



EESC Info

European Economic and Social Committee

A bridge between Europe and organised civil society

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EDITORIAL



Editorial

Sport values remain timeless: uniting people and countries

Dear readers,

The EESC took the initiative *Stronger together for sport values* to endorse the values enshrined in the 2024 Olympic Games in Paris from the civil society perspective. The initiative put into the spotlight the work of the Committee which has always been at the forefront of promoting sport as a positive force for nurturing healthy values across all sections of society.

With this initiative, we would like to symbolically raise the idea of *truce* which was first introduced in the ancient Olympic Games in Greece, dating back to the ninth century. The truce, *Ekecheiria* in Greek, during the celebration of the games was a period of peace among warring city states, to allow safe participation in the games for the athletes and spectators.

Nowadays, the idea of truce seems more timely than ever given the current fragile geopolitical landscape, where conflict and political turmoil rage across Europe and in other parts of the world.

Further on, we would like to endorse sport values which remain timeless. As Nelson Mandela said, sport can create hope where once there was only despair. The values we are defending have the power to change the world and unite people and countries in a way that brings peace and harmony, where respect and friendship prevail.

In this context we launched a short campaign reflecting the three original values of excellence, respect and friendship, which have evolved over the years, taking into account persons with disabilities.

Organised civil society has advocated for the spirit of building a peaceful and better world by educating youth through sport practiced without discrimination of any kind, requiring mutual understanding with a spirit of friendship, solidarity and fair play.

Articles, graphics, video messages and statements from our members saw publicity on the EESC website and EESC social media platforms since the beginning of the Paris Games. The campaign went on during the Paralympics, highlighting that this great sports celebration leaves a powerful imprint on society, echoing strong messages for equal opportunities and equal treatment.

The sport values in the Paris Games resonate deeply with the European values of freedom, peace, diversity and inclusion. These values should be the guiding principles in our everyday life, where differences and conflicts should be dealt with through dialogue and mutual respect.

The EESC, the house of organised civil society, has always stood up for these values, advocating for a more inclusive, fair and cohesive society, ensuring equality of opportunities and active participation of all its members.

#Paris2024

Respectfully yours,

Laurențiu Plosceanu

Vice-President for Communication

DIARY DATES

23 September 2024

EU Organic Awards ceremony

24 September 2024

The annual European Semester Group Conference

17-18 October 2024

Connecting EU seminar

23-24 October 2024

EESC plenary session and High-Level Forum on EU Enlargement



ONE QUESTION TO...

What is the value of the Paralympics and how do they and other sports competitions help break down the walls for people with disabilities?

EESC member Pietro Barbieri writes about the history of sports competitions for people with disabilities and how the two Olympics - the one held in Seoul in 1988 and the other in London in 2012 - brought the much needed change in the perception of disability. We finally entered a world of sport practised by all for all.



NO LONGER INVISIBLE: HOW THE SEOUL AND LONDON OLYMPICS MADE HISTORY

By Pietro Barbieri

Sport for people with disabilities emerged from rehabilitation efforts in the post-war period. It was a way to make physiotherapy more interesting and enjoyable. Play and fun helped people rediscover the joys of life, in their new condition, where a traumatic event was involved, or in their body from birth.

There were two specific purposes: to strengthen people's physical autonomy, and to help them recover a genuine and solid identity of their own. One might say today that there was a shift from rehabilitation-focused play to empowerment. In other words, empowering those who felt they did not have any power or had lost it. Power over themselves

and their own decisions. The core of human rights.

The natural way to do this is through people's social image – the image perceived by others. The path of self-recovery immediately crosses over into the community in which people live. Taking part in sport becomes a means of claiming one's own fundamental rights and dignity.

This has been a long journey in the dark; the pioneers of the 1960s were heroes before their time. Nevertheless, they were heroes in the long journey between those years and contemporary times. It was a struggle to achieve recognition of the athletic ability of Paralympians.

One event will go down in history: the 1988 Seoul Olympics. It was the culminating point in the battle to achieve recognition in the sporting world, where stigma surrounding physical, sensory and mental ideals was so strong that it constituted a greater obstacle than even inclusion in the world of work, where an unproductivity prejudice prevailed instead. Those Olympics were historic because the International Olympic Committee wanted to introduce competitions for athletes with disabilities alternating with those without disabilities. It was an experiment that took place only once, because organisational issues – in particular those linked to accessibility – made it difficult to continue down that path. Although debatable, that choice gave rise to the Paralympics that we know today, which gives proper recognition to the athletic efforts of each Paralympian. We finally entered a world of sport practised by all, for all. A new era.

From there, Paralympic sport needed to be made appealing to the vast number of people who followed sport either in person or on television. In 1988 in Seoul, the television commentators were so out of touch that they didn't even know who the favourites were in each individual competition. As can be imagined, the results were disastrous. With time, sports journalists have learned to follow the activities of athletes with disabilities. This was a fundamental step towards changing the narrative.

This brings us to another fundamental event: the 2012 London Olympics. Impeccably organised, with a strong television campaign in the UK in particular. This resulted in full stadiums in every field of sport. It was also the moment when certain athletes – thanks to the new journalistic narrative – became famous. Just like their Olympic colleagues.

The world has changed since the 1950s. The feeling of no longer being completely invisible has become a collective asset of the world of disability. Here, this narrative is a path we hope can be replicated in all areas of people's lives, just as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities states: 'a paradigm shift ... is needed'. In sport, despite everything, there certainly has been one.



THE SURPRISE GUEST

Our surprise guest is three-time Olympic gold medal winner and former Greek weightlifter **Pyrros Dimas**, who told us what he focuses on when watching the Olympic Games. Despite the fact that, with time, the Olympic Games have changed in many ways, the principles of Olympism and the emotions of competing athletes have remained the same as they ever were.

***Pyrros Dimas** is Vice-President of the International Weightlifting Federation and a coach for the USA national team. He won three Olympic gold medals and one bronze medal. He was a member of the Greek Parliament and President of the Hellenic Weightlifting Federation.*



WHAT I SEE AT THE OLYMPICS

I am a lucky man. The Olympic Games in Paris is the ninth edition I have attended; the first being in Barcelona in 1992. I took part in four of these, as an athlete who reached the podium. I experienced the remaining five from every possible point of view: as a spectator, as a member of the International Weightlifting Federation and as a coach for the United States of America national team. During these decades of moving in Olympic spheres, I have witnessed many changes. In addition to the venue in which they are hosted, the Olympic Games have adopted more characteristics. Developments in TV coverage have allowed spectators to come closer to the athletes – now able to see the emotions on their faces. The introduction of new sports to the Olympic programme has attracted young audiences and has familiarised us with disciplines that we had not heard of before. At the same time, the concept of security reminds all of us that we are living in an unpredictable world, in turbulent times.

