



European Economic
and Social Committee

Civil Society Week

4-7 March 2024

**NEXT STEPS
FOR DEMOCRACY**



Civil Society Week

On 4-7 March, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) brought together more than 800 participants of all ages and backgrounds from civil society for a vibrant debate on the upcoming 2024 European elections and Europe's future. If there is one unmistakable takeaway from this week, it is that **democracy thrives on the strength and engagement of civil society**. Across Europe, the voices and actions of civil society play a pivotal role in shaping policy, holding leaders accountable and safeguarding the rights and freedoms of citizens. During the week's many sessions organised by [EESC Liaison Group](#) members, [ECI Day partners](#) and young [YEYS participants](#) from across Europe, civil society came up with a comprehensive set of actionable steps to enhance democratic principles across our continent.

RESILIENT
DEMOCRACIES

CIVIC SPACE AND
CIVIL DIALOGUE

CITIZENS'
PARTICIPATION

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT AND
ACTIVE PARTICIPATION

AN ECONOMY THAT
WORKS FOR PEOPLE

DIGITAL
TRANSFORMATION



RESILIENT DEMOCRACIES



STOP MANIPULATION – civil society is fed up with constant attempts to manipulate citizens with disinformation. Europe needs to step up its fight against disinformation through targeted grassroots action for citizens, civil society and policymakers.



FREE AND INDEPENDENT MEDIA – the EU needs more funding to sustain the business model of independent, fact-checked journalism and to uphold journalism as a public service, thus fostering transparency and combatting **disinformation**.



EDUCATION IS THE ANTIDOTE – Europe needs a new generation of active citizens – ‘Gen-EU’, who are well-informed, engaged and who know that change starts with them. To make this a reality, democratic education from early childhood in all settings is key to fostering inclusive and cohesive societies and to cultivating the next generation of engaged citizens committed to democratic principles.



FIT FOR THE FUTURE – With the digital and green transitions requiring new blocks of skills, and the formal education curricula struggling to keep up, informal and non-formal learning opportunities become increasingly essential. Therefore, validation and certification of new skills are crucial for individuals to demonstrate their proficiency and qualifications in a standardised manner, ultimately improving their employability and adaptability in dynamic industries.

CIVIC SPACE AND CIVIL DIALOGUE



TRUE EUROPEAN CIVIC SPACE – there can be no question as to whether Europe, within and beyond our borders, is a safe, cross-border, **enabling space for civil society**, including philanthropy.



SUPPORT CIVIL SOCIETY – the path forward to ensuring a secure area against internal and external threats is a **comprehensive civil society strategy** that includes measures for a better overall operating environment for civil society organisations (CSOs), protection mechanism for civil society actors within the EU, an increase in the amount and accessibility of funding for civil society actors, a proper framework to monitor civic space trends, as well as amending the Defence of Democracy Directive to close loopholes that undermine democratic institutions.



STRUCTURED CIVIL DIALOGUE AS A NEW GOLDEN STANDARD – a reform of the current **civil society dialogue mechanisms** on all levels is needed to ensure structured, formalised and meaningful dialogue that integrates civil expertise, preventing credibility loss and discontent. The current ad hoc and piecemeal arrangements are insufficient, inadequate and rely too much on the goodwill and personal initiatives of the people/ units involved. The institutionalisation of civil dialogue processes will ensure comprehensive representation and participation of civil society in Europe, as per Article 11 of the Treaty on the European Union.



MAKING BETTER CHOICES TOGETHER – policymakers should meaningfully involve civil society organisations and academia when developing public policies. A multi-stakeholder, multi-level approach is a guarantee for better, more effective and more evidence-based public policies. To enhance democratic trust and citizen engagement, it is crucial to focus on both effectively implementing and continuously monitoring public policies.



NO MORE WAITING ROOM – we need to start working with **EU candidate countries** now by enhancing the support for and dialogue with social partners and civil society organisations through capacity building and structured civil dialogue. This will facilitate their involvement in accession negotiations and address administrative and legal hurdles to facilitate exchanges between the EU and those countries as well as to meet the minimum standards.



SOCIAL ECONOMY IS KEY – we must also advance towards creating a **single market for public goods** by swiftly adopting the European Cross-Border Association Statute and developing a similar initiative for foundations, and by implementing the Social Economy Council Recommendation nationally to bolster socially responsible business practices and philanthropic action across borders.

CITIZENS' PARTICIPATION



YOUR VOICE MATTERS – EU citizens have never spoken so loudly about what they want. Their voice needs to be included when decisions are taken in the EU, through **participatory and e-democracy tools** such as the European Citizens' Initiative and crowdsourcing citizens' policy ideas. This should be accompanied by a thorough follow-up and civic engagement activities, such as volunteering.



