



# Civil Society Week

**RISE UP  
FOR DEMOCRACY**

**Liaison  
Group**

**RECOMMENDATIONS**



The EESC's first Civil Society Week, held from 4-7 March 2024 successfully brought together 800 participants from across civil society to identify threats and submit proposals to strengthen democracy in Europe, ahead of the upcoming EU parliamentary elections. Throughout the four days, participants engaged in insightful discussions, joined enriching workshops, and networked with a broad range of stakeholders, fostering collaboration and knowledge exchange.

The EESC Liaison Group with civil society organisations and networks organised fourteen panel sessions and workshops resulting in the following forward-thinking recommendations:

### **Civic Space, threats to democracy and EU elections**

- ✓ The **EU should address threats to our democracy both internally and externally** by:
  - Developing long term measures such as developing an enabling civic space,
  - Promoting and supporting civic education at all levels as well as independent media, including fact checking and critical thinking
  - Address existing fundamental rights issues and loopholes in the proposal for interest service representation by third countries including geopolitical damage, undue stigmatisation and burden on civil society, inadequacy of definition fragmentation in the internal market of interest service representation, including by enlarging the scope to cover all interest representation services whether funded by third countries or within the EEA, while fixing all other issues.

The existing loopholes in the Defence of Democracy Directive must be closed. In particular, the scope should be enlarged to include registration requirement to all types of entities conducting advocacy activities; all types of funding including own resources by for-profit organisations; and all sources of funding whether internal or external to the EU.

- ✓ The **next European Commission** and **European Parliament** should take concrete actions to reverse the worrying trends of shrinking civic space and limited civil dialogue, notably through the development of a civil society strategy, including including three main pillars:
  - a better overall operating environment for CSOs,
  - a protection mechanism for civil society actors within the EU,
  - an increase in the amount and accessibility of funding for civil society actors.

Including civic space into impact assessment in view of legislative proposals.

The conclusion of an agreement on civil dialogue among EU institutions, to make sure that civil society can be meaningfully involved in all the stages of the policy making process.

- ✓ The **European Commission** should develop a proper framework to monitor civic space trends within the EU, building on the rule of law cycle and the work of the Fundamental Rights Agency.

### **Civil dialogue for inclusive democracy**

- ✓ **Civil dialogue is the backbone of representative democracy** and is essential to amplify the voice of the most vulnerable groups in our society and to give concrete responses to the diverse needs of the people in Europe. More institutional recognition, support and involvement of organised civil society is needed for it to fulfil its full potential and for Art 11 TEU to finally become a reality.

- ✓ **Civil dialogue** does not mean having a third social partner to engage in social dialogue, but to have a **parallel, equally important and structured process for representing the diversity of civil society in Europe** contributing towards fair and sustainable public policies that leave no-one behind. The two processes are not mutually exclusive but rather mutually reinforcing.
- ✓ There is **momentum for progressing on the institutionalization of civil dialogue and this must be seized in the next EU mandate**, it is high time for this. Concrete action such as a Civil society strategy based on an enabling civic space, a mechanism to protect civil society, activists and defenders and adequate funding, as well as an EU Interinstitutional agreement are the steps forward.

### **EP elections toolkit for civil society:**

#### **How to successfully tackle Disinformation and Citizenwashing**

- ✓ The **EU must establish proper civil society dialogue structures** as provided for in Art. 11 of the Treaty of Rome. Currently, the civil society consultations during the preparation of new legislation are simply a box ticking exercise. Civil society is not being taken seriously and its expertise in various areas is not considered. This ultimately results in loss of credibility and discontent, which can escalate to protests (a good example is the farmers' protests).
- ✓ The **business model** of independent fact-checked journalism is very expensive to maintain. Therefore, to maintain these standards, **more dedicated EU funding is needed** to uphold journalism as a public service.
- ✓ The **EU must find ways to ensure that critical thinking is being taught to all children throughout the Union**. Disinformation can never be stopped, but what we can do is educate the young, as well as the vulnerable (e.g. seniors, people from disadvantaged backgrounds) how to discern independent fact-checked journalism from fake news and propaganda.