Thus, everything is changing in the Olympic Games. Everything except the principles of Olympism and the dreams of the athletes taking part. In today's world, Olympic ideals are more relevant than ever. Moreover, Olympism is often ahead of its time. Concepts such as inclusion, acceptance of diversity and harmonious coexistence have constituted the Olympic spirit for decades, long before they were debated by societies. However, as a sportsman, as an Olympian who knows the pain that is caused by partaking in a competitive sport at such a high level, I must focus primarily on the athletes. For many of these young people, the Olympic Games represent the purpose of their existence – something which gives meaning to their lives and which shapes their dreams. For this reason, and for me personally, watching the Olympics is not about the scoreboard or the ranking list. It is about seeing the expressions on

the athletes' faces. In their joy and their sadness. Their tears and their cries of jubilation. It is about the human beings who are fighting to surpass themselves.



TO THE POINT

In our column 'To the point', rapporteur for the EESC opinion on [Hydrogen - infrastructure, development needs, financing, use and limits](#), Thomas Kattnig, lists the crucial conditions to be met for the European hydrogen industry to have a bright future.



EXPAND, CERTIFY, FUND – HYDROGEN AS A BUILDING BLOCK OF A GREEN FUTURE

By Thomas Kattnig

Green hydrogen is one of the building blocks of our energy transition, making its rapid roll-out immensely important for the future energy system as well as for the economic and social well-being of the EU.

Yet, establishing the supply, demand, infrastructure and production when it comes to hydrogen entails a range of challenges. Hydrogen is both expensive and dependent on proper framework conditions. On the one hand, we must first target its use to sectors that are difficult to electrify and as an energy storage medium. On the other hand, we must ensure that the necessary conditions are created for a rapid and efficient expansion of hydrogen infrastructure.

Three points are particularly crucial here:

1. The necessary financing of the infrastructure must be ensured. Since building transport infrastructure will entail significant costs, the EESC underlines the importance of the efficient allocation of resources. This will require smart and integrated planning, including across borders, and a regulatory regime that enables necessary investments in the infrastructure while promoting the environmental sustainability of the energy system as a whole and protecting network users from excessive network charges. At the same time, additional burdens in the form of cross-subsidisation of hydrogen grids by gas grid users certainly need to be avoided. This is especially important since the future users of the hydrogen grid infrastructure differ considerably from today's gas grid users. It is therefore important to apply the user-pays principle as far as possible and thus to ensure that hydrogen infrastructure is primarily financed by the users of that infrastructure.
2. In addition to financing, the workforce needed for the expansion and production must be secured. In addition to the creation of new quality jobs, the redeployment of existing workers is particularly important. This means that existing workers need to be properly trained, reskilled and upskilled, and the workforce needs to be retained by offering good working conditions. For example, network operators need to be bound by customary collective agreements and working conditions need to be improved to attract skilled labour. The EESC therefore calls for efficient and conclusive social dialogue in the gas sector at both the European and national level.
3. Uniform, traceable and mandatory certification of hydrogen produced by a central EU scheme must be ensured. In addition to environmental criteria, these certification schemes must also guarantee social standards. These must include fair and safe working conditions and compliance with labour, social and trade union rights.

The EESC therefore calls on the Commission to revise the hydrogen strategy, which was rightly criticised by the European Court of Auditors. In cooperation with civil society at national and European level, it must be ensured that a comprehensive strategy is drawn up, factoring in certification, financing, labour requirements, promotion and consumer protection. It is only then that the European hydrogen industry can have a bright future.

NEW PUBLICATIONS

Discover the European Democracy Passport – your guide to active citizenship



Are you ready to embark on a journey that empowers you to become a more informed, engaged and active European citizen? Whether you're a student, a young professional or an active community member, the EESC's [European Democracy Passport](#) is your key to unlocking the full potential of your civic rights.

This passport provides factsheets, background information, pathfinders and navigators for all aspects of modern European democracy, including a toolkit of participation resources and a detailed manual on the European Citizens' Initiative.

Interested in the new edition (2023-2024) of the European Democracy Passport brochure? [Write to us](#) and we will send it to you – it is now available in all 24 EU languages.

You can also check out the interactive version online in [English](#), [French](#) or [German](#) (more languages to be added gradually), and step into a world where your voice truly matters! (ep)

European Democracy
Passport



EESC NEWS



24 projects shortlisted for 2024 EU Organic Awards

The finalists for the [2024 EU Organic Awards](#) have been announced: 24 projects from 12 EU countries across eight categories. The winners will be revealed at a ceremony in Brussels on 23 September, to be held alongside the annual EU Organic Day celebrations.

The awards, taking place for the third time, reward projects that are innovative and sustainable and add significant value to organic production and consumption. They provide winners with a platform to present their good practices to a wider audience.

The awards are organised by the European Commission, the European Economic and Social Committee, the European Committee of the Regions, COPA-COGECA and IFOAM Organics Europe, the European Parliament and the Council of the EU. The selection panel comprises seven members nominated by these bodies.

Finalists include:

Best organic farmer (female): Blagovesta Vasilieva (Bulgaria), Caroline Devillers (Belgium), Reinhild Frech-Emmelmann (Austria)

- **Best organic farmer (male):** Gianpaolo Mancini (Italy), Tommi Hasu (Finland), Benny Schöpf (Germany)
- **Best organic region:** Comunidade Intermunicipal do Alto Tâmega e Barroso (Portugal), Castilla - La Mancha (Spain), South Savo (Finland)
- **Best organic city:** BioStadt Bremen (Germany), Cascais (Portugal), Las Rozas (Spain)
- **Best organic “bio-district”:** Distretto del Cibo Monregalese (Italy), Bioregião de S. Pedro do Sul (Portugal), Sörmland Bio-district (Sweden)
- **Best organic food processing SME:** Biologon GmbH (Austria), Gino Girolomoni Cooperativa Agricola (Italy), Organic veggie food GmbH (Germany)
- **Best organic food retailer:** BIOGAST GmbH (Austria), Coolanowle Organic Meats (Ireland), SAiFRESC (Spain)
- **Best organic restaurant/food service:** B2 Bio pur GmbH (Germany), Biohotel St. Daniel (Slovenia), Kalf & Hansen (Sweden)

Organic production in the EU covers 17 million hectares (10.5% of EU agricultural land in 2022), and the goal is to achieve the European Green Deal target of 25% by 2030. Increased public awareness and consumer demand are crucial. The EU Organic Awards, established in 2022 as part of the Action Plan for the Development of Organic Production, recognise excellence throughout the organic value chain, from farming to food services, enhancing visibility and knowledge of organic practices. (ks)



Ban unpaid traineeships: no trainee should work for free

Nearly half of the EU's more than three million trainees receive no compensation and almost a third have no access to social protection

The EESC held a high-level debate in July on improving the EU legislation on traineeships amid calls from civil society and youth organisations to stop the widespread practice of trainees working for free and having no access to social protection or other labour and social rights.

