



SEEEDS

Supporting Engagement in European Elections
and Democratic Societies



ELECTION-WATCH.EU



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Summary report of the high-level event at the European Parliament on 4 July 2023

A high-level event on “Ensuring the integrity of European Parliament (EP) elections in 2024 through the participation of civil society”, hosted by the Member of the European Parliament (MEP) **Domènec Ruiz Devesa**, took place at the EP on 4 July 2023. **First Vice President (FVP) Dr. Othmar Karas** opened this [Supporting Engagement in European Elections and Democratic Societies \(SEEEDS\) project](#) event, which brought together representatives of the four major pro-European political groups in the EP (European People's Party (EPP), Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D), Renew, and Greens/European Free Alliance (EFA)) with civil society organisations, election observation experts and representatives from the European institutions, to discuss key topics of the 2024 European Parliament elections.

In line with Vice President of the European Commission for Values and Transparency **Věra Jourová's** commitment to supporting resilient European elections and to reaching out to civil society in the objective to “defend democracy” - as expressed during the European Partnership for Democracy (EPD) annual conference - the event focussed on enhancing European elections integrity by bridging the gap between European decision makers and civil society.

The event highlighted the broad consensus among various stakeholders that, in the run-up to the 2024 EP elections, voter mobilisation is essential, and that campaigning will provide an opportunity to build a collective advocacy agenda, improve inclusion and address equality issues for underrepresented groups, including women, persons with disabilities, mobile EU citizens and minorities. A total of 60 persons from outside the EP registered for the high-level event, and 47 participants from 17 different EU Member States attended the live stream. A video summary can be accessed [here](#).

The panellists comprised:

- Key note speaker **FVP Dr. Othmar Karas** (EPP, Austria),
 - Key note speaker **MEP Domènec Ruiz Devesa** (European Parliament's Committee on Constitutional Affairs (AFCO) rapporteur on electoral reforms, S&D, Spain),
 - **MEP Sandro Gozi**, (European Parliament's Committee on Internal Market and Consumer Protection (IMCO) rapporteur on transparency and targeting of political advertising, Renew, France),
 - **MEP Ignazio Corrao**, (Greens/ EFA, Italy), and
 - **Ms. Antonella Valmorbida** (Secretary General of the European Association for Local Democracy (ALDA) and former President of EPD).
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- Moderator: **Mr. Armin Rabitsch**, Chairperson of Election-Watch.EU,
 - Final conclusions: **Mr. Ken Godfrey**, EPD Executive Director.

Four rapporteurs representing the SEEEDS project partners presented civil society recommendations emanating from the four SEEEDS webinars:

- **Mr. Michael Lidauer** from Election-Watch.EU on Equality and Inclusion and how to enhance coherence and address inclusion gaps,
- **Mr. Fernando Hortal Foronda** from EPD on Transparency and how to protect human rights in political advertising online,
- **Ms. Tatyana Hilscher-Bogusevich** on behalf of European Platform for Democratic Elections (EPDE) on Accountability and how to improve political and campaign finance regulations, and,
- **Mr. Dennis Wenzl** from Democracy Reporting International (DRI) on Risks and Opportunities and how to counter disinformation and safeguard rule of law principles.



Keynote speaker **MEP Domènec Ruiz Devesa** outlined the state of play of the European electoral reforms and highlighted three challenges: first, the fact that the European elections are too diluted by national circumstances and, instead of one European election, there are 27 national elections. Second, there is a lack of visibility of European political parties; according to the European Treaties they should be the main actors, but they are neither really visible in the campaign nor on the ballots. Third, there is both a lack of proper visibility and shortcomings concerning the voters' understanding of the *Spitzenkandidaten* process, an important development and innovation which worked in 2014 but not in 2019. Adding to the question of how to improve participation and turnout the hosting MEP emphasised the EP's solutions to set up a pan-European electoral constituency, made up of 28 candidates, in addition to the current national constituencies. On top of the list would be the *Spitzenkandidat* for the President of the Commission, followed by 27 candidates campaigning for a common interest in their respective member state, whereby European political parties would become visible with their symbol in the political campaign and on the ballot.

