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EDITORIAL



Editorial

Embracing Enlargement: A Commitment to Europe's Future

The enlargement and integration of candidate countries into the European Union is not a mere expansion: it is a geostrategic investment in fostering peace, stability, security and socio-economic development, strengthening the democratic fabric of our continent. EU enlargement thus serves as a powerful tool for disseminating and upholding core European values. Our established bilateral bodies with civil societies from candidate countries are Joint Consultative Committees (JCC) and Civil Society Platforms (CSPs), the Enlargement Candidate Members (ECM) initiative, and the expansion of the Rule of Law and Fundamental Rights country visits to candidate states. They exemplify the EESC's commitment to both deepening and widening the Union. Our work shows that progress on necessary internal reforms can and should proceed hand-in-hand with the integration of candidate countries. Despite persistent challenges in several candidate countries, these obstacles should energise our collaboration with candidate counterparts, rather than deter progress.

The EESC has been instrumental in EU enlargement, participating in the Western Balkans Ministerial Meeting in Skopje and closely collaborating with leaders of several candidate states. Our activities aim to assess candidate countries' readiness to meet the Copenhagen criteria, and reiterate our commitment to inclusive and equitable dialogue with all EESC members, ECMs most certainly included. This is why I am proud to say that the ECM initiative, launched this February in the presence of Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama and Montenegrin Prime Minister Milojko Spajić, is a cornerstone of my presidency's manifesto.

Actively including ECMs, the Committee positions itself as a leader among EU institutions in the gradual integration of EU candidate countries. The impact of this initiative is tangible and increasingly recognised in candidate countries and in the EU, with European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and Commissioner for Enlargement Oliver Várhelyi strongly supporting the project. This initiative aims to bring not just immediate benefits, but also seeks to build a solid foundation for the long-term aspirations of candidate countries, their citizens and their vibrant civil societies. It enables civil society from these nations to engage directly in the EU's decision-making process, maintaining momentum for necessary reforms. A total of 146 ECMs have been actively

engaged in opinions on topics related to enlargement, such as EU cohesion policy, the single market, sustainability of the agri-food sector and skills shortages.

The JCCs and CSPs represent a critical platform for dialogue among different stakeholders, ensuring that all voices are heard during the decision-making process. JCCs are currently in place with Montenegro, Serbia and Turkey, CSP are in place notably with Ukraine and Moldova. The JCC with Northern Macedonia is expected to restart as soon as the first negotiating cluster opens, while a new committee for Albania is well underway. The upcoming High-level civil society forum dedicated to Enlargement on 24 October, alongside the EESC Plenary, will further reinforce this commitment. Jointly organised with the Commission, it will gather EESC members, about a hundred ECM representatives, Member States, and candidate countries' leading politicians to explore the value of civil and social dialogue for a successful EU enlargement. It will highlight the role of social dialogue in advancing accession efforts, optimising the green and digital transitions and upholding the EU's fundamental values.

As a gateway for civil society, the EESC is dedicated to empowering and embracing voices striving for freedom, democracy and socio-economic prosperity – ultimately fostering closer integration in candidate states and the EU. Together, we are building a brighter future for Europe – one that is inclusive, prosperous and united. The Committee's commitment to enlargement is unwavering, and our actions are a testament to our belief in a more integrated and resilient Europe as a whole.

Oliver Röpke

EESC President

DIARY DATES

6 November 2024

Annual Conference on Fundamental rights and the Rule of Law

27 November 2024

Citizens can defeat disinformation (Athens, Greece)

28-29 November 2024

European Migration Forum – 9th meeting

4-5 December 2024

EESC plenary session



ONE QUESTION TO…

We asked Sandra Parthie, rapporteur for the opinion on *General-purpose AI: way forward after the AI Act*, about the AI Act. Specifically, why is it so important to ensure that this piece of legislation is implemented properly with regard to General Purpose AI models and how they are governed? How can we produce competitive AI in the EU and why does it matter?



AI 'MADE IN EUROPE' – POSSIBLE BUT NEEDS WORK

By Sandra Parthie

The AI Act is the first comprehensive legal framework regulating artificial intelligence globally.

The use of AI is expanding and affects many aspects of our daily lives. For instance, it influences the information people see online through targeted advertisements. But more importantly, it is now used in the health sector to help diagnose and treat diseases such as cancer. To do so, AI applications rely on general-purpose AI (GPAI) models, which need to be trained. They need to be fed many images of, for example, cancerous cells to eventually recognise them independently.

Successful training relies on data – enormous amounts of data. The way the training is done influences the quality of the outcome of the trained model or AI application. If it is fed the wrong data or images, it will misidentify healthy cells as cancerous ones.

Improving medical and health care is a compelling example of why it is necessary that in the EU we have the capacity and infrastructure to develop underlying general purpose AI models. It will simply help to save lives.

Beyond that, GPAI is a game changer in production processes and also for businesses. For Europe’s economy to remain competitive, we need to provide the space for innovation within the EU, and encourage entrepreneurs and start-ups to develop their ideas.

Of course, there are risks connected with AI and GPAI – ranging from flaws in the models and bugs in the applications to the outright criminal use of the technology. Thus, the EU also must have the expertise to

refute malicious attacks and cyberthreats, it must be able to rely on EU-based infrastructure, to ensure that, to put it simply, “the lights stay on”.

All of the above shows the importance of having the right regulation, one focusing on the quality of the training data, the training methods and ultimately, the final product. It needs to be based on European values, such as transparency, sustainability, data protection or respect for the rule of law. Unfortunately, many of the major GPAI developments are being spearheaded by actors outside the EU’s jurisdiction. The EU must therefore develop the capacities to enforce compliance with its regulatory provisions and European values vis-à-vis EU and non-EU actors active in our market.

The EU must reduce market dominance by large, often non-European, digital companies, including by mobilising the tools of competition policy. Competition authorities in the EU need to leverage their capacities and ensure that hyperscalers do not abuse their B2B or B2G market position.

Public authorities can support European providers of GPAI and AI applications by procuring their products, demonstrating their trustworthiness to further users and clients. The EU does have the talent, the technological know-how and the entrepreneurial spirit needed for “AI made in Europe”. But a lack of investment, a lack of the relevant IT infrastructure, and the continuous fragmentation of the internal market which hinders scaling-up, impede the competitiveness of Europe’s AI actors.



