

A group of people in formal attire are socializing at a high-rise event. In the foreground, a man in a grey suit and glasses is seen from the back, holding a wine glass. Next to him, a man in a bright orange patterned jacket is also holding a wine glass. They are surrounded by other guests, some of whom are clapping. The background shows a panoramic view of a city at dusk or night, with lights from buildings and streets visible through large windows.

NEOSLAB

DEMOCRACY 2050: BUILDING DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE

Shaping Europe's Democratic Future: Key Outcomes
and Policy Recommendations from the
ELF Spring 2026 General Assembly in Vienna

FOREWORD

A Liberal Spring in Vienna

Democracy is facing a new era of challenges. Technological disruption, geopolitical tensions, disinformation and declining trust in institutions are reshaping the environment in which democratic societies operate.

Against this backdrop, the **European Liberal Forum (ELF) Spring 2026 General Assembly**, held in Vienna from **15–17 April 2026**, brought together policymakers, researchers, civil society representatives and liberal thinkers from across Europe to explore one central question:

How can Europe build democratic resilience by 2050?

The discussions demonstrated that safeguarding democracy requires more than protecting institutions. It requires active citizens, trustworthy information, resilient societies and a renewed democratic culture that is visible in everyday life.

This booklet captures the key ideas, debates and policy recommendations emerging from the Assembly's four thematic working groups. It is intended not as a final answer, but as a starting point for further discussion and action.

The successful conclusion of the General Assembly in Vienna marks the beginning of many future European conversations. Building on the insights gathered here, new liberal strategies, innovative policy solutions and practical approaches can now be developed to address the defining challenges of our time.

We hope this publication serves as both a record of the discussions and an inspiration for the debates that lie ahead. After all, the future of democracy

will depend not only on institutions, but on our collective willingness to continuously strengthen, defend and renew it.

In this spirit, the LYMEC Spring Congress, which followed the ELF General Assembly on 17 April 2026, expanded the discussion towards another key dimension of democratic resilience: the future of skills, work and economic adaptability in Europe. The insights and recommendations gathered throughout both events reflect a shared commitment to shaping a resilient, innovative and inclusive European future.

As is always the case, a publication such as this is never the product of a single person, but rather the result of profound expertise, knowledge, and experience, as well as intensive research, brainstorming, and in-depth discussions.

We would therefore like to thank the excellent team of the European Liberal Forum (ELF) for their outstanding support and cooperation in organising the ELF Spring 2026 General Assembly and the LYMEC Spring Congress in Vienna.

We also wish to express our sincere gratitude to all speakers and keynote contributors, the hosts of the Working Groups, and, of course, all participants – more than 100 highly inspiring individuals who helped shape the discussions throughout the event. Without their remarkable commitment and engagement, this booklet would not have been possible.

This publication is the direct outcome of the gathering held from 15 to 17 April 2026, beginning with a humorous introduction and continuing with the conference reports, including the outcomes of the Policy Lab and the LYMEC Congress Working Groups.

We hope you enjoy reading this booklet and that it sparks new ideas and conversations about the future of democracy.

NEOS Lab Team

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INTRODUCTION

Vienna, Strudel, and No Grumpiness – When Liberals Come Together



**Three days in Vienna. Three days of exchange at NEOS Lab.
Three days full of energy.**

When around 100 people gather for the European Liberal Forum's spring event to discuss resilient democracy, liberal values, and social cohesion, one might expect the famous Viennese grumpiness to at least make a brief appearance. Perhaps a quick glance around the room, a sceptical nod, and then off again. But no such luck. Instead of scepticism, there was openness. Instead of complaining, there was a common willingness to shape the future. And somewhere between Parliament, apple strudel, and Vienna's skyline, one thing became clear very quickly: democracy thrives on togetherness.

Vienna, for its part, was at its very best. There was not even the weather to complain about. Surrounded by historic architecture, political institutions, and stunning views across the city under bright spring sunshine, participants found themselves in an environment where ideas were not only debated but challenged, refined, and occasionally accompanied by laughter. The conversations ranged from some of the defining questions of our time – How can democracies remain resilient? How do we preserve liberal spaces for dialogue in increasingly polarised societies? – to practical ideas for future projects, initiatives, and joint action.

What stood out most was the attitude shared by everyone involved: listening rather than simply broadcasting, understanding rather than rushing to judgement. Liberal openness to discussion was not treated as an abstract principle but practised in real life – during panel debates, workshops, coffee breaks, and sometimes over a second slice of apple strudel. Some might say that is exactly where the best ideas emerge.

The Austrian Parliament provided a fitting backdrop for these discussions. It served as a reminder that democracy is never something to be taken for granted. It requires constant work. Democratic resilience is not created by institutions alone, but by citizens willing to take responsibility, engage with different perspectives, and search for common solutions.

Perhaps that was the most valuable insight of these three days: democracy needs more than debate – it also needs joy. Joy in exchanging ideas, in learning from one another, and in shaping the future together. Those who see the future only as a collection of problems quickly lose the motivation to act. Those who see it as a shared project gain energy – and sometimes even new friendships.

Vienna became more than a host city. It became a symbol of a liberal spirit that combines conviction with openness and seriousness with a certain lightness. From the halls of Parliament to the views across the city's rooftops, one message stood out: when people come together with curiosity, optimism, and a willingness to contribute, something greater than a conference can emerge. A sense of momentum. And honestly, discussions tend to be better when accompanied by good strudel. Only one thing was missing: the vanilla sauce.

CONFERENCE REPORT

“Resilient Democracy” – the Focus Topic of the ELF Spring 2026 General Assembly

Under the motto “Resilient Democracy”, NEOS Lab, in cooperation with the European Liberal Forum (ELF), offered an intensive three-day programme in Vienna. The focus was not merely on defending European democracy, but rather on developing forward-looking visions and measures for a democratically resilient Europe in 2050.

This represented a clear mandate for all participants of the liberal family: to think beyond conventional boundaries and allow innovative ideas to flourish.



