**Civil society is key for depolarising Europe**

**The weight of strengthening cohesion to depolarise societies falls on the shoulders of civil society organisations, who have the strength and the motivation to protect civic and democratic spaces. This was the key message from Civil Society Week, hosted for a second year by the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) to discuss the alarming trend of widespread polarisation across EU societies.**

Over 800 people, including representatives from civil society organisations (CSOs), NGOs and youth groups, and stakeholders and journalists gathered at the EESC from 17 to 20 March in honour of [Civil Society Week](https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/agenda/our-events/events/civil-society-week-2025) to share views and discuss how to strengthen cohesion and participation in polarised societies.

EESC President **Oliver Röpke** said: ‘As we conclude this second edition of Civil Society Week, I am deeply inspired by the energy, resilience and commitment of civil society actors from across Europe. In an era of growing challenges – democratic backsliding, disinformation and social polarisation – civil society remains a vital force for unity, justice and democratic participation. This week has demonstrated that when civil society comes together, we can forge solutions that strengthen our democracy, foster social cohesion and build a Europe that truly works for its people. The EESC stands firmly as the house of European civil society, ready to amplify these voices and transform their demands into concrete action. Together we will ensure that civil society continues to thrive as the heartbeat of European democracy.’

**Henna Virkkunen**, European Commission Executive Vice-President on Tech Sovereignty, Security and Democracy, emphasised the crucial role that CSOs play in navigating societies using core European values. She added that further consultations with CSOs are needed to build on the Commission’s ‘democracy shield’ initiative, which aims to address threats to democracy such as information manipulation and interference by foreign forces online. Ms Virkkunen also pointed out the perils of certain online platforms, saying that while they give CSOs the opportunity to communicate, they can also open the door to threats. For this reason, the Commission has envisaged rules for safety and privacy in the digital world.

**Victor Negrescu**, Vice-President of the European Parliament, made a strong call to action, asking CSOs to show their strength and react to aggressive rhetoric, as their role is to protect democracy and European values. ‘We need a strong civil society and a real partnership between civil society and decision-makers in order to jointly build on a consistent society with real impact on people’s lives.’

**Gabriella Civico**, President of Civil Society Europe, stressed that civil societies are more than service providers; they are an essential part of democracy and participation, from the smallest village all the way to the EU level.

**Nataša Vučković**, Secretary General at Serbia’s Centre for Democracy Foundation, expressed her optimism that civil society can play a vital role in fighting the root causes and the spread of anti-democratic and anti-European narratives, both in the EU and in candidate countries. This can be done by decoding the European Union and ensuring its benefits reach all citizens in their everyday lives.

Some of the topics at the heart of these discussions were affordable housing, supporting and funding CSOs, empowering citizens, strengthening the European Citizens’ Initiative and giving youth a voice. CSOs also put forth a list of next steps, including the following.

* Empowering local authorities and social economy organisations that promote inclusive housing models to ensure long-term affordability, social cohesion, and that tenants are protected from speculative markets.
* Advocating a strong multiannual financial framework (MFF) to support CSOs and their involvement in designing and implementing cohesion policy.
* Empowering citizens through education and participation, ensuring teacher training modules on citizenship education and fostering inclusive learning environments.
* Integrating water resilience into all levels of EU decision-making, prioritising people over profit, communities over corporations and justice over short-term economic interests.
* Pushing for greater youth inclusion in decision-making processes by lowering voting ages and establishing regional youth councils.
* [Protecting, enabling, promoting and revising the European Citizens’ Initiative](https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/news-media/press-releases/eci-day-2025-european-citizens-initiative-needs-reach-its-full-potential).

The recommendations that came from these discussions will constitute the next steps towards more cohesive societies, and will be presented at the EESC plenary with Commissioner for Democracy and the Rule of Law, Michael McGrath.