



Consultation on EU Civil Society Strategy 3 September 2025 Online Session

Summary

DG INTPA held a consultation of stakeholders on 3 September 2025, hosted by the Policy Forum on Development (PFD), with the EEAS associated, and attended by DG JUST as chef de file. The consultation aimed to engage with PFD members and relevant network members to collect their input for the preparation of the EU Civil Society Strategy (hereafter referred to as the Strategy), whose key objectives are to strengthen meaningful engagement with, and to protect and support civil society actors active across a broad set of EU policies. The discussion focused on three themes: **Engagement, Protection and Monitoring, and Support and Overall Environment**.

Marlene Holzner, Head of Unit, DG INTPA G.2 - Civil Society, Foundations and Local Authorities highlighted the importance of the consultation meeting in light of the challenges faced by CSOs in the EU and Member States (MS), and expressed appreciation that DG JUST is taking this on and is trying to fill the internal policy gap. She underlined the importance of a very broad definition of civil society. The EC [Communication](#) 2012 “The roots of democracy and sustainable development: Europe’s engagement with Civil Society in external relations” should be the basis for the incoming Strategy which should take the broad definition of ‘civil society organisations’ spelled out in the EC 2012 Communication mentioned above.

Ingrid Bellander Todino, Head of Unit, Fundamental Rights, DG JUST provided an overview of the aims of the Strategy, which is based on the input from a broad range of stakeholders from within and out of the EU, and to be finalised by the end of October 2025. Participants were invited to take part in the [online public consultation](#), open until 5th September. Ms. Bellander Todino reiterated that the objective of the meeting was to hear from CSOs and gauge their opinion regarding the Strategy. The need for stepping up engagement with CSOs and protecting them has become more urgent, as highlighted in the [Commission President’s Political Guidelines for 2024-2029](#) and the [mission letter to the Commissioner for Democracy, Justice, the Rule of Law and Consumer Protection](#) as well as calls from CSOs and work from the European Parliament. The Strategy aims to find a common framework for action at the EU and Member State (MS) level and ensure coherence between internal and external actions. It will have a broad scope with various policy areas across the Commission and will recognise the role of CSOs in democracy. It will focus on three pillars: 1. Engagement; 2. Protection; and 3. Supporting CSOs. One of the flagship actions is the creation of a CSO platform that will streamline the systematic process to consult and engage with CSOs on EU values, starting as a pilot and focusing on issues related to democracy, rule of law and civic space. She noted that it is important to build on existing practices and dialogue platforms with CSOs.

The participants then provided their insights and recommendations for the Strategy, centred on the three themes of Engagement, Protection and Monitoring, and Support and Overall Environment.

Engagement

Jacqui Hale, Policy officer, DG INTPA G.2, presented the first pillar of the strategy and invited the participants to provide their insights regarding how to enhance engagement with CSOs, focused primarily on the question of “How do you currently engage with EU institutions on topics related to your work? What are the best practices that can be shared; what can be improved?” CSOs provided their opinions and recommendations, with repeated messages concerning the importance of maintaining the primacy of the 2012 EC Communication as the basis for engaging with CSOs in external action. A number of participants called for safeguarding the PFD, structured dialogues with INTPA, thematic dialogues and watch groups, and the EU Roadmaps for engagement with CSOs at partner country level (endorsed also by EU MS), as well as reaching out more proactively to marginalised groups, grassroots actors, and indigenous organisations. Participants emphasised the need to engage through programmes across countries, providing small grants to local CSOs to work in their communities and also proposed systematic and transparent engagement, such as by sharing information in advance, providing enough time for inputs, having a real feedback loop, and institutionalising mechanisms for participation. Participants encouraged the promotion of CSOs in shaping agendas together with the Commission around EU major initiatives and summits, such as Global Gateway.