Day 1: Roundtable at the Austrian Parliament

The event opened on 15 April with an informal roundtable discussion in the Heide Schmidt Hall of the Austrian Parliament. Together with NEOS party leader and Austrian Foreign Minister Beate Meinl-Reisinger, as well as NEOS Lab President and Member of the European Parliament Helmut Brandstätter, ELF Board members discussed which solutions European liberals can offer to current challenges such as declining living standards, migration, disinformation and far-right propaganda.

Beate Meinl-Reisinger emphasised: *“The key question is how we can reach people in relation to their everyday concerns and fears, and what concrete solutions we can offer them.”*

She added: *“We must also reach more people with our policies across Europe. Today, this is less a conflict between left and right, but rather a struggle for fundamental rights and the rule of law throughout Europe – a struggle primarily led by liberal forces.”*

The discussion also focused on how the liberal family can address sensitive issues such as asylum and migration without drifting into the rhetoric of the far-right. Liberal core principles – freedom, liberal democracy and the rule of law – must never be neglected.

This is particularly important when addressing disinformation and propaganda, as Helmut Brandstätter underlined:

“A recent analysis of far-right narratives in the European Parliament shows that right-wing populist parties spread their propaganda especially through social media while cooperating with Russia under Vladimir Putin and the United States under Donald Trump. Both Russia and the US are working against a united Europe.”

During the subsequent parliamentary tour, Brandstätter guided the European guests through the past and present of Austrian democratic history – providing valuable inspiration for the days ahead.

Day 2: Intensive Policy Lab Sessions

On 16 April, the NEOS Lab team welcomed colleagues from the ELF Secretariat and more than 100 guests at the Event Space Am Heumarkt. Participants then moved into a series of intensive discussions and workshops focused on the future of democratic resilience in Europe.

In a relaxed and welcoming atmosphere, participants tackled the central – and highly challenging – question:

How can democratic resilience be achieved and sustainably secured in the future?

The Policy Lab sessions opened with a powerful keynote by former European Commission Vice-President Věra Jourová, whose deep political experience shaped the discussion from the outset. From 2019 to 2024, Jourová served as Vice-President of the European Commission and Commissioner for Values and Transparency. In this role, she advanced initiatives such as the Digital Services Act (DSA) and challenged the authoritarian government of then-Prime Minister Viktor Orbán in Hungary.

In 2020, Jourová called not only for the continuation of the existing Article 7 procedure against Hungary, but also for the activation of the Rule of Law Mechanism, which links EU funding to compliance with rule-of-law standards.

As a result of serious rule-of-law deficiencies in Hungary, more than € 16 billion in EU funds have so far been frozen. These funds are expected to be released only after the necessary reforms are implemented under the government of the new Prime Minister, Péter Magyar.

However, Jourová did not focus on these milestones from her previous role, but instead warned about the growing impact of disinformation and propaganda spread through digital platforms. In particular, she stressed that US-based digital platforms, search engines, and AI systems are increasingly shaping anti-democratic “parallel worlds” that influence real-life politics in Europe.

To strengthen democratic resilience against online hate, hybrid warfare, and cyberattacks, she called for major investments in digital infrastructure, education, science, and innovation, while urging Europe to close the technological gap with the United States and China. She concluded with a stark warning: democracy will not survive unless it is actively modernised and made more resilient. Her words set the tone for the four Policy Lab Working Groups that followed.

Shaping Democracy 2050: the Four Working Groups

ELF Executive Director Alva Finn and NEOS Lab Director Helga Pattart-Drexler then introduced the four Policy Lab working groups and their tasks. Participants were first asked to envision what resilient democracy could look like in 2050 across four key areas: rule of law, democratic education, media freedom, and security policy. In a second step, they developed concrete pathways towards this vision, outlining the legislative, institutional, and societal reforms needed from 2027 onward.

Yet the central conclusion of the “Democracy 2050: Building Democratic Resilience” Policy Lab in Vienna was that the greatest challenge is not only defending democracy against external and internal threats, but making democracy meaningful again in citizens’ everyday lives. Across all four working groups, participants agreed that democracy must become a daily experience rather than an occasional event tied only to elections or institutions.

What became clear was that democracy cannot remain confined to constitutions and political systems alone. It must be visible and tangible

in schools, workplaces, communities, digital platforms, and public life, allowing citizens not only to vote for democracy, but to actively experience and shape it.

Day 3: ELF General Assembly Concluding Part

Current developments such as the Hungarian parliamentary elections also served as an important reference point during the concluding part of the General Assembly on day three. ELF President Jan-Christoph Oetjen recalled earlier editions of the gathering, which had taken place under the shadow of Hungarian autocracy. This year, however, felt markedly different: “Hungary has proven that populism can be defeated. Similar signals are emerging from Slovakia, the Netherlands, Portugal and across Europe.”

Oetjen also pointed to an important factor in the Hungarian elections:

“We must not forget that the liberal party Momentum sacrificed itself for regime change in Hungary and chose not to run in the elections in order to secure the legally necessary majority for Magyar’s conservative party.”

There were therefore many sacrifices – including silent ones – in achieving the first step towards overcoming right-wing populism and autocracy. Yet such measures can only be temporary. Today’s challenges require sustainable liberal solutions.

Alongside the economy, housing, and demographic change, migration remains one of Europe’s defining political challenges. In his keynote speech, NEOS parliamentary group leader and Austrian MP Yannick Shetty argued that no serious discussion about democratic resilience can ignore migration, as “few issues test the capacity of our European democracies as strongly as migration does.” He called for a liberal approach based on “order, integration, and cooperation” – combining fast and fair asylum procedures, participation from day one, and genuinely European solutions.

At the same time, Shetty warned against leaving the issue to populists and authoritarian forces: “If there is an authoritarian playbook, there must also be a liberal one – not merely in theory, but in practice.” Stressing that citizens rightly expect effective solutions from democratic governments, he concluded with an appeal fully aligned with the ELF motto “Own the Future”: “Let us build the future together.”



