Balkan Civil Society Development Network

Enlargement and Civil Society in the 2028–2034 MFF: Call for Safeguards, Participation and Dedicated Funding

The credibility of enlargement will be determined not only by political commitments, but by how the next EU budget translates those commitments into access, safeguards, and meaningful support.

As a regional network of civil society organisations from the Balkans, working to strengthen civil society and democratic governance across the region, BCSDN **welcomes EU's renewed commitment to enlargement and its growing recognition of civil society** as a structural pillar of democratic systems and the accession process.

The EU Civil Society Strategy, the Democracy Shield, and the preparations for the 2028–2034 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) signal an important shift: civil society is increasingly recognised not as an auxiliary actor, but as a key partner in safeguarding democracy and the rule of law. It is important that this recognition is reflected in a funding architecture that enables civil society to fulfil this role effectively in practice.

The next MFF will be instrumental in determining whether enlargement is translated into a credible and operational policy, supported by adequate resources and safeguards, or remains primarily driven by geopolitical considerations.

Current proposals appear to point towards more consolidated instruments (e.g. Global Europe, AgoraEU), reduced earmarking, and greater discretion at national level. While intended to enhance flexibility and coherence, they may also create challenges for independent civil society in enlargement countries, including reduced support for watchdog functions, increased political mediation of funds, and weaker accountability mechanisms. Without explicit safeguards, the contribution of civil society to accountability and reform credibility risks being weakened. These choices will have long-term consequences for both civil society and the credibility of enlargement.

We, therefore, call on the European Commission, the European Parliament, and the Council to ensure that the next MFF includes clear and effective safeguards for enlargement and civil society, in particular through the following measures:

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1. Establish enlargement as a distinct and protected budgetary priority

The new MFF should include a clear and transparent enlargement envelope, with dedicated allocations for civil society. This would require preserving a distinct enlargement funding logic (an IPA-equivalent logic) within the new architecture and avoid dilution under broader external financing instruments, thus ensuring visibility, predictability, and political accountability.

2. Safeguard dedicated and fit-for-purpose funding for civil society

EU funding should clearly recognize advocacy, monitoring, watchdog, and participation functions as essential components of democratic resilience, and thus eligible and protected across relevant programmes. This could include:

- ring-fenced allocations for civil society within Global Europe and related instruments
- expanded availability of operational and core funding, alongside project-based support
- regranting mechanisms through qualified intermediaries with demonstrated regional expertise, while preserving direct access for local civil society
- multi-annual and predictable funding arrangements that support long-term sustainability

3. Embed participation, conditionality, and protection in funding design

Civil society should be systematically included in programming, implementation, and monitoring of EU funds to ensure that rule of law, participation, and civic space remain embedded in funding decisions. This could include:

- clear expectations for EU delegations to ensure structured civil society participation in Global Europe programming and related financial instruments
- dedicated support allocated for civil society participation in the implementation and monitoring of the Growth Plan and country reform agendas
- integration of civic space indicators into (smart) conditionality frameworks, including the possibility of redirecting funds to independent civil society in cases of democratic backsliding
- clear institutional responsibility for follow-up and accountability

The next MFF is a critical opportunity to align political commitments with financial instruments. Without clear safeguards and dedicated support, the EU risks weakening one of its most important partners in safeguarding democracy.

Enlargement is unlikely to succeed without resilient, independent and adequately resourced civil society actors. Civic space in enlargement countries is not an external issue, but a matter of European democratic integrity, credibility, and stability. The next MFF should reflect this through a funding architecture that enables civil society to contribute fully and effectively to the enlargement process.