



EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION FOR  
THE EDUCATION OF ADULTS

## For Information

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# Democratic resilience starts with the protection of civil society

EAEA's Statement  
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Across Europe, the space for civil society organizations (CSO) is becoming increasingly constrained. Civil society is facing direct attacks from the political sphere, both at the EU level and in many EU Member States. This also has a direct impact on adult learning and education (ALE).

EAEA asks for a stronger commitment from the European institutions and Member States to protect a safe space of engagement.

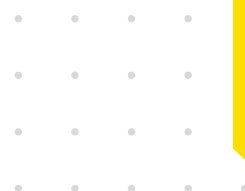
## Key recommendations

- Protect diversity and civic engagement;
- Defend democracy by including more participatory policy-making processes;
- Better leverage the return on investment of Adult Learning and Education;
- Establish and maintain a balanced and representative collaboration between Member States, European institutions and regional stakeholders.



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## The context

EAEA welcomes the latest *EU anti-corruption rules* [1] approved in the March Plenary of the European Parliament - they constitute a step towards support for our democracies. **However, it is fundamental that similar rules and values are followed not only by Member States, but also at the EU level, among institutions and its representatives.**

Systematic attacks on civil society and systematic interferences from third countries in EU policy-making and non-transparent processes [2] are undermining trust between citizens and institutions [3]. On top of this, the uncertainty and political resistance to the future of key European programs - such as Erasmus+, the European Social Fund (ESF) and Horizon - are jeopardising the credibility of European democracy. **Educated and well-informed citizens, trained to think critically, are the best defence a nation can hope for in combating disinformation - and this is precisely where ALE can help.**

Public opinion trends further reinforce the urgency for consolidated action. As recent Eurobarometer findings [4] show, citizens are increasingly concerned with security, economic stability and geopolitical uncertainty. In such contexts, there is a growing risk that democratic safeguards, including civic participation and pluralism, are perceived as secondary or even obstructive. **The values mentioned above are at the core of adult learning and education and a true reflection of a functioning democracy.**

This narrative is getting more preeminent in the political debate, too. The *NGO Scrutiny Group* [5] is reinforcing a belief that non-governmental organizations are laundering public money to lobby institutions to achieve green and social objectives. The narrative has already been refuted by independent evidence, including findings from the *European Court of Auditors* [6]. Nevertheless, it is gaining rapid visibility in political debates, causing damage to the vital funding of NGOs who become unable to support citizens as they were used to.

**Allegations of non-transparency and illegal practices against NGOs are fueling a debate which is distracting from the outburst of public scandals EU citizens have been witnessing in the past two years, involving EU representatives and institutions [7].**

1. [Link to the EP communication.](#)

2. [Ombudsman finds maladministration in how Commission prepared urgent legislative proposals.](#)

3. [Eurobarometer data - July 2025](#)

4. [Eurobarometer data - November 2025](#)

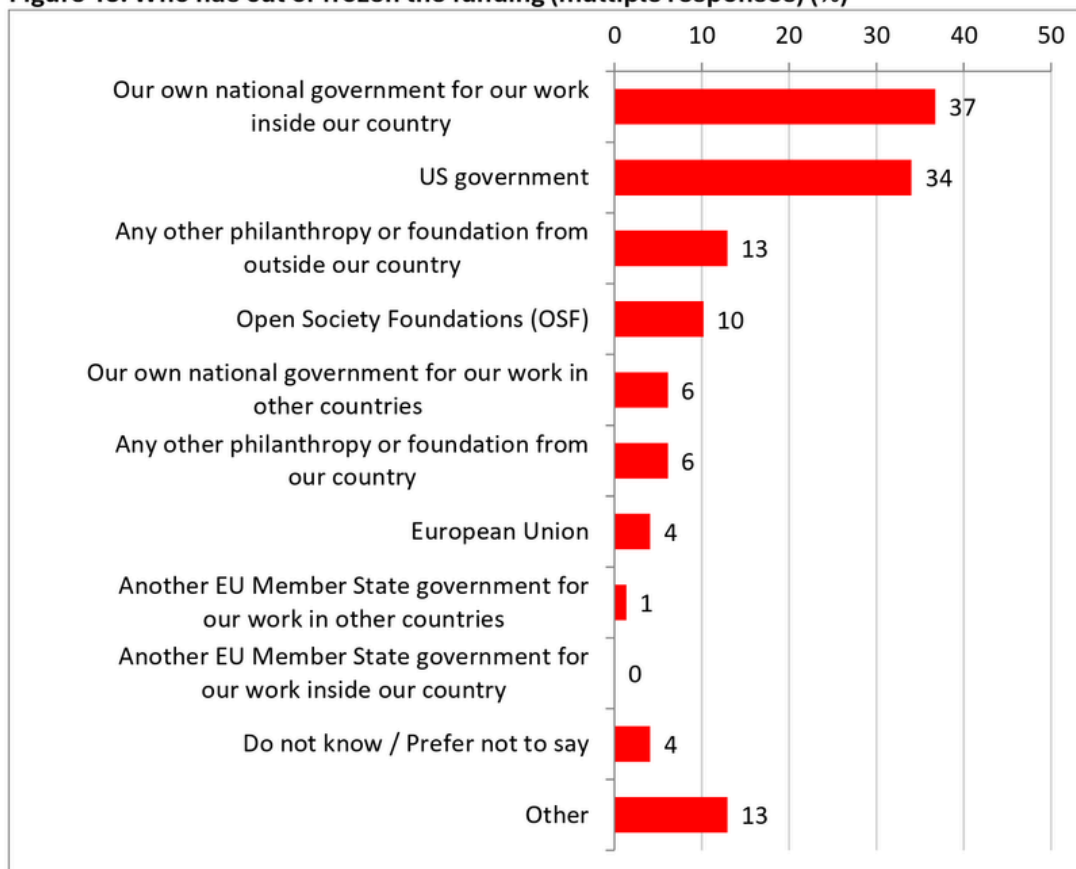
5. [EESC statement on the creation of the NGO Scrutiny Group.](#)

