

## **Liaison Group – Civil Society Organisations**

Record of proceedings of the virtual meeting

4 April 2021, 10.30 a.m. – 12.30 p.m.

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

**Brikena Xhomaqi**, director of the Lifelong Learning Platform and 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, namely:

- At the request of the EESC Diversity Europe Group, providing an oral contribution to the Recovery and Resilience Facility, focusing in particular on the involvement of civil society in the national consultations. The Group furthermore took into consideration much of the outcome of the Civil Society Days 2021, as well as the reports and data provided by some of the CSOs on the participation of civil society in the Recovery Plans;
- Meetings with the president of the Diversity Europe Group, Séamus Boland, who has undertaken to work closely with the CSOs;
- Meeting with the president of the EESC Association Life category, Andris Gobiņš, with whom closer coordination and cooperation with LG CSOs has been agreed;
- Meeting with the president of the EESC's TEN section Baiba Miltoviča, who is also looking forward to having more contributions from and cooperation with CSOs on issues related to the renovation wave, energy, transport and the Green Deal in general;
- Meeting with the chairs of the European Semester Group within the EESC, who asked for a contribution from the CSOs of the LG on the reform of the EU semester process. She herself would present that contribution at the ESG's Annual European Semester conference 2021 on the topic "Building a resilient Europe – Civil society and the National Recovery and Resilience Plans".

She then informed the participants about some other activities in the last two months:

- Some CSOs had contributed to the European Commission's 2022 Work Programme, providing input on the Resolution that the EESC has been drafting on the 2022 Work Programme;
- The Civil Society Days 2021 had been very successful; many EESC members had been involved and were looking forward to further cooperation with the LG.

## **Discussion on the next steps for the outcomes of the Civil Society Days 2021**

**Brikena** explained that the conclusions, the policy recommendations from all the workshops and also a short joint declaration by the two co-chairs of the LG had been published. She and the president of the EESC and co-chair of the LG, Christa Schweng, would meet on 3 May to discuss how concretely and specifically those conclusions could be used within the EESC. Brikena then opened the floor for discussion.

**Theodor Grassos**, EVBB, stated that the intention of his organisation was to bring the outcomes to the grassroots level.

**Philippe Seidel**, AGE, expressed his trust in Brikena and the EESC president to bring the CSOs' voice to the Conference on the Future of Europe.

**Piotr Sadowski**, Volonteuropa, added in the chat that from his experience the Civil Society Days 2021 had been the most engaging and involving between CSOs and various EESC sections.

**Gabriella Civico**, CEV, also wrote in the chat that her CSO trusted the co-chairs of the LG to do the work, but was prepared to provide feedback throughout the process.

**Brikena** assured participants that it would soon be possible to make use of outcomes of the Civil Society Days 2021 in the CoFoE process, as one of the most concrete ways of using them. Another opportunity to share these conclusions would be the EESC Social Summit event at the end of April.

## **Discussion on the state of play within the EESC and the LG's involvement in the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE)**

For this point, the floor was given to **Stefano Martinelli**, new acting head of the CSS unit, to provide an update on the CoFoE. Stefano started by highlighting the formal signing of the joint declaration by the EU institutions on 10 March, explaining that this was a milestone in the process because it defined the scope and content and set out elements of the calendar for the CoFoE. The main scope is to reconnect with European citizens, which offers a window of opportunities for the LG. The content involves tackling all the harder topics on the European political agenda (e.g. the digital and green transition), and the recovery and the industrial strategy, in order to make the EU more resilient and competitive for the years to come. In terms of calendar, the CoFoE is expected to adopt conclusions in spring 2022. On 19 April, there will be the launch of the Multilingual Digital Platform. The formal kick-off of the Conference will be held on 9 May, probably as a hybrid meeting in Strasbourg. In terms of governance of the Conference, there are two important bodies, namely the Plenary and the Executive Board. The president of the EESC has attended both of the two meetings held by the Executive Board (EB) so far, as a permanent observer with the right to take the floor. Furthermore, the EESC has already made arrangements to produce a specific contribution to the CoFoE, and one of the main points will be a revised roadmap for liaising with citizens and CSOs and the constituencies that make up the EESC.

After Stefano's update, the floor was opened for questions and comments addressed to him.

**Inge Brees**, YFJ, asked when the second plenary session was scheduled to take place and how the plenaries would be organised in terms of content in general.

