



Brussels, 25 September 2019

MINUTES

of the 34th meeting

of the

Liaison Group with European civil society organisations and networks

held in the Committee building, Brussels

on **12 September 2019**

The Liaison Group with European civil society organisations and networks held its 34th meeting in Brussels, **from 10.30 to 12.30 on Thursday 12 September 2019.**

ATTENDANCE LIST (See Appendix)

1. Adoption of the draft agenda

The draft agenda was adopted.

2. Approval of the minutes of the 33rd meeting

The minutes were approved.

3. Introductory statements by the EESC President, **Luca Jahier and the Liaison Group co-chair, **Conny Reuter****

Luca Jahier welcomed all participants, underlining that he was delighted to start one of the first meetings of the *rentrée* with the Liaison Group. He considered the two thematic focuses (fundamental rights and populism) to be very close to the priorities of our time and the EESC's ongoing work. He underlined a clear concern about fundamental rights and rule of law, which was also reflected in the priorities of the new Commission. He welcomed the study on populism commissioned by Group III as a clear reflection of today's societies' challenges. In this context, he referred to the evolution in the UK and Italy, the elections in major "Länder" in Germany and his visit to Sopron (Hungary).

He then commended the work of the Liaison Group, expecting that this could also be continued and reinforced via the new member organisations. The Civil Society Days were a great success in terms of content, timing and participation. In connection with the Conference on the Future of Europe, which will be a priority for the EP and also for the EESC's work, he wished to also involve the LG.

Conny Reuter welcomed the members of the EESC, particularly the three group presidents, and the civil society organisations which were well represented, which he saw as a good sign that the LG was going in the right direction and fully playing its role as an institutional link between civil society and EU institutions. He saw this evolution as being confirmed by the numerous requests for membership coming from liberal profession associations and civil society networks. He then commented on the proposals for the new Commissioners and their portfolios with a link to sustainability, and on the Civil Society Days with their twofold focus on democracy and sustainability. Mr Reuter regretted that civil dialogue was missing from the mission letters of the future Commissioners and proposed promoting the Liaison Group to the EP and EC as a good example of how civil dialogue could work. With a view to the planned Conference on the Future of Europe, the contribution of the LG could be the compendium of the recommendations of the various Civil Society Days, by building upon what has been already agreed upon instead of reinventing the wheel.

Before moving on to point 4, President Jahier gave the floor to Oliver Röpke, president of Group II (workers' group), welcoming him as a new member of the Liaison Group, replacing Gabriele Bischoff who has been elected to the EP.

Oliver Röpke, president of Group II, started by underlining how important the participation in this meeting was for him. Based on the clear distinction between social and civil dialogue, he thanked the LG for its work as a key contribution to civil dialogue, assuring that Group II would contribute to this work. He furthermore expressed the hope that the new Commission would deliver on the promises made by Ms Ursula von der Leyen, especially in fields such as sustainable development and the Social Pillar. He commented on the Commissioner's proposals regarding the topic of civil dialogue and of social issues linked to the planned splitting of DG Employment and Social Affairs into two directorates. Mr Röpke expressed his concern about the one-in-one-out principle that was taken up again by Ms von der Leyen. He concluded by welcoming the many membership applications and suggested opening up the LG to other groups like FERPA, a pensioners' union.

Luca Jahier thanked Oliver Röpke while emphasising that the LG was open minded and that all groups of organised civil society were welcome to join as long as they were not closely involved in institutional social dialogue as such.

He then briefly gave the floor to **Jeremy Wates**, EEB, who wished to have a brief exchange with the other stakeholders on the new composition of the Commission. The President proposed dealing with this under point 8 and then gave the floor to Andreas Accardo.

