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Brussels, 09 December 2021

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| **DRAFT MINUTES**of the 38th meeting of the Liaison Group with European civil society organisations and networks held in hybrid format on **29 November 2021**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ |

The Liaison Group with European civil society organisations and networks held its 38th meeting in hybrid format (in person in **room VMA 3**), **from 2.00 p.m. to 4.30 p.m.** on **Monday 29 November 2021**.

**ATTENDANCE LIST (see appendix)**

1. **Adoption of the draft agenda**

The draft agenda was adopted.

1. **Approval of the minutes of the 37th meeting**

The minutes were approved.

3. **Introductory statements by the EESC president, Christa Schweng, and the Liaison Group co-chair, Brikena Xhomaqi**

**Ms Schweng** welcomed to the Liaison Group (LG) the three civil society organisations whose membership was approved in May, and gave the floor to their representatives to introduce themselves.

* **Victor Petuya**, President of theEuropean Parents Association, presented his organisation as an umbrella association with the purpose of giving parents a strong voice in the development of education policies throughout Europe.
* **Mikael Leyi**, Secretary General ofSolidar, described his organisation as a European network of progressive Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) aimed at advancing social justice and environmental sustainability through a just transition.
* **Bruno Monarca**, Vice Secretary General ofJEUNE (Young Entrepreneurs Organization of the European Union), said that his organisation is active in representing and supporting young entrepreneurs.

**Ms Schweng** expressed her satisfaction with the continuous growth of the LG, which has reached the impressive number of 40 civil society member organisations from European level.

Referring to her activities in past months, the president informed participants that she co-chaired the annual meeting of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) and the national Economic and Social Councils (ESCs), where they discussed the involvement of national Economic and Social Councils in the Recovery and Resilience Plans, with some positive evolutions in the some of the Member States. The participants agreed that the CoFoE provides an opportunity to relaunch European integration and to develop participatory democracy, engaging EU citizens and civil society organisations. More details can be found in the press release that is published on the EESC [website](https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/news-media/press-releases/organised-civil-society-engages-create-better-future-europe)  which will also be uploaded to the CoFoE digital platform as an EESC contribution.

**Ms Xhomaqi** informed the participants about the meeting of the civil society organisation (CSO) members of the LG on September 28. She then reported on the CSOs' involvement in the EESC activities in the last months and expressed her appreciation for the collaboration between CSOs and EESC sections, especially with the ad hoc group on Fundamental Rights and the Rule of Law, Group III and the Transport, Energy, Infrastructure and the Information Society (TEN) section. Finally, she underlined that the Civil Society Days event, with its focus on economic prosperity, could be a further occasion for close cooperation with the sections and bodies of the EESC.

Ms Xhomaqi concluded by highlighting the increased synergies between EESC members and SCOs, especially in the framework of the CoFoE.

**4. Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE)**

* **Update on the EESC's work on the CoFoE and schedule of future work by the EESC president, Christa Schweng**

The **EESC president** opened the discussion on the CoFoE, pointing out that participation in the digital platform seems to be rather disappointing and the outreach level unsatisfactory. One of the reasons for this low participation seems to be a lack of political commitment at national level and communication efforts across Europe. The Conference, initially created to promote civic participation, is needed now more than ever in the context of the pandemic. In the little time left before the end of the Conference, it is crucial to ensure concrete results and avoid anti-European backlashes. For this reason, the EESC decided to publish its own contributions on the CoFoE's Platform (see them [here](https://futureu.europa.eu/profiles/EESC/activity)). In practice, the EESC reformulated the inputs in the EESC Resolution on the Conference on the Future of Europe, adopted in April 2021, translating its core concepts into five contributions. The intent was to highlight the need for "A New Narrative for Europe" in which organised civil society should be in the driving seat. Furthermore, the EESC is in the process of organising events on priority topics at European, national and local levels. The LG secretariat sent the CSO members a list of these events to open a channel of communication and cooperation. Moreover, in February, the EESC will organise a conference in the framework of the CoFoE, where the Liaison Group will be involved.

She concluded by underlining that the EESC strongly advocates for a feedback mechanism in the form of an online dashboard that informs citizens about how EU institutions are following up on their requests and where the EU can provide an explanation for the rejection of proposals.

