



CIVIL DIALOGUE MEETING

8 June 2018

Minutes

The Civil Dialogue group is made of civil society organisations and meets regularly (at least once a year) in the framework of the **Europe for Citizens programme**. **46 organisations** attended this year's meeting, most of them being beneficiaries of an operating grant from the programme.

1. Introduction by Ms Paraskevi MICHOU, Director-General DG HOME

P. MICHOU welcomed the participants. She presented the context and the general principles of the Commission proposal for the new Rights and Values programme under the next Multiannual Framework Programme 2021-2027, which will be the successor of the Europe for Citizens programme. In the current political context and the migration crisis, this programme is more important than ever as a tool to bring citizens closer to the EU. Civil society organisations are called to play a very important part to make the link between the grass roots level and the EU policy making.

P. Michou underlined that the civil dialogue group is and remains of utmost importance in the current EU framework. Forces need to be joined and existing platforms strengthened to pass positive messages. It is not only a question of communication but there is also the need to act. In times of rising Euroscepticism and populism encouraging the dialogue with citizens on the value of the EU project is of utmost importance, in particular with a view to reaching younger generations. In the coming years we will need a strong programme that gives citizens the opportunity to fully participate in shaping the Union's future. The Commission has proposed a European Rights and Values programme regrouping current activities around the European values, rights and citizenship. This proposal is the result of an intensive streamlining exercise.

For P. Michou, this meeting is an excellent occasion to exchange on the future programme and for the Commission to listen to the civil society organisations on how, together, we can do more. Their feedback is then very much welcome. Maintaining a strong, independent and pluralistic civil society requires our joint efforts and the Commission welcomed the continued engagement of the organisations in the Civil Dialogue group.

The European Elections in 2019 are also an important issue at stake for shaping the European future. It is now time to prepare for this important event in a changing environment. It is extremely important to ensure the full involvement of the civil society organisations action in this area and to build on their individual experience.

Questions/Answers

- Referring to integration of migrants, **SOLIDAR** asked how EU values can be mainstreamed. **SOLIDAR** also referred to the issues of the criminalisation of civil society which makes difficult for civil society organisations to function as well as the protection of civil society and civic space in some EU countries. **ICLS** asked to make minorities able to dialogue with a language adequate to develop positive messages. **European Alternatives** considered that increasing the understanding of the EU would increase people appreciation and that

communication should focus not only on history but on EU achievements, which are much closer to citizens. **EUROCLIO** warned on the importance to have a critical approach and being self-critical.

P. MICHOU said that the new programme will develop synergies with other programmes, notably in the field of migration where integration issues are addressed by the migration fund and the structural funds. Values should be seen as a cross-cutting and mainstreamed. On criminality, she referred to the dedicated session on "How to maintain a strong civic space in Europe?" foreseen later on the agenda of the meeting. The Commission is ensuring its role of guardian of the Treaties. However, the real change should come from the Member States. Currently the way the Union is perceived by citizens is discouraging and we should make a common effort to inform them on the EU achievements. We need to be critical and failures should be recognised. National governments should also be more active in communicating positive messages about Europe.

2. The Europe for Citizens programme and the next multiannual financial framework , Mrs. Marta CYGAN; Director DG HOME A, Strategy and General Affairs

M. CYGAN presented the mid-term evaluation of the Europe for Citizens programme, highlighting the consultation process, the findings of the mid-term evaluation and the recommendations for improvements. The mid-term evaluation concluded that the objectives of the programme have been and remain relevant since the needs it was designed to address are still relevant.

The programme reaches out to a large number of citizens who without this programme would not have engaged with the European Union. At least 3.3 million citizens per year have been directly reached by the Europe for Citizens programme between 2014 and 2016 and about 4 million citizens were indirectly impacted by the programme. These figures illustrate that the programme has been effective at a relatively low cost. Aspects that have been identified for improvement relate in particular to the increase of the programme's visibility, the revision of the monitoring indicators and the strengthening of synergies with other relevant EU funding programmes and initiatives.

M. Cygan then presented the Commission proposal for a European Rights and Values programme, underlining the efforts of streamlining while preserving the unique characteristics and strengths of the current activities. Two programmes are merged which have many points in common: the Europe for Citizens programme and the Rights, Equality and Citizenship programme. Both programmes have a strong societal focus. Together, they will provide more European added-value and have a more forceful impact.

The support of and case made by civil society organisations has also been very important when discussing the future of the activities carried out under the Europe for Citizens programme in the next multiannual financial framework (MFF). She reassured the participants that the Commission proposal preserves the legacy and achievements of the Europe for Citizens programme.

