



CIVIL  
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EUROPE

# ***STAND WITH CIVIL SOCIETY TO PROTECT HUMAN RIGHTS***

***A bold civil society strategy  
for the European Union***

***September 2025***



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# **STAND WITH CIVIL SOCIETY TO PROTECT HUMAN RIGHTS**

## **A bold civil society strategy for the European Union**

Civil society is a cornerstone of open, vibrant democracies. Individuals and organisations play a frontline role both as watchdogs, implementers and connectors across different sectors and regions. Yet with the pace and depth of democratic backsliding, this crucial role is under threat. Smear campaigns lay the ground for legal and administrative restrictions, which in turn enable attacks and the criminalisation of human rights defenders. This trajectory threatens not only organisations themselves, but also the values, pluralism and solidarity enshrined in the Treaties of the European Union (EU).

Recognising the rapidly evolving challenges, the European Commission has taken a critical step to launch a dedicated civil society strategy.<sup>1</sup> This provides an opportunity to establish a framework for action with the specific aim of safeguarding civic space and protecting rights. As its foundation, the strategy must be:

- anchored in the **EU Charter of Fundamental Rights** and other regional and international human rights standards, in particular the rights to freedom of association and assembly;

- set out the principles for engagement and communication;
- bring together key actors and link with complementary initiatives, such as the Democracy Shield;
- detail new initiatives that will address existing gaps and failures, such as civic space impact assessments and a protection mechanism for human rights defenders and civil society.

The text below sets out 5 key pillars that build on the 3 pillars set out in the consultation paper: support, protection and engagement.

### **1. VISIBILITY AND SUPPORT**

***The role that civil society plays to defend and promote the values enshrined in the Charter and Article 2 of the EU Treaty should be central to the EU's vision, communication and action.***

In increasingly challenging times, and as the role of civil society in the protection and promotion of fundamental rights is repeatedly undermined, the strategy needs to set a bold vision for how the EU Institutions will stand alongside and speak up for civil society in the protection of rights. This should include actions to:

- Articulate overarching responsibility for fundamental rights and engagement with civil society in the **mandate of future Commission Presidents** - echoed in the mandates of all Commissioners. Each Commissioner should systematically engage with civil society in their respective areas and reflect their inputs in policy making, with leadership from the Commissioner for Democracy, Justice and the Rule of Law.
- Promote and protect fundamental rights and Article 2 values, including an **EU-wide campaign to promote a fresh and positive narrative** that builds support for civil society.
- **Visibly stand up for civil society under attack**, affirming their work to promote and protect human rights as articulated in the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders.
- **Systematic civic space impact assessments** across all legislative and regulatory proposals, to ensure that all EU policies support rather than restrict civic space. An initial review of existing legislation should take place, followed by systematic assessments of new proposals. The EU Fundamental Rights Agency should have a role in these assessments.
- **New EU legislation** that builds a more enabling environment. This should include a strong European Cross Border Association Directive (ECBA) and laws that support cross-border giving and fair and conducive tax regimes.
- **Guidelines** to support an enabling environment, particularly around the **rights to freedom of association and assembly**. This should draw on regional and international standards and include the right to seek, receive and use financial resources and engage in critical advocacy.<sup>2</sup>
- **Swift legal action** when laws and practices violate EU law and limit the space for civil society. Infringement proceedings that violate fundamental rights should be prioritised, and expedited procedures and interim measures considered. Greater transparency and engagement with civil society should be instituted, including the possibility of submitting amicus briefs.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. AN ENABLING REGULATORY FRAMEWORK

***Civil society organisations need a secure space to operate, free from attacks and without unnecessary or arbitrary restrictions, both in member states and at the EU level.***

The strategy should set out steps to ensure that EU and member state legislation support an enabling environment for civil society. This should include both laws and administrative measures, ensuring that the latter are not overly burdensome. Specific steps should include:

### 3. ACCESS TO SUSTAINABLE FUNDING

*Sustainable funding is essential to ensure a strong, independent and diverse civil society that can speak out and hold governments to account.*

