



Samaritan International welcomes the recognition of the crucial role of civil society and particularly organisations fostering civic engagement in the Defence of Democracy package and the development of a recommendation on civic engagement.

In this context, we would like to note the role of not-for-profit civil society organisations that offer structured volunteering opportunities, thereby fostering and organising active citizenship.

Structured and qualified volunteering, as enabled by civic volunteering organisations, is an important source of and indicator for citizens' resilience and social cohesion. Volunteers do not only receive important qualifications that are useful to them well beyond their specific voluntary engagement. They also have the opportunity to participate in initiatives, services and work for citizens by citizens, thereby giving them a direct stake and a participatory sense of responsibility for the democratic society and civic space within which they live.

Besides the overall positive effects on social cohesion that are well-established in research on the issue, there is a particular potential in volunteers as a mean to combat disinformation and counter the societal divide it seeks to create. Voluntarily engaged citizens and the organisations that structure their work tend to enjoy an elevated degree of trust in the populace and could therefore be an effective and sustainable component in communicating against disinformation. We suggest that initiatives attempting to realise this potential of citizen-to-citizen dialogue to counter disinformation be supported.

In conclusion, we want to encourage and expand upon the idea to, as the Call for Evidence document puts it, "create an enabling environment for civil society and citizens". We understand this to explicitly include favourable framework conditions for volunteers, voluntary engagement, and volunteering NGOs. The European Union and its member states should actively encourage such engagement by facilitating and supporting the work of organisations offering structured volunteering opportunities. Volunteer work must be recognised for its benefits, addressed in an enabling way in relevant legislation and the added value it provides should be considered in the award criteria for relevant grant and funding programs, be they European or national.

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SAMARITAN INTERNATIONAL is a European network of 20 non-profit non-governmental organisations from 19 European countries. We are politically and religiously unaffiliated and cooperate across borders within our network, on a regional, bilateral, and multilateral basis. Our members are active in the areas of social services, first aid and rescue services, civil protection, humanitarian aid, youth work, and volunteer management. Our work is conducted with the support of about three million individual members and almost 150.000 volunteers.