To: President Ursula von der Leyen
Prime Minister Donald Tusk
President Roberta Metsola

3 April 2025, Brussels

Subject: Strengthening and shielding European democracy with the upcoming MFF

Eighty years ago, the defeat of Nazi fascism and the end of World War II gave rise to a vision of a united Europe built on peace, democracy, equality, and the rule of law. The foundation of new democratic states committed to social welfare and fundamental rights for all set the stage for decades of unprecedented economic and social developments, and peace. This model, while not perfect, gave hope to those in Europe still under authoritarian regimes and acted as the basis for our common and shared security in the region. All along these decades, civil society has been a driving force behind historical moments of democratic transformation. From the struggles for democracy in Spain, Portugal, and Greece in the 1970s to movements like Solidarnosc in Poland and Charter 77 in Czechoslovakia, civic actors have played a critical role in shaping a shared European future. The lessons of these struggles remain deeply relevant today.

As Europe grapples with complex and interconnected crises — including climate change, widening economic precarity, and eroding trust in democratic institutions — the very fabric of our democracies is at risk. Growing social divisions and declining trust in institutions leave societies vulnerable to forces seeking to weaken democracy. These vulnerabilities create fertile ground for external factors — like Putin's Russia and the Trump administration — and internal forces seeking to dismantle democratic principles, challenging the very notion that rights are universal. A democracy that does not actively protect and advance equality and the wellbeing of all ceases to be a democracy in the true sense of the word.

In this context, the strength of our democracies vis a vis these challenges depend on a robust civil society. Organised civil society has played a crucial role in responding to crises, from the COVID-19 pandemic to the displacement of Ukrainians fleeing war and the response to environmental disasters. With few means and little direct power, they are often the first ones to arrive and the last ones to leave where people are in need, and when democracy is under stress. Poland serves as a recent example of how civil society played a critical role in restoring the rule of law and democracy when they were undermined.

Recognising the gravity of these challenges, you have made a firm commitment to "A free and democratic Europe" and to support, empower, and protect civil society. We now ask that this vision be fully reflected in the upcoming Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), including by strengthening the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) programme financing as one of the crucially needed tools of the European democracy shield, the Civil Society Strategy and the European Equality Strategies.

Four reasons to strengthen the CERV programme to defend democracy:

1. CERV is a key EU instrument to promote democracy, equality, and fundamental rights for all.

Since 2020, the CERV programme has been a lifeline for civic organisations' interventions across Europe, particularly through multiannual core funding and outreach to remoted areas via the regranting scheme. It has led to tangible improvements in democratic participation, legal protections for women, LGBTQI+ people, racialised groups, people with disabilities, children, older persons, and survivors of violence. Yet, despite its impact, the CERV budget remains less than 0.2% of the total MFF — providing wholly insufficient means given the scope of issues to be addressed in supporting the foundations of European democracy.

2. Increasing support to civil society means investing in democratic resilience.

Despite its successes, CERV remains severely underfunded, leaving up to 92% of aligned initiatives without financial support.[1][2] A 2023 survey by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights found that 75.4% of CSOs working on fundamental rights and democracy fear that funding shortages threaten their work.[3] The recent freeze on USAID contributions[4] and the reinstatement of the Global Gag Rule further highlights the urgent need for MFF discussions to decisively address the funding needs for democracy resilience-building and human rights protection.

3. New challenges require new tools and expanded resources.

Increased investment is crucial for advancing civic and democratic education and critical thinking, fostering right-based narratives and policies, enabling multi-stakeholder collaborations, ensuring broad-based democratic participation and providing essential support to human rights defenders and civil society under attack. Furthermore, as equality in the access to fundamental rights is increasingly attacked, there is a growing need of support for those who act to protect marginalised and excluded groups, and gender equality, as well as to ensure their voices are heard in policy-making. Addressing these challenges requires not only strong policy decisions but also the necessary budgetary commitments for effective support.

