



CIVIL SOCIETY DAYS 2023

1–3 March

**Civil society organisations:
a pillar of democracy and a key player
to overcome current challenges**

RECOMMENDATIONS



**Liaison
Group**

European Economic
and Social Committee

#CivSocDays

Intro

This annual EESC civil society flagship event took place on 1-3 March as a web-streamed on-site conference. The debate focused on the fundamental role civil society organisations have in social cohesion and democracy, in Europe and beyond. More than 500 participants attended the event onsite and online to engage in the lively conversations on topics such as democratising the European economy, new horizons for participatory and deliberative democracy, expanding the civic spaces, digital rights, youth engagement and skills for democratic participation. The outcome of this conference are the forward-looking recommendations stemming from the eight workshops.

Opening inspiration from some of our speakers...



*A **strong and resilient democracy** requires open, informed discussion, as well as the **involvement of an active civil society and citizens**. And not just on election day! We need to **empower civil society organisations to play a central role in safeguarding our democratic institutions and values**. The EESC will continue to support civil society involvement at all levels, as that ultimately improves policies and governance methods and democratic legitimacy.*

Christa Schweng, EESC President



*We need to raise awareness about the European civic space that has been evolving and to **build democratic resilience from within**, we must equip citizens as they engage in democracy. **We can never take our democracy for granted**; we need to work together more than ever to find solutions to collective problems. With governance at all levels, with civil society organisations and with citizens.*

European Commission Vice-President Dubravka Šuica



*In order to flourish, **democracy needs both the formal world of parties and institutional politics and the informal world of civil society.** Civil society organisations are placed outside the two traditional centres of power (the state and capitalist operations in the market). That is why they are so important: without CSOs politics is remote from the public. However, we also need institutions, otherwise we would be thrown in the chaos. As such, both worlds need to **cooperate to create a healthy democratic space.***

Colin Crouch, professor Emeritus



*Across the world we are witnessing the **decline of democracy in favour of populism and nationalism,** as well as rising inequalities and attacks on human rights defenders, journalists, activists, and youth civil society organisations. The response to this shrinking of our civic space must not only be its protection. We must aim for the **expansion of our democratic space,** by opening it to youth, increasing rights and freedoms, and creating a supportive environment for young people in civil society organisations.*

Noura Berrouba, Swedish Council of Youth Organisations



*Democracy is a civil space for debate and discussion. **This is only possible if this civil space is cross-boundary, inclusive and safe for civil society organisations to operate freely.** Civil society cannot be at the mercy of local governments, it needs to be free. We need a European legal framework to enshrine minimum standards for how governments should interact with NGOs and CSOs.*

Sergey Lagodinsky,
Member of the European Parliament



*To empower CSOs we **must raise awareness, provide financial support, and build trust in civil society from all actors.***

Biljana Spasovska, BCSDN



*We need to create **opportunities for people and CSOs to engage with institutions and formal democratic channels.** We need to embed participative policies and legal frameworks in our democratic systems, meaning that we need to enshrine a **right to participate in the political debate and in democratic processes.***

Claire McEvoy, OECD Observatory of Civic Space

Workshop recommendations

- A **European strategy for civil society, including philanthropy**, is needed to connect different building blocks for a truly **empowering space**; to renew engagement and implement structured civil dialogue across EU institutions; to enable legal, tax and policy frameworks for CSOs, including cross-border protection; to build resilience, including access to flexible and sustainable resources, be they private or public. The approach should also include candidate countries.
- **Europe needs better safeguards for human rights, democracy and CSOs in a central place** in the democratic process. Civil society facing attacks from state or state-affiliated actors requires **capacity-building** in the fields of effective communication and campaigning, to trigger a shift in public perception of their activities and connection of trust with citizens as vital elements for securing CSOs' place in the democratic process. More than that, **trust must be rebuilt with institutions and funders** in relation to easing the administrative burden for financing.
- Russia's illegal war in Ukraine is a belated reminder to connect more strongly to civil society beyond the EU, transferring knowledge in both directions, and, by virtue of increased expertise, finding tailor-made solutions for the problems that organisations are facing. The situation showcases the terrible extremes that an **autocratic system can lead to, which pro-democratic voices can use to gain public support** in their efforts to defend a diverse and inclusive society.
- The **European Semester** is an important multi-governance mechanism. Europe and its Member States must **ensure the participation of relevant civil society at all levels. Not only** during the phase of analysis and policy proposals at EU level, but also in the creation of the national reform programmes, taking into consideration national contexts. The **key role CSOs play in the implementation of Country Specific Recommendations** must be considered. National European Semester officers should take a more proactive approach, building the capacity of CSOs to enable them to engage in national consultations.
- To face current challenges, a **holistic and cooperative approach on education and training** must be adopted. A European policy for skills should be co-shaped **with civil society and social partners**, who have the political capital, concrete knowledge and an understanding of current needs and shortcomings. Education and training are not a matter of government only.

