

Liaison Group – Civil Society Organisations only

Minutes of the hybrid meeting on

28 September 2023, 10.30-12.30, room JDE 63

Agenda topics

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Welcome and updates by Brikena Xhomaqi, co-chair of the Liaison Group

Brikena Xhomaqi welcome members and guest speakers and gave a recap of activities on behalf of the LG:

- **Revision of LG Operating Rules by a CSO working group to improve transparency and processes.** Updated rules will be shared asap to be discussed in the Full LG meeting in December (new date: 4 December, 11.00-13.00).
- **Dialogue Cycle.** The working groups focused on two topics – (i) definition of Civil Society, and (ii) Citizens' panels which now has a new focus, namely Civil Society panels. The reflection papers are advancing well and will be shared before the next meeting.
- EESC Opinion on "Strengthening civil dialogue and participatory democracy in the EU, a path forward": Brikena Xhomaqi has been appointed expert for the rapporteur (Pietro Barbieri, Gr III). The first Study Group meeting and a hearing, to which Alexandrina Najmowicz (European Civic Forum) was invited, took place in September.
- **Gabriella Civico (CEV) was a speaker at the September EESC Plenary** in the debate on the EESC Opinion on *Civil society support and funding in the area of fundamental rights, the rule of law and democracy*. The Opinion was shared with the CSOs.
- **As Co-Chair, Brikena Xhomaqi met with the Section Presidents** (18 September) and presented the work of the LG. The priorities now are (1) to raise awareness about the CSOs' work and (2) to foster cooperation with the Sections. The Secretariat is following up.

- Remarks on the importance of **the way of working in the run-up to the EU elections**.
- **Brikena Xhomaqi** will be a speaker at the EESC's 9th Western Balkans Civil Society Forum (19-20 October).

EESC Opinion on Strengthening civil dialogue and participatory democracy in the EU, a path forward – requested by the Belgium presidency.

Welcome to the rapporteur, Pietro Barbieri, and the representative of the future Belgian Presidency of the EU, Benjamin Robinet.

Pietro Barbieri presented the Opinion. He stressed the choice of Brikena Xhomaqi as the expert because of the great value of the LG and his willingness to integrate as far as possible the work of the LG in this opinion.

State-of-play:

- The study group focused on **two challenges**: Civil Dialogue of CSOs and vulnerable citizens' participation in the EU decision-making process.
- **A first draft** on the basis of the EESC Compendium already stated **elements** by the EESC, civil society organisations, and scholars. The following elements were mentioned and discussed:
 - A definition of civil society should be given to avoid contradictions from different sources (Treaty of Nice or UN). This concept will be defined by the LG Dialogue Cycle Working Group 1 (LG DC WG1).
 - A chapter on *the way forward* should be added. A main concern is *how* to forward civil dialogue.
 - Elements proposed: annual civil society scoreboard, civil society report, observatory on the state of civil society, civil society coordination, clear definition of civil society.
- Some **controversial issues** are activities of the field and interest of civil society, social dialogue, and accreditation.
- The **scope** is how to impact decision-making process at EU and national level.

Benjamin Robinet introduced the context of the opinion immersed in the upcoming Belgian Presidency and EP election. The Belgian Presidency will thus play an important honest broker role with a dual mission: (1) to finalize the ongoing files 2019-2024 legislature and (2) to prepare the post 2024 period and its strategic agenda. He remarked the following points:

- 16 year-old Belgians will vote for the first time in the elections.
- The EESC's consultative work is fundamental, and therefore, the 11 exploratory opinions requested by the Presidency.
- The Presidency expects stronger connections between participatory methods and intermediate bodies including social partners and CSOs, horizontality and synergies/ collaboration between citizens' panels, union consultation, social dialogue and citizens' consultations.

Brikena Xhomaqi opened the floor for CSOs' expectations, questions and views.

Hanna Surmatz (PHILEA) expressed satisfaction with the development of the opinion and the willingness of the Belgium presidency, and pointed out the following:

- The importance to consider the work done in the context of the CoFoE on better implementation of Article 11, such as the Action Plan drafted by the LG.
- The need for an inclusive definition of CSOs contributing to the public benefit.
- The dual approach of civil dialogue (EU and national level) as they influence each other.