The Civil Society Strategy and Multi-Annual Financial Framework (MFF) should complement each other to ensure that a strong range of funding instruments exists with a budget commensurate with the challenges and expected role of civil society. Specific steps should include:

- **An amplified, dedicated, directly managed fund building on CERV** for organisations that promote and protect fundamental rights, as well as the inclusion of funding for human rights work across multiple funds and sectors.
- **A range of support** that includes more operating grants, allowing organisations to plan and respond to new challenges, expanded re-granting to facilitate support to smaller, grassroots organisations and simplified procedures across all funds.
- The possibility of **redirecting frozen funds to civil society and final beneficiaries.**
- The possibility **for new funding structures**, for example, to develop a protection mechanism for human rights defenders and civil society in the EU, including rapid response funding and a fund to support strategic litigation in the EU.
- **Greater exchange** and co-funding with a range of bilateral and private donors.

### 4. INCLUSIVE AND EFFECTIVE PARTICIPATION

*Civil society plays a key role in engaging citizens to shape the kinds of societies they want to live in and can act as a bridge to laws and policies.*

Article 11 of the Treaty of the European Union<sup>4</sup> requires the EU to have an open, transparent and regular dialogue with civil society. The Civil Society Strategy should set out parameters that facilitate this dialogue and ensure that it is effective and inclusive. This should include:

- **An Interinstitutional Agreement on Civil Dialogue:** a binding agreement between the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union to establish structured practices of engagement of civil society across all stages of the policy cycle.
- Specific provisions dedicated to civil dialogue within the **Better Regulation toolbox**, to ensure the European Commission's engagement with civil society is meaningful and result-oriented.
- **A Civil Society Platform:** a mechanism to support systematic, transversal and vertical dialogue between the EU Commission and civil society organisations and strengthen civic participation in shaping the political

agenda, to be co-created with organised civil society.

## 5. PROTECTION OF CIVIL SOCIETY

*Civil society are facing increasing attacks from smear campaigns and physical attacks to measures that limit organisations funding and regulatory environment.*

Contrary to the support that the EU provides to civil society outside the EU, there is no mechanism to provide emergency support to human rights defenders at risk. Without the individuals and organisations there to protect rights, this cornerstone of our democracies will disappear. The Civil Society Strategy should instigate:

- A **regional protection mechanism** for Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) and civil society within the EU. This should provide rapid response funding and link to a holistic range of service providers.
- A system where human rights defenders and civil society organisations can **officially report attacks**, triggering investigations and follow-up by member states, as well as **follow-up on reprisals** related to engagement with EU institutions.
- **Guidelines on preventive action and in response to attacks.** These should include structured engagement with member state authorities but also practical steps to support defenders at risk such statements, visits and trial monitoring drawing inspiration

from the EU Guideline on Human Rights Defenders.<sup>5</sup>

- A **feedback loop** that drives structural reforms, helping to prevent similar attacks in the future with swift legal action where necessary.

All of the above should be underpinned by an **EU-wide Monitoring and Alert Mechanism**: a coordinated, evidence-based system to monitor civic space restrictions, identify early warning signs, and trigger a fast-track EU response. It should build on and complement civil society and FRA monitoring, and include a clear mandate for EU institutions to follow-up on registered complaints. The findings should be collected in a standalone civic space chapter within the Rule of Law Report, with country-specific recommendations that link to action in case of non-compliance.

All 5 pillars need to set out the principles through which the EU will act, as well as practical steps to make the civil society strategy a reality. Only with coordination vision and action will the strategy be a strong step towards ensuring a robust civil society across the EU with the power and support to stand-up and protect all of our rights.

This paper draws on several current and prior contributions on civic space:

- [Joint civil society contribution](#) coordinated by Civil Society Europe – to which Liberties both contributed to and drew on.
- Liberties 2025 MFF paper – [Amplify CERV to protect rights](#)
- Liberties 2022 Civic Space Policy Paper – [Bringing human rights and article 2 values to life: the roles, challenges and solutions for civil society](#)
- HRDN joint paper 2019 – [Civil Society on the Frontline: 5 points for EU action 2019-2024](#)

## **ANNEX – A MODEL FOR AN EU PROTECTION MECHANISM**

Liberties has worked with a coalition of organisations to map the protection landscape in Europe and propose a model for a dedicated EU Protection Mechanism. We are thus providing further detail here as also set out in the joint paper with [Civil Society Europe](#).

