

## Civil Dialogue in the EU – What’s next?

### *Lessons Learnt from the Conference on the Future of Europe and Suggestions to Strengthen Future Civil Dialogue*

Civil Society Europe participated in the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) through the Civil Society Convention on the Conference on the Future of Europe (CSOCOFE), a flagship project that gathered over 80 pan-European civil society organisations (CSOs). The Civil Society Convention developed 200+ recommendations from the ground up through various thematic clusters, which included over 100 experts and practitioners from 40 different organisations, as well as surveys and crowdsourcing processes involving over 2,000 national civil society organisations.

This is a preliminary evaluation of the Conference from our perspective as CSOs who participated in the CoFoE through the Civil Society Convention. Our intention is to contribute to the learning from this unique participatory democracy experience. We identify steps that need to be taken in the future to enable a more structured, open, transparent, and constructive dialogue between civil society, including CSOs and individual citizens, and EU institutions.

Our remarks are not meant to criticise the work of individuals, especially of those in the EU institutions and the Conference’s Common Secretariat who, like us, have tirelessly worked during evenings and weekends to make the Conference successful in a context marked by the COVID-19 pandemic and then also by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

This paper also serves as a preliminary evaluation of the European Commission’s post-CoFoE proposals regarding European democracy, values and rights, the rule of law, and civil dialogue.

#### *The role of civil society within the Conference*

From the very start of the CoFoE process, the involvement of civil society was limited, as civil society organisations (CSOs) were considered as multipliers of an initiative directed at citizens, which had a strong communication component. As a result, civil society was involved in the definition of the Conference’s objectives, methodology and governance structure to a very limited extent.

The Joint Declaration establishing the CoFoE process allocated merely a mostly promotional role to civil society. CSOs were expected to publicise the Conference, notably through their own events, and encourage citizens to contribute content to the Multilingual Digital Platform. Apart from a grant from the European Parliament, no funding was foreseen for this, and most CSOs who contributed to the CoFoE process, organised events and/or actively participated in the CoFoE Plenary and its Working Groups did so by using their own funding.

No specific role was foreseen for civil society in the Conference’s governance, nor in terms of facilitation or input in the Citizens’ Panels. Only during the last stage of decision, as a follow-up to civil society

advocacy, were CSOs included in the Conference's Plenary, while Social Partners were already included in the Plenary and also as observers in the Conference's Executive Board. European civil society networks were excluded from the Executive Board.

**Civil society organisations should be involved in the design of similar future exercises' objectives and methodology, and in the (design of) the CoFoE's follow-up.**

### *Overall functioning of the Conference*

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Together, the citizens and other different stakeholders participating in the CoFoE developed and adopted 49 proposals, containing hundreds of measures, on nine topics, including European democracy, values and rights, and the rule of law. The proposals, addressed to the European Parliament (EP), the Council of the EU and the European Commission (EC), were the result of months of hard work and extensive deliberations within the [Conference's four European Citizens' Panels, the six National Citizens' Panels, the Multilingual Digital Platform, the many national and local events organised across the EU, and the Plenary and its nine Working Groups \(WGs\)](#). The CoFoE's final proposals represent a historic milestone in the history of European institutions.

Nonetheless, we noticed some issues in the Conference's overall functioning. From the beginning, the organisation of the European Citizens' Panels meetings, the Multilingual Digital Platform, the Plenary and its WGs lacked a clear plan and structure. The breakout of the COVID-19 pandemic also created additional challenges, including a later start date of the CoFoE. Throughout the entire Conference, the Common Secretariat worked tirelessly and demonstrated a great commitment to the process' success, despite the constant delays caused by difficult discussions among the three institutions. Despite these challenges, EU institutions did not increase the human resources for the CoFoE, meaning the Conference's Common Secretariat was constantly under pressure and overworked. The Common Secretariat was clearly understaffed and until the end of the CoFoE, invitations, agendas and background documents were constantly sent very late. Even meeting dates were often shared at the last minute. Receiving invitations to the Plenary meetings in Strasbourg only days ahead of meetings made it very challenging to find cost-effective travel opportunities and sometimes rendered participation impossible altogether. It was difficult to communicate with the three EU institutions throughout the CoFoE. In fact, letters sent by the Civil Society Convention to the Executive Board were never answered in writing.

