# The Rise of Insurgent Europeanism

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**Mapping Civil Society Visions of Europe**

**2018-2020**

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# About the Report

This report presents findings of Visions of Europe, a project of research and engagement at the London School of Economics and Political Science based at LSE IDEAS. For more information about Visions of Europe events and publications visit www.europeforthemany.com.

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# Acknowledgments

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# Executive summary

Civil society in Europe and its attitudes towards the European project have changed dramatically in the past decade of multiple crises. This study mapped, tracked and monitored developments in European civil society over a two-year period, revealing the nature and implications of these changes.

Firstly, we can observe an emerging European public sphere with competing visions of Europe. Instead of pro- and anti-Europe, the debate is about the kind of Europe that should be constructed and it includes both traditional Europeanists and insurgent Europeanists composed of grassroots activists. While right-wing movements now tend to favour a Europe of the nations, the organisations and movements we studied favour what we describe as Normative, Popular, and Responsive visions of Europe.

Secondly, we observe a politicisation of civil society in Europe. The term 45 degrees has been used to describe the breakdown of the traditional distinction between vertical civil society focused on influencing policy and governance, and horizontal civil society active at a grassroots level on a range of issues. Traditionally the grassroots have often been suspicious of the political class. What has changed is the European focus of grassroots civil society and the readiness to engage with formal politics. We call this shift to the European level 45-degree politics at the third dimension.

Thirdly, while issues of climate change, social justice and countering inequality, as well as racial justice and migrant rights are all hugely salient for the actors that are the subject of this study, the foremost demand that emerges from the study is for increased citizen inclusion and participation in the governance of the European Union.

These changes have come about primarily because of the crises of the last decade – the financial/Euro-crisis, the migration crisis, Brexit and the pandemic. They have been facilitated by social, cultural and technological developments giving rise to trans-European networks and making a physical presence in Brussels much less important for engagement in European issues.

The forthcoming Conference on the Future of Europe offers an opportunity for bringing the European Union closer to the visions of civil society. While there are likely to be widespread civil society consultations, there needs to be political pressure to translate the outcomes of these consultations into meaningful reform of the European Union.

The visions of Europe put forward by civil society could be described as a set of proposals for a twenty-first century version of democracy. Twentieth century democracy was focussed on the national level and based on traditional vertical forms of representation. If democracy means the design of procedures, rules and institutions that enable individual citizens to influence and participate in the decisions that affect their lives and to hold decision-makers to account, then these procedures, rules and institutions need to reflect the complex, transnational character of contemporary European and global society.

Twenty-first century democracy has to involve citizens participation alongside formal representation, it has to be multi-level (European, national, local and regional), it has to encompass the diversity, cosmopolitanism and localism of European citizens, and it has to be able to overcome social fractures. That is why we end by proposing a permanent European Citizens Assembly, the empowerment of regions and cities, a secure and inclusive European citizenship, and an extension and deepening of the social pillar.

# Introduction

Ten years ago, some members of this research team undertook a study of newly emerging social movements and movement-parties and how they perceived the European project.[1] The main conclusion was that trans-European civil society was bifurcated. There was a group of what might be called elite or institutionalised civil society, composed of NGOs, think tanks or trades unions, who were Brussels focussed and engaged in debate and advocacy about European reform. But the European Union and its future was simply not an issue for grassroots civil society activists, concerned with economic and social justice, climate change, or migrant and minority rights; they were preoccupied with the national or local level. Right-wing nationalist movements tended to be Euro-sceptic, while progressive activists tended either to take Europe for granted, seeing themselves as the Erasmus, EasyJet, Euro generation, or were highly critical of the neo-liberalism of the European Union.

All this has changed. That is the conclusion of this study, which mapped, tracked and monitored developments in European civil society over a two-year period. The main findings are three-fold. Firstly, we can observe an emerging European public sphere peopled by competing visions of Europe. Instead of debates about for or against Europe, the debate is about the kind of Europe that should be in the process of construction and it is a debate that includes both the traditional Europeanists – the Brussels-focussed policy community – and insurgent Europeanists composed of grassroots activists. While right-wing movements now tend to favour a Europe of the nations, the organisations and movements that are the subject of this study favour what we describe as normative, popular, and responsive visions of Europe.

Secondly, we observe a politicisation of civil society in Europe. We note how the term 45 degrees has been used to describe the breakdown of the traditional distinction between vertical civil society preoccupied with policy advocacy and influence on political parties and governance, and horizontal civil society active at a grassroots level on a range of social, green or economic issues. Traditionally the grassroots have often been suspicious of the political class. What has changed is the European focus of grassroots civil society and the readiness to engage with formal politics. We call this shift to the European level 45-degree politics at the third (international/regional) dimension.

Thirdly, while issues of climate change, social justice and countering inequality, as well as racial justice and migrant rights are all hugely salient for the movements that are the subject of this study, the foremost demand that emerges from the study is for increased citizen inclusion and participation in the governance of the European Union.

These changes have come about primarily because of the crises of the last decade – the financial/Euro-crisis, the migration crisis, Brexit and the pandemic. But they have also been facilitated both by social and cultural changes as a consequence of work, study and travel in different European countries, and by technology – particularly the widespread use of digital tools. These social, cultural and technological developments have given rise to trans-European networks and have meant that a physical presence in Brussels is much less important for engagement in European issues.

[1] Mary Kaldor, Sabine Selchow, and Tamsin Murray-Leach, eds., Subterranean Politics in Europe (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2015)

The forthcoming Conference on the Future of Europe offers an opportunity for bringing the European Union closer to the visions of civil society. While there are likely to be widespread civil society consultations, there needs to be political pressure to translate the outcomes of these consultations into meaningful reform of the European Union. It is interesting to note that new Eurobarometer data shows that 90 per cent of Europeans demand that citizens voices are taken more into account in decisions about the future of Europe, six in ten are thinking more about Europe's future as a result of the pandemic, three-quarters expect the Conference on the Future of Europe to have positive impact on democracy within the EU, and as many as 50 per cent want to be involved in the conference themselves.[2]

The visions of Europe put forward by civil society could be described as a set of proposals for a twenty-first century version of democracy. Twentieth century democracy was focussed on the national level and based on vertical forms of representation. If democracy means the design of procedures, rules and institutions that enable individual citizens to influence and participate in the decisions that affect their lives and to hold decision-makers to account, then these procedures, rules and institutions need to reflect the complex, transnational character of contemporary European and global society. It has to operate in a three-dimensional space (45 degrees) and it has to make use of digital tools to engage many more citizens in the democratic process than is possible in purely physical forums. Twenty-first century democracy has to involve citizens participation alongside formal representation, it has to be multi-level (European, national, local and regional), it has to encompass the diversity, cosmopolitanism and localism of European citizens, and it has to be able to overcome social fractures. That is why we end by proposing a permanent European Citizens Assembly, the empowerment of regions and cities, a secure and inclusive European citizenship, and an extension and deepening of the social pillar.

In what follows, we start with a brief description of our methodology. We then outline our findings – the impact of the various crises on civil society and the three visions that have emerged from interviews and surveys. We then put forward a theory of change that has come out of our study and in the final section we draw out the implications of the study. We end with four recommendations for the future of Europe.

# 1. Mapping European civil society 2018-2020: The scope of the study

This study presents the main findings of Visions of Europe, a project of research and engagement that involved mapping, tracking and monitoring developments in European civil society between 2018 and 2020, in order to uncover how organisations and movements envisioned the future of Europe. This has been a tumultuous period for European politics. It rounds up more than a decade of crises, from the breakdowns in the Eurozone and Brexit, to the chaotic handling of migration from the Middle East and Africa, and the Coronavirus pandemic. These cycles of political turbulence and their catalysing effects provided the backdrop for the mapping of European civil society.

## Methodology

Investigating how European civil society has responded to this period of crisis and transformation raised a number of questions. What social and political change are movements and organisations hoping to see in the years ahead? How are they envisioning their own role in bringing it about? What are their frustrations, as well as aspirations for the European project? And what might the visions and debates in civil society tell us about the changing nature of European integration? To answer those questions, we sourced data in different ways using a combination of desk research, key informant interviews, a survey, and 'moments of dialogue' where we directly engaged civil society actors in discussion and debate and gathered insights through participatory observation.

Our desk research mapped a total of 167 civil society actors across Europe and provided the basis for identifying 30 key informants to interview, focusing on organisations and movements operating in European civic space and seeking change at the European level. About 47 per cent of our desk research sample comprises explicitly transnational actors and the rest are nationally based, including NGOs, start-up movement-parties, think tanks, social movements, and some active funders with interventionist agendas that go beyond providing resources (see Figure 1). We conducted desk research, using online sources, on these civil society actors focusing on their activities and priorities, as well as how they have responded to the Coronavirus pandemic. We coded the data and allocated the actors in different categories depending on how they engaged with the EU.

The mapping data was complemented with 30 interviews with civil society actors based in Austria, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, and Spain. These countries were selected because they have experienced significant political turbulence and polarisation over the past decade, and civil society actors have assimilated the effects of the crises and responded to them. Our point of departure in selecting actors for the sample was participation in the European Citizen's Initiative [3], relying on snowballing thereafter.

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[3]  https://europa.eu/citizens-initiative/_en

The material from the qualitative research provided the basis for conducting a survey, which was sent out to the civil society actors we had mapped, as well as others suggested by our key informants (n=159). The survey was designed to gain further insight on key themes emerging from our research, e.g. how civil society actors think about Europe, how they operate across borders in the EU, and their views on the forthcoming Conference on the Future of Europe. The survey was conducted between September and November 2020 and achieved a 25% response rate (40 civil society actors in total).

The other strand of our research involved creating opportunities for direct engagement with European civil society actors. We convened two international conferences "Europe form the Many," one in London in October 2018, the other in Palermo in November 2019 coinciding with the Transeuropa Festival. In addition, we organised a series of public events and had a number of informal discussions with civil society actors that served as 'moments of dialogue'.

The insights gathered through this extensive engagement with a range of organisations, movements, public intellectuals and other actors informed our research process for the mapping study and other outputs of the project. For example, our first conference highlighted the extent to which the rise of the far right in many parts of Europe had become a civil society concern. This new 'anti-civil civil society' was also operating across Europe in parallel ecosystems to the ones we were studying. That prompted us to examine the rise of the far right and some of the regressive visions of Europe that are emerging, capturing an important 'impetus for action' for the organisations and movements that were the primary focus of our research.[4]

## Exploring civic space: The types of movements and organisations we studied

Our mapping data provides a snapshot of the civil society ecosystem seeking change at the European level. It is a dynamic ecosystem characterised by significant fluidity and crossover between more and less institutionalised/ professionalised civil society actors. It comprises networks of interacting groups that constitute an important component of the European civic space, which exists 'above', but in interaction with, the national level.

**Figure 1: The evolution of European civic space: Organisations and movements in our study**



Legend:
- NGO
- Think tank
- Funder
- Movement
- Movement-party

NGO 61%, Think tank 16%, Funder 6%, Movement 8%, Movement-party 9%
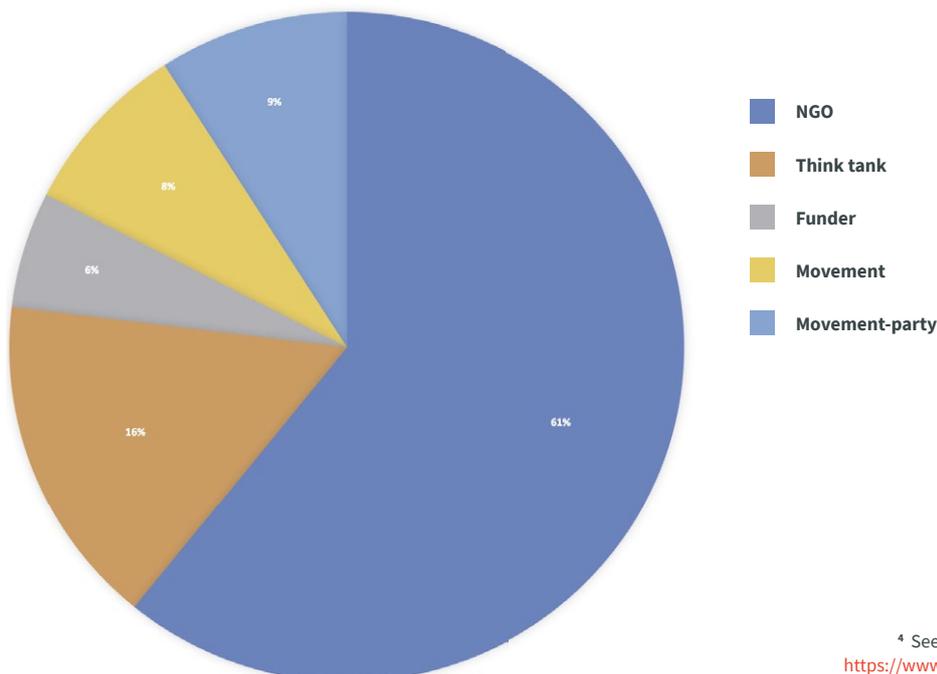
[4]  See the publications of Europe for the Many at: https://www.europeforthemany.com/category/reports/

While this picture reveals a considerable number of NGOs active in the European civic space, it does not necessarily follow that they 'crowd out' other types of actors in that space. Movements such as the environmental campaign Fridays for Future, for example, have had a significant impact and reach into the European civic space, which goes far beyond that achieved by most NGOs in our study. Moreover, of the transnational actors in our analysis, 29 per cent have offices only in Brussels. This suggests how civil society organisations are interacting with the European level. While in the age of the internet, transnational civil society activity no longer requires rooted infrastructure, the role of the EU's 'political capital' in how European civic space operates, as proximity to decision-makers is clearly seen as valuable and important.

