SHADOWS OVER EUROPE: Reflecting on two Years of war
FOREWORD

Challenges in 2024

Séamus BOLAND (IE)
President, Civil Society Organisations’ Group

As we enter February, we are reminded that nearly two years have passed since Russia illegally invaded Ukraine, a sovereign nation. This needless act remains a major threat to the European Union and to Europe as a continent. Our fears therefore remain the same. The shock caused by the outbreak of war has forced the EU to reaffirm its commitment to democracy and to overhaul many of its production chains in terms of energy, food and general manufacturing. In the past two years, too many people on both sides have died. The people of Ukraine are getting used to living in a state of war. Russia continues to pursue its objectives, despite the fact that its president completely underestimated Ukraine’s resilience and Europe’s determination.

There is no sign of peace. Meanwhile, civil society organisations continue to provide practical assistance in the war zones to the multitude of refugees and engage in various forms of activism. Sadly, it seems that this war will be lengthy. Many people and families will suffer needlessly. People in the countries located close to the war zone are getting their teeth, their hard-fought freedoms in serious danger. The question remains: how many more people must die before we give peace a chance?

At the end of January, together with Civil Society Europe we sent an open letter to the three main EU institutions involved in EU decision making, urging them to take real measures to implement the Treaty provisions for an open, transparent and regular dialogue with civil society in all policy areas. The letter gained the support of 156 signatories from 26 Member States. The signatories include 39 European networks, 85 national organisations and 60 Members of the EESC’s Civil Society Organisations’ Group. The letter suggests a new approach to building a robust civil dialogue process. This process must involve the millions of people who are connected to civil society organisations and who are therefore strongly linked to the many issues that affect people’s lives. The knowledge and expertise of civil society organisations can ensure that EU policies in all fields and on all socio-economic issues are more targeted and effective. The signatories of our open letter call for structured civil dialogue to complement social dialogue, with due regard for the social partners’ prerogatives in social dialogue. The Conference on the Future of Europe was an attempt to find ways to connect Europeans to the political establishment, the premise being that the gap between the two should not widen. Building on the Conference’s recommendations and implementing the Treaty provisions, the EU institutions must recognise, involve and support civil society as part of a structured civil dialogue.

In this election year, voters in the EU will consider what type of Union they want. Polls on citizens’ voting intentions confirm that political parties on the extreme left and right side of the spectrum are gaining real ground. Part of the solution is to redefine the structures that facilitate dialogue with civil society organisations at national and EU level. Failure to do so would accept that policy makers have rejected civil society organisations and disregarded their experience and knowledge of real issues affecting people. Sadly, this would mean that millions of people may turn to other political parties.

So, 2024 will be a year of elections that could reshape the geopolitical world. The Civil Society Organisations’ Group will focus on pursuing the objectives outlined in our work programme, which make it abundantly clear that poverty and socio-economic inclusion are closely tied to the health of our democratic structures. By voting, we can either close and bolt the doors to democracy, or open them wide.

Séamus Boland

1. EESC, Civil Society Organisations’ Group, Open Letter, https://www.europa.eu/!yG8b6t
SHADOWS OVER EUROPE: REFLECTING ON TWO YEARS OF WAR

For your freedom and ours

Krzysztof BALON (PL)
Vice-President, Civil Society Organisations’ Group
President, Programming Council of the Working Community of Associations of Social Organisations (WRZOS)

In February 2022, a non-governmental organisation near Lutsk in Ukraine, the Dubno Local Development Agency¹, put forward a project for young Ukrainian volunteers to make a film about the EU circular economy². After a few days, it became clear that our plans and dreams had to be postponed. Instead, our partners received a financial donation and several days later I got a precise account of what had happened to the transferred funds: they had been used to purchase equipment for a local military unit.

We all know what happened next... Citizens of Poland and other EU countries, and the organisations they represent, have taken action to support millions of war refugees from Ukraine, while providing material assistance to Ukrainian organisations. This support is still needed, but exchanges of experience with Ukrainian grassroots organisations are becoming increasingly important despite Russia’s ongoing aggression. That’s why the European Economic and Social Committee’s (EESC) Civil Society Organisations’ Group should become a forum for cooperation between our Members’ and Ukrainian organisations on the path to Ukraine joining the EU.

How such cooperation might look in practice is illustrated by the Polish-German-Ukrainian Expert Group Intergenerational Solidarity, which has been up and running since 2022 and has members from NGOs, universities and ministries from all three countries. Two EESC Civil Society Organisations’ Group Members are involved in its work: Andreas Kruse and myself. For the time being, meetings take place alternately in Poland and Germany. However, our Ukrainian friends are keen to host the Expert Group in Ukraine as soon as possible “following victory”.

“The victory of Ukraine – the victory of all of Europe – is a victory that motivates, inspires and strengthens,” said Volodymyr Zelenskyy of the European Council’s decision to open accession negotiations with Ukraine on 14 December 2023. This victory will be final only if Ukrainian civil society becomes a fully-fledged partner of the national authorities and the EU in shaping social policy, strengthening democracy and the rule of law, and defending civil rights and freedoms. That’s why we can and must help.