The new programme will enhance opportunities and increase financial support for civil society, given the key role NGOs play in the promotion, safeguarding and awareness-raising for EU common values and in contributing to the effective enjoyment of rights under Union law. It is fully in line with the objectives of the resolution the European Parliament adopted on 18 April 2018 on supporting NGOs as multipliers and defenders of EU values.

With regard to the legal basis for the new programme, an important improvement is that Commission proposal provides for the ordinary legislative procedure. This means that the proposed regulation establishing the future programme will need to be adopted by the European Parliament and the Council on an equal footing.

On the funding amount, the new programme has a proposed budget allocation of EUR 947 million for seven years (EUR 642 million for the Rights and Values programme and EUR 305 million for the Justice programme). The Commission proposal foresees a budget of EUR 233 million for the strand "Citizens' engagement and participation" which corresponds to a budgetary increase.

The proposed "Citizens' engagement and participation strand" with two priorities reflecting the activities and specific objectives of the current Europe for Citizens programme will guarantee the continuation of all successful activities of the current programme, such as remembrance activities, town twinnings, civil society organisations, etc. in the current format (both operating grants and action grants).

She stressed that the Commission wants to continue the civil dialogue and have more frequent meetings. The next meeting will take place in the second half of 2018.

Questions/answers session

- **European Policy Center** said that the new programme should keep the same format as the Europe for Citizens programme which is quite simple. It also asked if civil society organisations should lobby to increase the volume of the proposed budget for the citizens' strand and how this budget will be distributed between the different actions (operating grants/town twinnings...). **European House** pointed out the discrepancy between the very positive results of the mid-term evaluation and the budget which remains insufficient. **Institut für Europäische Politik** welcomed the change in the legal basis and the slight budget increase. **EUROCLIO** questioned the implementation of synergies with the enlargement programme and how it will be carried out. Balkans should be included as there is a strong cooperation ongoing with this region especially in the area of remembrance. **SOLIDAR** insisted on flexibility and the need to support civil society organisations in the context of shrinking of public space. The title of the programme should also change to include rights and inequalities. **European Civic Forum** underlined the need to fund civil society organisations at grassroots in some countries and asked how the EU Values Fund will be implemented in the programme and if the programme will still be managed by the two DGs (HOME and JUST). **European Volunteer Center** asked if the European Citizens' Initiative will be still funded by the programme and as well individual mobility for active citizens. **LIFELONG LEARNING PLATFORM** recommended looking at synergies with Erasmus+ and asked for more information on EU networks versus local organisations. **Polish R. Schumann Foundation** transmitted the message from Polish NGOs not to restrict participation to big organisations but to encourage also small ones as they do not receive national public funding. **CEMR** questioned the distribution between actions within strand 2 and invited the participants to continue to lobby for increasing the programme budget. More meetings should be organised in the coming months.

-**M. CYGAN** highlighted that civil society organisations can, of course, mobilise for a budget increase and reminded that the European Parliament is now fully involved in the legislative procedure, and has asked for EUR 500 million. There will be several committees involved in the EP, in particular CULT (Culture and Education), LIBE (Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs) and BUDG (Budgets). On the distribution between activities, the programme will keep the same modalities as today. It was not possible for the Commission to organise a

meeting earlier due to the negotiation calendar and it would not be of much use since lobbying should be done outside this group. On synergies with enlargement programmes, complementarity is needed. The Commission is ready to listen to civil society organisations suggestions and to gather ideas on this point and to other issues related to the programme implementation. Support to civil society organisations is still provided and can be found in point (h) of the Annex to the proposal. On the management of the programme, there will be no change for the time being and DG HOME will remain responsible for the implementation of the current EFC. The future programme budget will also fund technical and organisational support for the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI). Mobility should be funded under the Erasmus + programme whose budget has been increased. On the next steps, M. Cygan informed the participants that the Commission is open to their proposals on the programme implementation and to organise meetings or exchange their views, including by participating in meetings hosted by the civil society organisations.

3. First Roundtable: How to mobilise for the next European elections?

Ms. Federica CASASSA, Advisor, Coordinator of the EE19 Implementation Team, European Parliament gave a presentation on the EE19 strategy / One year to go

Mr. Jens MESTER, Head of Unit DG COMM.A.2, Corporate services Interinstitutional relations, visual communication, framework contracts, European Commission

Ms Casassa presented the EP strategy for the next European elections in 2019 and the campaign platform, which serves as the basis of the ground game. One of the main objective is to drive individuals and organisations to the platform and to engage them personally in the campaign (from pledge to vote and sharing of content, to organisation of events, distribution of flyers, etc.), so to act as multipliers / campaigners themselves. The campaign platform was launched on 1st June 2018 at the EYE event in Strasbourg.