* **Update on the work of the LG civil society organisations by Ms Xhomaqi and other members of the LG**

**Ms Xhomaqi** was given the floor to inform participants about on the activities of the CSO members of the LG concerning the CoFoE, which are active in mobilising their members and contributing to the digital platform. However, there are also some frustrations with the CoFoE among CSOs regarding logistical and organisational issues, short-notice invitations and translation, which are negatively impacting the involvement of citizens and associations. Moreover, without the structural support of Member States, it is very complicated for CSOs to effectively engage citizens. The co-chair highlighted the importance of using the last months before the end of the CoFoE to try to solve these critical aspects and invited Alexandrina Najmowicz to offer more insights.

**Ms Najmowicz** (European Civic Forum) introduced herself as co-chair of the Civil Society Convention, which was set up to compensate for the lack of an institutional channel for organised civil society to engage with the Conference outside of the digital platform and the plenaries. She underlined that CSOs are sceptical of the brevity of the Conference. Regarding the short-notice invitations to plenaries and working groups which Ms Xhomaqi already mentioned, Ms Najmowicz pointed out that this undermines the possibility of creating fruitful cooperation with civil society in the working groups and Citizens Panels. Moreover, in the two plenaries held so far, there was no possibility of establishing a real dialogue, while the Secretariat of the Conference is not creating any structured channel of interaction between CSOs and citizens, almost hindering contact among them. Furthermore, the citizens from the Panels speaking at the plenary were not prepared to present the discussion they attended. Finally, CSOs underline a lack of accessibility and representativeness of marginalised communities in the various components of the Conference. To conclude on a positive note, Alexandrina Najmowicz highlighted that the Civil Society Convention is productively working in thematic clusters and will finalise its political recommendations by the beginning of February. In the meantime, the Civil Society Convention has already established cooperation with EESC Group III, to which other bodies of the Committee are invited. Finally, she pointed out the necessity to join forces to make civil society heard and to establish a long term follow-up mechanism.

Meanwhile, on the chat, **Ms Gosme** (COFACE Families Europe) agreed on the problems of translation. Moreover, **Ms Finn** (Social Platform) underlined the difficulties in engaging people on the CoFoE Digital Platform.

**Ms Surmatz** (European Foundation Centre) took the floor to share her experiences, since the European Foundation Centre is strongly involved in the Conference. She underlined the necessity of a critical discussion beyond the procedural problems, focusing on the content of the Conference. There is concern around the capacity to ensure that the civil dialogue within the CoFoE is effective and that the content shared on the platform is taken into account meaningfully. Finally, she asked Ms Schweng for confirmation regarding the rumours of a prolongation of the CoFoE.

**Ms Schweng** confirmed that the prolongation possibility is just a rumour and also expressed her doubt that an extension would solve the engagement problems underlined so far.

**Mr Doz Orrit** (**President of the European Semester Group**) affirmed that if the Conference ends in six months without an extension, this would be just enough time to approve measures that do not concern the Treaties. Therefore, the EESC should seriously consider the possibility of an extension, expressing a clear position on this debate with resolutions or opinions. **In his opinion, there is also the need for a Directive making the consultation with social partners and CSOs compulsory within the European Semester framework. The Committee should work to achieve this result, learning from the outcomes of the national consultations around the Recovery and Resilience Plans.**

**Ms Schweng** added that the EESC, with the contribution of the various sections, is coming up with specific inputs for the working groups of the CoFoE, which are the dedicated channels, in addition to the Platform, for contributing to the Conference.

**Mr Palmieri** (**President of ECO section**) concurred with some of the concerns already expressed by other participants about the methodology of the Conference. There is also a lack of balance in representation, for instance, the quota of employees and employers is about 50% meaning that they are not well represented in the CoFoE. Moreover, in Citizen Panels some participants lack knowledge on the matters discussed and, consequently, are influenced by other actors. In any case, the sections are working to offer some key points to EESC members present in the CoFoE, but more time is needed to achieve agreements between CoFoE participants.

**Mr Mallia** (**President of Group I) intervened to express his perplexity on the CoFoE. However, he pointed out some slight improvements in the last Plenary. Although there is still a lack of transparency on the direction and results of the Conference: the fact that rumours are still a matter of discussion is unacceptable. Civil society must ask for more clarity in general, and specifically on the timeline and outcomes of the Conference.**

**Ms Schweng** recognised that there are still many open questions and that institutions are not yet on the same page within the Executive Board. She underlined that the priority should be to ensure a follow-up mechanism to whatever the outcomes of the CoFoE will be, and that organised civil society should be central in this process.

**Ms Xhomaqi** agreed with the concerns and proposals shared but expressed her doubts as to what could be done to avoid these problems affecting the outcomes of the Conference. It is crucial to flag these issues, and the EESC could be an important voice in this, thus mitigating the risk of ending up with unusable outcomes.

