EESC info
European Economic and Social Committee
A bridge between Europe and organised civil society

July 2022 | EN



The Grassroots View – S3 Episode 19 – The Western Balkan Countries on the doorstep of the European Union

The long drawn-out accession process of the Western Balkan countries is back on the EU agenda. This episode of *The Grassroots View* is focuses on EU enlargement and the Western Balkans, as not all of these countries are equally far along on the journey towards EU membership.

Our guests discuss the principle of gradual integration, the prospects of the region joining the EU family and whether the EU's increased focus on Ukraine will affect the negotiations with the Western Balkans.

Ionuţ Sibian, EESC member and president of the Western Balkans Follow-up Committee, whose country (Romania) joined the EU in 2007, voices civil society's take on the state of play in the region.

Jarosław Pietras, a former senior European Union and Polish government official who was involved in the Polish accession to the EU, shares his experience on the negotiating table, talking about the similarities and differences between the great enlargement of 2004 and today.

Dafina Peci, secretary-general of the National Youth Congress of Albania, expresses Albania's youth aspirations to a European future for their country.

Camille-Cerise Gessant, journalist from Agence Europe, and **Erisa Zykaj**, EU correspondent for Western Balkan media in Brussels, provide their perspective on the press situation in the region and the recently mooted idea of a European political community. (at)

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EDITORIAL

Power to the young and joining hands for Ukraine



Power to the young and joining hands for Ukraine

Dear readers,

As I am writing this, our mailbox is already filling with applications for the 2022 Civil Society Prize, which we launched in early June. Like every year, we are looking for the most creative and outstanding projects by civil society organisations and individuals, the ones that always make our hearts swell with pride for the fantastic work done by civil society on the ground across Europe.

However, this year is special. For the first time, we picked two themes for our prize, instead of the usual one: youth and Ukraine. This means we will be looking for two sets of winners, three in each category.

With 2022 being the European Year of Youth, we first decided we would honour projects that empower young people. With our prize, we want to showcase the pressing need to give young people the opportunity to become active citizens and meaningfully engage in decision-making processes affecting our, and especially their, future.

But as Russia unleashed a brutal attack on Ukraine causing horrendous human suffering, news began to trickle in about selfless efforts being made by Europe's civil society organisations and citizens, who mobilised overnight to help Europe's neighbours.

This is when we decided to open up our prize to projects helping Ukrainian civilians afflicted by the war. We will be looking for winners among those who are providing humanitarian aid on the ground, those giving shelter, those assisting with the integration of Ukrainians into European job markets, schools and society and all those who were there and continue to be there for people who are facing brutality and aggression, at the time when they need it the most.

So if you are running a project which aims to create a better future for young people or if you are trying to help Ukrainians in any way – either refugees already in the EU or those who have stayed in their war-torn country – quickly send us your application. Also, if you know someone who does outstanding work on either of these two themes, spread the word! Hurry up, as time is running out: the deadline for applications is 31 July.

We hope to receive many creative and useful projects. This will be our chance to pay tribute to all those who are striving to make Europe better for and together with young people, as well as to everyone out there showing courage, humanity and solidarity in the face of evil.

Cillian Lohan
EESC Vice-President for Communication

DIARY DATES

31 July 2022 10 a.m. (Brussels time)

Civil Society Prize: creating a better future for young people and helping Ukrainian war victims – deadline for entries

18 July 2022, Brussels

Communicating fundamental rights and the rule of law

21–22 September 2022, Brussels

EESC plenary session



IMAGINE UKRAINE…

Olga Chaiko, a Ukrainian news reporter from Kyiv who covers social and political life and now wartime events in Ukraine, comments exclusively for EESC info on the decision of the European Council on 23 June 2022 to grant Ukraine the status of EU candidate country. Take a look too at the photo that she chose to illustrate for us this historic moment.

"The candidate status is a great but very painful accomplishment for our country. We are paying a blood price for our democratic aspirations, but this is the only way to cut loose from our post-Soviet past and the influence of Russia. We have to win this battle so that our new generations can live happy and independent lives".

TO THE POINT

In our "To the point" column, EESC members share their views on important issues on the European agenda. This time we have asked Maurizio Mensi, EESC member, rapporteur for the opinion on the *Implications of the European Chips Act for defence and aerospace manufacturing*, adopted by the EESC at its June plenary session, to tell us in a nutshell why this is an important issue.

He explained to us what these implications are for two strategically important industrial sectors, defence and aerospace.



MAURIZIO MENSI, CHIPS ACT: "DO NOT OVERLOOK THE NEEDS OF THE DEFENCE AND AEROSPACE INDUSTRIES"

An essential component of any digital product, semiconductors are vital to the defence and aerospace industries, despite the latter accounting for only about 1% of the global chip market.

The semiconductors they need must be resistant, reliable and able to store data and information in complete safety and security. While interruptions of the supply chain in general represent an economic and potentially a social challenge, in these strategic sectors shortages also become a security problem.

Europe depends on a small number of foreign suppliers and this has sensitive implications. The United States, China and South Korea are investing large sums. With the Chips Act, the European Commission intends to double production in Europe, bringing it to a global share of 20% by 2030, with a total investment of about EUR 43 billion.