**Alexandrina Najmowicz**, ECF, referred to the LG's potential role in the Conference, through the EESC, pointing out that CSOs had had limited involvement in the development of national recovery plans and wondering what channels the EESC would put in place to gather CSOs' input in preparation for the meetings of CoFoE Executive Board. Outside the EESC, Alexandrina had contributed to the launch of a civil society convention for the CoFoE so far comprising more than 75 EU level civil society networks. She explained that the aim of this convention was to bring CSOs' agenda for change in terms of democracy, climate, socio-economic issues into the public debate, also using it for discussions on the reform of the European Semester. Since Alexandrina's organisation was a neophyte on the topic, she proposed creating an informal space to discuss how to link the LG's positions on the Semester and on the CoFoE.

**Annabel Seebohm**, CPME, asked for more details on the content of the roadmap that would be the EESC's contribution to the CoFoE.

In his reply, **Stefano** stated that the roadmap document was not yet finalised and that its aim was to find a way for the EESC to organise its outreach in the EU Member States in relation to civil society. He added that the EESC intended to involve the LG as effectively as possible, and pointed out that, on the basis of the joint declaration signed in March, all the topics raised by Alexandrina would be discussed in the CoFoE and that conclusions would be reached.

The floor was then given to **Nicholas Clark**, SEE, who said that his organisation's idea for the CoFoE was to raise awareness of it through communication with citizens. He listed three main ways in which SEE would do that: a press release around 9 May; a joint statement with the Stand Up for the Social Pillar Alliance; and a podcast on the Conference (<https://www.socialeconomy.eu.org/podcast/>, open to contributions from LG members, to be sent to [nicholas.clark@socialeconomy.eu.org](mailto:nicholas.clark@socialeconomy.eu.org)). He also expressed SEE's willingness to organise events, along with the LG if possible.

**Hanna Surmatz**, EFC, welcomed the idea of the civil society convention mentioned by Alexandrina but called the CSOs to try to find a coherent input or some key messages so they could appear to be speaking with one voice.

**Anna Echterhoff**, UEF, fully supported Hanna and proposed creating a group to work on certain thematic points that could be then shared on the Multilingual Digital Platform; she also suggested using the president of the EESC as a channel to get CSOs' positions to the EB.

**Jeremy Wates**, EEB, suggested that the EESC president's contribution to the CoFoE could somehow acknowledge the civil society convention as a complementary way to provide CSOs' input.

**Stefano** then suggested putting concrete proposals to the EESC president, in order to help her to raise the CSOs' voice loud and clear in the Conference.

**Alexandrina** said it would be crucial if the EESC president could also make a point on the imbalance that CSOs are facing in terms of recognition between social dialogue and civil dialogue.

**Hanna** supported Alexandrina, pointing out that Article 11 TEU on civil dialogue could be better implemented, if the LG came up with a concrete proposal and a position paper.

**Piotr** urged that the point on Article 11 TEU be raised publically ahead of the Porto Social Summit.

**Brikena** closed the discussion on the CoFoE saying that, for now, the Cabinet and the LG Secretariat would be kept informed on the various meetings of the EB and the EESC Ad Hoc Group. She would have the opportunity to speak at the upcoming EESC Social Summit event trying to raise some of the CSOs' points before the actual launch of the Conference.

### **Discussion on the LG opinion on European Semester reform and the EESC Resolution on Recovery and Resilience Plans**

The point started with a call for volunteers willing to contribute to a written contribution on the reform of the European Semester from the LG's perspective, to be presented at the Conference of the European Semester Group on 31 May.

**Luk Zelderloo**, EASPD, Social Services Europe, said he should be able to find some candidates within his organisations. In response to some questions on practical aspects **Brikena** explained that there would be a brief call with the contributors to start a draft document on European Semester reform. This document would be presented at the Conference at the end of May as CSOs' input to the EESC. This input would be probably discussed at the full LG meeting on 19 May.

In addition, **Piotr**, **Jeremy**, **Alexandrina** and **Julie Rosenkilde**, SDG Watch Europe, wrote in the chat that they would look for volunteers in their organisations.

**Ingeborg Niestroy**, SDG Watch Europe, informed the participants that her CSO was undertaking the kind of learning on the European Semester and RRP that Alexandrina had mentioned before, and was also working towards a process to improve the participation of CSOs at national level, and they would like to be in close contact with work in that direction.