Our study revealed a range of priority issues for civil society seeking change at the European level, but also a 'crowded space' with a relatively large number of NGOs working on thematically similar projects and initiatives. Figure 2 summarises the data on the priorities of civil society. It should not be interpreted as a measure of the relative weight of these groups within the European civic space. For example, the fact that there are numerous NGOs working on democracy and participation in the EU does not imply success in shaping public discourse. These groups may, for example, suffer from duplication and competition for resources. Relatedly, although they are a clear minority of the groups we studied, the pro-federalist organisations are often well resourced and connected within European political institutions.

**Figure 2: The main campaign priorities of the civil society actors studied**
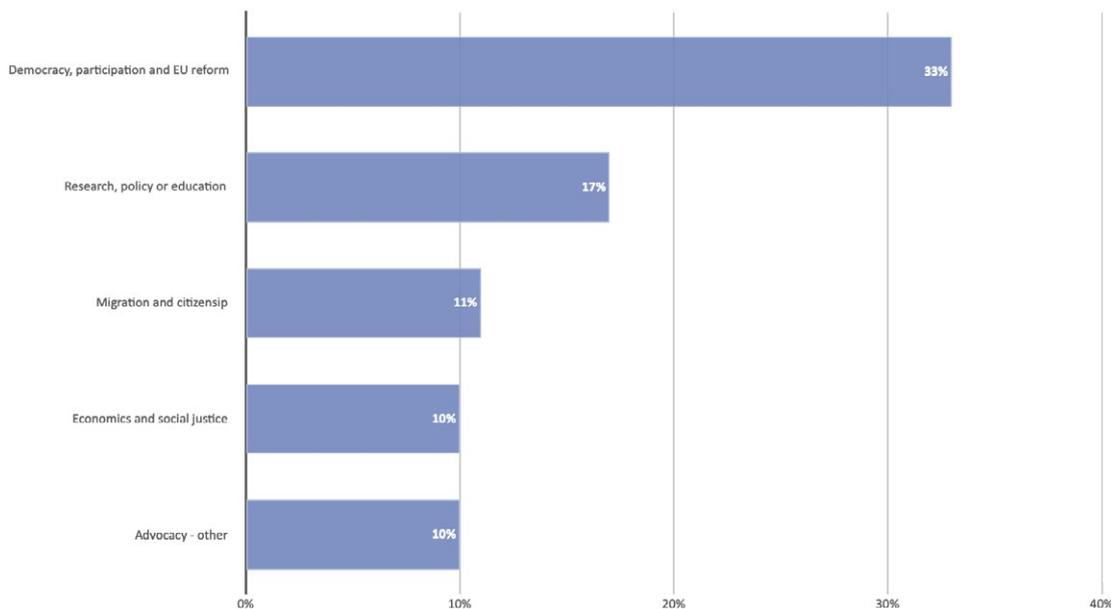


Our mapping identified three types of actors with regard to how they engage with Europe. They can all be considered broadly 'pro-European', in the sense that they attribute some positive value to the existence of the EU as a space for pursuing progressive civil society agendas, however they have different reasons for engaging with European issues in their activities. The first type are civil society actors who shape and communicate Europe – they actively promote European integration, and often also European identity, as well as participating in discussions on the future of the European project. The second type are actors who see Europe as a means to further their core agendas on specific issues. The third type are political disruptors emerging from civil society who take for granted that all politics (in Europe) is European these days.

**Traditional Europeanists:** The actors in this group are actively involved in shaping and communicating Europe. They advocate for European integration and reform efforts in some form. They identify positive advantages of EU membership, seek further European constitutional reform and democratisation, and sometimes promote European, as opposed to national, identities. They play an important role in how the public understand the European level but have been put on the defensive to a large degree due to the growth of Eurosceptic, nationalist forces. Nonetheless, they remain well connected within the institutional space of Europe. These actors have been a fixture of European civic space throughout the evolution of the contemporary European Union.

**Instrumental Europeanists:** For this group the European level of decision-making matters for advocacy and campaigning on particular issues. They do not advocate the advantages of EU membership and are not concerned with building a European identity for its own sake. But they recognise the European level of decision-making has important impact on how social issues originate, unfold, and might be tackled. Even if their day-to-day work is restricted to a national state, the issues they deal with are part of the larger European context. Furthermore, many of them acknowledge the European dimension of their networks, take advantage of EU funding, or seek partnerships and synergies across Europe to tackle particular problems. These groups construct concrete proposals and visions of Europe that are derivatives of their everyday experience, and sometimes stand in opposition to mainstream visions of Europe. These actors were previously either uninterested in European matters or took European integration for granted. Their critical reengagement with Europe, sparked by the crises of the past decade, is one of the major changes in European civic space identified in the study.

**Insurgent Europeanists:** This group comprises political disruptors emerging from civil society. Civil society is either the origin of these actors or it provides them with a strong base of intellectual and operational support. The actors in this group engage at the level of EU politics and tend to be concerned with furthering European integration in some form, although they often disagree on how this should be done. They realise that a return to a politics of the nation-state is impossible. They may achieve varied electoral success, however all have some sort of democratic representation and some have recently secured parliamentary seats for the first time. They are distinguished from traditional political parties by their social movement and insurgent character. Their emergence can be seen as signalling the rise of 'insurgent' Europeanism within the political field. These actors represent a new development in the landscape of European civic space insofar as they do not separate the national and European political fields and treat them as one.

Figure 3 shows how the civil society actors we mapped in the study are distributed across these three categories.

**Figure 3: How the civil society actors in the study think about and engage with Europe**



Traditional Europeanists
Instrumental Europeanists
Insurgent Europeanists
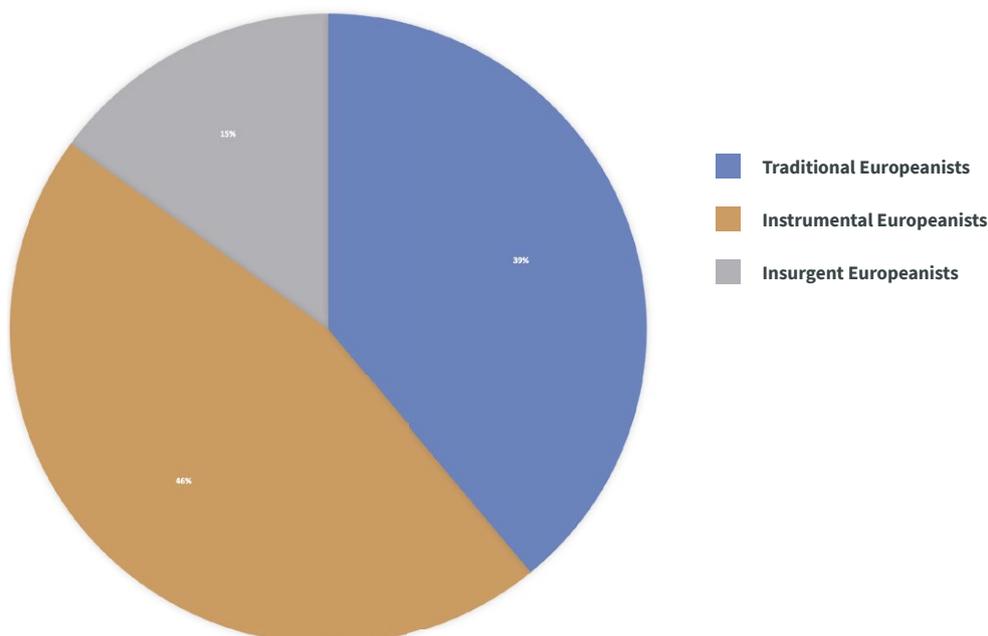
# 2. Findings: Civil society and the European crises

## The politicisation of European civic space

The past decade has been marked by a politicisation of European civic space in tandem with a politicisation of Europe's institutional politics. European integration was previously seen as largely depoliticising. By evacuating the ideology from politics, through an institutional approach based on technocracy, the EU was seen as contributing towards the apolitical 'void' in Western democracy.[5] The Eurozone crisis, however, exposed the highly political character of Europe's decision-making processes. It revealed to European citizens the profound impact EU policies can have domestically. That process of politicisation was accelerated by the poor handling of the wave of migration from 2014 onwards. Europe's inability to agree a collective humanitarian response to the crisis created a 'death spectacle' in the European media, and became a pivot of far-right agitation.

The crises of the last decade have created political turbulence within states, evident in the rise of anti-system parties,[6] as well as contestation between states and European institutions, breaking open the old politics of technocratic consensus and, increasingly, turning the attention of civil society to the European level. Especially for Eurozone countries, decision making at the EU level has shaped in critical ways the fiscal decisions of states. The EU has taken on a much more 'holistic', all-encompassing policy role.

In the early phase of civil society mobilisation at the outset of the Eurozone crisis, Europe was not made the explicit object of demands.[7] That has changed, giving rise to a much more Europeanised set of demands and agendas in civil society. We are now in the midst of another crisis, the COVID-19 health emergency. Such moments of emergency have often been relied upon in the EU to break open institutional sclerosis.[8] For European civil society actors, the pandemic is yet another impetus to address their political visions of Europe's future. In this report, we argue this has changed how civil society networks in Europe operate. The European field has constituted a 'third dimension', in which the 45 degree politics (neither wholly horizontal nor wholly top down) that links progressive politics to NGOs and movements domestically, has entered European political space, applying similar tactics and methods transnationally.

In this ongoing process of politicisation, our research reveals a new maturity of civil society understanding of the complexities of European integration. Pro-European civil society actors are not uncritical of the European institutional complex. Federalist groups, for example, remain very active within European civic space and highly critical of the persistence of intergovernmentalism in the EU's organisational structure (see more below). Nevertheless, the sense that Europe is imperfect but necessary was a strong theme of the civil society discourses we uncovered.

[5]  Peter Mair, Ruling The Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy (London ; New York: Verso, 2013); Colin Crouch, Post-Democracy, 1 edition (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2004); Chantal Mouffe, On the Political, 1st edition (London and New York: Routledge, 2005)

[6]  Jonathan Hopkin, Anti-System Politics: The Crisis of Market Liberalism in Rich Democracies (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2020)

[7]  Kaldor et al., supra n. 1

[8]  Jonathan White, 'Emergency Europe', Political Studies 63:2 (2013)

# Civil society and the European crises

An acute sense of living through a period of crisis was evident amongst our respondents. Three events, or processes, were highlighted as catalysts: the Eurozone crisis, the migration crisis (and its relationship to the rise of the radical right), and the COVID-19 pandemic. This sequence of crises was reflected in the trajectory of our research – the preoccupation with the financial and migration crises became increasingly supplanted by concerns over the economic and social repercussions of COVID-19 during the course of the study. That shift was especially visible between 2019 and 2020. Another observation is that while climate is rarely mentioned as a formative crisis in terms of critical reengagement with Europe, civil society actors expect Europe to tackle the climate emergency collectively (see the discussion in 'Responsive Europe' and 'Conference on the Future of Europe' below).

Much of our research focused on countries in Southern Europe and Central and Eastern Europe, where the effects of these crises were acutely felt and heightened political polarisation occurred. Both regions embarked on a path to European integration after emerging from authoritarianism, and democratisation was associated with Europe. Now both regions are witnessing similar patterns of disenchantment and critical reengagement with Europe.

