

January 2024 | EN

This page is also available in:

- ES
- BG
- CS
- DA
- DE
- ET
- FR
- EL
- HR
- IT
- LV
- LT
- HU
- MT
- NL
- PL
- PT
- FI
- RO
- SK
- SL
- SV

Available Languages:

EDITORIAL



Embracing Change and Navigating Challenges in 2024

Dear readers,

2024 will be the year of change, not only in Europe but around the world. As we gear up for the largest democratic exercise of this continent, the European Parliament elections in June, national or presidential elections will take place in over 50 countries worldwide, including the U.S. Political constellations will shift, and new paths will be chartered.

For the EU, the European Parliament elections will be a real test of citizens' trust. We have faced unprecedented challenges in recent years, and it will be the European citizens' turn to tell us if the EU has passed the test. With the fight against poverty and social exclusion as the top priority for EU citizens, I expect it will not be smooth sailing for our Union. Inflation, job insecurity, and an overall lack of economic stability create a fertile ground for fear, feeding populist and extremist narratives.

While it will not be an easy task, the EU can stop this trend. We need to start engaging with voters, letting them speak up and have their voices heard. In this context, I am proud to announce the first-ever EESC Civil Society Week (4-8 March), where citizens from across Europe, both young and old, will engage in a dialogue and formulate messages for the next round of EU leaders in the new European Commission and Parliament.

The EU will also need to navigate new challenges. The recent historic decision from the December European Council to open accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova while granting a candidate status to Georgia signaled a crucial phase for enlargement. The ball is on the camp of the candidates to undertake necessary reforms, but the EU leaders have also committed to addressing internal reforms, with conclusions expected in the summer of 2024. From the EESC perspective, we are advancing the cause through a progressive integration of "Enlargement Candidate Members" in our work, who will contribute to the drafting of the our opinions and participate in plenary sessions. After launching a call, we are in the process of selecting the new members, and we will kick-off their work during next month EESC plenary session.

All this will be happening under the watchful eye of the Belgian Presidency of the EU, which is tasked with closing legislative files while also gearing up for the EP elections. For those who

missed the Belgian Presidency priorities, tune in for our January Plenary session.

As we embark on the journey of 2024, it is important to remember that change is not a stumbling block, but an opportunity to grow. It is a chance to shape narratives and bring back a stronger and more united Europe.

Oliver Röpke

EESC President

DIARY DATES

14-15 February 2024

EESC plenary session

4-7 March 2024

Civil Society Week

TO THE POINT

Under the heading *To the point*, **Sandra Parthie**, EESC member, president of the Section for the Single Market, Production and Consumption and rapporteur of the opinion, highlights the Committee's proposals on the New European strategy for the Internal Market, to be adopted at the January plenary session.



SANDRA PARTHIE: DEVELOPING A NEW EUROPEAN STRATEGY FOR THE INTERNAL MARKET

Between the inception of the idea of a European single market in the 1980s, its design and launch in the early 1990s lie many historical changes on our continent and beyond. Since then, the EU itself more than doubled in size and membership, dealt with crises and conflicts, with natural, economic, social and technological challenges.

Since then, the geopolitical situation has changed dramatically, too. A new superpower has risen in Asia and become a systemic rival for the EU on many levels. Over the years, the principles of the internal market, i.e. the free movement of goods, services, capital and labour have proven a boon for the EU's economic performance. However, it remains far from perfect.

The implementation of the commonly agreed rules can be rather patchy, administrative requirements have mushroomed and market surveillance capacities are woefully limited. In addition, it is currently struggling with conflicting objectives: requests for subsidies by industry but also other actors on the national level versus calls to limit State aid and keep the playing field level across Member States; local production requirements to keep value creation and employment in Europe versus demands for open markets and access to them as a way of remaining cost-competitive with global competitors and providing consumers with affordable products; access to indispensable raw materials for the production of goods from cars, to wind turbines or solar panels, to kitchen or garden appliances versus supply conditions of these resources, such as guaranteeing labour and environmental standards and dealing with competitors for such resources.

Openness of the EU's markets and borders, a key aspect behind the original single market thinking, has become insufficient in a world that no longer respects multilaterally agreed international trade rules. In fact, it risks turning into a weak point for the EU if it isn't equipped with some safeguards, such as strict surveillance of the quality and safety of products entering the EU market or the screening of investments and related objectives by the investors. In a world that is turning away from multilateral rules-based systems towards states restricting or limiting access to resources based on their national interests, the economics of globalisation, of internationally integrated supply chains no longer function.

An internal market that was based on these rules therefore needs a new strategy. It should focus on several aspects: a European industrial policy, a favourable framework for businesses and SMEs, social economy enterprises, public support for the European project, properly organised and efficient services of general interest and steps to preserve and develop our social model.

In the EESC's view the completion of the EU capital market is crucial for deepening the internal market. The capital market should be focused on financing the production, purchase and flow of goods and services, in particular by supporting businesses' R&D&I and services of general interest, and by encouraging entrepreneurship.

Furthermore, priority should be given to policies that provide a framework for innovation by private companies and favour innovation through access to venture capital and cooperation between industry and science. The enforcement of the acquis must be a further priority for strengthening the internal market. Unfortunately, many of these rules have not been transposed into national law, are being implemented very differently, or are being applied to very different degrees. This is a serious and substantial obstacle to the smooth functioning of the internal market.

ONE QUESTION



One question to...

Under the heading *One question to...*, EESC member **Stoyan Tchoukanov** answered the question concerning his opinion set for adoption during the January plenary session.

EESC question: "You are the rapporteur for the opinion on *Promoting autonomous and sustainable food production: strategies for the post-2027 Common Agricultural Policy*. What does the Committee propose in its opinion, particularly about the CAP after 2027 with regard to sustainable food production?



Stoyan Tchoukanov: What direction for common agricultural policy after 2027?

"You are the rapporteur for the opinion on "Promoting autonomous and sustainable food production: strategies for the post-2027 Common Agricultural Policy". What are the Committee's proposals in its opinion, particularly concerning the CAP after 2027 with regard to sustainable food production?

