



Report from the EU Parliamentary **Democracy** Forum

Directorate-General for Parliamentary Democracy Partnerships
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European
Parliament

The report of the Directorate-General for Parliamentary Democracy Partnerships outlines the key content and outcomes of the first EU Parliamentary Democracy Forum, which brought together members of national parliaments, MEPs, EU institutions, civil society, and experts.

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[Parliamentary Democracy Forum, EP Multimedia Centre](#)

Table of Contents

Table of Contents	3
1. Foreword.....	5
Foreword by the European Parliament's Vice-Presidents responsible for relations with national parliaments	5
2. EU Parliamentary Democracy Forum in a nutshell	8
3. Key take-aways from the EU Parliamentary Democracy Forum	11
3.1 Opening Session.....	11
3.2 Session I – Strengthening parliamentary democracy through citizen engagement	13
3.2.1 Keynote interventions	13
3.2.2 Conclusions from the debate	16
3.2.3 Ideas put forward	16
3.3 Session II – Overcoming political polarisation	17
3.3.1 Keynote interventions	17
3.3.2 Conclusions from the debate	20
3.3.3 Ideas put forward	20
3.4 Conversation with Michael McGrath, Commissioner for Democracy, Justice, the Rule of Law and Consumer Protection	21
3.5 Session III – Building Resilience	21
3.5.1 Keynote interventions	21
3.5.2 Conclusions from the debate	24
3.5.3 Ideas put forward	25
3.6 Closing session – Towards a partnership on parliamentary democracy	26

Foreword



1. Foreword

Foreword by the European Parliament's Vice-Presidents responsible for relations with national parliaments



*Esteban González Pons and Katarina Barley, Vice-Presidents of the European Parliament.
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Democracy is under pressure worldwide. Geopolitical tensions, democratic backsliding, hybrid threats, disinformation and polarisation challenge the foundations of democratic governance. Europe's democracies cannot remain static in the face of these realities; they must show that they are not only resilient, but also capable of renewal, adaptation, and leadership.

The European Union and its Member States have both the responsibility and the opportunity to lead this democratic renewal. Parliaments are at the heart of this effort. Whether at national or European level, parliamentarians represent the same citizens and face the same challenges to democracy. These challenges transcend borders; therefore, our responses must be shared and coordinated.

It was with this conviction that the European Parliament convened the first EU Parliamentary Democracy Forum. The forum brought together Members of the European Parliament and national parliaments, civil society, youth, academics, and experts for open dialogue, mutual learning, and the development of practical ideas to reinforce democracy in Europe.

Throughout the forum, three themes consistently emerged: citizen engagement and participation, polarisation, and resilience. Participants emphasised the need to rebuild trust between citizens and institutions by strengthening democratic participation and ensuring that citizens feel genuinely part of the democratic process. They underlined that democracy cannot thrive where intimidation and violence against elected representatives persist, nor where polarisation replaces dialogue and mutual respect. The debates also highlighted that a modern, resilient democracy requires innovation: responsible use of digital tools, protection against foreign interference, and the harnessing of technological opportunities, including artificial intelligence, while safeguarding fundamental rights and democratic accountability.

The forum demonstrated that when parliaments come together, they are stronger, more innovative, and better equipped to respond to shared challenges. Its interactive and inclusive format created a genuine space for dialogue and practical exchange, showing that participation can bridge divides and build cooperation across parties, countries, and generations.

As Vice-Presidents responsible for relations with national parliaments, we are deeply committed to ensuring that the forum's momentum continues. The ideas developed here will not remain theoretical. The conclusions of this report will inform our ongoing work and feed into existing interparliamentary frameworks as well as future cooperation initiatives. Our ambition is to make the Parliamentary Democracy Forum a standing annual platform, ideally coinciding with the International Day of Democracy, where parliaments jointly discuss common democratic challenges, renew democratic commitments, exchange best practices, and strengthen Europe's democratic resilience.

Today, Europe faces profound challenges. But the message of this forum is one of determination and hope. We are firmly convinced that interparliamentary cooperation is not merely complementary to European integration – it is indispensable to it. Dialogue, mutual learning and the exchange of experience among parliaments enhance our collective capacity to respond to challenges, build unity, and reinforce democratic legitimacy.

Together, we can build a resilient Europe with connected parliaments and engaged citizens. We look forward to continuing this interparliamentary dialogue, working together to strengthen democracy across Europe.

