



Report of the International Conference

Shaping democratic renewal: Civic space and the path to a New Democratic Pact for Europe

Council of Europe, Strasbourg, 2-3 February 2026

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Civic space in action: the vibrant agora of democracy.

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This initiative is a contribution towards the
New Democratic Pact for Europe

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Executive Summary

Civic space is where democracy breathes. It enables citizen participation and is a key pillar of democracy. Yet, across Europe civic space is shrinking or even closing. This directly affects democracy, human rights, and the rule of law – the three core values of the Council of Europe. Fostering, protecting, and increasing civic space is thus crucial to protect these values. This report reflects the conference findings and is meant to feed into the process leading to a New Democratic Pact for Europe, as a concrete follow-up to the Reykjavik Principles. The report tracks the shrinking of civic space, the monitoring of this dangerous trend, the strategies to mitigate the negative consequences of shrinking civic space, the perils and potential of new technologies for civic space, and finally, the opportunities for action to foster, protect and increase civic space. It includes concrete recommendations emanating from the conference. The key ones are the following:

“Civic space is where democracy breathes.”



For states

- ✓ Enable civic space in law, policy, and practice: genuinely involve civil society and substantively and structurally assess the impact of proposed and existing laws and policies on civic space.
- ✓ Implement Recommendation CM/Rec(2018)11 on the need to strengthen the protection and promotion of civil society space in Europe.
- ✓ Execute judgments of the European Court of Human Rights relating to civic space and human rights defenders with priority and prioritise monitoring their execution in the Committee of Ministers. Similarly, implement with priority Venice Commission recommendations.



For the Council of Europe

- ✓ Lead by example: make the civil society participation aspect of the New Democratic Pact for Europe also part and parcel of the approach within the organisation.
- ✓ Create an effective rapid reaction mechanism to protect civil society actors at risk.
- ✓ For CDDEM (and GR-DEM) specifically: make civic space a recurring standing agenda, include civic space indicators in the development of parameters to implement the Reykjavik Principles, and invite and involve civil society in agenda items related to civic space.



For civil society

- ✓ Create or join national networks of civil society organisations to collectively develop and perform monitoring and to be better protected, avoiding threats to or stigmatisation of single organisations or individuals.
- ✓ Lead by example: found your own communication and ways of work on human rights and participation and use where possible platforms and technologies that comply with human rights.



Opening of the international conference, Strasbourg.

Introduction

‘Civic space is where democracy breathes’, the Secretary General of the Council of Europe stated at the opening of the international conference *Shaping democratic renewal: civic space and the path to a New Democratic Pact for Europe*, held in Strasbourg on 2 and 3 February 2026. The conference gathered in person and online almost five hundred and fifty delegates from civil society, member states, international organisations and the Council of Europe itself. The conference had three main goals: (1) Fostering dialogue and strategic cooperation on civic space, (2) promoting international collaboration, and (3) ensuring meaningful civil society participation in shaping the New Democratic Pact for Europe. This report presents the main findings and recommendations coming out of the conference.

What are civil society and civic space?

Civil society:

The ensemble of individuals and organised, less organised and informal groups through which they contribute to society or express their views and opinions, including when raising issues regarding human rights violations, corruption and other misconduct or expressing critical comments.

groups may include professional and grass-roots organisations, universities and

Civil society, in the Council of Europe’s member states’ own [wording](#), is “the ensemble of individuals and organised, less organised and informal groups through which they contribute to society or express their views and opinions, including when raising issues regarding human rights violations, corruption and other misconduct or expressing critical comments. Such organised or less organised

research centres, religious and non-denominational organisations and human rights defenders.”

Civic space, in turn, as the United Nations [define](#) it, is “the environment that enables people and groups – or “civic space actors” – to participate meaningfully in the political, economic, social and cultural life of their societies.”

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The environment that enables people and groups – or “civic space actors” – to participate meaningfully in the political, economic, social and cultural life of their societies.

The extent of civic space in any given state can be [assessed](#) from three perspectives: (1) formal norms and procedures: which substantive laws restrict or enable civic space and which procedures exist to contest restrictions or secure rights?; (2) discourse: in which ways are civil society organisations, movements, and individuals talked about and labelled, negatively or positively?; (3) which practical pressures on and opportunities for civil society exist to create and use civic space, ranging from threats to funding?

How does civic space connect to human rights and the rule of law?

