

## Civil dialogue for inclusive democracy

6 March | 11:15- 13:00



**Organised by:** Solidar, Social Platform, ECF, CSE & EESC Ad hoc Group on FRRL

### Report

SOLIDAR, Social Platform, Civil Society Europe and the European Civic Forum organised a workshop as part of the [EESC Civil Society Week](#) on 6 March. The workshop, titled ‘Civil dialogue for inclusive democracy’, was dedicated to highlighting the potential of civil dialogue for the health of our democracies and to reflecting on ways to fully realise this potential, which is enshrined in Art. 11 of the Treaty on European Union.

The two-hour long session was moderated by **Mikael Leyi**, SOLIDAR’s Secretary General, who highlighted the **timely nature of the exchange**, which came a few weeks after the adoption of the [EESC opinion on civil dialogue](#), drawn up following the Belgian Presidency’s request. He also noted that structured civil dialogue is needed by both civil society organisations (CSOs) and institutions, as the latter need to be able to identify the representative actors from civil society.

**Alexandrina Najmowicz**, Secretary General of the European Civic Forum and Board member of Civil Society Europe, made some opening remarks, in which she underlined that the political disengagement we are witnessing in Europe is the result of decision-makers’ inability to respond to their real needs. In addition, the increased **increased intolerance of diverging views’ is eroding the dialogue between civil society and authorities**, weakening democracy and exacerbating social injustice.

**Colette Solomon**, from the South African organisation Women on Farm Project presented a case study from her national context. She described how her grassroots organisation brought together multiple stakeholders, primarily women farmers and dwellers from marginalised communities, as well as trade unions and other CSOs, to call for a ban on pesticides that are already prohibited in the EU, but that are nonetheless sold by EU countries to South Africa. This advocacy campaign was

successful and led to the ban of such products. In this case study, Colette Solomon exemplified **the power of civil society to protect the rights of the most marginalised and foster democracy** – concrete proof of the need for an enabling space for civil society organisations and the creation of structural dialogue between CSOs and decision-makers.

Following this first national case study, a **panel discussion** took place. **Pietro Barbieri**, Vice-President of EESC Civil Society Organisations' Group, rapporteur of the opinion 'Strengthening civil dialogue and participatory democracy in the EU: a path forward', retraced the process that led to the adoption of the EESC opinion on civil dialogue, mentioning some of the obstacles encountered, which included the definition of civil society and the need to ensure that civil dialogue does not overlap with social dialogue. **Lucie Studničná**, President of the EESC Workers' Group, underlined the invaluable role of civil society in protecting the most vulnerable and defined civil dialogue as the backbone of our democracies. Furthermore, she stressed that it is important to clearly define **social and civil dialogue, as the two are not in competition**. **Laura de Bonfils** called for more structured civil dialogue in the EU. She underlined that this can be achieved by introducing an EU interinstitutional agreement on civil dialogue and a civil society strategy based on an enabling environment for CSOs, a protection mechanism for CSOs and human rights defenders and access to funding. She also provided examples of **good practices to improve the transparency and accessibility of civil dialogue** for CSOs, such as providing timely and clear information on how to engage in civil dialogue, beyond mere ad-hoc consultations. **Ingrid Bellander Todino**, Head of the Fundamental Rights Policy Unit at DG JUST, recognised that civil dialogue in the EU is present to a certain extent but that more should be done to **build a comprehensive structure**. She reiterated that social and civil dialogue are not mutually exclusive. **Vincent Vandersmissen**, Attaché at the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in the Directorate-General for European Affairs and Coordination, explained that the Belgian Presidency had requested an opinion on civil dialogue also with the intention of **making progress on the definition of civil society**, which is crucial to prevent it from being delegitimised.

The Q&A session focused on the need to capitalise on the current Belgian Presidency to advance the civil dialogue agenda. The Defence of Democracy Package was mentioned as a key file which, despite its weaknesses, should not be discredited according to Vincent Vandersmissen. Ingrid Bellander Todino specified that no new initiatives are planned at the end of this mandate, but that support for CSOs will still be given through funding.

Finally, **Tina Divjak** from the Slovenian CSO CNVOS, presented another case study on civil dialogue in Slovenia. In particular, she outlined how civil dialogue works in her country, introducing the role of **consultative bodies in which CSOs are also represented**, supporting the policy-making process on several issues in a structured manner.

In the closing remarks, **Gabriella Civico**, President of Civil Society Europe, recapped the salient points of the debate and concluded that bolder action is necessary to strengthen civil dialogue in the EU.

The key messages that emerged from our workshop and that will feed into the EESC recommendations for the next mandate are:

- **Civil dialogue is the backbone of representative democracy** and is essential to amplify the voice of the most vulnerable groups in our society and to give concrete responses to the diverse needs of the people in Europe. **More institutional recognition, support and involvement of organised civil society** is needed for it to fulfil its full potential and for Art. 11 TEU to finally become a reality.
- Civil dialogue does not mean having a third social partner to engage in social dialogue, but having a **parallel, equally important and structured process for representing the diversity of civil society in Europe**, contributing towards more fit-for-purpose public policies that leave no-one behind. The two processes are not mutually exclusive but rather mutually reinforcing.
- There is momentum towards the institutionalisation of civil dialogue and this must be seized in the next EU mandate. It is high time to do so. Concrete action such as a **civil society strategy** based on an enabling civic space, a mechanism to protect civil society, activists and defenders and adequate funding, as well as an **EU interinstitutional agreement**, are the way forward.