Esteban González Pons
Vice-President

Katarina Barley
Vice-President

EU Parliamentary Democracy Forum in a nutshell



2. EU Parliamentary Democracy Forum in a nutshell

The **first EU Parliamentary Democracy Forum (PDF)**, held on 19 November 2025, was organised to provide a platform for dialogue and exchange on the challenges confronting Europe's democracies and on possible actions to safeguard them. It provided a space to evaluate current trends, address threats to democratic governance, and share good practices and innovative ideas to strengthen resilience and bolster parliamentary cooperation across Europe.

The event gathered over **700 participants**: members of EU national parliaments (including five Speakers, three Vice-Presidents, and five Committee Chairs), Members of the European Parliament (including the President, four Vice-Presidents, and four Committee Chairs), staff of EU institutions, civil society organisations, youth representatives, and experts.



Group photograph at the PDF. © European Parliament

During the PDF, participants explored the following topics:

- **Strengthening parliamentary democracy through citizen engagement:** developing strategies to strengthen trust in democracy and its institutions, with a focus on grassroots movements, citizen participation, and youth engagement in democratic processes.
- **Building resilience:** exploring tools and policies to protect democracies from hybrid threats and foreign interference, in line with the European Democracy Shield; addressing disinformation, cyber threats, and other vulnerabilities, while also exploring how technology can strengthen democratic processes.
- **Overcoming political polarisation:** analysing the causes and consequences of deepening ideological divisions within democratic societies; examining the rise in violence against politicians; and discussing measures, including the role of parliamentarians, to reduce polarisation and promote democratic dialogue.

Instead of traditional panels, each session took the form of an open debate moderated by experienced facilitators. Interventions by experts, Speakers and members from the European and national parliaments ensured diverse perspectives, while discussions remained open and unscripted.

The PDF provided **a clear and compelling call for parliaments to join forces in defending and revitalising democracy** at a time of mounting pressures on democratic systems.



*Session I – Strengthening parliamentary democracy through citizen engagement of the PDF.
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**Key takeaways from
the EU**

**Parliamentary
Democracy Forum**



3. Key take-aways from the EU Parliamentary Democracy Forum

3.1 Opening Session

Democracy, its resilience and its ability to reconnect with citizens were at the heart of the opening session. **Roberta METSOLA**, President of the European Parliament, emphasised the need for collective action to confront growing challenges facing democracy. She called for greater efforts to reconnect institutions with citizens and younger generations, simplify EU action, widen participation in political life, and modernise parliamentary practices.

She also welcomed the decisive support for the introduction of voluntary proxy voting for Members of the European Parliament who are pregnant or have recently given birth, describing it as a long-overdue breakthrough after 46 years. The reform, she noted, now depends on continued backing from the Danish Presidency of the Council and from national parliaments to ensure its ratification.

Søren GADE, President of the Danish Parliament and Chair of the Parliamentary Dimension of the Danish EU Presidency, described the European Union as a unique model of democratic governance, built on cooperation and solidarity among its Member States. He pointed to transparency, accountability, and inclusivity as core democratic values and emphasised the responsibility of parliaments to uphold them.

He underlined that democracy needs solid institutional frameworks and a vibrant democratic culture to survive. While institutional frameworks rely on rights, constitutional safeguards and legal procedures, democratic culture is sustained through everyday practices of dialogue, listening, and respect for opposing views.



In her powerful keynote intervention **Maria RESSA**, journalist and Nobel Peace Prize laureate, warned of the growing threats to democratic systems by recounting her experience in the Philippines, which she described as a testing ground for modern authoritarianism. She spoke of facing 11 arrest warrants in a single year for what she termed “the crime of journalism”, as well as sustained attacks against her newsroom.

Her message to Europe was stark: “What happened to us is happening to you.” She cautioned that disinformation, algorithmic manipulation, and institutional distrust, which have poisoned democracy in the Philippines, are now operating across the West. Without truth, she warned, democratic institutions collapse. She nevertheless struck a note of cautious optimism, arguing that democracy can still fight back if parliaments, journalists, and citizens form a “trust triangle” capable of countering disinformation regulating platforms, investing in public-interest media, and strengthening digital literacy.



3.2 Session I – Strengthening parliamentary democracy through citizen engagement

Half of Europeans feel that democracy is not working for them¹, with trust eroding most rapidly among younger generations. Against this backdrop, participants explored strategies to reverse democratic disengagement and foster a culture of active citizenship.