Civic space is guaranteed by core human rights: the freedoms of expression – including access to information – and of assembly and association. These rights should be ensured in a non-discriminatory manner to everyone. Together these rights serve to buttress and deepen key democratic rights to vote and stand for elections. These rights protect the rule of law and in turn are protected by the rule of law, including through the rights to a fair trial and to an effective remedy in case of human rights violations. All these human rights are protected under the European Convention on Human Rights and elucidated in the case-law of the European Court of Human Rights. In this sense, protecting and enabling civic space part of binding human rights obligations for all Council of Europe member states.

Why is civil society crucial for democracy?

Democracy is the only guarantee for everyone to live in a peaceful, prosperous and free society, as the Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe emphasized at their 4th Summit, in Reykjavik in 2023. In the Reykjavik [Principles on Democracy](#), adopted on that occasion, the member states underlined that democracy is about much more than elections only. It is about the participation of people. Civil society, under these Principles, is “a prerequisite for a functioning democracy” and states committed “to supporting and maintaining a safe and enabling environment in which civil society, as well as human rights defenders, can operate free from hindrance, insecurity and violence.” Thus, the Council of Europe and its member states have committed to empower and protect civic space and to innovate for the benefit of civic space. This is a key element of the New Democratic Pact for Europe. Put succinctly, civic space is the modern agora of democracy.

Civil society has stood at the very basis of many democratic transitions in Europe. Equally, a free and vibrant civil society is a key guarantee against democratic

backsliding: it holds power to account. Democracies which open up to participation by their citizens build and enhance trust and are better equipped to deliver by being more in touch with the needs of their societies. Thus, civil society and civic space are crucial for the health and resilience of democracy.

Taking stock: current threats to civic space

For over almost two decades civic space has been shrinking across the globe, including more recently also in Europe. This is not a natural phenomenon but a direct consequence of state *action* decreasing civic space – sometimes purposefully, sometimes inadvertently – and of state *inaction* in protecting civil society against threats by third parties. This directly affects people’s rights and freedoms and it weakens democracy and can even make it collapse from the inside. But it also has effects beyond this, including on security. As a case in point, the deliberate destruction of civic space in the Russian Federation in the decade before its invasion of Ukraine has also taken away any internal checks-and-balances, accountability of democratic possibilities for dissent. The shrinking of civic space is thus not only a human or democratic problem, but also one dangerously increasing the risks of armed conflict.

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As a result of all these trends, currently only 18 out of 46 member states of the Council of Europe still have an open civic space, according to data of [CIVICUS](#). The trend of increasing threats to civic space and the resulting shrinking or even closure of civic space is visible across all three dimensions identified above.

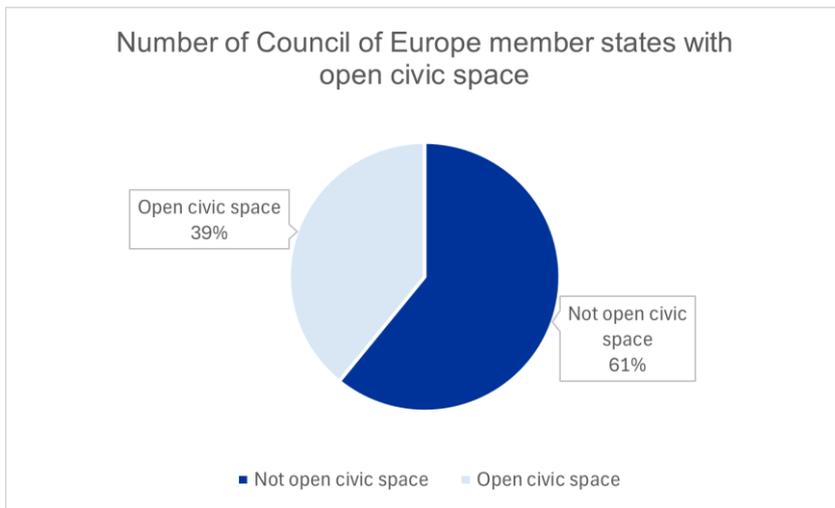


Figure 1 Open civic space in CoE member states (source: CIVICUS)

First, in terms of *laws and procedures*, restrictive legislation is increasingly being introduced and copied by states from each other, including in restricting funding for civil society under so-called foreign agent laws as well as increasing restrictions on protest and more burdensome requirements under the aims of anti-money laundering or anti-

terrorism efforts. In increasingly sophisticated ways, and not just nationally but also locally, these trends weaken civic space. Virtually all of these interfere with the core human rights protecting civic space: the freedoms of expression, assembly, and association.

Second, in terms of *discourse*, an increasing vilification and stigmatisation of civil society by both states and non-state actors, online and offline, is visible across Europe, according to the CoE's [NGO Law Expert Council](#). Equally, the Conference of International NGOs (CINGO) at the Council of Europe has noted in its [2025 Recommendation on Civic Space](#) that civil society actors are vilified as traitors or enemies even when acting in accordance with European standards and values.