Stoyan Tchoukanov: The CAP has enabled the European Union to secure a stable supply of food in high and ever increasing quality for its growing population, while maintaining a family farming model. Over the last 65 years, the policy has evolved, but there is still much criticism of the three dimensions of sustainability of the new version that came into force in 2021.

Faced with new challenges, now more than ever, we need a stable long-term policy framework geared to sustainable food production and open strategic autonomy for the European Union. This should go hand in hand with protecting the diversity of types of farming in the EU and responding to societal and ecological needs ("public money for public goods"), while ensuring rural development.

Environmental and climate policies should not be seen as a burden in the recovery from the current crisis, but rather as part of long-term solutions and guidelines for decision making in the future. The latest reform strengthened the principle that every hectare supported must in return provide society with environmental services.

However, uniform funding per hectare does not reflect ecological reality or fair support from a social perspective. We believe that the next CAP should take this even further, stepping up environmental and social requirements that must be duly rewarded and safeguarded from unfair competition.

Therefore, surface-based payments should be repurposed towards incentives instead of compensations for the benefiting services, with a reasonable transition period that may go beyond the scope of one single Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF).

Small family farms should have the opportunity to choose to maintain income support based on surface payments and labour units on the farm, letting Member States define the criteria in the strategic plans. In

order to stop the further drop in the number of farms in the EU due to the lack of generational renewal, action needs to be taken on increasing average earnings from farming, access to land (through investment grants, preferential credit, national legislation regarding land transfer), favourable investment conditions under the second pillar (bringing additional private money), upskilling (of farmers, farm workers and advisors), empowerment of women, good labour conditions, improvement of long-term prospects for farmers (pensions, etc.) as well as the overall attractiveness of rural areas.

The CAP must contribute to promoting consumer demand in the EU for healthier and more sustainable diets (organic, seasonal, local products), decrease food waste and regulate food markets to address the financialisation of the food sector that drives severe speculation, as huge profits are being made while Europeans are struggling to deal with rising food prices. Hikes in energy prices and risks of disruption in the supply of energy and fertilisers are part of the new normal, and the CAP should consider including counter-cyclical components and provide investment support schemes dedicated to improving the production and distribution of renewable energy at farm and local level in rural areas.

In our opinion we suggest that the Commission consider reinforcing public/private partnership insurance schemes – voluntary in the individual Member State – in the CAP instruments after 2027, in response to the consequences of extreme climate conditions. In view of the elections for the European Parliament in 2024, and the future enlargement of the EU, the EESC sees this opinion as an opportunity to set out some considerations/guidelines/proposals from organised civil society on the future shape and direction of the CAP post 2027, with a view to achieving autonomous and sustainable food production within a more holistic and comprehensive food policy. The aim is to contribute to the Commission's proposal for the next CAP by highlighting the needs of civil society organisations and society's expectations.

TRIBUTE TO JACQUES DELORS



In memory of Jacques Delors, former President of the European Commission

Jacques Delors died on 27 December 2023. He was President of the European Commission from 1985 to 1995 and Finance Minister in François Mitterrand’s government from 1981 to 1985.

Sébastien Maillard, former director and current special advisor of the Jacques Delors Institute in Paris and former EU correspondent in Brussels, pays a fitting tribute to him.

Lorenzo Consoli, one of the most well-known journalists in Europe, has also shared his thoughts on Mr Delors with EESC info readers.

Mr Consoli, an Italian journalist and European correspondent since 1991, is one of the most experienced specialists in European politics, notably working for the Italian news agency Askanews. He was President of

the Brussels International Press Association (IPA) from 2006 to 2010 and visiting lecturer in the executive master's programme in European Journalism and Communication at the Institut des Hautes Études des Communications Sociales (IHECS) in Brussels. (ehp)



Jacques Delors: a man of collective action

Jacques Delors has passed away after a long life of successful engagement that has had a lasting impact. He was directly involved in writing entire chapters of the European project as we know it: the single market, the Schengen area, the Erasmus programme, the euro and the Cohesion Fund. Behind the European achievements lies the ethics of action.

Mr Delors gave an air of nobility to public engagement. In his community work, his trade union activities and, later, his political action, the activist, as he humbly liked to define himself, was particularly inspired by Emmanuel Mounier's thoughts on personalism. A quietly devout Christian, he saw each person as a unique individual who is part of a network of social ties that he knew had to be mobilised if any large-scale action were to be undertaken.

Concerned about the rise of individualism, the social democrat believed in engagement in society, where everyone does their bit for the common good. His name remains inextricably linked to consultation, co-management, collegiality and other forms of collective action, which he promoted and advocated. This is why he attached so much importance to the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, which he helped create. He respected intermediary bodies and believed in sincere social dialogue in the spirit of compromise.

He practised this at EU level, where he also extended this to dialogue with religions. Mr Delors was not a saviour figure. While being self-taught, he did not consider himself a self-made man but someone who had been shaped by and with others and through action. His way of thinking was constantly evolving based on feedback from action in a virtuous circle. Although he was a man of principles and convictions rooted in his strong faith, he was not a slave to blind ideology. By clearly seeing the realities, grasping situations and respecting national traditions, he was able to find the way forwards.

For him, reality took precedence over the idea, which he knew to pave the way for when circumstances demanded. As such, he knew to take up the idea of the single currency, while supporting German reunification from the outset, which had become inevitable after the fall of the Wall. Of course, the world and its current turmoil are no longer those of Mr Delors' Europe. His achievements, like the internal market, must be adapted and added to in the face of threatening powers. But they provide the basis for action today. And his approach of incorporating and clearly seeing the realities, while adhering firmly to principles and remaining open to compromise in order to find a way forwards together, should be revived among European leaders.

Sébastien Maillard, special advisor and former director (2017-2023) of the Jacques Delors Institute

---



Lorenzo Consoli: the greatness and demise of Jacques Delors

Jacques Delors, who passed away on 27 December 2023, will be remembered as the greatest, most effective and most visionary, forward-looking President of the European Commission - and, like Jean Monnet and Robert Schuman long before him, a ‘founding father’ of a united Europe.