We observe how in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe the caesura of European accession is a prominent marker of civil society's initial engagement with Europe, and a symbolic marker for their societies with respect to civilizational aspirations. Initial years of enthusiasm – and benign Europeanism – have given way to a perception of unfulfilled potential and promise, despite significant development gains in the region. Here the 2015 migration crisis became a political opportunity for regressive and reactionary forces to mobilise identity politics. As a result, Europe has become increasingly politicised rather than viewed as benign and technocratic. Societies in Central and Eastern Europe are now in the midst of an ideological struggle over Europe, and activist civil society has been pushed to embrace Europe as a defence against neo-authoritarianism.

Southern Europe, a region where the European aspiration was woven in the discourse of national revival and post-fascist democratisation, is also experiencing a process of disenchantment and reengagement with Europe. The breakdowns in Europe's integrationist trajectory that were most significant in the region were the 2008 financial/euro crisis and the 2015 migration crisis. Here, too, economic breakdown and human insecurity have been instrumentalised for political gain. The rise of ethno-nationalist populists of various guises has shaken civil society actors out of their complacency over the trajectory of European integration, prompting them both to critique it, and to reimagine and reformulate it.

In both Southern Europe and Central and Eastern Europe, there is no talk of return to the status quo ante with regard to EU integration among civil society. However, in both places the mix of exogenous shocks, relative deprivation, and identity politics has led to a re-politicisation of the issue of Europe, forcing civil society to take a stance.

# The Eurozone crisis: A new and transformed civic space

Our respondents tended to locate the financial crisis and the ensuing Euro crisis as the first major rupture in the trajectory of European integration and how Europe was perceived. This was especially the case in 2019, before the outbreak of the pandemic, when concerns about the EU's handling of the Eurozone crisis started to be supplanted by concerns over the pandemic. Yet, as our respondents underline, the Euro crisis was the first one to fundamentally challenge the technocratic consensus and encourage 'anti-system' voting. This made more prominent in the public domain traditional criticisms of the Maastricht Treaty from the left (Podemos, SYRIZA) and the new radical right (Lega, VOX).

Greece was by far the worst hit country in the Eurozone crisis. It saw waves of popular unrest culminating in the historic showdown between the government and its creditors in the summer of 2015. While this was a difficult moment, civil society activists also observe that it created bonds of solidarity within the community, a new collective ethos. It was "an emancipatory experience for the political community", as one activist from Athens put it.

Previously a permissive and largely uncritical consensus towards European integration existed in Greek politics and society at large. The two main parties, PASOK and New Democracy, both "saw European integration through a transactional lens" (Civic Activist, Greece).

While the Greek civic space remains strongly supportive of EU membership per se, it is now notably more critical and contested, and less transactional. The rise of SYRIZA, and its formation of a government in 2015, changed the narrative with regard to Europe. After its defeated attempt to reform the Eurozone, break with austerity and get a better deal for Greece, certain despondency set in among Greek civil society:

*"The fact that major decisions in the Eurozone are made behind closed doors, that is disgraceful. […] At the political level we see that the EU is leaning all the more to more conservative directions, to many extreme fascist or openly neo-Nazi formations that come to parliament and come closer to power – so we're doing something wrong […]. "* (Civic Activist, Greece)

The financial crisis created febrile and polarised political environments across Europe. Much attention has been given to the ensuing clash between wealthy northern European states reluctant to bail out (the so-called 'Frugal Four' or 'Frugal Five') and their struggling allies. But the crisis revealed a broader complexity in the structure of the integration project. Eurozone agreements often required unanimity and led to endless horse trading between states to strike a compromise. In Slovakia, for example, the government fell in 2011 as parliament rejected the Euro bailout. It was a decision animated by a rising tide of anti-European rhetoric:

*"We had this freak collapse of government in 2011. Because of the Greek bailout. […] It was […] an opportunistic move by a party that hoped that it would gain some votes, based on a momentarily attractive anti-European position."* (Movement-Party Activist, Slovakia)

This complicates the picture surrounding the divisions in Europe over austerity politics. It was not a simple divide between a wealthy and selfish North versus a poor and profligate South. Civil society interactions have created civic spaces where the complex character of European integration can be ascertained and assimilated. It provides a vantage point to observe these tensions and reflect on the complexities they bring out.

## The migration crisis: A threat from the right and an impetus for civil society

The migration crisis emerged from a failure on the part of European states to provide regular, legal routes for those seeking safety and protection. As chaotic illegal routes developed and the crisis escalated, an anti-European backlash ensued. Regressive and reactionary forces instrumentalised the crisis for political gain, especially in Central and Eastern Europe and Southern Europe. The resurgence of identity politics shook civil society, but also prompted many to take action and provide relief:

*"So […] we've also initiated a campaign to collect and deliver masks to refugee camps in the Greek islands, […] and basically delivered from different member states. And this is something where [we] both act as a party, but [also] as a movement, because we kind of activate private businesses, private donors too, to get this and then work with NGOs to get the message to the right people."* (Movement-Party Activist, Transnational)

Confronting the rise of the radical right and its uses of anti-EU rhetoric became an important impetus for civil society rethinking and reengaging:

*"I think there are many policy issues that we might develop, like migration which was certainly not a very good period for the EU who were not able to solve the problems after 2015, however, mostly because of the influence of populists such as Orban…"* (Civic Activist, Hungary)

*"When there was this kind of migrant crisis with the war in Syria and everything, I think there were critical, way more critical voices, in the public sphere regarding the European Union also linked to this kind of issue."* (Civic Activist, Austria)

*"I mean, for Slovakia, this […] anti-Europeanism is quite opportunistic, in essence, that there is no deeper ideology as there is in Poland, or Hungary behind it. It's clearly just given the, you know, short term political context. So, if there is a crisis that, you know, gives an anti-European position, a quite good political gain internally, for example, the migration crisis so at that point, even the social democrats turned against Europe because it angles for them.* (Movement-Party Activist, Slovakia)

Civil society started to construct alternative visions of Europe that were sharply contrasted with the horse-trading of the European intergovernmental response. Civil society actors mobilised a values-based agenda that provided an alternative to the consensus approach within the EU, which treated the issue as a security, not a humanitarian one. Civil society actors spoke of the "disastrous EU-Turkey deal on migration", for example (Civic Activist, Greece).

But the crisis, including the rise of the radical right, was also a catalyst for social mobilisation. The Sardines movement in Italy protested in over 90 town squares across the country in response to the xenophobic and anti-immigrant rhetoric of Lega. According to the organisers of the protests, a sardine ("a quiet fish" in Italian) represents "community, lack of violence, and freedom". The name was a gesture of solidarity with the plight of migrants coming across the Mediterranean Sea. One of the main aims of the protest was to find a new language for civic deliberation and engagement.

As this civil activist describes, the 2015 migration crisis acted as a catalyst for civil society in Central Europe, too:

*"These crises definitely generate new potential. People get together, and if there isn't an actor who can already effectively address whatever is happening […], it creates space for new actors to come up. And I think, this is why we actually came to be. So, it gives you this like momentum, this push, and all of the sudden there is a lot of people with you who are like "yes let's do something about this". […] I've seen it across Europe. […] We're one of the specimens of that time."* (Civic Activist, Slovakia)

Actors within this progressive civic space see the migration issue as the one that will continue to galvanise activity:

*"If in the future, we [were to have] a common asylum and migration polic[y], that would benefit Europe as a whole."* (Movement-Party Activist, Transnational)

*"[W]hat we expect is that by 2050, there will be a massive push for people leaving the South […]. And therefore, it is very likely that by 2050, the population living in Europe will be quite different than what it is today. […] But actually, we don't really have that much time, even until this takes place. Yeah, potentially a big problem, but potentially, also [an opportunity] to find a solution."* (Civic Activist, Slovakia)

The positioning of civil society and insurgent movement parties allow them to take this longer-term view. By framing the question as an issue of values it imparts a humanitarian approach, which rejects the securitised treatment of the issue by European elites.

## The shock of Coronavirus: Civil society at a historic moment for Europe

We've been able to track in real time the extent and energy of civil society mobilisation during the pandemic. Seventy-five per cent of the organisations and movements included in our mapping responded to the crisis with specific activities and proposals. We have identified several patterns in the civil society response:

**Digital innovation.** Civil society has been a driver of the efforts to utilise technology and connectivity to overcome the restrictions of lockdown. These include making more extensive use of online campaigning tools such as petitions, and running webinar series and online events.

**Impetus for change.** Civil society discourses have recognised that – like the Eurozone and migration crises – the COVID-19 pandemic is catalysing change in Europe, both of a regressive and progressive character. The terms of this change are now being contested.

**Policy refinement and intervention.** Many civil society actors have developed tailored responses, through policy initiatives and advocacy, linking their pre-COVID goals to the new, post-COVID realities.

**Grassroots mobilisation.** We have also seen a stirring of bottom-up activity amongst European civil society, for example through volunteering and the formation of mutual aid groups.

The turn to the digital sphere has catalysed transnational dialogue and engagement, with online activities able to draw in groups and individuals from across Europe and beyond. As one of our respondents put it:

*"[It allowed us] to change experiences and to collaborate, and strongly collaborate, strong cooperation, for example […] in their initiative, I told you before a Europe day, it was fantastic, because there was a workshop on Saturday afternoon. And there were about, I think 15 women […] from Iceland, people from Ireland, from Poland, from Spain."* (Civic Activist, Spain)

Border closures and the central role played by nation-states in the first phase of the pandemic response have triggered a fear amongst some civil society actors that nationalists would exploit and benefit from the crisis:

*"[W]hat we are discussing quite a lot right now […] is what will happen after the COVID crisis. [I]t's how we will interpret the response (or non-response) of, of the different states, whether the oldest eastern states are better prepared. Because they are less liberal, you know, and there are voices that are saying that something that can be quite dangerous, [...] voices that will say that, actually, when it comes to real problems, the EU is nowhere to be seen. And this is something that is kind of starting to make its round into this discourse, but not really strongly. But you know, if things will not change, and if the division will be like that, or even if things will get worse in the West, then it will definitely have its following demon here."* (Movement-Party Activist, Slovakia)

These was also, however, the sense that at least during 2020, the EU had demonstrated its importance as a crisis-management organisation. From the common purchasing programme for vaccines to the crucial economic stimulus programme, the EU had responded in a way that appeared to be more attuned to the concerns of civil society actors than had been the case with the other two crises:

*"I am on the other hand very optimistic that the populist moment maybe is over. [L]et's say the corona crisis, it was relatively successful, we finally responded in a very short period. Not in the very beginning, but now there are decisions taken and which might give the impression to the people that the EU is functioning relatively well so some people always emphasise that you have to deliver so now maybe this is something that people might understand that the EU works relatively well, and that if you give national answers to the pandemic, it doesn't help."* (Civic Activist, Hungary)

 *"[W]e are in a great crisis after COVID, if we want to recover the union of the member states then this is the possibility to overcome the crisis and to go to another destination without so much suffering, to arrive at another point. I think now society entirely understands that Europe is fundamental for the future […]."* (Civic Activist, Spain)

The EU vaccine rollout programme has been heavily criticised. In other respects, however, the EU has been more effective in tacking COVID-19. It has taken most of the measures at its disposal, including the 'Next Generation EU' initiative, doubling its budget. Importantly, civil society actors have been the ones urging more European coordination along these lines. Many grassroots petitions and initiatives, coordinated by academics, industry bodies and trade unions, have been calling for "Europe to do more together" from the very beginning of the pandemic (many of them are featured on wemove.eu).

## Civic space as a forum for political contestation

Our research uncovers a European civic space dominated by debate and argument over the future of the integration project, policies undertaken at the EU level, and how citizens can be connected to the EU.

The response to the Coronavirus pandemic underlined the non-federal character of Europe's institutional landscape. Through the changes of the Maastricht and Lisbon treaties it has assumed a hybrid form, which combines intergovernmentalism with elements of supranationalism. The European Council (heads of government of the member states) was the main arena for arguments over the stimulus programme. The long and fierce horse-trading that took place between states underlined the *absence* of a European federal authority, a European government. Yet, conversely, within European civic space federalism enjoys a great deal of resilience as a current of thinking with organisational support.

Some pro-European civil society currents and insurgent parties have taken up the federalist cause in recent years:

*"All traditional parties, for them the vision of Europe is taking benefits from the idea of Europe and European integration as a place to obtain profit for their political project in the member states, they don't develop enough the integration, they don't end the project of building a federal state."* (Civic Activist, Spain)

*"Right now, the Euro Parliament is in many ways like a retirement for national politics [...] 99% [are] politician[s] at the European Parliament right [now]."* (Movement-Party Activist, Transnational)

They are also critical of how the transactional approach towards European integration has occasionally been manifested, for example, in "scapegoating the EU by successive governments for their own failures, regardless of their politics" (Movement-Party Activist, Italy). One of the curiosities of Europe's current institutional structure is that it creates a platform for federalist groups, and ecosystems of federalist activity, but within a structure that is decidedly unfederalist.

