



Mapping civil dialogue practices in the EU institutions

STUDY



European Economic
and Social Committee



Mapping civil dialogue practices in the EU institutions

Final Report

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Foreword

By Séamus Boland

*President of the Civil Society Organisations' Group (2020-2025)
European Economic and Social Committee (EESC)*



It is with pleasure that I commend to you this **study on Mapping civil dialogue practices in the EU institutions**. This novel research was commissioned by the European Economic and Social Committee at the request of its Civil Society Organisations' Group and carried out by the Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS).

Observers of civil society development will be aware that the release of this study comes a **crucial point in time**. For its 2024-2029 term of office, the European Commission has pledged to *step up engagement with civil society* and to better *protect civil society in its work*.

In the face of geopolitical and socio-economic shifts, coupled with shrinking and shifting civic spaces, our social cohesion is being put to the test. In this context, **supporting independent civil society and creating lasting structures for dialogue must be of the utmost concern**.

With this study, **our objective is to contribute to the foundations** of this process! The EESC has long called for a more consistent approach to civil dialogue – defined here as the structured engagement between EU institutions and civil society.

However, if we are to strengthen civil dialogue in a sustainable and inclusive way, **we need to know what is already happening**.

Over the course of its history, the EESC has been a frontrunner. Since its creation in 1957 by the Rome Treaties, it has channelled the views of organised civil society to the EU institutions. The Committee functions according to established institutional practices, which are not part of this assessment.

In parallel, and over time, European institutions have developed various ways of engaging with civil society stakeholders. And while there is increasing appetite for participatory processes, **there is a lack of up to date and comparable data on the type of practices which are already in place**. This is why our Group decided to request an EESC study to map civil dialogue in the EU institutions, the first initiative of this kind since 2015!

Interestingly, the research shows that civil dialogue practices have increased. The reader will also learn that numerous challenges remain, such as a lack of guidelines for civil dialogue within and across institutions as well as issues of capacity. In other words, **while much has been done, now is the moment to launch a concerted effort to further structure civil dialogue**. An **inter-institutional agreement, as recommended by this study**, could harmonise existing initiatives and ensure sustainability as well as predictability for all actors concerned. The EESC, in my view, is well placed to facilitate this process.

To conclude, let me echo here the words of the researchers, whom I thank for their assessment: *In a world increasingly shaped by conflict, misinformation, and social polarisation, the EU must urgently reconsider the role of civil society and strengthen civil dialogue, not only as a foundation of institutional legitimacy, but also as a vital pillar for building a more resilient, inclusive, and participatory Europe*.

This study sets an initial milestone in this direction, and I encourage EU decision-makers, scholars and members of civil society alike to make full use of this resource. I wish you an insightful read!

Séamus Boland
July 2025

Abstract

This study maps civil dialogue practices implemented by EU institutions, namely the Council, the Parliament, and the Commission. It collects information on existing practices, followed by a comparative analysis that assesses the identified practices along selected dimensions. The assessment serves as the basis for the identification of challenges and areas for improvement. Through interviews, a focus group, and a workshop with experts and civil society members, the study provides insights on the current challenges facing civil dialogue at the EU level and suggests ways forward. The study highlights the fact that there is a lack of common framework for constructive and effective dialogue between EU authorities and organised civil society, complicating the institutionalisation of participation in EU governance. To tackle this challenge, we advocate that the EU, involving its policymaking institutions and other relevant players, such as the European Economic and Social Committee, should agree on concrete steps to realise the vision stated in Article 11 of the Treaty on European Union.

Executive Summary

Civil society plays a major role in shaping the economic and social environments of the European Union. They contribute to the democratic governance and the cohesion of the Union. Their expertise and knowledge help channel ideas and preferences from local communities to national and EU institutions, generating innovative solutions for the formulation and implementation of public policy. In the context of the European Union, civil dialogue—the structured engagement between EU institutions and civil society—serves as a key mechanism for ensuring transparency, accountability, and participatory democracy. Article 11 of the Treaty on European Union recognises this by mandating EU institutions to maintain an open, transparent, and regular dialogue with representative associations and civil society. However, the practical implementation of this commitment remains uneven, fragmented, and often poorly understood.

This study aims to map the current landscape of civil dialogue practices within the EU institutions. Through careful desk research, focus group discussion, interviews, and a survey, the study provides a brief descriptive comparative overview of these identified practices together with an analysis of existing barriers preventing the EU institutions from realising the full potential of civil dialogue.

The mapping exercise not only identifies existing civil dialogue practices within EU institutions but also provides a comparative analysis based on a set of predefined dimensions. These practices are assessed in terms of their regularity, structure, format, and outcomes, among other factors, to provide a comprehensive overview of the current state of play. Following the mapping and comparative analysis, the study examines the barriers to effective civil dialogue and presents corresponding recommendations. This analysis draws on data collected through a survey, desk research, and interviews with both institutional representatives and civil society actors. Preliminary recommendations were further refined through consultations with these stakeholders, who contributed to shaping their content and specificity.

A key finding of the study is the absence of a common framework for civil dialogue practices across EU institutions. The diverse approaches to implementation make it difficult to assess practices effectively, as there is no shared basis for comparison. This problem also leads to inadequate identification and exchange of best practices, as well as limited reflection for improvement. In short, the study recommends the EU institutions, together with other relevant bodies and stakeholders, such as the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) and organised civil society, agree on a concrete plan for the future of civil dialogue in the EU. Please also see the accompanying infographic (p. 4) that highlights some of the recommendations.

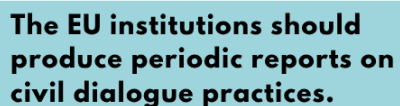
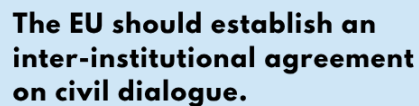
In addition, the study offers a brief overview of deliberative practices conducted by the EU institutions. Although these practices occur less frequently than civil dialogue, they are gaining traction and increasingly engage both officials and citizens, as well as the media. While deliberative democracy differs in principle from civil dialogue, where civil society organisations are central, there are valuable lessons to be drawn from deliberative processes that could enhance civil dialogue practices.

In this world troubled by conflicts, misinformation, and social polarisation, the EU urgently needs to reflect on the role of civil society and clear a path for civil dialogue, which is not only a matter of institutional legitimacy but also an important building block for a more resilient, inclusive and participatory Europe.

- should be held in an **open, transparent** manner, on a **regular** basis
- recognises proper **democratic structures**
- commits to **inclusion** and **equality**
- is supported by Article 11(2) of the Treaty on the European Union

[illegible]

Some highlighted recommendations



1. Introduction

Since the 2004 Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe, the role of civil society has been elevated to a central position within EU democracy. Civil society participation is increasingly regarded as an essential component of the EU's system of representative democracy,¹ which is often criticised for its 'democratic deficit'.² The heightened position of civil society is followed by more consistent use of civil dialogue, a form of consultative activities either between public authorities and civil society organisations (CSOs) or between CSOs, to form policy opinions and ideas. Civil dialogue, or more generally civil society participation in the EU policymaking process, would provide a much-needed legitimacy boost to EU governance.³

Although the importance of civil society and the inclusion of public voices in EU governance are widely recognised, the development of civil dialogue has been uneven across the various branches of EU institutions. The foremost challenge is that EU institutions do not share a common understanding of what constitutes civil dialogue. The absence of a common framework not only results in a lack of clarity regarding the policy outcomes of the dialogue, but also hinders effective evaluation of civil society's participation in EU governance.⁴ So far CSOs participation in EU governance is considered limited.⁵ Responding to the debate on civil society participation, Civil Society Europe has called for a more formalised and structured EU civil dialogue framework.⁶

An essential step to facilitate fruitful discussion is to map current civil dialogue practices in the EU institutions, despite the fact that such an endeavour may not be built upon a common understanding of what civil dialogue is. This study fills the gap and provides an overview of the status of civil dialogue implemented by EU institutions, namely the Parliament, the Council and the Commission. The mapping exercise collects some descriptive information of the identified practices, preparing a comparative analysis on the advancement of civil dialogue in the EU institutions. Furthermore, the mapping exercise and comparative analysis allow us to point to possible future reforms and paths for more inclusive, productive, and impactful civil society participation in EU governance, eventually enhancing not only the legitimacy of EU policymaking but also the resilience of the EU democratic system.

The study adopts a mixed-methods approach. It relies on data collected from official information in the public domain, interviews with EU authorities and CSOs, and a focus group discussion with some of the participants and the organising unit of a selected practice. The recommendations suggested by this study were co-created by the authors and the participants of a policy recommendation workshop. Throughout the process, the scope has been kept broad but manageable for a meaningful study.

¹ Kohler-Koch, B. (2013), 'Civil society and democracy in the EU'. *De-mystification of participatory democracy: EU-governance and civil society*, Oxford University Press, pp. 1-17.

² Follesdal, A. and Hix, S. (2006), 'Why there is a democratic deficit in the EU: A response to Majone and Moravcsik', *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 3, pp. 533-562.

³ Heidbreder, E. G. (2012), 'Civil society participation in EU governance', *Living Reviews in European Governance*, Vol. 7, No. 2.

⁴ Beger, N. (2004), 'Participatory Democracy: Organised Civil Society and the 'New' Dialogue', *Federal Trust Constitutional Online Paper No. 09/04*.

⁵ Kutay, A. (2021), 'Civil Society in European Governance: A Case Study', *NGOs, Civil Society and Structural Changes*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.

⁶ Civil Society Europe. (2022). *Open Letter: European Commission work programme 2023: the need to include the development of a European Civil Society Strategy*. <https://civilsocietyeurope.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Civil-Society-Strategy-letter-3.pdf>

The study is organised into three main components. First, we offer a brief discussion of key definitions to prepare readers for the subsequent analysis (Section 1), followed by an examination of the legal background and the current state of civil dialogue in EU institutions (Section 2). This section also outlines the role of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC). The second part comprises a mapping exercise and comparative analysis (Section 3), complemented by a case study of a selected practice (Section 4). Finally, we present the outcomes of the policy recommendation workshop with explanations of five highlighted recommendations (Section 5). Detailed explanations of some identified barriers are provided in the Appendix, which also includes a supplementary discussion on deliberative practices within EU institutions, offering further insights into the future of civil dialogue in the EU.

1.1 Definitions

1.1.1 Civil dialogue

Civil dialogue is, in general, exchanges between public authorities, civil society organisations, or civil society at large for the common good of society. A 2024 opinion by the EESC further advocates that civil dialogue ‘should be intended as a structured, long-lasting, results-oriented, and meaningful process enabling a genuine and substantive exchange of information, consultation, dialogue, co-creation of solutions to common challenges and long-lasting partnerships between public authorities, CSOs and civil society at large, which is designed to take place at all stages in the political decision-making cycle, from the framing of orientations and priorities to evaluation.’⁷ Currently, consultative activities or exchanges between public authorities and CSOs, or between CSOs themselves, vary widely in form and depth. These interactions are not always labelled as ‘dialogue’, making it difficult to map and assess the extent and progress of civil dialogue in the EU.

To facilitate easier understanding of the scope and analysis of the study, the following definitions are adopted:

Table 1 - Definitions of civil society and civil dialogue

Concept	Definition
Civil society	<p>Civil society refers to all forms of social action carried out by individuals or groups who are neither connected to nor managed by state authorities.⁸</p> <p>Civil society organisations are organisational structures ‘whose members serve the general interest through a democratic process, and which plays the role of mediator between public authorities and citizens’. They include labour market players, non-governmental organisations, community-based organisations and religious communities.⁹ Trade unions and employers’ organisations are distinct from other civil society organisations in their capacity as social partners.</p> <p>The sphere of all organised actions and structured policy dialogue is also often referred to as organised civil society, within which employers’ associations, trade unions, and other civil society organisations organising their members, representing collective interests, and promoting shared values.</p> <p>Civil society is larger than the sum of CSOs with a lot of unorganised activities and exchanges spontaneously happening.</p>
Civil dialogue	Civil dialogue refers to meaningful exchanges that facilitate a broad participation of different types of members of civil society.

⁷ EESC, Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on Strengthening civil dialogue and participatory democracy in the EU, C/2024/2481, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2024, Section 3.9.

⁸ See the definition by EUR-Lex. Accessible at <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/EN/legal-content/glossary/civil-society-organisation.html#:~:text=Civil%20society%20refers%20to%20all,nor%20managed%20by%20state%20authorities.>

⁹ EESC, Participatory Democracy: a retrospective overview of the story written by the EESC – Compendium, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2011.

It encourages the exchange of opinions, ideally done in an open, transparent manner on a regular basis. A civil dialogue practice should recognise proper democratic structures and commit to inclusion and equality rights, supporting minorities or vulnerable groups.

Civil dialogue is distinct from social dialogue.¹⁰

Although civil dialogue lacks a common framework, it is supported by legal provisions at the EU level. Article 11 of the Treaty of the European Union states that ‘[t]he institutions shall maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with representative associations and civil society’. On the basis of the EESC’s approach,¹¹ as well as Article 11 Treaty on European Union (TEU), the study defines civil dialogue as a meaningful consultative exchange between CSOs or between public authorities and CSOs to ensure participatory input on public policy across diverse areas, distinct from social dialogue, which involves negotiations between employers and workers on employment-specific issues.

Further building on the EESC’s 2024 opinion,¹² we categorise civil dialogue as either horizontal or vertical, and within vertical dialogue we differentiate between sectoral and transversal dialogue. See Figure 1 for a graphical illustration.

- **Vertical dialogue** is between civil society and ‘their interlocutors within the legislative and executive authorities at EU national level’ in line with Article 11(2) TEU.
 - *Sectoral dialogue* concerns specific policy areas.
 - *Transversal dialogue* concerns the development of the EU and its cross-cutting policies.
- **Horizontal dialogue** describes interactions among CSOs themselves.

Horizontal civil dialogue is primarily facilitated by CSOs in informal settings, whereas vertical dialogue typically involves varying levels of management by national and EU public authorities. This study concentrates on mapping vertical civil dialogue organised by EU institutions.

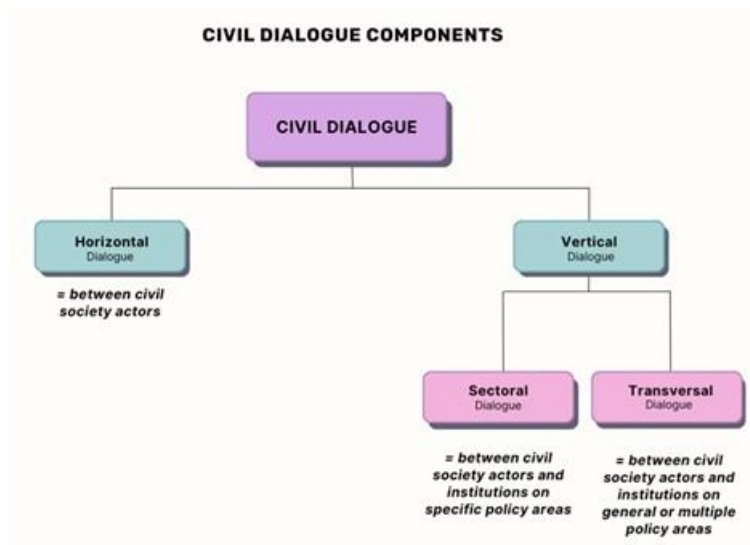
In practice, the concept of civil dialogue is often vaguely defined and embedded within a variety of participatory activities. Frequently, these initiatives are neither explicitly labelled as civil dialogue nor organised according to a clear categorisation framework, making it difficult for researchers to identify a well-defined sample. Additionally, civil dialogue is often mixed with expert groups and other consultative entities, or social dialogue and civil dialogue are sometimes indistinguishable when dealing with employment-related issues. This mapping exercise attempts to include civil dialogue as broadly as possible, while still maintaining a sample size that is practical and manageable. The resulting sample of civil dialogue is therefore not an exhaustive one but extensive enough for drawing generalisable insights for the EU.

¹⁰ Social dialogue refers to discussions, consultations, negotiations and joint actions involving organisations representing the two sides of industry (employers and workers). It can take place at the national, regional, sectoral or company level. See the definition by the EESC at https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies-and-activities/eu-employment-policies/social-dialogue_en. Retrieved on 25 May 2025.

¹¹ Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on ‘Strengthening civil dialogue and participatory democracy in the EU: a path forward’, SOC/782, 2023, Section 3.6

¹² Ibid.

Figure 1 - Types of civil dialogue



Source: Authors' elaboration

1.1.2 Direct citizen participation and deliberation practices

Direct democracy is a form of democratic governance where citizens directly participate in decision-making processes rather than through elected or organised representatives. In other words, direct democracy allows citizens to participate in policymaking decisions without intermediaries. A common instrument of direct democracy is referendum, which allows citizens to vote directly on specific legislative proposals. Direct democracy, broadly defined, focuses on citizens directly making joint decisions.

Under the umbrella of participatory democracy, **deliberative democracy** is a form of democracy in which decisions are made through reasoning and discussion among citizens. Deliberative democracy focuses on how the decision is made among citizens. Deliberation practices are based on a different model of democracy from representative democracy - one in which citizens represent themselves rather than being represented by an election person or an organised body - yet they complement civil dialogue by offering avenues for collaboration and cross-fertilisation. As such, there is a brief overview of how deliberation practices manifest in the EU institutions in the Appendix (Section 7.7), aiming to provide insights on the possible future of civil dialogue in the EU.

The importance of the discussion can be seen in the implementation of the Conference of the Future of Europe (2021-2022), in which citizen participation was decoupled from civil society.¹³ There was **perceived competition between citizens and CSOs**, with some CSOs complaining about their lack of involvement in the Conference.¹⁴ Lessons should be drawn from the experience of direct citizen participation in recent years to find the best path for future civil dialogue.

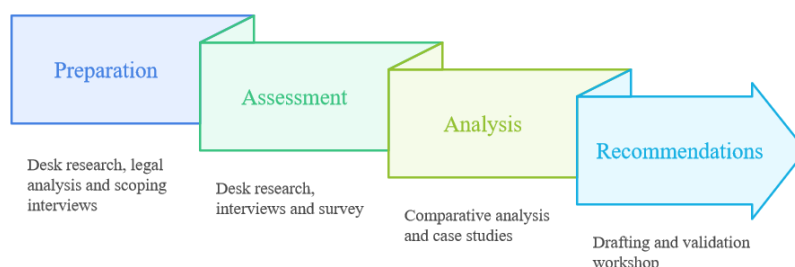
¹³ Oleart, A. (2023), 'The political construction of the 'citizen turn' in the EU: disintermediation and depoliticisation in the Conference on the Future of Europe', *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 1-15.

¹⁴ Ibid.

1.2 Methodology

The study commenced in four phases: preparation, assessment of civil dialogue practices, analysis of the collected practices, and creating recommendations.

In the **preparatory phase**, we conducted a legal analysis through extensive desk research, complemented by scoping interviews. This allowed us to refine the study methodology and contributed to Section 2: Background.



The **assessment phase** consisted of further desk research, interviews with members of civil society and EU institutions, and a survey with CSOs on their perceptions about civil dialogue in the EU. This phase began with mapping of civil dialogue practices in the EU institutions, namely, the Council of the EU, the European Parliament and the European Commission. The mapping draws inputs from extensive research over official websites and in particular the *Register of Expert Groups and Other Similar Entities of the Commission*, together with information collected from interviews. This study acknowledges that, given the lack of a clear delineation of civil dialogue from various types of consultative activities, the mapping exercise is not exhaustive – but it endeavours to be as extensive as possible while focussing on dialogue practices between civil society and EU institutions (vertical dialogue). The assessment of dialogue practices is grounded as much as possible in quantitative data, enabling clearer and more intuitive comparisons between practices. For some dimensions, such as structure and format, where quantitative measures are absent, we study extensively the available documents of these practices to gain a fair judgement, together with inputs from interviews. Interviews were chosen based on the scoping interviews and desk research – civil dialogues, units, and committees with missing information and subject areas relevant to civil society were prioritised, and the authors further invited contacts to fill out the study survey.¹⁵ In the end, there were 15 interviews with the European Parliament’s DG COMM and the European Commission’s DG COMM, DG EMPL, DG JUST, DG SANTE, and DG TRADE representing the institutional interviewees.

A list of the interviewees is included in the Appendix (Section 7.1).¹⁶

The Permanent Anti-Racism Civil Society Organisations Forum, organised by DG JUST, is presented as a **case study** following a focus group discussion with several participants and the organiser.

The **analysis phase** combined desk research and interviews to evaluate selected practices along the following dimensions: regularity, structure, access to information, inclusiveness, digitalisation, feedback quality, and outcomes. These dimensions were derived from recurring patterns identified in our initial desk research, which included literature and legal analysis, and scoping interviews. To ensure objectivity, we applied a quantifiable, evidence-based approach to the assessment. The comparative analysis assesses identified civil dialogue practices along five dimensions: regularity, structure, format,

¹⁵ While the mapping exercise was intended to be transparent and welcomed contributions from organising units, our invitations to comment or provide information were not always met with responses. We compensate for this with extensive desk research that tries to fill the information gaps with data from the public domain. Please note that the authors’ interpretation of available data might not always reflect the positions of public authorities.

¹⁶ We would like to thank everyone who participated in the study activities.

access to information, and outcomes. The results of the comparison are presented in a coloured table for easier comparison. Qualitative aggregate analysis based is then provided for all dimensions.

Subsequently, we developed **recommendations**, which were reviewed and validated through a hybrid participatory workshop involving members of civil society and EU institutions. The outcomes of the workshop are presented via six policy trees that match recommendations to barriers. Based on the workshop discussions, we highlight five recommendations with detailed explanations.

2. Civil dialogue: legal background and state of play

2.1 Legal background of civil dialogue

2.1.1 Legal basis

The concept of ‘civil dialogue’ is explicitly anchored by Article 11(2) of the Treaty on European Union (TEU). Specifically, the provision states that

‘The institutions shall maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with representative associations and civil society.’

In its wording – particularly through the use of the so-called ‘shall-clause’¹⁷ –, the provision establishes civil dialogue as a mandatory practice for the Union’s institutions. It is therefore not up to each institution’s own discretion to establish channels for regular dialogue, but an obligation mandated by the Treaty.

However, the legal requirement to engage in civil dialogue extends beyond the surface of Article 11 TEU and can be traced back all the way to its roots in Article 2 TEU. Without a doubt, Article 2 is the ‘crown jewel’ of the entire *acquis communautaire*, which enshrines the foundational principles that the European integration was built upon. These principles, spelled out as human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, are applicable both horizontally and vertically. This means that both the EU institutions as well as all Member State authorities must respect them, and these principles must inform policies in every single domain and remain respected in each and every legislative and non-legislative output, no matter the topic.¹⁸

Civil dialogue aims at ensuring broad participation and is therefore a manifestation of the principle of democracy. Moreover, continuous engagement with civil society is indispensable to deliver on the promise of checks and balances and the protection of fundamental rights. As civil society tends to follow day-to-day policy developments – may it be at the local, national or European level – their work involves informing the public about certain topics through outreach, position papers or even via social media. Through these activities, they become essential ‘bridges’ between the political level and the public,

¹⁷ In legislation, a ‘shall clause’ means that the rule described in the provision must be adhered to by those bound by the provision, without exceptions. A ‘may clause’, in turn, signals that what the provision describes is facultative in nature and adherence – or performing the task mentioned – is not mandatory. For example, Article 11(3) TEU uses the word ‘shall’ and obliges the institutions to carry out ‘broad consultations’. By contrast, the so-called ‘nuclear’ sanctioning option of Article 7(2), which can be triggered if a Member State seriously and persistently breaches Article 2 TEU, uses the term ‘may’, meaning that the European Council can decide to launch the proceeding but is not obliged to do so once it receives a proposal from the Commission or the Member States. Consequently, the representatives in the Summit have discretion when voting on Article 7(2).

¹⁸ This is based on the understanding – shared by the Court of Justice of the EU – that the general principles of Article 2 TEU (formerly Article 6(1) in the Maastricht Treaty) are the foundational principles of the Union and ‘any challenge to the principles that form part of the very foundations of the Community legal order’ – including democracy, the rule of law, and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms – is not permissible. This suggests, contrary to ‘simple’ primary Treaty law, a higher ‘position’ of Article 2 TEU in the normative hierarchy of the EU legal order. See: CJEU (2008). Judgment of the Court (Grand Chamber) of 3 September 2008. *Kadi v Council of the European Union and Commission of the European Communities*. Joined Cases C-402/05 P and C-415/05 P. ECLI:EU:C:2008:461. paras 282-285, 301-304. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A62005CJ0402>. As well as: Passchier, R. and Stremler, M. (2016). ‘Unconstitutional Constitutional Amendments in European Law: Considering the Existence of Substantive Constraints on Treaty Revision.’ *Cambridge Journal of International and Comparative Law*. Vol. 5. Issue 2. p. 355. DOI: 10.7574/cjicl.05.02.33 and: Eckes, C. (2020). ‘The autonomy of the EU legal order’. *Europe and the World: A law review*. Vol. 4. Issue 1. pp.1-19. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.ewlj.2019.19>.

helping raise awareness for issues that are of public interest and ‘translating’ often complicated legal texts for people who are not necessarily familiar with the language and process of policymaking. Often, these actors take it upon themselves to not only issue opinions, but, if legally possible, participate in public interest litigation and go to court to advocate for the topics and principles their work centres around.

By helping bridge the gap between people and institutions, as well as conducting advocacy activities, they contribute to protecting and raising awareness for fundamental rights while promoting transparency and holding the political level accountable. It follows that beyond democracy, civil dialogue also has far-reaching implications for other core principles enshrined in Article 2 TEU, particularly the rule of law, non-discrimination, equality and the premise of the Charter of Fundamental Rights (‘Charter’).

