

Report



#EUElections2024
#ConnectingEU2023

CONNECTING EU SEMINAR 2023

European Elections 2024: Why vote?

23-24/11/2023

Bratislava, Slovakia - European Labour Authority

The EESC "Connecting EU" seminar is an event for communication professionals working for civil society organisations representing employers, workers and other social, professional and cultural organisations across Europe.

Every year, "Connecting EU" focuses on a topic that has captured the attention of media in Europe in the run-up to the seminar and engages journalists, academic, experts and civil society in a debate in the emerging European public sphere.

Table of contents

Foreword	4
Introduction to the report	6
Day 1	
Welcome session	7
Panel I - Disinformation and how to survive it in the 2024 "World Cup of elections"	10
Day 2	
Opening session	14
Panel II - Civil society and elections: winning hearts and minds of European voters	16
Panel III - Pitching for the future: how to turn out young people	20
Speaker profiles	24
List of participants	32
Special thanks	36
Gallery	37

Foreword



Dear readers,

This brochure brings you the highlights of the EESC's Connecting EU 2023 seminar entitled "European elections 2024: why vote?", held in Bratislava, Slovakia, in November 2023.

As every year, Connecting EU, one of the EESC's flagship communication events, brought together communicators from civil society organisations represented in or linked with the EESC, journalists, policy-makers and researchers to discuss a topic that is of interest to the media.

However, while last year's theme – the impact of the war in Ukraine on the EU – had been dominating public discourse for many months before, this year we embraced a debate that is still in the making, with the certainty that the 2024 European elections will, for a number of reasons, grab more headlines than any previous European elections. And to make sure that it's for all the right reasons and none of the wrong ones, I would like to reiterate some of the messages I conveyed at the seminar.

Why should we, the men and women who make up European civil society, vote?

Does peace within the EU's borders matter? Do social rights for all matter? Does the freedom to work, live and study in any EU state matter? How about fighting climate change and protecting our environment? I think we can all agree that all these things matter a great deal.

The list of all the things that matter and that the EU has been doing to improve our lives would be very long. And yet so many people fail to turn up at their polling station on European election days. They will tell you that the decisions taken at the European level have nothing to do with them directly, that they have no idea who they should possibly vote for or what exactly the EU does, that Europe is a bunch of bureaucrats sitting in Brussels and deciding on the shape of cucumbers and bananas, or that their vote cannot possibly change anything anyway – so why should they bother?

But I will tell you why we all should bother about participating in a democratic process and about choosing people who will represent our interests when political decisions are made.



Because this is a privilege that should not be taken lightly. Because our democratic freedoms, such as the right to vote, are not set in stone. Without our active participation, they are not guaranteed to last. Because this is a right that many before us fought tirelessly to secure.

It is not easy to explain the complex process of decision-making at EU level or the intricate legislative processes, or know if this or that policy is a national or EU competence. It is not easy to explain EU jargon such as "upward convergence", "synergies", "Recovery and Resilience Facility" – things that may directly influence our lives, in a good way, but sound so cryptic and technical if you are not familiar with the complexities of EU speak.

So do not start from there. Do not talk Spitzenkandidaten over the Christmas turkey. Do not mention Europe in your first sentence. Start by talking about the issues that matter to the people you are talking to and where the EU is making a difference, whether that be climate change, regulating the internet giants or protecting consumer rights. Be real about what could be better as well as what is really good. Above all, do not insist on having a single message for all voters in all 27 EU countries, convey a local message that resonates with local voters, make it specific, community by community, country by country. And as for young people, do not talk down to them, treat them as adults, and give them a really good reason to vote. Ideally, they should also have a real chance to be represented by people like themselves.

This should be the starting point for our organisations' campaigns and engagement. And no one should know what matters to the members of your organisations and how to talk to them better than you, their communicators.

Some of you have sent us messages to say that the seminar gave them plenty of ideas as to how to design and run their campaigns. We hope that many of you were inspired by what you heard and by the ideas you exchanged at the seminar with other communicators like you.

We wish you an exciting and successful campaign and would encourage you to share with us any initiatives your organisations will be undertaking as a result of this seminar. We would be delighted to help you bring them to public attention. For our part, this event has marked the beginning of a new engagement with plenty of other initiatives to come, so watch this space!

Aurel Laurentiu Ploșceanu
EESC Vice-President for Communication

Introduction to the report

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) held its flagship annual event for civil society communicators on 23 and 24 November in the Slovak capital of Bratislava.

In the run-up to 2024, which has already become known as the year of "the World Cup of elections" as one billion people in 40 countries will be heading to polling stations across the world, our event focused on the vote for the new European Parliament, scheduled for June 2024.

The idea was to explore how the EESC and its network of 90 million people – employers', workers' and other civil society organisations, including many representing young people – can help boost the turnout by mobilising their members to go and vote. How can this network best relay the message that voting matters? How can it help drive home the importance of European elections against a backdrop of democratic backsliding in several Member States and loss of faith in democratic institutions in all of them?

The three panels revolved around three issues that will be crucial for the campaign:

- Disinformation and its impact on the European elections;
- Mobilising civil society around elections – winning hearts and minds of European voters;
- Elections and young people: how to convince young people that their vote matters?

In addition, an interactive session with **Philipp Schulmeister**, European Parliament director for campaigns, gave participants a preview of the European Parliament's strategy for the forthcoming campaign. It also introduced them to the Parliament's together.eu community as the first port of call for volunteers – individuals and organisations alike – wishing to enlist in a campaign that will rely on many local messages but pursue one objective: get out to vote.

Like every year, Connecting EU brought together press and communication professionals from civil society organisations. Speakers and participants included EESC members and other EU representatives, partner organisations from Member States, journalists and researchers.

The report gives a brief recap of the two days of discussion that took place in Bratislava.

