# The shrinking space of civil society in Europe

2021/2103(INI) - 08/03/2022 - Text adopted by Parliament, single reading

The European Parliament adopted by 526 votes to 115, with 54 abstentions, a resolution on the shrinking space for civil society in Europe.

***Crucial role of civil society organisations***

Members affirmed the crucial role played by civil society organisations (CSOs) in the realisation and protection of EU values and in the formulation and implementation of EU law, policies and strategies, including the fight against climate change, digital transformation and the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. They warned against the **degradation of civic space across the Union** through measures that hamper CSO activities, their access to sustainable funding and their ability to participate in decision-making. In this regard, they condemned all forms of harassment, stigmatisation, criminalisation and scapegoating of CSOs.

***European civic space index***

Members noted with concern that some governments have taken advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic to reduce civic space and adopt controversial laws and discriminatory measures that were not always related to the pandemic.

Stressing that the rule of law cannot function without a vibrant civil society operating in a safe and supportive environment, Members called on the Commission to intensify and structure its monitoring of the situation of civic space in the Member States by creating a ‘European civic space index’ based on existing frameworks for measuring civic space, and by dedicating a chapter with country-specific recommendations to civic space in its annual rule of law report.

***Civil society strategy***

The Commission is urged to adopt a comprehensive civil society strategy for the protection and development of civic space within the EU that integrates all existing tools, fills monitoring, support and protection gaps, and gives genuine political recognition to the crucial role played by civil society organisations. This strategy should outline a set of concrete measures that will protect and strengthen civic space, including *inter alia* by:

- introducing minimum standards for the legal and administrative environment of civil society;

- introducing a statute of European cross-border associations and non-profit organisations;

- setting up focal points between European institutions and civil society;

- strengthening access to monitor Union policies and the implementation of the Union budget;

- expanding flexible access to Union funding.

***An enabling regulatory and policy environment***

The resolution stressed that for CSOs to flourish, the civic space must be a **supportive and safe environment**, free from undue interference, intimidation, harassment and unnecessary disincentives,

whether from the state or non-state actors. Members called on Member States to guarantee the exercise of freedom of association, peaceful assembly and expression and the right to public participation. They also recalled the importance of **independent and responsible journalism** to report on CSO activities in both private and public media, as well as the importance of access to public information, essential pillars of democratic states based on the rule of law.

The Commission is invited to:

- propose EU-wide media ownership rules in addition to the rules of transparency of media ownership as a minimum requirements within the upcoming Media Freedom Act in order to strengthen media pluralism;

- review and monitor the implementation of Union law to ensure that it does not have a negative impact on civic space and to propose solutions where this is the case;

- use its powers under the Treaties to propose EU legislation to fill gaps and address the difficulties faced by civil society actors across the EU, including minimum standards on the registration, functioning and funding of CSOs and procedural safeguards against SLAPPs;

- use its enforcement powers against Member States that unduly restrict civic space in violation of EU law, including through infringement procedures.

***Sustainable and non-discriminatory access to resources***

The Commission is urged to identify existing obstacles and propose a comprehensive set of measures and recommendations to ensure **long-term predictable, adequate and enabling financing** for civil society organisations, including the funding of their operational activities related to advocacy and monitoring.

The resolution stressed the importance of securing complementary sources of funding, including from public institutions at all levels, private, philanthropic and individual donors, membership fees and income generated through economic activities.

For its part, the Commission is urged to set out conditions and procedures to ensure that EU funds designated to civil society, whether in direct or shared management, are only awarded to organisations that are strictly independent from any government and fully adhere to the EU values.

***Civil dialogue and participation in policy-making***

Stressing that all EU institutions should review their terms of cooperation with CSOs, Members considered that the President of Parliament could appoint one of her Vice-Presidents to carry out an open, transparent and regular dialogue with civil society organisations and encourage the political groups to devise their own civil dialogue structures.

For its part, the Commission is encouraged to (i) present an **inter-institutional agreement** on civil dialogue between all main institutions covering all areas of EU policy and (ii) restore the balance between representatives of corporate interests and representatives of other interests, such as workers' rights, social rights and environmental protection, and to ensure safeguards against unfair lobbying practices that are not compatible with fair and transparent dialogue.