

Annual Report 2025





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RIGHTS

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EQUALITY

RIGHTS

FREEDOM

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FREEDOM

20

YEARS

OF

ECF

RIGHTS

DEMOCRACY

RIGHTS

FOR ALL

FREEDOM

Table of Contents

Forewords from the co-presidents	2
---	----------

Highlights from 2025	5
-----------------------------	----------

Our activities	9
-----------------------	----------

Our impact	13
-------------------	-----------

About us	21
-----------------	-----------

Forewords from the co-presidents



Raffaella Bolini

ECF Co-President

In 2005, we joined forces to create the European Civic Forum, with a key mission: to call on European institutions to recognise the role of civil society organisations in promoting participation, equality, and solidarity.

Twenty years on, this work has become a crucial element in the defence of European democracy itself.

In 2025, we celebrated the European Civic Forum's 20th anniversary against a dramatic backdrop. We are confronted with new forms of authoritarianism, with attempts to dismantle all the limits imposed by humanity on the power of the powerful: international law, the rule of law, and the welfare state are under attack on a daily basis.

Authoritarianism and war are once again being considered as legitimate instruments of politics, while aggressive nationalism, colonialism, systemic racism, and genocide are re-emerging from the dungeons of history and shaping global politics once again. 2025 has been a dark year for Europe too, from Ukraine in the east to Gaza in the south.

Within the EU, the aftermath of the 2024 European elections presented us with two possible paths: to follow the reactionary trend, or to act as a lighthouse in defence of international law, the rule of law, and the welfare state. It is a struggle between entirely different visions and perspectives, which is now being played within the European Union itself, not just in its institutions and politics.

At the social level, new forms of resistance, and new generations of movements are emerging — the first signs of a democratic counter-offensive that will achieve its first successes in 2026.

ECF plays a vital role at the forefront of this struggle for democracy. Over the past 20 years, we have successfully adapted our agenda and our action plan to meet the needs. We have become a point of reference for democratic institutions, whilst the defence of civic space has become one of the core issues in the struggle for democracy.

Concrete projects and actions, such as the Protection Hubs created through the Net4Defenders project, provides direct support to activists across five European countries.

Let us continue on this path, so that we may see the light at the end of the tunnel. A special thank you to Alexandrina Najmowicz, the Secretary General who has helped us enormously to get this far together with a great and courageous team, and a warm welcome to Natacha Kazatchkine, our new Secretary General. Full speed ahead, ECF!



Veronika Móra
ECF Co-President

On a hot summer day, when Alexandrina phoned me to tell me she would resign as Secretary General of ECF I was shocked: what do we do now? How will we manage this, given the many changes happening both within the organisation and the outside world?

I shouldn't have been worried. The transition was led and managed with extraordinary efficiency. The perfect candidate was found in Natacha Kazatchkine, and plans for the interim months between October and December were developed. Giada and João took over temporary management seamlessly. The now 20-year-old ECF wasn't shaken by the changes but emerged better organised and stronger.

In the transition period, both internal and policy developments were dealt with properly. Statutory meetings were held as normal, staffing issues were solved, and most importantly, significant steps were taken towards more stable and diversified funding for the years ahead.

As negotiations for the next EU budget of 2028-34 were launched by the institutions, advocacy plans were made and discussed — which has since brought fruit in the form of the proposal for the new Agora EU programme. And on 12 November we received special news: the first ever Strategy for Civil Society of the EU was published by the Commission. This meant a major milestone for all of us who for many years advocated for the need of a more systematic approach towards and acknowledgement of civil society's contribution to European democracy and the protection of rights for all.

The new strategy does exactly that through its three pillars: protection, support, and engagement. Besides providing an overview of the Commission's existing toolbox in these areas, it also outlines potential future steps and measures at a time when we see civic space shrinking and being under attack in more and more member states.

Of course, we would have liked to see more concrete action plans included, but regardless: the strategy is an important reference point for coming advocacy work, as any such document is only worth only as much as it is implemented.

This is the work that lies ahead, to make sure the strategy becomes relevant in practice and that it builds on earlier work by civil society (among them, ECF), for example as regards monitoring and early warning of civic space deteriorations. ECF as a whole and particularly its old/new team is fully committed and equipped to do that. A big thank you to the ECF for this work!

