

POLICY BRIEFING

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR IRISH MEPS – NAVIGATING CIVIC SPACE IN THE EU



Introduction

European Movement Ireland works to build a pro-European movement, working towards a more democratic and inclusive EU. This briefing forms part of a policy series, which aims to promote dialogue on important EU issues. In this paper, EM Ireland assesses the civil society¹ landscape in the EU, outlining the threats and challenges contributing to shrinking civic space as well as the opportunities for MEPs to support civil society across this new mandate. We hope this paper serves as a resource to support MEPs with their responsibility as elected representatives to engage with civil society organisations (CSOs).

Civil society in Europe is at the vanguard of upholding EU values, as enshrined in Article 2 of the Treaty of the European Union (TEU). When allowed to operate in an enabling environment, civil society has the power to support citizens by ensuring their voices, and those of their communities, are represented in policymaking. Civil society plays a vital role in holding policymakers to account, monitoring the delivery of public policies, advocating for human rights, and oftentimes, fills gaps across society which are not met by public services. In essence, without a strong, diverse and independent civil society, advocacy space is dominated by corporate rather than collective interests. Yet across the EU, the changing dynamics of European politics and public opinion, democratic backsliding in some countries, as well as funding cuts and a change in budgetary priorities are contributing to a squeezing of civic space. Nonetheless, the duty of EU policymakers to engage with civil society is enshrined in Article 11 of the TEU:

- 1. The institutions shall, by appropriate means, give citizens and representative associations the opportunity to make known and publicly exchange their views in all areas of Union action.*
- 2. The institutions shall maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with representative associations and civil society.*

At EM Ireland, we believe that proactive engagement between policymakers and civil society is essential and aligns closely with the mission of our European network - European Movement International - to promote peace, democracy and European integration.

We call on Ireland's 14 MEPs to use this mandate to contribute to enhancing civic space, strengthening civil society engagement with the EU policymaking process, and ensuring the role of civil society in protecting democracy is respected. EM Ireland will act as a support and resource in your work.

¹ The term *civil society* refers to associations (whether registered non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or not), citizen's mobilisations and assemblies, and individuals that are exercising their civil liberties, and participating in public life. It can therefore cover actors ranging from sport clubs at the community level to NGOs at the front line of human rights protections and defence - European Parliament, Policy Department for Citizen's Rights and Constitutional Affairs, Directorate-General for Internal Policies, Protecting Civil Society Space: Strengthening Freedoms of Association, Assembly and Expression and the Right to Defend Rights in the EU, October 2020, pp. 14

[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/659660/IPOL_STU\(2020\)659660_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/659660/IPOL_STU(2020)659660_EN.pdf)

The Role and Landscape of Civil Society Within the EU

EU support for civic engagement includes funding programmes such as the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) Programme² and the Europe for Citizens Programme³. While these programmes offer funding support for projects relating to democracy, Rule of Law and the general values as outlined in Article 2 TEU, the importance of civil society runs deeper. Civil society tackles issues directly, but their work also contributes to equipping citizens with skills to hold states accountable for upholding democratic norms, as well as providing space for citizens to engage, participate and collaborate⁴.

As directly elected representatives, MEPs are well positioned to engage with civil society and incorporate broad input into the negotiations on legislative proposals. Civil society has the capacity therefore to act as ‘transmission belts’ in the EU policymaking process⁵, filtering societal preferences to policymakers and enhancing the creation of sustainable, long-term policy.

In the case of Ireland, civil society organisations range from national non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to smaller community-based groups such as sports clubs⁶. Of all organisations, approximately 11,500 are registered on the Register of Charities, led by the Charities Regulator⁷. Similarly, the EU civil society landscape is rich and diverse, employing more than 5% of the active population⁸. Across each Member State, there can be significant differences in the roles civil society plays, in their organisational structures, and in the level of financial support provided for the sector by the state.

² European Education and Culture Executive Agency, Citizens Equality Rights and Values (CERV) (2021-2027) webpage, https://www.eacea.ec.europa.eu/grants/2021-2027/citizens-equality-rights-and-values-cerv_en

³ European Commission, EU Funding and Tenders Portal webpage, <https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/portal/screen/programmes/efc>

⁴ Stanford Social Innovation Review, Civil Society and the Foundations of Democratic Citizenship, 16 August 2018, https://ssir.org/articles/entry/civil_society_and_the_foundations_of_democratic_citizenship

⁵ Albareda, A. (2018) ‘Connecting Society and Policymakers? Conceptualizing and Measuring the Capacity of Civil Society Organizations to Act as Transmission Belts’, VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations, 29(6), pp. 1216–1232. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-018-00051-x>

⁶ In 2019, independent non-profit Benefacts estimated that the Irish civil society sector comprised of approximately 30,000 organisations – The Wheel, Why Volunteer – (How Volunteers and Civil Society Organisations Can Create the Future) – webpage, <https://www.wheel.ie/blog/2019/12/why-volunteer-how-volunteers-civil-society-organisations-can-create-future>. Benefacts ceased operations in March 2022.