THE SURPRISE GUEST

Our surprise guest is Dr Alexandra Borchardt, who was the keynote speaker at EESC’s Connecting EU Seminar 2024. A lead author of EBU News Report 2024 on the effects of AI on journalism, she analyses prospects for accountable journalism following the rapid rise of generative AI. While some in the media industry have already gotten drunk on its promises, the risks that generative AI brings are considerable – but so are the opportunities.

Dr Borchardt is a senior journalist, independent advisor, university teacher and media researcher with more than 25 years of newsroom experience, 15 of which have been in leadership roles. In the past five years she has supported 26 European publishers in digital transformation as a coach for the World Association of News Publishers’ (WAN-IFRA) Table Stakes Europe Programme. You can check her work here.



TRUSTED JOURNALISM IN THE AGE OF GENERATIVE AI

By Alexandra Borchardt

Provocatively put, journalism and generative AI contradict each other: Journalism is about facts; generative AI calculates probabilities. Or maybe you want reporters to fill in the blanks of a story with anything that just sounds likely? Because that is exactly how generative AI works. Nevertheless, GenAI opens up immense opportunities to enhance journalism, ranging from its use in brainstorming ideas, interview questions and headlines, to its role in data journalism and speedy document analysis. It can also help to transcend formats and languages, and it can turn texts into videos, podcasts, and visuals, transcribe, translate, illustrate, and make content accessible in chat formats. These aspects might help to reach people who have been previously underserved: hyperlocal audiences, those who lack proficiency in reading or comprehension, or who are otherwise impaired, and those who are just not interested in consuming journalism in the traditional way. As Ezra Eeman, Strategy & Innovation Director at NPO, the Dutch public broadcaster, says: 'With generative AI, we can fulfil our public service mission better; it will enhance interactivity, accessibility, and creativity. AI helps us to bring more of our content to our audiences.'

But while some in the industry are clearly already drunk on the promises of generative AI, this technology poses considerable risks for journalism. The two most important ones are a general loss of trust in information, and the further erosion or even disappearance of its business models. As already mentioned, 'hallucinations' – the term used for generative AI's tendency to fabricate answers, coming up with fact- and source-lookalikes – are actually a feature of the technology rather than a bug. But the challenge goes deeper. Since GenAI enables anyone, within minutes, to create any kind of content including deep fakes, the danger is that the public might lose trust in all of the content that is out there. Media literacy training already advises everyone to be sceptical of content found online; this healthy scepticism might turn into outright distrust when content fabrication amplifies. There is no telling yet whether traditional media brands will profit from being guiding posts in this information world or whether all media will be deemed untrustworthy in this context.

The onslaught of generative searches adds to this calamity, since it threatens to make journalism increasingly invisible. Whereas in the past a Google search provided a set of links, many of them connecting to trustworthy media brands, search output is now increasingly shaped by GenAI. People get to see first-level responses in text form; they don't even have to dig deeper any longer. No wonder that media executives are terrified. Many of them are rushing into implementing AI for efficiency increases, which obviously won't do the job when what is needed would be even more investment in quality journalism to show audiences the differences between just 'content', on the one hand, and well-researched, accurate and reliable journalism, on the other.

An ethical approach to using AI in the media is called for. First, media organisations need an AI strategy and to focus on what the technology can contribute to delivering public service value. Resources need to be focused on what's desirable and implemented accordingly – always in the awareness that AI has a considerable environmental and societal cost. Saying no should always be an option. Organisations should

also use their power and influence when purchasing products, lobbying for regulation, and getting involved in copyright and data protection debates. There is a lot at stake. It is imperative for every company to regularly scrutinise the products they use for biases and stereotypes to avoid the amplification of harm. Lastly, in this rapidly changing environment with new products being churned out every day, walking alone is dangerous. Engaging in and promoting collaborations within the industry and between the industry and tech companies is essential for charting responsible paths forward.

But there is no doubt, GenAI will increase the media's dependence on big tech by many degrees. The more tech companies integrate AI-tools into applications people use in their daily lives, the less control media organisations will have over practices, processes and products. Their ethical guidelines might then be just an add-on to something that has long been decided elsewhere.

Given all of this, the following hypothesis might come somewhat as a surprise: Tomorrow's journalism might look a lot like yesterday's – and hopefully better. But part of today's journalism will disappear. Like it has always been, journalism will be about facts, surprises, storytelling, and holding power to account. It will be about building stable, loyal, trusted relationships with audiences by providing guidance, leading conversations and supporting communities. In a world of artificial content, what real people say, think, and feel will be at a premium. Reporters are uniquely equipped to uncover this. But AI can help journalism to do better: to serve individuals and groups according to their needs and life situations; to become more inclusive, local, and enriched with data in ways that weren't affordable before. As Anne Lagercrantz, Vice-CEO of Swedish Television, has commented about AI: 'It will fundamentally change journalism but hopefully not our role in society. We have to work on the credibility of the media industry. We need to create safe places for information.' It is safe to conclude that the AI age poses the greatest risks not for journalism itself, but for its business models.

This text is based on the free-to-download report on 'Trusted Journalism in the Age of Generative AI', published by the European Broadcasting Union in 2024, researched and written by Dr Alexandra Borchardt, Kati Bremme, Dr Felix Simon and Olle Zachrison.

TO THE POINT

In our column *To the point*, rapporteur for the EESC opinion *Devising a European flagship initiative for health* Alain Coheur recommends making health issues a priority topic for the future European Commission. He stresses the unifying nature of the European Flagship Initiative for Health, which should demonstrate European solidarity by strengthening health systems and protecting the EU against future crises.



ALAIN COHEUR

HEALTH SHOULD BE HIGH ON THE NEW COMMISSION'S AGENDA

By Alain Coheur

Health is a fundamental pillar of the resilience and prosperity of the EU. Far from being a peripheral topic, it is a key priority for every European citizen, given that we all use our health systems at one time or another. During COVID, health was the central focus. However, it has to be said that President von der Leyen failed to make use of her position to seize a unique opportunity to make health an essential component of all other policy areas by promoting the cross-cutting integration of health policies.

