

## Civil society representatives trust European Parliament to continue as driving force for an inter-institutional agreement on civil dialogue

**A properly structured civil dialogue can be a means of making European democracies more resilient to current societal challenges. Civil society organisations (CSOs) trust in the European Parliament to be the driving force when it comes to an agreement on structured civil dialogue between the Council of the European Union, the European Commission and the European Parliament, as a Parliament resolution proposed such an agreement in 2022. CSOs consider such an inter-institutional agreement a basis for developing more inclusive and qualitative policy-making.**

A first step towards such an agreement would be to set up a **working group** with all relevant stakeholders, including the EU institutions. This working group should co-create the blueprints for a more enabling and systemic environment for CSO involvement. **Citizen participation** through citizens' panels, for instance, is equally important. It should be further developed and could complement civil dialogue as part of a wider effort to strengthen participatory democracy.

With civil dialogue remaining patchy and unstructured across the European institutions, CSOs have been advocating for a structured civil dialogue for decades, with the [Conference on the Future of Europe](#) (CoFoE) and its final recommendations in mid-2022 creating a momentum for progress. Since then, significant progress has been made in charting out the way forward for civil dialogue in an EESC [opinion](#) requested by the Belgian Presidency of the Council of the EU. This **momentum must not be lost**, concluded a [conference](#) organised by the [Civil Society Organisations' Group](#) of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) on 25 March 2024. The conference explored how the EU as a whole, and Member States individually, could work towards effective sustainable civil dialogue and participatory democracy.

**Séamus Boland**, President of the Civil Society Organisations' Group, kicked off the event by reiterating that to harness CSOs' potential – to identify sustainable solutions to societal challenges – in an effective, inclusive and transparent way, their **proper recognition** and involvement in a **structured civil dialogue** was needed. He emphasised that his group could help promote, facilitate and support contacts between CSOs, on the one hand, and the EU institutions, on the other.

**Mr Boland** maintained: 'The EESC Civil Society Organisations' Group will continue its efforts to implement the proposals for a structured, regular, transparent and inclusive civil dialogue in all policy areas, as put forward by 156 civil society signatories from 26 Member States in an Open Letter to the EU institutions that our group initiated at the beginning of the year.'

The [Open Letter](#) on civil dialogue and a recently adopted EESC opinion on 'Strengthening civil dialogue and participatory democracy in the EU: a path forward' were presented at the conference. The signatories of the Open Letter #EUCivilDialogueNow call on the EU institutions to:

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

This should be achieved while at the same time respecting representative democracy and the prerogatives of the social partners in social dialogue. The letter calls for more structured cooperation between all actors to the benefit and in the interest of all.

Many participants expressed their support for the proposals of the Open Letter and the EESC opinion. As **Mr Boland** welcomed this support, he reflected on **ways to implement the proposals**, saying: 'As a first step, we call for the creation of a working group on civil dialogue.' **The EESC would be best placed to facilitate such a group**, because of its advisory role, expertise and links to European civil society networks and CSOs in the Member States.

A structured civil dialogue was essential for informed and evidence-based policy-making, said **Gabriella Civico**, President of Civil Society Europe, the European umbrella organisation that co-initiated the Open Letter. 'Participation ranges from providing input to policy and legislative proposals to agenda setting,' she explained. 'It should not be confused with a survey or box-ticking exercise. A participation **culture must permeate from the top to the bottom of the institutions**. It must rely on structure, regularity, openness, legitimacy and inclusiveness, as part of the full implementation of Article 11 (1) and (2) of the Treaty on European Union.'

**Dubravka Šuica**, Vice-President of the European Commission for Democracy and Demography, contributed to the conference with a video message, in which she welcomed the EESC opinion and the Open letter initiated by the Civil Society Organisations' Group and Civil Society Europe. Ms Šuica stressed the European Commission's commitment to maintaining an open, transparent and regular dialogue with representative associations and civil society. She said: 'We are committed to further improving the European consultation and dialogue toolbox. This work should not duplicate the work already covered by existing well-established mechanisms. Indeed, we should make every effort to ensure that those established mechanisms deliver the most meaningful results possible'. The Commission's efforts to follow up on the recommendations of the CoFoE on civil society and citizen engagement included the organisation of European citizens' panels and a child participation platform.

**Pedro Silva Pereira**, Vice-President of the European Parliament in charge of participative democracy and citizens' panels, said: 'The European Parliament has been a natural partner in supporting and valuing civil society organisations' role in shaping Europe's policies and priorities. But **more has to be done**. We have to strengthen the role of civil society organisations and also make sure that more EU bodies and institutions are properly involved in the process. The European Parliament's commitment is clear: **we will continue working hand in hand with civil society**, finding innovative ways to engage with citizens with the aim of bolstering our public space, making it more democratic and inclusive.'

**Ambassador Willem van de Voorde**, from the Permanent Representation of Belgium to the EU, pointed to Belgium's long-standing tradition of involving civil society in political decision-making at national level. 'Belgium has been at the forefront when it comes to participatory democracy,' he said. 'We now need to consider how we can learn from the **best practices** that exist across the EU in building a more inclusive and representative model at European level.'

Other speakers spoke about the efforts made by the Council, the Commission and the Parliament to engage with citizens and CSOs. It became clear that the provisions of the EU Treaty on civil dialogue can be interpreted in different ways and that existing instruments are perceived differently in terms of their openness, transparency and regularity. A more structured and systemic approach would guarantee better accessibility and coordination, and better results from ongoing initiatives and existing instruments.

The role of civic education, local communities and research in improving citizen and civic participation was highlighted.

The conclusions of this event will feed into the current and future work of the Civil Society Organisations' Group.

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