



**FROM PROTEST
TO ENGAGEMENT:**

EU'S OPENING TO
CIVIL SOCIETY AND
PROTEST DEMANDS

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Please cite as: Dostalík, P., Juel Larsen, C., Uzel, S. N., "From Protest to Engagement: EU's opening to civil society and protest demands". 89 Initiative.

PREAMBLE

In this paper, we explore the links between demands of civil society groups and party behaviour in relation to climate action and the rule of law issues, and in line with the 89 Initiative philosophy, produce policy recommendations for the EU political system. At the time of writing this paper, the EU is conducting its biggest non-electoral democratic exercise: the Conference on the Future of Europe. European citizens are asked to share their opinions on the future of the Union via online platforms and citizens' panels. However, the process is not gaining the hoped-for traction. The pandemic as well as general disinterest of Europeans in the future of the EU limit the outreach of the Conference.¹ To avoid 'persuasion of the persuaded,' the EU needs to transform the way it engages citizens. Europeans, most notably young people, have shown in the past years they are far from indifferent about the future. Record number of people took to the streets to call for climate action, human rights, and the rule of law.² What can the EU do to improve a constructive dialogue with its (young) citizens? We claim that if the EU wants to enhance engagement with civil society in its policymaking processes, it needs to do more than just launching an online platform and organizing consultations for a period of two years. A more structured, systemic and long-term cooperation between EU institutions and civil society can enhance the EU's democratic qualities.

1 Filip Milacic, "Democratization Of Democracy: The Conference On The Future Of Europe As A Role Model?" *EURACTIV*. 2022. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/all/opinion/democratization-of-democracy-the-conference-on-the-future-of-europe-as-a-role-model/>.

2 Samuel Brannen, "Global Political Protests and the Future of Democracy." *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 2021. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/global-political-protests-and-future-democracy>; Eliza Barclay and Brian Resnick, "How Big Was The Global Climate Strike? 4 Million People, Activists Estimate." *Vox*, 2021. <https://www.vox.com/energy-and-environment/2019/9/20/20876143/climate-strike-2019-september-20-crowd-estimate>.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Rise in protests and civil mobilization

Mobilization of increasingly more connected citizens via social media has become a prominent feature of European democracies. How can the EU react to and consider the demands of the people advocating for their agenda outside of the conventional political framework? Focusing on the political party level, we aim to highlight the dynamics of parties incorporating civil society groups' and movements' demands in the area of climate action and the rule of law.

Over the last decade, prominence of nonviolent protests has grown in both liberal democracies and authoritarian regimes, reaching its peak in 2019 with major protests, strikes, and demonstrations.³ Europe was no exception. Citizens of the EU were mobilized by a diverse set of causes: upholding democratic principles, the rule of law, and the urgency of the climate crisis. Increased citizens mobilization should enhance the chances of the EU's democratic exercise, the Conference on the Future of Europe. Despite the objective to consider citizens' views on the future of the Union, the project has struggled to attract the hoped-for attention.⁴ Whilst 90% of EU citizens agree that their voice should be taken more into account when deciding on the future of Europe,⁵ the inclusiveness of the Conference, and therefore its potential to succeed, was questioned.⁶ However, the past two years marked by the global pandemic have seen increased restrictions; the space for civil society has shrunk in several EU states.⁷ Even if the Conference on the Future of Europe brought citizens-driven proposals, the EU should expand its channels to communicate with citizens outside the electoral cycle to enhance its legitimacy in the long-term.

³ Erica Chenoweth, "The Future of Nonviolent Resistance". *Journal of Democracy* 31, no. 3 (July 2020): 69-84.

⁴ Alberto Alemanno and Kalypso Nicolaidis. "Citizen Power Europe: The Making of a European Citizens' Assembly", in *The Groundwork of European Power*, ed. A. Alemanno and P. Sellal, RED (*Revue Européenne du Droit*), Issue 3, January 2022, published by Groupe d'études géopolitiques.

⁵ European Commission. *Future of Europe 2021*. Eurobarometer Surveys. <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2554>

⁶ Citizens Takeover Europe. "Open letter to Executive Board: civil society organisations call for Conference to include marginalised communities", 18 June 2021, led by Citizens Take Over Europe and co-signed by other 62 civil society organisations. See <https://citizenstakeover.eu/>.

⁷ Aarti Naarse. "Europeans' Right to Protest Under Threat." *Carnegie Europe*. January 27th, 2021, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2021/01/27/europeans-right-to-protest-under-threat-pub-83735/>.

Policymaking at the EU level requires a broad set of input provided by interest representatives. To this end, relatively well functioning structures have been put in place to ensure a level of access to policymakers. However, the urgency of today's challenges including the climate emergency and the backsliding of liberal democracies mobilizes young European citizens who can hardly benefit from the current cooperation structures. Whilst the young generation voices its concerns loudly through protest and social movements, the EU is not adequately equipped to listen to these calls. Young people are concerned and mobilized, even though their engagement takes place outside the conventional institutional framework. **They represent a complementary force to the civil society whose role has been expanded in the light of the erosion of liberal democracies and increase of populism.**⁸ The fight we focus on in this report, for climate action and in support of the rule of law, is not relevant to one generation. Its success relies on intergenerational cooperation and solidarity, with young people ready to live up to the changes they call for in their daily lives and the older generations, often in the position to make decisions, to consider the demands of their younger European compatriots. We explore EU's engagement frameworks provided to movements and civil society, and identify their strong points and subsequently produce recommendations on their future improvement with the hope to enhance their engagement capabilities. It is not enough to keep the conventional frameworks in place and expect the young generation to navigate it in the midst of the turbulent times we live in. Current events also shift around political priorities and the way issues are approached. For instance, greater energy independence and a reduction of the EU's reliance on fossil fuels became a major topic as a result of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Whilst there had been considerable public pressure from numerous movements and protest representatives prior to the conflict, a paradigm shift required a major geopolitical event putting at risk European security. However, our political system cannot rely on major interventions to accelerate progress. Young people's voice cannot be excluded from the debate on these major crises and

⁸ Tito Boeri, Prachi Mishra, Chris Papageorgiou, and Antonio Spilimbergo. "Populism And Civil Society." *VOX, CEPR Policy Portal*, January 11, 2019, <https://voxeu.org/article/populism-and-civil-society>.

in order to include their perspective, a proactive innovative approach is needed.

Climate urgency as the protest driver

In this report, we discuss why the current methods of engagement favour established EU-level interest representatives, why the EU should change the way it engages with citizens and what it should do to establish a constructive dialogue, especially with young people. At the political party level, we examine the dynamics behind political party and civil society cooperation. We pay special focus to climate, which represents one of the greatest concerns for young European citizens.⁹ In numerous protests present across the continent, young people have demanded that the EU become more ambitious, which stands in contrast with generally moderate stances of most political parties in the European Parliament. We explore the specific drivers of climate protest movements to engage with policymakers and the way they articulate their demands.

Democracy and the rule of law

Additionally, we consider the rule of law. One of the cornerstones of the EU, the rule of law has been undermined in certain Member States through the restriction of citizens' rights and political interventions harming judicial independence. These trends put at risk the EU as an entity. While the exercise of the Conference on the Future of Europe is ongoing, it does not adequately consider the magnitude of the European citizens' policy requests in such areas. As such, this policy report elucidates what steps the EU should take to build a more constructive and solution-oriented approach to civic engagement. Young people are directly concerned by the developments of these areas as they will live through the impacts of current changes. It is therefore crucial for the EU to open its methods of engagement to the voices of the young generation.

9

Aarti Naarse. "Europeans' Right to Protest Under Threat."

PART I: POLITICAL PARTIES AND ENGAGEMENT

Political parties, civil society and protests

Globally, the past years saw an increase in protest movements advocating for a diverse range of causes: for and against climate action; pro-democracy and the rule of law; in support of minority rights; and against the pandemic-related restrictions, to name a few. The civic mobilization of increasingly connected citizens has become a prominent feature of European democracies in the age of social media. Young people are clearly concerned and conscious of the political stakes of our times; yet, access to policymakers by young people is limited. How can the EU more effectively open to citizen engagement processes outside the conventional political framework? Focusing on the political party level, we aim to highlight the dynamics of parties incorporating the demands of civil society groups in the area of climate action and the rule of law.

Parties consider the demands of civil society with the objective of gaining political relevance and enhancing their messages. Established political parties can adapt their political position to better reflect the position of civil society while new political forces can emerge based on civil society dynamics. What mechanisms connect political parties and civil society organizations? And what implications can we draw from such processes at the EU level? This section of the paper focuses on established practices of cooperation between policymakers and external input providers, including civil society representatives, business representatives, and citizens. Here, we focus particularly on patterns of cooperation between political parties and civil society. Whilst the practices observed have proven relatively accessible to established interest representatives, they fall short when it comes to providing an access point to young people, whose concerns often remain unanswered.