Yet, these lifeworlds of civil society activity also have high profile political supporters, especially in the European Parliament – perhaps unsurprisingly given its supranational character. The Belgian liberal, Guy Verhofstadt, made repeated federalist arguments during the 2019 European Elections hustings, for example. The Spinelli Group in the European Parliament, connected to the Union of European Federalists, also claims 74 members – a bloc of about 10 per cent of Parliament's members.[9] And, while these federalist networks generally praised[10] the 'Next Generation EU' proposals, some argued it was time "for a move away from such painful compromises and intergovernmental processes."[11] Some of our respondents argued that the intergovernmental character of decision-making leads to political problems:

*"And maybe one thing I think is quite remarkable is that if you think about how political solutions are arrived at the European level at the moment, often heads of government […] promise electorates certain things that they will fight for in Brussels. And then they try to negotiate and try to get what the electorate wants, this often leads to their performance not being fulfilled, because they're just one country with a certain power in the council and parliament. And so it's often a zero sum game, like they get something and then some other government gets what they want."* (Movement-Party Activist, Transnational)

This sets the stage for a rather critical form of pro-Europeanism:

*"We think that the Europe we have now is not necessarily working well. […] The message we are trying to put across is that we want more Europe, but a slightly different one. That the stance was pro-European was undeniable and we would never say that we want less Europe, but we simply acknowledged that Europe has some limitations and that people who are unhappy have a reason to be so."* (Movement-Party Activist, Italy)

Yet, others argue that the equation of pro-European with pro-federalist is also being challenged in the coalitions that have formed to achieve substantive policy change at a European level. And that to present the issues facing Europe as 'federalist or bust' is mistaken. Instead, European integration is transforming along lines that are neither federalist, nor intergovernmental, but a hybrid form of power-sharing. Some of our respondents highlighted how states that were once seen as pro-federalist have found in recent years that they can use intergovernmental structures very effectively.

What is clear is that the overall trends in European civic space involve growing contestation and politicisation as civil society actors engage more directly and critically with Europe. Civil society is debating the 'big questions' facing European societies and attempting to link big visions and ideas to substantive outcomes. In doing so, they are interacting with a European integration project that is also going through a process of transformation.

[9] https://www.federalists.eu/the-group-in-the-european-parliament

[10] https://www.federalists.eu/news-uef/view/uef-welcomes-the-mff-2021-2027-agreement-and-the-new-own-resources-package

[11] https://jef.eu/news/press-release-positive-eu-budget-compromise-feels-the-effect-of-the-eus-intergovernmental-decision-making-procedure

In October 2018, at the outset of the project, we hosted a two-day conference of European civil society. Working with our partners European Alternatives and Another Europe Is Possible, we brought together politicians, academics, and civil society activists working for change at the European level. The process of organising the conference, and the discussions and dialogues at the event itself, orientated the mapping project to the key issues that European civil society activism is engaging in. We organised two further follow up events, a smaller workshop of stakeholders in London (Feb 2019) and a larger conference in Palermo (November 2019).

The key issues and cleavages we identified as priority areas for this milieu were:

✓ The migration crisis in Europe and the rise of nationalism and the far right it was connected with;

✓ The relationship between financialization and corruption, including the links between the new radical right and the problems faced by the global economic system;

✓ Environmental crisis and climate change;

✓ Responding to the Eurozone crisis and opposing austerity;

✓ Positive visions and proposals for the reform of Europe, including citizens' rights.

Euclid Tsakalotos, who was then the Greek Finance Minister for the Syriza party, argued at the conference in London for creating social movements in tandem with political efforts for a broad coalition (combining Greens, social democrats and socialists). As part of this process, he proposed three 'dividing lines' that can unite a progressive alternative to the status quo:

✓ Social Issues and inequalities. This involved a critique of what has gone wrong in the globalised world, and the importance of the range of social issues discussed under the rubric of 'inequality'.

✓ Democratic rights and freedoms. For Tsakalotos this could include how to improve democratic politics, issues of constitutional reform, and arguments for migrant and human rights.

✓ Nationalism and anti-immigration. This identifies a problem of emerging nationalism, the importance of humanitarianism as an alternative and the need for a robust internationalist perspective.

The formulation of this 'alliance vision' at a European level shaped our understanding of 45 degree politics at the 'third', European dimension. It illustrated how civil society groups and movements were orientating towards the international levels as part of efforts to create change at the national. And it offered a concise summary of the conference dialogues we encountered.

BOX 1: CREATING 'MOMENTS OF DIALOGUE' IN EUROPEAN CIVIC SPACE

# 3. New visions: Normative, Popular, and Responsive Europe

Civil society emphasises the importance of progressive values to the future of Europe, it seeks more direct participation in European affairs for European citizens, and wants the EU to take the lead in tackling global threats and crises. Our research has uncovered three 'visions of Europe' with particular resonance in the European civic space. These visions are not alternatives and can be understood as a spectrum of ideas and aspirations in civil society. The same civil society actors often brought up aspects of more than one vision and highlighted how their activism encompassed them. We have called these visions Normative Europe, Popular Europe, and Responsive Europe.

## Normative Europe

The normative vision of Europe contrasts progressive, democratic, and universal values with the narrow nationalist logics of competition and bargaining in the EU. This approach to the EU is process driven and non-instrumentalist, i.e. it emphasises the importance of democratic participation and engagement over and above any short-term economic gains.

The proponents of Normative Europe tend to favour input legitimacy over output legitimacy and see the construction of a democratic, liberal Europe as a goal to be strived for. This vision of a normative Europe emphasises human rights, equality, and the rule of law, as well as the idea of the EU as a peace project:

*"Of course, the idea of Europe it's really big there […] And this idea of Europe working together in cooperation, in order to prevent war, or an unknown conflict, I think this is one value that you can extract out of history."* (Civic Activist, Austria)

European integration as a values-based endeavour is a recurring theme among many civil society actors. This is not a new argument, although it may be expressed in new ways and with a new sense of urgency. It was important in the democratic expansions of the EU as former military dictatorships Greece, Portugal and Spain joined the club in the 1980s. It also animated the negotiations with former communist states after the peaceful revolutions of 1989. Since 1993, accession countries are expected to meet the so-called Copenhagen Criteria that include democracy, human rights, the rule of law, and protection of minorities. For many civil society actors we interviewed, the idea of Europe as a protector of rights and freedoms remains strong:

*"[Civil society is] perceiving the EU as an opportunity. It's both in terms of funding, but also, you know, freedom of travel, but basic freedoms and principles that the EU is standing up for. So, when it comes to human rights protection, but also basically empowerment of the society in general" […] "[M]any of these people actually perceive the EU as a kind of "check and balance". […] [T]here are some rules of the game that cannot be changed, and here is the EU, to protect them. So, this community of principles of law, has certain values and norms."* (Think-tank Analyst, Czechia)

Scholars have highlighted the impact of the process of 'Europeanisation'– the spread of the EU's norms and ideas throughout the member states – that mainly applied to institutions and political processes. This kind of trickle-down effect is also highlighted by civil society:

*"Europe determines a lot of the life of Europeans every day. The regulatory power of Europe is huge and the right changes at the European level translate in positive results for all the European citizens."* (Civic Activist, Belgium)

The idea that European integration was about aligning with a set of norms and values was especially prevalent in the discussions surrounding the accession of post-authoritarian states of Southern and Central-Eastern Europe:

*"I mean, probably this whole value approach is something that was our new thing that we brought to the European discourse. Because, as I said before, [in the past] it [the approach to Europe] was always really pragmatic and economic, not really, not really ideological."* (Movement-Party Activist, Slovakia)

We now know that both in terms of the economy (euro, austerity), and the rule of law and pluralism (Hungary, Poland), the effects of institutional Europeanisation have been a mixed bag at best. In some cases, the perceived imposition of rules from Brussels has led to criticism of the European decision-making process, followed by either disenchantment with the EU or outright conflict over sovereignty. This point of view is captured well by a representative of a Central European association dealing with the rights of migrants. They maintain that the issue of refugee relocation in 2015 was mishandled by the EU and was perceived as an imposition from Brussels – and that perception has made their work that much harder ever since:

*"The EU's progressive value set has not been properly discussed with the Slovak public opinion. […] People think that Slovakia as a country is not properly represented at the decision-making table in Brussels."* (Civic Activist, Slovakia)

Equally, civil society activists criticise their political elites for adopting an instrumental approach towards Europe that is devoid of values and ideas. One of the respondents from a South European advocacy group highlights that the two main parties in Greece "saw European integration through a transactional lens" (Movement-Party Activist, Greece).

Similarly, a respondent from a Central European political movement explains that while Polish society is strongly in favour of European integration, support of the political class for the EU is driven by a transactional approach. The movement, in contrast, wants to see a genuinely closer European integration driven by values: "cosmopolitanism, welfare universalism, and socialism […] [and] while traditional parties are focused on interest-driven intergovernmental bargaining, [they see Europe as] a source of progressive legislation with regard to the economy and society - for example on the environment" (Movement-Party Activist, Poland).

Many actors naturally associate European values with tangible gains from European integration, such as 'Social Europe' and the 'Green Transition'. A political movement from Central Europe sees the EU as a "union of values and not just economic integration". In their political platform they highlight Europe as a "guardian of peace, of the rule of law, as well as the European Social Model" (Movement-Party Activist, Slovakia). Similarly, for one of the transnational political parties we spoke to Europe stands for "peace, social equality, human rights, [but also] progressivism and pragmatism." They cherish the most the EU's achievements as an "environmental guardian" (Movement-Party Activist, Transnational).

Building on this, a representative of a transnational think-tank elaborates that "European values are civic values based on the rule of law and fundamental freedoms" enshrined in the "ECHR, the Treaties and the Charter of Fundamental Rights". For them these "values are European because they are an expression of common will of the peoples of Europe, rather than a cultural essence of Europeanness of any sorts" (Think-tank Analyst, Transnational). This is an anti-essentialist approach to European values, which are not derived from a particular religious or cultural source but from a legal and political community.

Civil society's approach is non-instrumental in so far as it sees Europe as a guardian of values, rather than a mechanism for delivering short-term economic goods. It is about achieving social cohesion across the continent: "We strongly believe that youngsters participating in the community life make the community more democratic.

For this reason, the idea of Europe delivers what we want to do. Europe is not only an international organisation but an idea of society which promote democracy, participation, diversity, welfare, etc. supporting people in their lives" (Civic Activist, Croatia).

Going even further, a representative of a civic organisation that advocates strengthening European citizenship explains that this value-setting agenda goes beyond the European political field: "We want European citizenship based on the principle of political equality. Europe matters as a "pole" for freedom, rule of law and human rights in an increasingly unstable (Populist) world" (Tink-tank Analyst, Germany).

The normative vision of Europe came through in our survey as well. As one respondent put it in their comments: "We stand for a more united Europe. Who? Embracing and nurturing diversity, conciliation, enhancing hope and encouraging individual efforts to work for a better welfare continent" (Survey, 2020). Respondents made repeated references to a more federal Europe as a political project and a destination, as well as a Europe based on values - with one respondent commenting that Europe was "a beacon of light to aspire to" (Survey, 2020).  Europe as a dream, or an ideal, was also mentioned, especially in the context of human rights and multi-culturalism.

Treating the EU merely as a resource, a playground for inter-governmental bargaining, and a scapegoat for failing national administrations has been the domain of many mainstream parties on both the right and the left of the political spectrum. Civil society offers an alternative vision of Europe as a custodian of norms and values and a protector of rights and freedoms.

## Popular Europe

Another vision of Europe that came through in our research is what we call popular Europe. This vision emphasises notions of decentralisation and participation, as well as subsidiarity – all seen as contributing to the democratisation of the EU. On the one hand, civil society demands a Europe where citizens, cities, and regions, are empowered and able to challenge the hegemony of nation-states in the workings of the European construction. On the other, civil society emphasises subsidiarity, arguing that Europe should only step in when necessary and that Europe-wide solutions should be adjusted to local conditions and realties. Our respondents believe that the combination of the two can go a long way in addressing current democratic shortcomings of the EU, and pave the way for a more democratic Europe.

