



Brussels, 25 May 2023

MINUTES
of the 41st meeting
of the
EESC Liaison Group with European civil society organisations and networks
held in hybrid format
on **17 May 2023**

The Liaison Group with European civil society organisations and networks held its 41st meeting in hybrid format **Wednesday 17 May from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. in room JDE 63.**

[Link](#) to webstreamed recording

ATTENDANCE LIST IN APPENDIX BELOW

1) Adoption of the draft agenda

The draft agenda was adopted.

2) Approval of the minutes of the 40th meeting

The minutes were approved.

3) Ratification of the appointment of the CSO co-chair *Brikena Xhomaqi*

In the LG-CSO-meeting on 27 April 2023, Brikena Xhomaqi was re-elected Co-chair by unanimity. The full Liaison Group unanimously ratified this appointment.

4) Introductory comments by the two co-chairs, Mr Röpke and Ms Xhomaqi

Oliver Röpke, EESC President

❖ **Welcome of new EESC Members of the Liaison Group**

❖ **Introductory statements**

- The focal point of the EESC's activities during this second half of the mandate will be **the promotion of the rule of law, human rights and democracy**. As a response to the civil society organisations' call for a more robust European Union action on fundamental values and the rule of law, **cooperation with and support for the Group on Fundamental Rights and Rule of Law (FRA Group) will be strengthened**. The newly-elected president of the FRA Group should become a permanent member of the Liaison Group.
- There are high expectations on the Committee, and France24 recently called the EESC the watchdog of EU democracy. As such, the Committee has big responsibilities to meet not only within the EU but also beyond it, especially in candidate countries. For this reason, under the new presidency, **steps will be taken to implement the Defence of Democracy Package ahead of the EU Parliament elections in 2024**. The President affirmed his willingness to stand up for democracy with the EESC and especially with the Liaison Group.
- One key objective of the President's agenda is to **foster participatory democracy and connect with citizens**. Therefore, the Committee should mobilise citizens, also to encourage vote participation. The EESC should act as a bridge and bridge-builder to engage in debates in our regions and cities to fight abstentionism and anti-European sentiments. It is necessary **to protect the 2024 elections from disinformation and propaganda that try to destabilise European democratic processes**.
- The EESC has a responsibility to go beyond European borders as the future of Europe is deeply intertwined with the democratic, social and economic circumstances in neighbouring countries, especially candidate countries. It is thus the President's goal to **open up to civil society from candidate countries and to work closer with them**. The Liaison Group has already started to involve CSOs from non-EU countries, especially Ukraine and the Balkans during Civil Society Days, and this is a good starting point to deepen such relations.
- The President finally presented his project **to establish a Civil Society Health Test**. The aim is to have the EESC monitor the well-being of CSOs proactively in the EU Member states and candidate countries. The EESC should also observe developments that affect CSOs and the support of the Liaison Group would be essential when taking the first steps to turn this idea into reality. The Fundamental Rights and Rule of Law (FRRL) Group will also play a key role in building this project. The President concluded by expressing his enthusiasm for robust cooperation with CSOs and the Liaison Group, in a spirit of reciprocity.

Brikena Xhomaqi, Director of Lifelong Learning Platform (LLLP)

❖ **Introductory statements**

- Ms Xhomaqi said that she was excited to work together and that now is the moment to turn into actions the goals set out in the co-chairs' introductory speeches. She also stressed that the meeting was being webstreamed for the first time and thus open to the general public to allow more transparency.
- Ms Xhomaqi thanked the EESC sections and groups for the support, engagement and cooperation with the Liaison Group and the CSOs. She expressed appreciation especially for the cooperation with the European Semester Group and during Civil Society Days.
- Civil Society Days were very successful: there was strong participation, including by EESC Members. Event participants provided very good feedback. The organisers were also very

pleased with the outcome. The recommendations from the workshops were integrated into the EESC's Resolution "United for Democracy".

- Ms Xhomaqi referred to the point on citizen panels, highlighting that these are times of change for the EU and it is necessary to embrace and adapt to this change. This is why the meeting's discussion was so important.
- Finally, Ms Xhomaqi said she was glad to coordinate more and start cooperation with Civil Society Europe, which is a key partner for the CSOs of the Liaison Group. The Liaison Group is open to formalising and giving more structure to this cooperation, especially in view of the EU elections next year.

❖ **Welcome of the EESC new Members of the Liaison Group**

5) Getting to know each other

Round of introductions of the CSOs members and the EESC members of the Liaison Group.

