

EU Democracy Shield: Why protective gear is not enough

The Commission's work plan for 2025 includes a Democracy Shield, to be released later in the year, which is a policy that aims to address the most severe risks to democracy in the EU and build on the work already done under the European Democracy Action Plan and the Defence of Democracy Package.

As the Democracy for Transition coalition, a partnership of democracy/civic space and environmental/climate CSOs, our work is based on the understanding that strengthening all aspects of our democracies, including democratic institutions, the rule of law, gender equality and civic space, while simultaneously fostering innovative approaches to democratic participation, is the only way out of the triple planetary crisis (climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss) and the reduction of inequality.

The Commission's [recognition](#) of the important role civil society organisations and rights defenders play in protecting democratic systems and institutions and the vow to support, protect, and empower civil society are very timely. However, it is essential that support is consistent across the full range of issues.

The European Democracy Shield should not focus solely on defending the status quo, but also on ensuring that democracy is fit for the future and that democratic institutions and organisations are supported over the long term.

The aim of the Shield to protect EU democracy against foreign interference and disinformation and to uphold the integrity of democratic processes across the EU is laudable and necessary. However, safeguards against abuse of these objectives by governments, even within the Union, must be ensured. The shield for European democracy should not become a cover for governments to crack down on legitimate NGO, labour unions and CSO activity including attempts to limit advocacy activities and engagement in policy making, undermine political protests, restrict funding for civil society, shrink civic space, or damage innovative democratic participation that falls outside of traditional party politics. The implementation of the European Democracy Action Plan must protect civil and political rights and reinforce the role of civil society, independent media, and independent oversight bodies in building sustainable and equitable societies.

The European Economic and Social Committee's (EESC) [contribution to the 2025 European Commission's work programme](#) emphasises the crucial role of CSOs in the design, enforcement and monitoring of policies and tools both at the national and European levels (para. 1,3) and the importance of involving all people, especially those from seldom-heard groups, in EU policymaking and dialogue to deepen civic engagement and transparency across EU institutions (para. 1,4). The EESC also recognises that the EU Commission has the task of protecting EU citizens from risks such as climate and biodiversity emergencies, as well as from threats to participatory democracy, by guaranteeing the active participation of citizens in civic, political and democratic life (para. 3,2). We need an ambitious EU policy in taking action to ensure that climate policies are developed openly and inclusively and

implemented with the public's consent, support and understanding. Stronger democratic indicators go hand in hand with stronger environmental policy.

We remind you of the [Conference on the Future of Europe recommendation 36](#) on European Democracy, which proposes to increase citizens' participation and youth involvement in the democracy at the European Union level to develop a 'full civic experience' for Europeans, ensure that their voice is heard also in between elections and that the participation is effective. Civil Society Europe had also [recommended](#), in the context of the European Package on the Defence of Democracy, that this strategy should include a pillar on building a resilient democracy and a strong and vibrant space for civil society.

In the creation and implementation of the Democracy Shield, we encourage the Commission to:

- ensure that innovative and inclusive participatory and deliberative democratic formats are promoted as a central element of the defence of democracy;
- ensure that a European Democracy Shield does not inadvertently weaken the protection of civil society and innovative democratic structures;
- remain vigilant to the risks which ill-formulated foreign agents' laws can pose to democracy and civic space, and act against all efforts to shrink civic space or freedom of speech, association and assembly in the Union including any attempt to limit funding for CSOs or any other additional measures seeking to limiting the operating space of CSOs;
- aim for a EU Strategy to support, protect, and empower civil society, which ensures holistic protection against direct attacks (such as SLAPPs), reduces administrative burdens, and provides structural support to address power imbalances (encouraging Member States to provide structural support), including:
 - Structured civil dialogue, in line with the [recommendations](#) in EU Civil Dialogue: The Foundations of an Institutional Framework;
 - Protection mechanism for human and environmental rights defenders as well as CSOs, according to the [mapping and pathways papers](#) of Civil Society Europe;
 - Operational support to enable CSOs to be structured and effectively engaged in EU policy development and implementation. The [preservation of LIFE operating grants](#) and the CERV fund, for example, is paramount to enable civil society participation and guarantee their transparency and accountability.
- Engage in any revision or adoption of EU legislation to ensure full respect for the legal requirements set out under the Aarhus Convention and best practices in the field, and in line with fundamental rights

A healthy democracy and a healthy environment are intrinsically linked and mutually reinforcing. They are dependent on connected societal programmes driving towards a safer, cleaner, and more equitable world (such as the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable

Development and its Goals). Solutions must be designed by and with people themselves, in cooperation with democratically elected institutions.

Europe's civil society organisations are working hard to promote citizen engagement and active citizenship, foster civil dialogue, and promote innovative democratic practices. These are invaluable assets that contribute to the EU's strength, resilience, and legitimacy. We are available to continue working with EU institutions to defend our democracy and promote social and environmental justice.

Signatories:

1. European Environmental Bureau (EEB)
2. Environmental Justice Network Ireland
3. The Democratic Society (Demsoc)
4. Association For Promotion Sustainable Development
5. Women Engage for a Common Future (WECF)
6. Youth and Environment Europe (YEE)
7. BlueLink Civic Action Network
8. Association For Promotion Sustainable Development
9. LEGAMBIENTE
10. ÖKOBÜRO - Allianz der Umweltbewegung
11. Eco-union
12. ZERO - Association for the Sustainability of the Earth System
13. Child Rights International Network (CRIN)
14. Jesuit European Social Centre
15. Knowledge Network on Climate Assemblies (KNOCA)
16. France Nature Environnement
17. Climate Action Network (CAN) Europe
18. ClientEarth
19. German Speleological Federation VdHK