When taking the requirements of Articles 2 and 11(2) TEU together, civil dialogue emerges as the manifestation of both a functioning rule of law and representative democracy, and as a concept indispensable for the robust protection of fundamental rights. Therefore, to raise claim to completeness, **the legal basis for civil dialogue is Article 11(2) TEU in conjunction with Article 2 TEU¹⁹.**

Establishing this legal basis has significant consequences to the normative value of civil dialogue. Article 11(2) TEU, by itself, already enjoys the standing of primary law in the Union’s normative hierarchy. However, Article 2 TEU elevates it even further and the conjunction of these two provisions affords a stronger, more solid basis for civil dialogue. In addition to being a requirement under Treaty law, consistent, meaningful, and regular civil dialogue is also essential for respecting the principles of democracy, the rule of law, and fundamental rights. If the institutions fail to follow through, their violation goes beyond a mere infringement of primary law and touches upon the very foundations of the European integration.

Accordingly, Article 11(2) TEU is not an invitation or a courtesy. It is also more than a mere black letter law requirement. Through this line of argumentation, civil dialogue becomes an inherent necessity to realise the European Union’s innermost aims, values and principles.

2.1.2 Legal benchmarks for assessing civil dialogue

On this legal basis, the more specific requirements – mainly, the terms ‘open, transparent, and regular’ – need to be specified. As these phrases are understandably framed vaguely and broadly, it is necessary to pin down the obligations they establish to allow for meaningful analysis and assessment for civil dialogue practices.

There is not a lot of scholarship or even case law elaborating on the specificities of these terms that hinders accountability for the institutions whenever they fail to substantially engage in civil dialogue.

‘**Openness**’ presupposes a broad degree of accessibility and suggests that civil society representatives, in all their diversity, must be invited and included in the conversation. This is in contrast with a possible ‘selectivity’ that would only see the involvement of a few organisations that are possibly hand-picked by the institutions. As detailed in a 2001 White Paper published by the Commission, it is crucial that in

¹⁹ This is the authors’ assessment as researchers and legal analysts.

the partnerships established by the institutions, arrangements go ‘beyond minimum standards’ and guarantee the existence of ‘additional consultation[s]’ and the ‘representativity of the organisation consulted’.²⁰ Consequently, civil dialogue under Article 11(2) TEU needs to be as inclusive and reciprocal as possible and ensure the participation of a wide range of different actors within civil society.

‘**Transparency**’, meanwhile, is an important pillar for good governance²¹ and requires the provision of ‘up-to-date’²², easily available and complete information about all stages of the policy- and decision-making process to ensure inclusivity and accountability.²³ It must encompass not only the list of entities consulted, but how they were selected, the content of the discussions, and how input from participants were considered in the subsequent institutional process. Additionally, reporting from each meeting is necessary and documentation should be published, without delay, on a dedicated website such as Have Your Say.

Lastly, ‘**regularity**’ is a key yet undefined element of the Treaty framework. It outlines the establishment of a structured framework²⁴ yet forgoes any concrete temporal indicator as to what frequency would satisfy the regularity requirement. In lieu of tangible definitions, we consider that it suggests a systemic approach, such as the establishment of a mechanism or a schedule to facilitate ongoing interactions instead of mere ad-hoc consultations. We also realise that these might need to be different for ‘vertical transversal’ and ‘vertical sectoral’ dialogues. For example, in the realm of vertical-sectoral dialogue, to maintain a constructive and reciprocal nature of these exchanges, it would be most beneficial to have a monthly or bi-monthly recurring meetings on the specific topic between the given units/teams of the institution and civil society representatives. In case of cross-cutting, vertical-transversal topics that do not focus on a specific policy, there should be at least a quarterly meeting between civil society and all the relevant teams within the institutions.

Overall, the benchmarks of Article 11(2) require a deep commitment for inclusivity, reciprocity, responsiveness, and continuous dialogue. The Treaty makes it clear that **merely consulting civil society once a specific policy is being drafted is not enough** and that **there must be a framework** that allows for consistent and constructive engagement with a broad coalition of representatives.

2.1.3 Non-legislative frameworks

We would like to mention two frameworks that further civil dialogue in EU policymaking in specific sectors that are not part of EU legislation because our desk research and interviews indicated that they are successful. These are the **Aarhus Convention**²⁵ and the **Bologna Process**²⁶.

²⁰ European Commission (2001). European Governance – A White Paper. DOC/01/10. COM(2001) 428. p. 2.

²¹ Lock, T. (2019), ‘Rights and principles in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights’, Common Market Law Review, Vol. 56, No. 5, pp. 1201-1266. Article 11 Treaty of EU. Kellerbauer, M. et al. (2019). ‘The EU Treaties and the Charter of Fundamental Rights: A Commentary’. OUP. pp. 113-115.

²² European Commission (2001). supra foot note 7.

²³ id. p.6.

²⁴ Lock, T. (2019). supra footnote 8.

²⁵ United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, "Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters" (Aarhus Convention), June 25, 1998, <https://unece.org/environment-policy/public-participation/aarhus-convention/text>.

²⁶ European Higher Education Area (EHEA), "How Does the Bologna Process Work," accessed April 3, 2025, <https://ehea.info/page-how-does-the-bologna-process-work>.

The Aarhus Convention establishes rights for individuals and civil society to environmental information access, public participation in decision-making, and access to justice in environmental matters. The Bologna Process is a voluntary commitment in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) that seeks to harmonise academic degree standards, mutually recognise qualifications, and assure quality.

Multiple interviewees emphasised that these frameworks support civil dialogue: the Aarhus Convention requires that the public has the chance to participate in environmental governance, while the Bologna Process has a structured partnership principle with its consultative members (that include civil society).

2.1.4 Merits of dialogue for the EU's basic principles

Beyond finding its roots in the principles of Article 2 TEU, civil dialogue is essential for their protection and reinforcement.

As previously detailed, civil society helps the public 'cut through the noise' by keeping people informed about policy developments in a digestible, accessible manner. Those civil society actors who engage in advocacy are in a unique position to translate the needs and opinions of larger, often marginalised and underrepresented societal groups. They help amplify marginalised voices and afford such communities more visibility in the policy-making process. Thereby, civil dialogue strengthens the democratic process and contributes to safeguarding fundamental rights against legislation that might detrimentally affect them.

Consequently, by informing and mobilising at least parts of society, civil dialogue ensures people's democratic participation and affords them the chance to keep elected officials accountable.

In our modern, digital age, where disinformation and misinformation²⁷ are growing ever more impactful²⁸ in the political context²⁹, and where echo chambers on social media might prevent many from being comprehensively informed about the issues relevant to them, civil society actors can once again help restore balance and stand up even for those citizens who might not be aware that their rights and interests could be negatively affected by certain policies.

Based on the principles of democracy and the rule of law, public servants must not only serve the interests of the 'people' on paper, but must actively listen to them and consider their viewpoints and necessities when making decisions on their behalf. Civil dialogue can help legislators fulfil this duty, and thanks to this involvement their decisions will be more easily implemented and received on the

²⁷ The Commission's 2018 Communication titled 'Tackling online disinformation: a European Approach' (COM(2018)236) final of 26 April 2018) defines disinformation as 'verifiably false or misleading information that is created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public, and may cause public harm. Misinformation, in turn, is also false or misleading information, but was shared without harmful intent.

²⁸ According to a survey conducted by Statista in 2024, 70% of Europeans regularly encounter fake news, which has also led to a decreasing trust in media. See: Statista (2024). Fake news in Europe – statistics and facts. <https://www.statista.com/topics/5833/fake-news-in-europe/#topicOverview>

²⁹ The European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO) started monitoring EU-related, detected disinformation in May 2023 in preparation for the 2024 European elections. From the 5% measured in January 2024, the rate of EU-related disinformation across the total detected disinformation rose to 15% by May 2024, right before the elections. The main narratives involved escalation of the war in Ukraine and the direct involvement of EU Member States, false stories questioning election integrity and false content portraying migrants as 'seizing power' in the EU. See: EDMO (2024). Final Report – Outputs and outcomes of a community wide effort. <https://edmo.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Final-Report-%E2%80%93-EDMO-TF-EU24.pdf>

field. This win-win process can only be fruitful if the institutions recognise civil society as equal partners and not just a box to tick in the policy-making checklist.

2.2 The role of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC)

The **European Economic and Social Committee** serves as an institutional bridge between EU institutions and decision-makers and organised civil society, playing multiple roles in promoting and implementing civil dialogue across the EU. It is officially recognised as the ‘voice of organised civil society’ and involves 329 members aiming to improve the quality of EU policy and legislation.³⁰ The EESC has three main missions:

- Help ensure that EU policies and regulations reflect the economic, social, and civic circumstances on the ground;
- Promote the development of a more participatory EU;
- Promote the cause of participatory democracy and the roles of civil society organisations.

Established under the Treaty of Rome, the EESC is a consultative body that issues opinions on proposed legislation. It also initiates opinions on its own initiative or is requested by EU institutions to draw up exploratory opinions. Own-initiative and exploratory opinions are drawn up before the Commission has even drafted its proposals, thus enabling the various components of organised civil society represented within the EESC to express the expectations, concerns and needs of grassroots stakeholders³¹.

The EESC has over the last decades extensively explored and developed the way civil dialogue is exercised and structured, including internally.³² A key part of the EESC’s outreach is its **Liaison Group**, established in 2004, that meets roughly twice a year in plenary and facilitates bottom-up communication between the EESC and the European organisations and networks, coordinates joint activities, and channels non-institutional civil society input into the EESC’s work. The Liaison Group serves as the **primary institutional link between civil society organisations and the EU**, enabling them to engage in vertical civil dialogue. At the same time, it also functions as a platform for horizontal civil dialogue, offering a space for European networks and organisations to exchange views, coordinate on shared priorities, and build synergies across sectors. Its flagship event is the annual Civil Society Week.

2.3 Existing civil dialogue literature

Over the years, European civil society and the EESC have built a trail of documentation that shows continuous effort in formulating the challenges of civil dialogue. These documents build on each other and employ similar narratives by noting the lack of a standardised definition of civil society and the absence of an inter-institutional agreement on civil dialogue. Some also include mapping exercises, albeit not as granular as the one in this study.

³⁰ See the official website at <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en>

³¹ EESC, “The EESC in the Interinstitutional Framework” (2022), p.4, <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/files/ge-01-20-364-en.pdf>.

³² EESC, Participatory Democracy – A success story written by the EESC, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2020, pp. 7-9.

A 2002 Commission communication³³ listed issue-areas that are still being discussed today: no commonly accepted definition of “civil society organisation” and no institutional approach to consultation. A 2010 position paper by 16 European CSO platforms³⁴ explains the relevance of Article 2 and 11 TEU, the lack of harmonised definitions, shows the patchwork of practices employed by the Council of Ministers, the Commission, and the Parliament, and recommends creating an institutional framework and appointing reference points for civil dialogue within EU institutions. Much the same was in a 2015 report commissioned by the EESC, with a focus on the legal underpinnings of civil dialogue³⁵. The report “*Towards an open, transparent, and structured EU civil dialogue – Civil society’s views on challenges and opportunities for an effective implementation of Article 11 TEU*”³⁶ includes a wealth of insight from civil society actors themselves, establishes minimum requirements for civil dialogue, and lists recommendations that include creating an inter-institutional agreement, coordination structures within each EU institution and a CSO-enabling environment. In 2023, a Commission recommendation³⁷ that was part of the Defence of Democracy Package encouraged Member States to provide more opportunities for citizens and CSOs to participate in public policymaking to increase the democratic resilience of the EU. It listed good practices such as having a clearly defined framework for participation, enabling participation early in the policymaking process, informing participants of the outcomes and follow-up to participatory activities, exploring the use of digital technologies, and having expert facilitation. In 2024, an EESC opinion³⁸ called for a civil dialogue action plan that results in an inter-institutional agreement. Most recently, the Commission and the EESC reaffirmed the importance of civil society through the Commission’s new Civil Society Strategy. As part of the Commission’s 2025 work programme, it includes plans to establish a civil dialogue platform to monitor threats to civic space.³⁹

These reports, surveys, opinions and recommendations have achieved results: consultations have a better-defined process, the Transparency Register has been established to funnel and track interest representation, and there is now a hefty body of evidence to rely on when making the case for the betterment of civil dialogue. Because the efforts above are mostly unidirectional from the side of civil society and its supporters, there is little documented understanding of the intentions and challenges faced by institutions.

³³ European Commission. Communication from the Commission - Towards a reinforced culture of consultation and dialogue - General principles and minimum standards for consultation of interested parties by the Commission, COM/2002/0704 final, 2002.

³⁴ 16 civil society organisation platforms supported this position paper, Towards a structured framework for European civil dialogue, Brussels, 2010, <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/resources/docs/towards-a-structured-framework-for-european-civil-dialogue-en.pdf>

³⁵ Pichler, J.W., Hinghofer-Szalkay, S. and Pichler, P., Civil dialogue and participatory democracy in the practice of the European Union institutions. European Economic and Social Committee, Brussels, <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/resources/docs/qe-02-15-397-en-n.pdf>

³⁶ Ravo, L.M., Towards an open, transparent, and structured EU civil dialogue - Civil society’s views on challenges and opportunities for an effective implementation of Article 11 TEU, 2021, <https://civilsocietyeurope.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Civil-Dialogue-Study.pdf>

³⁷ European Commission. COMMISSION RECOMMENDATION (EU) 2023/2836 of 12 December 2023 on promoting the engagement and effective participation of citizens and civil society organisations in public policy-making processes. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32023H2836>

³⁸ Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on Strengthening civil dialogue and participatory democracy in the EU: a path forward, C/2024/2481, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2024, Section 3.6.

³⁹ See the press release at <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/news-media/press-releases/eesc-join-forces-commission-defend-civil-society>

From the legal requirements for civil dialogue (should) come operational requirements in the EU policymaking processes. However, there is no inter-institutional agreement or code of practice on how to conduct civil dialogue. There are a lack of reference or focal points in the institutions, making it difficult for civil society actors to know who to turn to. Too often, exchange with civil society amounts to an online questionnaire or a consultation with little opportunity for policy impact.

This is a problem because it undermines the very reason civil dialogue is required in Article 11 TEU. It limits interaction between civil society and the EU, puts the onus on civil society actors to be proactive, and requires that CSOs have personal connections and a constant presence in Brussels or Strasbourg in order to be effective. Participation is even harder if there are language barriers. The struggle to participate and resulting frustration felt from civil society's side is evident. The reports and opinions mentioned above clearly show that civil dialogue requires greater institutionalisation and a mindset shift.

3. Mapping civil dialogues in EU institutions

3.1 Selection methodology

It is difficult to differentiate civil dialogue from other engagement or consultative channels. As civil dialogue practices in the EU institutions do not always follow the same structure, this study distinguishes civil dialogue from other consultative channels by emphasising first its composition of participants and second the extent to which the consultative channel involves **exchanges** between EU institutions and organised civil society. Civil dialogue should involve a significant participation of **civil society** and provide a transparent space for **mutual dialogue**. Accordingly, this analysis excludes public consultations, which are not interactive, and consultative groups whose composition is not in significant part made up of civil society members. Some consultative bodies are composed primarily of social partners—particularly trade and business associations—due to the technical nature of the issues discussed and the need for specialised expertise. These bodies tend to be more technical and may involve few or no other types of CSOs. To ensure the study remains relevant to broader societal interests, we have chosen to limit the mapping exercise to practices that include a more meaningful level of participation of CSOs that are not social partners.⁴⁰ This choice does not exclude labour market players from the analysis and has the benefit of narrowing the sample and focus on topics other than social dialogue or employment.

The mapping process is not straightforward. Consultative entities or channels are named or tagged in many different ways. On some occasions, a majority of the members in an officially named ‘expert group’ are CSOs other than social partners.⁴¹ These expert groups undoubtedly serve as platforms for civil society members to share information and express opinions and should be recognized as forms of dialogue. Such practices may be labelled as expert groups, policy forums, or advisory bodies. Therefore, selecting examples based solely on their titles can be misleading.

To ensure the usefulness of this study, we adopt mixed methods to map civil dialogue practices conducted by EU institutions. For the Commission, we used the *Register of Commission Expert Groups and Other Similar Entities* that documents a vast amount of Commission consultation activities. Civil dialogue practices were identified and analysed from this pool based on the selection criteria described 3.2.3 below. This selection was then complemented by desk research, interviews, and a survey. For the Council and the Parliament, information is less abundant and therefore we rely on extensive desk research together with interviews with officials and CSO representatives.

The difficulty of collecting information for this study points to the lack of a unified approach to civil dialogue in EU institutions. However, the study draws insights from its varied data collection approach and presents an extensive overview of the current state of civil dialogue in the EU institutions.

⁴⁰ There are plenty of consultative activities and bodies managed by the Commission. Some of them involves trade and business associations for their expert inputs. These groups with technical objectives usually involves no or few CSOs other than trade and business associations and professional associations. We intend to maintain this study closer to CSOs other than social partners, yet trade and business associations show up in our sample substantially. See the composition analysis under Section 3.2.3.

⁴¹ For example, 60% of the organisation members of the Commission Expert group for Digital Education Content are NGOs or Academia, Research Institute and Think Tanks.

In the Appendix (Section 7.3), we present the civil dialogue practice implemented by the Fundamental Rights Agency, which is not by one of the three EU institutions but provides interesting insights for this study.

3.2 Civil dialogue in EU institutions

3.2.1 The Council (The European Council and the Council of the European Union)

The European Council, which comprises the heads of state or government of EU Member States, primarily focuses on defining the EU's overall political direction and priorities. Unlike other EU institutions, such as the European Commission and the Council of the European Union, the European Council does not have a formalised structure for direct civil dialogue with CSOs. Most of the civil society engagement work is carried out by the Council of the European Union, led by the presiding Member State.

The Council of the European Union (hereafter "the Council") is the EU institution that directly represents the Member States. Its leadership rotates among Member States, with each presiding country responsible for managing both formal and informal Council meetings. Of particular relevance to our research, the presidency has the capacity to organise events involving civil society, sometimes in collaboration with the EESC.

Our analysis of all presidencies since the COVID-19 pandemic has identified several events that could broadly be classified as civil dialogue. However, due to the rotating nature of the presidency and the diverse priorities and approaches of each Member State, we have not identified a recurring event that meets the definition of civil dialogue.

To facilitate the incorporation of CSOs' opinions into the formal agendas of the presidencies of the Council, the Presidency Project, partially funded by the EU, was set up in 2019 and aims to gather CSOs and leverage their voices to the governments holding the presidencies. For instance, Forum 2020, a part of the Presidency Project, was a platform of more than 30 Croatian CSOs that attempted to influence the agenda of the Croatian Presidency (January-June 2020) by organising events discussing issues such as disinformation, the Western Balkan geopolitics, and migration policies.⁴² Prior to the Czech Presidency (July-December 2022), three CSO platforms collaborated and presented their opinions on the critical issues that the Presidency should address.⁴³ However, it is unclear how these bottom-up initiatives influenced the agenda of the corresponding presidencies. While these bottom-up initiatives do receive some recognition by the EU, given that the website of the Presidency Project is partially funded by the EU, the extent to which the Project is considered as an important source of input to a presidency is unknown.

In recent years, there has been a trend of involving civil society in the events and meetings arranged by the Council presidencies. The Polish Presidency (January-June 2025) organised a conference on "*The role of civil society in protecting the rule of law*", which aimed to address challenges faced by civil society and support its role in upholding the rule of law.⁴⁴ The High-level Conference on the European

⁴² See <https://crosol.hr/eupresidency/en/civil-society-priorities/>

⁴³ See <https://presidency.concordeurope.org/three-platforms-of-non-profit-organisations-present-the-main-priorities-for-the-czech-eu-presidency>

⁴⁴ See <https://polish-presidency.consilium.europa.eu/en/events/the-role-of-civil-society-in-protecting-the-rule-of-law>

Pillar of Social Rights organised by the Belgian Presidency (January-June 2024) attempted to involve some civil society actors, notably social partners. The two-day in-person conference strove to renew stakeholders' commitment to upholding social rights.⁴⁵ The event ended with the signing of the La Hulpe Declaration. However, the event was primarily aimed at endorsing and formalising the Declaration instead of a dialogue where both sides, policymakers and civil society, could exchange ideas and to influence the direction and the drafting of the Declaration. Furthermore, the influence of CSOs other than labour-market players was minimal compared to social partners, which is reflected in the Declaration. The focus of the Conference and the Declaration remained on social dialogue, which prioritised trade unions and employers over broader civil society actors.

On some occasions, the presidencies participated in existing civil dialogue implemented by the Commission to reach out to civil society. For example, the Slovenian Presidency and the French Presidency reaffirmed their commitment to maintain dialogue with civil society regarding the EU Drugs Strategy 2021-2025.⁴⁶ In 2021, the Portuguese Presidency and the Commission launched the EU Platform on Combatting Homelessness, which is led by a Steering Board comprised of representatives of EU institutions and the EU Council Trio of Presidencies as well as civil society. Meetings at ministerial level and plenary meetings are organised by each incumbent Presidency of the Council. These examples demonstrate that the Council Presidency possesses sufficient authority to support civil dialogue practices. However, the six-month rotation of the presidency does not favour the continuity of such practices, unless there is close cooperation with the European Commission, which offers greater institutional stability.

Our interview with a civil society organiser of a previous Presidency Project reveals that Member States, when preparing for their presidencies, do not always actively engage CSOs to shape their priorities. It is usually the CSOs which initiate the conversation and their influence and perceived impact is limited.

In short, our research does not find a civil dialogue practice systematically conducted by the Council. However, Council presidencies often seek exploratory opinions from the EESC.⁴⁷ This is encouraging as the EESC is the institutional representative of organised civil society and its Group 3 members all come from national CSOs. Additionally, the EESC published a note documenting the EESC's activities during each Council Presidency with contributions by the corresponding Member State. On agenda setting, CSOs are to a certain extent involved but their inputs might not be officially recognised and included. On participating in the official events, CSOs are invited but their influence is unknown, given that these events are often designed as high-level, structured conventional conferences. Furthermore, the Council, led by assorted presidencies, has been collaborating with the Commission on various occasions. For example, the European Platform against Homelessness was initiated by the Commission and the Portuguese Presidency in 2021, and followed up by the French Presidency in 2022.⁴⁸ Overall, the

⁴⁵ Represented social partners included BusinessEurope (who declined to sign the Declaration), SGI Europe, SMEUnited, and the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC). Represented CSOs included Social Platform, European Women's Lobby, and Equinet. See the speaker list here: <https://wayback.archive-it.org/12710/20240719000229/https://belgian-presidency.consilium.europa.eu/media/g20jklij/programme-of-the-high-level-conference-on-the-european-pillar-of-social-rights-15-16-april-2024-1.pdf>

⁴⁶ See the minutes of the Civil Society Forum on Drugs Plenary Meeting 2021 at <https://ec.europa.eu/transparency/expert-groups-register/screen/meetings/consult?lang=en&meetingId=37414&fromExpertGroups=2681>

⁴⁷ See the example of the Hungarian Presidency: <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2024-08/qe-05-24-323-en-n.pdf>

⁴⁸ See the news posted by the DG EMPL at https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/french-presidency-and-european-commission-join-forces-give-new-impetus-fight-against-homelessness-2022-02-28_en

Council's involvement in civil dialogue highly depends on the priorities set by each respective presidency.

3.2.2 European Parliament

Civil society engagement in the European Parliament takes the form of collaboration on external communication and ad-hoc hearings with parliamentary committees or upon request of individual members of the European Parliament (MEPs). The European Parliament has a Vice-President mandated to engage with civil society, but how and to what extent this is to be done is not standardised and it is difficult for civil society to effectively signal if they are not being adequately included. When asked, those involved in Parliamentary committee coordination confirmed that there are no horizontal guidelines at committee level concerning dialogue with civil society.

At the time of writing, the relevant European Parliament Vice-Presidents are new to their positions: **Nicolae-Bogdănel Ștefănuță** (Romania, Greens/EFA) and **Katarina Barley** (Germany, S&D) hold responsibility for *Relations with European civil society organisations, including the European Citizens' Initiative*.

The Parliament does have ongoing engagement with civil society in its **external communication strategy and campaigning strategy**. As explained in an interview with the Parliament's DG COMM, the Parliament wishes to cooperate with civil society to increase the local reach of EU communication. While this cooperation falls outside the scope of civil dialogue for this study, it has been included because 1) we wished to provide a full picture of European Parliament cooperation with CSOs, and 2) the communication strategy provides takeaways relevant for the rest of the study. DG COMM found that the benefits of collaborating with civil society are more granular outreach coupled with the freedom civil society has to address political topics to motivate voter turnout⁴⁹. DG COMM interacts with a pool of contact organisations via a newsletter and ad-hoc meetings, and had an increase in its engagement activities during the lead-up to the European elections in 2024. It is up to civil society to decide how they wish to implement the EU's proposed strategies and messages, which gives decision-making power to civil society. There is no code of practice or establishing guidelines in how DG COMM liaises with civil society.

The **EU Roma week**⁵⁰ is co-hosted by the European Parliament, the European Commission, the European Economic and Social Committee, the Council of Europe, the City of Brussels, several members of the European Parliament (MEPs), the European Parliament Anti-Racism and Diversity Intergroup (ARDI) and many CSOs⁵¹. Since 2018, Roma Week is an annual opportunity to strengthen Roma inclusion and leadership in EU policymaking. While the event is not intended as input into any particular file, the 2018 Roma Week was discussed in the then-operational High Level Group on combating racism, xenophobia and other forms of intolerance⁵².

⁴⁹ To clarify, DG COMM is not using CSOs to deliver political messages – rather, it provides CSOs with the freedom to structure their outreach to be more effective at national and local levels. This is useful because the EP's external communication should not be perceived as favouring a specific political ideology and it cannot provide advice on how to locally promote European elections.

⁵⁰ EU Roma Week 2025 website at <https://romaweek.eu/about/>

⁵¹ As the event is physically hosted in the European Parliament, we have included it in this part of the report.