Replying to the above comments and question by Hannah Surmatz, on ways the CSOs' can provide input into the opinion:

- **Pietro Barbieri** stressed the importance of reporting what works and what does not, opening the possibility of implementing what CSOs want within the institutions.
- **Benjamin Robinet** agreed on the need to integrate the Member States in the discussion.

Replying to the remark by **Gabriella Civico (CEV)** on the volunteering dimension of civil dialogue and questions on the amount of (formal and informal) volunteering within the opinion scope and the possibility to make 2025 the European Year of Volunteers (as supported in the CoFoE, Civil Society Europe and EESC conclusions):

- **Pietro Barbieri** stressed the importance of volunteering within civil dialogue and remarked its involvement in participation in democracy and citizens' everyday life.
- **Benjamin Robinet** explained the dual dimension of volunteering as a cornerstone for society and self-development, and thus could be included through CSOs' representative bodies and citizens' consultation. He did not raise expectations on 2025 Year of Volunteers since it is a matter that depends on the Hungarian EU Presidency as well.

Replying to **Dirk Jarré (EURAG)**'s questions on the (1) possibility to incorporate civil dialogue into the Treaties at the same rank as social dialogue is, and (2) the future of a European status for CSOs,

- **Pietro Barbieri** expressed the difficulties of an ambitious proposal such as a change in the treaties, and emphasized the importance to balance ideas with the Belgian presidency. He also flagged that definition and accreditation go together.
- **Benjamin Robinet** did not raise any expectation on this matter.

Replying to **Antonella Valmorbida (ALDA)**'s question on the level of maturity of citizens' participation in decision-making and participatory democracy in an innovative sense, and her observation on the political parties' resistance to engage with CSOs, as the latter are perceived as stealing/ capturing many activists from political parties,

- **Pietro Barbieri** disagreed that the problem was CSOs capturing activists, but that it was rather a decrease in citizens' participation in political parties. He added that the opinion cannot aim to solve problems about the way people participate in democracy.

Hanna Surmatz (PHILEA) expanded on the issue of stealing constituencies and raised the idea of interesting policy development to trigger direct engagement.

Replying to the question raised by **Martina Corti (Solidar)** about the inclusion of social policy in the opinion's scope of civil society,

- **Pietro Barbieri** said that he agreed and that he would argue in favour of this inclusion.

Replying to **Sarada Das (CPME)**'s question on the considerations of the Council of Europe's role concerning the involvement of civil society,

- **Pietro Barbieri** indicated that the Council of Europe's content and processes serve as a basis.
- **Brikena Xhomaqi** added that the Council of Europe serves as a basis for the definition of civil society.

Replying to **Brikena Xhomaqi**'s question on the expectations of the Belgian EU Presidency to go beyond the exercise of citizens' panels in the opinion considering the warning to not overuse them,

Benjamin Robinet explained there are expectations to see the question of citizens' panels addressed and understand what framework should be established to better provide and consult citizens and CSOs (as they represent citizens as well).

Replying to **Andris Gobins'** (EESC member, Gr. III) question on the Belgian presidency's expectations on interinstitutional and horizontal dialogue in the opinion, **Benjamin Robinet** shared the willingness of Belgium to foster this dialogue.

Presentation of Civil Society Week 2024

State of play on the Civil Society Week (CSW) following the meeting between LG Task Force (volunteering CSOs), ECI stakeholder, and staff:

- Date: 4-7 March
- Topic: Rise up for Democracy!
- Outcome: recommendations drawn from the week will feed into the EESC's Resolution for the EU Elections.
- All rooms on floors 5 and 6 in the main building available.
- Taskforce: 11 CSOs (ALDA, CEV, ESU, ECAS, EEB, ESU, PHILEA, Solidar, EVBB, Volonteuropa, and UEF). More CSOs to join the taskforce?
- A maximum of 10 workshops can be organised on different topics. The list of topics so far proposed will be shared by the LG Secretariat, and remains open for more ideas (like inclusion, equality, LGTBQI+ etc). So far suggested:
 - 'citizenwashing' (EEB).
 - Success factors for e-democracy participatory initiatives (ECIs, crowdsourcing legislation, participatory budgeting): horizontal session LG-ECI stakeholders on 4 March PM ECAS, Democracy International, CEV and Volonteuropa.
 - ECAS: Disinformation – link to Journalists' seminar?