⁷ Charities Regulator, Charities Regulator - webpage, <https://www.charitiesregulator.ie/>

⁸ This report, conducted by the European Commission, sought to gain a better understanding of the civil society landscape, for broader research in the areas of the protection and promotion of EU Rights and Values. The report used surveys, interviews and literature reviews to collect pan-European data. Based on the data collected, it was found that France, Germany and Italy have the highest number of CSOs with approximately 1.3 million, 900,000, and 360,000 respectively. There are 12 Member States with over 100,000 CSOs, and 9 Member States with 10,000 – 90,000 (the group Ireland is part of). Cyprus, Greece, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg and Malta have fewer than 10,000. In general, there is correlation between the size of the population and the size of the CSO sector, with Greece acting as an outlier – European Commission, Civil Society Landscape in the European Union, August 2022, For further information: [Study Civil Society Landscape in the EU.pdf](#)

Challenges Faced by Civil Society

Funding

Sustainable funding is crucial for civil society to implement its essential work. However, regular reports from organisations such as the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA)⁹ have shown that access to adequate funding continues to be a major barrier to the functionality of civil society in Europe.

Civil society funding comes from a range of public and private sources including national and local government, institutional grants and tender competitions, philanthropy, membership fees and private donations. Budget cuts, and deliberate decisions at the national/regional level in certain Member States not to fund organisations focusing on work relating to EU values and rights, have impacted these sources in recent years. Moreover, the Covid-19 pandemic affected funding by diverting funds to fight the pandemic, generating increased competition for funding streams, and delaying calls for tender and proposals¹⁰.

According to the FRA's 2022 consultation¹¹ with national and local organisations across the EU, 67% of respondents cited difficulties in accessing funding relevant to their work as a major challenge to the implementation of their projects. 42% also pointed to difficulties in applying for funding. This is a common theme in grant application procedures, where applications can be long, bureaucratic processes and therefore difficult for smaller organisations to devote extensive time and resources to.

Moreover, there can be a lack of diversity in terms of the types of activities or sectors for which funding is available. For example, donors often make grants available for specific projects and implementation, with less availability of funding for operational costs, or for activities addressing civic space restrictions including advocacy and litigation¹².

Examining funding more broadly in the current geopolitical context, civil society undoubtedly faces significant and growing obstacles. Amidst a shift in EU policy priorities towards competitiveness and enhanced security cooperation, there is a risk of possible cuts to official development assistance (ODA) and other funding. Traditionally large European donors are also retreating, with France and Germany already announcing considerable cuts to their 2025 ODA budgets¹³. This situation is compounded by US President Trump's decision to freeze USAID, the world's largest ODA donor, funding for 90 days. Now the Trump administration has said it is eliminating 90% of USAID's foreign aid contracts¹⁴. This, coupled with the likelihood that

⁹ European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, FRA – webpage, <https://fra.europa.eu/en>

¹⁰ European Commission, Civil Society Landscape in the European Union, August 2022, pp. 7, [Study Civil Society Landscape in the EU.pdf](#)

¹¹ European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, Protecting Civil Society – Update 2023, 18 October 2023, pp. 36, [Protecting civil society – Update 2023 | European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights](#)

¹² Ibid., pp. 38

¹³ Euractiv, Europe's NGOs Scramble for Clarity Amid USAID Freeze, 07 February 2025, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/europes-ngos-scramble-for-clarity-amid-usaid-freeze/>

¹⁴ TIME, Trump Administration Cuts More Than 90% of USAID Foreign Assistance Contracts, 26 February 2025, <https://time.com/7262188/usaid-contracts-eliminated-foreign-assistance-trump-administration/>

President Trump will try to extend the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act¹⁵, part of which reduced tax incentives for charitable donations, has contributed to a drastic decrease in financial support for civil society, including in Europe.

This precarious funding landscape for civil society will impede essential work on issues related to human rights, environmental protections, and equality.