⁵² European Commission, A EU High Level Group on combating racism, xenophobia and other forms of intolerance, 2019, <https://ec.europa.eu/newsroom/just/items/51025/en>

The Parliament also supports in implementing **Article 17 TFEU Dialogue** – also known as dialogue with churches, religious associations or communities, philosophical and non-confessional organisations⁵³. However, the implementing team for this dialogue is situated in the Secretariat-General of the European Commission (and was until recently in the Commission’s DG JUST). The dialogue does have guidelines that require it to be open, transparent, and regular but do not provide information on organisational or procedural details⁵⁴. It is a highly informal practice that revolves around an annual high-level meeting between 10-20 participants. Other meetings are ad-hoc and in the past years, the group has met to discuss AI, environmental issues, migration, etc. Organisations that wish to participate can contact the dialogue’s Coordinator, who keeps a mailing list of partners. There is a preference that participants be registered in the Transparency Register, but this is not a requirement. There is no feedback mechanism or way to track impact.

One barrier to engaging more with civil society in the European Parliament mentioned in the interview with DG COMM is a fear from the side of Members of Parliament (MEPs) of being perceived as introducing an avenue for lobbying or political bias. Similarly, another interviewee explained that MEPs, as elected representatives, may feel less need to hold participatory activities. Finally, interviewees noted that as the composition of the institutions changes every couple of years, CSOs have to periodically rebuild their networks and partnerships and reexplain the value of civil dialogue to newcomers.

3.2.3 European Commission

Civil dialogue in the European Commission mainly occurs within the work of its Directorates-General (DGs) and provides opportunities for CSO views to be heard at various stages of policymaking. There is no harmonised approach within the European Commission. Some interviewees expressed a desire for the Commission Secretariat-General to be more active in overseeing and encouraging civil dialogue. Some DGs have dedicated subunits or advisors in charge of liaising with civil society, where others do not. At the time of writing (April 2025), the following DGs had units or subunits with the words “civil society” or “civil dialogue”⁵⁵ in their title based on the organisational charts available on each DG’s website:

- **DG CLIMA.E.2** – *Communication, civil society relations and climate pact*
- **DG COMM** – *Principal advisor for relations with stakeholder, civil society, think tanks and outreach (vacant)*
- **DG ENEST** (includes former DG NEAR) – *Principal advisor for civil society and media*
- **DG TRADE.R.3** – *Transparency, civil society, communication & briefings*

Additionally, some subunits are dedicated to programmes related to civil society or citizens, activities from which civil dialogue could logically follow. These are DG EAC.B on *Erasmus+*, DG COMM.B in charge of *Citizen communication*, and the Secretariat-General’s SG.E.1 on *Citizens, equality, democracy & rule of law*. Some DGs dedicate a subunit to communication, such as DG RTD.F.4 *Communication* and DG AGRI.F.1 *External communication and promotion policy*. Note that some DGs have executive agencies (EACEA, FRA, EIGE, etc.) where stakeholder engagement happens. DG

⁵³ European Parliamentary Research Service, Article 17 TFEU: Dialogue with churches, and religious and philosophical organisations, European Parliament, 2024, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/files/be-heard/religious-and-non-confessional-dialogue/home/en-article17-the-ep-implementation.pdf>.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Note that some units or subunits related to external relations and stakeholder relations did not make it onto this list, as we restricted the list to titles that mention civil society specifically.

SANTE has a dedicated Advisor for Stakeholder relations. DG EMPL has a dedicated team working with civil society members under unit D.1 *Social policies, child guarantee, SPC*.

In the Commission, there are numerous requirements and codes relating to stakeholder participation. Better Regulation provides guidelines and tools that the European Commission follows when preparing, managing, and evaluating proposals and existing legislation. It guides stakeholder consultation in the Commission and civil society is mentioned in its texts, saying that public consultations should “*reach out to relevant stakeholders, in particular start-ups, research institutes, innovation foundations, civil society organisations dealing with sectoral legislation, etc*”⁵⁶ and that the Commission is “*committed to promote the participation of Europeans and civil society in the policymaking activities*”⁵⁷.

Commissioners with relevant mandates and the Regulatory Scrutiny Board, which reviews impact assessments for quality control, could theoretically provide a final check for whether stakeholder consultation with civil society was properly carried out. However, the Board and Commissioners do not currently undertake the responsibility to scrutinise due civil society consultation in final drafts.

Based on the surveys and interviews, a reoccurring setback to civil dialogue is the sense that civil society struggles to contribute meaningfully. This partly due to the inadequate format of the dialogue, which is often an information session or panel session with a brief Q&A at the end. An interviewee pointed out that while diverse information-gathering and participatory methods are nominally encouraged, some EU officials are unfamiliar with these methods, lack facilitation experience, and do not receive training or support in acquiring the skills that would enable them to make the most of participatory opportunities. While the methods used would differ according to the context and aim of the dialogue, employing groupwork, foresight exercises, World Cafés, etc. could help bring more out of participants and include more perspectives, as moderators have been shown to heavily influence discussion outcomes⁵⁸.

Another reason is a lack of advance notice or access to information as well as the phase of the policy cycle in which civil society is looped in. According to interviewees, some dialogues include civil society late in the policymaking process, after proposals or reports have been drafted, for final review and critique. This limits the impact CSO contributions can have. In other instances, participants are not part of the agenda-setting process and do not receive preparatory information, meaning that they have to give their contributions on the spot.

Thankfully, organisers can draw from good examples provided by their colleagues. For example, the EU Disability Platform sends participants relevant background information 2 weeks ahead of sessions, and the Permanent Anti-Racism Civil Society Forum gives CSOs the opportunity to pitch topics for discussion when creating session agendas.

⁵⁶ European Commission. (2023), Better Regulation Toolbox p. 174. https://commission.europa.eu/law/law-making-process/better-regulation/better-regulation-guidelines-and-toolbox_en (accessed March 25, 2025).

⁵⁷ European Commission, Better Regulation Toolbox, 2023, p. 444. https://commission.europa.eu/law/law-making-process/better-regulation/better-regulation-guidelines-and-toolbox_en (accessed March 25, 2025).

⁵⁸ Spada, P. and Vreeland, J. R., ‘Who moderates the moderators? The effect of non-neutral moderators in deliberative decision making’ *Journal of Deliberative Democracy*, Vol. 9(2), 2013.

The sample

Comparatively the Commission has established many more civil dialogue or consultative bodies with CSO participation than other EU institutions. However, their formats vary and are not always referred as a ‘civil dialogue’. Our research reveals that civil society consultation activities are often documented and listed together with ‘expert groups’.⁵⁹ The Commission has published a list of expert groups online, titled ‘*Register of Commission Expert Groups and Other Similar Entities*’. Expert group is defined as a consultative body set up by the Commission or its departments to provide them with advice and expertise. There are 675 active expert groups and similar entities. These expert groups are certainly important channels for dissemination of information and collection of ideas and opinions. To narrow down our scope, we select those active expert groups in which more than one-third of the organisation members are either ‘NGOs’ or ‘Academia, research institute and think tanks’, defined by the Register.⁶⁰ This ad hoc selection criterion does not intend to redefine CSOs but to help focus the study towards societal issues other than technical topics which often involve trade and business associations and professional organisations as experts or in social dialogue. The one-third threshold is, however, an arbitrary choice, as there is no objective standard for determining the significance of CSO participation in a consultative entity. This threshold is also motivated by practical considerations: setting the limit at a higher level, for example, one-half of the organisation's members, would significantly reduce the sample size, thereby undermining the external validity of the mapping exercise.

Note that this selection criterion does not exclude social partners, which are present significantly in the retained sample (see Figure 2) but helps limit the scope to a manageable scale. While social economy entities and agricultural organisations are not distinctly categorised, they participate as ‘Trade and business associations’, ‘Professional organisations’, ‘NGOs’ or ‘Other organisations’. The research team acknowledges that this sampling method may drop some interesting cases which might need reforms, for example, by including more voices from CSOs. Moreover, we exclude some less formal civil dialogue from the mapping exercise, such as the Strategic Dialogue by DG EMPL, because it would be unfair to compare less formal dialogue practices to other more structured ones. These less formal dialogue practices are not well documented but still serve the purpose of engaging civil society.

Some fairly prominent civil dialogue practices, such as the EU Trade Civil Society Dialogue, are not listed in the Register, prompting the research team to look beyond the Register and seek a more balanced sample including various DGs. These civil dialogue practices could take the form of fora, ad-hoc groups, stakeholder networks, etc. We therefore carefully study the available public information for each Commission DG and keep the practices that fall in the scope of this study's definition of civil dialogue.

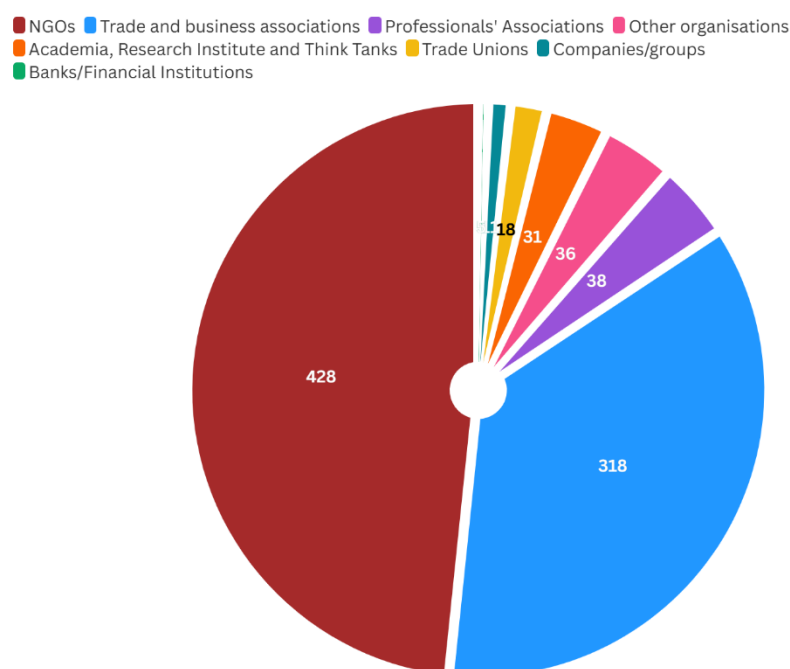
⁵⁹ See <https://ec.europa.eu/transparency/expert-groups-register/screen/home?lang=en>

⁶⁰ The Commission has defined 5 types of members, namely, Type A - Individual expert appointed in his/her personal capacity, Type B - Individual expert appointed as representative of a common interest, Type C - Organisation, Type D - Member State Authority, and Type E - Other public entity. Among Type C - Organisation, there are pre-defined categories, namely, ‘NGOs’, ‘Trade and business associations’, ‘Trade unions’, ‘Academia, research institute and think tanks’, ‘Company/Group’, ‘Banks/Financial Institutions’, ‘Professionals’ associations’, and ‘Other organisations’. We only consider Type C - Organisations members when computing the proportion of CSOs. We define, for the sake of this sampling methodology, that CSOs contain NGOs and academia, research institute and think tanks. We acknowledge that some professional associations, social economy entities, agricultural organisations, and those listed as ‘Other organisations’ share common elements as NGOs. Yet it may require case-by-case judgement and we prefer keeping the method clean and straightforward. Meanwhile, there is no clear definition of NGOs. According to the [European Court of Auditors](#), a NGO is a voluntary, independent from government, non-profit organisation, which is not a political party or a trade union. In the Register, the categorisation suggests that NGOs are those remaining CSOs which are neither trade and business association, trade unions, academia, research institute and think tanks, nor professional associations.

Based on the 35 practices listed in the Register, we examined their membership lists and the types of organisations represented. Together, these 35 practices include a total of 885 organisational members.⁶¹ The composition of these members is illustrated in Figure 2. NGOs constitute the largest group, accounting for 48% of the total, followed by trade and business associations at 36%. Other organisation types make up a relatively small proportion. Overall, the sample achieves a good balance: it reflects the general and specific (e.g., vulnerable group) interests represented by various types of civil society organisations, including trade and business associations and trade unions.

The final sample of practices implemented by the Commission contains 47 civil dialogue practices, with the seven Civil Dialogue Groups under DG AGRI grouped into one single practice. The complete list of these practices with descriptions is provided in Table 4 in the Appendix.

Figure 2 - Composition of the members of the identified practices



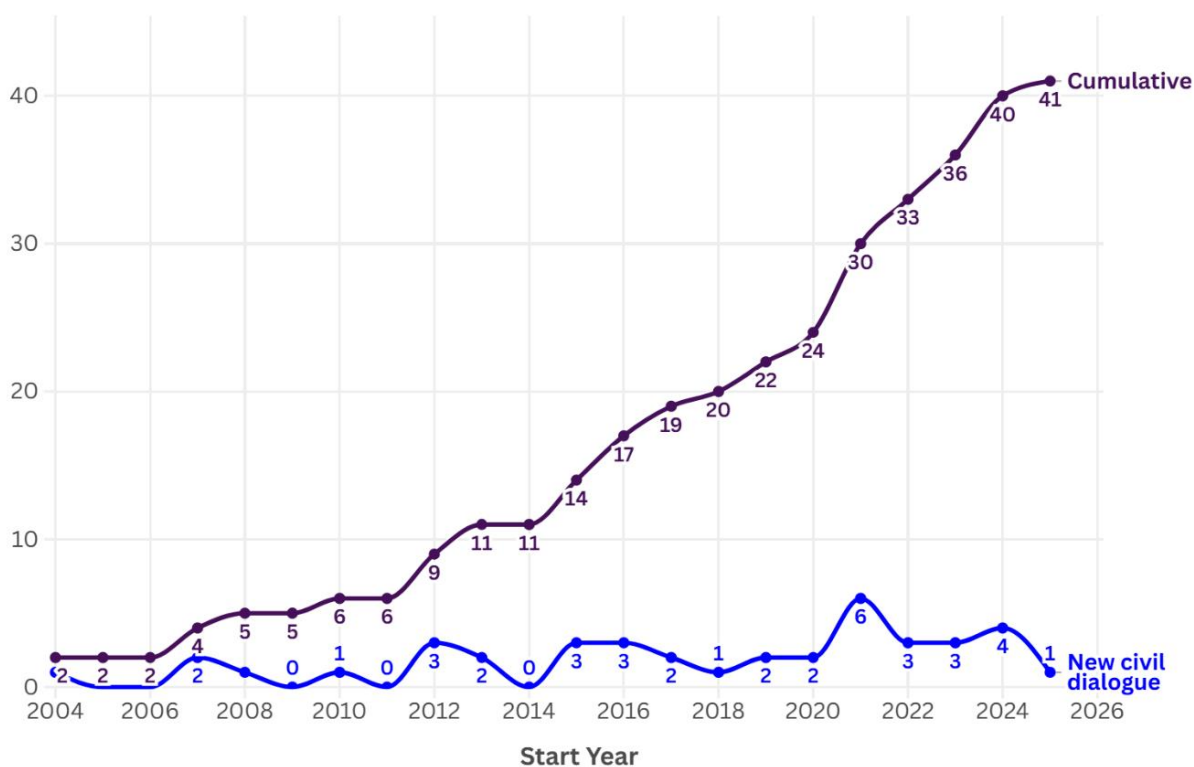
Source: Authors' selection and elaboration of the information provided by the Register of Expert Groups and Other Similar Entities

The *Register of Commission Expert Groups and Other Similar Entities* is an excellent online source for keeping track and understanding the Commission's consultative bodies. These consultative bodies follow standardised rules in sharing information, which systematises the Register. One drawback of using this sampling method is that some groups are heavily occupied by national authorities with little space for CSOs or are designed as information or update sessions with little genuine contributions from CSOs. Note that these groups are designed for their own specific purposes; no single scoping criteria could capture the variety of civil dialogue.

⁶¹ Many organisations appear multiple times in different consultative entities. The sample retains repeated entries for organisations that appear more than once

It would be interesting to study the temporal dimension of these civil dialogue practices. Figure 3 reports the number of new civil dialogue each year since 2004 together with the cumulative number. Since 2015, there has been at least one new civil dialogue practice in the Commission. The peak year is 2021, having a record of 6 new civil dialogues. This temporal analysis is not completely accurate as some disbanded or replaced groups might not be documented in the Register and thus not included. Yet it gives a sense that civil dialogue seems to have momentum over time.⁶²

Figure 3 - Number of civil dialogue sorted by their start year

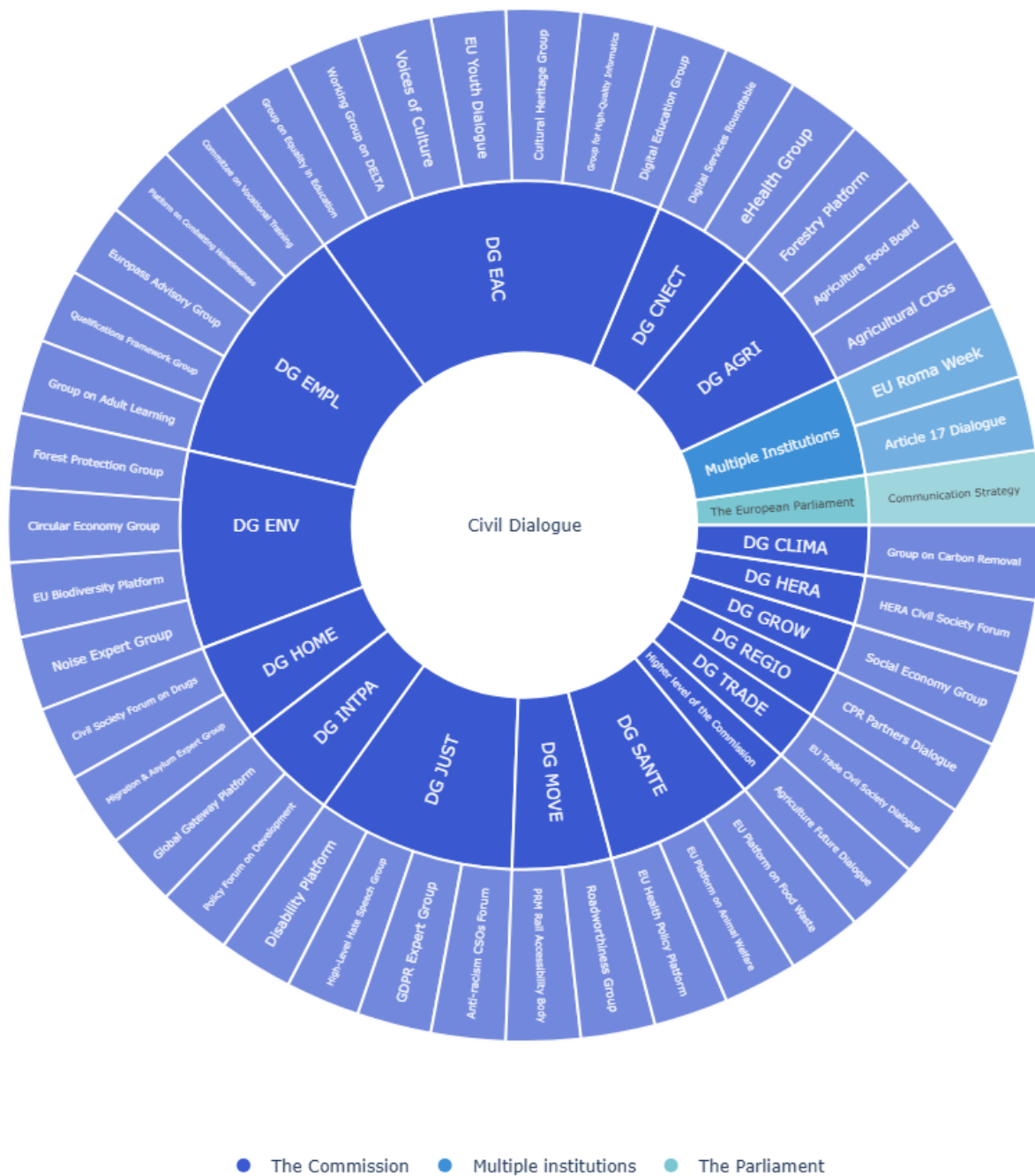


Source: Register of Expert Groups and Other Similar Entities

Figure 4 is a sunburst chart that visualises the aforementioned 43 civil dialogue practices by the Commission, the Parliament, and by various institutions.

⁶² Note that the sample is dated May 2025.

Figure 4 - Sunburst chart of all identified practices



Source: Authors' own elaboration on data collected from the Register of Expert Groups and Other Similar Entities and other official EU websites

3.3 Comparative analysis of civil dialogue practices

What follows is a description of civil dialogues practices in the EU across several aspects that determine the quality and completeness of the dialogue.

- **Type:** is the initiative vertical, horizontal, or transversal? Is the role of the dialogue to consult, or do the attendees share some decision-making power? Who is involved in the selection of topics/agenda-setting?
- **Regularity:** is the initiative a one-off, or is it part of a reoccurring series? If yes, then what is the frequency of sessions?
- **Structure:** Is the dialogue structured with Rules of Procedure and clearly defined objectives? Are there terms of reference for operating, or is the dialogue more informal? Who assumes political and administrative responsibility? If it is a collaboration between EU institutions or services, how is the collaboration organised? Is the session open to all, or is it invitation-only? Which human and financial resources are dedicated to the dialogue? Are there focal points in each directorate, allowing CSOs to contact the relevant interlocutors?
- **Format:** what is the format? how much space is given to CSOs to express their views?
- **Access to information:** are there any preparatory or supporting materials? Do attendees receive guidance on finding relevant information?
- **Inclusiveness:** are there any traditionally underrepresented groups involved? Are there any supporting measures aimed at making the physical or online participation smoother?
- **Digitalisation:** are digital tools used to prepare for and to conduct the dialogue? Are these free to use? What level of digitalisation is present in the dialogue?
- **Feedback quality:** are attendees asked to give feedback? Do the organisers provide feedback to attendees? What is the mode of communication (survey, informal chat, interview, written feedback, etc.)?
- **Outcomes:** have the recommendations made by civil society partners effectively been taken into account? Have the organisers committed to taking the insights on board, or is it based on good faith? Has there been follow-up on how participant input was taken into account (or if not, then why)?

Note that **type, digitalisation, inclusivity, and feedback** are not included in the summary table below. Since all are nonetheless important aspects, each has its own section in the comparative overview below the table, examples included. Digitalisation was moved because greater digitalisation does not necessarily improve civil dialogue, whereas the other assessment aspects are more linear (i.e., greater regularity, inclusiveness, etc. improves civil dialogue). **Inclusivity** is not in the summary table because there were very few dialogues with explicit inclusivity considerations. Similarly, **feedback** collection is underreported on and data collection efforts revealed that there are few practices with feedback systems in place.

Structure is a broad and multifaceted dimension, encompassing many elements. Attempting to reduce this complexity to a single, linear scoring scheme is impractical and yields limited insight. Therefore, in the summary table below, we score Structure based on the following two key elements:

- Whether the civil dialogue is governed by publicly available Rules of Procedure⁶³
- Whether the dialogue defines concrete policy objectives

These two components are directly linked to the quality and outcomes of the dialogue process. The subsequent analysis considers additional elements—such as the composition of participants, openness to external stakeholders, and whether the dialogue is part of an inter-institutional initiative.

Despite our best efforts, ranking the practices linearly across each dimension remains a challenging task. In many cases, practices are designed with specific goals in mind and work within their intended context. While some may be considered best practices, there is no single ideal model. We therefore remind readers that the ranking presented here is just one of many possible approaches, and we encourage the research community to explore and develop alternative assessment frameworks.

The assessment scheme is shown in Table 2.

⁶³ Some identified practices are governed by both Terms of Reference and Rules of Procedure. For some we only find their Terms of Reference and for some other neither of them is found. As Rules of Procedure are believed to be more important in laying down the basic structure of the consultative activities, we highlight the existence of Rules of Procedure in this comparative analysis.

Table 2 - Civil dialogue assessment scheme

Colour legend	Light green	Green	Dark green
Regularity	Highly irregular, ad-hoc or without assurance of reoccurrence	Reoccurring but at infrequent or irregular intervals	The dialogue takes place more than once a year at regularly scheduled intervals, with high confidence of reoccurring
Structure	The practice is not governed by Rules of Procedure and does not specify concrete policy-oriented objectives.	The practice is not governed by Rules of Procedure or does not specify concrete policy-oriented objectives.	The practice is governed by Rules of Procedure and specifies concrete policy-oriented objectives.
Format	The format does not provide sufficient space for civil society to express their views.	The format allows only limited space for civil society to express their views.	The format provides sufficient space for civil society to express their views.
Access to information	No information is given to participants beforehand. Documents such as the agenda, participant list, and meeting minutes are not always published	Some information, such as agendas and minutes, is available to participants and publicly, but no working document or other preparatory materials are shared before the meeting.	Participants have information on the topic and agenda of the dialogue, and relevant documents, such as summary reports, are publicly available.
Outcomes	No concrete policy outcomes.	Some indications of concrete policy outcomes, such as plans and priorities.	Concrete policy outcomes with contributions to legislations, strategies, guidance, recommendations or communications are mentioned.

Source: Author's own elaboration of these dimensions

Apart from interviews and survey responses, the sources of information for the following comparative analysis are as follows. On **regularity**, most of the information is obtained from the [Register of Commission Expert Groups and Other Similar Entities](#) where consultative activities are supposed to keep materials of meetings from which we deduce the frequency of meetings.⁶⁴ For practices not listed in the Register, we study any information regarding the practices available in the public domain. On **structure**, the information is again obtained from the Register where objectives are stated and Rules of Procedure uploaded along with other information. On the page of each consultative entity, the organising unit may outline the specific activities the group is expected to undertake. We assess whether these tasks are clearly defined, for example, by referencing potential contributions to specific legislation, or whether they are more vaguely described, such as providing assistance to the Commission within a policy area. On **format**, we study the uploaded agendas and minutes to understand the typical arrangement of a practice and then infer the space for expressing opinions given to CSOs. On **access to information**, we check the Rules of Procedure of the identified dialogue and collect the written rules on information sharing, which is however not necessarily the actual practice of the organising unit. On **outcome**, we attempt to identify traces of concrete policy outcomes for each practice, which in some occasions appear on the 'Next Steps' of the minutes or explicit acknowledgements by legislative documents. The

⁶⁴ See <https://ec.europa.eu/transparency/expert-groups-register/screen/home?lang=en>

assessment on outcome is however significantly limited by the availability existing information and therefore may not comprehensively reflect the actual policy outcomes of these practices.

