

Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Department of European Neighbourhood

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**CISU response in rel. to Consultation on
Danish Eastern Neighbourhood Programme January 2027 - December 2031**

CISU appreciates the opportunity to provide inputs to the Danish Eastern Neighbourhood Programme (DANEP) as it embarks on a new phase. CISU and CISU's member organisations and grantees have proudly been a part of the preceding years of enhanced focus on this region and the efforts to strengthen civil society, democratic resilience and governance, and we are looking forward to continuing through an expected agreement with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Department for Humanitarian Action and Civil Society, contingent on the approval of the Budget Act 2027.

Civil society as a strategic partner

CISU welcomes the recognition of civil society as an important actor in DANEP 2027-2031 and particularly appreciates the emphasis on capacity development of civil society actors as an integrated element of the programme. However, the role of civil society could be framed more broadly and strategically throughout the programme. Based on decades of experience supporting partnerships and local civil society actors across the Eastern Neighbourhood, CISU has seen that civil society contributes not only to accountability and oversight, but also to democratic participation, social cohesion, resilience, and citizen engagement in times of crisis and democratic pressure. These perspectives are reflected in the points below.

Democratic resilience

The current draft primarily presents civil society as a watchdog actor holding institutions and governments accountable, particularly under Sub-area 1. While this role remains essential, CISU encourages DANEP to adopt a broader understanding of civil society's contribution to democratic resilience.

Democratic resilience depends not only on accountability mechanisms but also on citizens' continued engagement in democratic processes, trust-building, inclusive participation, and democratic culture, norms and values. Civil society plays a vital role in fostering these foundations of democracy. These functions are particularly important in contexts characterised by democratic backsliding, polarisation and external interference, where resilient democratic culture is often as important as formal democratic institutions.

- ➔ CISU therefore recommends that DANEP explicitly recognise civil society's role in strengthening democratic culture and citizen participation as a core component of democratic resilience.

Misinformation, disinformation and media literacy

CISU welcomes the programme's strong focus on independent and free media as a key response to disinformation. While support to independent media is essential, protecting the democratic information environment also requires investments in information and media literacy. Citizens' ability to critically assess information and recognise manipulation is a prerequisite for meaningful democratic participation and resilience against disinformation. Civil society organisations are uniquely positioned to reach various citizen groups through community-based approaches and trusted local networks.

- ➔ CISU therefore recommends that support for media and information literacy be explicitly integrated into DANEP's approach to counter disinformation. This would align well with DANEP's broader objective of strengthening democratic resilience and citizen participation.

Civic space and long-term resilience of civil society

DANEP rightly acknowledges that civic space is shrinking in several countries of the region and that independent civil society actors face increasing pressure.

Given the increasing restrictions on civic space across several countries in the region, stronger attention should be paid to protecting the conditions that enable civil society to operate. This includes support for organisational resilience, adaptive approaches, informal civic initiatives, and mechanisms that allow civic actors to remain engaged under increasingly restrictive conditions.

Based on our experience from supporting civil society partnerships across the region, CISU encourages the programme to place even greater emphasis on protecting and strengthening civic space, as this is a prerequisite for achieving the programme's democratic objectives, also to enable local actors to continue operating under restrictive and rapidly changing conditions. This includes strengthening adaptive capacities, security awareness, informal networks, organisational resilience and the ability to maintain citizen engagement over time despite political pressure.

- ➔ CISU therefore recommends that DANEP explicitly recognise support for civil society resilience and the ability to navigate shrinking civic space as a strategic investment in democratic development.

Exiled citizens, civil society and business

Lastly, it is crucial to mention for this particular region and for specific countries considered in the DANEP that exiled communities play a crucial role in many aspects related to the

approaches of DANEP. While SMEs in exile are mentioned, it is important to also note that civil society and human rights defenders to an increasing extent are forced into exile.

- ➔ CISU therefore recommends that the approaches in DANEP could to a larger extent consider the increasing challenge of citizens and civil society being forced to operate from exile.