Shrinking Civic Space

Changing Perceptions of Civil Society

Civil society has been impacted by increased democratic backsliding within the EU. A growing disregard for democratic standards and human rights has been observed in areas such as the EU's response to migration management and, in several countries, the hostile narratives directed at LGBTQIA+ communities and the diminishing protection of the rights of women and girls¹⁶. Alongside democratic backsliding, there has also been a surge in support for far-right and nationalist parties across the EU, both at the national and EU levels. Countries like Austria, Italy, and the Netherlands have seen far-right parties win their latest Parliamentary elections. France and Germany have seen a surge in support for the Rassemblement National (National Rally) and Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany) respectively, while other governments, such as Sweden, are reliant on confidence and supply agreements with nationalist parties¹⁷. It should be noted that rising support for far-right and nationalist parties is not the only threat to democratic norms. Dangers also emerge when centrist parties form coalitions with or adopt extremist positions in order to maintain public support.

Nonetheless, this rise of the far-right has repercussions for the ability of civil society to strategise and interact with the public, with research suggesting the role of civil society as an intermediary in the EU policymaking process has changed significantly¹⁸. The vilification of civil society, often linked to broader disinformation narratives, is a growing theme in far-right rhetoric¹⁹ and is a key enabler in the growth in threats and attacks against civil society and human rights defenders (HRDs), by both public and private actors, targeting organisations, staff, and even volunteers²⁰. These negative perceptions of civil society can contribute to the increase in online threats and

¹⁵ Forbes, Trump Tax Policies Seek to Push Ambitious Reforms Through Congress, 10 February 2025,

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/mikesylvester/2025/02/10/trump-tax-policies-seek-to-push-ambitious-reforms-through-congress/>

¹⁶ Council of Europe, Annual Report 2023: Commissioner Mijatović Calls for Determined and Collective Efforts to Regain Lost Ground and Advance Human Rights, 22 January 2024, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/annual-report-2023-commissioner-mijatovi%C4%87-calls-for-determined-and-collective-efforts-to-regain-lost-ground-and-advance-human-rights>

¹⁷ Politico, Mapped: Europe's Rapidly Rising Right, 24 May 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/mapped-europe-far-right-government-power-politics-eu-italy-finalnd-hungary-parties-elections-polling/>

¹⁸ Ruzza, C. and Sanchez Salgado, R. (2020) 'The Populist turn in EU Politics and the Intermediary Role of Civil Society Organisations', *European Politics and Society*, 22(4), pp. 471–485. doi: 10.1080/23745118.2020.1801180

¹⁹ Sanchez Salgado, R. (2020) 'Emotion Strategies of EU-based Human Rights and Humanitarian Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in times of populism', *European Politics and Society*, 22(4), pp. 550–566. doi: 10.1080/23745118.2020.1801185.

²⁰ European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, Protecting Civil Society – Update 2023, 18 October 2023, pp. 27, [Protecting civil society – Update 2023 | European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights](#),

attacks²¹, which 62% of organisations have experienced and are re-enforced by negative media reports, which 55% of organisations were subject to across 2023²².

In the context of a changing information ecosystem, civil society is also frequently a target of online disinformation. This can further damage public perceptions of its work and impact; lead to attacks and further marginalisation against the communities it supports; and even result in funding cuts. Growing political and social fragmentation in Europe will likely further shift public perceptions of civil society in a negative direction. In the Irish context for example, public scrutiny of the records of Irish-registered charities jumped by 87%, with 248,858 views across 2023, compared to 133,428 in 2022²³.

Crackdowns on Civil Society

In February 2022, the European Parliament Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE), produced an own-initiative report highlighting a range of trends and concerns regarding the ‘shrinking of civic space’²⁴. It was published against the backdrop of the pandemic, amidst growing concerns that civil society and even individuals across Europe were facing increased restrictions when exercising civil liberties²⁵.

Organisations in receipt of so-called ‘foreign funding’ are subject to particular scrutiny by some governments. With support for nationalism growing, ‘foreign funding’ can be marketed as a threat to the State. In reality, increased scrutiny by governments tends to be motivated by authorities wishing to curtail the activities of organisations active on issues such as transparency, anti-corruption and human rights and that are seen to challenge anti-democratic behaviours of governments. In 2020, the EU Court of Justice ruled Hungary’s foreign agent’s law unlawful, stating that it stigmatised civil society²⁶. More recently, Georgia, a candidate country for EU membership, introduced a ‘Foreign Agent’s’ Bill²⁷ leading to widespread protests in the capital Tbilisi. The bill stipulated that organisations with more than 20% of funding from abroad must register as ‘agents of foreign influence’ or face fines and is modelled on Kremlin legislation which has devastated the civil society sector in Russia. Even the proposed Directive on interest representation services on behalf of third countries introduced as part of the EU’s *Defence of*