Addressing the internal focus of the new Strategy, participants also called for creating a bridge between the EU level and the EU Member States’ national level, as well as maintaining internal and external coherence by applying the same standards of CSO space at home as promoted abroad. Participations highlighted the importance of supporting expert groups within the Commission to collect specific expertise, encouraging at the same time cross-cutting consultations between DGs. There was a consensus among speakers on retaining the wide definition of CSOs as per the 2012 EC Communication. Another suggestion was encouraging governments to involve CSOs in agenda setting and evaluation, support independent civic space monitoring and impact assessment of national laws on civil society. There were also repeated calls for a decentralised approach, as well as bringing together analysis, funding, and dialogue into a coherent whole and ensuring complementarity with other initiatives. **Laetitia Cadet, Team Leader, DG INTPA G.2** added on this point – spelling out that INTPA has put in place a strong basis for local engagement (through the dialogue with CSOs at EUD level) and that the new guidance on Civil Society Engagement Roadmaps will reinforce the need to consult a broader group of CSOs in line with the 2012 Communication and in the context of the Global Gateway and its initiatives.

Recommendations to the EU:

- Maintain a broad definition of civil society to ensure the inclusion of the diverse and wide spectrum of actors as stated in EC Communication 2012 “The roots of democracy and sustainable development: Europe’s engagement with Civil Society in external relations”
- Ensure that the 2012 communication is referred to in the Strategy as the primary framework for EU engagement with civil society in external relations
- Promote co-creation with civil society through systematic and transparent engagement, such as by sharing information in advance, providing enough time for inputs, having a real feedback loop, and institutionalising mechanisms for participation (such as those of CELAC-EU and AU-EU)
- Ensure coherence between the EU level and the EU Member States’ national level as well as internal-external coherence by applying the same standards of civic space at home as promoted abroad
- Continue providing small grants to local CSOs to work in their communities, reaching out more proactively to marginalised groups and smaller grassroots actors
- Encourage a cross-DG approach for engaging with civil society (encouraging cross-cutting consultations and coordination among the DGs)
- Maintain structured dialogues with INTPA, PFD, Roadmaps, thematic dialogues and watch groups

- Reflect the experience, framework and analysis of the EU SEE in similar actions aimed at countering the shrinking civic space proposed for inside the EU under the EU CS Strategy
- Recognise that Global Gateway is an important area of engagement, and CSOs must be seen as a critical and constructive partner throughout the entire process
- Engage the European Parliament and the EC in the context of this Strategy
- Look at the representativeness of various bodies (European Economic and Social Committee noted) and be strategic when designing the CSO platform foreseen under the Strategy.

Protection and Monitoring

Penelope Gambi, Programme Assistant, DG INTPA G.1 invited participants to provide insights on what is currently lacking in the system of protection for human rights defenders (HRDs) and CSOs, and what kind of assistance would be needed. HRDs based in the EU and abroad are facing challenges and are being attacked by governments in the countries where they work. One of the main issues is cybersecurity, as well as laws that target CSOs and place them and their funding under scrutiny. Participants noted timely and costly steps they have had to take to protect staff, and suggested funds to increase protection, which is no longer guaranteed in the EU. Intervention at earlier stages is more cost effective. They requested training with regards to conflict between national (MS) laws and EU law, and cross-checking fundamental rights compliance as well as civic space compliance at national level when EU policy is developed, as well systematic monitoring of civic space issues.

A common call was on the importance of maintaining EU tools for CSOs that exist in partner countries, especially the CSO and Human Rights Country Strategies and focal points, and the EU Roadmaps for engagement with CSOs at partner country level. Others underscored the need to address transnational repression of CSOs and HRDs within the EU, through enhancing the legal framework, ensuring digital protection, regulating surveillance technology, having more institutional coordination within Europol and Eurojust, and considering sanctions against EU countries that restrict civic space. Participants stated that they would like to see a priority for the timely implementation of the [EU Anti-SLAPP Directive](#). Participants asked the Commission to stand up against the narrative around civil society at the European Parliament, with regard to CSO's work and sources of funding, and their right to carry out advocacy.

