



European Economic  
and Social Committee

# Civil Society Week

17–20 March 2025

*Next steps  
for more  
cohesive societies*



# Civil Society Week

In recent years, overlapping crises – ranging from the lingering effects of the pandemic to the escalating challenges of climate change, rising living costs, and widening inequalities – have fuelled widespread polarisation. Social instability, economic hardship and political discontent, particularly among those who feel unheard and left behind, have further deepened societal divisions.

To address these pressing concerns, **Civil Society Week 2025** brought together a diverse array of stakeholders from across Europe and candidate countries, alongside experts, EU policymakers, national economic and social councils, youth representatives, and journalists.

Over the course of four days, the event gave more than 800 participants a unique opportunity to engage in lively discussions, share best practices, and work together to develop solutions that would strengthen social cohesion and democratic participation.

**If there is one unmistakable lesson from this week, it is that civil society's power to drive change is as immense as the challenges we face. Europe must act swiftly and boldly, advocating its vibrant civil society as a pillar of sustainable democracy.**

During the conference's 14 sessions organised by **EESC Liaison Group members** and **European Citizens' Initiative Day partners**, including the **EESC Civil Society Prize award ceremony**, civil society stakeholders drew up a comprehensive set of actionable steps and key demands for a **more cohesive and resilient Europe**.

*Strengthen  
Cohesion  
through  
Education and  
Culture*

*Strengthen Citizens'  
Participation  
through the  
European Citizens'  
Initiative (ECI)*

*Boost Innovation  
and Leverage  
Technology for  
the Common  
Good*

*Provide  
Affordable,  
Democratic and  
Sustainable  
Housing*

*Secure an Inclusive  
Just Transition  
and Green-Blue  
Growth*

*Reinforce  
Support and  
Funding for  
CSOs*

*Build a Strong  
European  
Strategy for  
Civil Society*

*Engage Young  
People in  
Shaping a  
Stronger, More  
Resilient Europe*





## Strengthen Cohesion through Education and Culture



### Invest in Lifelong Civic Engagement and Dialogue

- ✓ Expand the definition of “basic skills” in the Basic Skills Action Plan to **include media literacy, civic engagement, cultural participation, and critical thinking**.
- ✓ Integrate modules on dialogue, critical thinking and media literacy into basic skills training programmes funded through the Action Plan to foster active citizenship and counter polarisation.



### Empower Citizens through Education and Participation

- ✓ Implement **structured student participation mechanisms** within the European Education Area framework.
- ✓ Ensure teacher training includes modules on **citizenship education** and fosters inclusive learning environments.



### Prioritise Local Initiatives and Inclusive Language

- ✓ Use the Union of Equality framework to **fund community-level initiatives** that foster social cohesion.
- ✓ Review educational materials and public discourse for **inclusive language**, ensuring initiatives are tailored to local needs and promote a people-centred approach.



## Strengthen Citizens' Participation through the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI)



### Strengthen the Follow-up and Impact of the ECI to Restore Trust

- ✓ More must be done to meet citizens' expectations through the ECI, ensuring it plays a key role in strengthening democracy and preventing the erosion of public trust and the rise of anti-democratic forces.



### Strengthen Stakeholder Engagement for the ECI's Long-Term Success

- ✓ Stakeholders, in particular institutional ones, must step up their efforts to ensure ECI achieves lasting success in European democracy. This includes boosting **visibility**, ensuring **impact**, engaging **youth**, and continuously improving the ECI, including revising its legislation in 2027.



### Empower Bodies across Member States to Support the ECI

- ✓ National economic and social councils, as well as regional and local authorities, should actively support and make use of the ECI as a tool to promote European policies, expanding infrastructure to ensure citizens' ideas are reflected in the EU agenda.



### Build Capacity of ECI Organisers and Foster Collaboration

- ✓ Ensure **more structured peer-to-peer exchanges**, stronger connections and sustained collaboration among ECI organisers and stakeholders, while also raising awareness, engaging youth, and providing financial support.