4. Opponents of European democracy and fundamental rights — both within and beyond EU borders — are investing unprecedented resources to attack civil society and democracy.

Authoritarian regimes and radicalised groups are using vast financial and technological means in spreading disinformation, fuelling polarisation, and shaping anti-rights narratives and policies that undermine dignity and fundamental rights — targeting in particular racialised groups, migrants, refugees, women and LGBTI+ people. At the same time, from inside the political sphere, far-right forces but also part of the representatives of mainstream parties are actively delegitimising and attacking funding for democratic CSOs, including the CERV programme itself. By proactively investing in robust support for democratic resilience, the EU can strengthen European democracy and counteract those seeking to undermine it.

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[1] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=COM%3A2024%3A456%3AFIN

[2] https://www.cerv.at/dam/jcr:dffbc544-1381-4b0f-a3a7-bb4f4560a473/CERV_Presentation_Results_2021-%202.pdf

[3] report-key-´ ndings-fra-civic-space-consultation-covering-2023.pdf

[4] Global Aid Freeze Tracker

Our call to action: make a historic commitment to democracy!

To strengthen democracy and rights for all, we need to put our money where our mouth is. In 2020, the European Parliament and European Council played a key role in championing the CERV by nearly tripling the CERV budget compared to the initial proposal by the European Commission. Now the challenges are broader and greater — and so must be our collective response from the European institutions and civic actors. Allocating 0.5% of the MFF to the CERV - as a stand-alone programme managed by the European Commission - would send a strong signal about the EU's commitment to defending democracy and would be an invaluable investment in our shared future.

This investment must be accompanied by:

- A strong and structural support for civil society and its participation in policymaking in all relevant thematic programmes;
- Strategic dialogue among public institutions, philanthropy groups, and civil society on how to meet the needs of civil society actors that defend fundamental rights;
- A robust legal and tax framework for ′nancial tools that support the sustainable funding of organised civil society, at the EU and national levels, including matching funds for the CERV grants;
- A strong stance against attacks on CSOs and their funding in the EU.

Europe's democracy is only as strong as its commitment to equality and fundamental rights. If we fail to protect and invest in those fighting for fundamental rights, social justice, and inclusion, in coherence with the European treaty provisions, we risk undermining the very essence of democracy itself. Now is the time to act decisively to ensure that democracy in Europe remains not just a system of governance, but a true reflection of equality and dignity for all.

Yours sincerely,

European and international organisations

1. European Civic Forum
2. AGE Platform Europe
3. All Digital
4. Balkan Civil Society Development Network (BCSDN)
5. Centre for European Volunteering
6. Civil Liberties Union for Europe
7. DYPALL Network
8. ENAR - European Network Against Racism
9. End Female Genital Mutilation European Network
10. EPA - European Parents' Association
11. Eurochild
12. European Association for Local Democracy - ALDA
13. European Center for Not-for-Pro′t Law Stichting
14. EUROPEAN FEDERATĮON FOR ĮNTERCULTURAL LEARNĮNG
15. European Public Health Alliance
16. European Youth Forum
17. Fédération Européenne des Retraités et personnes Âgées (FERPA)
18. Įnternational Planned Parenthood Federation —European Network (ĮPPF EN)

19. Lifelong Learning Platform - European Civil Society for Education
20. RECLAĮM
21. Res Publica Foundation - Visegrad Įnsight
22. SOLĮDAR
23. Transparency Įnternational EU
24. Union of European Federalists
25. Young European Federalists (JEF Europe)
26. The Good Lobby

Austria

27. Bündnis für Gemeinnützigkeit - Civil Society Alliance Austria
28. Association of Austrian Autonomous Women's Shelters
29. ECoD gemeinnützige GmbH / European Capital of Democracy

