

European Citizens' Initiative - CONCEPT NOTE

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1. Political Context: Why This Initiative Is Necessary Now

Democracy in Europe Is Under Pressure

Across the EU, independent civil society organisations are facing:

- Legal and administrative restrictions
- Political attacks and stigmatisation
- Financial instability
- Reduced access to decision-making

In countries like Hungary and Slovakia, recent developments show how quickly civic space can shrink.

When civil society is weakened, democracy becomes more fragile.

The Challenge Is Also Cross-Border

Europe's democratic space is not shaped only by national politics.

Today we see:

- Cross-border ideological networks
- Strategic funding aimed at influencing EU debates
- Coordinated efforts to reshape governance models

Well-funded authoritarian political actors operate across borders with strong financial backing. Meanwhile, many organisations defending democracy rely on short-term, unstable funding. That imbalance matters.

Monitoring Alone Is Not Enough

The EU already recognises the problem through:

- The annual Rule of Law Reports
- New initiatives such as the proposed Democracy Shield

But identifying risks is not the same as solving them.

The Core Problem: A Structural Funding Gap

There is a growing asymmetry:

- Actors challenging democratic standards are often well-resourced and coordinated.
- Organisations defending EU values depend on project-based, uncertain funding.

This weakens Europe's democratic resilience.

The Solution

If the EU is serious about protecting its core values —

Democracy. Rule of Law. Fundamental Rights.

— then it must provide:

- Stable, long-term funding for independent civil society
- Ring-fenced support within EU programmes
- Targeted assistance where rule-of-law concerns are identified

Those who protect and promote democracy must not stand alone.

2. What We Are Proposing

We are proposing a concrete and realistic solution:

Stronger, smarter and more stable EU funding for independent civil society by:

- Setting up a new dedicated EU funding mechanism
- Ring-fencing support within EU programmes
- Intervening with targeted support where it is most needed
- Making a structural investment in EU values

3. The Legal Ask: What the ECI Would Request

This ECI would formally request the Commission to submit a legislative proposal that:

1. Establishes a Permanent EU Funding Mechanism Supporting

- Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and other independent civil society organisations working to promote and protect Union values.

The objective would be to strengthen democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights as enshrined in Article 2 TEU.

2. Provides Structural and Operational Support

The mechanism should provide:

- Core operational funding (not only short-term project grants)
- Support pro-democracy outreach
- Strategic litigation capacity
- Research and analysis linked to EU values

3. Operates Under Strong Governance Standards

The mechanism should operate under:

- Direct EU management
- Transparent and independent allocation criteria
- Full accountability and anti-fraud safeguards

4. Includes a Resilience Component

The mechanism should include a resilience component whereby enhanced support may be activated where:

- Systemic or persistent deficiencies affecting Article 2 TEU values are identified
- On the basis of objective criteria defined in Union law

5. Integration into the Next EU Long-Term Budget

The ECI would not demand specific funding amounts.

Instead, it would require the Commission to integrate this permanent mechanism into its proposal for the next Multiannual Financial Framework (EU long-term budget).

4. Internal – Framing and Messaging Guidance

Topic	What We Can Say	What We Cannot Say
Purpose of the Initiative	This initiative strengthens democracy, rule of law and fundamental rights across the EU.	This initiative is designed to target or punish specific governments.
Nature of the Proposal	It creates a permanent EU funding mechanism for independent civil society organisations.	It changes EU governance structures or redesigns EU institutions.
Legal Basis	It uses existing EU budgetary powers under the Treaties.	It creates new constitutional powers or amends the Treaties.
Institutional Balance	The initiative does not alter institutional roles defined in the Treaties.	It gives civil society a formal decision-making role in EU institutions.
Resilience Component	Funding priorities may reflect objective criteria, including rule-of-law findings defined in Union law.	Funding will automatically be triggered as a sanction against Member States.
Relation to Rule of Law Reports	Monitoring should be matched with structured support for civil society.	The Rule of Law Report will directly penalise governments financially.
Political Context	Democratic resilience requires stable support for civil society in a changing political environment.	This initiative is a tool to fight particular political parties or ideological movements.
Cross-Border Influence	Political coordination and funding networks operate across borders; democratic resilience must also operate at EU level.	External actors are directly controlling EU Member States.
Funding Design	The mechanism provides long-term, structural and operational support.	The EU will bypass Member States to discipline them.
Campaign Tone	This is about fairness, resilience and protecting Union values.	This is an institutional revolution or a confrontation between

		Brussels and Member States.
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Annex 1 – Draft for European Citizens’ Initiative Registration

1. Title

CORE – Civic Operational Resilience for Europe

2. Subject Matter of the Initiative

This initiative calls on the European Commission to propose a legal act establishing a permanent and structured EU funding mechanism to support independent civil society organisations working to promote and protect democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights across the European Union.

3. Objectives of the Initiative

The European Citizens’ Initiative invites the European Commission, within the framework of its powers, to submit a proposal for a legal act that:

A. Establishes a permanent EU funding mechanism supporting independent civil society organisations working to protect and promote Article 2 TEU values.

B. Provides:

- Core operational funding
- Support pro-democracy outreach
- Strategic litigation capacity
- Research and analysis linked to Article 2 TEU values

C. Operates under:

- Direct EU management
- Transparent and independent allocation criteria
- Full accountability and anti-fraud safeguards

D. Includes a resilience component whereby enhanced support may be activated where systemic or persistent deficiencies affecting Article 2 TEU values are identified, based on objective criteria defined in Union law.

The initiative does not seek to amend the Treaties or alter the institutional balance established by the Treaties.

It calls on the Commission to integrate this permanent mechanism into its proposal for the next Multiannual Financial Framework (EU long-term budget).

4. Treaty Provisions Relevant to the Proposed Action

This initiative concerns the establishment and design of EU spending programmes within the framework of the Treaties.

The Commission is empowered to propose legal acts establishing Union programmes and implementing the Union budget under, inter alia:

- Article 2 TEU (Union values)
- Articles 19, 153, 174–175 TFEU (anti-discrimination, social inclusion, cohesion)
- Article 310 TFEU (implementation of the Union budget)
- Article 322 TFEU (financial rules governing the establishment and implementation of the budget)

The proposed action falls within the Union's competence to adopt spending programmes that advance Treaty objectives.

5. Additional Information

Across several Member States, civic space is narrowing and independent civil society organisations face increasing financial and structural constraints. At the same time, democratic resilience is challenged by coordinated and well-resourced authoritarian political networks operating across borders.

While the European Union monitors rule-of-law developments through instruments such as the annual Rule of Law Report and initiatives aimed at strengthening democratic resilience, there is currently no permanent, cross-cutting funding mechanism

specifically designed to provide stable and structural support to organisations defending Union values.

This initiative seeks to address this structural gap by establishing a sustainable EU funding framework to protect and promote democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights throughout the Union.