### Strengthen ECI Impact Strategy and Enhance Communication and Transparency to Build Trust

- ✓ Raise awareness of legislative follow-ups and participatory democracy **to ensure both legal and political outcomes**.
- ✓ Strengthen ECI rules to improve their **follow-up and impact**.
- ✓ Improve the involvement of ECI organisers in Commission decisions through better communication, sustained engagement and transparency to build **citizen trust** and ensure that their voices are heard.





## *Boost Innovation and Leverage Technology for the Common Good*



### Co-Design a European Digital Space

- ✓ Establish a **participatory process** where citizens and stakeholders co-design a **democratic digital space** rooted in European values, rights, and principles with EU institutions and political representatives.
- ✓ Ensure **effective implementation of EU regulations** to protect citizens' rights and sovereignty over data use while investing in infrastructure and tools that ensure EU regulations are applied in the digital space.
- ✓ Lead by example by adopting and promoting **digital technologies developed in Europe** that respect the environment and human rights.
- ✓ Address AI in the workplace through an **inclusive process involving all relevant stakeholders** to protect fundamental rights and ensure transparency for workers and citizens.



### Build Digital Skills for Democratic Participation

- ✓ Develop and implement an **inclusive European Skills Agenda** that prioritises digital literacy, critical thinking, and transversal skills essential for democratic engagement, ethical technology use and informed decision making.
- ✓ Strengthen **education opportunities to empower citizens** to navigate digital democracy, harness emerging technologies, drive innovation, and address the ethical and societal challenges posed by artificial intelligence.
- ✓ Ensure **continuous upskilling and reskilling opportunities** that prepare citizens for the evolving digital landscape and labour market demands.



### Invest in Digital Infrastructure and Inclusion

- ✓ Promote **EU investments in inclusive digital infrastructure and technology for social good** that enhance democratic participation (e.g. a permanent mechanism to engage with and monitor representatives in policymaking) and ensure accessibility for all, particularly for people with disabilities and marginalised groups.
- ✓ Provide a **business- and tech-friendly environment for European entrepreneurs** and other relevant actors to invest in and develop 'Made in the EU' AI solutions, software, and hardware.
- ✓ Ensure **long-term funding in digital inclusion and civic engagement**, integrating accessibility and accountability in all digital policy frameworks.
- ✓ Give every citizen the opportunity to participate actively **in the digital space, free from barriers**.





## *Provide Affordable, Democratic and Sustainable Housing*



### **Strengthen Investment and Regulation in Housing**

- ✓ Increase EU investment in affordable, energy-efficient, and accessible housing, earmarking funds in the **Social Climate Fund**.
- ✓ Prevent financialisation of housing by enforcing **transparency**, combating speculation, and ensuring housing serves its primary social function, rather than acting as a financial asset.



### **Empower Local Authorities and Social Economy Organisations**

- ✓ Provide **direct funding** and technical support to **cities and local governments** to develop sustainable housing plans that involve cross-sector partnerships.
- ✓ Encourage **community-led** and **cooperative housing models** for long-term affordability, social cohesion, and protection of tenants from speculative markets.



### **Address Homelessness Through Data-Driven Solutions**

- ✓ Expand the EU Platform on Combatting Homelessness (EPOCH) and prioritise the **Housing First Model**.
- ✓ Implement robust data collection and monitoring frameworks to improve cross-national comparisons and inform evidence-based policies that effectively address hidden homelessness and service gaps.



## *Secure an Inclusive Just Transition and Green-Blue Growth*



### **Place Water Resilience at the Heart of the EU Blue Deal and the Water Resilience Strategy**

- ✓ Ensure universal access to water as a fundamental right through the **EU Blue Deal** and the upcoming **Water Resilience Strategy**.
- ✓ Implement binding commitments to address infrastructure failures, pollution, and governance gaps.
- ✓ Integrate water security into climate, energy, and economic policies through the **Water Resilience Strategy** to guarantee long-term sustainability and justice.