Peter Schmidt, President of NAT Section

- ❖ The Liaison Group should be more closely linked to the Sections. Many EESC members do not understand what the role of this group is
- ❖ It would be useful to have a work programme for the next year/year and a half in order to coordinate our work and to cooperate better, for example in the implementation of the SDGs and stronger involvement of youth in the Committee's activities
- ❖ To foster and facilitate cooperation between the EESC Sections and the Liaison Group, the two co-chairs could be invited to the Sections Presidents' meetings, in order to involve them more in the Section-specific activities

6) From Civil Society Days 2023 to Civil Society Week 2024

Ms Xhomaqi stressed again the success of the 2023 edition of Civil Society Days and gave the floor to **Janine Borg**, CSS Head of Unit, to present Civil Society Week 2024.

Janine Borg, CSS Head of Unit

- ❖ As of 2024 the EESC flagship events of Civil Society Days, ECI Day and Civil Society Prize will be streamlined into a one week-long event with the purpose of bringing together all civil society actors and stakeholders in the House of civil society.
- ❖ The event will take place in March 2024. Ahead of the European Parliament elections, it will be a great opportunity to show the important role of civil society but also what it expects of the upcoming European leaders.
- ❖ The advantages of streamlining three events are:
 - increase the impact of the event
 - reach a wider and cross-cutting audience
 - raise the institutional profile of the Committee

- ❖ The event will be designed as follows:
 - The first three days will be dedicated to the Opening Session and Civil Society Days
 - The fourth day will be dedicated to ECI Day
 - The last day will feature the Closing Session and Civil Society Prize
- ❖ The event will strive to include civil society organisations and stakeholders operating at the national level as much as possible. The aim is to include all stakeholders at all levels (local, national and European) and bring them together.
- ❖ The overarching topic will be democracy ahead of the European Parliament elections. The next practical steps will be reaching out to partners, including members of the Liaison Group, to create a taskforce and identify more specifically the format and the contents of the event.

Matteo Vespa (ESU)

- ❖ In order to effectively involve local stakeholders and make it possible to organise simultaneous side events in the Member States, it is necessary to reach out to them as early as possible.

7) Liaison Group Dialogue Cycle

Oliver Röpke

- ❖ The new communication strategy of the Committee is aimed at strengthening communication and cooperation with civil society partners, and especially with the members of the Liaison Group. As part of this new strategy and as a means to elevate the profile of this Group:
 - The Committee should make more use of the expertise of the Liaison Group's CSO members, by involving them as experts or advisors for the Committee's opinions.
 - In order to include more CSOs from candidate countries, the idea is to use the connections that the CSO members of the Liaison Group already have with them as well as the contacts that were established during Civil Society Days and the expertise of REX section and honorary enlargement members.
 - Within the Liaison Group it is proposed to establish Dialogue Cycles, namely smaller working groups focusing on some specific topics. The working groups will analyse and discuss the topic and prepare a reflection paper on it that could then be incorporated into the Civil Society Week.
 - There are already a few proposals of topics to be discussed in dialogue cycles, including:
 - An updated definition of "civil society"
 - How to create better synergies between CSOs and the EESC to stand up for democracy in view of the EP 2024 elections
 - In light of the proposal to create a Youth Advisor Council, gather ideas and input to make this idea a reality

Hanna Surmatz (Philea)

- ❖ In view of Civil Society Week, it would be a good idea to prepare the agenda of the event to make it possible to come up with some concrete recommendations. The dialogue cycles could be used to provide a bit of groundwork on the topics that could potentially be featured during Civil Society Week, for example the shrinking civic space.

Giulia Bordin (CEV)

- ❖ Embracing the Committee's suggestion to make 2025 the year of volunteers, it could be useful to use the dialogue cycle to further explore this proposal.

Adrian Licha (ALDA)

- ❖ On 9 June, during ALDA's general assembly, there will be a meeting to reflect on the local dimension of accession for the Balkans, Ukraine and Moldova. ALDA is organising two separate meeting where two different representatives of local democracy agencies from these countries and of EU institutions will be hosted. Liaison Group members are invited to join.

Matteo Vespa (ESU)

- ❖ Reiteration of the importance to focus on youth and young people inclusion in institutional decision- and policy-making processes.

Mathilde Delabie (Cooperatives Europe)

- ❖ In relation to candidate countries, Cooperatives Europe is part of a platform of local CSOs in some candidate countries, namely Moldova, Ukraine and Armenia. It would be good to integrate the work of the Liaison Group with this platform, which could be used to involve CSOs from candidate countries in Civil Society Week next year.