Before him, the President of the European Commission was little more than a Eurocrat; it was he who gave the role the same status, later recognised universally, as a head of state or government. During his ten-year term of office, from 1985 to 1995, and thanks to the support of German Chancellor Helmut Kohl and French President François Mitterrand, he drove the process of European integration forward forcefully and decisively. He began by immediately revitalising it with the aim of transforming the common market, based on the customs union, into a genuine single market by 1992. Then, while the single market was still being built, he launched his other major project - monetary union - while working on the enlargement of the Community’s competences with the founding of the European Union, via the Maastricht Treaty.

For the first time, he also addressed the Union’s ‘democratic deficit’, proposing and obtaining more powers for the European Parliament, first through the cooperation procedure (provided for by the Single European Act), and then (starting with the Maastricht reform) with co-decision, which finally gave the Strasbourg assembly a true co-legislator role in matters subject to qualified majority decisions in the Council.

The path towards the strategic objective of the single market began with two documents: the ‘cost of non-Europe’ report, which demonstrated the economic benefits of removing the remaining internal regulatory barriers, and a first ‘White Paper’, which identified all the legislative measures (around 200) needed to eliminate those barriers.

From the start, Delors identified the essential tool for completing the project and strengthening the decision-making mechanisms and the European institutions: he proposed, by means of the Single European Act, a first real reform of the 1957 Treaty of Rome, which had established the European Communities (Common Market and Euratom), and convinced the Member States to approve it (1987).

Delors then played an essential role in redefining the Community financial framework, with a significant increase in budgetary resources to 1.20% of the Member States’ total GDP with the Delors I Package (1988-92) followed by 1.27% with the Delors II Package (1993-99), and a substantial increase in funds for ‘economic and social cohesion’ (regional and structural policies), seen as a necessary counterpart to the unification of the internal market. Even more important, however, was the systemic change to the Community budget framework from annual to medium-term (7-year), starting from the two Delors ‘packages’.

This prevented lengthy financial negotiations between the Member States, which slowed down the work of the European institutions for months at a time, being repeated every year. Another key element introduced by Delors in European policies was the focus on the social dimension (it was he, among others, who initiated the ‘social dialogue’ between businesses, trade unions and European institutions). Nevertheless, his social programme, which also provided for the harmonisation of the instruments to protect workers in the event of a crisis and to counteract the pressure to relocate production activities, was one of his unfinished works.

His toughest defeat, however, concerned his second White Paper, on 'growth, employment and competitiveness’, launched in style in 1993 as the last major project of his mandate. It was a proposal to

revitalise and boost the economy (to be financed with EUR 20 billion over 20 years), based on, among other things, a common debt issuance (EUR 8 billion per year) and contributions from the Community budget and loans from the European Investment Bank. The aim was to support the construction of transport and telecommunications infrastructure and a number of other economic and social initiatives (essentially foreshadowing what would follow more than 20 years later with ‘NextGenerationEU’ in response to the pandemic crisis).

The plan, initially welcomed by the European Council, was later criticised and abandoned by the EU's Finance Ministers. The end of Delors' decade followed a downward trajectory, as the tide turned and he was accused of extravagant ambition, centralised Jacobinism and excessive regulation. Some of his ideas would be revisited later, however - such as the Trans-European Networks and the ‘SURE’ programme, which supported temporary unemployment schemes during the COVID-19 crisis.

EESC NEWS



EESC Jubilee: EU needs even more social dialogue

The EESC is a success story, but the European Union needs to make an even stronger effort to uphold its social contract, solidarity, a fair economy and inclusiveness. This is the key to preserving its European values.

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) was established by the Treaty of Rome (signed in March 1957) and held its first plenary session in May 1958. Its past experience and lessons for the future were the subject of a debate on the **"Celebration of the 65th anniversary of the European Economic and Social Committee: Empowering Civil Society, Defending Democracy"**, which took place on 13 December 2023 in Brussels. "Over the past 65 years, the Committee has built a true platform where civil society can freely express its views and so endeavour to improve the EU's legislation. In the changing geopolitical context, the voice of strong and independent civil society is more important than ever. It is civil society, in its role as watchdog, which makes sure that nobody switches off the checks and balances, the rule of law or fundamental rights and values – so that nobody 'unplugs democracy'", said EESC president **Oliver Röpke**.

EESC members represent the diversity of civil society organisations across Europe, including business, trade unions and other interest groups. It is an EU consultative body that delivers opinions to the European Commission, the EU Council and the European Parliament, acting as a bridge between the EU's decision-making institutions and EU citizens. "The EESC has turned 65 and you might have thought it was time to retire. But the opposite is true. The EESC is now needed more than ever, when so many Europeans face

difficulties. The attempt to ignore the role of organised social dialogue should be resisted. Other EU institutions should listen to us more and more," urged **Georges Dassis,** former President of the EESC and President of the Association of former members of the EESC.

As highlighted during the debate, the EESC has been a leading partner in the debate on the European Pillar of Social Rights in recent years. The EESC was also an integral part of the Conference on the Future of Europe, whose final recommendations explicitly mentioned the EESC as an instrument for increasing participation and transparency in EU democracy. Recent examples of the EESC's pioneering role include being the first to call for a proper European Health Union and being at the forefront in proposing the "right to repair". **Stefano Mallia**, President of the Employers Group, stressed the importance of the impact of the EESC's work, highlighting the improvements made in legislation since 1958: "In recent months, we have achieved several key goals, including the competitiveness check and an EU Blue Deal. And we will continue to work to convey the views of the people we represent."

The energy transition, the fight against the climate crisis and the response to the geopolitical threat posed by Russia are just some of the challenges that reinforce the need for an EESC that helps to build consensus for the common good, to promote the values of European integration and to advance the cause of participatory democracy and civil society organisations. "For 65 years, the EESC has provided a platform for trade union representatives to engage in meaningful discussions with employers, civil society organisations and other institutions of the European Union. The success of the EESC lies in collaboration. By bringing together representatives from many different groups in society, we manage to produce opinions with many different perspectives. This inclusivity ensures that our work stays in line with democratic principles," said **Lucie Studničná**, President of the Workers Group.