²¹ The rise in online attacks is particularly dramatic – between 2018 and 2022 organisations experiencing online attacks rose from 37% to just below 50% - *ibid.* pp. 29

²² European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, Fundamental Rights Report 2024, 05 June 2024, pp. 63, https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2024-fundamental-rights-report-2024_en.pdf

²³ Charities Regulator, Annual Report 2023, pp. 3 <https://www.charitiesregulator.ie/media/lrwbzq5/annual-report-2023.pdf>

²⁴ European Parliament, Report (A9-0032/2022) on the Shrinking Space for Civil Society in Europe, 22 February 2022, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2022-0032_EN.html

²⁵ European Parliament Press Release, The Shrinking Space for Civil Society in Europe, March 2022, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2022/729269/EPRS_ATAG\(2022\)729269_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2022/729269/EPRS_ATAG(2022)729269_EN.pdf)

²⁶ Court of Justice of the European Union, Press Release No 73/20, The Restrictions Imposed by Hungary on the Financing of Civil Organisations by Persons Established Outside that Member State do not Comply with EU Law, 18 June 2020, <https://curia.europa.eu/jcms/upload/docs/application/pdf/2020-06/cp200073en.pdf>

²⁷ Reuters, Georgian Parliament Passes ‘Foreign Agent’ Bill, Prompting US Anger, New Protests, 15 May 2024 <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/georgian-lawmakers-brawl-parliament-set-pass-foreign-agent-bill-2024-05-14/>

*Democracy Package*²⁸ has been met with concern from civil society in Europe²⁹ due to the risks it poses to civic space including freedom of association and freedom of expression. In response, several civil society groups have called for its review or withdrawal.

The LIBE Committee report also expressed concern at the increased use of *Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation* (SLAPPs)³⁰. According to a report³¹ conducted by the Directorate-General for Internal Policies, between January 2022 and August 2023, 47 legal actions against 102 defendants were identified in Europe. Political figures and public officials were the most common claimants (42.6%), while businesses and wealthy individuals are additional key claimant groups, with the relative majority of defendants being individual journalists (44%). The highest number of cases were recorded in Italy (25.5%), Spain (17%), and Greece (12.8%), while 6.4% were filed in Ireland. CASE³² is a coalition of more than 110 NGOs across Europe, who work to identify the scale and nature of SLAPPs in Europe, building an extensive database of more than 1000 cases³³, with corruption and environmental issues the topics most frequently ‘SLAPPED’ across 2023³⁴.

SLAPPs present a threat to democracy and their increased use across EU Member States are evidence of the growing restrictions on media freedoms and freedom of expression. Their prevalence denotes that shrinking civic space is a Europe-wide trend and not just a limited occurrence in Member States already on the EU radar for Rule of Law violations.

In parallel, there have been increasing crackdowns on those who defend human rights and work with at-risk groups – migrants and refugees, LGBTQIA+ communities, Roma populations, environmental defenders, and those advocating for the rights of Palestinians, among others³⁵. CIVICUS³⁶, the non-governmental group assessing civic freedoms, downgraded civic space in the Netherlands from ‘open’ to ‘narrowed’ in 2024³⁷ amid increasing repression of protest rights, while Greece moved from ‘narrowed’ to ‘obstructed’ in 2023 due to the repeated targeting of civil

²⁸ The Defence of Democracy Package was adopted by the European Commission in December 2023 – European Commission, Protecting Democracy – Defence of Democracy webpage, https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/new-push-european-democracy/protecting-democracy_en#inclusive-civic-engagement-and-participation-for-european-democratic-resilience

²⁹ Civil Society Europe, Q&A: The proposed Directive on third-country interest representation, 11 October 2024, <https://civilsocietyeurope.eu/qa-the-proposed-directive-on-third-country-interest-representation/>. Civil Society Europe, Briefing Paper, the Defence of Democracy Package, April 2024, <https://www.thegoodlobby.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/FINAL-DoD-POLICY-BRIEF.pdf> The European Commission proposal for a directive on transparency of interest representation can be found [here](https://www.thegoodlobby.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/FINAL-DoD-POLICY-BRIEF.pdf).