In the plenary session debate with the Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights, **Nicolas Schmit**, the EESC welcomed the Commission's latest proposals aimed at improving traineeships in Europe - [the Traineeship Directive and the Reinforced Quality Framework for Traineeships](#).

However, the EESC urged the co-legislators to bolster the proposals to prevent traineeships being misused as a source of cheap labour or a replacement for entry-level jobs. It stressed the importance of fair compensation for trainees and of covering the living expenses that they incur when taking part in a traineeship.

The EESC president, Oliver Röpke, said that 'Traineeships are a pivotal tool enabling young people to acquire first-hand work experience. We must ensure that no young person is excluded from these opportunities due to financial constraints. That is why traineeships need to be fairly compensated. We must tackle exploitative traineeships in Europe, and I thank the Commission for its proposals to achieve this goal.'

Commissioner Schmit said that 'Traineeships can be a great way for young people to get initial work experience, learn new skills and build their network. However, they must be good quality traineeships. This means that there must be a clear learning objective, they must be paid and trainees must receive mentoring and guidance to help them transition to the world of work.'

In its opinion on the [Traineeship Directive and a Reinforced Quality Framework for Traineeships](#), the EESC underscored the key role played by the relevant authorities in combating regular employment relationships disguised as traineeships. The social partners can be instrumental in these efforts, in line with existing national practices.

'Improving the Quality Framework for Traineeships across Europe, especially in terms of strengthening learning and training content, and combating the abuse and misuse of traineeships is essential. We therefore call on the Commission to improve the proposals put forward so as to ensure that these goals are met,' said the rapporteur for the opinion, **Nicoletta Merlo**. (II)



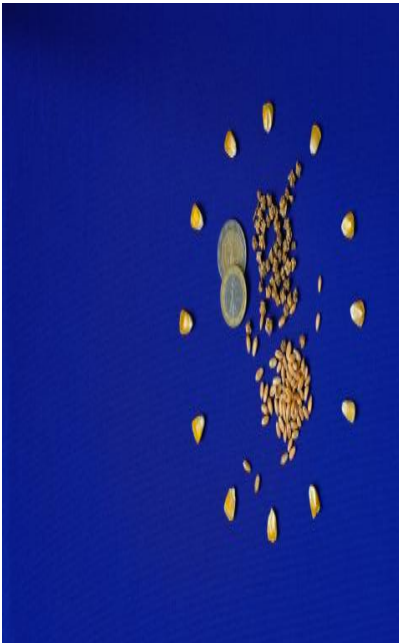
[The EESC stands ready to work with the Hungarian Presidency of the Council of the EU](#)

The EESC's July plenary session included a debate with the Hungarian Minister for European Union Affairs, János Bóka, who presented the main priorities of the Hungarian Presidency of the Council of the EU.

Hungary is taking up the rotating presidency at a sensitive time for Europe, a time of political transition within the institutions and extraordinary challenges for the Union. 'The 2024 Hungarian Presidency of the Council comes at a time of multiple crises,' said **Mr Bóka**. 'We are witnessing war in our neighbourhood, declining European competitiveness, increasing tensions in the EU's trade relations, demographic challenges, uncontrolled migration and decreasing prospects for European farmers.'

Pointing out that the Committee had a long-standing history of working well with Council presidencies, the **EESC president Oliver Röpke** spoke about the institution's role as a guardian of European values: 'Our Committee is committed to working closely with the Hungarian presidency to ensure that the EU is taking action on what Europeans feel are the most urgent priorities. We will be invaluable partners, but also outspoken and constructive critics. Civil society has a strong voice, and we will ensure that it is heard.'

Some EESC members voiced concerns about Hungary's position on Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, respect for the rule of law in the EU, and the shrinking space for civil society in Hungary. **Mr Bóka** said that the Hungarian presidency was fully aware of its responsibilities and subscribed to both the EU's common position on Ukraine and the rule of law and European values. The Hungarian presidency has already contacted the EESC and requested ten exploratory opinions. For more information on the EESC's activities during the Hungarian presidency, please check the [EESC website](#). (mp)



EESC issues an early warning on the impact of EU enlargement on agriculture

The EESC has issued an early warning regarding the agricultural impacts of the EU's forthcoming enlargement. This expansion is set against a backdrop of significant global challenges, including geopolitical shifts, climate change, and transitions in energy and environmental policies. The EESC stresses the importance of thorough preparation and adherence to EU values as new members join.

At its July plenary session, the EESC adopted an [opinion](#) emphasising the complexities of the enlargement process, highlighting the need for preparedness, sustainability, and balanced support for both current and candidate member states' agricultural sectors. This enlargement aims to enhance the EU's strategic autonomy and reduce the environmental impact of agriculture. However, enlargements have yielded mixed

outcomes in the past, often benefiting larger agricultural enterprises over smaller, rural farms.

This has been pointed out by the rapporteur for the opinion, **Stoyan Tchoukanov**, who noted that while past enlargements were generally successful, they did not benefit rural areas and small-scale farmers alike. He stressed the need to manage the agricultural system carefully to avoid disruptions.

To address potential misinformation and ensure smooth integration, the EESC advocates comprehensive data collection and monitoring of agricultural reforms. Candidate countries will need to adapt to the evolving common agricultural policy (CAP), which now emphasises ecosystem services over traditional supports. The enlargement is expected to increase the EU's agricultural area significantly, especially with Ukraine's accession, which alone would expand it by a quarter.

The EESC recommends a gradual integration approach, with dedicated budgets to support the most impacted agricultural subsectors, particularly SMEs. Future CAP reforms should focus on sustainability, replacing hectare-based subsidies with incentives based on environmental and societal benefits.

