Attacks on civil society in the EU: Joint Letter to the European Commission

article, protection from violence and hate, fundraising, non-discrimination

Together with 12 civil society organisations, we wrote a Joint Letter to the European Commission to raise concerns regarding the future of civil society in the EU and to share our outlook for the upcoming Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF). Read our joint letter below.

Democracy demands inclusive dialogue, participation and decisions that reflect the diverse realities of all societal segments, including communities that face systemic discrimination, repression, or marginalisation and whose concerns are often not heard or considered in decision-making processes. In line with these democratic principles, EU laws and policies must be responsive to the needs and concerns of all individuals living in the EU. Civil society organisations play a crucial role in making this happen – they are critical in informing EU policymakers and stakeholders of the realities on the ground, providing a comprehensive view of the issues involved and the likely or expected impact of policy solutions.

However, civil society is increasingly under threat. Over the last months, we have seen a significant rise in attacks on civil society, globally through US funding cuts, at the national level across the EU, through funding restrictions and foreign agent laws, and at EU level, through political attacks mainly by reactionary MEPs and think tanks. These are not isolated incidents – they are part of a broader, deliberate effort to erode the fundamental values on which the European Union is built, as well as the EU itself.

In this context, we would like to draw your attention to three urgent and interrelated concerns regarding EU funding for European networks under the current and upcoming Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF).

1. Co-funding requirements for operational grants amid shrinking resources

Amid increasing pressure on international funding for civil society — including the reintroduction of the Global Gag Rule and cuts to US-based funding streams such as USAID — many European NGOs, particularly those working on gender equality, women's rights, LGBTIQ rights, and marginalised communities, are facing severe financial strain. These challenges are further compounded by rising operational costs and inflation.

Maintaining the current 20% co-funding requirement for the Framework Partnership Agreements – which has always been a challenge for many networks – in these conditions risks jeopardising the work of many organisations, particularly those without access to large private or national-level donors.

We therefore urge the European Commission to consider reducing the co-funding rates required for operational grants of European networks under the Citizens, Equality, Rights, and Values (CERV) programme.

These rates should be aligned with the 10% required under action grants, starting from the next operating grant period in 2026 and in the upcoming Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF). This is crucial for sustaining inclusive participation in EU-funded programmes, especially for organisations working to uphold equality, democracy, and fundamental rights.

2. Alarming signals regarding the eligibility of advocacy-related activities under EU funding programmes

We are extremely concerned by the European Commission's requests to limit advocacy activities for NGOs receiving EU funding through the LIFE programme, the EU4Health Programme, and, more recently, the CERV programme. These requests seem to be the European Commission's response to a series of deeply anti-democratic, politically motivated attacks. Advocacy is notably specifically listed as an eligible activity in the democratically adopted CERV Regulation. **Such attacks not only call into question the independence of the European Commission and civil society organisations funded through EU funds, but are also signs of a broader attempt to restrict civil society's ability to engage in democratic debate and policy advocacy, and ultimately, to undermine EU values.**

Such measures risk undermining the very essence of EU support for civil society. Advocacy, watchdog work, campaigning, and participation in policymaking are core democratic functions of NGOs and explicitly recognised by the European Parliament, the Council of the EU, and the Commission itself as essential to a vibrant civic space and democratic resilience. This ensures that the voice of marginalised groups are included in EU processes.

3. Safeguard funding for civil society defending EU values in the next MFF

Civil society organisations are on the frontlines of defending democracy, the rule of law, and fundamental rights across Member States. In the face of escalating pressure, funding from the European Commission has been and remains indispensable to the functioning of a healthy and empowered civil society that can support the EU's work. As recently underlined by the EU Fundamental Rights Agency (in its statement and contribution to the EC MFF consultation), the European Parliament, and the European Commission in its 2024 Annual report on the application of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, robust and sustainable financial support to civil society through the CERV programme is essential for protecting EU values.

As the European Commission shapes its proposal for the next Multiannual Financial Framework, the continuation and strengthening of the CERV programme as a stand-alone instrument, equipped with an appropriate budget to sustain its fundamental objectives and under direct management, is indispensable.

The EU has consistently reaffirmed its commitment to civil society as a pillar of democracy and human rights on several occasions. This commitment must be translated into independent, accessible, stable, and enabling financial mechanisms, particularly in the face of growing threats to civic space across Europe.

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss these matters further in a joint meeting with representatives of our organisations and remain at your disposal for any additional information.

Letter jointly written by:

- TGEU – Trans Europe and Central AsiaAGE Platform Europe
- Center for Reproductive Rights
- EL*C – Eurocentralasian Lesbian* Community
- End FGM European Network
- European Disability Forum
- European Women's Lobby
- IGLYO – The International LGBTQI Youth & Student Organisation

- ILGA-Europe
- International Planned Parenthood Federation – European Network (IPPF EN)
- OII Europe – Organisation Intersex International Europe
- WAVE – Women Against Violence Europe Network