

CONFERENCE PROGRAMME

17-18 November
2022 ESPAS Annual Conference

GEOPOLITICS IS BACK

CHARTING A COURSE FOR THE EU
IN A WORLD OF SHIFTS AND SHOCKS

EUROPEAN FORESIGHT DAYS



European Strategy and
Policy Analysis System

DAY ONE

Thursday, 17 November 2022

16.45 -17.45: *The future of democracy in an age of fear and anger*

Presenting the views of a diverse panel, the session discussed the challenges and opportunities facing democracies in the context of current climate of political disaffection, 'permacrises' and shrinking civic space.

Given the enormous social and political shifts of the past thirty years and the recent exacerbation of these trends, the panel raised several points about the increased difficulty and complexity of governing. The perception that democratic governance does not deliver on its promises is widespread among citizens, especially those who are older, socially marginalized or culturally/geographically isolated from decision-making power. This political discontent leads to decreased institutional trust and electoral decisions. Decreased voter turnout and high electoral volatility have increased political turnover and enabled populist and anti-system political parties to gain power through democratic means, while advocating for policies which oppose democratic principles.

Shrinking civic space was a recurrent theme of the session. Citizens have fewer avenues to contribute and politically organize, and do not see themselves reflected in the political sphere in general. Ayaka Suzuki from the Executive Office of the UN Secretary General framed these issues as a fracturing of the social contract, the mutual bond between the governing class and citizens. She stressed that as the social contract is the basis of democratic power, it must be repaired as a point of urgency. Proposed mechanisms to achieve this were expanding measures of societal success beyond GDP, to ensure that financial profits are not at the expense of human welfare, and ensuring that global public goods such as peace and security are delivered and global public commons such as the environment are protected. EESC president Christa Schweng emphasized the power of participatory and direct democracy, stressed the need to foster democratic participation at all levels and underlined that greater emphasis should be placed on civil and social dialogue. Tangible follow up of the recent Conference on the Future of the EU is key to restore this social contract and create a robust civic space. Brigid Laffan of the European University Institute commented that while civil society is a vital contributor to the democratic process, representative democracy plays an irreplaceable role in aggregating political preferences and the focus on electoral politics in conversations about democracy is not misplaced.

In addition to civil society involvement, emancipatory values and social equality were promoted as drivers of democracy. Professor Laffan pointed to the demonstrated links between gender equality and robust democratic systems. Strong regulation of electoral funding and combatting social marginalization were also raised as a key policy actions. However, Professor Lanxin Xiang questioned the supposed universality of EU values and raised the need for Westerners to recognize the diversity of perspectives that exist in cultural values.

Looking towards the future, protecting democracy will require attention to political processes at all levels. Sophia Russack from CEPS raised the recurring criticism of democratic deficit at the EU level and proposed possible reforms to reduce this, focusing on the Spitzenkandidaten process. Having a joint candidate procedure which involves both the European Parliament groups and the European Council could inject a higher level of democratic representation into the Commission President selection process. Strategic foresight was also mentioned as an important tool to understand the complexity of our world and help us prepare for the complexities of future. Beyond simply using foresight tools, there should be a dedicated effort to build a culture of foresight in our institutions. Such efforts are now beginning in the UN, and the work of the EESC in this area was praised.

Overall, speakers shared the sense that democracy requires urgent and constant support and improvement, noting that complacency in democracy is a hidden threat. As Christa Schweng quoted, 'those who sleep in democracies wake up in dictatorships'.