### **Education to tackle polarisation and enhance democracy**

- ✓ To **increase the effectiveness** of citizenship education, we need to inspire and encourage teachers to create open classrooms where pupils can discuss polarizing topics and where they can transform toxic polarization into democratic disagreement.
- ✓ **Embed Critical Thinking, Emotional Intelligence, and Media Literacy in Educational Curricula.** This includes fostering empathy, respect, and constructive communication to promote understanding of diverse perspectives and engage in constructive dialogue contributing to a more cohesive society. By teaching students to critically evaluate information, we would empower them to become independent thinkers capable of navigating complex issues and the media landscape responsibly.
- ✓ **Support all children's well-being and development from day 1**, and break cycles of intergenerational inequality, through adequate social protection and care policies.

### **A Single Market for public good**

- ✓ Move ahead for **creating a single market for public good with a swift adoption of the ECBA proposal by the Council of the EU** (see the call of 19 MS in the Liège roadmap for the Social Economy in the EU) Important step towards enabling civil society space and develop a similar legislative initiative to ease cross-border work for foundations and mutual societies.

- ✓ **Implementation of the Social Economy Council Recommendation at the national level:** guarantee that the non-discrimination principle with regard to taxation applies to cross-border philanthropy in a meaningful way.
- ✓ **Create a European public benefit status.**

### Civil Society for democracy in candidate countries

- ✓ **Better financial support for CSOs** in candidate countries to carry out their actions. Funding needs to be tailored to their needs, must vary in size and form to be viable for organisations and financial regulations must allow for more flexibility as local needs and contexts rapidly change.
- ✓ **Encourage dialogue and facilitate exchanges between the EU and candidate countries' civil society organisations.** To do so, administrative hurdles such as visa issues or obstacles in the legal framework must be removed or adapted.
- ✓ **Secure and standardize the role of social partners and civil society in the accession negotiations on all topics and on both sides.** Initiatives similar to those taken by the EESC must be set up to move the negotiations beyond a mere “intergovernmental” process.

### National heat, European beat

- ✓ **Reform of the EU treaties**, involving new processes such as the introduction of a citizen panel mechanism -similar to CoFoE- or the strengthening of the Spitzenkandidat system.
- ✓ **Promote citizen involvement in decision-making via new participatory processes** such as participatory budgets, while also engaging in a more effective communication to encourage the local community (and particularly, young people) to take ownership of the more tangible elements of municipal management and keep them involved in local affairs in the mid- and long-term.
- ✓ **Increase resources for civil society organisations**, particularly for youth-led organisations, to strengthen civil society organisations as an essential tool for the preservation of the democratic character of our societies.

### Smart public policymaking in the EU. Making better choices together

- ✓ **The democratic process needs to adapt to regain the trust and engagement of all citizens**, including those from marginalised and underrepresented groups. Since a multi-stakeholder, multi-level approach is a guarantee for better and more effective public policies, and since civil society input is evidence-based and this connection with evidence guarantees better policies, public authorities should respect civil society and academia, engage in dialogue with civil society organisations (CSOs), and strengthen partnerships with them. Moreover, input from CSOs and citizens should be viewed as legitimate and meaningfully included in public policymaking. Citizens’ assemblies should also be strengthened to bring about new topics and policy positions on the political agenda.
- ✓ **Co-creation of policies with the communities and CSOs**, where many actors can feel ownership of the process and the results, have a stronger rate of effective implementation. Therefore, it is important that participation pathways not only exist, but effectively shape the

policies in a way that civil society can feel ownership of policies. Last but not least, more attention needs to be paid to effectively implementing public policies, and to monitoring and reviewing them.

- ✓ **Public policies are common goods** but they become private goods when captured by special interests, and this is indeed a big issue. Political parties and social actors, including think tanks, are grossly underfunded and have to rely on finances from special interest, for-profit groups. A revision of public funding to policymaking actors is therefore needed. Furthermore, we need to ensure the existence of public good-oriented knowledge intermediaries to translate scientific evidence into policy recommendations.

### Towards a digital transformation that leaves no one behind

- ✓ In order to **ensure the success of digital transformation in Europe** that leaves no one behind, the EU must foster stronger partnerships between governments, educational institutions and technology providers who must create and curate high quality learning content to enhance citizens' digital literacy.
- ✓ **We need to bridge the Digital Divide for Civil Society.** To empower civil society organisations to address the pressing issues that European citizens face, European Institutions should invest in programmes that bridge the digital divide by providing upskilling and capacity-building in digital technologies. This will equip CSOs and community groups with the necessary tools and skills to utilise technology effectively in their work, enhancing their reach and impact in tackling societal challenges.
- ✓ **AI is here to stay and it is important that the EU is not left behind in the digital transformation process happening worldwide.** The EU must show itself as a competitive frontrunner in the use of AI following ethics, norms and democratic principles. The EU Institutions need to focus on prioritising policies that allow citizens to learn about AI and teach them how to live and work with it, instead of creating fears and anxieties.