### **Thematic priorities for 2021 and beyond**

**Brikena** asked participants for a round of quick input, feedback or suggestions on who they would like to have invited as an external guest for discussion at the full LG meeting in May.

**Alexandrina** proposed inviting a representative of the Secretariat General of the European Commission, in order to provide a space to make key high-level contacts understand what CSOs mean by implementation of civil dialogue.

**Luk** suggested holding another discussion on COVID-19 recovery, not only of the economy but also of civil society organisations and social services, focusing especially on to the impact of the crisis on vulnerable people. The aim would be to try to learn from it and to see how this crisis had shown the weaknesses of our social protection system, how civil society organisations had been silenced and how the hard economy had taken over in the recovery plans. He also mentioned that vaccination would be an interesting topic.

**Hanna** proposed three points: 1) Article 11 TEU and a better implementation of civil dialogue; 2) Overcoming barriers to cross-border action of CSOs on which she remarked that new attempts had been made at European Parliament level regarding recognition of the status of

non-profit organisations and the promotion of cross-border philanthropy; 3) the EU's new fight against money laundering and terrorist financing, currently in the making, which would also hugely impact the operational space for NGOs and the civil society sector.

### **Strengthening cooperation within the EESC – Guest speaker Andris Gobiņš**

**Brikena** introduced the guest speaker, with whom she had already had a few exchanges on an interesting idea he had brought up, namely broadcasting an LG meeting at least once a year to have an open online meeting where citizens could also follow the discussion. She then gave the floor to **Andris Gobiņš**, member of the EESC and president of the Associational life category.

**Andris Gobiņš** started by giving a general introduction to the EESC categories, explaining that they allowed people with joint interests (e.g. farmers, consumers, NGOs) to organise themselves and to see what they could push forward. The members of the Associational life category come from almost two thirds of EU Member States, with a strong focus on and representation of youth organisations. He shared in the chat the list of the 18 members of the category:

1	Andersson, Jan Torsten	Sweden	INT, SOC
2	Barbieri, Pietro Vittorio	Italy	REX, SOC
3	Bogusz, Małgorzata Anna	Poland	TEN, REX
4	Calistru, Elena-Alexandra	Romania	ECO, REX
5	Gobiņš, Andris	Latvia	ECO, REX, SOC
6	Joó, Kinga	Hungary	TEN, SOC
7	Kiukas, Vertti	Finland	ECO, REX, SOC
8	Leitāne, Katrīna	Latvia	TEN, ECO, SOC
9	Mcloughlin, Michael	Éire-Ireland	ECO, REX, SOC
10	Moos, Christian	Germany	REX, CCMI, SOC
11	Pavić-Rogošić, Lidija	Croatia	TEN, REX, NAT
12	Pîrvulescu, Cristian	Romania	REX, SOC
13	Repanšek, Neža	Slovenia	INT, REX, SOC
14	Sibian, Ionuț	Romania	REX, SOC
15	Sinkevičiūtė, Elena	Lithuania	TEN, REX, SOC
16	Topolánszky, Ákos	Hungary	REX, SOC
17	Vardakastanis, Ioannis	Greece	ECO, REX
18	Zych, Tymoteusz Adam	Poland	INT, SOC

Mr Gobiņš went on to explain that the key goal of the category was not only to open up the EESC but to look more broadly at what could be done to open up all EU institutions to get them to really work on the structure of dialogue with civil society. A final programme for the category would be approved at its next meeting, which would probably be held in June.

He then pointed out that one of the upcoming SOC section meetings might be broadcast, and said that he saw this as a prerequisite for giving CSO representatives the opportunity to provide feedback and input during meetings, and not only in the chat.

He then also referred to the selection process for EESC Members. In Andris' opinion, the Committee needs to have proper representatives of civil society, not politicians of one kind or

another. He also advanced the idea that the LG should have the right to write its own opinions, which might be an unrealistic dream at this stage, but could be a step in the wider future.

Moving to content, Mr Gobiņš invited the CSOs represented in the LG to share their priority position papers and ideas with his category so that they could try to push forward ideas and include them in official documents. In order to give this invitation practical follow up, he listed in the chat the opinions his category is contributing to, and invited participants to contribute by email to [gobins@web.de](mailto:gobins@web.de).