Third, in terms of *practical room for civic space*: disproportionate force used against protesters, threats to human rights defenders, and at times even killings, and dis-information campaigns – both domestic and external – can all have a chilling effect on the room for all people in Europe to make use of their human rights and thus to shape and protect civic space. The shrinking is also evidenced by bureaucratic silencing in terms of arbitrarily applying burdensome law enforcement through administrative or tax law on critical civil society organisations or selectively closing of access to policymakers. It is equally visible in cyber-attacks on civil society organisations websites or communication, in surveillance of people active in protests, and in formal procedures to try and silence critical voices through SLAPPs (strategic litigation against public participation). There is also transnational repression of civil society, affecting diaspora communities, including human rights defenders in exile. Recently, decreasing opportunities for funding for civil society activities have exacerbated the problems for civil society to function.



Figure 2 Poll undertaken among participants at the conference identifying threats to civic space.

All of these deteriorations have been reported and tracked by a variety of actors, including but not limited to civil society organisations themselves, from [National Human Rights Institutions](#) across Europe to the EU's [Fundamental Rights Agency](#). It has been highlighted with great urgency by the Council of Europe's [Commissioner for Human Rights](#), and is part of a wider global trend, as the United Nations' Office of the [High Commissioner for Human Rights](#) has noted.

Finally, it is crucial to note that *space shrinks, but it shrinks unevenly*. Not all people face the same pressures, and not even everywhere in the same state are the pressures the same. These trends negatively affect certain groups more in particular, such as organisations working on girls' and women's rights, as GREVIO has [reported](#), as well as people at the margins of their societies.

The trend is thus undeniable, severe, and urgent. And there is not just one canary in the coalmine, but a whole chorus by now. The deterioration of civic space, from shrinking to closing, directly affects not just the individuals and organisations targeted but democracy, human rights, and the rule of law as such: the three core values on which the Council of Europe is founded. These all interlock: when institutional or societal watchdogs such as ombudpersons, NHRIs, media, or civil society organisations get discredited, attacked, or weakened, this blocks the arteries of democracy. When institutional checks and balances, such as independent and impartial courts, whether domestic ones or the European Court of Human Rights, are attacked, human rights protection starts to falter, and the rule of law suffers.



Conference participants debate how coalitions increase the effectiveness of monitoring civic space and build resilience.

Monitoring the state of civic space

Reliable information and data are crucial to monitor the state of civic space. To enable such monitoring, key human rights come into play, such as the right to access to publicly held information and the freedom of expression and the right to impart and receive information. Only when data is accessible, both from the side of states and from international organisations, can civil society perform its democratic watchdog and public agora roles. Such data helps to assess the consequences of both proposed and already existing laws and policies affecting people's lives in general and their civic space specifically. Free collection, analysis and dissemination of civic space data also allows not just citizens, but equally international organisations to monitor civic space and react in a timely fashion, including in terms of advocacy. This applies not only in terms of what negatively affects civic space – problems and threats – but also in terms of best practices, such as open government initiatives strengthening access to information and transparency.

Civic space monitoring can be done both by civil society itself as well as by states and international organisations. In the latter cases, it is important to involve civil society in the development or refinement of civil space monitoring: not just about it, but with it. This serves both to make the data more reliable (which elements matter, to whom, and to what extent?) but also because such involvement itself is part of the very public participation that strengthens democracy.

Concerning *monitoring by civil society*, in a number of states, coalitions or even formally established umbrella organisations of civil society organisations across sectors have developed active and successful monitoring of legislative and policy initiatives related to civic space, as well of more specifically compliance by state institutions with their own rules on public participation. Here again, the link between having actual access to reliable public data, the freedom to exchange and discuss information, and to participate in policy-making all interlink. In addition, coalitions avoid fragmentation of efforts and increase their salience.



Only when data is accessible can civil society perform its democratic watchdog and public agora roles.

Similarly, at the European and international levels, a number of civil society initiatives monitor civic space, including the Monitoring Action for Civic Space ([MACS](#)), the Monitor Tracking Civic Space of [CIVICUS](#). The NGO Law [Expert Council](#) of the Council of Europe assesses and provides legal opinions on domestic legislation affecting civic space, with the ECHR as its key legal framework. For many of these, a best practice is the co-ownership and co-design of such monitoring by civil society itself, including at the local and national levels. Another advantage of monitoring is the possibility to act preventively and not just reactively, and to directly address European institutions.