Welcome session

Chair and Introduction:

- **Aurel Laurențiu Plosceanu**, EESC vice-president for Communication

Welcome speeches:

- **Oliver Röpke**, EESC president
- **Cosmin Boiangiu**, executive director of the European Labour Authority
- **Monika Uhlerová**, vice-president of the Economic and Social Council of Slovakia
- **Vladimir Šucha**, head of the European Commission Representation in Slovakia
- **Robert Sermek**, head of the European Parliament Liaison Office in Slovakia

Keynote interview

Grigorij Mesežnikov, political analyst, president of the Institute for Public Affairs (IVO) in Slovakia

“Slovakia: a case in point for European elections”

Interviewer: **Ivana Dragičević**, editor-at-large and reporter for N1 television/CNN exclusive news channel affiliate; Europe's Futures Fellow, Institute for Human Sciences (IWM), Vienna



Europeans need to know the practical impact of EU decisions on their lives: this will help mobilise them and get them to vote. Messages need to be adapted to the different EU countries. Barriers to young people entering politics need to be urgently addressed.

The impact of disinformation on the 2024 European elections and ideas for mobilising civil society, and especially young people, around the elections were the main topics discussed at the seminar "European Elections 2024: Why vote?", organised by the EESC in Bratislava on 23-24 November 2024.

To set the scene, the welcome session gave the floor to EESC partners and collaborators who supported our event: our host the European Labour Authority (ELA), our partner and co-organiser the Economic and Social Council of Slovakia, the European Parliament Liaison Office and the European Commission Representation in Slovakia.



The opening speech was delivered by EESC president **Oliver Röpke**.

"If we want the 2024 elections to be successful, we need to work all together - the EU institutions, the media and communication specialists - to raise awareness, fight disinformation and, above all, bring Europe closer to people. Everyone must be involved: young and old, women and men, entrepreneurs, workers, civil society organisations, NGOs, think tanks, associations. Above all, people need to know that these elections are about them," said the EESC president.

"We are proud to host you in Slovakia. Many experts from all over Europe come to us to talk, discuss and work for labour mobility in Europe. We want Slovaks to be proud of being home to a European institution working from here for the whole of Europe," said **Cosmin Boiangiu**, the ELA's executive director.



If we want the 2024 elections to be successful, we need to work all together - the EU institutions, the media and communication specialists - to raise awareness, fight disinformation and bring Europe closer to people

Monika Uhlerová, vice-president of the Economic and Social Council of Slovakia, stressed that "more and more people in this region are questioning the European institutions, EU membership, the purpose of the EU's existence, and these sentiments are being fuelled by some politicians who are using the fear, uncertainty and discontent of a section of the population to satisfy their ambitions for power."





Vladimir Šucha
head of the European Commission
Representation in Slovakia

Vladimir Šucha, head of the European Commission Representation in Slovakia, argued that "one of the themes of the European elections should be the benefits of 20 years of EU membership, which could help mobilise civil society and the younger generation, who are a source of hope, although there is still much to be done in Slovakia".

"When people say that there is no democratic legitimacy in the EU institutions, I usually respond that 200 million people voted in the 2019 European elections, with a turnout of over 50 % across the EU. We should make it clear to people that the decisions of the European Parliament affect their lives," said Robert Sermek, head of the European Parliament Liaison Office in Slovakia.



When people say that there is no democratic legitimacy in the EU institutions, I respond that 200 million people voted in the 2019 European elections



Political actors in Slovakia tend to emphasise only the economic dimension of EU membership, but non-material benefits such as security and human rights are deliberately neglected

turnout of Slovak voters in the European elections. He pointed to the inconsistency of Slovak public opinion on EU membership. "It is due to a wave of disinformation, but it is also a simplistic perception of our EU membership. Political actors in Slovakia tend to emphasise only the economic dimension of EU membership, but non-material benefits such as security and human rights are deliberately neglected by politicians and overlooked by the population," explained Mesežníkov.



Journalist Ivana Dragičević interviewing keynote speaker Grigorij Mesežníkov, president, Slovakia's Institute for Public Affairs

Grigorij Mesežníkov, president of the Institute for Public Affairs (IVO) in Slovakia and keynote speaker at the seminar, discussed the reasons for the constantly poor

Panel I – Disinformation and how to survive it in the 2024 "World Cup of elections"

How disinformation is likely to impact the 2024 European elections and what can be done to fight it

Moderated by:

- **Andrej Matišák**, deputy chief of foreign desk, Pravda, Slovakia

Introduction by:

- **Violeta Jelić**, vice-president of the EESC Employers' Group

Panel:

- **Rastko Kužel**, media and election expert, executive director of MEMO 98
- **Nick Robins-Early**, journalist writing for the Guardian, Insider, Huffington Post
- **Alice Stollmeyer**, founder and executive director of Defend Democracy
- **Giovanni Zagni**, chair of the European Digital Media Observatory's Task Force on the 2024 European Elections



Undermining the integrity of the electoral process is an increasingly common theme in disinformation campaigns across Europe. A major challenge is the proliferation of AI tools. More intensive 'pre-bunking' is needed.

The panel on disinformation brought together leading experts in the field. The discussion focused on the mushrooming of fake news and false narratives in election campaigns, and on ways to crack down on election disinformation amid the rise of AI. The panel was moderated by **Andrej Matišák**, a prominent Slovak journalist and editor at Slovak outlet Pravda.



In her introduction to the debate on disinformation in the European elections, **Violeta Jelić**, vice-president of the EESC Employers' Group, spoke of the increasingly common comparison of disinformation with the atomic bomb. "Disinformation undermines people's trust in traditional news sources. It also undermines people's trust in governments and other public institutions. It is designed to appeal to our worst impulses, fears and prejudices," Jelić said. The debate called for a distinction to be made between disinformation based on misleading political messages or election manifestos, which requires classic fact-checking, and viral hoaxes, for example, recordings based on increasingly available deep fake technologies that pretend to be recordings of real politicians.