However, the EESC is asking the Commission to clarify the sources of this funding, as some of it would seem to come from a redistribution of sums already allocated in the budget to other priority areas such as space, AI and cybersecurity, which must not be jeopardised. The appropriations of the European Defence Fund must not be reduced either, given the already limited resources available. In a context of growing geopolitical tensions, ensuring that the defence and aerospace sectors have adequate financial support is critical for the Chips Act.

We also suggest that the Chips Act should focus on and promote innovation not only in small semiconductors, but also in the larger ones which are still very much in use in the defence and aerospace industries.

The development of certification procedures is also fundamental for these two sectors. For example, there is a need to support the development of joint military-civil standards as part of the European strategy for standardisation.

An issue to be addressed without delay is legal certainty in the field of State aid, indicating at EU level the criteria for authorising any support measures and streamlining administrative procedures at national level.

There is also a need to strengthen cooperation with allied countries such as the United States through the EU-US Trade and Technology Council. In short, the global defence and aerospace semiconductor ecosystem is complex and highly interdependent. Only by leveraging on the strengths and developing coordinated strategies is it possible to avoid duplication and increase the efficiency of the entire system.

Maurizio Mensi, EESC member

ONE QUESTION TO...



One question to…

In our "One question to…" section, we ask EESC members to respond to a question on a hot topic that is or should be high on the European agenda.

For the July edition, we spoke to **José Antonio Moreno Diaz**, EESC member and rapporteur for the opinion on *Combatting violence against women*. We asked him what action the EU could take to combat the epidemic of violence against women and girls, which he describes as a form of terrorism claiming thousands of victims each year.



José Antonio Moreno Díaz: "Violence against women is a form of terrorism"

Of the almost 500 million people living in the EU, about half are women. And according to a 2014 study by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, around one third of women in the EU have experienced violence at some point in their lives simply because they are women.

What we are talking about here is an epidemic of violence against women: violence in their relationships, in the family, at work, on the streets, and so on. We are talking about a form of terrorism against women which claims thousands of victims each year, with women who are killed, injured, ill-treated, humiliated, raped, assaulted, offended, insulted, threatened, and more.

Violence against women is therefore a human rights issue, i.e. violation of human rights for the simple reason of being a woman: the right to physical and mental integrity, the right to security, the right to non-discrimination, the right to privacy, etc.

It is therefore the responsibility of Member States' authorities and the EU institutions to safeguard the human rights of women: the proposal for a Directive presented by the Commission on 8 March – International Women's Day – is an essential and urgently needed first step.

The EESC applauds the regulatory innovation of a Directive on combating violence against women from an intersectional perspective. Such a Directive is much sought-after by society.

In addition, given the range and extent of the various forms of violence suffered by women, policies that aim to counter them must not be neutral but rather drawn up with a clear and unequivocal gender perspective, presented in such a way as to make it easier to understand their importance and effectiveness.

There is a need for a debate on violence against women in the EU, to design mechanisms to define prosecutable behaviour such as violence and to establish penalties and their aggravating circumstances. However, it is also necessary to put in place procedures to protect victims and ensure safe and secure access to judicial proceedings, as well as providing support and integration mechanisms for victims.

The EESC suggests that specific measures should be included as part of social dialogue and collective bargaining to ensure that victims of violence against women can retain their jobs and to ensure the integration of unemployed victims into the labour market.

At the same time, we all know that social problems cannot be resolved purely through the courts, that punishment should not be the only means and that multidisciplinary education and awareness-raising policies should therefore be put in place: we should use education and culture to prevent the emergence of abusers, providing education in conditions of equality and respecting diversity.

Given the part that education plays in shaping gender roles and stereotypes, its preventive role should extend across all education stages – especially in the form of comprehensive sexuality education – and the education community, civil society organisations (especially feminist associations), social partners and impacted communities should be an explicit part of institutional cooperation.

Finally, the EESC is deeply concerned that the extreme right has made it its goal to oppose proposals of equality between men and women. It is especially concerned about the systematic denial of structural violence against women, i.e. violence suffered simply for being a woman. Not only does this denial undermine equal coexistence between men and women, it also constitutes an attack on the values and principles enshrined in Article 2 of the Treaty on the European Union.

THE SURPRISE GUEST



The surprise guest

In our "Surprise guest" column, we feature people whose work inspires others and whose determination and commitment to what they do commands respect.

In this edition of EESC info, our guest **Olga Chaiko**, a Ukrainian journalist from Kyiv, shares her story of working as a journalist during the war and the challenges she and other Ukrainian journalists are facing. She describes how they have adapted their working methods to the dangerous times they are going through, how they are serving their country and

how they deal with fake news and propaganda.



Olga Chaiko: "In it for the long haul"

One day you wake up to find your country is at war. The world is breaking down; you are still trying to talk sense into your relatives in Russia, but propaganda and fear seem to have damaged their ability to think logically. You realise that the lives of all Ukrainians are changing drastically, including those of us journalists, because we now perceive ourselves, at least to some extent, as soldiers.

It all started eight years ago, when Russia first invaded Ukraine. Between 2014 and 2018, the country as a whole and the press went through hard times, as the Kremlin used propaganda to justify its deeds in multiple ways, calling Ukrainians Nazis and convincing Russians that the people of Donbas and Crimea needed their protection.