Concerning monitoring by international organisations and their agencies, this is done in different ways. On civic space specifically, the EU's Fundamental Rights Agency monitors civic space based on input by civil society through its Fundamental Rights Platform, which subsequently serves to inform EU institutions. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) collects data directly from governments for its monitoring, focusing on civic freedoms, enabling environments, and media transparency and pluralism. Its civic space monitoring complements monitoring by civil society by yielding insight into how states perceive civic space. This monitoring enables the spreading of concrete good practices among policymakers and helps to identify gaps between frameworks on paper and concrete action in practice.

Monitoring is also done on specific issues. The European Commission in its annual Rule of Law reports monitors as one of its indicators an enabling framework for civil society. In compiling these reports, not only state input is used, but also input by civil society organisations. In addition, specific European treaties have supervisory bodies which include in their monitoring civic space elements related to their subject-matter. For example, the Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO) supervising the Istanbul Convention monitors the civic space of women's organisations.

Recommendations



For states

- ✓ Monitoring of civic space is part of democratic participation and thus strengthens democracy: value it as such.
- ✓ Ensure effective access to public information, also in terms of wider open government initiatives, to enable monitoring.
- ✓ Enable free expression to enable advocacy based on monitoring. Monitoring the state of civic space should not be criminalized in any way or otherwise be interfered with in contravention of human rights contained in the ECHR.
- ✓ Actively engage with monitoring efforts by the organisations a state is member of, including in following up on recommendations based on such monitoring.



For the Council of Europe

- ✓ Structurally engage civil society in monitoring efforts, building on good practices developed by several of its own institutions.
- ✓ Connect monitoring to follow-up action, if need be by other parts of the Council of Europe. In that context, be aware that backsliding or shrinking of civic space is not always evident through dramatic or very visible decreases: just like democracy, civic space dies in darkness, when its gradual shrinking goes unnoticed.
- ✓ Protect the monitoring role of its own institutions, and the persons performing such monitoring, against vilification or threats.



For civil society

- ✓ Adopt the best practice of creating of joining national networks of civil society organisations to collectively develop and perform monitoring and to be better protected, avoiding threats to or stigmatisation of single organisations or individuals.
- ✓ Connect to Europe-wide monitoring initiatives by civil society to provide input and for collective advocacy at the European level.
- ✓ Actively use monitoring data, either from civil society itself or from the European level to engage with domestic policymakers, politicians, and media, to the extent that this is possible and safe.



Panel discussion on how legislation and its implementation can directly affect civic space.

Legislative trends and civic space – navigating regulatory change

Legislation and its implementation can directly affect civic space. It is therefore crucial to identify how detrimental effects can be prevented and which steps can be taken to mitigate risks. It is clear that early warning about risks or problems is only useful when followed up by early intervention or adjustment of laws or policies. Only then can civic space be kept open or can negative trends of shrinking civic space be reversed.

In many states, as well as at the European level, it is key to guarantee time and factual possibilities for civil society to participate. To ensure such meaningful democratic participation in law-making, good standards of public consultation need to be adhered to. Shortening time for consultation should be regarded with great caution and should never obviate the core element of public participation. And beyond that, participation by groups potentially affected by laws or policies, such as youth or people in vulnerable situations, should actively be invited and enabled. In other words, making democracy truly human-centred – and this applies also to the New Democratic Pact for Europe.

In states where civic space is already repressed, external condemnations and holding states to European standards is crucial. Statements coordinated among several international organisations and actors may be more effective than separate ones. Timing and speed are key: in some cases, civic space does not erode slowly but rather repression and stages of backsliding follow one another swiftly. In such situations, swiftness of monitoring and holding to account by international organisations is key, including on the basis of legal assessments under common standards like the ECHR: these are clear but not sufficiently implemented. Equally important is the active protection against reprisals of those human rights defenders or civil society organisations who engage with international organisations.

For international organisations, coordinated action across their different branches and activities is key. The newly adopted [Civil Society Strategy](#) of the European Union can be an inspiration in this regard. This explicitly ties a vibrant civil society to the robustness of democracy. It brings together in a multi-year strategy and commitment existing and new *protective action* for civic space, such as the EU's anti-SLAPP legislation, *connective action* such as the work done by FRA's civil society platform, and *funding, expertise, and data*, including the building of a knowledge hub and aims to *actively involve civil society*.

In addition, collaborating much more actively across borders between players active in monitoring and defending civic space is crucial. The United Nations are launching a community of practice on human rights defenders in Europe. This can dovetail with the initiatives of FRA and other actors.