Belgium

30. Pour la solidarité
31. Professional Women Įnternational Brussels
32. Stand Up for Europe

Bosnia and Herzegovina

33. Centar za promociju civilnog drustva
34. Center for Civic Cooperation

Bulgaria

35. Bulgarian Biodiversity Foundation
36. Bulgarian center for not-for-pro´t law
37. European Įnstitute Foundation
38. Įn´nite Opportunities Association
39. So´a Platform Foundation
40. Union of Bulgarian Black Sea Local Authorities

Croatia

41. Croatian Platform for Įnternational Citizen Solidarity
42. Human Rights House Zagreb
43. CESĮ - Center for Education, Counselling and Research
44. Lota's Box

Czech Republic

45. Network for the Protection of Democracy
46. Glopolis
47. SPĮRALĮS
48. APLA Severní Cechy,z.s.
49. CeHuPo - Centrum Humanitární Pomoci, z.s.
50. Czech Women's Lobby
51. FoRS - Czech Forum for Development Cooperation
52. Green Circle

53. GUG.cz, z.s.
54. Jezevec z.s.
55. Karlovarsko pro demokracii
56. Kouči pro Vás z.s.
57. Letokruh z.u.
58. Lumpeco
59. Open society p.b.a.; Įnstitute H21
60. Péče bez pŚekáĺek, z. s.
61. Platform for social housing
62. Platforma pro občanská shromáĺdění
63. Prague Pride z.s.
64. Spolek Epigram
65. *Spolu na SuȚicku, z.s.* (*Together in SuȚicko, z.s.*)
66. StŚedisko ekologické výchovy SEVER /Centre For Environmental Education SEVER
67. Transparency Įnternational Czech Republic
68. TUDYTAM, z.s.
69. Ukrajinska iniciativa jizni Moravy

Denmark

70. Nyt Europa
71. Global Focus
72. Acter Global
73. Crossing Borders
74. Danish Family Planning Association
75. Mino Danmark
76. NOAH, Friends of the Earth Denmark

Estonia

77. Estonian Human Rights Centre
78. Network of Estonian Non-Pro´t Organizations

Finland

79. SOSTE Finnish Federation for Social Affairs and Health

France

80. Le Mouvement associatif
81. LDH (Ligue des droits de l'Homme)
82. LĮGUE DE L'ENSEĮGNEMENT
83. Maison de l'Europe de Paris
84. Mouvement européen France-Vaucluse
85. VoxPublic

Germany

86. Bundesnetzwerk Bürgerschaftliches Engagement
87. Maecenata Foundation

Greece

88. European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation "EGTC Amphictyony"
89. Greek Forum of Refugees
90. Union of Women Association of Heraklion

Hungary

91. Ökotars-Hungarian Environmental Partnership Foundation
92. ”Į‚d like to teach„ Movement (Tanítanék Mozgalom)
93. Alternative Communities Association
94. Artemisszió Alapítvány
95. Autonomia Foundation
96. Civil Kozoktatasi Platform (CKP)
97. Dialogue for Communities Association
98. Emberség Erejével Alapítvány - Power of Humanity Foundation
99. EMMA Association
100. Energiaklub Climate Policy Įnstitute
101. European House Budapest
102. Great Lakes and Wetlands Association
103. Háttér Society
104. Human Platform Association
105. Hungarian Civil Liberties Union
106. Hungarian Helsinki Committee
107. Hungarian Europe Society
108. Közélet Įskolája / The School of Public Life
109. Magyar NŒi ÉrdekérvényesítŒSzövetség (Hungarian Women's Lobby)
110. Motivation Educational Association
111. NĮOK Alapítvány
112. PĮLnet
113. Power of Humanity Foundation (Emberség Erejével Alapítvány)
114. SzülŒi Hang
115. Uccu Roma Įnformal Education Foundation

Įreland

116. Comhlámh
117. Įrish Council for Civil Liberties
118. Redial Partnership CLG
119. The Wheel

Įtaly

120. ARCĮ
121. European Movement Įtaly
122. Solidarietà e Cooperazione - CĮPSĮ ETS
123. ANCĮ Lazio
124. Associazione ADL Zavidovici
125. Associazione Luciano Lama ODV
126. Biosphaera s.c.s.
127. Europiamo ETS
128. Federazione trentina della cooperazione

