

Conference of the Civil Society Organisations' Group of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), Brussels, 30 March 2023

'Civil society organisations defending and strengthening European democracy'

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS



CONFERENCE

Civil society organisations defending and strengthening European democracy

 @CSOGroupEESC #EUDemocracy

30.03.2023 | 9:15 - 13:00 CEST

EESC | VMA 3 & online



European Economic
and Social Committee
Civil Society Organisations' Group

Following the 2023 [Civil Society Days](#) of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), Building on the resolution '[United for Democracy](#)' adopted by the EESC on 23 March 2023, The conference [Civil society organisations defending and strengthening European democracy](#), organised by the Civil Society Organisations' Group of the EESC on 30 March 2023, highlighted that:

Civil society organisations (CSOs) must be recognised, involved and supported as partners that defend and strengthen European democracy and contribute to a functioning rule of law culture.

Strengthening and upholding democratic values

- While liberal democracy is losing ground globally, there are also worrying trends inside the EU, with several Member States witnessing authoritarian shifts and a decrease in media freedom and diversity, whilst there is an overall shrinking civic space.
- Independent CSOs play a key role in maintaining a culture based on values, including fundamental rights, the rule of law and democracy and in supporting media freedom and pluralism. It is of paramount importance to secure an enabling environment, in which civil society players are protected, supported and empowered, including beyond EU borders.
- The rule of law is a precondition to an enabling civic space, just as an enabling civil space is a determining factor for effective democracies. Nurturing an enabling civic space and protecting the rule of law are mutually reinforcing.
- In recent years, the contribution to the rule of law from "*below*" by CSOs has been increasingly recognized, including: their contribution to checks and balances through monitoring, advocacy and litigation, fostering a rule of law culture, promoting the transparency and accountability of public authorities, ensuring access to justice or the fight against corruption. (Cf. [FRA 2022](#))
- However, CSOs are facing multiple challenges in carrying out these activities. Those working in advocacy or defending the rights of women, LGBTIQ+ persons and ethnic minorities are particularly vulnerable to threats. Access to funding is a particular challenge for those working directly on the rule of law and democracy. In this context, core funding, as opposed to project-based funding, is key for building CSO resilience.

Ahead of the Defence of Democracy package and European elections 2024

- In accordance with the Treaties, the EU should act against Member States that curtail the rights and freedom of action of CSOs. Action is also needed at national level, where all actors should be involved.
- A clear framework on how to implement Art. 11 TEU is lacking. The EU should do more to insist that Member States adhere to Art. 11 when implementing EU laws and policies.
- Within this context, it is essential that the EU adopts a European Civil Society Strategy and a European Statute of Associations, which will provide an enabling civic space to support democracy. It is also strongly recommended that each DG in the European Commission appoints a civil society coordinator who will liaise directly with CSOs.
- Defending fundamental rights and our basic values needs a whole-of-society approach: every stakeholder and every CSO that stands for these rights and values plays a role.

- Looking ahead to the Defence of Democracy package and the European elections in 2024, CSOs must be treated as partners in strengthening and defending European democracy and in enabling participatory approaches, which are complementary to representative democracy.
- In this context, youth organisations will play an essential role in the civic education and in mobilising first time and young voters to actively participate in the European elections.

CSOs need to be able to trust public authorities that values and goals are shared. Moreover, CSOs must cooperate to guarantee effective policy dialogue and should be given a status similar to social partners, a true partnership.

Creating conditions for mutual trust

- Good relations between civil society and public authorities are to the benefit of the whole society. For a constructive civil dialogue, mutual trust is essential.
- Participation is a precondition for trust in EU institutions. However, it is not implemented to a satisfactory level: there are large differences both between and within the institutions, a lack of initiative, approaches are often top-down without transparent methodology. There is a shared feeling that input is being cherry-picked. (Cf. EnTrust project [presentation](#)).
- It is important that the approach is clear and that feedback is given. This is essential for CSOs' advocacy work and investment in resources. Dialogue should be scheduled over the long term, from agenda-setting to implementation.

Reinforcing horizontal collaboration and partnership

- In times of crisis, CSOs and volunteers are often in the first line, assisting those in need, as has been the case with the Covid-19 pandemic and Ukrainian refugees. They channel the voice of those that who underrepresented. It is therefore essential that they are vocal and transmit their learning through advocacy.
- Horizontal collaboration is paramount for the recognition of the sector. It is by engaging in cross-sectoral dialogue and forging alliances, which can channel their voices towards their interlocutors, that CSOs can work towards being considered a real partner in policy-making.
- Currently, social partnership excludes many parts of civil society, whereas these actors have an important role to play in informing the discussions between the social partners and government on an ad hoc basis. It is necessary to avoid situations in which agreements among social partners are made without considering the views and arguments of other civil society organizations, which represent and have a significant impact on the lives of European citizens.
- While the shrinking space for CSOs in various European countries needs to be closely monitored, there are also inspiring examples of effective policy dialogue across the EU, which CSOs should capitalise and mainstream.