



**Liaison
Group**

European Economic and Social Committee

Liaison Group - Civil Society Organisations

Record of proceedings

Meeting of 25 September 2017

1. Welcome by Conny Reuter

The Liaison Group Co-chair, Conny Reuter, opened the meeting by welcoming the participants and invited them to a short presentation round.

Pierluigi Brombo (EESC, LG secretariat), invited participants to keep the LG secretariat informed about conferences and activities of their respective organisations, in order to include any event in the Liaison Group newsletter.

2. Debriefing CSDays 2017 and first discussion on next edition

Conny Reuter mentioned the debriefing meeting in July and summed up this year's edition in terms of participation, institutional recognition (with participation of Federica Mogherini, EP Vice-President and other high level speakers) as well as in terms of content.

Pierluigi Brombo (EESC, LG secretariat) backed up with some key figures on participation and social media outreach and underlining the highly participative approach of several workshops.

Ms Neven (RED) reported on their workshop and asked about the follow-up and the impact of the recommendations adopted at the end of the CSDays 2017.

Mr Reuter stated that the recommendations will circulate and be sent out to the institutional representatives. The question would be how to integrate them into the LG's working

programme. He also referred to the Riga Roadmap adopted in 2015 and how to build on these elements.

Mr Brombo explained that the recommendations will be sent in the frame of the *thank you letters* to Mogherini, Timmermans, Avramopoulos and EP-Vice-President Gebhardt. He pointed out that there is a thematic link between the different CSDays editions and emphasised the spirit of cooperation between the CSO and the EESC.

He also announced that as from April 2018 the new EESC President will be Luca Jahier, Group III (Various Interests), underlining his sensibility for civil society issues. Consequently, the **CSDays 2018 will take place on 24/25 May 2018** following the EESC plenary session, and in the framework of the celebrations for the 60th anniversary of the EU and of the EESC. This junk time is meant to highlight and present the EESC as the "House of Civil Society".

Mr Reuter noted that in November will start a first gathering of those CSO wishing to contribute to the next CSDays. Also the meeting of the full LG will take place in November.

3. Presentation of the EESC draft opinion on *Financing of NGO by the EU* by the rapporteur Jean-Marc Roirant

Conny Reuter introduced the topic pointing out that, with view to the next Multi Annual Financial Framework and the Brexit, there will be a lot of pressure on programmes as well as on structural funding. He asked for CSOs engagement to promote this key opinion and the role of civil society and the necessary financing they need to work properly.

Jean-Marc Roirant (EESC member, group III) pointed out that this EESC own-initiative opinion was to be adopted in October - right on cue to the Multi Annual Financial Framework. This means that the EESC will come with concrete proposals at the right time. The issue is highly important as a "bad wind is blowing over the CS organisations" and not only there will be less money available but also the operating grants might be threatened. He addressed several issues regarding the image of CSOs and the pressure from certain sides to cut or stop their grants or subject them to specific conditions. He also advocated for a kind of contract for civil dialogue ("compact") as, unlike the social dialogue, it is not enshrined in the Treaties.

In the tour of remarks that followed, Claude Debrulle (EADHR) addressed among others the issue of recognition and criteria of evaluation of the work done by CSOs.

Philippe Seidel (AGE Platform Europe) advocated to better promote the role of NGOs and pointed out the importance of NGOs as intermediary bodies for people don't wishing to be in

contact with authorities. He reminded the internal democratic methodology of NGOs and the importance of social research pointing out that the role of CSOs is to report different perspectives and not to report on facts.

Marilena Vrana (European Foundation Centre) congratulated the rapporteur for his good work and welcomed among others the proposal of the establishment of a European Fund for Democracy and Human Rights. She announced the creation of a Philanthropic Fund for Solidarity and Democracy in Europe by the Network of European Foundations.

Mr Roirant underlined the need to promote a positive image of CSOs and their valuable work pointing out that they deserve public funding as actors contributing to the development of the European project. An official recognition in the form of a statute is necessary. In Central and Eastern Europe, NGOs being funded from abroad are under suspicion.

Mr Reuter ended up on the need for CSOs to react against the suspicions from authorities against NGOs. He also mentioned that despite of all sort of assumption towards NGO, it was clearly stated at the highest level (i.a. European Court of Auditors, Commission) that NGOs are not to be blamed as their partnerships are very clear as are the roles and that financing is very transparent. It's important to develop a strategy on this regard, to promote the opinion once adopted and to kick off an in depth discussion.