LISTEN TO THE PEOPLE – to this end, we must reform EU treaties to include **citizen participation mechanisms** and promote direct citizen and civil society organisations' involvement in decision-making, so as to fully live up to participatory democracy processes.



CALL FOR MORE POLITICAL INFLUENCE – in order to truly increase the legitimacy and citizens' sense of ownership of European policies, democratic agenda-setting instruments such as the **European Citizens' Initiative (ECI)** should have significantly more political influence.



SUPPORT BY EU INSTITUTIONS – Successful European Citizens' Initiatives must be followed up on **in a timely and responsive manner** to ensure that the instrument generates bolder political impact, and that democracy is respected. All EU institutions involved in the legislative process – the Commission, Parliament and the Council – need to step up their commitment in this regard. Notably, the European Commission must honour its commitment to End the Cage Age ECI to reflect its written response to the initiative, and the European Parliament should improve its institutional role in successful ECIs by adopting a resolution on each successful ECI following its plenary debate.



CITIZENS IN THE DRIVER'S SEAT – A possible combination of European Citizens' Initiatives and **European Citizens Assemblies** might be beneficial too, and – if strongly linked to the political system and having a visible impact on policy – it could strengthen the idea of a citizen-driven EU democracy. A set of concrete models for integrating these two instruments should therefore be developed and applied over a wide range of critical EU matters, supported by a legislative framework.



SPREAD AWARENESS – the EU should **increase its efforts to communicate the ECI** and inform citizens of its existence, including by better involving media. It should also contribute to building a thriving community by advancing support infrastructures and creating an environment where ECI organisers develop skills and can foster peer-to-peer exchange.

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT AND ACTIVE PARTICIPATION



POWER TO YOUNG PEOPLE – tomorrow's future starts today. Young people must be given a seat at the decision-making table. Young people that are responsibly engaged ensure the future of the EU. However, they should not only be consulted in the final stages of the decision-making process. Young people should be invited to contribute, and consulted from the beginning of the process, so that their hopes, needs and aspirations shape policies from the start.



THE OVER 100 YOUNG CITIZENS brought together by this year's edition of YEYS came up with recommendations to the new mandate that are relevant to society as a whole, such as civic engagement, migration, housing, education, corruption and the erosion of trust in public institutions, as well as with the following top five youth-related priority proposals:

1. Implement a **youth quota** for the European Parliament elections;
2. Approve the **Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive** (CSDDD) to make human rights and environmental considerations mandatory in supply chains and companies;
3. Develop a **legal framework for social media** to mitigate disinformation and polarisation;
4. Develop a standardised common **strategy on sexual and reproductive rights**; and,
5. Introduce special **taxation guidelines for climate-damaging luxury goods or services**.

DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION



LEAVING NO ONE BEHIND – in order to ensure that all people have the necessary digital skills to fully live up to citizens' participation instruments, partnerships for digital literacy need to be fostered to bridge the digital divide for citizens, including civil society organisations.



BRIDGING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE FOR CIVIL SOCIETY – to empower civil society organisations (CSOs) to address the pressing issues that European citizens face, European institutions should invest more in programmes that bridge the digital divide by providing upskilling and capacity-building in digital technologies. This will equip CSOs and community groups with the necessary tools and skills to utilise technology effectively in their work, enhancing their reach and impact in tackling societal challenges.



ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IS HERE TO STAY – it is important that the EU is not left behind in the digital transformation process that is happening worldwide. The EU must show itself as a competitive frontrunner in the use of AI following ethics, norms and democratic principles. The EU institutions need to focus on prioritising policies that allow citizens to learn about AI and teach them how to live and work with it, instead of creating fears and anxieties.

AN ECONOMY THAT WORKS FOR PEOPLE



OUR PLANET HAS LIMITS – civil society agrees that it is time to shift away from growth-centric economic models and to give more weight to well-being and prosperity within the planetary boundaries, considering the impact of the ongoing transition on people and businesses.



ACCESS TO WATER AS A HUMAN RIGHT – a sustainable and inclusive economy includes the integration of sustainable water management in all EU policy programmes, and the prioritisation of the robust governance of freshwater resources via an EU Blue Deal as a strategic political priority.



DEMOCRATISING ECONOMIC POLICY-MAKING – the European Semester must be reformed to broadly involve civil society and citizens in a meaningful and structured way. Inclusive economic policymaking emerged as a vital component for a democratic and sustainable future in Europe.

YES WE CAN! – by incorporating deliberative processes and related capacity building to lower entry barriers, by establishing multi-stakeholder platforms for joint policy input, by enhancing funding accessibility for businesses adhering to good practices, by increasing resources for civil society organisations, particularly youth-led ones, for capacity building, by promoting community-level transparency and collaboration, and by advocating for a business paradigm focused on sustainability and intergenerational justice.



European Economic and Social Committee

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#CivSocWeek

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