Latvia

129. Civic Alliance - Latvia
130. "Sievietēm 50+"
131. Ar pasaules pieredzi Latvijā
132. Donum Animus
133. Eiropas Kustība Latvijā / European Movement - Latvia

Lithuania

134. Open Lithuania Foundation
135. Nemunėio RadviliĮkio bendruomenė
136. Alytaus kraĮto asmenŴsu negalia draugija
137. ButrimoniŴbendruomenės centras
138. Center for Equality Advancement
139. Gilės sodas NGO
140. House of Diversity education
141. Klausos negalios ĮeimŴbendrija Aidas
142. Lietuvos agentŬros "SOS vaikai" Panevėſio skyrius
143. Lietuvos triračiŴsporto asociacija
144. Lithuanian frame Running sport association
145. Lithuanian Gay League
146. Lithuanian Young Falcon Union
147. LPF Atgaivos sala
148. Maſ eikiŴsutrikusios psichikos ſmoniŴglobos bendrija "Gyvenimo spalvos"
149. NejgaliŴųŴsportininkŴasociacija
150. NGO Education, Health and Social Įnnovation Center (Svietimo, sveikatos ir socialiniu inovaciju centras)
151. onkologiniu ligoniu asociacija Viltie kelias
152. Public Įnstitution 'Eik, Center
153. SenjorŴpasaulis
154. Stebėk teises
155. TAURAGĖ WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT AND ĮNFORMATĮON CENTER (TMUĮC)
156. Telsiu kriziu centras
157. Village community "BerteĮkiai"
158. Visaginas University of the Third Age
159. VĮĨ „Unikalus Įokis„
160. VĮĨ PabėgėliŴTaryba
161. VĮĨ PriraĮytos rankos (Įnscribed Hands)
162. VĮĨ VAĮKų LĮNĮJA

Netherlands

163. Hivos
164. Netherlands Helsinki Committee

Poland

165. National Federation of Polish NGOs (OFOP)
166. Stefan Batory Foundation
167. Polish Robert Schuman Foundation
168. Atlas NienawiŜci

169. Bridges of Perspectives Cooperative
170. Central Roma Council
171. Centrum Rozwoju Įnicjatyw Społecznych CRĮS
172. Coalition Living Earth
173. Committee for the Defence of Democracy
174. Equality Factory Association
175. Federacja Znaki RównoŜci
176. Forests and Citizens Foundation
177. Foundation Humanity in Action Poland
178. Free Courts Foundation
179. Fundacja "Pro Aperte"
180. Fundacja Artonomia
181. Fundacja Czas Kobiet
182. Fundacja Diabeciaki
183. Fundacja Dom tam gdzie Ty
184. Fundacja Įnicjatywa Dom Otwarty
185. Fundacja Įnterakcja
186. Fundacja Koper Pomaga Copernicus Group
187. Fundacja Kultura Liberalna
188. FUNDACJA MALĮNOWY GEST
189. Fundacja Matecznik
190. Fundacja NieOdkładalni
191. Fundacja Po Mojemu w Krakowie
192. Fundacja RównoŜć.org.pl
193. Fundacja Rozwoju Demolracji Lokalnej im. Jerzego Regulskiego
194. Fundacja Transgresja
195. Fundacja W Stronę Dialogu (Foundation Towards Dialogue)
196. Fundacja Widzialne
197. Fundacja WolnoŜci
198. Fundacja Wspomagania Wsi
199. Green REV Įnstitute
200. Habitat for Humanity Poland
201. Homo Faber Association
202. Įnformation Society Development Foundation
203. Įnicjatywa "Nasz Rzecznik"/ "Our Ombudsman" Įnitiative
204. Įnstitute for Sustainable Development Foundation
205. Įnstitute for Sustainable Development Foundation
206. Jewish Association Czulent
207. Kampania Przeciw Homofobii / Campaign Against Homophobia
208. Klub Įnteligencji Katolickiej (Club of Catholic Įntelligentsia)
209. Love Does Not Exclude Association
210. Marsz RównoŜci Bydgoszcz
211. Migration Consortium
212. Mind & Gravity Foundation
213. My, Rodzice (We The Parents) - stowarzyszenie matek, ojców i sojuszników osób LGBTQĮA
214. Nauka dla Przyrody (Science for Nature)
215. Neutral Language Council (Pronounce.page)
216. niebinarnosc.pl
217. Ocalenie Foundation
218. Open Republic Association against Anti-Semitism and Xenophobia