The Executive Board also did not meet from mid-December 2021 to early April 2022, and this also appears to have impacted negatively on the timely development of the processes and procedures.

### *The Multilingual Digital Platform*

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One aspect that made the CoFoE so unique was the Multilingual Digital Platform, a website available in the 24 official EU languages. On this website, citizens could submit ideas on any of the nine topics discussed within the Conference, as well as any other topic. Citizens could also debate with each other

by commenting on other citizens' ideas, endorse ideas, as well as use the platform to organise, advertise and report on events.

Still, we identified several flaws. First of all the CoFoE Platform as the Have your Say Platform used for consultations requires to acquire an EU login, which involves a quite cumbersome and not user-friendly process which has discouraged a number of potential contributors. The Multilingual Digital Platform's lack of focus and structure, paired with the lack of guidance for CoFoE participants, was problematic and discouraged the submission of contributions. Moreover, it resulted in a somewhat chaotic submission of ideas of very different rank — some ideas were very specific and others very general. It was not clear how the ideas were weighted and classified almost till the end of the CoFoE. The Conference's final report explains that the qualitative analysis of the contributions is the result of a manual textual analysis and clustering of the ideas proposed online and discussed during events. This analysis led to the publication of several reports, with different sections per topic. It was performed by a research team, aided by a computer-assisted clustering tool made available by the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission. This should all have been made clear and communicated at the very beginning of the CoFoE process.

There is also the need to reflect on whether this was the best way to prioritise contributions because since the prioritisation was done on the basis of repetition of ideas, the question of who contributed to the Digital Platform becomes very important as the contributors shaped the agenda of the citizens' panels discussions and had an impact on the final CoFoE recommendations. Despite the disclaimer in the final report of the CoFoE (May 2022) that the socio-demographic data presented provides only a limited view, the gender imbalance among the contributors was clear from early on. [Indeed, a report published by Kantar Public and covering the period of April 2021 to February 2022](#) found that 49.1% of contributors identified themselves as men and 16.1% as women, while 33.9% did not indicate their gender and 0.9% identified as non-binary. A targeted communication and engagement strategy should have been implemented to remedy this situation and incite women to contribute, as well as people with lower levels of education and other underrepresented demographic groups.

Civil society organisations did not have their own space on the Digital Platform, therefore they had to follow the citizens' path to submit contributions. Any future activities on the Digital Platform or a similar website need to provide a dedicated space for civil society to contribute by registering as organisations. Such a step is essential to ensure the transparency of the contributions.

Moreover, there were accessibility problems for persons with disabilities. A [technical assessment ordered by the European Disability Forum](#) (a civil society organisation and member of the Civil Society Convention for the CoFoE) describes all the issues and provides recommendations to resolve these accessibility issues.

Overall, the proposals from the Digital Platform were not adequately represented in the Conference conclusions and as explained above, the methodology used to analyse them and to include them in the CoFoE's agenda was opaque. Although an interesting innovation, the platform was in the end more a communication exercise than a truly participatory process.

**A revised platform should guarantee accessibility to all, diversity of contributions, and meaningful analysis and inclusion of the contributions into the debate.**

## *Organisation of the European Citizens' Panels*

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Another unique feature of the CoFoE was the four European Citizens' Panels. We strongly supported and continue to support this initiative, as it brought together hundreds of EU citizens with different backgrounds and experiences. This is essential to strengthen deliberative democracy at the EU level. We commend and thank the citizens involved for their priceless contributions and dedication to the CoFoE process.

Unfortunately, civil society organisations, many of which are not only made up of citizens but also represent many citizens, were not assigned a role in the citizens' panels. A few representatives were invited on an individual basis to contribute as experts in some of the panels, thanks to the proactive proposal of experts and observers from civil society organisations. However, the Common Secretariat did not take up the numerous suggestions to have civil society experts. There was also the idea that citizens should be preserved from being influenced. However, institutional experts played an influential role in the citizens' panels and some of the experts involved in the first phases, including, for example, members of the EU agency Frontex, cannot be considered as neutral.

