

Civil society's call for a new political impetus to relaunch the EU

CIVIL SOCIETY DAYS 2017

On 26-27 June, the [European Economic and Social Committee \(EESC\)](#), joining forces with other civil society organisations and European institutions, hosted the annual [Civil Society Days](#) at the EESC's premises.

This major gathering of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) from across Europe provided strong civil society input to the reflection on the future of Europe launched by the Commission with its "White Paper on the future of Europe". A forceful call was made for a new political impetus to relaunch the EU on the basis of our fundamental values and also to express a clear commitment by civil society organisations to forge ahead. [A number of key demands and civil society commitments](#) were adopted and presented to the EU decision-making institutions to promote a wider civil dialogue and to deepen participatory democracy on four challenging topics: **populism, the technological revolution and its impact on work and democracy, the empowerment of civil society organisations, and social and territorial cohesion.**

In his opening speech, **the EESC president Georges Dassis** called on organised civil society to play a leading role at critical times, and drew attention to the rise of populism. "Citizens are beginning to realise that if Europe doesn't do better and do everything it can to protect them, take tangible steps to guarantee freedom, democracy and economic and social cohesion, then it is quite certain that populism will eventually get out of hand Another issue that has to be urgently tackled concerns new technologies. Undoubtedly they represent progress. But the question we need to ask ourselves is this: is the wealth that we generate through these new technologies fairly shared out?"

The EESC strives for citizens, particularly our young people, to be involved in answering these questions, and in the decision-making process.

That is why this year the EESC has invited three students to the CSDays to present the outcome of the EESC Youth Event Your Europe Your Say (YEYS) 2017: "Europe at 60 – where to next?": [three recommendations](#) for the future of the EU on combating nationalism through interactive education and an internationally agreed history curriculum, on reducing food waste to help the

impoverished and promote sustainability, and on increasing political interest in Europe by tapping the potential of social media.

Federica Mogherini, EU High Representative for foreign affairs and security policy firstly reminded participants of civil society's crucial role as one of the most active forms of political participation. "I am still an activist, I began my political activities in civil society organisations, and **the institutions need civil society to make the right choices and implement them. And civil society also needs good institutions to do its work.** Exactly one year ago, we heard claims that the British referendum would be the beginning of the end of the EU. One year after, what we have seen is the awareness that closing yourself in your borders, and regaining sovereignty is an illusion, and that in the global world we live in, the only way to regain sovereignty is actually by being together as Europeans. In this context, I would like to stress that we need to do together. We see a shrinking space for civil society, sometimes also inside the EU, and this is something that worries me a lot, because we know **that no society is strong if it's not based on an open and participatory society.** The usual approach is that we support your work, but the point is also how can we improve our partnership? We sometimes act as if we don't see that Europe needs migration for economic and cultural reasons. I know that you have worked on an [Opinion on the cost of non-Europe](#). **Why don't you work on an opinion on the cost of non-migration?** Because my impression is that sectors of our economies would collapse the day after, if all migrants disappeared from one day to the other". Such was Ms Mogherini's appeal to the EESC, and appeal that was immediately considered by the EESC President, Georges Dassis.

The European Union is experiencing an unprecedented crisis of legitimacy due to its inability to come up with solutions for various problems. **Conny Reuter, co-president of the EESC Liaison Group** argued that " Civil society has to take up the challenge to defend the most important values of our society and find global solutions: for instance migration should no longer be treated as a crisis but as an opportunity, and we shouldn't take the angle of how to manage migration ... it is not a management issue, it is a humanitarian and investment issue and is the core work of many of the civil society organisations that have participated in the CSDays, making sure that human rights, democracy, integration and solidarity are respected, inside and outside the European borders".

Europe has to rapidly respond to all these challenges, and also start to act in a forward-looking way to ensure a smooth transition when it comes to new technologies and the future of work. Furthermore, it must strike a new balance between rural and urban areas, with a greater emphasis on territorial and social cohesion. The EESC is deeply concerned about these developments and has been focusing much of its work on these subjects.

Demands towards the EU institutions:

- stick to the objective of territorial and social cohesion to overcome the disparities between and within the Member States;
- develop the EU based on rights that ensure social protection and decent work for all and all forms of employment;
- enable and support diversified channels of participation. CSOs should be recognized and empowered as bridge builders;
- ensure open civic space taking into account the changing civic space and framework for civil dialogue;
- communicate on EU policies based on values in a more positive and appealing way;
- adopt a rural agenda in recognition of the specific needs in order to ensure territorial cohesion.