We present the comparative analysis in Table 3 for easier reading and comparison.

Table 3 - Comparative analysis of civil dialogues

Organiser	Title	Regularity	Structure	Format ⁶⁵	Access to information	Outcome
Commission						
AGRI	Agricultural civil dialogue groups (CDGs)	Multiple annual working group meetings	Governed by Rules of Procedure. Tasks are well specified.	Presentation of updates by authorities, with space for members to express opinions. The space however varies across meetings.	Agendas are sent no later than 30 days before the meeting. Agendas, minutes, and participant lists are published.	They contributed to the drafting of strategic plans but other more concrete policy outcomes are unknown.
AGRI	European Board on Agriculture and Food	Established in 2025, so far 2 meetings in 2025.	Terms of references or Rules of procedures are not publicly available. Tasks are well specified.	Roundtable, fairly sufficient space given to members to express their priorities.	Draft agenda is public 2 weeks before the meeting. Agendas, minutes and participant list are shared publicly. Yet the amount of information is comparatively limited.	So far no concrete policy outcomes; proposed priorities are taken note.
AGRI	Forest and Forestry Stakeholder Platform	2 meetings a year since 2023	Governed by Rules of Procedure. Tasks are comparatively broadly/vaguely defined	Presentations by authorities, followed by members' questions. Fairly sufficient space given to members to share their opinions, which are well captured by the minutes.	Agendas and other relevant documents are shared at least 14 and 7 days respectively before the meeting. Agendas, minutes and other working documents are shared publicly.	No concrete policy outcomes; the Commission promised to follow up inquiries.
CLIMA	Expert Group on Carbon Removal	2 meetings a year	Governed by Rules of Procedure. Tasks are well specified.	Presentations by officials followed by discussion.	Agendas and other relevant documents are shared at least 14 and 7 days respectively before the meeting. Agendas, minutes and other working documents are shared publicly. ⁶⁶	The Group contributes to the finishing of several technical assessment papers.
CNECT	eHealth Stakeholder Group	2 meetings a year, except 2022	Governed by Rules of Procedure. Tasks are comparatively broadly/vaguely defined	Presentations by authorities, followed by members' questions. Fairly sufficient space given to members to share their opinions, which are well captured by the minutes.	Agendas and other relevant documents are shared at least 30 and 14 days respectively before the meeting. Agendas and minutes are shared publicly.	The Commission promised to take into account the inputs for its future planning.

⁶⁵ Assessment of this dimension relies on our study of the meetings' minutes and occasionally some other documents.

⁶⁶ They are available in its own website, not in the Register.

CNECT	Online roundtable with CSOs on the implementation of the Digital Services Act (DSA)	Series of online exchanges (2024 only)	Unsure if governed by Rules of Procedure. Tasks are well specified.	Presentations of updates by officials, followed by sharing by members.	No public information on the participants, agendas, or minutes. Chatham House rule applied.	No summary report was published. Concrete policy outcomes are unknown.
EAC	Commission expert group on cultural heritage (Cultural Heritage Forum)	2 meetings a year; last record is March 2023.	Governed by Rules of Procedure. Tasks are well specified.	Open floors are organised. Members are given sufficient space to express their opinions which are well captured by the minutes.	Agendas and other relevant documents are shared at least 30 and 14 days respectively before the meeting. Some agendas and minutes are shared publicly but some are missing.	Mainly for exchange of ideas and information. Concrete policy outcomes are unknown.
EAC	Commission Expert Group for the development of guidelines on high-quality informatics	2 meeting a year	Governed by Rules of Procedure. Tasks are well specified.	Presentations by officials, followed by breakout sessions. Members are given sufficient space to express their opinions which are well captured by the minutes.	Agendas and other relevant documents are shared at least 14 and 7 days respectively before the meeting. Agendas, minutes and other working documents are shared publicly.	The meetings contribute to the drafting of guidelines.
EAC	EU Youth Dialogue	A 18-month operational cycle with multiple meetings	Unsure if governed by Rules of Procedure. Tasks are well specified.	The Dialogue includes a Youth Conference where national youth organisations can participate. Space for civil society members to express their views is sufficient.	Consultation information is given several months before the Youth Conference. These preparation materials and reports are publicly available.	Each cycle produces various reports. In 2018, the cycle led to the creation of 11 Youth Goals that were then added to the EU Youth Strategy. ⁶⁷
EAC	Voices of Culture	1–3 annual topic-specific dialogues. Latest record is dated 2023.	Unsure if governed by Rules of Procedure. Tasks are well specified	Given the information found in the reports, civil society members are given sufficient space to express their views.	Given the information found in the reports, civil society members are given sufficient information for preparation. Session reports, themes, and agendas published on Commission's website.	Summary reports submitted to the Commission; no assessment of the outcome
EAC	Working Group on Digital Education: Learning, Teaching and Assessment (DELTA)	4-7 meetings a year between 2022 and 2024	Governed by Rules of Procedure. Tasks are broadly/vaguely defined.	Presentations of updates, followed by breakout group discussions. Yet national authorities often take more central role than CSO members.	Agendas and other relevant documents are shared at least 14 and 7 days respectively before the meeting. Agendas, minutes and other working documents are shared publicly.	After a meeting, a document of Key Policy Messages is drafted and shared publicly. The Council Recommendation (2023) recognised the contribution of the Group for its support to the High Level Group on DELTA.

⁶⁷ See https://youth.europa.eu/get-involved/eu-youth-dialogue/what-eu-youth-dialogue_en

EAC	Working Group on Equality and Values in Education and Training	4-7 meetings a year between 2022 and 2024	Governed by Rules of Procedure. Tasks are broadly/vaguely defined.	Presentations of updates, followed by breakout group discussions. Yet national authorities often take more central role than CSO members.	Agendas and other relevant documents are shared at least 14 and 7 days respectively before the meeting. Agendas, minutes and other working documents are shared publicly.	Concrete policy outcomes are unknown.
EAC	Commission Expert group for Digital Education Content	2 meetings a year	Governed by Rules of Procedure. Tasks are well specified.	Use activities to elicit opinions from members, which are well captured by the minutes.	Agendas and other relevant documents are shared at least 14 and 7 days respectively before the meeting. Agendas and minutes are shared publicly.	The Group is tasked with developing guidelines and quality requirements.
EMPL→JUST ⁶⁸	Disability Platform	3-4 plenary meetings since 2022	Governed by Rules of Procedure. Tasks are well specified.	Presentation of updates by authorities, with some space for CSO members. Yet national authorities often take more central role than CSO members.	Agendas and other relevant documents are shared at least 14 days before the meeting. Some agendas and minutes are shared publicly but some are missing.	Platform opinions feed into the EU's Disability Strategy; yet more concrete policy outcomes are unknown.
EMPL / The Council	EU Platform on Combatting Homelessness	Irregular; 6 'mutual learning' meetings from 2022 to 2024	No Rules of Procedure. Tasks are well specified.	Position papers are prepared by civil society members.	Position papers are prepared and disseminated beforehand for the mutual learning events, though how many days before is unknown.	Mutual learning sessions facilitate learning by EU and national officials with the inputs by scholars and CSO, though concrete policy outcomes are unknown.
EMPL	Europass Advisory Group	Roughly 3 meetings in a year; last documented meeting is November 2021	Governed by Rules of Procedure. Tasks are broadly/vaguely defined.	Presentations of updates by authorities, followed by questions and comments from members, but space for CSOs is unclear or unlimited.	Agendas and other relevant documents are shared at least 30 and 14 days respectively before the meeting. Agendas, minutes and other working documents are shared publicly.	A Report from the Commission on Europass acknowledged the contributions by the Group to oversee the implementation and for being a consultation platform. ⁶⁹
EMPL	European Qualifications Framework	3 meetings a year since 2020	Governed by a Working Method, which is less	Presentations of updates by authorities, with	Not sure how many days before a meeting	Occasionally the Group led to important steps in

⁶⁸ Since February 2025, the EU Disability Forum has been organised by DG JUST.

⁶⁹ European Commission, Commission Staff Working Document – Evaluation of Decision (EU) 2018/646 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 April 2018 on a common framework for the provision of better services for skills and qualifications (Europass) and repealing Decision No 2241/2004/EC. Accompanying the document Report from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council on the implementation and impact of Decision (EU) 2018/646 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 April 2018 on a common framework for the provision of better services for skills and qualifications (Europass) and repealing Decision No 2241/2004/EC (submitted pursuant to Art. 9 of Decision (EU) 2018/646), SWD(2024) 71 final, Brussels, 2024.

European Commission, Report from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council on the implementation and impact of Decision (EU) 2018/646 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 April 2018 on a common framework for the provision of better services for skills and qualifications (Europass) and repealing Decision No 2241/2004/EC (submitted pursuant to Art. 9 of Decision (EU) 2018/646), COM(2024) 135 final, Brussels, 2024.

	Advisory Group		precise than usual Rules of Procedure. Tasks are well specified.	open floors welcoming inputs from members. Yet national authorities often take more central role than CSO members.	information is shared. Agendas, minutes and other working documents are shared publicly.	the policymaking process. The Council Recommendation on EQF (2017) recognised the contribution by the Advisory Group for its guidance and development of referencing criteria. ⁷⁰
EMPL	Working group on Adult learning - opening up opportunities for all	6 meetings in 2022, last record is dated October 2022	Governed by Rules of Procedure. Tasks are broadly/vaguely defined.	Presentations of updates by authorities, followed by questions and comments, but space for CSOs is unclear or unlimited.	Agendas and other relevant documents are shared at least 14 and 7 days respectively before the meeting. Agendas, minutes and other working documents are shared publicly.	The Group was designed as a mutual-learning platform; no concrete policy outcome.
EMPL	Advisory Committee on Vocational Training	Several meetings a year	Governed by Rules of Procedure. Tasks are broadly/vaguely defined.	Presentations of updates by officials followed by small group discussion. Space for members is sufficient	Agendas and minutes are not shared publicly though the Committee is listed in the Register.	Occasionally the Group led to important steps in the policymaking process. An opinion produced by the Group led to a subsequent Commission's proposal and then a Council Recommendation. ⁷¹
ENV	Commission Expert Group/Multi-Stakeholder Platform on Protecting and Restoring the World's Forests	Roughly 5-6 meetings in a year; 13 meetings in 2023; some meetings were MS only.	Governed by Rules of Procedure. Tasks are well specified.	Sufficient space for CSOs to present their findings and opinions.	Agendas and other relevant documents are shared at least 14 and 7 days respectively before the meeting. Agendas, minutes and presentation slides are shared publicly.	Provide advice to the Commission on the implementation of the EU Timber Regulation and the FLEGT Regulation
ENV	Commission's Expert Group on Circular Economy and Sustainable Production and Consumption	2-3 meetings a year	No Rules of Procedure is found. Tasks are broadly/vaguely defined.	Presentations by authorities, followed by comments and questions. Yet national authorities often take more central role than CSO members.	Not sure how many days before a meeting information is shared. Agendas, presentation slides and minutes are shared publicly; occasionally working documents were shared beforehand.	Mainly exchange insights, updates and coordinate efforts. Concrete policy outcomes are unknown

⁷⁰ Council Recommendation of 22 May 2017 on the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning and repealing the recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 April 2008 on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (2017/C 189/03), OJ C 189, 15.6.2017, p. 15.

⁷¹ Council Recommendation of 24 November 2020 on vocational education and training (VET) for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience (2020/C 417/01), OJ C 417, 2.12.2020, p. 1.

ENV	EU Biodiversity Platform	Vary significantly (2 meetings in 2023, 22 meetings in 2021)	Governed by Rules of Procedure. Tasks are well specified.	Presentations of updates by authorities, with space for CSOs to present their opinions. Yet compared to authorities CSOs play a less major role.	Agendas and other relevant documents are shared at least 30 and 14 days respectively before the meeting. Agendas are shared publicly but some minutes are missing.	Mainly facilitate exchanges of views and information for the implementation of the EU Biodiversity Strategy 2030
ENV	Noise Expert Group	1-2 meeting a year until 2020	Governed by Rules of Procedure. Tasks are well specified.	Presentations of updates by authorities, followed by collections of inputs from members. Two recent meetings, 2023 and 2024, invited Member States and EEA only.	Agendas and other relevant documents are shared at least 14 days before the meeting. Agenda and minutes are publicly available.	The Group contributed to the drafting of a Commission Delegated Directive on common noise assessment methods. ⁷²
GROW	Commission expert group on social economy and social enterprises	Roughly 2 times a year with some sub-group meetings;	Governed by Rules of Procedure. Tasks are well specified.	Presentations by authorities, followed by members' comments and questions. Fairly sufficient space given to members to share their opinions, which are well captured by the minutes.	Agendas and other relevant documents are shared at least 15 and 10 days respectively before the meeting. Agendas, minutes and working documents are publicly available.	Concrete policy outcomes are unknown. Mainly to assist the Commission on the implementation and to share experience and best practices.
HERA	HERA Civil Society Forum	2-4 annual meetings	Governed by Rules of Procedure. Tasks are well specified.	Presentations by authorities, followed by comments and questions. Fairly sufficient space given to members to share their opinions, which are well captured by the minutes.	Agendas and other relevant documents are shared at least 5 days before the meeting. Agendas and minutes are publicly available.	Contributions to HERA Advisory Forum; concrete policy outcomes are unknown.
HOME	Commission expert group - Civil Society Forum on Drugs	1-2 meetings a year; last record is dated 2022	Governed by Rules of Procedure. Tasks are broadly/vaguely specified.	This Forum has a few sub-groups where CSOs enjoy sufficient space to express their opinions.	Agendas and other relevant documents are shared at least 10 and 3 days respectively before the meeting. Agendas and minutes are publicly available.	The Forum provides space for CSOs to express their opinions, but concrete policy outcomes are unknown.
HOME	Expert Group on the views of migrants in the field of migration, asylum and integration	2 meetings a year; 4 times in 2021	Governed by Rules of Procedure. Tasks are well specified.	Presentations by authorities, followed by small group discussions, in which CSOs enjoy space to express their opinions.	Agendas and other relevant documents are shared at least 30 and 14 days respectively before the meeting. Agendas, minutes and working	Mainly to provide advice; concrete policy outcomes are unknown.

⁷² See the official page of the 13th Noise Expert Group Meeting at <https://ec.europa.eu/transparency/expert-groups-register/screen/meetings/consult?lang=en&meetingId=22455&fromExpertGroups=2809>

					documents are publicly available.	
INTPA	Global Gateway Civil Society and Local Authorities Advisory Platform	Multiple annual member update meetings	Governed by Terms of Reference. Tasks are well specified.	Mix of information sessions and discussions. Unsure if members are given sufficient space to express their opinions.	Unsure if information is shared sufficiently in advance. Minutes and other materials, such as slides, are publicly available.	Concrete policy outcomes are unknown. The Platform will reach out to DG INTPA with proposals on concrete next steps and proposals of focus groups.
INTPA	Policy Forum on Development	Several annual meetings	Unsure if governed by Terms of Reference or Rules of Procedure. Tasks are well specified.	Presentation of information and updates by officials, followed by comments by members. Judging from the reports, civil society members are given sufficient space.	Dedicated website exists documenting materials; preparatory materials are however reportedly insufficient.	Summary reports published; led to DG INTPA Global Gateway Platform.
JUST	Permanent anti-racism CSOs Forum	4 times a year	Unsure if governed by Terms of Reference or Rules of Procedure. Tasks are broadly/vaguely specified.	Members are consulted for setting the agenda of a meeting. CSOs can pitch topics. Space for members is sufficient.	The member list is public. Minutes are prepared and shared among members but not publicly available.	Concrete policy outcomes are unknown.
JUST	High Level Group on combating hate speech and hate crime	1-4 meetings a year; last record is dated 2022.	No Rules of Procedure. Tasks are broadly/vaguely specified.	Presentations of updates by authorities and reports by four working groups. Yet CSOs seem play a less major role than authorities.	Not sure how many days before a meeting information is shared. Agendas and minutes are publicly available.	Mainly to exchange views and best practices; concrete policy outcome are unclear.
JUST	Multistakeholder expert group to support the application of Regulation (EU) 2016/679	1-2 meetings a year	Governed by Rules of Procedure. Tasks are well specified.	Presentations of updates by authorities, followed by comments and questions by members. Member could also express their opinions through a questionnaire.	Agendas and other relevant documents are shared at least 15 and 14 days respectively before the meeting. Agendas and minutes are uploaded publicly; replies to a questionnaire are uploaded.	The Group contributes to the preparation of delegated acts.
MOVE	Advisory body on accessibility of the EU rail system for PRM	Roughly 1 meeting a year	Governed by Rules of Procedure. Tasks are broadly/vaguely defined.	Presentations of updates by authorities, followed by comments and questions. Yet, CSOs play a less major role than Member States.	Agendas and other relevant documents are shared at least 30 and 14 days respectively before the meeting. Agendas and minutes are publicly available, with some minutes missing.	Mainly to provide advice and exchange views; concrete policy outcomes are unknown.
MOVE	Expert Group on Roadworthiness and Vehicle	1-3 meetings a year	Governed by Rules of Procedure. Tasks are well specified.	Presentations by authorities, followed by comments and questions. Yet,	Agendas and other relevant documents are shared at least 30 and 14 days	Mainly for collecting advice for the preparation of non-legislative acts and guidance

	Registration Documents			CSOs play a less major role than Member States.	respectively before the meeting. Agendas and minutes are publicly available.	
REGIO	Dialogue with CPR partners 2021-2027	1–2 meetings a year	Governed by Rules of Procedure. Tasks are well specified.	Presentations by authorities, followed by comments and questions and slots of presentations by members. CSOs are given space to express their opinions, which are well captured by the minutes.	Agendas and other relevant documents are shared at least 30 and 14 days respectively before the meeting. Agendas and minutes are publicly available.	The Dialogue aims to also contribute to the future of the policy, though so far concrete policy outcomes are unknown.
SANTE	EU Platform on Animal Welfare	1 meeting a year since 2024	Governed by Rules of Procedure. Tasks are well specified.	Conference with panel discussions with some CSO speakers.	Agendas and other relevant documents are shared at least 15 days before the meeting. Documents and other materials (e.g. leaflets and recommendations) of the Platform are publicly available on the official website.	The Platform played a role in the phase of preparation of the animal welfare legislative proposals.
SANTE	EU Platform on Food Losses and Food Waste	1-2 meetings a year with some sub-group meetings	Governed by Rules of Procedure. Tasks are well specified.	Presentations by authorities followed by discussions. CSOs are given space to express their opinions, which are well captured by the minutes.	Agendas and other relevant documents are shared at least 30 and 14 days respectively before the meeting. Agendas and some minutes are published but some minutes are missing	Mainly for collecting opinions; no concrete policy outcomes
SANTE	EU Health Policy Platform	Annual meeting, three to four temporary Thematic Networks annually, other meetings and hybrid events on a regular, ad-hoc basis.	Governed by Rules of Procedure. Tasks are well specified.	Online platform provides an open discussion space. Presentations by members of civil society, commented by EU officials.	Detailed information on official website, simple registration process with detailed instructions. Joint statements, event programmes etc published on commission website.	After each Annual Meeting, an independent report is prepared. Concrete policy outcomes are unknown.
JUST/ European Parliament	Dialogue with churches, religious associations and non-confessional organisations (Article 17 Dialogue)	Annual meeting with additional ad-hoc sessions as needed	No Rules of Procedure. Tasks are broadly/vaguely specified.	High-level conference with panel discussion, in which CSO representatives are invited on stage.	Agendas are video recordings of the Dialogue publicly available. ⁷³	Moderate perceived impact. No minutes or summary report are drafted. Concrete policy outcomes are unknown.
TRADE	EU Trade Civil Society Dialogue	200+ short meetings across diverse areas.	No Rules of Procedure. Tasks are	Presentation of officials followed by questions and	Discussion document is available 2 weeks	Comprehensive impact evaluations

⁷³ Available here <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/en/be-heard/religious-and-non-confessional-dialogue/events>

		Several annual CSD Contact Group meetings	broadly/vaguely specified.	comments. Space for members to express opinions is sufficient, which are well captured by the meeting reports.	before the meeting. Agendas, minutes and working documents are published.	conducted around every 5 years.
The European Commission (higher level)	Strategic Dialogue on the Future of EU Agriculture	Seven annual plenary meetings with supplementary working group sessions	No Rules of Procedure. Tasks are well specified.	Plenary meetings and working groups. Members are given sufficient space to express their opinions.	Agendas and background documents shared 1 week pre-meeting; minutes are circulated but not publicly available.	Plenaries and final report were attended and commented upon by the President of the Commission. It led to the creation of the European Board on Agriculture and Food.
The Parliament						
DG COMM	External communication strategy	Multiple ad-hoc meetings annually	No Rules of Procedure. Tasks are broadly/vaguely specified.	Open discussion format (no structured activities/guidelines)	Newsletters are distributed; no preparatory materials are provided.	Concrete policy outcomes are unknown.
Multiple institutions						
European Roma Grassroots Organisations (ERGO), DG JUST of the Commission and the Parliament	EU Roma Week	1 event a year	No Rules of Procedure. Tasks are well specified.	Presentations and panel discussions with CSO representatives on stage. Members are given sufficient space to express their opinions.	Agendas and participant lists shared pre-event via a dedicated website. Video recordings (2025 edition) are available on YouTube. Yet no summary report is produced.	Concrete policy outcomes are unknown.

Source: Register of Expert Groups and Other Similar Entities, EU official websites, and the authors' elaboration. Data are updated up to May 2025.

Type: *is the initiative vertical, horizontal, or transversal? Is the role of the dialogue to consult, or do the attendees have decision-making power? Who is involved in the selection of topics/agenda-setting?*

This report investigates vertical dialogue convened by EU institutions. In most of the collected practices, civil society was asked to give opinions or feedback to existing workstreams, but the decision-making power stayed with EU institutions. In some instances, such as the Parliament's external communications collaboration, civil society had **autonomy** on whether or not to implement the measures discussed with EU officials. This increases civil society's decision-making power.

Regularity: *is the initiative a one-off, or is it part of a reoccurring series? If yes, then what is the frequency of sessions?*

Most dialogues in the table above meet a **handful of times** a year, with **little to no asynchronous online interaction** in between meetings. Some civil dialogue groups, such as the ones in DG AGRI and DG TRADE, meet **frequently** throughout the year. DG EMPL has a handful of ad-hoc meetings yearly for various files through their Strategic Dialogues initiative, which are centrally coordinated by DG EMPL's Directorate. The Directorate also sends out yearly reminder emails to units about the possibility to consult civil society. Others, like the dialogue with churches, religious associations and non-confessional organisations (also known as Article 17 Dialogue), have **one annual meeting** and meet ad-hoc **upon request** between sessions.

Civil society members of the Permanent Anti-Racism Civil Society Forum appreciated both the regularity of the sessions (three online and one in-person meeting each year) and that the timing was **jointly decided upon by EU organisers and civils society members.**

A dialogue does not have to continue into perpetuity to be effective. For instance, the Strategic Dialogue on the Future of EU Agriculture (launched by President von der Leyen), ran for less than a year while achieving its objective of answering a handful of specific policy questions. Conversely, permanent dialogues (such as the aforementioned Anti-Racism Forum) are appreciated for their perceived stability.

The identified practices often demonstrate a degree of agility, characterised by less formal interactions and flexible exchanges that complement plenary meetings. This agility challenges the assumption that regularity and stability are always preferable. In certain cases, increased meeting frequency within a short period allows participants to focus intensively on specific objectives. For instance, the High-Level Group on combating hate speech and hate crime organised its work through three dedicated working groups, which presented their findings and recommendations during the plenary sessions.⁷⁴ On the other hand, major strategic dialogue may not reoccur again in the near future but it may lead to the establishment of more regular dialogue practices. For example, the European Board on Agriculture and Food was set up following one recommendation of the Strategic Dialogue on the Future of Agriculture.⁷⁵

Structure: *Is the dialogue structured with Rules of Procedure and clearly defined objectives? Who assumes political and administrative responsibility? If it is a collaboration between EU institutions or services, how is the collaboration organised? Is the session open to all, or is it invitation-only? Which human and financial resources are dedicated to the dialogue? Are there focal points in each directorate, allowing CSOs to contact the relevant interlocutors?*

Most of the dialogue practices are governed by their Rules of Procedure, which seem to be the standard for Commission expert groups. The need of Rules of Procedure for one-time major dialogue or less formal practices is however believed to be lower and these practices are usually not implemented with clear procedural rules. The existence of Terms of Reference (ToR) or Rules of Procedure (RoP) depends heavily on whether a practice was formalised (e.g., expert groups or established platforms) or ad-hoc. For example, in DG EMPL formal practices include their Europass Advisory Group and the EU Platform on Combating Homelessness, and in parallel there are a handful of yearly ad-hoc Strategic Dialogue meetings with civil society that are centrally organised by a team in the DG EMPL Directorate. The formal practices have ToR and RoP, whereas the ad-hoc meetings do not.

Our sample includes multiple Commission expert groups, which had similar ToRs to define the selection process and criteria, ensure accountability, give a framework of what is required of the participating organisations, and lay out basic operational principles. It is rare for the goal of a dialogue to be very specific (such as the handful of questions the Strategic Dialogue on the Future of EU Agriculture was tasked with answering), the stated aim is typically to provide opinions on a policy initiative or domain.