Recommendations



For states

- ✓ Implement Recommendation [CM/Rec\(2018\)11](#) of the Committee of Ministers to member States on the need to strengthen the protection and promotion of civil society space in Europe.
- ✓ Implement Recommendation [CM/Rec\(2024\)2](#) of the Committee of Ministers to member States on countering the use of strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs), and for EU member states also the '[anti-SLAPP](#)' directive.
- ✓ Execute judgments of the European Court of Human Rights relating to civic space and human rights defenders with priority and prioritise monitoring their execution in the Committee of Ministers.
- ✓ Implement civic space-related recommendations of monitoring bodies of other Council of Europe treaties, including pre-eminently of the Venice Commission.
- ✓ Involve civil society in law and policy-making to prevent negative effects of envisaged legislation on civic space and promote measures which enable civic space.
- ✓ Include civic standards on civic space such as the case-law of the European Court of human Rights on the freedoms of expression, association, and assembly in training of judges and prosecutors.



For the Council of Europe

- ✓ Actively invite and enable civil society input across all its monitoring institutions.
- ✓ Actively join and participate in networks of civic space activities between international organisations and connect relevant policy officers.
- ✓ Strengthen the Secretary-General's Private Office procedure to protect civil society against reprisals when engaging with Council of Europe, in line with the [Helsinki Commitments](#), and provide information on its functioning so far.
- ✓ Use sector-specific and sub-national networks and institutions when general engagement with national authorities on civic space is not fully conducive or effective. For example, through the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities or through the Council of Europe's Youth or other programmes to promote citizen involvement in policy-making which may in turn increase civic space.



For civil society

- ✓ In the face of SLAPPs, preventively form or join coalitions with other organisations to build mutual support and defence. This includes monitoring the implementation by states of anti-SLAPP legislation and measures.
- ✓ Collaborate within civil society in order to be able to engage with international institutions such as the Council of Europe's organs: specialised and experienced organisations or umbrella networks can facilitate such engagement. This includes amongst other the Conference of International NGOs and the European Implementation Network.



Conference panel discusses how digital spaces can strengthen civic engagement.

Digital civic space: innovation, inclusion, and protection

Increasingly, civic space also has an online component: it is where people exchange views, find information and form and express their opinions. Clearly, digital technologies are also reshaping civic space. This comes with perils and risks, but also with opportunities. In order to be truly rights-based and democratic, the digital civic space should foster innovation and inclusion with the aim to involve more citizens in democracy, and yet protect people against harassment, threats and discrimination. Only then can the digital sphere truly enhance democracy rather than threaten it.



To be truly rights-based and democratic, the digital civic space should foster innovation and inclusion with the aim to involve more citizens in democracy, and yet protect people against harassment, threats and discrimination.

In terms of *perils and risks*, human rights defenders and other civil society actors increasingly face threats online, as the Committee of Ministers has also [acknowledged](#). Online tools have been used to spread anti-democratic propaganda, to organise campaigns of mis-information or to lower trust in democratic institutions, ranging from the judiciary to the media and civil society at large.

Civil society actors are very dependent on current social media platforms, mostly owned by businesses outside Europe, to communicate.

Civil society is also exposed by the very nature of digital technology: its speed and directness can easily discredit specific organisations or people, exclude certain views or opinions for commercial reasons from online platforms, and decrease civic space for specific groups by the chilling effect of online attacks or threats. Added to this are imbalances of means in terms of money and capacity. These may even have more disproportionate effects in online campaigns than in the offline world.

Specifically, the rise of algorithms coupled to Large Language Models (also known as ‘artificial intelligence’ or AI) poses risks that are far from imaginary. AI can and has been used across the globe as a tool of repression including through surveillance, as the EU’s European Parliament has [documented](#). Algorithms can provide hyper-personalised online experiences but in doing so can also fragment civic space, creating a ‘bubble of one’ for each individual. By generating and amplifying false information, stereotypes, and biases, they can also be used to influence public opinion at a large scale in non-democratic ways. This poses a risk to civic discourse. In its [Guidance Note on the implications of Generative AI for freedom of expression](#), the Council of Europe has emphasized that civil society should be engaged by states across the full cycle of developing law and policy on this issue in order to guarantee compliance with the freedom of expression under Article 10 ECHR.

These risks and perils of digital technologies also particularly deeply affect another key group of actors in democracy and civic space: the *media*. The media’s roles as civic forum and as watchdog of democracy have come under pressure, as even traditional media have become dependent on the platform function of social media to considerable extents. This also entails that commercial pressure in the ‘market of attention’ have become even more prominent at the detriment of journalism’s own key functions in democracy.

In terms of *opportunities*, the digital dimension can greatly benefit civic space, both as a space to engage with the general public, as well as to engage with state authorities. At its best, it can shape a shift of perspective for and by citizens from beneficiaries or objects *of* policy to protagonists *in* policy in a democracy. For civil society itself, this is most clear in the reach and effectiveness of using social media for campaigns and advocacy and more widely for mobilisation of people.