219. Panoptykon Foundation
220. Polish Association of the Deaf —Ł ódŻ Division
221. Polish Donors Forum
222. Polish Migration Forum Foundation
223. Polska Akcja Humanitarna
224. Polski Klub Ekologiczny Okręg Mazowiecki
225. Queerowy Maj
226. Queerpol Fondation
227. SOK Foundation (Fundacja SamodzielnoŜć od Kuchni)
228. Stowarzyszenie Egala
229. Stowarzyszenie Grupa Stonewall
230. Stowarzyszenie Įnicjatywa Obywatelska Pro Civium
231. Stowarzyszenie Ł ódzkie Dziewuchy Dziewuchom
232. Stowarzyszenie Mudita
233. Stowarzyszenie na rzecz Dzieci i DorosÝych z Mózgowym PoraŽeniem Dziecięcym "ŝURAWĮNKA"
234. Stowarzyszenie na rzecz imigranckich rodzin osób z niepeÝnosprawnoŜciami "PATCHWORK"
235. Stowarzyszenie Tęczowe Opole
236. Stowarzyszenie Tęczówka / Tęczówka Association
237. The Association for "Our Ombudsman" Įnitiative
238. The KARTA Center Foundation
239. To Proste Foundation
240. Tychy Osiedle Q
241. Visegrad Įnsight
242. We are Together Association
243. Workshop for All Beings
244. Zielone Mazowsze

Portugal

245. Academia Cidadã

Romania

246. FundaŢia pentru Dezvoltarea SocietăŢii Civile
247. Apulum Forum Association
248. Asociatia eLiberare
249. Association for Social Įntegration and Environmental protection Feedback Brasov
250. Association of Ecotourism in Romania
251. Átlátszó Erdély
252. Braˆov Community Foundation
253. Center for Public Įnnovation (Romania)
254. Center for the Study of Democracy
255. Centre for Legal Resources
256. Centrul pentru Studiul Comparat al MigraŢiei
257. Civic Radauti Association
258. CĮVĮCA Association
259. E-Romnja Association
260. FederaŢia OrganizaŢiilor Neguvernamentale pentru Copil - FONPC
261. FundaŢia Comunitară Bucureˆti

262. FundaŤia Comunitară Buzău
263. FundaŤia Comunitară Cluj
264. Fundatia Comunitara Galati
265. Fundatia Comunitara Įasi
266. Fundatia Comunitara Oradea
267. Fundatia Comunitara Sibiu
268. Fundatia Comunitara Tara Fagarasului
269. FundaŤia Comunitară Timiˆoara/Timiˆoara Community Foundation
270. FUNDATĮA COMUNĮTARA VALCEA (VALCEA COMMUNĮTY FOUNDATĮON)
271. Įntercultural Įnstitute Timisoara
272. Migrant Įntegration Center Brasov, Romania
273. Mioritics Association
274. MozaiQ LGBT Association
275. Mures Community Foundation
276. Novapolis Association - Center of Analysis and Įnitiatives for Development
277. Odorheiu Secuiesc Community Foundation
278. OrganizaŤia Umanitară CONCORDĮA
279. Prahova Community Foundation
280. Resource Center for Roma Communities Foundation
281. Respiro Human Rights Research Centre
282. Romanian Federation Of Community Foundations
283. Save the Children Romania
284. Society for Feminist Analyses
285. The Ecotourism Association Tara Dornelor (AETD)
286. The Federation of Nongovernmental Organisations for Social Services-FONSS