The 2024 joint civil society report ‘[Mapping the Protection of HRDs and CSOs in Europe](#)’ found a scattered protection ecosystem with pockets of mostly civil society-led initiatives, and most support targeted to HRDs from outside the EU. Within the EU, there is considerable expertise and resources but no institutional mechanism to document restrictions and attacks, nor an overarching framework

to ensure access to support. In particular, there is no:

- regional protection mechanism for HRDs and civil society within the EU. The EU Guidelines on HRDs and initiatives such as [ProtectDefenders.eu](#) focus exclusively on the protection of human rights defenders outside the EU;
- rapid response funding for HRDs and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in the EU to support urgent protection measures;
- follow-up on reprisals by Member States related to engagement with EU institutions;
- connection between reporting and concrete action.

The mapping found that HRDs at risk for the most part didn’t know where to find support, particularly in an emergency. This was the case even for relatively well-connected HRDs, but even more stark for those who are less connected or based in more rural, remote regions. Finding the right support was also a challenge with a holistic range of tailored services rarely accessible. Defenders from racialised groups, environmental movements, migrant and LGBTIQ+ communities, and women are disproportionately targeted and face specific risks.

The Pathways to Protection Paper explored different models and identified several key elements and prerequisites to improve the protection landscape in Europe.

Firstly, is a system that integrates several core elements around **Reporting, Rapid Response and Reform**. HRDs and CSOs need to be able to officially **report** attacks leading to an investigation and follow up by the state. HRDs need to be able to access a **rapid response system** that can provide them with appropriate and timely support and in the longer term, there needs to be a feedback loop to ensure reforms that prevent similar attacks in the future.

For such a system to work, there are several pre-requisites to ensure the rapid response element:

- support needs to be **timely**, in many cases within 2-3 days;
- the system needs to be **sustainable and long-term**, meaning that it cannot be project-driven;

- it needs to be **independent** and ensure **safety and security**;
- should be closely linked to ongoing monitoring and data collections; and
- Importantly, it needs to be rooted in international and regional **human rights standards, including the principle of non-discrimination** and a recognition of the pressing and intersectional challenges of many HRDs.