⁷⁴ See the minutes of The 10th meeting of the High Level Group on combating hate speech and hate crime at <https://ec.europa.eu/transparency/expert-groups-register/screen/meetings/consult?lang=en&meetingId=44185&fromExpertGroups=3425>

⁷⁵ See the press release by the Commission at https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_24_6205

The tasks associated with these dialogue practices are often broadly defined or vaguely articulated. They are typically decided upon by the institutions when initiating a call for participation and most commonly involve supporting the institutions in implementing existing policies. In some cases, the practices define their tasks more precisely by referencing specific issues and legislation. For example, the Expert Group for Digital Education Content is working with clear tasks to *‘Establish(ing) a common vocabulary and terminology to facilitate a shared understanding and transparency with regard to digital education content across stakeholders and Member States’*⁷⁶ and the Cultural Heritage Forum specifies that the Forum is to *‘to monitor and if needed provide recommendations regarding the implementation of the European Framework for Action on Cultural Heritage’*⁷⁷ A reflection on the level of detail in task specifications suggests that, while detail is valued, more vaguely defined tasks can offer greater flexibility in implementation. However, insufficient clarity may hinder the dialogue’s effectiveness, potentially resulting in a lack of concrete policy outcomes.

Dialogues were **typically organised by single institutions**, with few collaborative exceptions such as the EU Roma Week. And within institutions, there was little collaboration between sections – for example, most dialogues in the Commission were organised by a single DG, or a team within a DG. One Commission interviewee theorised that new mandates and reshuffling of files associated with a new Commission may naturally lead to more opportunities for collaboration within DGs. Sometimes inter-institutional collaboration took the form of organisers **inviting colleagues with relevant topic expertise** for dedicated discussions (for example, the Anti-Racism Forum invited AI policymakers to a session).

A reoccurring observation from interviewees was that **recruitment processes are often untransparent**. Practices with open calls (such as the initiation of expert groups) often have selection criteria related to transparency (e.g., being in the Transparency register) and domain relevance, but do not provide information on how final participants are selected after filtering for these minimal eligibility criteria. Some sessions are **invitation-only** or **require organisations to contact the organisers** to be involved (e.g., DG COMMS in the Parliament or the Article 17 Dialogue in the Secretariat-General). In the case of DG EMPL, a contact pool which was originally a list of organisations financed by DG EMPL that was then expanded upon over years serves as a mailing list.

There is little available information regarding resources. However, multiple interviews revealed that staffing dedicated to civil dialogue is limited, pointing to a concerning trend: the allocation of human and financial resources to civil dialogue appears to be increasingly inadequate. Such a stringent situation is also reflected in the fact that few DGs in the Commission dedicate specific subunits to civil society engagement.⁷⁸ The management of civil society relations and civil dialogue is probably diffused among units and subunits according to the topics of the dialogue. Such a practice might have led to inadequate communication between authorities and civil society members.

As some institutional interviewees explained, **rigid work and planning structures** could create bureaucratic hurdles that make dialogues less flexible, which may increase the effort and time required to incorporate civil dialogue. However, once a civil dialogue is in place, it typically has Terms of

⁷⁶ See the description of the Expert Group at <https://ec.europa.eu/transparency/expert-groups-register/screen/expert-groups/consult?lang=en&groupId=3942&fromMembers=true&memberType=1&memberId=108456>

⁷⁷ See the description of Cultural Heritage Forum at <https://ec.europa.eu/transparency/expert-groups-register/screen/expert-groups/consult?lang=en&do=groupDetail.groupDetail&groupId=3650>

⁷⁸ See Section 3.2.3

Reference with a governance structure, adequate access to information, and a reassurance of continuity (stability). Some CSO interviewees, when asked about why they participate in civil dialogue that had low perceived impact, replied that they wished to show support for an imbedded and assured avenue of participation.

Format: *what is the format? how much space is given to CSOs to express their views?*

The identified dialogue practices employ a variety of formats. One common approach involves **plenary meetings**, where **officials present updates** – often on policy developments or legislative implementation – followed by comments and questions from civil society members. This format provides a structured way for authorities to inform stakeholders while allowing limited space for civil society input. A less frequently used format, adopted by the EU Health Policy Forum, reverses this structure: **civil society representatives deliver presentations**, followed by responses from officials. This approach offers civil society greater prominence and creates more direct opportunities for institutional actors to respond to their challenges and suggestions. While this format may not be suitable for all dialogue practices (particularly those focused on keeping stakeholders updated), it merits further exploration. Giving civil society a central role could enhance the responsiveness and inclusiveness of policy dialogue.

Another widely used format is the conference with **panel discussions**, where civil society representatives are invited to speak on stage. Some high-level dialogues are organised in this way, allowing civil society actors to engage in broader discussions – for example, the Article 17 TFEU Dialogue co-organised by the European Commission and the European Parliament. While this format offers civil society organisations (CSOs) visibility and access to a wider audience, its impact on concrete policy developments remains unclear. This is largely because such events are typically designed to exchange high-level ideas or priorities, rather than to focus on specific legislative initiatives.

Another commonly adopted format is the **roundtable discussion**. Compared to conferences, this format is believed to be less resource-intensive for the organising bodies. Typically, organisers provide participants with preparatory materials – such as working documents or briefings – enabling civil society members to formulate their inputs in advance. The meetings themselves are structured to maximise the time allocated for participants to present their views, as exemplified by the approach of the European Board on Agriculture and Food.

An innovative format involves **complementing plenary meetings with an online platform**. For instance, the EU Health Policy Forum maintains a digital space where civil society members can register, initiate discussions, and engage with one another asynchronously. Public authorities may also participate in these discussions, offering responses or clarifications. This format enables bottom-up exchanges and gives participants the opportunity to reflect before contributing, fostering more thoughtful and inclusive dialogue.

Regardless of the specific format adopted, the core objective of any dialogue should be to facilitate genuine exchange—one in which authorities and civil society engage in a structured, transparent, and meaningful manner. Interviewees expressed that EU organisers are often unfamiliar with participatory formats and did not receive support or training to cultivate the skills. While not every dialogue should follow the same format, if an organiser's goal is reciprocal communication and learning, then a

facilitation toolkit that encourages deliberation and groupwork is a valuable asset and we refer back to this issue in the recommendation section below.

Access to information: *were there any preparatory or supporting materials? Did attendees receive guidance on finding relevant information?*

Practices such as the Strategic Dialogue on the Future of EU Agriculture and the EU Disability Platform send out agendas and relevant background information to participants 1-2 weeks before meetings. Ad-hoc meetings of DG EMPL Strategic Dialogues with civil society provide relevant information to invitees 2 weeks prior to meetings and often include the opportunity to input via a parallel Have Your Say consultation process. One European Commission interviewee wondered whether 2 weeks was enough time to prepare, as they acknowledged that smaller civil society organisations often work with very limited resources. Indeed, some civil society interviewees mentioned that they would benefit from receiving preparatory materials earlier (e.g., DG INTPA's Global Gateway Platform).

To streamline proceedings, some dialogues (e.g., DG TRADE's Civil Society Dialogue) created a group of CSOs, called the Contact Group, to represent the larger pool of participants.

Most dialogues are transparent in who their participants are: members of expert groups have to be in the Transparency Register, and non-expert group stakeholder consultation initiatives also often require that participants be in the Register. These practices usually publish the minutes/recordings of their meetings or summary reports online. Some dialogues, such as the Youth Dialogue or the Policy Forum on Development, have dedicated websites. However, in some instances there is no publicly available information on the participants or proceedings. Related to transparency, Civil Society Europe and the Social Platform filed an Ombudsman complaint in 2023 following the Commission's decision to restrict publication of contact details of staff below the Head of Unit level in the publicly accessible online directory 'Whoiswho', making it harder to find relevant contact points and reference persons⁷⁹. Most of the identified practices, especially those officially listed in the Register of Commission Expert Groups and Other Similar Entities, follow their own internal rules of procedure, which ensures a baseline level of transparency. Such rules of procedure specifies the number of days before a meeting agendas or relevant documents should be shared with members.

Inclusiveness: *were there any traditionally underrepresented groups involved? Were there any supporting measures aimed at making the physical or online participation smoother?*

The inclusiveness of EU civil dialogues varies significantly across initiatives. The EU Disability Platform (DG EMPL) demonstrates a strong commitment to inclusivity by defining its selection process in the Creating Act and Internal Rules of Procedure, ensuring transparency in participant selection. The EU Youth Dialogue (DG EAC) is a structured mechanism for youth participation, providing opportunities for young people to engage in EU-level decision-making. Despite its advanced structure, challenges remain in engaging marginalised youth, such as those from rural areas or disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds. The EU Roma Week not only focuses on Roma rights and perspectives, but puts effort into including and reflecting on young Romani perspectives. Ad-hoc Strategic Dialogue

⁷⁹ European Ombudsman, Decision on the European Commission's decision to remove the contact details of staff below head of unit level from the EU's online directory of EU staff (Whoiswho) website (case 1983/2023/ET), 6 September 2024, <https://www.ombudsman.europa.eu/en/decision/en/192132>

meetings in DG EMPL were referred to as “eye-opening” by an interviewee because numerous invited civil society members represent marginalised and disadvantaged communities, which gives new, local perspectives and context to the organisers.

However, **for the majority of selected civil dialogues it remains unclear whether they have any inclusiveness frameworks as this information is often undocumented and undisclosed.** The Article 17 Dialogue (Secretariat-General) was noted for the underrepresentation of women and youth.

One Commission interviewee mentioned that while they are in contact with European CSOs, they could benefit from closer contact with civil society at national level – but that this was harder to achieve due to the more limited capacity of national-level civil society and the extra effort needed for outreach and translation.

Some practices – such as the EU Disability Platform – use online tools such to overcome language barriers. However, some institutional interviewees have explained that they decided against using such accommodating tools because they were perceived as clunky or hard to use.

***Digitalisation:** were digital tools used to prepare for and to conduct the dialogue? Are these free to use? What level of digitalisation is present in the dialogue?*

Overall, while there is a trend towards digitalisation, there is room for improvement as many dialogues would benefit from leveraging digital tools.

The implementation of digitalisation across EU civil dialogues varies, with some dialogues leveraging advanced digital tools to enhance accessibility and inclusivity, while others exhibit minimal use of digital tools. Interviewees mentioned that some dialogues first digitalised as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, in-person meetings have been replacing virtual or hybrid meetings. Some meetings remain virtual or allow hybrid participation, but few venture further and experiment with tools for digital collaboration (such as forum threads that visualise outputs, online whiteboards, etc.). It may be that this underutilisation hinders online and hybrid meetings from reaching their full potential.

Dialogues like the EU Youth Dialogue and the CERV Civil Dialogue demonstrate high levels of digitalisation, utilising webinars and online platforms effectively. In contrast, practices such as the Article 17 Dialogue show limited digitalisation. DG SANTE operates the Health Policy Platform, which is a useful source of information and gathers NGOs working with DG SANTE into one online space. However, an interviewee from DG SANTE expressed that it is difficult to update the platform with features that participants have come to expect from social media (such as being able to comment on posts) and suggested that having a combined inter-institutional online civil dialogue platform with pooled IT resources would make technological advancements easier.

One Commission interviewee had a very positive opinion of online channels for providing input, such as the EU’s Have Your Say Platforms. However, they had noticed that CSOs often preferred to have meetings in tandem with – or instead of – online participation, reflecting that CSOs feel as though they are shouting into “a big void in the internet”.

While no civil dialogue practice mentioned using generative AI, one interviewee did reflect on the potential of prompting a large language model (LLM) to critique policies from the perspective of civil society to prepare for civil dialogue sessions. However, multiple consulted participants from CSOs and EU institutions expressed distrust towards using AI for opinion summary, especially if it replaced dialogue efforts or was done without supervision of the affected parties.

Feedback quality: *were attendees asked to give feedback? Did the organisers provide feedback to attendees? What was the mode of communication (survey, informal chat, interview, written feedback, etc.)?*

Dialogues with an established work and governance structure (typically in the Commission) periodically collected feedback from CSOs in the form of surveys or written feedback. A good example is DG TRADE's Civil Society Dialogue, which conducts a comprehensive impact evaluation every 5 years, and occasionally runs mini surveys to measure satisfaction and get suggestions for improvement. The CERV Civil Dialogue Week collected feedback with an online survey and published the outcomes in the event's summary report. The EU Youth Dialogue offers the possibility to provide feedback on their dedicated website. However, even when feedback is collected there is no planned joint reflection or official response from organisers. Additionally, feedback was only one-way: civil society does not receive structured feedback from EU institutions on how they are contributing. As one interviewee explained, if the institutions' role is to provide service, then judgment from them may be unwelcome.

There are dialogues where feedback is not systematically collected but **occurs via interpersonal discussions**. Examples include the Article 17 dialogue, the Parliament's external communication coordination, or DG INTPA's Global Gateway Platform and Policy Forum on Development. Roles dedicated to external outreach, such as DG SANTE's Advisor for Stakeholder Relations, may provide a natural contact point for feedback.

Compared to other assessment aspects (e.g., regularity, structure), **feedback mechanisms are in particular underreported on** and can only be understood via insider knowledge. One reason is the absence of a common practice for collecting and using feedback to improve the dialogue experience. However, the few cases in which we have been able to observe feedback between participants and organisers have also shown willingness to listen and to adapt. For example, organisers from DG JUST's Anti-racism CSO Forum suggested ways to improve their recruitment strategy after civil society members expressed confusion at the current process.

Outcomes: *have the recommendations made by civil society partners effectively been taken into account? Have the organisers committed to taking the insights on board, or is it based on good faith?*

Measuring the impact of dialogue on policy is inherently challenging. This is partly because the policy cycle consists of multiple stages, and dialogue practices may contribute at various points along this continuum. One interviewee explained that measuring the effectiveness and efficacy of civil society collaboration is both conceptually difficult (hard to determine metrics) and resource-intensive. Some mentioned that there is perceived impact, but it is incremental and builds up over time – supporting the EESC's opinion that dialogue should be regular and reoccurring.

Dialogues are generally designed to support policy implementation or facilitate the exchange of experiences and updates, rather than to directly inform legislative drafting. While input from civil society organisations may influence the formulation of priorities and strategies, their specific impact is often difficult to trace or attribute. In some cases, the contribution of a dialogue practice is explicitly acknowledged, but typically only in broad or general terms.⁸⁰ When asked about why they continue participating if there is no assurance of their impact, CSO interviewees replied that they wish to show support for continuing dialogues and that dialogues without tracked outcomes were still preferable to no engagement. One institutional employee opined that civil society appreciated being heard, and that measuring impact became less of a priority if they felt they were being listened to.

One way of having tangible impact is for the dialogue to shape new platforms: DG JUST's anti-racism dialogue led to the Permanent Anti-Racism Civil Society Organisations Forum, and DG INTPA's consultations with civil society shaped the Global Gateway Civil Society and Local Authorities Advisory Platform. The High-Level Group on combating racism, xenophobia and other forms of intolerance had high effectiveness due to high-level officials being members, and their outputs (recommendations, guidelines, toolboxes) feed directly into EU policymaking. Similarly, the Strategic Dialogue on the Future of EU Agriculture was created to answer specific policy questions by President von der Leyen, who attended multiple plenary sessions and publicly received the final report.

Further measures that increased perceived impact were publishing summary reports and presenting them to EU officials (e.g., DG EAC's Voices of Culture) or having high-level policymakers interact with participants (e.g., Article 17 Dialogue and the Youth Dialogue). DG SANTE holds an annual hybrid meeting where NGOs can present policy papers to units, who reply to the proposals.

When evaluating the outcomes of dialogue practices, the main focus should be whether authorities listen to civil society members and take their opinions on board to change the status quo, be it during the policy formulation phase or the policy implementation phase. To facilitate tracking, organising units could conduct in-depth reports of their dialogue practices and closely monitor the contributions of the dialogue throughout various stages of a policy cycle.

⁸⁰ One example is Working Group on Digital Education: Learning, Teaching and Assessment. See Table 4.

4. Case study: The Permanent Anti-racism Civil Society Organisations Forum

This section dives deeper into a civil dialogue practice, namely the Permanent Anti-racism Civil Society Forum, giving detailed information obtained via desk research and a dedicated focus group with civil society members and EU policymakers. The Forum was chosen because it is a structured and reoccurring civil dialogue that has policy implications and provides opportunities for long-term collaboration. The focus group was invaluable to painting a full picture of the Forum, and we would like to thank all of the participants for their availability.

Overview

The Forum was launched in 2021 following a series of consultation meetings on anti-racism between the Commission and civil society, one of the recommendations of which was to set up a permanent forum for discussion. It aims to mainstream perspectives of people with a racial minority or ethnic background into EU policies. Following a public call, CSOs could reach out to the Commission by completing and sending in expression of interest forms. The Commission then reviewed those forms and internally filtered CSOs for legitimacy, expertise, etc. The members of the Forum are public. The Forum has been consulted for the common guiding principles for national action plans against racism as well as for a monitoring checklist and reporting tool.

Focus group methodology

The focus group (six persons) was entirely online and split into two parts. We started with civil society members of the Forum to gather information on how the Forum operates, and then welcomed organisers of the Forum from DG JUST to complete any missing information and have a joint reflection on the benefits and barriers of the Forum. The session was in English and used Miro, an online whiteboard, during a virtual call for harvesting information and ideas. Participants were encouraged to suggest articles for further reading and given the opportunity to contact the authors privately.

Regularity

Since its launch, the Forum has been organised four times a year, with three online and one in-person occasion. The online sessions are shorter, typically two hours in a virtual call, while the in-person session is a two-day formal event. The frequency of these meetings was decided jointly by civil society and the EU organising team during the Forum's set-up.

CSOs appreciated the frequency and regularity of the Forum.

Structure

While the DG JUST organising team ultimately decides on the agenda, they ask members if there are any topics they wish to have included. Sessions, especially the in-person events, include small groupwork and allow space for discussion. Civil society members praised the format of the activities and were pleased with the Forum's commitment to long-term collaboration.

Access to information

The list of participants is public. Minutes are sent a week after sessions by the policy team, with CSOs having the option to review and request amendments. The policy team also send participants relevant EU policy information via email (e.g., about housing, law enforcement, etc.). The agendas are decided upon by the DG JUST organising team – however, they ask CSOs to pitch topics they wish to have

included and seek out European Commission colleagues for topic expertise (e.g., they sought support from colleagues to be able to discuss AI).

There was some ambiguity regarding the Forum's recruitment process. Since 2021, there has not been a public call for new participants, but some civil society representatives have been invited to join as observers by DG JUST. The civil society members who were included worked with DG JUST in different areas/projects and were seen by the organising team as dependable and beneficial to include in the Forum. However, this caused consternation among participants, who expressed confusion in the roles and responsibilities of the newcomers and pointed out that they were not aware that organisations could be brought into the fold via recommendation/invitation.

As a result, the focus group suggested to jointly update the Terms of Reference and clarify the dialogue's membership process.

Digitalisation

Three out of four annual Forum meetings are conducted online as two-hour long video conferences. Participants had no qualms with the online format, but as with other dialogue practices the online calls were not augmented or supported by digital tools.

Inclusivity

By its nature the Permanent Anti-Racism Civil Society Forum includes some traditionally underrepresented voices (e.g., Romani and Jewish representation) and its substance also considers inclusivity. There is no monitored inclusivity criteria or proactive outreach effort to bring marginalised voices into the fold, and the Forum is conducted in English. Focus group members suggested that having sign language interpretation would be beneficial. Furthermore, they were concerned with the lack of BIPOC (black, indigenous, and people of colour) representation within the European Commission in general, and the lack of reporting on the progress of inclusivity in HR policies.

Feedback

While there is no periodically conducted survey or written feedback process, the organising team and civil society have frequent discussions on the working of the Forum. Furthermore, the policy team organised a debate on civic space in 2024, allowing for civil society members to reflect on the Forum. Some focus group participants felt that more systematised feedback mechanisms could be beneficial, as the current model provides little space to discuss how to improve the Forum and relies on the organising team's willingness to interact (which was praised).

Outcomes

As the Forum is not a decision-making body and is mainly discussive, there was some frustration at the limited amount of impact it can have. This was felt to partly stem from a lack of high-level political engagement and access to authorities, and partly from a lack of mandate to establish a link between Forum discussions and the implementation of EU Anti-racism Action Plans. The participants pointed out that there were some opportunities to liaise with policymakers (e.g., the NAPAR (national action plans against racism) group once met CSOs from the Forum) and that these were appreciated. Similarly, CSOs were happy to have an institutional space to discuss policy monitoring.

The Focus group suggested to make time in a Forum session to jointly discuss how to have greater impact.

Reflection on benefits and barriers

To paraphrase a focus group participant, the mere existence of the forum is a victory. There was recognition for the organising team's openness and dedication. Participants especially appreciated their efforts in a changing global political atmosphere that is de-prioritising anti-racism efforts and impacting the Forum's capacity. The Forum was praised for bringing together organisations from across EU and creating a long-term institutional space for policy discussions with civil society.

The aforementioned de-prioritisation of anti-racism efforts leads to less resource availability, both in terms of finances and personnel. The organising team is fairly small, therefore unfortunate coincidences like successive illnesses or leaves of absence impact the functioning of the Forum. Additionally, decreased interest in anti-racism policy coupled with the Forum's lack of decision-making power makes it harder to attract high-level policymakers and influence policy, leaving the Forum reliant on the willingness and personal interest of Member States and policymakers to engage.

5. Recommendations for civil dialogue

This section reviews barriers to civil dialogue and lists recommendations for improvement. The analysis began with a literature review and a survey sent to civil society members, which elicited some perceived barriers to participating in civil dialogue organised by the EU institutions.⁸¹ In the meantime, some barriers were identified through interviews, the comparative analysis, and the case study presented above. A full description of the barriers, including the source of each claim, can be found in the Appendix (Section 7.5). Recommendations were then developed to respond to the identified barriers, again drawing on information from desk research, the interviews, the survey, and the case study. In some cases, recommendations were complemented or created by the authors of the report.

The barriers and recommendations are clustered into six policy trees: each policy tree starts with an overarching issue that branches into specific barriers, which are then matched to recommendations.

The policy trees were reviewed in a hybrid workshop with members from civil society and EU institutions (see the list of participating organisations/institutions in the Appendix) using online whiteboards. Participants reviewed and revised the six policy trees in small groups, with each group working on two trees and reviewing the work done on two further policy trees, so all trees incorporate insights from multiple groups and all participants had the chance to comment on two-thirds of the policy trees. Participants could indicate which recommendations should be prioritised through dot voting. Recommendations that received the most votes are explained in greater detail after this section.

The research team then incorporate inputs from the participants into the six policy trees, which state the barrier category, specific barriers and their related recommendations.

The six barriers that this study identifies are:

1. Problems with definitions, categorisation and standardisation
2. Lack of perceived outcomes or impact
3. Limited CSO capacity
4. Limited EU capacity
5. Format of dialogue is not conducive to the process
6. Unwillingness or uninterest to interact from high level

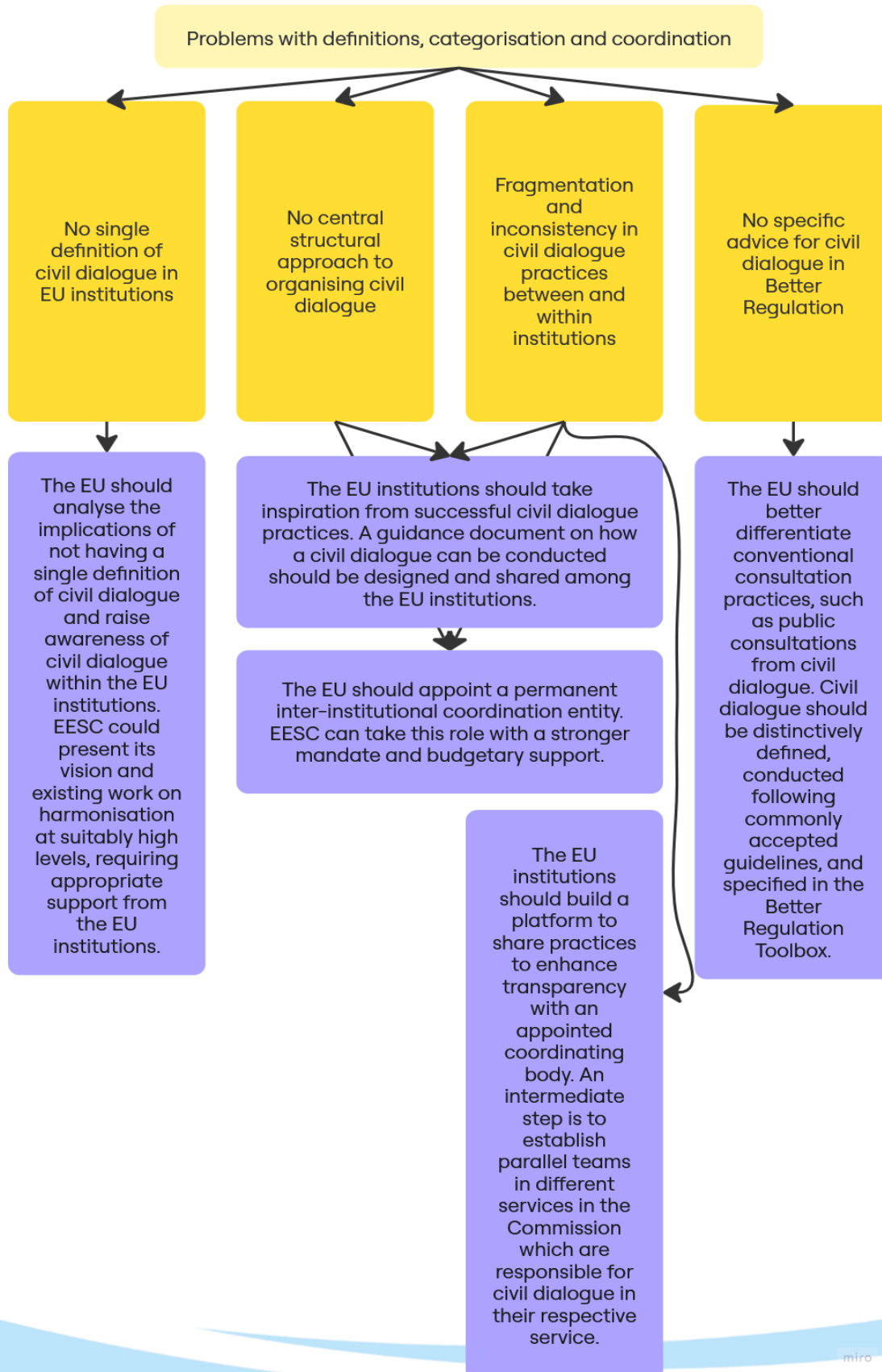
These six barriers are explained in detail in the Appendix (Section 7.5).

