



DARING  
NEW  
SPACES



DARING A EUROPEAN  
PUBLIC SPHERE

PAVING THE  
WAY TOWARDS

RESILIENT  
EUROPEAN  
CIVIC  
COOPERATION

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DARING A EUROPEAN PUBLIC SPHERE:

# PAVING THE WAY TOWARDS RESILIENT EUROPEAN CIVIC COOPERATION

**This paper outlines challenges and opportunities to creating a robust and resilient European public sphere. First, we present an overarching vision of a possible European public sphere in 2025 as well as milestones that need to be reached to achieve such a reality. We then narrow in by presenting a vision of a cooperation-based European Union supported by a more interconnected European civil society. These bold visions assist us in developing policy recommendations and gathering existing successful practices that bring us closer to a truly European public sphere. The ideas presented have emerged in a collaborative and co-creative process of exchange amongst experts and professionals passionate for a more united Europe. This future-oriented exercise was launched within the Daring New Spaces project in a working group focussing on European civic cooperation.**

## I. DARING VISION: A EUROPE FOR ALL

In our vision for the year 2025, a truly European public sphere has emerged. In this world, Europeans engage in respectful and constructive discourse on European issues across national borders. This shift is noticeable across all corners of the continent: from political decision-makers at EU institutions to the broader public, there are high levels of engagement and interactions in many spaces. In 2025, Europeans truly live according to the EU's slogan: They are united in diversity. But also networked through lived, shared experiences.

### A CONNECTED EUROPEAN MEDIA LANDSCAPE

In this future, national and transnational media actors cooperate across borders. The daily digital exchange of data, information and perspectives on current issues has become a normality. Regular exchange programmes are also normalised: journalists throughout Europe are able to better understand other countries' narratives and priorities. These new networks lead to more and better informed coverage of current topics, including both EU

politics and stories about the daily realities of EU citizens in other member states. Thanks to these exchanges, European narratives have emerged and have managed to reconcile different views on Europe, while creating mutual understanding of differing public opinions.

The emergence of a European media landscape has been backed by public funding. This helps to support independent and diverse media outlets, but also is directed at creating an EU public service broadcaster that carries out European journalism in the public interest and takes into account diverse perspectives. This publicly funded journalism upholds an independent media, while supporting and improving the level of European public debate.

### A COMMON AND SOVEREIGN DIGITAL PUBLIC SPHERE

The emergence of a European public sphere has also taken place digitally. This development is closely linked to the EU's investment in its digital sovereignty. This digital public sphere is supported by an independent European digital infrastructure and improved connectivity across the EU, with high data protection standards as well as ethical and transparent Automatic Decision Making Systems (ADM systems) and pan-European digital platforms.



### PROMOTING EUROPEAN TOPICS OF PUBLIC INTEREST

There are already many initiatives striving for more European integration from the bottom up. Yet, often they remain unnoticed and do not enjoy enough media attention or visibility by the general public. As a result, recognition and appreciation of such efforts are even more important. Please support the awards and prizes that promoting European topics of public interest, like The Good Lobby Awards, Innovation in Politics Awards or European Charlemagne Youth Prize.

Hate speech, fake news and online disinformation are regulated by European laws and repeated offenses lead to consequent and effective banning from the platforms. The EU has invested massively in the development of open source and public platforms, developing competition that is beginning to seriously challenge the existing private US tech firms. Instant translators allow for new forms of direct communication and exchange. This well-funded digital infrastructure, opens up new possibilities for networking throughout Europe: between cities and the countryside, between government and citizens, and amongst citizens themselves. Europe comes closer together thanks to a strong digital public sphere.

### A VIVID EUROPEAN CULTURE THROUGH SHARED EXPERIENCES

Spaces to experience Europe are abundant and accessible in 2025. There are more opportunities to share experiences, both on and offline. Similarly to the Eurovision song contest, which is watched (and its results debated) across Europe, there is a crime series ("Euro-Crime"). This rotates between cities across Europe and introduces viewers to particular characteristics of regions and areas every Saturday evening. The idea of the Ryder Cup has also been transferred from golf to other sports, with all-star European teams playing against teams from other continents every two years. EU-Tubers go viral with videos on European E-Sports, EU elections and cooking shows. These events give Europeans the opportunity to develop a common sense of belonging.