Nick Robins-Early, journalist writing for the Guardian, Insider, Huffington Post and other major outlets, admitted that it is not easy to find positive aspects in



Disinformation undermines people's trust in traditional news sources. It also undermines people's trust in governments and other public institutions. It is designed to appeal to our worst impulses, fears and prejudices

the increasing use of generative artificial intelligence (AI) services such as Chat GPT in the area of information. It gives broad access to the generation of written text, images, audio and video for disinformation purposes. For example, an "average teenager with average digital literacy" can go online and produce a fake piece in ten minutes using AI tools. Among other things, audio mimicry capabilities have recently advanced significantly, allowing campaigns, for example, to call voters with the false information that their "polling station address has changed at the last minute". "Additionally, there is the 'liar's dividend', which means that the proliferation of



AI-generated disinformation and content can make the average citizen suspicious that anything could be AI-generated. It reduces trust and the quality of the information ecosystem," said Robins-Early.



Rast'o Kužel
executive director, MEMO 98

"The main goal of disinformation campaigns is to create a passive and cynical society and to undermine trust in institutions. The aim is to make people indifferent to political and social issues. The goal is to kill activism," stressed **Rast'o Kužel**, media and election expert, and executive director of MEMO 98. He argued that awareness of this clear objective is a prerequisite for an effective defence against disinformation in elections. An example of the model of society pursued by the authors of disinformation campaigns is Putin's Russia with its passive people.



The main goal of disinformation campaigns is to create a passive and cynical society and to undermine trust in institutions - make people indifferent to political and social issues and to kill activism

Kužel believes that AI tools, like Gutenberg's once ground-breaking invention of the printing press, will also find good uses, but this will require research and the efforts of people who care about democracy. On the other hand, the immediate goal is to protect the integrity of elections, because people need to be convinced that

their vote matters and can influence reality. In the face of growing attacks on democracy, in addition to fact-checking and debunking disinformation, there needs to be a much more proactive attitude and use of pre-bunking, namely, pre-emptively debunking a line of disinformation, warning people about it before they see it and training them to recognise disinformation.



Giovanni Zagni
chair, 2024 European Elections Task Force, EDMO

Giovanni Zagni, chair of the European Digital Media Observatory's Task Force on the 2024 European elections, pointed out that, based on an analysis of nine different types of elections in Europe in 2023, a new phenomenon - probably inspired by the US – is the huge and ever increasing amount of disinformation that has been used to undermine the integrity of the electoral process itself. "European institutions and media professionals should be aware that this will also happen in the European elections. There will be disinformation about



Moderator Andrej Matišák and Rast'o Kužel, executive director, MEMO 98



the falsification of ballot papers, about giving voting rights to immigrants who are not legally entitled to them and about disproportionate and unreliable changes in turnout in constituencies," said Zagni. Another example is 'information' about politicians manipulating public transport to make it harder for voters to get to polling stations.

"You don't have to be positive about the EU, but legitimate questions aim to contribute to democracy, not to undermine it. A simple distinction is the relationship to the facts, whether the questions contradict the facts or not," said **Alice Stollmeyer**, founder and executive director of Defend Democracy.



There will be disinformation about falsified ballot papers, voting rights given to immigrants who are not entitled to them, and disproportionate, unreliable changes in turnout

The problem in the fight against disinformation is the occasional overlap between campaigns run by hostile foreign actors and those in which Europeans, protected by the rules of free speech, contribute, sometimes unwittingly, to spreading fake news. A pro-EU narrative in national politics cannot be the only acceptable option, and care must be taken not to demonise Europeans who hold different views to the pro-EU mainstream. On the other hand, we must not fall for the questioning tactics of, among others, Russia's RT against the West, whose aim is to sow division and hit democracy with 'bold questions'.

Opening session

- **Aurel Laurențiu Plosceanu**, EESC vice-president for Communication
- **Karin Kóváry Sólymos**, journalist, Jan Kuciak investigative Centre:
“Slovakia: a playground for Russian propaganda?”



The second day of the seminar started with an opening session that laid the groundwork for the panel on encouraging civil society to help raise awareness of the importance of the European elections and ways of communicating with prospective voters.

In his opening speech, EESC vice-president for Communication **Laurențiu Plosceanu** stressed that democracy and freedom should never be taken for granted.



Our democratic freedoms, such as the right to vote, are not set in stone. Without our active participation, they are not guaranteed to last. It is our duty, as communicators, as civil society, to never tire of spelling out what the EU does for us

He read a letter from Serbian independent journalist and activist **Boško Petrović**, who had been fighting every day to motivate people to get out and vote in the Serbian elections and try to change their country for the better. "Leave apathy at home and take your freedom into your own hands! Quality is hidden in large numbers. A large number of voters really speaks to what the people of a country want for their future," Mr Petrović's message read.



Mr Plosceanu reminded those present that "Our democratic freedoms, such as the right to vote, are not set in stone. Without our active participation, they are not guaranteed to last. It is our duty, as communicators, as civil society, to never tire of spelling out what the EU does for us."

The second speaker in the opening session, **Karin Kőváry Sólymos** of the Jan Kuciak Investigative Centre, talked about the dangers of propaganda for trust in democracy. She stressed that "Slovakia, like other EU countries, has experienced the impact of Russian propaganda, which often seeks to exploit existing fault lines in our societies, create divisions and undermine the foundations of trust. Unfortunately, the most critical aspect is that it finds an audience here, which is not surprising given the conspiratorial and pro-Russian sentiments of a large part of Slovak society."



Slovakia, like other EU countries, has experienced the impact of Russian propaganda, which seeks to exploit existing fault lines in our societies, create divisions and undermine the foundations of trust

Panel II – Civil society and elections: winning hearts and minds of European voters

Mobilising civil society around elections: what works and what does not

Moderated by:

- **Eva Mihočková**, chief editor, Slovak Foreign Policy Association portal, former Euractiv reporter

Introduction by:

- **Miroslav Hajnoš**, member of the EESC Workers' Group

Panel:

- **Laura Sullivan**, executive director at WeMove SCE mbH and WeMove Europe gGmbH
- **Małgorzata Molęda-Zdziech**, professor at the Warsaw School of Economics, Institute of International Studies, Department of Political Studies
- **Dominika Hajdu**, director, Centre for Democracy & Resilience at GLOBSEC
- **Márta Pardavi**, co-chair of the Hungarian Helsinki Committee



The European elections are actually 27 separate elections, which limits the extent to which campaigns can be run as one. But for a civil society at risk, the EU as a whole can provide safety nets. A solid alternative to a culture of conflict is needed.