⁸¹ See more information about the survey in the Appendix (Section 7.4).

5.1 Barriers and policy trees

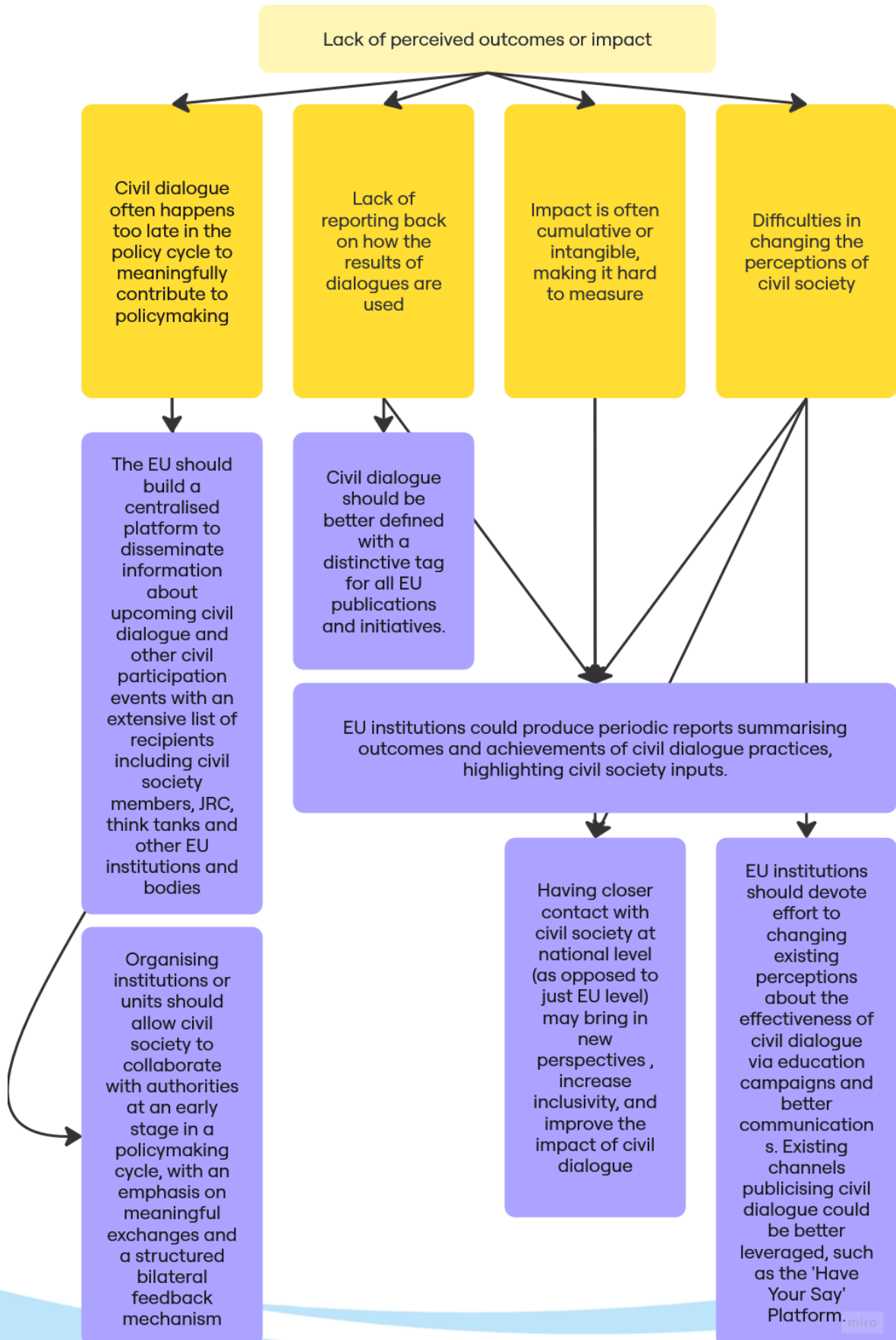
1. Problems with definitions, categorisation and standardisation

Figure 5 - Policy tree #1: Problems with definitions, categorisation and standardisation



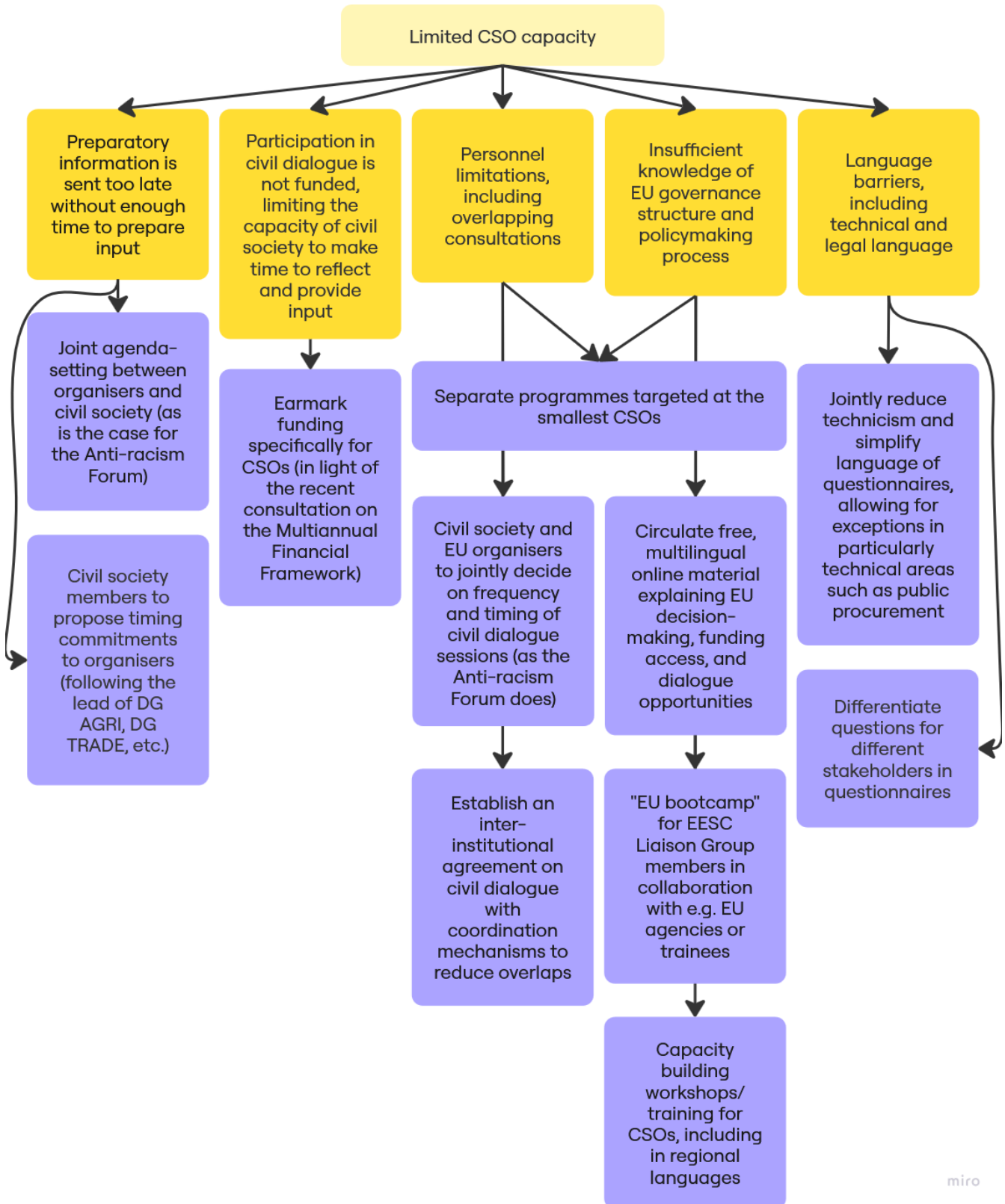
2. Lack of perceived outcomes or impact

Figure 6 – Policy tree #2: Lack of perceived outcomes or impact



3. Limited CSO capacity

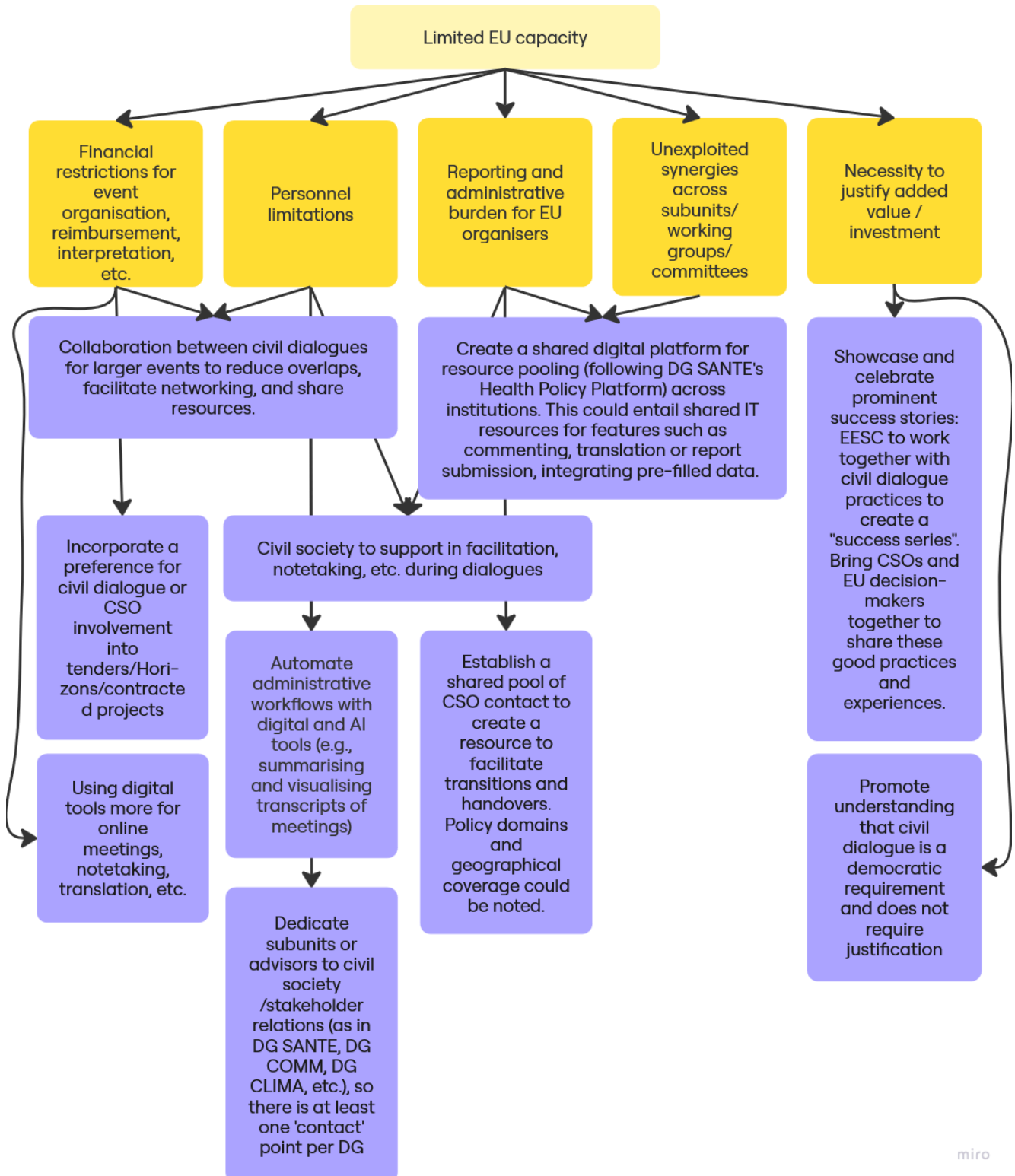
Figure 7 – Policy tree #3: Limited CSO capacity



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4. Limited EU capacity

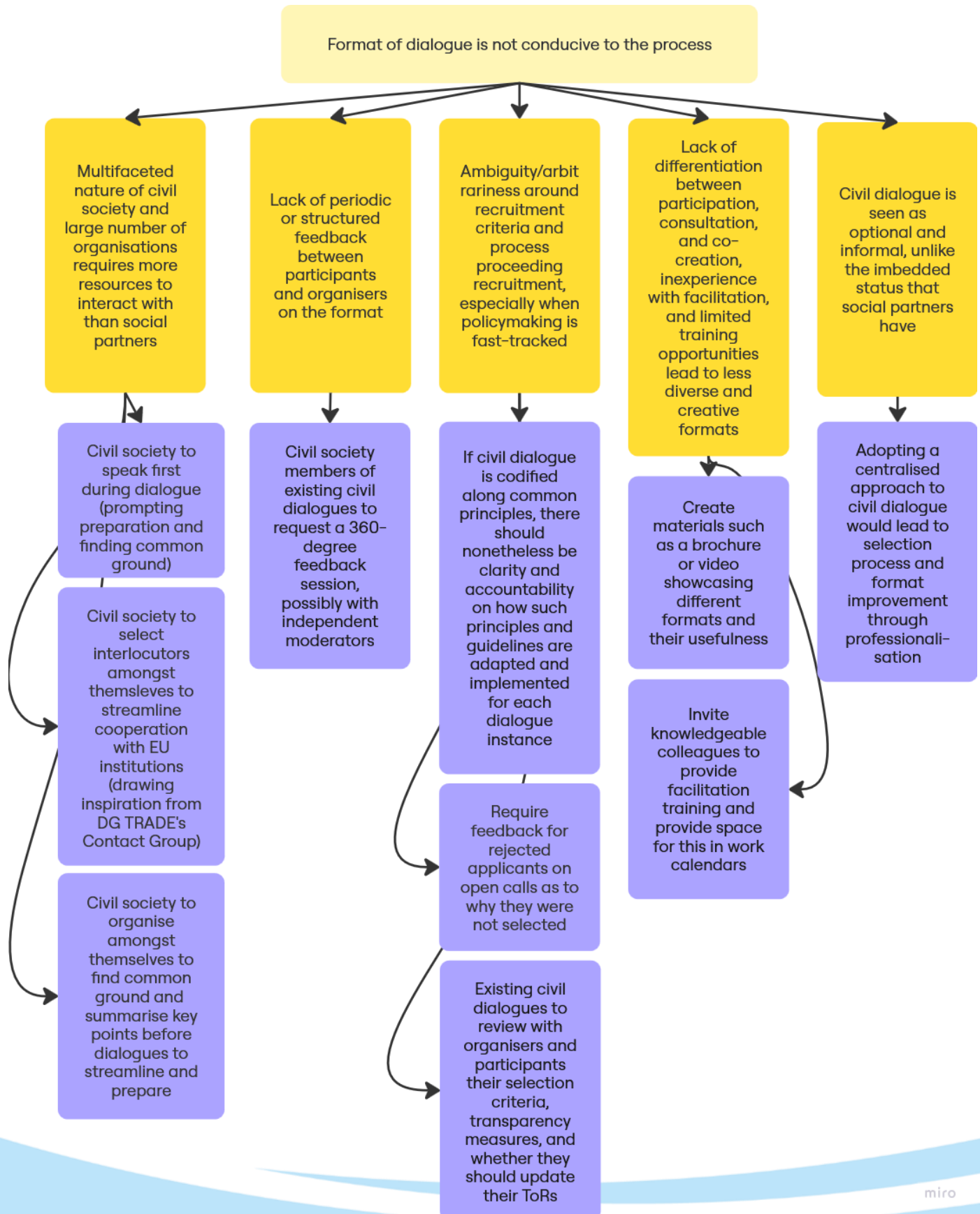
Figure 8 - Policy tree #4: Limited EU capacity



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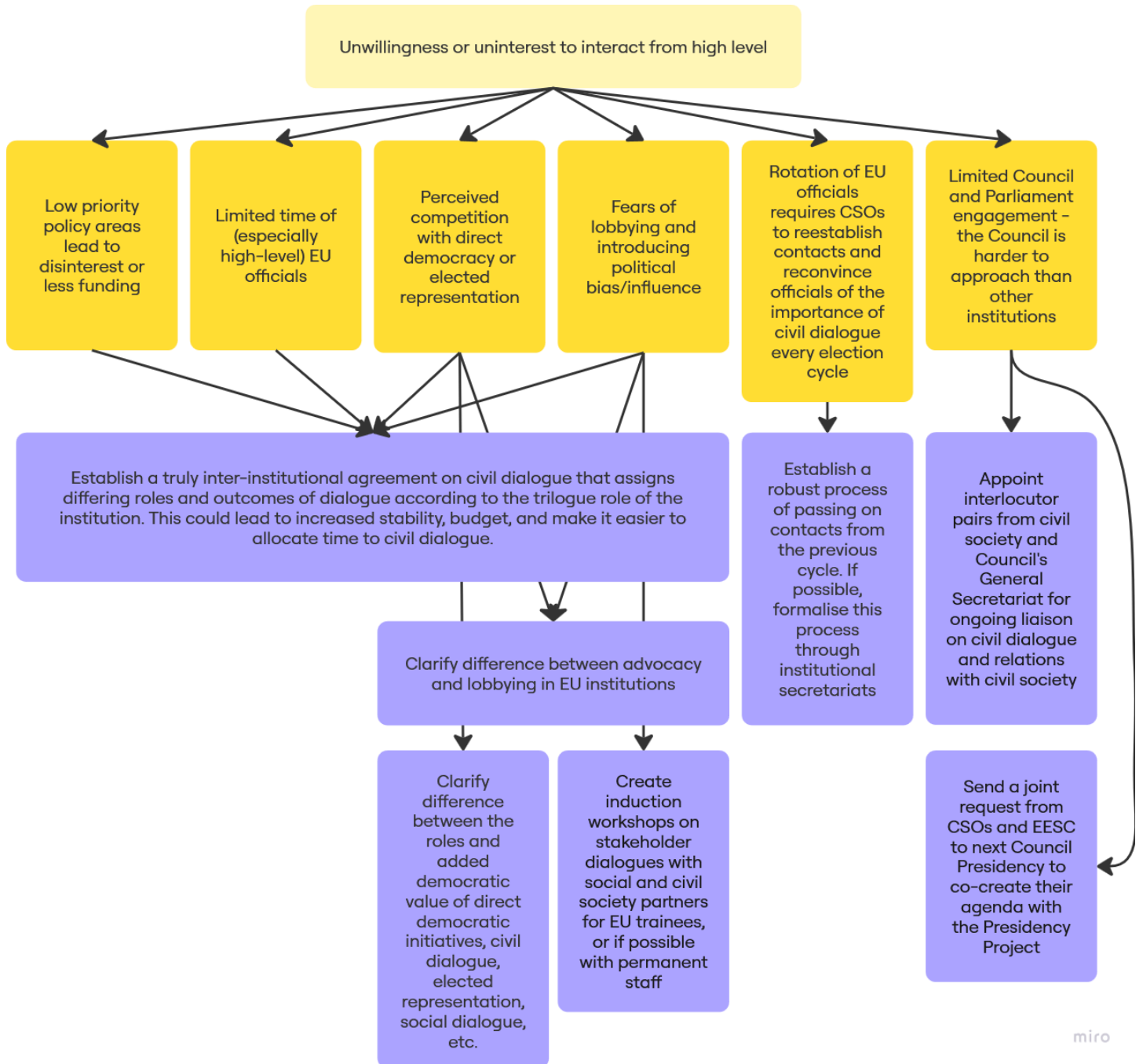
5. Format of dialogue is not conducive to the process

Figure 9 - Policy tree #5: Format of dialogue is not conducive to the process



6. Unwillingness or uninterest to interact from high level

Figure 10 - Policy tree #6: Unwillingness or uninterest to interact from high level



5.2 Highlighted recommendations

Below we present the five highlighted recommendations in more detail. Note that most of these recommendations are addressed to the EU, including the EESC.

- 1) The EU should define civil dialogue with administrative clarity and provide guidance on conducting civil dialogue. It would further be beneficial to clarify the difference between the roles and added value of direct democratic initiatives, civil dialogue, elected representation, and social dialogue.**

This recommendation is linked to the subsequent one (on establishing an inter-institutional agreement for civil dialogue). While civil dialogue is broadly defined, differing interpretations of it across the EU institutions make it difficult to, first, identify civil dialogue practices and, second, assess its progress and achievements. Before successfully mainstreaming civil dialogue as a common practice, the EU should define or agree on the scope, actors, and goals of civil dialogue. Clarification could also help settle the following discussions:

- a) on the perceived competition between civil dialogue, direct democratic initiatives, and elected representation, which was mentioned in interviews;
- b) on the difference between participation, consultation, and co-creation activities. The Better Regulation Toolbox specifies how consultations are to be conducted while drafting legislative proposals. However, as workshop participants pointed out, a dialogue must involve some bilateral exchange between two parties and is therefore different from a one-way consultation.

It is therefore recommended that EU institutions join forces to develop unified guidelines for implementing civil dialogue—distinctly defined and clearly separated from traditional consultative processes in the Better Regulation Toolbox.

To streamline the process and avoid overlapping work, the EESC could present its vision and existing work on harmonisation at suitably high levels with the appropriate support from EU institutions.

While it is likely that implementation issues would persist even if a common definition were accepted, without a clearer definition fostering civil dialogue in the EU will be a Sisyphean effort.

- 2) The EU should establish an inter-institutional agreement on civil dialogue that assigns differing roles and outcomes of dialogue according to the trilogue role of the institution.**

Adopting a centralised approach to civil dialogue would lead to greater recognition and professionalisation. Workshop participants argued that this would improve dialogue processes and address many of the barriers collected above, such as financial and temporal limitations, opaqueness around launching dialogues and recruitment, lack of structured feedback, and differing approaches across the institutions. Institutionalisation would further promote the understanding that civil dialogue is a democratic requirement and does not require justification. CSOs and academics have for years called for an inter-institutional agreement on civil dialogue. In a 2024 opinion,⁸² the EESC calls for a strategy for civil dialogue, which could include seeking an interinstitutional agreement through a process

⁸² Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on Strengthening civil dialogue and participatory democracy in the EU: a path forward, C/2024/2481, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2024, Section 3.9.

facilitated by the EESC. It should therefore come as no surprise that this recommendation was repeated throughout the recommendations workshop. The participants further added that:

- a. If civil dialogue is codified along common principles, there should be a degree of freedom to allow for organisers to tailor their practices to their own needs. Therefore, clarity and accountability on how such principles and guidelines are adapted and implemented for each dialogue instance will be necessary.
- b. If inter-institutional framework is realised, a shared pool of contact organisations would be a useful resource. This pool could match CSOs to policy topics and geographical coverage.
- c. Creating coordination mechanisms between and within institutions would help to reduce overlaps and minimise resource use.

3) The EU should produce periodic reports summarising achievements of civil dialogue and should showcase success stories.

A reoccurring observation of the study is that the impact and outcomes of civil dialogue are largely unmonitored and unacknowledged, partly due to the fact that the impact of dialogue practices are incremental. Workshop participants felt that putting greater effort towards communicating the dialogue outcomes – such as celebrating success through showcasing best practices and producing periodic reports showing how civil society inputs are used – would improve the perception of civil dialogue both in EU institutions and in CSOs. Workshop participants also suggested the EU enhance its efforts at communicating the various participation platforms it operates (e.g., the Have Your Say platform) or implement an ad-hoc educational programme at national level for EU citizens to promote perceptions that civil society can explore various channels to influence EU policymaking.

4) Dedicate subunits or advisors to civil society / stakeholder relations so there is at least one ‘contact point’ per Directorate-General with a policy area relevant to CSOs.

This recommendation was borne from observing the positive impact of existing civil society or stakeholder relations contact points in European Commission Directorate-Generals such as DG SANTE, DG COMM, DG CLIMA and DG EMPL. As such, the discussion focussed on the Commission, although it could be expanded to include the Council and the Parliament. These positions provide a natural contact point for civil society and help with creating contact lists, reminding colleagues the benefits of civil dialogue, or easing the personnel limitations that sometimes thwart civil dialogue. Having more such positions could have positive knock-on effects such as creating a community of practice within the institutions and encouraging joint (cross-unit or cross-institutional) events and resource-pooling. It may also increase the accountability of the civil dialogue if contact points have peers with similar duties. Note that establishing contact points could be one of the outcomes of an inter-institutional agreement.

5) Civil society should organise amongst themselves to establish common grounds and summarise key points before dialogue instances. Furthermore, they could select interlocutors amongst themselves to streamline communication with the EU institutions.

In the experience of workshop participants, the multifaceted nature of civil society coupled with a lack of coordination among CSOs complicates current civil dialogue practices. Having civil society members coordinate before dialogues to find common ground could help improve the quality of inputs, and if required civil society could choose interlocutors from amongst themselves to more effectively promote

their message. Smaller civil society members in particular could benefit if these sessions promote networking among civil society members and provide a forum for exchanging insights on the EU policymaking process. Participants acknowledged this would increase the amount of effort that is required of civil society for a process that does not provide them with funding, but felt that it would be worth it to have more impactful participation and increase solidarity among civil society members.