Send weapons!

Jan DIRX (NL)
Vice-President, Civil Society Organisations’ Group
Liaison Officer, Groene11 (Green11), Dutch nature and environmental organisations

“The world will not be destroyed by those who do evil, but by those who stand by and do nothing.” Albert Einstein’s wise statement takes on a certain urgency as we reach a crucial phase of the war that Russia has been waging against Ukraine for two years. Fatigue is setting in in the West: should we continue to support Ukraine?

The answer to that question can only be a wholehearted YES. Indeed, the war in Ukraine is much more than a regional conflict, where an authoritarian leader believes that he can take over a neighbouring country whatever the cost. It is also the ultimate proof that the optimistic notion that, after the fall of the Iron Curtain¹, the whole of Europe would move towards democracy based on the rule of law with recognition of human rights, was and is false. Putin’s war shows how essential it is that democracies realise that freedom cannot be taken for granted, but must be continuously defended. And not only in words, but also, if it comes to it, in deeds. That is why Putin’s Russia must be defeated in Ukraine and in such a way that nobody at the top in Russia dares to think about possibly going to war against the “West”. And above all, let nobody here in the West think that maintaining good relations with Putin would be a guarantee of peace. That is fake news!

Let us also not lose sight of the fact that this is a war in which hundreds of thousands of soldiers are fighting on a front line stretching to over a thousand kilometres, with hundreds of thousands of casualties. A regional conflict??

It is therefore crucial that Ukraine can continue to rely on the support of Western states in Europe and across the Atlantic. This is why we must remain prepared to send money and weapons, as this is not only about Ukraine, but also about the values on which our European Union is built: freedom, the rule of law, and human rights.

Polish-German-Ukrainian Expert Group Intergenerational Solidarity, Kraków, PL, 1 June 2021 © Krzysztof Balon

Send weapons!

Jan Dirx © EESC

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3. Post on X (former Twitter) by Volodymyr Zelenskyy, https://x.com/ZelenskyyUa/status/1735354038256808018/s=20
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Almost two years have passed since Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which resulted in the greatest security crisis Europe has seen since the end of the Cold War. The situation on the front is increasingly unstable and the prospect of Donald Trump being elected US President¹ risks drastically reducing funding to support this heroic nation in its unequal fight against an imperial aggressor. Undoubtedly, if Russia wins the war, it will be able to rebuild its forces and attack further countries. This time it would most likely breach the EU’s borders and we would be faced with the prospect of a devastating battle.

Alongside its war efforts, Ukraine is striving to join the European family. It has submitted its application for EU membership a few days after the invasion and was granted candidate status in June 2022. Accession negotiations were opened in December 2023 – a historic step towards integration.

Ukraine is facing both external and internal threats. On the one hand, Russia continues to destabilise the east of the country, making its move towards the EU more difficult. On the other hand, Ukraine has to overcome the resistance of some political forces and interests that oppose reforms. The Ukrainian people need determination and unity to achieve their European dream.

In the face of these challenges, civil society has played an important role in defending Ukraine’s sovereignty and European aspirations. NGOs have been providing humanitarian, medical and psychological assistance to the victims of the war, but have also been active participants in the reform process and social dialogue. The EU-Ukraine Civil Society Platform², an integral part of the EU-Ukraine³ Association Agreement, has played a crucial role here. The platform has become a unique forum for cooperation between social organisations from both sides to monitor progress on implementing the Agreement and make recommendations to the authorities. It is also a source of knowledge and inspiration for other initiatives working to improve the situation in Ukraine and speed up its integration.

After two years of war we, as representatives of civil society, can be proud to contribute to peace, freedom and democracy. Our commitment is invaluable for Ukraine and can serve as an example for Europe.

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3. EEAS, EU-Ukraine Association Agreement, https://europa.eu/7F肴RD

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Ukrainian civil society has been the key driving force behind a stronger reform agenda

Ołha KOVALSKA
International Advocacy Officer, Anti-corruption Action Centre¹
International Advocacy Officer, International Centre for Ukrainian Victory²

I vividly remember the winter of 2013-14. In the final year of my bachelor’s, I could not help but come to Euromaidan in Kyiv every day. Amidst the despair of the previous years marked by Yanukovych’s dictatorial rule, we suddenly felt freedom, unity and hope for a brighter European future. History was unfolding in front of our eyes.

Since that winter, Ukraine has changed dramatically. Russia’s aggression launched in Ukrainian Crimea and Donbas in 2014 turned into a full-scale genocidal war against Ukraine some eight years later. But even beyond that, today’s Ukraine does not resemble the Ukraine of 2013: back then, we could only dream of a corrupt top official being prosecuted. Nowadays, even a top judge³ or a deputy minister⁴ in Ukraine can’t avoid criminal liability for bribery or embezzlement.