The all-women panel on winning hearts and minds of European voters analysed where and how the battle to get out the vote should be waged. How to mobilise civil society around elections? What kind of messages will encourage people to head to the polls? Apart from tips and tricks on how to communicate about elections, our expert speakers zoomed in on lessons learned from previous election experiences and the outlook for civil society and voting in three EU countries where life for civil society organisations had not always been easy: Poland, Slovakia and Hungary. The moderator was Slovak journalist **Eva Mihočková**, editor of Foreign Policy News.



Miroslav Hajnoš, member of the EESC Workers' Group, set the scene for the debate.

"Countries with a higher level of organisation of trade unions, business and civil society organisations tend to have a higher turnout in European elections," he stressed.

Laura Sullivan, executive director at WeMove Europe, argued for the right sequencing of campaign messages, drawing on her experience from the 2019 European election campaign. Rather than starting with "Europe matters", you should start with individual issues that are important to voters in their daily lives, with a European



In 2019, when I looked at the websites of the different EU institutions for reasons to vote in the European elections, the top reason was free roaming. That's pretty good. But when you put it as the number one reason to vote, you see me as a consumer and not as a citizen

context as a secondary consideration. "In 2019, when I looked at the websites of the different EU institutions for reasons to vote in the European elections, the top reason was free roaming. That's pretty good. But when you put it as the number one reason to vote, you see me as a consumer and not as a citizen. Talk to people about the cost of living, workers' rights, climate change," she argued.

Sullivan advised not to waste too much energy on drafting a general manifesto, but to focus on talking to voters. In doing so, it is necessary to strike a balance between Euro-bubble talk and not insulting voters' intelligence. It is possible to talk to them about the EU without being over-simplistic. On the other hand, "discussing the Spitzenkandidats system around the Christmas table" is not such a good idea.

In the wake of the recent Polish elections, **Małgorzata Molęda-Zdziech** from the Warsaw School of Economics talked about how Polish voters had grown tired of fomenting conflict and had taken up the offer of a more cooperative approach. "The concept of politics has changed. Politics is no longer defined as conflict. Now we are moving towards a policy of cooperation," said Molęda-Zdziech.

This time in Poland, the election victory was not built around negative stereotypes and communication based on smearing tactics. Many voters were tired of years of manipulation, propaganda and disinformation campaigns. On the other hand, the detailed discussion of individual public policies, emotionally charged



messages, grassroots campaigns by NGOs or single-issue groups (including "Kobiety na wybory", i.e. "Women for the Election"), direct communication between politicians and voters and reliable information campaigns had borne fruit, especially in the large-scale electoral mobilisation of young people ("Youthquake") and women.



The concept of politics has changed. Politics is no longer defined as conflict. Now we are moving towards a policy of cooperation

The undermining of key democratic watchdogs, the demonisation of the press and the spread of the narrative that the elections would be rigged (and that consequently people's vote would not make a difference) were key features of the recent parliamentary elections in Slovakia, as **Dominika Hajdu**, director of the Centre for Democracy & Resilience at GLOBSEC, reported.

"What are the recommendations from this experience for the future? In a situation like the one we had in Slovakia, you need a strong alternative to offer society in the election campaign. Unfortunately, unlike in Poland, where it was

possible to choose between conflict and cooperation, this notion of cooperation was missing in Slovakia," said Hajdu. She stressed that the pro-democracy parties could not unite behind a single narrative for the sake of saving democracy. In the future, civil society organisations in Slovakia should put much more pressure on political parties to work towards improving the political culture despite their mutual divisions and disagreements.



Unfortunately, unlike in Poland, where it was possible to choose between conflict and cooperation, this notion of cooperation was missing in Slovakia



Dominika Hajdu
director, Centre for Democracy & Resilience, GLOBSEC

Márta Párdavi, co-chair of the Hungarian Helsinki Committee, stressed that in countries like Hungary, the discussion of how to design an election campaign to appeal to voters must go hand in hand with one on how to ensure free and fair elections. This is not just about the day of the election. It must go much further and address the conditions under which civil society and politicians can operate in Hungary. "If you were to ask me what the



Márta Pardavi
co-chair, Hungarian Helsinki Committee

European Union means to me as a Hungarian or as a human rights defender, I would say that the EU is a safety net, made of European frameworks, European laws, a society and a space where you can build transnational networks and find transnational civil solidarity".



If you were to ask me what the EU means to me as a Hungarian and as a human rights defender, I would say it is a safety net

Panel III – Pitching for the future: how to turn out young people

How to mobilise young people around the elections

Moderated by:

- **Ali Al-Jaberi**, moderator and studio presenter, ProModeration, Amsterdam, Netherlands

Introduction by:

- **Katrīna Leitāne**, member of the EESC Civil Society Organisations' Group

Panel:

- **Martine Clerckx**, founder & associate director of Wide, professor of strategic planning at IHECS, Brussels
- **Ivana Dragičević**, editor-at-large and reporter for N1 television/CNN exclusive news channel affiliate; Europe's Futures Fellow, Institute for Human Sciences (IWM), Vienna
- **Corina Pîrvulescu**, senior programme management, public policy & campaigning with impact on electoral democracy, youth & digital governance
- **Nika Kovač**, founding director, 8th of March Research Institute, Slovenia; member of the 2020 class of the Obama Foundation Leaders program in Europe; book author

Presentation of the 2022 EU futurEU Initiative winning project "**This time I've voted, but am I represented?**" by authors **Federica Bellato, Benedetta Coraglia, Carolina Guerra** and **Allegra Semenzato** (SciencesPo/Università Bocconi)



The under-representation of young people hinders their electoral mobilisation. Better campaigns are needed, but the feeling of having a real impact on decisions would also provide a strong incentive to vote. Would youth quotas help?