KEYNOTES

Democracy Will Not Survive by Itself

Why Democracies Must Reinvent Themselves in the Age of AI and Digital Platforms



Věra Jourová

former European Commission Vice-President for Values and Transparency (2019–2024), former Czech politician, and current advisor to the President of the Czech Republic on foreign policy, as well as member of the Ethics Committee of the European Central Bank, the board of GLOBSEC, and the Club de Madrid, on 16 April 2026:

For a long time, many of us in Europe believed democracy had already won.

After the Cold War and the fall of authoritarian regimes in Central and Eastern Europe, democracy began to feel almost permanent – the natural condition of modern societies. We built institutions, constitutions and electoral systems and assumed they would continue functioning automatically.

Today, I no longer believe that assumption is safe.

Democracy is under immense pressure. Not because one single enemy suddenly appeared, but because several powerful transformations are happening simultaneously: digitalisation, artificial intelligence, geopolitical instability, disinformation warfare and growing public frustration.

And unlike previous historical shifts, this transformation is happening at an enormous speed.

When the internet emerged, many believed digital technologies would strengthen freedom, democracy and human progress. We imagined better communication, broader access to knowledge and more informed citizens.

Today, that optimism feels distant.

Digital platforms, algorithms and AI systems increasingly shape how we think, communicate, vote and interpret reality. A “parallel digital world” has emerged – and it no longer merely reflects society. It actively shapes it.

The real question is therefore no longer whether technology changes democracy. It already has. The real question is whether democracy can adapt quickly enough to survive.

Democracies Risk Losing the Attention War

Across democratic societies, citizens are living through overlapping crises: inflation, migration pressures, housing shortages, war, economic insecurity and social fragmentation.

People feel exhausted. Many feel politically powerless. Increasingly, citizens doubt that democratic systems are capable of delivering effective solutions.

This creates fertile ground for populists and autocrats. Their message is simple: “We act fast. Democracies hesitate.”

At the same time, social media and AI amplify anger, fear and polarisation at industrial scale. Outrage spreads faster than facts. Emotional manipulation travels faster than democratic debate.

Digital platforms reward visibility and emotional intensity – not necessarily truth, nuance or social cohesion.

This combination is dangerous because democracy depends on trust, participation, patience and informed citizens. Digital systems often reward exactly the opposite.

Elections Are Becoming Digital Battlefields

Free and fair elections remain the foundation of democracy. But elections themselves are changing fundamentally.

Traditionally, democratic elections were competitions between people, ideas and visions for society. Increasingly, they resemble sophisticated digital marketing operations powered by algorithms, influencers, hidden financing and psychological profiling.

The Facebook–Cambridge Analytica scandal – in which the personal data of millions of Facebook users were collected without their knowledge or consent – was not an isolated event. It was an early warning.

Today, manipulation takes many forms: AI-generated deepfakes, coordinated disinformation campaigns and massive volumes of emotionally targeted content designed not to inform voters, but to influence their behaviour.

The deeper danger is not only that people may believe false information. It is that citizens gradually lose confidence in the very possibility of objective truth.

And once trust collapses, democracy becomes extremely vulnerable.

This is why European democracies have reacted with legislation such as the Digital Services Act, the EU AI Act and the European Media Freedom Act.

These are democratic safeguards, not bureaucratic exercises. But regulation alone will never be enough.

Democracy Cannot Survive Without Engaged Citizens

One of the greatest threats facing democracy today is not only disinformation. It is helplessness.

Too many citizens feel their voices no longer matter. Too many distrust institutions, political leaders and traditional media.

Disinformation campaigns exploit exactly these emotions. Their goal is often not to convince people of one particular lie, but to create confusion, cynicism and permanent distrust.

A passive and frustrated society is easier to manipulate. This is why democratic resilience begins with citizens themselves.

We need people who participate beyond election day, who remain engaged locally and nationally, and who care about public life.

We also need to protect institutions that provide democratic stability: public service media, independent journalism, civil society organisations and education systems that strengthen media literacy and historical awareness. And we need to find new ways of warnings against totalitarian regimes – through education, culture, and the film industry – while carrying forward the messages that “survivors are leaving us” and “do not be indifferent.”

Young people especially must not be left alone in algorithmic “rabbit holes” designed to maximise attention rather than understanding.

Democracy Must Innovate

For too long, many democracies assumed their success was permanent. It is not.

Democracy is neither automatic nor guaranteed. History teaches us that democratic systems can weaken gradually – often through small, almost invisible steps.

This is why defending democracy cannot simply mean preserving old structures and hoping for the best.

Democracy must innovate.

Democracies must become more resilient, more responsive and more visibly useful in people’s daily lives. They must also become more attractive to younger generations, while the voting system must innovate – 16 years limit and e-voting with relevant civic education.

We therefore need serious discussions about new forms of democratic participation, modern voting systems and stronger civic engagement.

Importantly, the responsibility for protecting democracy cannot remain exclusively in the hands of politicians. Researchers, educators, journalists, technology experts and civil society all have a role to play. Democracy must become more digital without losing its humanity.

The Future of Democracy Depends on Us

I do not believe democracy, as we know it today, will survive unchanged.

But I also do not believe its decline is inevitable. Democracy has survived before because citizens decided it was worth defending – and worth improving. That remains true today.

Years ago, Madeleine Albright once told me: “It is for the people to say – we want it.”

In the age of AI and digital platforms, those words matter more than ever.

Because democracy does not disappear overnight simply because dictators become stronger. It disappears when too many citizens become passive, cynical or indifferent.

The future of democracy will therefore not be decided by technology alone, nor by politicians, platforms or algorithms.

In the end, it is up to us as citizens to take responsibility and stand up for democracy before we start missing it.

Building Our Future Together



Yannick Shetty

parliamentary group leader of NEOS in the Austrian Parliament, at the European Liberal Forum Spring 2026 General Assembly in Vienna on 17 April 2026:

When we speak about resilient democracies, we often focus on institutions – on independent courts, free media, and checks and balances. And all of that is, of course, essential.

But resilience is not only tested in constitutional theory.

It is tested in political reality – in the moments where pressure builds and systems are forced to prove that they can actually deliver.

Against this backdrop, I would like to offer a specific perspective – one shaped by my role as my party's spokesperson on integration, but also by my own background. I was born right here in this city to an Austrian mother and an Indian father.

