

Brussels, 27 June 2022

**MINUTES**  
of the 39th meeting  
of the  
Liaison Group with European civil society organisations and networks  
held in hybrid format  
on **7 June 2022**

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The Liaison Group with European civil society organisations and networks held its 39th meeting in hybrid format, **from 10.30 to 12.30 on Tuesday, 7 June 2022**, in room JDE 63.

## **ATTENDANCE LIST (see appendix)**

### **1. Adoption of the draft agenda**

The draft agenda was adopted.

### **2. Approval of the minutes of the 38th meeting**

The minutes were approved.

### **3. Introductory remarks by the co-chairs, Christa Schweng and Brikena Xhomaqi**

#### **Ms Schweng, EESC President:**

- **Ukraine:**
  - Adoption of an [EESC resolution on the War in Ukraine](#) in March 2022
  - In 2015, the EESC established the [EU-Ukraine Civil Society Platform](#) to allow CSOs to monitor the implementation process of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement and to draft recommendations.
  - Launch of [Ukrainian Civil Society Hub](#) in April 2022 putting premises and logistics at the disposal of Ukrainian civil society organisations.
  - A second [EESC resolution on Ukraine](#) will be adopted at June plenary session.
  - 19 July high-level EESC conference on Ukraine in Cracow
- **Review of key activities:**
  - Coordination meeting with MoU partners ahead of the CoFoE plenary session in Strasbourg
  - [EESC Civil Society Days](#) with participation of VPs Schinas and Suica and several MEPs
  - Brikena presented the main findings of Civil Society Days at the EESC March Bureau
  - LG's to contribute to the EESC's contribution to the European Commission's work programme 2023. Adoption set for EESC plenary session in July.

#### **Ms Xhomaqi, director of Lifelong Learning Platform:**

- **Review of key activities as co-chair and of CSOs:**
  - Intense cooperation with the EESC European Semester Group (ESG) on reforming the European Semester (annual conference of the ESG and the lessons learnt from non-involvement of CSOs in the NRRPs with a view to the future of the European Semester)
  - Several coordination meetings with EESC to align positions for CoFoE plenaries. The contributions from the LG helped to improve the final recommendations
  - The final CoFoE report is positive for the EESC and the CSOs. Key question: how to make them a reality?
  - The Civil Society Days in which many CSOs and also EESC members have been involved. [The outcomes have been published](#) and shared. For the future, possibility to rethink the methodology in order to make the best use of the conclusions, raising

awareness and making them more visible for policy makers. The use of the outcomes was also brought up in the Bureau meeting in March

- Informal EESC meeting on Youth (in April) to present the work of CSOs about the EU year of youth. A list of events foreseen by the EESC were shared with the LG members and CSO members are invited to contact the group to share their events with them in order to cooperate as much as possible.
- Meeting with the Directorate for communication director Alexander Kleinig in May to get to know each other and discuss improvements in terms of communication: how to make each other's work more visible and how to cooperate better between CSOs and EESC members
- LG members have been involved in quite a number of EESC events since beginning of this year (public hearings, category meeting, webinars, conferences) and have contributed to the EESC contribution to the European Commission's work programme 2023.
- Invitation to CSOs to notify to the LG secretariat their participation in EESC events and the EESC participation in their events.

#### 4. **Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE)**

- **Update on recent EESC activities and follow-up to the CoFoE by Christa Schweng**
  - Some recommendations very much in favour of the EESC. In total, 49 proposals and more than 300 measures, which should not be ignored.
  - EESC proposed a dashboard to allow citizens to see the follow-up measures to ensure transparency and accountability
  - [Final report on results.](#)
  - European Parliament: adopted resolution to ensure a proper follow-up and pushing for a Treaty review.
  - European Commission: Communication on a first analysis is available [here](#)
  - European Council: CoFoE on agenda for Summit on 23/24 June. Conclusions [here](#)
  - Need to make visible and transparent which tools we already have at our disposal, those we do not have, and those which require treaty changes.
  - EESC will closely follow the process and prepare its own position and priorities in terms of involvement of citizens in future participatory democracy exercises.
- **Update on recent civil society organisation (CSO) activities by Brikena Xhomaqi and LG CSOs**
  - **Ms Xhomaqi**, co-chair and director of Lifelong Learning Platform (LLLP):
    - key question is the follow-up of the recommendations and the proposals and on article 11 implementing real civil dialogue at EU level
    - The LG CSOs have already carried out extensive work on civil dialogue: Riga roadmap in 2015 and [Action Plan on the Implementation of Art. 11](#) in 2018.
  - **Mr Fassoulas**, secretary general of European Movement International (EMI):