The closing panel of the seminar looked to the future: what would it take to motivate young people to head to polling stations and decide who gets to represent their interests? Research figures show they feel abandoned by the EU and alienated from mainstream politics. How should we communicate with them today, now that the world has to a large extent moved online and social media increasingly shapes their world view? The panel included top speakers with hands-on experience of talking to young people. The winning project of the 2022 futurEU initiative entitled "This time I've voted, but am I represented?" was presented by its young authors during the debate. The panel was moderated by **Ali Al-Jaberi**, a former journalist and professional moderator.



Introducing the debate on how to boost young people's participation in politics, including in European elections, was **Katrina Leitane**, member of the EESC's Civil Society Organisations Group. "The complexity of the EU policy-making system and EU jargon alienates young people. But it is not up to young people to try to understand politics. It is up to us to make EU policies relevant to young people's lives," she said.

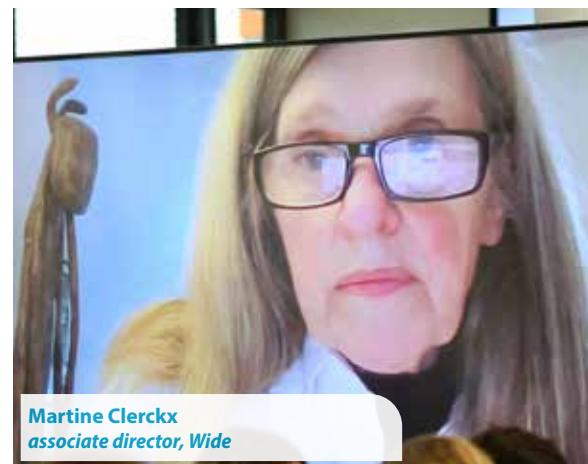
Martine Clerckx, associate director of Wide and professor of Strategic Planning at the Brussels School of Journalism

and Communication, IHECS, presented her study on "How to light up the switched off", which looked at young people's attitudes towards the EU and European elections



The complexity of the EU policy-making system and EU jargon alienates young people. But it is not up to them to understand politics. It is up to us to make EU policies relevant to young people's lives

in five EU countries, including Slovakia. She drew attention to the fact that young people felt alienated from the world of traditional politics. One of her recommendations to remedy this in election campaigns was to appeal not only to reason and rational facts, but also to hearts and hopes, and to offer something that made sense of the world we live in. She also recommended reaching out to young people who were not politically involved in their own environment: "They are not going to come to you. So we have to break into their living space. We really have



to create opportunities for these chance encounters, such as setting up stands at festivals and also spreading the message through influential figures in sports, games and entertainment", said Clerckx.

Nika Kovač, founding director of the 8th of March Research Institute, who spoke about her experience with the 2012 Slovenian referendum on the Water Act, stressed that the success of the mobilisation she had triggered was based on communicating with young voters as adults, because that was the only way to treat them. "We simply talked to young people as intelligent adults who understand politics and know what needs to be done. So we had straightforward and honest communication. We didn't try to make things easier for them, because they don't need that," said Kovač. She warned against emphasising only the "future problems of young people", citing her experience of effective cooperation between young people and voters over 70.



Nika Kovač
founding director, 8th of March
Research Institute

On the other hand, some of the added value young people brought to the referendum campaign she had co-led came from their creativity. Sending handwritten letters to neighbours and friends and encouraging the taxi drivers' company to drive people to polling stations were ideas that had contributed to a good turnout and a referendum victory, with an 87% majority against the pro-privatisation amendments to the Slovenian Water Act.

The gradual introduction of a youth quota in the European Parliament, i.e. an appropriate number of MEPs aged 18-35, so as to bring it closer to the actual proportion of voters of this age group in the EU, was one of the ideas raised in

the debate. "The percentage of MEPs under 35 is 6.6%, which is very far from the proportion of Europeans in the same age group (over 20%). The political marginalisation of young people is a potential obstacle to the fair



Young people are not going to come to you. So we have to break into their living space

representation of their interests," said **Carolina Guerra**, co-author (with **Federica Bellato**, **Benedetta Coraglia** and **Allegra Semenzato**) of the winning project of the 2022 futurEU initiative entitled "This time I've voted, but am I represented?". It is impossible to introduce a 'youth quota' in the forthcoming European Parliament elections. However, it could become an encouraging theme for the election campaign and subsequently for the work of the Parliament in the new legislature.

More young MEPs would increase the perceived legitimacy of decisions, and young Europeans would feel more listened to, which in turn would make the European Union's decisions more widely accepted and more relevant to young people's concerns. Surveys indicate that they show the greatest interest in, for



Benedetta Coraglia and Federica Bellato,
co-authors of project "This time I've voted, but
am I represented?"

example, environmental issues and the climate crisis. The current under-representation of young people is due to structural problems such as the right to vote, exclusion from established networks and a lack of campaign funds.

Drawing comparisons with the US, **Corina Pîrvulescu**, a civil society activist with expertise in mobilising young voters in both the EU and the US, pointed to the need for the European media (and political discourse) to provide more complex data on polling, showing how specific groups of voters, including young people, would change



If you show not only the projections of how many people will vote and how, but also how specific groups, such as young people, can potentially influence the outcome, you send the message that your vote has power

the outcome of particular elections. "If you show not only the projections of how many people will vote and how, but also how specific groups, such as young people, can potentially influence the outcome, you send the message that your vote has power, that this is what you can do if you turn out," Pîrvulescu said. By contrast, one advantage Europe has over the US is that institutions are more open to young people, including discussions about increasing their influence on decisions.



We simply talked to young people as intelligent adults who understand politics and know what needs to be done

These days, as **Ivana Dragičević**, editor-at-large and reporter for N1 television, pointed out, populist, anti-establishment, far-right politicians are effective at mobilising young people, and they can - largely with the help of social media - create a sense that they represent people who are underrepresented and misunderstood by



elites, including young people. They are targeting young men in Europe; they are targeting their grievances. We need to go after big tech and ban addictive algorithms. This is the new heroin," Dragičević stressed. She argued that the EU still underestimated this problem, which needed to be addressed urgently in the 2024 European elections.