Afterwards, however, the situation stabilised somewhat. Following the Revolution of Dignity (2013-2014), journalists enjoyed freedom of speech. It became much easier to arrange interviews, politicians stopped running away from the press, and the media would never imagine, for example, that filming an establishing shot of some location – be it a railway or a metro station, or even a bridge – could put the country at risk.

Nevertheless, Ukrainian society had been expecting a full-scale invasion by Russia at least since December 2021. There were several signs of it coming: Russian rhetoric and propaganda getting tougher, foreign embassies from Kyiv to Lviv being evacuated, and foreign nationals being strongly encouraged to leave Ukraine by any possible means. The Ukrainian president and government answered questions around a possible war evasively, so all we could do was guess when the full-scale strike would come.

After Putin's address to Russia on 22 February, Joe Biden's multiple warnings to Americans and Ukrainians, and the arrival of military aid, it was clear it could start any day. Yet when it did, on 24 February, we were disappointed. As we heard the sound of explosions all over the country and people began fleeing Kyiv and other cities, towns and villages, we realised that war was a tragedy one could never be fully ready for. The first day the media tried to film everything, thinking that the war would end soon, but there were also misgivings that we were in for a long marathon.

The Ukrainian press has experience in covering anti-terrorist operations. A strong pool of correspondents have cut their teeth on the Donbas frontline. In late 2016, the Ministry of Defence arranged training for journalists wishing to be accredited to the war-zone, providing information about our military forces and teaching the principles of tactical medicine. Reporters had to follow strict rules, for example wearing protective equipment such as bulletproof vests and helmets, and know what to do if caught up in shelling. They had to coordinate themselves with Ministry of Defense press officers and inform them daily about their route on the frontline. They were not to display the locations of our military. Some fighters would ask for their faces or tattoos to be blurred on video so as not to be identified by the enemy. The number of deaths in the military was to be taken only from reliable official sources. We became more careful when interviewing the local population, as many people in frontline towns and villages had relatives in the occupied territories and were afraid of retaliation by the quasi-republics of Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) and the Luhansk People's Republic (LNR).

Since 24 February 2022, these have become the rules for all Ukrainian journalists. We have to take extra care of those who share their experiences. People in liberated territories often cry or tell us stories they would never have shared in their pre-war life, so we must know how to talk to people carefully so that the stress will not be enhanced.

We have to think not just twice, but three, four, even ten times before showing something, without becoming paranoid or falling into self-censorship. We must remember that it has taken several Ukrainian revolutions to secure freedom of speech, and we must never lose it.

However, free speech should always go hand in hand with the highest responsibility. Let me give you an example. In those early days, when Russia bombed Ukraine non-stop, there was a strong temptation to show people's tragedy and pain with no filters – airing it almost in real time, with the traditional live broadcasts that our audience was waiting for. How unpleasantly surprised we were to hear that the enemy could use our footage to adjust their line of fire! Now we avoid reporting from the location for several hours. Other limitations include a ban on filming the movement of military equipment and soldiers on block-posts.

The topics we cover have changed drastically. The war and its consequences are in each and every story. We report on evacuation, destruction and the pre-fab towns that are replacing the more upmarket and ordinary houses that Russia has left in ruins. We talk with fighters, heroes who have supported our army, and their neighbours, despite the occupation; we help volunteers collect money for our armed forces and for tactical medicine. We are experts in de-mining processes, but most of the time we cannot recall what day of the week or month it is. We are in it for the long haul.

Our work has become a source of constant stress, a test of our physical and mental strength. Our TV channels (ICTV and STB) have set up a studio in a shelter to broadcast non-stop for six hours – our slot in the TV United News Marathon set up by the Ministry of Culture and Information, which gathers together six TV channels (both state and privately owned) to ensure around-the-clock wartime broadcasting.

Ukraine has been trying to fight fake news for at least eight years. We journalists can easily spot Russian input because we are a dab hand at understanding Russian propaganda after so many years. We check most news reports against reliable sources, responsible officials mainly emanating from Ukrainian civil society. We also talk to experts in many fields of Ukrainian life. We double check news reports with official websites, social media pages and, of course, with the people we talk about.

Russian or pro-Russian channels are not being aired in our country. Their websites can only be accessed through a VPN connection (except for official ones). We can still monitor Russian telegram channels – these can be easily accessed and, of course, to some extent they have an impact on the Ukrainian population, but our government and the Council of National Security and Defence have done a lot to spread truthful information among viewers and readers.

The United Marathon is aired on at least 10 channels and can be accessed via smartphone through the DIYA application. The state sends alerts through multiple channels and social media, although there are many problems in occupied territories, which are cut off from our internet and mobile connections.

There is one more problem that is common to all post-Soviet states. People are suspicious of TV news. They remember how the press was censored in Soviet times and often say it is manipulated. This is good on the one hand, because it pushes them to look for and compare information from different sources to form their own opinion. We understand that our neighbours, the Russian and Belarusian people, were too trusting of official information and have lost the ability to think critically. That is why democracy and freedom of thought is one of the strengths of Ukrainian viewers, readers and journalists.

