

A THRIVING CIVIC SPACE FOR UPHOLDING FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS IN THE EU: LOOKING FORWARD

SEMINAR 2: Empowerment

THEME: EMPOWERING CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS AND HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

CO-ORGANISERS: The European Commission and the European Economic and Social Committee

WHEN: 7 June 2023 from 9:30 to 15:30

WHERE: EESC premises (Rue Belliard 101, 1000 Brussels)

CONCEPT NOTE

A strong civic space is instrumental to strengthen the resilience of democracies. As recognised in the 2022 Annual report on the application of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights¹, civil society organisations and human rights defenders play a key role in protecting and promoting the EU values of fundamental rights, rule of law and democracy. They are crucial in the system of checks and balances as they act as watchdogs, drawing attention to threats to the rule of law, democracy and the conduct of free and fair elections, thereby contributing to making those in power accountable. They contribute to overcoming challenges our democracies are facing, including by combating disinformation.

Independent civil society organisations also play a role in channelling the voices of the underrepresented in ensuring that all groups can express their opinions and advocate for their interests, and empowering individuals to participate in matters of public interest by creating opportunities for meaningful public participation. Channels for the participation of civil society organisations exist in many Member States, under various forms: permanent and ad hoc consultation mechanisms, and economic and social councils (for civil and social dialogue). They complement the increasing use of citizens' panels and other deliberative democracy tools.

However, in the consultation conducted in support of the 2022 Charter report, more than half of the participating organisations (53%) reported obstacles in 'participation and cooperation with authorities'². The biggest challenges in this area were obstacles restricting their access to consultations and participation in decision-making (45%), as well as access to information and documents (42%). A significant number of organisations (30%) had encountered obstacles to civil dialogue more generally. According to FRA's findings, minorities and vulnerable groups are furthermore insufficiently represented in consultations³.

This seminar will discuss how civil society actors can further be empowered at the EU level in a meaningful way. It is organised in collaboration with the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), as the second in a series of three targeted seminars on maintaining an open civic space in the EU (the first seminar took place on 10 May 2023 and focused on protecting civil society actors and the third is foreseen for 19 June 2023).

Among the participants will be representatives from the Member States, CSOs and human rights defenders, international organisations, Commission representatives, and EESC Members.

¹ A thriving civic space for upholding fundamental rights in the EU. 2022 Annual Report on the Application of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, COM(2022) 716 final.

² 2022 Charter consultation of the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights ('FRA'): Question (K) Obstacles under 'Participation and cooperation with authorities'.

³ FRA, Protecting civic space in the EU (2021), p. 9.



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STRUCTURE

The event will be opened with a general scene setter.

The discussion will then be organised in two sessions. Session 1 will present best practices from the Member States to facilitate civil society actors' more efficient participation in policy-making. It will offer an opportunity for the participants to share best practices and suggestions and exchange on the measures which would be necessary to better ensure the effective democratic participation of civil society organisations and human rights defenders.

Session 2 will move the discussion on the level of the EU institutions. It will examine ways in which civil society actors' participation could be further supported at EU level.



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Moderator: The European Commission

08:45 – 09:30

Registration (morning coffee)

09:30 – 10:10

A strong and empowered European civil society – setting the scene

Welcome – **Oliver Röpke**, President of the European Economic and Social Committee

Civic engagement at the European Parliament – **Sergey Lagodinsky**, Member of the European Parliament

Effective participation of civil society actors in a thriving civic space – European Commission, DG Justice and Consumers – **Ingrid Bellander Todino**, Head of Unit for Fundamental Rights Policy, DG Justice and Consumers, European Commission

How to ensure civic participation and dialogue with civil society organisations – perspective of a civil society organisation – **Alexandrina Najmowicz**, Secretary General of the European Civic Forum, former Co-Chair of the Civil Society Convention on the Future of Europe

10:10 – 11:10

Session 1: Civic Engagement in the Member States: best practices

Enabling environment for an empowered civil society – **Deniz Devrim**, Policy Analyst, Observatory of Civic Space, Open Government and Civic Space Unit, OECD

Facilitating the participation of CSOs in democratic decision-making processes at the national level – perspective of a National Human Rights Institution – **Tatjana Vlašić**, Deputy Ombudswoman of Croatia

Civil society perspective – **Kristīne Zonberga**, Director of the Civic Alliance, Latvia

Open discussion



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11:10 – 11:20

Break

11:20 – 12:30

Session 2: Civic Engagement in EU-level decision-making

Civil society's and other and stakeholders' opportunities to contribute to EU policymaking – **Ima Gomez Lopez**, Policy Officer, Secretariat-General of the European Commission

Structured consultation with organised civil society through the EESC – **Ozlem Yildirim**, Vice President of the EESC Fundamental Rights and Rule of Law Group

Civil society participation at EU level: best practices and challenges – **Eszter Hartay**, Program Director, European Network for Not-for-Profit Law

Open discussion

12:30 – 13:30

Lunch

13:30 – 15:30

Extracting suggestions for further EU-level work

13:30 – 15:25

Harvesting of ideas – with all seminar participants to extract suggestions for further work at the EU level

15:25 – 15:30

Closing words – **Paul Soete**, President of the EESC Fundamental Rights and Rule of Law Group