Civil society groups want to include citizens, and local actors, in policymaking. In other words, they want to see a bottom-up approach to governance, which supplements national structures and the supranational institutionalism of Europe: "[The] European Union should solve the democratic deficit within its institutional system. People should be more involved in the decision-making" (Civic Activist, Croatia).

What different iterations of this vision seem to have in common is that, beyond decentralisation, they seek to do away with the elitism of Europe. We found consistent emphasis on citizen participation and consultation in (re)constructing Europe across our interviews and survey data. In terms of civic participation, the inclusion of citizens in the decision-making process is a reoccurring theme. It is seen as a way to alleviate the perceived, and actual, democratic deficit of the EU: "We think citizens should have a real voice in Europe. It is really important that citizens recover the confidence on Europe, and we think this will only be possible if Europe focuses its work in a Social Europe, in equality and citizens participation" (Civic Activist, Spain).

Localism, as a way of cutting out the middleman of the nation-state, is an important dimension of the popular vision of Europe, especially in the face of democratic backsliding and corruption in some member states. Our respondents suggest that this could be a strategy to circumvent corrupt and illiberal national governments when it comes to the transfer of European funds: "We are supporting that funds should be received by communities and smaller levels of organisations who can use them, like municipalities, companies, directly" (Movement-party Activist, Hungary). That approach would help elevate the role of municipalities, cities, and regions in European governance, alongside member states.

It would also allow local actors to pursue policies pertaining to issues of European significance, such as addressing irregular migration and refugee resettlement: "One key priority is to achieve an EU fund that directly funds cities and municipalities across Europe to host and integrate refugees and asylum seekers" (Think-tank Analyst, Germany).

Subsidiarity is a key feature of the popular vision of Europe. Europe should only step in when necessary. Europe-wide solutions should be adapted to take into account local conditions and priorities, and local actors should have as much agency as possible in putting them into practice. Policymaking and policy implementation should be as local as possible, and thereby accountable to citizens: "New regulations and parliament initiatives should be more disseminated to the grass-roots so that citizens are aware of the accountability and competences of the EU in comparison to their national governments. Information management is a responsibility and provides accountability" (Civic Activist, Belgium).

While this 'popular Europe' mind-set is shared by all types of civil society actors we studied, we found that transnational actors already may practice what they preach. For example, representatives of a transnational political party-movement maintain that "Europe's problems do not stop at national boarders," and that "the idea is that Europe is not made up of governments, it's made up of people, and all these people have potential to affect change, and improve on things that they don't like, and find the forms to problems or […] solutions to challenges that they may see. […] European democracy cannot be done by alliances between different national parties […]" (Movement-party Activist, Transnational). Their political platform, and governance practice, is predicated on wanting to "make policies more accessible to [the] people", namely they envision a policy-making structure that "keeps people in the loop" beyond the electoral cycle (Movement-party Activist, Transnational).

Civil society, especially at the grass-roots level, sees itself as playing a central role in achieving a more popular Europe and fostering connections with ordinary citizens. Some respondents argued that subsidiarity depends on civil society: "There is the principle of subsidiarity in the European Union […]. I think decisions should quite clearly be done at the lowest possible level and this should be a very, very important claim on behalf of civil society […]" (Civic Activist, Greece).

Popular Europe is, fundamentally, a vision of a more democratic Europe of citizens, cities, and regions, alongside nation-states, where civic participation is at the heart of making decisions and policies as well as their implementation.

# Responsive Europe

Europe has been exposed to a series of global threats in the twenty-first century: the financial, migration, and climate crises, as well as the COVID-19 pandemic. Civil society want Europe to step up its response to such emergencies and to pursue adequate continent-wide solutions.

One respondent from a movement-party conveyed the need for Europe to play a decisive role, despite current public sentiments:

*"Stop thinking that Italy can be and exist independently of Europe, that is the underlying message. There are some Italians that think Italy should come first, and for them this does not go down well. (…) So, I think our message is rightly opposed to the current trends of Italians from all sides, by the way, not just old ignorance but also from young and educated there is this really almost identarian movement which is gaining a lot of ground. And we are going against the current."* (Movement-party, Italy)

While many of our respondents speak of finding "European solutions to European problems", they would like to see greater inclusion of diverse perspectives and social actors in society in policy debates (discussed in more detail in the previous section). The areas where Europe should play a greater role include democratic reform, economic inequality, as well as the climate, health, and migration/refugee emergencies. As one respondent from an education platform summed up: "Migration, Transition to a Green Economy (Mobility, Food, Jobs), Democratic Reform, [and] Health" (Think-tank Analyst, Germany).

The rationale for a united European approach to the big problems facing European societies came through in a number of the interviews. While not new, that rationale is often forgotten and sometimes directly undermined by many politicians in Europe: "We see a united, democratic Europe as the only means to address shared challenges faced by its citizens, be it climate change, social inequality or migration. Because in an alliance of national governments national voter mandates are pitted against each other, they tend to produce at best lowest-common-denominator solutions which aren't sufficient" (Movement-party Activist, Transnational).

The same group argues that "[a] democratic Europe requires true European parties instead of loose, disparate alliances of national parties. [They] aim to spearhead this development, while at the same time set an example when it comes to democratic participation even outside election cycles, as well as in terms of transparency." (Ibid.).

Democratic reform, or putting a stop to the backsliding of substantive democracy, in Europe is on the minds of many civil society actors, especially those in Central and Eastern Europe, where the breaches of democratic norms have been most egregious lately. A transnational advocacy group from the region wants the EU to "support/build more bottom-up EU-wide democratic civic education to outlive/surpass authoritarian leadership in particular countries". They maintain that would probably require "building EU cohesion instruments on welfare to avoid welfare competition" (Think-tank Analyst, Poland).

This connection between democracy and economic inequality is also highlighted by a Polish party-movement who outline an array of specific policies that the EU should implement in order to "achieve solidarity and democracy on a European level". These include, "a European minimum wage, institutionalization of transnational workers' councils, decriminalization of drugs, and a true Green New Deal" (Movement-party, Poland). Another respondent highlighted the same connection from the perspective of young people: "Fifty per cent of European youth under 25 are unemployed and are badly effected by COVID19 we need to ensure a bright future, or we will have a lost generation with no faith in the European ideals" (Civic Activist, Transnational).

With reference to the COVID-19 health emergency, an activist from a transnational advocacy group argued that they "very much support the idea of a European Health Union and full political rights for European citizens living in other European member states [and] hope that the Conference on the Future of Europe will be citizens cantered" (Civic Activist, Transnational).

Migration remains an issue of concern for civil society. On 1 January 2021, more than 3 million European citizens effectively became migrants in the United Kingdom. A local advocacy group argued that the EU should take measures aimed at "protecting EU citizens' rights in the UK and also the future of democratic rights (voting and standing in elections in different EU countries) […] The impact of COVID-19 on migrants also merits urgent consideration," they claim (Civic Activist, UK).

A somewhat federalist sentiment is still present among civil society and some groups would like to see more Europe in almost every domain, for example to "really encourage more European education, a European social security system, European assuring for employment, European pensions, more European instruments to really care about Europeans… the [national] political parties that are acting in them obtain more benefits focusing on national issues, topics rather than European ones" (Civic Activist, Spain).

The survey comments provide further insight about the responsive vision of Europe. There are calls for significant reforms to make the EU better suited to meet future challenges, such as treaty reform and more political rights for citizens. There are many references to the need for greater solidarity, for example in a call for "creating local national and transnational interactions between citizens and parliament members and commissioners" (Survey 2020). Renewed calls for a constitutional draft for the EU to promote democracy also appear. There are also references made to the EU as a security community. Respondents mention the need for the EU to act as a security framework for member states, and face up to future challenges.

A civil society vision of a more responsive Europe emerges from the assimilated experience of past and current crises and threats, many of them global and transnational in character, as well as an anticipation of those that lie ahead.

# 4. The third dimension: A theory of change for European civil society?

## From 45-degree change to the 'third dimension'

Civil society groups operating at the level of national politics have been referred to as creating ecosystems based on the idea of '45 degree change, the diagonal fault line through which a new society can and must be born'.[12] This runs between the vertical axis of institutional politics and the horizontal axis of the 'pure' social movement and is seen as the 'sweet spot' in which change becomes possible (see Figure 4). We find this description useful in capturing the behaviour of the groups and movements that we have mapped. They tend to observe the strategic horizon of the '45 degree'. Ant they operate in an ecosystem that connects political parties, NGOs, academia etc. with social movement organising.

**Figure 4: 45 degree change. From Lawson (2019)**
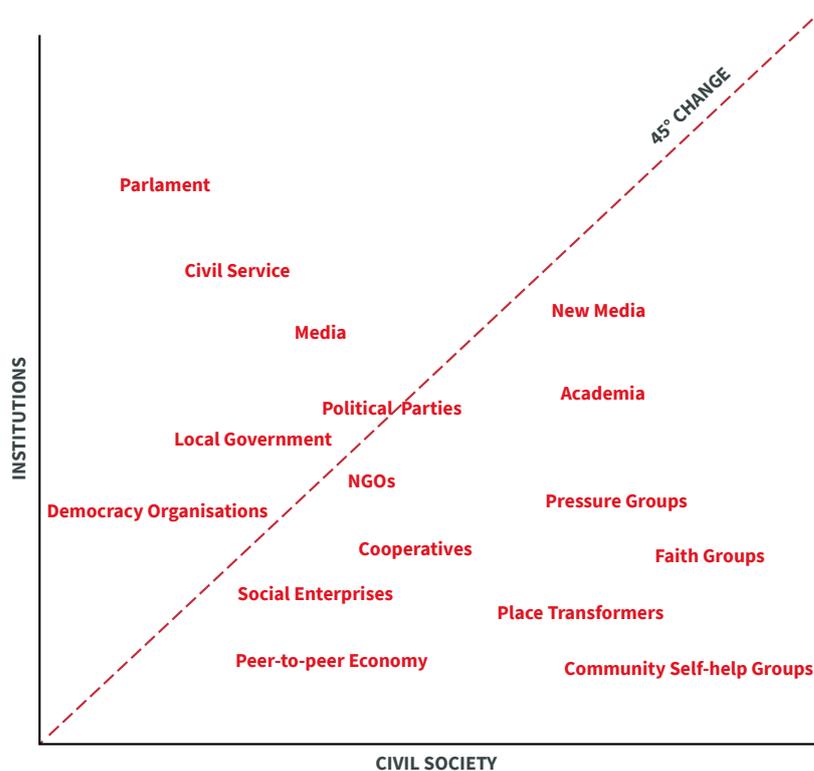


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However, at a European level the nature of the '45 degree' ecosystem becomes more complex in its organisation and outlooks. This reflects the challenges that the European institutional space – and its various 'layers' of sovereignty – pose to transnational and pan-European civil society. Indeed, European political space introduces what can be called the 'third dimension' – a third axis – which lies in the transnational character of the activity.

Both institutional politics and civil society interactions take place across borders. This creates networks of activity within and beyond the 'capital' of Brussels. And today it has generated something akin to a European public sphere: a world of discussion and debate on the future of Europe that is seeking to capture the 45-degree diagonal fault line but at a new, transnational level.

wwwThis transition from a two-dimensional axis to a three-dimensional level is presented in Figure 5. It offers the starting point for the development of a theory of change for actors operating within European civic space.