4. Presentation of the **Fundamental Rights Report 2019** and the situation of civil society organisations by Andreas Accardo, Fundamental Rights Agency

Andreas Accardo, Head of Unit for Institutional Cooperation, outlined key fundamental rights developments on the basis of the Agency's [Fundamental Rights Report 2019](#). While acknowledging positive legislative and policy developments by the EU institutions, he highlighted the gap between fundamental rights commitments and practice. As key examples, he mentioned the areas of migration management, Roma inclusion, and the rights of people with disabilities. He spoke about the increasing relevance of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights 10 years after its entry into force, but that awareness remained low at national level. Finally, he referred to challenges facing civil society as an emerging fundamental rights threat in the EU. He suggested three ways forward: 1) making active use of human rights as a legally binding normative framework for all policy; 2) implementing the Sustainable Development Goals with a built-in focus on human rights and equality; and 3) building a new pro-human rights alliance between civil society, policy makers, businesses, local authorities and others. In this context, he welcomed cooperation with the Liaison Group on those issues.

The **EESC President** thanked Mr Accardo for the very good presentation. As the topic of fundamental rights and rule of law was closely linked to the topic of point 5, populism, he proposed to hold one general discussion with the contribution of Karolina Dreszer-Smalec after the presentation by Assya Kavrakova, thus also allowing an exchange of views on the planned composition of the EC as requested by Jeremy Wates.

Arno Metzler, president of Group III (Diversity Europe), wished at this point to update the information given by Mr Accardo linked to legal professions. He pointed out that the EESC hosted the Justice

Stakeholder Forum and that at last year's meeting one of the major topics was the rule of law. He drew attention to the fact that the International Bar Association and the European Legal Association CCBE has been running a popular rule of law campaign since last year, launched in the EESC and in the EP, involving all the national associations and EU Member States. Furthermore, the European lawyers' organisation founded a company to employ and deliver such services in all hotspots for refugees.

5. Presentation of an **EESC study on *Societies outside metropolises: the role of civil society organisations in facing populism*** by Assya Kavrakova, ECAS, LG member and contractor for the study commissioned by Group III

Assya Kavrakova (ECAS) thanked the EESC Diversity Group, which had commissioned this study, for the trust shown in ECAS. The research was carried out in eight regions in four countries with a twofold objective: to understand the factors influencing citizens' choices in favour of populism in non-metropolitan areas and to give an insight into how civil society organisations (CSOs) operate to counter populism in view of recommending further civic actions. The description of the research methods was followed by the presentation of the socioeconomic and cultural factors of populism (anxieties, fears, cultural insecurity, etc.) and various additional factors (crisis of representative democracy, diminished trust in traditional parties, online disinformation, euroscepticism, etc.). Ms Kavrakova mentioned that when it came to civil society organisations, all-encompassing and comprehensive initiatives in tackling populism were lacking. She also highlighted a general lack of human and financial resources, thus CSOs need to be supported. At the end of her presentation, Ms Kavrakova commented on the 10 recommendations to CSOs (for more details see the attached PPP).

The EESC President then gave the floor to **Karolina Dreszer-Smalec**, vice president of the EESC Group on Fundamental Rights and the Rule of Law (FRRL) and rapporteur for the EESC opinion "Populism and fundamental rights – suburban and rural areas".

Before briefly presenting the EESC Group FRRL, Ms Dreszer-Smalec expressed the wish to have an exchange with the participants on the fact that civil dialogue was completely missing in the mission letters of the proposed Commissioners. She then commented on the FRRL fact finding missions to Member States and invited all CSOs in the room to the presentation of the related report on 5 November at the EESC, pledging strong and better cooperation with CSOs. Also in connection with the EESC opinion on populism and fundamental rights in suburban and rural areas, she explained the two different dimensions for action (real problems of citizens and selfish politicians) and called for new alliances to involve CSOs, local authorities and other stakeholders. She concluded by highlighting that the EESC would like to bring a CSO component to the new European Rule of Law mechanism.

Subsequently, Luca Jahier opened the floor for general discussion. The following participants actively took part in the debate:

Dilyana Slavova (president of REX section) with a question for Ms Kavrakova regarding the trust in the EU in countries particularly affected by populism and protest votes.

Alexandrina Najmowicz (European Civic Forum) advocating for a link between the EU Charter on Fundamental Rights and the Pillar of Social Rights, commenting on the Commissioner proposals and identifying fake news as the biggest challenge.