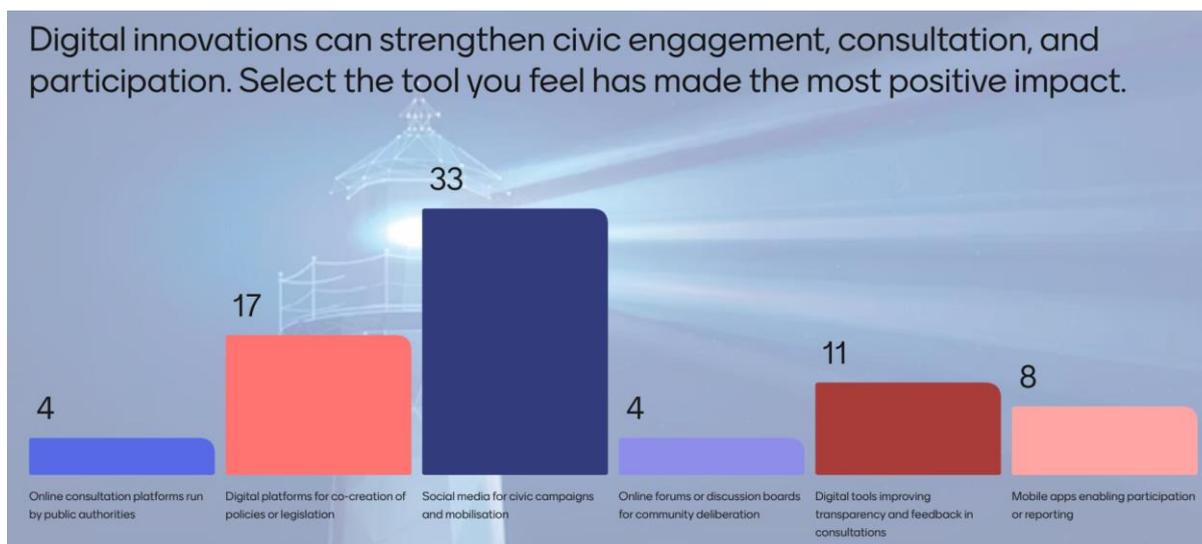


Figure 3 Poll undertaken among participants at the conference on the value of digital innovation.

In addition, in terms of engaging with the state, civil society actors see the potential of digital platforms to facilitate, with low thresholds, engagement with law or policy proposals – at its best even in the co-creation of policies. Digital means can also serve to improve the transparency of such processes, in terms of informing the public of what takes place when and at which points consultation is possible. In such ways, democratic decision-making can directly become more open and inclusive.

Digital tools hold significant potential for more inclusive civic engagement, and promising practices are emerging in this field. For example, authorities from the local to the European level can use online tools to organise public consultations on laws and policies, as for example the European Union does through the ‘Have your say’ [portal](#). It also includes digital applications comparing political party programmes in order to help citizens decide on what to vote for (although here too, AI-generated ones can mis-inform or mis-represent party positions or even influence potential voters to be guided to certain parties only). It also entails digital means to facilitate citizen assemblies, including for those people unable to come to physical assemblies. Digital tools can equally inform citizens more easily in smaller and minority languages. In addition, digital technology may enable local civil society to engage more people, especially youth. In doing so, digital technology can render civic space more inclusive and sustainable.



At the *European level*, new standards regulating the digital sphere have emerged recently. These include the Council of Europe’s [Framework Convention](#) on Artificial Intelligence and Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law and the European Union’s [Digital Services Act](#). Such human rights-based regulation of itself can benefit and protect democratic civic space. Public participation in the actual implementation of these norms as well as in the development of new normative frameworks is called for.

The promise of technology can potentially be harnessed most usefully and directly at the *sub-national – regional and local – levels*. It is, after all, at the level of their town, city, or region that citizens will most often be in touch with state authorities. At these levels, experimentation or pilot projects with inclusive technology are useful to try out new ways of citizen participation – such as online consultations on local policies

affecting the daily lives of people. They can also lower the threshold for youth or people in vulnerable situations to provide input and engage with democratic decision-making beyond elections only. Finally, they can serve to test software or platforms that are open-source or otherwise less dependent on Big Tech. When successful, such pilots can then be implemented more widely across states. The local level can thus serve as small-scale laboratories of democratic innovation using technology.