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- While education and training policies often focus on job-specific skills, **transversal competences are the true backbone of a participatory and deliberative democracy**: cooperation, critical thinking, problem-solving, democratic and collective management, and conflict resolution. These competences are based on common European values: **democracy, solidarity, inclusion**. They allow citizens to consciously participate in society and actively engage in our economy. Their crucial importance must be reflected, in **formal and non-formal education**, including alternative governance models, such as cooperatives.
 - Volunteering based on European values is an important part of resilience and **crisis prevention and response**. A European Year of Volunteers in 2025 would be a fitting tribute to the contribution of volunteers of all ages and backgrounds in supporting health and well-being, their role in resilience and recovery, and for the future of Europe. Volunteer organisations need to be in a more secure position to contribute effectively. The compassion, altruism, generosity, and solidarity that underpins volunteering needs an enabling environment.
 - It is necessary to build a **fair and enabling context for volunteering**. **Public funding should reflect the true cost of volunteering**, the value and contribution of volunteers, and the needs of volunteering infrastructure organisations that ensure the provision of quality volunteering. Public funds should be fairly allocated, matching the required flexibility in responses to needs, and accessible to all civil society organisations that respect human rights and European values through open calls for proposals. Support for associations through impact measurement systems should be considered.
 - **In our digital society, EU institutions must ensure young people** have fair access to the internet, devices and skills which are the foundation of equal opportunities for education and employment. EU legislators must ensure that new technologies do not undermine quality, dignifying jobs or human-centric workplaces, and do not exacerbate existing exploitative and oppressive practices in the recruitment and HR management of young people. In today's digital society, EU institutions must guarantee - through legal and non-legal means - the **preconditions for young people's empowering, meaningful, secure and proactive participation in the democratic process**. Namely: **a protected civic space**, access to encrypted, **safe and secure communication, equitable and inclusive processes for participation, while ensuring our physical and mental health**.

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- The **upcoming European elections will be important**, yet challenging, with fears of abstentions and anti-European votes. **CSOs must be empowered to act as translators and bridge builders, to debate the European project with citizens**, going beyond the convinced ones, and reaching others in their communities, territories, cities and villages. It is crucial to create the **possibilities for participating in public debates and foster a culture of participation at all levels**.
 - It is necessary for EU institutions to **strengthen cooperation between different actors** (public authorities, CSOs and media) in order to improve citizens' outreach and engagement in politics using **new and creative communication tools** throughout a political mandate. In this context, the recommendations of the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) must be fully implemented.
 - **Europe must invest in active citizenship**. Drawing on the success of the Conference on the Future of Europe, we recommend **strengthening the role of transnational citizen panels in the EU decision making process as well as citizen consultations at local, regional and national levels**. These inclusive and innovative panels play a crucial role in improving the democratic functioning of the EU, as well as enhancing legitimacy, trust and accountability of the democratic process.
 - It is vital to **strengthen the key role of organised civil society, social partners and trade unions in supporting deliberative democracy, in complementarity to representative democracy, to further strengthen civil dialogues**. Europe and its Member States must build the capacity of civil society organisations, including to strengthen their role in citizen panels, where they can help identify processes, **provide expertise** to increase diversity of debates, as well as facilitate the organisation and running of panels. **Civil society organisations should also be empowered to increase the political uptake of citizen recommendations** stemming from the panels.
 - We also call for the development of tools that will enhance participatory and deliberative democracy, such as the **European Citizens' Initiative and Online EU Public Consultations**. These tools need to be accessible and communicated to all citizens.

Read more about the EESC's active engagement and forward-looking proposals in relation to each of the workshops' topics:

- **Civil society space, civil dialogue and funding of civil society**
<https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/agenda-items/workshop-3-civil-society-space-civil-dialogue-and-funding-civil-society>
- **CSOs resilience against shrinking democratic space in CEE**
<https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/agenda-items/workshop-4-csos-resilience-against-shrinking-democratic-space-cee>
- **Can we democratise the European Economy through the European Semester?**
<https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/agenda-items/workshop-1-can-we-democratise-european-economy-through-european-semester>
- **Skills and lifelong learning for democratic societies**
<https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/agenda-items/workshop-2-skills-and-lifelong-learning-democratic-societies>
- **Volunteers and Resilience**
<https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/agenda-items/workshop-5-volunteers-and-resilience>
- **Digital participation and digital rights in the European public space: a focus on youth**
<https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/agenda-items/workshop-6-digital-participation-and-digital-rights-european-public-space-focus-youth>
- **Elections 2024: debating EU outside the capitals and the key role of organised civil society**
<https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/agenda-items/workshop-7-elections-2024-debating-eu-outside-capitals-and-key-role-organised-civil-society>
- **The Future of participatory and deliberative democracy**
<https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/agenda-items/workshop-8-future-participatory-and-deliberative-democracy>