Civil society as a key to balanced legislation

As political actors in the European Parliament represent diverse interests, so is this also projected onto their cooperation with stakeholders, including

civil society representatives. Civil society positions on specific issues are an important feature of the policy making process. MEPs are continuously exposed to a large number positions of particular business and national interests. For instance, a legislative file regarding artificial intelligence policy can generate up to 40 meeting requests from organizations and associations engaged in this field.¹⁰ Additionally, policymakers and political parties can monitor the civil society space through social media, press reviews, and event mappings. Nonetheless, civil society movements and organizations often lack the means necessary to achieve high levels of visibility compared to more resourceful actors.

Commonly, civil society representatives face competition from corporate sectors. Whilst there are areas in which the interests of civil society and business overlap, interests commonly diverge during legislative processes. What role should the policy maker adopt when weighing the different positions? Policy makers can assume the role of the compromise-seeker, trying to balance the array of positions and deliver a compromise solution. Such a role could be attributed to the centrist political group in the European Parliament, Renew Europe, as described by the Deputy Secretary General Sylvain Maréchal: “Of course, you will have divergences, but the question is whether they will remain or not. Can you bring a compromise that will solve the concern of the industry as well as the NGOs? In most files, you can come to that point.”¹¹ Furthermore, policymakers can act as promoters of one particular approach to the policy, aligning themselves with one side of the debate and pursuing given interests in the legislative process.

Creating a network

EU-level policy making can be characterized as a collective democratic process involving a high number of political and nonpolitical actors bound together in multiple networks. As such “public policy is made and delivered via some kind of

¹⁰ Interview with Tomáš Adamec, APA to an MEP of the Greens/EFA, March 7th, 2022.

¹¹ Interview with Sylvain Maréchal, Renew Europe, March 7th, 2022.

hybrid arrangement involving a range of different actors, including some representing private or non-governmental institutions.”¹² Given the dynamic environment of the European Parliament and the volume of legislative processes it undertakes, it is usually not within MEPs’ remit to carry out policy research on agenda items. In this, individual MEPs rely on their political party and the EP-level political group, whose capacities vary depending on their size and resources. Larger political groups can allocate fewer files to individual MEPs for rapporteurship given the higher number of policymakers in comparison to smaller groups whose MEPs have to work on several files simultaneously. Policymakers from smaller groups then “tend to prioritize cooperation with their verified network of experts, academics or representatives of different interest groups, given the increased volume of work and time constraints.”¹³ Establishing an individual network becomes more challenging in this situation. Therefore, political groups or domestic political parties often supply experts and other relevant points of contact.

Other parties have greater scope to pursue cooperation with external input providers. For instance, the Renew Europe political group is developing a framework for cooperating with interest groups, including civil society organizations. This includes “a mapping of key association in Brussels, but also in Member States that are linked to civil society” with the objective “to engage with them to show that we are a group that cares about and listens to the citizens, and also, to make them understand that we are a key player in Parliament, if not the key player.”¹⁴ Engagement with external input providers helps the political group to establish its position both internally and externally.

MEPs additionally rely on **a wider network of experts, stakeholders, and civil society representatives** to provide detailed analyses of specific policies. In general, input networks can be

distinguished by policy areas, with various national contexts determining their interests, and ideological positions. However, this distinction is never strictly followed as the functioning of organizations, experts and networks remains fluid and represents the changing need for cross-cutting insights when working on significant policy files. Internal functioning of networks does not necessarily influence their ability to achieve their primary goal as “networks may be loosely structured but still capable of spreading information or engaging in collective action.”¹⁵

Networks concentrating on specific policy areas provide detailed information related to a narrow area of public policy and are consulted by MEPs. Often, such networks establish long-term cooperation with policymakers and remain present in the proximity of the policymaking environment of EU institutions. Examples of policy-specific networks members include European Digital Rights (EDRi) specializing on privacy and data protection and Climate Action Network (CAN) advocating for specific solutions in the area of climate and energy transitions.

Additionally, **networks providing specific national contexts relevant to a given policy** supply the policymakers with input specific to the environment and circumstances they operate in as some legislative files and themes might be located or more advanced in certain Member States, and not in others.¹⁶ The varying degree of policy impact on different Member States needs to be reflected by the policymaker when making choices of which input to take into consideration during the legislative process.

In addition to institutional information sources such as the European Parliament Think Tank, political parties and organizations complement these input sources with expertise produced by their own **political think tanks, expert groups, and research institutes**. The example of the German political environment illustrates this point well as each major

¹² John Peterson, “Policy networks”, *Forschungsberichte: Reihe Politikwissenschaft* 90 (2003): 1.

¹³ Interview with Tomáš Adamec, APA to an MEP of the Greens/EFA, March 7th, 2022.

¹⁴ Interview with Sylvain Maréchal, Renew Europe, March 7th, 2022.

¹⁵ John Peterson, *Policy networks*, 1.

¹⁶ Interview with Sylvain Maréchal, Renew Europe, March 7th, 2022.

political party has a connection with a think tank: the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung is connected to the Christian Democratic Union, while the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung cooperates with the Social Democratic Party, and the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung is aligned with the German Green Party.¹⁷

Benefits of a network

Through long-term cooperation, it becomes possible to establish a relationship of trust between the policymaker and the input provider, as both sides achieve their objectives. The policymaker can shape policy outcomes and provide expert- or stakeholder-backed input, which can also increase their political authority. As described by an accredited parliamentary assistant to Marcel Kolaja, MEP and quaestor of the European Parliament, “you can form what kind of opinions will be mentioned in the hearing and this is what is going to influence the other MEPs as well.”¹⁸ On the side of the stakeholders, their potential to shape the policy outcome through a detailed and in-depth analysis increases.

Furthermore, long-term cooperation helps to define a policymakers’ political profile as their commitment to the given issue is recognised by the members of the policy-specific network, generating political capital for the policymaker who, in the long-term, relies on popular support.

Constraints of a network

The current system favors already established networks due to the processes described above. However, engaging with an established network can limit the landscape of stakeholders and interest representatives with whom they might collaborate. For the parts of civil society not represented by established organizations and associations, the accessibility of policymakers decreases if the policymakers’ working methods rely extensively on

an established network. Newly emerged movements and organizations struggle to have their voice heard. Despite young people mobilizing and shaping public opinion through protests and social media campaigns, their presence in the policy making process remains limited. The comfort of retaining the status quo decreases the potential for innovative approaches to policy making.

Without actively pursuing network diversification, the overall output is limited especially in policy areas that develop quickly. This relates to the way policymakers approach their work overall. Given the fact that movements and ad hoc civil society associations often emerge swiftly in reaction to an event or a major policy, channels of access to policy makers by civil society should operate more nimbly. Especially if the magnitude of public mobilization reaches levels seen in the case of climate protection and the rule of law, policymakers’ insistence on conventional methods of input gathering does not ‘meet the moment’. In one of the political groups in the European Parliament, “there is this understanding that you need to challenge yourself. I think that is important, and we also try to do that as a political group, to question why we are doing this, and look at other ways to do it and see if there is any other way. The answer that ‘we have always been doing this one way’ is not good, so we want to try to challenge that.”¹⁹ Yet, this propensity to flexible and novel channels of engagement needs to be adopted as a system-wide feature.

Two-way relationship: benefits of relations with stakeholders and experts

The relationship between the policy maker and the interest representative goes two ways. Whilst cooperation with established lobby and business representatives can provide the policymaker with highly specialized and technical information, cooperation with civil society and movement representatives brings an added social value. This is supported if civil society leaders and the policy maker share the same values and, more importantly, if the policy maker comes from a background

¹⁷ Parties And Political Foundations In Germany, Deutschland.de, October 14th, 2017, <https://www.deutschland.de/en/topic/politics/germany-europe/parties-and-political-foundations>.

¹⁸ Interview with Tomáš Adamec, APA to an MEP of the Greens/EFA, March 7th, 2022.