The shared space of experience is not limited to common media consumption or sports - in-person exchanges have also greatly increased and are widely accessible. The Erasmus+ programme has been expanded, as well as the DiscoverEU programme for 18 years olds to travel across Europe by train. Students aged 15 and up are encouraged to go to an EU country of their choice for a school exchange year and European Community Service

Programmes are well-funded and popular. A core part of military training is to participate in one-year stints in other EU armies or a joint corps. Europeans from all walks of life are able to grasp and experience Europe in their everyday lives. Europe is not a far-removed concept, but a tangible reality.

## II. REALISING THE VISION – WORKING TOWARDS 2025

How can we arrive at such a reality? Some elements of the above-mentioned vision already exist, but others do not. As we work towards the goal of a truly European public sphere, it is clear that we will need to reach certain milestones. They include: public spaces that can withstand diverse and contrasting opinions, a European media landscape, accessible opportunities for non-electoral democratic participation, increased European civic education, and the development of Europarties, to name a few. Normalising and institutionalising these components of the public sphere are crucial stepping stones towards our goal.

When working towards our overarching vision, it is important to take into account current regional and global socio-political developments. As we enter the post-Brexit period, we must consider how the EU is now more politically united and how EU integration is advancing. Economic inequalities stemming from the Euro-Crisis and expanded during the Covid-19 pandemic will surely continue to be a central point in any discourse on Europe, in addition to persistent regional challenges such as migration and the rule of law. And as the global political order shifts, the role of Europe as a single unit within larger political and economic systems is still to be decided. Together, these topics remind us that Europe is also interconnected with a larger world - one that cannot be ignored. With these milestones and overarching topics

in mind, the next section will zoom in on a more detailed vision of how civic cooperation in Europe could look like in 2025. This closer examination serves to expand on the overarching vision and dive even deeper into a future society in order to see more clearly on how we can arrive at such a point.

### III. BOOSTING CIVIC COOPERATION FOR A ROBUST EUROPEAN SPHERE

In our vision of civic cooperation for the year 2025, renewed trust in the EU as well as a collaborative mindset and thinking have emerged – amongst decision-makers, civil society, and the general public. Misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech have faded away and have been instead replaced by respectful and informed dialogue on European political issues. We see increased collaboration not only amongst civil society actors, but also municipalities and professional networks – all across national borders. Functional and meaningful cross-border networks working towards shared goals and ideals have emerged. These networks provide support to civil society and journalists working on the same issues and are actively being used across the EU. Europe is felt and lived by all people in their day-to-day interactions.

#### EUROPEAN CIVIL SOCIETY: INCLUSIVE, ACCESSIBLE, ORGANISED

The European public sphere has become something that every person in Europe can access and “inhabit” thanks to a legal framework that protects the rights of minorities and prevents a resurgence of hate speech in political discourse. People of all age groups, gender and social backgrounds are able to engage on European issues if they wish – in particular, young people who want to take the future of their generation into their own hands. They have the necessary educational background, the means for doing so – especially free and reliable access to the internet – and the support that is required to become active, be it financial or institutional. Moreover, each EU citizen can vote in all elections, including national or in their country of residence, which strengthens a civic sense of responsibility and belonging. This environment is a catalyst for cooperation.

Local initiatives are building connections to like-minded civil society groups in other EU member states. Their awareness of the European and global dimensions of the issues they are working on – be it global like climate change and migration or local like public transport and greening the city – has increased, and so has the relevance of EU politics for the development of solutions to shared challenges.

The opportunities for organised civil society to engage politically at the EU level, to lobby for their positions and, in particular, to participate meaningfully in policy-making processes has greatly increased through legal and institutional reforms. Civil society work is protected by a European statute for civil society organisations (CSOs), a common legal framework that protects the freedom of association, counters shrinking spaces, and allows for truly European membership-based CSOs. Thanks to better and easily accessible information on civil society action across the EU and an improved understanding of how to use this information, new collaborations become possible – both in the streets and on the screens. A civil society based on cooperation and inclusivity is flourishing.

#### SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE: A CORNERSTONE FOR EUROPEAN PUBLIC SPHERE

Thanks to the successful management of the economic and social consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic and major social reforms, people across the EU are confident that their basic needs are catered for, which has provided the space and security for increased engagement in civic activity.