- CoFoE results were positive and good to connect citizens with decision makers;
  - we must ensure that CSOs and institutions like the EESC are part of the political dialogue when it comes to the implementation. The next steps need to be inclusive and must include actors from organised civil society.
  - We need to keep the good cooperation of the past 12 months, with CSOs and the EESC as well as with the citizens' representatives who played a crucial role in the process
  - EMI will keep the discussions running with stakeholders until the summer break.
- **Ms Valmorbida**, secretary general of European Association for Local Democracy (ALDA):
- [Civil Society Convention](#) (CSC) proved to be a successful endeavour: because of the many recommendations CSOs of the Convention were able to produce and bring in the process and because they regularly participated in working groups, contributing substantially to the debate and to participate to the plenary sessions. Besides the positive outcome of 49 recommendations, the Convention will also present the outcome of its work at the end of June in Paris.
  - Conclusions: the CoFoE results were better than the process. The CoFoE pushed us to apply other forms of interaction. The multi-stakeholder format was new but stimulating and inspirational, while reshuffling the decision-making process and being forced to measure the own decision-making processes. It was refreshing that civil society was set to draft a common position.
  - Now, implementation is key and CSOs must push for action.
  - **Proposal:** as LG drafts an action plan for implementation we should put pressure on decision-makers, calling on the institutions to deliver on the results of the conference.
- **Ms Najmowicz**, director of European Civic Forum (ECF):
- happy with the final outcome. In the final CoFoE report civil society is mentioned 54 times and 60 times in the chapter on democracy. The positive side effect was the creation of the Civil Society Convention to bring up a constructive civil society proposal.
  - The Convention within its own process came up with more than 100 recommendations that will be presented on 30 June in Paris. All LG members are invited. The coordination and cooperation with the EESC, in particular with Gr. III, throughout the process was very positive.
  - The follow-up of the recommendations must consider the role of civil society in European policy-making, social dialogue, the institutional frameworks for civil dialogue, the adoption of a civil society strategy.
  - With a view to the role of the EESC and its Liaison Group, these are best placed to watch/monitor implementation and ensure a proper follow up.
  - Regarding the EESC contribution to the EC work programme 2023 to be adopted in July, request to include some proposals taking into account the

CoFoE report (especially the recommendations on civil dialogue and article 11, the civil society strategy, the Rule of Law, European Democracy Action Plan etc.)

- **Mr Boland**, president of EESC's Civil Society Organisations' group:
  - Making civil society organisations' voices heard at CoFoE was a major achievement.
  - Need to be careful how we message and present ourselves as organised civil society. CSOs take part in the process but are not the elected part. There is a very distinct difference between CSOs and elected representatives, for instance in the Committee of the Regions.
  - Key question: how do CSOs get involved in the policy shaping? How do CSOs influence policy? How do CSOs break that invisible barrier of not being a social partner?
  - The citizens' voices echoed through organised civil society need to be part of the political process at EU level.
- **Ms Kavrakova**, director of European Citizen Action Service (ECAS):
  - ECAS was involved in the Civil Society Convention leading the Deliberation and Digital Transformation Cluster: positive experience
  - CSOs succeeded in putting a foot in the door of CoFoE because they reacted quickly and in a very organised way and because they have the expertise.
  - What will be the future of the online Platform? CSOs must make sure to have a structured place, without needing to prove once again how valuable CSOs are.
  - **Proposal:** set up a task force to follow the deliberations and participate in the deliberations of what will come out of the citizens' panels and the online platform and make sure that next time CSOs will be there from the beginning with a recognised role and in structured manner.
  - The EC published recently Horizon 2020 projects calling to set up networks of academics and practitioners of democratic innovation to follow the conference.
  - Next time CSOs need to be in the room, not only putting a foot in the door.
- **Mr Meseguer**, director of Social Economy Europe (SEE):
  - Supports the proposal of a Task Force in terms of showing CSOs we have to offer, connecting with citizens and with their national organisations.
  - Civil Society Days 2023 might be an excellent occasion to explain why CSOs need a recognised role (importance of structured civil dialogue). The next edition of the Civil Society Days need to be much more ambitious in this sense.
- **Ms Surmatz**, Philea (ex European Foundation Center):
  - CoFoE has shown a strong alignment with the Civil Society Convention on the CoFoE, with the input provided by the EESC, LG and all its members.
  - There is a need for a strong civil dialogue as a clear common agenda. Good to revive the idea of the Riga Roadmap on civil dialogue.

