



Proposals

of Connect, the macro-regional civil society network to the EU's civil society strategy

The EU macro-regional strategies seek to bring more closely connected geographical areas to strengthen cooperation allowing stakeholders to jointly address today's complex economic, social and territorial challenges. There are four macro-regional strategies in the EU: the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR) created in 2009, the Danube Region (EUSDR) set up in 2010, the Adriatic-Ionian Region (EUSAIR) established in 2014 and the Alpine Region (EUSALP) founded in 2015 encompassing 27 countries in total, 19 of which are EU Member States with more than 340 million people.

Civil society organisations (CSOs) are crucial partners in delivering the EU's macro-regional strategies (MRS): they bridge transnational cooperation with local communities, bring European policies closer to citizens. Connect, the macro-regional civil society network aims to and bring together for the first time civil society organisations and like-minded societal entities across the four macro-regions and even beyond under one roof to creatively and systematically participate in and contribute in a pro-active manner to the design and implementation of EU macro-regional strategies. The Network is an open and inclusive pro-European collaborative and legitimate arrangement with an advocacy function. European House Budapest acts as coordinator of the network.

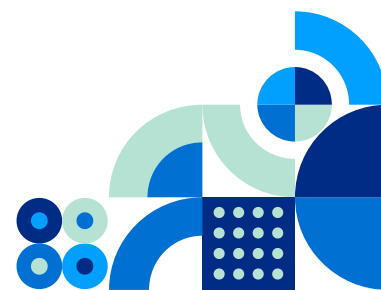
Connect welcomes the European Commission's consultation on the EU civil society strategy and highlights the following 11 challenges and proposed solutions.

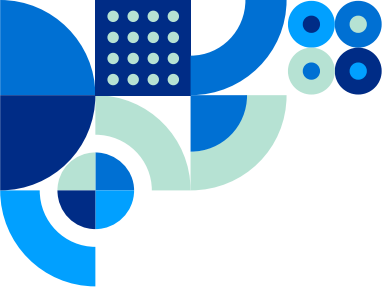
1. The partnership principle

- *Challenge:* Many CSOs in macro-regions face shrinking civic space, obstacles in daily operations, and unfavourable conditions for joint action.
- *Proposal:* The EU civil society strategy should set out a clear vision and framework for meaningful CSO involvement in policy-making at both European and macro-regional levels, grounded in shared European values. The creation of an open and inclusive pro-European collaborative and legitimate CSO platform with an advocacy function on macro-regional level is an important asset and contribution to this process.

2. Making the EU civil society strategy work (macro)regionally

- *Challenge:* The EU civil society strategy is seen as an empty EU document and stakeholders lack commitment and instruments to systematically implement it.
- *Proposal:* The creation of a macro-regional civil society strategy based on the process initiated at the First Macro-Regional Citizen Agora in December 2023 is a means to underpin and prove the usefulness and vitality of a meaningful civil society policy.





3. Promotion of cross-border cooperation

- *Challenge:* CSOs struggle with divergent national rules, heavy administration, and lack of legal clarity in cross-border work.
- *Proposal:* Introduce common minimum standards or mutual recognition of CSOs' legal status across Member States, so that a registered CSO in one country can operate easily in another without needing to reregister.

4. Civil Society Platform design: impact indicators and participatory monitoring

- *Challenge:* The planned Civil Society Platform remains a digital-only tool, risking being underused and disconnected from real needs and aspirations of civil society. Lack of clear instruments to measure the impact of CSOs' contributions in macro-regional strategies.
- *Proposal:* Ensure that the Platform is a hybrid structure, combining digital functionalities with regular in-person exchanges, thematic working structures, and links to macro-regional initiatives, to become a true engine of meaningful cooperation and policy dialogue. One of the functions of the Platform should be the continuous monitoring and yearly evaluation of the functioning of the EU civil society strategy. This increases transparency and legitimacy of the policies.

5. Intergenerational solidarity

- *Challenge:* Create conditions for all generations to live in a safe, prosperous and fair environment.
- *Proposal:* The European civil society strategy with its comprehensive charter assists the conduct of meaningful dialogues and programmes among generations to address important societal issues. Special attention is paid to the social cohesion at the local level and involvement of young people.

6. Enlargement

- *Challenge:* Lack of interest and instruments to use in a targeted and coordinated manner the potential of civil society to promote the EU enlargement process, an issue of strategic importance.
- *Proposal:* The principles and standards of the European civil society strategy are consistently applied in the EU and enlargement countries ensuring equal opportunities for civil society actors.

7. New, inventive interactions

- *Challenge:* Although civil society involvement in EU policy-making is expressed through diverse forms, these are not always fit to respond swiftly and effectively to emerging challenges.
- *Proposal:* The EU macro-regional policy serves as an appropriate framework for developing and testing new and inspirational methods of civil society involvement, given its cross-sectoral, transnational, and multilevel approach.





8. Fragmented and short-term funding

- *Challenge:* CSO participation in macro-regional strategies is hindered by project-based grants that exclude core costs and restrict continuity.
- *Proposal:* Ensure that the next Multiannual Financial Framework (2028-2034) secures appropriate, regular and transparent funding for CSOs with special emphasis on programmes by civil society organisations from the four macro-regions.

9. Role of Member States

- *Challenge:* While civil society is largely a Member State competence, uneven national environments limit CSO rights and opportunities.
- *Proposal:* The Commission should encourage Member States to align with the EU civil society strategy through Council conclusions, national action plans, and monitoring mechanisms, ensuring the Strategy's principles are applied consistently across Europe.

10. Communication

- *Challenge:* Extremist voices and policies, anti-European sentiments and movements are on the rise and together with the spread of disinformation and manipulation pose a direct threat to democracy.
- *Proposal:* The EU civil society strategy should encourage and empower civil society organisations, citizens together with the EU institutions to counter these phenomena negatively influencing citizens' thinking and attitudes.

11. Alignment

- *Challenge:* To make Europe stronger and safer in a fragmented and uncertain world.
- *Proposal:* With the assistance of an European civil society strategy developing a sustainable and impactful alignment on a partnership basis between European civil society and the EU institutions.



Connect, the macro-regional civil society network

c/o European House Budapest

5 September 2025

<info@europeanhouse.hu>

