



THE EU CHARTER FOR THE DEFENDERS OF CIVIC SPACES

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We want to clarify that the use of English in this Document has been checked with the online AI-enhanced tool “DeepL.com” (free versions), for improvement of the writing style and clarity. We have then reviewed the resulting contents to ensure consistency with our original texts and correspondence with the Consortium’s vision and priorities.

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Introduction

This Charter is addressed to different actors committed to the protection and promotion of civic spaces at the local and regional levels. It speaks directly to Local and Regional Public Institutions, actors from the Social and Solidarity Economy, academic institutions, independent research and advisory centres, and other non-profit organisations. Together, these stakeholders act as the primary “defenders” of civic spaces, providing the essential conditions, tools and resources needed to nurture robust, inclusive and participatory environments.

The language of the Charter is deliberately non-prescriptive and flexible, designed to be adaptable across different national, cultural, and political contexts.

It is framed as a “living” declaration that invites ongoing dialogue, reflection and refinement based on practical experience and evolving challenges.

This approach acknowledges that formal adoption of the Charter may be limited or challenging in certain political environments. However, its greatest value lies in its function as a communication and advocacy instrument: a shared reference point that can be tailored locally and used to engage diverse stakeholders in strengthening civic life.

The Charter emphasises that effective civic spaces rely on more than infrastructure or service delivery alone. They inherently depend on trust, the development of social and relational capital, as well as on inclusive shared governance.

Finally, the document reflects the collaborative spirit of the *B.RIGHT SPACES – Better Rights in Better Civic Spaces* project, funded by the European Union’s CERV programme (2024–2026) and coordinated by the REVES Network. It builds on the collective knowledge and experience of project partners and stakeholders from Italy, Poland, Portugal and Spain.

The B.RIGHT SPACES Charter for the Defenders of Civic Spaces

***A shared commitment to strengthening democracy, inclusion
and community resilience***

Preamble

We, the undersigned Local and Regional Public Institutions, actors from the Social and Solidarity Economy, academic institutions, independent research and advisory centres, and other non-profit organisations committed to the protection and promotion of civic spaces, acknowledge the essential role that civic spaces play in enabling democratic participation, community well-being and local resilience and recognise the principles set out in the present Charter, developed in the framework of the project *B.RIGHT SPACES – Better Rights in Better Civic Spaces*¹.

In times of rising socioeconomic inequalities, social fragmentation and polarisation, institutional mistrust and environmental uncertainty, we affirm our commitment to supporting locally-grounded civic infrastructures as key components of inclusive governance and social cohesion.

This Charter reflects our shared intention to promote, support and learn from diverse civic spaces, both formal and informal, permanent or temporary, institutional, co-initiated or self-initiated, with various management forms (also including self-managed and co-managed ones), physical or digital.

It sets out a series of shared principles and pledges that we aim to valorise in our policies, strategies and partnerships, adapted to local contexts and legal frameworks.

¹ The project “*B.RIGHT SPACES – Better Rights in Better Civic Spaces*” is a CERV-funded initiative (2024–2026) coordinated by the REVES Network. Further information and documentation can be accessed and downloaded from the project website: <https://www.revesnetwork.eu/project/b-right-spaces/>

I. What We Understand by “Civic Spaces”

Civic spaces are enabling environments where people and diverse organisations – i.e., stakeholders – come together to exchange, organise, support one another, co-create solutions for the benefit of the community and engage in democratic life. They may take many forms, such as neighbourhood houses, community centres, local activity hubs, co-managed cultural venues, self-organised commons, mobile outreach units, hybrid social economy platforms, and so on and so forth.

These spaces have some common traits. They:

- Enable the protection and affirmation of fundamental rights;
- Are rooted in the local community and, as such, are concrete expressions of local communities that have the potential to influence institutional policies;
- Operate with openness, inclusivity and care;
- Enable mutual support, dialogue and public innovation;
- Can be initiated by public institutions, civil society actors, including individual citizens and informal groups of citizens, or a mix of these;
- Contribute to individual empowerment and collective resilience.

II. Shared Statements

The partners of the B.RIGHT SPACES project² and the members of the REVES Network affirm the following understandings as guiding references for policy-making and cooperation:

A) Civic spaces are democratic infrastructures

They enable everyday participation, strengthen democratic values and promote social accountability beyond electoral cycles.

B) Civic spaces are engines of inclusion and social innovation

Especially in marginalised or underserved areas, civic spaces help reach people often excluded from traditional institutions, enabling access, empowerment and co-created solutions.

C) Civic spaces are co-governed ecosystems, not service outposts

Effective civic spaces rely on trust, the building of social and relational capital, and shared governance, not solely on programme delivery or public services.

D) Civic spaces flourish in contexts of autonomy and mutual respect

Institutional support should recognise and strengthen, not instrumentalise, the creativity and initiative of civic actors.

E) Civic spaces are drivers of social/civic economies

Many civic spaces enable local entrepreneurship, mutual aid, and cooperative action, thus contributing to sustainable economic models rooted in solidarity and care.

F) Civic spaces are adaptable and diverse

Civic spaces differ across territories and cultures. Their diversity is a strength to be nurtured, not standardised, as long as basic principles and values such as democracy and participation are respected.