And maybe that is why I believe that if we want to have an honest conversation about democratic resilience today, there is one issue we cannot ignore:

Migration.

Not because it is the biggest challenge we face – but because it brings many of them together.

Migration As a Structural Reality

Migration is not just about asylum or forced displacement. It is, in a much broader sense, about movement – about people making decisions to build their lives elsewhere, across borders, within an increasingly interconnected world.

It is a constant feature of globalization. A driver of economic dynamism. A force of social transformation.

And at the same time – and we need to be equally clear about this – it is also a challenge.

A challenge that must be addressed at every level: institutional, political, economic, and societal.

And that is exactly why I chose to speak about migration in the context of resilient democracies.

Because few issues test the capacity of our European democratic systems as directly as this one.

Migration is not a temporary phenomenon, nor is it a crisis that will simply pass. It is a structural reality of our past, present, and especially our future.

People move – because of conflict, economic opportunity, climate change, and globalization itself. And Europe will remain one, if not *the* main destination globally.

So, the real question is not whether migration happens. The real question is whether democratic systems are capable of managing it.

Migration touches something fundamental: identity, fairness, and control.

And when people feel that these are no longer being managed well, trust in the ability of democratic systems erodes.

The Political Consequences of Lost Trust

Once that trust weakens, the political consequences are immediate. We see it across the world: migration becomes the central battleground of political competition. It fuels polarisation and creates fertile ground for those who are not interested in improving democracy, but in undermining it.

And this dynamic is not accidental.

It follows a pattern – an authoritarian playbook. The logic is simple.

You take a complex issue like migration and turn it into a cultural conflict. You create a sense of threat, tell people that the system has failed them, and promise simple solutions through strong leadership. Institutions are discredited, opponents delegitimised – and once fear takes hold, democratic checks begin to erode.

It works.

And the uncomfortable truth is: it works partly because it builds on real problems.

So what is the alternative?

The Need for Honest Policymaking

It begins with honesty.

Migration is a real policy challenge. When integration fails, when parallel societies form, when people feel that the system is unfair, that is real. And people are right to expect their governments to address it. Acknowledging this is not a concession to populism. It is the foundation of credibility.

But honesty must be followed by action. A resilient democracy is one that delivers.

And in migration, that means three things: order, integration, and cooperation.

Order means functioning systems. Fast and fair asylum procedures, clear decisions, and consequences that are actually enforced. Without this, legitimacy erodes.

Integration means participation from day one. Language, education, access to the labour market. Because exclusion creates parallel realities, and parallel realities undermine democratic cohesion.

And cooperation means recognising a basic fact: migration is a European challenge. No single country can manage it alone. Without European solutions and international partners, national systems will remain under permanent pressure.

Democracy in the Digital Age

There is another dimension we need to address. Because today, the resilience of our democracies is tested not only in the physical world – but in the digital one.

We are witnessing the emergence of a digital radicalisation ecosystem. Algorithms amplify outrage. They reward extreme content. And migration is one of the issues where this dynamic is most visible. Young people searching for belonging are drawn into narratives that simplify, divide, and radicalise.

We can see that on the radical right, but also on the side of the radical Islamists. Often their radicalisations are different sides of the same coin.

Step by step, the boundaries of what is acceptable shift.

This is not a marginal issue. It is a direct threat to democratic stability.

Europe has started to respond. But regulation still lags behind reality. If we are serious about resilience, we must treat digital spaces as part of our democratic infrastructure. So where does this leave us?

The Liberal Playbook

If there is an authoritarian playbook, then there must also be a liberal playbook too. Not as theory – but as practice.

First: own the hard questions.

Do not cede migration, security, or cohesion to the populists.

Second: deliver results.

Democracy survives when it works – when people experience fairness, order, and opportunity in their daily lives.

Third: protect democratic institutions.

Independent courts, free media, strong parliaments – these are the foundations of freedom.

Fourth: build Europe.

On migration, digital regulation, and security, the nation state alone is too small.

And fifth: tell a better story about the future.

Authoritarians offer a narrative of fear and lost greatness. We need to offer something more powerful: a vision of what we are building together.

Imagining Europe in 2050

This conference asks us to look ahead – and to imagine Europe in 2050.

I want to believe that in 2050, a young person with their own migration history – or any combination of the world's stories – can stand in front of an audience like this and be heard not as a symbol of a problem, but simply as a citizen. As a leader. As a liberal.

That future is not inevitable. But it is possible.

The democracies that will survive the next decades are those that have the courage to be honest about what is difficult – and the determination to fix it.

Let's build that future together.

POLICY LAB OUTCOMES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Democracy 2050: Building Democratic Resilience

Why Europe's democratic future depends on more than institutions – the policy lab working groups



Europe is entering an era in which democracy can no longer be taken for granted.

The challenges are familiar: geopolitical instability, technological disruption, democratic backsliding, information warfare, social fragmentation and declining trust in institutions. Yet the discussions at the “Democracy 2050: Building Democratic Resilience” Policy Lab in Vienna suggested that Europe's greatest challenge is not simply defending democracy against its enemies. It is making democracy matter again to ordinary citizens.

Throughout the conference, one idea repeatedly surfaced across all four working groups: Democracy must become a daily experience rather than an occasional event.

By 2050, democratic resilience will depend not only on strong institutions but on the ability of citizens, governments, media, and civil society to actively sustain democracy in everyday life. Across all working groups, a common vision emerged: democracy must become more participatory, transparent, responsive, and resilient in the face of technological disruption, geopolitical competition, disinformation, and societal fragmentation.

Common findings highlighted five interconnected priorities:

- Strong and trustworthy democratic institutions
- A vibrant democratic culture based on education and participation
- A free, pluralistic, and trustworthy information environment
- Effective protection against external interference and hybrid threats
- Human-centred technological innovation that strengthens rather than replaces democratic governance

What became clear was that if Europe wants to remain resilient by 2050, democracy cannot be confined to constitutions, elections, and institutions alone. It must become far more visible in schools, workplaces, communities, digital platforms, and public life. Citizens must not only vote for democracy – they must experience it in their everyday lives.