Participants found the EP strategy very innovative. In the course of the debate, some participants argued that strong abstainers should also be targeted and that arguments are often lacking. A special focus should be put on achievements. Materials should be provided in all EU languages. The EP representative reassured that a lot of "easy to read" information in the format of fact sheets is available and that ambassadors will have access to it. Some services in the EP and in the Commission are regularly dealing with fake news. It was also clear that it is not possible to give a political connotation to the platform and link it to those of political parties. Participants asked for the active involvement of MEPs at national level since there will be no EU lists. For that, it is important to establish a sufficient level of cooperation between MEPs and civil society organisations. Local authorities should also be actively involved and capacity building of national/local public officers should be raised. For that, info sessions should be organised not only in Brussels but also at local level. The issues of fake news and possible illegal funding of campaign and how to avoid it were also raised. Some practical suggestions on how to improve the access to the platform and its content i.e. by adding the question on why in case of "NO" vote, were provided. However, this will not be possible due to data protection limitations. The core of the debate focused on the importance not only to make people vote but also on what they are going to vote. In that context, efforts should be made on how to improve the image of the European Union.

Mr Mester gave an overview of the activities undertaken by the Commission in view of the 2019 European elections. He referred to the 2016 Bratislava roadmap in which leaders committed to improve communication with citizens and recalled the political milestones until 2019. He stressed that the European elections will take place just shortly after the summit in Sibiu, Romania, on 9 May 2019 where leaders are expected to re-found the European Union

at 27 and to renew the commitment to an EU that delivers on the issues that really matter to people. In communication terms it will be important to underline that the elections will give citizens a say on their own and Europe's future in this context. He reminded of the institutional package the Commission has adopted on 14 February 2018 to improve the efficiency and legitimacy of the EU. He also informed that DG COMM is implementing a number of corporate campaigns and actions on the future of Europe (citizens dialogue, citizens on-line consultation, and is cooperating closely with the European Parliament. More information: web page on the future of Europe: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/future-europe_en. EU-branded stories and materials from the corporate campaigns: https://europa.eu/investeu/home_en and <https://europa.eu/euandme/en/>.

The Commission invited participants to help raise awareness about the elections and the EU benefits and citizens' electoral rights by making best possible use of the available materials and channels. It also suggested to receive feedback on the activities of the participants in view of the European elections at the next meeting.

4. Second Roundtable: How to maintain a strong civic space in Europe?

Mr. Pierluigi BROMBO, Head of Unit, Relations with Organised Civil Society and Forward Studies, European Economic and Social Committee gave a presentation on the EESC contribution to a strong civic space in Europe. In underlining the EESC engagement for it, he particularly pointed out 3 opinions of the EESC: on rule of law and Fundamental Rights, on financing civil society organisations by the EU and on the Union budget and the rule of law (09/2018). The Committee, notably through the Liaison Group with EU civil society organisations, is ensuring and promoting the vertical dialogue between civil society organisations and EU institutions (art. 11.2 TUE), being the only institutional access point to EU institutions, and the horizontal dialogue (art. 11.1 TUE) providing civil society organisations a forum for debate and dialogue.

Some questions for debate were launched, namely: What are the main challenges civil society organisations are facing today? What are the actions undertaken by civil society organisations and how can they demonstrate their added value? What cooperation between civil society organisations could be useful to maintain a strong civic space?

Some participants considered that shrinking of public space not only concerns EESC group 3 (called "Diversity Europe" and representing civil society organisations) and asked if this should not also be an important concern for groups 1 and 2 (employers and trade unions). The EESC representative confirmed that freedom of association and organisation as other fundamental rights are interlinked and therefore of interest to the whole EESC, as for example, the right of strike. It was stressed the need for the EESC to continue to work on the successor of the Europe for Citizens programme. On the European elections, it was requested that the Committee feeds the work of civil society organisations by providing good arguments and studies to defend the European added value. The EESC representative confirmed the willingness of the EESC to cooperate with civil society along these lines. According to **ALDA**, EU target should not be the Erasmus generation but not-mobile people who represent 90% of the EU citizens. EU must provide social arguments (social progress, food security, protected social labour market) to civil society organisations that need to have a toolbox to tell citizens exactly what means added value for Europe. Some participants invited the Commission to take action in the area of education to raise awareness of the EU impact. In history text books there is not much about EU as it comes at the end of the curriculum. This lack of knowledge on EU history should be tackled by the future programme.

Participants stated that it is very hard to get resources for their activities and the current trend of shrinking public space in their countries (e.g. Latvia) is becoming an obstacle. A reflection should be made on civil society organisations funding in the perspective to become self-sustainable. In this context, civil society organisations should discuss between them on funding opportunities as well as on the possibility to have a good funding scheme to allow them to work together if national funding will not be ensured anymore

5. Wrap-up and closing remarks

M. CYGAN thanked the participants for the interesting meeting and the good exchanges. The next meeting will take place in the second half of 2018.