Olga Chaiko, Ukrainian journalist at the "Fakty" news programme, ICTV, SLM News

EESC NEWS



EESC kicks off Civil Society Prize 2022 focusing on two themes: Youth and Ukraine

Creating a better future for young people and helping Ukrainian war victims are the two themes of this year's EESC Civil Society Prize.

The EESC is now accepting applications for its Civil Society Prize 2022, which will reward innovative and creative projects and initiatives in two categories: empowering young people and helping Ukrainian civilians affected by the terrible events in their war-torn country.

A total of **EUR 60 000** will be awarded to a maximum of six winners, with three winners per category.

The theme of category 1 is e**mpowering young people**. The EESC will choose the winners from among the projects which aim to create a better future for and with young people in Europe. They should be tackling the specific needs of young Europeans and contributing to their empowerment and participation in economic and social life.

The theme of Category 2 is **European civil society for Ukraine**. With the prize the EESC will pay tribute to all those active on the ground who offer humanitarian assistance to Ukrainians on a day-to-day basis and who aid refugees both upon arrival and during their integration into European society.

The prize is open to all civil society organisations, individuals and private companies carrying out non-profit initiatives. All initiatives and projects must have been carried out in the EU, with the exception of the projects in Category 2 which can also be carried out in Ukraine.

Deadline for entries: 31 July 2022, 10 a.m. (Brussels time),

Award ceremony: 14-15 December 2022, Brussels

The **full description of requirements** and the **online application form** are available on our webpage.

The aim of the EESC's flagship Civil Society Prize is to raise awareness of civil society's outstanding contribution to creating a European identity and citizenship and to promoting the common values that bolster European integration. (ll)



EESC voices unconditional support for Ukraine joining the EU

The EESC, just a week ahead of the European Council's June Summit, adopted a resolution strongly backing EU candidate status being granted unconditionally to Ukraine and pledging European civil society's commitment to working hand in hand with Ukrainians to build their country back better.

At its June plenary, the EESC adopted a second resolution on Ukraine. Entitled **From relief to reconstruction-proposals by the European civil society**, the resolution emphasises that the country should be granted accession to the EU once it meets requirements for membership. The resolution clearly states that Ukraine's candidacy should not be to the detriment of the ongoing accession process for Western Balkans countries.

On the reconstruction of the country, the resolution highlights the immediate need for European and international financial assistance to prevent a total breakdown of the Ukrainian economy.

The EESC President **Christa Schweng** said "Our resolution sends a clear message to the Commission and the Council to grant Ukraine candidate status. Ukraine deserves it and its people must be given clear European prospects."

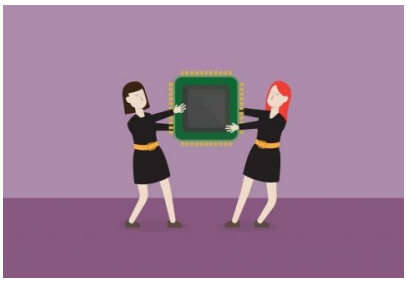
The president of the Workers' Group, **Oliver Röpke,** said "We will be working together with Ukraine for Ukraine to put in place gradual steps to meet the standards required by the European treaties to join the Union".

Stefano Mallia, president of the Employers' Group, said: "We are calling on the EU institutions to provide specific emergency funding for SMEs, which should first go towards preserving SMEs and then towards helping them grow".

Séamus Boland, president of the Civil Society Organisations' Group, said "Civil society actors must be at the heart of the planning, implementation and monitoring of EU and national humanitarian assistance to Ukraine – both during the war and in the re-building of the country".

Marta Barandiy, chair of "Promote Ukraine", said "We need your help to rebuild the country", while **Mariya Korolchuk**, speaking on behalf of NGOs CORE and Funky Citizens, said in a very emotional speech that the Ukrainian people were determined to win and rebuild Ukraine.

Taking the floor, **Vsevolod Chentsov**, Head of the Ukrainian Mission to the EU, thanked the EU Member States for their solidarity, underlining that EU candidacy status was an "existential moment for us". (at)



Chips Act for Europe: "lab to fab" is not enough to achieve resilience

In a new opinion package the EESC argues that the whole semiconductor value chain needs to be bolstered, including the final stages of production, where COVID-19 also exposed critical gaps.

At its June plenary the EESC adopted a package of opinions on the Chips Act for Europe initiative. Hailing the Commission's proposals as a very good initiative overall to address the shortages experienced during COVID-19, the EESC stressed nonetheless that the Commission should go further in specific areas.

First and foremost, the EESC believes that for European industry to achieve strategic resilience, the whole semiconductor sector needs to be taken into account: "The Commission's 'lab to fab' principle does not go far enough because the value chain does not end with manufacturing", stresses **Heiko Willems**, rapporteur for the EESC opinion on the Chips Act for Europe.

The EESC flags up that the later stages of production –packaging, testing and assembly– are not really fully covered. "European production is sometimes shipped to South-East Asia for packaging and then shipped back to Europe: this is not the right approach to strategic autonomy, having seen the dangers we've encountered in recent years", says **Dirk Bergrath**, rapporteur for the EESC opinion on Europe's semiconductor ecosystem (Chips Act).