Recommendations to the EU:

- Focus on the digital space and cybersecurity
- Ensure the availability of protection funds
- Provide legal support, training, and technological support
- Provide training on how to use EU law to defend CSO space to address cases of conflict between national laws and EU law
- Consider protection mechanisms at the level of the EU, such as complaint mechanisms for CSOs in case their national governments are not collaborating
- Establish a comprehensive CSO protection mechanism that addresses all the gaps, including those arising from transnational repression, while ensuring coherence between the EU internal practices and external democracy promotion and civil society support efforts
- Maintain the definition of CSOs from the 2012 communication to ensure that a larger spectrum of civil society organisations is protected through that broad definition
- Introduce impact measurement for actions and policies to avoid unintended impacts on CSOs
- Address the shrinking civic space and protection of CSOs and Human Rights Defenders in the Strategy
- Consider sanctions against EU countries that restrict civic space and do not protect civil society
- Set a priority for the timely implementation of the EU Anti-SLAPP Directive
- Defend CSOs at the current European Parliament, specifically with regard to CSO's work and source funding, and their right to carry out advocacy

- Ensure funding and increase flexibility, especially in situations where CSOs on the frontline are facing difficulties in project implementation, management, and reporting
- Do not implement restrictions that make full participation difficult, such as the Transparency Registry requirement

Support and Overall Environment

Jacqui Hale invited the participants to share their views on the kind of support available in case of threats and attacks against civil society. Repeated interventions raised the seismic shift in international funding for civil society, following the termination of USAID. Concerns were raised regarding the next MFF, whereby further merging of external instruments means that there is no specific programming dedicated to human rights, democracy, and civil society. Participants suggested setting specific objectives for CSOs. Participants asked for a clear indication that advocacy is a legitimate use of EU funding in the next MFF. The role of philanthropic organisations as actors and as funders and enablers of civil society was pointed out, with a call for an enabling environment for philanthropy, as the space is shrinking for not only civil society, but also for philanthropy. The point was made that we need to be smarter and more strategic in dialogue and in collaboration opportunities in terms of co-financing, and that foundations can potentially engage in pooling of funds. Concerns were also raised regarding the geopoliticisation of aid, where some countries (and some fragile states) are being removed from recipient lists. Suggestions were also made whether the EU could press the investment banks to have both dialogue mechanisms with civil society, and direct funding to civil society engagement, underlining the need to consider CSOs not just as beneficiaries of the projects but as actors in wider dialogue with governments.

Recommendations to the EU:

- Address the shift in international funding following the USAID termination, and consider how the EU can fill the gap, particularly in human rights, democracy, civil society participation and gender equality
- Clearly refer to advocacy as a legitimate use of EU funding in the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), and set specific objectives for CSO funding
- Coordinate better with MS on supporting civil society amid funding cuts
- Enable funding flexibility for CSOs
- Encourage an enabling environment for philanthropy, as space for both civil society and for philanthropy is shrinking
- Encourage strategic dialogue on collaboration opportunities for co-financing and pooling of funds
- Explore whether investment banks could engage in dialogue mechanisms with CSOs and channel funds to civil society organisations
- Encourage MS to talk to each other about where they are going to prioritise their funding, so that it does not all end up in a small collection of countries
- Bring together various civil society support initiatives for more coherent consultation at country-level
- The new Civil Society Platform should include regular structured sectoral dialogues with various policy actors in its mandate (drawing on experiences in external action including business and civil society dialogue platforms, including the Global Gateway platforms)

Wrap-up

Jacqui Hale reiterated key points and thanked everyone for their participation. **Ingrid Bellander Todino** confirmed that the contributions will be collated into a document that will express the general principles of what is understood to be civic space and protection of human rights defenders, the main challenges and the gaps, and key actions to address those challenges. A draft will be shared with the political leadership and the other services to agree on a text. Everyone was reminded that the public consultation would end on September 5th and thanked for their active participation.