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Input for European Commission's upcoming Civil Society Strategy from CSOs in Croatia and Slovenia

Introduction

Human Rights House Zagreb and Danes je nov dan organised a consultation meeting on 2nd September 2025, bringing together Croatian and Slovenian CSOs to discuss challenges impacting their work on human rights, democracy, and the rule of law, with the goal of providing input to the European Commission's upcoming Civil Society Strategy. Participants, representatives of 22 CSOs from Croatia and Slovenia, shared their perspectives on various issues including civic space, legal protection, funding, policy-making, and dialogue. The meeting was held as part of the Cross-Border Cooperation project "Report on the Rule of Law - opportunities for civil society through good practices in cooperation and advocacy", funded through IMPACT4VALUES, a Slovenian-Croatian support program for civil society organizations, implemented within the framework of the EU program Citizens, Equality, Rights, Values.

Key Challenges and Recommendations

Legal Protection and Civic Space

Participants highlighted the shrinking civic space in the EU, emphasizing the need for:

- **Legal protection of the right to public participation**

Problems in exercising the right to participation on the national level, both in Slovenia and Croatia, manifest in a lack of involvement of civil society organizations in decision-making and consultation processes. Even when civil society is included, the consultations are often more



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formal than substantive, which weakens opportunities for participation and has a negative impact on the quality of public policies. Rules and principles concerning public participation in policy and law-making processes at the government level are outlined in various types of documents. Some EU MS have also included procedures and rules in legally binding documents (laws, regulations), while others have included them in documents with no binding measure (codes, standards). Although the European Commission has made steps to address shortcomings in national participation and consultation procedures by issuing a recommendation on promoting the engagement and effective participation of citizens and CSOs in public policymaking processes, these recommendations are lacking public visibility and implementation at the national level, both in Croatia and in Slovenia. The upcoming Civil Society Strategy **should aim to encourage MS to upgrade a framework for participation in public policy-making processes based on the right to public participation**, so that the right to public participation is legally protected and implemented accordingly.

- **Better protection mechanisms against SLAPP lawsuits and harassment**

Although journalists are the main targets of SLAPP in Croatia, human rights defenders and CSOs, especially environmental protection organisations, are also being subjected to legal actions aimed at limiting their right to public participation. The current context in Croatia reveals that CSOs are not only potential targets of SLAPPs but also lack the systemic support, knowledge, and tools needed to respond effectively. The upcoming Civil Society Strategy **should address the problems of CSOs facing SLAPPs by encouraging MS to ensure a legal framework that offers procedural mechanisms against SLAPPs targeting CSOs and human rights defenders.**

- **Need to upgrade the EU Rule of Law report mechanism methodology to include a standalone pillar on the protection and advancement of civic space**



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CSOs recognise the Rule of Law report as an important step towards and a mechanism to strengthen the advocacy role of CSOs for the advancement and promotion of the rule of law as one of the fundamental values of the EU. Even though more country reports and EC recommendations tackle the issues regarding civic space, such as the right to participation, SLAPPs and freedom of expression, other issues of civic space often remain unaddressed. The upcoming Civil Society Strategy **should aim to review the methodology of the current Rule of Law report to include rule of law issues related to civic space. This would involve adding a dedicated chapter on civic space to the annual Rule of Law report, thereby strengthening civil space at the national level.**

Funding Issues

Several funding challenges were identified:

- **Limited financing opportunities, particularly for advocacy and watchdog work, including insufficient funding caps**

Access to funding for the protection and promotion of human rights for civil society organizations from public or private sources is an integral part of the right to freedom of association and is crucial for the exercise of the rights and work of human rights defenders. There is a continuing non-existence or lack of funding from national sources for programs of CSOs concerned with human rights, while particularly worrying is the lack of sustainable and long-term funding for watchdog, research, and advocacy activities, along with the lack or absence of tenders for financing activities of civil society organizations aimed at pressing social issues and challenges. Delays in publishing announced tenders and the lengthy process of evaluation and publication of tender results remain an issue when it comes to the European Social Fund and local tenders. Both Croatian and Slovenian CSOs also face challenges concerning EU funding, noting that the current €60,000 cap per organization in the EU funding programme that lasts 4 years is insufficient for impactful work. The CSOs underline the importance of supporting mid-sized organizations that can drive regional and national change and are working on long-term