3.2.1 Keynote interventions

The scene-setting intervention was delivered by Professor **Kalypto NICOLAÏDIS**, Chair in Global Affairs at the School of Transnational Governance, who offered a reflection on participatory democracy. She addressed concerns often raised by parliamentarians that participatory mechanisms might delegitimise elected institutions. Her call was not to replace parliaments but to enhance their collective intelligence through the creation of a permanent participatory infrastructure, composed of citizens chosen by lot, rotating regularly and meeting across the continent.



Kalypto Nicolaidis, Chair in Global Affairs at the School of Transnational Governance at the PDF. © European Parliament

¹ <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2966>

In his keynote remarks **Sven SIMON**, Chair of the EP's Committee on Constitutional Affairs, cautioned that while such ideas may appear innovative, they also carry profound democratic risks, particularly the potential loss of accountability, which he described as the cornerstone of parliamentary legitimacy. The priority, he argued, must remain ensuring that elections can meaningfully change political majorities, alongside more effective communication with citizens. Echoing **Maria RESSA's** warning, he concluded that when parliaments fail, the bridge between citizens and power collapses.



Polarisation and social fragmentation featured prominently in the intervention of European Parliament Vice-President **Nicolae ȘTEFĂNUȚĂ**. He highlighted the role of algorithms in fuelling polarisation, alongside political strategies that amplify divisive cultural issues at the expense of shared socioeconomic concerns. He described a widening generational and gender divide and appealed to young people to step outside digital bubbles, talk to parents and elders and engage across differences, and reconnect through dialogue with older generations, stressing that the survival of Europe's democracy depends on it.

The importance of reclaiming physical spaces for democratic debate was underlined by **José Pedro AGUIAR-BRANCO**, President of the Portuguese Parliament. He stressed initiatives that bring young people directly into parliamentary life, such as Portugal's Youth Parliament, and called on parliaments across Europe to open their doors more widely and coordinate civic dialogue. Parliaments, he reminded participants, are both the heart and the barometer of democracy: when society withdraws, legitimacy erodes.



A forward-looking perspective was added by **Raya NAZARIAN**, President of the Bulgarian Parliament, who argued that the defence of democracy must rest not only on shared values but also on technological competence. Future generations, she noted, will defend freedom as much through digital literacy as through civic engagement. This, she argued, requires substantial investment in media literacy, modern education programmes, and legislation that promotes healthy online public discourse.

3.2.2 Conclusions from the debate

Participants converged on the need to create more open and sustained spaces for meaningful dialogue between citizens and parliamentarians. Trust, they agreed, cannot be rebuilt through elections alone. Continuous exchange, embedded in parliamentary practice, was identified as a practical way to deepen democratic engagement, broaden participation — particularly among young people — and ensure that diverse voices shape Europe’s political agenda.

3.2.3 Ideas put forward



- **Annual EU-wide parliamentary debates with citizens**

Organise annual debates with citizens on the occasion of the International Day of Parliamentarism (30 June), with national parliaments and the European Parliament simultaneously opening their doors to discuss key policy issues and European priorities. Such debates would enable more regular and meaningful citizen involvement between elections, reinforce public trust in institutions, and enhance parliaments’ democratic mandate.

- **Youth checks on new legislation**

Introduce youth checks within parliamentary committees for new legislative proposals, ensuring that the perspectives and needs of young Europeans are considered from the outset of the law-making process. This mechanism would give young people a genuine voice in shaping EU policies, while fostering a culture of participation and democratic accountability.

- **Pan-European citizens’ consultations**

Establish permanent tools for democratic debate and collective intelligence, both digital and in-person, to complement parliamentary democracy at European level.

- **Empowering youth through parliamentary simulation**

Develop structured parliamentary simulation exercises allowing school-age young people to engage in parliamentary-style debates or votes on key political issues. Such exercises would boost political self-confidence and strengthen trust in the political system and elected leaders. Building on existing European Parliament initiatives such as Euroscola and the Ambassador School Programme, national parliaments could coordinate a pan-European network of youth civic education exercises.

3.3 Session II – Overcoming political polarisation

The session explored the causes and consequences of growing ideological divisions in democratic societies, including the rise in violence and intimidation against politicians. Speakers discussed measures to reduce polarisation and to support democratic dialogue.