Generally speaking, the experts involved in the panels lacked diversity in many ways. Most of them were academics or representatives of think tanks or political institutions, with very few exceptions to this rule. There was a gender imbalance among the official experts (listed on the CoFoE website). The lack of civil society experts resulted in limited feedback on the impact of EU policies and legislation on the ground.

Observers were invited to each of the citizens' panels very late, which made it very difficult for them to plan their participation in both financial and logistical terms. Also, civil society expertise was often mediated by the EU institutions or limited to an observer role.

For all these reasons, citizens in the panels were not provided with a broad enough spectrum of expertise and opinion. They were also not fully informed about ongoing policy and legislative developments at the EU level, and about challenges and issues at stake in the different areas. This led to the development of recommendations that were less impactful than what they could have been. It would have been more effective to have included civil society and other experts able to present different points of view and thus present a broader perspective to citizens.

The first meetings of the citizens' panels lacked focus and organisation. Issues included late delivery of informative materials for each session and ineffective communication concerning the content and logistical details, as well as incorrect or even missing simultaneous interpretation into different languages. However, the process improved over time.

Citizens' panels were composed of people chosen through a semi-randomised mechanism, based on the coordination of 27 national polling agencies. Diversity of age, gender, geographic origin (both in terms of nationality and urban/rural setting), socio-economic status and education were reflected in the final composition, according to the Common Secretariat. However, there has been no assessment or sufficient information shared about the actual diversity of the selected participants, for instance, with regard to socio-economic status or education level and technical background. More efforts should have been made to ensure that citizens' panels are wholly representative of the EU's diversity, for instance, by expanding the diversity criteria to include disabilities, racialised groups and ethnic and religious minorities, including Roma and Sinti, and sexual orientation. Using such an expanded diversity criterion, another option would be to implement quotas that go beyond the CoFoE requirement to have at least one female and one male citizen per Member State in the European Citizens' Panels.

There is also the question of how to include residents and non-EU nationals living in the EU, as well as citizens of candidate countries. The status of participation of candidate countries changed during the unfolding of the Conference, which added to the confusion.

It would have been important to conduct an anonymous and voluntary survey amongst CoFoE participants to assess the diversity of the citizens' panels. Such an initiative could be done in the follow-up of the CoFoE.

#### **We recommend:**

- . **Including civil society from the beginning in the preparation of the future citizens' panels and/or assemblies;**
- . **Reworking the selection of participants so as to ensure more diverse citizens' panels and/or assemblies;**
- . **Reviewing the system to choose experts, including by adding representatives of civil society organisations to the expert pool.**
- . **Ensure that costs of all participants are covered as well as personal assistants for persons with disabilities so as to ensure that all are on an equal basis.**
- . **Plan ahead needs and foresee sufficient staff.**

#### ***The Plenary and Working Groups (WGs)***

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Civil society organisations (CSOs) had a very limited number of representatives in the Conference Plenary compared to the number of representatives of EU institutions, national parliaments and EU advisory bodies. It was very difficult to be visible and also to have an impact. An additional challenge was the fact that civil society had only eight seats while there were nine Working Groups (WGs). The lack of flexibility in the CoFoE rules and their implementation prevented civil society Plenary members from following more than one WG. Moreover, civil society had more limited speaking time in the Plenary as compared with other represented groups because of our limited seats

Although the CSOCOfoE was able to nominate its own five representatives within the CoFoE's civil society component, the three other places were assigned to the European Movement International (EMI). This organisation includes not only CSOs, but also social partners and political groups (including MEPs in the EMI's leadership) which is significant because political groups and social partners already had seats assigned through the Conference's other components. The Common Secretariat's lack of foresight on this matter led to a challenging cooperation situation with Civil Society Convention and EMI competing for places in the WGs or for speaking time in Plenary. Despite the CSOCOfoE's best efforts to organise coordinated meetings and exchange information, there was very limited cooperation on content and input into the WGs. This weakened the impact of the overall civil society component and the latter's possibility to positively influence the Conference's outcomes.