### **Advance a Just Green-Blue Transition that Empowers Communities and Ensures Social Justice**

- ✓ Prioritise **community-led action** and **place-based solutions** in Europe's green-blue transition. Ensure these approaches promote equity and inclusivity by embracing participatory policies.
- ✓ Address the economic and social costs borne by vulnerable regions, workers, and marginalised groups, which are often overlooked by the **Just Transition Mechanism** and **Territorial Just Transition Plans**.
- ✓ Increase accessibility to funding for local actors to enable them to shape and implement meaningful initiatives.



### **Shift from Consultation to Co-Creation**

- ✓ Go beyond consultation by providing **targeted support, proactive outreach and direct resources** to empower communities in the transition.
- ✓ Ensure that civil society and local stakeholders play a central role in designing and delivering policies that reflect real local needs.





## *Build a Strong European Strategy for Civil Society*



### **Ensure a Bold, Visionary and Forward-Looking Strategy**

- ✓ Closely involve **civil society** in its **design and implementation**.



### **Guarantee that the Civil Society Strategy**

- ✓ **Aligns responsibilities and resources** of civil society organisations (CSOs) with their role in addressing societal challenges, acting as checks and balances to the rule of law, and ensuring institutional accountability.
- ✓ Allows for the **full implementation of Article 11 TFEU**.
- ✓ Paves the way for an **inter-institutional agreement on civil dialogue**.
- ✓ Recognises **civil society's key role** in advocating for a more inclusive, fair, and democratic society.
- ✓ Includes concrete tools and actions to **protect human rights defenders** and civil society activists.
- ✓ Creates an **enabling environment** for cross-border action by non-profit associations and foundations.
- ✓ Integrates a **democracy and civic space check** into future policies and legislation.



### **Take Action**

- ✓ Immediately co-create and implement a **European Civil Society Platform**.
- ✓ Enable the **Civil Society Platform** to provide structured input into EU decision-making, to ensure civic participation.
- ✓ Swiftly adopt the **European Cross-Border Associations (ECBA) Directive**, paving the way for a similar legal tool for foundations.



## *Reinforce Support and Funding for CSOs*



### **Secure a Strong 2028-2034 Multi-Annual Financial Framework (MFF)**

- ✓ Strengthen support for CSOs through EU-managed programmes, including a strong **Citizens, Equality, Rights and Value Programme (CERV)**, cohesion policies and a strong **European Social Fund Plus**, by investing in capacity building and reinforcing the **principle of partnership**.
- ✓ Involve CSOs actively in the **design, monitoring, implementation, and evaluation of public funding**.



### **Maximise Opportunities and Support for CSOs**

- ✓ Through regranting under the CERV and the European Economic Area (EEA)/Norway grants.



### **Create an Enabling Environment for Philanthropy and Foundations**

- ✓ Support cross-border CSOs in their capacity building.
- ✓ Remove barriers to cross-border philanthropy.

The **2025 edition of Your Europe, Your Say! (YEYS)** took place on 13-14 March, bringing together around 100 young people from the EU, nine candidate countries, and the UK. Representatives of national youth councils, youth organisations, and secondary schools collectively drafted recommendations focused on fundamental rights, equality, societal issues, and active participation, aiming for a more inclusive, transparent, and sustainable future.



## ***Engage Young People in Shaping a Stronger, More Resilient Europe***



### **Fighting corruption through transparency and youth participation**

- ✓ Urging greater involvement of young people in anti-corruption efforts, improved transparency in public spending, and stronger protection for whistle-blowers.



### **Active citizenship: from classroom to community**

- ✓ Promoting civic education that empowers young people with the tools to champion democratic values, combat disinformation, and contribute to social and cultural development.



### **IN for equality**

- ✓ Addressing inequality with concrete actions to ensure equal pay, representation, reproductive rights and non-gendered education, while challenging outdated societal structures.



### **Young people deserve a seat**

- ✓ Advocating for stronger youth representation in decision-making through lower voting ages, regional youth councils, and more inclusive structures in governance.



### **Develop a coherent climate change strategy**

- ✓ Calling for the EU to take a leadership role in global climate action, with comprehensive strategies for both mitigation and adaptation, ensuring sustainability for all citizens.





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