

## Liaison Group - Civil Society Organisations

Record of proceedings of the meeting

21 January 2020, 2.30 p.m. - 4.30 p.m., JDE 63

### List of attendance

Participants: Ian PRITCHARD (ACE), Kornelia KISS (CAE), Gabriella CIVICO (CEV), Lisa MASHINI (Cooperatives Europe), Annabel SEEBOHM (CPME), Luk ZELDERLOO (EASP), Flavio GRAZIAN (ECAS), Assya KAVRAKOVA (ECAS), Elisa LIRONI (ECA), Alexandra NAJMOWICZ (ECF), Haydn HAMMERSLEY (EDF), Sevda KILICLP (EFC), Elisa BRIGA (EFIL), Gohar HOVHANNISYAN (ESU), Enrico TORMEN (Eurochild), Horst DREIMANN (EVBB), Dirk BOCHAR (FEANI), Yves PIANET (FEANI), Barbara STEENBERGEN (IUT), Pauline BOIVIN (LLL), Brikena XHOMAQI (LLL), Ingeborg NIESTROY (SDG Europe), Silvana ROEBSTORF (Social Platform), Emmanuelle CAUSSE (UIPI), François BALATE (YFJ), Liva VIKMANE (YFJ).  
Observer: Elisa GAMBARDELLA (SOLIDAR).

Guest speaker: Gabriele BISCHOFF, MEP and Vice President of the AFCO Committee in charge of preparing the Conference on the Future of Europe.

Apologised: Dirk JARRÉ (EURAG), Víctor MESEGUER (SEE), Diego NARANJO (EDRi), Valentina PRESA (UEF), Lea GAUDRON (RED), Emma ACHILLI (Front Line Defenders), Tanya COX (CONCORD), Piotr SADOWSKI (Volonteuropa), Davyth HICKS (ELEN), Roland BIACHE (AEDH), Maciej KUCHARCZYK (AGE), Jeremy WAITES (EEB).

### Welcome: Pierluigi Brombo

**Pierluigi Brombo**, representing the secretariat of the Liaison Group and chairing the session, opened the meeting and introduced the guest speaker, **Gabriele Bischoff**, Member of the European Parliament, Vice-Chair of the AFCO committee and a member of the working group on the Conference of the Future of Europe.

In view of the adoption of the resolution on the Conference of the Future of Europe and the publication of the documents presenting the views of the European Commission and of the Council of Ministers, the current discussion was well-timed. Mr Brombo welcomed the fact that the European Parliament's resolution attached considerable significance to involving civil society, but regretted that the involvement was not more structural. He considered this meeting as a first chance to pass a message to the European Parliament; the Civil Society Days 2020 (22-23 April) would present a further opportunity as the topics to be dealt with would be fully in line with the six topics proposed by the European Parliament.

### Conference on the Future of Europe: Gabriele Bischoff

**Ms Bischoff** mentioned that this was the first opportunity she had had to talk about the content of the resolution after it had been adopted in Strasbourg. Before outlining the next steps of the process, she quickly reminded those present of developments to date concerning the Conference of the Future of

Europe. She mentioned that the Commission president, Ursula Von der Leyen, had launched the initiative on a basis of a proposal from the European Parliament. In September, the European Parliament had set up a working group to support the president of the European Parliament in presenting a proposal to the other institutions. The European Parliament had made it clear from the beginning that it wanted to be a driving force in this process because it was clear that positive change for Europe was only possible if it had the broad agreement of the Parliament, considering that this was the institution that was the most heavily engaged in the process. In drafting the resolution it had come up with a wide range of ideas from all the political parties of the European Parliament and had built a consensus that had been presented to the president of the European Parliament. Convinced of the quality of the work of the working group and of the Committee on Constitutional Affairs (AFCO), the president of the European Parliament had agreed on the results and asked AFCO to prepare a joint resolution, to be presented at the January plenary.

Ms Bischoff went on to summarise the content of the resolution, indicating that the conference would be made up of three bodies:

- **An institutional body** that would gather representatives of the European Commission, the European Parliament, the Council, national parliaments, the European Economic and Social Committee, the European Committee of the Regions, regional and local authorities and the social partners. The body could potentially transform itself into a convention to gather all the necessary proposals.

- **Citizens' Fora:** the criteria for selecting citizens, indicated in the roadmap, made it possible for European society to be fully represented. At least six major themes should be discussed. For each of the themes there would be a thematic forum that would meet 2/3 times and would be invited to come up with a practical way of avoiding the "tunnel" echo that tended to occur with the citizens' dialogue. It should be meaningful and provide feedback.

- **Youth Fora:** since discussions would be focusing on the future of Europe, proposals from young people aged between 16-25 were needed.

The plenary would be organised into plenary meetings and working groups on the thematic issues, involving civil society, academics and experts.

