

**POLICY DEBATE**

# **PROTECT CIVIL SOCIETY, DEFEND DEMOCRACY**

**A CIVIL SOCIETY STRATEGY FOR AN EFFECTIVE RULE OF LAW**

**WEDNESDAY 22 MARCH 2023**

**BRUSSELS (ATELIER 29) & ONLINE**

CO-ORGANISED BY



**MONITOR**  
TRACKING CIVIC SPACE

## **CONCEPT NOTE**

Civil Society is a crucial actor for an inclusive society and a functioning democracy and intervenes when rights and rule of law are in danger. Yet, even in the European Union, civil society organisations and rights defenders are subject to restrictive laws and funding frameworks, limited participation, intimidation and harassment amongst other restrictions. [The European Civic Forum's](#) and [CIVICUS Monitor's](#) annual reports – both published on 16 March - showcase a deterioration of civic space but also important stories of resilience.

The European and national institutions have an important role to play to guarantee, safeguard and expand the space for civil society to operate and thrive, in order to defend democracy and the rule of law. The European Commission's rule of law report is a key mechanism for civil society to raise concerns at the EU level. Additionally, the 2022 European Commission's report on the application of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU which focused on civic space highlights the need to protect, support and empower CSOs and rights defenders. However, the success of these tool lies in the commitment to turn the findings into prompt and effective actions to respond to the challenges identified. For this reason, in June 2022, over 300 civil society organisations **called on the President of the European Commission to develop a European Civil Society Strategy.**

The upcoming review of the European Democracy Action Plan and the upcoming Defence of Democracy package provides a crucial moment for European institutions to strengthen the ability of civil society actors to act as democratic antibodies at national and EU level and empower their participation in the EU policymaking processes.

In light of the above, the European Civic Forum (ECF), Civil Society Europe and CIVICUS will host a policy dialogue involving key EU policy and decisionmakers, regional and national civil society organisations titled *"Protect Civil Society, Defend Democracy,"* on 22 March 2023. The aim of the event is to present the findings of annual civic space reports and studies in the framework of the rule of law consultation and engage in a discussion on how to defend civil society and its role in society and democracy. The approach for this policy debate will be horizontal and participative, with diverse speakers (including MEPs, Commissioners and civil society actors). The event is part of the **campaign** for a European Civil Society Strategy.

**REGISTER NOW!**



Co-funded by the  
European Union

[civic-forum.eu](http://civic-forum.eu) | [monitor.civikus.org](http://monitor.civikus.org) | [civilsocietyeurope.eu](http://civilsocietyeurope.eu)

## PROGRAMME

09:30-10:00	Registration and welcome of participants	
10:00-10:05	Introduction and setting the scene	Carlotta Besozzi, Civil Society Europe (CSE)
Part 1: Restrictions faced by civil society and rights' defenders		
10:05-10:12	Summary of key findings	Giada Negri, ECF and Marianna Belalba, CIVICUS Monitor
10:13-10:40	Testimonies from defenders	<p>Several defenders from national level.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Justyna Wydrzyńska, Abortion dream team Poland</li> <li>• Seán Binder, Migrant rights Defender, Greece (TBC)</li> <li>• Patrizia Heidegger, European Environmental Bureau</li> <li>• David Ratinaud, Le Mouvement Associatif, France</li> <li>• Valentina Brinis, Open Arms, Italia</li> </ul>
Part 2: How can the ROL mechanism help defend civic space?		
10:40-11:30	Roundtable 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Joachim Herrmann, member of Commissioner Reynders cabinet</li> <li>• Henri Nickels, Head of Policy Analysis &amp; Stakeholder Cooperation Sector, European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA)</li> <li>• MEP Terry Reintke (TBC)</li> </ul>

COFFEE BREAK

### Part 3: Brainstorming an EU level Protection mechanism to protect defenders

11:30-12:20	Roundtable 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• UN Special Rapporteur, Michel Forst</li> <li>• MEP María Soraya Rodríguez Ramos (TBC)</li> <li>• Ingrid Bellander Todino, Head of Unit on Fundamental rights Policy at DG JUST</li> <li>• Erik Adell Hellström, Swedish Presidency</li> <li>• Chiara Adamo, Head of Unit on Gender Equality, Human Rights and Democratic Governance at DG INTPA</li> </ul>
12:20-12:30	Closing remarks from the organisers	Raffaella Bolini, European Civic Forum