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EDITORIAL



Foreword by the EESC President

In 2025, we have a shared responsibility to build a stronger Europe

As we step into 2025, the Polish Presidency of the Council of the European Union brings a sense of urgency and determination to tackling the complex challenges shaping Europe's present and future. Under the overarching theme of security, Poland's leadership promises to guide us through a year that will be pivotal for the EU's resilience, cohesion, and progress.

The priorities outlined by the Polish Presidency reflect a comprehensive approach to security in its many dimensions. Internal security, with an emphasis on protecting borders and countering disinformation, highlights the need for vigilance against emerging threats. External security will focus on strengthening defence capabilities, fostering innovation, and accelerating enlargement efforts to ensure stability in our neighbourhood. Meanwhile, economic, energy, food, and health security will remain central to ensuring Europe's independence and the well-being of its citizens.

At the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), we are ready to fully support the Presidency's agenda, leveraging our unique role as the voice of civil society. The EESC will actively contribute to discussions on how to safeguard Europe's competitiveness while ensuring that no one is left behind in the transitions we face – whether they be digital, green, or economic.

This year is also marked by political renewal, with a newly formed European Commission beginning its mandate. This provides a fresh opportunity to shape policy frameworks and implement initiatives that align with the expectations of European citizens. The EESC will play its part in supporting this new chapter, ensuring that civil society and social partner perspectives are at the heart of EU decision-making.

As we look ahead to 2025, we are reminded of our shared responsibility to build a stronger, more inclusive Europe. The EESC will continue to advocate for the rule of law, sustainable development, and social cohesion, ensuring that civil society's contributions shape the priorities of the EU's agenda. Together with the Polish Presidency, we will strive to address the pressing challenges of today while paving the way for a secure, competitive, and united Europe for generations to come.

Oliver Röpke

EESC President

DIARY DATES

23 January 2025

Screening of *Flow*, a contender for the 2025 LUX European Audience Film Award

3 February 2025

Social justice in the digital era

18 February 2025

Road to the Global Disability Summit: For disability-inclusive development and humanitarian action

26-27 February 2025

EESC plenary session



THE SURPRISE GUEST

The EU's response to post-Assad Syria faces challenges balancing humanitarian needs, migration policy, and the country's stabilisation and reconstruction. Domestic politics and short-term considerations risk prioritising and hastening returns, while coordinated and balanced approaches could play crucial roles in stabilising Syria and fostering long-term development, writes EESC Info's surprise guest Alberto-Horst Neidhardt, a top migration expert at the European Policy Centre.

Alberto-Horst Neidhardt *is a Senior Policy Analyst and Head of the European Diversity and Migration programme at the European Policy Centre (EPC). He works on asylum and migration law and policies, EU citizens' rights, disinformation, and the politics of migration. He obtained a PhD in EU law from the European University Institute. He lectures at the Catholic University of Lille on migration and mobility policies, EU governance and ethical policymaking.*



POST-ASSAD SYRIA: THE EU'S APPROACH TO SYRIAN RETURNS COULD MARK A TURNING POINT IN ITS MIGRATION POLICY

By Alberto-Horst Neidhardt

A month after the end of Bashar al-Assad's brutal rule, the official EU response remains largely confined to the announcement of assistance for development and economic stabilisation. It remains unclear whether and when sanctions on Syria will be lifted. European support will hinge on protections for minorities and other guarantees, the prospects for which remain uncertain. Syria's complex political, security and humanitarian dynamics suggest that any democratic consolidation will be long and challenging. This will test the EU's ability to speak with one voice and act jointly on the country's future. Instead, several European countries showed no hesitation in highlighting an immediate and common priority: returning displaced Syrians. In December, just days after the Assad regime lost Damascus, Austria – where FPÖ leader Herbert Kickl received a mandate to form a new government – announced a 'return bonus' and a deportation programme for those with criminal records. In the Netherlands, the coalition government led by right-wing nationalist Geert Wilders plans to identify safe areas for returns. Germany also announced that protection granted to Syrians will be 'reviewed and revoked' if the country stabilises. Other European countries have made similar declarations or are watching the situation closely. In this light, even the decision on lifting sanctions may be driven by the goal of implementing returns rather than by a shift in views about Syria's new leadership.

With support for far-right and anti-immigration parties growing across Europe – and the German federal elections looming – the Member States' vision for Syria is at risk of being dictated by domestic priorities and short-term electoral calculations. Between 2015 and 2024, over one million Syrians were granted protection by EU Member States, most of them in Germany. Their presence has become a contentious political and societal issue. Amidst widely publicised security incidents, high inflation, and rising energy costs, public sentiment in many refugee-hosting countries has grown less welcoming. This shift has normalised hostile rhetoric and policies. Despite calls by the European Commission and UNHCR to take a cautious approach to returns, this dynamic could push European governments to accelerate them, even unilaterally.