### Success factors for e-democracy initiatives

- ✓ To be successful, organisers of **e-democracy initiatives need to ensure that the process, including its online dimension/platforms are inclusive, accessible and transparent.**
- ✓ **Policymakers need to ensure follow up of e-democracy initiatives in terms of impact and feedback** to citizens and should acknowledge the work and dedication of volunteers.
- ✓ Policymakers need to **embrace innovation and make novelty more visible** – include crowdsourcing of citizens' ideas as part of the EU democratic toolbox and pilot participatory budgeting at the EU level.

### Empowering social inclusion through the validation of non-formal and informal learning

- ✓ **Volunteering should be formally integrated into formal & non-formal education,** skills development and employment policies, establishing frameworks that allow volunteers to translate their experiences into tangible skills and qualifications and in this way encouraging employers to recognize and value learning outcomes acquired through volunteering as a factor in hiring practices through validation of prior learning and experience.

- ✓ **Policymakers should prioritise** the proper understanding and implementation of the **“European Guidelines for Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning”**, developing mechanisms and infrastructure to validate the skills and experiences gained through volunteering that are inclusive and accessible for all. The use of microcredentials and open badges as a means of validating non-formal, informal learning and prior experience, particularly in the context of volunteering should be explored and promoted.
- ✓ **The validation of skills and competencies acquired through volunteering in sustainability initiatives can empower people to contribute meaningfully to environmental and social causes** while at the same time enhancing their employability and social inclusion. The acquisition of skills and competencies that are relevant to the ever-evolving labour market via volunteering experiences can lead to personal but also socio-economic development.

### **A Blue Deal through citizenship and stewardship**

- ✓ Water has been taken for granted for too long, resulting in water scarcity and pollution. In fact, freshwater ecosystems are the most susceptible to biodiversity loss. **It must be treated as a resource for all, and access to safe drinking water and sanitation must be seen as a human right**, as explicitly recognised by the UN General Assembly already in 2010.
- ✓ The frequency of water stress is expanding across Europe: on average, 20% of the European territory is affected by water stress and 30% of the total population. To drive change, we **need water development programmes which are sustainable** because they are based on equity, partnerships, collaborations, education, co-creation, and education, across all age groups, but especially so amongst Europe’s youth.
- ✓ **We must understand that we live in planetary boundaries regarding access to water.** For the EU Blue Deal to be successful will require robust governance of freshwater resources, including groundwater and we require EU Institutions, and Member States, to consider water as a priority, and place the EU Blue Deal on an equal footing and view it as fully complementary with the EU Green Deal and the UN SDGs. Constructing hope is about giving pro-active citizens access to represent their rights, devise and implement the EU Blue Deal.

### **Reinventing prosperity. An intergenerational dialogue for a wellbeing economy**

- ✓ **Make funds more accessible for businesses** following good practices, truly incentivise through public investment and take away public grants and licenses of companies who are breaching social and environmental obligations.
- ✓ **Create transparency and collaboration among different stakeholders** at the community level to serve a social purpose. This would foster a mindset shift towards inclusivity and sustainability within education, culture, and mindsets to value better social responsibility within business practices.
- ✓ **Promote a shift in the current business paradigm** to focus on businesses designed with people and nature in mind, striving for wellbeing and intergenerational justice.

### **Democratising economic policymaking – Yes, we can!**

- ✓ **Widen the spectrum of involved actors in the consultative mechanism of the European Semester** from social partners to a broad variety of CSOs. This should be extended to direct citizen involvement with specific formats. Take efforts to bringing more actors to the table to contribute with different types of knowledge and experience, including reflections on the economic system, and to support the implementation of CSRs.
- ✓ **Widen the classic consultative approaches with hearings** to include deliberative processes and practices, and establish quality criteria for these processes and their facilitators. For the topic of economics there is a special need to lowering the entry barriers for engagement. Therefore, capacity must be built by organising knowledge upgrades and providing accessible material etc.
- ✓ **Establish multi-stakeholder platforms (MSPs) for economics and sustainability in the member states**, modelled after the EU level MSP on the SDGs, for developing joint policy input for economic policy making at all levels, including for the European Semester. Existing bodies like advisory councils and national economic and social committees shall be a part of the MSP, which should also organise direct citizen deliberations in support of its work.