At the same time, it is important for Europe to stay open as the chips sector is one of the most globalised value chains in the world. Establishing a closed value chain would make no economic sense. Striking the right balance between boosting Europe's capacities and strengthening partnerships with like-minded countries is, in the EESC's view, the right path to follow.

To alleviate the semiconductor shortage, the EU needs to address several issues: access to raw materials, R&D facilities, intellectual property, technological know-how and availability of skilled labour. This requires a great deal of investment and support from the public sector. The Commission has planned to raise EUR 43 billion in the coming years. However, a large chunk of this budget is already earmarked for other programmes such as Horizon Europe and Digital Europe, and will only be reallocated.

"Where is the fresh money for the industry?" asks **Stoyan Tchoukanov**, rapporteur for the EESC opinion on the Chips Joint Undertaking. "Compare this with the US, which is investing USD 52 billion between 2021 and 2026, and China, looking to mobilise USD 150 billion by 2025. Even a smaller country like Korea is planning to invest USD 450 billion by 2030."

The EU will need to find additional public funds and the EESC is calling on the Commission to flesh out its investment plans. Private investment will also need to be boosted to raise 43 EUR billion.

The Commission is opening the door for state aid up to 100% of the funding gap for first-of-a-kind facilities, i.e. facilities that do not yet exist in Europe, to support technology segments that are particularly vulnerable due to geopolitical concerns or strategic relevance.

"We all agree that if we have strong dependencies in Europe and a lack of capacities where we need strength, projects will need to be financed with public money too," say the three rapporteurs, "but 100%

state aid rings the alarm bell, because then you can come up with a project which is not really sustainable.". The economic viability of such facilities must be guaranteed, at least in the medium term, with no subsidy race, no creation of overcapacities and no market distortions. (dm)



Migration policy: migrant instrumentalisation and Ukrainian refugee crisis call for a fresh start

The state-sponsored instrumentalisation of migrants, aimed at destabilising the EU, and the unprecedented influx of refugees as a result of war in Ukraine call for a review of European migration policy. The EESC insists that solidarity and burden-sharing among Member States are needed for a common response to refugee crises. At the same time, it highlights the need to guarantee migrants' safety and human rights.

In the EESC opinion **Instrumentalisation of migrants**, adopted at the June plenary, members emphasised that the EU's response to this tactic should be based on a common, shared and coherent migration policy.

The upcoming and much hoped-for specific regulation in this field should provide a solidarity-based form of responsibility-sharing between the Member States.

Especially now, with the war in Ukraine and the massive refugee flows, it has become clear that migration impacts all Member States. Therefore, the new Pact on Migration and Asylum should be redesigned in order to bring about the systemic change necessary to develop a rational, rights-based asylum and migration policy.

Stefano Palmieri, rapporteur for the EESC opinion, underlined: "It is now necessary to continue working towards consolidating Europe's reputation as a place able to provide humanitarian aid and guarantee compliance with human rights".

Regarding "hybrid threats" deployed by third countries to test the EU's unity, **Pietro Vittorio Barbieri**, co-rapporteur for the EESC opinion, stressed that human beings were not the threat but rather the victims of such tactics.

The migrants involved are highly vulnerable and in need of protection, emphasised the EESC, insisting that humanitarian assistance has to meet the standards required under EU law and comply with established practices for supporting vulnerable individuals. The EESC recommends a fair, full and immediate recognition of the rights of instrumentalised migrants, avoiding grey areas of administrative uncertainty. (at)



Conference on the Future of Europe: follow-up is now critical

The collective efforts of civil society organisations over the past year have paid off and the Conference on the Future of Europe has managed to deliver meaningful results on issues that concern Europeans. With this message EESC President Christa Schweng welcomed Dubravka Šuica, European Commission Vice-President for Democracy and Demography, to the EESC plenary session on 15 June 2022.

"Forty-nine proposals were adopted, based on citizens' recommendations and after contributions from all stakeholders. They include many forward-looking objectives, such as explicitly empowering the EESC as a facilitator and guarantor of participatory democracy activities," said Ms **Schweng**.

She added that the challenge was now two-fold: to find the best possible way to support structured dialogue with civil society organisations and to follow up on the Conference, ensuring feedback is thorough, simple, transparent and in the form of an online dashboard and public screening.

Ms **Šuica** highlighted that "the Committee is an essential part of the democratic ecosystem, it reinforces trust and reduces the gap between citizens and institutions. It is now vital that we provide Europeans with feedback from this unique democratic exercise. The Commission will always be on the side of those who want to reform the EU to make it work better. However, treaty change should not be an end in itself; there is much that can and will need to be done under the existing treaties."

Announcing the follow-up conference, which would take place in the autumn of 2022, she said that "the event will put a seal of legitimacy on the entire process because democracy is precious and we can never take it for granted, as the tragic events in Ukraine are reminding us. Our focus must be to continue developing democracy and we are now making our democracy fit for the future." (mp)



Professor Andrea Renda, CEPS

Digitalization: the EESC assesses Europe's "third way"

With the Declaration of Digital Rights and Principles and the Data Act, the EU is taking two further steps towards the creation of a digital space that puts people at its centre, a debate at the EESC's June plenary highlighted.