Decent living wages, functional health insurance and health care systems, reliable unemployment insurance, the end of the gender pay gap, and innovative policies for tackling youth unemployment as well as poverty and social exclusion among elderly people have rebuilt people’s trust in public institutions. At the same time, new opportunities for rebuilding the economy, in particular through the European Green Deal and The Just Transition Fund, have been actively used and Europe has embarked on the swift transition to a sustainable economy, founded on human wellbeing and the respect of planetary boundaries.

As an important part of the post-Covid-19 recovery plans, investments in social infrastructure have been implemented and helped overcome societal divisions. Public spaces such as cultural centres, public educational facilities, youth centres, and libraries have become key locations for building societal trust; they provide civic education and a safe environment for young people to work towards their own visions and ideas. Accessible digital infrastructure, including in rural areas across the EU, is ensuring equal access to the emerging new civic space. People everywhere in the EU have fast, cheap, and neutral access to the internet, and educational facilities are working hard to improve people's media and digital literacy. Human-centred policies enable larger portions of society to engage with one another within an accessible public sphere.

### GENERATION EU: GROWING UP INTERCONNECTED

Young people understand that the challenges ahead are transnational and global. They build on the experiences and the success of the climate justice movement and keep fighting for their voices to be heard and their opinions to be considered.

EU institutions are simultaneously facilitating more participation of young people in decision-making processes. This includes increased representation of young people in political decision-making bodies, such as local, regional, and national elected youth councils. An institutionalised European Youth Parliament, advising the European Parliament, makes democratic participation possible and creates new opportunities. Young people have become the lifeblood for a thriving European public sphere.

The real opportunities for young people to make Europe part of their personal experience, to study and work across borders, have been greatly expanded. The multiple barriers to participating in schemes such as ERASMUS+ have been overcome. Promoting commitment to the Youth Guarantee in all member states improves the accessibility, outreach, and awareness of the opportunities provided by the EU to the youngest generation of Europeans. Civic life is accessible, European, and cooperative.

## IV. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS: FROM VISIONS TO REALITIES

In order to realise this cooperative vision of a European public sphere, governments and European public institutions will need support from an informed and active civil society to strengthen democratic values, European awareness and democratic behaviour across Europe. It is clear that an organised civil society can be a powerful ally in creating a feeling of belonging to Europe and facilitating exchanges across national borders. This also helps fight shrinking spaces – and create new spaces for civil society, both within EU member states and across national borders. Policy that focuses on expanding civil society will provide necessary spaces for cooperation. And these spaces in turn can become the pillars of a European public sphere that we require.

To accomplish the necessary next steps and approach our vision, we propose that the following concrete policy recommendations are implemented. They will move us forward on the way to a more inclusive, interconnected and organised European civil society and civic cooperation.



### YOUTH PARLIAMENTS

Including young people in decision-making processes is a crucial part of civic education and robust democratic systems in the future. An institutionalised Youth Parliament with rights and responsibilities, cooperating and consulting the European Parliament would be a true democratic innovation. Meanwhile, examples to follow are the Welsh Youth Parliament, working directly with Senedd, the Welsh Parliament, local youth councils implemented in the German state of Baden-Württemberg, or the Swiss model of youth parliaments at the local and regional levels.

For more information, please visit:

<https://www.youthparliament.wales>

<https://www.youpa.ch>

<https://jugendgemeinderat.de>



### FUNDS FOR CIVIC START-UPS

Innovative ideas and civic engagement need resources to develop and blossom. It is crucial to make access to seed funding for emerging initiatives easier, to enable their uninterrupted growth as well as cross-border collaboration. For example, Join Politics offers support to political activists in pursuing their mission. Prototype Fund funds Public Interest Tech – ideas in civic tech, data literacy, data security and software infrastructure.

For more information, please visit:

<https://www.joinpolitics.org>

<https://prototypefund.de>

### THE CIVIC VENTURE FUND

- **OBJECTIVE:** To invest in and support NGOs and civic movements.
- **DESCRIPTION:** The Civic Venture Fund mirrors the way in which the EU currently invests in creating start-up ecosystems in various countries, and it would also accept private investment. Instead of going after financial returns, this fund would pursue social returns on the basis of common European goals and values. These would be defined and quantified at the EU level so that they can be measured. Such a fund will also allow CSOs and initiatives to access funding in a simpler way compared to the highly bureaucratic procedures currently in place.
- **KEY STAKEHOLDERS:** European Commission; supported by private donors and European philanthropy such as The European Foundation Centre and the Network of European Foundations; in consultation with representatives of European civil society organisations.