- EVBB: Youth Civic Engagement and VET; Innovation and Democracy in VET (including artificial intelligence issues); Digital Tools for Civic Engagement
 - UEF, ALDA, JEF: idea-generation workshop on the Treaty change, local and citizen engagement, and the European elections.
 - CSE would like to present its civil society SOTEU
- Timeline: the launch of a first Save the Date for #CivSocWeek is envisioned to be ready mid-October. Ideas for workshops should be submitted by 15 October at the latest.

Silvia de Mofonti (ECAS) proposed two initiatives on (1) Digital transformation leaving no one behind in relation to the State of the Union Report, and (2) disinformation.

Sotiria Tsalamani (EVBB) suggested a new topic on innovation and democracy with a focus on education (vocation and training), and the changes of AI on democracy.

Hanna Surmatz (PHILEA) proposed another workshop on enabling space for civil society and cross-border as a tool to engage.

Replying **Dirk Bochar (Engineering Europe)**'s request of a CSW program draft, **Karen Serafini** explained the preliminary stage of the CSW due to its complexity streamlining five flagship events. *Brikena Xhomaqi opened the floor for suggestions for cultural elements, outstanding keynote speakers (opening and closing), and moderators. As an example for the cultural event, she mentioned the #EUSuperGirl: [Madeleine Kay](#) (UK), and the possibility of a film projection of [reel borders](#).*

Replying to the question raised by **Hanna Surmatz (PHILEA)** on whether the opinion will be ready before the CSW and comments on using it as a basis for participatory democracy, and inviting the Belgian presidency to the event,

- **Brikena Xhomaqi** affirmed the opinion is planned to be adopted in December and that the involvement of the Belgian EU Presidency is already considered.

Brikena Xhomaqi also added that:

- She will discuss with President Röpke how to involve the LG in the EU elections work, with the CSW being a great moment for consultation and discussion with EESC Members on the upcoming elections, new Parliament and new Commission.
- All the above-mentioned documents will be shared with the CSOs and follow up proposals should be forwarded to Karen Serafini.

LG Work programme

Brikena Xhomaqi introduced the need for a work programme according to the LG operating rules:

- She invited the members to share their ideas for the next Dialogue Cycle in 2024 and suggested to create a task force on revising the *Action plan on the civil dialogue* (2018).
- All ideas should be forward to the LG Secretariat/ Karen Serafini.
- A proposal will be drafted and discussed in the next LG meeting.

Silvia De Mofonti (ECAS) suggested two ideas: (1) how to actively move forward more inclusivity to ensure access and representation; and (2) how CSOs can advocate for the adoption of decisions or recommendations/opinion guidelines arising from any form of civil dialogue.

Hanna Surmatz (PHILEA) recalled and suggested the strong call for a European strategy on civil society formulated in the Civil Society Days 2023. She also proposed an activity on the topic with other CSOs (CSE and CEV).

Membership requests

Brikena Xhomaqi explained the state-of-play of less active members and new or to be expected membership requests (CECOP, Samaritan International, ESN, Transparency International, and Generation Climate Europe). Decisions will be taken in the full LG meeting in December.

Brikena Xhomaqi opened the floor for suggestions on potential candidate members to be contacted. She also introduced a discussion on potential membership of LG CSOs' members.

Dirk Bochar (Engineers Europe) said that the LG is a space where European organisations are represented.

Antonella Valmorbida (ALDA) suggested a case-by-case evaluation should take place.

Any other business

Liaising CSOs with EESC rapporteurs on future opinions.

- **New procedure** (implemented last time): CSOs are invited to flag to the LG Secretariat expertise they have related to the topics of upcoming opinions. Then, the LG Secretariat liaises rapporteur with these CSOs.

LG members agreed on this new procedure.