Séamus Boland, President of the Civil Society Organisations Group, called for the EESC to be fully mobilised for the European elections. "The EU must bring collective problem-solving to common European challenges. Whether we achieve this will largely depend on the results of the European Parliament elections. The EESC and its members have a mandate and a responsibility to reach out to citizens through their networks of civil society organisations to address disinformation, fears and lack of trust. We must also reiterate our call for real measures to implement dialogue with civil society at EU level in all policy areas."

Find out more about the history of the EESC (ab)



Isabelle Le Galo Flores to be new Secretary-General of the European Economic and Social Committee

On 12 December 2023, the Bureau of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) decided to appoint **Isabelle Le Galo Flores** as the EESC's new Secretary-General.

Ms Le Galo Flores holds a Master's degree in mathematical engineering as well as in communication, media studies and international relations. In the course of her career, she has held various management

positions, most recently the post of Deputy General Director for Spain at the Daniel and Nina Carasso Foundation, where she was involved inter alia in sustainable food systems and citizenship through art.

The Secretary-General of the EESC has an executive function, providing assistance and advice to the statutory bodies of the EESC and managing a workforce of approximately 700 staff. **Ms Le Galo Flores** took office on 16 January for a period of five years, following Gianluca Brunetti, who left the post on 31 December 2023. (ehp)



EESC demands that political efforts to eradicate homelessness be stepped up

Almost 900 000 people experience street homelessness or stay in a shelter on any given night in the EU. Homelessness has more than doubled in the last 15 years, and so the EESC calls on the Member States and the EU to take action.

The EESC is calling for a comprehensive EU homelessness strategy and for effective national homelessness policies to be enacted swiftly in a bid to substantially reduce homelessness, one of the most extreme forms of social exclusion, by 2030.

"We call for an EU homelessness strategy that fully integrates the European Platform on Combating Homelessness (EPOCH) and enables national homelessness policies to be included in the European Semester," said **Maria del Carmen Barrera Chamorro,** rapporteur for the EESC opinion on the EU framework for national homeless strategies.

The strategy must be supported by a Council Recommendation and the EESC calls on the new Belgian presidency of the Council of the EU to start work on it. It also asks the Commission to lose no time in drawing up a proposal for a new multiannual work programme which would continue into and cover its entire next mandate.

"The EESC wants homelessness to remain a social policy priority for the EU in the run-up to the European elections and beyond. We need a strategic shift in focus from managing homelessness to actually ending it by 2030," said **Ákos Topolánszky,** co-rapporteur for the opinion.

The EESC suggested actively promoting the "Housing First" principle to address chronic homelessness. Under this principle, housing is not just a shelter: it is also a tool for reintegration. It provides long-term housing solutions and is not dependant on conditions such as the need to demonstrate personal development or to accept support.

The housing-led approach has already been endorsed in the Lisbon Declaration, which was signed by all 27 EU Member States, the European institutions and several European NGOs in 2021. The Declaration is the political basis for EPOCH, and its signatories undertook to cooperate on homelessness at EU level and to work towards ending homelessness by 2030. However, the EESC notes in the opinion, despite political efforts, not enough is being done to address homelessness at either European or national level.

Over the last 20 years, Finland is the only country that has managed to reduce homelessness consistently. (ll)



Spain's deputy prime minister, Nadia Calviño, says Europe must continue to lead

Economy and finance, digitalisation, competitiveness and business, and trade. These are the four areas where the Spanish Presidency of the Council of the European Union made progress from July to December 2023.

Speaking at the December plenary session, Spain's first deputy prime minister and minister for economy and digitalisation, **Nadia Calviño,** summarised the conclusions of the rotating EU Presidency, mentioning, among other things, the deepening of economic and monetary union, instant payments in banking, the reform of the electricity market and the signing of an advanced trade agreement with Chile.

Ms Calviño, who is expected to take up office as the next president of the European Investment Bank (EIB) on 1 January 2024, also highlighted the items the European Union will need to put on the agenda soon, especially in view of the upcoming European elections. "The world is undergoing a massive change and the tectonic plates created after the Second World War are shifting," she said. "We need to ensure that the EU continues to lead the most important debates in the world, tackles the main challenges and protects its European values in this new world."

Referring to the busy semester that was about to end, she added that "cooperation with other European institutions and, in particular the EESC, was instrumental in its success. My presence shows the strong commitment of the Spanish government to the social partners, social dialogue and civil society. We try to listen carefully and integrate the opinion of civil society into our work." (mp)



European Disability Card: one step closer to achieving free movement for people with disabilities in the EU

The EESC calls for the scope of the Commission proposal for a European Disability Card to be expanded to cover longer stays for work or study, in order to deliver freedom of movement for people with disabilities in the EU.

The EESC has hailed the Commission proposal for a European Disability Card and a European Parking Card as the first step towards enabling people with disabilities to move freely around the EU.

"The proposal on the two Cards will affect more than 80 million Europeans with disabilities," said **Ioannis Vardakastanis**, rapporteur-general for the EESC opinion on The European Disability and Parking Cards, presented at the EESC plenary session on 14 December. "This is a very important step towards removing serious obstacles and ensuring that people with disabilities, both Europeans and third-country nationals legally resident in a Member State, can enjoy the fundamental principle on which the Union is founded: freedom of movement. Further policies will be built on this in the future."

However, the EESC has warned that the proposal falls short of removing some of the most significant barriers to the free movement of Europeans with disabilities, namely the lack of portability of disability-related benefits when they relocate to another EU country for work or study. In its own-initiative opinion, the EESC calls for the scope of the proposal to be expanded so that a person with a disability who has relocated can use the cards, on a temporary basis, to continue receiving benefits linked to social policies or national social security systems.

