Economic and Social Councils as Platforms for NGO Participation: Strengthening Democratic Governance in Central and Eastern Europe

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of Economic and Social Councils (ESCs) as institutionalised platforms for consensus-building and civil society participation in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). Moving beyond a narrow corporatist interpretation, the study conceptualises ESCs as hybrid institutions situated at the intersection of collaborative governance and multi-level Europeanisation. The research focuses on five country cases: Bulgaria, Romania, Greece, Slovenia, and Slovakia – and extends the analysis to Albania and Moldova as candidate countries engaged in the European Economic and Social Committee's Enlargement Candidate Members (ECM) initiative.

The paper employs a comparative qualitative research design combining desk research, elite semi-structured interviews with ESC leaders and EESC officials, and original survey data from ESC representatives and ECM delegates. This multi-level empirical approach allows for the examination of both domestic institutional functioning and transnational processes of institutional diffusion.

The findings demonstrate that while ESCs formally expand participation beyond traditional tripartite dialogue, their effectiveness remains uneven and conditional. Formal inclusiveness does not automatically translate into substantive influence; consensus-building often remains procedural rather than deeply deliberative; and policy impact depends significantly on political receptiveness. At the same time, ESCs play an increasingly important role as vehicles of Europeanisation, facilitating the diffusion of participatory governance models to candidate countries.

The paper concludes that ESCs should be understood as conditionally effective governance institutions, whose democratic contribution lies primarily in enhancing participatory processes, mediating stakeholder interests, and supporting the development of consensus-oriented policy frameworks across multiple levels of governanceEconomic and Social Councils (ESCs) represent one of the most institutionalised mechanisms for integrating civil society organisations – including NGOs – into national governance across Europe. Their mandate typically includes facilitating dialogue among social partners, advising governments on economic and social policy, and strengthening participatory democratic processes. Yet in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), the role and performance of ESCs as platforms for NGO engagement remain uneven, contested, and understudied. This paper analyses the functioning, inclusiveness, and democratic impact of ESCs across CEE, with a particular focus on their capacity to serve as effective platforms for NGO participation under conditions of political volatility, shrinking civic space, and declining institutional trust.

The study investigates three interconnected dimensions: (1) Institutional design and inclusiveness – how ESCs incorporate NGOs alongside traditional social partners; the extent to which NGOs can meaningfully shape agenda-setting and policymaking; (2) Political autonomy and vulnerability to co-optation – how ESCs navigate government influence, political pressure, and structural dependence on executive authorities; (3) Democratic performance and civic impact – the extent to which ESCs enhance transparency, accountability, policy legitimacy, and citizen engagement.

Using a comparative qualitative design, the paper draws on official documents, ESC statutes, and secondary literature, as well as empirical evidence collected by ESCs representatives through cross-national surveys. The empirical component includes newly collected cross-national survey data from ESC representatives in CEE, examining organisational challenges and patterns of NGO participation. This parallel empirical material helps trace systemic patterns in how NGO platforms interact with governments and how structural conditions shape civic participation.

The findings show stark differences across the region: while some ESCs provide meaningful channels for NGO input, others struggle with weak mandates, government dominance, or symbolic participation. Nevertheless, innovations emerge, including diversified membership structures, transparency reforms, and digital consultation tools.

By situating ESCs within broader debates on NGO-state relations, democratic resilience, and participatory governance, the paper contributes new insight into how institutionalised platforms can strengthen – or fail to strengthen – democracy in CEE.

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