Finally, technology can directly help to *monitor the protection of civic space*. It can play a role in gathering data on the extent of civic space itself, in analysing such data, in making such data accessible and, pre-eminently, in connecting actors across civic space. Along the three above-mentioned dimensions through which one can assess civic space: (1) technology enables tracking and comparing of legal norms and procedures, within and between states and at the European level; (2) technology can track discourse on the ways civil society, including human rights defenders and organisations, are talked about, framed or even attacked verbally; (3) technology can help to gather data on concrete practices hampering or enlarging civic space, from enabling alerting about threats and other dangers for civil society to making inventories of best practices and spreading those. In a nutshell, technology itself can thus be a tool in tracking the increase or decrease of civic space.

All these potential advantages can only become reality, if and when state authorities are sufficiently aware of them. Such awareness does not currently exist at every level of governance. In addition, it may require a wider outlook, as much of the technological innovation in democratic tools occurs beyond the Big Tech enterprises. To fully enable digital innovation to strengthen democracy rather than weaken it, public authorities could use a number of criteria to inform their choices in public procurement of digital services and tools: (1) the degree of accessibility and usability of these for everyone; (2) the degree to which these increase rather than decrease diversity of participation, including through their algorithms; (3) the availability of clear mechanisms to measure this.

Recommendations



For states

- ✓ Uphold standards, including the ECHR and other CoE Conventions relating to digital technology.
- ✓ Actively use digital tools as a means for inclusive democracy, including making its own websites and platforms accessible to everyone, including to people with disabilities.
- ✓ Actively use digital tools to inform citizens and civil society of upcoming laws and policies and through transparent timelines enable input into these processes also through online means.
- ✓ Actively share best practices on inclusive democratic tools between different localities and regions within their territory and learn from digital democratic innovation in other states.
- ✓ In procuring or buying digital tools for democratic governance and participation, explicitly select on the (1) the degree of accessibility and usability of these for everyone; (2) the degree to which these tools increase rather than decrease diversity of participation, including through their algorithms; (3) the availability of clear mechanisms to measure this.



For the Council of Europe

- ✓ Use inclusive and participatory technologies in the process itself of developing a New Democratic Pact for Europe.
- ✓ Increase awareness of the Council of Europe's own standards on democracy and human rights related to civic space towards sub-national authorities as the levels of democracy closest to citizens, through the conduit of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities.
- ✓ Work with states to ensure implementation of the Guidance Note on the implications of Generative AI for freedom of expression and explicitly emphasize civil society involvement.



For civil society

- ✓ Lead by example. This means founding one's own communication and ways of work on human rights and participation and use where possible platforms and technologies that comply with human rights.
- ✓ Use digital technology not only to send out one's own message or position, but to hold power to account in order to make online space truly a civic space.



Engaged civil societies strengthen democracy.

Opportunities for action to protect civic space

The shrinking and closing of civic space is far from being a problem only for civil society organisations. It is a problem for everyone, for each of us. In that sense, civic space truly is the human element in democracy: the many ways in which people speak out, organise, debate, and participate. The New Pact for Democracy should thus explicitly include this human element. Protecting, nurturing and enabling civic space is not only a crucial foundation for democracy, it also relates directly to security: war and conflict

happen when voices of dissent are stifled, when peaceful modes of societal debate are no longer possible, when watchdogs are muzzled and checks and balances on power have broken down. Civic space is not a luxury, but a necessity for both democracy and peace. It can be eroded slowly or be quashed at high speed with premeditated actions. Negligence can dangerously endanger what is fragile, yet the lifeline of democracy. A steadfast protection of civic space is thus a key calling for everyone: states, international organisations, and civil society itself.

This fostering of civic space and democracy should not happen only at state level in law-making or bureaucratic levels, but equally so in *everyday life*. Schools, local societies, families, public broadcasters, and other media can all foster the practices of democracy, of participation, of speaking out individually and collectively. Civic education about the value of democracy and its crucial dimension of a vibrant civil society should be taken much more seriously.

Civil society itself urgently needs both sufficient access to funding – without unnecessary hurdles or stigmatisation – as well as flexibility of funding, also in terms of administrative procedures. Yet, the human side of a functioning civil society is equally crucial: protection and safety, offline and online, for people involved and capacity-building in terms of human resources, communication, and outreach. Again, horizontal learning across civil society is a best practice here, such as for example in the project Recharging Advocacy for Rights in Europe ([RARE](#)).

International organisations, including the Council of Europe, have a key role to play. In providing fora for sharing best practices, in watchdog and monitoring roles, in long-term creation and supervision of common norms and in short-term protection and support for civic space.



Figure 4: Poll undertaken among participants at the conference on what international organisations can do.