In the last phase of the Conference, in an attempt to make discussions in Plenary more dynamic, the Common Secretariat changed the rules and created an artificial distinction between institutional and non-institutional components. These changes obliged civil society to coordinate with social partners and EU advisory bodies for speaking time and the use of blue cards in Plenary, which was a very time-consuming exercise and eventually constrained the representation of all actors involved. This had a particularly heavy consequence for civil society representatives who became even less visible and wrongly assimilated to quasi-institutional bodies.

Accessibility for persons with disabilities was not mainstreamed throughout the CoFoE. For instance, personal assistants' costs for civil society representatives were not covered.

It was complicated to book meeting rooms for the civil society component and for the meetings to appear in the official calendar of meetings. As a result, other components, including the citizens, were not as aware as they could and should have been that CSOs were present and active within the CoFoE unless we had the opportunity to liaise directly with them.

Also, since discussions in the Plenary and WGs lacked focus and organisation until the last phase of the CoFoE process – when the citizens' panels' recommendations were ready – civil society's contribution was limited in the first phase of the Conference. Despite several requests, the CSOCOfoE was never allowed to present its recommendations in the Plenary. The CSOCOfoE's final event in March 2022 did however raise awareness about its thematic clusters' comprehensive and ambitious recommendations. Several WG chairs did allow a presentation of the CSOCOfoE's recommendations during the Plenary's WG meetings but there was no uniform approach and was only enabled at the discretion of each Chair.

One additional challenge, which was mentioned at the start of this paper, was the lack of funding for civil society's participation in the CoFoE and the uncertainty linked to the dates of the meetings, the latter of which implied higher costs than would have been the case with more timely notifications and the possibility for advance bookings. The civil society component was the only component, together with the social partners, which did not receive any funding or travel reimbursement for participation. Therefore, CSOs' engagement in the Conference was the result of their own investment in terms of time and resources.

Furthermore, there were limited interactions with the citizens, as they had an extremely busy schedule and were only encouraged to meet with EU institution representatives. The set-up of the CoFoE did not allow for the creation of an atmosphere of openness and exchange between the different components. All of the citizens' meetings, contrary to the meetings of other components, were closed to other components.

On a positive side, the cooperation that the CSOCofOE initiated with trade unions for the civil society component led to the organisation of common side-meetings during plenaries which gave visibility to CSOs' input, work and role in the Conference. These meetings also involved Groups II and III of the European Economic and Social Committee.

With regard to the Plenary WGs, they all achieved a common text, and some worked particularly well. However, the first meeting of the nine different WGs did not include a dedicated time for participants to familiarise themselves with the WGs, their members and objectives. As a result, participants in the WGs often did not know who was who and who represented which constituency (other than the citizens who knew each other from the National Citizens' Panels stage). This did not help foster an open and cooperative working environment.

Moreover, the physical set-up of the WGs in EP Committee meeting rooms reflected a hierarchical set-up, with a Chair and the latter's collaborators sitting on a podium and the WG's participants across from them in amphitheatre-style rows. As a result, participants could not look at each other while talking; instead, they had to face their microphone and the Chair. Not only is such a set-up unfit to foster fruitful exchanges and debate, but it is also intimidating for participants who have no public speaking experience. Only at a later stage were the chairs of the WGs given more precise guidelines, but the latter's effectiveness depended mostly on each Chair's ability to build consensus and make the work move forward.

In total, more than thirty proposals put forward by the CSOCofOE have been integrated in the final CoFoE recommendations, including proposals on European democracy, climate change and the environment, digital transformation, a stronger economy, social justice and jobs, and other key themes.

