



**European Economic
and Social Committee**
Civil Society Organisations' Group

**Strengthening civil dialogue and participatory democracy in the EU,
linked to the adoption of the opinion SOC/782 on Strengthening civil dialogue and participatory
democracy in the EU: a path forward**
**Debate with Dubravka Šuica, Vice-President of the European Commission and Commissioner
for Democracy and Demography**
Speech by Civil Society Organisations' Group President Séamus Boland
EESC plenary session, 15 February 2024

Dear Vice-President,

- I would like to thank you for joining us today – you are very welcome at our plenary;
- As shown by the latest Eurobarometer survey on democracy, **one in three citizens identify ‘growing distrust and scepticism towards democratic institutions’ as a key threat to democracy**. Furthermore, as we all know, **our societies are undergoing deep and rapid changes**.
- While we need to protect our democracies on many levels, these challenges make it clear that it is time to **invest more in their resilience from within!**
- The **Conference on the Future of Europe** (COFOE) was an opportunity to explore more participatory approaches. As you will remember, the COFOE emphasized the value of civil society as a vital component of democratic life. Furthermore, its final report recommended *"reforming the way the European Union works, by better involving social partners and organised civil society"* and, *"(to) increase citizens' participation and youth involvement"*, e.g. by *"strengthening cooperation between EU legislators and civil society organisations to utilise the link between decision-makers and citizens which civil society organisations constitute"*.
- It is now the time to build on these recommendations and, together, to **lay the foundations for a more mature involvement of civil society organisations** in the policy-making process.
- In this Opinion, **our Committee examines the way forward for civil dialogue** and I want to take this opportunity to express my **thanks and support to my colleague and Vice-President Pietro Barbieri** for his work.
- In particular, we call on the EU institutions to take the lead and to **develop a strategy for civil society, resulting in an action plan**.
- Such an action plan should be the **result of a shared process**, where all stakeholders are invited to **co-create guidelines on which topics, with whom and how civil dialogue should take**

place. This could be facilitated by the EESC, with the participation of civil society networks at EU level.

- **In parallel, our Group has published an Open letter, together with Civil Society Europe,** which reflects the efforts of our Group.
- As you know, as part of the principles enshrined in the Treaties, Article 11 of the Treaty on the 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. We believe it is time to take a **more structured approach.** A first step in this direction could be a **European Commission Communication on strengthening civil dialogue at EU level.**
- Finally, let me look ahead to the European elections. I emphasized earlier that it is time to **invest more in the resilience of our democracies.** Civil society organisations play a key role in this regard. **At the same time, they are key actors in building trust, fighting disinformation, shaping public opinions and acting as positive agents of change.**
- As mentioned by the rapporteur, today's debate on civil dialogue does not represent a point of arrival. Rather, our task is now to move from words to action and work together in developing participatory approaches and creating the blueprints for a more enabling environment for civil society organisations in the policy-shaping process.

Dear Vice-President, thank you very much for your attention and we look forward to continue this conversation with you.