

SOC/873

Expert hearing within

Study Group 2, on Friday 4 September AM

Inclusive Democratic Participation: Promoting Civil Society in Communities

SUMMARY

Ionut Sibian, Rapporteur of the [SOC/873 Opinion](#), explained that it builds on recent EU initiatives and EESC work related to democratic participation, including the [European Democracy Shield](#), the [Civil Society Strategy](#), [AgoraEU](#), and [other previous EESC Opinions on civil society](#). Referring to the Irish Presidency's request for this Exploratory Opinion, he highlighted three key areas for examination: how organised civil society and social partners can better engage disaffected communities through mechanisms such as citizens' assemblies and participatory forums; the effectiveness of EU instruments supporting grassroots organisations, particularly in addressing administrative burdens faced by smaller CSOs; and the links between participatory democracy and media literacy as a means of strengthening democratic resilience. Mr Sibian underscored the close link between the Democracy Shield and the Civil Society Strategy and expressed the EESC's readiness to contribute to a proposed structured interinstitutional dialogue on democratic resilience and to the future Stakeholders' Forum of the European Centre for Democracy Resilience (ECDR).

Katarzyna Sumisławska, StratCom Officer, Task Force for Strategic Communication and Countering Information Manipulation, [European Commission Directorate-General for Communication](#), welcomed the EESC's work on inclusive democratic participation, stressing that democratic resilience is stronger when people feel they have a real place in democracy. This logic is the building block for the [European Centre for Democratic Resilience \(ECDR\)](#), a flagship initiative of the European Democracy Shield aiming to strengthen cooperation between public authorities, civil society, academia, media and fact-checkers, while fostering a genuine whole-of-society approach to democratic resilience, including through the fight against foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI). The ECDR Stakeholders' Platform will provide a forum for regular exchanges on emerging trends, cooperation between institutional and non-institutional actors, and policy input grounded in independent expertise. Ms Sumisławska also referred to the [European Citizens' Panel on preparedness](#) and the forthcoming [European Citizens' Panel on democratic resilience](#). She concluded that societies characterised by participation, trust and a sense of belonging are best equipped to resist foreign information manipulation and interference.

Paweł Czajkowski, Coordinator of the Legal Workstream of the [Polish Resilience Council](#) and Director of Legal and Public Policy at Agora Media Group, highlighted the importance of strengthening institutional resilience alongside citizens' capacity to counter foreign information manipulation and interference. He stressed that when people feel they have no real influence on public decisions, trust in institutions declines. Drawing on the Polish Resilience Council's experience, he highlighted the value of a body composed mainly of civil society representatives but working inside a government structure without losing its independence. The strengths of such a model lie in detecting emerging threats, lending legitimacy to policy changes, and delivering practical solutions, such as draft Criminal Code amendments on foreign disinformation, political deepfakes and online impersonation, and a toolkit developed for municipalities to address FIMI. Mr Czajkowski welcomed the European Centre for Democratic Resilience as an opportunity to involve civil society more closely in democratic resilience efforts and suggested building a network of

national resilience councils feeding into the ECDR Stakeholders' Platform, as a two-way channel between Member States and the European level. He also emphasised the need to involve a broad range of actors, including youth, media and local authorities. He argued that media should be treated as actors in democratic resilience, often the first to detect manipulation and the most credible source of correction, rather than only as a target of media literacy efforts. He called for support for independent journalism under AgoraEU, shielded from political capture through management at EU level or by independent intermediaries, and for extending rapid-response support for human rights defenders to journalists, including legal aid in SLAPP cases. To channel funding to grassroots organisations, he advocated intermediary re-granting, operational funding without co-financing, and recognition of advocacy as eligible, potentially supported by DSA and DMA fines.

Maddalena Alberti, Governing Board Member of the [European Association for Local Democracy \(ALDA\)](#) and Director of [ADL Zavidovići](#), stressed that inclusive governance is not only about representation but also about democratic learning. Referring to efforts in Brescia, Italy, to include unaccompanied foreign minors in the Municipality's General Assembly of Young People, she argued that democracy is weakened when certain perspectives are absent. Drawing on ALDA's work in the Western Balkans, she emphasised that trust in democratic institutions must be built through local participation and cooperation between citizens, civil society and public authorities. Ms Alberti also highlighted the need to address democratic disengagement in rural and peripheral areas, strengthen democratic education, and ensure greater coherence between EU migration, inclusion and anti-discrimination policies. After referring to the recent launch of ALDA's [Centre of Expertise on Participative Local Democracy](#), Ms Alberti concluded that inclusive governance makes democracy more resilient because societies understand themselves less fully when some voices are excluded.

