protection of Democracy (Slovenia)

Netherlands Helsinki Committee (Netherlands)

PIC - Legal Center for the Protection of Human Rights and the Environment (Slovenia)

Stefan Batory Foundation (Poland)