Currently, this is not the case. When someone moves from one Member State to another, they lose their right to any disability-related benefits when they cross the border, until such time as their disability is reassessed in the new Member State.

This assessment process can take over a year, and during the transition period the person is left without any recognition or support. "We are asking for the scope to be expanded to ensure that there will be no legal vacuum and no gap during this period in the new country. This will enable people with disabilities to live with dignity from the outset," said **Mr Vardakastanis**. (ll)



COP28: Civil society to push for more action to save climate

Civil society organisations express disappointment at the outcomes of COP28, but view them as a platform for increased European action on the global stage. The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) remains committed to addressing the climate crisis, emphasisng the need for greater ambition and youth involvement.

COP28 marks a historic shift as countries commit to transitioning away from fossil fuels in energy systems for the first time in thirty years. EESC President **Oliver Röpke** acknowledges this progress but insists on a complete fossil fuel phase-out and stresses the importance of engaging young people in these efforts.

European Union negotiators claim success in keeping alive the Paris Agreement's goal of limiting the global temperature increase. COP28 focuses on the energy sector, targeting a 43% emissions reduction by 2030 and aiming for net-zero emissions by 2050. However, the agreement is the target of criticism due to its shortcomings, including uncertainties about meeting the 1.5°C target, influence from petro-states and weak financial provisions for the transition.

Sandrine Dixson-Declève, Co-President of The Club of Rome, warns of increasing wealth inequality and social tensions resulting from inadequate burden-sharing. EESC Youth delegate **Diandra Ni Bhuachalla** says she is devastated by COP28's outcome, emphasising the importance of real people's experiences in countering fossil fuel lobbyists.

Despite concerns, EESC members recognise positive aspects of the Dubai agreement and pledge to address loopholes, while urging other EU institutions to do the same. The overarching message from the EESC debate is a resolute commitment: "We will not give up" on urgently tackling the climate crisis through continued EU and UN action. (ks)



EU needs to prioritise climate diplomacy in its external action policy

The EU should promote climate diplomacy as a flagship policy in its external action, stressed the European Economic and Social Committee in its opinion adopted at the December plenary. A robust and credible strategic plan is needed to adjust its climate diplomacy to the current geopolitical landscape and the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

The EESC believes that the way forward is to upgrade climate diplomacy to the status of flagship action of the EU's foreign relations.

The president of the EESC Employers' Group and opinion rapporteur, **Stefano Mallia**, underlined: "There is no time to waste if we want to avoid irreparable damage. Climate diplomacy is preventive diplomacy. This is why there is an urgent need to upgrade climate diplomacy, making it the flagship action of the EU's external affairs and foreign policy."

The EESC encourages the EU to adopt a comprehensive climate diplomacy strategy with short and long-term priorities that would integrate climate actions into all fields of external relations, including security and defence, trade, investments, transport, migration, development cooperation, financial and technical assistance, culture and health.

The effective implementation of the European Green Deal internally gives the EU credibility to influence and inspire others to take a similar turn towards sustainability. This is why the EESC urges Member States and institutions to ensure better coordination among EU actors in order to align their respective policies with the climate objectives and accelerate domestic action to implement the Green Deal.

As the rapporteur for the opinion **Stefano Mallia** put it: "We need to look internally to assess whether we are able to achieve the targets we have set within the Green Deal. Once we have our house in order, we should then be engaging with neighbouring countries, foster their economic diversification, shape just transition plans and support adaptation and risk management projects to prevent and reduce fragility risks". (mt)



A Critical Medicines Act to secure Europe's pharmaceutical independence

In a recently adopted opinion, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) warns that the EU's overreliance on imports from Asia of active pharmaceutical ingredients and finished medicines poses a threat to the health and well-being of EU citizens. The EESC is therefore proposing a Critical Medicines Act.

The European Union is facing a growing challenge in securing its supply of essential pharmaceuticals, with the majority of its active pharmaceutical ingredients (APIs) and finished medicines currently being imported from Asia. This reliance on external suppliers raises concerns about the EU's resilience in the face of supply chain disruptions, price volatility and potential geopolitical risks.

"We are jeopardising our citizens' health by relying on external suppliers for essential pharmaceuticals. We must act now to ensure that Europeans have access to the medications they need," stated **Lech Pilawski**, EESC rapporteur for the opinion.

To address these concerns, the EESC recommends setting up a new EU mechanism to support the production of APIs and finished medicines in Europe. The proposed Critical Medicines Act is envisioned as a comprehensive EU mechanism, presented in the form of a regulation, to actively support the production of APIs and finished medicines within the European Union. This mechanism would provide funding for research and development, infrastructure development and operating costs.

Implementation of these recommendations will require significant investment and cooperation between EU Member States. The EESC is calling on the European Commission to take the lead in coordinating this effort and to develop a comprehensive strategy that can safeguard Europe's health security, promote economic prosperity and ensure the affordability of medicines for EU citizens. (gb)



EESC calls for tailored pacts to support remote EU regions

In an opinion adopted at its plenary session, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) has proposed a strategy to address socio-economic challenges facing the EU's islands, mountainous regions and sparsely populated areas. The EESC is calling for EU action to be taken through cohesion policy, emphasising the need for tailored strategies, reliable data and specific mechanisms for sustainable growth.

The EU's remote regions, from islands to mountainous and sparsely populated areas, grapple with economic, social and environmental challenges that hinder their progress. Isolated islands face high costs due to

their isolation, while climate change poses risks to mountainous areas. Declining populations in sparsely populated zones demand innovative growth strategies. EESC rapporteur **Ioannis Vardakastanis** stresses the need for tailored approaches, recognising each region's distinct characteristics. In its opinion, the Committee advocates cohesive EU action, emphasising regional solidarity to prevent marginalisation. The EESC proposes utilising the EU cohesion policy's strong legal basis, recommending specific funds and pacts like the "Islands Pact" or "Mountainous Areas Pact" to address unique challenges, mirroring successful strategies in urban and rural areas. Solutions encompass economic, social and environmental aspects, requiring diverse measures, from reducing operational costs to fostering job creation and preserving local culture. Informed decision-making hinges on accurate data and capacity-building, promoting active dialogue among EU, national and local stakeholders to shape policies reflecting the unique circumstances of these regions within the EU. (tk)



EESC develops vision for reinforcing the competitive edge of the EU's financial sector

The financial sector, particularly banking, is instrumental in making the EU's economy more competitive, as it wields considerable influence over financing and the vital transition towards sustainability. In an opinion adopted during the plenary session, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) highlights key ways to reinforce this sector and bolster its contribution to the EU's strategic autonomy and the goals which will help it achieve this.