To come up with this proposal, the working group had evaluated the outcome of the last convention, held discussions with representatives of academia and looked at the different national citizens' participation formats. Ms Bischoff pointed out that the European Parliament's position was different from what she anticipated would be that of the Commission, less ambitious and more in favour of a format that could be called citizens' dialogue 2.0, i.e. an enhanced version of the EC Citizens dialogue with a bigger use of online consultations. She also mentioned that the Council was showing some reluctance in changing European policies. Ms Bischoff highlighted the fact that much would depend on the negotiations that were now coming up between the three Presidents (the Parliament, the Commission and the Council). She said the European Parliament had asked for a Memorandum of Understanding so as to have a transparent published document covering the goals, structures, process and procedure of the Conference on the Future of Europe. The kick-off conference for the process was scheduled for 9 May (70th anniversary of the Schuman Declaration). Ms Bischoff was convinced that the whole process would only be successful if there was an active debate at national level enabling the EU to act and to overcome the continuing crisis.

## **Debate**

**Mr Brombo** opened the floor for questions. **Alexandra Najmowicz** (ECF) was the first to speak, saying that she was in favour of the European Parliament's proposal, although she highlighted the fact that there was a certain degree of frustration vis-à-vis Article 11 TEU which was not adequately implemented under the terms of the proposal. She wanted to know how civil society organisations would be involved and how they could have an impact. **Dirk Bochar** (FEANI) said he could not understand why "*professional interest representatives cannot participate in the citizens' agoras*"<sup>1</sup>, as stated in the resolution of the European Parliament. **Liva Vikame** (YFJ) welcomed the idea of having a youth agora and asked what the plan was should the other institutions not be as ambitious as the European Parliament.

**Ms Bischoff** explained that the debates had been complicated. Although they had strongly advocated some ideas, they had had to compromise on others. It had been hard work to convince all the parties of the need to include the advisory body and civil society. Initially, they had only wanted to involve the three institutions and the national parliaments. The EESC had been allocated four seats. To this end, they had had to compromise on the wording, especially the term "*professional interest representatives*", a term strongly advocated by a party that feared that lobbies could take an important role. She added that citizens would be selected by an independent body. The point was also to have all the parties on board and to achieve a strong consensus in order to have some negotiation leverage. She added that if there was broad support for the European Parliament proposal from civil society, it might have a positive impact on less ambitious institutions. Ms Bischoff reiterated that it might be one of our last chances to change Europe. There were a lot of expectations, so care was needed in order not to create frustration. She encouraged civil society to speak up and to embrace this initiative.

**Mr Brombo** wanted to know how the working group would function. **Ms Bischoff** said that it would work in the same way as in the European Parliament. It would gather and invite experts from civil society and the academic sphere. She informed those present that the six themes were not exhaustive and said the list could be expanded if citizens came up with new themes for the agenda. She highlighted the fact that the Liaison Group had a role to play. She recommended that the Civil Society Days produce a common position on the Conference on the Future of Europe with specific recommendations.

Mr Brombo gave the floor to **Brikena Xhomaqi** (LLL), who expressed some doubts regarding the way in which citizens would be informed about the Conference and asked for solutions to ensure that the debates were fruitful. **Ms Bischoff** agreed that this was a crucial point and that the process should not be mistaken for training for European citizens. Nevertheless, she hoped that dividing the working group up according to themes would help to elicit more practical proposals. Furthermore, she added that the important thing was to listen to what people had to say and to understand how they experienced European policies. The key endeavour here was to reach out to people who were normally not reached.

**Elisa Briga** (EFIL) commented on the importance of the multicultural aspect, saying that it needed to be managed really well as the citizens selected might not have experience of this type of process. Ms Bischoff entirely agreed, hoping that the three institutions would take this knowledge on board. To conclude the session, Mr Brombo thanked Ms Bischoff for coming, for the very informative discussion and for her frankness.

## **Election of an interim co-chair of the LG**

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<sup>1</sup> Resolution on the Conference on the Future of Europe, p. 4

After a short break, the civil society organisation members of the Liaison Group proceeded to elect a new interim co-chair to represent them and to chair the Liaison Group alongside the EESC president, Luca Jahier. The secretariat explained the voting procedures and the two candidates, Assya Kavrakova (ECAS) and Brikena Xhomaqi (LLLP), each gave a short speech to introduce themselves and present their political programme. The members of the group then proceeded to vote. **Karen Serafini** (secretariat) mentioned that 17 electronic votes of the 36 had already been cast. Since three organisations had not replied to the invitation or used their right to vote by mail, 16 votes were cast in the meeting. After all the votes (33) had been counted, **Brikena Xhomaqi**, by 20 votes to 13, became the new interim co-chair of the Liaison Group until the end of the mandate of the president in September 2020.

NB: The secretariat would like to thank **Assya Kavrakova** for the commitment she showed during the campaign and the election.

**Brikena Xhomaqi** thanked the members for electing her and expressed her thanks to the secretariat for organising the work of the group. She said she was glad to work with the group and looked forward to their cooperation. She expressed the hope that the Liaison Group would be able to push for an open and transparent debate in the framework of the Conference on the Future of Europe.