



EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION FOR
THE EDUCATION OF ADULTS

For Information

EUROPEAN
ASSOCIATION FOR THE
EDUCATION OF ADULTS
(EAEA)

Transparency register
no. 3334854676-12

Greta Pelucco
Senior EU Public Affairs
Coordinator
greta.pelucco@eaea.org

EAEA Statement on the Civil Society Strategy Consultation 2025

EAEA's Statement - October 2025

EAEA participated in the **Commission's open public consultation of the EU Civil Society Strategy**, highlighting the pivotal role of not-for-profit organizations in the pursuit of democracy and societal resilience. EAEA invites the Commission to increase its support by ensuring CSOs have the space to bring the citizens' voices at the heart of the democratic process.

Key Recommendations

- **Continue and increase the financial support** for CSOs to enable them to sustain their role as guardians of democracy.
- **Broaden the concept of defense and security** beyond the military sphere, by recognizing CSOs as key players on behalf of the social fabric, and reflecting this through increased funding and stronger recognition in the key institutional documents and initiatives.
- **Safeguard the space for CSOs** in the democratic decision-making process, including organizations in candidate and neighboring countries.
- **Enhance dialogue** between CSOs and Institutions through more efficient and continuous forms of collaboration.



Co-funded by
the European Union

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them.

The European Commission has developed different initiatives to engage with civil society: Public Consultations, Civil dialogues and the Thematic Expert Groups and Platforms are evidence of this. While EAEA considers these efforts important tools, at the same time it recognizes these processes are often **too technical and fast-paced and not accessible to all**. This leads to a fragmented understanding of the challenges and urgent issues faced by CSOs, as consultations are often allocated limited time and announced at short notice, restricting effective information-sharing.

This shrinking space for CSOs is further exacerbated by a European Union becoming more and more hostile towards CSOs. With the establishment of a **new ethical unit at Directorate-General for Budget (DG BUDG)**, the **ongoing accusations from some MEPs** questioning the legitimacy of NGOs activities and the restraining budgets ahead, the **criminalization of the work of civil society** organizations is far from coming to an end. Far-right extremism is targeting CSOs as criminals for carrying out the role of ensuring that the **voices of the citizens** are heard within the institutions. In this scenario, NGOs do not feel protected: while the priorities of the Institutions are shifting from social cohesion to military and defense expenditure, NGOs continue to struggle without the adequate funding to sustain their activities - including covering staff salaries.

"People and regions must be at the centre of the next MFF and we must ensure that the EU is equipped to respond to its citizens' needs. We need strong investments to boost strategic autonomy, economic resilience and green goals while leaving no one behind."

Carla Tavares, co-rapporteur

We understand the more prominent role that **defense and security** have at this particular moment in history, given the current geopolitical situation. However, if we fail to consider **social fabric** as a priority alongside defense and security, the result will be a broken society. **The Multifinancial Framework (MFF) needs to reflect the world we want to live in the years to come**; if it is built only on the above selected priorities, we are signing up for a gloomy future. We need more concrete actions within the Erasmus+ and we must safeguard the social dimension of the European Social Fund. This is why we call on the European Institutions to protect the space of CSOs to protect the interests and the future of the citizens.

Under-recognized fields at risk of further deterioration

- **Adult learning and non-formal education:** non-formal adult education remains marginalized compared to formal schooling, despite its crucial role in preparing citizens for democratic participation, employability, and personal well-being. CSOs are the main providers of non-formal and community-based adult learning, media literacy and their expertise should be systematically included in shaping education, skills, and lifelong learning strategies.
- **Green and digital transitions:** these transformations will succeed only if all citizens are empowered to adapt. CSOs are well placed to deliver inclusive, accessible learning opportunities that ensure no one is left behind. CSOs are a key component in empowering adults on the importance of the transition, but also on the critical points that come with it.
- **Social inclusion, migration, integration, and equality policies:** CSOs are often the first responders, offering not only services but also safe spaces for dialogue and intercultural exchange. Ultimately, civil society should be recognized as a partner in any policy area where citizen engagement and inclusion are prerequisites for success.
- **Democracy:** CSOs play a crucial role in democratic life, acting as bridges between institutions and people, creating spaces for dialogue, participation, and civic engagement. They widely support the society by providing people with the tools to participate, by voicing the needs of communities, and holding institutions accountable. International organizations can help frame the global debate on education. Without them, democratic systems risk becoming detached from citizens' everyday realities.

The link between education and democracy goes a long way back. **Although education is not considered as a high prestige cabinet portfolio position**, it is frequently emphasized in political rhetoric for its potential **to ensure equity and order. Governments know this too well: they have always used educational systems to promote specific visions on citizenship and national identity. And this technique is still relevant today.**

Protecting civil society organisations is essential to protect democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. CSOs provide channels for participation, advocacy, and accountability, and are often at the frontline of defending democratic values. When CSOs are undermined, societies lose irreplaceable mediators between institutions and citizens. This weakens social trust and leaves individuals without spaces for dialogue and empowerment.

If we want to fully commit to democratic and social sustainability, this commitment cannot stop at the EU's borders. **Civil society organisations from candidate and neighbouring countries**, such as Moldova, Ukraine, and the Western Balkans, **should have a seat at the table** in promoting European values, peacebuilding and lifelong learning in the context of democratic transition, reconstruction and social transformation.

Their participation should be considered as a strategic investment through civil dialogue mechanisms such as consultations, platforms and expert groups (ensuring translation support, flexible formats), expanding the eligibility and facilitating access for non-EU CSOs to key EU funding programmes, supporting their long-term institutional sustainability and facilitating joint projects with EU partners.

All these aspects are not only important but also urgent. The data speaks clearly: the EU currently counts **47.7 million low-qualified adults, adult participation in education and training** has stagnated at **39.5%** since 2022 - well below the EU target of 60% to reach by 2030. These figures must be a wake-up call: without stronger support to CSOs, the EU will not reach its targets, nor safeguard its democratic fabric. If we want to build a resilient and informed society, we need to enable CSOs to continue their essential work in empowering citizens.



Protecting Civil Society Organizations is also a matter of equity and justice:

- They ensure that citizens remain **aware of their rights and responsibilities**, and they offer opportunities for their active involvement in social and political life.
- They prepare societies to **respond to crises** (from pandemics to climate change) by fostering resilience and collective action.
- In a time when democracy is under pressure in several Member States, ensuring a **safe and enabling environment** for CSOs is not optional.
- CSOs are a necessity to **safeguard active citizenship, democratic participation, and social cohesion** across the EU.

About us

The European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA) is the voice of non-formal adult education in Europe. EAEA is a European NGO with 120 member organisations in 44 countries and represents more than 60 million learners Europe-wide.



EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION FOR
THE EDUCATION OF ADULTS

