



REPORT

This session of the Civil Society Week 2026 gathered more than 100 participants around a discussion on **Funding for civic space: the role of the EU and other donors**. The discussion was particularly timely as negotiations on the EU's next long-term budget for 2028-2034 are underway.

The session was facilitated by **Natacha Kazatchkine** (Secretary-General, European Civic Forum) and structured in two parts: a panel discussion, followed by breakout sessions, each focusing on a key question related to funding civil society in Europe.

Panel discussion

Natacha Kazatchkine (European Civic Forum) introduced the panel by recalling the challenging context in which CSOs operate, particularly global budget cuts and a political climate characterised by distrust toward CSOs, even as the needs continue to grow and civil society remains crucial for social cohesion and democracy in the EU.

Elena-Alexandra Calistru (European Economic and Social Committee) presented the state-of-play of the MFF negotiations and the importance of civil society's mobilisation on the file. She stressed the need to ensure civil society's participation across all funding programmes and recalled the key role that the Council will play in deciding on the budget, insisting on the importance of mobilising at national level for decent funding of civil society.

Carlotta Besozzi (Civil Society Europe) explained how EU-level organisations are engaging with EU policymakers on the budget towards a new MFF with clearer structures and better support for civil society. She encouraged CSOs to look beyond the AgoraEU

programme to push for civil society funding that empowers civic participation in all policy areas. She also encouraged engagement with national authorities.

Federico Mallone (Fondazione CRT and Philea) underlined the role that the philanthropic sector plays in funding civil society and the need to enhance collaboration opportunities between EU institutions and philanthropy.

Malcolm Fleming (Association of Charity Lotteries in Europe) shared the findings of a [recent study](#) published by ACLEU on *Supporting Civil Society Under Pressure: How charity lotteries can help reshape the funding landscape in Europe*.

Breakout tables

Participants were invited to split in four groups according to their interest to reflect on different dimensions of funding in a workshop setting which was facilitated by the co-hosts of the session. Each group had to agree on two key messages as answers to their guiding question.

[1] How to ensure a strong Agora EU that delivers on Civil Society Strategy and Democracy Shield? (Facilitated by Solidar & European Civic Forum)

Ensure that civil society's participation is at the core of AgoraEU by reinstating the Civil Dialogue as it has existed under the current CERV; recognising advocacy as an essential part of civil society's role in democratic debate and policymaking; and enhancing the accessibility of funding for small and grassroots organisations as well as organisations from candidate countries.

Guarantee structural support and protection to civil society actors by maintaining operating grants, addressing co-funding barriers, and ensuring dedicated funding and protection mechanisms for organisations and human rights defenders under attack.

[2] How to ensure EU and external grants voice out and integrate civil society's concerns? (Facilitated by Cooperatives Europe)

Maintain thematic funding envelopes for CSOs in the next MFF, ensuring that funds are ring-fenced for civil society with fewer restrictions on the nature and scope of operational grants. Funding mechanisms should prioritise trust-based and flexible support to ensure the long-term sustainability of CSO activities.

Simplify and harmonise the full funding process - from application submission to performance-based evaluation - to reduce administrative burdens on applicants, particularly smaller or younger CSOs. This should include revising the conditions of EU operational grants so that their size, scope, and level of flexibility better reflect the diversity of civil society actors and reduce excessive competition for limited funding.

[3] How to ensure that EU funding will continue to support advocacy and civil society participation and action across all funding programmes? (Facilitated by Eurochild)

EU funding frameworks should recognise and adequately support advocacy and civil society participation as core functions of democratic governance and avoid restrictions on advocacy activities, especially in operating grants.

EU funding programmes across the board should become more accessible to civil society organisations, particularly smaller and grassroots organisations, including by reducing administrative burden, addressing co-financing barriers, and providing appropriate support, including in-person guidance, to facilitate grant applications.

[4] What is the role of other public and private donors in the context of shrinking space for critical organisation? What is the role of mutually beneficial donor-CSO partnerships? (Facilitated by Batory Foundation/Philea)

Other donors could **complement EU funding**, both in terms of supported causes (funding activities at European and national level that others are unwilling to engage with) and in terms of the funding method (offering more flexible, core, unrestricted support and matching funds for EU projects), but **they need better, effective coordination** so there is no cause left behind.

To operate efficiently and solve common cross-border challenges, it is essential for the philanthropic organisations, private foundations and other donors that **EU institutions provide them with the necessary space for the free flow of capital dedicated for public good**. This is why we need solutions such as the European Cross-border Associations (ECBA) directive and establishing a Single European Market for Philanthropy.

Conclusion

Out of the images proposed to capture the workshop's themes, participants chose a tightrope walker between two mountain peaks. It reflects the precarious position of civil society amid political turmoil, striving to maintain balance within increasingly polarised societies. The image also highlights the need for stable funding that both secures the ground for action and provides safety nets to recover and endure. The group urged EU institutions, and governments to prioritise support for civil society in the next EU budget not as charity, but as an essential investment in the vitality of democracy.