Henri Lourdelle (FERPA)

- ❖ Reiteration that it is important not to overlook the elderly, as they represent 20% of the population and their needs and views matter too.

Brikena Xhomaqi (LLLP)

As there are a lot of ideas, it could be useful to prepare a paper with key points on these proposals in order to further develop dialogue cycles around them.

- ❖ The co-chair also suggested starting a first dialogue cycle on the definition of civil society organisations.

Mr Röpke, EESC President, agreed.

8) Citizens' Panels and deliberative processes, by Camille Dobler, Missions Publiques, and Constantin Schäfer, Ifok

- ❖ **Introductory remarks by Brikena Xhomaqi, Director of Lifelong Learning Platform (LLLP)**
 - The purpose of this discussion is to explore ways in which CSOs can be engaged more and what role they can play in a democracy.
 - The conversation will focus on the role of citizens' panels as well

Camille Dobler, Missions Publiques

- ❖ Citizens' panels are one example of deliberative democracy tools among many. They can be considered equivalent to citizens' assemblies. While there are various forms of citizens' panels, they all have some *common basic features*:

- The composition of these panels needs to be varied and stratified. Therefore, members are picked randomly from different groups of people
- Rotation of the members of the panels needs to be ensured
- During citizens' panels' sessions there is alternation between experts Q&A and a deliberative process within a smaller group
- The end product of citizens' panels is a recommendation, which usually is voted upon
- There needs to be a follow-up to (even though in practice it is not common)

Citizens' panels are used to *increase the legitimacy of government policies in democratic institutions*. Since the early 2020s, however, citizens' panels have started to be used as a means to legitimise politics per se and not just policies. This is something to avoid, as these panels are ill-suited to solve the legitimacy crisis of politics and EU institutional decision-making. Therefore, it must be clear what citizens' panels are for.

- ❖ Some shortcomings of citizens' panels need to be considered in order to carefully consider how they can be effectively used and for what purposes. The biggest shortcoming of these panels is that they have difficulty in connecting with the larger public. With a few exceptions, there has been poor connection between the people actively involved in the panels and the general public not participating in them. Hence, **any future cooperation of EU institutions and citizens' panels needs to find ways to embed them in something better**. This can be done with the Liaison Group, which offers a proper setting to allow citizens' panels to link with a larger public. Furthermore, people prefer citizens' panels to be influential but not binding. **Thus, the EESC and other EU institutions should find a way to empower citizens' panels without making them binding**.

Constantin Schäfer, Ifok

- ❖ The strength of citizens' panels is that they manage to bring people together, without polarising conflicts so as to make recommendations reflecting other people's expectations and life experiences. Citizens' panels also have the potential to bridge the gap between citizens and politicians.
- ❖ Mr Schäfer addressed the question on the role of CSOs in the context of citizens' panels. There are seven stages of CSOs' involvement in such panels:
 1. Design of the panel and identification of the topic to be addressed: the thematic question of the panel must be framed in such a way as to allow common citizens to answer it. It should not be either too broad or too technical
 2. As members of advisory committees providing citizens on the panel with information and knowledge about the topic at issue
 3. As speakers at panel sessions. In previous citizens' panels at the European Commission academics would participate as speakers, but it is important to also include CSOs to provide different opinions and perspective on the subject matter of the panel. In this way, it would be possible to find a common ground and come up with a solution shared by a large majority
 4. During the review of the draft recommendations
 5. As observers to ensure transparency of the panels
 6. In the follow-up phase to ensure that the recommendations are enacted and to monitor the impact of the panels
 7. Expanding the outreach of citizens' panels and raising awareness about their existence

Luca Jahier, president of the EESC European Semester Group

- ❖ Mr Jahier expressed some perplexity and called for caution. There is a huge risk of following "*la mode*" without reflecting on the boomerang effect that could emerge. Mr Jahier underlined that the issue is with the delivery of impactful outcomes. As expectations are created, there is a need to ensure proper follow-up.
- ❖ Mr Jahier stressed the importance of avoiding fragmentation and of ensuring that consultations have a structure when they occur. A hub should be designed to provide a well-structured forum for consultations.
- ❖ The suggestion is also to launch an annual process co-managed by the EESC and the CoR, local authorities and citizens' panels to focus on shared priorities making sure that it will have both an impact and follow-up.