A resilient financial system is a priority for the EU's economic transformation, but challenges remain despite efforts to incorporate competitiveness checks and refine regulation via REFIT. EESC rapporteur **Antonio García del Riego** points out that incomplete Banking and Capital Markets Unions are barriers to market unity, causing EU banks to lag behind the global pack. This will have to be addressed by means of thorough evaluations in order to secure a competitive, resilient financial sector. Fair competition is crucial for stability and growth, but it requires stronger regulatory frameworks safeguarding banking sector diversity. The EESC stresses the role played by fair competition in ensuring stability and attracting investment, and calls for a balanced approach to oversight which promotes digitalisation and market sustainability. While commending the EU's inclusion of a competitiveness check in future policies, the EESC points out that competitiveness must be enhanced without diverging from global standards such as Basel III. Aligning this check with financial sector specifics is vital. Completing the Capital Markets Union will combat market fragmentation, enhance financial stability and foster integration. The EESC stresses that effective evaluation methods, stakeholder engagement in impact assessments, and robust data for informed decision making are the key to advancing the sector. (tk)



Impact assessments and active involvement of civil society should be guiding principles for the Global Gateway strategy

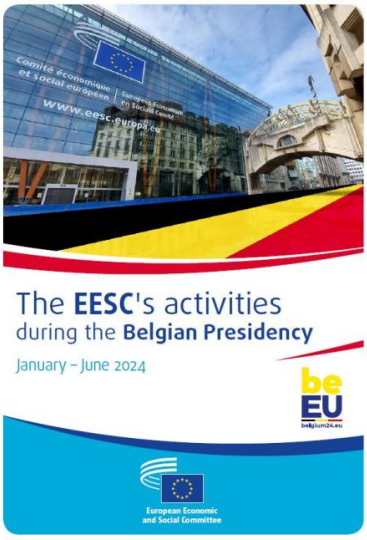
The Global Gateway initiative aims to secure the EU's open strategic autonomy, but must be based on impact assessments, as underlined by the European Economic and Social Committee in its opinion adopted at its December plenary. The EESC proposes to play a more active role in the key stages of the decision-making process for development projects associated with the Global Gateway.

The Global Gateway strategy pledges to mobilise up to EUR 300 billion in investments between 2021 and 2027 to fight climate change; improve digital, energy and transport connectivity; and strengthen health, education and research infrastructure worldwide.

However, the EESC stresses that investment programmes within the Global Gateway initiative must be based on impact assessments, ensuring democratic ownership of development initiatives in partner countries, as well as the economic, social and environmental sustainability of the projects. At the same time, it expresses reservations about projects financed by other EU funds, which could deviate from the standard monitoring process due to a lack of clarity of the procedures for assessing the impact of each project.

EESC member and opinion rapporteur **Stefano Palmieri** highlighted the need for Global Gateway projects to respect a number of principles and objectives, stating that "compliance with EU values and the submission of detailed impact assessments are important for ensuring the sustainability of these projects".

At the same time, the Committee regrets the lack of meaningful involvement of local European stakeholders in the overall development process. The EESC would like to play a more active role in the key stages of the decision-making process for development projects associated with the Global Gateway, starting with the organisation of regular meetings between the Global Gateway Committee and civil society organisations and social partners. (mt)



Just published: Our activities during the Belgian EU Presidency

Belgium took the helm of the EU on 1 January and will hold the presidency of the Council of the EU during the crucial first half of 2024. The highlight will undoubtedly be the European elections in June, when European citizens can decide on the future course of the Union. We will play an active role in communicating information about the elections and encouraging voters to go to the polls. "The EESC, as the home of organised civil society, will work closely with the Belgian Presidency to build a stronger, more resilient and more democratic Europe", says EESC President **Oliver Röpke**.

This new brochure presents our activities during the first half of the year and the key files our sections are working on, as well as the exploratory opinions requested by the Belgian presidency.
Curious to find out who our Belgian members are?

You can discover here who they are and what parts of civil society they represent. Information is in Dutch, French, German and English (cw).



EESC Civil Society Week 2024, 4-7 March – Save the Date!

The European elections in June 2024 will steer Europe's future, and so the EESC, the institutional partner of civil society, is **kicking off its first Civil Society Week**.

Don't forget to save the date!

This flagship event will bring together people of all ages and backgrounds, including young people, journalists and EU institutions, for a lively debate on topics that matter for our everyday lives and the future of Europe.

Under the heading ***Rise up for democracy!***, we will discuss the threats and challenges when it comes to safeguarding democratic values and identify just what civil society expects of Europe's future leaders. Our recommendations will feed into the EESC's Resolution on the EU elections.

Civil Society Week will cover **five major EESC initiatives**:

- **Civil Society Days:** *civil society organisations: a pillar of democracy and a key player in overcoming current challenges*
- **European Citizens' Initiative Day:** *a common meeting point for EU and national legislators, campaigners, citizens and civil society actors*
- **Your Europe, Your Say!:** *stand up for democracy and speak up for Europe: youth priorities for the next EU legislative term*
- **The Civil Society Prize:** *the 14th EESC Civil Society Prize dedicated to mental health*
- **The Journalists' Seminar:** *mobilising Europeans for the European elections: A challenge*

Join us and be inspired by our expert-led workshops and high-level debates. Make your voice heard on key issues for Europe's new legislative cycle and connect with civil society organisations and change makers from all over Europe!

Registration will open in January 2024.

