



REPORT

The session highlighted the critical role of civil society organisations as pillars of democracy. It underscored the necessity for supportive legal and policy frameworks, particularly in the face of increasing challenges and attacks across Europe.

Panel Discussion

A panel opened the session, presenting recent developments on several key initiatives: the European Civil Society Strategy (CSS), the Social Economy Action Plan (SEAP), the European Cross-Border Association (ECBA) Directive and Taxation policies at national and EU level.

Ewa Kulik-Bielinska (EESC and Batory Foundation) introduced the CSS, which recognises civil society's vital role as an advocate for the public good. She explained that the Strategy was published on 12 November 2025 and is structured around three pillars: ENGAGE, PROTECT, and SUPPORT. In relation to the ENGAGE Pillar, and notably the creation of a Civil Society Platform, she called for the Platform to be as inclusive as possible. She also highlighted the pressing need for an enabling environment for philanthropy, both within and across national borders.

Brigitte Fellahi-Brognaux (DG EMPL, European Commission) presented the background and vision behind the Social Economy Action Plan (SEAP), highlighting how it helps foster a supportive environment for the social economy and also for foundations and philanthropy. Since the SEAP is currently undergoing its mid-term review, she invited the organisations present to take part in this exercise.

Petar Tanev (European Parliament) provided an overview of the status of the European Cross-Border Association (ECBA) Directive. After the Commission announced its plan to withdraw the directive, a final decision will be made in March. Since concerns from certain Member States about security are influencing this potential withdrawal, he emphasized the need to encourage Member States—especially France and Germany—to support the initiative. This would help Associations operate more effectively across borders.

Giuseppe Guerini (EESC, Cooperatives Europe, Social Economy Europe) stressed that national tax laws should align with EU law, though taxation is a Member State competence. He

called for distinct tax status for civil society and social economy organisations, removal of cross-border philanthropy barriers, and inclusion of social economy groups in the "28 regime" to strengthen the single market.

Concluding Remarks

Cillian Lohan, President of the Civil Society Organisations' Group at the EESC, delivered the final remarks. He emphasised that collaboration is the sector's greatest strength and that collective advocacy is vital for the welfare of society. The importance of formulating and acting on concrete recommendations from the session was also stressed.

Breakout Sessions and key recommendations from civil society

Participants discussed the issues presented by the panel in breakout sessions and developed concrete recommendations. Key recommendations included:

- **The European Civil Society Strategy must now progress from vision to implementation.** This process should include candidate countries, and the Civil Society Platform should strive for maximum inclusivity. There is a need for strong connections between the monitoring of civic space restrictions and responsive actions, as well as stable, predictable funding for legitimate advocacy initiatives.
- **The Social Economy Action Plan (SEAP) must foster an enabling environment** through effective legislation, appropriate taxation, diverse funding sources (public, private, blended), local strategies, and a digital space that aligns with EU values. These measures should also be integrated into EU external actions, with a focus on candidate countries and global EU initiatives.
- **The European Cross-Border Association (ECBA) Directive is essential** for defending democracy, recognising the role of non-profit organisations, and building a resilient civil society. Member State governments should actively support the ECBA.
- **To lower tax barriers for civil society organisations and philanthropy, particularly in cross-border operations, a Single Market for the public good is necessary.** The Commission should promote dialogue among Member States and publish guidance on upholding the non-discrimination principle, including the development of templates for cross-border philanthropy as outlined in the Council recommendation on social economy frameworks.
- **'Simplification' initiatives by the Commission must safeguard democratic consultative processes and citizens' rights,** including social, environmental, public health, and digital rights.