Speaker profiles



Ali Al-Jaberi is a professional moderator and studio presenter at ProModeration with strong expertise in European affairs. He is a former Europe correspondent for Associated Press TV News, a multiple award-winning public speaker and a former lecturer in public policy at The Hague University. In addition, Ali is a PR consultant and an executive communication and media coach. See www.promoderation.nl



Federica Bellato is a Politics and Policy Analysis (MSc) student at Bocconi University. She has previous experience working at the European Commission on sanctions and is currently writing her thesis on youth representation in Alpine areas.



Cosmin Boiangiu is the Executive Director of the European Labour Authority. A career diplomat since 1996, Mr Boiangiu has expertise in EU affairs and multilateral diplomacy, security and strategic policies, development, NATO and the United Nations. He has represented Romania at the UN Security Council and NATO and has worked as Spokesperson and Director for Information and Press at the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. From 2012 to 2016, he was Romanian Ambassador to Slovenia and then went on to serve as Romania's Deputy Permanent Representative to the EU and Representative to COREPER I, which he chaired during Romania's presidency of the Council of the EU in 2019. He has a degree in International Economic Relations, a Master's degree in Public Management and a PhD in the Economics of climate change.



Martine Clerckx is the founder of Wide - The Societal Strategic Institute in Brussels and has been its Associate Director since 1999. Her research focuses on detecting social trends, forecasting future scenarios and identifying the key factors that shape the changing behaviours of Europeans. Her extensive expertise spans various domains, including institutions, civic engagement and sectors such as health, technology and mobility. In addition to conducting her research work, she has served as a professor of strategic planning at Brussels' Ihecs and pursued advanced studies in 'Building sustainable agreements' at Harvard Kennedy School and foresight techniques with Futuribles International.



Benedetta Coraglia has a Double Degree in Politics and Policy Analysis (MSc), with a focus on energy and environmental policy, from Bocconi University and Sciences Po. She is currently working at the OECD on environmental policies and climate action.



Ivana Dragičević is editor-at-large at N1 Television, an exclusive CNN affiliate for the Adria-Balkan region, where she was previously executive producer of news programmes and executive editor of international news. She began her career at Croatian public TV broadcaster HRT where she held several positions, including foreign affairs correspondent and chief correspondent in Belgrade. A multiple award-winning reporter, her work has focused on European and international affairs for more than 25 years. She has received three annual awards as best TV journalist from the Croatian Journalists' Association (1999, 2001, 2013) and an award from HRT for best TV reporting (2010). She has interviewed a number of global public figures, from Bashar al-Assad to Jens Stoltenberg, from Amin Maalouf to Bob Geldof. Ms Dragičević is also Europe's Future Fellow at Vienna's Institute for Human Sciences (IWM).



Carolina Guerra is a Politics and Policy Analysis (MSc) graduate of Bocconi University. She works at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), where she focuses on development co-operation in support of poverty and inequality reduction. She has previous experience working at the European Commission on sanctions.



Dominika Hajdu serves as policy director at the Centre for Democracy & Resilience at GLOBSEC, a European policy think tank. Throughout her tenure at GLOBSEC she has spearheaded a series of international projects and initiatives centred on research, awareness-raising and capacity-building, aiming to fortify societal and state resilience against attempts to weaken democracy and transatlantic unity. In her research, Dominika delves into the effects of emerging technological and geopolitical trends on democratic societies, emphasising cognitive security and strategic communication. She earned her MA in EU Foreign Policy from the University of Leuven in Belgium.



Miroslav Hajnoš is a professional trade union expert with experience spanning a decade. As a specialist in European and International Relations at the Slovak Confederation of Trade Unions, he plays a pivotal role in shaping European initiatives. Since 2019, he has also served as a specialist in digitisation and marketing, focusing on AI, Big Data, digital transformation and IT technology. Miroslav is also active in EU bodies. He has been a member of the European Economic and Social Committee since 2020 and has worked with the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (EUROFOUND) since 2016. He is also a deputy member of the executive committee of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC).



Violeta Jelić has been General Secretary of the Croatian Chamber of Trades and Crafts since 2012 and a member of the EESC since 2013, serving as Vice-President of the EESC Employers' Group since 2015. Ms Jelić sits on the EESC Employers' Group Bureau and on three permanent EESC sections, which deal with: the Single Market, Production and Consumption (INT), Agriculture, Rural Development and Environment (NAT) and External Relations (REX), respectively. She chairs the Ad hoc Group on the Citizens' Initiative and is part of the EU-Morocco Joint Advisory Group and of the EU-Turkey Joint Consultative Committee.



Alexander Kleinig is the EESC's Director for Communication and Interinstitutional Relations. Mr Kleinig is Austrian and previously worked at the European Parliament, first in legislative work and then in communication. In 2005, he was appointed project manager to set up a European Parliament Visitors' Centre in Brussels, which has grown to be the largest parliamentary Visitors' Centre in Europe, attracting 350 000 visitors per year and winning 16 different design and communication awards. He then became Head of the Concept and Design unit, where he developed several Europe-wide communication campaigns, including part of the 2019 European election campaign ("thistimelmvoting"). Mr Kleinig joined the EESC in 2022 and has a master's degree in economics from the University of Vienna.



Nika Kovac is the founding director of the 8th of March Research Institute, a movement-building organisation that uses storytelling and advocacy to confront gender and economic inequalities across Slovenia. The Institute works to break the silence around sexual violence by gathering testimonials and data on rape, abortion, and sexual assault across the country. Under her leadership, their advocacy campaigns successfully initiated the legal redefinition of rape in Slovenia, enforcing a new legal precedent for the "yes means yes" consent model. A member of the 2020 class of the Obama Foundation Leaders program in Europe, and of the Foundation's 2021-2022 Scholars Program at Columbia University, Nika is also the author of three books, *My Choice: Testimonies, Rights and Prejudices Regarding Abortion*, *Brave Girls* and *#metoo The Storm That Shook the World*.



Karin Kováry Sólymos is a Slovak journalist who has worked for the Jan Kuciak Investigative Centre (ICJK) since 2022. Karin's work primarily focuses on disinformation, Russian propaganda, information operations, and OSINT investigations. Together with her colleagues, she won the 2022 Investigative Press Prize for a series of texts about the disinformation website NewsFront. Before joining ICJK, she worked as an editor and presenter for the Slovak national broadcaster RTVS (Radio Patria). During her university years, she was a senior analyst for the only fact-checking portal in Slovakia. Karin holds a Security Studies and Political Science degree from Masaryk University, Brno.