More information coming soon on the #CivSocWeek webpage (mt)

NEWS FROM THE GROUPS



What ways and means for a real strategic autonomy of the EU in the economic field?

New study by the EESC Employers Group

The EU has always strenuously promoted economic integration with the rest of the world. In a peaceful world governed by a rules-based system, this strategy has made Europe one of the most important global trading powers and one of the most prosperous regions.

The COVID-19 pandemic followed by Russia's invasion of Ukraine have fundamentally altered the dynamics of openness and economic integration and foreshadowed a lengthy uphill struggle to preserve the EU's prosperity. These disruptive events have shown just how important it is that the EU become more resilient and able to safeguard its strategic interests effectively.

The EU is gearing up to respond to challenges that could signal a shift away from the multilateral, rules-based trading system that has been the hallmark of the era following the Second World War, and it cannot

afford to be fuzzy on what strategic autonomy means.

The study carried out by the Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS) delves into these complex issues, explores Europe's vulnerabilities and devises a number of recommendations on how to deliver strategic autonomy. The study was commissioned by the EESC at the request of the EESC Employers Group and was prepared by the CEPS.

Read the study here: https://europa.eu/!n98Tdd



The EU in 2030, COP28 and the urgent need for a Just Transition

By the EESC Workers' Group

The European Environmental Agency's (EEA) 2023 annual progress report was not particularly encouraging: the EU may not meet the majority of targets by 2030. In particular, prospects for the consumption footprint, consumption energy levels, circular production and organic farming are especially dire, although the rest - from biodiversity to climate change mitigation and adaptation - does not look any better.

As for the COP28 results, they offer little respite. As the debate at the EESC's December plenary showed, civil society is far from happy with the conclusions: the text is weak on how and who shall pay, and richer in words than in concrete action (despite for the first time singling out fossil fuels as being at the root of climate change). The target of limiting the rise of the global temperature average by the end of the century to 1.5 ° is unlikely to be met as that temperature increase will be reached most probably within five years. The warmest year on record was 2023, with every month since June being the warmest in record history.

This grim picture must not discourage us, but rather it should motivate us: action is needed. Now is not the time for timid good intentions (we have had plenty of those in the past, and look where we are now), or for a return to austerity measures. The principles of the Just Transition, with economic, social and environmental sustainability, must permeate each and every EU policy. And this must include, in line with the latest EESC opinion on the matter, adopting a directive for a Just Transition at EU level for the world of work: only if everyone is on board will the gigantic task ahead of us be doable. If the cost of it is passed on to the most vulnerable, as is so often the case already, far right populism will grow. By the time even they cannot deny the catastrophic effects of climate change, it will be too late.



New study sheds light on cost of climate change for households across the EU

By Lorenza Campagnolo, research coordinator, and the CMCC team involved in this study

The study on *The cost of climate change on households and families in the EU* was a great opportunity to shed some light on how the costs associated with adaptation measures, mitigation policies and the impact of climate change affect households in the EU depending on which region they are in and their socio-economic characteristics. The study acknowledges that there is a gap in the literature, with no broad assessment of the costs of climate change focusing on EU households.

It also proposes new methodology and results combining Eurostat's household income and expenditure information, climate-related hazards and modelling tools. Our study considers both household income losses and climate-induced expenditure as a direct consequence of the impacts of climate change or adaptation needs.

Climate change will have a different impact on different EU regions and socio-economic groups in 2050. In a moderate climate change scenario, there will likely be increases in household health expenditure in northern and southern parts of the EU, in food expenditure in eastern, western and southern areas, in electricity expenditure across all regions and in insurance, especially in the north. This rise in expenditure will place a heavy burden on poorer households, which will be less able to diversify consumption and will have limited ability to adapt. At the same time, labour income losses will emerge in the south of the EU and overall income losses will be widespread across all regions.

There will be negative and regressive (weighing more on poorer households than on richer ones) impacts on a wide range of expenditures on goods/services and income sources, especially in the south of the EU (health, electricity and insurance expenditure, and total labour income), but also marginally in eastern (food expenditure) and northern regions (electricity and insurance expenditure). Climate change will likely increase the number of people at risk of poverty across the EU; climate change mitigation scenarios will likely reduce this, favouring faster wage growth in low-skilled labour compared to high-skilled labour.

The main recommendations for policymakers are to prioritise regions, as in the case of southern parts of the EU, which are experiencing negative impacts on households and regressivity at the same time, and to strengthen income support measures and tailor them to the most vulnerable segments of the population in these regions. Furthermore, the multi-sectoral nature of climate change costs calls for horizontal policy integration to make policymaking more effective.

The study, which was carried out by the CMCC at the request of its Civil Society Organisations Group and the executive summary can be downloaded from the EESC website.

I AM VOTING. ARE YOU?

"I am voting. Are you?"

Since December, we have started posting our guests' opinions on the European elections in the column: "I am voting. Are you?" This time, our guest is **Malgorzata Molęda-Zdziech**, Polish sociologist, political scientist and active commentator on events in Poland.

She is head of the Department of Political Studies at Warsaw School of Economics and the rector's representative for cooperation with European Union. In her article, she comments on the significant role of Polish civil society in influencing the outcome of the last Polish national elections in October 2023 . She also refers to the one of the priorities of the future Polish Presidency of the EU Council regarding the role of civil society in protecting the rule of law. (ehp)



Ma?gorzata Mol?da-Zdziech: Civil society and the 2024 European elections

Civil society is, in short, groups of communities capable of self-organising and defining and achieving selected objectives. In democratic systems, civil society groups are numerous and diverse in order to represent the diversity of voices and opinions of their members as much as possible. In non-democratic regimes, NGOs are most often in opposition to the rulers. Civil society can act through active citizenship and a desire to cooperate for the common good, independently of state institutions.

When PiS was in power, civil society organisations mobilised against changes that were detrimental to the country’s system of government and protection of human rights. From 2016 to 2022, as shown in the report *Pressure and mobilisation*: *Civil society and the rule of law crisis* from the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, non-governmental communities organised many mass protests in defence of the rule of law and against violation of constitutional values, and offered legal assistance to groups at risk of discrimination or repression. The non-governmental sector has continued to seek new channels to participate in decision-making processes, including through organising effective coalitions for electing the Commissioner for Human Rights and the Ombudsman for Children’s Rights, and citizens’ panels.