### A COMMON EUROPEAN STATUTE FOR CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS

- **OBJECTIVE:** To protect the freedom of association, counter shrinking spaces of civil society, and

facilitate the unbureaucratic foundation of new initiatives and organisations across the EU.

- **DESCRIPTION:** It allows for a new type of legal approach in order to facilitate transnational civic cooperation and ensure both the protection and the proper functioning of CSOs – including from a legal and compliance point of view – in all member states.
- **KEY STAKEHOLDERS:** European Commission, European Parliament; in consultation with institutions with independent legal expertise on European law and representatives of European CSOs.

### THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITY SERVICE

- **OBJECTIVE:** to foster youth mobility regardless of individual socio-economic circumstances, promote transnational exchange and help develop a European identity amongst the youngest generation of Europeans.
- **DESCRIPTION:** It integrates existing voluntary service schemes, including the European Solidarity Corps. Every person, from the age of 18 and after their secondary education, from all EU member states, will be encouraged and fully supported (financially, socially, etc.) to participate in an activity that brings public benefit or value for up to one



### THE CAMPAIGN FOR THE EUROPEAN STATUTE FOR ASSOCIATION

This campaign launched by European NGOs lobbies for freedom of association at the European level. In its appeal to European institutions – the European Council, the European Parliament and the European Commission – it urges them to establish a statute for European associations by the 2024 European elections at the latest.

For more information, please visit: <https://say-yea.eu>



year, in a different European country, or a different region in their country of residence. The host organisations would be public institutions, social welfare facilities, NGOs, etc. This can also be an alternative to military service.

- **KEY STAKEHOLDERS:** European Commission, European Parliament, Council of the European Union, Member State Parliaments.

### A FREE ONLINE LANGUAGE LEARNING PLATFORM

- **OBJECTIVE:** to support multilingualism, inclusive education using new technologies (digital transition) and the life-long-learning (LLL) approach.
- **DESCRIPTION:** A free-of-charge online language learning platform would allow anyone (young people and adults alike) in Europe to learn any other European language. It can operate based on open-source and freely reusable technology and can later be expanded to include local dialects and minority languages.
- **KEY STAKEHOLDERS:** European Commission and The Council Of The European Union – as part of the European Education Area.

## MOVING FORWARD

Strengthening the European public sphere is an urgent matter. The visions we laid out in this paper are goals that can guide us and ensure that we are on the right track. What will ultimately determine the success of this endeavour will be if we are able to make the European public sphere accessible to all.

To do so, it will be important to actively pursue these visions, for example by implementing the above-mentioned policy recommendations and advancing similar existing initiatives. Structural change will be required. But the political will to implement these changes needs to be as bold as the visions guiding us.

## ABOUT



The project “**Daring New Spaces: Striving towards a European Public Sphere**” was initiated by Das Progressive Zentrum and supported by the German Federal Foreign Office in cooperation with the Mercator Stiftung, with the support of the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR).



**Meet the working group on European Civic Cooperation:**

<https://www.progressives-zentrum.org/working-group-european-civic-cooperation/?lang=en>

### Das Progressive Zentrum (DPZ)



is an independent, non-profit think-tank founded in 2007, devoted to establishing new networks of progressive actors from different back-

grounds and promoting active and effective policies for economic and social progress. It involves the next generation German and European innovative thinkers and decision-makers in the debates. Its thematic priorities are situated within the three programmes: “Future of Democracy”, “Structural Change” and “International Dialogue”, with a particular focus on European integration and the transatlantic partnership. The organization is based in Berlin and also operates in other European countries (including France, Poland and Great Britain) as well as in the United States.

[www.progressives-zentrum.org](http://www.progressives-zentrum.org)

Twitter: @DPZ\_Berlin

Facebook: [www.fb.com/DasProgressiveZentrum](https://www.facebook.com/DasProgressiveZentrum)

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### Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the partner institutions.

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