Overall, the EESC calls for a careful, well-supported enlargement process to ensure that all Member States benefit from it and that EU agricultural practices remain sustainable and equitable amid growing geopolitical tensions. (ks)



[EESC calls for additional measures to boost EU capacities in advanced materials](#)

The EESC has criticised the European Commission's current plan for advanced materials for its lack of funding, quantifiable targets and sustainability indicators. In its opinion on the relevant Commission Communication, it advocates a comprehensive strategy to position the EU as a global leader in this vital sector.

'Advanced materials are crucial for industry, economic growth and sustainability in the EU. We need sustainability indicators in all production processes and must secure the right skills and qualified labour,' said **Anastasis Yiapanis**, rapporteur for the opinion.

The Committee warns that the Commission's plan lacks the ambition and specific targets needed to secure the EU's industrial leadership. Co-rapporteur **Gerardo Luis Arroyo Herranz** emphasised the absence of quantifiable targets, deadlines and key performance indicators. The EESC calls for a bold, strategic approach to enhance the EU's capabilities in advanced materials and proposes including healthcare as a strategic area due to its significant industrial impact.

A central recommendation is transitioning towards a circular economy to reduce reliance on raw materials. This requires enhanced cooperation between industry, academia and policymakers, substantial investment in research and development, and skills development. 'Without adequately skilled people, any action may fail. The EU must implement upskilling and reskilling programmes and vocational education initiatives,' said **Mr Arroyo Herranz**.

The EESC deems the proposed EUR 250 million for advanced materials under Horizon Europe insufficient and calls for more substantial funding, tax-based incentives and simplified bureaucratic processes to stimulate investment and innovation. Securing a stable supply of critical raw materials is also a concern.

The EESC advocates strengthening the EU's domestic capacity and diversifying sources, including partnerships with South Korea and the United States and long-term contracts with smaller countries to mitigate supply disruptions. (gb)



[Call for the role of caregivers to be addressed](#)

EESC calls on the Commission to make the topic of informal carers a political priority and to set up a platform for the exchange of best practices among Member States.

In July, the EESC adopted an [opinion](#) calling for additional measures to be taken, at both EU and national level, to better protect informal carers and recognise their essential contribution to society.

These measures include: the European Commission setting up a platform for the exchange of best practices among Member States, the provision of high-quality, accessible community-based services to alleviate the burden on family caregivers, and provision of respite services. It is also crucial that caregivers be able to access flexible working conditions, so that they are not forced to leave their jobs to look after family members.

Pietro Barbieri, rapporteur for the opinion, said: "The EESC is ready to give a voice to a group of people in our society who are largely invisible: the informal caregivers. These people are often forced to leave their work and, as a consequence, they lose their income and many of their rights. Informal carers carry out their activity in the shadows. Now is the time to turn the spotlight on to their efforts".

The EESC calls on Member States to take appropriate measures to guarantee that a decision to take on informal care is voluntary, that gender inequalities are tackled, and that informal carers can maintain their employment and pay through more flexible working conditions and can easily re-enter the job market if they have been forced to leave it. It is important to ensure they have an appropriate work-life balance.

Informal caregiving does not affect men and women the same way. A huge percentage of informal carers are women, of whom about 70% care for their children, spouses or siblings. In addition to being exposed to higher risks of burnout and psycho-physical disorders, these women are at serious risk of poverty. "We have one of the best welfare systems in the world, but in many cases, it relies upon the bodies, the arms and the willpower of women," Mr Barbieri said.

In order to be able to monitor the impact of the relevant rules and regulations, it is of major importance to have access to qualitative and quantitative data describing the actual living conditions of informal carers. The EESC calls for further research strategies to be adopted, in particular with the cooperation of Eurofound and the involvement of relevant stakeholders. (sg)



Revitalising democracy in Europe: Urgent action needed to bridge gaps and inspire change

The European elections proved that the pro-European majority still holds, but also showed that voters across the EU demand urgent political and legislative responses to the challenges raised in the electoral campaign. Otherwise, the pro-European majority may risk losing support as citizens may increasingly turn their backs on mainstream political forces.

At its July plenary session, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) hosted a debate on the state of democracy in Europe with the President of the European Parliament, **Roberta Metsola**, and the representatives of the political groups of the newly elected European Parliament.

EESC President **Oliver Röpk**e said that ‘the European elections in June were a wake-up call and it is our duty to reflect on the state of democracy today, after these election results. We are united in our conviction that the European Union is the only answer in this respect, delivering a form of democracy that visibly improves lives across Europe.’

In order to consolidate support for democracy in Europe, the EU, as **Roberta Metsola** pointed out, must prove that politics is still the best agent for positive change in societies and communities. ‘Employers, workers and civil society are essential to the construction of Europe - across our European towns, cities and regions. Because that is where Europe starts and where democracy is in action.’

In the debate with the representatives of the political groups, **Željana Zovko**, Vice-Chair of the European People’s Party (EPP), the biggest group in the European Parliament, said that the group expected that the policies begun during the previous mandate would be pursued. **Ana Catarina Mendes**, Vice-President of the Socialists & Democrats (S&D) Group, said that it was vital to focus on implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights and combating poverty. **Dan Barna**, Vice-Chair of the RENEW Group, urged the new European Commission to defend the rule of law using existing tools in a more effective way. **Kira-Marie Peter-Hansen**, Vice-Chair of the GREENS/EFA Group, spoke about how important it was to keep the Green Deal as a crucial EU policy. **Martin Schirdewan**, Co-Chair of the LEFT Group, made it clear that they will call on the new Commission to deal with the cost of housing crisis. (mt)



Energy digitalisation – Consumers must be able to continue to choose between digital and pre-digital methods

The EESC's July plenary session included the adoption of the opinion on [Energy Digitalisation: Balancing Opportunities and Risks for European Consumers.](#)

This opinion, drafted by EESC member **Kęstutis Kupšys**, points out that energy should remain affordable, adjustable and easy to use for consumers. Energy digitalisation does not mean 'digital only'.

Consumers must remain the top priority and the traditional ways of doing business must be preserved. The EU needs to make progress in developing user-friendly digital tools that accommodate diverse needs and promote equal access to digital energy services.

However, users should still be able to choose prices, contracts and customer services in a 'pre-digital' way. 'Energy digitalisation offers opportunities and challenges. We must work together to ensure that the digital energy transition is inclusive, secure and truly beneficial for all European consumers, turning strengths into opportunities,' said **Mr Kupšys**.

The recent IT outage caused chaos for transport and businesses all over the world, and showed just how important it is not to be overly dependent on technology.

The advantages of the transition to digital energy must not overshadow the other side of the coin: risks and challenges. For this reason, protecting consumers and supporting workers must remain high on the agenda.