#### **Our recommendations:**

- . **Future similar participatory and deliberative democracy exercises should include a methodology to involve citizens and/or civil society on an equal basis with decision-makers, favouring dialogue rather than the expression of own standpoints;**
- . **A facilitator, rather than a Chair, should lead the debates, so as to not put the Chair in a position of defending their own institution;**
- . **Equal opportunities and accessibility for persons with disabilities need to be mainstreamed;**
- . **A future Convention to revise the EU Treaties should give a meaningful place and role to civil society.**

### *Citizens' involvement*

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The Joint Declaration on the CoFoE stated that the Conference was meant to be “*a citizens-focused, bottom-up exercise for Europeans to have their say on what they expect from the European Union [and to give them] a greater role in shaping the Union's future policies and ambitions, improving its resilience.*”

Taking into account all the limitations in the organisation and facilitation of the citizens' panels, the latter led to concrete recommendations that contain a number of positive proposals which are in line with civil society's own recommendations.

Despite all the difficulties mentioned in previous sections, the citizens' recommendations were mostly reinforced by the discussions in the Plenary and its WGs and were included in the final CoFoE proposals.

Citizens were also coached and supported during the last phase of the Conference in order to be able to defend and argue in favour of their proposals.

Questions remain, however, on the follow-up on these recommendations since the views of the European Parliament, the European Commission and EU Member States diverge.

### *What's next*

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What has been considered as a ground-breaking exercise, with the involvement of citizens in key EU discussions, needs to be reviewed and assessed thoroughly in order to learn from the CoFoE process and improve future deliberative formats in the EU context.

EU institutions and Member States need to clearly and transparently define the objectives and methodology of the follow-up of the CoFoE, as well as how the follow-up will be regularly monitored, in order to guarantee a comprehensive and effective implementation of the final CoFoE recommendations. CSOs need to be involved in the definition of the follow-up and the monitoring process from the start, just as they need to be involved in the follow-up and monitoring processes themselves. This will help ensure that the follow-up of the CoFoE is well-structured, effective and accessible to all, including persons with disabilities.

In addition, the follow-up of the CoFoE requires adequate resources at the disposal of both EU institutions and civil society organisations.

The President of the European Commission (EC) has announced the establishment of permanent citizens' panels, which correspond to the permanent European Citizens' Assemblies that are included among the final CoFoE recommendations. The EC's 2023 work programme states that [“\[the\] new generation of citizens' panels will deliberate on next year's initiatives on food waste, learning mobility and virtual worlds.”](#) It is essential for civil society organisations (CSOs) and representative associations of citizens to be involved in these panels in terms of support, expertise and participation. Many CSOs

also have experience in the facilitation and organisation of such panels. Furthermore, citizens participating in the panels should have access to experts not just from institutions or agencies and academics, but also from the field, such as NGOs.

The conference conclusions have called for a strong and better involvement of civil society in the decision-making process. The process should be underpinned by an overall strategy for the involvement of citizens and their representative organisations. Such a strategy should include an array of measures that facilitate and promote civil dialogue, for instance, participatory budgets and crowdsourcing legislation as well as deliberative democracy. .

EU institutions and Member States need to conduct, as a follow-up, a thorough dialogue with CSOs on the EU's future. In parallel and importantly, EU institutions and Member States should conclude an inter-institutional agreement on EU civil dialogue to implement [Article 11 of the Lisbon Treaty](#); such an agreement has also been called for by the European Parliament (EP) this year in a resolution.

Moreover, if the European Council agrees by simple majority to convene a Convention for the revision of the EU Treaties, CSOs should be included as active participants and not only be invited as observers to the Convention (as proposed by the EP in its resolution on 9 June 2022). . A revision of the Treaties should include discussions on how to strengthen both the role of civil society and the civil dialogue with EU institutions.