- A task force could use a lot of the contributions that were made to build on this a strategic common agenda.
  - The Civil Society Strategy could be a very important tool as well.
  - The 2023 edition of the Civil Society Days could be a great occasion to put some of the CoFoE recommendations on a much wider food.
- **Ms Niestroy, SDG Watch Europe:**
  - Presenting the [REAL DEAL project](#), a Horizon 2020 research project focused on reshaping citizens participation and deliberative democracy in the framework of the European Green Deal and a green and just transition. Focus of the project: how to make benefits of the citizens' deliberations and the role of organised civil society.
- **Brainstorming on future cooperation between EESC and the LG CSOs:**
  - **Ms Schweng:**
    - The EESC is in the middle of the process to discuss in which direction to go regarding the 2 proposals in the CoFoE recommendations that foresee a specific role for the EESC and how to live up to its recognised role as facilitator and guarantor of participatory democracy activities such as structured dialog with civil society organisations and citizens' panels.
    - Input to the EC work programme might still be possible.
    - the LG is best suited to be the Task Force that has been requested to follow up on the implementation of the CoFoE proposals and deliver input. A proper follow-up is crucial also to avoid further disengagement by citizens.
    - The EESC regularly engages with CSOs in the frame of hearings organised in the elaboration process of opinions. Thus the EESC engages with CSOs but not with individual citizens.
    - A closer cooperation with the LG would be important while already some achievements has been reached during this mandate.
  - **Ms Xhomaqi:**
    - Action Plan for the implementation of civil dialogue as a concrete follow-up on the CoFoE proposals
    - How to best use the next edition of the Civil Society Days as a follow up to CoFoE. Focus on role of CSOs and how to secure a space of civil society in the decision making.
    - Supports the idea of a Task Force on Reviving the Riga Roadmap liaising with the role of the LG within the EESC.
    - Main issue of the cooperation: how to make each other's work more visible and how to build synergies on the basis of common expertise.
    - A lot of improvements have been made regarding the involvement of CSOs in opinions, in groups' and sections' meetings. A better mutual knowledge could be strengthened. More and better communication about the work of the EESC and the CSOs has been achieved.

- Improvements also regarding the participation of EESC members in the Civil Society Days (CSD). How can we make the CSD a shared exercise between EESC and CSOs, shared ownership regarding the organisation of the thematic workshops.
  - Question now: How do we move forward also with a view to the new role of the EESC as facilitator and guarantor of civil dialogue. How can we improve further the cooperation?
- **Ms Najmowicz:**
    - The Liaison Group is the only institutionalised experience of structured dialogue. The EESC is well placed to bring this experience to the next level which could be a reform of the LG as such in order to apply to the EESC what CSOs ask to other institutions, namely a kind of compulsory framework of consulting civil society during policy making process and regarding the EESC, during the elaboration process of opinions.
    - **Proposal:** to reflect on what mechanisms could allow a more structured consultation of CSOs, to have a real input to opinions and to see follow-up of CSOs contributions?
  - **Ms Schweng:**
    - Opinions with a special impact or high relevance are usually accompanied by hearings to be considered as structured consultation of CSOs, while the structured follow up is done by the European Commission.
  - **Mr Meseguer:**
    - **Proposal:** to scale up Civil Society Days (CSD) and frame the event in the context CoFoE, showing connection with citizens, scale up funding in connection with the European Commission, more cooperation and integration with the EC when organising within the framework of CoFoE, Our European way of life, European Democracy etc.
  - **Ms Schweng:**
    - **Proposal:** outreach not only to European Commission but also to the European Parliament, and the Council, which despite of being one of the most important players, tends to be neglected.
    - Regarding the CSD, we can explore how to improve the outreach and link the topics better.
    - More input from CSOs for improvement of the cooperation can be given within the next 10 days in order take it into account in the ongoing reflection process within the EESC.
    - The EESC and its possible future role is explicitly mentioned twice in the "European democracy" chapter <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Proposal 36 on Citizens information, participation and youth that aims to ensure that citizens' voices are heard also in between elections, and that the participation is effective. It is proposed that organised civil society, regional and local authorities and existing structures such as the EESC be included in the citizens' participation process;