It is important to create dynamic consumer protection regulations adapted to the novel contexts and participants in the sector but also to offer training, re-training programmes and financial assistance to workers. (mp)



[The Van Maerlant building \(VMA\) opened its doors to the public for Heritage Days 2024](#)

The European Economic and Social Committee, in collaboration with the Committee of the Regions, agreed to include its Van Maerlant building (VMA) in this year's edition of [Heritage Days](#), organised by [Urban Brussels](#), which took place on the weekend of 14 and 15 September.

Visitors enjoyed guided tours of the building, in which they were able to climb the marble steps of the rotunda to discover the original architecture from the early 1980s, the completely renovated and modernised 4th floor with its innovative and eco-friendly solutions, as well as the most recognisable part of the building – the two-storey footbridge over Rue Belliard with the renowned sculpture *Le fil d'Ariane*, made by Belgian sculptor Jean-Paul Laenen in 1991.

Brussels Heritage Days (Journées du Patrimoine/Open Monumentendagen) is a yearly event celebrating the rich history of Art Nouveau in the city. Residents and tourists alike are invited to explore various buildings across the capital, with a special focus on those usually closed to the public.

More information accessible here: [European Heritage Days | European Heritage Days](#) (cw)



#ConnectingEU2024

CONNECTING EU SEMINAR 2024

**A bastion of democracy:
helping journalism
survive and thrive**

17 - 18 October 2024

EESC | Brussels



A bastion of democracy: EESC's top communication event will be dedicated to journalism

The EESC's Connecting EU seminar, which brings together communication professionals from civil society organisations every year, will take place in Brussels on 17 and 18 October 2024. It will focus on journalism and the importance of preserving its independence and relevance in the context of mounting political pressure on the media and the rapid rise of generative AI.

Under the title 'A bastion of democracy: helping journalism survive and thrive', the seminar will include two panels and a networking session:

Responsible journalism in the post-truth era - Democracy levels are plummeting across the world and journalists are faced with new challenges, such as the ever-craftier use of AI to spread fake news. On top of that, old challenges, such as the lack of media ownership transparency or insufficient funding, seem set to stay. What will it take for journalism to remain a cornerstone of democracy? Is responsible journalism even viable today? In a world where media outlets are competing with influencers or social media as the sources of news, will journalism have to reinvent itself to stay a public good? Can the latest EU acts help make AI an ally of press freedom?

The job of living dangerously - investigative reporting

Investigative journalism has a long history of holding power to account and providing a voice for those seeking to report abuse of position and privilege. What kinds of challenges do investigative reporters have to grapple with to bring the truth to light? What protection do they have at their disposal to shield themselves from threats? Can the new EU legislation secure more freedom and power for them?

Working as a press or communication officer in the age of Instagram, TikTok and AI - how to get your message across

(networking session and workshops) – Through presentations and hands-on workshops, the session aims to offer a glimpse into the brave new world of communicating to different audiences, including young people.

The Connecting EU seminar offers a platform where press and communication professionals from civil society organisations can network and discuss current issues of common interest affecting Europe. It brings together EESC members and other EU representatives, partner organisations from Member States, journalists and researchers to debate the hot issues of the day. The full programme and the list of speakers will be available shortly on the EESC's website. For more information, please write to: pressofficers@eesc.europa.eu. (11)

NEWS FROM THE GROUPS



Competitiveness: a tall order for the next von der Leyen Commission

By the EESC Employers' Group

The Employers' Group congratulated Commission president Ursula von der Leyen on being re-elected in July and welcomed her political guidelines. These guidelines mark a significant shift towards addressing the challenge of crumbling competitiveness, acknowledging that this is a critical issue on a par with climate change and security.

Competitiveness and prosperity are finally key priorities. The new European Prosperity Plan aims to ease business operations in Europe, deepen the Single Market and boost productivity through ground-breaking technologies. We particularly welcome the focus on making life easier for businesses by reducing administrative burdens, simplifying

implementation and having a vice-president coordinate this aspect.

The EESC Employers' Group has long called for this approach, as you can see in our priorities: [Driving prosperity for all: A Competitiveness Agenda for the EU](#) and we are eager to collaborate on aligning implementation with real-world conditions. The EU's competitiveness has been under severe threat for some time. While Europe continues to be one of the most innovative, secure and prosperous regions, it is falling behind the US and losing ground vis-à-vis China on various key metrics, such as GDP per capita growth, in which the US has been outperforming Europe for the last decade. More granular warning signs of this trend include the number of information and communications technology (ICT) patents and levels of foreign direct investment (FDI).

This is why we particularly welcome the following priorities in the political guidelines for the next Commission:

- A revamped competitiveness check and an Interinstitutional Agreement on simplification and better law-making
 - Turbo charging investment with a European Savings and Investments Union
 - Increasing research spending to focus on strategic priorities, ground-breaking research and scientific excellence
 - Establishing a new, EU-wide legal status to help innovative companies grow
 - A Clean Industrial Deal to invest in infrastructure and industry, bringing down energy prices and supporting companies in their greening efforts.
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Social progress is the future of the European Union

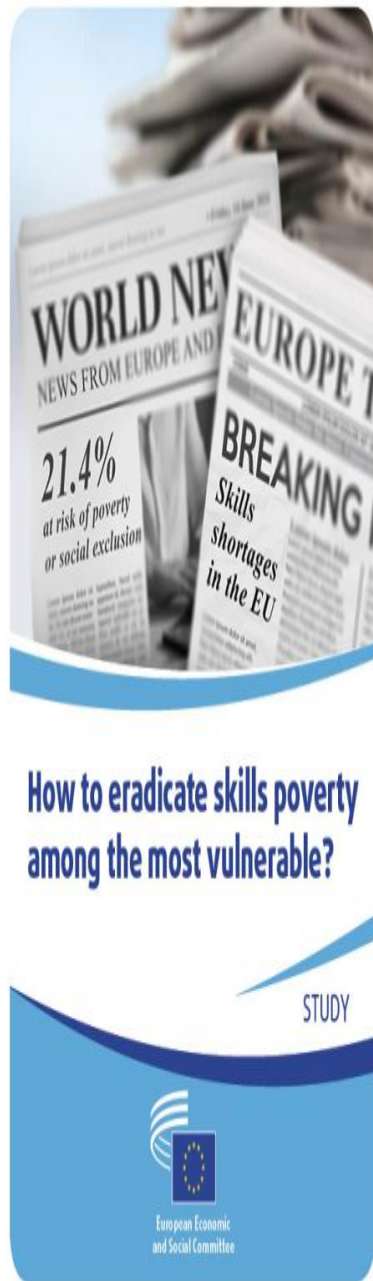
By the EESC's Workers' Group

There is a tendency to excessively label some happenings as defining moments and events of the century, leading to the overuse of this expression. However, as the new European Commission is about to be formed, we happen to be in one of those defining moments: the far right is on the rise and discontent is spreading throughout the continent, the war in Ukraine rages on and the Gaza war risks becoming an open regional war.

