

Ms Ursula von der Leyen
President-elect of the European Commission

Brussels, 22 July 2019

Dear President,

I am writing to you on behalf of Civil Society Europe, which is the coordination of civil society organisations organised at EU level and which includes the most representative platforms of associations in the areas of social rights, culture, education, youth, non discrimination, international cooperation, environment, civic participation, volunteering, and citizenship. Our members include national and local networks of organisations and or individuals, involving million of citizens. What unites such diverse organisations is our joint work on enabling civic space in Europe and the promotion of an open, transparent, and regular dialogue with civil society organisations.

First of all we would like to congratulate you on your election as President of the European Commission.

We would also like to contribute to some of the proposals that you made within the political guidelines that you have presented this week to the European Parliament in view of the definition of an inter institutional multiannual programme, and in particular on your proposals related to the rule of law and on strengthening European democracy.

At a moment when basic civic rights are challenged across the European Union, **the European Parliament should lead by example in ensuring that democracy is strengthened and that organised civil society can flourish and be empowered.** You will find attached to our letter an infographics that we have developed on the value of civil society in Europe.

Civil society plays a key role in the defense and promotion of the values enshrined in Article 2 of the EU Treaty, which include respect for human dignity, human rights, equality, democracy and the rule of law. In addition, the work of civil society organisations is to empower people within their diversity to speak up on key issues making their "right to participate in the democratic life of the Union" a reality, as enshrined in Article 10, as well as to seize the opportunity to "make known and publicly exchange their views in all areas of Union action" and participate in an open, transparent and regular dialogue with the institutions (Article 11). **In order to guarantee this, and work towards the**

implementation of existing Treaty provisions on civil dialogue, the EU institutions need to introduce measures to support and develop civic space in Europe.

We welcome the proposal that you have made for a **comprehensive rule of law mechanism** and your approach to draw coherence on the respective initiatives of the EU institutions, as well as including the rule of law in the next Multiannual Financial Framework. We would like nonetheless to draw your attention to some key points that we have highlighted within our contribution to the rule of law consultation. Civil society organisations are an essential watchdog in healthy democracies and in holding accountable those in power, as well as in promoting common standards and best practice in respect of the rule of law. That is why any future strategy to strengthen the rule of law must **include measures to promote and enable civic space including through adequate funding (to NGOs) at EU level**. Also **civil society organisations need to be fully included in a future rule of law mechanism, and more in general should be part of a regular, meaningful and structured dialogue with the EU institutions on the rule of law**, as well as considered a key partner to identify violations, promote democracy and fundamental rights and raise awareness to rights of redress and litigation. We also have proposed to include **a rapid response mechanism within the European Commission as well as an EU Coordinator on the rule of law and civic space** to ensure monitoring, verification and analysis.

We also welcome your proposal to ensure that Europeans play a leading and active role in setting the European Commission priorities and their level of ambition and to organise a Conference on the future of Europe from 2020 to 2022. However we would like to stress that **such a conference will not be successful without involving actively in its preparation and agenda civil society organisations from the onset** in order to ensure real participation and ownership. It cannot be just the result of a top down interinstitutional agreement.

Moreover, this should be accompanied by further concrete measures to enhance citizens' participation.

We believe first of all that the **European Commission should recognise in their work and statements, the specific role of civil society organisations**: NGOs, associations and foundations in the development of a European democratic society. *We also call for:*

- **Including in your mandate as President of the new European Commission, the promotion of an open, regular, transparent, accessible and inclusive dialogue with civil society**

- Including **protection and promotion of civil society in the mandate of the Vice-President** in charge of the rule of law and fundamental rights
- include in the **mandate of the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy** should the support, promotion and development of a **thriving and independent civil society**
- **Developing guidelines on structured dialogue with civil society and propose an EU framework agreement on civil dialogue**
- Ensuring a **Focal point/Unit on civil society within each Directorate General** that will be responsible for organising regular exchanges with civil society organisations and for information sharing
- **Reviewing the Better Regulation agenda**, so as to ensure that online consultations are adapted to civil society organisations, and not just to business or public authorities or individual citizens as well as fully accessible to persons with disabilities
- **Including in all EU impact assessments** the impact of the new legislation on **the freedom of Association, Assembly and Expression**
- **Ensuring transparent trilogue negotiations** by publishing negotiation documents and amendments

We are available for a meeting with you and your staff at your earliest convenience to discuss more in detail these proposals.

Best regards....

LOGO of all CSE members (and partner organisations)