6. Conclusion

This study attempts to map current civil dialogue practices within EU institutions. Although definitions exist – most notably from the European Commission and the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) – civil dialogue is interpreted inconsistently across institutions. It is frequently conflated with other consultative mechanisms, making it challenging to distinguish as a standalone practice. Consequently, the sample identified in this study is not comprehensive. Nevertheless, it offers valuable insights into how civil dialogue is implemented within the EU framework. These practices vary widely in structure and format, and they do not consistently yield or document concrete policy outcomes. Such inconsistencies highlight the lack of harmonisation and standards of civil dialogue in the EU policymaking process, contributing to divergent interpretations of it and a poor perception of its effectiveness.

The selected sample of practices, alongside interviews, a survey, and a focus group discussion, have yielded valuable insights for the future of civil dialogue in the EU. A recommendation workshop brought together experts to discuss and refine identified barriers and suggested actions. This process ultimately led to the formulation of five key recommendations:

- The EU should define better civil dialogue and provide guidelines for its implementation.
- The EU should establish an inter-institutional agreement on civil dialogue.
- The EU institutions should produce periodic reports on civil dialogue and summarise policy outcomes and achievements.
- DGs or units in EU institutions should establish contact points handling civil dialogue.
- Civil society should establish common ground prior to a dialogue.

Civil society members and the EESC have long called for a more structured and consistent approach to civil dialogue and the implementation of the related Art. 11 TEU. In response to increasing attacks on civil society organisations and the media, the importance of civil society has recently been reaffirmed by the more frequent involvement of civil society through the EESC under various Council presidencies. Meanwhile, the Commission's new Civil Society Strategy, as part of its 2025 work programme, aims to support, protect and empower the civil society and includes plans to establish a civil dialogue platform to better engage civil society members.⁸³ With growing institutional support, civil dialogue is gaining momentum. The challenge now is to ensure that the relevant units within the institutions adhere to core principles – providing adequate space for civil society voices to be heard and establishing transparent mechanisms to incorporate meaningful input into policymaking. While there is reason for optimism, further work remains to be done.

In a world increasingly shaped by conflict, misinformation, and social polarisation, the EU must urgently reconsider the role of civil society and strengthen civil dialogue, not only as a foundation of institutional legitimacy, but also as a vital pillar for building a more resilient, inclusive, and participatory Europe.

⁸³ See <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/news-media/press-releases/eesc-join-forces-commission-defend-civil-society>

7. Appendix

7.1 List of services and organisations involved in the interviews

Organisation/service	Phase involved in
Conference of INGOs in the Council of Europe	Scoping interview
SOLIDAR	Scoping interview
Civil Society Europe	Scoping + mapping interview
CONCORD	Mapping interview (x2)
DG COMM in European Commission (European Citizens' Panels)	Mapping interview
DG COMM in European Parliament (external communications)	Mapping interview
DG EMPL	Mapping interview
DG JUST	Mapping interview
DG SANTE	Mapping interview
DG TRADE	Mapping interview
European Civic Forum	Mapping interview
European Commission Secretariat-General	Mapping interview
European Network Against Racism	Mapping interview
European Agroforestry Federation	Mapping interview
Fundamental Rights Agency	Mapping interview
Presidency Project	Mapping interview

7.2 List of identified civil dialogue practices organised by the European Commission

Table 4 - List of 41 civil dialogue practices implemented by the Commission (information up to May 2025)

Organiser	Title	Start year	Last meeting	Policy Stage ⁸⁴	Major non-institutional stakeholders ⁸⁵
AGRI	Agricultural civil dialogue groups (CDGs)*	2022	May 2025	Agenda setting; Policy Implementation; Policy monitoring	TBAs, NGOs, PAs
	European Board on Agriculture and Food*	2025	May 2025	Agenda setting	NGOs, TBAs, TUs
	Forest and Forestry Stakeholder Platform*	2023	April 2024	Policy implementation; Policy monitoring	NGOs, TBAs
CLIMA	Expert Group on Carbon Removals*	2023	May 2025 ⁸⁶	Policy formulation; Policy implementation	TBAs, NGOs, Research, Companies
CNECT	eHealth Stakeholder Group*	2012	November 2024	Policy formulation; Policy implementation	NGOs, TBAs, PAs
	Online roundtable with CSOs on the implementation of the Digital Services Act (DSA)	2024	December 2024	Policy implementation	NGOs, Research
EAC	Commission expert group on cultural heritage - Cultural Heritage Forum*	2019	March 2023	Agenda setting	NGOs, PAs
	Commission Expert Group for the development of guidelines on high-quality informatics*	2024	November 2024	Policy formulation, Policy implementation	Research, PAs
	EU Youth Dialogue	2010	June 2025	Agenda setting	NGOs, individuals, Research
	Voices of Culture	2015	June 2023	Agenda setting	NGOs
	Working Group on Digital Education: Learning, Teaching and Assessment (DELTA)*	2021	March 2025	Policy implementation	NGOs, PAs
	Working Group on Equality and Values in Education and Training*	2021	January 2025	Policy implementation	NGOs
	Commission Expert group for Digital Education Content*	2024	January 2025	Policy implementation	NGOs, Research
EMPL	Advisory Committee on Vocational Training*	1963	December 2023	Policy formulation; Policy implementation	TBAs, TUs

⁸⁴ The policy stages refer to when CSOs are involved in the consultation process implied by the stated objectives of the practice and publicly available documents. Source: Official webpages and the authors' own elaboration.

⁸⁵ Major types of stakeholders include: Financial - Banks/Financial Institutions; Companies – Companies/Groups; NGOs - Non-governmental organisations; PAs - Professional associations; Research - Academia, Research Institute and Think Tanks; TBAs - Trade and business associations; TUs - Trade unions. The order in the table ranks the stakeholders according to their proportion of the total number of organisations.

⁸⁶ Information and documents are not uploaded to the Register but on its own webpage.

	EU Platform on Combatting Homelessness	2021	April 2024 ⁸⁷	Policy formulation; Policy implementation	NGOs, TBAs, TUs, Research
	Europass Advisory Group*	2018	November 2021	Policy implementation	NGOs, TUs, TBAs
	European Qualifications Framework Advisory Group*	2007	November 2024	Policy implementation	NGOs, TBAs
	Working group on Adult learning - opening up opportunities for all*	2022	November 2022	Policy implementation	NGOs, TBAs, TUs
ENV	Commission Expert Group/Multi-Stakeholder Platform on Protecting and Restoring the World's Forests, including the EU Timber Regulation and the FLEGT Regulation*	2015	April 2025	Policy formulation; Policy implementation	NGOs, TBAs, PAs
	Commission's Expert Group on Circular Economy and Sustainable Production and Consumption*	2004	June 2023	Policy implementation	NGOs, TBAs
	EU Biodiversity Platform*	2008	November 2024	Policy formulation; Policy implementation	NGOs, TBAs
	Noise Expert Group*	2012	June 2024	Policy implementation	TBAs, NGOs
GROW	Commission expert group on social economy and social enterprises*	2012	February 2025	Policy formulation; Policy implementation	NGOs, TBAs, Research, Financial
HERA	HERA Civil Society Forum	2022	March 2025	Policy formulation	NGOs, TBAs
HOME	Commission expert group - Civil Society Forum on Drugs*	2007	December 2024	Agenda setting; policy formulation; policy implementation	NGOs
	Expert Group on the views of migrants in the field of migration, asylum and integration*	2020	January 2025	Policy formulation; policy implementation	NGOs
INPTA	Global Gateway Civil Society and Local Authorities Advisory Platform	2023	October 2024	Agenda setting	NGOs, TBAs, TUs
	Policy Forum on Development	2013	November 2024 ⁸⁸	Agenda setting; Policy formulation	NGOs, TBAs, TUs
JUST	Permanent Anti-racism CSOs Forum	2021	January 2025	Policy implementation	NGOs, Research
	High Level Group on combating hate speech and hate crime*	2016	June 2024	Policy implementation	NGOs
	Multistakeholder expert group to support the application of Regulation (EU) 2016/679*	2017	June 2024	Policy formulation; Policy implementation	NGOs, TBAs
	Disability Platform* (moved to	2021	March 2025	Policy implementation	NGOs

⁸⁷ It was the 6th Mutual Learning Event under the framework of EU Platform on Combatting Homelessness.

⁸⁸ It was the African Regional Meeting held in Nairobi, Kenya.

	JUST since February 2025)				
JUST and the European Parliament	Dialogue with churches, religious associations and non-confessional organisations (Article 17 Dialogue)	2013 ⁸⁹	December 2024	Agenda setting	NGOs, TBAs, TUs, PAs, Research
MOVE	Advisory body on accessibility of the EU rail system for PRM*	2015	February 2025	Information collection; policy monitoring	NGOs, TBAs
	Expert Group on Roadworthiness and Vehicle Registration Documents*	2020	April 2024	Policy formulation	TBAs, NGOs
REGIO	Dialogue with CPR partners 2021-2027*	2021	May 2025	Policy implementation; Policy evaluation; Policy monitoring	NGOs, TBAs, Research
SANTE	EU Platform on Animal Welfare*	2017	March 2025	Policy formulation; Policy implementation	TBAs, NGOs, PAs
	EU Platform on Food Losses and Food Waste*	2016	November 2024	Policy implementation	TBAs, NGOs, Research, Companies
	EU Health Policy Platform	2016	November 2024	Policy formulation; Policy implementation	
TRADE	EU Trade Civil Society Dialogue	2019 ⁹⁰	May 2025	Policy formulation; Policy implementation	NGOs, TBAs, TUs
The European Commission (higher level)	Strategic Dialogue on the Future of EU Agriculture	2024 ⁹¹	August 2024	Agenda setting	NGOs, TBAs

*Listed in the EU Register of Commission Expert Groups and Other Similar Entities

7.3 Civil dialogue in the Fundamental Rights Agency

European Union agencies are distinct from its institutions and are tasked with a specific focus. Although they are not the primary focus of this report, understanding how civil dialogue works in select EU agencies can be useful to provide ideas for recommendations and collaboration with the EU institutions. The Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) has been chosen because its work is tightly linked to the work of many CSOs and because their methods can provide food for thought for the working of EU institutions.

The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) is tasked with providing expert advice to EU institutions and Member States on fundamental rights issues. FRA's mandate⁹² covers a wide range of fundamental rights, from equality and non-discrimination to access to justice, victims' rights, and data protection.

⁸⁹ Information is taken from the Briefing by the EPRS at <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/files/be-heard/religious-and-non-confessional-dialogue/home/en-article17-the-ep-implementation.pdf>

⁹⁰ It is what the record at https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/analysis-and-assessment/eu-trade-meetings-civil-society_en shows, but information shows that the dialogue practice was adopted back in 2002.

⁹¹ It is designed as a series of meetings all conducted in 2024. It eventually led to the establishment of European Board on Agriculture and Food.

⁹² Council Regulation (EC) No 168/2007 Establishing a European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2007/168/oj/eng>

FRA's main mechanism for civil society engagement is the **Fundamental Rights Platform (FRP)**, a network open to non-profit, non-governmental organisations and institutions engaged in fundamental rights at the EU, national, or local level. The vast majority of organisations which cooperate with the platform are NGOs dealing with human rights. However, it is also open to trade unions, "relevant social and professional organisations, churches, religious, philosophical and non-confessional organisations, universities and other qualified experts of European and international bodies and organisations". Registration (and deregistration) is free and not subject to any time constraints. The Platform exists to facilitate information exchange, allow FRA to request input and strategic advice, connect FRA with the registered organisations, and make FRA materials and tools easily available. FRA can also be contacted via a dedicated form on their website.

FRA's cooperation with civil society organisations is defined in Article 10 of the EU Regulation on FRA's Founding Regulation and the Platform's Terms of Reference explains how this cooperation works. The section on FRP's commitment to connect organisations with FRA and among each other states that FRA meets with EU level umbrella networks annually and that when meetings occur at national level, FRA will seek to invite Platform organisations active in a given Member State. Furthermore, the agency pledges to ensure that the relevant Platform organisations are invited to participate in the Fundamental Rights Forum. The FRP also facilitates online platforms, newsletters, and thematic working groups.

One interviewee from FRA pointed to the National Rule of Law Dialogues as particularly successful civil dialogues facilitated in a participatory way with everyone contributing at the same level. However, it was also pointed out that these dialogues are primarily among the stakeholders at the national level with the Commission listening in and facilitating, but not actively participating.

7.4 The survey

Together with the desk research and interviews, we conducted a survey targeting civil society organisations (CSOs) with the aim to uncover barriers facing CSOs in participating civil dialogue hosted by EU institutions and their perceptions of the purposes and effectiveness of civil dialogue. The survey results were then fed into the analysis of barriers and recommendations in Section 5.

The survey was distributed to more than 230 civil society contacts.⁹³ There are three main sources of the contacts. First, we identified the email contacts of 75 EU-level CSOs following the list of the 'Open Letter: Ensuring a vibrant civic space in the European Union – civil society's expectations for the next five years' published by the Civil Society Europe.⁹⁴ Second, we randomly selected and identified their contact information of 62 CSOs which have participated in consultative activities organised by EU institutions using available public information. Third, we explored the existing CSO network of CEPS and further identified 94 contacts. Together with our invitation email, we encourage the recipients to forward to anyone who would be interested in replying to the survey. The survey was open from 30th January 2025 to 7th April 2025. Eventually 45 effective replies were received.

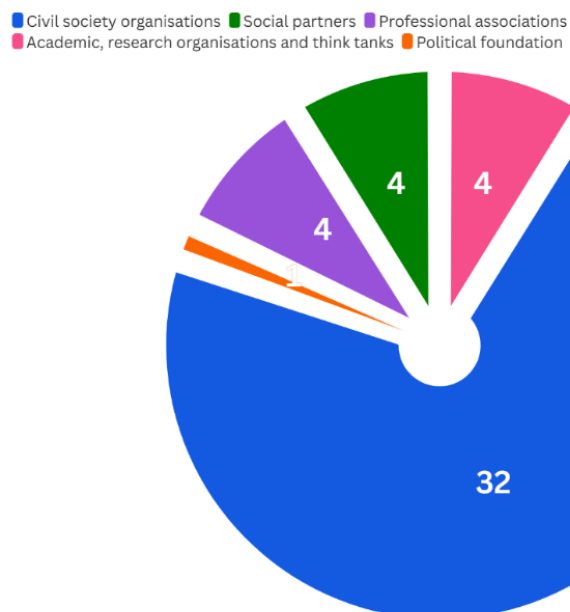
⁹³ The exact number of invitations to the survey is however unknown as we encouraged invitees to forward the survey.

⁹⁴ The Open Letter can be found at <https://civilsocietyeurope.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Open-letter-Ensuring-a-vibrant-civic-space-in-the-EU.pdf>

7.4.1 Composition of the respondents

Figure 11 reports the composition of the sample of the respondents. The largest group is CSOs, occupying 71% of the sample. Social partners, political associations and research institutions roughly share the remaining 29% of the sample. Among the respondents, 33 of them reported that they have a presence either in Brussels or Strasbourg and 26 of them claimed that they are EU-wide organisations.

Figure 11 - Composition of the respondents

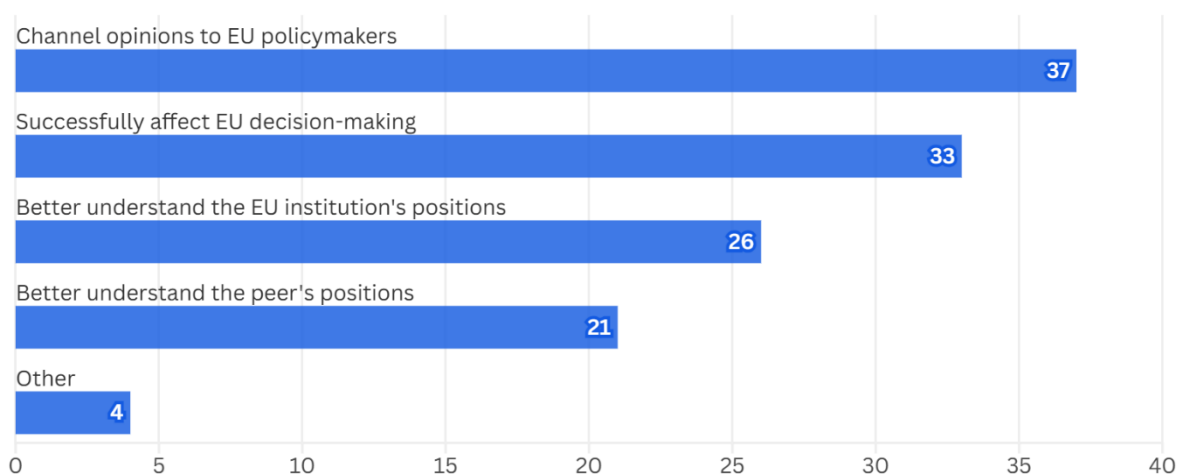


Source: Authors' illustration of the data collected by the Survey

7.4.2 Benefits and barriers

The survey focuses on the perceptions of organisations about EU civil dialogue. First of all, we asked the respondents what the benefits of EU civil dialogue are. The result is summarised in Figure 12.

Figure 12 - Perceived benefits of EU civil dialogue



Source: Authors' illustration of the data collected by the Survey

The most frequently identified benefit is ‘Channel opinions to EU policymakers’ (37 out of 45), followed by ‘Successfully affect EU decision-making’ (33 out of 45). Roughly speaking, civil society members on average tend to agree that channelling opinions does not necessarily lead to corresponding changes in EU decision-making. Comparatively information sharing between institutions and civil society or between civil society members is not perceived as a major benefit of civil dialogue. A possible explanation is that civil society members may have other channels to acquire the information and therefore they expect civil dialogue to mainly facilitate upward channelling of opinions and eventually to impact decision-making.

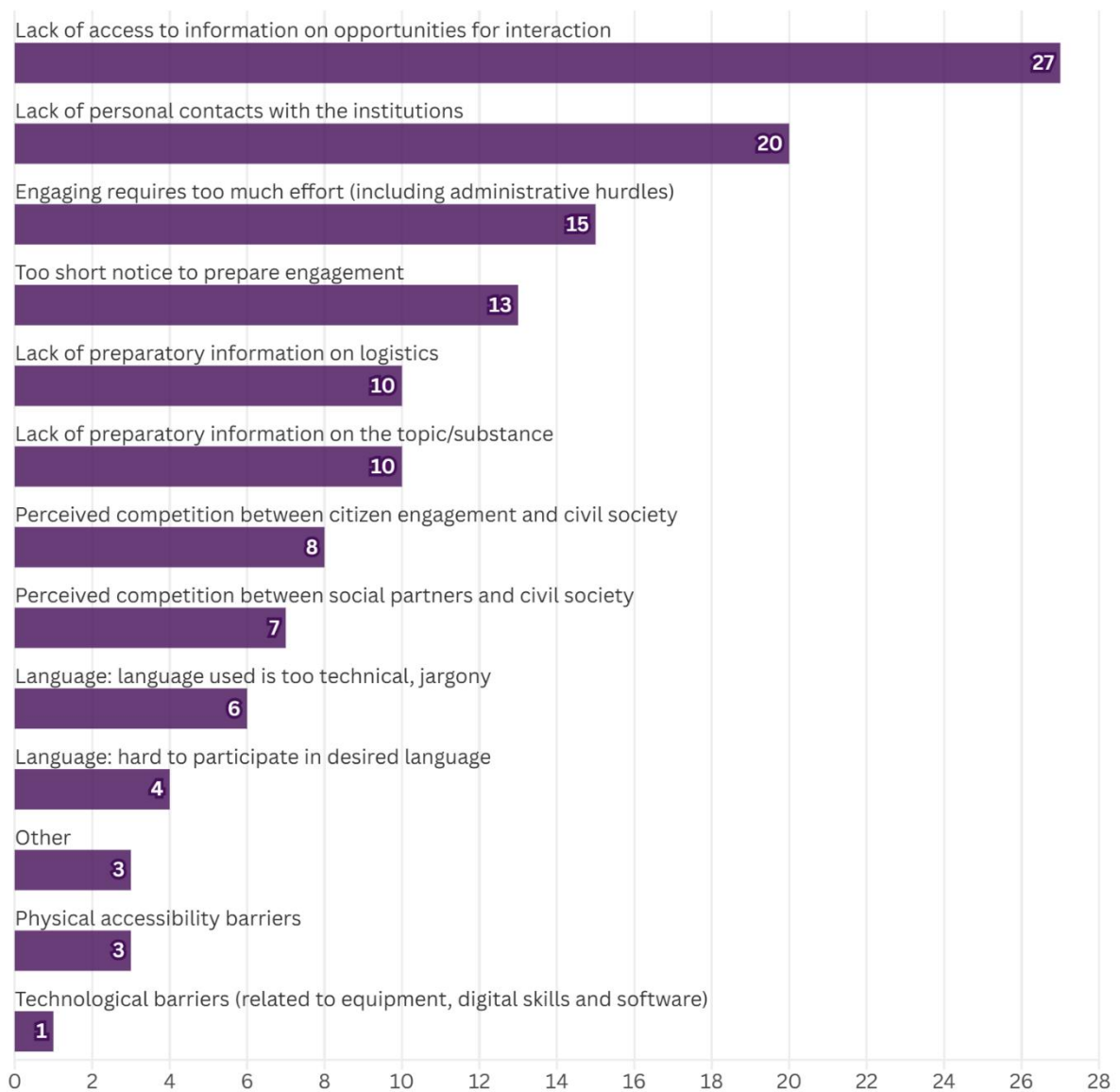
Next, we asked the respondents what barriers to EU civil dialogue are. The result is reported in Figure 13. Twenty-seven (60%) respondents reported a lack of access to information on opportunities for interactions with EU institutions, while 20 (44%) respondents shared the barrier that they do not have personal contacts with the EU institutions. The next category of barriers concerns preparation efforts needed on the side of civil society members. It may require too much effort to engage authorities and preparation within a very short notice.

Finally, we asked the respondents whether they agree with the following statements using a 5-step Likert scale (1-Strongly disagree; 2-Somewhat disagree; 3-Neutral; 4-Somewhat agree; 5-Strongly agree):

1. The EU’s civil dialogue environment is regulated and follows a certain protocol.
2. Current civil dialogue does not financially burden CSOs.
3. Current civil dialogue provides participants a platform to influence policymaking.
4. Preparatory information on the substance and process of dialogues is sufficient and the expectations of organisers are clearly stated beforehand.
5. Participants can provide feedback following civil dialogue.
6. Current civil dialogue ensures voices from different groups are represented and considered.

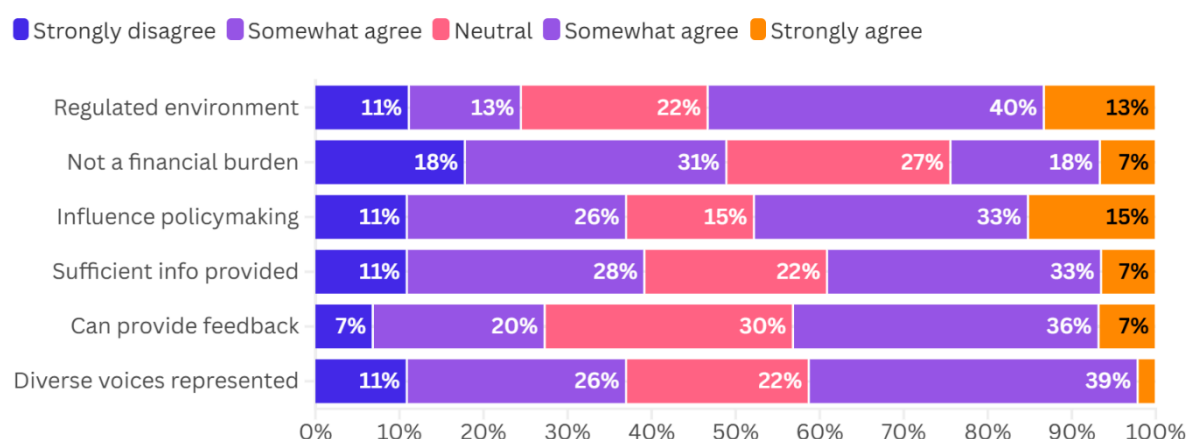
Results are reported in Figure 14. Overall, the respondents express a positive outlook on EU civil dialogue, although they note that it may pose a financial burden for civil society members. More than half (24 out of 45) reported that EU civil dialogue is conducted in a regulated environment, while almost half of them (22 out of 45) agreed that civil dialogue could influence policymaking. Meanwhile, 22 of them agreed that civil dialogue is a financial burden and 18 respondents agreed that information is not sufficiently provided. Notably, 17 out of 45 respondents (38%) expressed disagreement with the idea that civil dialogue can influence EU policymaking. While a minority, this figure nonetheless serves as a warning sign, highlighting the need for EU institutions to more effectively integrate civil dialogue into the routine policymaking process.

Figure 13 - Perceived barriers to EU civil dialogue



Source: Authors' illustration of the data collected by the Survey

Figure 14 - General attitudes of civil society members



Source: Authors' illustration of the data collected by the Survey

7.5 Identified barriers

7.5.1 Problems with definitions, categorisation and standardisation

1. No single definition of civil dialogue EU institutions (*EESC, 2018*⁹⁵; *EESC, 2024*⁹⁶; *Ravo, 2021*; *interviews*): the lack of an accepted definition makes it harder to monitor and discuss civil dialogue and stands in the way of efforts to codify civil dialogue. More importantly, the interpretations of the definitions in practice vary substantially.
2. No central structural approach to organising civil dialogue (*European Civic Forum & Civic Space Watch, 2024*⁹⁷): this perpetuates the fractured approach mentioned above, increases the effort required to start civil dialogue, and results in shallower exchanges. Having a central structure would furthermore be beneficial for accountability and assigning responsibility as well as providing a stable point of communication.
3. Fragmentation and inconsistency in civil dialogue practices between and within institutions (*EESC, 2024*; *Ravo, 2021*; *interviews*): a siloed approach leads to duplicated efforts and makes monitoring more difficult. It also risks missing out on opportunities for collaboration and sharing best practices.
4. No specific advice for civil dialogue in Better Regulation (*interviews*): Better Regulation supports stakeholder consultation but falls short in advocating for the type of democratic dialogue that is required by Article 11 TEU. Raising the bar in Better Regulation Guidelines could help push for deeper participation.