We need to overcome sectoral silos and develop a more coherent, cohesive and inclusive European model, supporting a just transition for all, leaving no one behind. We must unite all stakeholders, strengthen social dialogue and involve civil society, from policy design to implementation and evaluation.

The Committee calls for a European Flagship Initiative for Health: a unifying initiative anchored in European solidarity to reinforce our health systems, combat health inequalities and protect against future crises. Here are some of the aspects that will form the heart of this all-encompassing initiative:

- The European Care and Healthcare Guarantee: a promise made to every European citizen to guarantee equitable and universal access to high-quality care.
- The One Health approach: human health is inextricably linked to animal, plant and environmental health. Climate change, pandemics and biodiversity loss are all threats that compel us to take a holistic approach.
- Modernising our health systems by adopting digital tools and artificial intelligence, ensuring that cybersecurity and the enhancement of digital skills for citizens and health professionals lie at the heart of this process.
- Strategic social and health investments. Investing in health has a positive impact on the well-being of citizens and on Europe's competitiveness.
- Ensuring access to medicines and building up an innovative and competitive EU industry whose advances must place health and the public interest at the forefront and reduce our dependence on global supply chains. Producing on European soil is essential for guaranteeing our health sovereignty.
- Ensuring sufficient numbers of well-trained, well-paid health professionals, by creating attractive working conditions, investing in training, building enriching careers and providing constant support to health workers.
- Strengthening occupational health and safety policies, in particular through occupational medicine, workplace screening programmes and protection of workers from carcinogens and mutagens.
- Tackling the scourge of non-communicable diseases and the challenge of rare diseases must be a priority; it is a struggle against health inequalities stemming from multiple causes.

EESC NEWS



EESC opens applications for its 15th Civil Society Prize on combating the harmful polarisation of European society

Civil society organisations, individuals and private companies can now enter their non-profit projects for the EESC's prize devoted to combating the harmful polarisation of European society.

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) has just launched its 15th Civil Society Prize. The specific objective of this year's prize is to reward effective, innovative and creative not-for-profit initiatives and activities in the European Union that combat the harmful polarisation of European society.

A total of EUR 50 000 will be awarded to a maximum of five winners. The deadline for entries is set at 10:00 (Brussels time) on 7 November 2024. The award ceremony is set to take place during the EESC's Civil Society Week in March 2025.

Applications can be submitted by any civil society organisation officially registered in the EU and acting at local, regional, national or European level. The prize is also open to individuals who reside in - as well as to companies registered or operating in - the EU, provided that their projects are strictly not-for-profit.

Initiatives and projects must be carried out in the EU to be eligible. They must already have been implemented or still be ongoing. A full description of requirements and the online application form are available on the EESC's Civil Society Prize web page.

The types of activities and/or initiatives proposed for the prize can cover a wide range of topics, such as: identifying individual and collective determinants of harmful polarisation; fostering transparency surrounding the funding of organisations; combating shrinking media plurality; promoting media freedom, diversity and independence; and countering disinformation and fake news.

The aim of the EESC's flagship Civil Society Prize is to raise awareness of civil society's outstanding contribution to creating a European identity and citizenship and to promoting the common values that bolster European integration. Each year, the prize focuses on a different theme that is particularly relevant to the EU. (lm)



EESC urges stronger EU action on the rule of law and highlights long-anticipated civil society platform

Following the nomination of a new European Commissioner for Democracy, Justice and the Rule of Law, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) called for stronger EU action on the rule of law and fundamental rights.

At its September plenary, the EESC hosted a debate on democracy which put forward ideas for a stronger EU response to rule of law breaches and democratic erosion, including European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen's announcement of a long-anticipated civil society platform**.**

The EESC has advocated for such platform since 2016. The platform is expected to give civil society a stronger voice in shaping EU policies, offering a much-needed space for organisations to engage with EU institutions and help guide decisions on key issues like judicial independence and democratic freedoms.

Joachim Herrmann, from the European Commission's Directorate for Justice, presented the latest rule of law report, highlighting its expansion to EU accession countries and its impact on the single market.

Kevin Casas-Zamora of International IDEA praised the EU's efforts but warned of democratic backsliding, calling for stronger civil society engagement and more detailed rule of law reports. **Alexandrina Najmowicz** from the European Civic Forum urged clearer recommendations and an early warning system to prevent further democratic erosion.

During the debate, participants warned against complacency and emphasised the need to address growing concerns on authoritarianism, threats to judicial independence and shrinking civic space. **Jerzy Pomianowski**, head of the European Endowment for Democracy, cautioned that side-lining democracy for more immediate concerns like migration and security could backfire and called for 5% of development aid to be allocated to democratic programmes.

The EESC's debate highlighted civil society's indispensable role in defending the rule of law, calling for their deeper involvement in EU policymaking. The launch of the civil society platform, coupled with renewed commitment to fundamental rights, is crucial for the future of democracy in the EU. (gb)



EESC and African Union ECOSOCC present Joint Declaration at the UN Summit of the Future

On 20 September, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) and the African Union Economic, Social and Cultural Council (ECOSOCC) presented a Joint Declaration at the UN Summit of the Future in New York, emphasising the crucial role

of civil society in addressing global challenges and advancing sustainable development.

This declaration, in the framework of the Memorandum of Understanding between the **EESC** and **ECOSOCC**, outlines a shared vision for a fairer, more inclusive and equitable world. The partnership between the EESC and ECOSOCC aims to inspire new alliances and initiatives.

President Röpke said: 'This declaration represents far more than mere words; it is a strong commitment to our shared values of democracy, inclusivity and sustainability. In the face of pressing global challenges, we require a more robust multilateralism—one that genuinely engages civil society at its core'.

The Joint Declaration emphasises:

- Accelerating progress on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), calling for a comprehensive strategy to advance the SDGs.
- A fair transition to climate neutrality, stressing the importance of ensuring decent work and eradicating poverty while transitioning to climate-neutral economies.
- Global financial reform in the global financial system to better support sustainable development, particularly in vulnerable countries.
- Gender-responsive policies calling for gender-inclusive policies in climate action and development programs.
- Civil society must play a central role in reforming global governance, including a reformation of the United Nations' decision-making bodies.
- Engaging young people and fostering digital innovation as key drivers of future global governance.

