



REPORT

The workshop “*Mind the Gaps: Completing the European Democracy Shield*” brought together stakeholders at the European Economic and Social Committee to discuss how the EU Democracy Shield (EUDS) can effectively strengthen democratic resilience across Europe.

The EUDS, first announced in May 2024, is structured around four pillars: countering disinformation and foreign information manipulation and interference; safeguarding electoral integrity and democratic institutions; strengthening societal resilience through media literacy and critical thinking; and fostering citizen participation and engagement. Participants noted that while the initiative represents an important step toward strengthening democratic resilience, further clarity is needed on how the EUDS will operate in practice.

The workshop included three discussion groups focusing on key dimensions of the EUDS: citizen participation and democratic engagement; information integrity and democratic resilience; and societal resilience through education, culture, and media literacy. Discussions highlighted the growing pressures facing democratic systems in Europe. Journalists and civil society organisations increasingly face threats and attacks, while online platforms often amplify polarisation and disinformation. Participants emphasised that democratic resilience requires not only addressing foreign interference but also confronting domestic disinformation, political extremism, and declining trust in democratic institutions. Civil society was repeatedly described as a critical part of democratic infrastructure, playing an essential role in enabling participation, fostering public debate, and ensuring accountability.

The first discussion group focused on strengthening citizen participation. Participants stressed the importance of bringing democratic engagement closer to citizens’ everyday lives, including through local communities, workplaces, and schools. Governments at EU and national levels should take greater responsibility for enabling participation by ensuring

accessible tools and clearer communication about existing participatory mechanisms. Participants also highlighted the need for stronger accountability mechanisms to demonstrate how citizens' input is used in policymaking. In addition, participants suggested involving citizens from EU candidate countries in participatory processes such as European Citizens' Panels.

The second discussion group examined information integrity and democratic resilience. Participants emphasised that responses to disinformation should address both foreign information manipulation and domestic threats to democracy. Efforts to counter disinformation must focus on protecting democratic processes while avoiding the perception of political censorship. Participants also discussed the proposed Centre for Democratic Resilience and highlighted the importance of developing it through a participatory approach involving civil society organisations and independent experts. The inclusion of civil society networks from EU candidate countries was also seen as important, given their experience in addressing democratic backsliding and hybrid threats.

The third discussion group focused on strengthening societal resilience. Participants highlighted the importance of education, media literacy, and civic engagement in strengthening democratic culture. Greater cooperation between the EU and Member States is needed to support media literacy, civic and cultural education, and digital and AI literacy to boost critical thinking skills and help citizens recognize disinformation. Participants also emphasised the importance of supporting teachers and educators, investing in youth participation and leadership initiatives, as an important way to strengthen democratic culture and empower younger generations, including through peer-to-peer learning. This would help address the risks of online echo chambers and social isolation. Cross-sector cooperation between civil society, educational institutions, technology actors, and policymakers was identified as an important element in strengthening democratic resilience.

Overall, participants stressed that the effectiveness of the EUDS will depend on how it supports democratic actors and strengthens democratic culture across Europe. Protecting democracy requires not only defending institutions from external threats, but also fostering critical thinking, civic participation, and resilient democratic societies.