- The EESC is currently discussing how to fulfil this role and of course there is a way in order to see how to gather CSOs view and bring them to the attention of EU institutions. With the LG we fulfil this role already.
- **Ms Niestroy** echoed some concerns brought up by CSOs regarding the interpretation of proposal 39 in the sense that the EESC might consider itself as the only place for civil dialogue.
- **Ms Najmowicz:**
  - Regarding the potential interpretation of proposal 39 as a facilitator and guarantor of civil dialogue: is there an intention to transform EESC as the only channel through which organised civil society should engage dialogue with the other EU institutions? Or does the EESC rather aim to improve its role as guarantor and facilitator through gathering expertise in the opinions' making process and engage as much as possible with CSOs?
- **Ms Schweng:**
  - No answer possible since the EESC is in the middle of the discussion process on this.
  - It is clear that the EESC is an institutional player for civil dialogue.
  - It is also clear that CSOs have an autonomy and working towards limiting that autonomy is not the EESC's role.

## 5. Shrinking civic spaces in and outside Europe

- **Cristian Pîrvulescu**, president of the EESC ad hoc group on Fundamental Rights and the Rule of Law (FRRL) – Presentation on the FRRL group's activities and findings
- Testimonials from CSO members
- General discussion
- **Cristian Pîrvulescu:**
  - 15 EESC country visits implemented to date: kick off with RO, PL, HU, DK (online) - [reports here](#) -, and most recent ones in CY, GR, LT, and FL (reports soon available).
  - Situation of civil society, civic space and RoL in CY and GR worsened a lot. Dangerous situation when it comes to freedom of expression, media under pressure, journalists murdered, arrested. NGOs dedicated to defend human rights are in very precarious situation. Cyprus with its two separated parts is a special case, but it instrumentalised the pandemic to force NGOs to register. Very critical NGOs are thus in instable circumstances, many have been suspended.

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Proposal 39 on EU decision-making process that aims to improve the EU's decision-making process by improving the way the EU works and by better involving social partners and organised civil society. Within this framework, it is suggested that the institutional role of the EESC be enhanced, empowering it as a facilitator and guarantor of participatory democracy activities such as structured dialogue with civil society organisations and Citizens' panels.



- CZ (visit in 2021): critical situation too. In many countries governmental offensives against civil society. Putin's civil society model dominates in many of EU Member States.
  - Greece: seems not to be a stable democracy. According to NGOs in Greece, the liberal society is threatened and situation for NGOs rather bad.
  - Ireland: only Member State with high scores when it comes to an open civic space etc.
  - Denmark: NGOs working in the field of migration encounter a difficult situation. Cooperation with government very good.
  - Spain: tried to change the EESC report on civic space and fundamental rights.
  - France: 18 pages of observations on the report.
  - **Conclusion:** even in countries with a long and solid democratic tradition, problems emerge. There is a gap between Brussels and the national level.
- **General discussion**
- **Mr Grassos**, secretary general of EVBB:
    - Discussing about democracy: Cyprus is not divided but occupied.
    - Asking for more background regarding the situation in Greece which he was not aware of. 3 years ago, 1 Greek journalist was killed by Greek mafia. Greece cannot be hold responsible for this.
  - **Mr Pirvulescu:**
    - 2 journalists were killed in Greece. On top, a journalist from Deutsche Welle has been arrested for his investigations on migrants' situation which is a major issue for Greek government.
    - We need to be critical also towards EU Member States.
    - Both sides, governments and NGOs are asked for their opinions.
  - **Mr Grassos:**
    - Many NGOs in Greece saying that they are not free in their activities are actually under investigations for having committed frauds. Calls not to judge a whole country without having a complete picture.
  - **Ms Bobic**, European Movement International:
    - Are missions and reports also planned in non-EU countries?
    - What will be the follow-up to these reports?
  - **Mr Meseguer:**
    - To congratulate the EESC for this task. This is the raison d'être of the EESC and the LG.
    - Democracy needs to be defended always and everywhere.
  - **Mr Pirvulescu:**
    - The EESC started with these missions in 2018, before the Commission took up the monitoring of civic space.