The EESC and ECOSOCC partnership was formalised with the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on 17 July 2024 in Accra, Ghana. This MoU strengthens cooperation on key issues like sustainable development, climate action and civil society engagement. It sets out actions including regular meetings, joint contributions to EU-AU summits and the creation of a permanent civil society engagement mechanism.

The collaboration reflects both institutions' commitment to advancing the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and promoting inclusive governance. With a focus on enhancing civil society's role in the EU-Africa partnership, the MoU underscores the need for joint solutions to global challenges, including climate change and democratic resilience.

The EESC and ECOSOCC aim to empower civil society across Africa. (at)



EESC's post-elections resolution urges EU institutions to focus on security in new legislative term

At its October plenary, the EESC adopted the Resolution *Charting the EU's democratic progress: a resolution for the next legislative mandate* drafted by its members Christa Schweng, Cinzia Del Rio and Ioannis Vardakastanis.

With a view to the current multi-crisis, the EESC asks the new European Parliament and Commission to make use of the EESC's diversity of representation to strengthen the European Union.

The new legislative term should aim to reinforce the EU's international position, deal with the problems in its institutional architecture, provide a solid anchor for Europe's common values, and lead the economy into a sustainable future built around an advanced, inclusive social model – something that is vital for progress, unity and competitiveness.

In the Resolution, the EESC asks the EU institutions to establish a six-fold concept of security, based on a Union that:

- protects its people against external threats;
- protects people against internal risks, mainly those relating to health, demographic change and poverty, and that provides accessible, universal social protection and well-being across Europe;
- guarantees a competitive social market economy built on ecosystems that ensure productivity, innovation, good quality jobs and full employment;
- creates a resilient economy for all;
- ensures dialogue and the participation of the social partners, organised civil society and the public in order to cope with the challenges and far-reaching changes of today and the near future;
- protects against the current and future threats of climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss.

The Resolution is the outcome of the first ever Civil Society Week, held by the EESC in March 2024 to sound out the views of Europeans of all ages, social partners and civil society organisations. (mp)



Biodiversity: EESC calls for an integrated approach to address the triple planetary crisis

With the 16th meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity (COP16) approaching, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) calls for an integrated global approach to address the ongoing biodiversity crisis.

As global tensions rise, the EESC is urging governments to focus on biodiversity as a key solution to the triple planetary crisis (climate change, biodiversity loss and desertification). COP16 will be a pivotal moment to accelerate the global effort to safeguard our planet's ecosystems, the EESC stressed in its opinion which was adopted in September.

'Without biodiversity, ecosystems and economies will collapse, as over half of global GDP and 40% of jobs depend directly on nature,' said Arnaud Schwartz, rapporteur for the opinion.

The EESC points out that biodiversity, the foundation of ecosystems, human well-being and economies, must be mainstreamed across multiple policy sectors such as climate, agriculture and trade, and not treated in isolation. For instance, trade agreements should promote sustainability by ensuring that goods and technologies do not contribute to deforestation and habitat destruction.

It also urgent to secure financial support for biodiversity preservation. Public funding alone is insufficient, so a blend of public, private and innovative financial mechanisms are needed.

The EESC urges the EU to support countries in the Global South as they protect biodiversity, and advocates for the phasing out of subsidies harmful to biodiversity, particularly those promoting fossil fuels. Redirecting these subsidies towards ecosystem restoration could address both climate change and biodiversity loss through nature-based solutions like reforestation, sustainable agriculture and wetland restoration.

Furthermore, the EESC highlighted the importance of the 'One Health' approach, which links human, animal and environmental health. Healthy ecosystems provide critical services, such as pollination, carbon sequestration and water filtration, all of which contribute to human well-being. The decline in biodiversity undermines ecosystems' resilience, increasing the risk of zoonotic diseases such as COVID-19.

The EESC has also called for young people to be more involved in decision making. It proposed creating the position of European Commission executive vice-president for future generations, ensuring that long-term sustainability and well-being are prioritised over short-term gains. (ks)



2024 EU Organic Awards: Italy, Spain, and Sweden lead with best organic SME, retailer, and restaurant recognised by the EESC

On 23 September 2024, the European Commission announced the winners of the third EU Organic Awards. The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) chose and awarded the winners in three key categories: Best Organic Food Processing SME, Best Organic Food Retailer, and Best Organic Restaurant.

The winners are:

- **Best Organic Food Processing SME**: *Gino Girolomoni Cooperativa Agricola* (Italy), a cooperative producing organic pasta in the Marche region using renewable energy, supporting over 300 local farmers.
- **Best Organic Food Retailer**: *SAiFRESC* (Spain), a farmer-led initiative producing 70 varieties of organic fruit and vegetables on 30 hectares of organic farmland, promoting a circular economy and offering educational workshops.
- **Best Organic Restaurant/Food Service**: *Kalf & Hansen* (Sweden), a restaurant chain specialising in 100% organic, seasonal Nordic cuisine, known for sustainable sourcing and strong ties with local producers.

Peter Schmidt, president of the EESC's section on Agriculture, Rural Development and the Environment (NAT) praised the winners, noting that the awards recognise innovation and excellence in the EU's organic sector. He emphasised that increasing the accessibility and affordability of organic products is essential for the sector's growth and to help the EU meet its target of 25% organic farming by 2030. 'However, solving social problems through agricultural policies is the wrong approach. Social policies must empower European citizens to afford organic products', he added.

The EU Organic Awards are part of the broader *EU Organic Day* initiative, launched in 2021 to highlight the benefits of organic farming. Organic farming, supported by the EU's Common Agricultural Policy, grew significantly from 5.9% of EU agricultural land in 2012 to 10.5% by 2022, with retail sales reaching €45 billion in 2022. Despite economic challenges, the EU remains the second-largest organic market globally, after the US. (ks)



EESC at COP29

This year, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) will once again participate in COP29, the 2024 UN Climate Change Conference to be held in the Azerbaijani capital, Baku.