The same dynamics can also be observed in EU Member States. The latest European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) report on civic space [8] show that: **“across the EU, civil society actors continue to face a range of challenges that obstruct their ability to work safely and freely [...]** This includes hurdles in the legal environment, growing difficulties in securing funding, persistent threats and attacks on organisations and people, and underdeveloped practices in participation and consultation”.

**Adult learning and education is civil society in action:** ALE organisations (NGOs, community centres, ALE centres, associations) are themselves an expression of civil society. They are independent, non-profit organisations that are rooted in local communities, create spaces for participation, dialogue and collaborative learning, and enable people to organise themselves, reflect together and take action.

The current attacks on civil society mean that, in many countries, funding and political support for ALE structures and programmes are under threat or have already been cut - this includes traditionally well-supported regions such as the Nordic countries and Western European countries.

**Figure 13: Who has cut or frozen the funding (multiple responses) (%)**



Question: "Who has cut or frozen the funding?" (N=147)

[9]

6. [Click here for the report.](#)

7. [Amongst them: Qatargate, Huawei scandal, the European External Action Service scandal, and the Big Tech corporate interference in the EU decision-making process.](#)

8. [Civic Space Update: Enabling civil society to uphold EU values and strengthen democracy.](#)

9. [European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights \(FRA\): Civic Space Consultation Covering 2024](#)

These recent developments point to a growing pattern: the delegitimization, restriction and gradual marginalization of independent civil society actors. The latest *Corruption Perception Index (CPI)* from Transparency International [10] shows how corruption levels are increasing in all Europe. **When corruption creeps in, the voices of civil society are the first to be silenced.**

This shift is unfolding in a context of increasing geopolitical pressure, where external influences, including well-funded international ideological and lobbying networks, are reshaping parts of the European policy landscape [11]. This consolidation risks creating a fertile ground for narratives that frame civil society as a problem rather than a partner in policymaking.

**EAEA strongly opposes these narratives and affirms the crucial role of civil society as a key democratic actor.**

These dynamics are already producing tangible effects on civil society organisations across Europe. Increasingly, NGOs are forced to divert significant resources to **respond to political attacks, rather than carrying out their core work, leading to fragmentation of efforts and organisational fatigue.** At the same time, growing uncertainty around funding and political pressure is fostering **self-censorship**, with organisations becoming more cautious in their public positions and advocacy activities. This creates an environment in which participation remains formally possible, but is **increasingly constrained in practice.** As a consequence, the situation forces NGOs to reduce their advocacy capacity, to deal with increasing difficulties in maintaining experienced staff, and to an overall gradual weakening of civil society presence in EU policymaking spaces. [12]

**The European Union must act as an independent actor to these threats,** upholding the fundamental EU values, from environmental and digital protections to social rights and democratic participation.

10. [Click here for the full report](#)

11. [POLITICO on American influence in EU](#)

12. [For a deeper read: « C'est une chasse aux sorcières » : la droite européenne veut réduire au silence les ONG, Reporterre.](#)

## Our solution

When attacks towards democracy and pluralism are systematically increasing, measures to protect civil society organizations must be implemented. CSOs are a core component of democratic systems: they ensure accountability, bring expertise, represent communities that would otherwise remain unheard, and contribute to the quality and legitimacy of policymaking.