³⁰ SLAPPs refer to legal claims or threats of action that involve an abuse of process or right in matters concerning the defendant’s exercise of their right to public participation - European Parliament, Report (A9-0032/2022) on the Shrinking Space for Civil Society in Europe, 22 February 2022, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2022-0032_EN.html

³¹ European Parliament, Policy Department for Citizen’s Rights and Constitutional Affairs, Directorate-General for Internal Policies, Open SLAPP Cases in 2022 and 2023: The Incidence of Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation, and Regulatory Responses in the European Union, November 2023, pp. 29

[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2023/756468/IPOL_STU\(2023\)756468_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2023/756468/IPOL_STU(2023)756468_EN.pdf)

³² Coalition Against SLAPPs Europe (CASE), CASE – webpage, <https://www.the-case.eu/>

³³ CASE, Press Release – Number of SLAPPs in Europe Continues to Rise, 09 December 2024, <https://www.the-case.eu/latest/number-of-slapps-in-europe-continues-to-rise/>

³⁴ CASE, SLAPPs Report 2024: SLAPPs in Europe: Mapping Trends and Crises, 09 December 2024, https://www.the-case.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/CASE-2024-report-vf_compressed-1.pdf

³⁵ CIVICUS, Who Bears the Brunt - Global Findings 2024, 04 December 2024, https://monitor.civicus.org/globalfindings_2024/whobearsthebrunt/, Human Rights Watch, <https://www.hrw.org/>

³⁶ CIVICUS, Monitor Tracking Civic Space – updated 04 December 2024, <https://monitor.civicus.org/>

³⁷ CIVICUS, The CIVICUS Monitor Downgrades the Netherlands’ Civic Space to “Narrowed” amid Increasing Repression of Protest Rights, 04 December 2024, https://monitor.civicus.org/press_release/2024/netherlands/

society and activists working with refugees and asylum seekers³⁸. Now, the Dutch government, led by the far-right Partij voor de Vrijheid (Party for Freedom) has announced development programmes relating to women's rights, higher education, sports and culture will be scrapped while significant cuts can be expected for programmes relating to climate, civil society, and multilateral cooperation³⁹. Meanwhile civil society in France has been under attack from mainstream and extreme-right political forces, who have expressed stigmatising views towards Muslim communities and organisations⁴⁰. In its 2024 report, CIVICUS documented detention of protestors and journalists, the prevention and disruption of protests and excessive use of force; and violations of rights to freedom of assembly and expression among the top violations⁴¹.

A Changing Institutional Environment

Finally, the shifting institutional environment of the EU itself, with the increase in hard-right and far-right representatives in the new European Parliament, will likely present challenges for civil society in Europe. The changing landscape and priorities of the EU may also pose challenges. For instance, the increased emphasis on competitiveness and economic strength within the European Commission could push key targets of the Green Deal off the agenda, despite a strong climate lobby in Brussels. Already, environmental NGOs have been informed that a €5.4 billion fund for green projects can no longer be used for advocacy or lobbying work including 'organising meetings or providing advocacy material' to specific EU officials or institutions⁴². The proposal to curtail LIFE programme⁴³ funding has been criticised by civil society groups as a clear attempt to discredit and stifle civil society. If endorsed, it could set a dangerous precedent of restricting EU funding toward civil society.

As previously mentioned, danger to civic space is not solely associated with groups operating at the far ends of the political spectrum but is also connected to the growing trends of the centre breaking their own traditions of cordon sanitaire⁴⁴ or adopting anti-democratic rhetoric or measures for political gain. The current push against funding for environmental NGOs is led by some members of the largest group in the European Parliament – the European People's Party (EPP)⁴⁵. Conservative lawmakers within the Parliament are claiming the European Commission

³⁸ Human Rights Watch, World Report 2023 – Country Chapters Greece, 12 January 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/greece>

³⁹ DutchNews, Slashed Aid Budget Must Help Dutch Earning Power – Minister, 20 February 2025, <https://www.dutchnews.nl/2025/02/slashed-aid-budget-must-help-dutch-earning-power-minister/>

⁴⁰ European Network Against Racism, Joint Statement: France's Shrinking Civic Space Must be Protected, 20 July 2021, <https://www.enar-eu.org/joint-statement-france-s-shrinking-civic-space-must-be-protected/>

⁴¹ CIVICUS, Global Findings 2024 – Europe and Central Asia webpage, 04 December 2024, https://monitor.civicus.org/globalfindings_2024/europeandcentralasia/

⁴² Politico, Commission tells NGOs EU Money is not for Lobbying, 28 November 2024, [Commission tells NGOs EU money is not for lobbying – POLITICO](https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-lawmakers-escalate-ngo-funding-fight/)

⁴³ European Commission, LIFE Programme webpage, https://cinea.ec.europa.eu/programmes/life_en

⁴⁴ In political terms, a cordon sanitaire refers to a 'political quarantine' whereby certain parties refuse to engage with others to stop the ideology of more extreme groups entering the mainstream – Downs, W.M. (2012). Is the Cordon Sanitaire Effective? *Palgrave Macmillan US eBooks*, pp.81–109. doi: https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137052834_4.

