I

(Resolutions, recommendations and opinions)

RESOLUTIONS

EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE

577TH PLENARY SESSION OF THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE, 22.3.2023-23.3.2023

Resolution of the European Economic and Social Committee on 'United for Democracy'

(2023/C 184/01)

Rapporteurs: **Stefano MALLIA (MT-I)**
Oliver RÖPKE (AT-II)
Séamus BOLAND (IE-III)

Legal basis	Rule 50 of the Rules of Procedure
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Post-pandemic recovery, democratic values, civic space, media freedom, diversity and liberal democracy are all under pressure on both sides of the EU's borders, and they have deteriorated since the start of the war on European soil: less than 50 % of the world's population lives in a democratic system.

As the world continues to witness the atrocious war in Ukraine and its devastating humanitarian, social and economic consequences, the EESC is launching a call to strengthen democracy and democratic values.

The extraordinary mobilisation of the EU civil society organisations offering humanitarian, logistical and medical assistance for the Ukrainian people has also shown the importance of a well-connected, efficient and vibrant civil society. Beyond Ukraine, we also witness grassroot movements fighting for democracy in Iran, Belarus and Moldova. Strengthening them strengthens democracies.

It is now more important than ever to invest in making democracies more resilient and better able to safeguard our fundamental rights, build longstanding peace and stability and ultimately to deliver prosperity for all.

There is no doubt that we should engage in joint reflection on new approaches to strengthening the structures for participatory democracy. A strong, independent and diverse civil society is more important than ever as a key ingredient to ensure active citizenship and resilient democracy that can safeguard the rule of law, fundamental rights, freedom of expression and the integrity of our democratic way of life. Democracy in the EU is intrinsically and irrevocably linked to the concepts of equality, justice, respect for human rights and non-discrimination, as stipulated in Article 2 of the TEU.

In times of complex change and challenges, deliberative/participatory democracy can be one part of a bigger picture of the systemic change that is needed. There are many examples that, if implemented effectively, can enable policymakers to take hard decisions about the most challenging public policy problems and enhance trust between citizens and government. The prerequisite is to guarantee that it takes into account the diversity of opinions and the right to express them freely. However, participatory democracy is not a panacea. Democratic societies face a wide range of challenges, which require different methods of participation. Democratic governance therefore requires the use of different mechanisms for different purposes, to take advantage of their strengths and weaknesses.

We must collectively seek a new balance between representative democracy, participatory democracy, and direct democracy.

The conclusions of the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) on European democracy of 9 May 2022, specifically proposals 36 and 39, **set the objectives of increasing citizens' participation and strengthening the structures for participatory democracy and deliberative actions**. Bearing in mind the results of the CoFoE and the important role already being played by the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), the EESC would like to outline various options that could provide a blueprint for institutional reforms to best serve the EESC's purposes.

Against this background, and building on the Civil Society Days 2023, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC):

1. calls for the effective implementation of Article 11 of the TEU, including a **European strategy for civil society** and a European Statute of Associations to connect different building blocks for a truly empowering and inclusive space, in order to renew engagement and implement structured civil dialogue across EU institutions, including by inviting organised civil society to, Social Summits and high-level conferences, in particular. If the civil society sector is to have more meaningful and broad engagement, resources also matter. Better funding opportunities and fair and transparent policy frameworks are needed for CSOs, including cross-border protection, to build capacity and resilience for all CSOs, including youth organisations, the social economy and the voluntary sector, as are access to flexible and sustainable resources, be they private or public;

2. emphasises the need to strengthen the key role of organised civil society and social partners in supporting deliberative democracy, complementing representative democracy, to further strengthen civil dialogue in all Member States and at EU level. The strength and power of European democracies are based on solid and wide-scale cooperation between the EU and its Member States, which must help to build the capacity of civil society organisations, as independent CSOs are 'guardians of the common good', with a pivotal role in identifying sustainable solutions, promoting societal innovations and building mutual trust within societies. CSOs also help to identify processes, provide expertise to increase the diversity of debates, and facilitate participatory democracy as set out in the Treaties;

3. calls for a holistic and cooperative approach on education and training to face current challenges. A European policy for skills should be co-shaped with civil society organisations and social partners, who have political capital, concrete knowledge and an understanding of current needs and shortcomings; in this context, calls for 2025 to be designated as the European Year of Volunteers, as the sector has a key role to play in the development of informal skills;

4. highlights that transversal competences are the true backbone of a participatory and deliberative democracy: cooperation, critical thinking, problem-solving, democratic and collective management, conflict resolution, civic education and media literacy. These competences are central to combatting anti-democratic trends, promoting European values and overcoming current socioeconomic and political divides, while empowering civil society organisations and social partners to co-design policies via consultative or participatory means to achieve accountability, transparency and active citizenship;

5. is committed to helping to further develop tools to enhance participatory and deliberative democracy, such as the European Citizens' Initiative and Online EU Public Consultations, that need to be fully accessible and communicated to the general public;

6. emphasises the importance of the 2024 European elections and of the crucial role of CSOs in encouraging voter participation and pro-European sentiment, as well as in countering abstention and disinformation. The EESC calls on the European political families to underline, in their electoral manifestos, the role of civil society organisations in enhancing democratic life;