At its plenary session on 15 June, the EESC hosted a debate on digital rights and principles with Professor **Andrea Renda**, senior research fellow and head of Global Governance, Regulation, Innovation and the Digital Economy at CEPS. The debate was linked to the adoption of the EESC opinions on the draft European Declaration on Digital Rights and Principles and the Data Act.

Prof. **Renda** expressed support for both the declaration and the act as two pieces of the puzzle of the EU regulatory system taking shape, which constituted an alternative to both the US, dominated by private governance at the hands of giant corporations, and State-controlled China, where the data acquired by large tech giants has become a tool of mass government surveillance.

"We have these ideas of safety and security, which require not only more responsible individuals and private companies, but also sharper and more powerful governments that have the tools to look into what is safe and secure and what is about to evolve into something that is not," he said. "And we talk about sustainability – not only environmental, but also increasingly economic and social sustainability, because the model we've seen until now is economically and socially unsustainable."

"Committing the EU to digital rights and principles is highly relevant to address the still prevalent digital divide, particularly when it comes to access to online public services and private services for aging and rural populations," said **Philip von Brockdorff**, rapporteur for the EESC opinion on the draft declaration.

He stressed that the declaration should support sustainable development not just in relation to the environment, but also in terms of social sustainability, minimising the harmful effects and maximising the positive impact of digital technologies on the economy and society.

Presenting the EESC opinion on the Data Act, rapporteur **Marinel Dănuț Muresan** stressed the need to address civil society's legitimate concerns: "The security of EU citizens is very important. Each stakeholder needs to have access. We have to develop data centres that follow the rules on cyber security, ensure that there is continuous professional training for everybody who processes data and fair access for all stakeholders and particularly SMEs." (dm)



Left to right: Stefano Palmieri, Javier Doz Orrit, Brikena Xhomaqi, Luca Jahier, Gonçalo Lobo Xavier, Dragoș Pîslaru

European Semester: Reform it to ensure effective participation of organised civil society, asks the EESC

During its annual conference in June, the European Semester Group (ESG) renewed its call for civil society participation and proposed a permanent and common investment financing mechanism to enhance crisis preparedness and response capacity.

The conference followed on from the recent Committee resolution to discuss the reform of the European Semester, which will be overseeing the implementation of the national recovery and resilience plans

(NRRPs). "With the new challenges facing the EU, the European Semester needs to be updated, strengthened, and opened up to European organised civil society", explained ESG vice-president **Gonçalo Lobo Xavier**.

Opening the conference, EESC president **Christa Schweng** reaffirmed that that ''civil society has a crucial role for the Europe of tomorrow'', while **Elisa Ferreira**, commissioner for cohesion and reforms, said: "as we think about future crises, we need to think in terms not of one master tool, but of many tools and a well-stocked toolbox. We need diversification."

The EU will need massive investments in the years to come. The panellists discussed whether these recovery plans should be made structural and permanent to ensure common investment in key areas. "Europe needs energy independence", stated **Javier Doz Orrit**, president of the European Semester Group, while president of the Section for Economic and Monetary Affairs (ECO), **Stefano Palmieri**, insisted on the need to "ensure a structural transformation of the system."

Luca Jahier, vice-president of the European Semester Group, closed the conference by acknowledging the importance of the RRF and the NRRPs. "With these tools, we have done more in these last two years than in the last 20 years", he said. "We now need to ensure the participation of organised civil society, invest more and accelerate the transition." (tk)


Pietro Francesco De Lotto and Christa Schweng

Europe's key industries urge EESC to maximise its role in policy-making

At an event celebrating 20 years of the EESC advising on industrial change, key EU industrial sectors argued for a more data-driven and future-oriented response to the disruption arising from COVID-19, Russian aggression, the climate crisis, and industrial and social transformation.

On 8 June, the EESC celebrated the 20th anniversary of its Consultative Commission on Industrial Change (CCMI). Representatives from the mining, energy, defence and aerospace industries stressed that, in a radically changed world, EU policy has to accurately reflect both industrial imperatives and the social context.

EESC President **Christa Schweng**, opening the event, underlined the commitment to "work together with organised civil society, the EU institutions and all relevant stakeholders to find joint solutions to the challenges that our industries are facing."

Thierry Breton, Commissioner for the Internal Market, paid tribute to how "the EESC continues to play a key role in industrial policy issues." He told participants that the challenges of climate change, the pandemic and war on the EU's doorstep mean that Europe urgently needs to be able to take control of its industrial destiny.

Pietro Francesco De Lotto, President of the CCMI, highlighted the commission's role in asking new questions, anticipating new fields of analysis and bringing new expertise to discussions to ensure that all stakeholders' views are taken into account. "The Consultative Commission on Industrial Change is a model for rethinking the future of social dialogue in the European institutions," he said.

Monika Sitárová, CCMI Vice-President, said: "our reports provide an evidence base for our opinions and recommendations. We use our experience of social dialogue to deal with industrial change and its social impact, to anticipate change and to contribute to solutions that are socially acceptable." (ks)


Christa Schweng and Ann Hardt

ECI: on 10th anniversary EESC seeks to boost its impact

On European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) Day 2022, hosted by the EESC on 2 June, speakers and activists stressed that a more impactful ECI would also be more popular.

