



Report

Civil Society Week 2026 entitled "People, Democracy, Resilience – our Future!" was shaped around three European Commission's priorities: supporting people and strengthening our societies; protecting our democracy and upholding our values; and delivering together to prepare our Union for the future. These thematic pillars were central to the opening speech delivered by EESC President Seamus Boland and the keynote speech by Katherine Zappone, who addressed the challenges, opportunities, and responsibilities of civil society in shaping our Union.

Welcome address by EESC President Seamus Boland

EESC President Séamus Boland addressed the recent geopolitical tensions, including the outbreak of a new war in Iran. He expressed deep concern for the people affected and reflected on the repeated failure of diplomacy to prevent conflict. He called on leaders worldwide to engage in dialogue, emphasising that preventing war through conversation remains one of our greatest aspirations.

Mr. Boland then stressed the essential role of civil society in representing those who otherwise have no voice: "Who speaks for those who are not in the room, who don't even know that the room exists? The answer is you – civil society representatives."

He warned that democracy, especially in the European Union where 27 Member States must find compromise, is now a fragile flower. This fragility is heightened by pressing challenges such as housing insecurity, rising energy prices, and the outbreak of war. Yet, he noted, optimism persists among younger generations, who continue to support a united and ambitious Union, showing that hope and engagement can endure even in difficult times.

The EESC President stressed that for Europe to remain resilient and united, transparency, accountability, and meaningful citizen engagement are indispensable, and civil society is key to

upholding these democratic values. He concluded by urging participants to embrace all voices, including those that may seem unconventional or challenging, reminding them that *“Never be afraid of that awkward voice in the corner; it may be telling us something we need to hear.”*

Keynote speech by Katherine Zappone, former Irish Minister for Children and Youth Affairs

Katherine Zappone reflected on the transformative power of civil society, emphasising that meaningful change begins within individuals and communities. She noted that building a Union of opportunity, security, and resilience requires listening deeply, acting on values, and resolving conflicts through dialogue. Drawing on her personal experience as a young lesbian in the United States, she illustrated how civil society has historically created pathways for dignity, equality, and inclusion.

Ms. Zappone stressed that the challenge is not only to protect civil society but to strengthen it. Civil society creates spaces for communities to make sense of social challenges and imagine better futures. She highlighted initiatives such as An Cosán, a community education project she founded together with other 13 women in Ireland supporting over 21,000 learners who had limited opportunities due to poverty. These examples demonstrate how acting on values through education and community engagement can foster opportunity, security, and resilience.

Drawing on the three defining pillars of Civil society Week 2026, she defined, based on her experience, how the pillars can be achieved:

- Opportunity – providing access to education, resources, and pathways for those who have been left behind.
- Security – promoting democratic innovation through citizens’ brave, creative, and strategic work within and among member states.
- Resilience – cultivating long-term social, cultural, and legislative transformation through civil society engagement.

Ms. Zappone concluded by highlighting the importance of inner work and community collaboration: putting aside personal differences, listening deeply, and negotiating toward shared objectives is essential for democracy and for resolving conflicts constructively.

Audience Interaction

During the Q&A, participants raised questions about political support for civil society. Particularly in reaction to Chiara Piccolo from Learning Forward Foundation who asked how to address the lack of political support in order to keep delivering as civil society organisations, Ms. Zappone advised to simply “find your political champion(s)” and work with them, ultimately encouraging everyone to use their voice when they have one.