¹⁹ Interview with Sylvain Maréchal, Renew Europe, March 7th, 2022.

connected to activism and civil engagement. “For our political group, it is important because there's a symbiosis. Especially among the Pirates and the Greens, a lot of the members grew on the street activism on this kind of activism from the bottom to the top” says one official.²⁰

In such cases, the policy maker understands the movement's functioning and the requirements for its success. From the policy maker's perspective, “it is also beneficial to be in touch with the movement representatives because they are the ones who can bring people to the streets and create pressure on other policy makers in the light of protests. Or that they just reach out to them, send them their arguments, talk to them, and question them in debates.”²¹ Further, policy makers can provide visibility through event organization featuring the movement representatives and communication of the movement's message on social media.. “What is important for any kind of activism, be it Fridays for Future and others, is that they see a political response and political backing. If our politicians participate in their rallies, if they talk about their events, that can boost them to continue in their effort, because they have a feeling that they are appealing to someone who is listening to what they have to say.”²²

The two-way nature of the relationship ensures benefits for the policy maker as well, serving as a visibility platform to communicate messages and enhance outreach. The policy maker's clear and long-term connection to a particular policy area represented by a movement helps to define their political positioning and to create a recognizable profile. Moreover, many policy issues cannot be resolved in a short period of time and require a gradual, systematic approach. This is well illustrated by the work on extreme poverty done by several MEPs, as described by Sylvain Maréchal who worked as a parliamentary assistant for a number of MEPs in the European Parliament. “With the fight against extreme poverty, of course you cannot solve it in one

year time and certainly not with one event. And you need to avoid that. [...] It is important to establish this kind of cooperation and make sure this point of view is present, because you and your network cannot have all the experience of life.”²³

Furthermore, movements themselves establish networks of experts and supporters, which can represent another potential benefit for the policymakers who can expand their network. Finally, policy outcomes can be shaped by pressures exerted outside the political institution: protests, campaigns, petitions, and strikes. One of the prime examples of this was ACTA, the Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement which was rejected by the European Parliament in July 2012 after a large-scale mobilization of citizens, most notably internet users. Prior to the Parliament voting down the international agreement, policymakers were exposed to “unprecedented direct lobbying by thousands of EU citizens who called on it to reject ACTA, in street demonstrations, e-mails to MEPs and calls to their offices.”²⁴ Part of this direct lobbying was a petition of 2.4 million signatures calling on the MEPs to reject the agreement.²⁵ However, as mass youth mobilization became a normalized feature of European democracies, especially in the case of the climate emergency, policy makers' perceptiveness and responsiveness decreased. The comfort of an established network wins over the disruptive nature of protests which is often difficult to navigate due to its lack of formal structures.

Direct engagement: talking to the citizens

In addition to cooperation with established associations, organizations and movements, political parties and groups engage in participatory schemes for citizens. For instance, similarly to the principles of the Conference on the Future of Europe, political actors organize citizens' tables and

20 Interview with Tomáš Adamec, APA to an MEP of the Greens/EFA, March 7th, 2022.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 Interview with Sylvain Maréchal, Renew Europe, March 7th, 2022.

24 European Parliament, European Parliament Rejects ACTA, July 4th, 2012: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20120703IPR48247/european-parliament-rejects-acta>

25 European Parliament, Parliament To Receive 2.4 Million Petition Signatures Against ACTA, February 17th, 2012, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/eu-affairs/20120223STO39230/parliament-to-receive-2-4-million-petition-signatures-against-acta>

consultations. In the interview conducted with a deputy secretary general of Renew Europe, citizens tables were mentioned as a method of reaching out to voters and starting a dialogue. In the case of Renew Europe, the organisers of the citizens' tables worked with a private company specializing in organizing consultations, providing the party with a representative sample of European citizens who are not extremely remote from the group's political position.²⁶

Political parties and organizations, to an extent, base their activities and communications on their cooperation and relations with their electorate. It is common for political institutions, including at the EU-level, to closely follow the developments of and changes in public opinion which can be observed in the public sphere, the media and in institutional surveys such as Eurobarometer.²⁷ Additionally, parties carry out internal polling and public opinion monitoring. Cooperation with civil society organizations and political movements can offer a valuable insight for political parties who, at times, need to try harder to meet the moment.

We now explore two policy fields related to climate change and the rule of law which have been exposed to pressures of the civil society and interest groups with increasing intensity over the past years. These two relatively highly politicized policy fields provide an insight into how political parties cooperate with interest groups and movements active in salient areas. The dynamics of climate change and policymakers are explored, followed by the cooperation between the two sides on the rule of law.

²⁶ Interview with Sylvain Maréchal, Renew Europe, March 7th, 2022.
²⁷ Olivier Costa and Nathalie Brack. 2019. *How The EU Really Works*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge.

PART II: CLIMATE EMERGENCY DRIVING CITIZENS' MOBILIZATION

The European Parliament elections in 2019 made it clear that climate change represents one of the greatest concerns among the electorate.²⁸ This concern still dominates the agenda, especially among young European voters, who demand action from the political leaders of Europe. The environmental challenges and climate crisis constitute an important pillar of the Conference on the Future of Europe as the EU must maintain environmental protection as a priority and ensure the full implementation of the European Commission's policy proposals, introduced under the European Green Deal. As the EU's growth strategy aims to transform the EU into a modern, climate neutral, and resource-efficient competitive economy.²⁹ What is the response of European policymakers, in the light of the Commission's progressive work? In the case of the European Parliament, the voting behaviour on climate and energy issues reveals that five out of eight of the Parliament's political groups score low, rhetorically supporting the fight against climate change but not voting accordingly, given the urgency required to address climate issues.³⁰ The young people's protests drew more than six million people globally onto the streets before the pandemic hit.³¹ Paradoxically, current events have accelerated the debate on the climate action-related issues, which young people called for during numerous protests and campaigns. With Russia's invasion of Ukraine, discussions on ending the EU's energy dependence have reached a position for which young people have been advocating in recent years. We believe that such sudden paradigm shifts should not exclude young people's voices, but rather should be used as a window of opportunity to include young people's voices. It is crucial to explore the engagement of civil society and evaluate how they attempt to realize this

engagement through the articulation of demands and how it is perceived by the political parties.

Why do stakeholders engage in climate action?

The interest in the environment has increased over the past decades, leading to the proliferation of environment-focused stakeholders, non-governmental organizations, as well as protest movements. By articulating their common objectives they provide new information and bring new perspectives to the policymaking process.³² Stakeholders' contribution is crucial, at different stages of the policy-making process, in the development and formulation of policies. By means of scientific and advocacy expertise, they impact political deliberations, ultimately setting climate action targets. Furthermore, they bring attention to the policy areas which require enhancement or improvement. The added value brought to climate negotiations has been acknowledged by national and EU-level politicians, as well as non-governmental organizations.³³ As such, they generally exert pressure on political parties and politicians through increasing citizens' engagement and articulating concrete objectives in fighting climate change.

Engaging through demand articulation

In climate negotiations, stakeholders engage by articulating their demands both at the national and the European level. The form of engagement with policymakers varies from informal bilateral meetings to formal institutionalized consultations. Internally, some stakeholders articulate their policy positions through consensus-based decision-making, which refers to reaching an agreement on a series of actions to address the issue at hand. Depending on the internal organizational structure, they often formulate policy positions within the secretariat, along with working groups, by reaching a compromise. Organizations with more dynamic

28 European Parliament, "2019 European Elections: Record turnout driven by young people", European Parliament press releases, last modified September 24, 2019, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20190923IPR61602/2019-european-elections-record-turnout-driven-by-young-people>.

29 European Commission, A European Green Deal, accessed on March 7th, 2022: https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal_en.

30 Climate Action Network Europe, "Defenders, Delayers or Dinosaurs: where do EU political groups stand on climate change?", *Climate Action Network Europe*, April 16, 2019, <https://caneurope.org/defenders-delayers-or-dinosaurs-where-do-eu-political-groups-stand-on-climate-change/>

31 Kate Abnett, "World's youth take to the streets again to battle climate change", *Reuters*, September 25 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/business/environment/worlds-youth-returns-streets-fight-climate-change-2021-09-24/>.

32 Chiara Giorgetti, "The Role of Nongovernmental Organizations in the Climate Change Negotiations", 9 *Colo. J. Int'l Envtl. L. & Pol'y* 115, *Richmond School of Law Faculty Publications* (1998).

33 European Commission, "LIFE-funded NGOs' contribution to tackling climate change", *European Commission Executive Agency for Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (EASME)*, Publication Office of the European Union (2018). doi: 10.2826/780516.

structure evaluate their demands accordingly as they find themselves in a more flexible position to reflect the changes in the political landscape. A similar trend is manifested with certain protest movements which have continued to advocate for a core set of goals based on the principle of respecting science, especially over the last years.

There are several ways of formulating policy positions which can be done through a number of steps. First, the issue at stake needs to be identified. Further, what follows is building a common position through internal consultations, among experts and members, involving board members. Subsequently, the advocacy strategy that the organization develops may entail specific activities to raise awareness of the particular cause. When asked about how stakeholders translate demands into the policy arena, the interviewees indicated that this is often done through advocacy. Moreover, interviewees explained that attempts of influencing the policy process often take place through many kinds of activities such as workshops and panel debates for decision-makers. For instance, CliMates, a youth empowerment NGO, relies on two main activities. A simulation of the United Nations COP meeting - called 'COP in my city', as well as a municipal-level simulation dealing with a climate-related crisis situation, called 'HeatWave'.³⁴ Larger organizations, such as Greenpeace, have a specific unit managing advocacy, as well as campaign organizers working to contribute to achieving the organization's goal.³⁵ Despite the politically impartial stances of most NGOs, their work depends on cooperation with political actors. It is therefore essential to explore constructive ways of engagement, particularly the political parties' way of engagement on climate action.