7. reiterates its willingness, together with wider civil society organisations and the EU institutions, to act as a bridge builder to debate the European project with citizens, going beyond those already convinced, and to reach out to them in their communities, territories, cities and villages. It is therefore vital to create the possibilities for participating in public debates and foster a culture of participation at all levels;

8. The Commission should make provisions, in its organisation, for contact persons responsible for civil dialogue. It should also work with the Member States to promote the strengthening of civil dialogue structures and support their creation where they do not yet exist, by harnessing European funds. This initiative would raise awareness and improve the quality of civil dialogue, thereby helping the Commission and Member States to better comprehend the benefits that well-functioning civil dialogue can bring to policymaking. Moreover, civil dialogue would be strengthened by research and monitoring activities, leading to the identification and sharing of best practices;

9. highlights in this regard that the involvement of young people and youth organisations is particularly important in mobilising first time voters and young voters. In order to achieve full representativeness, it is necessary to support solutions that allow for broad involvement and foster equality of opportunity in this regard. It is necessary to reach out to those who are furthest from the decision-making centres and engage in discussions with them. Greater participation at local level appears to be a necessity;

10. moreover, calls on the European Parliament, the European Council and the Member States to amend the 1976 Electoral Act as a matter of urgency, to clarify the principles of universality, directness and secrecy of elections. This would allow for the implementation of standards throughout the EU, thus guaranteeing voting rights for persons with disabilities.

Drawing on the above recommendations and the Conference on the Future of Europe, the EESC:

11. views the recently signed protocol on cooperation with the European Commission (27 October 2022) as a renewed political commitment to contributing to the European political agenda and to Europe's main goal, objectives [1] and aspirations, namely achieving a European Union that is competitive, economically prosperous, socially inclusive and environmentally sustainable, whilst ensuring that the transition to climate neutrality, digitalisation and demographic change are socially fair and just, and making the European Green Deal and the 2030 Digital Decade successes for all Europeans. The European Union must also be guided by the European Pillar of Social Rights and a Competitiveness Agenda, the political roadmaps that ensure that no one is left behind;

12. stands ready — and, now more than ever, has the legitimacy — to act as a key hub for citizens and organised civil society participation, including future citizens' panels. The role of such a hub would be to multiply the effect of ongoing citizens' consultations organised by the European Commission and other institutions, and also to systematically collect feedback from European organised civil society on all the major priorities and policies of the European political agenda. This will help to enhance public trust in the EU project and institutions by giving citizens an effective role in public decision making. The EESC would be a host to guide, supervise, design, organise, run, and facilitate deliberative processes with the aid of external experts and representatives of civil society organisations. This offer builds, in particular, on the final report of the Conference on the Future of Europe of 9 May 2022 which explicitly call for 'enhanc[ing] the institutional role of the EESC and empower[ing] it as facilitator and guarantor of participatory democracy activities such as structured dialogue with civil society organisations and Citizens' panels'. Within this context, the recommendations of the EESC own-initiative Opinions and Commission-requested exploratory opinions should be reviewed via evaluations of EU policies, where relevant;

13. is of the view that citizens' panels and CSO consultations could focus on agenda setting, such as the preparation of the Commission's work programme, or could be linked to the lifecycle of key legislative priorities. Citizens' input could be most useful in the pre-legislative phase, to deliberate and make recommendations ahead of certain key (legislative) proposals. To this end, consultations of citizens' panels and of the CSOs could be carried out on the basis of an annual roadmap and timeline, established by the EESC in cooperation with the European institutions. This could include specific requests from the European Commission, the European Parliament or the Council of the European Union, by the EESC itself on its own initiative, or at the initiative of its partner organisation, the European Committee of the Regions;

14. reiterates that the cycle of activity could start with the State of the Union speech and declaration of intent, with a view to the European Commission's annual work programme for the following year. Consultations would take place during the first half of the following year;

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[1] Articles 2 and 3 of the Treaty on European Union.

15. as a complement to tools to strengthen the rule of law, will continue proposing to other EU institutions the establishment of an annual EU Forum on Fundamental Rights, Human Rights and the Rule of Law. This forum will improve monitoring by allowing EU decision-makers to receive early warning from organised civil society and grassroots organisations from all EU Member States, regarding the full and transparent application of Article 2 TEU. Moreover, the Committee calls on the European Commission to include a chapter on civil society in the forthcoming review of the European Democracy Action Plan. The EESC will also play an important role in monitoring the accession processes of candidate countries and facilitate a meaningful discussion with the parties involved to ensure that European values are respected, including those affecting national and ethnic minorities;

16. will launch a European Civil Society Week, to enhance its role as the House of European Civil Society and broaden the reach of its flagship initiatives, such as Civil Society Days, ECI Day, YEYS and the Civil Society Prize. This initiative will bring together key players in European and national civil society organisations, and provide a forum for dialogue on issues that are of concern to civil society stakeholders at European level. The EESC will seek to strengthen grassroots activity in order to reach out as much as possible to those who have limited opportunities to take part in debates on European issues and to ensure that their voices are taken into account in decision-making processes.

Brussels, 23 March 2023.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Christa SCHWENG