



Report

During the opening session of Civil Society Week, speakers from various sectors gathered to set the scene for civil society to ‘Rise up for Democracy’, and to discuss the state of democracy in Europe. The session was characterised by a rich exchange of ideas and insightful discussions, underlining the urgency of reimagining Europe’s future amidst current challenges.

Oliver Röpke, President of the European Economic and Social Committee, opened the conference by underlining the importance of 2024 as a stress test for democracy around the world. He welcomed this conference as an opportunity to give a strong and united response from civil society to the multitude of challenges that pose serious threats to European democracy and its values, and to showcase the essential role civil society plays when it comes to defending and promoting democracy in everyday life.

Erika Staël von Holstein, Chief Executive of Re-Imagine Europa, delivered a keynote speech focussing on the cycle of distrust that threatens democracy’s pre-eminence, and the need to break it. She highlighted the importance of fostering honest, open and respectful conversations over simply seeking to ‘win’ arguments, while underpinning the need to reframe the way we talk to each other in order to facilitate dialogue and build trust.

In the subsequent panel discussion on ***Democracy across Europe: in peril or prosperity?*** moderated by **Shada Islam**, the following speakers contributed their views:

Věra Jourová, Vice-President of the European Commission for Values and Transparency, underscored the need to keep electoral processes free and fair, emphasising the need for a bottom-up approach to protecting democracy through engagement with civil society. She called for updated digital safeguards to ensure the elections remain resilient to outside interference, and to preserve open debates.

Brikena Xhomaqi, Co-Chair of the EESC Liaison Group, and Director of the Lifelong Learning Platform, stated that democracy is an ongoing project requiring collective dedication and constant engagement. She also emphasised the importance of transparency, accountability, and the active involvement of civil society in shaping democratic processes.

Gabriella Civico, President of Civil Society Europe, highlighted civil society's pivotal role in strengthening democratic governance. She advocated transparency, inclusivity and citizen engagement to uphold democratic values. Moreover, she emphasised the importance for civil society to address internal challenges and foster resilience, for democracy to thrive.

Janis Fifka, Representative of the European Youth Parliament, advocated for transparency and accountability in democratic governance. He highlighted the need to confront realities to drive meaningful change.

Laura Sullivan, former Executive Director of WeMove.EU, emphasised the great importance of the power of individual people in motivating meaningful change by influencing political dynamics within the EU. She referenced that through individual mobilisation, citizens can advocate for their rights and advance progressive policies. Sullivan also highlighted citizen engagement as vital in nurturing democracy and fostering a fairer global society.

In summary: The opening session of Civil Society Week 2024 served as a platform for esteemed speakers to express diverse perspectives and insights on the trajectory of democracy in Europe. From reinforcing the importance of protecting electoral processes to advocating for transparency, accountability, and active civil society engagement, the discussions underscored the multifaceted nature of safeguarding and advancing democracy across Europe.