Highlights from 2025



87%

Increase in LinkedIn following



8

New member organisations



42

Mentions of ECF in academic articles



13

Joint letters



1146

New subscribers to our mailing lists



5

Public events



35+

Articles in the international media citing ECF work



35

Events where ECF staff spoke as experts



581

Signatures mobilised on ECF-led joint letters

January

We support a joint Civil Society Europe statement in the context of the European Parliament's debate on the LIFE programme and advocacy activities.

February

The Commission announces it will publish a Civil Society Strategy after years of campaigning by ECF and others.

March

As part of the Monitoring Action for Civic Space (MACS) project, we launch the Early Warning and Alert System, hosted on Civic Space watch and aimed at alerting on civic space developments.

April

We coordinate a letter on behalf of 330+ civil society organisations across Europe for a stronger EU investment in democracy in the next EU Multiannual budget.



May

ECF supports fast mobilisation of signatures for joint letter against the Hungarian bill entitled "Transparency of Public Life", attacks against NGO funding in the European Parliament and the Italian Security decree.

June

We publish our Civic Space Report and host a policy roundtable in the European Parliament with MEPs and HRDs.

We celebrate our 20th anniversary in Warsaw with a policy conference as part of the Polish civil presidency and our general assembly.





July

Following collective advocacy, the European Commission unveils the AgoraEU programme in the next multiannual budget proposing to double CERV funding.

October

Alexandrina Najmowicz, our long-term secretary general steps down after 17 years in the role, handing over to João Labrincha and Giada Negri as interim co-secretaries general.



November

We organise our annual European Civic Academy in Barcelona, hosted by Novact's Nonviolence Factory.

The European Commission unveils its first Civil society strategy.

December

We close the year looking back at 20 years of ECF, and arguing that now is the time for Europe's democrats to back civil society.

Our activities

2025 was a year that tested civil society — and proved its strength. Across the continent, civic organisations, activists, and movements faced increasing restrictions on their freedoms of association, assembly, and expression, as well as funding constraints, delegitimisation campaigns, and direct attacks.

These are becoming more coordinated and institutionalised, as the recent establishment of the [Scrutiny Working Group on NGO funding](#) in the European Parliament shows.

Against this backdrop, the European Civic Forum (ECF) strengthened its role as a connector, coordinator, and advocate. We worked closely with our members and partners to mobilise collective responses, amplify voices on the ground, and translate civic space developments into concrete policy engagement at European level. At the same time, we secured important progress on long-term advocacy priorities, including the recognition of civil society in EU policy frameworks and proposals for increased EU funding for the democracy ecosystem.

Our 20th anniversary year was not without its challenges. ECF adapted to a more contested and restricted political environment for civil society funding and advocacy. We navigated some funding uncertainties at the start of the year and managed changes in our secretariat, particularly a leadership transition following the departure of our long-standing Secretary General, Alexandrina Najmowicz stepping down after 17 years. That the organisation emerged more stable, better structured, and strategically focused is a testament to the commitment of our members, governing bodies, staff, and partners.

Monitoring and Acting on Civic Space

In 2025, our model of “monitoring for action” remained at the heart of ECF’s work. Through the Monitoring Action for Civic Space (MACS) project, ECF, together with its partners, has developed and piloted an Early Warning and Alert System integrated into the Civic Space Watch (CSW) platform. The alert system aims to alert EU, regional, and international institutions, civil society organisations, donors, and the media to early warnings and critical developments on civic space in Europe. Alerts are produced through a network of reputable civil society partners, most of them members of the ECF network, all of which are local organisations monitoring developments on the ground. These partners collect, verify, and draft alerts, while ECF strategically amplifies them at European level and links them to EU processes. Through the Civic Space Watch platform and its annual Civic Space Report, covering 16 EU countries and the Western Balkans, we documented a wide range of threats in 2025 — from the criminalisation of solidarity to the misuse of foreign influence legislation and attacks on the legitimacy of advocacy. Crucially, ECF also documented resistance and success stories, ensuring the picture painted of European civil society is one of agency, not helplessness. The report was launched at a cross-party event in the European Parliament co-hosted with the Greens/EFA and Renew Europe. The event brought together 25 civil society organisation representatives and human rights defenders from across Europe. It also included Brussels-based networks and policymakers from EU institutions to discuss needs and gaps in civic space protection.