A constructive way to engage: political parties

Civil society organizations engage in political processes, communicating with policymakers and political parties. With the objective to have a

constructive dialogue through open communication channels, stakeholders organize discussions and policy-focused events which serve as a platform for exchanges between policymakers, NGOs and experts. As it is derived from the conducted interviews, the level of engagement tends to vary depending on the size and impact of the organizations, as well as their engagement level whether at the wider or national level.

It has been pointed out in the interviews that smaller organizations might find engaging and finding agreement with political parties at the national level easier than on the European level as bilateral talks with political parties at the national level are usually more accessible. For instance, some of the organization representatives are in close contact with the Committee of Regions to participate in stakeholder consultations on specific legislative texts. This allows them to access a space in the decision-making process to have a say, as was stressed by one of the interviewees.³⁶ On the other hand, for some organizations, the main emphasis is on emphasizing agenda-setting rather than talking to politicians on a superficial level during the later stages. Similar to youth organizations focusing on climate change, organizations putting pressure on the policy cycle are open to supporting the position of political parties, although they tend not to have official relationships with a single party, given that it is not their main 'role' to play.³⁷

Trying to cooperate with political parties

Participation of political parties in climate action is important for two reasons. First party leaders are the key actors in shaping public policies both at national and international level. Secondly, when shaping people's behaviour towards climate mitigation policies, political parties affect their attitudes, alongside stakeholders working on climate action.³⁸ Stakeholders including civil society, informal groups, and non-governmental organizations

³⁴ Interview with Victor de Laleu, CliMates, March 2nd, 2022.
³⁵ Interview with Bram Michielsen, Greenpeace, Fridays for Future, February 28th, 2022.

³⁶ Interview with Victor de Laleu, CliMates, March 2nd, 2022.
³⁷ Interview with Bram Michielsen, Greenpeace, Fridays for Future, February 28th, 2022.
³⁸ Baiba Witajewska Baltvilka, *Political Parties and Climate Change Policy*, (IBS Working Paper, 2018), 5, accessed 23 February 2022, https://ibs.org.pl/app/uploads/2018/09/IBS_Working_Paper_05_2018.pdf

influence policymakers, reorienting governments' priorities, fundings and their agendas through a multitude of actions and channels.³⁹ One of the important elements this study has found is that policymakers' accessibility for small stakeholders depend on how progressive that group or political party is⁴⁰ and that the importance of the cooperation between political parties and stakeholders on climate action is needed to achieve the climate neutrality goal. Especially in the last years, as young generations' leading action on climate change made it more clear.

One of the interviewees stated an example and evaluated it as a positive outcome of the efforts they have made towards raising the climate ambitions. It was in regards to the greenhouse gas emission reduction targets set by the European Commission. It initially aimed at reducing emissions by 40% by 2030. Climate Action Network Europe pushed for the increasing of this target to 65% to have higher ambitions in line with the EU's climate action goal. This eventually led the Commission to agree on the 55% target. This outcome has been evaluated as a step in the right direction by CAN Europe. Another exercise has been ranking MEPs on climate action according to their voting behaviour in the Parliament. The goal was to make it clear for Europeans to see the MEPs who supported stronger climate policies and who competed for re-election.⁴¹ This exercise generated dissatisfaction in some of the policymakers. As a result, politicians who were not satisfied by what the poll revealed took a step back from a positive direction to cooperation with the environmental non-governmental organizations. Another behavior far from an example of good cooperation was described by the activist for Fridays for Future, Bram Michielsen. Pursuant to what the interviewee said, sometimes cooperating with politicians does not go beyond a simple photo-op, a meeting with the objective of getting a picture with young climate-focused people.

Exploring the areas of cooperation by asking stakeholders and protest movement representatives questions on how the meetings with policy-makers are conducted provided a broader understanding of their engagement. What the interviewees stressed was the shift in how meetings are held since the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic has undeniably affected meeting culture. It has been evaluated as "the death of informal meetings" as it became harder to come across people on the spur of the moment at conferences, for instance.⁴² Moreover, the room for personal influence shrunk due to the digital distance created when approaching policymakers. Furthermore, the interviews revealed that formal meetings with policymakers are preferred by both smaller and bigger organizations.⁴³ Smaller organizations see meetings with policymakers as less accessible due to the difficulty for them to stand out amongst larger organizations with more resources. In addition, small organization representatives have a limited capacity to formulate specific recommendations, especially when their cooperation with politicians is in early stages.⁴⁴ Cooperating on climate action with political parties is crucial, and the answer to the question on whether this cooperation tends to turn into a competition between stakeholders and businesses when it comes to business interests is provided in the following section: it's never black or white.

Business interests: never a black and white competition

The business community remains an important part of the green transition towards climate neutrality. Corporate businesses need to adopt a climate policy agenda which is science-based and in line with the zero emission goal in 2050.⁴⁵ Businesses should work in line with the goal of zero emissions strategy by aligning their climate policy advocacy of trade associations.⁴⁶ An ambitious coalition

39 'The Stakeholders of Climate Change', *Plan A Academy*, 2019, accessed 23 February 2022, <https://plana.earth/academy/the-stakeholders-of-climate-change/>
40 Interview with Tom Boyle, CAN Europe, February 23rd, 2022. Interview with Nathan Méténier, Youth and Environment Europe, March 2nd, 2022.
41 'Ranking European Parliamentarians on Climate Action', *Climate Action Network Europe*, 2014, accessed 23 February 2022, <https://caneurope.org/content/uploads/2014/04/CAN-ranking-all.pdf>

42 Interview with Nathan Méténier, Youth and Environment Europe, March 2nd, 2022.

43 Interview with Tom Boyle, CAN Europe, February 23rd, 2022; Interview with Victor de Laleu, CliMates, March 2nd, 2022.

44 Interview with Lucas Świągot, CliMates, February 28th, 2022.

45 "Release: Major environmental groups call on businesses to lead on climate policy", press release, October 15, 2019, <https://www.wri.org/news/release-major-environmental-groups-call-businesses-lead-climate-policy>

46 *ibid.*

between environmental stakeholders and corporate businesses is not impossible.

Therefore, the relations between civil society and business interests in the area of climate action could be described as never black and white. The cooperation of the two sides is necessary as the transition requires support from a broad coalition. Though competition between the two perspectives is ongoing in many cases, the idea of how to carry out the transition differs. It would not be wrong to say that the competition between civil society and business interests is always ongoing, as a coalition is needed for reaching a common goal of climate neutrality. The competition dynamics are never black and white.

Civil society organizations focusing on climate protection, when compared to business interest representation, do not enjoy as strong presence and resources. However, in several cases, the cooperation between trade unions and civil society representatives resulted in positive outcomes. For businesses, it is easier to access policymakers; on the other hand, there are also policymakers who favour cooperating with climate action organizations. As much as business interests constitute an important aspect of climate action, it can be said that the most crucial force in this area is public support. Hence, we further evaluate how public support has been considered at the core of this process.

A complementary force to a healthy democracy: public support

Because climate-focused organizations like Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace, and WWF have significantly prominent public profiles,⁴⁷ the important thing to understand here is that most of the direct engagement with citizens at the national level is done by their member organizations. CAN Europe, based in Brussels, does not have much direct interaction in terms of organizing what goes on with European citizens, for instance.⁴⁸ It has

been observed by the organizations that the value of network strategy for influencing politics is in gathering public support and strengthening civil society in order to wheel greater power and more influence on politics, politicians, and eventually on policy.

Civil society is a complementary force to a healthy democracy. Some smaller organizations such as CliMates, could not exist without public support even though this support is more visible on the French level than on the international level for them, Victor de Laleu states. They consider themselves as the voice of the young people and a source of intimacy between the public and decision-makers.⁴⁹ This link between politicians and civil society is legitimized by civil society. Organizations such as Greenpeace can bring people on the streets, and more recently they also collaborate with anti-racism and anti-poverty movements to strengthen their links with civil society at all levels. This is all the case with Fridays for Future, who are the civil society formation working together with other movements. The general aim is to bring those movements together because, in the end, they are fighting against the same system and to change it, it is crucial to follow each other's progress and learn from one another, with the support of civil society.

