



European  
Commission

CONFERENCE ON

**A THRIVING CIVIC SPACE**  
**FOR UPHOLDING FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS IN THE EU:**  
**A FRAMEWORK FOR FUTURE ACTION**

**DISCUSSION PAPER**



*Justice  
and Consumers*



# A THRIVING CIVIC SPACE FOR UPHOLDING FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS IN THE EU: A FRAMEWORK FOR FUTURE ACTION

**CO-ORGANISERS:** European Commission and Spanish Presidency of the Council of the EU

**WHEN:** 16 November 2023 from 9.00 – 15.00

**WHERE:** Berlaymont building

## INTRODUCTION

As recognised in the [European Commission's 2022 report on the application of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights](#), as well as in the [Council Conclusions on the role of the civic space in protecting and promoting fundamental rights in the EU of March 2023](#), civil society organisations (CSOs) and other human rights defenders (HRDs) play a key role in protecting and promoting the EU values of fundamental rights, rule of law and democracy. They are crucial in the system of checks and balances as they act as watchdogs, drawing attention to threats to the rule of law, to democracy and to the conduct of free and fair elections, thereby contributing to hold decision makers accountable. They contribute to overcoming challenges our democracies are facing, including by combating discrimination, hate speech and disinformation. The active engagement and participation of CSOs and HRDs enhance the effectiveness and representativeness of policy and decision-making, considering the multiple and diverse interests they represent and can voice.

In May and June 2023, as a concrete follow up to the 2022 report, the Commission organised, with key partners such as the Swedish Presidency of the Council of the EU, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), and the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), three [thematic seminars](#) on safeguarding an open and enabling civic space in the EU. Each seminar gathered around 80 participants representing public authorities in the Member States, CSOs from the European, national and grassroots levels, HRDs, as well as EU institutions and agencies, international organisations, national human rights institutions, and donors. By presenting initiatives and sharing data and good practices, the aim of the seminars was to discuss in depth how to empower and support CSOs and HRDs at both national and EU levels and how to ensure their safety and protection. The seminars addressed the following themes:

- How to enhance protection of CSOs and HRDs exposed to threats and attacks, both in the online and offline environments;
- How to secure adequate funding and capacity for CSOs and HRDs to exercise their role and support their communities;
- How to empower CSOs and HRDs to take active part to policy and decision-making process, by fostering their effective participation.



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Building on the outcomes of the thematic seminars organised by the Commission, time has come to move **towards a holistic approach for a thriving civic space, which puts at the centre the ability and capacity of civil society to work for the promotion and protection of fundamental rights**. Actions should be aimed at overcoming the fragmentation in tackling the cross-cutting challenges still faced by CSOs and HRDs, and at developing a coordinated approach at EU and Member States level, by fostering increased cooperation among all the actors involved, including, in particular, public authorities, donors, CSOs and HRDs.

Taking stock of the discussions, the participants to the Conference representing national authorities, European and national civil society organisations, human rights defenders, EU agencies, donors and international organisations, are invited to reflect on the possible follow up actions.

In particular, the delegates will be asked to provide their views on the following questions:

- Do you have an experience at either local, national or EU/international level of a structured holistic approach and/or a common framework to ensure a thriving civic space? If so, how would you assess their effectiveness?
- What could be possible initiatives to enhance the protection of CSOs and HRDs and to support and empower them to participate in public policy making and to effectively promote fundamental rights and EU values
  - at EU level?
  - by public institutions in the Member States?