The EESC will be represented by **Peter Schmidt**, chair of the Ad Hoc Group on the COP, and the EESC youth delegate to the COP, **Diandra Ní Bhuachalla**. At the conference, the EESC will reiterate the messages from its recently adopted opinion on climate finance and will repeat its calls for an inclusive and equitable transition, ensuring that climate action does not increase social inequality. The EESC will also advocate sustainable agri-food systems, renewable energy, energy efficiency, green technologies and the alignment of biodiversity and climate goals. By participating in COP29, the EESC aims to ensure that the voice of European civil society is heard and that the outcomes of the conference reflect balanced, socially just solutions to the climate crisis. (ks)



The EESC brings the European Citizens' Initiative outside Brussels

On 4 October, the EESC's Ad hoc Group on the European Citizens' Initiative (AHG ECI) held a debate on *The European Citizens' Initiative – State of play in Croatia* in Zagreb. The aim of the debate was for ad hoc group members to engage with local stakeholders to discuss their experiences, views and ideas. They focused in particular on the visibility and awareness of the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) in Croatia, as well as lessons learned and best practices identified so far. The ECI is a tool that

allows citizens of the European Union to directly influence EU policy by proposing new legislation.

The Zagreb debate on *The European Citizens' Initiative – State of play in Croatia* was the first such event that the ad hoc group organised outside Brussels. Hosted by the Croatian Chamber of Trades and Crafts (Hrvatska Obrtnička Komora), the EESC's *ad hoc group* members had the pleasure of welcoming **Margareta Mađerić**, State Secretary in the Croatian Ministry of Labour, **Dino Zorić** from the Ministry of Justice, representatives of the European Commission and the ECI Forum, and many participants representing Europe Direct centres, universities, local authorities and national economic and social councils, as well as Croatian ECI Ambassadors, ECI organisers, university students and other ECI stakeholders.

The debate was followed in the afternoon by a regular AHG ECI meeting and a walk in the centre of Zagreb during which the ad hoc group members engaged with Croatians directly by handing out the EESC's popular *European Democracy Passport*.

With its 2023-2025 work programme, the ad hoc group aims to further increase the EESC's active participation in the European Citizens' Initiative process. It plans to organise further meetings outside Brussels, as they provide a good opportunity to debate with local ECI stakeholders and raise awareness about the ECI at national and local level.

Currently chaired by EESC member Violeta Jelić, AHG ECI was set up in 2013 to provide political guidance on the ECI and monitor developments in this area.

Introduced by the Lisbon Treaty, the European Citizens' Initiative came into existence in 2012 as the very first instrument for participatory democracy at a transnational level. It allows at least one million EU citizens from at least seven Member States to call on the European Commission to propose legislation and is thus the closest equivalent we have to a citizens' legislative initiative.

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) has played a very active role in developing and promoting the European Citizens' Initiative from its very beginning. (ep)



EESC and CoR host Cybersecurity Days in Brussels

From 2-4 October, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) and the Committee of the Regions (CoR) hosted the European Cybersecurity Month (ECSM) in Brussels. The event brought together top speakers from EU institutions, regional governments and civil society to address the challenges of today's rapidly changing cyber landscape.

The 12th edition of the ECSM focused on social engineering, a growing threat that targets human behaviour to gain unauthorised access to information and services and thereby breach security.

The key takeaways from this year's event are:

1. The new cybersecurity regulation establishes a common baseline for EU institutions and Member States.
2. Regular risk assessments are crucial for identifying vulnerabilities and prioritising mitigation strategies.
3. Emerging threats, such as AI-powered attacks and quantum computing, require innovative countermeasures.
4. Regional authorities play a crucial role in supporting local entities through knowledge sharing, technical assistance and tailored training programmes.
5. AI-powered social engineering attacks are increasing, and countering them requires a multifaceted and collaborative approach.

You can find more information about the event here. (lp)



EESC Info – Film screening – The Teachers' Lounge

On Tuesday 17 September, the EESC hosted the screening of *The Teachers' Lounge*, winner of the LUX European Audience Film Award.

Directed by German filmmaker **İlker Çatak,** the film explores the challenges faced by a teacher, while addressing broader issues within the educational system. After the screening, attendees engaged in a debate moderated by EESC Vice-President for Communication **Laurențiu Plosceanu**. The discussion featured insights from speakers **Jan Wilker** and **Tatjana Babrauskienė**, who delved into the film's themes and their significance in relation to current social issues.

This screening is part of a series organised by the EESC in collaboration with the Lux Audience Award of the European Parliament, highlighting the EESC's engagement and role in promoting and nurturing dialogue on pressing social topics.

NEWS FROM THE GROUPS



Draghi's report charts the path forward: Do we have the courage and political will to restore EU competitiveness?

By Stefano Mallia, President of the EESC Employers' Group

The release of the Mario Draghi report has once more turned the spotlight on to the urgency of addressing Europe's economic challenges. Both the Letta and the Draghi reports have sounded alarm bells - loudly: Europe is facing a decisive moment, and we cannot afford to be complacent.

The stakes are higher than ever: over the past two decades, EU economic growth has been persistently slower than that of the United States, while China has been rapidly closing the gap. From 2002 to 2023, the EU-US gap in GDP levels (at 2015 prices) widened from just over 15% to a worrying 30%. The comparison is even starker when looking at purchasing power parity (PPP): the gap has grown from 12% to a significant 34%.

One of the biggest challenges is Europe’s regulatory environment. The figures are striking: from 2019 to 2024, the EU enacted approximately 13 000 legislative acts, compared to around 3 500 in the US.

This regulatory overload has entailed significant compliance costs for businesses, diverting resources away from innovation and performance improvement. Moreover, it has led to a worrying trend of companies relocating outside the EU, with 30% of European unicorns moving away between 2008 and 2021.

As Draghi emphasises, investment alone will not drive Europe forward. It is about ensuring that reforms lead to meaningful progress. We must focus on completing the Single Market, removing barriers, prioritising a coherent approach to burden reduction and streamlining regulations. These are key steps that can be taken immediately without major political battles and would deliver tangible benefits to businesses, particularly SMEs, which are the backbone of our economies.

Moreover, we cannot ignore the interconnectedness of our sectors and economies. Improvements in one area can lead to positive ripple effects across others. For example, the integration of AI and data-driven technologies can support smarter energy management across industries, significantly cutting costs and emissions, from advanced manufacturing to precision farming. These are the kinds of synergies we must pursue.

The path forward is clear. Europe has the capacity, talent and innovation potential to regain its competitive edge. But it will require strong political will, collaboration and a focus on long-term strategic objectives. Now, the onus is on us — EU institutions and Member States — to transform these opportunities into action that delivers real change.