⁴⁵ Politico, EU Lawmakers Escalate NGO Funding Fight, 02 February 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-lawmakers-escalate-ngo-funding-fight/>

has used NGOs to lobby on their behalf in relation to the Green Deal⁴⁶. In addition, the European Parliament Committee on Budgetary Control (CONT) has reportedly requested a list of all grants awarded by seven specific European Commission departments (DG DEFIS, DG RTD, DG ENV, DG CLIMA, DG AGRI, DG JUST, and DG HOME) across 2023⁴⁷.

To be clear, EM Ireland resolutely supports efforts to ensure transparency and accountability for the civil society sector both at the national and EU level and is registered with the relevant authorities at both levels. The point here, however, is to highlight that undue interference undermines the capacity of organisations to operate effectively. NGO recipients of EU funding are already subject to transparency and accountability standards, while charities in many Member States are obliged to report on transparency and governance measures on an annual basis⁴⁸.

The changing environment is also reflected in the decision of European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen to create a single portfolio for Preparedness and Crisis Management; Equality, amalgamating equality into a portfolio already burdened amidst a range of on-going and serious humanitarian crises. The decision was met with disappointment from civil society in Europe, on the basis that the urgent and overwhelming nature of crises will sideline implementation of the Equality agenda⁴⁹. Moreover, the persistent focus on the externalisation and securitisation of migration – the framing of migration as an external threat, despite it being denounced by civil society – will place the EU’s approach to migration management increasingly at odds with the work of human rights and refugee rights organisations working on the front lines and providing protection and other support to refugees, asylum-seekers, and migrants.

In addition to the shifting policy priorities and increased scrutiny, the institutional design of the EU can already be difficult for organisations without expertise to navigate and gain access to.

Supporting Civic Space

Despite the challenges, there are several ways MEPs can support civil society to strengthen civic space and engage with the diversity that enriches our shared Union. While the EU undoubtedly

⁴⁶ Politico, Fact-Check: Did the European Commission Really Pay NGOs to Lobby for the Green Deal?, 04 February 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/article/fact-check-european-commission-ngo-lobby-green-deal-activist/>

⁴⁷ Politico, EU diplomats need lobbyists too, 06 February 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/newsletter/politico-eu-influence/eu-diplomats-need-lobbyists-too/>

⁴⁸ For instance, in Ireland charities with the Triple Lock symbol are charities that have adopted the Charities Regulator’s Charity Governance Code. They are required to report annually under the Triple Lock mechanism, to prove compliance with the highest standards of transparency, governance and fundraising – Charities Institute, The Triple Lock Standard webpage, <https://charitiesinstitute.ie/pages/triple-lock-standard#:~:text=The%20Triple%20Lock%20symbol%20highlights%20charities%20that%20uphold,these%20organisations%20operate%20with%20professionalism%2C%20integrity%2C%20and%20openness.>

⁴⁹ Eurochild, European and National Equality Civil Society Networks and Organisations React to the Portfolio of the Commissioner-designate for Preparedness, Crisis Management and Equality, 20 September 2024, https://eurochild.org/uploads/2024/09/Final-Open-letter_Equality-Commissioner.pdf

faces instances of democratic backsliding, it is, overall, better equipped now in terms of funding, tools, and the capacity to respond to a shrinking civic space⁵⁰.

Protection of Funding Mechanisms

The provision of accessible, sufficient and sustainable funding is essential for civil society to operate effectively. In fact, the UN Special Rapporteur on assembly and association and the Venice Commission have developed standards to affirm that the right to access funding, including foreign funding, is an integral part of the right to freedom of association⁵¹.

Across this mandate, MEPs should continue to advocate for the provision of EU funding mechanisms, the design of which is informed by civil society to effectively support their activities, such as the CERV programme and other funding mechanisms. The CERV programme supports activities related to fundamental EU values and rights, as well as those dealing with violence against some groups such as journalists and HRDs. In April 2019, the Parliament reached a tentative agreement with the European Council to run the programme across 2021-2027, with a budget of €642 million. Across the negotiating period, the programme received a major boost, moving to €1.55 billion, more than double the original proposal⁵². Current budget breakdowns suggest the 2021-2027 iteration will finish at around €1.17 billion⁵³.