**Undermining their role - whether through funding restrictions, administrative burdens, reputational attacks or limitations on advocacy - weakens democracy: this means, the power of citizens.**

This role is fundamental: involving a broad range of stakeholders enhances the **effectiveness of policy-making**, both by addressing societal problems and by creating the conditions for smoother implementation, avoiding obstructions and delays - as political decisions are based on a broad societal consensus. Particularly when addressing local challenges, utilizing local assets and local knowledge is a fundamental asset. [13]

As a European organization, representing 130 members across the continent, EAEA reaffirms its commitment to ensuring that civil society voices are fully encompassed in EU policies and priorities, as a key standard for the respect of civil and social rights.

### **This commitment is grounded in six core principles [14]:**

#### **1. Adult education as the engine of democracy**

Democracy does not sustain itself. It requires informed, empowered and critically engaged citizens. Adult education plays a fundamental role in equipping individuals with the skills to understand complex realities, counteract disinformation, and participate in democratic life. Weakening civil society while underinvesting in education risks creating societies that are less resilient to manipulation and polarization.

13. [Research article: Pondering the Promises & Problems of Participatory Policy-Making: Lessons Learned from Experiences in Four European Countries](#)

14. [These principles are also embedded in our Manifesto.](#)

## 2. Diversity and peaceful dissent as democratic foundations

A healthy democracy is not built on consensus, but on the coexistence of diverse perspectives and the ability to express dissent. Attempts to stigmatize advocacy, restrict civic participation or frame dissenting voices as illegitimate directly undermine this foundation. This should be true in every Member State and reflected at the EU level.

## 3. A Union resilient to external influence, but rooted in cooperation

Protecting European values requires vigilance against external pressures that seek to reshape policy agendas in ways that undermine social, environmental and democratic standards. At the same time, the EU must continue to act in cooperation with Member States, CSOs and partners, recognizing that shared goals - such as solidarity, cohesion and collective wellbeing - cannot be achieved without inclusive governance.

## 4. Just and inclusive transitions through education

The digital and green transitions will define Europe's future. Without strong investment in adult education and active involvement of civil society, these transformations risk deepening inequalities and eroding trust. Inclusion is not automatic - it must be built through participation, learning and empowerment. This needs to happen by following an agenda that reflects the European values, without external interference. [15]

## 5. Democratic security beyond military capacity

The security of European societies cannot be reduced to defense spending alone. Long-term resilience [16] depends on strong democratic infrastructures: education systems, civic engagement, social cohesion and institutional trust. Civil society is a central pillar of this architecture. [17]

## 6. Participatory policy-making at all levels

The right of civil society organizations to participate and actively engage in policy-making is engrafted in official European documents such as the Commission Recommendations 2013/2836 [18]. CSOs are perceived as watchdogs of society and, as such, pivotal contributors to EU policies. The inclusion of such actors enhances participatory democracy, strengthens accountability and transparency, and ensures that policies are better grounded in societal needs and realities. [19]

The European Union stands at an historical crossroad, but it will be European citizens who will ultimately bear the consequences or will benefit from its choices.

15. [The same suggestions can be found in Draghi's Report on European Competitiveness.](#)

16. [Resilience is also part of EAEA's annual theme, to discover why it matters see our website.](#)

17. [For more on this, read the interview by EAEA's Vice-President Oleg Smirnov for EU Perspectives.](#)

18. [Commission Recommendations 2023/2836 Commission Recommendations 2023/2836 on promoting the engagement and effective participation of citizens and civil society organisations in public policy-making processes](#)

19. [Examples on this can be found in EAEA's projec ENHANCE funded by the Commission.](#)

Policies that constrain civil society in the name of efficiency, simplification or control may offer short-term political gains, but they carry long-term systemic risks. **When civic space shrinks, accountability weakens, and independent voices disappear as policymaking becomes less representative while replacing participation with control.**

**EAEA calls on European institutions and Member States to redefine the role of Adult Learning and Education** as a key protector of civic space, recognizing it as a precondition for democratic legitimacy, social cohesion, and the credibility of the European project.

As education remains a shared competence, its direction depends on a **joint commitment between the EU and Member States**. In this context, ensuring meaningful engagement with the adult learning providers and civil society is essential to shape inclusive and legitimate policies.

Failing to support ALE means weakening the very foundations of democratic resilience. **The European Union must ensure that its commitment to protecting citizens is reflected in a consistent and systematic recognition and support of ALE.**

## 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.



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