**Figure 5: Adding the 'third dimension' to civic space, 45-degree change at the European level**
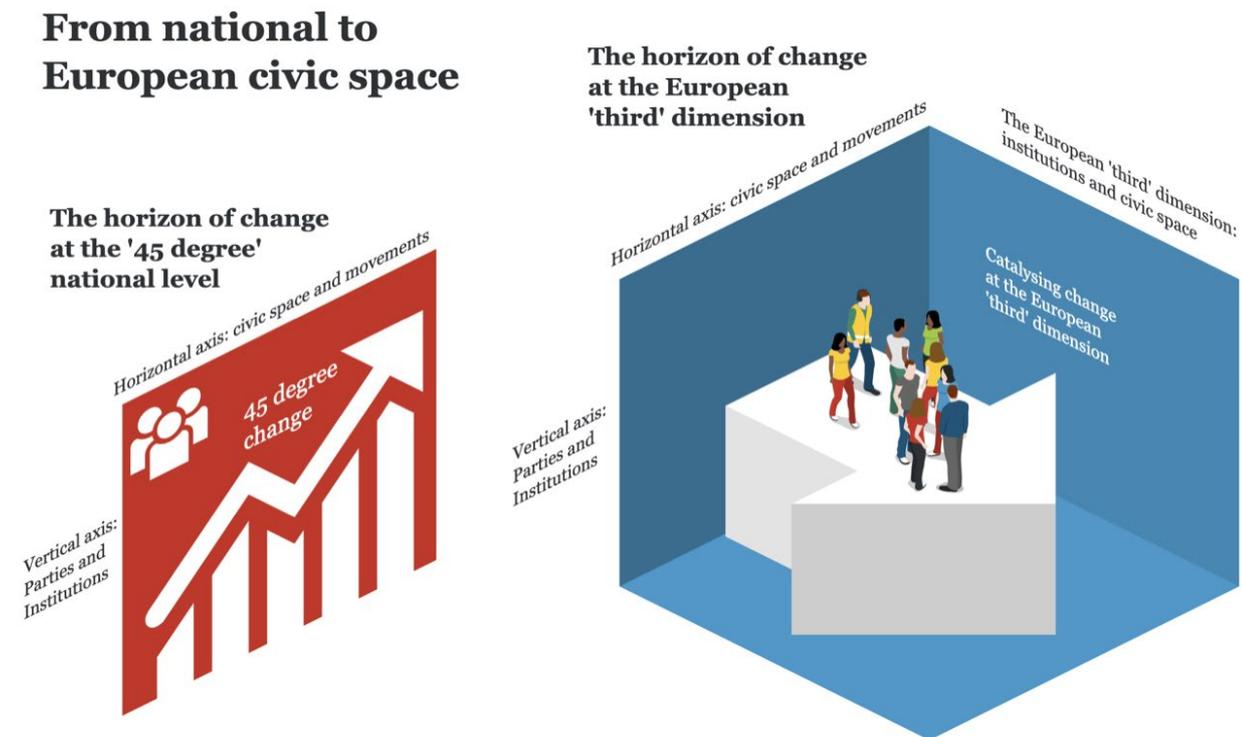


## A theory of change for the third dimension

Our research uncovered an implicit theory of change for civic actors operating at the third dimension of European civic space, combining institutional politics, social movements and the transnational level of organising. The theory of change is holistic, as outcomes at each level of analysis feed into the development of the circular logic. We identified the following levels: crisis as impetus, systemic critique, primacy of values, and these feed into the dynamic of mobilisation, outreach and public engagement.

## *Crisis as impetus*

*"This international of nationalists is the real paradox of our times. We need to build a common front [against it] at the European level which is progressive and green at the same time."* (Elly Schlein, Activist-politician, Vice President of Emilia-Romagna, former MEP)

*"Authoritarian right-wing populists are a threat. The fight against nationalism and extreme right should be organised in an international framework."* (Alper Tasdelen, Mayor of Cankaya, Ankara)

*"We need a complete restructuring of the economy, not just a few environmental taxes, to prevent climate catastrophe."* (Caroline Lucas MP, Green Party)

## *Systemic critique*

*"The Ukrainian kleptocratic elite is embezzling funds and they are spending them in the developed world… Everything is… ready [here in London for them] to enjoy life. They make easy money in Ukraine… And… intoxicate your democracy and your financial systems… It's not enough for Europe to come to Ukraine and saying, "You guys are corrupt. Clean up yourself. And then we will probably help" … [We reply and]… say that listen guys. You're corrupt as well. You are part of the problem." (Daria Kaleniuk, Ukrainian Anti-corruption Activist)*

*"The capture is deep and is actually going throughout all our institutions, European, but, as well, national institutions… I mean as it is, it's gonna be defeating us. It's spreading corruption. It's of course alienating the citizens from the governments. So we are handing the extreme right wing all the ingredients to exploit, against democracy and against - of course - the democratic and peace project that is the European Union."* (Ana Gomes, Portuguese Socialist, former MEP)

## *Primacy of values*

*"There is a failure of democratic education. And of course that doesn't just mean the failure of the school system. But a more general failure of promoting a culture of democratic values in a post-communist society."* (Rafal Pankowski, Scholar-activist with Never Again Association, Poland)

*"We are in favour of the European Union. But in a different, not conventional way. We seek a Europe of the people, of different connections between the people, a Europe of solidarity where the poorest countries and regions are supported. A Europe that raises the development of the poorest regions… A Europe of rights, for refugees and other minorities, a Europe that taxes the big multinationals and data companies."* (Makis Balaouras, Greek Pro-democracy Activist and former politician)

## *Mobilisation, outreach and public engagement*

These methods can be separated into those focused on direct public engagement (public events, petition campaigns, street protests, public education stalls, online events), engagement with the public filtered by media and social media, and lobbying and outreach to decision-makers. The theory of change is presented in Figure 6.

**Figure 6: A theory of change for civil society at the third dimension**



Groups and individuals seeking change at the third dimension operate with a holistic methodology and analytical approach. They do not hold the emergence of the radical right to be an aberration that might be corrected through a return to a 'normal' political modus operandi. Rather they argue that the rise of the radical right is a symptom of wider systematic failings. For example, in our workshops there was a strong tendency to link financial liberalisation (the ease with which money can move across borders, often with very little transparency) and the corruption and crony capitalism that the new radical right are associated with. Once seen in tandem with current inequalities, and the backlash against multiculturalism and social liberalism, this provides the ingredients for a 'capture' of democratic institutions. Consequently, breaking the cycle of regression requires political and economic reform efforts; and the holistic approach can therefore generate an anti-systemic, transformative politics.

Groups and individuals at the third dimension also tend to operate with a register that asserts the primacy of values. These provide a range of normative perspectives from which to assess the current trajectory of Europe. They inform concrete policy responses; for example, the policies that follow from treating the refugee crisis as a humanitarian issue, rather than a security one. These also feed into how civil society conceptualises the process of political reform. They critique conceptions of reform based on a series of elite-based manoeuvres and assert instead a preference for citizens-based, deliberative engagement.

The 'crisis as impetus' implies a prognostic realism regarding the relationship of the status quo to the potential dangers ahead. For example, we found that groups and individuals operating at the third dimension have created networks of knowledge production and transmission that bring light to the complexities of social change in Europe. Hence, while in some countries the far right is cast as seeking to 'roll back' fundamental rights and freedoms, in others discussion has centred on the limitations and contradictions of post-communist transition; how, for instance, the creation of competitive democratic systems was juxtaposed in some places (e.g. East Germany, Poland) to the loss or erosion of certain fundamental rights such as access to abortion. These networks of knowledge production and distribution operate in real world and digital spaces, they create ecosystems of political thought which are then leveraged to seek substantive change.

# 5. Conference on the Future of Europe

Our research captures some of the hopes and concerns of civil society with regard to the forthcoming Conference on the Future of Europe, announced by Commission President Ursula Van Der Leyen as part of 'a new push for European democracy' following her appointment in September 2019, which is likely to start with one year delay on 9th May 2021. Our respondents highlighted that the success of the Conference would depend on active and meaningful participation of citizens and civil society. There is a risk that the conference will not be taken seriously, as has been the case with similar exercises in the past, and an important opportunity for Europe will be missed: "To prevent this, the Conference must be carefully designed, ensuring an open, transparent, inclusive, and participatory process, including a clear role for civil society, and there must be a strong commitment for meaningful implementation of its outcome" (Survey, 2020).

When asked what the Conference should look like to help them achieve their goals, most respondents emphasised citizen participation, inclusivity, and engagement (see Figure 7). Making sure that citizens from all countries and regions have a say: "The goal is to ensure inclusiveness and transparency throughout the whole process" (Survey 2020). Some suggested this could be achieved by using "[d]igital platforms (surveys, crowdsourcing, e-voting) [made] accessible to individual citizens or to representatives following face to face meetings at different geographical levels" (Survey 2020). Commitment to change is a central concern for civil society. A number of our respondents emphasise that the EU must put into action any recommendations arising from the Conference, and worry that failing to do so might reflect negatively on the EU as a whole.

**Figure 7: What should the Conference on the Future of Europe look like so that it can contribute to achieving your goals? (Survey, 2020)**
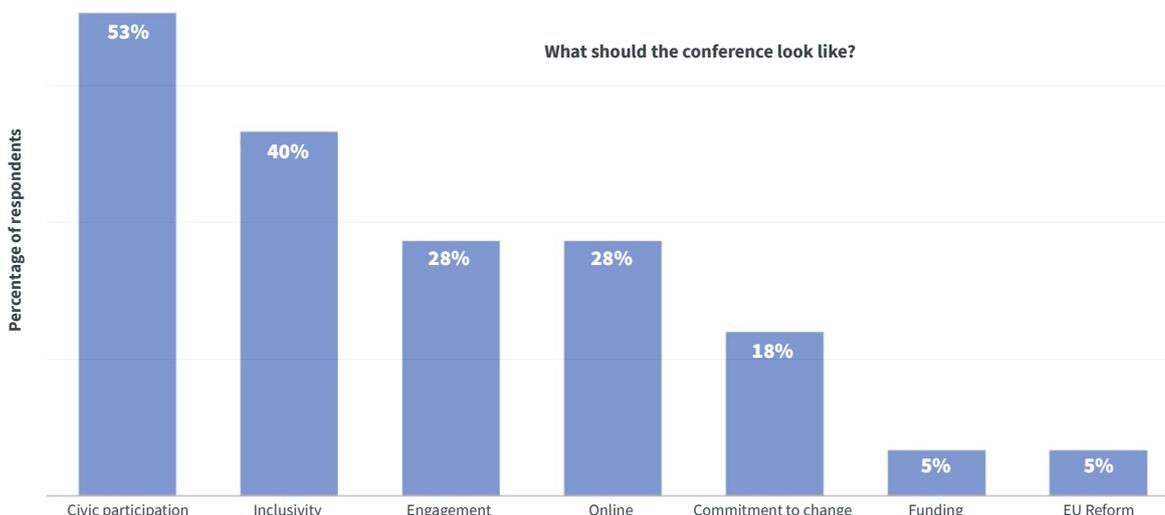
Civil society should be able to participate and contribute at all stages of the process; ideally, the Conference "should be co-created with civil society and be given a real mandate by EU member states and institutions" (Survey 2020). Our survey suggest that civil society is keen to participate. When asked about their ability to contribute to the Conference, 50 per cent of respondents were 'positive' and 10 per cent 'somewhat positive', and many pointed to their track record of public engagement. Among respondents who worry about their ability to contribute, the main factors mentioned include how the Conference would be set up, what methods would be used and whether they would enable them to participate. Others worry that civil society organisations that are not well-resourced and connected may not be able to contribute at all.

When asked what issues should be raised there, respondents are focused primarily on ensuring that citizen participation is made a priority in the EU at large. Concern for the environment and a desire for the EU to take on more effective policies against climate change was also mentioned. This is often raised in connection to employment and general sustainability. Equally important is EU reform (including Treaty change). The protection of democracy in the member states is a priority for many activists, including the fending off of authoritarianism and populism, as well democracy at the European level: "[M]ain focus should be the democratic functioning of the institutions: the citizens must be able to influence politics on European level at least by their votes" (Survey 2020). A few respondents are concerned about migrants' rights, as well as the EU's external role and the "future of the EU in a global world with China and US focused on their interests" (Survey 2020).

**Figure 8: What issues should be raised at the Conference on the Future of Europe? (Survey, 2020)**
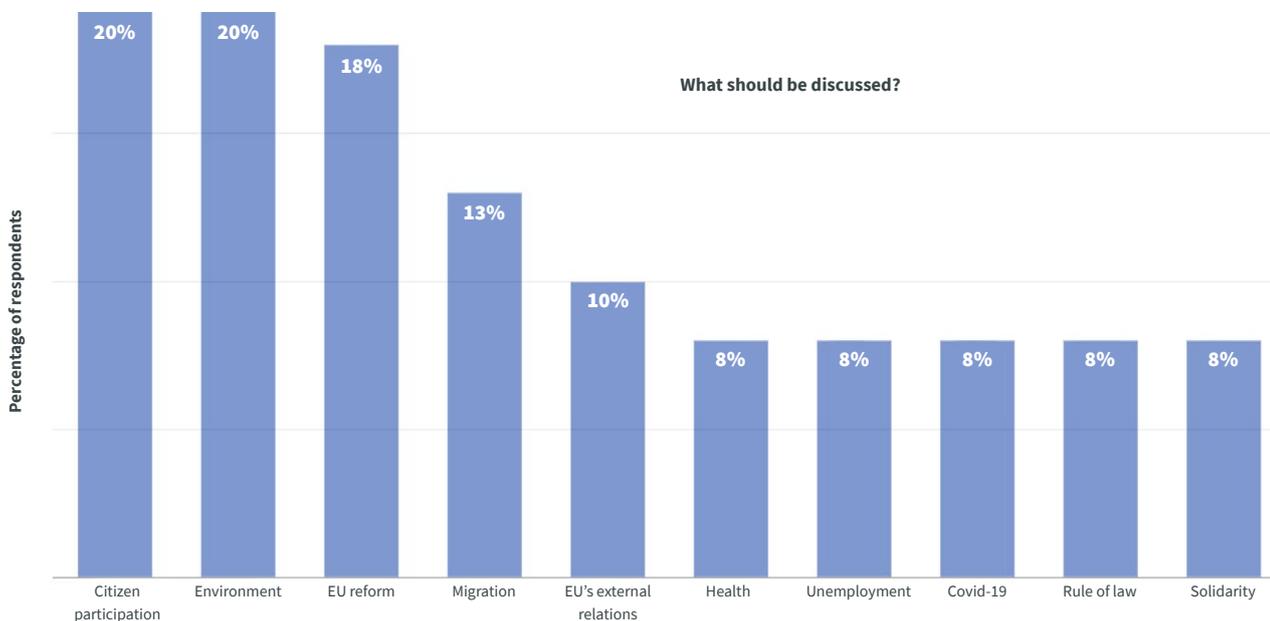


When it comes to desired outcomes, respondents again emphasise the need for EU reform and, more generally, a genuine commitment to change. This is often connected to a wish to make the EU more democratic as a whole, through increased citizen participation. As one respondent put it: "Our own wish, of course, is a set of reform proposals to create a true democracy" (Survey 2020).