47 Interview with Tom Boyle, CAN Europe, February 23rd, 2022.
48 Ibid.

49 Interview with Victor de Laleu, CliMates, March 2nd, 2022.

PART III: DEMOCRACY PROTECTION IN CITIZENS' HANDS

Introduction

A political concern that has spurred tension in recent years, particularly among young Europeans, is the rule of law. As enshrined in Article 2 of the Treaty on the European Union, “the Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities.”⁵⁰ The rule of law thereby constitutes one of the cornerstones of the Union. However, within the last decades, the rule of law has been challenged in various EU Member States, manifested e.g. by the restriction of judicial independence, freedom of the press, LGBTQ+ rights, and even basic human rights.⁵¹ The rule of law violations are becoming increasingly prevalent in Europe, and they do not only affect the citizens of the Member States in question; in fact, they pose a threat to democracy of the EU as a whole. While the EU has appeared institutionally ill-equipped to efficiently tackle this, thousands of people have taken to the streets across Europe to call out national governments and to attract attention from EU-level politicians. Despite awareness at the EU level about the serious rule of law violations in some Member States, EU action has so far been rather ineffective.⁵² Recent political developments, such as the Hungarian April 2022 elections securing Prime Minister Viktor Orbán another term, emphasize that Europe’s rule of law issues are persistent and must be effectively addressed by EU policymakers. As such, it is uplifting to see that the EU now will apply its new rule of law mechanism to cut EU funding to Hungary.⁵³ This also shows why civil society

continues to play an important role in safeguarding democracy by pressuring policy-makers to clamp down on EU Member States that systematically fail to comply with European rules.

This section therefore elaborates how civil society movements and organizations draw political attention to the rule of law issues in the EU, how these articulate their demands for political action, and finally how political parties at the EU level adopt and integrate these stances, when pursuing politics in the EU.

Striking the Right Balance between Formal and Informal

A starting point for this study was discussions about the EU’s Conference on the Future of Europe, initiated to enhance civil society engagement in formulating EU priorities, also regarding upcoming reforms and policies, e.g. through European Citizens Panels.⁵⁴

Therefore, we found it interesting that a recurring response throughout the interviews conducted with organizations working on the rule of law, was that they actually perceived the existing formal and informal instruments and procedures as quite efficient when addressing policymakers and influencing policy. As mentioned by an interviewee, using a mix of the different procedures that are available is key.⁵⁵ That said, none of the existing procedures were perceived as perfect, and the interviewees therefore stressed the need for improvement, to which we will return later. However, what the interviewees put emphasis on was that context is vital when deciding on means of advocacy.

Formal structures of advocacy

According to Laurens Hueting, Senior Advocacy Officer at the European Centre for Press and Media

50 Article 2, Treaty on the European Union.

51 Marlene Wind, *The Tribalization of Europe: A Defense of Our Liberal Values*, (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2020); Attila Ágh, “De-Europeanization and De-Democratization Trends in Ece: From the Potemkin Democracy to the Elected Autocracy in Hungary”, *Journal of Comparative Politics* 8, no. 2 (2015); Ivan Krastev, “The Strange Death of the Liberal Consensus”, *Journal of Democracy* 18, no. 4 (2007); L. Pech, and K.L. Scheppele, “Illiberalism Within: Rule of Law Backsliding in the EU”, *Cambridge Yearbook of European Legal Studies* 19 (2017): 3–47. <https://doi.org/10.1017/cel.2017.9>; Antoaneta L. Dimitrova, “The New Member States of the EU in the Aftermath of Enlargement: Do New European Rules Remain Empty Shells?”, *Journal of European Public Policy* 17, no. 1 (2010): 137–48. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501760903464929>; R. Daniel Kelemen, “Europe’s Other Democratic Deficit: National Authoritarianism in Europe’s Democratic Union”, *Governance and Opposition* 52, no. 2 (2017): 211–38. <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2016.41>.

52 Venetia Argyropoulou, “Enforcing the Rule of Law in the European Union, Quo Vadis?”, *Harvard Human Rights Journal*, November 2, 2019, <https://harvardhrj.com/2019/11/enforcing-the-rule-of-law-in-the-european-union-quo-vadis-eu/>.

53 Lili Bayer, “EU launches process to slash Hungary’s funds over rule-of-law breaches”, *Politico*, April 5, 2022, [https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-commission-to-trig-](https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-commission-to-trig-ger-rule-of-law-budget-tool-against-hungary/)

[ger-rule-of-law-budget-tool-against-hungary/](https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-commission-to-trig-ger-rule-of-law-budget-tool-against-hungary/).

54 The European Union, the Conference on the Future of Europe, accessed on March 13, 2022, <https://futureu.europa.eu/?locale=en>.

55 Interview with Laurens Hueting, European Centre for Press and Media Freedom, February 21st, 2022.

Freedom (ECPMF), official structured consultation processes, facilitated by the European Commission, can be a useful tool for civil society interest groups, when there is already a policy proposal on the table or when a consultation process is organized due to legal requirements, because it forces policymakers to give a role to civil society.⁵⁶

However, as was pointed out by Paweł Marczewski from the Stefan Batory Foundation, “the EU and the European Commission are not doing enough [...] to make the civil voices heard in the sense that they are predominantly focused on umbrella organizations, [which are] not always as efficient or as vocal as they should and could be.”⁵⁷ He further linked this to the notion that with the Conference on the Future of Europe, and other more local initiatives and conferences, this issue might be slowly changing, because voices ‘on the ground’ and of grassroots movements now to a larger extent get the chance to be heard.⁵⁸ Additionally, the aspect of EU-level issues vs. domestic level issues were also emphasized. Even if the Conference enhances inclusion of smaller, domestic organizations and grassroots movements, the EU could, and should, still do more to initiate dialogue with organizations working in the Member States, rather than focussing its efforts on umbrella organizations limited to the EU bubble in Brussels that find themselves in a position to potentially filter certain messages coming from domestic level members of such organizations.⁵⁹ When engaging with stakeholders, it is thus important to differ between national interest groups and the so-called Eurogroups due to their different interests and strategies when representing those interests.⁶⁰

This aspect was also touched upon by Laurens Huetting from the ECPMF, who, however, had an opposing view. He argued that “[...] the big advantage of the public consultation is that the selection of the interlocutors is not up to the

politicians. [...] It is not because you are already well-established, or because you find yourself in the same political camp [...], as the one who is doing the consulting that you get asked.”⁶¹ Despite perhaps seeming a bit conflicting, there is truth to both. Within the EU’s political system, it is possible to call for either targeted consultations, in which organizations or actors deemed relevant for the given policy are invited to provide their opinion, or call for public consultations, in which every interested citizen, organization or other actors can submit their opinion.⁶²

Returning to the division between EU-level and domestic level advocacy, Paweł Marczewski (Stefan Batory Foundation) similarly pointed towards the advantages of the public consultation processes, when discussing advocacy strategies at the national level. He argued that one of the primary tasks of the civil sector is to make the policy processes as public and open as possible. Yet, within certain national political systems, it can be difficult for civil society actors to make policymakers embrace the policy demands of civil society organizations - even if these policymakers are pro-European - due to the uncertain electoral impact, among other things. However, the public consultations are needed to ensure transparency and openness, and to make political issues, whether domestic or EU-level issues, more accessible to the public.⁶³ Marczewski further highlighted an example from Poland regarding discussions on the European Recovery Fund - a grant and loan facility created by the EU following the Covid-19 pandemic.⁶⁴ As part of the framework of the Fund, the Member States had to submit their national recovery and resilience plans on how to facilitate reforms and investments to boost the economy. These plans were then to be approved by the Commission in order for the Member States to

56 Ibid.
57 Interview with Paweł Marczewski, Stefan Batory Foundation, February 7th, 2022.
58 Ibid.
59 Interview with Paweł Marczewski, Stefan Batory Foundation, February 7th, 2022.
60 Rainer Eising, “Interest Groups and the European Union”, in *European Union Politics*, ed. Michelle Cini and Nieves Pérez-Solórzano Borragán (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2019), 209.

