Finding a new consensus on European civil society values and their evaluation

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
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## General information

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| AUTHORS | Corina Stratulat  
Paul Butcher  
Johannes Greubel  
Antonela Raspudic |
| CONTACTS | Rue du Trône 14-16  
1000 Brussels  
Belgium |
| IDENTIFIERS | | |
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Foreword

By Arno Metzler
President of the Diversity Europe Group
European Economic and Social Committee

Values such as the "respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities" are at the core of the European project. However, despite this highest priority, the effective endorsement of the EU’s core values seems to have suffered over the last decade. As the EU has had to deal with multiple crises and increased confrontation between Member States, the common interpretation of values such as democracy, the rule of law and solidarity is drifting apart. The latest confirmation of this is found in the declaration of the EU Council from July 2020.

As recent EESC opinions and studies have shown, civil society organisations (CSOs) could play a crucial role for both the respect and implementation of the above values. However, in a context in which the common understanding of European values is regularly undermined, CSOs are facing challenges such as the reduction of their advocacy role. In fact, despite their different backgrounds and general differences among European CSOs, CSOs across Europe seem to be becoming more and more alike in the way they react to major societal trends such as demographic changes, economic crisis, populism, shrinking civic space and digitalisation. As a result, EU values are losing ground in favour of other opinions.

It is for this reason that Group III of the EESC – Diversity Europe – took the initiative to commission and support this study, entitled Finding a new consensus on European civil society values and their evaluation, which I am pleased to recommend to you. It has been prepared by the European Policy Centre (EPC) and I am convinced that its results will be most useful for both CSOs and decision-makers, but also for academics and the broader public. It will be very helpful to design and discuss further steps to strengthen the foundations for a joint understanding of European citizenship.

As the title indicates, this study seeks to explore which core values drive citizens and societal change and whether CSOs are and will be able to endorse and promote them in the future, in 2030 and beyond.

To this end, the researchers focused on three core values: democracy, the rule of law and solidarity. Efforts were – due to budget limits – further concentrated on six Member States: Germany, France, Greece, Italy, Poland and Hungary, a rather accidental choice of representatives from amongst the EU Member States.

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1 Treaty on European Union, Article 2.
Relying on quantitative and qualitative data, they show that despite the fact that CSOs operate under different legal frameworks, representatives of civil society organisations interviewed for the purpose of this study largely concur in their understanding of democracy, the rule of law and solidarity. However, the challenges these organisations face in promoting these values differ mostly with regard to national political contexts. While CSOs in Western countries describe a positive relationship with the state, others, in the East and to a certain extent in the South, face distrust and social challenges or are confronted with an increased polarisation of civil society between traditionally-minded and state-supported CSOs and others that are more liberal and pro-European.

While it is safe to say that values are not losing ground among representatives of the interviewed CSOs, there are reasons to be concerned about their advocacy role. In doing their work – which is crucial for the health of democratic societies – CSOs across the continent increasingly have to face political opposition and a climate of distrust, confrontation and polarisation.

What is also particularly striking in this study is the picture it paints of the understanding of the value of solidarity. Rather than referring to an economic solidarity among Member States, representatives of CSOs define this value in a humanitarian sense, underlining the importance of social inclusion and solidarity towards the vulnerable. This is in line with the opinions of the general public, where there is broad support for humanitarian solidarity, while the majority of people (except in Greece) disapprove of the economic and social aspects. Moreover, in both cases, solidarity is above all seen to apply in local or national contexts. The association with Europe is generally absent.

The task of countering these tendencies and fostering a climate which is more understanding and open to compromise will not be an easy one. In doing so, I believe that it will be of great importance to work towards a joint understanding of values, not just in certain countries, but by all European citizens as a way to establish the values of a European citizenship.

Our responsibility, in this regard, will be of a shared nature. Action will be required not only from CSOs, but also from EU institutions, national authorities and maybe other relevant decision-making bodies as well.