Skills gap? The EU Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights is missing from the new Commission

By the EESC's Workers' Group

Now that the new college of commissioners has been unveiled, we cannot help but notice that the post of the commissioner for social rights and jobs has been scrapped. In its place, we now have a commissioner for 'People, Skills, and Preparedness'. Using the word 'People' begs a lot of questions. After all, shouldn't almost all the other portfolios also be about people? We could also comment on the jargon-heavy nature of the word 'Preparedness', which also appears in one other portfolio.

However, this is about what's missing, and what's been left behind. Social policy and employment have faded into the background, all in the name of competitiveness. The cryptic and sometimes colourful nature of some other job titles speaks for itself: from Implementation and Simplification to Prosperity and Water Resilience, to name but a few.

A portfolio for Employment and Social Policy has existed since the 1970s, but it was renamed Jobs and Social Rights in 2019. It included key policies, such as the European Pillar of Social Rights and its far-reaching initiatives. Quality jobs, equality, social dialogue and working and living conditions remain fundamental issues for the very survival of our democracies.

However, instead of employment, we now have skills. The idea that many of our current problems stem from skills gaps seems to be widely accepted in some circles. Companies struggle to find the skilled workforce they need. And it is no surprise. Entry jobs require several years of job experience, and it is not uncommon to see requirements for PhDs, a number of languages, and a long list of certifications for skills that could be learnt on the job in just a few months. On top of this, very often the salaries offered will barely cover living costs. And this is for qualified positions, which already get the better end of the stick.

It is deeply worrying, as the Commission often says, to observe this haphazard distribution of jargon combined with a narrative clearly dominated by competitiveness. It seems to suggest that ensuring well-being, quality jobs and decent wages is already mission accomplished and now the only issue left is to close the skills gap. However, this gap seems to exist mainly in the new college of commissioners, unable to grasp the current situation, put it into perspective, and offer realistic solutions. Let's hope that beyond the initial portfolios and beneath the surface, we can find solid proposals to strengthen social and labor rights, democracy, and the fight against climate change.



Connecting generations: fostering intergenerational dialogue, justice and solidarity in the European Union

By Krzysztof Balon, rapporteur for the EESC opinion on *Promoting European intergenerational solidarity – towards an EU horizontal approach*.

The Treaty on European Union states that ‘The Union … shall promote … solidarity between generations."

However, ageism, negative attitudes towards certain age groups and demographic trends paired with multiple crises are dividing European societies and creating barriers to real inclusion and participation. These issues do not only affect older generations; they will also come to have an impact on current younger generations.

At the same time, intergenerational dialogue and positive influences on economic development would cover the needs of different generations in a sustainable way, strengthening democracy and social cohesion. Intergenerational dialogue would work as a form of civil dialogue.

We therefore need a new political approach to intergenerational solidarity – here and now!

The EESC therefore calls on the European Commission to publish a green paper on intergenerational solidarity. This should include proposals mentioned in the EESC opinion on *Promoting European intergenerational solidarity*, including those related to the world of work, pension systems and health and care services. The Member States, in turn, are urged to exchange best practices in those fields. To support these efforts, intergenerational solidarity should be established as one of the objectives of the European Social Fund 2027-2034 regulations.

Civil society organisations and social partners play a key role in planning and implementing specific policies. The EESC ought to establish an Intergenerational Solidarity Forum, which would provide a platform for exchanging information and experience and developing new ideas in close cooperation with civil society organisations and other relevant stakeholders. With the participation of the European Commission, the forum might also monitor the implementation and development of the intergenerational solidarity approach across the EU.

IN FOCUS: JOURNALISM AND MEDIA FREEDOM



EESC Connecting EU Seminar: Journalism is a public good that the EU must defend

On 17 and 18 October, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) held its top annual communication event, Connecting EU, which brings together communicators from civil society organisations. Held under the title "A bastion of democracy: helping journalism survive and thrive", the seminar this year focused on the media's current situation and its place in society. It pointed to journalists facing increasing pressure from governments and private interests that curb media freedom.

Alongside the familiar obstacles, they now face the rise of generative AI, which despite its benefits, threatens the economic foundations of journalism.

"What is truth? This age-old question has resurfaced with AI, in the context of fake news, conspiracy theories and authoritarian governments, all of which systematically undermine informed debate, accuracy and respectful discussion. It is so timely that we come together to look for questions and answers that unite us in the EU," said EESC President **Oliver Röpke.**

"20 years ago, few could have predicted that in 2024 most of us would no longer read the morning paper with our morning coffee, but would browse through our phones to read news on the news websites and increasingly so - on social media," said **Aurel Laurenţiu Plosceanu**, EESC Vice-President for Communication, "But beyond new challenges, old ones remain. Journalists still battle their old enemies: censorship, opaque media ownership, insufficient funding and anti-media laws, to name but a few."

Ricardo Gutiérrez, General Secretary of the European Federation of Journalists, stressed that the work of journalists should be treated as a “public service” or “public good” threatened by economic challenges, harassing lawsuits (SLAPPs) and direct violence (14 journalists killed in the EU since 2015).

"Journalism is becoming a more dangerous profession than ever," argued **Jerzy Pomianowski**, Executive Director of the European Endowment for Democracy, citing the persecution of journalists in Belarus. **Andrey Gnyot**, a Belarusian filmmaker, activist and journalist under house arrest in Belgrade and at risk of extradition, shared in his video message that the greatest threat to journalism is "a brute force intent on destroying truth and decency." Similarly, Belarusian journalist **Hanna Liubakova**, sentenced to 10 years in prison in absentia, noted that in Belarus, 33 journalists are imprisoned, and that even subscribing to her social media channel could result in jail time.

Dr Alexandra Borchardt, senior journalist, independent advisor, media researcher and lead author of the EBU report "Trusted Journalism in the Age of Generative AI", made what she called the “provocative” claim that “journalism and generative AI are at odds because journalism is about facts, and generative AI calculates probabilities, so it's not about facts. That's why it needs to be fact-checked," she said in her keynote speech '*Trusted Information in the Age of Generative AI*'.