The EESC celebrated a decade of ECIs with an event taking stock of achievements and challenges and looking forward to the future. Speakers and activists painted a mixed picture, with some remarkable successes standing side by side with shortcomings and weaknesses, among which **impact, accessibility and visibility** stood out.

"We are celebrating the 10th anniversary of this still unique transnational participatory tool," said EESC president **Christa Schweng** as she opened the event. "Ten years is a long time: we have definitely gained some experience. But it is also very short: we still have to learn, improve and make sure the ECI gets the place it deserves in the EU institutional process."

The EESC president announced the EESC's decision to take a stance on relevant successful initiatives before the European Commission actually responds to them, starting with **Save the Bees**. It will also pay special attention to young people and monitor how Member States are taking up the possibility of lowering to 16 the minimum age for signing an ECI – an option that has so far become a reality in one Member State, in addition to three others where the voting age in general is 16 or 17.

Commission Vice-President **Dubravka Šuica** said: "The ECI is an example of the institutions' ability to adapt, change and improve our engagement with citizens. Our focus must be on continuing to develop an ecosystem of democratic innovation and citizen engagement and participation in democracy."

MEP **Helmut Scholz** suggested that, if the European Parliament were to acquire the right of legislative initiative through treaty changes following the Conference on the Future of Europe, it could take it upon itself to make sure that successful ECIs are followed through.

One workshop zoomed in on the success of recent ECIs. Their initiators agreed that, in the absence of substantial financial resources for campaigns, whose cost they estimated at some EUR 300,000, the backing of NGOs was key to obtaining the required one million signatures. People trust them, they stressed, and because they trust them, they are more willing to sign and provide the personal information required by Member States.

Another session looked at the popularity of the ECI among young people, who rank high among initiators, though not among the most successful ones. Speakers discussed how the institutions could encourage more

young people to use tools like the ECI. Young activists stressed that political education at a young age is necessary across the EU to prevent such tools from being accessible only to the highly-educated few. Learn more about the event. (dm/rl)

NEWS FROM THE GROUPS



Rising inflation without indexation: workers' wages diminish and poverty grows

By the EESC Workers' Group

Measures must be taken so that workers and families already having difficulties making ends meet do not end up in complete poverty as inflation eats up the value of their wages each month.

Inflation is a complicated process with several causes. But its effects are clear and direct: workers and families across Europe are now seeing their salaries effectively shrink and their savings wane. As is usually the case, the most vulnerable are also the most severely hit, as their margins were already narrow (if any). In addition, the price hike we are experiencing is particularly marked in basic goods for most workers, including food, electricity, heating and fuel.

ECB data shows that in 2008 there was some sort of automatic indexation between the rising cost of living and wages (Belgium, Spain, France, Cyprus, Luxembourg, Malta and Slovenia) or non-automatic but still with some guidelines (Greece, Italy, and Finland). After the austerity measures following the 2008 crisis, only Belgium and Luxembourg kept and currently have automatic indexation. Meanwhile, Italy, Cyprus, and Malta have some sort of non-automatic indexation (ECB). These measures are usually based on the general cost of living, and while they help, they can hardly cushion the blow dealt by the price hike in the basic goods listed above.

However, most of the EU does not have any of these systems. It is therefore even more important to provide additional assistance to the most vulnerable, and to tackle the roots of the rising prices as much as possible. In the short term, some of the causes of inflation are not controllable, namely the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Structural limitations to global supply chains after COVID-19 must also be addressed, amidst growing uncertainty. Long-term solutions are necessary. Meanwhile, measures must be taken so that workers and families already having difficulties making ends meet do not end up in complete poverty as the value of their wages diminishes each month. (prp)



Czech Presidency: "Europe as a task" that makes perfect sense

By Stefano Mallia, President of the EESC Employers' Group

Prague has put forward a pragmatic and dynamic programme that correctly identifies the immediate challenges we face.

The Czech Republic is taking over the rotating presidency of the Council of the EU at a difficult time for our Union – probably the most critical time ever – as we face war on our continent again while we are still grappling with the impacts of the pandemic, weak recovery and inflation.

The slogan chosen by the Czech Presidency is telling: **Europe as a task**. Indeed, we are all tasked with leading Europe to rethink, rebuild and repower, and with finding the courage to re-evaluate many of our current approaches.

The challenges in front of us are considerable: we must focus on creating the conditions for peace, security and prosperity in the EU, while ensuring the strategic resilience and competitiveness of the European economy. It is only through a strong and competitive economy that we can face up to international pressures while taking care of our citizens.
The internal market needs to be further deepened, especially in the service sector and the digital economy. We must improve the business environment, including support for science, research and innovation. Only that will boost the competitiveness of European firms.

We are all in favour of the Green Deal and the "Fit for 55" agenda, but we must be careful about the pace of decarbonisation of EU industry. Our energy security issues are currently more pressing than the energy transition. First and foremost, we need to strengthen the energy resilience of the EU as a whole. We must ensure that we eliminate our dependency on Russia while securing energy from different suppliers.

