



The opening session entitled ‘*Still United in Diversity?*’ marked the official start of Civil Society Week 2025. Moderated by Shada Islam, the session brought together representatives from the EESC, the European Commission, the European Parliament, the Polish Presidency of the Council of the EU and civil society organisations. Together, they explored the central question posed in the session’s title — whether Europe remains united in its diversity in the face of growing societal challenges.

The session opened with a welcome by EESC President, Oliver Röpke, who underlined the importance of civil society in safeguarding democracy and bridging divides. This was followed by a keynote speech from Professor Albena Azmanova on ‘*From Polarisation to Collaboration: Can Democracies Dream Big Again?*’, who urged participants to consider civil society’s potential in transforming political systems under strain, highlighting the importance of leadership from below when trust in institutional leadership falters.

A central part of the session was a panel discussion featuring:

Younous Omarjee, Vice-President of the European Parliament, who warned of the growing spread of far-right ideologies and rising individualism. He described civil society as ‘the glue that unites us’, essential for protecting democratic values and confronting polarisation.

Adriana Porowska, Minister for Civil Society under the Polish EU Council Presidency, who highlighted the crucial role of NGOs in crisis response and social resilience. Drawing on Poland’s experience, she emphasised how civil society often steps in where public services fall short, particularly in remote and vulnerable communities.

Szabolcs Schmidt, from the European Commission’s DG JUST, who reaffirmed the EU’s commitment to civic space and equal participation. He underlined civil society’s central role in implementing inclusion and anti-discrimination policies across Europe.

Brikena Xhomaqi, co-chair of the EESC Liaison Group, who called for stronger legal protections and concrete action to defend civic freedoms. She stressed that unity in diversity requires more than slogans — it demands enforceable rights and meaningful participation.

Petros Fassoulas, Secretary General of the European Movement International, who urged civil society to promote empathy, dialogue and inclusive policymaking. He warned that polarisation is not only externally driven, but often stems from missed opportunities for connection.

Mădălina-Mihaela Antoci, of the National Youth Council of Moldova, who brought a strong youth perspective, calling for civic education, deeper cross-border solidarity and more structured inclusion of young people in shaping Europe's future — within and beyond the EU.

Audience interaction

The session included several interactive moments via Slido, inviting participants to reflect and share perspectives in real time. Early inputs revealed a mix of concern and cautious optimism, with words like *worried*, *hopeful* and *polarised* capturing the mood in the room.

A mid-session poll on the central question — '*Are we still united in diversity?*' — showed a divided audience, with a plurality unsure.

In closing, word clouds captured what gave participants *hope* — *youth*, *solidarity* and *peace* — and what *troubled* them, including *war*, *fake news* and *polarisation*.

Conclusion

Throughout the session, speakers and participants touched on a number of recurring themes. These included the importance of civic resilience and the role of local organisations in crisis response; the need to protect and expand civic space across Europe; the significance of youth engagement and cross-border solidarity; and the challenge of maintaining democratic trust through inclusive and respectful public dialogue. While no single answer to the session's title question emerged, the conversation underscored the ongoing effort required to ensure that Europe's diversity continues to be a unifying strength rather than a source of division.