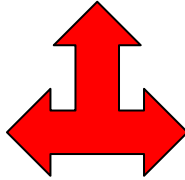


THE NEED FOR AND POSSIBLE OUTLINE OF A EUROPEAN CIVIL SOCIETY STRATEGY

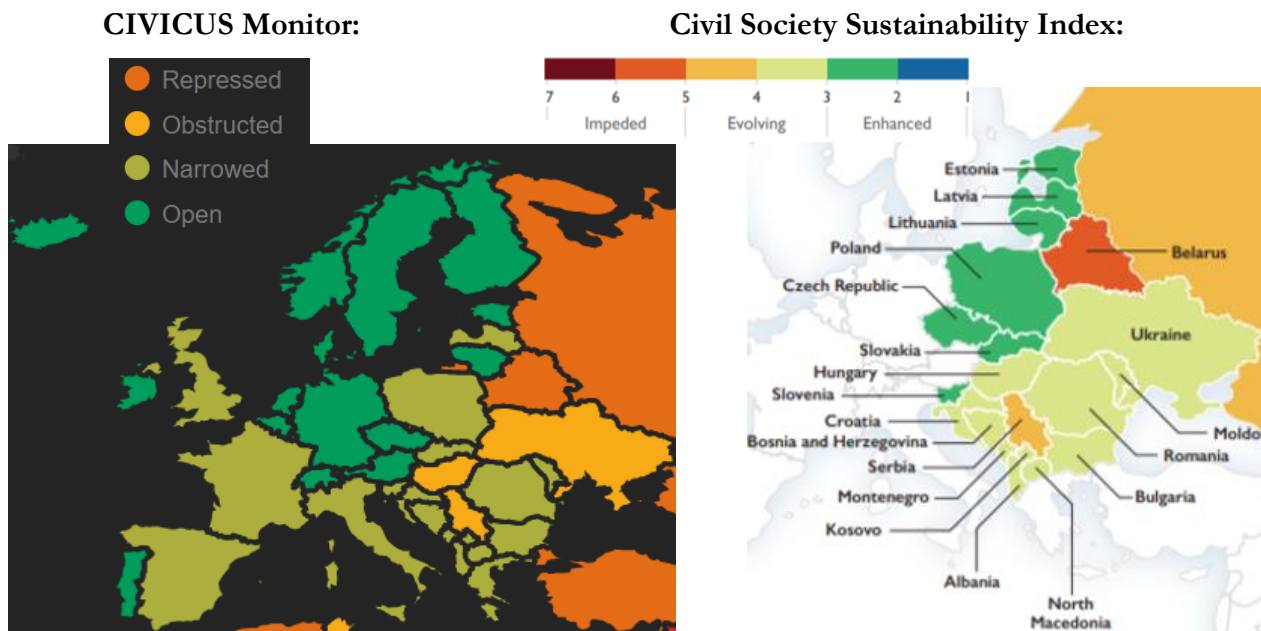
Civil society organizations (CSOs) play an essential role in upholding democratic values of the EU and contribute to implementing its policies; from decreasing disparities through safeguarding freedoms to protecting the environment.

They are important allies of the EU in defending citizens' rights against extremism and populism



They need an enabling (legal, political and fiscal) environment to thrive – and therefore the EU's support

But civil space is shrinking in many European countries:



As civil society matters remain largely a Member State competence in Europe, EU response to the negative trends has so far been case-by-case and piecemeal, lacking a systematic approach. Also, EU institutions often tend to view civil society organisations (CSOs) as instruments that help achieve certain policy goals (e.g. people living with disabilities, gender equality), but not as a sector, an entity by itself.

Recently, EU institutions (particularly the Commission and Parliament) undertook several initiatives that benefit civil society in some way, e.g.:

- the Annual Rule of Law Report: civil society addressed in chapter 4. (other institutional checks and balances)
- the European Democracy Action Plan and the Strategy to strengthen the application of the Charter of Fundamental Rights in the EU: chapter 2. on empowering civil society organisations
- Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values programme: new funding mechanism with considerably increased allocation
- Initiative to introduce a European Statutes of Association and minimum standards for association law

But we believe that in order to efficiently defend democracy and rule of law, civil society should become **a protected European value and asset in its own right**. A way to achieve this is to adopt a European Civil Society Strategy or policy (e.g. in the form of a Commission Communication) that:

- acknowledges the importance of and the role CSOs play in upholding and promoting European values
- reviews ongoing initiatives and processes that have a relevance to civil society
- identifies gaps and shortcomings
- integrates existing, new and future tools to defend and expand civil space.

Such a strategy could be structured along the internationally recognised basic prerequisites of a safe civil space and include elements, e.g.:

- **Freedom of association – legal environment**

- *Develop and pass legislation on European Statute for Associations and Foundations and the minimum standards of association law as proposed by the European Parliament*
- *Integrate the CoE Convention on the recognition of civil society organizations into European law*

- **Freedom of peaceful assembly**

- *Monitor and regularly report on the state of and potential restrictions on the freedom of assembly across Member States, highlighting practices that contravene relevant international law*

- **The right to operate free from unwarranted state interference**

- *Cover civil society in the annual Rule of Law reports in a structured and detailed manner*
- *Continue the regular FRA data collection and monitoring of the state of civil society*
- *Continue using infringement and legal procedures in case of legislation restricting legitimate civil society action*
- *Create an alert system to report attacks on civil space*

- **The right to free expression**

- *Encourage balanced reporting about and giving more space to civil society in media during the implementation of the European Democracy Action plan and the Media Plan*
- *Fully implement and use the CoE charter and framework for citizen education; create European best practise and a separate agency devoted to the subject*

- **The right to cooperation and participation**

- *Develop an inter-institutional guidance for structured dialogue with civil society*
- *Improve the accessibility and the impact of the European Citizens Initiative*
- *Develop binding rules for delegating civil society members to the 3rd group of the EESC*
- *Monitor national-level consultation processes in the programming of EU funds under shared management*

- **The right to seek and secure resources – funding**

- *In consultation with civil society experts, further refine the CERV programme in order to improve flexibility and decrease administrative burdens on applicants, also taking into account the capacity building and institutional development needs of target CSOs*
- *Increase the accessibility of other centrally managed funding programs to CSOs (through simplifying procedures and/ or capacity building of applicants)*
- *Monitor the accessibility of funds under shared management for CSOs and step up in case of deficiencies observed*

Further reading: <https://civilspace.eu/en/the-need-for-a-comprehensive-european-civil-society-strategy>