* **Strengthening cooperation in the framework of the Memorandum of Understanding**

**Ms Schweng** opened the discussion on the cooperation between LG participants and the EESC. Thirty-five of the forty CSO members of the LG signed a Memorandum of Understanding to join forces, in particular for the organisation of events at national and European level. She informed the group that CSO members of the LG which take part in the CoFoE plenary had been invited to a coordination meeting in Strasbourg on December 17 to possibly define a common message on the basis of shared common positions for the CoFoE Plenary that will take place the following day

**Ms Xhomaqi** expressed her gratitude for the Memorandum, and reminded participants of the efforts of CSOs in putting it into practice. The cooperation meeting will be a positive step in this sense.

**5. Civil Society Days 2022**

**Ms Xhomaqi** took the floor to announce some key information on the most important annual event of the LG and the EESC, the Civil Society Days. The conference will take place from 15 to 17 March 2022 in a hybrid format under the motto *The EU as a driver of shared prosperity – civil society for an economy that works for people & the planet*. This edition will be linked to the CoFoE. Depending on the closing date of the CoFoE it will be possible to either give contribution or to discuss the outcome of the Conference.

Meanwhile, CSOs set up a Task Force in charge of preparing the conference and more specifically the workshops. The first topic clusters identified for the events are: ecological and social market economy; democratisation of economy; building a democratic economy for the just transition; upskilling opportunities for all; strengthening social safety nets and minimum income; volunteers for prosperity; young entrepreneurship and intergenerational dialogue; and enabling environment for civil society. The exact topics and titles will be defined by mid-December.

She underlined that the Civil Society Days are a great occasion for cooperation between all members of this group, the EESC and CSOs. By the next Task Force meeting in mid-December, concept notes for the workshops will be ready and sections will be contacted to get further involved. In the meantime, the Secretariat is available to receive suggestions from members and sections interested in contributing more actively.

In January, an EESC delegation of a total of thirty EESC members will be set up to participate in the event. The co-chair pointed out that CSOs are open to suggestions on how to ensure higher participation of EESC members beyond the opening and closing session. Moreover, she invited the group to keep themselves updated through the [Civil Society Days 2022 webpage](https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/agenda/our-events/events/civil-society-days-2022) and the Twitter account of the LG.

**Ms Schweng** agreed that the Civil Society Days are an excellent occasion for cooperation between CSOs and EESC members, and encouraged the presidents of the sections to take this opportunity. She added that it will be a hybrid event, considering the rules that the EESC will implement at least until the end of March.

Meanwhile, on the chat, **MS Finn** (Social Platform) informed participants that her association is looking for partners for a workshop on strengthening social safety nets and minimum income.

**6. Participatory and deliberative democracy and open public consultations**

**Ms Xhomaqi** briefly introduced the discussion on participatory democracy and open public consultations in the EU and then gave the floor to Ms Guimaraes Pereira.

* **Presentation of the recently launched Competence Centre on Participatory and Deliberative Democracy by Angela Guimaraes Pereira, Joint Research Centre, European Commission**

**Ms Guimaraes Pereira** gave a presentation on the Competence Centre of the Joint Research Centre (JRC), launched on 6 October. There is a new "wave" of interest for participatory democracy in Europe and the Competence Centre seized this political interest to embrace more inclusive practices, as envisioned by the European Commission (EC) 6th priority *New push for European democracy*.

The JRC has a thirty-year history of citizens' engagement, also learning from bottom-up initiatives. The launch of the Competence Centre builds on this experience to mainstream participatory and deliberative practices across all phases of the EC’s policy cycle. The Centre is committed to developing an internal culture to engage citizens from the start in policy-making, leading other institutions by example. To achieve these goals, the work is shaped around five pillars: guidance; capacity building; knowledge repository; research and innovation; and networking. The Competence Centre provides the European Commission with updated information on the state of the art of participatory practices implemented by other entities. Moreover, it co-designs, pilots and eventually evaluates projects of the Commission services.

For instance, the Competence Centre carried out the study that led to the establishment of the CoFoE Digital Platform. Moreover, it promotes the annual Citizen Engagement Festival whose fourth edition will take place in October 2022. Furthermore, the Centre, in collaboration with the OECD, will organise a major capacity-building package on participatory and deliberative democracy practices.

**Ms Schweng** acknowledged the importance of citizens' engagement instruments and opened the floor for questions.

**Ms Surmatz** (European Foundation Centre) asked whether the goal of the Centre is to engage citizens or to also include dialogue with organised civil society.