It’s not new to say that every country has corruption, but what matters is whether and how it is exposed and addressed, and corruption scandals in Ukraine leading to criminal cases are clear signs that the system is curing itself. Ukraine goes on with its fight against corruption even amidst extreme existential threat, thanks to its anti-corruption architecture and irreversible changes in the rule of law domain.
For our democracy to survive, the successful practice known as “islands of integrity” (anti-corruption institutions) should be multiplied and scaled up across other sectors, e.g. customs, anti-monopoly, state audit, law enforcement. For this, Ukraine needs firm political and financial support from its partners, mainly the EU, with clear and achievable conditionalities secured by unconditional “anything-Ukraine-needs-to-win” military support. This is the only guarantee of restoring security in Europe.

Since 2014, Ukrainian civil society has been the key driving force behind a stronger reform agenda when Ukraine’s authorities were not resolute enough. Now, already on its steady path to EU accession, we realise that Ukraine just needs to increase the pace of its reforms tenfold to strengthen its resilience and win the war.

War is a time of extreme challenges and existential threat. But it is also a time of opportunity – to finish what started at the Euromaidan. With their strong demand for justice, zero tolerance for corruption and extra high support for EU integration and reforms, Ukrainians are now the EU’s biggest allies. They also expect the EU to be rapid and determined to overcome any internal obstacles to Ukraine’s accession. We have no right to lose momentum while our Armed Forces of Ukraine are giving their lives and heroically fighting the aggressor on new European frontlines of the war between democracy and dictatorship.

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2. International Centre for Ukrainian Victory, https://ukraineric.org/

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Responding to the needs of young Ukrainians in Ireland

Since the latest phase of Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine, Ireland has taken in a very large number of Ukrainians – a particularly high number of refugees considering its distance from Ukraine. A huge number of them were children and young people and services in these areas, particularly those provided by civil society organisations at local community level, have been critical. Overall, the welcome has been an extremely warm one. In mid-2023 a third (32%) of all arrivals from Ukraine (or 27,076 people) were aged 19 or younger.

The voluntary youth sector has been a key local community resource all around the country. Youth Work Ireland is the largest youth organisation in the country. We are made up of 20 local Member Youth Services and a national office. We support our members to deliver an integrated youth services model to young people in their communities.

The activities organised for young Ukrainians by Youth Work Ireland provide safe, single-identity spaces when required, but are almost entirely open to all young people. Ukrainian, Irish and those from other countries. The benefits of including people from other countries and backgrounds are significant. The presence of people from other countries creates space for intercultural work and understanding of integration and the integration process as well as resulting in integration. The starting point for newly arrived Ukrainians is to build on the existing strengths within the Ukrainian community and empower them to support young people. Ukrainian parents are connecting well in many locations with Ukrainian-led youth clubs. A large number of Ukrainian adults have expressed interest in and have begun to undertake leadership training – certified and non-certified. It has been noted that older young Ukrainians are highly capable and able to take on leadership roles and are engaging in structured programmes such as Music Generation. A Ukrainian choir in Galway is another example of self-organising in the community. Likewise, it has been noted that when young Ukrainians engage, they stay engaged.

In conjunction with the Council of Europe, Youth Work Ireland also recently engaged directly with a delegation of youth workers from Ukraine.

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2. Youth Work Ireland, https://www.youthworkireland.ie/
Who is profiting from the war?

The EU is us: let us strengthen sanctions, link development priorities and investors and fight disinformation

Nadija AFANASIEVA
Director, Ukrainian Institute for International Politics (UIIP)
Co-head, EU-Ukraine Civil Society Platform, EESC²

The 700th day of the full-scale invasion has come and gone, despite the prediction that Ukraine would fall in the first week, in February 2022. Ukrainian resilience has been possible thanks to the Ukrainian people, but also thanks to the world’s reaction to this attack. However, the invasion is ongoing and missiles are destroying Ukraine. International responses are still not enough. The recent attacks on Ukraine show that Russia is producing missiles and that the export/import volume is growing in “Russia-friendly” countries, meaning that sanctions are not working as effectively as they should to influence the economy of the terrorist state. Freezing Russian assets is not enough to support Ukraine. Of course there are procedures to follow, but time here is crucial, and concentrating resources would allow Ukraine to reach victory faster.

The only force that can stop the invasion is the Armed Forces of Ukraine. We need to concentrate all support to ensure their capacities. I’m not only talking about weapons, but also support to help veterans during rehabilitation and adaptation. We can learn so much from their unique skills and knowledge.

We need to coordinate the processes connected with the recovery and reconstruction of Ukraine more efficiently with the Ukrainian Government. We need a clear link between the development priorities of Ukrainian regions and the priorities of investors and donors. We don’t even need to wait until victory to develop links with investors. We can implement a preparatory analysis and negotiations with regional and national authorities, identify territory for future constructions and map human resources right now.

One of the tasks of civil society is to educate citizens about their countries and to think critically, teaching them skills against absorbing disinformation provided in mass media. Disinformation is a strong missile which is reaching all EU countries, and our minds and logic are our only defences against it. The recent Il-76 case¹ showed us again how carefully we need to scrutinise sources of information and promote critical thinking when absorbing information about the invasion. Supposed “official” sources, such as Russia’s Ministry of Defence, are used as propaganda to promote messages to destabilise cooperation with Ukraine.

