

Liaison Group - Civil Society Organisations

Record of proceedings of the virtual meeting

5 October 2020, 10.30 - 12.30

List of attendance

Participants: Alejandra Almarcha (UEF), Sebastian Berger (ESU), Davide Capecchi (EFIL), Gabriella Civico (CEV), Laura de Bonfils (Social Platform), Annemie Drieskens (COFACE), Anna Echterhoff (UEF), Léa Gaudron (R.E.D.), Theodor Grassos (EVBB), Flavio Grazian (ECAS), Haydn Hammersley (EDF), Davyth Hicks (ELEN), Sevda Kilicalp (EFC), Lisa Mashini (Cooperatives Europe), Francesco Pala (ALDA), Ian Pritchard (ACE), Gabriele Rosana (CAE), Julie Rosenkilde (SDG Watch Europe), Piotr Sadowski (Volonteuropa), Annabel Seebohm (CPME), Philippe Seidel (AGE), Robert Suesser (ECF), Enrico Tormen (Eurochild), Liva Vikmane (YFJ), Natasa Vistricka (UIPI), Jeremy Wates (EEB), Brikena Xhomaqi (LLLP, co-chair)

Observer: Mikael Leyi (SOLIDAR)

Guest speaker: Tatiana Adamisova, Head of Unit, REL

Apologies received from: Dirk Jarré (EURAG), Diego Naranjo (EDRi), Luk Zelderloo (EASPD)

Welcome: Brikena Xhomaqi, interim co-chair of the Liaison Group (LG)

Brikena Xhomaqi, director of Lifelong Learning Platform and interim co-chair of the LG, opened the meeting by welcoming all participants. She then gave a short update on her activities on behalf of the LG since the last CSO meeting held in June, namely:

- Participation in the meeting of the EESC category on voluntary sector to give input on the European association statute. Alexandrina Najmovic from Civic Forum was also part of the working group drafting a relevant opinion and would update the group on the evolution of this work;
- Participation in the preparatory meeting of the presidents of the national economic and social councils in June for their annual conference in September as well as in the Annual Conference itself;
- Participation in the first meeting of the EESC ad hoc group on the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE), where she had referred to the concerns of the CSOs, namely having civil society organisations as active participants in the heart of the process and involving citizens throughout the whole process.

She then informed the participants about the ongoing renewal process in the EESC:

- Christa Schweng, Employers Group and former president of the SOC section, and, as such, still a member of the LG, would be the next EESC president as of 27 October.
- Amongst the President's thematic priorities, there should be: circular economy, international trade and digitalisation.
- Since there would be a partial renewal of EESC members, there would also be new members of the LG on the EESC side. Ms Xhomaqi invited the CSO members to study the list of new members that Karen had shared with them in order to figure out potential partners and build a cooperation process to be able to contribute to the EESC's opinions and reports.
- The first full LG meeting with the new EESC members was planned to take place on 10 December, but needed to be confirmed in accordance with the new president's availability.

Adoption of the revised operating rules

Brikena briefly summarised the proposed changes (mainly regarding the voting procedure for the CSO co-chair), thanked Gabriella Civivo (CEV) in particular for her valuable contribution while underlining that the adoption of the rules by the CSO members of the LG would be ratified by the full group at the next meeting (probably in December).

The revised operating rules were then adopted by the CSO members.

Election of a CSO co-chair for the new EESC mandate

Pierluigi Brombo, LG secretariat, took over and provided some technical explanations before opening the vote.

Election outcome: Brikena was elected as new co-chair of the CSO members of the LG by large majority. There were no votes against and no abstentions. Pierluigi highlighted that the outcome of this election would also be formally validated by the full LG at the next meeting.

Brikena expressed thanks for the trust placed in her. She highlighted the fact that, in view of the pandemic, the group would need to strengthen the new ways of working together, as the virtual had become the new norm.