#### **We recommend:**

- . **The adoption of a roadmap to strengthen participatory and deliberative democracy that includes:**
  - **Consultation of civil society and citizens for the preparation of the upcoming citizens' panels, methodology, expected outcomes;**
  - **Review in cooperation with civil society representing/ engaging with citizens of the review of the mechanisms for structured civil dialogue within the different EU institutions;**
  - **Development of tools for participation such as crowdsourcing legislation and participatory budgeting or the definition of participatory lists of civil society organisations;**
  - **Preparation of a European communication to be debated at The European Parliament and Council;**
  - **We call for a Convention for the revision of the EU Treaties, to strengthen European competences, overcome the national veto and allow the EU to respond quickly and effectively enough to citizens' requests and needs. This process should be open, participative and it must include civil society organisations.**

### *Follow-up of the initiatives proposed by the EC so far*

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As a first step in its follow-up of the CoFoE, the European Commission (EC) published a Communication on 17 June 2022 which includes in its [annex](#) a review of the Conference proposals and analyses based on the EC's ongoing or future work. Then, during her State of the Union address on 14 September, EC President Ursula von der Leyen announced [several initiatives that “directly follow up on or indirectly contribute to a \[CoFoE\] proposal”](#), including a defence of democracy package. Von der Leyen also stated that “[she believes] the moment has arrived for [a European Convention](#)”, although this proposal was not included in the [letter of intent](#) that she sent to the European Parliament and the Czech Presidency of the Council of the EU. More recently, on 18 October, the EC adopted its [2023 work programme](#).

This section provides preliminary comments on some of the EC's proposals that are included in the aforementioned annex, the letter of intent and the official 2023 work programme, especially as regards civil dialogue. The comments draw from the [Civil Society Convention's recommendations](#) and identify steps that need to be taken to implement the final CoFoE proposals and to go beyond them where necessary, especially with regard to enabling a more structured, open and transparent civil dialogue.

Although there are some promising steps, the EC has proposed insufficiently ambitious initiatives on civil society and civic space. . We believe that the CoFoE proposals often cover a much wider scope and require EU institutions to have a longer-term approach than the current plans suggest. An open debate should take place with the three EU institutions, EU advisory bodies, social partners and civil society on the follow-up of the CoFoE recommendations in order to improve the potential results.

### *European democracy*

In its Communication on 17 June, the EC stated that it also intends to table proposals on “Organising smaller targeted deliberative or co-creation/co-design processes, run on a smaller scale, to address specific policy issues more cost-effectively and in a timelier way.” These proposals would “ensure youth involvement in policy-making” through youth participation.

In its communication, the EC adds that it will consider new areas of action, such as helping create deliberative and decentralised citizens' dialogues, developing a European Charter for Citizens' Participation, and allowing citizens' observers to closely follow the EU decision-making process to make the latter more transparent. Another potential area of action could be “Making European citizenship more tangible to citizens, including by reinforcing the rights attached to it and by providing reliable and easily accessible information about it.”

These new initiatives are welcome, but only address part of the CoFoE conclusions. The Conference conclusions called for stronger involvement of organised civil society (as well as social partners) in the EU decision-making process, so as to “utilise the link between decision-makers and citizens which civil society organisations constitute”.

Also, the CoFoE called for concrete actions to ensure transparency of decision-making such as guaranteeing broader access to documents and web streaming of the meeting of the Council just as the European Parliament are mainstreamed. This would mean for instance web streaming of the preparatory working groups of the Council or at least access to full minutes and documents with the positions of the national delegations.

The Civil Society Convention for the Conference on the Future of Europe had also called for ensuring transparency of the trilogues in line also with the [Ombudsman strategic enquiry conclusions](#) and the [European Court of Justice judgement](#) of 2018, so as to make sure that all stages of the legislative process are transparent.

Access to documents is a key precondition for participation for allowing civil society and citizens to hold institutions accountable. In this context, several of the country specific recommendations of the rule of law report for 2022 stress the need to ensure compliance with the [European Standards on access to documents](#). These standards should be fully applicable also to European institutions, which should ensure that limitations to such access are not used in a disproportionate way.

Furthermore, the conference conclusions underlines that civil society is crucial for the democratic life of the European Union and call for “ensuring proper civil (and social) dialogue mechanism and processes at every step of the EU decision making process, from impact assessment to policy design and implementation” and “reform the way the European Union works by better involving (social partners) and organised civil society” by ensuring “participatory democracy activities” such as “structured dialogue with civil society organisations” next to “Citizens’ panels”.