Ukraine’s accession is an opportunity for the EU to eliminate bottlenecks in EU legislation and to improve procedures and the EU administrative approach. The European Economic and Social Committee’s (EESC) initiative to add enlargement candidate members is an effective way to move forward together. The EU is us. We have a clear voice and valuable expertise that will help bring prosperity for all.

¹. Ukrainian Institute for International Politics, https://www.uip.org.ua.uk/

EU enlargement: Civil society representatives from EU candidate countries to join work of EESC from February 2024

The ECM is a landmark initiative by the EESC; a beacon of hope for the candidate countries on their journey to a more prosperous European future. For the first time, this Committee will involve civil society representatives from EU accession countries in our daily advisory work by appointing Enlargement Candidate Members (ECMs). These ECMs will contribute to the drafting process of key opinions, take part in debates and provide perspectives from future EU Member States. They will take part in shaping rules for sectors that will be of vital importance for them, from the common agricultural policy for Ukraine, to the energy security and grid integration for Moldova, sustainable tourism for Montenegro and Albania or air pollution for North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. In turn, EESC opinions will be able to better reflect the challenges and priorities of candidate countries in important policy areas and benefit from their expertise.

What is the political backdrop of this initiative?

In these times of geopolitical instability that we are currently experiencing, it is vital that the EU take every measure possible to promote our democratic values and act as a true geopolitical player. The brutal and illegal Russian war of aggression in Ukraine, the spread of disinformation surrounding elections and the shrinking space in which civil society operates are but a few of the threats we are currently facing. I firmly believe that by strengthening our partnerships and acting as a true civil society gateway for accession countries, the EESC will support and empower them to fight for freedom, democracy and closer integration.

What makes this initiative special?

The EESC’s initiative is truly unique; we are the first EU institution to integrate enlargement partners into our ranks before their accession. It has been warmly welcomed by EU institutions, EU Member States’ representatives, ambassadors, social partners and civil society from all candidate countries. Just before Christmas, we received the European Commission’s political and financial support for the initiative in a letter from President von der Leyen, a pivotal moment that we are deeply grateful for. With the ECM, our house demonstrates its commitment to fostering cooperation with candidate countries, promoting dialogue and enriching our advisory work with diverse perspectives from civil society stakeholders across the EU and beyond.

Why does this initiative matter to Ukraine and the other EU candidate countries?

With the two-year anniversary of Russia’s illegal invasion of Ukraine approaching, we must stand together with our Ukrainian counterparts and demonstrate that our support never stopped. EU enlargement means the spread of democratic values, peace and stability across the continent and the ECM is a giant leap towards this future. For the other accession countries in the Western Balkans and the Eastern Neighbourhood, as well as most recently Georgia, the ECM is vital for learning from the mistakes made in previous enlargement rounds. Civil society is the key to integrating all parts of society in accession countries into the European single market. During our mission to Ukraine in November 2023 with the Civil Society Organisation’s Group President Séamus Boland, we witnessed first-hand how this initiative has been enthusiastically received on the ground. In times of war, concrete initiatives bearing symbolic meaning do matter.
What has been done since 19 September 2023 to make this initiative a reality?

In order to maintain the momentum in the first days of the new year, we launched our call for civil society representatives from EU candidate countries to join our work. The response has been truly remarkable, with numerous applications pouring in. We have now reviewed them and selected the most suitable candidates. I want to pay tribute to our dedicated colleagues in the Committee’s REX Section and in the three groups for their tireless efforts in making this initiative a reality.

During the February EESC plenary session, we will have a dedicated debate and the formal launch of the initiative with high-level guests. Ultimately, our message to candidate countries and EU partners is clear: the EESC is a credible partner that delivers on its commitments. We are steadfast in our dedication to advancing the cause of EU enlargement, fostering stronger bonds and collectively building a more prosperous future.

What are the next steps?

In the coming months, our new ECMs will be invited to take up their roles in our study groups, linked to the Committee’s legislative works. Through their work, the ECMs will be provided with the necessary support in the framework of the enlargement process to make sure they upgrade their socio-economic and democratic systems to reach EU standards.

This is a momentous step for our Committee and I would like to thank all the Members and colleagues for their support. We can all be proud of this initiative.

In Schengen, yet not really

Cristian PÎRVULESCU (RO)
President, permanent group on Immigration and integration, EESC
Honorary president, Pro Democraţia association (APD)
Member of the Board of Directors, Step by Step

On 14 December 2023, at the European Economic and Social Committee’s (EESC) 583rd plenary session, the plenary voted on a declaration in support of the accession of Romania and Bulgaria to the Schengen area. The EESC reiterated its position, also supported by the European Commission and the European Parliament, according to which the two Member States meet all the conditions for accession to the Schengen area, and considers it imperative that the accession formalities be completed quickly. This statement came at a time when conditions for the admission of the two Member States had shown signs of improving:

- just a few days before, the Dutch parliament had shown its support for the accession of Bulgaria to the Schengen area (a year ago, the Netherlands had objected to progress on the rule of law and had voted in the Justice and Home Affairs (JHA) Council against Bulgaria’s accession – these objections were revised after the positive report of the European Commission), with the official announcement being made on 22 December 2023;

- Austria, which had blocked the accession of the two Member States a year before on the grounds that their entry into the Schengen area would facilitate immigration, announced a flexibility in their position on 10 December 2023.