Alexandrina Najmowicz (ECF)

- ❖ The blooming of citizens' panels – even if they actually flourish at the local level – risks becoming a "citizens-washing" exercise. The Conference on the Future of Europe started with the best intentions, but for CSOs it was frustrating as they felt overshadowed.
- ❖ Spaces for deliberation are needed and citizens' panels are one way of doing it, but it is also important to consider the relation between participatory democracy and deliberative democracy.
- ❖ As for the outcomes of citizens' panels, the question to be addressed is whether the aim is to ensure they have a direct influence on policies or rather if they are an opportunity for the institutions to get a taste of what civil society's stance on some issues is.

Seámus Boland, president of Group III

- ❖ The weakness that was made very clear during the Conference on the Future of Europe is that CSOs tend to be excluded.
- ❖ Civil society and trade unions need to work very hard to get to have their say in the system, but civil society is very much part of the system of the EESC and this needs to be acknowledged.

Mikael Leyi (Solidar)

- ❖ There is a conceptual misunderstanding when it comes to presenting the experience of citizens' panels. It is as if for the first time there is an opportunity to listen to the voice of citizens. But this is oblivious of the fact that CSOs are made up of citizens who have taken a concrete stance to organise themselves. Some of them have also joined or built EU level federations to take part in decision-making processes and have their voices heard by EU Institutions.
- ❖ It is paramount to reinforce links with civil society organisations and strengthen civil dialogue rather than looking for other venues to engage with citizens.

Philippe Seidel (AGE)

- ❖ As a membership-based organisation, most of the funds of AGE come from its members and from the EU Commission. Many local and national organisations do not have enough money to fund their Secretariat in Brussels because they are involved in providing services at the local level of their constituencies. The point is that CSOs need resources and they do not often receive support from their government. Therefore, involving CSOs in citizens' panels entails providing them with the resources necessary to participate.

Antje Gersteiner, Group I

- ❖ The difference between policies and politics is fundamental and the frustration on the Conference on the Future of Europe was rooted in the fact that the Parliament seemed to use citizens' panels as a tool for election campaigning. Rather, talks on contents need to be prioritised.
- ❖ Ms Gersteiner also asked two questions:
 - How can representativeness be guaranteed through random selection of people participating in citizens' panels?
 - How can the EESC connect with citizens in a broad sense and how useful are digital tools in this?

Oliver Röpke, EESC President

- ❖ While the President acknowledged the criticism, he also suggested a way to move forward. In his view, the EESC is in a position to be a bridge between civil society and EU institutions and there should be no fear to resort to additional elements of participatory democracy.
- ❖ Citizens' panels can complement the function of the EESC in enhancing participatory democracy.
- ❖ The suggestions to have more structure in the way EESC carries out consultations have been welcomed and the President said that the EESC could become the hub for structured citizens engagement and consultations.
- ❖ EU elections can be a good opportunity to have a stronger liaison with citizens and make sure that there are no counterproductive elements.

Matteo Vespa (ESU)

- ❖ The idea of the EESC being a hub for consultations with citizens and CSOs is very promising. However, it is also necessary to figure out the place of such deliberative democracy within the institutional framework.
- ❖ When it comes to involving stakeholders, the question arises, for instance, of who decides which stakeholders are going to be involved in the process.

Ingeborg Niestroy (SDG Watch)

- ❖ In representative democracy, there are political parties and there is negotiation and competition. The same style is often adopted by civil society organisations when they come together in multistakeholder bodies, like the EESC. The more this process is institutionalised, the more this style prevails. However, there is also another style of decision-making based on consensus-building via debate. This style prevails in settings such as citizens' panels and it is an additional and complementary element to any institutional form of decision-making.

Hanna Surmatz, Philea

- ❖ It is important to also recall Article 11 as a norm able to back new participatory structures and elements. As such, a review of Article 11 could lead to more participation.
- ❖ Citizens' panels can be a complementary tool to the participation of CSOs in decision-making but their embedding in deliberations should occur in such a manner as to make sure that CSOs also participate in these panels, together with policy-makers and academia.

Carlotta Besozzi, Civil Society Europe

- ❖ Citizens' panels are a good tool that needs to be used and carried forward in a structured manner and as part of a general approach to participatory democracy.

- ❖ It is also necessary to develop a methodology and to ensure transparency in the choice of the experts to involve in the panel.

Constantin Schäfer, Ifok

- ❖ Representativity is different from representation. Citizens' panels do not represent citizens of the EU. There is still room for improvement in terms of representativity. In fact, even though citizens are randomly selected to be part of the panel, only those who are really interested take part in it. As such, only the views of some are represented in the panel.
- ❖ There need to be criteria to select experts. In previous panels at the Commission there were "knowledge committees", but the members of such committees were chosen by the Commission itself. As such, solutions should be found to guarantee that these knowledge committees have more independence.
- ❖ Citizens' panels should also be better tied with other instruments of participatory democracy that already exist, e.g. the ECI.