ECF also once again coordinated civil society input into the European Commission's Rule of Law Report drawing on submissions from national partners. As chair of the Civil Society Europe civic space working group, we contributed to bringing together ten other EU civil society organisations to produce a unified EU-level submission on the situation of civic space in the EU and chaired the resulting dialogue with the Commission.

Putting civic space on the EU agenda

ECF's most significant policy impact in 2025 came through sustained, strategic engagement on several major EU-level processes. The biggest news of the year came with the publication of the European Commission's Civil Society Strategy — the first comprehensive EU framework to recognise civil society's legitimacy, its advocacy role, and its need for dedicated protection and funding. As chair of the Civil Society Europe working group on civic space, we helped coordinate a comprehensive joint civil society submission into the development of the Strategy and co-chaired the European Commission's civil society consultations ahead of its launch.

ECF also steered collective network actions on a range of other key processes, including the Democracy Shield, the Defence of Democracy package, the proposed European Cross-Border Associations (ECBA) Directive, and the European Commission proposal for the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) towards funding for democracy. During the Polish Presidency, we co-organised a major policy conference in Warsaw with the National Federation of Polish NGOs (OFOP) and the

Stefan Batory Foundation, bringing together around 80 civil society representatives, EU and Polish policymakers, and donors. The event reflected on five years of EU policy priorities on democracy and the rule of law, and closed with a symbolic handover to Danish, Cypriot, and Irish civil society ahead of their respective EU Council presidencies.

In the context of the Danish EU Presidency, ECF supported the organisation of the Rights and Democracy conference hosted by member Nyt Europa and Global Focus to examine how rights, civil society, and the rule of law can serve as core instruments in defending democratic governance in 2025 and beyond.

Contributing to developing a protection infrastructure for civic actors under attack

Through the Net4Defenders project, ECF and its partners advanced work towards a more structured and coordinated approach to protecting civil society actors at risk.

The project combined advocacy and practical capacity-building. At policy level, ECF contributed to raising awareness of the need for a European protection mechanism for civil society, drawing on evidence from civic space monitoring and testimonies from human rights defenders. At operational level, the project supported the development of national protection hubs in five countries. These hubs act as coordination points for providing holistic support to civil society actors, including legal, digital, psychosocial, and advocacy assistance.

Capacity-building activities and workshops helped establish shared methodologies among partners and identify key gaps in existing protection systems. Together, these efforts contribute to a more coherent and sustainable protection ecosystem for civil society in Europe.

Building capacity across the network — and beyond

ECF ran an extensive programme of capacity-building in 2025, designed to equip members to engage confidently with fast-moving EU policy processes. We organised eight structured sessions for members, drawing more than 200 participants and covering key files including the EU Civil Society Strategy, the Democracy Shield, the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), and civic space monitoring methodologies.

Sessions combined expert input, policy training, and facilitated discussion — enabling members to share national perspectives, identify common priorities, and develop joint advocacy positions.

Beyond its own membership, ECF contributed to seven external capacity-building activities organised by partner networks.

In November, ECF co-organised the European Civic Academy, hosted by NOVACT and The Nonviolence Factory — bringing together nearly 50 participants to explore counter-narratives, democratic futures, and strategies for action against authoritarianism and political apathy.

Strengthening ECF's foundations for a new era

Alongside its external work, ECF invested significantly in its own organisational health in 2025. We worked towards greater diversification of funding for 2025 and the coming years.

ECF also progressed work on a Charter of Values and Membership Policy, strengthened internal communications with and engagement of members, revised the organisational structure of the secretariat, and improved salary transparency and fairness. Three parallel CERV-funded projects — MACS, Net4Defenders, and our operating grant — were integrated into a coherent strategy and work programme, reinforcing both our management capacity and the consistency of our impact.

The leadership transition, following the departure of Alexandrina Najmowicz, was navigated successfully, and we entered 2026 on a strong footing for a new era of ECF.

Our impact




The EU's First Civil Society Strategy

After years of advocacy from ECF and other civil society organisations, 2025 saw the European Commission launch its first-ever Civil Society Strategy — a landmark EU-level framework that formally recognises civil society's role in democracy, its right to advocate, and its need for dedicated funding and protection.