Jacek Krawczyk (president of Group I) proposing rethinking the role of CSOs and reflecting on how to make it understood and accepted by institutions. He confirmed that the EU had to act on fake news and that CSOs and education were ways to counter them.

Jeremy Wates (EEB) sharing the concern about the deregulation re-emergence of the one-in-one-out principle, which he considered completely senseless and counterproductive.

Kornelia Kiss (CAE) speaking about the case of the cultural sector and the rise in violation of freedom of artistic expression in all MS.

Liz Gosme (COFACE) wondering how to deal with the numerous CSOs that did not represent the general interest and European values.

John Walker (Group I) commenting on the one-in-one-out principle and the need for a proper definition of populism.

Conny Reuter concluded the debate by underlining that using the word populism was not helpful. Instead of discussing political messages, we should discuss what was changing in our societies. We need to understand the changes in societies to develop political answers. He suggested a CSO working group to draft proposals which build upon the two studies and the work of FRRL.

Luca Jahier summarised the debate in three key phrases for further reflection within the EESC: *low civil society infrastructure, civic education and the need for new alliances*. In these three areas, the LG can give advice and the EESC can play a key role.

He then left the floor to his co-chair **Conny Reuter** for the other items on the agenda and Mr Reuter started out with the suggestion to the CSO members of the LG to meet up and build a common agenda proposal on these three topics.

6. Civil Society Days 2019

Conny Reuter first of all expressed thanks for the opportunity he had been given to present and discuss the outcomes of the CivSocDays 2019 at the EESC plenary in July.

6.1 Adoption of the policy document

Mr Reuter highlighted that this document was not a report of workshop recommendations but a synopsis of the main messages of this conference on which the LG could follow-up and challenge the institutions, mentioning Didier Reynders and Vera Jourova in the Commission, respectively designated for Justice and Rule of Law, and Katarina Barley, VP of the EP in charge of citizen relations. He underlined that Article 11 was transversal, concerning all the institutions and not only one specific Commissioner who might be in charge of civil dialogue.

The document was then acknowledged by the Liaison Group and can now be used for dissemination and further follow-up by all LG members.

6.2 Composition of the EESC Delegation to the Civil Society Days

In order to improve the links between EESC members of the LG and the Civil Society Days, the idea has been raised that the 15 EESC LG members would, *ex officio*, be part of the EESC delegation and that each Group would then nominate five, to have 30 altogether. The final decision on this is up to the three Groups.

6.3 Outlook Civil Society Days 2020

Conny Reuter mentioned that the date would be set after the approval of the official EESC meeting agenda, but probably late spring. The potential topics could be found in this very meeting, namely rule of law and the replies built upon the three proposals for action mentioned by Luca Jahier.

Luca Jahier remarked that, like 20 years ago, the key issue was still how to profile the infrastructure of civil society. He added that not only rule of law and fundamental rights, but also CSOs, needed institutions for full compliance.

Since there was no request to speak on this point, **Assya Kavrakova** briefly took the floor to add some important points on the nature of populists who destroy the foundations of our democracies and do not respect institutions, rule of law and legislation. This highlights, in her view, the clear link between rule of law and fundamental rights and populism.

As suggestions for the title of the 2020 CivSocDays, **Conny Reuter** proposed **Back to the Future – Engage!**

Furthermore, he suggested building upon the recommendations of last years' editions to reinforce its credibility.

7. Development of the Liaison Group

7.1 State of the art

The two co-chairs acknowledged the very positive development of the LG. Conny Reuter continued by welcoming the good attendance and the thematic topics that would just need a bit more time for discussion. He reported furthermore that the status of substitutes had been abolished and that in implementation of the LG's operating rules, five member organisations have lost their membership due to continued inactivity. At the same time, several organisations requested membership in the Liaison Group.

7.2 Approval of applications for membership

Pierluigi Brombo briefly commented on the applications received after having organised a couple of information meetings and highlighted the idea behind them, namely to enlarge the LG to new areas relevant to its work, as decided in the LG meeting in June 2018. (See the list of requests in your meeting documents.)

The participants approved the applications and welcomed the nine new LG members from CSOs.