# 6. Implications and Takeaways

## The changing form and content of European civil society

The main conclusion of our research is that the fabric of civil society has changed dramatically in Europe over the past fifteen years of crises. Both the issues around which civil society in Europe mobilises, and the organisational forms this activity takes have changed, in the context of rapid technological, communications, and geopolitical developments.

One picture that emerges is of an older, more institutionally-anchored, sectorial and often more hierarchically-organised formal civil society concerned with European affairs – structured around a tripartite ideological divide between a traditional European federalism modelled on the United States of America, a more 'confederate' model, and a Eurosceptic nationalist position – which is challenged and disrupted by a more fluid, newer and more transversal set of civil society actors addressing themselves to European affairs, who find the ideological categories of the longstanding federalism debate unsatisfactory and outmoded.

In one sense, this change in the forms of civic mobilisation has come late to 'European' civil society: already a decade ago 'movement-parties', occupations of squares, the social network imaginary were all leitmotifs of a new generation of civic activism, but one which did not systematically thematise 'Europe'. If something of this spirit has now reached a European scale, its 'lateness' can be explained in part by a process of diffusion from localised and national experiments to a European scene which is more complex, and partly by a strategic consideration of the actors concerned: in several European countries the relative success of authoritarian political forces in 'capturing' the institutions of the state has led to civil society actors with a different value set displacing their activity onto a European stage.

More fundamentally, however, the relevance of 'European' affairs has become more central to the concerns of civil society and citizens in general, and this has changed the meaning of being an active citizen. The European dimension is inescapable in any discussion about issues of high concern for democracies in Europe, not least because of the systemic nature of the crises of the past 15 years: the financial system, movements of people, the pandemic and the threat to the climate all affect every aspect of social and political life. Moreover, for each of them it has become obvious to almost everybody that the role and orientation of the European Union cannot be ignored.

An implication of this increased everyday, inescapable relevance of the European dimension is that the geography of European civil society changes: to be a civil society organisation with a 'European' vocation no longer requires an office in Brussels, a network across borders or a claim to 'represent' national member organisations, a special focus on or access to the European institutions, or (for accession countries) a mission oriented to preparing the population for joining the EU. European affairs is now something that can be done locally, and can even be done as an action of an individual. In some respects, it could be argued that the European civil society scene has come full circle, returning to something analogous to various moments in the history of the Union when (re)constructing Europe was also a personal struggle of large numbers of citizens and not the exclusive preserve of politicians or civil society professionals: movement-organisations with slogan-names like 'Stand Up for Europe', or 'Pulse of Europe' are testaments to the pertinence of this personalised appeal.

Yet the political context is of course radically different to previous epochs, and those civil society organisations acting on the three-dimensional 45° axis between the vertical, horizontal and transnational, are in reality fighting on several fronts, including more/less Europe, technocracy/popular participation, and a value-based culture war which influences the normative objectives of European policy.

Embedded in each of these struggles is also an epochal contest over the place of politics as such in collective life, in relation to technology, the economy, science and the media, and civil society cannot avoid this self-questioning over its own place and role and implications for democracy itself. In several ways European civil society appears to be 'on the cusp' of transformation. If the discussion in the public spheres of Europe has moved partially from a discussion of the legitimacy of the European Union as such to a discussion about what kind of European Union we should have and what specific policies should be, this debate is undermined by the paucity and ambiguity of renewed visions of the finality of the Union, and amongst 'pro-European' civil society there is a strong tendency to fall back rather uncomfortably onto unreconstructed normative federal views, which often mimic the nation-state at a simply larger scale. In this respect the recent 'Green turn' of European affairs, under sustained and decades-long pressure from citizen mobilisation as well as scientific authority, perhaps offers some prospect of a paradigm shift in the democratic imagination and a more radical questioning of modes of life and temporalities of political responsibility, albeit fraught with its own risks.

## Civil society navigates Europe's ambiguities with a holistic approach

We have seen that through the years of addressing interrelated crises civil society has articulated three visions of Europe: a normative vision about European values, a popular vision about democratic participation and citizenship, and a vision of a responsive Europe which is able to come up with effective, timely and just policy responses to common challenges. Civil society actors show a high degree of situational awareness in terms of coordination and role division between themselves, and crucially now demonstrate both a holistic approach to systems change and a prognostic realism about the shortcomings of the European Union and the likely challenges it will continue to face. If the timing and specificities of the financial, migratory and public health crises of the past decade were all to some extent unpredictable, many of the underlying failures in international governance and underlying injustices that each of these crises has exacerbated were widely identified by civil society in advance. Nevertheless, the specific relevance of the European Union as a political actor was largely underestimated, either through a lack of awareness of the degree to which European integration impacts and conditions almost every policy area, or through a complacency about the non-political and technocratic nature of the European Union, which has instead shown itself to be a complex and often contradictory set of political institutions which wield their considerable power in ideological ways.

Each of the visions has multiple internal dilemmas, in part the result of the collapse and/or complexification of a teleological federal vision of Europe. For example, should the EU be normatively understood primarily as a guardian in relation to its member states: a guardian of rights and the rule of law, a guardian of the long-term in contrast with short-term electoral objective of national politics? Or should the EU be normatively understood as an actor in its own right, unifying the member states into one voice at least in some areas (in geopolitical affairs, for example)? Does the EU already have everything it needs constitutionally to be a functioning democracy, and the issue is to ensure the treaties are adequately implemented, or is profound constitutional reform or even 'refoundation' required to make the EU responsive to the citizens as a democracy? Should the EU act flexibly and adaptively to respond to any risk that materialises, be it health, security, migration, economic… and if so, what is required to ensure the EU is such a flexible instrument, or should the competences of the EU be more tightly defined so that there is a clearer division of responsibilities between the EU institutions and the member states? These political questions may seem distant from the concerns of some civil society organisations, but talking about the European Union and developing strategies for change within requires either taking a view on the finalities of the process of European integration, or dealing with its ambiguous realisation so far.  If a particular federal vision of the European Union is no longer credible outside of small groups of Euro-enthusiasts, the unfinished form of the European project is still inescapable, and cries out for some content.

Each of these dilemmas and more require further investigation, not only as theoretical questions, but as popular questions and dilemmas negotiated day to day by civil society organisations in relation with citizens and in civil society forums. This investigation of the ways citizens and civil society organisations think, imagine and act in a context of uncertainty over the future destination of European integration is what is required to thoroughly renew our understanding of the macro dilemmas about the EU and its institutional form, which can no longer be treated as legal and constitutional questions without relation to a wider social context, and repertoires and strategies of action which form the meaning of living in the European Union and its neighbourhood day to day.

## Implications for the European institutions

The implications of these shifts in the form and content of European civil society over the past years ought to be dramatic for the European Union. The last time the EU asked itself seriously about its relationship with civil society was around the turn of the millennium, in the Commission White Paper on European Governance in 2001 and in the 'Convention on the Future of Europe', which drafted the Treaty Establishing a Constitution for Europe by 2003. The White Paper led to significant change of practice of the Commission when it comes to openness, transparency and consultation of a plurality of stakeholders. The Convention introduced what would become articles 10 and 11 of the Lisbon Treaty (after the rejection of the draft constitution), which introduce elements of participatory democracy into the European Union's democratic principles alongside representative democracy. Specifically, Article 10 affirms the right of every citizen to 'participate in the democratic life of the Union', and Article 11 enumerates four kinds of participation:

> *1. The institutions shall, by appropriate means, give citizens and representative associations the opportunity to make known and publicly exchange their views in all areas of Union action*

> *2. The institutions shall maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with representative associations and civil society*

> *3. The European Commission, within the framework of its powers, to submit any appropriate proposal on matters where citizens consider that a legal act of the Union is required for the purpose of implementing the Treaties…*

It is fair to say that Article 10 and 11 'potentially' introduce highly significant changes to the European Union's own conception and practice of political legitimation: introducing what could be construed as a right to forms of participatory democracy, and innovative tools such as the European Citizens Initiative (ECI) which is the first transnational instrument of participative democracy.

When it comes to the practical implementation of Article 11, at least three issues have caused significant obstacles. Firstly, beyond what could charitably be called 'teething problems' in setting up the procedures of the ECI, the European Commission has shown itself to be particularly reticent to take up any of the initiatives that have succeeded in getting over 1 million signatures, leading to some degree of disillusionment with the instrument amongst its promoters. This reticence is surely not disconnected from the dominance of the European Council in the European policy circle, whereby the Commission is unlikely to take up any initiative which does not coincide with a project of the most powerful members of the Council.

Secondly, the European Parliament, jealous to guard and reinforce its own power, has sometimes seen new participatory instruments as a threat. An important reinforcement of the ECI procedure was to introduce a hearing of successful ECIs in the European Parliament, with a view to giving the citizen promoters a stage and the Parliament a role, but this has also tended to assimilate ECIs to some extent with the Parliament's own petition procedure (which has no minimum number of signatures and so is much more accessible).

Thirdly and most importantly, the implementation of Article 11 has been caught up in dilemmas about what is a 'representative' association? What kind of representation is involved here, and how does this form of

representation differ from that of elected representatives? How to establish which civil society organisations are representative, and of what? These dilemmas have been exacerbated by the profoundly changing form of civil society itself, which as we have seen is in its newest forms less concerned with structured 'representation' of sectors of society, and closer to spontaneous association of citizens albeit also with iconic figures often chosen by the media as spokespersons. Scepticism about representation as such, deliberate political attacks on the legitimacy of civil society organisations by populist political forces, the impression that Brussels-based 'European civil society' (which has often been created or sponsored top-down by the European institutions themselves, as is the case of the 'Platforms') has vested interests and is disconnected from wider society, and some successes of other forms of organised participation, such as citizens assemblies, have all pushed in the direction of the European institutions being more eager to exchange with citizens rather than organised civil society in their implementation of Article 11. Questions about what might be lost from the quality and durability over time of democratic engagement by only consulting with individual citizens rather than organised citizens remain largely unposed.

Lastly, Article 10 and 11 need to be looked at in the context of the entirety of the treaty and its implications for European governance, as well as the practice of the institutions. Here the major change of the past decade has been the dominance of the European Council, and the increased relative power of member states that this has implied, both as initiators of policy-making, as veto-players, and oftentimes in the context of crisis as by-passers of the EU altogether through the making of inter-governmental treaties. This increased importance of national governments in European policy-making easily outweighs any marginal improvements in citizen participation.

## Crisis management and the centrality of the Council

The pre-eminence of the European Council as the crucible of Europe's crisis management, has led to a corresponding downgrading of the role of the European Commission. When the Commission has attempted to regain the initiative during each crisis with, for examples, proposals around the sharing of financial risks, sharing of responsibility for welcome of refugees, or the development of a common approach to the Covid-19 pandemic, it has each time found its ambitions significantly curtailed by the member states.

This pre-eminence of the Council has the effect of creating strong tensions in the institutions between the three visions of Europe emerging from civil society. The normative vision of a Europe of values is compromised by member states using their veto threat at the Council as a bargaining tool for backsliding on European values and even ignoring the judgements of the European Court of Justice: the Hungarian and Polish governments holding the European budget hostage to the weakening of the rule of law mechanism is just a recent example. The nature of last-minute emergency decision making in the Council, which by its composition of heads of state and government and by its need for unanimity in many areas only manages to come to decision in extremis, means that the capacity of the European Union to be responsive often comes at the price of any popular involvement.

