

Liaison Group - Civil Society Organisations

Record of proceedings
Meeting of 1 July 2015

1. Opening remarks

The Liaison Group Co-chair, Conny Reuter, opened the meeting with a few preliminary remarks on the British vote on EU membership, presented the agenda of the meeting and invited everyone to a 'tour de table'.

2. Civil Society Days 2016

Christian Weger (EESC, LG secretariat) briefly reported on the recent Civil Society Days 2016, notably on the good level of participation, the outreach to new participants as well as the success of the event on social media (trending topic in Belgium as well as 6,4 million potential outreach (triple the result of 2015)).

The draft report on the Civil Society Days was distributed to participants, who were invited to give final feedback on the text by next week.

The Chair opened the debate for concrete feedback, of which the main points were:

- A better planning and coordination of the dates (avoiding any clash with similar events);
- Organizational improvements on the invitations of speakers by the Committee, the registration procedure, catering, the networking dinner, and the moderation of the debate;
- A narrowing of the topic especially for the workshops;
- Improvements on the reporting on the conference workshops;
- Possibility to have funding available for participants from outside of Belgium and neighbouring countries;

- Possible follow-up/post-conference engagement.

The secretariat will follow-up on this with a detailed e-mail to the workshops' organisers to collect their proposals for improvement and possibly with a meeting.

The Chair suggested starting preparation on the next edition already in the autumn and invited organisations to prepare contributions. The date of the next edition should be set as quickly as possible, also in light of potential synergies with other meetings.

3. UK referendum on EU membership ('Brexit')

Conny Reuter briefly commented on his perception of the vote, the apparent unpreparedness of the EU institutions on the 'no' vote and the political situation in the UK after the vote. He called upon the EU to change its policies. Confidence in democratic system needed to be restored. He informed the organisations of the joint declaration drafted by him and the President of the EESC and presented the main points (see annex).

In the following debate, organisations generally voice their overall agreement with the content, though underlining the need of an EN version (in translation) to express their final views.

The issue of the augmentation of hate speech and hate crimes in the wake of the referendum was addressed. Members further discussed the issues of the referendum which, besides the topic of EU membership, were domestic issues such as the NHS and immigration policies. The EU needed to strengthen its policies, for example the social rights pillar, and shape positively what affected citizens in their daily life. NGOs needed to reinforce their collaboration and support their mutual efforts. Organisations also reported back from their organisation's efforts in campaigning, in standing up for Europe and the work they did. The question of youth engagement in politics and the referenda was also addressed, as well as the lack of a positive narrative on the 'yes' campaign. All agreed on the need for a strong, coordinated civil society reaction. Several organisations had issued statements, and were also looking into concrete actions, as for example a policy paper on the impact of the Brexit on citizen's rights.

In conclusion, Conny Reuter identified the raise in populism as a problem for representative democracy and warned of a domino effect. He suggested the Liaison Group should have a double approach: the ongoing work in the networks plus working with the institutions. In that approach he underlined the crucial role and the chances offered by the EESC, and its Liaison Group, as only institutional access for CSI to the EU institutions. He proposed to meet again in

September to define the road ahead, and inform the members about the proposed civil society convention (see declaration in the annex).

4. Liaison Group contribution to the Commission's work programme 2017

Conny Reuter thanked the organisations for their contributions. He drew the members' attention to a recent press release on the Commission's proposal for the 2017 budget, and commented on the allocation of resources.

5. Work plan ahead

The chair proposed that the group would draw up a concrete work plan with actions to be taken, and mentioned notably the abovementioned *civil society convention* and the preparation of the next Civil Society Days in 2017. He also informed members about the elaboration of an own-initiative report in the EP Budget control committee on the funding of NGOs.

Carlotta Besozzi, invited by Mr Reuter as representative of Civil Society Europe, informed the members about this report on NGO funding and the apparent agenda, warning of future problems for NGOs to receive EU funding, including a possible limit to co-funding. Furthermore, provisions that would limit EU funding to NGOs promoting EU policies raise the question if critical NGOs would be cut off. The first draft of the report should be ready in October.

Luc Zelderloo also addressed the issue of civil society participation in the Commission's high level group on the simplification of the structural funds, which did not include any representatives of the NGO perspective. He warned that the simplification would only affect the management authorities and place further burdens on NGOs as the focus is not on the beneficiaries.

Conny Reuter proposed to hold informal meeting under the auspices of CIVIL SOCIETY EUROPE on both issues, suggesting the EESC might take them up in an opinion.

6. Composition of the LG

Pierluigi Brombo (EESC, LG secretariat) informed the group of the suggested changes to the composition of the Liaison group, notably

- Several changes concerning changes in alternate members;

- The fusion of the family life/children 'family' and the possible addition of an 'environment' family;
- Replacement for inactive/dissolved associations.

The group briefly debated several issues, absences and general engagement, as well as proposals for new member organisations, such as EFIL, AEGEE, ENOP. Their inclusion was generally welcomed though it was deemed necessary to deepen some aspects. The inclusion of an LGBT representative was also mentioned. Proposals and questions should be sent to the secretariat. It was recalled that any change in the composition of the Liaison Group could only be agreed by the full Liaison Group (e.g. including its EESC component).

7. Any other business

Conny Reuter suggested that in the next meeting in September, organisations could briefly present the main issues they are currently working on in a tour de table.

The group was informed about a request from the EESC's EU2020 steering committee to draw up a 5-page contribution by October. The request will be set around, and a drafting group will be established.

The Europe we want, the Europe we need!

Europe has not changed over the past week, but the challenges have become clearer. A majority of the British people has expressed the wish to leave the European Union, a decision which we respect, but regret because of its negative consequences for the British people and for Europe.

Ever since the United Kingdom joined the European Union, a series of unfortunate compromises have been made, finally culminating in "Brexit". For too long, the Union has been blackmailed and has given way on too many issues. All of which has brought us to where we are now. The vote represents a historic break with the notion that European integration is a project that will help overcome the divisions among states and peoples and ensure that everyone enjoys prosperity, well-being and peace.

Unfortunately, in recent years and particularly since the beginning of the financial crisis, Member States have moved away from the Community method in taking political decisions and have focused too much on competitiveness as the guarantee of economic growth, leaving aside social cohesion.

Too many citizens feel abandoned, with uncertainties over their future and their social protection and security. Populists from certain reactionary elites are exploiting people's fears and doubts to turn them against migrants, minorities, other peoples and against Europe.

The specious arguments put forward during the campaign were directed at the so-called European elites. Rarely have we witnessed such a campaign of hatred and lies under the pretext of direct democracy.

It is high time for Europeans to wake up and for civil society to pull together! A change of rhetoric will not suffice. We will need to rethink our policies and invest in social relationships, in social policies and in the future.

We therefore call on civil society to step up its cooperation and jointly determine the Europe we want and the Europe we need. It must include the strategy of sustainable development goals to ensure greater economic, social, cultural and political cohesion. Of course Europe must be based on its founding values, but European societies are in the process of breaking up and only civil society can make these values a central part of society once more and build the bridges needed to create relationships of trust - social relationships.

The EESC will therefore seek to draw up a "Civil Society Convention on the future of Europe" that will include political and economic decision-makers and civil society, in parallel with the President of the Commission's presentation to Parliament of the "state of the Union".