3.3.1 Keynote interventions

Ken GODFREY, Executive Director of the European Partnership for Democracy (EPD) stressed that while diversity of opinion is essential to democracy, polarisation becomes dangerous when it turns toxic, fostering an “us versus them” mindset and weakening democratic institutions. He noted that depolarisation remains rare, with only a few democracies showing progress. Electoral systems, levels of civic participation, and political strategies all shape degrees of polarisation, while digital platforms often amplify divisive dynamics. Although polarisation cannot be eliminated entirely, he argued that its most damaging effects can be mitigated by shifting debate away from identity conflicts and strengthening digital regulation.



Ken Godfrey, Executive Director of the European Partnership for Democracy at the PDF. © European Parliament

From a parliamentary perspective, **Javier ZARZALEJOS**, Chair of the European Parliament's Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs, described how polarisation is altering the nature of legislative work. Parliamentary debate increasingly resembles confrontation rather than negotiation, making compromise and majority-building more difficult. In this environment, committee chairs and rapporteurs play a critical role in preserving constructive dialogue. While pluralism must be protected, polarisation poses clear risks to the long-term resilience of parliamentary democracy.



The human cost of polarisation was brought into focus by **Daiga MIERIŅA**, Speaker of the Latvian Parliament, who described the growing normalisation of threats, harassment and violence against politicians. Physical attacks, harassment, and defamation have become systemic, fostering fear and self-censorship, discouraging public engagement and distorting democratic debate, as sensationalism and radical positions increasingly crowd out thoughtful policymaking. Ensuring that everyone feels safe to express their views, she argued, is essential. Combating these trends requires research-based strategies, stronger legal protections, and the promotion of respectful public discourse. Attacks on political speech, she concluded, are ultimately attacks on democracy itself.

Katarina BARLEY, Vice-President of the European Parliament responsible for relations with national parliaments, framed polarisation as both a political and cultural challenge, with particularly severe consequences for women in public life. She underlined the role of parliaments and civil society in creating safe spaces for dialogue and cooperation, pointing to early engagement and cross-party initiatives, such as exchange programmes, as ways to build habits of collaboration. Institutions, she argued, must not only regulate, but also apply democratic standards consistently, ensuring fairness and credibility. Responding to deliberate provocation, she noted, presents both strategic and moral challenges. Discussing polarisation can itself become a tool.



A practical perspective came from **Kamzy GUNARATNAM**, Member of the Norwegian Parliament, who described polarisation as the refusal to share a common reality. In Norway, she explained, parliamentary practices such as seating arrangements and cross-party cooperation are deliberately used to build trust and accountability. Democracy, she argued, does not require full agreement, but rather a willingness to live and work together. Polarisation begins when dialogue and mutual recognition disappear.

3.3.2 Conclusions from the debate

The exchange of views emphasised the need for more accessible and transparent democratic institutions. Participants highlighted the importance of opening institutions to citizens and engaging with schools through educational programmes to foster civic awareness. Support for free and independent media was identified as essential to democratic resilience. Participants agreed that social media is a tool rather than the root cause of conflict, and that political disagreement should not lead to societal division. Rebuilding trust, fostering empathy, promoting civic education, and ensuring constructive dialogue within democratic institutions were identified as key measures to counter polarisation and strengthen democracy.

3.3.3 Ideas put forward



- **Interparliamentary alliance and roadmap on combating violence against politicians**

An EU interparliamentary alliance on safety in politics could be established, bringing together European and national parliamentarians. The alliance would provide a clear framework for coordinated parliamentary action, contribute to the Commission's recommendations on safety in politics and the forthcoming guide of best practices, and ensure systematic follow-up on their implementation at EU and national levels. It could also serve as a platform for the regular exchange of best practices, information sharing, capacity building and the development of expertise on preventing and responding to violence against politicians.

- **Cross-party European platform for young parliamentarians**

Establishing a cross-party platform for young parliamentarians could serve to counter polarisation by fostering dialogue, collaboration, and shared sense of purpose across ideological lines. Grounded in generational solidarity rather than political division, such a platform would encourage the exchange of perspectives and innovative policy ideas.

- **Joint EP-NP parliamentary civic education visits to schools and universities**

Joint visits by European and national parliamentarians from diverse political backgrounds to schools and universities would expose students to democratic principles, consensus building, and constructive dialogue. Interactive sessions would allow legislators to share experiences of navigating ideological differences to achieve common goals, demonstrating how compromise and mutual respect underpin effective governance.