The agreement over the recovery funds of June 2020 in the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic is an example: a potentially 'Hamiltonian leap' in European economic integration, widely welcomed by political elites and specialists in European affairs, but agreed with no consultation, debate or popular deliberation whatsoever, with even the European Parliament largely bypassed. At worst, the Council's dominance leads to policy incoherence, moral failure and popular condemnation all at once, as with the widely denounced 'EU-Turkey deal' on migration, which neither solved the problem of 'irregular' arrivals, nor did anything to improve the conditions of migrants already on the European territory, and had the geopolitical consequence of handing financial resources and a powerful negotiating power to a neighbouring authoritarian regime with a disastrous human rights record.

# The Conference on the Future of Europe

The Conference on the Future of Europe ought to be a moment to address at once the institutional imbalance of the European Union and consolidate the place and role of civil society, thereby resetting the normative compass of Europe by anchoring it in an active citizenry, and breaking the stranglehold of the Council and short-termist national political cycles over the potential of the European Union to show strategic foresight and prudence.

The holistic approach of civil society to Europe's challenges is quite different to the piecemeal and technocratic fixes dominating the legalistic imagination of Europe's institutional actors, which tend to only address one problem at the price of making another one worse: giving more power to the Commission as a 'European government' may make the Union more responsive, but on its own will tend to exacerbate the democratic deficit; removing the unanimity requirement in the Council altogether (as is advocated in many federalist circles) will not on its own consolidate a common understanding of European values and fundamental rights, and may make democratic backsliding worse; introducing transnational lists and common electoral provisions for the next European elections (an objective of Emanuele Macron at the origin of the Conference idea) may do something to make the exercise of popular European participation more transnational and reinforce the European Parliament, but on its own risks making political representation in the Union even less responsive to local realities and problems. Independently of each of these changes, which may in themselves be good ideas, anchoring the future of Europe in an active citizenry means maximising the possibilities for citizens to contribute to the collective intelligence of the Union, maximising the possibilities for the citizens to hold executive and administrative power to account in the Union – whether it is power wielded by European institutions, national or local governments, governmental agencies or administrations – and maximising the possibilities of civil society to show initiative and propose solutions to emerging problems.

As the Conference finally approaches following a year of negotiations over the personalities to run it, exemplifying the horse-trading in the Council and its disconnection from the preoccupations of civil society, there is a strong sense that a mix of inertia, institutional blockages, and a lack of ideas all risk combining in the Conference on the Future of Europe. If this is the case any interesting initiative for renewing the relationship between the EU and civil society will rather come from the margins, by civil society mobilising on the edges of the official Conference, by academics reflecting on the institutional proceedings and proposing alternative formats, and by journalists and media commentators who have become more adept at following European affairs over the past decade of crisis pointing out its shortcomings and starting debates on topics largely untouched by the institutional process (recent media debates over racism and Europe's attitudes towards its internal diversity are one good example of topics of high social pertinence but unlikely to be addressed in the Conference).

In this context civil society is likely to exercise its prognostic realism and not focus its efforts exclusively on the Conference on the Future of Europe, but rather strategically engage with those actors and institutions inside the Conference who may be most open to transforming the nature of European democracy. Asides from the most open and progressive members of the European Parliament, and individuals in the European Commission, there are two institutions that are rarely on the front pages of media discussions of European affairs, but offer particular opportunities precisely because of their unclear role in the European infrastructure: the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions.

# European Institutions in search of a role

The European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of Regions would both, in theory, seem to be ideally placed European institutions to welcome and interact with some of the newer currents in European civil society identified in this report. Often summarily dismissed as auxiliary institutions with no power in European decision making, the missions of the two institutions are nonetheless highly pertinent and most serious studies – as well as conversations with senior figures in the Commission – demonstrate that they can have significant influence on the content of European law-making when they act in a concerted and strategic way. Both institutions have seen their roles strengthened by the Lisbon Treaty, but neither is currently well constituted to promote a renewed relationship between civil society and the European institutions, complement representative democracy or reinforce the provisions of participative democracy. Proposals for reform of these institutions should be a centrepiece of any program for renewing the relationship between the European Union and civil society, and ought to be a topic in the Conference on the Future of Europe.

The European Economic and Social Committee is composed of 'representatives of the various categories of economic and social activity, in particular, representatives of producers, farmers, carriers, workers, dealers, craftsmen, professional occupations and representatives of the general public' (Article 257 EC Treaty). Its 329 seats are divided amongst the Member states who nominate the appointments, and the ESC Rules of Procedure organises these appointees into three groups that represent national employers organisations (Group 1), national trade unions (Group 2), and various other national socio-economic categories (Group 3). In addition to the unsatisfactory democratic credentials of the member states themselves appointing 'representatives' to a European chamber, the group structure has the consequence that employers and trade unions are reasonably well represented, but civil society in general and its organisations are particularly badly represented because of the incoherence of group 3, mixing for example civil society organisations which act in the general interest, or speak for youth or minorities, with farmers, medical associations or the craft sector.

As a result, 'structured dialogue' with civil society is at risk of being very confused and weak, and is a poor cousin of the dialogue with employers and trade unions that the EESC was built for through the Treaty of Rome in view of building support for the single market. In recent years, the Economic and Social Committee has become more strategic in making its resources (in terms of meeting rooms, translation and political access) available to civil society, which has given it a newfound dynamism and profile. In the perspective of reform, it is worth noting that the *Convention sur le Climat* in France, a deliberative citizens assembly on combatting climate change, was formally constituted by the *Conseil économique, social et environmental* of the French Republic, on which the European Economic and Social Committee is largely modelled. Also worth noting here is precisely the addition of 'environmental' concerns to the mandate of the Conseil in France in 2008, in the same reform that allowed citizens to petition it.

## The Committee of the Regions

The Committee of the Regions shares a similar problem in its mode of constitution to the ESC in as much as it is the member states that nominate representatives, which may tend to add to a culture of political clientelism inside the Committee. Established by the Maastricht Treaty, and thereby the youngest European institution, the Committee of Regions also has the unenviable task of trying to form a coherent assembly of highly heterogeneous sub-national forms of government. The role of the Committee has always been framed in terms of bringing Europe closer to the citizens. Jacques Delors notably said at its opening:

*[T]he task of the CoR is nothing less than to enhance the democratic legitimacy of the Union. That is why our Committee is so important: you will help to close the gap. Firstly, your involvement will bring the Union, perceived as being too distant, closer to local reality. You will be able to communicate local concerns and grass-roots reactions. The other side of the medal is that you will have the task of explaining Community policies to the people back at home.[13]*

As a consultative body, this task has usually been taken up by the Committee acting as a watchdog of subsidiarity in European law making, and focusing on impact assessment of Union policies. Our research into the importance of locality and municipalism in new forms of European civil society organisation suggests that there could also be a dynamic role for the Committee as a place of horizontal initiative between regions and citizens across Europe, generating new practices of dealing with common problems from migrant rescue to climate change, which may then become models of best practice for European-wide programs. Investigating the potential of the Committee of Regions to play this role, in synergies with other European programs for city twinning, interregional collaboration and development, cohesion funds and sharing of best urban practices would be another important area of further research and engagement.

Whatever happens in the coming year of the Conference on the Future of Europe, an epoch of refusing to talk about treaty change in the European Union following the rejection of the Constitutional Treaty is coming to an end. Even if it is with reluctance in many quarters – the Council, for example, has attempted to rule out talk of treaty change as part of the Conference itself (with unclear success) – the taboo has been broken. The implications of this are both that civil society also needs to be much clearer and more ambitious with its proposals, and that the institutions need to be mindful of their impending need to have treaty change accepted by the European population.

[13] J. Delors, President of the Commission at the inaugural plenary session of the Committee of the Regions in Brussels, 9 March 1994

# Recommendations for the Future of Europe

The European Union is a unique form of non-national governance which cannot sustain itself with limited contact outside of its own institutional ecosystem: it urgently needs to take account of the changes in the civil society fabric of Europe that has developed across borders and addresses itself to the European project. In order to open up the institutions to the energy of civil society, we propose four concrete initiatives for the future of Europe, which civil society ought to push for over the coming years independently of whether the Conference on the Future of Europe is a productive institutional exercise for doing so:

**1. Create a permanent European Citizens Assembly:** Recent experiences with citizens assemblies in Ireland, in Belgium, in France, in Germany and elsewhere have shown that a sortation-based format of citizen participation can create social consensus for change, can build social trust, and can reinvigorate politics. A European Citizens Assembly would be a pioneering transnational experiment which should be led by independent civil society, with a view to providing a permanent space in which the European Union can fulfil its obligations of dialogue with citizens and civil society under Article 11 of the Lisbon Treaty. The European Economic and Social Committee could potentially host this assembly, following the example of the French Economic, Social and Environmental Committee and the Convention sur le climat, or, more radically, the Strasburg seat of the European Parliament, unused for 3 weeks a month, could be put at the disposal of a European Citizens Assembly. The assembly, also as a physical place for European civil society to meet and organise, could serve each of the purposes of enriching popular participation in the EU, ensuring the EU benefits from the collective intelligence of its citizens in foreseeing emerging issues, and as a chamber independent of party politics in which the fundamental rights and values of the European Union are reaffirmed and deepened.

**2. Empower cities, regions and localities to take European initiative together with civil society:** The emergence of a civil society engaged with European affairs at a highly local level is one of the main research results of this project. This tendency in civil society is likely to develop considerably as the European Union becomes ever more relevant to local issues and as global systemic changes and risks have differentiated impacts in local contexts. The Committee of the Regions could become not only an institution responsible for assessing the potential and actual impact of European policies on localities and regions, but a space of proposition and pilot projects on a much wider scale than the EU currently promotes, fostering the collaboration of civil society and local government in pioneering trans-local solutions. This could not only lead to better and more innovative policies, but by promoting civil society and local government collaboration it could anchor and renew European civic participation where citizens live and work.

**3. Secure meaningful and inclusive European Citizenship:** European Citizenship has been to a large extent the neglected promise of the Maastricht Treaty, and through the decade of crises it has been particularly challenged: already prior to the financial crisis by expulsions of some minority group European citizens by founding member states of the Union, during the economic crisis by the emergence of 'golden passports' for the rich but the highly unequal status, degrees of social and economic protection of European citizens for the rest, through Brexit by the undermining of the security that ought to be provided by a fundamental citizenship status, and through the Covid-19 crisis by, amongst other things, border closures leading mobile European citizens often being stranded away from family, and many 'essential workers' in delivery, health and food services being put at greater risk than other citizens.

The crisis in welcoming migrants and refugees to Europe has been exacerbated by the derivative nature of European citizenship, creating divisions between 'third-country' nationals and European citizens.

In order to establish a solid and inclusive basis for civil society to act across the continent, as well as to affirm the open and humane values of the European Union, now is the time to emancipate European citizenship and ensure it provides a consolidated set of political, social and civil rights to everyone in the European Union. Together with this should be pursued an upgrading and extension of Europe's anti-discrimination and anti-racism provisions.

**4. Sustainably address Europe's social fractures:** Civil society across Europe has been responsive to the multiple crises affecting the continent, but fundamentally concerned with the social fractures which underlie, and have been exacerbated, by these crises.

Civil society has the impression that very little has been done to address these social fractures or their institutional causes such as the global financial architecture. As the Covid-19 pandemic runs into a historic recession, there is a danger of the cycle starting over again, with last minute, inadequate policy fixes found by the European Council which do not address fundamental problems. In the scope of the Green Deal, rich with the learnings emerging from civil society of the ways inequalities in education, in jobs and pay, in housing, in access to clean air, water, social services and a healthy environment and more can all in a context of systemic crisis and global risk become problems not only for the people directly concerned but for all of society, now is the moment to take decisive action to reduce Europe's gaping inequality problem. The Social Pillar agenda of the European Commission is in this timely, and civil society should mobilise to ensure it is extended and deepened to bring binding and ambitious commitments for member states and not just guidelines. Proposals for minimum wages and guaranteed income, rights to decent housing and utilities, the creation of socially useful, environmentally sustainable and decently paid jobs as part of a massive public program of green conversion, and ensuring global finance is working in the interests of democracy and not bypassing it, are all priorities for a future which shows it can learn from the mistakes of the recent past, as well as securing the material preconditions for healthy and equal democratic participation of citizens.

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