## A potential model

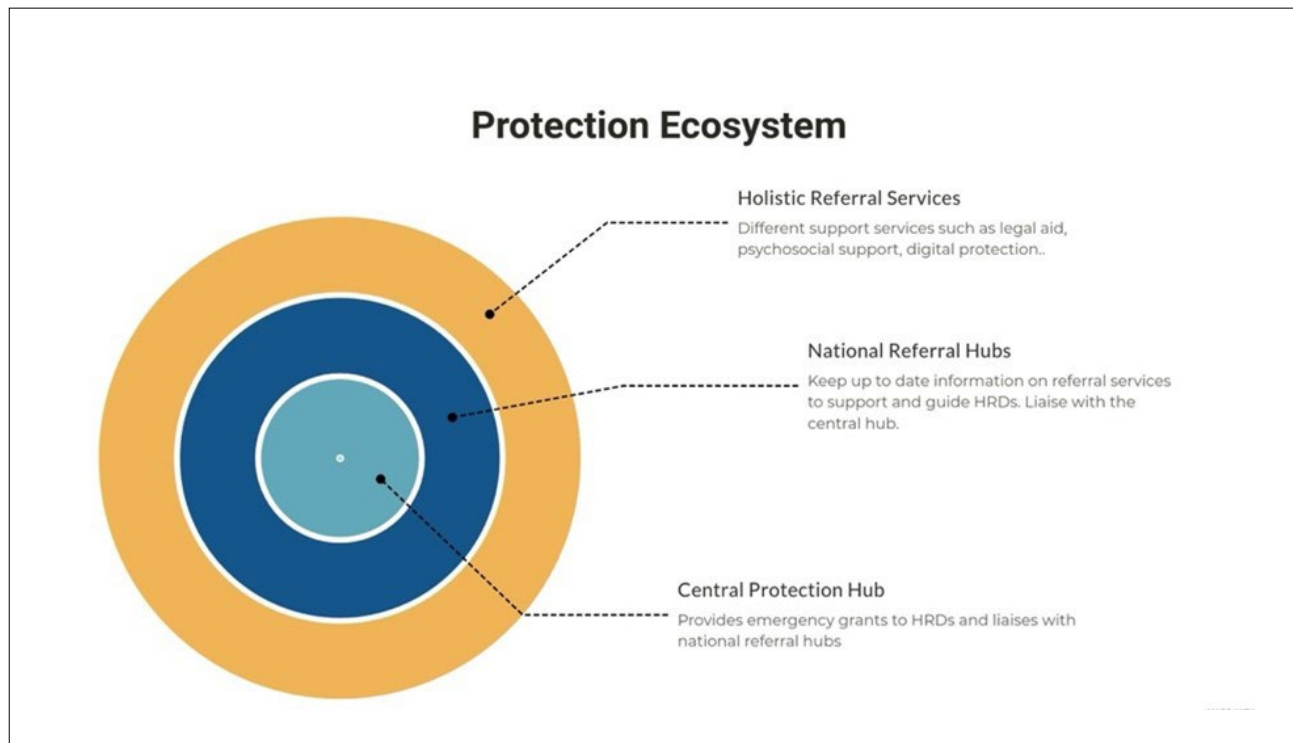
The two papers and further discussions have informed a potential EU model which should be designed and co-created with HRDs and CSOs – drawing on existing knowledge and expertise. A two-layered approach is envisioned, incorporating:

### A Central Coordination Hub

This central hub would act as the nerve centre of the protection system, with the primary responsibility to review and disburse emergency funds (both to individuals and organisations), and liaise with national protection hubs. The emergency funds would support human rights defenders and civil society from the EU as well as those seeking refuge in the EU.

The central hub would be led by a consortium of organisations with the requisite knowledge and expertise, including regional and thematic networks, civic space and protection organisations. The hub and consortium members should be independent of the EU institutions and of member state governments.