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democratic resilience, and highlight the lack of systematic funding for democracy and human rights projects in countries trending towards authoritarianism. Not suitable one-time one-year project financing models to support programs that civil society organizations provide to citizens, such as free legal aid or psychological counselling, unnecessarily burdening organisations and public authorities with administrative requirements. The upcoming Civil Society Strategy should **aim to increase EU funding for civil society from 0.2% to 0.5% of the EU budget and connect the EU Civil Society Strategy to the multi-annual financial framework.** It should **encourage MS to ensure sustainable funding for CSOs from national and local sources, and condition the use of European Funds and Programs with the inclusion of CSOs as beneficiaries.** The Civil Society Strategy should **ensure that CSOs are meaningful stakeholders in programming and implementation of European Funds at the national level,** and that they have the **capacity to monitor the compliance of the use of EU funds with the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU.**

- **Excessive administrative requirements and co-funding requirements for EU funding**

The administrative requirements that organizations must meet are continuously increasing, while the financial support for ensuring sustainable administrative, financial, and operational activity for the organizations is not proportional to these requirements. Addressing the issue of administrative burden requires dialogue between donors and civil society organizations, as well as mutual understanding of the methods and frameworks of their work. Opportunities for such dialogue are rare, and civil society organizations in the current funding models are most often placed in a passive position as recipients of funds, rather than as equal partners in achieving shared goals in collaboration with donors. The lack of national and local tenders for co-financing of projects received within EU programs remains a problem, especially for smaller CSOs. Even if there are tenders for co-financing, organizations that are successful in getting EU projects in Croatia usually have only one co-financing tender available at the national level, which in turn covers only a part of the required amount of co-financing. The upcoming Civil Society Strategy



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should **encourage MS to support the implementation of projects financed from EU programs by securing the entire co-financing amount for received and contracted projects from national or local sources.** The upcoming Civil Society Strategy should **address the issue of the administrative burden on CSOs and encourage funding that can ensure the sustainable administrative, financial, and operational activities.**

Public and Institutional Support

Main challenges were identified:

- **Lack of institutional responses to attacks on civil society and public authorities' support for civil society's role**

Empowering citizens, journalists, and CSOs to exercise their right to free expression and public participation, including watchdog functions are fundamental to democratic life. CSOs in Croatia and Slovenia still face a lack of public support for human rights defenders and their organizations from politicians and representatives of institutions. Additionally concerning is the portrayal of human rights defenders and CSOs as harmful for the interests of the state, delegitimisation in public, as well as threats received when they focus on politically current and socially polarising topics. Particularly worrying is the normalisation and acceptance of a certain level of hate speech, violence and threats, which are sometimes even diminished, or met with condemnation only when they reach extremes. The upcoming Civil Society Strategy **should aim to encourage MS and EU institutions to take stronger institutional responses to attacks on civil society, as well as affirm civil society's role as an "immune system" for democracies.**

Cross-cutting Recommendations for the Strategy

Participants proposed several more cross-cutting recommendations for the EU Civil Society Strategy:

- To develop a monitoring system at the national level for civic space



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- To establish clear indicators and reporting processes for the protection of civic space
- To support grassroots and local organizations in maintaining a vibrant and diverse civil society
- To promote legal standards developed by the Council of Europe regarding right to public participation
- To encourage national governments to increase funding for civil society organisations
- To adopt a more regional approach to EU funding programs, including CSOs in the Western Balkans
- To anchor the strategy in the EU policy infrastructure

Participants:

Kuća Ljudskih prava Zagreb, Danas je nov dan, B.a.B.e. Budi aktivna. Budi emancipiran., CESI - Centar za edukaciju, savjetovanje i istraživanje, Centar za mirovne studije, Centar za demokraciju i pravo Miko Tripalo, Zelena akcija, Centar za mir, nenasilje i ljudska prava - Osijek, DKolektiv - organizacija za društveni razvoj, Documenta - Centar za suočavanje s prošlošću, Pravni center za varstvo človekovih pravic in okolja - PIC.



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