Although the better regulation process does include guidelines and steps for consultation of civil society and citizens, there are no concrete guidelines for engaging in dialogue with civil society within the decision-making process. There are a number of good practices within the European Commission, the European Parliament and to a more limited extent in the Council of the EU that would need to be streamlined and upscaled.

The inclusiveness of participatory processes is also an issue to be further addressed so that the diversity of the EU population can be reached adequately and accessibility for persons with disabilities is ensured. This also includes a specific analysis of the impact of policies on women and on disadvantaged or discriminated persons.

The Conference conclusions also insist on the need to provide enhanced structural support to civil society, and in particular youth organisations. Such support should include adequate funding but also capacity building to enable civil society organisations to participate in decision making, but also in the monitoring the implementation of EU legislation, and the use of funds, and in holding institutions accountable.

The Conference calls for an additional pillar dedicated to civil society to be added within the European Democracy Action Plan to be reviewed in 2023, as well as the adoption of a civil society strategy. The

EC's 2023 work programme includes a Defence of Democracy Package "to deepen the action under the European Democracy Action Plan to promote free and fair elections, to step up the fight against disinformation and to support media freedom and pluralism, **including by developing civic space and citizen participation to bolster democratic resilience from within.**"

The Defence of Democracy package, a welcome new initiative, should include a pillar on building a resilient democracy and a strong and vibrant space for civil society. Civil Society Europe, together with Philea, have developed a [list of concrete proposals](#) centred around five key areas that could be part of such a pillar:

1. *Protection of civil society, democracy, and the rule of law*
  - . Including by **expanding the mandate of the EC Vice-Presidents Jourová and Šuica, as well as Commissioner Reynders**, to ensure a more structured civil dialogue between EU institutions and civil society organisations (CSOs);
2. *Empowering civil society to act as a watchdog*
  - . Including by **making the EC ensure that EU policies across all sectors support a thriving civic space**;
3. *Democratic engagement, participation, and dialogue*
  - . Including by **organising public consultations and dialogue with CSOs that would complement direct participation exercises like citizens' assemblies** and town hall meetings with citizens,
  - . **Formalising and structuring the involvement of CSOs on both sectoral policy issues and key horizontal issues at the EU level**, and
  - . **Developing guidelines and consolidated practices for EU institutions**, based on advice from the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights, **regarding dialogue with CSOs** that would complete the EC's Communication on Better Regulation;
4. *Promotion of democratic education*
  - . Including by **investing in and mainstreaming quality citizenship education**;
5. *Safeguarding elections & tackling disinformation*
  - . Including by **ensuring equality, inclusiveness, representativity and transparency within the framework of elections**.

**We recommend:**

- . **Guaranteeing broader access to documents of EU institutions in line with European Standards**;
- . **Ensure public web streaming of preparatory council works and complete minutes with the position of individual Member States**;
- . **Ensure access to the different steps of the legislative decision-making process including trilogues**;
- . **The conclusion of an inter-institutional agreement on EU civil dialogue for the implementation of Article 11 of the EU Treaties, in order to harmonise civil dialogue**

- standards, procedures and mechanisms across EU institutions and Member States, and across sectoral and transversal dialogue;
- . Adoption of Guidelines addressed to EU institutions for engaging in dialogue with civil society within the decision-making process;
  - . The development of eligibility criteria for civil society organisations participating in the civil dialogue that guarantee equality, diversity, inclusiveness, legitimacy and representativeness, including by enabling the participation of civil society organisations from non-EU countries that are impacted by European policies;
  - . Trainings and tools for ensuring the inclusiveness and accessibility of the decision-making process;
  - . Capacity building of civil society organisations to participate in monitoring processes including for the use of EU funds;
  - . The adoption of a civil society strategy;
  - . A pillar on building a resilient democracy and a strong and vibrant space for civil society within the upcoming Defense of Democracy package.

### *Values and rights, rule of law*

#### *European identity*

In line with the CSOCofOE's recommendations, the European Commission (EC) recognises the importance of democracy in fostering a common European identity and has already proposed the European Democracy Action Plan.

