



## REPORT

**Co-organising CSOs:** ALDA, EPA, EVBB, LLLP, OBESSU, UEF, YES Forum & EIP Lab

This session investigated the profound mutual dependency between democracy and education. In a climate of rising social and political polarisation, citizenship education can no longer be relegated to a low-priority 'fourth pillar' but must be recognised as the foundational cornerstone of European resilience. Practical, lifelong and multigenerational learning solutions need to empower today's citizens as critical thinkers and active participants in a true 'Union of Opportunities'.

### Opening Statements

The session was opened by EESC member Pavel Trantina, who emphasised the role of lifelong learning in safeguarding democratic health and building non-polarised communities. While formal schooling is vital, informal and non-formal environments – such as the home, youth spaces and leisure activities – play a major role in transmitting common values. Elisa Gambardella (LLLPP) followed by highlighting the essential lifelong learning aspect of citizenship education.

### Key Insights: Changing Narratives & Bridging Silos

The panel discussion featured diverse perspectives that converged on one central risk: treating citizenship education as an optional extra rather than a structurally embedded element of EU policy.

- **MEP Brigitte van den Berg** advocated better recognition of **vocational education and training (VET)**. She emphasised that VET students deserved the same mobility opportunities and soft skills education as those in academic tracks.
- **Claudio Dondi (EiP Lab)** identified a gap between top-down frameworks and classroom reality. He proposed institutionalising local learning ecosystems to bridge this gap, relieving pressure on formal school systems by strengthening links with non-formal providers.
- **Lauren Bond (OBESSU)** noted that young people often found their civic voice in youth organisations before bringing it to the classroom. While today's youth are a

resilient generation, they require immediate recognition now, rather than being treated as ‘citizens of the future’.

- **Suzana Carp (ECIT Foundation)** called for a transition from theoretical concepts to tangible, active experiences, stressed the need for concrete European mechanisms to safeguard democratic education and highlighted the Voters without Borders ECI as a tool for making European rights visible and active.
- **Eszter Nagy (UEF Hungary) and György Miklós (Parents’ Voice Hungary)** shared testimonies on the challenges of maintaining educational values in polarised environments. They warned that in countries facing authoritarian backsliding, regimes use targeted disinformation to turn education into ‘dis-education’ against democratic values – a systemic threat to the EU as a whole.

### **Parallel Sessions: Deep Dive into Practice**

Participants transitioned into four focus groups to co-create practical solutions:

1. **Learners’ voices:** This group focused on the power of accessible language in policymaking. Key recommendations for learners’ participation included: slowing down, speaking clearly, using simple words, providing time/space and using visuals.
2. **Local learning ecosystems:** Using the [DECITEL](#) model, this group explored challenges such as fragmented policy initiatives and limited assessment methodologies in citizenship education.
3. **Synergy between institutions:** This group recommended establishing rural community spaces with volunteer support to empower isolated individuals, including elderly and young people, to engage in local life.
4. **Local-European synergy:** Using the Valongo municipality as a model, participants concluded that the EU must institutionalise sustainable cooperation between training institutions, CSOs and local authorities, backed by adequate funding to scale ‘whole-school’ learning ecosystems.

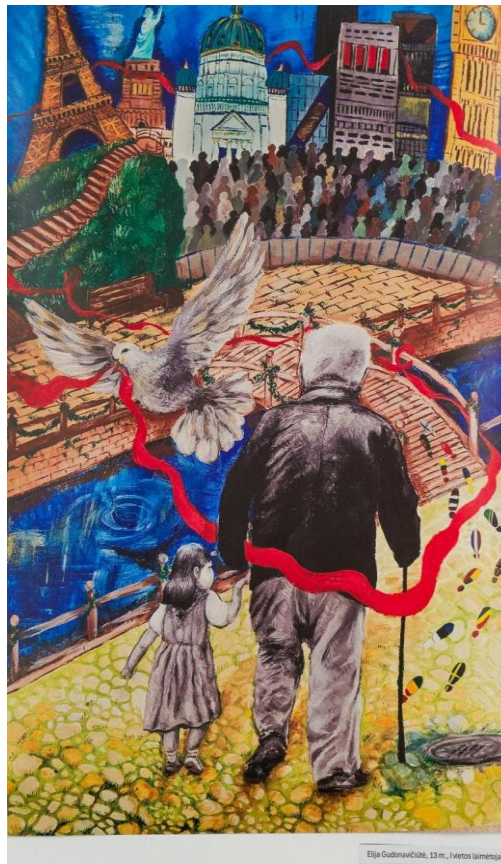
### **Final Recommendations**

The session concluded that citizenship education cannot be mandated; it must be practiced in real-life, daily interactions that form a healthy collective tissue that is resilient against radicalisation and disinformation. The following strategic priorities were produced for the EU’s new mandate:

- **Accessible language:** To be truly democratic, citizenship education must be accessible to everyone via easy-to-understand communication – a tool for inclusion not only for people with intellectual disabilities but also for older generations, migrants, etc. It supports political participation for all, particularly in fields that use technical policy language.
- **Upscaling through adequate funding:** Recommendations are only as strong as the resources behind them. We call for dedicated, sustainable funding to upscale existing successful initiatives to enable a ‘**whole-school approach**’ where educational institutions, CSOs, local authorities and stakeholders collaborate.

- **Immediate recognition for youth:** Young people are resilient, yet they are often treated as ‘citizens of the future.’ We must provide them with immediate recognition and dedicated spaces where their voices have the power to shape policy today.
- **Reforming the formal and vocational divide:** We must target teachers who lack specific training in civic education and stop neglecting VET institutions. VET students deserve equal access to EU mobility and citizenship initiatives.
- **Building local learning ecosystems:** There is a disconnect between high-level EU frameworks and individual schools. We propose local learning ecosystems to bridge this gap, creating a collaborative middle ground where local authorities, educators and families work in synergy.
- **Defending against ‘dis-education’:** In regions facing democratic backsliding, regimes use targeted disinformation to turn education against European values. Protecting civic space and the integrity of citizenship education is a vital security interest for the EU.

The audience concluded the session by selecting a picture that represented the interconnected, multigenerational nature of these goals:



by Elija Gudonavičiūtė  
Entry from children’s drawings from the town of Kėdainiai, Lithuania  
as part of the Lions International Peace Poster Contest