

Brussels, 6 December 2018

MINUTES

of the 33rd meeting of the

Liaison Group with European civil society organisations and networks held in the Committee building, Brussels

on 29 November 2018

Rue Belliard/Belliardstraat 99 — 1040 Bruxelles/Brussel — BELGIQUE/BELGIË Tel. +32 25469011 — Fax +32 25134893 — Internet: http://www.eesc.europa.eu The Liaison Group with European civil society organisations and networks held its 33rd meeting in Brussels, at 10 a.m. on Thursday 29 November 2018.

ATTENDANCE LIST (See Appendix)

1. Adoption of the draft agenda

Due to the schedule of EP Vice-President Sylvie Guillaume, the President, Luca Jahier, proposed switching agenda items 3 (Introductory statements by the EESC President, Luca Jahier, and the Liaison Group co-chair, Conny Reuter) and 4 (Presentation of the European Parliament's election campaign and the strategy towards civil society organisations by Sylvie Guillaume, EP Vice-President). The revised draft agenda was adopted.

2. Presentation of the European Parliament's election campaign and the strategy towards civil society organisations by Sylvie Guillaume, EP Vice-President

Luca Jahier introduced Sylvie Guillaume, who had been invited to present the European Parliament's election campaign and in particular its strategy for working with CSOs, and institutional mobilisation. Before giving the floor to Ms Guillaume, he stressed the good institutional relations between the EESC and the EP, particularly in terms of communication strategies, but also in other areas. He hoped to be able to communicate a statement together with EP President Tajani in the upcoming weeks.

Sylvie Guillaume thanked the President and the group for the warm welcome she had received, and expressed her hope for even closer cooperation between the institutions and between the Liaison Group and the European Parliament. With the election coming up, the EP election campaign would be certainly different to previous ones. For some context, Ms Guillaume stated that election campaigns were of course always exceptional, but that in recent years European issues had become more present at the level of Member States. This went hand in hand with rising numbers of citizens who expressed their support for the continuity of the European project – around 60% according to Eurobarometer, depending on the Member State, which was a significant number, particularly in the context of Brexit. Europeans thus clearly appreciated the European Union. The statistics also indicated a stronger interest among the population in this election in comparison to the 2014 election.

Ms Guillaume then presented the institutional campaign, which was about to start. The EP aimed to get some strong messages across. The campaign had three main focal points:

First, the campaign sought to put national contexts at the forefront. Using the EP's Liaison Offices in the Member States, and contact with associations and citizens, this way the EP hoped to address issues that were of greatest concern to the citizens of the respective Member States.

Second, the main focus of the campaign was to mobilise people who did not usually vote in European elections. Ms Guillaume took her home country France as an example, where turnout in European elections had been poor. This focus on encouraging former non-voters to vote was reflected in the campaign's slogan: "This Time I'm Voting". The main goal was therefore to target absentees and to get them to question themselves *why* they did not vote. A second element was to create a kind of community around the campaign, and to have citizens themselves spread the message that decisions in

the EP were important, and that citizens should therefore be involved, as they could have an impact. In order to mobilise citizens, in the campaign they could choose the topics they were interested in, including specific policy issues close to them.

The third main focus was trying to span the complex and the simple. Europe was often perceived to be distant and technocratic, so the messaging should be simple and understandable for citizens, striking a good balance between correct messaging and easy-to-understand wording. In this regard, a central piece of the campaign was the "What Europe Does For Me" website. Citizens could read about European policies in geographic, socioeconomic and professional categories, allowing them to properly identify where the EU had improved *their* life.

Concerning the involvement of civil society in the institutional campaign, Ms Guillaume stressed the importance of strengthening support and collaboration between the EP and CSOs for the effectiveness of the campaign. The support mechanisms in place needed to be improved, in order to coordinate the message communicated. CSOs could therefore be a crucial intermediary between the EP and the citizens, serving to multiply and reinforce the campaign message. Many organisations were already involved, particularly with the "This Time I'm Voting" campaign. The European Parliament also offered funding for CSOs involved in the campaign. However, the need for more structured cooperation, Ms Guillaume remarked, went beyond the next European election, and also applied to other EU institutions. Ms Guillaume closed her presentation by expressing her hope for an interesting discussion with the audience, and to hear input from the CSOs.