Under these conditions, in its declaration, the EESC welcomes the progress regarding the possible accession of the two Member States to the Schengen area, first at the level of air transport only, and encourages the Spanish Presidency, the Council and the Member States to hold an extraordinary meeting of the JHA Board to complete this procedure.

Finally, on the evening of 30 December, an EU Council Decision was published, which took note of the conclusion of an agreement between Austria, Bulgaria and Romania, and stated that the Schengen acquis would apply to the air and maritime borders of the two Member States from March 2024. However, no date has been proposed regarding land borders. Austria insists that the agreement concluded does not mean that the two Member States are part of the Schengen area; in fact, without a clear date regarding the extension of the agreement to the land area, where 90% of both countries’ transport takes place, they are not really in Schengen.

1. EESC, Enlargement Candidate Members initiative, https://europa.eu/!hH7IYq
2. The EESC’s External Relations Section

COMMENTS ON CURRENT AFFAIRS

In Schengen, yet not really

Cristian Pîrvulescu © EESC

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FEBRUARY 2024
Climate challenges, Baukultur and safety: we need strong solutions at European level

Daniel FÜGENSCHUH
President, Austrian Chamber of Architects and Chartered Engineering Consultants (BKZT)
Member of the Executive Board, Architects’ Council of Europe (ACE)

The open letter was initiated by the Austrian Federal Chamber of Architects and Engineering Consultants (BKZT) and includes specific Civil Society organisations in all policy areas. The open letter was initiated by the Civil Society Organisations’ Group of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) and Civil Society Europe and includes specific proposals for implementation. The letter gained the support of a total of 156 signatories from 26 Member States. The signatories include 39 European networks, 85 national organisations and 60 Members of the EESC’s Civil Society Organisations’ Group.

Four months from now, Europeans will elect a new Parliament. There is a lot at stake – and not only for architects and engineers. The transformation of our society and our economy and the current geopolitical conflicts concern us all.

The outcome of the elections will be crucial for getting the green transition off the ground. The Austrian Federal Chamber of Architects and Engineering Consultants will keep its members informed on the election process and the candidates’ policies regarding issues pertinent to our profession. As a civil society organisation, we think it is our duty to position ourselves as strong pro-Europeans in the face of today’s crises and future challenges.

High-quality built environments must become sustainable. The building industry is currently one of the most resource-intensive sectors in Europe. It is also one of the most waste-producing and CO₂-emitting industries. It therefore constitutes a major lever for the green transition. Activating this potential will be a major task for the EU in the upcoming years. What European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has started with the Green Deal and deepened with the New European Bauhaus (NEB) initiative must be continued after the 2024 elections. The NEB is a strong driving force for implementing the circular econoclusive and beautiful future, and for promoting Baukultur.

The quality of architectural and engineering services is also imperative for the safety and reliability of our cities, infrastructures and buildings, and for many other aspects of our everyday lives. It is the base for the intelligent use of resources and for ensuring that technology advances in a creative and ethical manner. A lack of quality in architectural and engineering services leads to unsatisfied consumers and, in the long term, a higher cost. Quality assurance in public procurement, such as architectural design competitions, is essential for ensuring that the best and most cost-effective solutions are chosen. The BKZT fosters cross-border competitions in several ways. It is the lead partner in the EU-funded Creative Europe project ARCHÉ, together with 15 other European cooperation partners.

In the face of the destruction of large parts of the built environment in Ukraine following Russia’s invasion, we are cooperating with Ukrainian and other European partners in the U-RE-HERIT project to coordinate a reconstruction that is led by the idea of sustainability and participation through architectural design competitions.

On 24 January, European civil society sent an open letter to the Presidents of the European Commission and the European Parliament, and the Belgian presidency of the Council of the European Union. The signatories of the letter urge the three main institutions of the European Union (EU) involved in EU decision-making to take concrete measures to implement an open, transparent and regular dialogue with civil society organisations in all policy areas.

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To:
H.E. Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission
H.E. Roberta Metsola, President of the European Parliament
H.E. Willem van de Voorde, Permanent Representative of Belgium to the EU

JOINT OPEN LETTER FROM THE EESC’S CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS’ GROUP AND CIVIL SOCIETY EUROPE

European Institutions must recognise, involve and support Civil Society as part of a structured Civil Dialogue

Dear Ms von der Leyen,
Dear Ms Metsola,
Dear Mr van de Voorde,

The signatories to this letter call on the European Institutions to take real measures to implement the Treaty provisions for an open, transparent and regular dialogue with civil society in all policy areas.

The signatories call on the EU Institutions to:

1. initiate an inter-institutional agreement on civil dialogue,
2. establish within each institution leadership positions in charge of relations with civil society and
3. encourage and promote greater cooperation between civic and social actors.

As part of the EU democratic principles enshrined in the Treaties, Article 11 of the Treaty on European Union calls for EU Institutions to maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with representative associations and civil society. However, in spite of these legal provisions, civil dialogue remains patchy and unstructured across EU Institutions. Civil dialogue has too often been organised on a purely ad-hoc basis and it has been highly variable in terms of quantity and quality, depending on the policy area, the European Institution or Member State.

