

EESC Civil Society Days end on a cautiously optimistic note about the sustainability of democracy in Europe



European citizens should be both vigilant and engaged

At a crucial time in Europe and in the world, ***Sustainable Democracy in Europe*** was this year's topic at the **Civil Society Days**, organised by the Liaison Group at the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) on 12 and 13 June 2019.

EESC president **Luca Jahier** underlined the need for change and the need to drive the process of carrying out this change. ***Sustainable Democracy in Europe*** is extremely important for Europe. We need to address the climate crisis, the impact of which we are already feeling. We need to address the social crisis and contain inequality. And, finally, we need to uphold our values, and defend our multi-cultural, open democracy against nationalist movements, but also against any other radical currents.

According to the president, politicians alone cannot solve the challenges of today, and he reminded citizens of their duty to participate in decision-making processes. *It is important to involve young people in what they are*

passionate and serious about, to drive a constructive revolution towards a new way of living.

The higher rate of voter participation in the EU elections is proof of people's interest in Europe, said **Conny Reuter**, co-chair of the Liaison Group and moderator of the opening session. However, the result has also shown that anti-democratic forces are on the rise and the popularity of anti-European rhetoric is increasing in too many Member States. It is therefore the responsibility of all democratic forces, including civil society, to act at European and Member State level and to strengthen civil and social dialogue.

Michael O'Flaherty commented on the Sibiu declaration, signed by European leaders on 9 May, which sets out a vision of **one united Europe**, guaranteeing the protection of our way of life. He reminded that Europe has developed impressive institutions for democracy, **making the EU the most human-rights-protected zone on earth.**

Practical events like the Civil Society Days will help to develop a roadmap leading to the objectives laid down in the declaration.

Mr O'Flaherty came up with five challenges, which should be tackled as priorities in Europe:

- **Building an equal society in Europe** – too many children are at risk of poverty;
- **Building a society that repudiates hate** – hate against Jews, Muslims or the LGBT community;
- **Building a society that celebrates diversity**, rather than just tolerating differences;
- **Building a society that respects the rule of law**;
- **Building a society that works on the basis of partnership** – engaging the different forces of society, e.g. policy-makers and civil society.

In six workshops addressing topics such as resilient democracies, economy for people and planet, e-democracy and active participation, freedom of expression in culture and education, democracy at work and youth civil society groups from all over Europe – among them many young people – developed proposals for making Europe and Europe's democracies more sustainable. They are available on the CivSocDays [event webpage](#).

In his conclusions, **Jeremy Wates**, Secretary General of the European Environmental Bureau (EEB) described the outcome of the EU elections as a moment of opportunity: Firstly, a **green wave** that transcends Green Parties, embracing social issues, and secondly, the higher turnout, which was good for democracy in general. The fact that the new Parliament will be more diverse will leave more room for discussions and negotiations, making democracy more visible.

In addition to the challenges that Mr O'Flaherty already mentioned, he saw corruption and fake news as the main threats to Europe's democracy.

What we should take away from this two-day event, he said, is that

sustainability should become the main guiding force of the new Commission. Society must not accept any trade-offs between environmental and social issues.

Since the current economic model is contributing to the social and environmental challenges that we are facing, it also needs to be reconsidered. Governance alone will not be sufficient to deliver on sustainability; we need a **multi-stakeholder engagement including European citizens**, since democracy is more than holding elections every few years.