7.5.2 Lack of perceived outcomes or impact

1. Civil dialogue often happens too late in policy cycle to meaningfully contribute to policymaking (*Ravo, 2021*; *interviews*): some civil dialogue practices review finished reports or give opinions after policy proposals have been submitted. This limits the impact participation can have.

⁹⁵ Divjak, T. and Forbici, G., The future evolution of civil society in the European Union by 2030, European Economic and Social Committee, Brussels, 2017, https://www.eesc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/files/the_future_evolution_of_civil_society_in_the_eu_by_2030.pdf

⁹⁶ Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on Strengthening civil dialogue and participatory democracy in the EU: a path forward, C/2024/2481, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2024.

⁹⁷ European Civic Forum and Civic Space Watch, Civic Space Report, 2024, <https://civic-forum.eu/civic-space-report-2024>

2. Lack of reporting back on how the results of dialogues are used (*interviews*): some interviewees expressed that the slow pace of policymaking and lack of reporting back made them question whether their contributions were used. Not knowing how inputs are funnelled further made them uncertain about the use of participating.
3. Impact is often cumulative or intangible, making it hard to measure (*interviews*): multiple interviewees expressed that they would struggle to monitor the impact of civil dialogue as contributions do not have individual impact, making quantitative indicators infeasible.
4. Difficulties in changing the perceptions of civil society (*workshop*): Workshop participants pointed out that even when civil dialogue does yield outcomes, this may be overlooked due to miscommunication, no reporting of success stories, and not acknowledging the input of civil society in policy files. This is especially the case for organised civil society outside of Brussels, who are less likely to believe that they can participate meaningfully in EU policymaking activities

7.5.3 Limited CSO capacity

1. **Preparatory information is sent too late without enough time to prepare input** (*survey, interviews*): some interviewees mentioned that they would like to receive an agenda and preparatory information on the topic more in advance to have time to adequately prepare contributions. Some dialogues, such as DG EMPL's Strategic Dialogues or the EU Disability Platform, are successful in sending their participants information in advance.
2. **Participation in civil dialogue is not funded, limiting the capacity of civil society to make time to reflect and provide input** (*survey, workshop*): workshop participants emphasised that the time and energy civil society members can invest into participation is limited by the fact that civil dialogue is not funded.
3. **Personnel limitations, including overlapping consultations** (*interviews*): overlapping consultations and busy agendas sometimes make participation difficult, especially for smaller civil society members. Factors such as late notices exacerbate these limitations.
4. **Insufficient knowledge of EU governance structure and policymaking process** (*interviews*): the complexity of the EU and its policymaking process can be difficult to grasp. However, insufficient understanding of this process can lead to weaker contributions.
5. **Language barriers, including technical and legal language** (*survey, interviews*): the language generally used in civil dialogue is English, with translation dependent on resources. Survey respondents and interviewees alike mentioned the lack of translation and the technicality of some documents as barriers to participation, especially for smaller or more local civil society members.

7.5.4 Limited EU capacity

1. **Financial restrictions for event organisation, reimbursement, interpretation, etc.** (*Ravo, 2021; interviews*): reoccurring, regular civil dialogue requires a budget, and services such as interpretation or travel reimbursement can quickly limit the financial capacity organisers have for sessions. It also limits the extent to which organisers can reach national or local-level civil society, which some interviewees mentioned they would like to do more.
2. **Personnel limitations** (*Ravo, 2021; interviews*): having small teams dedicated to civil dialogue coupled with limited working hours for organisation and skills training available creates bottlenecks and makes it harder to create space for civil society in the policymaking process.

3. **Reporting and administrative burden for EU organisers** (*interviews*): while reporting aids transparency, it can also increase the cost of organising civil dialogue. Multiple interviewees mentioned that they have significant reporting burdens.
4. **Unexploited synergies between subunits/working groups/committees** (*interviews*): Financial and personnel limitations are compounded by a siloed approach to civil dialogue. While there is some collaboration across DGs and institutions, having more shared resources could make it easier to organise dialogue and discuss interdisciplinary policy.
5. **Necessity to justify added value/investment** (*interviews*): some interviewees commented that the difficulty of measuring the impact of civil dialogue makes it hard to justify its added value, adding that the democratic requirement for civil dialogue should be enough justification for its existence. Workshop participants then noted that codifying civil dialogue would help solve this issue

7.5.5 Format of dialogue is not conducive to the process

1. **Civil dialogue is seen as optional and informal, unlike the embedded status that social partners have** (*workshop*): workshop participants pointed out that the informal status of civil dialogue contributes to issues with facilitation, transparency, and recruitment and further felt that the greater recognition of social partners leads to better professionalised processes in social dialogue.
2. **Lack of differentiation between participation, consultation, and co-creation (from civil society and EU side), inexperience with facilitation, and limited training opportunities leads to less diverse and creative formats** (*Ravo, 2021; interviews*): good facilitation helps to harvest participants' insights and provides a pleasant experience. Good administrators and researchers do not necessarily have the skillset to moderate and plan diverse sessions, which prevents some current practices from reaching their full potential. This is exacerbated by difficulties differentiating between participation, consultation, and co-creation from both civil society and EU institutions. Limited support or training to gain necessary skills from EU institutions blocks organisers in their professional growth.
3. **Ambiguity/arbitrariness around recruitment criteria and process proceeding recruitment, especially when policymaking is fast-tracked** (*Ravo, 2021; interviews*): the way participants are selected for dialogues via open calls (e.g., expert groups) or reached out to by organisers is not always clear-cut. Workshop participants emphasised that these processes are especially untransparent when dialogues are fast-tracked, citing recent simplification work.
4. **Lack of periodic or structured feedback between participants and organisers on the format** (*Ravo, 2021; interviews*): periodic feedback can help course-correct and reaffirm commitment between organisers and participants. At the moment, not all dialogue has feedback built-in, and sometimes the feedback is one-way only (civil society to organisers).
5. **Multifaceted nature of civil society and large number of organisations requires more resources to interact with than social partners** (*workshop*): workshop participants explained that interacting with the multitude of opinions and organisations in civil society takes up resources that could be spent diving deeper into policy discussions if there were greater solidarity or organisation between civil society members. They argued that there should be more streamlining and preparation to be more effective during dialogue instances.

7.5.6 Unwillingness or uninterest to interact from high level

1. **Perceived competition with direct democracy or elected representation** (*EESC, 2018; interviews*): there is a perception that participatory activities may be in competition with each other for resources. Interviewees explained that units and working groups that interact directly with residents may be less inclined to engage with civil society. Similarly, MEPs may feel less need to seek out civil society perspectives as elected representatives. Workshop participants pointed out that this stems from an insufficient differentiation between the roles and added value that direct democracy, civil dialogue, social dialogue, and elected representation provide.
2. **Fears of lobbying and introducing political bias or influence** (*interviews*): interviewees pointed out that EU institutions, especially the European Parliament, are wary of being seen as introducing lobbying to policymaking. There seems to be a disconnect between these apprehensions and the stated purpose of civil dialogue, which aims to increase democratic legitimacy, as well as insufficient differentiation between advocacy and lobbying.
3. **Rotation of EU officials requires CSOs to reestablish contacts and reconvince officials of the importance of civil dialogue every election cycle** (*interviews*): CSO interviewees explained that building up interpersonal relations and persuading Commissioners, MEPS, etc. of the feasibility and value of civil dialogue has to be periodically redone following the election cycle and the appointment of new officials. While this is to some extent unavoidable, the process could be streamlined and made less resource-intensive.
4. **Limited Council and Parliament engagement** (*Ravo, 2021; interviews*): our mapping found relatively low levels of civil dialogue in the Council and the Parliament compared to the Commission. Interviewees and workshop participants expressed that the Council is especially difficult to interact with and that Council documents typically arrive too late for civil society members to prepare opinions and suggestions. Workshop participants cited the EESC's European Semester Group, which produced opinions on the basis of annual consultations with organised civil society.⁹⁸
5. **Limited time of (especially high-level) EU officials** (*interviews*): interviewees and workshop participants acknowledged that the informal nature of civil dialogue means that it will be harder to prioritise for high-level EU officials with packed agendas. This is related to the barriers to EU capacity found in policy tree #4 above.
6. **Low priority policy areas lead to disinterest or less funding** (*Commission Recommendation 2023/2836*,⁹⁹ *interviews*): shrinking civic space and a decreased policy importance of topics traditionally valued by civil society make it harder to establish civil dialogue and for existing civil dialogue practices to have an impact. This issue was discussed with workshop participants, who pointed to the lack of institutionalisation, the limitation of EU competencies, and the often-performative nature of dialogues and consultations as contributing factors.

⁹⁸ European Economic and Social Committee, Recommendations on reform and investment proposals for the 2024-2025 European Semester cycle, EESC website, 2025. <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/agenda/our-events/events/recommendations-reform-and-investment-proposals-2024-2025-european-semester-cycle> (accessed May 11, 2025).

⁹⁹ Commission Recommendation (EU) 2023/2836 of 12 December 2023 on promoting the engagement and effective participation of citizens and civil society organisations in public policy-making processes, Publication Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2023.

7.6 Recommendation workshop participant list

We thank all participants for their time and effort. Below is a list of the organisations represented at the workshop. In total there were twelve participants.

- Civil Society Europe
- Council of Europe's Conference of INGOs
- DG CLIMA of the European Commission
- DG EMPL of the European Commission
- European Consumer Organisation
- Civil Society Organisations' Group of the European Economic and Social Committee
- European Roma Grassroots Organisations Network
- Fundamental Rights Agency
- Social Services Europe

7.7 Direct citizen participation and deliberative practices in the EU institutions

Section 1.1 discussed the definition of deliberative democracy. The main distinction from civil dialogue that this study focuses on is that the protagonist of deliberative democracy is the citizens, who are given information, time for learning, space for deliberation and sometimes partial legislative power that could influence subsequent policymaking. CSOs, usually acting as the mediators or the representatives of their respective constituencies, occupied a secondary but still important role in deliberative democracy. This section presents a short overview of deliberative democracy implemented in EU institutions and discusses the lessons learned for the future of civil dialogue and also the possibility of blending the best of the two democratic practices. The overview attempts to find the root of the current deliberative democracy in the EU institutions and then focuses on the stream of citizens' panels organised by DG COMM of the Commission. The information mainly comes from official webpages, complemented by inputs from an interview.

7.7.1 The two streams of Citizens' Panels

Russack (2018) identified five EU instruments that are participatory in a sense that they allow for communication between EU citizens and the EU institutions:¹⁰⁰

- European Citizens' Initiative
- Petitioning the European Parliament
- Formal complaints to the Ombudsman
- Public consultations
- Citizens' Dialogues

While the first three are bottom-up channels, the last two are top-down and implemented by the EU institutions. By the time of the publication of Russack (2018), there had not been any institutionalised, top-down, recurrent participatory practices at EU level. Yet the EU had already tasted some flavours of deliberative democracy a decade ago. The European Citizens' Consultations (2007 and 2009) were organised by the European Union to engage citizens directly in discussions about the future of Europe.

¹⁰⁰ Russack, S, 'Pathways for citizens to engage in EU policymaking', *Direct Democracy in the EU: The Myth of a Citizens' Union*. CEPS and Rowman & Littlefield International, 2018.

In October 2006, 200 citizens were randomly chosen to submit their opinions and, as a result, three priorities were chosen, which were then debated at 27 national consultations with randomly selected citizens. National reports were drafted and contributed to the final report '*European Citizens' Perspectives on the Future of Europe*', which was presented to the European Parliament.¹⁰¹ The objectives of the 2009 edition of the European Citizens' Consultations was similar but the consultation method was different and more developed with four phases, from online forum, national consultative events with randomly chosen citizens, selection of recommendations, to a 150-person 2-day in-person deliberative summit followed by four conferences in four different countries. Despite the criticism that it failed to influence policy; it was more integrated into the EU political context and involved more extensively the European Parliament and MEPs due to the coming European election.¹⁰²

In May 2018, the EESC launched a European Citizen' Panel, which brought together 80 citizens from 27 Member States to debate and identify 12 overarching questions that mattered the most to European citizens. The panel was aimed at shaping the subsequent public consultation on the future of Europe,¹⁰³ though it was not directly linked to the Conference on the Future of Europe launched in 2021.

The Conference on the Future of Europe was a joint initiative by the European Parliament, the Council of the EU, and the European Commission and is a key milestone in the history of participatory democracy in the EU that signalled that it was gaining momentum. Over the course of a year, the EU convened four European Citizens' Panels, each composed of 200 randomly selected individuals from across the Member States. The topics of the four panels were chosen by the Executive Board of the Conference based on the contributions of various consultation sources:

Panel 1: A stronger economy, social justice and jobs / Education, culture, youth, sport / Digital transformation

Panel 2: European democracy / Values and rights, rule of law, security

Panel 3: Climate change, environment / Health

Panel 4: EU in the world / Migration

These panels were designed to reflect the diversity of the EU population in terms of age, gender, socioeconomic background, and education level, ensuring a broad and inclusive representation.¹⁰⁴ These in-person panels were accompanied by a Multilingual Digital Platform.

Each panel convened for three deliberative sessions held in different cities. During these sessions, participants engaged in discussions and workshops, moderated by facilitators and subject-matter experts. Participants also reviewed contributions on the Multilingual Digital Platform, which collected ideas from citizens across the EU. Each panel then formulated recommendations on their respective topics, which were presented to the Conference for further discussion.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰¹ See <https://participedia.net/case/7251>

¹⁰² See <https://participedia.net/case/4135>

¹⁰³ First European Citizens' Panel took steps to enable citizens to contribute to the creation of the future of Europe, 7 May 2018 at <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/news-media/press-releases/first-european-citizens-panel-took-steps-enable-citizens-contribute-creation-future-europe>

¹⁰⁴ See <https://wayback.archive-it.org/12090/20230417170950/https://futureu.europa.eu/en/assemblies/citizens-panels>

¹⁰⁵ See <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/conference-on-the-future-of-europe>

The Conference on the Future of Europe sowed the seeds for the new generation of European Citizens' Panels.¹⁰⁶ The Commission began a series of Citizens' Panels, which are designed for particular policy areas.¹⁰⁷ According to the official webpages dedicated to Citizens' Panels, there were five concluded panels. Table 5 summarises some basic information of these five panels.¹⁰⁸

Table 5 - Citizens' Panels organised by the European Commission

Title / Topic	Timeline	Sample	Objectives	Results	Hyperlink
Food Waste	3 sessions from 16 December to 12 February 2023	150 randomly selected citizens	It asked the panel to propose ideas to reduce food waste.	23 recommendations concluded, which were published together with the Commission's legislative proposal.	European Citizens' Food Waste Panel - European Commission
Virtual Worlds	3 sessions from 24 February to 23 April 2023	150 randomly selected citizens	It asked the panel to develop a set of guiding principles and actions for the development of virtual worlds in the EU.	23 recommendations concluded, which inspired the European Commission's Strategy on Web 4.0 and Virtual Worlds	Virtual worlds panel - European Commission
Learning Mobility	3 sessions from 3 March 2023 to 30 April 2023	150 randomly selected citizens	It asked citizens for help in making learning mobility in Europe more accessible to and better known by any learner or educator.	21 recommendations concluded, which contributed to the Commission's proposal for the Council Recommendation "Europe on the Move".	Learning mobility panel - European Commission
Energy Efficiency	3 sessions from 23 February to 14 April 2024	150 randomly selected citizens	It discussed how energy is used in the EU and how the energy system may change in the future.	13 recommendations concluded, which contribute to the drafting of the forthcoming Commission's 'Energy Efficiency First Principle'.	Energy Efficiency Panel - European Commission

¹⁰⁶ Von der Leyen, *Speech by President von der Leyen at the closing event of the Conference*, 9 May 2022, Strasbourg.

¹⁰⁷ The topics of these panels first appeared in the *Commission Work Programme 2023: A Union standing firm and united*, COM(2022) 548 final, 2022, following the results of the Conference of the Future of Europe.

¹⁰⁸ See https://citizens.ec.europa.eu/index_en

<i>Tackling hatred in society</i>	3 sessions from 5 April to 19 May 2024	150 randomly selected citizens	It examined the root causes of hatred and the ways to address them, with the aim of producing recommendations on how to build bridges across fractured groups and communities.	21 recommendations concluded, which contribute to the Code of Conduct on countering illegal hate speech online.	Tackling Hatred in Society Panel - European Commission
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Source: European Commission at https://citizens.ec.europa.eu/index_en

These Citizens' Panels are well documented in their webpages with updates of follow-ups by the Commission. For example, an update dated November 2024 about the launch of the EU Food System Monitoring Dashboard has been notified on the webpage, 14 months after the closure of the panel on food waste. Such a practice not only responds to the expectations of the participants and the general public but also enhances the legitimacy of the Citizens' Panels.

Our interview reveals that the Commission follows a structured protocol for collecting feedback and ensuring follow-ups. Before each event, participants receive a pre-event survey to assess their expectations. After the event, an exit survey gathers feedback on various aspects, from logistical arrangements to whether participants felt heard. Reports from the Citizens' Panels are made public, and the organising unit follows up with participants approximately 6-12 months after the panel's conclusion to update them on the progress of their recommendations within the EU policymaking process. Additionally, the Commission is working on establishing an alumni network for former participants of the Citizens' Panels.

Our research and interviews identified two major barriers to deliberative democracy. First, these events require significant financial resources, primarily to cover travel and ensure accessibility for participants. Second, some policymakers remain sceptical about citizen participation in policymaking, believing that their own expertise is sufficient for developing the best policy options. However, this attitude has been shifting, as one of the interviewees stated.

The European Citizens' Panel organised by the Commission is a good example of deliberative practices, which is regularly conducted with a clear and transparent methodology of participant recruitment. More importantly, the follow-up efforts by the organising unit and the way it documents the progress and aftermath are impressive, with updates of a panel's contributions to the subsequent policymaking process clearly shown on the dedicated webpage.

7.7.2 Citizens' Panel on AI by the Belgian Presidency of the Council

A recent example of deliberative practices was the Citizens' Panel on AI, organised by the Belgian Presidency of the Council (January–June 2024). A total of 16,200 invitation letters were sent to Belgian citizens, and from the 1,170 positive responses, 60 participants were selected based on specific criteria to ensure a representative sample of the Belgian population.

The panel took place over three weekends, featuring a mix of learning sessions, discussions, and deliberations. Participants worked together to refine and finalise key messages on AI. On May 25, the

panel's results were presented at a ceremony attended by representatives from the Belgian government, European institutions, the private sector, and civil society organisations, who provided feedback on the outcomes. To assess shifts in participants' perspectives, pre- and post-panel surveys were conducted, measuring changes in attitudes toward AI and democracy. The final report is publicly available.

The panel was organised by three CSOs, Glassroots, Missions Publiques, and VO Citizen upon the request of the FPS Foreign Affairs of the Belgian government. A professional cameraman made a report of each weekend by interviewing organisers and citizens. Videos were produced and disseminated through various media channels. The press was also invited throughout the process and some content creators were commissioned to create a report and publish it on their respective channels.¹⁰⁹ It is unclear whether the Belgian government or the organisers have followed up with the participants and tracked the policy impact of the proposed recommendations along the EU legislative process.

Meanwhile, the European Parliament, although not the organiser of a major civil dialogue event, has called for stronger citizen involvement in the EU's policymaking process. It has proposed the creation of a permanent 'European Agora', a forum where citizens would deliberate on EU policies and priorities, providing direct input into the Commission's work. Supporters within the European Parliament argue that increasing citizen participation will reinforce EU democracy, serving as a complement to the existing system of representative democracy.¹¹⁰

7.7.3 Comparison between civil dialogue and deliberative practice

Deliberative democracy is built on a fundamentally different philosophy than most mainstream policymaking. In this model, citizens take centre stage, while civil society organisations (CSOs) play only a supporting role, providing organisational and informational assistance rather than acting as intermediaries. This approach ensures direct engagement between citizens and policymakers, creating a transparent exchange channel that shields citizens from unnecessary lobbying pressures. There is however room for cross-learning between civil dialogue, in which CSOs are the representatives of civil society, and deliberative democracy, which puts citizens as the protagonist.

Implementing deliberative democracy comes with significant costs. One interviewee estimated that organising a citizens' panel is ten times more expensive than holding a one-day conventional conference. In a system where facilitating citizen-to-policymaker dialogue is costly, CSOs take on the role of civil society representatives, gathering public preferences and professionally engaging with policymakers to ensure citizens' concerns are heard.

Despite their similarities, civil society engagement through civil dialogue and deliberative democracy differ in one crucial aspect: feedback and accountability. In deliberative democracy, failure to respond to citizens' input and expectations can have serious consequences, leading to frustration and disillusionment among participants and the broader public. Ensuring that citizens see tangible outcomes

¹⁰⁹ See Kingdom of Belgium, [Belgian citizens meet to reflect on AI](#), 29 May 2024.

¹¹⁰ See <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/eu-parliament-pushes-for-more-participatory-tools-for-europeans/>

from their involvement is essential to maintaining trust in the process.¹¹¹ Politicians and technocrats recognise that fully implementing a citizens' panel's recommendations word for word is often impractical. As a result, they anticipate potential risks or backlash associated with deliberative democracy, particularly when public expectations are not met. Civil dialogue, where CSOs act as intermediaries, presents a lower-risk alternative, though sidelining CSOs' opinions or demands would also backfire. Yet through a close collaboration between public authorities and CSOs, civil dialogue helps structuring citizen inputs and facilitates a more manageable and politically feasible citizens engagement process.

To some extent, deliberative democracy is seen as a remedy for public discontent, offering citizens a more direct role in shaping policy and restoring trust in governance.¹¹² However, relying on deliberative democracy as an ad-hoc solution without proper expectation management is a flawed strategy. Poorly handled processes can lead to frustration and disillusionment, ultimately undermining the credibility of deliberative democracy and pushing citizens toward more confrontational forms of engagement. For deliberative democracy to be truly effective, it must be institutionalized as a regular practice and understood as an ongoing process of civic learning.¹¹³ Its core aim should be to cultivate a democratic culture of thoughtful dialogue, thereby deepening citizen engagement and rebuilding trust in policymaking.

7.7.4 Lessons learnt for civil dialogue

Given the more sophisticated design of the Citizens' Panels organized by the European Commission and the EESC, it is clear that current EU civil dialogue practices could benefit from adopting some of their features. In principle, a civil dialogue process could be restructured along similar lines.

The Citizens' Panels managed by the Commission have two main strengths. First, EU Citizens' Panels emphasise transparency and accountability by collecting participant feedback and providing regular updates on how their contributions influence the policymaking process. These follow-ups are essential to maintaining participants' trust and confidence in the deliberative process. Second, the Panels are carefully designed to ensure impartiality and representativeness: participants are randomly selected, and external influences are minimised to preserve the integrity of the deliberation. Meanwhile, some major civil dialogue efforts resemble a citizens' panel, such as the Strategic Dialogue on the future of EU agriculture.¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ One unfortunate step of the French Citizens' Convention for Climate was the subsequent disempowerment after the proposal was handed into the government. The 'dialogue' between the participants and the ministers involved little meaningful exchange while the meetings with the private sector were even considered 'violent and traumatic' as participants of the CCC were sent to confront industrial stakeholders who possess much more professional knowledge. See Galván Labrador, A., & Zografos, C. (2024), 'Empowerment and disempowerment in climate assemblies: The French citizens' convention on climate', *Environmental Policy and Governance*, Vol. 34, No 4, pp. 411-426. <https://doi.org/10.1002/eet.2093>.

¹¹² In response to the commitment to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, the French government proposed to abolish the tax advantage for diesel fuel in November 2018. The proposal embarked on a long period of protests by the Gilets Jaunes (Yellow Vests). While standing firm, Macron announced staging a 'Grand National Debate' that would incorporate elements of participatory and deliberative democracy and maintain the principle of social justice.

¹¹³ Chwalisz, C., 'Reimagining democratic institutions: Why and how to embed public deliberation', *Innovative Citizen Participation and New Democratic Institutions – Catching the deliberative wave*, OECD Publishing, Paris, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1787/339306da-en>

¹¹⁴ See https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/overview-vision-agriculture-food/main-initiatives-strategic-dialogue-future-eu-agriculture_en#dates-of-the-plenary-meetings

Civil dialogue could benefit significantly from the successes of recent EU deliberative practices. To start, it should be more intentionally structured and purpose-driven. Currently, civil dialogue often mirrors expert consultations, lacking the interactive and inclusive dynamics of deliberative formats. Instead, it should foster genuine exchange among CSOs, while separating out information-sharing sessions for more passive communication. Moreover, civil dialogue should clearly state its policy objectives, such as formulating recommendations for forthcoming legislation, to give participants a sense of direction and purpose. Organisers should also provide regular updates following meetings, sharing how participants' contributions are being taken forward and inviting reflection on both the successes and limitations of the process. This feedback loop helps build a sense of ownership among participants and encourages sustained engagement in future dialogues.

The Commission should reformulate its civil dialogue approach to ensure it genuinely reflects the diversity of civil society, rather than allowing dominant voices to overshadow others. While open calls for participation are standard practice among organising units, some CSO interviewees noted that interested stakeholders were unaware of these opportunities and consequently excluded. To address this, improved communication strategies and more effective dissemination of information are needed—particularly to engage CSOs that are less connected to institutional networks. In certain cases, organising units should proactively reach out to relevant organisations to strengthen the representativeness and inclusivity of the dialogue process.

CSOs can help prepare the groundwork of deliberative activities together with public authorities, providing expert knowledge in the particular policy area and sharing experience of communicating with citizens. Besides, CSOs should be involved in the aftermath of the deliberative events and perform as a proactive observer because very often citizens, even the participants, are too occupied to follow the outcome of the deliberation throughout the policymaking process. While citizens may return to their daily responsibilities, CSOs are well positioned to carry forward the work of citizen panels by monitoring how public authorities respond to and implement their recommendations.

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