

António Costa, President of the European Council
Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission
Roberta Metsola, President of the European Parliament

Henna Virkkunen, Executive Vice-President for Tech Sovereignty, Security and Democracy
Piotr Serafin, Commissioner for Budget, Anti-Fraud and Public Administration
Michael McGrath, Commissioner for Democracy, Justice, the Rule of Law and Consumer Protection
Glenn Micallef, Commissioner for Intergenerational Fairness, Youth, Culture and Sport

Members of the General Affairs Council
Permanent Representatives of the Member States to the European Union (COREPER II)
Presidency of the Council of the European Union

Cc:

Johan Van Overtveldt, Chair, Committee on Budgets (BUDG), European Parliament
Nela Riehl, Chair, Committee on Culture and Education (CULT), European Parliament
Javier Zarzalejos, Chair, Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE), European Parliament
Emma Rafowicz, AgoraEU co-rapporteur, Committee on Culture and Education (CULT), European Parliament
Alice Bah Kuhnke, AgoraEU co-rapporteur, Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE), European Parliament

Brussels, 15 February 2026

Dear Presidents, Commissioners, Ministers and Members of the European Parliament,

We write as a coalition of European organisations representing the cultural and creative sectors, independent media and journalism, and civil society and democracy actors. Across all Member States and candidate countries, we work daily to sustain cultural production, public-interest information, democratic participation and access to rights.

We welcome the Commission's proposal to establish AgoraEU as a unified framework bringing together support for culture, the audiovisual sector and media (currently under Creative Europe) with support for rule of law, fundamental rights and freedoms, democratic participation, and efforts to combat gender based violence and all forms of discrimination (currently under CERV). The proposed envelope marks a significant increase compared to previous programming periods and recognises culture, media freedom and democratic participation as core elements of Europe's social and democratic infrastructure.

Europe is facing structural challenges — geopolitical instability, technological transformation, increasing inequalities and widespread precarity, declining trust in democratic institutions, coordinated and institutionalised attacks against fundamental rights — particularly affecting excluded groups — and growing pressures on competitiveness. Erosion of institutional trust creates vulnerabilities that can be exploited through Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) and by internal actors dismantling democratic norms and fundamental rights.

Culture, independent media and civil society are not peripheral sectors; they form part of Europe's democratic infrastructure. A pluralistic and participatory public sphere safeguards the rule of law, protects fundamental rights, strengthens social cohesion and underpins long-term competitiveness.

The Union has recognised this through its commitment to a “free and democratic Europe”, the European Democracy Action Plan, the emerging European Democracy Shield and the forthcoming Civil Society Strategy. The next MFF must ensure that these commitments are matched by adequate financial instruments.

At the same time, structural funding gaps have emerged following the retrenchment of major international funders, including significant reductions by actors such as USAID and large philanthropic foundations.

Authoritarian actors have simultaneously increased investment in influence operations. Russia's federal budget allocated approximately 120 billion RUB (around €1.4 billion at the time) to mass media in 2021, with subsequent budget laws indicating further increases in state-supported information activities. In 2024, significant additional resources were directed to patriotic films, youth festivals and related cultural initiatives aimed at reinforcing official narratives. China has likewise expanded its footprint through strategic investments and influence operations.

As recognised in the Declaration on the Necessity of Culture and Media adopted under the Danish Presidency of the Council, culture and media are integral to Europe's societal resilience and democratic security. AgoraEU therefore contributes not only to cultural vitality, but to the Union's resilience against FIMI and other hybrid threats, while strengthening the competitiveness of Europe's cultural and media ecosystems.

The Polish Presidency conclusions on democratic resilience underline that adequate financing for civil society organisations and human rights defenders is essential to safeguarding checks and balances and Union values.

Sectoral evidence shows that needs across all three pillars outpace available resources. While the baseline AgoraEU envelope is ambitious, it does not fully match the scale of the challenges identified.

Private funding streams remain structurally constrained: journalism revenues have declined significantly; recovery in cultural sectors remains uneven; and philanthropic funding for civil society is volatile. Robust EU-level support is therefore indispensable.

Culture and cultural & creative sectors

Public support for EU action in culture is strong: 87% of Europeans consider culture and cultural exchange very important at EU level.

Yet Creative Europe Culture remains structurally oversubscribed. In the latest European Cooperation Projects call, only 122 of 1,663 proposals were selected — a 7% success rate.

The cultural and creative sectors employ 8.7 million people and generate nearly 4% of EU GDP, with €200 billion in annual value added. Adequate funding within AgoraEU is essential to maintain accessibility, territorial balance and impact.

Media and journalism

The European Media Industry Outlook 2025 documents an annual €7 billion decline in journalism revenues between 2019 and 2023. Two-thirds of Europeans pay nothing for news and newsroom employment continues to decline.

Data shows that traditional media remain significantly more trusted than social media platforms. Strengthening trusted information providers is therefore a matter of democratic resilience, societal security and economic stability.

Local and regional outlets are disproportionately affected, and European news organisations face a growing investment gap in digital infrastructure and innovation compared to global platforms. These developments directly affect democratic resilience and the Union's capacity to counter FIMI and other hybrid threats.

While the MEDIA+ strand of AgoraEU is a crucial response, the proposed envelope remains modest relative to the scale of market erosion identified by the Commission. Independent media and journalism must be recognised as critical infrastructure and supported accordingly.

Civil society and democratic participation

CERV has delivered tangible impact in safeguarding rights and the rule of law, combating gender-based violence and all forms of discrimination, yet calls remain severely oversubscribed.

According to the EU Fundamental Rights Agency (2024), 85% of civil society organisations working on fundamental rights fear that funding shortages threaten their work — a 10-point increase year-on-year.

Civil society actors are increasingly tasked with defending the rule of law and fundamental rights without proportional resources. Additional support is required to ensure accessibility and territorial reach of grassroots organisations and balance among macro-regions, as well as for the implementation of the Strategy for Civil Society, particularly the establishment of an EU protection mechanism for civil society and human rights defenders under attack, and the new EU Equality strategies.

Supporting reinforcement during MFF negotiations

We welcome and support the European Parliament's proposal to increase the AgoraEU envelope.

Amendments strengthening its financial allocation are justified in light of documented structural gaps and the programme's strategic importance, particularly given that, according to the European Parliamentary Research Service, even at the reinforced level AgoraEU would represent approximately 0.43% of the overall Multiannual Financial Framework. We encourage the Parliament to maintain AgoraEU as a key priority throughout MFF negotiations.

Revenues from fines under the Digital Services Act, Digital Markets Act and AI Act could provide an additional allocation mechanism.

We explicitly support directing decommitted funds resulting from the Rule of Law Conditionality Mechanism towards reinforcing programmes that strengthen democratic resilience, independent media, civil society and the rule of law. Allocating such funds to AgoraEU would ensure that withheld resources are reinvested in strengthening democratic safeguards.

We call on the Council and the Commission to work with the Parliament to ensure that the final envelope enables effective and inclusive implementation across all Member States.

At a time when Europe's cultural ecosystems, information space and civic participation are under sustained pressure, reinforcing AgoraEU is a forward-looking investment in the Union's social and democratic infrastructure. We stand ready to contribute constructively to the ongoing discussions and to support the effective implementation of AgoraEU in the next programming period.

Yours sincerely,

Center for Sustainable Media

Civil Society Europe

Culture Action Europe

European Civic Forum

European Federation of Journalists

Irish Council of Civil Liberties