Mr Brombo mentioned the EESC study on online consultations carried out by ECAS. One of the conclusions of this study is that online consultation of citizens as the Commission is practicing can still be improved and is, in any way, not sufficient to get the people's voices heard. Hence, the confirmed importance of intermediary bodies, i.e. CSOs.

3. Discussion on the shrinking civil and democratic space with Ionut Sibian

Mr Sibian (EESC member) gave an overview of the situation of civil and democratic space and financing of NGOs in Central and Eastern Europe emphasising that it has been shrinking over the last years. Legislation about gathering and protest has been changed by governments to chase NGOs and to turn them in pure service providers, thus helping the conservative agenda. Therefore, active civic movements are to be eliminated. This is done in several ways: reluctance of consulting NGOs and national platforms, harassment of NGOs with administrative and physical attacks and over-regulation. He mentioned the ideological driven public funding,

where NGOs are financed by national resource centres if they are friends of the government. He also underlined that trust in NGOs is decreasing in the public opinion and should be converted.

Vladimir Sestovic (European Civic Forum) explained briefly the situation in Poland with the creation of a National Freedom Institute as a body to control NGOs not in line with the government.

Piotr Sadowski (Volonteuropa) referred to the Volonteuropa's annual conference on access to rights of young people, hosted by the EESC on 31 October. He invited the participants to join as well on 9 November for the celebration of the European citizenship awards. He asked for the support of the LG in promoting both events.

Mr Reuter summarized the state of affairs referring briefly to German elections results and the fact of traditional NGOs being bypassed by right wing movements pretending to speak on behalf of civil society although undermining democratic values and fighting against them. Legal restriction of civic and democratic spaces is becoming more frequent.

Mr Brombo invited everybody to share all kind of activity, initiative or event with the LG in order to spread the voice and promote them.

Ionut Sibian noted that a mapping of initiatives devoted to shrinking civic space is missing and should be done in order to share best practices. He invited to ally with each other on European level because the problems NGOs are facing in some countries shouldn't be considered as purely national issues.

Mr Reuter sketched the difficult situation of NGOs and the risks for future of society considering broaching the issue of shrinking civic and democratic spaces and the role of CSOs as promotor of democracy in and for Europe at the next CSDays.

4. Discussion on Juncker's State of the Union speech

Mr Reuter invited participants to give some feedback on the SOTEU 2017.

Katherine Heid (Culture Action Europe) mentioned that the culture sector throughout the EU has been working together to react to Juncker's Whitepaper giving a "cultural response". The culture sector is disappointed with a lack of vision on culture in the broader sense of the term.

Mariel-Noel Neven (RED) remarked that territorial spaces were completely lacking in Juncker's speech. His attention was very much focussed on global economy and trading with third countries.

Emma Klever (European Movement International) was disappointed by the fact that civil society was mentioned only once, and this in a national context. He didn't seem to be convinced about more citizen participation.

Elisa Lironi (ECAS) regretted the lack of a citizen scenario and remarked that Juncker was very generic, without giving a concrete action plan. In terms of digitalisations, he seems to have no idea about how to reconnect citizens and institutions, stakeholders, decision makers and politicians. No mention of potential of technology to reconnect with citizens and listen to them.

Claude Debrulle recognised that Juncker touched upon important issues and values giving some avenues in specific fields, which shows his willingness to go further and press ahead with certain issues. He criticised Juncker's approach towards the trade treaties with third countries.

Conny Reuter considered this speech as probably the one with the most concrete proposals, such as, for example, the proposal of a European minister of finances. Referring to social issues, the proposed labour authority could be a good step towards more harmonised labour and social standards.

He invited to use the platform of the LG to publish CSO member's statements or the links to them.

Since time was running short, he proposed to tackle the Riga Roadmap separately and to establish a small working group of interested organisations to reflect on the achievements and further steps to be taken. Invitation will be sent out in the next weeks.

5. Data Protection - Sharing mails with internal services

Karen Serafini (EESC, LG secretariat) explained that the LG secretariat got a request of a section's secretariat for having access to the LG's mailing list. This might be a good opportunity to the CSO members of the LG to get directly informed about adopted opinions, conferences, events etc.

The question of frequency was raised. More information about quantity and content of these mails will be sent out to all CSO members and a written consent will be asked. Those who won't wish to share will be cancelled from the list to be shared.

6. Other business

Conny Reuter mentioned the 2nd edition of European Civic Academy taking place on 30 September and 1 October in Brussels.

Mr Sestovic gave some more information about this event and invited the participants to join and contribute to the discussions between CSO and academics (*see also the LG newsletter*).

**Save the date: the meeting of all members of the LG will take place on
29 November 2017.**