The die has not yet been cast on the other side of the Atlantic, but the increasing tariffs and the growing trade war with China are still there, which are bound to result in subsequent shocks to supply chains and consumer prices that will ultimately be felt by the population.

Meanwhile, in the spring, the European Parliament and the Council of the EU agreed on [new austerity rules for the EU](#), and 'frugal' EU Member States continue to block additional own resources or borrowing options. The EU is facing growing climate pressure, social unrest, extremism and fascism, the discrediting of democracy and rising authoritarianism, which – together with the threat of nuclear annihilation and open war on its borders – should give the EU leaders a little push to abandon their short-sightedness and internal fights. Any policy that ignores (or simply pays lip service to) inequality and justice is bound to fail. Citizens are tired of hearing copycat well-sounding speeches and words, only to find themselves increasingly in dire straits and struggling to make ends meet, only to see their jobs disappear and their income plummet. Far right populism is taking advantage of all this, avoiding fundamental questions by putting the blame on immigrants.

Without social justice there will be no stability and no reliable partners in any of the Member States. And without it, the unity needed to tackle what the EU is facing will not be there. [Let's make social progress](#) the unifying force behind this new EU legislative term.



New EESC study: How to eradicate skills poverty among the most vulnerable?

By the EESC Civil Society Organisations' Group

The jobs of tomorrow will require the skills to bring about the green and digital transitions and address demographic shifts. When investing in training and reskilling, how can we ensure that these measures also reach the most vulnerable? What are the current skills divides and how are they linked to poverty?

On 10 July, the EESC's Civil Society Organisations' Group explored these questions as part of a thematic debate which also marked the **launch of a new EESC study exploring How to eradicate skills poverty among the most vulnerable?** The study was commissioned by the EESC at the request of the Group in connection with the European Year of Skills (2023). It examines the novel concept of skills poverty, proposing a definition and investigating possible drivers and solutions, paving the way for further research on this topic in the future. One of its conclusions is that civil society organisations have a unique role to play in identifying and supporting vulnerable individuals who need upskilling. They should work closely with local communities and authorities, leveraging their networks and ensuring that no one is left behind when it comes to education and skills development.

The debate included contributions from **Juliana Wahlgren**, Director of the European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN), who discussed the underlying factors affecting access to skills, and **Agnieszka Maj**, researcher at the Center for Social and Economic Research (CASE), which carried out the study.

For the **full article on the thematic debate** and an **interview** with the authors, see the [event website](#).

The **study and the executive summary** are available [here](#).

SPORTS IN FOCUS



Together for the 2024 Paris Olympic Games values

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) takes the initiative to endorse the values enshrined in the 2024 Olympic Games in Paris, from the civil society perspective.

In today's fragile geopolitical landscape, the EESC is symbolically raising the idea of *truce* during the celebration of the games, reflecting the three original values of *excellence, respect and friendship*. Organised civil society has advocated for the spirit of building a peaceful and better world by educating youth through sport practiced without discrimination of any kind, with a spirit of friendship, solidarity and fair play.

Oliver Röpké, EESC President, said: 'The Games embody the spirit of unity and peace, transcending borders and bringing people together from all walks of life. By advocating these values, we hope to inspire a global movement towards peace and solidarity.'

Laurențiu Plosceanu, EESC Vice-President for Communication, said: 'With this initiative we would like to endorse the sport values which remain timeless. The values we are defending have the power to change the world and unite people and countries.'

Krzysztof Pater, EESC Vice-President for Budget, said: 'The Paris Games show that everyone has the right to be part of this great sports celebration without discrimination. Persons with disabilities are a powerful example to audiences across the world, highlighting the values of courage, determination and equality.'

Dimitris Dimitriadis, former EESC President and President of the EESC's External Relations section, commented: '*The truce*, or "*Ekecheiria*" in the original Greek, now appears more timely than ever. We need to revive and put into practice the idea of the truce as hope to inspire humanity and promote peace and dialogue.'

Giulia Barbucci, former EESC Vice-President for Budget and EESC member, said: 'For the first time in history, there will be equal participation between men and women in the Paris Games. But we must remember that parity in participation is not equality and there is still a lot to do on this objective in sport.'

Isabel Caño Aguilar, former EESC Vice-President for Communication and EESC member, said: 'My wish at the Paris Games is for all categories of disability to be fairly represented, with the right to compete and be protected, especially including people with intellectual disabilities!' (mt)



The Revived – Ukraine's first ever digital Olympic team

For nearly 500 Ukrainian athletes killed in the war that Russia is waging against their country, the dream of taking part in the Olympics or any future sports competition has been forever shattered. To keep their memory alive, the Ukrainian NGO BRAND UKRAINE is telling a tragic story of six deceased athletes by using artificial intelligence to bring them back to life, if only for a brief moment in time. We spoke to Tim Makarov, head of Digital & Content at BRAND UKRAINE, who told us that the ultimate idea of the [project](#), presented at the Paris Games, was to make people stop and think about the value of human life.

How did the idea for the project arise?

This idea was born in the Berlin agency BBDO. They proposed a framework concept, an idea, to show the tragic history of Ukrainian athletes who could not participate in the Olympics. They came to us with the concept, and we developed the idea and expanded the circle of partners, connecting the Ukrainian Ministries of Youth and Sports and of Foreign Affairs and the Office of the President of Ukraine. We worked together on the final design of the project, while the technical part stayed with BBDO. We built a communication strategy, and provided content distribution and legal support. The project was presented at the official

Ukrainian site in Paris - Volia House - and influencers were involved.

How difficult was it to collect stories and to make the video? What techniques were used to 'revive' the protagonists?