When it comes to immigration and refugees, we must seek to put in place permanent and lasting solutions that ensure equal responsibility among EU Member States.
We trust that the Czech Republic will lead the Union with great resolve. Prague has put forward a pragmatic and dynamic programme that correctly identifies the immediate challenges we face and sets out to address them in the shortest possible time and in the most effective way possible.

It is a Presidency programme that puts the economy and its competitiveness at its core, and one that the Employers' Group will support.
Europe is a task that makes perfect sense. (sm)



European Just Transition Conference in Ireland

By the EESC Civil Society Organisations' Group

The EESC Civil Society Organisations' Group, in partnership with Irish Rural Link, organised a conference in Ireland to explore the topic of "Just Transition" from multiple angles.

The Civil Society Organisations' Group, in partnership with Irish Rural Link (IRL), a national network representing the interest of rural communities in Ireland, held a joint conference on 9 June in Tullamore, Ireland.

The conference explored the topic of "Just Transition" from multiple angles and speakers debated the necessity for, as well as the opportunities emanating from, Just Transitions in the following three panels:

- Strengthening communities and building capacities through recreation and heritage;
- Creating jobs and delivering renewable energy;
- Investing in education and training.

The conference was opened by **Pippa Hackett**, minister of state for land use and biodiversity, with guest speakers **Kieran Mulvey**, just transition commissioner, Ireland; **Declan Harvey**, chair of Offaly County Council, and **Séamus Boland**, president of the Civil Society Organisations' Group and CEO of IRL.

Speaking about the conference, **Séamus Boland**, said: "I am delighted to be able to bring my EESC Group to Tullamore to see first-hand how the Just Transition is being implemented in an area which has been impacted most by the measures needed to address climate change. It is also important to highlight the vital role communities play in a Just Transition and ensuring that they are involved and engaged with every step of the way".

Minister **Pippa Hackett** said: "We stand in the doorway to transition – we can see the landscape ahead, some of us have dipped our toes in, but many of us are, understandably, reluctant to fully commit as to do so is to wave goodbye to what we know, what we understand. Civil Society Organisations have a tremendously important role to play as communicators, mediators and animators of both the people most impacted and those legislating, at national and EU level, for transition. I welcome this conference as one more important step along the road for the most impacted regions of the EU, including our own Midlands region of Ireland".

The conclusions and recommendations, a video recording and photos of the conference as well as the presentations of all guest speakers are available on the EESC website . (jk)

SOON IN THE EESC/CULTURAL EVENTS



Combating gender-based violence: listen first

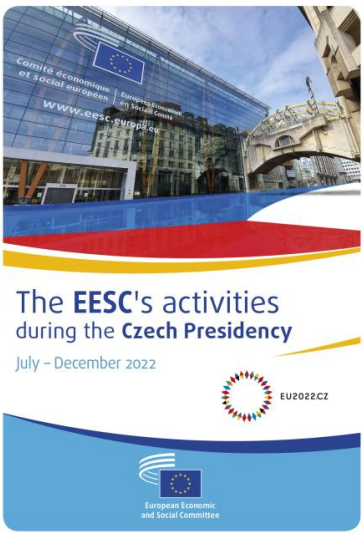
A video exhibition on show at the EESC highlights the frightening reality of female survivors of violence in Europe.

The virtual exhibition, entitled "Voices of Violence", consists of a series of ten short videos by the Danish Cultural Institute in which Danish, Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian actresses give voice to anonymous stories and reveal the marks and scars these experiences have left on women across borders. The idea is that listening and understanding are the first steps towards taking action and triggering change.

The exhibition will run from 13 July to 31 August. The launch will take place online during the EESC's July plenary session, in connection with the adoption of the EESC opinion on *Combating violence against women*.

A word of warning: some viewers may find some of the content of these videos disturbing or upsetting.

You can find more information on our website.



The EESC's activities during the Czech presidency: July-December 2022

A newly published brochure sets out how the EESC intends to help achieve the objectives of the Czech presidency.

The Czech presidency of the Council of the European Union will have to deal not only with the humanitarian crisis caused by the war in Ukraine, but also with the continuing economic consequences of the conflict. The fact that Europe has not yet fully recovered from the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic only makes the challenge greater.

The incoming presidency intends to focus its efforts on **ensuring energy security**, **developing the EU economy's strategic resilience** and **boosting defence capabilities and cybersecurity in Europe**. At the same time, it will have to deal with issues relating to management of the **refugee crisis and Ukraine's recovery**.

The **rule of law** and the resilience of democratic institutions will also be at the heart of the incoming presidency's priorities.

The Czech presidency will also have another important role to play in ensuring an appropriate, transparent and substantial **follow-up to the Conference on the Future of Europe**.

The EESC is determined to work closely with the Czech presidency on these joint objectives. A newly published brochure details the way in which each one of the EESC's thematic sections is planning to contribute in its policy areas. The brochure also highlights the issues on which the Czech presidency has specifically asked the EESC to provide its expertise. The Committee will make every effort to ensure that the voices of Europe's civil society organisations are heard throughout the presidency.

The brochure is available in English, French, German and Czech on the EESC's website. Hard copies may be ordered from: vipcese@eesc.europa.eu. (fgr)

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EESC info is published nine times a year during EESC plenary sessions. EESC info is available in 24 languages
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08/2022