Beyond the more specific recommendations outlined above about monitoring, changing legislative landscapes and digital technologies, general recommendations to take action to protect and strengthen civic space emanate from the debates that took place at the international conference.

Recommendations



For states

- ✓ Enable civic space in law, policy, and practice. This also means genuinely enabling civil society participation in these processes and it entails substantively and structurally assessing the impact of proposed and existing laws and policies on civic space.
- ✓ Increase protection of civil society actors, including human rights defenders against harassment, threats, and stigmatization, including by way of practical and legal support.
- ✓ Include in civic and democracy education that civil society and civic space are crucial aspects of democracy. Democracy is about voice, not just vote.
- ✓ Actively foster and engage in pro-democracy and pro-civic space networks and coalitions, such as the Friends of Civil Society group of states at the Council of Europe.
- ✓ Promote, facilitate, and protect civil society engagement in international organisations. This includes the good practice of some states to appoint civil society representatives to participate in the drafting of European standards related to civil society.



For the Council of Europe

- ✓ Lead by example: make the civil society participation aspect of the New Pact for Democracy also part and parcel of the approach within the organisation.
- ✓ To do so, create an integrated approach across all Council of Europe mechanisms and institutions for norm creation, monitoring, and rapid protection and ensure sufficient capacity and funding for these.
- ✓ Create an effective rapid reaction mechanism to protect civil society actors at risk. This mechanism can build on and make use of existing monitoring mechanisms and data gathering, but should move more swiftly in order to prevent human rights violations against civil society rather than remedying them after the fact. Especially those civil society actors facing threats or backlash because of their engagement with the Council of Europe should receive priority.
- ✓ Open up much more to civil society participation across all mechanisms and procedures. To do so, build on the roadmap for civil society engagement, but also go beyond that. The Council of Europe is now relatively closed to civil society compared to other international organisations and prioritizes international civil society organisations. Procedurally allow and practically enable access also to national and local organisations *and* have rapporteur groups actively reach out to relevant civil society in the context of their work – also as part of the Helsinki commitments.
- ✓ Have Council of Europe country offices meaningfully engage with civil society at the local level, especially where civic space is shrinking.



For CDDEM (and GR-DEM) specifically:

- ✓ Make civic space a recurring standing agenda item as an integral part of its work on democracy.
- ✓ Adopt the draft recommendation on legal status of civil society organisations in Europe and ensure effective monitoring of its implementation.
- ✓ Include civic space indicators in the development of parameters to implement the Reykjavik Principles.

- ✓ Invite and involve civil society in agenda items related to civic space.
- ✓ Liaise with other international organisations (such as EU and OECD) working on civic space monitoring to inform the work of CDDEM and vice versa.
- ✓ Function as a platform to share among member states good domestic practices of civil society dialogue and participation in law, policy and practice.



For civil society

- ✓ Actively build coalitions and join networks beyond one's own sector or subject-matter: civil society organisations should not only work with each other, but also reach beyond: to media, academics, ombuds offices, and even businesses.
- ✓ Focus more on which strategies are working and share those. Also learn from other regions beyond Europe which have been facing these issues already for a longer time.

Conclusion

Since democracy is not just about vote, but also very much about voice, room for a variety of voices to be heard is crucial. Civic space is that room, in which people can speak out on matters that matter to them, to their lives. Not just organisations, but also less formally organised social movements, including by youth, journalists, individual human rights defenders, and other citizens. This voice is protected by key human rights: the freedoms of expression and association, of assembly and of participation, all to be enjoyed without discrimination. This voice matters at all levels of civic space: local, national, European, and even global. For each of the three dimensions of looking at civic space, the New Democratic Pact for Europe matters.

First, *formal norms and institutions*, laws can and have been used to shrink civic space in increasingly refined ways. Yet, norms and institutions can also crucially be tools to protect and enhance civic space. The full protective potential of existing human rights norms, including the ECHR, the case-law of the European Court of Human Rights and other European legislation and commitments are clear foundational norms to base action on. They should be used to their full potential.

Democracy is not just about vote, but about voice.

Second, *discourse and narratives* have been effective in shrinking civic space but can also be used for the reverse: conveying the importance of civic space and civil society as a key element of democracy to all citizens. This applies to both states and international organisations: not just talking the talk of democratic and human rights norms and values as lofty ideals, but also speaking out when these are violated.

Third, the *practice of civic space* through real actions. Threats and practical hurdles have shrunk civic space, but practical action can also enlarge and revive civic space. By involving civil society in norm-making, norm monitoring and in norm implementation. By practising what you preach: both states and international organisations should foster democratic participation. And by building coalitions, between states, between international organisations, and across civil society to grow an ecosystem of fostering and protecting civic space.