The discussions explored what this future might look like and how Europe can get there. The following chapters summarise the common findings and policy recommendations of the four thematic working groups.



Working Group 1: Democratic Institutions & Rule of Law

Vision for 2050

By 2050, democratic institutions are trusted, transparent, responsive, and closely connected to citizens. Democracy is experienced as a daily practice rather than a process limited to periodic elections. Institutions are accessible, accountable, and capable of adapting to technological and societal change while maintaining democratic legitimacy.

Political leadership is characterised by competence, integrity, diversity, and a strong culture of public service. Citizens experience public institutions as partners that listen, respond, and provide meaningful opportunities for engagement.

Common Findings – Backcasting 2027–2050

Participants agreed that democratic resilience by 2050 will not emerge automatically, but must be actively built through long-term reforms, institutional modernisation, and renewed democratic culture starting already in the late 2020s.

A central reform priority for the coming decades is the rebuilding of trust between citizens and democratic institutions. This requires making decision-making processes more transparent, clarifying political responsibility, and creating institutions that are more accessible, responsive, and understandable in everyday life. Democratic legitimacy will increasingly depend on whether citizens feel heard, involved, and capable of shaping political outcomes beyond election cycles.

To achieve this, participants emphasised the need to institutionalise permanent participation mechanisms at local, national, and European level. Future democracies will require stronger feedback cultures, participatory platforms, deliberative democratic formats, and more direct interaction

between institutions and society. Democracy in 2050 should no longer function as a reactive system, but as a continuous process of engagement and co-creation.

In that sense, the participants proposed the development of permanent digital participation systems, including a European “Daily Democracy” framework with continuous citizen feedback loops, non-binding pulse checks, and AI-supported consultations. A central proposal was the establishment of a multilingual European Citizens App or Digital Citizens’ Platform through which citizens could participate in consultations, provide policy feedback, access transparent information, and engage in cross-border democratic deliberation.

Another main discussion point concerned stronger institutional transparency, including public access to decision-making processes, six-week maximum decision timelines, and obligations for institutions to respond to citizens within two or three days. AI could support administrative responsiveness, but participants repeatedly stressed that every decision affecting citizens must ultimately remain subject to human responsibility, with a real person accountable for responses and public decisions. Technology should therefore support democratic decision-making, but not replace political judgement, accountability, or human oversight.

Political reform proposals included improving leadership standards within political parties, introducing stronger management and HR structures, creating incentives to attract more competent politicians, enforcing stricter anti-corruption safeguards, and strengthening protections against violence and intimidation directed at politicians, especially women in politics.

At the European level, participants discussed structural reforms such as transnational electoral lists, greater direct citizen influence over the composition of the European Commission, the abolition of national vetoes in certain EU policy areas, the replacement of unanimity voting in the

European Council with qualified majority voting, and even the abolition of trilogues as informal interinstitutional negotiations between the European Commission, the European Parliament, and the Council of the European Union. Participants also supported strengthening the powers of the European Court of Justice to uphold the values enshrined in Article 2 TEU and, ultimately, moving towards a more federal European political structure with stronger democratic legitimacy and accountability.

Finally, participants agreed that democratic resilience ultimately depends not only on institutions, but on democratic culture itself. Building resilient democracies therefore requires long-term investment in civic education, political participation, democratic literacy, and stronger connections between citizens and public institutions throughout Europe.

Policy Recommendations

1. Establish Permanent Citizen Participation Mechanisms

Create continuous digital and physical participation channels that enable citizens to engage with institutions beyond elections.

2. Improve Institutional Responsiveness

Introduce clear service standards, including response times, citizen feedback systems, and transparent communication procedures.

3. Strengthen Transparency and Accountability

Ensure public access to decision-making processes, institutional performance indicators, and government data.

4. Protect Rule-of-Law Institutions

Strengthen judicial independence, anti-corruption frameworks, and constitutional safeguards against political capture.

5. Maintain Human Oversight in AI-Assisted Governance

Require meaningful human supervision and accountability for all AI-supported public services and administrative processes.

6. Protect Democratic Participation

Adopt stronger measures against political intimidation, harassment, and violence directed at elected representatives and public servants.

7. Modernise Democratic Institutions

Support institutional innovation, leadership development, and organisational reform to improve effectiveness and citizen trust.

Working Group 2: Democratic Culture, Education & Participation

Vision for 2050

By 2050, democracy is deeply embedded in everyday life. Citizens possess the knowledge, skills, and confidence required to participate actively in democratic processes. Participation extends beyond voting and is integrated into schools, workplaces, communities, and civil society.

Democratic culture is inclusive, resilient, and capable of adapting to social and technological change while maintaining social cohesion and democratic values.

Common Findings – Backcasting 2027–2050

As agreed within this Working Group, the path towards democratic resilience by 2050 must begin with long-term investment in education, civic culture, and democratic participation. Democracy was consistently understood not merely as an institutional framework, but as a set of skills, behaviours, and social practices that need to be continuously learned, exercised, and renewed across generations.

A central priority for the coming decades will therefore be the systematic strengthening of critical thinking, media literacy, civic literacy, and democratic competences throughout all stages of education and public life. In that sense, participants proposed embedding civic education, critical thinking, media literacy, democratic competences, and participation skills into schools, universities, workplaces, public institutions, and lifelong learning systems. Mock elections, school participation projects, peer learning, and democratic training in institutions such as the army and police were all discussed as practical tools.

The groups strongly supported the expansion of participatory democratic formats beyond elections. Suggested mechanisms included citizens' as-

semblies, local democratic councils, participatory budgeting, deliberative forums, and stronger local democratic experimentation. One particularly prominent idea was the development of a European Citizens App that would allow citizens to engage with European politics, learn debating skills, participate in consultations, and strengthen democratic involvement across borders. Over the coming years, stronger participatory infrastructures will be required to reconnect citizens with democratic processes in everyday life.

Participants also emphasised the importance of rebuilding social cohesion through physical community spaces, local civic participation, culture, sports, and face-to-face democratic interaction. Democracy was described as a “skill” that requires constant practice. The groups therefore proposed investments in community organisations, local participation structures, cultural initiatives, democratic festivals, and civic meeting places.

