



Strengthening Democracy: Civic Engagement and Democratic Resilience in Germany and the UK

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Speakers: Professor Bryony Hoskins, Roehampton University, Dr. Jurgen Grotz, University of East Anglia

Moderator: Dr. Robert Keeling, Deutsches Institut für Gutes Leben

This event was organised jointly by the Deutsches Institut für Gutes Leben and the British-German Association at RSA House, London.

1. Introduction

Dr Robert Keeling opened the event by introducing working definitions of two key concepts underpinning the discussion: **civil society** and **democratic resilience**.

Civil society (Zivilgesellschaft) refers to the wide range of associations, grassroots organisations, charities, NGOs, and community groups that create spaces for participation, dialogue, and collective action. Both the UK and Germany have long and rich traditions of civil society engagement, from Britain's history of voluntary associations to Germany's dense network of *Vereine* (clubs and associations), which are embedded in everyday life.

Democratic resilience (demokratische Widerstandsfähigkeit) was defined as the ability of democratic systems to withstand and recover from shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic, economic crises, or other social disruptions. Resilience depends not only on strong institutions, but also on active, informed citizens who are willing and able to engage in democratic life.

2. Citizenship Education and Democratic Resilience

Speaker: Professor Bryony Hoskins

Professor Hoskins presented research on the role of **citizenship education** in strengthening democratic resilience, focusing on the **G-EPIC (Girls' Political Empowerment and Civic Engagement)** project.

2.1 Why Citizenship Education Matters

Democracy requires more than formal institutions — it depends on citizens who:

- Understand democratic processes
- Feel confident in their ability to participate
- Hold values such as gender equality and human rights
- Are willing to take action to protect democratic norms

Education plays a crucial role in developing these capacities, particularly among young people.

2.2 The Confidence Gap in Political Engagement

Research shows a persistent **gender gap in political confidence**:

- Boys report higher levels of political confidence than girls across most countries
- The gap emerges early (ages 10–16) and often persists into adulthood
- School environments can unintentionally reinforce this divide through peer dynamics, classroom practices, and teacher expectations

While girls are often active in **informal or activist politics** (e.g. climate movements), they are less likely to see themselves in **formal political leadership roles**.

2.3 The G-EPIC Project

G-EPIC is a €3 million EU Horizon-funded project involving six countries (including Germany and the UK). It aims to develop and test a scalable classroom intervention to increase political confidence among girls from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Researchers worked collaboratively with teachers, students, and civil society organisations to design a programme that could be delivered in ordinary schools without requiring expensive resources.

2.4 The Five-Lesson Intervention

The intervention consists of five structured lessons focused on:

- Understanding what politics is and how it relates to everyday life
- Exploring how individuals can create change

- Challenging stereotypes about who can be a political leader
- Building political knowledge and skills
- Designing and presenting a political campaign and discussing it

Teaching methods emphasise:

- Inclusive and respectful classroom environments
- Small-group work to build confidence
- Positive feedback and encouragement
- Creativity and enjoyment in learning

2.5 Key Findings

The intervention was tested across multiple countries [including from Hessen in Germany] and showed positive results:

Participants demonstrated:

- Increased political knowledge
- Higher levels of political self-confidence
- Greater confidence speaking in class
- Stronger belief that they could influence political decision-making
- Increased interest in future political leadership

2.6 Lessons Learned

Key takeaways from the project include:

- Meaningful change is possible through low-cost classroom interventions
- Confidence builds effectively through small-group practice
- Safe, supportive classroom climates are essential
- Positive role models and counter-stereotypical narratives are powerful tools

The research team is now working to integrate the approach into curricula and expand teacher training. Citizenship education, Professor Hoskins concluded, is a vital investment in democratic resilience. Noted that for funding reasons that this research was limited to England rather than the rest of the UK.

2.7 Discussion Points after Prof. Hoskins talk

- Girls in single-sex school environments often report significantly higher political confidence

- Schools face practical challenges in allocating time and resources for teacher training
- The role of social media, disinformation, and critical thinking skills was highlighted as an emerging priority for civic education

3. Volunteering and the Future of Civil Society

Speaker: Dr Jürgen Grotz

Dr Grotz discussed long-term trends in volunteering and their implications for democratic life, drawing on research from the **Institute for Volunteering Research** at the University of East Anglia where he is director.

3.1 Historical Perspective

In the early 2000s, there was limited data on volunteering in the UK and globally. Over the past 25 years, research has provided a clearer picture of participation trends.

Drawing on William Beveridge's description of voluntary action as a defining feature of British society, Dr Grotz argued that this characterisation is now less accurate.

It's interesting to compare how schools (which most people attend) teach civic norms, compared to volunteering (which approximately 70% of adults have tried).

3.2 Decline in Volunteering

Key trends include:

- A steady decline in volunteering in the UK over the past two decades
- Reduced engagement in traditional civil society organisations
- A shift away from state support for volunteering in the UK, particularly since 2008/09

In contrast, Germany continues to provide structural support to associations such as *Vereine*, which remain central to civic life.

3.3 Rethinking “Strengthening Civil Society”

Dr Grotz emphasised that strengthening civil society is a complex goal that requires clarity about:

- What types of participation are being encouraged
- Who is included — and excluded
- Whether increased participation always contributes positively to democracy

He noted that **volunteering is inherently political**. While it can strengthen social cohesion, it can also contribute to polarisation, depending on the causes and communities involved.

3.4 International Context

The launch of a new **International Year of Volunteering** (first time organised in 2001) highlights global concern about civic participation. However, unlike in 2001, the UK is no longer seen as a leading country in this area. Dr Grotz observed that UK government engagement in discussions about civil society is currently limited.

4. Overall Conclusions

The event highlighted that **democratic resilience depends on both education and participation**.

- Citizenship education can equip young people – especially those from underrepresented groups – with the confidence and skills to engage politically.
- Civil society and volunteering remain essential pillars of democracy but are facing structural and political challenges, particularly in the UK.

Both speakers emphasised that strengthening democracy requires **long-term investment in people**, not just institutions – through schools, community organisations, and supportive public policy.

Materials:

5 country national reports on the development and effectiveness of the Girls empowerment (G-EPIC) 5 class intervention

[Evaluating effectiveness of the G-EPIC 5-class intervention in increasing levels of political self-efficacy of disadvantaged students; National Reports from 5 countries - University of Roehampton Research Explorer](#)

Main toolkit that explains the G-EPIC teaching resources; Eng [Main G-EPIC Toolkit \(Afsana\)](#) De [TeacherToolkit_German](#)

Folder of teaching resources; Eng [Toolkits | G-EPIC](#) De [Toolkits | G-EPIC](#)