Luca Jahier thanked Ms Guillaume for her concise presentation, and stressed the generally good relations with the European Parliament. He opened the floor for a discussion with Ms Guillaume.

Pierre Jean Coulon (EESC-TEN) also thanked Ms Guillaume for the presentation and for having pointed out that this was an institutional campaign. He stressed the importance of standing for Europe, giving an example of his home region, the eastern Pyrenees, where he would be focusing his European election campaign on the universities (Perpignan and Montpellier), because many nonvoters were students, which meant a loss of dynamism and of potential voters. He therefore asked whether the EP campaign had a particular focus on young voters and university students.

Ariane Rodert (EESC-INT) mentioned that the EP's office in Sweden was rather small and quiet, as was the Commission's office. Their work focused specifically on EU legislation, so it seemed that CSOs were particularly relevant in spreading the word of this campaign. Her umbrella organisation in Sweden would also carry out a campaign, and they would focus particularly on youth ambassadors for the election. She deemed it important to inform EESC members about the tool and make sure that they could apply it in their national contexts.

Maciej Kucharczyk (AGE Platform) picked up on the Eurobarometer numbers mentioned by Ms Guillaume, stating that in his home country (Poland), pro-European attitudes were even more widespread, at around 80%. Nonetheless, many citizens who considered themselves pro-European ended up voting for eurosceptic parties. He therefore pointed out that having a higher turnout at the election was in itself a good thing, but it did not automatically translate into a pro-European election

result. Hence, he asked what kind of message should be transmitted by CSOs and how they could persuade both those intending to vote and potential non-voters to vote pro-European.

François Balate (EYF) asked about the timeline of the campaign, and what the central elements and events in the campaign would be in the coming months, before the election. Furthermore, he stressed that the crucial demographic would not only be students, but young people in general, who were difficult to mobilise if parties and campaigns were not tailored towards young people's interests. He therefore wanted to know whether the EP campaign felt ready to engage young people sufficiently so as to have them participate more strongly.

Brikena Xhomaqi (LLLP) added that, apart from young people, who tended not to vote because they did not see the added value of Europe, adults also seemed to have developed a problematic tendency: while they did vote, they expressed their frustration by voting for eurosceptic parties. Therefore, how could a balance between these two demographic groups be struck?

Vladimir Sestovic (EFC) stated that his organisation fully supported the EP campaign. He stressed that a lot of European discourse at the moment concerned borders, protection, and similar points. What he found to be lacking was a utopian discourse to counter this narrative, and he wanted to know whether Ms Guillaume agreed with that statement.

Jeremy Wates (EEB) congratulated the EP for the "What Europe Does For Me" campaign, which he considered to be an extremely useful tool for environmental NGOs prior to the election. He also described the contradictory role of NGOs in this campaign, which are generally critical of EU institutions' policies but but would then be changing this stance and campaigning together with and for the institutions which they usually scrutinised and criticised rather severely.

He continued by saying that the institutions had not addressed issues that were a concern to people. In this sense, in the Brexit discussion, the social and environmental dimension of the EU had suddenly come to the forefront.

Furthermore, he asked Ms Guillaume about any risk that the EP campaign might fracture among the political groupings' campaigns as election day drew closer.

Claude Debrulle (AEDH) stressed that it was crucial for mobilisation to have a positive vision, recalling how he campaigned for the elimination of intra-European border controls – a sight that had resurfaced in recent years. Furthermore, civic space was shrinking, not only outside of Europe, but also within it.

Conny Reuter said that it was important to not just campaign on a dichotomous platform of pro-European versus anti-European positions. Rather, he stressed the importance of addressing topics that were relevant to people, and not to follow suit on making the EP election a referendum on the EU as eurosceptic parties were trying to do. He also identified interinstitutional problems that made communicating the EU more difficult. First, he mentioned the lack of openness of some of the EP's offices in the Member States. Second, there was a certain element of competition between the offices of the EP and the Commission, which made communication as a whole less efficient. He agreed that it was important to allow people to dream, rather than to instil fear in them. It was therefore crucial to have a message for the future that could be communicated in order to motivate people.

