

# European Youth Forum priorities

## Defence of Democracy package

The upcoming Defence of Democracy package of the European Commission, first announced by President Von der Leyen in her 2022 State of the Union speech, will include a series of legislative and non-legislative initiatives aiming at enhancing the democratic resilience of the European Union. These initiatives are expected to include among others a recommendation on secure and resilient elections, a recommendation on civic engagement, and a much contested legislative initiative on foreign interference.

### Foreign interference: the danger of an EU FARA

Whereas the Defence of Democracy package contains welcome and needed initiatives to enhance democratic participation and civic space in the European Union, the proposed **'foreign interference' directive has raised concerns** among civil society across the European continent<sup>12</sup>, **which the European Youth Forum shares**.

The planned directive would introduce 'transparency and accountability standards' for civil society organisations, requiring them to disclose funding from outside the EU, and creating a register of organisations that receive such type of funding. This proposal echoes other infamous 'foreign influence legislation' and can have **unintended negative consequences, such as narrowing space for civil society to perform its functions and silencing critical voices**. Furthermore, the fact that the chosen format of this legislation is a directive generates the danger for Member States currently opposing independent and critical civil society - including youth organisations - to transpose legislation to the detriment of civic space and civic freedoms, which has also happened most recently<sup>3</sup>. On a more global scale, if approved with such provisions, this legislation would not only further shrink the enabling environment for civil society in Europe, but **also it would undermine the EU's credibility as a global actor working on human rights and democracy**, as it would create a dangerous standard for other countries and regions to follow.

Additionally, when it comes to foreign-funded work linked to public debate, it is important to note the **fundamental difference between corporate and civil society organisations**. The European Commission's public consultation packed both under the same category. Civil society organisations' work is not meant to produce value measured in economic or monetary terms, but in social terms. In this sense, the nature of their activities differ highly from those of corporate actors and should be distinguished as such, particularly in legislative processes impacting the functioning of our democracies. For example, a campaign on

<sup>1</sup> <http://civilsocietyeurope.eu/eu-foreign-interference-law-is-civil-society-at-risk/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://epd.eu/2023/03/30/joint-civil-society-and-democracy-organisations-priorities-for-the-defence-of-democracy-package/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://en.hatter.hu/news/the-act-on-whistleblower-protection-does-not-outlaw-rainbow-families>

increasing sustainable mobility opportunities coordinated by a youth organisation funded by a non-EU based climate philanthropic entity, and a conference aimed at connecting oil and gas companies with relevant policy-makers and funded by countries highly economically reliant on gas and oil production, would both fall under the umbrella of *'Lobbying and public relations activities remunerated by or controlled by third countries'*, as described and phrased in the EC public consultation, whereas arguably their purpose and value highly differ from one another. FR check.

## Enabling environment for civil society and youth organisations

The Defence of Democracy package also serves as an opportunity to safeguard democracy and overall civic space in the EU **at a time when anti-democratic and authoritarian tendencies keep rising**. This is evident from the European Commission's 2022 report on the implementation of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights - which focused on civic space<sup>4</sup> - and in the EU Fundamental Rights Agency's "Europe's civil society: still under pressure" report<sup>5</sup>. Our most recent [position paper on civic space for young people](#) shows a similar if not exacerbated trend impacting youth civil society. In our paper, we propose a set of recommendations for how to address those challenges.

EU institutions also have a duty to implement civil dialogue as foreseen by Art. 11(2) TEU. In this sense, civil dialogue should be restructured beyond merely consultations, and established on an equal footing to social dialogue in the EU policy-making, in all areas of EU action and along all policy cycles. Such civil dialogue structure should be coordinated through equal cooperation between EU institutions, member states and civil society actors and ensure meaningful participation for civil society organisations. This should happen by including them in the development and monitoring of the structure, providing the necessary resources and means for them to fully take part in it and enabling them to follow up on the implementation of the outcomes.

Furthermore, it is crucial that institutions include civil society organisations that are **representative** in the fields at hand, **experts** able to provide researched and evidence-based input, and who are **accountable** to their constituencies to ensure legitimacy in the process.

Last but not least, following the conclusions of the Conference of the Future of Europe, the **EU should establish a dedicated Civil Society Strategy in the framework of the European Democracy Action Plan revision**, which is in line with the revision of the **EU Youth Strategy**. This would ensure that the European Union is able to adequately protect, support and empower civil society organisations in general and youth organisations in particular.

## Free and fair elections that put young people at the forefront

The European Parliament as well as national, regional and local authorities should ensure the dissemination of **accessible information about the EU and EU**

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<sup>4</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_22\\_7521](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_22_7521)

<sup>5</sup> <http://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2022/civic-space-2022-update>

**elections** to young people. This should include specific information packages for first time voters and students residing away from home, and should make use of online platforms used by young people.

Resources should also be invested into **'Get Out The Vote' (GOTV) initiatives** while working closely with youth organisations to ensure effectiveness and outreach. **Funding for youth organisations around civic engagement and electoral participation** should be provided not just at European level, but also at national level.

Additionally, the European Parliament as well as national, regional and local authorities should **ensure easy access to voting for young people by facilitating accessible and ubiquitous polling places**. A particular focus should be placed on **ensuring young people from marginalised backgrounds and those young people who are studying or working abroad** - outside their country of origin - do not struggle to exercise their right to vote. Some of these struggles include: difficulties for students residing away from home, who may need to register again; lack of e-voting possibilities; or lack of postal voting possibilities for some countries, among others. In parallel, **parties should be encouraged to put young people on their lists as prospective parliamentary candidates**.