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**Civil Society Under Fire: Why the EU Must Act Now**

**Civil society organisations (CSOs) are under attack across Europe and America. The EU must act now to defend them and safeguard democracy. At its plenary debate on the International Day of NGOs, the European Economic and Social Committee sent out a clear message: CSOs are democracy’s frontline defenders. With funding cuts threatening their survival, the EU must take immediate action to protect and support them.**

On 27 February 2025, the EESC held a debate *The EU and Civil Society: Strengthening Democracy and Participation* giving representatives and experts from civil society organisations (CSOs) and Members of the European Parliament an opportunity to discuss and evaluate the role of the CSOs in this vital area.

**Raquel García Hermida-Van Der Walle**, MEP from Renew Europe, pointed out that CSOs often contribute to checks and balances. CSOs also provide different methods of social interaction, potentially replacing government services which may be lacking. As a result, CSOs are the first ones to be targeted as they can prove politically inconvenient to some governments.

**Nicholas Aiossa**, Director of Transparency International Europe, said "There is an orchestrated political campaign in the European Parliament, to discredit, defund and disrupt the role and function of the CSOs. No evidence of financial irregularities had been found".

Criticism of CSOs is nothing new but the recent attacks have been amplified by fake news and misinformation. As **Brikena Xhomaqi,** Co-chair of the EESC Liaison Group put it the situation is a wake-up call for all CSOs to stand together and make a change: "People should know that most CSOs depend on volunteer work, so we do not waste taxpayers' money".

However, the EU funding is vital to allow CSOs to remain part of the policy dialogue. As **Faustine Bas-Defossez,** Policy Director at the European Environmental Bureau organisation underlined, the funding via the EU LIFE programme represents just 0.3% of the EU budget, with operating grants making up an even smaller fraction—a mere 0.006% of total EU spending. "Yet, these funds are crucial in ensuring that the voices of our 180+ member organisations are heard in Brussels".

Defending the value and role of CSOs and NGOs, **Carlotta Besozzi**, Director of Civil Society Europe, explained they are defined by their pluralism and democratic structure. "Without their input, the accountability of EU institutions and of national governments would be strongly weakened. So instead of using false accusations to question funding for CSOs, the EU should further support them so that they can continue to be the EU's democracy shield" she said.

The participants also called on the European Commission to speak out more strongly about this topic and proposed a number of solutions to reinforce the role of CSOs.

**Raquel García Hermida-Van Der Walle**, MEP from Renew Europe said that she would push for the role of CSOs to be more acknowledged and strengthened in the rule of law report and the conditionality mechanism as enabling condition.

She also stressed that she would be strengthening the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) mechanism, since these initiatives, even when successful, are largely ignored by the European Commission and Member states in particular.

Finally, she mentioned that she would push for a bigger role for CSOs in their engagement with enlargement countries, building on **Andi Dobrushi's** statement, Open Society Foundations Director for Western Balkans.

Mr Dobrushi said that, for the first time, CSOs from the Western Balkans had the opportunity to take part in the deliberation process of EU policy-making, as a result of the EESC's initiative to involve Enlargement Candidate Members in its advisory work.

Also, funding programmes in the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) need to addressed.

**Michał Wawrykiewicz**, MEP from the European People's Party (EPP), said his mission was to raise awareness about these fundamental topics inside his group. Speaking from experience as a former member in a civil society organisation, committed to spread the message among his colleagues that both the existence and funding of CSOs and NGOs is crucial to our democracies and shared vision of Europe.

Another point he raised was informing decision-makers that CSOs and NGOs are not only think-tanks engaged in the protection of fundamental rights but also actors engaged in the protection of human rights, since they are organisations operating on the ground, providing crucial services that directly affect people's lives.

EESC President **Oliver Röpke** embraced the positions of the CSOs representatives and stressed "As the House of European Civil Society, the EESC is a champion of the crucial role of civil society in policy making and democratic governance". He emphasized that "We must resist efforts to delegitimize these organizations or restrict their access to the resources essential for democratic participation. From funding constraints to increasing political pressures, it is clear that civil society organisations require stronger and more predictable support to continue their vital work.”

The participants proposed some solutions to reinforce the position of the CSOs.

The next opportunity to keep the topic on the agenda and continue the discussion will be the [Civil Society Week](https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/agenda/our-events/events/civil-society-week-2025) held by the EESC on 17-20 March 2025, on the theme of *Strengthening cohesion and participation in polarised societies*.

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*The European Economic and Social Committee represents the various economic and social components of organised civil society. It is an institutional consultative body established by the 1957 Treaty of Rome. Its consultative role enables its members, and hence the organisations they represent, to participate in the EU decision-making process.*

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