7.3 Adoption of the amended operating rules following the decisions taken at the last meeting

Pierluigi Brombo commented briefly on the changes in the operating rules that reflected the decision to abolish the alternate status taken in the last meeting as well as a transposition of two EESC Bureau decisions on the EESC members in the LG.

The amended rules were adopted.

8. Any Other business

Conny Reuter thanked all members for their participation. Based on the three proposals the president made, an informal LG meeting will be organised to draw up a joint agenda and to prepare the next edition of Civil Society Days. He recommended disseminating the excellent reports from FRA and ECAS and asked Ms Dreszer-Smalec for an official invitation of the LG to the presentation of the FRRL fact finding missions on 5 November, as this would validate the cooperation and connectivity between both groups.

Conny Reuter concluded the meeting by thanking the LG secretariat for its excellent work.

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Appendix



APPENDIX

LIAISON GROUP WITH EUROPEAN CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS AND NETWORKS

Thursday 12 September 2019 at 10:30 a.m., room JDE 63

ALPHABETICAL LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

EESC members present:

Mr	Pierre Jean COULON	President of the TEN section
Ms	Karolina DRESZER-SMALEC	Vice President of EESC Group on Fundamental Rights and the Rule of Law
Mr	Luca JAHIER	President of the European Economic and Social Committee
Mr	Jacek KRAWCZYK	President Group I
Mr	Arno METZLER	President of Group III
Mr	Oliver RÖPKE	President Group II
Mr	Peter SCHMIDT	President of SDO
Ms	Dilyana SLAVOVA	President of the REX section
Ms	Teresa TISZBIEREK	LMO
Mr	John WALKER	Member Group I

Members of civil society organisations present:

Ms	Emma ACHILLI	Front Line Defenders
Mr	Sebastian BERGER	European Students' Union
Ms	Kasia Hanula BOBBITT	CONCORD
Ms	Gabriela CIVICO	European Volunteer Centre
Mr	Bruno ECHTERBILLES	International Association Rurality-Environment-Development
Ms	Tamara GOJKOVIC	Lifelong Learning Platform
Ms	Liz GOSME	COFACE
Mr	Haydn HAMMERSLEY	European Disability Forum
Ms	Assya KAVRAKOVA	European Citizen Action Service
Ms	Kornelia KISS	Culture Action Europe
Ms	Elena MAGGI	Culture Action Europe
Mr	Daniel MARTÍN	Social Economy Europe

Ms	Lisa MASHINI	Cooperatives Europe
Mr	Víctor MESEGUER	Social Economy Europe
Ms	Alexandrina NAJMOWICZ	European Civic Forum
Ms	Maria OREJAS-CHANTELOT	European Foundation Centre
Mr	Conny REUTER	Co-chair of the EESC Liaison Group
Ms	Katja REUTER	Social Platform
Mr	Piotr SADOWSKI	Volonteuropé
Mr	Jeremy WATES	European Environmental Bureau

Guest speaker:

Mr	Andreas ACCARDO	Fundamental Rights Agency
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EESC secretariat:

Mr	Pierluigi BROMBO	Head of Unit "Relations with organised civil society and Forward Studies" (CSS)
Ms	María ECHEVARRIA	Director, Directorate A "Legislative Planning, Relations with Institutions and Civil Society"
Ms	Sandra SCHWEDER	Assistant, CSS
Ms	Karen SERAFINI	Administrator CSS
Ms	Daniela VINCENTI	Cabinet of the President of the EESC

EESC Members who sent their apologies:

Mr	Krzysztof PATER	President of LMO
Mr	Maurizio REALE	President of the NAT section
Mr	Ariane RODERT	President of the INT section
Ms	Lucie STUDNICNA	President of the CCMI section

Members of Civil Society organisations who have sent their apologies:

Ms	Elisa BRIGA	European Federation for Intercultural Learning
Mr	Dirk JARRE	EURAG
Ms	Valentina PRESA	Union of European Federalists
Ms	Barbara STEENBERGEN	International Union of Tenants
Ms	Andrea WITT	Eurochild
Mr	Luk ZELDERLOO	EASPD