Ms Borchardt warned the media against a 'digital divide', where part of society embraces the age of AI and the rest resists it. If media fail to adapt, they risk losing in the battle to use AI to modernize and reach audiences. Among the challenges for the media arising from generative AI is the loss of visibility for journalists in an AI-based business model and the lack of control over content.

The overabundance of information that AI can mass-produce can lead to audience overload. “Will young people want to become journalists if it means competing with AI?" asked Ms Borchardt. (ll)



Murdering of journalists will not silence the truth

One of the speakers at Connecting EU 2024's panel on investigative journalism was Lukáš Diko, director of the Ján Kuciak Investigative Centre. He spoke to us about the work of investigative reporters in Slovakia today, where the initial support for free press and the fight against corruption after Ján Kuciak's murder has shifted to a lack of trust in independent media and a hostile atmosphere towards journalists.

1. **The murder of your colleague Ján Kuciak, the first assassination of a journalist in Slovakia since its independence, sent shockwaves through not only your country but also the EU. What is the latest in the legal case about the perpetrators?**

It is six and half years since Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová were murdered due to Ján's investigative work. Despite this, the trial is still ongoing and may last even longer. As of today, the assassin, his driver, and the middleman have been sentenced to long prison terms. However, the trials of the alleged mastermind, businessman Marian Kočner, and his close associate Alena Zsuzsová, who, according to the investigation, ordered the murder, are awaiting appeal decisions from the Supreme Court. Zsuzsová was convicted by the first-instance court, while Kočner was acquitted. A retrial is also a possibility depending on the upcoming decision. Both Kočner and Zsuzsová had already been serving long jail terms for other crimes. We at the Ján Kuciak Investigative center (ICJK) have been following the trial very closely as one of our main goals is to preserve the legacy of Ján by continuing his investigative work.

2. **After the initial shock and protests against the murders which led to the demise of the then PM Robert Fico, what has, in your view, shifted in the public opinion for Mr Fico to be able to regain power**?

After the murder of Ján and Martina in 2018, the whole society was in shock. Slovakia saw its largest popular protests since the 1989 Velvet Revolution which had led to the fall of communism. The protests led to the resignation of Prime Minister Robert Fico and Interior Minister Robert Kaliňák. People supported journalists, everyone wanted to be an investigative journalist and people cared about corruption. Riding this wave, the opposition won the election in 2020 with an anti-corruption agenda. But soon afterwards, the Covid-19 pandemic started with all its problems and mismanagement and political turmoil. As an experienced politician, Robert Fico capitalised on anti-vaccination protests, which gave him momentum. With the start of the war in Ukraine, he also intensified his pro-Russian narratives, which helped his party, Smer, regain support. Slovakia is particularly vulnerable to propaganda and hoaxes, and these factors contributed to Robert Fico and his party winning the 2023 elections.

3. **How dangerous is it to be an investigative journalist in Slovakia today? What new threats are you facing in your work?**

Over the last few years four investigative journalists were murdered in EU member states. Daphne Caruana Galizia in Malta in 2017, Ján Kuciak in Slovakia in 2018, Giorgos Karaivaz in Greece in 2021 and Peter de Vries in the Netherlands in 2021. Being an investigative journalist has become dangerous in Europe. But we can also see that murdering of one journalist will not silence the truth and the truth will come to light. We saw it in all those countries.

Despite these horrendous murders, we can still see an increasing number of verbal or online attacks against journalists in Slovakia, often incited by politicians including the prime minister, and often inciting harassment and smear campaigns against journalists. This hostile atmosphere against journalists and independent media leads to other acts against them. Recently, we have seen an increase in SLAPPs, with for example, prime minister Fico suing the editor-in-chief of Aktuality.sk for using his photo on the cover of a book. And the most recent case involved the misuse of law enforcement to intimidate journalists, which happened to our colleague at ICJK. All of these attacks lead to public trust in the independent media being undermined as well as an overall hostile atmosphere towards journalists. As a consequence, the number of investigative journalists in the country is decreasing, and not many young people are aspiring to become investigative journalists. On a positive note, we at ICJK started the project Safe.journalism.sk, which provides training in personal and digital security for journalists as well as legal and psychosocial help to journalists who face threats and attacks.

Lukáš Diko is the editor-in-chief and chairman at the Investigative Centre of Ján Kuciak (ICJK). Lukáš is an investigative journalist and media leader with more than 20 years' experience. He worked as a director of news, sports and public affairs of Slovak public broadcaster RTVS. Lukáš is also co-author of Code of Ethics of Slovak journalists adopted in 2011.



Daphne Caruana Galizia Prize for Journalism – Encouraging journalistic excellence

Connecting EU 2024 was organised with the support of the Daphne Caruana Galizia Prize for Journalism. Awarded by the European Parliament in October each year, the prize recognises courageous investigative journalism. Find out more about the prize and 2024 award ceremony taking place on 23 October!

At a glance

The Daphne Caruana Galizia Prize for Journalism was launched in 2021 as a tribute to the Maltese journalist and blogger assassinated in 2017. It is awarded, on an annual basis, to outstanding journalistic work reflecting core principles and values of the European Union, such as freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and human rights.

The 2024 laureate will be announced in the Award Ceremony taking place at 6pm on 23 October at the European Parliament (EP) in Strasbourg. You can follow it live **here**. An independent European-wide jury, composed of journalists and communication experts, selected 13 finalist works.

EP Vice-President Pina Picierno (responsible for the Prize) will welcome participants, giving the floor to EP President Roberta Metsola for her opening speech. A member of the jury will then provide an overview of the Prize, after which the trophy will be given to the winner by a representative of last year's laureates.

In retrospective

In its inaugural edition, the Prize was awarded to "**The Pegasus Project**", coordinated by the *Forbidden Stories* consortium, whereas the 2022 winners were Clément Di Roma and Carol Valade, for a documentary on "**The Central African Republic under Russian Influence**". A joint investigation on the **Pylos migrant boat shipreck** - by the Greek investigative outlet *Solomon*, in collaboration with *Forensis*, the German public broadcaster *StrgF/ARD*, and the British newspaper *The Guardian* - won the Prize in 2023.

Press Seminar

Ahead the Award Ceremony, the Media Services Unit of the European Parliament will hold a press seminar on "Safeguarding Media Freedom" (23 October, 3pm). Around 65 journalists are expected to attend, engaging in insightful speeches and discussions in the presence of Matthew Caruana Galizia, journalist and son of Daphne Caruana Galizia.