Discussion on the outcomes of the thematic survey

Brikena presented the outcome of the thematic survey to which one third of all CSO members had replied. The topics having received the most preferences were: civic space and digitalisation (4), followed by the EU Recovery Plan (3), civil dialogue, Green Deal, transparency, children, financing (2 each) as well as CoFoE, associations, youth & employability, family, rural & urban cooperation (1 preference each). She pointed out that civic space had been a central topic of the LG also in the past, while digitalisation was the only topic in common with the new EESC presidency's priorities. A very broad topic, which needed to be specified.

She then opened the floor for discussion.

Gabriella Civico, CEV, pointed out that there needed to be a space for reflection and monitoring when it came to digitalisation, while recognising that digital connection and engagement was facilitating some aspects of the work of civil society and of social inclusion and active citizenship in general. At the same time, the digital divide continued to exist on a socio-economic, geographic (access to fast broadband, wifi) and financial (equipment) level, leading to a huge educational divide especially for children and young people. She furthermore underlined that volunteering online should not become an elitist activity but should be open and inclusive to everyone. She therefore called for regular monitoring and assessment also in relation to the Digital Agenda on access to connectivity and access to devices.

Mikael Leyi, Solidar, backed Gabriella's concerns regarding digital inequalities throughout Europe, which seemed to him not to have been sufficiently taken into consideration by the Commission. In relation to the Recovery Plan, he considered it difficult to separate it from the Green Deal, underlining the importance of the fact that they were both linked to each other. Regarding the Recovery Plan in relation to the European Semester, he also shared his concern that the participation of civil society organisations (CSOs) in the country reports seemed to be limited. He found this regrettable considering that the European Semester was a very good opportunity for CSOs to get involved, for example in relation to the European Pillar of Social Rights. As further priority topics, he mentioned the alarming situation relating to shrinking civic space as well as digitalisation. He concluded by proposing that the LG could focus on a comprehensive strategy on these three topics (Recovery Plan, Green Deal, Digitalisation).

Pierluigi, speaking about the European Semester, briefly informed the participants about the internal EESC European Semester Group whose president would be elected at the end of October and, as such, would then be part of the Liaison Group. Even in the past, the LG had been cooperating with this group, providing input into their reports.

Brikena called upon everybody to pay special attention to the national recovery plans, which were currently being drafted at high speed. She also pointed out that the Commission had promised to pay attention to participation of CSOs in this process.

Léa Gaudron, R.E.D., strongly welcomed these interrelated thematic priorities which fully corresponded to what R.E.D. was working on. When it came to digitalisation, she pointed out that R.E.D. was focussing on the digital divide due to the fact that rural areas were less connected to the Internet. During lockdowns, having access to the digital world had become a matter of fundamental rights. That was why it was important to ensure that rural areas were not left behind when it came to digitalisation.

Jeremy Wates, EEB, wanted to see the European Green Deal having an essential role which of course was very much linked to the other topics that had been mentioned. From an environmental point of view, digitalisation was a double-edged issue because, on the one hand, it had its own substantial environmental footprint while, on the other, it made it possible to cut back on CO2 emissions connected to international travel. Jeremy very much supported all that had been said so far and was

pleased to see how resilient the commitment to the Green Deal from mainstream politicians had been throughout this pandemic. Therefore the EEB saw the Recovery Plan as extremely important, in the same way that the topic of civic space was very important for all CSOs.

Brikena proposed regrouping the priorities by putting together the Recovery Plan, Green Deal and sustainability as they were highly interlinked.

Annemie Driescens, COFACE, highlighted that digitalisation was key in this pandemic crisis and commented on the vulnerability of families, which had now been magnified significantly with the global pandemic bringing inequalities to the fore. She insisted that families and family carers needed full support through implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights. Short-term emergency measures were needed as much as long-term strategies. She concluded by calling for a systemic two-generation approach (children, families).

Philippe Seidl, AGE, agreed with the comments on digitalisation made by previous speakers. He pointed out that the Green Deal should benefit the most vulnerable people and that the priorities of the LG should also include a focus on the EU Pillar of Social Rights, especially access of citizens to services (health, long-term care, support for informal carers) as well as on developments in the EU Semester.

