

Strengthening dialogue between Civil Society from the Southern Neighbourhood and the EU

Representatives of more than 100 civil society organisations, academics, media, government representatives, local authorities and international organisations from the Southern Neighbourhood and Europe gathered at the European Economic and Social Committee and Committee of the regions headquarters in Brussels for the second annual Southern Mediterranean Civil Society Forum. The Forum is part of an overall initiative aiming at an enhanced and more strategic engagement with civil society. HRVP Mogherini, Commissioner Hahn and EP President Schulz, together with EESC President Malosse and CoR President Markkula, discussed with participants the results of an 18 month-long consultation between the EU and civil society and marked out the next steps in this process.

The objective of the Forum and the consultation process is to create mechanisms for a sustained and structured dialogue between civil society, the authorities and the EU at a regional level. The aim is to provide space for civil society representatives to express their views about EU policies in the region and, more broadly, about the policy priorities needed to improve the lives of the people. This year, the Forum discusses the current ENP policy review in addition to the ongoing consultations with EU Member States and Southern Partners. Participants are also discussing the role of dialogue and civil society in light of the situation in the countries of the Southern Mediterranean.

Speaking at today's Forum, HRVP Mogherini said: "Politics has its deep roots in the civil society and it is with the civil society that we build our collective responses to the many challenges we face. By monitoring and giving advice to parliaments, governments and political parties on issues of human rights and fundamental freedoms, Civil Society Organisations are key in reshaping our European Neighbourhood Policy and strengthening the cooperation, while we are tackling so many threats around us."

Commissioner Hahn added:

"We have to ensure that the voice of civil society is better heard and respected when policy decisions are made and implemented. The EU's contribution consists in making our own policy process open, transparent and inclusive. And this is precisely our approach to the review of the European Neighbourhood Policy in which Civil Society places a crucial role. The forum today is a demonstration of our determination to improve the dialogue between Civil Society and EU policy makers and reiterate the commitment that this should take place on a regular basis".

The event, jointly organised by the European Commission, the European External Action Service, the European Committee of the Regions and the European Economic and Social Committee, adds fresh momentum to the consultation process between the EU and Civil Society organisations aimed at improving dialogue between civil society, the EU and the authorities, and promoting reform in the region.

The Forum marks an important milestone in the initiative, the next steps of which will be discussed between the EU and Civil Society representatives in follow-up consultations.

This event is a follow-up to other initiatives taken by the EU to improve engagement with civil society at national and regional level. It underlines the necessity of increased support offered to Civil Society organisations in their ongoing efforts to foster and assist the democratic transformation process in the Neighbourhood partner countries.