61 Interview with Laurens Huetting, European Centre for Press and Media Freedom, February 21st, 2022.
62 European Commission, Consultations, accessed on March 14, 2022, https://ec.europa.eu/info/about-european-commission/service-standards-and-principles/transparency/consultations_en.
63 Interview with Paweł Marczewski, Stefan Batory Foundation, February 7th, 2022.
64 European Council and the Council of the European Union, Infographic - Recovery fund: the EU delivers, accessed on March 14, 2022, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/infographics/recovery-fund-eu-delivers/>.

receive the disbursement.⁶⁵ What Marczewski noted is, however, that the incumbent Polish government was unwilling to meet with not only the civil sector, but also with local authorities. This resistance from the national government resulted in a strong alliance between the excluded actors, who eventually succeeded in pushing for the organization of multiple rounds of open public consultations, which were also broadcasted, ensuring accessibility to everyone.⁶⁶ The interviewee further added that even if the civil society organization did not necessarily succeed in incorporating all their demands in the final plan submitted to the European Commission, the political process had still become more open.⁶⁷

One can thereby argue that despite civil society organizations experiencing some restraints when attempting to influence policy-makers, the formal advocacy structures generally serve as a great point of entry to policy-makers, as they allow a large variety of civil society organizations to make themselves heard. However, as the formal advocacy structures predominantly function as one-way relationships, they are characterized by an imbalance of power. Regardless of the efforts civil society organizations put into their advocacy strategies, their impact on the policy process is not guaranteed. It all comes down to the political willingness of the policy-makers and whether they decide to pursue a policy outcome that is consistent with organizations' demands.

Informal structures of advocacy

Despite some room for improvement, there appears to be general support towards, and positive takeaways from, the formal means of advocacy. However, as Laurens Hueting (ECPMF) argued, the formal and more structured meetings and consultations entail the "risk of being a box-ticking exercise"⁶⁸ indicating why such types of advocacy must be complemented by informal meetings and relationships with politicians, facilitated e.g. through

bilateral meetings, by inviting politicians to webinars, interviews, conferences etc. Neither the formal or informal advocacy structures can stand alone.⁶⁹

However, informal meetings may be lacking transparency. As Jiří-Jakub Zévl, spokesman of the Czech organization Million Moments for Democracy, noted, some national governments may try to use informal meetings to 'brush aside' civil society organizations that might be critical towards the government and its actions. Zévl explained how his organization faced many obstacles and rejections when trying to organize public meetings with the former Czech government led by Andrej Babiš. The Babiš-government never wanted to engage in public dialogues, but eventually invited the Million Moments for Democracy organization to an informal meeting behind closed doors.⁷⁰ According to Zévl, this was problematic as the dialogue that the organization wanted to pursue would focus on the policy demands of society. Thereby, such dialogue was perceived to be in the interest of society as a whole. Moreover, since the organization did not have legal power to actually negotiate with the government, they did not perceive it as sensible to attend non-public meetings with government officials. As such, it would only make sense to them to have a public meeting with media exposure, holding the government accountable for its political views. The then prime minister refused to participate in such a meeting and cut all contact with the organization afterwards.⁷¹

This relates to what was argued in the previous section on formal advocacy structures, namely that even if informal advocacy is needed to ensure greater engagement of civil society sectors, these advocacy structures are highly context-dependent. In the EU political landscape, lobbying and interactions between politicians and civil society organizations are much more prevalent than in some Member States.⁷² Even if one might have 'the perfect formula' for how to improve civil society

65 Ibid.
66 Interview with Paweł Marczewski, Stefan Batory Foundation, February 7th, 2022.
67 Ibid.
68 Interview with Laurens Hueting, European Centre for Press and Media Freedom, February 21st, 2022.

69 Ibid.
70 Interview with Jiří-Jakub Zévl, Million Moments for Democracy, February 10th, 2022.
71 Ibid.
72 Eising, *Interest Groups and the European Union*, 203.

involvement in policy-making processes, there may still be different national political traditions and contextual obstacles preventing actors from obtaining the desired influence, or involvement in general. We can also argue that this in particular applies to Member States in which society and public debate is highly polarised, for instance as in Poland. Ekiert argues that civil society in Poland is organised in a pillar structure, in which the “presence of vertically segmented civil society enables extreme cultural and political polarization [facilitating] mobilization of far-right, nationalist and conservative religious movements.”⁷³ We may thereby presuppose that policy-makers, particularly in polarised societies, might be playing it safe by engaging with civil society groups and organizations sharing similar views as themselves, however more or less deliberately excluding those groups of civil society that are opposed to the political line pursued by the incumbent government. Even if governments on paper can be said to involve civil society in the policy-making processes, (national) contextual aspects and the willingness, or lack thereof, by policy-makers to engage with certain civil society groups might trip up the likelihood of fully representative civil society involvement.

Nonetheless, pursuing more informal types of advocacy can contribute to overcoming some of the restraints of the formal structures of advocacy, as the informal relationships, once established, typically allow for a more two-way discussion in which policy demands can be debated at eye level, rather than merely being presented through a consultative feedback process or hearing. The informal meetings between civil society organizations and policy-makers thereby foster a more personal environment for discussion in which civil society actors are able to elaborate on their views, get immediate responses from policy-makers etc. Although the final political strategies of policy-makers still depend on willingness to pursue a policy in a certain way, informal meetings allow more room for persuasion by civil society organizations. Moreover, we should

also not underestimate the power of civil society as a resource for policy-makers. If actively engaging with civil society and effectively incorporating the policy demands of civil society groups and organizations, policy-makers, whether operating domestically or at the EU level, might facilitate an important support system in the future, as these different political actors by means of engaging in a network of policy-making will be able to benefit from each other’s resources and thus have greater incentives to cooperate in the future.⁷⁴

Overall, we can thereby argue that the combination of both formal and informal advocacy by civil society organizations is of key importance: the formal procedures facilitate a vital entry-point for organizations, including those that might otherwise struggle to get policy-makers’ attention; whereas, informal advocacy structures are needed to establish a more equal political debate, which can increase the potential of civil society organizations to persuade policy-makers to integrate policy requests. However, this perceived ideal combination approach might be easier said than done, as the battle for policy-makers’ attention is highly competitive. Moreover, the generally positive perceptions of traditional advocacy structures presented here are solely rooted in the interviewees’ experiences. We can thus argue that although the traditional formal and informal means of advocacy work relatively well for these established organizations, the same advocacy structures might not work, or even be accessible, for young and less mobilized people who take to the streets to demand political change. The EU should therefore consider how to make common citizens, including the younger generation, be heard.

The Competitive Lobbying Landscape of Brussels

A crucial point, when attempting to influence the political agenda and to attract policy-makers’ attention, is to have access to politicians and to ensure speaking time. However, due to an extensive number of interest groups, including civil society and business interests groups, the EU lobbying

73 Grzegorz Ekiert, “Civil society as a threat to democracy: Organizational bases of the populist counterrevolution in Poland,” *CES Open Forum Series* (Working paper) (2020): 1.

74 Hugh Compston, *Policy Networks and Policy Change* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 11.

landscape is highly competitive.⁷⁵

Laurens Hueting (ECPMF) recognized the competition with business interests, and explained that a major disadvantage is the difference in financial resources, which allows industry groups to invest much more in their lobbying strategies, than what would be possible for the organization Hueting represents, even if it pooled its budgetary resources with many other press freedom organizations active in Europe.⁷⁶ He further added that these financial differences also come to expression through the amount of outputs an organization can produce, as public and private advocacy campaigns are both costly and time-consuming.⁷⁷

Another interviewee, Paweł Marczewski (Stefan Batory Foundation), presented a somewhat different view on this issue. While acknowledging that there are, at times, competing interests in the EU political landscape, for instance regarding the European Green Deal, where civil society and businesses compete, the situation is different regarding rule of law issues.⁷⁸ Drawing on the Polish national context, which is the primary country of operation for the organization he represents, Marczewski exemplified that since the rule of law is important for investors in Poland, the business sectors are generally on board with the policy requests put forward by organizations like the Stefan Batory Foundation.⁷⁹ This notion corresponds to what Kelemen presented in a study from 2020, namely that flows of foreign direct investments tend to increase, the more stable and democratic a country becomes.⁸⁰

Regardless, civil society organizations and movements rely on the accessibility of policymakers when wanting to address their policy demands. As addressed previously, this accessibility might be influenced by the policy field in question, policymakers' openness towards meeting with

stakeholders, as well as general points of entry, such as whether one has access to the relevant contact information etc.⁸¹

Moreover, accessibility also depends on current political situations. As Paweł Marczewski (Stefan Batory Foundation) noted, the accessibility of policymakers fluctuates depending on the given context, and organizations do also not necessarily have a list of politicians whom they know will always be responsive. In the case of the Stefan Batory Foundation, they try to keep as many channels open and discuss with as many people as possible. Organizations should thereby look for windows of opportunity and seize them, whenever they appear.⁸² Yet, this may again be easier to figure out for more established civil society organizations, working with advocacy daily, in contrast with the more spontaneous movements that tend to arise among young people in particular as a response to a given political development. As these movements employ e.g. means of protests, rather than traditional means of advocacy, they might struggle obtaining a direct link of influence to politicians.

Sharing Best Practices

This section combines the aspects and approaches presented in the previous sections. What recurs when drawing on these different discussions of advocacy is the need to articulate and share best practices.