Keynote speaker **FVP Othmar Karas** emphasised opportunities of the 2024 European Elections and explained that the EP, which constitutes the heart of European democracy, is the only directly elected multi-national parliament in the world with legislative powers. The FVP emphasised that the vote next year is decisive for the direction the EU will take in the next five years. It is important to protect and strengthen the liberal parliamentary European democracy, especially when law is broken, values are violated, trust is lost, and freedom of speech is restricted in some EU member states and some national parliaments are silenced through emergency powers. The FVP emphasised that we cannot take our liberal democracies for granted; what one generation has achieved should not be lost by the next one. Therefore, we must do everything to strengthen our achievements. Preserving democracy requires, first, a common understanding about liberal parliamentary democracy, second, the political will to implement that commitment in our daily work, and third, the accompanying support from civil society. The FVP announced his initiative to develop a Charter describing the role of parliaments in functioning liberal democracies, in order to create a common understanding based on seven fundamental principles and key ingredients of modern parliamentarism, which shall be adopted by national parliaments by April 2024. Moreover, Dr. Karas emphasised that it is crucial to deepen cooperation with civil society and to encourage citizens to vote.

MEP Sandro Gozi spoke about transparency and targeting of political advertising, and emphasised three priorities: First, to develop European democracy along the proposal on the electoral law outlined by the hosting MEP Domènec Ruiz Devesa; second, to mobilise around the democratic processes in Europe and the EP elections, for which we need several instruments including the proposal on political advertising to increase transparency of the political and democratic processes. Third, to protect our democracies as they are under attack. He outlined that working on common rules for political advertising is paradoxical, as the parties cannot conduct transnational campaigns in the European elections. The proposal for transnational lists is one solution to overcome the walls of national politics. The political advertising proposal is based on two pillars: on the one side you got the democracy package, including the European Democracy Action Plan, and on the other side you got the Digital Services Act. This proposal aims at building a truly digital single market for online political advertising, but also for offline political advertising, and introduces rules that ensure more transparency to protect our democracies.

MEP Ignazio Corrao discussed the inclusion of youth and mobile EU citizens in the European elections. Answering the question of how to make young people protagonists in the electoral process, he proposed to engage them with relevant content on digital platforms and social media. MEP Corrao also encouraged parties and candidates to address youth-specific European concerns in their campaigns and to create a sense of relevance and involvement among young voters. While acknowledging that young people have historically been underrepresented in elections, he reiterated that it is essential to recognise the immense potential they hold and the unique perspective they bring to the table. Furthermore, MEP Corrao emphasized our duty to make the participation easier for the eleven million mobile EU citizens, who should be able to vote and stand as candidate under the same conditions. Referencing AFCO Rapporteur Boeselager's [report](#), which was adopted in February 2023, there is special emphasis on the importance of including youth and persons with disabilities in the European elections.

Ms. Antonella Valmorbida (ALDA Secretary General) talked about the EU's needs for a more effective participatory democracy and for involving civil society in decision-making processes. She emphasised that it is not enough to change European politics in the EP, but it also requires changes on the ground, amongst the citizens. It is of great importance, but equally difficult, to ensure that the EP elections are widely

noticed and appreciated by the voters. It requires work at the local level, in each school and local government, to build a sense of European citizenship. Democracy needs to be seen holistically, as it includes freedom of press, promotes multi-party involvement, transparency, and accountability, and builds on genuine elections. Ms. Valmorbidia outlined that we need to be ambitious in our thoughts regarding the strategy of reforming the European electoral framework to make it more functional. She emphasised not to be afraid of including the communal level more, in order to bring back trust in political affairs.