Luca Jahier agreed that it was important to have a message to communicate that was, in a sense, visionary and went beyond the election. He also stressed that there was still work to be done to implement Article 11 TEU concerning European institutions' dialogue with civil society – not as an alternative to the election, but to complement it and strengthen the EU's legitimacy and reach.

Sylvie Guillaume responded to several of the questions posed. She expressed agreement with regard to focusing on students and universities for campaigning – there seemed to be a paradox as students and universities were among the demographics that most clearly benefited from European values and funding. She expressed surprise at the criticism of the small role of EP offices in some countries; this did not correspond to her own experience in France.

Ms Guillaume furthermore agreed that pro-European attitudes did not result in pro-European votes, and identified a mismatch between the EU's and national governments' ability to communicate to their citizens, which was used by some national politicians to blame the EU for personal shortcomings, while claiming the successes of the EU to be their own.

On youth participation, she recalled information from Denmark that showed that first-time voters who did not vote tended not to vote in the future. Take-up from an early stage was thus a crucial element for motivating people and encouraging them to vote.

Concerning potential rivalry between party campaigns and the institutional campaign, Ms Guillaume did not see a problem. Recalling the "Spitzenkandidaten" debate from 2014, the party campaigns could ultimately also foster the creation of a European public sphere and awareness of European issues and the European election.

She agreed with many of the previous contributions that it was important not to make the European election a referendum on Europe. Nonetheless, this tendency would be present in some Member States. It was therefore important to criticise the European institutions – not for what they were, but for the contradictions they produced and the promises they did not deliver on. This included, however, also communicating the omissions of Member States, and calling out who did what, and what the European position was.

3. Approval of the minutes of the 32nd meeting

The minutes were approved.

4. Statements by the EESC President, Luca Jahier, and the Liaison Group co-chair, Conny Reuter

Luca Jahier started by welcoming the new member of the Liaison Group from the EESC side, **John Walker** from Group I. He then recalled the "Roadmap to Sibiu and beyond", by which the Committee intend to address some key messages for the EU institutions to be submitted to the last Council summit before the European elections as well as to propose priorities to the new European Parliament and Commission. He invited the Liaison Group to contribute to this process, as well as to the input

into the next Commission work programme. He also mentioned the possibility of organising an event together with civil society in February or March 2019 to strengthen the EESC message.

The President further underlined four developments in the Committee: first, the appointment of Gianluca Brunetti, the former head of Human Resources and Budget, as the new Secretary-General of the EESC. Second, the dedication of the Committee to working on the new multiannual financial framework (MFF); the EESC approved the first opinion of any EU institution in February, and had produced many other opinions since.

Thirdly, regarding Brexit, he noted that the Committee had established its own Brexit Group in September, which would continue to inform and follow developments after the Brexit agreement. He pointed out that the divorce agreement mentioned the importance of civil society dialogue to be established between the EU and the UK.

Lastly, he mentioned the work of the EESC on sustainable development on the one hand, where the role of the EESC was prominent and should be further strengthened, and of culture on the other hand. In this regard, the Leonardo project would work around the figure of Leonardo da Vinci in 2019 as he was a symbol of the Renaissance and an expression of the vitality of civil society and innovation for progress, symbolising the motto of rEUnaissance. He could be a positive message for the future.

The floor was then given to the co-chair, **Conny Reuter**, who welcomed the participants by expressing his satisfaction at the high number of European civil society networks present. Referring to the link between migration, climate change and social issues presented by Sylvie Guillaume, he emphasised that the Sustainable Development Goals were a very concrete international agenda that could be directly built upon.

He also addressed the current political discussions surrounding the UN Migration Pact, which were being abused in many Member States for political reasons. Furthermore, he expressed his concern about the shrinking civic space in the EU, particularly in relation to the financing of NGOs which continued to be at stake.

Lastly, he addressed Brexit, stating that no matter what kind of Brexit happened, from the standpoint of civil society, British organisations would remain members of and partners with European networks in a post-Brexit world.

5. **Development of the LG**

Conny Reuter then introduced agenda point 5, recalling the lack of participation of CSOs at the last meeting. He explained that a survey had been sent out to all member organisations to find out what had prevented them from participating (apart from agenda constraints), and said that a voluntary working group had been formed whose draft proposals would be presented now. He specifically thanked Marilena Vrana (EFC), Gabriella Civico (CEV) and Assya Kavrakova (ECAS) for their participation in this working group.

a) Outcomes of the CSO member survey

Pierluigi Brombo reported that the response rate for the survey sent out to all member organisations was almost 50%. The survey showed that the reasons for not attending were usually of an organisational nature, and not due to a lack of interest.