For instance, Laurens Hueting (ECPMF), explained how his organization has had productive contact with both the current and former rapporteur of the European Parliament's Delegation to the EU-Turkey Joint Parliamentary Committee.⁸³ Members of the Committee have participated in regular meetings organized by civil society groups, and have agreed to receive regular updates from these. This informal relationship has not only provided direct access to the politicians, but has also allowed the civil

75 Ibid., 209.

76 Interview with Laurens Hueting, European Centre for Press and Media Freedom, February 21st, 2022.

77 Ibid.

78 Interview with Paweł Marczewski, Stefan Batory Foundation, February 7th, 2022.

79 Ibid.

80 R. Daniel Kelemen, "The European Union's authoritarian equilibrium", *Journal of European Public Policy* 27, no. 3 (2020), 485.

81 Interview with Jiří-Jakub Zévl, Million Moments for Democracy, February 10th, 2022.

82 Interview with Paweł Marczewski, Stefan Batory Foundation, February 7th, 2022.

83 Interview with Laurens Hueting, European Centre for Press and Media Freedom, February 21st, 2022.

society organizations to set the agenda for these meetings and steer the discussions. Moreover, the outcome so far has been positive as the politicians in question have come prepared, and have been receptive and ready to actually integrate specific elements into their work.⁸⁴ Now this best practice example draws on informal relationships with MEPs, however, the interviewee acknowledged that such type of relationship would be much more difficult to establish with officials from the Commission or the Council, e.g. because it would involve formal institution-building, in which organizations collaborating with the relevant institutions would have to take into account a large variety of formal considerations.⁸⁵

That said, an increased focus on sharing best practices, e.g. regarding accessibility to policymakers, could also help smaller and more domestically-oriented civil society groups, including less mobilized groups, to get a foothold at the EU-level. As Jiří-Jakub Zévl (Million Moments for Democracy) explained, he would like their organization to be more involved at EU-level, but they have not figured a way to do so yet.⁸⁶ This similarly relates to the general notion that large parts of civil society might not be very familiar with the EU and might find its policy structures complex and opaque. As such, we cannot expect civil society to engage actively in the EU political debate, if they do not feel confident in how the EU's institutional procedures work, or if they do not see the potential added value of action on the EU-level. In its efforts to enhance civil society engagement in the public debate, the EU should therefore address the general need to raise awareness among the European citizens about the European project and strengthen the collective European identity.

Finally, when discussing whether the Conference on the Future of Europe serves as an efficient platform to address the requests of European civil society and to improve the involvement of civil society in the EU's policymaking processes, the response was mixed. Laurens Hueting (ECPMF) argued that

although the Conference might be unable to bring about similar positive results as those experienced through the combination and best practices of traditional formal and informal structures, there is still value in how open and public the Conference is, and a certain value in its ceremonial aspect.⁸⁷ Sometimes, it may be more impactful to have informal meetings behind closed doors, both for the sake of the civil society groups but also for the sake of the politicians. Both sides may be able to speak more freely and with more nuance, without being 'taken hostage' by statements that one might have previously given in public.⁸⁸ Such situations can lead to politicians or representatives of civil society groups being "accused of being unreliable [or] flip-flopping" their standpoints.⁸⁹ Bearing this in mind, it is therefore also important that we do not get too dazzled by the democratic exercise of the Conference itself, but rather see it as a first step in a number of new European policy initiatives backed by the European citizens. As such, civil society must continue to put pressure on the EU policy-makers and push for action regarding the requests and reforms discussed during the Conference. Increasing involvement and influence of civil society groups in the EU's policymaking processes thereby comes down to the need of combining the best practices rooted in the different formal and informal advocacy methods and enhancing the use of these practices to have productive and inclusive political discussions. And then the EU to a much greater extent needs to consider innovative ways of effectively engaging less established and mobilized groups of society, including in particular the young generations, to ensure a more nuanced and representative public debate.

84 Ibid.
85 Ibid.
86 Interview with Jiří-Jakub Zévl, Million Moments for Democracy, February 10th, 2022.

87 Interview with Laurens Hueting, European Centre for Press and Media Freedom, February 21st, 2022.
88 Ibid.
89 Ibid.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The following section sets out policy recommendations based on the findings of the research. Here, we provide concrete suggestions as to how the EU should improve its engagement with civil society and ensure a balanced legislative output.

1 Ensure availability of all policymakers, regardless of their administrative capabilities.

Accessibility and availability of policy makers are prerequisites of constructive cooperation and widening engagement with the public. It has been highlighted in our research that it is important to engage with policymakers at all levels, regardless of the extent of their influence, in order to provide a better policymaking process. Political actors face different limitations during policymaking processes based on their administrative capabilities. This can be due to the size of a political group, different levels of expert teams etc. Such differences could be reduced by an institutional single-access-point platform suggested in recommendation 7, serving all external input providers as well as policymakers.

2 Provide incentives for establishing long-term cooperation with civil society representatives.

Whilst institutions like the European Commission often engage in public and targeted consultations when drafting a legislative proposal, public engagement should be ensured at all stages of the legislative process where external input can shape the final outcome. Greater emphasis should be therefore put on supporting policymakers in the European Parliament to ensure that political work is rooted in a dialogue with civil society groups and movement representatives. In this regard, the EU-level politicians should focus their efforts to a greater extent on sharing best practices based on informal relationships with civil society organizations, as long-term relations establish credibility, nurture mutual trust and facilitate long-term constructive dialogues. The objective should be a permanently high level of public engagement at all relevant steps of the

policymaking process, gathering input from a diverse set of stakeholders and civil society groups. This would increase the EU's democratic credibility as well as the quality of its legislative outputs.

3 Generate a strong political response to the outcomes and suggestions of the Conference on the Future of Europe.

Our research has shown that engagement levels of civil society representatives and interest groups depend on the perceived success of their efforts. Political responsiveness leading towards the achievement of their objectives further increases engagement levels. It is therefore crucial for European policymakers to live up to the expectations of the Conference and take its recommendations into account with enough commitment so that credibility of the EU's relationship with civil society is enhanced for the Union of the future.

4 Establish permanent consultative bodies in the European Union institutions to build on the work of the Conference on the Future of Europe.

To avoid the Conference on the Future of Europe being a one-time democratic box-ticking exercise, the EU should draw on its experiences from the Conference on the Future of Europe to establish permanent consultative bodies. These should consist of alternating civil society interest groups and European citizens with the aim of ensuring long-term effects of extensively enhancing the civil society engagement in the EU's policy-making processes.

5 Ensure greater diversity of civil society representatives, when selecting stakeholders for consultations.

Although there already exist official consultative procedures that are open to the public, the EU should enhance its efforts in ensuring a more diverse representation of civil society, when performing hearings, targeted consultations. This study found that often the EU tends to rely on

EU-level, as well as umbrella organizations, when including civil society in its policy-making processes, thereby risking excluding potentially relevant stakeholders. Focused endeavours to increase and diversify civil society representation should therefore consider domestic and local actors, as the interests of these risk being marginalized.

6 Protecting and strengthening the civil society space in the EU

In order to ensure greater involvement of civil society in the EU's policy-making process, the EU should generally enhance its efforts to protect the space for civil society in the EU by defending the freedom and right of association, assembly and expression, which to a greater extent has been challenged and restricted in some EU Member States, most recently with the COVID-19 pandemic as a pretext. To protect and uphold its democratic values, the EU should consider providing civil society with a pan-European legal status, contributing to the protection, defending, and strengthening of the independence and impartiality of European civil society.

7 A holistic approach through a one-access-point platform

Whilst the diversity of possible access points to the policymaking process can enhance the chances of established interest groups to influence policy outcomes, the EU should increase the accessibility of its policymaking to less influential and less Brussels-centered groups.

Building on the online platform of the Conference on the Future of Europe, European institutions should create an online platform facilitating access for stakeholders, input providers, civil society and interest groups, and citizens. This platform should be interinstitutional, serving as a one-access-point to view and shape ongoing policymaking processes. One example of this would be to provide a clear overview of current policy proposals making it easier for the general European citizen to provide direct input. Such a platform would boost stakeholders' capabilities and willingness to engage and would

represent an arena of all relevant stakeholders and groups as well as policymakers participating on a given legislative file.

CONCLUSION

This research paper examined the responsiveness of policymakers in the European Union to protest movements and civil society representatives through a qualitative study, focusing on how political parties, and policymakers more generally, incorporate the demands of civil society when developing policies. The study addressed the means used by policymakers to engage civil society in the policymaking processes, as well as the different advocacy strategies adopted by civil society groups to ensure involvement in those policy processes. Based on the findings of this study, we were then able to present concrete policy recommendations as to how the EU should improve and enhance its engagement with civil society, most importantly, but not exclusively, with young people, as a way of strengthening its democratic practices.