Another important reform trajectory identified throughout the discussions was the strengthening of a shared European democratic identity. Participants argued that democratic resilience by 2050 will depend increasingly on whether citizens feel connected not only to national political systems, but also to a broader European democratic project based on pluralism, freedom, diversity, and civic responsibility. The participants’ proposals also included the establishment of Europe Day as a national holiday and further expanding Erasmus-style programmes for workers and public servants, promoting multilingualism, encouraging cross-border exchange, and using education and civic exchange to cultivate a stronger sense of shared democratic belonging.

Artificial intelligence and digital technologies were widely recognised as transformative forces that must be actively shaped over the coming decades. Participants emphasised that digital tools should support democratic learning, participation, and access to information, while remaining transparent, accountable, and aligned with democratic principles. Europe was repeatedly described as having the opportunity to develop a distinct

democratic model for digital governance that combines innovation with civic responsibility, public oversight, and democratic control.

Overall, the discussions highlighted that democratic resilience by 2050 will depend not only on institutional reforms, but on Europe’s ability to rebuild democratic culture as a lived social experience embedded in every day life.

Policy Recommendations

1. Introduce Comprehensive Democratic Education

Embed civic education, critical thinking, media literacy, and democratic competences throughout all levels of education.

2. Promote Lifelong Democratic Learning

Develop civic education programmes for adults through workplaces, community organisations, and public institutions.

3. Expand Participatory Democracy

Support citizens' assemblies, local democratic councils, participatory budgeting, and deliberative democratic innovations.

4. Strengthen Local Communities

Invest in civic spaces, cultural initiatives, community organisations, and local participation structures.

5. Foster European Democratic Identity

Expand mobility programmes, language education, cultural exchange, and cross-border civic cooperation.

6. Use Technology to Support Participation

Develop democratic digital platforms that facilitate engagement while ensuring transparency and inclusiveness.

7. Combat Social Isolation

Promote social cohesion through community-building activities, civic networks, and public engagement initiatives.

Working Group 3: Free Media and Information Environment

Vision for 2050

By 2050, Europe enjoys a free, pluralistic, and trustworthy information environment that enables informed public debate and democratic accountability. Citizens have access to diverse information sources, professional journalism, and transparent digital platforms.

Media freedom remains a cornerstone of democratic resilience.

Common Findings – Backcasting 2027–2050

Common findings emphasised that safeguarding democratic resilience between 2027 and 2050 will require a gradual but determined transformation of Europe's media and information environment. Participants repeatedly stressed that strengthening media pluralism and independent journalism must become a strategic democratic objective rather than a secondary cultural issue.

A central pathway identified throughout the discussions was the creation of more sustainable and transparent funding structures for journalism. Participants argued that reducing political influence, limiting economic concentration, and diversifying revenue models will be essential to protect editorial independence over the long term. Several proposals pointed toward stronger European frameworks for transparent media financing, clearer ownership disclosure rules, and new mechanisms to support high-quality public-interest journalism without undermining media autonomy.

The discussions also highlighted the growing democratic risks created by concentrated platform power, opaque algorithms, and the rapid spread of disinformation. Building resilience by 2050 will therefore require stronger European regulatory capacities capable of increasing accountability in

the digital sphere. Suggested reforms included algorithmic transparency obligations, stricter enforcement of competition law, partial liability for harmful algorithmic amplification, and stronger safeguards against foreign information manipulation and coordinated disinformation campaigns.

At the same time, participants repeatedly warned that regulation alone will not restore trust in public information. Long-term democratic resilience depends equally on strengthening citizens' ability to critically navigate increasingly digital and AI-driven information spaces. Media literacy, critical thinking, and digital competences were therefore identified as essential democratic skills that must be systematically integrated into education systems, lifelong learning programmes, and civic initiatives across Europe.

Several discussions further pointed toward the need for stronger European cooperation in the information sphere. Ideas included European networks for independent journalism, cross-border fact-checking cooperation, common ethical standards, and self-regulatory media councils inspired by Nordic models. Such initiatives were seen as important tools for strengthening professional standards while protecting freedom of expression and media independence. The group also discussed strengthening European digital sovereignty through investment in European digital infrastructure, public-interest platforms, European AI systems, and competitive European media products that reflect democratic values.

Artificial intelligence emerged as both a challenge and a potential opportunity for democratic communication. Participants agreed that AI systems shaping public discourse must remain transparent, accountable, and subject to democratic oversight. At the same time, AI could support multilingual access to information, improve fact-checking capacities, and strengthen citizens' access to reliable public knowledge if embedded within clear democratic safeguards.

Overall, the discussions made clear that the pathway toward a resilient European information environment will require simultaneous investment in independent journalism, democratic regulation, civic education, technolo-

gical accountability, and cross-border cooperation. Democratic resilience in 2050 will depend not only on protecting free media, but on rebuilding trust in shared facts, democratic institutions, and open public debate itself.

Policy Recommendations

1. Increase Transparency in Media Ownership and Financing

Require comprehensive disclosure of ownership structures, funding sources, and financial relationships.

2. Strengthen Independent Journalism

Support sustainable and diversified funding models that protect editorial independence and media pluralism.

3. Introduce Platform Accountability Standards

Require transparency regarding recommendation systems, algorithmic curation, and content amplification.

4. Expand Media Literacy Programmes

Integrate media literacy and critical-thinking education into schools, universities, and lifelong learning initiatives.

5. Support European Digital Sovereignty

Invest in European digital infrastructure, media platforms, and technological alternatives that reflect democratic values.

6. Promote Ethical Standards in Journalism

Develop and strengthen professional codes of conduct, independent oversight mechanisms, and self-regulatory structures.

7. Strengthen Enforcement Capacity

Improve European and national capacities to enforce transparency, competition, and accountability rules in the information ecosystem.

Working Group 4: Keeping Democracies Safe

Vision for 2050

By 2050, democratic societies are capable of protecting themselves against external interference, hybrid threats, cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns, and strategic dependencies while fully preserving civil liberties and democratic freedoms.