3.4 Conversation with Michael McGrath, Commissioner for Democracy, Justice, the Rule of Law and Consumer Protection

In conversation with the EP Vice-President **Esteban GONZÁLEZ PONS**, Commissioner **Michael MCGRATH** outlined the core objectives of the European Democracy Shield, including monitoring disinformation and foreign electoral interference while safeguarding free and fair democratic participation.

He stressed that new legislation, such as the European Media Freedom Act, must be complemented by civic education, national initiatives, and adequate financial resources. Looking ahead, he expressed the hope that the upcoming Multiannual Financial Framework would include a strong allocation for the protection of fundamental rights and democracy. While the conduct of elections remains a national competence, he argued that no Member State can face these threats alone, making cooperation essential within the limits of subsidiarity.

During the discussion, some participants raised concerns about potential risks to freedom of expression. The Commissioner acknowledged the need for balance but reaffirmed that freedom of speech remains a core value of the European Union.



3.5 Session III – Building Resilience

The final session focused on democratic resilience, examining the impact of technology on democracy and the need for preparedness through a whole-of-society approach.

3.5.1 Keynote interventions

Paula GORI, Secretary-General and Coordinator of the European Digital Media Observatory, opened the discussion by outlining how artificial intelligence (AI) and algorithmic systems are placing increasing pressure on the critical thinking upon

which democratic societies rely. Given the speed of technological change, she argued for a risk-based approach to regulation and insisted that democratic values must be embedded in AI systems by design.



Paula Gori, Secretary-General and Coordinator of the European Digital Media Observatory at the PDF. © European Parliament

The first keynote speech was held by **Nathalie LOISEAU**, Chair of the Special Committee on the European Democracy Shield. She described European democracies as being under sustained hybrid attack. She pointed to the use of weaponised deepfakes, chatbots, and large-scale disinformation, as well as collusion between political agendas and powerful tech interests. The European Union, she argued, must show greater determination in enforcing its own laws and strengthen cooperation and mandates for bodies such as Europol. Defending democracy requires the mobilisation of society as a whole.



The session also featured perspectives from Moldova. A prerecorded message from President **Maia SANDU**, was followed by an intervention from **Radu MARIAN**, Chair of the Economic, Budget and Finance Committee of the Moldovan Parliament, who reflected on Russian interference during the 2025 elections. Drawing on this experience, Mr **MARIAN** argued that even small states can protect democracy when they have courageous political leadership, support from allies, coordination with law enforcement, and effective public communication. Unanchored democracies, he warned, are particularly vulnerable and must support one another.



Peeter TALI, Chair of the EU Affairs Committee of the Estonian Parliament, described Estonia’s long-term approach to preparedness against hybrid threats. He outlined how Russia interferes in elections, uses state-controlled media outlets such as RT and Sputnik to spread disinformation, weaponises resource exports, and supports extremist political movements to fuel societal tensions. Estonia’s response has included banning Russian television channels, restricting tourist visas for Russian and Belarusian citizens, and investing heavily in public education. However, he argued that defence alone is insufficient; hostile actors must also be actively confronted.

The final keynote speech was delivered by **George PAPANDREOU**, General Rapporteur on Democracy for the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. He argued that democracy depends on the ability to manage disagreement within a framework of shared values. Rising economic inequality, he warned, is undermining trust and fuelling disillusionment. A new democratic pact, he suggested, is needed, based on power sharing, economic equality and technological autonomy. Concrete steps would include strengthening training on disinformation, reforming the governance of technology, and sustaining public trust through more transparent communication.



3.5.2 Conclusions from the debate

Participants warned of the accelerating impact of disinformation, hybrid interference and opaque algorithms on democratic systems. They called for stronger oversight of major technology platforms, sustained investment in resilience, and more coherent regulatory frameworks. Democratic resilience, they agreed, depends not only on technical safeguards but also on cooperation across parliaments, borders and society. As disinformation knows no borders, responses must be interparliamentary by design. Participants urged a shift from ad hoc exchanges towards permanent joint structures. Civil society and youth representatives warned of declining participation and the polarising effects of social media, advocating a whole-of-society approach that engages citizens, schools and media to strengthen democratic literacy and public trust.

3.5.3 Ideas put forward



- **Interparliamentary working group on the European Democracy Shield**

A dedicated interparliamentary working group, composed of Members of the European and national parliaments, could monitor the implementation of the [European Democracy Shield](#) and support Member States in strengthening democratic resilience. Joint efforts could focus on threats such as disinformation, political polarisation, voter disengagement, and violence against politicians, including women in public life.

