



Workshop 7

Elections 2024: debating EU outside the capitals and the key role of organised civil society

2 March 2023 | 16:00 – 17:30 | EESC - Brussels

Organised by: The Union of European Federalists (UEF) and the European Association for Local Democracy (ALDA), in cooperation with the EESC Section for Economic and Monetary Union (ECO) and EESC members

Report

The focus of the Workshop was laid on the challenges around awareness-generation, information, motivation, and activation of civil society, especially when it comes to electoral turnout and in consideration of the upcoming EP-elections next year. After a brief welcome by **Anna Echterhoff**, Secretary General of the UEF, who underlined that civil society organisations communicate Europe every day and function as bridge builders between the institutions and the citizens, **Daniel Gerer**, Head of Europe Direct Vienna and Member of the Executive Bureau of Union of UEF introduced into the debate. He presented some highly successful communication approaches and activities that actually managed to reach thousands of people, targeting for example first time voters and people in rural areas, areas where right wing parties are very present, as well as people who are not too much interested in politics at all.

The interactive discussion was moderated by the journalist **Nana Walzer** and started with a short round of flashlight-statements by each panelists. The President of UEF, MEP **Sandro Gozi**, underlined that ahead of the 2024 European elections the communication with the European citizens needs to improve as the citizens consider the EU too distant. The Secretary General of LEADER France, **Alexis Lebrat**, stressed that “*we must speak of rural zones to Brussels and of Europe to rural communities*”. **Oliver Röpke**, President of the EESC Workers’ Group emphasized that the EESC and the civil society organisations are key actors in connecting with citizens. According to **Richard Kühnel**, Director in the European Commission, the civil society needs to “occupy” the communication space, which has become a battlefield with positive messages about Europe. **Katrina Leitane**, EESC Civil Society Group, drew attention to the important role of families. “*Democratic participation starts already in the family. We must ensure that citizens’ voices are heard from the first day,*” she said.

After that an interactive discussion with the audience started. The participants from civil society organisations from all over Europe shared their experiences and perspectives on their

challenges or their solutions when it comes to European elections and civil society, especially in rural areas. **Antonella Valmorbida**, Secretary General of ALDA, the European Association for Local Democracy and the Rapporteur of the Workshop concluded, that “*the European elections of 2024 will be challenging. We will face abstentions, non-European votes and foreign interference. Therefore, we need translators, bridge builders and trust builders*”.

The workshop elaborated the following recommendations:

- 1) Acknowledging the growing threats on democracy and the challenges to reach out to citizens in a constructive way. The upcoming European elections will be important but at the same time challenging. We are fearing abstention and anti-European votes. In this context, more than ever we need translators, bridges builders, like all the people gathered in this room and their constituency, to debate the European project with citizens. We need to go outside of the convinced ones, we need to have tools to reach them. We can count on organisations that can reach out to citizens in rural areas, that can also talk to citizens in their territories. Trust needs to have a relationship and create the conditions to be. We need to occupy the space, with emotions, with topics to which citizens can related in their daily life. We also need to create the possibilities of participating in public debate, to create a culture of participation at all levels.
- 2) Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) communicate Europe every day, be it as a European umbrella organisation or via their member chapters. They are important bridge builders between the European institutions and citizens.

In this context we recommend to further strengthen the role of civil society organisations as key actors linking citizens and to EU institutions. Creating a favourable environment that allows synergies between different types of actors promoting democracy and European values. They should also be given greater consideration in the development of new participatory elements.

We recommend to strengthen the cooperation between the different actors (public authorities, CSOs and media). We cannot afford to stay in our respective bubbles. We need to all together find new ways to reach to those citizens that are far away from politics. This requires great commitment, but above all creativity in the development of new communication formats, such as infotainment. We recommend working on this continuously and not only before the European elections. Against the background of emerging Eurosceptic trends and the fact that the communication space has become a battlefield, it is important to be continuously active and to occupy the communication space with pro-European messages. In this context, we recommend also that the recommendations of the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) be fully implemented, including those that require Treaty Changes.