Replying to **Dirk Bochar (Engineers Europe)**'s comment on non-response to his contributions for previous opinions sent to the rapporteur, **Brikena Xhomaqi** and **Karen Serafini** reaffirmed the new way of proceeding to liaise EESC rapporteurs with CSOs expertise would probably counteract to absence of replies.

Hanna Surmatz (PHILEA) suggested inviting the opinion's rapporteur as a speaker to a LG meeting if the opinion is of general interest for the members. **Brikena Xhomaqi** agreed and mentioned the

initial idea to invite the Democracy package rapporteur to a meeting, once the Commission publishes the Defence of Democracy Package and the EESC work on the opinion can continue.

Hanna Surmatz emphasized the relevance of the Democracy package Opinion for the LG, specifying different consultation channels that circulated among CSOs and suggested including this topic in the CSW.

Karen Serafini mentioned the option for CSOs to organise a side-event on this topic to be organised right after the section meeting in which the opinion will be adopted.

- This side-event will count with the participation of some Section members, the rapporteur and LG members.
- She expressed the suitability of this idea for the *Democracy package* once it resumes and the positive outcome a similar event organised by UEF on SLAPP had last year.

Explanation on the Council recommendations on social economy framework conditions and European Cross Border Association proposal

Hanna Surmatz (PHILEA) explained both items' state-of-play, flagging their relevance for LG members, specifically considering the cross-border scope of their members' activities. She invited LG members to take part in the Commission's ongoing public consultations.

1. The Council recommendations on the social economy framework conditions were published.

- SEE has analysed them and suggested a call to action for Member States regarding cross-border philanthropy taxation to better implement the non-discrimination principle when there are public benefit donations across borders, make them tax deductible and reconsider the treatment for public benefit organizations. European Cross Border Association proposal (EBAR): published on 6 September.
- The initial proposal of Sergey Lagodinsky (MEP) has shifted into a concrete proposal without European legal form, but for the introduction of national forms of European cross-border associations - which does not include minimum standards.
- Public consultations are open, and events have been organized for the exchange of views. Consultation is now focused on associations, but foundations will also be able to formulate an ECBA.
- **Brikena Xhomaqi** and **Hanna Surmatz (PHILEA)**: recalled that **Karen Serafini** already circulated the event info on 4 October

Natasha Maes (Civil Society Europe) explained the SSE's involvement on the ECBA consultation and on behalf of Carlotta Besozzi (CSE), invited other CSOs to reach out in case of questions. She also flagged the Civil Society State of the Union report (September) demanding for an interinstitutional civil dialogue agreement, among other demands, and invited CSOs to contact her if interested.

Attendance list

CSO	Mr/Ms	Present	Remotely
AGE	Philippe Seidel		x
ALDA	Adrien Licha	x	
	Antonella Valmorbida	x	
CEV	Gabriella Civico	x	
COFACE	Eirini Vlachopoulou	x	
CPME	Sarada Das	x	
ECAS	Silvia Demofonti	x	
EEB	Sonia Goicoechea	x	
EMI	Maja Bobic		x
Engineers Europe	Dirk Bochar	x	
	Inès Crauwels	x	
EPA	Renate Heinisch		x
ESU	Tanguy Guibert		x
EURAG	Dirk Jarré		x
EVBB	Sotiria Tsalamani	x	
LLL	Brikena Xhomaqi (Co-president)	x	
	Andrea Lapegna	x	
R.E.D.	Eric Martial Taguem		x
PHILEA	Hanna Surmatz	x	
SDG Watch Europe	Jeffrey Moxom	x	
SEE	Paula De Diego Olmos	x	
Solidar	Martina Corti	x	
	Elisa Gambardella	x	
UEF	Alexandre Metereau	x	
UIPI	Eva Saring	x	
Volonturope	Amer Habayba	x	
YFJ	Anna Blackwell		x

Guest speakers:

Mr	Benjamin Robinet	SPF Affaires étrangères, BE
Mr	Pietro Barbieri	EESC member

Observer:

Ms	Nastassia Maes	Civil Society Europe
Mr	Andris Gobins	EESC member

EESC staff:

Karen Serafini	CSS Unit
Michael Heaslip	CSS Unit
Elena Perez	CSS Unit

Catlin Lhoest	Group III secretariat
Layla Reiter	Member of Cabinet