Slovakia

287. Centrum pre výskum etnicity a kultúry (Center for the research of ethnicity and culture)
288. Ekopolis Foundation
289. Įniciatíva ĮnakosŤ
290. Kompromis - Kompromisszum
291. MEMO 98
292. Moľ nosŤvoľby/Freedom of Choice
293. Partners for Democratic Change Slovakia
294. People in Peril
295. Volunteer Center Banska Bystrica

Slovenia

296. CNVOS - Centre for information service, co-operation and development of NGOs
297. ADRA Slovenjja
298. Alpe Adria Green, Įnternational organisation of protection of Environmental and nature
299. Association Legebitra
300. Celiac Slovenija - druĮtvo bolnikov s celiakijo (Celiac Slovenia - Celiac Disease Patients Association)
301. Center za trajnostni razvoj podeľ elja Kranj
302. Danes je nov dan, ĮnĮtitut za druga vpraĮanja
303. DruĮtvo prijateljev mladine občin Postojna in Pivka

304. DruƮtvo Svit Koper
305. DruƮtvo za razvijanje prostovoljnega dela Novo mesto
306. DruƮtvo za strpne odnose Eksena
307. Drſavljan D / Citizen D
308. Forum za enakopraven razvoj
309. Global Water Partnership Slovenia
310. Įnstitute Meta's list
311. Ljubljanska kolesarska mreſa
312. Local development foundation for Pomurje region
313. Maribor Cycling Network
314. Mesto ſensk, DruƮtvo za promocijo ſensk v kulturi
315. Morigenos —Slovenian Marine Mammal Society
316. Muzej norosti, Trate
317. Planet to the 3rd Power, Įnstitute for Įnterdisciplinary Sustainable Development
318. Slovene Philanthropy
319. Slovenian Third Age University
320. Transparency Įnternational Slovenia
321. VARNA POT zavod za pomoč ſrtvam prometnih nesreč, preventivo, vzgojo in izobraſevanje
322. Zavod Aspira
323. Zavod Etnika
324. Zavod Įgrivi svet
325. Zavod PĮP
326. Zavod Radio študent
327. Zavod ZON.si
328. Zdruſenje ONA VE
329. Zveza druƮtev Mladinski center Postojna (Youth Center Postojna)

Spain

330. NOVACT
331. ASOCĮACĮON CULTURAL BAĮZARA
332. Asociación Mundus - Un mundo a tus pies
333. Districte 11 - City to City
334. Fundación Platoniq
335. Įrídia - Human Rights Defence Centre

Candidate countries to the EU

336. Center for European Policy Studies on Regional and Local Development - Albania
337. Partners Albania for Change and Development - Albania
338. Urban Research Įnstitute —Albania
339. Kosovar Civil Society Foundation (KCSF) - Kosovo
340. Reproductive Health Training Center - Moldova
341. Macedonian Center for Įnternational Cooperation —North Macedonia
342. Civic Įnitiatives - Serbia
343. Ecumenical Humanitarian Organization - Serbia
344. Įnitiative for Development and Cooperation —Serbia
345. Association of Ukrainian Civic Įnitiatives - Ukraine
346. NGO LDAM - Local democracy agency of Mariupol - Ukraine

Ministries and local authorities

1. Roskovec Municipality (Albania)
2. City of Vimercate - COMUNE DĮ VĮMERCATE (Įtaly)
3. RĮSORSE PER ROMA SPA/CĮTY OF ROME (Įtaly)
4. Ministry of Culture in Latvia
5. Cimiˆlia City Hall (Moldova)
6. Chernihiv City Council (Ukraine)
7. Odesa Rayon Council (Ukraine)
8. Slavutych Town Council (Ukraine)
9. The Executive Committee of Zelenodolsk City Council (Ukraine)