To gather input from both sides – policymakers and interest groups – we conducted interviews with representatives of NGOs, protest movements, and civil society groups as well as policymakers and political institutions. In the interviews, we explored the motivations for cooperation between the civil society and political actors, the patterns of cooperation and their strengths and flaws. Whilst public engagement is crucial for any policy area, our focus has been on climate and rule of law developments. These two highly salient and politicized issues provided this research with an insight into the dynamics of cooperation between interest groups and policymakers. However, we cannot claim that the perspective provided by this research is universal and applicable to every policy area in the EU. The goal of this paper is to highlight the public engagement in the climate and rule of law areas given the importance of these two policy fields for young people.

Analytical findings

Democratic political systems rely on input from the citizens; a more participatory democracy considers such input more often than once per election cycle. This is recognised by the EU and its political actors who engage with external input providers by various means. In the conducted interviews, political

actors acknowledged the role of **civil society and movements as key in achieving a balanced legislation which reflects multiple perspectives**. They stressed the importance of building a network comprising interest groups, experts and civil society representatives who enhance the policymakers' influence on legislative outcomes. The **cooperation between civil society groups and movements and policymakers is a two-way street, providing benefits to both**: increased visibility, additional logistical and information support and increased potential to shape policies.

Civil society support is a complementary force to a healthy democracy, especially in the case of climate action, where demands are translated into the policy area through democratic exercises. This study has found that stakeholders' functioning depends on their cooperation with political actors through advocacy. It has also highlighted that smaller organizations find cooperation at the national level easier to achieve, whereas, **accessing policymakers at the EU-level appears more difficult** as organizations perceive their voices to be excluded or lost among many competing interest representatives. This touches upon **the perceived lack of diversity** when cooperating with stakeholders from the policymakers' side. Regardless of their impact, most of the organizations interviewed for this study tend to operate in a competitive environment with business interests when it comes to attracting policymakers' attention. Constructive cooperation between policymakers, stakeholders and civil society can be enhanced by increased accessibility and diversity of input providers. It became clear that the current methods of engagement favour established, EU-level organizations when aggregating external input. Dynamic and newly emerged interest groups, such as protest movements advocating for ambitious climate policies, encounter difficulties in translating their demands to the policymaking environment. Mobilized young citizens voice their concerns in great numbers only to see their demands have limited impact on the policymaking process.

For civil society groups advocating for political issues

related to the rule of law, and seeking to include policy requests into final political outcomes, this study found the means of advocacy to be highly context dependent. As such, formal structures of advocacy, such as official consultations procedures, can be a useful tool, as it allows a variety of civil society actors to make themselves heard. With limited time and capacity, the EU institutions, however, show a tendency of preferentially inviting Eurogroups or umbrella organisation, thus risking the exclusion of smaller or domestic level groups that might have somewhat differing perspectives to bring to the table. What was also noted is that **neither formal or informal advocacy strategies can stand alone, and these therefore need to go hand in hand.** In this regard, accessibility to policymakers is vital. Yet, the level of accessibility is constantly fluctuating and may be influenced by competing business interests, or general changes in the political landscape, arguing that civil society interest groups must strike while the iron is hot, if wanting to get their message across. Finally, **to improve and enhance civil society engagement in the EU's political processes, EU-level policymaking actors, whether being politicians or interest groups, should do more to share best practices**, e.g. of informal relationships. This would contribute to the facilitation of long-term constructive dialogues based on credibility and trust, with a mutual aim of ensuring quality policy outcomes.

Summary of recommendations

Finally, this report offered a set of seven recommendations, which share **three main features that the EU's approach to civil society should consider: accessibility, diversity, and sustainability.** The commitment and capabilities of policymakers to lead a constructive dialogue with civil society and movement groups varies; therefore, a horizontal effort needs to be made to increase the overall accessibility of European policymakers for less Brussels-established groups. Increased accessibility is inherently linked to a greater diversity of groups contributing to the policymaking process as our research revealed that **policymakers**

often rely on EU-level, including umbrella, organizations which might not be representative of particular national, sectoral or societal contexts whose representation is absent at the EU-level. Lastly, sustainability should represent a crucial feature of the EU's engagement with civil society and movement representatives. European policymakers should honour the outcomes of the Conference on the Future of Europe by showing serious political commitment to achieving the final propositions. Building up on the Conference, and going beyond, we recommend establishing a permanent platform for external input providers to follow and shape the policymaking process, across the institutional landscape of the EU, reducing the gap between policymakers and civil society. However, it needs to be noted that it does not suffice to keep the conventional frameworks as they are without a substantial change to accommodate the needs of young citizens. Young people's voice must not be excluded from the debate on either climate policy, nor rule of law issues, as both will significantly impact their future lives in the EU.

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INTERVIEWS

Tomáš Adamec, Accredited Parliamentary Assistant to Marcel Kolaja, a Member and Questor of the EP for the Greens/EFA, interviewed by Pavel Dostálík, March 7th, 2022, audio video.

Tom Boyle, Head of Network Development, Climate Action Network Europe, interviewed by Suzan Naz Uzel, February 23rd, 2022, audio video.

Victor de Laleu, Secretary General, CliMates, interviewed by Suzan Naz Uzel, March 2nd, 2022, audio video.

Laurens Hueting, Senior Advocacy Officer, European Centre for Press and Media Freedom, interviewed by Cecilie Juel Larsen, February 21st, 2022, audio video.

Paweł Marczewski, Head of Citizens Research Unit at ideaForum, Stefan Batory Foundation, interviewed by Cecilie Juel Larsen, February 7th, 2022, audio video.

Sylvain Maréchal, Deputy Secretary General, Renew Europe, interviewed by Pavel Dostálík, March 7th, 2022, audio video.

Nathan Méténier, Climate Justice Advocate / United Nations Climate Advisor, interviewed by Suzan Naz Uzel, March 2nd, 2022, audio video.

Bram Michielsen, Activist / Organiser, Greenpeace, Fridays for Future, interviewed by Suzan Naz Uzel, February 28th, 2022, audio video.

Lucas Swiegot, Project Manager, CliMates, interviewed by Suzan Naz Uzel, February 28th, 2022, audio video.

Jiří-Jakub Zévl, Vice-President and spokesman of Million Moments for Democracy, interviewed by Cecilie Juel Larsen, February 10th, 2022, audio video.

ANNEX 1: METHODOLOGY

This study is rooted in the qualitative research strategy, as its methodological approach is based on semi-structured interviews, as well as knowledge obtained from secondary data, such as existing academic literature, news articles etc.

With the aim of addressing whether and how political parties, and policymakers in general, should improve the way they engage with civil society organizations and consider the policy demands of these organizations, we have conducted our research through three parallel streams: the party political stream; the climate action stream; and finally, the rule of law stream. As we have identified climate action and the rule of law to be some of the most important political issues amongst our generation⁹⁰, we have selected these two topics as cases in order to examine the engagement between the party political level and the civil society organizations that work with these specific policy issues. The objective is thereby to shed light on the relationship between these actors with regard to policy advocacy and policy formulation.

We have conducted 10 interviews in total, covering all the three streams of our research. As such, within the party political stream of this study, we have completed interviews with the Renew Europe Deputy Secretary General, Sylvain Marechal, and Tomáš Adamec, who is an Accredited Parliamentary Assistant to Member and Quaestor of the European Parliament, Marcel Kolaja (Greens/EFA, Czech Pirate party).

Within the climate action stream, we have held interviews with Nathan Méténier, who is Advocacy and Partnership Manager at Youth and Environment, as well as Youth Advisor on Climate Change to the United Nations Secretary General, António Guterres; Tom Boyle, Head of Network Development at Climate Action Network Europe (CAN Europe); Bram Michielsen, activist and event organizer of Greenpeace and Fridays for Future; Lucas Swiegot, Project Manager at CliMates and Victor de Laleu, Secretary General at CliMates.

⁹⁰ European Parliament, "2019 European Elections: Record turnout driven by young people", European Parliament press releases, last modified September 24, 2019, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20190923IPR61602/2019-european-elections-record-turnout-driven-by-young-people>.

Finally, within the rule of law stream of this study, we have conducted interviews with several organizations, involved in different topics falling under the rule of law framework. More specifically, we have had interviews with Paweł Marczewski, Head of Citizens Research Unit at the IdeaForum Programme within the Polish NGO, the Stefan Batory Foundation; Jiří-Jakub Zévl, Vice-President and spokesman of the Czech NGO, Million Moments for Democracy; and lastly, Laurens Huetting, Senior Advocacy Officer in the organization European Centre for Press and Media Freedom (ECPMF).

After having conducted the interviews, the responses were categorized by themes, and thereby constitutes the basis for our policy recommendations and conclusions. Certain recommendations were suggested specifically by the interviewees.

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