As suggested in this study, the EU will have to learn the importance of a permanent and joint understanding and communication about its founding values. Rather than speaking only the language of economics and financial figures, it needs to engage in dialogue with its citizens and better communicate its projects and achievements. Civil society organisations, e.g. members of the EESC, must contribute to this common and European understanding of values through education and civic activism. In a diversifying associational landscape, CSOs may also have to find new and unconventional allies, such as grassroots movements, and further invest in European and cross-border cooperation. The EESC will have to actively play its role as the European voice of organised civil society especially in view of the Conference on the Future of Europe. However, in doing so they will need the support of Member States, which, in some cases, will have to respect the space of CSOs and improve the framework in which CSOs operate.
Finally, the recent coronavirus pandemic and the subsequent health and economic crises also shed new light on the value of solidarity, not only in the humanitarian sense, but also when it comes to burden-sharing among Member States. We have seen a certain increase in the readiness to find common solutions.

To achieve these solutions and make it a successful process in the upcoming decade we have to work on the joint understanding of the values and the procedural structures for projects. We will have to work very hard to defend the process towards an educational, sustainable, social, inclusive and prosperous EU.

Without success in these fields, Europe is falling back on nationalism and destruction. It is the duty of every European, both officials and the general population, to play their role to deliver on this chance.

Don't mess with our Europe!

Brussels September 2020

Arno Metzler
President of the Diversity Europe Group
European Economic and Social Committee
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The EU’s core values are described in Article 2 of the Treaty of European Union, and the EU is committed to upholding them. Civil society, too, plays a vital role in promoting these values. This study investigates the extent to which civil society organisations (CSOs) from six EU member states (France, Germany, Italy, Greece, Hungary, and Poland) share a common understanding of three of these core values that have come under particular pressure through the EU’s experience of poly-crisis since 2008: democracy, the rule of law, and solidarity. It explores what hurdles CSOs face in promoting them and what capacity they have to continue doing so until 2030 and beyond. As civil society is facing a worsening situation in many parts of Europe, confronted with economic crisis, populism, and shrinking civic space, understanding the challenges CSOs face and the degree to which they have a single vision of values is of utmost importance for the Union’s future. This is especially the case as the EU begins to emerge from the Coronavirus crisis, perhaps its biggest challenge yet. For this reason, the study provides targeted recommendations for EU institutions, member state governments, and CSOs themselves to help strengthen civil society and facilitate the promotion of European values.

The study relies on a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection and analysis. In particular, it draws on interviews carried out between March and June 2020 with 62 CSO representatives: 13 from Greece, 12 from Germany, 11 from France, 10 from Italy, 8 from Poland, and 8 from Hungary. The research served to investigate whether civil society across Europe operates under broadly similar legal frameworks (Hypothesis 1); whether there are regional differences, such as between East-West or North-South (Hypothesis 2); and whether the definition of any given value varies significantly within and across countries (Hypothesis 3). The CSOs interviewed cover a wide spectrum of actors, including organisations representing socially vulnerable groups and advocating active citizen participation in decision-making (26); human rights and family organisations (16), environmental CSOs (5), media (5), youth (3), religious (3) and consumer (2) organisations, as well as new grassroots movements (2).

The analysis shows that CSOs across Europe operate under very different legal frameworks. Above all, political circumstances emerge as a driving force not only for the general environment in terms of attitudes towards civil society, but also for the shaping of the legal framework itself. Other challenges faced by CSOs, such as access to funding, were largely seen as closely tied to national political situations.

The interviews reveal that CSOs in all six countries broadly agree in their definition of the three European values studied. None of the respondents had any difficulty explaining their understanding of these values and most offered theoretical, almost textbook, descriptions of them. They also drew connections among the three values, linking, in particular, the rule of law and solidarity to the meaning of democracy. Greater convergence emerges on the CSOs’ conceptualisation of democracy and the rule of law, whereas solidarity seems to be the subject of more diverse interpretations.

For many CSOs, democracy is not just a means for ‘the people’ to determine how they are governed but also the principle that decisions should be made for the good of the community as a whole. This
understanding of democracy as an inclusive and communitarian political system prompted several interviewees to say that CSOs are crucial in the promotion of democracy, precisely because they give citizens another channel to participate in politics (and/or shape society more widely), beyond the ‘usual’ means of political parties.