- **EP-EU national parliaments thematic dialogue on the implementation of the AI Act**

Structured thematic dialogues between European and national parliamentarians could be set up to ensure coordinated follow up on the implementation of major EU legislative files, related to the European Democracy Shield and beyond. Within the framework of the European Parliament's IMCO-LIBE AI Working Group, a pilot initiative is under way, bringing together MEPs and Members of national Parliaments for inter-parliamentary exchanges focused on the implementation of the [AI Act](#) across Member States.

- **Strengthening cooperation with the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE)**

The European Parliament and [PACE](#) share a strong commitment to defending and revitalising democracy across Europe and should join forces to advance initiatives such as the proposed Democracy Pact. Joint work could be enhanced in areas where both institutions bring a clear added value, including gender equality, combating corruption, protecting minority rights, and tackling democratic backsliding. By combining their complementary mandates, geographic reach and expertise, the EP and PACE could also deepen cooperation on hybrid threats, such as cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns, foreign interference and challenges stemming from AI and other emerging technologies.

- **Development of a core European civic education curriculum**

A joint core civic curriculum could be developed and made available for all schools in EU and Council of Europe Member States. While fully respecting national competence in education, this framework would offer a shared, high-quality reference to promote democratic literacy, critical thinking, and active citizenship among young people.

3.6 Closing session – Towards a partnership on parliamentary democracy

The closing session featured interventions by the two Vice-Presidents of the European Parliament responsible for relations with national parliaments, **Esteban GONZÁLEZ PONS** and **Katarina BARLEY**, who reflected on the lessons of the day and outlined possible paths forward.

Vice-President **Esteban GONZÁLEZ PONS** reminded the audience that democracy never thrives in isolation. National and European Parliament today face the same cross-border challenges: polarisation, disinformation, hybrid interference, and declining trust. He also outlined the pressures reshaping European democracies, including disruptive digital technologies, geopolitical instability, complex policy decisions that are difficult to communicate, and deepening inequalities. None of these challenges, he stressed, belongs to a single country or level of governance; each demands coordinated responses grounded in democratic values.

Mr **GONZÁLEZ PONS** highlighted the European Democracy Shield as a key framework for protecting Europe's information space, safeguarding elections, defending independent media, and empowering citizens. The Commission's plan to establish a European Centre for Democratic Resilience, he noted, would reinforce cooperation between EU institutions and Member States. However, he underlined that parliamentary cooperation must also be reinforced. Europe, he argued, needs more than occasional exchanges; it requires permanent structures, regular joint work, and long-term platforms connecting the European Parliament and national parliaments. His conclusion was compelling: "There is no democracy without parliament. A weakened parliament means a weakened democracy." For democracy to thrive, parliaments must continuously adapt and renew themselves to meet the evolving challenges of our time.



Vice-President **Katarina BARLEY** stressed the need for parliaments to reconnect with citizens and to reinvent the partnership that binds representatives to the people they serve. Creating time and mechanisms for genuine engagement, she suggested, should be part of the institutional reforms ahead. She considered that digital tools, if designed responsibly, can provide new opportunities for engagement, especially for young people and those living in remote areas. At the same time, she cautioned that technology cannot replace in-person dialogue. Discussions throughout the forum had shown that citizens want more spaces to meet parliamentarians face-to-face and to deliberate on major issues.



She emphasised the importance of youth participation, noting that younger generations will inherit Europe's political future. She praised initiatives such as the youth checks, which would ensure that young Europeans are included early in policymaking and that intergenerational fairness becomes a structured consideration. She also stressed the value of joint civic education initiatives, developed across parties and across levels of governance, to help rebuild trust from the ground up. Such efforts, she argued, can demystify politics, strengthen democratic literacy, and show that democracy truly belongs to everyone. Ms **BARLEY** highlighted cooperation with the Council of Europe and welcomed initiatives such as the Democracy Pact, arguing that Europe's democratic institutions must reinforce one another if they are to withstand present challenges.

Both Vice-Presidents converged on a central message: polarisation thrives on distance, while democracy thrives on connection. Further interparliamentary action, they noted, will be pursued through existing platforms such as COSAC, Speakers' Summits, and meetings of Secretaries-General. Both endorsed the ambition to make the Parliamentary Democracy Forum a permanent annual event, ideally aligned with the International Day of Democracy. Over time, they envisaged the forum becoming a flagship moment in Europe's democratic calendar, and a catalyst for building durable alliances across parliaments.



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