The idea itself is very simple and clear - to tell the stories of Ukrainian athletes who died tragically and create their digital avatars. We have done a tremendous job. We used voice recordings, digitised them, used archival photos and video materials, and processed all this with the help of AI. The goal was for the digital copy of the person to be very humanlike, to evoke eeriness with reality and unreality at the same time. This was the meaning. Their stories are very powerful in themselves, and enhanced by AI technology they leave no one indifferent. I'll be honest - this project is very 'on the edge'. When we discussed it, we were afraid that we would not be understood, that people would not see the nakedness, defenselessness, pain and despair that we put into the words of the dead athletes behind the creepiness. The project presents a very simple idea - people who sincerely love their country, who want to live and achieve, become hostages of circumstances when their dreams, plans and lives are cut short. But they should be remembered. Every deed has a price, and it is often measured in human lives and destinies.

It must have been very painful for the families of the killed athletes to take part in the project and see the videos. What feedback did you receive from them at the end?

Of course, such a project could only be done with the consent of the closest relatives. This is an extremely important point: we showed, explained and demonstrated them what we were going to do. There were several dozen stories in the long list - but in the end, we agreed on six only. This took weeks of complicated negotiations. But when we showed the final result, the parents could not hold back their tears. They said: 'Thank you, you are doing an extraordinary job. It will help preserve the memory of our child.' As far as I know, none of them regret participating. We signed all the necessary legal documents, and only after that did the project get the green light. Everything was ready for the Olympics, and we went out for two weeks, showing and unfolding six extraordinary stories. Such a level of success was not expected - the reaction to the project exceeded all our expectations. And it is not surprising, as in the modern world of global communications true stories provoke complex and contradictory emotions.

What is the main message of the project - what do you hope the viewers will take home with them after watching the videos?

At BRAND UKRAINE we are engaged in spreading the truth about Ukraine and its realities in the conditions of Russian aggression. We use human stories for this. I am sure they best convey our pain, pride, zeal, gains and losses, what makes us humans, a strong and courageous nation. This is our mission - not just to talk about Ukraine, but also to make it a lovemark for the whole world. We are working on it so that there are more such powerful projects to come that touch people's hearts and give an opportunity to stop and think about the value of human life.

You can see the videos and photos [here](#) and on Instagram:

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C-Dd7B7tueo/>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C-SkUtONRJR/>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C-VHXOdtDps/>

https://www.instagram.com/p/C-YG_wHtNke/

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C-ajpwSN7A6/>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C-dWm1vNzDW/>

Tim Makarov is Head of the Content & Digital Team at BRAND UKRAINE. He has spent 20 years in journalism, marketing and digital communications. His vocation is to tell stories and to create projects that change the world for the better.



Photo by Tomislav Štuka

Children with disabilities: we can do everything, we just might do some things a little differently

11-year-old Jan Štuka from Zagreb, Croatia, has spina bifida and can only walk with the help of braces and a walker, but this is not stopping him from being an accomplished athlete. Winner of the award for the best young Croatian para basketball player in 2023, Jan also competed in swimming and now practices Nordic skiing. In his spare time, he plays football with his friends, scoring goals with his hand. Jan and his mother Jasmina Bogdanović talked to us about sports opportunities for children with disabilities and explained why it is important to treat them as little as possible as people who have special needs.

JAN:

When did you start doing sports and what sports have you practiced so far?

I started swimming at the swimming school when I was two. At the age of four, I moved to the Natator Para Swimming Club, where I learned all the swimming techniques and participated in some competitions. I dropped out when I was 11 because I got a bit bored.

When I was eight, I began with para Nordic skiing and started playing basketball in a wheelchair. I still practice both and they are now my

favourite sports.

I also tried rock climbing a couple of times and it was great, but I don't have time to practice this sport too. Also, I did a Krav Maga training cycle for one summer. It was great and I would like to do it again occasionally in the future.

What awards have you won and which one means the most to you?

I have won several awards with the basketball club, and my favourite is the award for the best young para athlete of 2023 in my category, which is awarded by the Zagreb Para Sports Association.

What does your day look like when you have training? How much do you usually train each week?

I go to school in the morning. After school, I first do my homework and go out with my friends, and in the evening I attend one of the training sessions. Until now, I have been going to dry-land ski training once a week, basketball once a week and swimming 1-2 times a week. From this school year, I will stop swimming and boost skiing training to 2-3 times a week.

In the winter, I also go to ski camps in Planica in Slovenia and to some of the Austrian ski resorts. I like those camps because my friends also go, so besides training we also have a great chance to socialise.

With basketball, we sometimes go to matches in other cities around Croatia. Last fall, we were also in Rome and played a match against the Lazio basketball team.

Do you have any male or female athletes that you admire? Do you want to participate in an important international sports competition one day?

My favourite athlete used to be Luka Modrić, but at the moment I have no idols, so I don't follow anyone in particular.

I would love to participate in international sports competitions...I hope in both basketball and skiing.

JASMINA:

How much attention is paid to sports for children with disabilities in Croatia?

As a parent, it seems to me that much attention is indeed being paid. Unfortunately, parents are not sufficiently informed about the possibilities, and the clubs are crying out for new members, and it is a pity that it is the way it is. Of course, the situation is much more favourable in bigger cities.

Does a child with a disability have enough opportunities and incentives to play sports, or does it require a great deal of parental involvement?

Children have opportunities and incentives... if they and their parents want it. As I said, parents are less informed, and some of them either don't want additional commitments or are afraid that the child will get injured playing sports... It's a shame that they think this way. Otherwise, playing sports for people with disabilities is free and, in my opinion, very stimulating for both physical and mental health, and certainly for social integration. I wouldn't say that the parents' involvement is greater than with healthy children of the same age. There are of course exceptions related to a specific diagnosis: for example, Jan still needs to be accompanied by one of us when he goes to winter ski camps or to away games, but as he grows up, this will probably decrease and hopefully become optional from our perspective. The goal is to become independent in all of this. He does regular training without our assistance.

What would you add as a parent of a child with special needs?

Treat them as little as possible as having special needs and include them in daily activities in accordance with their age and capabilities, so they will perceive themselves as such. They will have an image of themselves as normal children who do some things 'a little differently', but they still do them! Jan rides a bicycle with three wheels, not two; he swims and dives like all his peers, but he uses his legs less or not at all; he plays football with the team, but he shoots at the goal with his hand. 'We can do everything, we might just do some things a little differently' - if they accept themselves that way, others will accept them that way too.

***Jan Štuka** is an 11-year-old student from Zagreb, currently in year five of primary school. He was a member of the Natator Swimming Club. He is a member of KKI Zagreb (basketball in wheelchairs) and the Monoski Zagreb Ski Club for people with disabilities, where he regularly trains in the Nordic skiing programme for people with disabilities.*

***Jasmina Bogdanović** has a degree in design from the School of Design at the Faculty of Architecture in Zagreb. She worked in different marketing agencies for 20 years. She currently works part time and remotely in a small graphics studio, which allows her to accompany Jan to ski camps and during his other*

sports endeavours. She is also a passionate cyclist who goes everywhere by bike.