- No mission outside Europe now.
  - There will be still 12 countries to be visited before end of mandate in April 2023.
- **Hanna Surmatz:**
    - The monitoring of civic space issues increasingly important because this space cannot be taken for granted, not even within the EU.
    - Mapping of civil society philanthropy space revealed restrictions of cross border activities, freedom of association and the free flow of capital, tightening of rules in some countries, also caused by overdoing in applying the security agenda (Anti-Money-Laudry etc) for instance in Spain and Poland
    - Any monitoring activity is welcomed to alert where national rules are potentially in conflict with EU law.
    - Social Economy Action Plan is a good example of more guidance to Member States how to implement the various principles
    - A more comprehensive European civil society strategy would be needed to resolve issues around civic space.
    - Will the FRRL reports flag concrete actions to be adopted?
  - **Ms Negri, European Civic Forum (ECF):**
    - Monitoring civic space through the [Civic Space Watch](#)
    - [European civil society strategy report](#) and [related FAQ - factsheet](#)
    - The use of spy ware to survey not only civic actors, but also, judges, journalists, opposition parties etc is an emerging trend on which organised civil society develops skills, expertise and alliances. Cases in Poland, Hungary and Spain.
  - **Mr Pirvulescu:**
    - FRRL group very good cooperation with Commission and with LIBE committee in EP
    - The findings of the reports feed in the EESC opinions. But no action plan.
  - **Ms Xhomaqi:**
    - Having the shrinking civic space topic as a regular item on LGs agenda will allow the group to discuss this core matter systematically
6. **European Semester and Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF)**
- **Javier Doz Orrit**, president of the EESC European Semester Group (ESG) – Presentation on the links between the Semester and the RRF and on future adjustments to the Semester
  - General discussion
- **Mr Doz Orrit:**
    - 1,5 years of work by the ESG on the plan. First [resolution on involvement of organised civil society in the National Recovery and Resilience Plans – What works and what does not?](#) adopted in February 2021. Art.18 RRF regulation on civil society participation was well implemented only in 5 MS.

- [Second resolution on the involvement of organised civil society in the National Recovery and Resilience Plans – How can we improve it?](#) adopted in May 2022: Civil society participation improved.
- Conclusions of the [annual conference of the ESG](#) "Reforming the European Semester for a resilient, sustainable and inclusive Europe - Tackling present and future challenges":
  - EESC calls for a directive/regulation to ensure participation of civil society in the European Semester.
  - Need to set a new frame for the European Semester
  - Reorientation of Next Generation EU Fund
  - Need for a Reserve Fund.
- **Hanna Surmatz:**
  - CSOs can also be part in the monitoring of how the RRP's are implemented
  - Within the European Semester process there should be civil dialogue or civil society participation
- **Julie Rosenkiedle, SDG Watch:**
  - How should civil society be involved on European and national level?
  - Has the ESG reminded the European Commission in its work to keep the promise to include the SDGs within the European Semester?
- **Mr Doz Orrit:**
  - Different ways of civil society participation in the Member States while it's true that participation of social partners is bigger than of civil society but in most countries there are specific structures for dialogue with civil society (round tables, working groups etc).
  - The Commission pushed MS to establish forms of civil society participation
  - There might be in the future an own-initiative opinion on the reform of the European Semester in relation with the reform of the Stability and Growth Pact.

## 7. Any other business

Since no other business was raised, **Ms Schweng** ended the meeting, thanking all the LG members, the secretariat of the Liaison Group and the interpreters.