1. SOC/661 – Vocational training: the effectiveness of systems to anticipate and match skills and labour market needs and the role of social partners and different stakeholders

Rapporteur: Michel Pottier (FR-I)

2. SOC/663 – Promoting skills for a more just, cohesive, sustainable, digital and resilient society

Rapporteur: Tatjana Babrauskienė (LT-II)

3. SOC/665 – Building a European Health Union

Rapporteur: Ioannis Vardakastanis (EL-III)

4. SOC/666 – Union of equality: EU anti-racism action plan 2020-2025

Rapporteur: Cristian Pîrvulescu (RO-III)

5. SOC/667 – Union of Equality: LGBTIQ Equality Strategy 2020-2025

Rapporteur: Ionut Sibian (RO-III)

Co-rapporteur: Maria del Carmen Barrera Chamorro (ES-II)

6. SOC/668 – Action plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027

Rapporteur: Paul Soete (BE-I)

7. SOC/674 – Ensuring justice in the EU – A European judicial training strategy for 2021-2024

Rapporteur: Elena Calistru (RO-III)

### **Membership requests**

**Brikena** explained that this point would be discussed with the full LG in May, already mentioning that there had been at least two more membership requests, specifically from the European Parents Association (EPA) and Solidar.

### **Any other business**

On the web-streaming of one LG meeting a year, **Brikena** stated that, if there were no objections to it, the Secretariat would look into the technicalities and see when there could be an initial trial.

As no other topic was brought up, she concluded the meeting by thanking the participants for their contributions and inviting them to continue the discussion by email and stay in touch with each other on the various issues.

**DATE OF THE NEXT VIRTUAL LG MEETING: 19 MAY, 10.30 a.m.-12.30 p.m.**

See below for the attendance list

## **LIST OF PARTICIPANTS**

(in alphabetical order)

### **Members of civil society organisations who confirmed attendance:**

Ms	BOBIC, Maja	EMI
Mr	BOCHAR, Dirk	FEANI
Ms	BREES, Inge	European Youth Forum (YFJ)
Ms	BRIGA, Elisa	EFIL
Ms	CIVICO, Gabriella	CEV
Mr	CLARK, Nicholas	SEE (Social Economy Europe)
Mr	DÜRSCH, R	CED
Ms	ECHTERHOFF, Anna	UEF
Ms	ESPÍN ONIEVA, Mariona	UEF
Mr	GRASSOS, Theodor	EVBB
Mr	GRAZIAN, Flavio	ECAS
Mr	GRODECKI, Jakub	ESU
Ms	HEYSSE, Heleen	Cooperatives Europe
Mr	INSIDIOSO, Giovanni	IUT
Mr	LOURDELLE, Henri	FERPA
Ms	MASHINI, Lisa	Cooperatives Europe
Ms	NAJMOWICZ, Alexandrina	ECF
Ms	NIESTROY, Ingeborg	SDG Watch Europe
Ms	OSICHENKO, Iulita	Eurochild
Mr	PALA, Francesco	ALDA
Mr	ROSANA, Gabriele	CAE
Ms	ROSENKILDE, Julie	SDG Watch Europe
Mr	SADOWSKI, Piotr	Volonteuropé/Social Platform
Ms	SEEBOHM, Annabel	CPME
Mr	SEIDEL, Philippe	AGE

Ms	SURMATZ, Hanna	EFC
Mr	WATES, Jeremy	EEB
Ms	XHOMAQI, Brikena	LLLP, Liaison Group Co-chair
Mr	ZELDERLOO, Luk	EASPD (Social Services Europe)

**Guest speaker:**

Mr	GOBIŇŠ, Andris	EESC member, president of the EESC Associational life category
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**Members of Civil Society organisations who sent their apologies:**

Ms	CILDERMANE, Eva	European Youth Forum (YFJ)
Mr	ESPETER, Markus	EVBB
Ms	GOSME, Elizabeth	COFACE
Ms	HANULA, Kasia	Concord Europe
Mr	JARRÉ, Dirk	EURAG
Mrs	KILICALP, Sevda	EFC
Mr	NARANJO, Diego	EDRi
Mr	PRITCHARD, Ian	ACE

**EESC staff members:**

Ms	LOMBARDI, Camilla	CSS unit, trainee
Mr	MARTINELLI, Stefano	Acting head of CSS unit
Ms	NARDELLO, Enrica	Group III
Ms	SERAFINI, Karen	CSS unit
Ms	SCHWEDER, Sandra	CSS unit