On the question whether they wanted the format or content of the Liaison Group to be changed, there were three main responses. First, the Liaison Group should address issues of common interest. Second, the civil society organisations wished to have more influence on the priorities and the work of the Liaison Group. Third, CSOs wanted to have a better link with the Committee's work and have more influence on it. Measures had already been taken by the Secretariat to improve the information flow about the Committee's work plan to the CSOs.

On the question of where the CSOs saw the added benefit of Liaison Group membership, they mentioned that it was the only institutionalised contact point within the EU policy process, that it enabled them to have a structured impact on the EESC's opinions, and, through the EESC's work, also on the work of the Council, the Commission and the Parliament. CSOs also mentioned that the Liaison Group was a good example of horizontal civil society dialogue (Art. 11) that enabled progressive goals to be fostered.

The next question concerned the fields of interest of the CSOs, which received diverse answers: active citizenship, human rights, the environment, the social economy, learning, volunteering, digital democracy, funding.

Lastly, the question on whether there was interest in continuing to work with the Liaison Group; all survey participants expressed their interest in doing so.

b) Ideas for the development of the LG and discussion

Conny Reuter then presented the ideas developed so far in the working group.

The first proposal concerned the abolition of alternate status, allowing all member CSOs to speak in Liaison Group sessions.

A second proposal concerned the opening of the Liaison Group to new sectors, including CSOs that may be closer to Group I and II and not only Group III.

A third proposal was to have a thematic focus per meeting.

Conny Reuter then gave the floor to Assya Kavrakova (ECAS) to further develop on the proposals.

Assya Kavrakova (ECAS) referred to a study commissioned by the EESC, "The Future of Civil Society in Europe by 2030", which showed certain trends that were important for civil society. This study could function as a good backdrop for thinking about the enlargement of the Liaison Group, taking into consideration a forward-looking perspective. This could even mean being on top of changes happening to the civic space in Europe, rather than being merely reactive. Ms Kavrakova mentioned digitalisation as an example of both a good new category for CSOs and a good thematic focus for the meetings.

Gabriella Civico (CEV) was then given the floor by Conny Reuter to present the ideas about improving the communication and work of the Liaison Group. One idea was to introduce written memos prior to the sessions, in which CSOs and EESC groups and sections would inform about their current work and upcoming projects. A second idea was to introduce a coordination group made up of

CSO and EESC members to facilitate the administration and organisation of the meetings. This would allow a truly thematic and political focus for the meetings themselves to be developed. The group would not be representative, but would simply try to facilitate the functioning of the Liaison Group meetings through preparation.

Pierre Jean Coulon (EESC-TEN) agreed that there seemed to be no need to maintain the rule concerning alternate status. He also emphasised the fact that CSOs present in the Liaison Group should be given priority in being heard when they were providing input relevant to EESC opinions, something he would do for an opinion of a package of opinions on energy matters that his section is working together with the NAT section, due next June.

François Balate (EYF) expressed his approval of the proposals, particularly with regard to thematic meetings, which could have the potential to create synergies between the work of the Liaison Group and the EESC.

Susanna Florio (for Ms Bischoff, Group II) recalled that many Liaison Group meetings focused on procedure rather than policies; the proposals could be a good remedy for this. Furthermore, Ms Florio mentioned that the Liaison Group could reinforce its visibility and strengthen the ties with within the Committee. She regretted that not enough members knew about the purpose and work of the Liaison Group. It seemed clear, however, that it was important to strengthen the alliance between social partners and civil society. She remarked that the Liaison Group could have a bigger role in the "Roadmap to Sibiu and beyond" strategy.

Vladimir Sestovic (ECF) informed that there would be a major CSO event in Sibiu shortly before the summit, where CSOs would work together to deliver a message to the Sibiu EU summit. This would also make it important to coordinate between Liaison Group members to ensure that there was no overlap of events.

