#EUelections2024: Civil society organisations discuss the EU they want and propose priorities for the new mandate

Addressing immediate and long-term challenges, properly implementing existing EU policies and strengthening EU values are some of the priorities proposed by civil society organisations (CSOs) for the new mandate, along with structured civil dialogue and a strong social agenda. With a view to the coming elections to the European Parliament and the signing of the La Hulpe inter-institutional declaration on the European Pillar of Social Rights, national and European level CSO representatives discussed their political priorities at the conference on Building Together the EU We Want. The event was organised by the Civil Society Organisations’ Group of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) and took place on 16 April. Its conclusions and recommendations will feed into an EESC resolution with policy proposals for the new European Parliament and European Commission, to be adopted in July 2024.

Opening the conference Séamus Boland, President of the Civil Society Organisations’ Group, deplored the fact that many politicians from mainstream national parties do not want to discuss the EU with voters. Consequently, voters do not understand why the EU is necessary and EU politics do not always reflect what matters to them. This has led to a dangerous disconnect between the general public and the EU and could result in many people voting for extremist parties. ‘What is urgently needed now is for national and European politicians to engage with people in an open debate on the problems facing the EU and on what should be done to resolve them. Only like this can we persuade them that the EU is for the many and continues to create opportunities for everyone.’

‘In the Europe of tomorrow, we want a virtuous circle of dialogue between representative democracy, the executive, civil society organisations and citizens, during the formulation, implementation and follow-up of all EU policies. This is crucial to achieve our political objectives’ - a call that was supported by several conference participants. Given their commitment to a more social Europe, reaffirmed in the La Hulpe Declaration, EU institutions and Member States also have to fully recognise the role of CSOs through a formal structured and meaningful civil dialogue, which complements social dialogue.

According to a recent Eurobarometer survey presented by Philipp Schulmeister from the Secretariat of the European Parliament, 36% of EU citizens wanted the new European Parliament to prioritise the fight against poverty and social exclusion, underlining their desire for a more social Europe. Mr Schulmeister hoped for an increased turnout in the coming elections, as most people also saw the EU affecting their everyday life (70%) and an increased number believing that their country had benefited from EU membership (72%).

In his speech, Ioannis Vardakastanis, rapporteur for the EESC resolutions on the European elections and President of the Greek National Confederation of Disabled People (NCDP), encouraged citizens to use their vote, joining forces for a sustainable, democratic, more inclusive and social EU that reflects our common values and addresses the EU’s immediate and long-term challenges. ‘Let’s vote for an EU that delivers and more effectively meets the rights, expectations and daily needs of all its citizens without
exception. Let’s strengthen the EU to tackle effectively the global challenges that surround us,’ said Mr Vardakastanis.

**Janis Emmanouilidis** from the European Policy Centre gave an inspiring keynote speech in which he addressed the socio-economic and political challenges facing the EU, the expectations of the European elections and the priorities for the next political cycle. ‘Geopolitical and geo-economic imperatives require the EU27 to **increase the Union’s level of ambition.** Muddling through will not suffice,’ he said. ‘There is no time to lose’ as the permacrisis that we have been experiencing for more than 15 years is here to stay.’ The new mandate would require clear prioritisation and trade-offs to ensure that the EU delivers on the most pressing policy issues. On the basis of probability and urgency, weak reaction capacity and systemic impact, Mr Emmanouilidis considered **security and defence, climate change and geoeconomics security** to be the priorities for the new term. These priorities needed to go hand in hand with the preparations for EU enlargement and reform as well as strong implementation.

In two round tables, CSO representatives discussed what needs to be improved in the EU. They also put forward specific ideas about what the Europe of tomorrow should look like. Participants stressed the need for **political leadership** and increasing the **trust in the EU**. EU policy in the next term should:

- be centred around youth, climate change and health, while recognising the impact of climate change on public health;
- champion a Europe united in solidarity, values and the pursuit of social justice, including as regards refugees and migrants and the Global South;
- tackle poverty and inequality, especially among children and young people, and promote inter-generational solidarity;
- ensure equal access to and affordability of healthcare and care;
- enhance engagement for democracy;
- address the challenges facing rural areas and generational renewal in agriculture.

Participants spoke about the need to:

- provide guidance and tools to engage all stakeholders in the green and digital transition, including financing and funding;
- act on words, preferably through legally binding acts, for instance regarding the Action Plan of the European Pillar of Social Rights;
- create an EU central fiscal capacity that stimulates social investment in the Member States, ensuring that social protection systems are fit for the challenges ahead;
- ensure that legislative acts are effective and properly implemented;
- Revisit/implement policies that make the sustainable option the first choice for consumers.

Participants further suggested the nomination of a European Commission Vice-President for health, social rights and wellbeing and the implementation of a wellbeing economy, prioritising people and the planet. They called for an economy based on solidarity and not-for-profit and the redistribution of power and wealth in society that could help achieve a just transition.

Closing the conference, **María Rodríguez Alcázar** from the European Youth Forum said that ‘**Young citizens** deserve an EU that puts them and future generations at the centre’. EU policy makers needed to tackle forms of inequality faced by young people and address the climate emergency for today’s youth
and the generations to come. She congratulated the EESC on its leadership on youth issues and touched upon the EU Youth Check proposed by the European Commission. ‘The EU Youth Check is an important step towards achieving this ambition. However, it cannot just be a labelling exercise. The Youth Check needs to be further elaborated, comprehensively implemented as a genuine cross-Commission process and truly embedded in the development of all legislation to make this vision a reality.’

The conclusions and recommendations of the conference will soon be available at: https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/agenda/our-events/events/the-eu-we-want/building-together-eu-we-want

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