Such a rights-centred vision of democracy also transpires from the high value that interviewees place on the rule of law, which many defined as the presence of a strong legal system that restricts the abuse of power and guarantees the same rights and duties for all, as well as a free and just trial. Here too, respondents saw themselves as sharing in the responsibility to implement the rule of law, alongside the state, considering civil society to be a fundamental part of their country’s system of checks and balances.

Regarding solidarity, despite nuances in the interpretations of this value among interviewees, the findings suggest that there is a firm core to the notion of solidarity, which most respondents identified in the humanitarian dimension of the concept and which, again, they connected to responsibility and action. When speaking about solidarity, interviewees mostly invoked human rights and dignity, social inclusion, and equality, going beyond race, gender, religion, sexual orientation or nationality. As such, it is safe to say that the humanitarian aspects of this value – rather than its economic facets – ultimately lie at the centre of the CSOs’ understanding of solidarity.

Consequently, values are not losing ground: the CSOs tend to converge both in their definitions of the values studied, as well as with regard to the crucial role that the civil society sector plays in promoting them. Yet respondents do highlight differences between their own personal definitions of values and those of different actors in their national context or other member states.

In all cases, the interviews expose regional similarities and differences, corresponding to the countries in the West (Germany and France), South (Greece and Italy), and East (Poland and Hungary) of Europe. Within each of these groups, CSOs describe their situation, their perception of values, and their outlook for the future similarly. More specifically, respondents from Western countries mainly describe stable circumstances and a positive relationship with the state, while being vocal about violations of the rule of law and democratic backsliding in other member states. Southern countries tend to have a much more pessimistic view about the state of play and the future, not least given the impact of the poly-crisis in these member states. The assessment of CSOs from Eastern countries is comparable to that of Southern Europe, but the findings portray a notably worse political situation in these countries, where governing parties tend to support mainly traditionally-minded and pro-government organisations over pro-European, liberal and government-critical parties, resulting in fragmentation and polarisation in the civil society landscape.

Having said that, the overall picture that emerges from the interviews is one in which society in all the countries surveyed is in fact becoming more confrontational, more political, more polarised, and less open to compromise: these characteristics apply both to the government and to civil society itself. Thus, CSOs are experiencing increasing difficulty in engaging with state institutions impacted by political polarisation. At the same time, the civil society sector is diversifying, with many of the newcomers themselves less open to constructive dialogue and working within the confines of the system. The civil
sector remains at the forefront in the defence and promotion of values across the EU but its constant and tireless endorsement of values is not without challenges in the present volatile and interdependent national, European and global contexts.

Reflecting on the future, the analysis indicates that domestic political dynamics and populism are seen as enduring challenges for CSOs, especially in Eastern and Southern Europe. The EU’s efforts are often considered slow and ineffective, especially when it comes to European solidarity. In this context, the biggest challenge that CSOs identify for the future of the EU is the in-fighting among member states and the inability of EU capitals to put on a more united front. Many organisations do find optimism, however, in the potential of digitalisation, which they perceive as beneficial to democracy and democratic participation, and in the renewed interest of the younger generations in civic engagement, which manifests itself through the emergence of increased grassroots movements.

The CSOs best placed to promote EU values in the coming years will be those that make use of opportunities for collaborating with like-minded organisations, including those based in other countries, European-level umbrella organisations, and new movements with different methods and support bases. Staying abreast of fast-changing social developments, such as the use of digital technology and the interests and priorities of the youngest generations, will be essential. Ultimately, however, CSOs’ ability to shape their own future is limited: their conditions for promoting values rely to a great extent on a favourable political climate. Member states and European institutions must therefore take steps to improve access to funding, strengthen and maintain channels for civil dialogue, and harmonise or simplify legal requirements. The EU should also ensure particular support for those CSOs operating in countries with restrictive political environments.

While the Coronavirus crisis struck right in the middle of the work for this study and, therefore, was not initially factored into the analysis, it soon became clear from desk research and interviews that the pandemic has put serious constraints on civil society’s ability to carry out its activities, and the ensuing economic crisis is bound to cause serious funding problems for CSOs. Dealing with the aftermath of the crisis has to be a concerted effort, involving all actors at the different levels of decision-making in Europe, and should include adequate and targeted support and attention for the civil society sector. Europe is more than just an economic project – it is a Union of values, the sustainability and health of which depends on the everyday work of CSOs across member states.