Elisa Briga (EFIL) expressed her organisation's support for abolishing the status of alternate membership, as her organisation itself held this status, and participation should be based on willingness rather than status. She also asked an operational question concerning the planning group, which she deemed a generally good idea. For it to work effectively, however, Ms Briga wanted to know how to ensure that the planning group knew about the activities of members inside and outside the Committee, for it to be able to identify the themes with the greatest possible synergies.

Marilena Vrana (EFC) took up what Ms Briga and Ms Florio said, as a planning group would potentially facilitate coordination both with other groups in the Committee as well as with the CSOs. Organisations would not have to share all their activities, but a plan with the key activities for the next half-year could be shared through the planning group, for members to have a better understanding of the current topics for other CSOs and sections. With this exchange, the planning group could satisfy the need to be more forward-looking in terms of topic selection and to make the full Liaison Group meetings more effective.

Conny Reuter roughly summarised the positive responses to the proposals and highlighted the unique institutional status of the Liaison Group for organised civil society. He clarified that the proposed planning group was not meant to be a new formal body with specific duties, but rather a space for coordination between the EESC and organised civil society, so as to create a new dynamic and – picking up on Ms Florio's comment – to strengthen existing bonds within the Committee, and to improve coordination as well as the partnerships that already existed. He concluded by stating that there seemed to be general agreement on the other three proposals.

The three proposals (abolition of alternate status, enlargement to new sectors, thematic focus for meetings) were agreed upon. Concerning the planning group, the Secretariat was advised to further consider, together with volunteers, how to improve the coordination and administration of the Liaison Group without creating a new body.

Luca Jahier concluded the discussion by reiterating the commitment to the three proposals adding a forth one, namely the creation of a database, publicly accessible and in line with the GDPR, to have a better view of all the contacts the Committee maintains. He summed it up as a question of transparency and of capitalisation of the Committee's richness, which is unique among the EU institutions. On the topic of a planning group, he emphasised the importance of improving the fluidity of contacts and cooperation without creating new structures and burdens.

Jeremy Wates (EEB) asked about what the abolition of alternate status would mean for the statute of the Liaison Group, which stated that each sector should be represented by only one organisation in the Liaison Group. The idea behind this rule – to ensure good representation but also a manageable group size – should not be lost sight of when reforming the membership rules.

Conny Reuter clarified that the abolition of the alternate status would not result in an unmanageable number of members.

Luca Jahier recalled that the idea behind the membership rules was to represent all relevant sectors of European civil society.

The four proposals as exposed by the EESC President were formally agreed to; the Secretariat would do further work on ideas for better coordination.

6. Civil Society Days 2019

Conny Reuter shared the date of the Civil Society Days (CivSocDays), which would take place on June 12-13. The date had been chosen to fall between the EP elections and the formation of the new Commission, which would potentially allow civil society to provide input into the process. Furthermore, the new composition of the EP would already be apparent, and what this may mean for the future of civil society in the European context.

Concerning the topic, the pressing issues were sustainability, democracy, and citizenship. The precise wording of the topic had yet to be found – Mr Reuter preferred "Sustainable Citizenship" – but broadly speaking the topic would revolve around those issues. Another matter to be discussed prior to the CivSocDays was opening up to CSOs that were not based in Brussels or had not participated in the past.

In the further planning of the conference, the Secretariat would issue a call for volunteers among CSO members to join in the further elaboration of the programme and the topic.

Pierre Jean Coulon (EESC-TEN) recalled that the last topic had been very relevant to many sections. Last year's steps should therefore be repeated so as to involve the EESC members and sections as much as possible.

Brikena Xhomaqi (LLLP) pointed out the exclusive nature of citizenship, herself being a non-EU citizen working for the European project. She therefore deemed it important that the concept of citizenship – if it was used – should be used in a way that went beyond the mere legal definition of citizenship, as this affected many migrants within the EU, and created a sense of non-belonging among migrants and asylum seekers.

Elisa Briga (EFIL) recalled a meeting at the European Commission the week before on the topic of common values, which might be a better frame for the CivSocDays, because it also linked closely with the Sustainable Development Goals. Rather than citizenship, it might therefore be a good idea to talk about democracy.

Conny Reuter stated that citizenship was a conceptual issue and a legal term. He summarised the discussion by stating that the working title for the next Civil Society Days would refer to democracy, values, and the sustainability of our democracies. He proposed a slogan akin to "Let democracy be sustainable", which could make it possible to move away from the concept of citizenship.