² B.RIGHT SPACES – Better rights in better civic spaces, is a CERV-funded project 2024-2026, coordinated by the REVES Network. Further information and documentation can be accessed and downloaded from the website:

III. Pledges to Civic Space

We, as signatories of the present Charter for the Defenders of Civic Spaces, pledge to promote and support civic spaces by considering the following orientations in our local, regional, and organisational policies:

1. Reinforce the role of civic spaces as political actors

Therefore, we intend to:

- Include civic spaces in local and regional strategies (e.g. for social inclusion, regeneration, youth, culture or resilience).
- Advocate for legal or administrative frameworks that enable co-managed or community-led civic spaces.
- Acknowledge civic spaces as active players in the co-creation of public policies, engaging them in co-programming and co-design with local authorities.
- Establish structured mechanisms of dialogue between public institutions and civic spaces, enabling the latter to be not only users but co-producers of policies.

2. Support their sustainability

Therefore, we intend to:

- Encourage long-term partnerships based on clear and enforceable engagements, over short-term contracts or ad hoc grants.
- Establish mechanisms to evaluate the impact of civic space initiatives and formally recognise their contribution to society.
- Provide financial and/or other forms of support for project activities and the core operational needs of civic space actors.
- Support the development of sustainable, impact-oriented economic models that allow self-sufficiency being aligned with their values.
- Encourage multi-source funding (public, private, philanthropic) that allow stable financial sustainability.

3. Invest in the people behind the spaces

Therefore, we intend to:

- Acknowledge and support (also financially) the role of local coordinators, facilitators and community animators as essential civic professionals.
- Value the contribution of public officials in promoting and enabling civic spaces, and ensure access to targeted and ongoing training to equip them with the knowledge and tools to address evolving social and democratic challenges.
- Facilitate training, peer learning, recognition of their work and other initiatives that can support a sustainable capacity-building approach.

- Ensure fair and decent working conditions for all those employed in civic spaces, aligning employment practices with the ethical principles of participation and inclusion. This includes formalising civic-related professions to provide stability and legitimacy to their roles.

4. Foster shared governance

Therefore, we intend to:

- Enable participatory decision-making in the governance and management of civic spaces.
- Promote horizontal relationships between public institutions, civil society organisations and informal groups.

5. Ensure openness and accessibility

Therefore, we intend to:

- Encourage inclusive design, culturally sensitive environments and active outreach.
- Remove all barriers (whether related to language, socioeconomic status, disability, age, gender, ethnicity, digital access, or mistrust of institutions) to ensure inclusive and equitable participation for everyone.
- Encourage the free and open access for all, with no barriers or gatekeeping, and push on the informal, non-exclusive and spontaneous use of civic spaces (not necessarily linked with a specific purpose/function) as a key to inclusion and openness to social diversity.

6. Encourage civic mutuality and co-responsibility

Therefore, we intend to:

- Promote civic spaces as places of mutual exchange, where individuals both give and receive, helping to build stronger communities and a shared sense of civic responsibility.

7. Facilitate experimentation and learning

Therefore, we intend to:

- Treat civic spaces as laboratories for democratic practice and social innovation.
- Monitor and evaluate outcomes collaboratively, valuing both quantitative and qualitative forms of impact.

8. Guarantee autonomy and operational independence in management and decision-making

Therefore, we intend to:

- Avoid political co-optation or commercial exploitation of civic spaces.
- Protect freedom of association, expression, initiative, and all other fundamental rights and freedoms as expressed in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights.

9. Acknowledge the digital sphere as an emerging civic space

Therefore, we intend to:

- Contrast the lack of digital literacy and awareness on available digital tools for enabling civic spaces / digitalisation as a way to foster civic spaces.
- Recognise and cultivate the potential of digital environments to enable self-organisation and civic participation.
- Critically reflect on the relationship between digital and physical spaces, promoting mindful and empowering use of technology.

10. Mobilise the next generations

Therefore, we intend to:

- Create inclusive and welcoming environments where young people feel recognised, respected and safe to express themselves and participate meaningfully.
- Encourage youth-led initiatives, offering space and support for experimentation, creativity and autonomy, while providing guidance and mentorship when needed, without condescension or over-direction.
- Actively involve young people in decision-making processes related to civic spaces, not only as participants but also as co-creators and co-responsible actors in shaping their present and future.
- Collaborate with youth organisations, schools and informal networks to reach a diversity of young people, especially those who may be marginalised or underrepresented, and to create pathways for sustained engagement.

IV. Working Together

We commit to:

- Fostering the exchange of knowledge and good practices among the members of the B-RIGHT SPACES project Consortium, the members of the REVES network, and all local and regional Public Institutions, actors from the Social and Solidarity Economy, academic institutions, independent research and advisory centres, and other non-profit organisations committed to the protection and promotion of civic spaces;
- Sharing know-how on different means and methods to support civic spaces and jointly discuss solutions to related challenges (e.g. of administrative kind);
- Jointly documenting and evaluating how civic spaces contribute to democratic and social objectives;
- Supporting advocacy to strengthen the role of civic spaces at national and European levels.

Endorsement

This Charter is a living document. The members of the B-RIGHT SPACES project Consortium, of the REVES network, and all local and regional Public Institutions, actors from the Social and Solidarity Economy, academic institutions, independent research and advisory centres, and other non-profit organisations committed to the protection and promotion of civic spaces, may endorse it by signing it, or referencing its contents within their local and organisational frameworks.

Signatories may also develop complementary local charters, frameworks or action plans inspired by its principles and pledges.