

CSOs call for true partnership between electoral and participatory democracy to strengthen EU democracies ahead of the 2024 elections

Civil society organisations (CSOs) must be recognised, involved and supported as partners that defend and strengthen European democracy and contribute to a functioning rule of law culture. They must cooperate to guarantee effective policy dialogue and should be given a status similar to social partners, a true partnership, concluded the conference [Civil society organisations defending and strengthening European democracy](#), organised by the *Civil Society Organisations' Group* of the *European Economic and Social Committee (EESC)* on 30 March 2023.

Opening the conference, **Séamus Boland**, President of the *Civil Society Organisations' Group*, warned against an ever-shrinking civic space. "Our democracy cannot be taken for granted," he said, stressing the role of independent CSOs in maintaining the resilience of EU democracies. CSOs needed to receive due respect and support and be involved in decision-making processes beyond crisis situations.

With a view to the European elections in 2024, he therefore urged politicians to work towards a true partnership between representatives of electoral and participatory democracy, reminding that "alongside equality, justice, freedom, respect and solidarity, the strength and freedom of civil society organisations are important indicators of the good functioning of democracies".

Mr Boland's call for further support was backed by **Gabriella Civico**, Director of the *Centre for European Volunteering*, representing the *EESC Civil Society Liaison Group*, who said: "CSOs need to be empowered to act as translators and bridge builders to debate the European project with citizens". In the face of apathy and anti-European votes, the 2024 elections will be an opportunity to boost inclusive, civil and democratic dialogue.

Presenting the highlights of the conclusions and recommendations from the 2023 Civil Society Days, Ms Civico also called for the European policy on skills to be co-designed and implemented with civil society and the social partners. "Transversal competences such as critical thinking, democratic and collective management, as well as conflict resolution are the true backbone of a participative liberal democracy," she explained.

From the *European Commission*, **Colin Scicluna**, Head of cabinet to Dubravka Šuica, and **Marie-Hélène Boulanger**, acting director of directorate Just.C, joined the conference to present the Commission's initiatives to protect, support and empower CSOs, particularly with regard to the adoption of the Defence of Democracy package and the review of the European Democracy Action Plan, which are expected later this year. Ms Boulanger also explained that the Commission and the *European cooperation network on elections* are developing a handbook of best practises to ensure that people with disabilities find the necessary support to exercise their electoral rights.

MEP Gwendoline Delbos-Corfield spoke about the Parliament's efforts to protect the rule of law and the work of CSOs and suggested that the annual rule of law report should include an assessment of the state of fundamental rights at national level. "The EU must ensure that CSOs have the resources to act and promote European values across Europe. They must be protected from attacks from Member States for speaking out," she said.

Presenting the results of the civic space report 2022, **Waltraud Heller** from the *European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights* agreed that based on the Treaties the EU should act against Member States that curtail the rights and room for manoeuvre for CSOs, as civil society contributes to the effective functioning of the rule of law in many ways. She considered recognition, regulation, participation, resources and resilience-building as key areas of action, also suggesting a clear framework on how to implement Art. 11. "The EU should insist more that Member States adhere to Art. 11 when implementing EU laws and policies," she said.

Drawing attention to the role of CSOs in monitoring and reporting the respect for the rule of law and human rights in the Member States, **Dovilė Juodkaitė**, member of the *EESC Ad Hoc Group on Fundamental Rights and the Rule of Law*, explained that "Monitoring is used to demand that public authorities are held responsible and accountable. It helps advocate rule of law and human rights-compliant legal and policy responses".

Jana Miléřová from *Glopolis* (Czechia) stressed that CSOs strengthen democracy and the rule of law in many ways, in times of relative calm and in times of crisis. This, she underlined, did not only hold true for organisations explicitly involved in the promotion of democracy, but also for those who support vulnerable groups in society, as they have a deep understanding of the needs and perspectives of the communities they serve.

Anne Esser from *Civil Society Europe* presented the initial findings of the [EnTrust Project](#). "Mutual trust between public authorities and CSOs is essential for a constructive civil dialogue," she said. She explained that, on the one hand, public authorities need to trust CSOs so that organisations are involved in debates and decisions, and that their opinion is valued and has an impact. CSOs, on the other hand, need to be able to trust public authorities that values and goals are shared.

Strategic cooperation between CSOs is also key, explained **Anna Herweg** from the Dutch organisation *Groene11*, which unites different environmental organisations. The success of cooperation between CSOs depends again on high levels of trust and the acceptance of inherent differences.

David Samuelsson of *NOD Sweden* also stressed the importance of CSO cooperation, as it is hard for public authorities and governments to reach the relevant part of civil society because of CSOs' diversity. "The government and civil society organisations have different objectives, regulations, processes, time frames and funding," he said. His organisation, *NOD*, serves as a good practice example helping to build bridges between both parties.

All recommendations and conclusions of this conference will be published on the event page in the coming weeks and inform the work of Civil Society Organisations' Group members.

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