

## **Civil Society Week: Strengthening Democracy and the Role of Civil Society**

It is almost time again for the European Parliament elections from June 6th to the 9th of this year. It serves as an important democratic exercise for all its member countries. There is no doubt that a key partner in this democratic process is the civil society and the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) took it upon themselves to bring them to the forefront with the launch its inaugural Civil Society Week, a flagship event designed to foster vibrant debates on issues affecting everyday life and the future of Europe.

As a participant of the British Councils EU/UK Stronger Together initiative, I was able to witness first-hand the diverse gathering of people from all ages and backgrounds, including students, professors, representatives from EU institutions, community groups, and many more. In my early career as a British journalist, I had the privilege to observe a significant strengthening of democracy and understand why civil society is so vital within the political process. This event is part of a travel grant offered to young journalists like myself that are a part of the pool of young journalists attending youth events across Europe.

Civil Society Week took place in the vibrant city of Brussels so before I witnessed any of the historical events of the week, I took it upon myself to explore the city. Despite my limited French, it was relatively easy to navigate around town but a great way to practise my 150-day streak on Duolingo. Of course, I had to take the opportunity to explore the city's attractions and indulge in its culinary delights, despite my huge distaste for chocolate. If I don't travel back again for the frites or waffles, then it will certainly be for the friends I made at the bustling Kitty O'Shea Irish pub.

Brussels is at the epicentre of EU politics, it exudes a unique atmosphere that reflects a blend of European cultures. The warm hospitality of the city dispelled any apprehensions I had about travelling alone and allowed me to fully immerse myself in all the activities that took place during Civil Society Week.

It is clear that we are in a time of heightened geopolitical tensions and widening polarisation. In this current state of the world today, civil society provides a glimmer of hope in bolstering democracy. The week focused on debates and insights into the power of civil society in creating a more democratic society, emphasising the significance of truthful elections and the battle against misinformation.

The opening session was a truly monumental event, titled 'Democracy across Europe: In Peril or Prosperity?' participants listened to the panellists explore defending democracy in practice. Oliver Röpké, President of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), stressed the importance of basing EU elections on facts rather than misinformation. The call for co-creation between civil society and policymakers was prevalent as conversations expanded during the week. Participants passionately expressed concerns about the diminishing role of civil societies and a demand for policies regarding growing income inequality, the imbalance of voices in power and a call for greater youth involvement within the civil society.

There was also a feeling of true unity as discussions highlighted the transformative period the EU is undergoing, with civil society being a crucial partner in this transformation. To

counter the notion that the EU and the world are on the wrong trajectory and the civic space useful in more ways than one. They play a pivotal role in defending democracy against conflicts in countries like Ukraine. While policymakers often focus on economic aspects, civil society does much more, and there is a need to recognise and support their contributions.

However, civil society faces challenges such as limited access to funding, limited involvement in policy dialogues, and the need for capacity building to keep up with technological advancements like AI and data technology. The scarcity of skilled individuals for civil organisations further compounds the challenges.

During the week, I was particularly enthusiastic about one event during Civil Society Week – the journalist seminar. I was fortunate to be among seasoned European journalists and policymakers, where we had the opportunity to ask meaningful questions about the week's events. Brexit has limited the UK's participation in the upcoming EU elections but still wanted the opportunity to question the President of the EESC on how the UK-EU relationship could be strengthened during the election. Mr Röpke told me 'there is an ongoing relationship and I am committed to strengthen it'. His answer focused on maintaining strong ties by emphasising the ongoing engagement with the UK, particularly with civil society organisations, to sustain cooperation along with an in-house follow-up committee.

Another important issue I wanted to raise was the need for joint action to address climate change. I was happy to know that the UK is seen as a significant ally in this area, and the importance of UK-EU cooperation was highlighted, especially considering the large number of EU citizens living in the UK. Christian Gsodam, the EEAS Principal Advisor for Strategic Communications, reiterated this commitment, stating that they will continue to work with the UK, not only with the government but also with civil society and various actors.

As a beacon of hope, I was able to get a hold of a champion in vocational education and training which is Ms Sotiria Tsalamani, Project Manager for the European Association of Institutes for Vocational Training (EEVB). The EEVB is a non-profit network of more than 390 Vocational schools, universities and private organisations that covers all fields and levels of education and training. In an exclusive interview, Ms Tsalamani shed light on the transformative power of vocational training and how it empowers young people to navigate the ever-evolving job market.

'Vocational education and training (VET) is not just about technical skills' asserts Ms. Tsalamani. 'It's about providing a holistic approach to developing employability, social inclusion, and economic resilience.' By embracing a multi-stakeholder approach, EEVB connects all their members to create a vibrant ecosystem that nurtures a young, active, and employable workforce.

One of the key aspects discussed was the emphasis on volunteering as a means of skill acquisition. Ms. Tsalamani emphasises that volunteering is not just an act of altruism but a strategic way to gain valuable skills. 'Volunteering allows individuals to acquire specific skills that can be recognised as prior experience and prior learning,' she explains. These skills, when validated through credentials or open bodies, can significantly enhance employability and social inclusion.

Addressing the challenges and opportunities presented by the EU election, Ms. Tsalamani highlights the potential for increased international corporation and development in vocational training. She envisions transferring good practices and examples from EVBB's extensive network to other regions, tailoring them to local contexts for maximum impact.

When asked about the top agendas for VET policies, Ms. Tsalamani stresses, just like many Civil society organisations over the week, the importance of financial support for VET institutions, inclusive and accessible programmes, and a focus on excellence. By investing in infrastructure, teacher training, and student development, VET institutions can prepare their students for the demands of the modern labour market.

EVBB's impact extends beyond vocational training. With programmes for migrants, refugees, and addressing societal challenges such as gender-based violence, the organisation takes a holistic approach to promoting social development and providing opportunities for all.

The conversation also touched upon the recognition of qualifications from refugees, a topic that was touched on during a previous panel session called 'Empowering Social Inclusion by Validating Non-formal and Informal Learning'. Ms. Tsalamani shared with me the potential of micro-credentials as a digital format of certified learning that can validate prior learning and experience. By integrating micro-credentials into educational and employment systems, refugees can more easily integrate into their new communities, but this is something that is still being worked on.

Ms Sotiria Tsalamani's insights illuminate the transformative potential of vocational training in shaping a resilient and inclusive future. By empowering young people with valuable skills and opportunities, EVBB and other organisations like it are paving the way for a brighter tomorrow.

The successful Civil society week by the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) certainly created a blueprint for the strengthening of democracy and the vital role of civil society within the political process. The event brought together individuals of diverse backgrounds to discuss issues affecting everyday life and the future of Europe, highlighting the importance of truthful elections and the battle against misinformation. I gained a renewed understanding of how important Civil society organisations are in supporting the resilience of countries facing challenges and are instrumental in defending democracy against conflicts, emphasising the need to recognise and support their contributions.

It could not be overemphasised how important it was to address the challenges faced by civil society, such as limited funding, involvement in policy dialogues, and technological advancements. It is certainly crucial to harnessing its full potential in promoting democracy and creating a more equitable future. I am looking forward to seeing more of the youth participating in the elections through these organisations and of course the final and hopefully, positive, transformation that will take place in the EU after the elections.