Beyond grant-based funding for specific projects under defined pillars of activity, MEPs should also negotiate for a shift from project-based to core funding, as a more sustainable form of support, enabling civil society to focus on their long-term mission and responsibilities⁵⁴. MEPs should also encourage funding streams with low administrative burden to increase accessibility. This could assist smaller, grassroots organisations in fulfilling their roles with local communities. Grant systems with arduous application procedures, and high-capacity requirements across their design and implementation stages can exclude smaller organisations and tend to allow elite organisations with significant resources to dominate, affecting the inclusivity of the funding mechanism. MEPs should advocate that the next iteration of the Multiannual Financial Framework, for which negotiations will begin during 2025, include increased funding for the CERV programme, and recognise the needs of civil society by incorporating both operational and project funding⁵⁵. For example, the inclusion of an operating costs funding stream for European

⁵⁰ Havlíček, P. (2020). 'The EU's Lessons for Supporting Civil Society in Member States'. [online] German Marshall Fund of the United States. doi: <https://www.gmfus.org/sites/default/files/Havlicek%20-%20Supporting%20Civil%20Society%20-%202030%20June.pdf>

⁵¹ Human Rights House, Funding Civil Society – Our Position webpage, <https://humanrightshouse.org/we-stand-for/foreign-funding/#Ourposition>

⁵² European Union, Citizens Equality Rights and Values Programme (2021-2027) webpage, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/EN/legal-content/summary/citizens-equality-rights-and-values-programme-2021-2027.html>

⁵³ European Commission, Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme – Performance webpage, https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/eu-budget/performance-and-reporting/programme-performance-statements/citizens-equality-rights-and-values-programme-performance_en

⁵⁴ European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, Challenges Facing Civil Society Organisations Working on Human Rights in the EU, 18 January 2018, pp. 33 https://staging.fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2018-challenges-facing-civil-society_en.pdf

⁵⁵ Civil Society Europe, Open letter: Ensuring a Vibrant Civic Space in the European Union – Civil Society's Expectations for the Next Five Years, 16 September 2024, <https://civilsocietyeurope.eu/open-letter-ensuring-a-vibrant-civic-space-in-the-european-union-civil-societys-expectations-for-the-next-five-years/>

Beyond EU funding, policymakers could also support civil society by proposing improvements in tracking access to and levels of funding, particularly through comparative research across the EU. As it stands, most Member States do not have a single overview of how much money, from national government or EU funds, they spend on project implementation or to fund human rights activities within the bloc⁵⁶. This data is also unavailable to civil society organisations who might benefit from partnerships with other organisations working within the same funding stream, or on similar advocacy projects.

MEPs should use this mandate to support an enabling environment for civil society across the EU. With many countries across the EU rated as having ‘narrowed’ civic space, and some like Greece and Hungary marked as ‘obstructed’⁵⁷, MEPs should propose that EU governments are monitored on their respect for fundamental freedoms and should support calls⁵⁸ for the European Commission to create a ‘European civic space index’, as well as the inclusion of a dedicated chapter for civic space and country recommendations in the annual Rule of Law Report. At EM Ireland, we welcome the confirmation from Commissioner Michael McGrath that the Democracy, Justice, Rule of Law and Consumer Protection portfolio will include a new EU strategy to support, protect and empower civil society⁵⁹.

The European Commission, Council and Parliament should actively work to ensure political and legal measures to protect civic space, particularly for human rights NGOs and other HRDs are available, while ensuring Member States refrain from taking legal and non-legal action which hampers the operations of civil society working in these areas. Moreover, based on recommendations from a series of seminars following the 2022 Annual Report on the Application of the Charter of the Fundamental Rights of the EU⁶⁰, an early-warning mechanism should be utilised to monitor deterioration of civic space across Member States⁶¹.

https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/sites/default/files/protection_for_hrds_mapping_final_october.pdf

MEPs can play an important role in working towards the creation of a safe environment for civil society, advocating for policies and regulations which protect organisations from and ensure accountability for attacks and harassment – both online and offline. They should actively condemn violence against civil society, including threats of violence, and work with national level bodies to ensure that occurrences can be reported and addressed. While the EU’s existing legal framework, along with the EU Guidelines on HRDs⁶², includes tools such as the EU Rule of Law Mechanism and Article 7, as well as specific EU laws including the Anti-SLAPP Directive, and the European Media Freedom Act⁶³, the level of sustained threats and attacks against civil society warrants greater efforts from policymakers to counter shrinking civic space.