Sport Accessibility: Pioneering Inclusive Sport for Visually Impaired People Across Europe

The Eye Association Netherlands (Oogvereniging), with the help of the European Blind Union (EBU)'s network, has launched the Sport Accessibility initiative, which seeks to offer practical solutions on how to remove barriers deterring blind and partially sighted people from joining sports clubs and associations in the EU. Disability activist and volunteer for Oogvereniging and EBU, Peter van Bleijswijk, tells us all about this ground-breaking collaborative project, which paves the way for truly inclusive sport. You can also help by responding to the [survey](#) on the accessibility of sport and recreational activities for visually impaired people in your corner of Europe.

By Peter van Bleijswijk

In the pursuit of true inclusivity in sport, the Sport Accessibility initiative from the Netherlands is breaking new ground by focusing on the unique challenges faced by blind and partially sighted people. This forward-thinking project aims to address and eliminate the barriers that prevent visually impaired people from participating fully in sports and physical activities in sports clubs and associations.

The project is built on a deep understanding of the obstacles these individuals face. After extensive research and previous experiments, Sport Accessibility has identified 10 major barriers, which include the availability of specialised coaching, buddy programmes, the physical accessibility of sports facilities and transportation issues. These barriers are often overlooked but play a significant role in preventing visually impaired people from enjoying the benefits of sport.

To tackle these challenges head-on, the initiative has introduced the concept of 'Sport Proeftuinen', or 'Sport Labs'. These labs are set up in existing sports clubs or by partnering with sports providers, creating a real-world environment to test potential solutions. For each identified barrier, three different solutions are proposed and tested. The most effective solution is then refined and tested multiple times to ensure its practicality and effectiveness.

The findings from these experiments are compiled into a 'Digital Sport Blueprint', a comprehensive guide that will be made available to sports clubs, providers and municipalities. The blueprint aims to serve as a resource for improving accessibility and inclusivity in sport, providing practical solutions that can be implemented across various settings.

The project's ambition is not limited to the Netherlands. Recently, Sport Accessibility reached out to European partners, including EBU, to gather insights and best practices from different countries. The initiative has been met with enthusiasm, with numerous organisations and countries expressing a willingness to participate. This European collaboration seeks to enhance the accessibility and inclusivity of sport on a broader scale, ensuring that visually impaired individuals across the continent can benefit from the effort.

The strength of Sport Accessibility lies in its collaborative approach. The project is supported by a coalition of local governments, the Eye Association Netherlands, the Knowledge Centre for Sport and Physical Activity, the Athletics Union and other organisations dedicated to promoting inclusivity. By bringing together these diverse partners, the initiative leverages a wide range of expertise and resources to create sustainable, impactful solutions.

As the project continues to gain momentum, Sport Accessibility is calling for further participation from European educational institutions and eye health organisations. The team sees this as a crucial step towards fostering a truly inclusive sports culture across Europe, where everyone, regardless of their visual abilities, can participate in and enjoy sport.

Sport Accessibility is more than just a project; it's a movement towards a future where no one is left on the sidelines. Through the combined efforts of dedicated partners across Europe, the initiative aims to make a lasting impact on the accessibility of sport, paving the way for a more inclusive and equitable environment for all.

For those interested in joining this transformative journey or learning more, Sport Accessibility invites you to get involved and help ensure that everyone has the opportunity to experience the joys and benefits of sport. You can help by filling out the [survey on the accessibility of sport and recreational activities for blind and partially sighted people](#) in your town or region by 27 September.

*A former director of innovation, facility management and ICT and manager in both profit and non-profit organisations, **Peter van Bleijswijk** has in recent years focused on advocating for client interests. He is actively committed to inclusion and improving sport accessibility for blind and partially sighted people. Additionally, he serves as a dedicated volunteer for the Eye Association Netherlands and EBU and is actively involved in the working groups collaborating with local and national governments. His work is deeply rooted in dedication to improving quality of life and creating equal opportunities for vulnerable groups in society.*



[EESC: promoting sport as a positive force for upholding EU values](#)

The EESC has always been at the forefront of promoting sport as a positive force for nurturing healthy values across all sections of society.

In its opinion on [Sport and European Values](#), drawn up by member **Bernardo Hernández Bataller**, the EESC says that sport helps meet the EU's strategic objectives, brings to the fore key educational and cultural values, and is a conduit of integration, since it is open to all members of the public, regardless of their gender, ethnic origin, religion, age, nationality, social situation or sexual orientation. Sport has a pivotal role

to play as a tool for tackling intolerance, xenophobia and racism.

In 2022, the EESC's work on sport focused on its opinion on [The EU action for Post COVID-19 period: recovering better through sport](#), drafted by member **Pietro Barbieri**. After the long period of the pandemic, which hit the sports sector as a whole, and local sports clubs particularly hard, the Committee put forward the argument that a strategic approach was needed to boost and promote the role of sport and physical activity in building a more resilient and sustainable society, as part of the wider process of economic and social recovery.

The EESC has also underlined its strong commitment to cycling as a healthy and climate-friendly mode of transport in several opinions, such as [Promotion of cross-border cycle transport](#) and [Transport in urban and metropolitan areas](#).

The EESC's [European Cycling Lexicon](#) (latest edition published in 2023) is a practical example of its support for cycling. It brings together cycling-related vocabulary in all EU languages and is useful for anyone wishing to cycle in another European country and beyond.

In recent years, the EESC has also organised and supported cycling events. In May 2024, EESC member **Bruno Choix** led a cycling event across France and Belgium to promote the European elections and encourage people to go out and vote. In 2019, for the **Grand Départ de Bruxelles 2019** (1-7 July 2019) of the **Tour de France**, the Committee promoted the role and increased popularity of cycling as a clean mode of transport. (mp)

Editors

Ewa Haczyk-Plumley (editor-in-chief)
Laura Lui (ll)

Contributors to this issue

Christian Weger (cw)
Daniela Vincenti (dv)
Erika Paulinova (ep)
Ewa Haczyk-Plumley (ehp)
Giorgia Battiato (gb)
Jasmin Kloetzing (jk)
Katerina Serifi (ks)
Laura Lui (ll)
Marco Pezzani (mp)
Margarita Gavanias (mg)
Margarida Reis (mr)
Millie Tsoumani (mt)
Pablo Ribera Paya (prp)
Simran Grewal (sg)
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

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