Sevda Kilicalp, EFC, explained that the EFC also suggested civil dialogue and cross-border philanthropy as thematic priorities for the LG and that cross-border solidarity had never been needed in Europe as much as it was today. She regretted that the Single Market did not yet work for philanthropy because of the issue of defining what "benefitting the public" meant in practice.

Brikena summed up the discussion by proposing to further reflect on the input that had been given and to formulate 3-4 topics the group would like to focus on. She once again flagged up that digitalisation would be a shared priority with the future EESC presidency and that this broad topic could be divided up among the various other topics that had been highlighted in the discussion. This could serve as guiding and adaptable principles in the current uncertain times.

Conference on the Future of Europe: state of play within the EESC. Report by Tatiana Adamisova, head of unit for interinstitutional relations

Tatiana Adamisova, EESC, began by summarising the chronological developments and the changes in the political landscape since the last European elections which had led to the proposal of a Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE). The most tricky, unresolved question so far was: who should lead the CoFoE-process?

She then commented on the state of play within the EESC:

- Ad hoc Group (AHG), 12 members, chaired by the EESC president. First meeting in July (Ms Xhomaqi had participated), second meeting in September.

- This outgoing AHG had drafted a document for the upcoming mandate, which was intended as a roadmap proposing possible actions. The outgoing EESC Bureau had unanimously adopted this document.
- The CoFoE was supposed to be a priority for the EESC.
- Particularly well suited to the CoFoE was the EESC *Going local* communication tool as well as the country visits by EESC members relating to specific topics.
- Information and discussion sessions in the CoFoE framework were a possibility at EESC level as well as at national level.
- Possibility to make the EESC premises available to national or European CSOs for the organisation of debates within the CoFoE.
- EESC sections and groups in particular were invited to organise relevant events relating to the CoFoE at national level.
- External partners: network of national ESC to organise events.

She concluded by underlining that the EESC wished to be the institution to voice the concerns of civil society organisations which were not represented in the social dialogue, for instance through the LG.

Jeremy Wates, EEB, pointed out a concern that quite a few CSOs had about the CoFoE process, namely the limited role of civil society organisations. In light of this, he very much welcomed the priority followed by the EESC to voice CSO concerns within this process and to use its role to support the participation of organised civil society, not just of millions of individual members. When it came to the three EESC groups, he noted that Group III (Diversity Europe) was at a disadvantage compared to Groups I (Employers) and II (Employees), as the latter had a seat in the process while Group III did not. That was why he would be grateful if the EESC could recognise and address this imbalance.

Tatiana Adamisova flagged up that there were indeed concerns within the EESC about the issues Jeremy had just raised. The EESC was wondering about his role in the process and wanted it to be formalised.

Any other business – Civil Society Days 2021

Brikena asked the participants who had been involved in the preparation of the cancelled 2020 Civil Society Days 2020, if they would be interested in holding their workshops in a 2021 digital edition of the event. It might be spread out over a week, potentially with a web-streamed opening and closing session taking place at the EESC (with a limited number of people in situ), and then with the workshops held under the management of the different CSOs in a fully virtual format as web-conferences. This would also allow a wider participation at national level. There was a general consensus and wish to do so while adapting the workshops to the new pandemic context where necessary. Of course, there would be the possibility not only of maintaining the planned programmes but also of proposing new workshops.

She announced that the LG secretariat would call for volunteers to form a small working group that would work on this and prepare the virtual edition.

The dates for this edition, however, had not yet been set.

Brikena concluded the meeting by thanking the participants for their contributions and inviting them to continue the discussion by email and staying in touch with each other on the various issues. At the next plenary meeting, CSOs would have the chance to meet the new EESC members of the LG.

SAVE THE DRAFT DATE: NEXT FULL LG MEETING: 10 DECEMBER, 10.30-12.30