Camille Dobler, Missions Publiques

- ❖ The success and the usefulness of citizens' panels really depend on the goals that need to be achieved.
- ❖ Digital tools guarantee more participation and may be very useful to mobilise people and reach more people. Nonetheless, they are not a tool for deliberation.
- ❖ The EESC would be the perfect hub for citizens' panels and it could provide them with a very powerful setting even if not binding.

Brikena Xhomaqi, Director of Lifelong Learning Platform (LLLP)

- ❖ **Closing remarks**
 - The conversation on citizens' panels and how to embed them in the work of the EESC could continue in dialogue cycles.
 - A European strategy and a structure to implement citizens' panels need to be developed.
 - Citizens' panels can complement the work of the Liaison Group and the EESC.

Oliver Röpke, EESC President

- ❖ **Closing remarks**
 - The President reiterated the willingness to work together with the Liaison Group and thanked the speakers for their contributions.
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LIST OF PARTICIPANTS
(in alphabetical order)

EESC members:

List of members			
Mr/Ms	Section/Group	Present	Remotely
Seámus BOLAND	Gr. III	x	
Pietro F. DE LOTTO	CCMI	x	
Antje GERSTEINER (<i>for Stefano Mallia</i>)	Gr. I	x	
Louise GRABO	SMO	x	
Luca JAHIER	ESG	x	
Dragica MARTINOVIĆ DŽAMONJA (<i>for Dimitris Dimitriadis</i>)	REX	x	
Baiba MILTOVIČA	TEN	x	
Sandra PARTHIE	INT	11.30-12.00	
Aurel Laurentiu PLOSCEANU	VP Comm.	x	
Christophe QUAREZ (<i>for Cinzia Del Rio</i>)	SOC	--	
Maurizio REALE	SDO	x	
Oliver RÖPKE	President	x	
Peter SCHMIDT	NAT	x	
Lucie STUDNIČNÁ	Gr. II	x	
Carlos Manuel TRINDADE	LMO	--	
Ioannis VARDAKASTANIS	ECO	x	

Andris GOBINS

x

Members of civil society organisations:

Mr/Ms	Organisation	Present	Remotely
Ian Pritchard	ACE		x
Philippe Seidel	AGE	x	
Adrien Licha	ALDA	x	
Lars Ebert	CAE		x
Giulia Bordin	CEV	x	
Matilde Delabie	Cooperatives Europe	x	
Silvia Demofonti	ECAS	x	
Alexandrina Najmowicz	ECF	x	
Sonia Goicoechea	EEB		x
Maja Bobic	EMI	x	
Federico Terreni	EMI	x	
Renate Heinisch	EPA		x
Matteo Vespa	ESU	x	
Samir Cheriaa	EVBB		x

Henri Lourdelle	FERPA	x	
Damiano Rinaldi	IUT	x	
Brikena Xhomaqi	LLLP, LG co-chair	x	
Andrea Lapegna	LLLP	x	
Hanna Surmatz	Philea	x	
Eric Taguem	R.E.D.		x
Ingeborg Niestroy	SDG Watch	x	
Sarah De Heusch	SEE		x
Paula Dediego	SEE		x
Riccardo Rossella	Social Platform		x
Elisa Gambardella	Solidar	x	
Mikael Leyi	Solidar	x	
Alexandre Météreau	UEF		x
Nataša Vistrička	UIPI	x	

Apologies:

Mathias Maucher	SSE
Dirk Bochar	Engineers Europe
Zuzana Konradova	Eurochild

Guests:

Ms	Camille DOBLER	Missions Publiques
Ms	Salomé SAÏAH	
Mr	Constantin SCHÄFER	Ifok
Ms	Carlotta BESOZZI	Civil Society Europe

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Ms	Erika PAULÍNOVÁ	CSS Unit
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Mr	Alexander KLEINIG	Dir. D
Ms	Ewa HACZYK	Dir. D
Ms	Marie-Laurence DRILLON	INT
Ms	Paola GOSIO	Cabinet
Ms	Chloé LAHOUSSE	SG Secretariat
Ms	Catlin LHOEST	Gr. III (remote)
Mr	Charles MANOURY	Cabinet
Ms	Leila REITER	Cabinet
Ms	Fausta PALOMBELLI	Gr. III (remote)