ECF was explicitly acknowledged by Commission representatives as a key stakeholder in shaping the strategy, having coordinated three thematic consultation sessions, produced two major briefings, and mobilised a wide coalition of national and EU organisations throughout the consultation process. The ECF will cooperate with EU institutions to ensure a meaningful implementation.



A high-angle photograph of a massive crowd gathered in a public square. In the center of the square, the word 'CIVIL' is painted in large, white, block letters on a dark, patterned surface. The crowd is dense and extends far into the background, where classical architecture and a tall column are visible under a clear sky.

Strengthening the case for EU funding for democracy

Ahead of the European Commission's proposal for the next EU multiannual budget, the ECF coordinated a joint civil society letter calling for increased funding for the CERV programme, gathering over 330 signatories. This call contributed to the European Commission's proposal for AgoraEU, the first EU funding programme for the entire democracy ecosystem and doubling of the CERV budget. While negotiations on the EU budget are ongoing, this represents a significant step towards increased and more structured funding for civil society at EU level.



Enhancing monitoring and protection against civic space threats

The Early Warning and Alert System (EWAS), developed through the MACS project, provides a structured mechanism for detecting and responding to threats against civic actors across Europe. By linking local monitoring with European-level advocacy, the system strengthens the ability of civil society and institutions to respond to emerging risks in a timely manner.

The Net4Defenders project contributed to strengthening practical support mechanisms for civil society actors facing pressure or attack. The establishment of national protection hubs in five countries represents an important step towards more coordinated and accessible support systems.

These hubs facilitate cooperation between different types of expertise and improve the capacity to respond to complex challenges faced by civil society actors.

Both tools are now available to ECF members and the broader civil society community.



Mobilising civil society in solidarity

In 2025, supported by the Early Warning and Alert System, we ramped up our efforts to rally civil society in solidarity with those facing civic space restrictions. In March, working with partners on the ground, we rallied more than 130 organisations from across Europe in 24 hours to express solidarity with the [Serbian protest movement](#) and urge action. The call spread far and wide in the Serbian press.

In April, we coordinated a group of 70 CSOs urging European Commissioner Michael McGrath, to [take action on the Italian Security Decree](#). And in October, we coordinated a coalition of leading human rights groups to [condemn the widespread repression of protests](#) against the seizure of Global Sumud Flotilla activists. While the impact of such actions varies depending on context, they contribute to a broader environment in which restrictions on civil society are more visible and subject to scrutiny.



More civil society collaborations

In 2025, ECF further contributed to civil society cross sectoral and cross European collaboration. At EU level, we actively participated in Civil Society Europe and its thematic working groups, particularly chairing the one on civic space. In this framework, ECF contributed to joint analysis, policy positions, and coordinated advocacy efforts with a broad range of European networks and national organisations. We also actively supported efforts led by thematic EU networks around the anti-migrants agenda, digital policies, and the deregulation wave in the EU.

Beyond structured EU-level coordination, ECF played a facilitating role in bringing together national civil society organisations across countries to respond collectively to key EU policy developments, including funding for democracy, rule of law, and civic space protection. This included supporting joint statements, aligning messaging across networks, and ensuring that national perspectives were reflected in EU-level advocacy processes.

This work contributed to strengthening civil society's collective capacity to respond to democratic challenges at both national and European levels.



Monitoring Action for Civic Space

In 2025, we kicked continued our work through the MACS project. Coordinated by European Center for Not-for-profit Law (ECNL), we developed a common methodology for monitoring civic space – to consolidate and strengthen this work. In addition, we worked to develop an early warning system on Civic Space Watch platform to alert the EU institutions on specific threats to civic space and recommend action to be taken.