Rasto Kužel is a media and election expert with over 25 years of international experience who runs MEMO 98, a media monitoring organisation with extensive experience in delivering analyses and technical assistance to different electoral stakeholders. Rasto has worked as an analyst, consultant and trainer, participating in many election observation missions and projects. Rasto has also focused on disinformation in the context of elections and on the role of social media during elections. He co-authored *Elections in Digital Times*, published by UNESCO, a practical guide focusing on the Internet, social media and AI.



Katrīna Leitāne is a member of the EESC Civil Society Organisations' Group and the president of the EESC Youth Group, with more than 10 years of experience in the field of youth. She has developed several Erasmus+ projects promoting youth engagement at local and national level. She was also a national expert in the European Commission's expert group on EU indicators in the field of youth and a member of the National Working Group for the EU Youth Dialogue at the Latvian Ministry of Education and Science. An alumni of the Committee of the Regions' 2020 Young Elected Politicians programme and a member of Latvia's National Youth Council, Ms Leitāne is working towards fostering meaningful and structured youth engagement in the EESC with the ultimate goal of improving youth participation in the EU.



Tomáš Madleňák has been a reporter for the Jan Kuciak Investigative Centre since 2020. He covered the Ján Kuciak murder trials, worked on the Kočner's Library project and was part of the 2020 Journalism Award-winning team of investigative reporters for the series on the financial schemes, shell companies and hidden properties of the oligarch Norbert Bödör. He now focuses on international crime, money laundering and corruption cases in an attempt to continue the legacy of the murdered Slovak journalist Ján Kuciak.



Andrej Matišák is a journalist and deputy head of the foreign desk at the Slovak daily newspaper Pravda. Between 2015 and 2016 he was editor of the Defence Matters project, an online discussion platform concerning defence topics and joint initiative between four media outlets from four EU countries. Previously he had worked as head of the foreign desk at 24 hodín, and as editor of the foreign desk at Národná obruba. He focuses on global security, terrorism, US politics and foreign policy, China, NATO and the EU. He has reported from Afghanistan, Kosovo, Ethiopia, Ukraine, China, South Sudan, Myanmar, Mozambique and other countries.



Grigorij Mesežníkov is a political scientist and the co-founder and incumbent president of the Institute for Public Affairs, an independent Slovak think-tank. He has worked at Comenius University and the Political Science Institute of the Slovak Academy of Sciences. He has edited and authored several books and published numerous studies, both in Slovakia and abroad, on the development of party systems and the transformation of post-communist societies, and on illiberal and authoritarian tendencies, populism, nationalism and hybrid threats. In 2006, he was awarded the Reagan-Fascell Fellowship by the US National Endowment for Democracy. In 2012, he was a research fellow at the Department of Political Science of Taiwan National University and in 2019-2020 a Europe's Futures fellow at the Institute for Human Sciences (IWM), Vienna.



Eva Mihočková is editor-in-chief of Foreign Policy, a media site specialising in European and global affairs run by the Slovak Foreign Policy Association. Eva started her journalistic career in 1998 at Slovak Television. Since then, she has worked for major news organisations such as TA3, RTVS, Euractiv.sk, Plus7dní and Trend, where she served as a reporter, moderator and a member of the editorial office management team. Her analyses and interviews consistently reflect her dedication to addressing critical issues. Eva's commitment to strengthening the rule of law and democracy in Slovakia has also led her to work as an investigative journalist for the Stop the Corruption Foundation. She was awarded the 2022 Journalism Award by the Open Society Foundation.



Małgorzata Molęda-Zdziech is a sociologist and political scientist. She is head of the Department of Political Studies at SGH Warsaw School of Economics and is the Rector's Representative for Cooperation with the European Union. Previously, she was Director of the Polish Science Contact Agency of the Polish Academy of Sciences Polska in Brussels (2017-2020). Her research interests focus on political communication, the mediatisation of public life, lobbying and interest groups at national and European level. She supports the European Commission Representation in Poland as an EU expert member of the Team Europe Direct Poland network.



Márta Pardavi is co-chair of the Hungarian Helsinki Committee, a Budapest-based leading human rights NGO. A lawyer by training, she has recently been focusing on the threats to the rule of law and civil society space in Hungary and the EU. She also co-leads the Recharging Advocacy for Rights in Europe (RARE) programme. Márta serves on the boards of PILnet and the International Partnership for Human Rights. She was awarded the 2018 William D. Zabel Human Rights Award from Human Rights First and the 2019 Civil Rights Defender of the Year award and was chosen to be a member of POLITICO28 Class of 2019. In 2020-2021, she was a Policy Leader Fellow at the European University Institute's School of Transnational Governance in Florence, Italy.



Corina Pîrvulescu has over 12 years' experience working in youth programmes and on the electoral engagement of young voters in Romania and the US and at EU level. Over the years she has had different roles, starting as a youth representative and continuing as a professional, advising public institutions and international organisations. She has co-authored various publications on youth (electoral) participation. Her main goal is to make elections accessible, meaningful and fun for young people. She is the co-founder of Civics International, a Brussels-based non-profit organisation to be launched by the 2024 European elections, aimed at connecting the experiences of young Europeans and Americans in elections. Corina holds a Master's Degree in Public Administration from the Hertie School in Berlin.



Aurel Laurențiu Plosceanu is the EESC Vice-President for Communication. Previously, he was president of the EESC Section for Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship. He has been a member of the EESC and its Employers' Group since 2007 and over the years has been involved in activities across all sections of the EESC. In 2016, Mr Plosceanu became Vice-president of UGIR, the Romanian Industrialists General Union. Since 2007, he has been President of ARACO – the Romanian Association of Building Contractors. Mr Plosceanu has technical, economic, law and defence qualifications.