Security and freedom reinforce one another rather than compete with one another.

Common Findings – Backcasting 2027–2050

Common findings emphasised that strengthening democratic security between 2027 and 2050 will require Europe to combine institutional resilience, strategic autonomy, civic preparedness, and closer democratic cooperation. Participants repeatedly stressed that democratic security cannot rely solely on military capabilities or state institutions, but must also be rooted in public trust, democratic legitimacy, and active societal resilience. The importance of making democratic institutions more accessible, effective, and attractive to younger generations was also highlighted in order to counter growing political disengagement and declining institutional trust.

Foreign interference, cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns, and economic dependencies were identified as some of the defining security challenges of the coming decades. In response, participants called for stronger European coordination mechanisms, stricter enforcement against foreign influence operations, greater transparency in political financing, and more effective regulatory frameworks to address algorithmic manipulation and hostile information campaigns.

A major focus of the discussions concerned Europe's strategic dependencies in key sectors. Building democratic resilience by 2050 will require reducing vulnerabilities in areas such as digital infrastructure, semiconductors, energy, defence, food production, and critical raw materials. As a result, technological and economic sovereignty should not be understood as isolationism, but as the capacity of democratic societies to remain politically independent and resilient under geopolitical pressure. Initiatives such as stronger European industrial cooperation, diversified supply chains, and investment in European innovation ecosystems were viewed as essential components of this transition.

Another proposal was a stronger European strategic autonomy agenda under slogans such as “Invented, Designed and Made in Europe.” Investments in European innovation, cybersecurity, and strategic industries were considered essential for democratic sovereignty.

The discussions further highlighted the importance of strengthening European cooperation in matters of democratic security. Participants pointed toward the need for more coordinated decision-making structures, stronger common standards, improved enforcement capacities, and deeper integration in areas such as cybersecurity, intelligence cooperation, defence policy, and the protection of democratic processes. Several contributions also emphasised that the credibility of Europe's democratic model depends on its ability to consistently uphold international law, support democratic partners, and respond collectively to external threats.

At the same time, participants repeatedly warned that increasing security pressures must not lead to authoritarian drift. Democratic oversight, transparency, judicial independence, data protection, and the protection of fundamental rights were consistently identified as essential safeguards that must accompany any expansion of security measures. Democratic resilience, participants argued, ultimately depends on preserving the balance between freedom and security rather than sacrificing one for the other.

Overall, the discussions made clear that the pathway toward democratic security by 2050 will require Europe to invest simultaneously in institutional trust, civic resilience, strategic autonomy, technological sovereignty, and democratic cooperation. Resilient democracies will not emerge automatically from stronger security structures alone, but from societies that remain politically engaged, institutionally robust, and committed to defending democratic values under conditions of growing geopolitical uncertainty.

Policy Recommendations

1. Strengthen European Democratic Security Cooperation

Enhance cooperation against cyber threats, foreign interference, hybrid warfare, and disinformation campaigns.

2. Improve Democratic Oversight

Strengthen parliamentary, judicial, and independent oversight of intelligence and security services.

3. Reduce Strategic Dependencies

Develop European capabilities in critical sectors including technology, energy, semiconductors, defence, and digital infrastructure.

4. Enforce Transparency in Political Financing

Strengthen rules on donations, lobbying, foreign influence, and campaign financing.

5. Build Democratic Resilience Through Education

Integrate democratic literacy, scientific literacy, media literacy, and digital literacy into resilience strategies.

6. Protect Democratic Institutions During Crises

Develop crisis-response frameworks that preserve constitutional rights, democratic oversight, and civic participation.

7. Strengthen International Democratic Cooperation

Support democratic partners, uphold international law, and strengthen democratic solidarity across Europe and beyond.

Conclusion: Democracy as a Daily Practice

A common conclusion across all working groups was that democratic resilience cannot be achieved through institutions alone. Strong democracies require active citizens, trustworthy institutions, free media, civic education, technological accountability, and effective protection against emerging threats.

The vision for 2050 is a Europe in which democracy is not experienced only during elections but becomes a daily reality in schools, workplaces, communities, public institutions, and digital spaces.

Democracy 2050 is therefore not a final destination. It is an ongoing process of participation, responsibility, innovation, and shared commitment to democratic values. The resilience of European democracy will ultimately depend on whether citizens continue to see themselves not merely as observers of democracy, but as its co-creators and guardians.

In addition to the policy recommendations listed above, the following cross-cutting European priorities can be identified:

- Ensure that the green and digital transitions are socially inclusive and benefit all European regions equally.
- Invest in democratic innovation while maintaining strong human oversight and accountability.
- Build a stronger European public sphere through transnational media, political debate and citizen engagement.
- Reduce democratic and economic inequalities between regions to prevent new East-West divides.

- Position Europe as a global model that combines democracy, innovation, human rights, sustainability and technological leadership.
- Strengthen democratic resilience during crises, including wars, pandemics, cyberattacks and geopolitical emergencies.
- Move from passive citizenship towards a culture of active democratic co-creation, where citizens are partners in shaping Europe's future.

Europe's democratic resilience will ultimately depend on three interconnected pillars: trusted institutions, empowered citizens and responsible technological innovation. Democracy in 2050 must not merely be protected – it must be experienced, practiced and renewed every day.

Democratic resilience depends not only on political institutions and civic culture, but also on societies' ability to manage economic and technological transformation in socially inclusive ways. Questions surrounding skills, labour market adaptation and technological change are therefore closely connected to the broader debate on democratic resilience.

Against this backdrop, the LYMEC Spring 2026 Congress continued the discussions initiated during the ELF General Assembly by focusing on the future of skills, employment and economic adaptability in Europe.

THE LYMEC SPRING 2026 CONGRESS – “THE FUTURE OF SKILLS AND JOBS”

Skills First: Preparing Europe for the Future of Work

Europe is entering a decisive decade. Technological acceleration, demographic change, geopolitical tensions and fiscal constraints are reshaping economies and labour markets at unprecedented speed. Against this backdrop, the question of skills can no longer be treated as a niche issue within education policy. It sits at the heart of Europe's economic competitiveness, social cohesion and political resilience.