**Nex meetings:**

**CSOs: 13 October, 10.30-12.30.**

**Full LG : beginning of December.**

Annex: Attendance list

# ANNEX

## LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

(in alphabetical order)

**Tuesday 7 June 2022 at 10.30 a.m., room JDE 63**

EESC members:

Mr	Seámus BOLAND	President of Group III	phys
Mr	Pietro Francesco DE LOTTO	President CCMI	phys
Mr	Dimitris DIMITRIADIS	President of the REX section	phys
Mr	Javier DOZ ORRIT	President European Semester Group	phys
Ms	Louise GRABO	President SMO	remote
Ms	Violeta JELIC	for Stefano MALLIA	phys
Ms	Baiba MILTOVIČA	President of the TEN section	remote
Mr	Lech PILAWSKI	President of LMO	phys
Mr	Peter SCHMIDT	President of the NAT section	remote
Ms	Christa SCHWENG	President of the European Economic and Social Committee	phys

Members of civil society organisations:

Ms	BARI, Veronica	FEANI	phys
Ms	BOBIC, Maja	EMI	phys
Ms	CIVICO, Gabriella	CEV	phys
Ms	DAS, Sarada	CPME	remote
Ms	DELABIE, Mathilde	Cooperatives Europe	phys
Mr	FASSOULAS, Petros	EMI	remote
Ms	FINN, Alva	Social Platform	phys
Ms	GOICOECHEA, Sonia	EEB	phys
Ms	GOSME, Liz	COFACE	remote
Mr	GRASSOS, Theodor	EVBB	phys
Mr	GYÖRGY, Dávid	UIPI	remote
Mr	HARRINGTON, Joe	UIPI	phys
Ms	HEINISCH, Renate	EPA	remote
Mr	HICKS, Davyth	EUROLANG	remote
Ms	KAVRAKOVA, Assya	ECAS	remote
Mr	LAPEGNA, Andrea	LLLP	phys
Mr	LOURDELLE, Henri	FERPA	phys
Ms	MARAFFA, Fabiana	European Youth Forum (YFJ)	phys
Ms	MASSAROTTO, Chiara	IUT	phys

Mr	MESEGUER, Víctor	SEE	phys
Mr	MÉTÉREAU, Alexandre	UEF	phys
Mr	MIGUEL JEUNE, Bruno	Jeune-Europe	remote
Ms	NAJMOWICZ, Alexandrina	European Civic Forum	remote
Ms	NEGRI, Giada	European Civic Forum	remote
Ms	NIESTROY, Ingeborg	SDG Watch	phys
Mr	ROSANA, Gabriele	CAE	remote
Ms	ROSENKILDE, Julie	SDG Watch	phys
Ms	SURMATZ, Hanna	Philea	remote
Mr	TAGUEM, Eric	R.E.D.	phys
Ms	VALMORBIDA, Antonella	ALDA	remote
Mr	VESPA, Matteo	ESU	remote
Ms	XHOMAQI, Brikena	LLLP, Vice-chair Liaison Group	phys

**Guest speakers:**

Mr	PÎRVULESCU, Cristian	President of EESC FRRL Group	phys
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**EESC Members who sent their apologies:**

Mr	MALLIA, Stefano	President of Group I	
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**Members of Civil Society organisations who have sent their apologies:**

Ms	BRIGA, Elisa	EFIL	
Mr	JARRÉ, Dirk	EURAG	
Ms	GAMBARDELLA, Elisa	Solidar	
Mr	KUCHARCZYK, Maciej	AGE	
Mr	MAUCHER, Mathias	SSE	
Mr	SADOWSKI, Piotr	Volonteuropé	

**EESC staff:**

Ms	BORG, Janine	Head of CSS unit	
Ms	CALVY, Sonia	CSS unit	
Ms	DUMITRACHE, Ana	President's Cabinet	
Ms	GÓMEZ DE LA ROSA, Yolanda	CSS unit, trainee	
Mr	KNOBLACH, Bernhard	INF unit	
Ms	SCHWEDER, Sandra	CSS unit	
Ms	SERAFINI, Karen	CSS unit	