European Center for
Not-for-Profit Law




NET 4 DEFENDERS

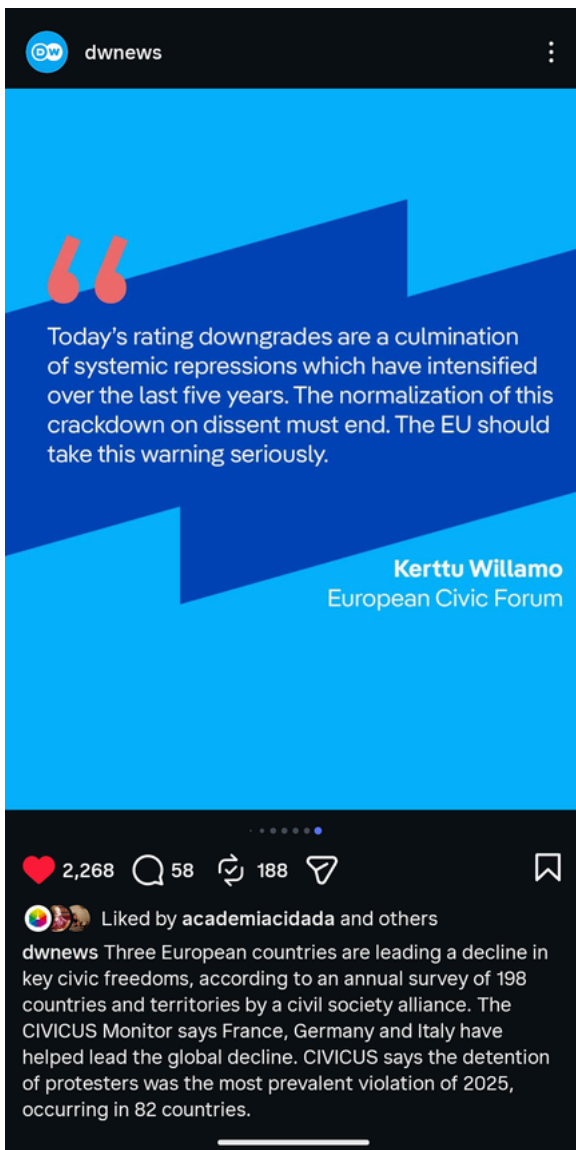
Civil society and human rights defenders act as democratic antibodies when rights, democracy and the rule of law are under attack. For this, they need support and protection. Through the Net4Defenders project, ECF and five civic organisations across Europe worked to build capacities of activists on the ground to monitor and respond to civic space restrictions and illiberal tendencies, develop national protection hubs to provide support to civil society under attack, and advocate for a thriving civic space in the respective countries.



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ECF in the media

In 2025, ECF's work was cited in more than 35 articles in the international press as we were increasingly recognised as a leading actor on civic space and fundamental rights.



Letter of solidarity with the people of Serbia signed by more than 130 European NGOs

In the statement, which was initiated by the European Civic Forum (ECF) and the Balkan Civil Society Development Network (BCSDN), those organizations describe the protest movement as inspiring, express solidarity with the struggle of the citizens of Serbia and emphasize that the repression of the movement is part of a broader trend of attacks on civil society in Europe, the statement emphasizes.



ALJAZEERA

European NGOs condemn EU response to pro-Palestine protests

Commenting in the wake of the ceasefire, European Civic Forum's Giada Negri said: "Instead of cracking down on the right to protest, European leaders should work to foster a vibrant civic space, where everyone can freely express themselves, show solidarity, and demand justice."

About us

Our Steering Committee



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Co-president
Arci, Italy



Vera Mora
Co-president
Okotars, Hungary



Jan Robert Suesser
Vice President
Ligue des droits de
l'Homme, France



Oonagh Aitken
Vice President
Volonteurope



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Vice President
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Julie Rosenkilde
Vice President
Nyt Europe, Denmark



Frank Heuberger
Member
BBE, Germany
(Until October)



Thais Bonilla
Member
Novact, Spain



Kristine Zonberga
Member
Civic Alliance Latvia



Filip Pazderski
Member
Stefan Batory Foundation,
Poland
(From October)



Jonni Lopes
Member
Academia Cidadã,
Portugal
(From October)

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Bulgaria

Lubov Panayota, European Institute Foundation

Czech Republic

Jolana Turnerova, SPIRALIS

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France

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Ligue des Droits de L'Homme

Martine Besson, La Ligue de l'enseignement

Jenny Carneiro, Association Cap Magellan

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Carsten Berg, The ECI Campaign

Greece

Yonous Muhammadi, Greek Forum of Refugees

Moussa Sangaré, Community Rights in Greece

Hungary

Bálint Farkas, Okotars

Miklos Barabas, European House Budapest

Italy

Lorenzo Carangelo, ARCI

Pier Virgilio Dastoli, European Movement Italy

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North Macedonia

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Portugal

Jonni Lopes, Academia Cidada

Romania

Stefania Andersen, Civil Society Development Foundation

Serbia

Miodrag Nedeljkovic, Initiative for Development and Cooperation

Spain

Elena Jimenez, Òmnium Cultural

Thais Bonilla Martinez, NOVACT

24
Members

15
Countries

Our staff

In 2025, we welcomed two new members of staff and one new trainee. In November, ECF Secretary General Alexandrina Najmowicz stepped down after 18 years at the helm of the organisation. In the interim period, João Labrincha and Giada Negri became Acting Co-Secretaries General.