The value of civil dialogue was once again brought to policy-makers’ attention, when it was recognised by the Plenary of the Conference on the Future of Europe, which comprised members of the public, representatives of the EU Institutions and advisory bodies, elected representatives at national,
regional and local levels and organised civil society. The final report of the Conference, issued in May 2022, urged for “...reforming the way the European Union works by better involving social partners and organised civil society. Strengthening the existing structures in order to better reflect the needs and expectations of EU citizens in the decision-making process...” (proposal 39, in the chapter on European democracy). You will also recall proposal 36, the objective of which is to “increase citizens’ participation and youth involvement”, amongst other things by “strengthening cooperation between EU legislators and civil society organisations to utilise the link between decision-makers and citizens which civil society organisations constitute”.

The signatories to this letter hereby urge that these recommendations be followed up with an ambitious approach. They are strongly convinced that fully harnessing the potential of involving civil society organisations (CSOs) in policy-shaping will require a more structured approach at EU level.1

Therefore, they jointly call on the European institutions to:

1. Initiate an inter-institutional agreement on civil dialogue2; providing structure, regularity, transparency and inclusiveness for civil dialogue in EU and national policy-making as part of the full implementation of article 11 (1) and (2)3 of the Treaty of the European Union4.

2. Within this framework, establish the post of “Civil Society Coordinator”5 in each Directorate General of the European Commission, similar to the proposed “Social Dialogue Coordinators”. Furthermore, EU Institutions should establish leadership positions in charge of relations with civil society. A European Commission Vice-President should take on the task of dialogue with civil society and the role of the European Parliament Vice-President in charge of contacts with civil society should be strengthened. The Council Secretariat and, at national level, European Parliament and Commission Offices should also establish a regular dialogue with civil society.

Introducing direct channels for CSOs to engage in the EU policy-making process can lead to more targeted and effective policies in all fields and socio-economic issues.

3. The signatories fully respect the prerogatives of the social partners in social dialogue, tripartite negotiations and collective bargaining. At the same time, civil society stakeholders have extensive knowledge, expertise and networks in communities and societies, therefore the signatories believe that civil society actors when appropriate, should have their voices heard. After all, effective and responsible civil society organisations can cooperate with governments, employers’ and workers’ organisations in promoting rights at work, encouraging job creation, implementing the ecological and digital transition and strengthening social protection.

The European Institutions have all the necessary tools at their disposal to commit to and make considerable progress on these proposals ahead of the European elections in 2024. A first step in this direction could be a European Commission Communication on strengthening civil dialogue at EU level and a Proposal for a Recommendation on promoting civil dialogue in the Member States, similar to the initiative on Strengthening social dialogue11 and as a follow up of the Annual Report on the implementation of the Charter on Fundamental Rights. This would also be in line with the call for a Civil Society Strategy.

The signatories to this letter stand ready to work in partnership with the Institutions in order to define the key building blocks and requirements to put these proposals into practice.

Yours sincerely,

European networks

National organisations

Members of the EESC’s Civil Society Organisations’ Group

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1. The call for signatures for this letter was open between September and November 2023.
2. As called for by the EESC (SOC/672) and civil society organisations (cf. Civil Society 2024 EU Elections Manifesto – For better civic space and civil dialogue)
4. The EESC has repeatedly called for the implementation of art. 11 TEU, cf: the EESC’s resolution United for Democracy, adopted by the EESC plenary in March 2023; the conclusions and recommendations of the EESC’s Civil Society Organisations’ Group conference Civil society organisations defending and strengthening European democracy on 30 March 2023; EESC opinions SOC/605, SOC/639, and SOC/672.
7. EESC SOC/672 and the Final Report of the COFOE (proposal 36 (8.)).
Joint meeting of the Consumers and Environment and Farmers’ Categories to discuss food consumption

On 31 January, the EESC Consumers and Environment\(^1\) and Farmers\(^2\) Categories held their respective meetings. The morning session was dedicated to a joint meeting on Food consumption, agriculture and the environment. Members of the two categories started by presenting their respective work on opinions. The EESC INT Section\(^3\) secretariat presented work on different topics regarding consumers and European current affairs.

A discussion ensued, focusing mainly on the collaboration between the Categories and the common approach to food education, food waste, and environmental policy linked to agriculture and food prices.

In the afternoon, the Farmers’ Category held a debate on future animal welfare legislation in Europe, with presentations from Miguel Ángel Higuera, chairman of the Copa-Cogeca Working Group on Animal Health and Welfare\(^4\), and Jaume Bernis Castells, Member of the European Economic and Social Committee’s (EESC) Civil Society Organisations’ Group, on the impact of animal welfare legislation and prohibiting the use of cages in the rabbit, pig and poultry industries.

In the second part, there was a presentation by François Huyghe from the Flemish farmers union Boerenbond\(^5\).

Finally, the Category exchanged views on the ongoing NAT/914 opinion Towards a greater involvement of Member States, regions and civil society actors in the implementation of the long-term vision for the EU’s rural areas\(^6\).