In line with the CSOCofOE's recommendation and Conference conclusions we propose to add a fourth pillar to the European Democracy Action Plan that would promote civic engagement beyond elections — such a pillar would further strengthen democracy in the EU and thus further strengthen a European identity.

While the EC has a number of proposals and planned proposals on education, these do not include anything related to the CSOCofOE's recommendation of a European-wide history and civic education syllabus as part of compulsory education. Such a syllabus should include historical advancements in rights and democracy, struggles to overcome colonialism, the patriarchy and racism, among other topics, and it would give people a sense of common experience and common knowledge.

The EC has not and does not plan to endorse the CSOCofOE's and Conference recommendation of making 'Europe Day' (9 May) a public holiday in all EU countries, even though such an initiative would contribute to a Common European identity.

### *Civic space and the rule of law*

The Conference has called for making European values tangible for EU citizens through more interactive and direct involvement. We believe that a concrete step to achieve this and recognise and further promote volunteer's engagement would be to declare 2025 as the European Year of Volunteers.

The EC is calling on the EP and Council to adopt a set of proposals for tackling unfounded or abusive lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs). Moreover, in September 2022, the EC proposed the European Media Freedom Act. Such policies would hopefully ensure that civil society, including civil society organisations, activists, journalists, and others, is protected from certain attacks across the Union.

Since late 2019, the EC has initiated an annual Rule of Law cycle. These reports, which are developed in part through a targeted stakeholder consultation involving EU and national civil society organisations (CSOs), allow for the state of rule of law and civil society in the EU to be monitored and lately include country specific recommendations. The Conference plenary conclusions stress that EU values must be fully upheld in all Member States.

In order to do so, it is critical to ensure that checks and balances and notably an independent and plural civil society is enabled. We welcome that the 2022 Annual Rule of law report on the implementation of the Charter of Fundamental Rights will be dedicated to civic space, and we are confident that this will lead to the inclusion of a new pillar dedicated to civic space within the reporting — a proposal that would strengthen the Rule of Law reports by allowing for a more in-depth analysis of the state of the rule of law and civil society across the Union.

Furthermore, impact assessments on fundamental rights should specifically address potential impact of EU laws on civil society. Such a proposal is needed to ensure that progress in building a civil society is not reversed unintentionally by the effects of new laws.

Following an ambitious European Parliament resolution, the EC has committed to proposing a legislative initiative on a statute for European cross-border associations. Although this is a promising commitment, the EC's initiative should cover all non-profit organisations (NPOs), including associations and foundations, in order to match the needs of NPOs and CSOs when it comes to overcoming the obstacles they face in carrying out cross-border activities and fully benefiting from the single market, as [argued by a joint civil society and social economy coalition that includes Civil Society Europe](#). Other key arguments can be found in the [coalition's two joint contributions](#) to the EC's call for evidence and public consultation. We believe that this initiative could also support an enabling civic space in Europe, and we are convinced that civic freedoms, such the right of association, assembly and expression are key elements of a future European Citizenship Statute.

We welcome in this context the proposal of an annual conference on the rule of law including civil society and citizens. This fills an important gap and would also allow civil society to develop a stronger dialogue with other actors such as the judiciary and authorities at all levels.

The Conference has also called for reinforcing the instruments to address breaches of the rule of law, including the conditionality regulation and Treaty changes. We expect this to be part of a structural dialogue with civil society.

**We recommend:**

- . **To include a new pillar on Civic engagement beyond elections;**
- . **To initiate discussion on a European-wide history and civic education syllabus as part of compulsory education, involving civil society with expertise in non-formal and informal civic education;**
- . **To propose to establish 9 May as the Day of Europe as a Public holiday with the organisation of events and festivities in all EU capitals;**
- . **To declare 2025 as the European Year of Volunteers/civic engagement;**
- . **A new pillar dedicated to civic space in the annual rule of law reports;**
- . **Development of a structural dialogue with civil society on reinforcing instruments to address breaches to the rule of law;**
- . **Structured dialogue with civil society on a proposal to address cross border obstacles to civil society activities and minimum benchmarks.**