

2025-09-16

Proposal for Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council - Establishing the 'AgoraEU' programme for the period 2028-2034, and repealing regulations (EU) 2021/692 and (EU) 2021/818

The National Forum for Voluntary Organisations wishes to submit the following views on the memorandum, as we represent a broad spectrum of Swedish civil society organisations within the social field.

The National Forum for Voluntary Organisations is an umbrella organisation for civil society organisations in Sweden, working for a society where strong volunteer engagement and independent non-profit organisations can contribute to and further develop society, democracy, and welfare. Our members comprise a wide range of organisations – from some of Sweden's largest civil society organisations to associations with only a few employees. Together, they represent hundreds of individual associations, thousands of employees, and hundreds of thousands of volunteers. What unites them is their commitment to social cohesion, solidarity, equality, and enabling people to influence their own lives. All contribute to strengthening democracy and welfare, and to giving people a voice. Forum also operates Volontärbyrå – a national platform that matches volunteers with assignments and supports civil society organisations through training and advice on matters related to volunteer engagement.

Evidence shows that countries in Europe are experiencing democratic backsliding, and Sweden is no exception. Politically motivated threats and harassment are on the rise, anti-democratic narratives are gaining traction, and civil society organisations are increasingly exposed to stigmatization and mistrust. Forum has, over an extended period of time, undertaken efforts to equip organisations and their representatives with the tools needed to counter anti-democratic rhetoric, to strengthen internal democratic culture. Forum therefore

welcomes the Commission's commitment, within the framework of the MFF 2028–2034, to reinforce democracy, civil society, and the open society. Forum strongly supports all initiatives aimed at strengthening democracy – in Sweden, in Europe, and globally. We are particularly positive towards measures that enhance civil society's role as a representative and advocate of citizens' voices in a vibrant democracy. Against the backdrop of ongoing democratic backsliding, both nationally and internationally, AgoraEU emerges as an urgent and strategic initiative. We consider the programme capable of creating arenas for dialogue, countering authoritarian tendencies, and contributing to the restoration of trust in democratic institutions.

However, Forum wishes to underline the importance of designing and implementing AgoraEU in a manner that preserves and reinforces the established democratic structures in Sweden, in which civil society organisations act as representatives of broad societal groups. These organisations represent wide constituencies, are democratically constituted, and have long-standing experience in articulating and channeling civic engagement. It is through these structures that diverse perspectives, particularly those of marginalized groups, can obtain a legitimate and representative place in decision-making processes. To disregard this function in favour of more temporary or randomly selected citizens' initiatives would risk weakening, rather than strengthening, the legitimacy of democracy.

Against this background, Forum considers that the proposal to establish new dialogue platforms could fulfil three key functions:

- *Compensate for reduced national support by providing civil society, in dialogue with citizens and decision-makers, with genuine opportunities to influence EU policy.*
- *Strengthen the voice and legitimacy of civil society at a time when it is increasingly questioned in the Swedish public debate.*
- *Position Sweden as part of a broader European movement to defend democracy and counter the global democratic backsliding.*

The following section presents Forum's comments on the specific proposals and assessments.

Unequal representation in political assemblies

Linked to the proposal's objective of upholding democracy and the rule of law, fundamental rights and equality, reducing discrimination, and empowering civil society

Forum welcomes the Commission's ambition to strengthen democracy and broaden civic participation through AgoraEU. Statistics from Statistics Sweden (SCB) show that young people under 30 and foreign-born citizens are clearly underrepresented in Sweden's elected assemblies. In the Swedish 2022 parliamentary elections, young people under 30 constituted approximately 17% of the electorate but only about 5% of the elected members. SCB's study, *Elected by the People*, further confirms that foreign-born citizens continue to hold a significantly smaller share of elected positions compared to their share of the population, which amounted to around 20% in 2024. This imbalance between the composition of the population and political representation constitutes a challenge to the legitimacy of democracy.

Against this background, Forum considers that AgoraEU should be designed in a way that actively ensures the participation of groups that are currently underrepresented in political participation. This should involve providing open as well as guaranteeing effective participation by means of inclusive and participatory working methods, language support, accessibility measures, and targeted initiatives. In this way, AgoraEU can contribute to greater equality and representation, thereby strengthening democracy in line with the programme's objectives.

