

EU Democracy Shield Recommendations

by the Res Publica Foundation during the [EU Values Foresight project](#). Research collected from civil society leaders and the expert community, primarily from Central and Eastern European countries during 2025 workshops and public events utilising the Visegrad Insight – Res Publica Foundation's main CEE media and analysis platform.

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Context

The European Democracy Shield (EUDS) is an initiative proposed by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen to protect and strengthen democratic processes in the European Union against threats such as foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI), disinformation and hybrid attacks. It aims to counter challenges such as cyberattacks, media repression and electoral interference, particularly from actors like Russia and China, whilst promoting media literacy, fact-checking and civic engagement.

Rationale

1. The EU Democracy Shield must be envisioned as a transformative framework to empower EU citizens as active guardians of democracy, adopting a bottom-up approach rather than a top-down impositional approach. The EUDS should also recognise the importance of defending civic space against shrinking freedoms, legal harassment, and state-sponsored delegitimation campaigns targeting CSOs, journalists, and activists.
 - a. This aligns with the EU's legal culture, rooted in the Treaty on European Union (TEU) Article 2, which emphasises democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights as well as the Charter of Fundamental Rights, which states: "The enjoyment of these rights entails responsibilities and duties".
 - b. This underscores that democracy-enabling rights impose a duty to uphold these privileges, positioning citizens and civil society organisations (CSOs) as equal partners to critical infrastructure in upgrading the democratic resilience.
2. The EUDS must counter the ongoing global struggle of autocracies to destroy, hollow out or reduce democratic institutions to decorative facades.
 - a. Example 1: Russia's kill lists discovered after its 2022 invasion, targeting Ukraine civil society actors,
 - b. Example 2: State-driven blacklisting that normalises exclusion from democratic processes – examples from Hungary, Slovakia, and under the previous Polish government.
3. The EUDS must enhance the EU's open strategic autonomy, protect electoral integrity, and foster a cohesive political strategy against both foreign malign interference and guarding fair and free electoral process. It can achieve this only by
 - a. prioritising CSO empowerment,
 - b. strengthening independent media and media pluralism,
 - c. fostering cross-border learning, and
 - d. ensuring strategic alignment of all involved actors with the EU Strategic Compass and the objectives outlined in EEAS Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) reports.

Policy Recommendations for the EU Democracy Shield

1. Establish a Cross-EU Democratic Resilience Council for CSOs and Experts

Objective: Create a permanent advisory council with CSO representatives, academics and policymakers to facilitate the exchange of best practices, monitor democratic malpractice and channel evidence to EU institutions.

Rationale: Enhances participatory governance, aligning with the European Democracy Action Plan (EDAP) (2020) and the Defence of Democracy Package (2023), which emphasise civic engagement and transparency. This council fosters cross-border learning, addressing the need for EU added value beyond national democracy-building tools.

Implementation: Monitor and verify reports about CSOs actions that do not adhere to EEAS FIMI methodologies in identifying or combatting FIMI threats. Provide advice to the EU based on the results of such screening to ensure that the conditions for funding in the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) programme are met.

EU Legal Backing: TEU Article 11 promotes participatory democracy, requiring institutions to engage citizens and CSOs in policy dialogue.

2. Strengthen Electoral Integrity through CSO-Led Monitoring

Objective: Support CSOs in monitoring electoral processes, detecting foreign interference and domestic malpractice, and promoting voter participation, particularly in enlargement countries.

Rationale: Protects electoral integrity, a cornerstone of the Defence of Democracy Package, against FIMI threats like Romania's 2024 election interference. CSOs ensure bottom-up resilience, complementing the European Cooperation Network on Elections.

Implementation: Fund CSO-led observation missions and digital monitoring tools via CERV.

EU Legal Backing: TEU Article 21 mandates the EU to promote democracy globally, whilst the 2018 Electoral Package supports transparent elections.

3. Expand CERV Funding: Include Institutional Support, Watchdog Activities, and Screen For Non-Aligned Actors

Objectives: A) Increase CERV funding from 0.15% to 0.5% of the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), including dedicated grants for CSO watchdog activities. B) Establish a dedicated EU Democracy Resilience Fund with Institutional Support for CSOs and support to individuals recognised as key components of democracy critical infrastructure. C) Ensure that CERV includes a rapid-response mechanism to support CSOs under immediate threat.