Elisa Lironi, Deputy Executive Director of the [European Citizen Action Service \(ECAS\)](#), highlighted the importance of well-designed participatory processes in strengthening trust in democracy, particularly in the context of digital democracy and e-participation. She stressed that successful participation requires accessibility, representativeness, and meaningful feedback and impact. Accessibility should take into account differences in resources, time, skills, privacy expectations and participation cultures, while participation formats, ranging from consultations and citizens' panels to crowdsourcing exercises or specific models like [the European Citizens' Initiative Forum](#), should be adapted to specific objectives and target groups. Ms Lironi emphasised that citizens must receive clear feedback on how their contributions are used, meaning that genuine political commitment is necessary from the outset to avoid tokenistic participation. She concluded on the central role played by civil society organisations as trusted intermediaries, outreach actors, facilitators of participatory processes and advocates for translating citizens' input into concrete policy outcomes.

Nina Arwitz, Chief Executive Officer of [Volunteer Ireland](#), stressed that volunteering is a key driver of inclusive democratic participation, civic engagement and social cohesion, arguing that investing in volunteering is essential to strengthening democracy and community resilience. Drawing on the experience of Ireland, she highlighted how volunteering helps engage new arrivals, including people applicants for international protection, while also supporting persons with disabilities, the unemployed and other groups facing barriers to participation. She emphasised that volunteering fosters intercultural understanding, trust and a sense of belonging, while strengthening grassroots organisations, many of which depend heavily on volunteers to maintain links with local communities. Referring to initiatives such as the [Community Volunteers Programme](#), Ms Arwitz also highlighted the contribution of volunteering to emergency preparedness, skills development, leadership and employability. In view of the persistent barriers to

participation and the growing pressures faced by volunteer-based organisations, she called for increased investment in volunteering through national strategies, appropriate support infrastructure and dedicated funding, together with stronger political recognition of its contribution.

Prof. Dr. Nicole Bolleyer, Head of Chair and Principal Investigator of the [ERC project CIVILSPACE](#) at [Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München](#), examined the conditions that enable inclusive democratic participation by civil society organisations. Drawing on large-scale survey research, she highlighted that state funding and organisational professionalisation are key drivers of both member involvement and external political engagement. She also presented evidence of the “chilling effects” of regulation, showing that not only restrictive measures but also seemingly neutral administrative requirements can discourage advocacy and lobbying activities, including among organisations not directly targeted by such legislation. Professor Bolleyer called for tailored funding and consultation mechanisms that strengthen civil society resilience and participation, particularly for organisations unable to professionalise through private funding alone. She further stressed the importance of enabling organisations to exercise their formal rights through courts and other accountability mechanisms, while supporting networks that help pool resources, expertise and knowledge. Finally, she underlined that citizen involvement, including in non-political spaces, remains essential to democratic resilience and helps prevent civic spaces from being occupied by illiberal actors when democratic organisations withdraw.

Ruairi Fitzgerald, Senior Advisor at the [European Trade Union Confederation \(ETUC\)](#), welcomed the Opinion’s focus on both participation and policy impact, arguing that democratic resilience requires not only countering disinformation and improving digital literacy, but also empowering people to influence decision-making. He stressed that social insecurity, precarious work, housing pressures and wider inequalities can fuel feelings of powerlessness and distrust in democratic institutions. From a trade union perspective, he highlighted the importance of representative structures that give workers a collective voice through social dialogue, warning against diluting this role in broader consultation processes and stressing that different democratic channels serve different purposes. Mr Fitzgerald emphasised that effective participation must be accompanied by real influence, adequate resources, and respect for the autonomy and independence of representative organisations. He also noted that meaningful engagement requires sufficient time and capacity for organisations to consult their members and formulate collective positions, otherwise participation risks becoming merely tokenistic rather than genuinely empowering.

Ideas that emerged from the **Q&A discussion** covered the role of youth, civil society organisations and representative structures in strengthening democratic participation and resilience. It was observed that the future ECDR Stakeholders’ Platform should combine expertise, geographical balance and broad stakeholder representation, including civil society, academia, media and youth, while national resilience councils could provide useful models and channels for engagement. The discussion also highlighted the importance of accessible funding, intermediary organisations and programmes such as Erasmus+ in supporting grassroots participation. Participants stressed that economic insecurity, social exclusion and the perception that democracy benefits only elites can weaken trust in democratic institutions. At the same time, volunteering, community engagement and collective forms of participation were identified as essential for fostering belonging, democratic resilience and meaningful citizen involvement, while concerns were raised about regulatory measures that may inadvertently constrain civil society engagement.

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