The results of the parliamentary elections held on 15 October 2023 are a testament to the strength of civil society in Poland. The historic voter turnout of 74.38% and opposition groups gaining the electoral advantage are proof of the effective civic mobilisation that has led to a change of government. The Law and Justice party’s (PiS) candidates obtained 35.38% of the votes. In doing so, this party was the first since 1989 to win parliamentary elections for the third time in a row, but, unlike the 2015 and 2019 elections, its list of candidates did not obtain majority of the seats needed to form a government. Political groups also entering the Sejm were: the Citizens’ Coalition (30.7%), Third Way PSL-PL (14.4%), New Left (8.61%) and Confederation Freedom and Independence (7.16%). Three coalition groups – Civic Coalition, Third Way PSL-PL and the New Left – won a total of 51.72% of the votes, which gave them the majority necessary to form a government. The government with Donald Tusk as Prime Minister was formed after an initial failed attempt by PiS.

None of the surveys predicted such a high turnout. As a reminder, it was 61.74% in the 2019 parliamentary elections and 62.7% in the historical elections of 1989. The results of surveys (e.g. CBOS and the Batory Foundation) show that the desire for change, brought about by the long-standing frustration of society, motivated citizens to head to the ballot box. It should be noted that strong social mobilisation could be seen before the elections, which included: the record number of voters who registered to vote from outside their place of residence (by 15:00 on 12 October 960 000 people changed their polling station and around 1 200 000 requested to do so). The number of Poles living abroad who registered to vote almost doubled (around 600 000, compared to 350 000 in the 2019 elections).

The announcement and holding of a nationwide referendum could have been another factor in the increased civic mobilisation for the parliamentary elections. Turnout for the referendum was 40.91%, it was therefore non-binding. Another important factor in this mobilisation were the numerous actions undertaken by NGOs to encourage voter turnout. Those aimed at women and young people (e.g. *It's Your Choice* from the Women's Voices Initiative, *We're Done Being Quiet* from the Wschód [East] Initiative or *It's Your Decision* from SexEd), which contributed to the increased voter turnout, are worth noting in particular. In the 2019 parliamentary elections 61.5% of women voted and 60.8% of men. The turnout among young people aged 18-29 was 46.4%. More women (73.7%) than men (72.0%) and 68.8% of young people (18-29) voted in the 2023 elections. Community-based organisations carried out at least 20 campaigns in the run-up to the elections to encourage people to vote.

The campaigns were mainly carried out on the internet, but some were also on TV, radio and even in cinemas. The involvement of celebrities, influencers, actors and public figures increased their ability to reach different audiences. According to the CBOS survey *Electoral motives and decisions 2023*, conducted in October 2023, the majority of voters (around 70%) decided on their vote at least a few weeks before the elections. The rest did so later – in the last week before the elections (28%), only on election day (9%) or on the day before the elections (4%). The group's relationship with the European Union was particularly important for Civic Coalition (KO) voters (80%). The desire for a change in leadership was mentioned almost as frequently as a reason for voting for the KO (77%). A large share of the voters for this grouping (64%) felt that it represented values and principles that were close to them. PiS voters felt that this party represented both their interests ('cares about people like them' – 66%) and their values and principles (62%). At the same time, they had a positive opinion of this group's leadership so far (64%) and its economic programme (59%).

In June 2024 Poles will go to the polls to elect their Members of the European Parliament. The EP elections can be seen as another phase of an electoral cycle that kicked off in 2023 with the parliamentary elections, as local elections will take place in Poland in April 2024. The topic of Europe will be present in local government campaigns, albeit to a lesser extent than during parliamentary elections. Moreover, the 20th anniversary of Poland's accession to the EU may have an influence on the turnout in the European elections. Remember – for the last EP elections in 2019 the voter turnout in Poland was 45.68%.

Polish people are strongly in favour of their country being part of the European Union. According to the April 2023 CBOS study, 85% approve of EU membership. This number has decreased, but it remains very high. 10% are against Polish presence in the EU, and 5% have no opinion on the subject.

We should also remember that this is the first time the European Parliament elections will be taking place in the shadow of a polycrisis: e.g. the ongoing war in Ukraine, the climate crisis, the economic crisis, the rise of the populist right. Therefore, in view of the expected intensification of disinformation activities, it will be important to have an effective and coherent communication policy in the campaign that is adapted to specific groups of voters. These international tensions lead supporters of the European Union to see hope in a community that guarantees our security.

Małgorzata Molęda-Zdziech

Warsaw School of Economics – Team Europe Direct Poland

Editors

Ewa Haczyk-Plumley (editor-in-chief)
Daniela Marangoni (dm)

Contributors to this issue

Christian Weger (cw)
Daniela Marangoni (dm)
Daniela Vincenti (dv)
Ewa Haczyk-Plumley (ehp)
Agata Berdys '(ab)
Giorgia Battiato (gb)
Jasmin Kloetzing (jk)
Katerina Serifi (ks)
Katharina Radler (kr)
Laura Lui (ll)
Marco Pezzani (mp)
Margarita Gavanas (mg)
Margarida Reis (mr)
Millie Tsoumani (mt)
Pablo Ribera Paya (prp)
Thomas Kersten (tk)

Coordination

Agata Berdys (ab)
Giorgia Battiato (gb)

Address

European Economic and Social Committee
Jacques Delors Building,
99 Rue Belliard,
B-1040 Brussels, Belgium
Tel. (+32 2) 546.94.76
Email: eescinfo@eesc.europa.eu

EESC info is published nine times a year during EESC plenary sessions. EESC info is available in 24 languages
EESC info is not an official record of the EESC's proceedings; for this, please refer to the Official Journal of the European Union or to the Committee's other publications.
Reproduction permitted if EESC info is mentioned as the source and a link is sent to the editor.

01/2024