**Ms Guimaraes Pereira** replied that the Centre focuses on engaging individuals through different purposefully organised processes.

**Ms Najmowicz** (European Civic Forum) asked how the work of the Centre relates to Article 11 of the Treaty of the European Union and the demands of organised civil society to implement it through the establishment of channels for structured civil dialogue. Moreover, she asked if there is an intention of engaging more with CSOs.

**Ms Guimaraes Pereira** pointed to the presence of channels for EU institutions to liaise with CSOs, highlighting again that the Centre often works in partnership with CSOs. In her opinion, participatory democracy is not substitutive, but complementary to the various forms of representative democracy.

**Ms Najmowicz** replied in the chat that the channels to engage with civil society at EU level exist, but do not allow for a structured and impactful civil dialogue. She proposed that the Centre also considers the participation of civil society and perhaps map such practices inside the Commission and other institutions to propose guidelines and improve practices.

**Mr Leyi** (Solidar) took the floor to ask how the Centre differentiates between participatory democracy and focus groups since, according to his experience in the Citizens Panels of the CoFoE, the difference is very small. This is a matter of concern because it can lead to the organisation of these consultations as an alternative to CSOs' involvement.

**Ms Guimaraes Pereira** explained that while focus groups usually last two and a half hours, the involvement of citizens in the CoFoE is a much longer process. The Conference is the first and biggest experiment of a Pan-European dialogue at this level: it has issues, but it can also be an opportunity for learning and improvement. She reiterated that the CoFoE offers the possibility to engage citizens in forms other than through representativeness, in a process of complementing ongoing democratic processes that is already widespread at local level.

**Ms Xhomaqi** said she was pleased with the presentation. In her opinion, CSOs must remain vigilant about how the contribution of citizens to the Platform and the Panels is followed up by legislators. Moreover, while it is true that participatory democracy and the work of organised civil society are complementary, it is also important to link them effectively, instead of seeing them as separate.

* **Presentation on "*Levelling the EU Participatory Playing Field: A Legal and Policy Analysis of the Commission's Public Consultations in Light of the Principle of Political Equality*" by Alberto Alemanno, Jean Monnet professor of EU Law**

**Mr Alemanno** took the floor to share his work on the participatory environment at European level, focusing on the Public Consultations held by the European Commission. The EU has a long tradition of consulting interested parties when formulating its policies, since the time of the European Coal and Steel Community, but this process was institutionalised only with the Lisbon Treaty. Historically, EU citizens have been marginalised in EU decision-making, which was steered only by the institutions, Member States and organised groups. However, reforms led to the establishment of the so-called European participatory tool-box, which includes the right of petition, public consultation, the European Ombudsman, freedom of information and the right to request documents, and the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI).

The main issue with these tools is the fact that they are not very well known by the public and, as a result, they are underused. Concerning mandatory public consultation, only a few jurisdictions systematically publish consultations for legislative and non-legislative initiatives. Moreover, the number of contributions to the consultation is usually quite low and it comes mainly from organisations, not individual citizens. Therefore, the problem is that the Commission still has unrestrained discretion regarding who, how and when to consult.

He saw this as problematic because, under Article 9 of the Treaty of the EU concerning the principle of political equality, EU institutions affirm to pay equal attention to all citizens in the exercise of EU activities. Mr Alemanno affirmed that the current participatory environment is not in full compliance with this provision. He then proposed a substantive interpretation of the article, requiring all the institutions to ensure that everyone will effectively be given equal opportunities of access to the policy process, proactively supporting all actors in their engagement in participatory practices. To do so, Mr Alemanno proposed five recommendations: establishing a legal framework for EU public participation; implementing political equality by design; diversifying consultations via embracing deliberative mechanisms; building the administration’s epistemic capacity; and finally, strengthening and diversifying quality oversight, perhaps involving the EESC in ensuring the follow-up to the consultation. He concluded his presentation by outlining some more radical ideas like: the equalisation of resources; the decentralisation of grant-making; the introduction of a registration or public consultation fee, whose profit would be then redistributed to organisations; the establishment of civic-time off; and the creation of a lobbying aid mechanism. These ideas could improve the participatory framework in the EU and create an enabling environment for public consultation.

**Ms Guimaraes Pereira** agreed in the chat that the main problems concern the available channels, which already favour representatives, including civil society organisations. The goal of participatory and deliberative democracy is to give a voice to people who do not have vested interests and who are most likely not affiliated with organisations. **Alexandrina Najmowicz** (European Civic Forum) replied that she found it quite dangerous to associate participation in CSOs to vested interests, since this image is often used in populist narratives.