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Belgium takes the helm: protect, strengthen and prepare Europe for the future

Elena Calistră drew attention to the need for EU civil society to be involved in shaping economic policies during the Belgian Presidency. Europe’s collective future depended on inclusive and transparent policy-making.

Luca Jahier welcomed the fact that one of the core priorities of the Belgian Presidency was reinforcing the social agenda. The EU had to ensure that the concept of investment in the reform of the economic and fiscal pact remained the foundation of the Next Generation EU. The Union needed to boost long-term inclusive growth through reforms and investment.

The second debate was attended by David Clarinval, Belgium’s Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for the Middle Classes, the Self-Employed, SMEs and Agriculture, Institutional Reform and Democratic Renewal. Mr Clarinval discussed the priorities under his portfolio, namely the pursuit of a green and social transition and strengthening European competitiveness.

Katrina Leitâne, President of the Ad Hoc Group on Youth of the EESC, said that it was imperative for all presidencies to build a Union with a vision that youth could connect with.

"As Jacques Delors had asked: How can we ever build the EU if young people do not see it as a collective project and a vision of their own future?"

Christian Moos underlined the fact that the EU was in massive need of reform. The EU needed to put an end to the rule of unanimity.

The roadmap for the future of Europe had to be ambitious. Structured civil society dialogue was an important ally here. Organised civil society could make the difference.

João Nabais raised four topics of utmost importance, which needed to be tackled by this presidency: firstly, the promotion of democratic values, while strengthening the pluralism and freedom of media; secondly, the reinforcement of the energy union; thirdly, the need for the EU to boost the energy and green transition, securing an affordable and stable energy supply; and fourthly, social cohesion, as an instrument for long-term investment.

Finally, Andris Gobiņš thanked the Belgian Presidency for asking the EESC to draw up an exploratory opinion on the topic of Strengthening civil society and participatory democracy in the EU, as civil society engagement was the best long-term response to populism and all kinds of threats to democracy and the rule of law.

4. EESC opinion SOK/782, https://europa.eu/7P7gXw
At its first plenary session of 2024, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) held a debate on European competitiveness and the future of the internal market, following the adoption of opinion INT/1043 "Developing a new European strategy for the Internal Market: helping our businesses to meet technological, social, environmental and competition challenges". The discussion saw the participation of several guests and Members of the EESC Civil Society Organisations’ Group (CSOs Group), who advocated for the modernisation of the internal market for the benefit of European citizens.

Belgium’s Energy Minister, stressed that the internal market is “supposed to make us dynamic, it is supposed to spread innovation for 450 million citizens.” He explained that competitiveness is just one of the policy areas that can influence the functioning of the internal market, and encouraged cooperation between companies.

Guiseppe Guerini drew attention to wealth disparities in Europe and presented the internal market as an invaluable political and democratic tool to address these inequalities. He concluded that “we need to think of competitiveness along with social cohesion” when it comes to the internal market.

The Future of the Internal Market

The EU must improve its energy infrastructure between neighbouring Member States

The second day of the EESC’s January plenary session saw a debate on cross-border energy infrastructure planning, during which it was emphasised that transnational electricity and gas grids are an essential component of the EU’s energy system, and must be strengthened through targeted investment. The EU’s energy infrastructure should be upgraded through interconnectors between neighbouring countries to increase its energy autonomy and sustainable energy capacity.

The plenary debate was linked to the presentation and adoption of EESC opinion TEN/823 on the same topic. Tinne Van der Straeten, Belgium’s Energy Minister, participated in the debate.

“We at the EESC believe that in order to achieve the green transition and strategic energy autonomy, it is fundamental to make a structural change to our energy system,” said EESC President Oliver Röpke.

Ms Van der Straeten stressed the clean energy transition, born out of climate necessity, was now an economic and security imperative, and that interconnection created a more flexible system that could balance geographic variations in wind and solar generation. “Europe’s ambitions of renewable energy currently exceed its plans in terms of infrastructure, so we need these trans-European infrastructures fast. And they need to be cost-efficient, secure, sustainable and flexible,” she explained. This had been the reason why the Belgian presidency of the Council of the EU had sought the EESC’s input on cross-border infrastructure planning.

Several Members of the Civil Society Organisations’ Group engaged in the debate. “Interconnected grids are very important,” stressed Baiba Miltoviča, president of the EESC’s TEN section, not least with a view to greater EU energy independence. “Energy infrastructure, like infrastructure for transporting and distributing energy, should not be treated like a standard commodity, but should be classified as a service of general interest for both the economy and society as a whole,” she said, inviting the Belgian presidency to continue its cooperation with the TEN section in view of the section’s upcoming conferences on issues such as energy affordability and the EU hydrogen strategy.