Forum further underlines that the planned citizen platforms must not replace civil society's role as a bearer of democratic voice. Civil society organisations represent broad constituencies, are democratically constituted, and have long-standing experience in channeling civic engagement. The platforms should therefore complement, rather than replace, these established structures. Combining direct citizen dialogues with the representative role of civil society will, in our assessment, help safeguard both legitimacy and representativeness within the democratic process.

Disparities in levels of interpersonal trust

Linked to the proposals' objections to enhancing democratic resilience and participation

Civil society organizations encounter, in their everyday work, significant differences in the degree of interpersonal trust, both in relations between individuals and in trust in societal institutions. Empirical patterns demonstrate that trust is unevenly distributed: it is high within certain social groups and geographic contexts, but markedly lower in others. Locally embedded organisations report, for instance, that individuals with experience of unemployment, poor health, or discrimination more frequently express distrust, whereas trust tends to be stronger in groups characterized by socio-economic stability. The geographic variations are particularly salient. In areas rich in resources, established norms of participation and trust are often present, whereas organisations operating in socio-economically disadvantaged districts frequently must initiate long-term relational work in which confidence-building measures are a prerequisite for broader engagement and democratic participation. This suggests that the role of civil society is not merely to provide forms of participation, but fundamentally to contribute to the construction of social trust where it is weakest.

Against this backdrop, Forum assesses that AgoraEU can serve as a strategic instrument for promoting trust and strengthening democratic resilience in Europe. Such an ambition, however, presupposes that the program is not confined to already established and resource-rich organizations, but is instead designed to also include actors that reach groups with low trust in institutions and social cohesion. A systematic focus on locally anchored organisations, which enjoy confidence in their respective contexts, is essential if the agoras are to effectively contribute to strengthening democratic resilience.

A threatened democratic discourse

Linked to the proposal's objective to contribute as well to fighting against gender-based violence, violence against children, and other groups at risk. In addition, it will contribute to enhancing democratic resilience and participation.

An open and vibrant public discourse is the lifeblood of democracy. Yet in Sweden, as in many other countries, democratic debate is increasingly under threat. Rising polarisation, harsher rhetoric, and growing threats against elected representatives and civil society organisations contribute to self-censorship and silence. At the same time, local journalism and independent media are weakening, particularly outside major urban centres. Altogether, these trends risk diminishing citizens' willingness and ability to engage in public debate.

A report by Forum highlights how civil society organisations in Sweden are subject to negative labelling and stigmatization, with organisations engaged in the field of human rights, anti-racism, feminism, and minority rights being particularly affected. Alarmingly, the report finds that political decision-makers are themselves often responsible for perpetuating such rhetoric.

Forum considers that AgoraEU can play a key role in strengthening democratic discourse by establishing new platforms where diverse voices can meet under safe and constructive conditions. To achieve this, it is essential that the EU earmarks resources to counter hate crimes and harassment directed at engaged citizens and organisations. Equally important is ensuring that independent media are enabled to cover, analyse, and disseminate the outcomes of the agoras, thereby embedding their results into the wider democratic debate.

Citizens' assemblies and representativeness

Linked to the proposal's ambition of enhancing democratic resilience and participation

Forum wishes to express caution regarding the proposal that randomly selected citizens should represent the entire population in councils at an EU level. While the voices of individual citizens are important, this method risks failing to provide a representative picture of Sweden's population or the diversity of civil society.

Forum therefore considers it essential that AgoraEU combines methods of direct citizen dialogue with the established representative functions of civil society organisations. In this way, both legitimacy and representativeness can be ensured within the democratic process.

In conclusion, the National Forum for Voluntary Organisations welcomes the AgoraEU proposal as a timely and strategic investment in Europe's democratic infrastructure. To succeed, the programme must ensure long-term and flexible funding, actively include underrepresented groups, reinforce civil society's role as

a representative voice, and safeguard democratic discourse. Properly designed, AgoraEU can strengthen participation, legitimacy and resilience in Sweden, in Europe, and globally.

We wish to express our appreciation for the opportunity to submit comments on the above proposal. Beyond the views outlined herein, we refrain from providing further remarks on the remaining provisions.

Regards,

Hannah Kroksson

Chair – The National Forum for Voluntary Organisations