**Ms Xhomaqi** said that this presentation provided CSOs with a lot of food for thought.

**Ms Schweng** said that the presentation confirmed some of the concerns of the LG members about civic participation.

**8. Any other business**

**Ms Civico** (European Volunteer Centre) and **Ms Aitken** (Volonteurope) took the floor to invite participants to the events organised by their organisations for the tenth anniversary of the year of volunteering on December 7.

**Ms Xhomaqi** thanked the participants and expressed her enthusiasm for the upcoming preparations of the Civil Society Days and the CoFoE in Strasbourg.

Since no other business was raised, **Ms Schweng** ended the meeting, thanking all the LG members, the secretariat of the Liaison Group and the interpreters.

Annex: Attendance list

**ANNEX**

**LIST OF PARTICIPANTS**

(in alphabetical order)

**Monday, 29 November 2021 at 14:00**

**LIST OF PARTICIPANTS**

(in alphabetical order)

**EESC members:**

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| **Mr** | **Alain COHEUR \*** | President of the INT section |
| **Mr** | **Pietro Francesco DE LOTTO \*** | President CCMI |
| **Ms****Mr****Mr** | **Louise GRABO****Cillian LOHAN\*****Stefano MALLIA** | **President SMO****VP for Communication****President Group I** |
| **Mr** | **Stefano PALMIERI \*** | **President of ECO section** |
| **Mr** | **Lech PILAWSKI \*** | **President of LMO** |
| **Mr** | **Lutz RIBBE \*** | **President of SDO** |
| **Mr** | **Peter SCHMIDT \*** | **President of the NAT section** |
| **Ms** | **Christa SCHWENG \*** | **President of the European Economic and Social Committee** |

**\* These members attend the meeting in person.**

**Members of civil society organisations remotely:**

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| Oonagh AITKEN | **Volonteurope** |
| **Veronica BARI** | **Federation of professional engineers** |
| **Elisa BRIGA** | European Federation for Intercultural Learning |
| **Gabriella CIVICO** | European Volunteer Centre |
| Petros FASSOULASAlva FINNMathilde DELABIE | European Movement International **Social Platform****CoopsEurope** |
| **Elizabeth GOSME** | **COFACE Families Europe** |
| **Flavio GRAZIAN** | **European Citizen Action Service** |
| **Davyth HICKS** | European Language Equality Network |
| **Renate HEINISCH** | European Parents' Association |
| Mikael LEYI | SOLIDAR |
| Henri LOURDELLE | FERPA |
| Fabiana MARAFFA | European Youth Forum |
| Victor MESEGUER | Social Economy Europe |
| **Bruno MONARCA** | JEUNE |
| **Alexandrina NAJMOWICZ** | European Civic Forum |
| Victor PETUYA | **European Parents' Association** |
| **Gabriele ROSANA** | **Culture Action Europe** |
| Annabel SEEBOHM | Standing Committee of European Doctors |
| **Hanna SURMATZ** | **European Foundation Centre** |
| **Enrico TORMEN** | **Eurochild** |
| **Nataša VISTRIČKA** | **International Union of Property Owners** |
| **Katy WIESE** | European Environmental Bureau |
| **Brikena XHOMAQI** | **Co-chair,** European Civil Society Platform on Lifelong Learning **LLLP** |

**Guest speakers:**

Alberto ALEMANNO, Jean Monnet professor of EU Law

Angela GUIMARAES PEREIRA, Joint Research Centre, European Commission

**EESC Members who sent their apologies:**

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| **Mr** | **Seámus BOLAND**  | President of Group III |
| **Mr** | **Dimitris DIMITRIADIS** | President of the REX section |
| **Mr** | **Oliver RÖPKE** | **President of Group II** |

**Members of Civil Society organisations who have sent their apologies**

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| --- | --- |
| Dirk JARRÉ | **EURAG** |
| Julie ROSENKILDE | SDG Watch Europe |

**European Commission:**

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| Tessa DUNLOP | JRC |
| Stijn VERLEYEN | JRC |

**EESC administration:**

Carola CHIUSI CSS unit, trainee

Anna DUMITRACHE Deputy Head of President's Cabinet

Michael HEASLIP CSS unit, assistant

Bernhard KNOBLACH INF unit, moderator

Catlin LHOEST Secretariat of EESC Diversity Group

Stefano MARTINELLI CSS unit, acting head of unit

Charlotte RIVE CSS unit, ECI

Karen SERAFINI CSS unit, LG