Rationale: CSOs are essential to the defence of democracy, and should be treated as part of Europe's democratic critical infrastructure. This approach is in line with the EU Strategic Compass (2022), which prioritises countering FIMI. The EU Democracy Resilience Fund addresses physical threats to CSOs, as seen in Russia's 2022 actions or blacklisting in some EU states.

Implementation: Allocate funds for civic education and media and digital literacy programmes, get-out-the-vote campaigns, CSOs combating FIMI, and independent election monitoring. Guarantee long-term sustainability through institutional funding. Introduce a screening mechanism to ensure alignment with core EU values and prevent funding of actors who contradict the Union's democratic principles.

EU Legal Backing: The Charter of Fundamental Rights (Article 11 and 12) protects

freedom of expression and association, affirming the necessity of supporting CSOs to ensure pluralistic, independent civic and media spaces across the EU.

4. **Develop Civic Defence and Media Literacy Programmes**

Objective: Launch EU-wide cross-border civilian defence training and media literacy curricula required to be implemented by CSOs funded by the EU, emphasising critical thinking and digital resilience, particularly for youth and marginalised communities.

Rationale: Empowers citizens as the EUDS, countering polarisation and disengagement exploited by autocratic FIMI campaigns. Aligns with the Digital Services Act (DSA) and EDAP focus on media literacy.

Implementation: Fund CSOs to develop open-source educational materials via Erasmus+ and Creative Europe, integrating AI literacy to address disinformation tools used by adversaries.

EU Legal Backing: TEU Article 165 supports education initiatives enhancing EU values, whilst the DSA mandates platforms to mitigate disinformation risks. Integration with the EU Preparedness Strategy 2025.

5. **Promote a Democracy Deep Tech Strategy**

Objective: Create a European digital public infrastructure prioritising public interest, supporting private companies partnerships with CSO to develop AI tools for disinformation detection, and reducing reliance on third-country tech.

Rationale: Enhances strategic autonomy, addressing EEAS FIMI reports highlighting adversaries' AI misuse. A public platform counters media monopolies and addictive algorithms, aligning with the proposed Digital Fairness Act.

Implementation: Fund CSOs and tech startups via Horizon Europe to develop ethical AI tools, ensuring compliance with the AI Act's transparency requirements.

EU Legal Backing: Example: the AI Act (2024) regulates high-risk AI systems, supporting democratic integrity.

6. **Foster CSOs and Political Actors Interaction As Part of EU Good Governance**

Objective: Promote regular dialogues between CSOs, political parties, and EU institutions to co-create policies that ensure EU good governance standards of civil society participation in decision-making, anticipatory methods of policy evaluation with civil society stakeholders (strategic foresight) and therefore counter autocratic narratives of segmenting, silencing or sidelining civil society.

Rationale: Builds trust and counters disenchantment, aligning with the Conference on the Future of Europe's deliberative democracy model. CSOs' role in political dialogue mirrors good governance practices in the EU.

Implementation: Fund CSO platforms and political foundations for cross-border policy dialogues via CERV and Creative Europe, ensuring the inclusion of marginalised groups to avoid elitism.

EU Legal Backing: For instance, TEU Article 11(2) requires structured dialogue with civil society to enhance democratic legitimacy.

7. **Enforce and Expand Regulatory Frameworks (DSA, DMA, AI Act)**

Objective: Urge full implementation of the DSA, Digital Markets Act (DMA), and AI Act, whilst proposing a Digital Fairness Act to regulate algorithms and influencer content.

Rationale: Strengthens digital safeguards against FIMI as well as domestic behaviour matching FIMI characteristics, addressing gaps in spoofing and cyber deception noted by ECPMF. Avoids over-regulation by focusing on transparency and accountability, not the content control.

Implementation: Empower CSOs to monitor platform compliance via CERV, Creative Europe and Horizon Plus grants, ensuring enforcement aligns with EDAP goals.

EU Legal Backing: For instance, the DSA (2022) mandates platform accountability for systemic risks, including disinformation.

8. **Protect Pluralism of the Media by Strengthening Independent Outlets**

Objective: Expand support provided to CSOs as democracy's critical infrastructure to include and emphasise the sector of public interest media across the EU.