Importantly, MEPs need to promote accurate information regarding the funding to and activities of civil society amidst growing misinformation and changing public perceptions. Civil society, particularly those based in countries experiencing democratic backsliding, need support in restoring their public image. To support this, MEPs could invest in EU public diplomacy and strategic communication strategies, while openly facilitating civil society in decision-making processes.

Facilitating Dialogue

While sustainable funding, and the creation of an enabling environment are conducive to supporting civil society in their vital work upholding democratic norms, a key recommendation for MEPs is to facilitate strategic and consistent dialogue. Civil society groups can make a vital contribution to the policymaking process. Moreover, their in-depth knowledge of and engagement with different sectors of society, is a vital resource, enabling them to reflect the perspectives of the groups they represent directly to MEPs across this mandate.

MEPs should continue to collaborate with civil society; however, it is important that more formal mechanisms are established to connect civil society to the policymaking process. Despite its flaws, the Defence of Democracy package puts forward a non-binding recommendation to enhance civic engagement⁶⁴, which leading organisations such as the European Democracy Hub support on the basis that it may encourage Member States to establish structured dialogue processes⁶⁵. There is an opportunity for MEPs through both their national and EU level work, to champion bottom-up pathways for citizen engagement. While tools of citizen engagement such as formal petitions submitted to the European Parliament Committee on Petitions (PETI), and European Citizen’s Initiatives are useful for bringing citizens’ concerns to the EU agenda, they are

⁶² European External Action Service, Ensuring Protection – European Union Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders, 2004, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/eu_guidelines_hrd_en.pdf

⁶³ Centre for European Reform, the EU and the Rule of Law: Much Movement, Little Change, 07 October 2024 <https://mailings.cer.eu/insights/eu-and-rule-law-much-movement-little-change>

⁶⁴ European Commission, Protecting Democracy - Defence of Democracy webpage, https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/new-push-european-democracy/protecting-democracy_en#inclusive-civic-engagement-and-participation-for-european-democratic-resilienceission

⁶⁵ European Democracy Hub, European Civic Space at Risk, 20 February 2024, <https://europeandemocracyhub.epd.eu/european-civic-space-at-risk/>

tools which are more closely connected to enhancing the legitimacy of policy outcomes. More channels are needed to allow citizens and civil society to shape policies directly⁶⁶.

MEPs should also endeavour to make civil society engagement inclusive, reaching out to wide ranges of organisations and particularly those who work with the most marginalised groups in society. The EU-system can be difficult to navigate and civil society access to policymakers can favour organisations with strong networking skills, and a clear understanding of the institutional environment⁶⁷. This can result in civil society engagements with organisations who have access but may be further removed from community perspectives.

Potential formats for this dialogue might include public consultations such as open hearings or policy roundtables, establishing working groups with civil society advisory committees, digital engagement, supporting campaigns publicly, or participating in local and regional events to name a few. Consistent engagement with civil society not only enhances the policymaking process and participatory democracy, but also allows for landscape mapping of the sector, giving MEPs a clearer understanding of activities on the ground and in cases of risk, has the potential to act as part of the aforementioned early-warning mechanism.

Conclusion

This briefing highlights the on-going challenges faced by civil society in Europe. Yet there are ways in which MEPs can use the 2024-2029 term to counter the shrinking of civic space and to support civil society to be able to continue to play its essential role contributing to healthy democracies and policymaking that is representative of a Union of 450 million citizens.

At European Movement Ireland, we encourage MEPs to support legislative initiatives that seek to address practices which risk harming and undermining the role of civil society. Moreover, we encourage active engagement with, and vocal support for civil society organisations. Ensuring civil society is protected is in the interest of all.

European Movement Ireland will continue to focus on civil society outreach and facilitate opportunities for dialogue between civil society representatives and policymakers, particularly in relation to our recently released report⁶⁸ outlining key policy opportunities for MEPs this mandate.

⁶⁶ Centre for European Policy Studies, Pathways for Citizens to Engage in EU Policymaking, 29 November 2018, <https://www.ceps.eu/ceps-publications/pathways-citizens-engage-eu-policymaking/>

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ European Movement Ireland, Challenges and Opportunities for Irish MEPs: Navigating the 2024-2029 European Parliament, 06 March 2025, <https://www.europeanmovement.ie/policy-briefings/>

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