To explore these challenges and opportunities, LYMEC and NEOS Lab brought together policymakers, researchers and young professionals in Vienna on 17 April 2026 for the Conference on the Future of Skills and Jobs. The discussions highlighted a growing consensus: Europe's future prosperity will depend less on technology itself and more on the skills, adaptability and resilience of its people.

Beyond the University-Centric View of Education

The conference opened with a challenge to one of the most deeply rooted assumptions in European education policy: that educational success is primarily measured by the expansion of university degrees.

Brigitte van den Berg, Member of the European Parliament and ELF Board Member, argued that policymakers often overlook alternative educational pathways. At both national and European level, political institutions remain heavily dominated by university-educated professionals, which can narrow perspectives on how talent is developed and recognised.

The discussion pointed towards a broader understanding of education – one that values vocational training, practical skills and lifelong learning alongside academic achievement.

Why Basic Skills Still Matter

A recurring theme throughout the conference was the enduring importance of universal basic skills. Clemens Ableidinger, Senior Researcher at NEOS Lab, highlighted the worrying decline in literacy rates across OECD countries and stressed that even in advanced economies, improvements in reading, numeracy and problem-solving skills continue to generate measurable economic benefits.

The challenge extends beyond schools. Evidence suggests that literacy and other core competencies can deteriorate over time, making lifelong learning and continuous skills development increasingly important. Investing in foundational skills remains one of the most effective ways to strengthen economic productivity and social participation.

AI, Productivity and Human Capital

Presenting the European Liberal Forum's research agenda on AI, skills and jobs, Maartje Schulz emphasised that artificial intelligence should be understood as an opportunity rather than a threat.

Europe's competitiveness, she argued, depends on its ability to translate technological innovation into higher productivity. Since productivity is ultimately driven by people, investments in skills and human capital must be seen as a central pillar of industrial and innovation policy.

Two structural challenges emerged clearly from the discussion. First, education systems are struggling to adapt to the speed of technological change. Second, labour mobility within Europe remains constrained by

regulatory, linguistic and institutional barriers, preventing talent from flowing to where it is needed most.

What Skills Will Matter Most?

Participants worked in three thematic groups focused on universal basic skills, future skills and labour market policies. While their perspectives differed, several common conclusions emerged.

Universal Skills for a Changing World

The first working group identified three categories of essential skills for 2035:

- Reading and writing literacy
- Digital and media literacy
- Social and emotional skills

Digital competence was understood broadly. It includes not only the ability to use technology effectively, but also cybersecurity awareness, critical engagement with digital tools, accessibility and the capacity to avoid over-dependence on technology.

Participants called for significant educational reforms, including greater emphasis on interdisciplinary learning, teamwork, debate, resilience, arts, sports and practical skills. Teacher training and digital upskilling were seen as essential preconditions for successful reform.

What Will AI Replace – and What Will It Enhance?

The second working group explored the evolving relationship between artificial intelligence and human labour.

Participants identified several categories of work that may become increasingly automated, including repetitive administrative tasks, parts of the financial sector, basic coding functions, translation services, customer support and some entry-level positions.

At the same time, AI was seen as a powerful tool for enhancing human capabilities in areas such as:

- Medical diagnostics
- Governance and public administration
- Negotiation and mediation
- Agriculture
- Inclusion and accessibility
- Complex coordination tasks

The discussion repeatedly returned to the importance of human judgement. While AI can support decision-making, participants stressed that areas such as healthcare and justice should retain meaningful human oversight and accountability.

Adaptability emerged as perhaps the most important future skill. The careers of tomorrow will require individuals to continuously learn, reskill and navigate changing technological environments.

From Job Protection to Transition Protection

The third working group focused on labour market policies and the institutional frameworks needed to support workers throughout their careers.

Participants argued that policy should increasingly shift from protecting individual jobs towards protecting people during periods of transition. In a rapidly changing labour market, security should come from access to education, retraining and new opportunities rather than from preserving specific occupations.

- Among the ideas discussed were:
- Stronger support for lifelong learning
- Expanded re-skilling and re-schooling programmes
- Flexicurity models
- Enhanced support following job loss
- Greater labour mobility across borders

The group also highlighted the importance of recognising individuals as long-term assets whose skills evolve over time rather than simply as occupants of specific roles.

Businesses as Partners in Skills Development

Participants emphasised that governments cannot address the skills challenge alone. Businesses, civil society organisations, schools, vocational institutions and local communities all have a role to play.

Proposals included tax incentives for training, dedicated skills budgets, apprenticeships, skills vouchers, corporate training campuses and stronger partnerships between employers and educational institutions.

Interestingly, several discussions highlighted the role of culture, sports, emotional intelligence and discipline in developing transferable skills that remain valuable across different professions and industries.

A Shared Message Across All Discussions

Although the three working groups approached the issue from different angles, several themes repeatedly surfaced.

First, AI should complement rather than replace human judgement. Second, responsibility for education and training must extend beyond formal educational institutions. Third, social protection systems need to become more responsive to labour market transitions. Finally, ensuring equal access to future skills remains one of the most pressing challenges facing European societies.

Key Policy Recommendations

The conference concluded with a number of clear priorities for policymakers:

- Strengthen universal basic skills, including literacy, numeracy, digital competence and social-emotional learning.
- Make lifelong learning accessible throughout the entire life course.
- Integrate AI literacy and technological adaptability into education and training systems.
- Reduce barriers to labour mobility across Europe.
- Shift social protection systems towards supporting transitions rather than preserving individual jobs.
- Create stronger incentives for businesses to invest in skills development and workforce training.
- Ensure that access to future skills does not depend on geography, income or social background.

Conclusion

The future of work will not be determined by technology alone. Europe's ability to remain competitive, innovative and socially cohesive will depend on how effectively it equips its citizens with the skills needed to navigate change.

The discussions in Vienna made one point particularly clear: if Europe wants to succeed in the decades ahead, it must place skills at the centre of its economic, social and political agenda. Investing in people is not merely an educational objective – it is a strategic necessity.



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