Rationale: The independent media outlets are the pillars of democratic resilience. As long as they thrive the freedom and pluralism of the media is provided as a prerequisite of free and fair electoral process. Numerous reports point out to their vulnerability due to economic models, SLAPPs as well as digital age trends that favour centralised platforms in the media ecosystem. **Implementation:** Apply monitoring and protection measures to CSOs whose core activity includes public interest media. Ensure additional budget for the support of the independent media under core CERV funding as well as institutional support and emergency support schemes.

EU Legal Backing: The Charter of Fundamental Rights (Article 11), TEU (Art.2), European Media Freedom Act (e.g. Art.3-6), DSA (especially in protecting from content removal), DMA (granting copyright remuneration rights for the use of their content by online platforms), Anti-SLAPP Directive, and others.

Possible Added Value of the EUDS

- **Citizen Empowerment.** Enables citizens to act as the shield through education, participation, and CSO support, fostering resilience against autocratic threats.
- **Cross-Border Innovation.** Facilitates learning and innovation beyond national borders, enhancing EU-level democratic practices.
- **Open Strategic Autonomy.** Reduces reliance on third-country also in funding CSOs, developing democratic resilience know-how, boosting core European-based institutional capacity.
- **Holistic Defence.** Integrates CSOs as critical infrastructure, addressing hybrid threats (FIMI, cyberattacks), mobilizing citizens' engagement in democratic processes and building societal resilience to threats to democracy per EU Strategic Compass.
- **Economic Benefits.** CSO-driven innovation done right boosts competitiveness, increases oversight and hence efficiency of EU investment (cohesion funds) supporting MFF discussions on cost-effective democratic resilience.
- **Institutional Continuity.** Anchoring democratic resilience into the EU's next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) ensures long-term impact beyond political cycles.

Possible Negative Aspects to Avoid

- **Polarisation and Elitism.** Ensure inclusive funding to avoid sidelining smaller CSOs or communities, countering perceptions of elitism.
- **Over-Regulation.** Focus on enabling, not restricting, to avoid alienating citizens or diminishing the meaning of democracy.

- **Defensive Framing.** Shift from a static "shield" to an active "empowerment framework," emphasising development over protection.
- **Misinformation Funding Risks.** Implement transparent criteria and oversight to prevent funding media or CSOs that amplify disinformation.
- **Reactive Approach.** Proactively address novel threats like AI-driven political deception, ensuring the EUDS remains forward-looking.

Consequences of Not Implementing the EUDS

Without the EUDS, the EU risks fragmented strategies related to democracy promotion (e.g. relying solely on the Defence of Democracy Package), failing to address in other parts of the legislation challenges to the fundamental pillars of the EU system such as: rising populism, media capture, or autocratic interference. In effect, this could weaken strategic autonomy, electoral integrity, and CSO resilience, leaving democratic institutions vulnerable to being reduced to facades, as autocracies intend.

Lack of coordination of EU policies with regard to shielding EU democracies invites foreign malign interference to drive a wedge between EU member states by meddling in their democratic processes in order to weaken EU global positioning, competitiveness and resilience against coercive pressures, let alone defence posture. The EUDS needs to be operationalised by allocating a significant budget for its implementation both for enforcement of mechanisms to control platforms and make them accountable and for all other elements of the EUDS connected with the involvement of CSOs. Otherwise it will be reduced to empty statements considered as a weakness which in turn invites further malpractice.

Methods

In this project, the Res Publica Foundation aims to promote democratic values and strengthen democratic security in Central European states. Res Publica engages in activities, such as horizon scanning of democratic security trends and triggers, scenario-building workshops, yearly foresight reports, conferences and media appearances to improve discourse on EU values and foster collaboration within civil society. Leveraging our position, Res Publica Foundation develops a Central Europe-wide public foresight debate on future scenarios for democracy, freedoms, elections and social cohesion, bringing together thought leaders, academia, and policymakers. The primary goal is to address the decline in the public debate caused by the lack of information sovereignty, limited trust in democratic institutions and political polarisation, offering solutions and reinforcing support for democratic values.

Background for this brief:

EU Values Foresight Workshops and other [Events](#) (2023-2024)

[Shielding European Democracy. EU Values Foresight from Central Europe](#) - Report (2024)

[Boost CERV Funding in At-Risk Democracies](#) - Brief (2024)

[A Shield for CSOs: Countering Malign Foreign and Domestic Actors](#) - Policy Brief (2024)

[Foster Societal Readiness for EU Armies - Policy Brief \(2024\)](#)

[How European Democracies are to Survive a New Trump Age](#) - Report (2023)