The programme will feature testimonies from journalists who have faced threats in their line of work. One of them is Stefania Battistini, an Italian journalist who has recently been added to Russia's wanted list further to a report about the war. The Seminar will be web-streamed **here**.



Two years of the Hannah Arendt Initiative: Protecting journalists in crisis regions and in exile

One of the programmes presented at the 2024 EESC Connecting EU seminar dedicated to journalism was the Hannah Arendt Initiative. It is a network of civil society organisations supporting and protecting journalists who work under extreme pressure and are subject to censorship, harassment and persecution. A protection programme funded by the German Federal Government, the initiative offers all kinds of precious help to journalists worldwide – from Afghanistan and Sudan to Russia and Ukraine – be it in their home countries or in exile.

When critical voices are silenced, journalists imprisoned and whole media outlets shut down, the public no longer has access to independent information. Yet such information is essential to enable people to freely develop their opinions and for democracy to function.

Two years after the Hannah Arendt Initiative was launched by the German Federal Government, there is no less cause for concern – in fact, there is more. The latest World Press Freedom Index drawn up by Reporters Without Borders (RSF) shows that conditions for media professionals have worsened worldwide. There are currently more countries – 36 in total – in the bottom category (where the situation is classed as 'very serious') than there have been in over a decade. Journalists from a number of the countries in this category, including Russia, Afghanistan and Sudan, are supported by several projects run by the Hannah Arendt Initiative's partner organisations.

Thanks to the Hannah Arendt Initiative – a protection programme which is funded by Germany's Federal Foreign Office and Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media – media workers can receive many different kinds of help, either in their home country or in exile. Sometimes help is even

possible where at first glance it seems impossible. For example, a project under the initiative supports female journalists in Afghanistan: they receive safety training, scholarships and native-language mentoring. A particularly large number of women in the media have lost their jobs since the Taliban took power in 2021, which means there are now hardly any women left working in radio or television. Since that time, the whole sector has contracted sharply.

Russian and Sudanese media professionals can benefit from the Hannah Arendt Initiative in neighbouring countries. Special centres have been set up to serve as contact points for exiled media workers, run or supported by partners of the initiative. The Exile Media Hubs and the *Casa para el Periodismo Libre* (a space for exiled journalists) in Central America are also safe spaces that offer psychological and legal advice. The hubs are also places that provide further training and are a starting point for networking among media professionals who are persecuted in their home countries for various reasons.

Rebuilding sustainable editorial structures in exile is another approach followed under the Hannah Arendt Initiative. This is about ensuring that people in the journalists' totalitarian home countries continue to receive independent information.

Afghanistan, Russia and Sudan are not the only countries whose journalists receive support. The initiative's scope is essentially worldwide, and it can respond flexibly to worsening security situations. At present, support is mainly being provided to media professionals from Belarus, Central America, Myanmar, North Africa and Ukraine. In this respect, Ukraine is a special case, as the aim of the project work there is to guarantee continued reporting in the ongoing war. This requires material and technical assistance, as well as specific training and insurance for frontline operations.

The following four civil society organisations are partners of the Hannah Arendt Initiative: DW Akademie, the European Fund for Journalism in Exile (JX-Fund), Media in Cooperation and Transition (MiCT), and the European Centre for Press and Media Freedom (ECPMF). The programme requires independence from state control as well as state neutrality. Funding is granted solely on the basis of unbiased criteria, by independent juries free of state influence.

For further information, go to https://hannah-arendt-initiative.de/hannah-arendt-initiative-english/ or write to info@hannah-arendt-initiative.de.

The Hannah Arendt Initiative is a network for the protection of journalists and media worldwide. It was set up in 2022 at the initiative of and with funding from Germany's Federal Foreign Office and Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media.



Diversity in media: are we really all equally represented?

Journalists with disabilities can do their jobs equally well and can also bring different and fresh perspectives – why then are so few working in the media? Lars Bosselmann from the European Blind Union writes about underrepresentation of people with disabilities in the media industry and the need to stop the stereotypical portrayals of them in the news.

All democracies are built on key principles, and one of the most important is freedom of the press. This freedom helps ensure that the actions of political leaders are transparent to the public. It also allows us to access information without outside interference.

However, there are still aspects of media practice that need to be improved, especially when it comes to diversity. When it comes to representation in the media or coverage of topics relating to different social groups, we are still far from being equal.

Current figures show that people with disabilities are not adequately represented in the staff of newspapers, radio stations and TV broadcasters. This is very worrying considering that up to 16% of the world's population have some form of disability. Moreover, as underlined by a UNESCO report, persons with disabilities often also face prejudice due to stereotypical portrayals of our communities in the media, before worldwide audiences.

To change the public perception of persons with disabilities, we need to underline the importance of having them on board in newsrooms and in content creation processes.

Society needs to understand that the media industry is not going to be fully inclusive until persons with disabilities become part of workflows. Furthermore, disability-related topics must be covered with a different approach: media outlets should recognise that persons with disabilities are individuals who should enjoy their rights on an equal basis with others. Moreover, as content formats change constantly, we need experts to design these formats to be accessible and inclusive.

Despite the fact that the disability community is underrepresented in the media industry, we can still find very inspirational examples showing that persons with disabilities can excel as content creators.

Recently, in its podcast series, the European Blind Union broadcast a focus episode on the Paris 2024 Paralympic Games. In the episode, we talked to Laetitia Bernard, a blind French journalist who works for Radio France. Apart from this year's Paralympics, Ms Bernard had already covered the 2012 and 2016 editions in London and Rio respectively. Additionally, she covered the Sochi 2014 and PyeongChang 2018 Winter Paralympic Games.

'Events such as the Paralympic Games have a positive impact in bringing down barriers and challenging stereotypes,' Ms Bernard stressed during the interview. 'Even if a journalist has a disability, he or she can work efficiently and even be able to describe things differently,' she added. Ms Bernard's professional journey, as well as her reflections on this subject, tell us that this dimension also needs to be addressed in order to build a more inclusive society: equality must be at the core of the media industry.

Lars Bosselmann is the Executive Director of the European Blind Union (EBU).

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