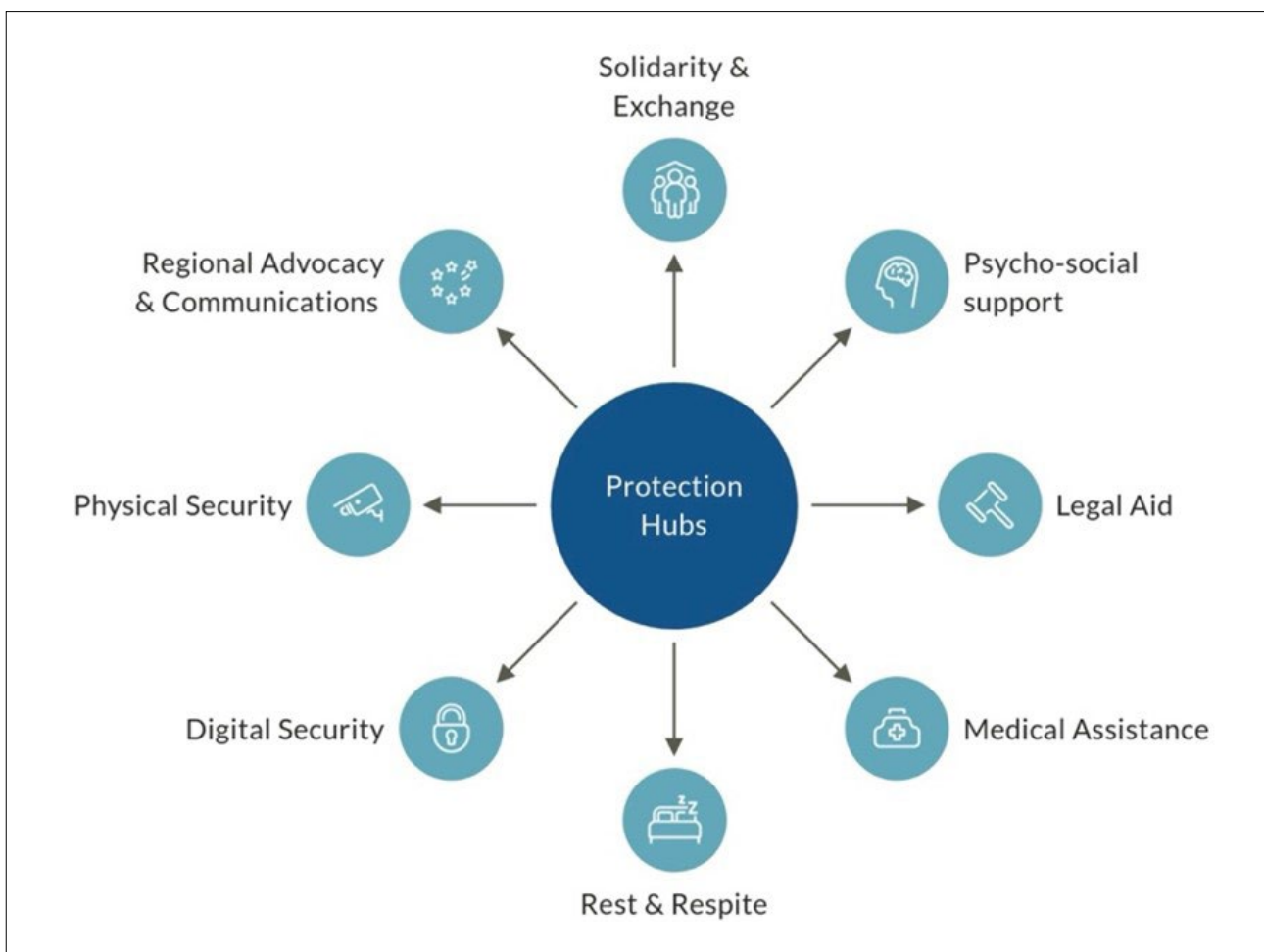
The central hub and the consortium members, would play a monitoring and advocacy role with the EU and other regional and international institutions, and ensure tailored capacity building either through existing programmes or new, joint initiatives. This would include tracking new developments such as trans-national repression.



### **National Protection Hubs**

National protection hubs would act as sites of information and referral, linking HRDs and CSOs both with the Central Coordination Hub for rapid financial support - and with those able to provide direct support. For example, lawyers with relevant expertise, organisations providing digital protection and psycho-social support. These hubs would ensure holistic protection through links with a range of specialised organisations and professionals.

National protection hubs would build on existing expertise and could comprise a group of organisations or an existing coalition tailored to the needs of local defenders and organisations. They should be independent of national governments, but where independent Ombudsman and National Human Rights Institutions are available there would be the possibility for collaboration and exchange.



## **Funding**

Drawing on the experience with ProtectDefenders.eu the EU should fund a similar system within the EU, ensuring long-term support and an independent management structure. Other donors could contribute, including bilateral and private donors.

### Endnotes

- 1 In 2022, over 340 CSOs signed a letter urging European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen to include the Strategy in the Commission's 2023 Work Programme. The European Parliament echoed this call in its 2022 resolution on the shrinking space for civil society, inviting the Commission to develop a dedicated strategy. In 2024, another letter addressed to President Von der Leyen was supported by over 400 CSOs.
- 2 See further at <https://freemassembly.net/>
- 3 See further at <https://www.liberties.eu/en/stories/advocacy-brief/45153>
- 4 Article 11 of the TEU states that EU institutions 'shall by appropriate means, give citizens and representative associations the opportunity to make known and publicly exchange their views in all areas of Union action' and 'shall maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with representative associations and civil society'.
- 5 EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders and internal guidance note.



## **Contact**

### ***The Civil Liberties Union for Europe***

The Civil Liberties Union for Europe (Liberties) is a non-governmental organisation promoting the civil liberties of everyone in the European Union. We are headquartered in Berlin and have a presence in Brussels. Liberties is built on a network of 21 national civil liberties NGOs from across the EU.

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