Regarding the necessary transition to sustainable energy and the establishment of affordable energy prices, Jan Dirx, vice-president of the Civil Society Organisations’ Group, emphasised that...
investment decisions on energy infrastructure had an important impact on the profitability of different sources of energy. “The energy industry in Europe should be based on renewable energies, with producers and other local small-scale producers involved. It must be possible for small-scale producers to participate in the energy infrastructure and to play a role in other options, for instance around energy storage,” Mr Dirx said that, wherever possible, energy infrastructure can be liberalised, but should be regulated where necessary. Corina Andrea Murafa Benga highlighted the importance of solidarity-based infrastructure and of guaranteeing basic energy consumption at regulated prices. In the future, it would be necessary to further emphasise the urgent need to ramp up grid investments to accommodate citizen initiatives in decentralised energy production. “Governments and regulators are currently blocking investments for prosumer energy communities because the grid is not modern enough to accommodate them,” she explained. “Governments should put pressure on the grid to upgrade fast and embrace these developments instead of slowing them down.”


WHAT IS EESC OPINION INT/1046 ALL ABOUT?

An interview with Giuseppe Guerini, rapporteur for the European Economic and Social Committee’s (EESC) opinion INT/1046 on European cross-border associations

The opinion was presented and adopted at the January plenary session in 2024.

Giuseppe GUERINI (IT)
Co-spokesperson, EESC Social Economy Category
President, Cecop-Cicopa Europe (the European confederation of industrial and service cooperatives)
Board Member, Confcooperative (Confederation of Italian Cooperatives)
President, Confcooperative Bergamo
President, Ecosviluppo (social cooperative for labour market integration)

Mr Guerini, your opinion INT/1046 was recently adopted by the EESC plenary. What are the main points of this opinion?

With this opinion, the EESC is contributing another important piece to the pursuit of the objectives of the action plan for the social economy, confirming the ten-year commitment made to the development of framework conditions for the social economy in Europe and in the Member States. By creating the additional European Cross Border Association (ECBA) qualification for non-profit entities, the EU finally opens up the possibility for these entities to fully participate in cross-border activities, simplifying the administrative procedures that until now have made it difficult for most social economy entities to carry out activities in various states of the European Union. In this way the EU recognises an important function of the associations and bodies of the social economy in the creation of the single market, finally recognising the fact that the market is not an exclusively commercial institution but is also a social and political infrastructure.

What are the main recommendations or proposals of the opinion?

The opinion essentially supports the position of the European Commission and advocates implementing it in full, including as an action consistent with the implementation of the European Council’s recommendations to the Member States about social economy. However, in the EESC’s opinion, some restrictions that the Commission’s proposal contains should be overcome: first, we do not share the constraint which provides that the ECBA status can only be acquired by entities whose board of directors or management bodies only include citizens of EU Member States. Many European association networks also have members who are citizens of states that are not in the EU, excluding these networks from the ECBA qualification appears inconsistent with the principle of the single market.

How will you promote this opinion?

I believe that it should be promoted and disseminated among European social economy networks, taking every opportunity to make this proposal known. We must use the many events that promote the social economy and every opportunity to spread awareness of the recommendation to make this provision known. In relation to this I would like to say that it is a pity that when organising the Liège Conference on the social economy, under the Belgian Presidency, the ECBA proposal was not taken into consideration at all, when one of the workshops could have been planned to make a presentation on it.

Read the EESC opinion on European cross-border associations at: https://europa.eu/!Vp7Y8R

1. EESC opinion INT/1046, https://europa.eu/!Vp7Y8R
OVERVIEW OF RECENT WORK

The last EESC plenary session took place on 17 and 18 January 2024. The EESC plenary adopted 13 opinions, of which seven were drafted by Members of the Civil Society Organisations’ Group. A list of the recent work can be found below.

Alain COHEUR (BE), co-rapporteur, INT/10431 Developing a new European strategy for the Internal Market: helping our businesses to meet technological, social, environmental and competition challenges

Alain COHEUR (BE), rapporteur, INT/10442 Combatting poverty and social exclusion: harnessing the power of the social economy and socio-economic innovations

Cristian PÎRVULESCU (RO), co-rapporteur, INT/10233 Corruption in public procurement and its impact on the internal market

Giuseppe GUERINI (IT), rapporteur, INT/10464 European cross-border associations

Panagiotis GKOFAS (EL), rapporteur, INT/10415 Revision of the late payments Directive

Panagiotis GKOFAS (EL), rapporteur-general, NAT/9236 Targets for fixing fishing opportunities

Stoyan TCHOUKANOV (BG), rapporteur, NAT/9137 Promoting autonomous and sustainable food production: strategies for the Common Agricultural Policy post-2027

The complete texts of all EESC opinions are available in various language versions on the Committee’s website.

The next EESC plenary session will take place on 20 and 21 March 2024. For more information on the upcoming plenary session please visit our website.

A list including all new work appointments of Civil Society Organisations’ Group Members is available on the Committee’s website.

1. EESC opinion INT/1043, https://europa.eu/!x678cx
2. EESC opinion INT/1044, https://europa.eu/!RpbpNh
6. EESC opinion NAT/923, https://europa.eu/!bYHjNq
7. EESC opinion NAT/913, https://europa.eu/!tDpDc7

UPCOMING EVENTS

4-7/03: Civil Society Week

12/03: Associational Life Category

25/03: Conference on “Strengthening civil society and participatory democracy in the EU: the way forward”

Information at: https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/agenda/our-events/upcoming-events

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