Nick Robins-Early is a New York-based investigative journalist whose coverage focuses on politics, technology and disinformation. His work as a reporter and editor has appeared in numerous publications, including The Guardian, The Huffington Post, Vice News and Business Insider. He has received multiple accolades for his reporting, including the 2023 European Press Prize as part of an international investigation that exposed a global extremist network. In addition to journalism, he has an academic background in the study of international relations and non-state terror groups.



Oliver Röpke was elected President of the EESC in April 2023. Member of the EESC since 2009, Mr Röpke was president of the EESC Workers' Group, member of the EESC Bureau, and rapporteur of many EESC resolutions and opinions on employment and social policy, the single market and innovation. Mr Röpke headed the Brussels office of the Austrian Trade Union Federation (ÖGB) and took on several senior positions, including representative of ÖGB to the EU institutions and to the executive committee of the ETUC, and advisory member of the ÖGB federal executive board. Mr Röpke has a legal background and holds a law degree from the University of Vienna.



Philipp Schulmeister is Director for Campaigns in the European Parliament's Directorate-General for Communication. Austrian by nationality, lawyer by education and communicator by passion, he has worked in the European Parliament for over 20 years, most recently as head of Public Opinion Monitoring (2017-2022). Leading a team of six units, he is responsible for institutional communication directed at citizens, developing, coordinating and implementing strategies and campaigns designed to inform them, create a positive attitude and trust vis-a-vis the European Parliament, and engage the public in multiple ways, the most important being voting in the European elections.



Allegra Semenzato has a Double Degree in Politics and Policy Analysis (MSc), with a focus on European affairs, energy and environmental policy, from Bocconi University and Sciences Po. She is currently working at the OECD on a multidisciplinary project.



Robert Sermek is head of the European Parliament Liaison Office in Slovakia. Leading a team of seven, he is responsible for implementing Parliament's communication strategies at national level and for bringing the work of Parliament and its members closer to Slovak citizens. He has been working in the European Parliament since 2007. He was project leader for audiovisual products in the EU-wide communication campaigns before the 2014 and 2019 European elections, and editorial coordinator for Parliament's audiovisual services. Before joining the EU administration, he worked as a journalist and was a correspondent for the Slovak News Agency TASR and later for Slovak Radio in Brussels, covering a crucial period of Slovakia's accession talks with the EU and NATO.



Alice Stollmeyer is the Founder & Executive Director of Defend Democracy, a nonpartisan, transatlantic NGO defending democracy from foreign, domestic and technological threats. Alice has a background in social studies of science, technology and society. A former energy policy adviser and digital strategist, she now works on democracy, technology, geopolitics and hybrid threats. She is in the list of Politico's #Power40 top influencers who are most effective in setting the agenda in politics, public policy and advocacy in Brussels.



Vladimir Šucha has been head of the European Commission Representation in Slovakia since 2022. Before that, he was a senior policy adviser at UNESCO, seconded from the European Commission. He has held leading positions at the European Commission's Joint Research Centre and before that was Director for culture and media in the European Commission's Directorate-General for Education and Culture. Prior to joining the European Commission, he worked as Director of the Slovak Research and Development Agency (2005-2006) and as counsellor for research, education and culture at the Slovak Representation to the EU in Brussels (2000-2004). In parallel, he has had an academic and research career in Slovakia and many other countries. He has published over 100 scientific papers in peer-reviewed journals.



Laura Sullivan is a feminist activist and executive director of WeMove Europe, a one-million member digital campaigning organisation focused on transforming the EU through people power. She has spent 22 years in Brussels campaigning for social and environmental justice, with shorter stints living and building bridges with campaigners in Senegal, Brazil and Peru. A former MEP assistant, Laura later spent ten years with ActionAid International as a campaign manager and as Regional Director for Europe and the Americas. During that time, she was Vice President of the Board of Concord, Europe's main global social justice network. She has an MA in Governance and Development specialising in civil society participation.



Monika Uhlerová is the President of the Confederation of Trade Unions of the Slovak Republic (KOZ SR) and a member of the Steering Committee of both the European and the International Trade Union Confederations (ETUC and ITUC). Previously, she was assistant professor at the Department of Political Science at Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica, Slovakia, where her work focused on social dialogue and policy, the trade union movement and the labour market. A committed trade unionist since 1999, Monika chaired KOZ SR's Youth Council and served as its vice-president from 2016 to 2022, when she took over its presidency. She has also been vice-president of Slovakia's Economic and Social Council since 2016 and will be at its helm as of 2024.



Giovanni Zagni, PhD, is a journalist based in Milan, Italy and director of the fact-checking projects Pagella Politica and Facta.news. He is a member of the executive board of the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO), where he serves as the Chair of its Task Force on the 2024 European Parliament Elections. Giovanni is a member of the MSI-INF Committee of Experts on the Integrity of Online Information, established in 2022 by the Council of Europe, and took part as an expert in the Monitoring Unit on Disinformation around COVID-19 established by the Italian government in 2020.

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We cannot thank Slovakia's Economic and Social Council enough for partnering with us in organising this event and for generously offering the gala dinner for all the participants. Special thanks to **Miroslav Hajnoš** for tirelessly supporting us all the way, for offering tips, ideas and solutions and for seamlessly liaising between us and local stakeholders from beginning to end. Special thanks also to **Martina Širhalová** for providing whatever help and wearing whatever hat was needed in Bratislava: you name it, she would do it for us!

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We are also grateful to the **European Commission Representation** in Bratislava for disseminating the news of our seminar to the Slovakian press.

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Particular thanks also to our interpreters, **Erika Kerpcarova, Eva Homolova, Zuzana Revúcka** and **Yveta Sechnyova**, for doing such a good job in making our seminar multilingual and enabling everyone in the room to follow the debates.

We also want to thank the team of technicians of the company **Lifepark** for their excellent work and for ensuring that our event went smoothly and flawlessly from a technical point of view.

Finally, a big thank-you to the photographers **Marek Marko** and **Radoslav Hajnoš** for capturing the faces and the highlights of our event in a wide variety of excellent photos, several of which we are delighted to share with you all in our [online gallery](#).

Gallery



Gallery







European Economic and Social Committee

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