Alexandrina Najmowicz
Secretary General
(until October)



João Labrincha
Network Development
Coordinator;
Acting Co-Secretary
General
(from November)



Giada Negri
Research and
Advocacy Coordinator;
Acting Co-Secretary
General
(from November)



Aarti Narsee
Senior Policy &
Advocacy Officer



Benjamin Goodwin
Communications and
Campaigns Officer



Kerttu Willamo
Policy and Capacity
Building Officer



Hana Jemli
Office Manager
(until May)



Sylvain Mossou
Operations Manager
(May-November)



Anne Maufrais
Operations
Manager
(from November)



Agapi Antonaki
Civic Space Assistant
(until March)



Iñaki Arrizabalaga
Communications and
Projects Assistant
(until April)



Domiziana Palumbo
Civic Space Assistant
(from June)

Our full members



Balkan Civil Society
Development Network



INSTYTUT SPRAW
PUBLICZNYCH

Fundacja na rzecz
Collegium Polonicum
łączymy potencjały!



FDSSCC
Civil Society
Development
Foundation

glopolis



HR
CN
HUMAN RIGHTS
CITIES NETWORK

NOVACT
Noviolència
Nonviolence
التعايش



la ligue de
l'enseignement
un avenir par l'éducation populaire

la ligue de
l'enseignement
un avenir par l'éducation populaire

A
CIVIC
ALLIANCE
LATVIA

Le
MOUVEMENT
ASSOCIATIF

LDH
Fondée en 1898



MILION CHVILEK
PRO DEMOKRACII

nsp
MINISTARSTVO
PROSTORA

NACIONALINĒ
NVO KOALICIJA



NEW EUROPEANS
.uk

nyt
europa
bæredygtigt og inkluderende

OF
OP
Ogólnopolska
Federacja
Organizacji
Pozarządowych



ÒMNIUM
LLENGUA CULTURA PAÍS

PerEsempio

pic
LEGAL CENTER FOR THE PROTECTION
OF HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE ENVIRONMENT

SCHU
MAN
Polska
Fundacja
im. Roberta
Schumana

POUR LA
SOLIDARITÉ
European think & do tank

RIGHTS
DEMOCRACY
RECLAIM

the
wheel
Stronger Charities.
Stronger Communities.



IEC
INITIATIVE FOR
DEVELOPMENT &
COOPERATION



Associate members

A BUON DIRITTO
— ONLUS —

anne frank
stichting

HOTM

anno
Asociace nestátních
neziskových organizací
České republiky z. s.

**ASOCIACE
OBČANSKÝCH
PORADEN**

ad
asociația pro democrația



À PRAÇA
criar, agir, participar

AGEE
EUROPE



**PRIPREMA
POZOR
SMART**

AD

réseau national
de la participation
enfance jeunesse
anacej

**ATD
QUART MONDE**

CEO CENTRUM EDUKACJI
OBYWATELSKIEJ

CEP

cidem.org



documenta
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l'enseignement
Fédération de Paris

les français
L'éducation en mouvement!

GS ITALIA
GRUPPI SOLIDARIETÀ INTERNAZIONALE

iRi

INSoC
Initiative for Social Change

Jaan Tõnissoni Instituut

**JEUNES
EUROPÉENS
FRANCE**

**Jeunesse
au Plein Air**

JK JOHANNES
MIHKELSONI
KESKUS



About the European Civic Forum

The European Civic Forum (ECF) is a pan-European network of more than 100 associations and NGOs across 30 European countries. Founded in 2005 by our member organisations, we have spent nearly two decades working to protect civic space, enable civic participation and build civil dialogue for more equality, solidarity and democracy in Europe.

[Visit the ECF website](#)

[Visit Civic Space Watch](#)



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