Luca Jahier emphasised that as well as including the CSOs, the groups in the EESC should also be considered and kept on board by means of meetings with their respective presidencies.

Conny Reuter expressed his agreement and his hope that the working relationship with Group I could also be further improved.

It was agreed that the Secretariat would send out a call for volunteers for the further planning of the Civil Society Days.

7. Exchange of views on the follow-up of the **Action Plan for the implementation of Articles** 11(1) and 11(2) of the Treaty on European Union

Pierluigi Brombo recalled the work done on the Riga Roadmap on Article 11 TEU that had been agreed at the NGO Forum in Riga in 2015. He explained that the Roadmap adopted in Riga was

somewhat up in the air and needed to be relaunched politically. To that end, a voluntary working group had been developing specific solutions and tools. These proposals had been adopted at a meeting of the CSO members the previous year. He invited those present to discuss and potentially adopt the Action Plan for the implementation of Article 11.

Conny Reuter agreed that it was important to continue the work done in the year before, and hoped that the Liaison Group members would pick up on the proposals and promote them as well.

The Liaison Group acknowledged the Action Plan for the implementation of Article 11.

8. Other business

Regarding the organisation of the Civil Society Days at such a crucial time, **Luca Jahier** suggested that the co-chair, Conny Reuter, meet with the presidents of the three EESC groups on a bilateral basis to collect ideas for more cross-cutting issues.

Conny Reuter confirmed the good current practice of ongoing consultation not only of the section presidents but also of the group presidents in the EESC, underlining that he was regularly invited to meetings of Groups III and II. That said, he would appreciate the opportunity to present the work of the Liaison Group at a Group I meeting.

Conny Reuter thanked all members present for their attendance and participation before closing the meeting.

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Appendix



APPENDIX

LIAISON GROUP WITH EUROPEAN CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS AND NETWORKS

Thursday 29 November 2018 at 10 a.m., room JDE 70

ALPHABETICAL LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

EESC members present:

Mr	Pierre Jean COULON	President of the TEN section
Ms	Susanna FLORIO	For Ms Bischoff, President of GRII
Mr	Luca JAHIER	President of the European Economic and Social Committee
Mr	Arno METZLER	President of GRIII
Mr	Maurizio REALE	President of the NAT section
Ms	Ariane RODERT	President of the INT section
Ms	Dilyana SLAVOVA	President of the REX section
Ms	Lucie STUDNICNA	President of the CCMI section
Mr	John WALKER	Member GRI

Members of civil society organisations present:

Mr	François BALATE	European Youth Forum
Ms	Laura de BONFILS	Volonteurope
Ms	Elisa BRIGA	European Federation for Intercultural Learning
Ms	Gabriela CIVICO	European Volunteer Centre
Mr	Claude DEBRULLE	European Association for the Defence of Human Rights
Mr	John DELAP	European Students' Union
Ms	Sophie DOWDEN	Culture Action Europe
Mr	Haydn HAMMERSLEY	European Disability Forum
Ms	Assya KAVRAKOVA	European Citizen Action Service
Ms	Katja KELLER	Social Platform
Mr	Maciej KUCHARCZYK	AGE Platform Europe
Mr	Conny REUTER	Co-chair of the EESC Liaison Group
Mr	Vladimir SESTOVIC	European Civic Forum
Ms	Barbara STEENBERGEN	International Union of Tenants

Ms Marilena VRANA European Foundation Centre

Ms Andrea WITT Eurochild

Ms Brikena XHOMAQI Lifelong Learning Platform

EESC members who sent their apologies:

Ms Gabriele BISCHOFF President of Group II
Ms Violeta JELIC President of SMO
Mr Jacek KRAWCZYK President of Group I

Mr Stefano PALMIERI President of the ECO section

Mr Krzysztof PATER President of LMO Mr Peter SCHMIDT President of SDO

Ms Christa SCHWENG President of the SOC section

Members of civil society organisations who sent their apologies:

Mr Dirk JARRE EURAG

Ms Marie-Noëlle NEVEN International Association Rurality-Environment-

Development

Ms Valentina PRESA Union of European Federalists

Mr Luk ZELDERLOO EASPD