Since the fall of the Assad regime in December, over 125 000 refugees have already returned to Syria, mostly from neighbouring countries. However, their prospects are grim. Even before recent events, more than half of Syria's population faced food insecurity, with three million suffering severe hunger. With many houses destroyed by the conflict, hosting facilities are already at full capacity. According to the UNHCR, close to EUR 300 million is needed for those going back, for shelter, food and water. While the EU and the Member States should develop coordinated approaches to facilitate Syrians' safe and voluntary repatriation in the long term, the immediate priority should be to address the country's humanitarian needs in this context. Pressuring refugees to return rapidly to a war-torn and unstable country could actually backfire, further limiting access to food, energy and shelter. Large-scale returns could also disrupt the ethnic and socio-economic fabric of already fragile regions. A balanced and sustainable approach is further justified by the potential contribution of the Syrian diaspora to reconstruction efforts. The country will need engineers, doctors, administrators and teachers and manual workers at various skill levels. Syrians have

gained valuable skills and experience in Europe across relevant sectors, including education, construction, and healthcare, but recruiting the right profiles will not be easy. A permanent return would also not be a pre-condition for contributing to the reconstruction: remittances from Europe could play a crucial role in poverty reduction and sustainable development. Through diaspora engagement, Europe-based Syrians could also help strengthen diplomatic and cultural ties between the EU and post-Assad Syria.

Yet, the Member States may struggle to adopt a balanced approach and fail to pursue a coordinated agenda. Some countries might prioritise long-term stability and Syria's reconstruction, allowing returns to occur spontaneously. Others may hasten to offer financial incentives for voluntary repatriation or even systematically review Syrians' status as soon as the humanitarian situation improves, even slightly. Yet, implementing a systematic review of refugee status will face significant legal hurdles, and involve considerable financial and administrative costs. Meanwhile, any incentives for return will have to account for the fact that most Syrians displaced in Europe are now settled, with over 300 000 having acquired EU citizenship. At the same time, the country's bleak economic and labour prospects may discourage even the most motivated from going back. A fundamental question in this context will be if Syrians will be allowed to engage in so-called 'pendular movements' – returning for limited periods, with European host countries continuing to offer sustainable opportunities for a more permanent return. These questions will inevitably be intertwined with broader discussions on EU migration policy. The future negotiations on the reform of the EU Directive governing returns, for which a proposal is expected soon from the European Commission, could gain decisive momentum depending on evolving discussions about Syrians' returns. But the Directive's reform could similarly see further divisions emerging among the EU Member States. With migration policies in need of a fundamental rethink to address today's challenges effectively, the EU's approach to displaced Syrians is likely to constitute a first critical turning point in the new cycle.

TO THE POINT

The EU faces a severe housing crisis driven by rising rents, unaffordable real estate prices, and wages lagging behind inflation. To remedy the market failure in the housing sector, the EESC demands urgent action and calls for a sound EU housing strategy, writes Thomas Kattnig, rapporteur of the EESC opinion *Social housing in the EU - decent, sustainable and affordable*.



EESC PRESENTS SOLUTIONS FOR OVERCOMING EUROPE'S HOUSING CRISIS

By Thomas Kattnig

Rising rents, soaring real estate prices and salaries that are not keeping up with inflation are making housing unaffordable for a growing number of people. The housing crisis in the EU is real.

This is leading to higher healthcare costs, productivity losses, environmental damage and negative economic consequences due to reduced purchasing power.

The EESC, as the voice of organised civil society, believes that urgent action must be taken to remedy the market failure in the housing sector. Therefore, we call on the Commission to work with the Parliament, Member States and civil society to put together a comprehensive package of EU measures establishing framework conditions and the right to housing, in line with the European Pillar of Social Rights and the Charter of Fundamental Rights.

We therefore welcome the appointment of a Commissioner for Energy and Housing and the announcement that a European Affordable Housing Plan will be put forward within the next 100 days. We need, among other things, an EU-wide transparency register for real estate transactions, more streamlined coordination, more efficient permitting procedures, better land-use planning, affordable land for social housing, more investment in renovation and climate-friendly construction, and the Housing First programme so as to give homeless people security and prospects once more. We call for housing to be recognised as a fundamental right and not a commodity, by enshrining it in EU primary law.

At the same time, we agree with the Letta report that access to social housing needs to be more broadly defined in State aid law.

Moreover, the EESC calls for a significant increase in financial support for social housing. Firstly, public investment in social housing must be excluded from the Stability and Growth Pact's debt rules. Secondly, non-profit property developers and cooperatives, as well as municipalities, should be able to obtain long-term, interest-free loans through the planned investment platform or directly from the European Investment Bank.

Short-term rentals, which are a problem in many major European cities, further reduce the amount of housing available. To get to grips with this phenomenon, we need a toolbox at EU level with various tools, such as vacant property taxes and rent caps, so that Member States can take appropriate action.

Particular attention must also be paid a) to meeting the housing needs of young people through targeted programmes such as Housing First for Youth (HF4Y) and b) to including people with disabilities.

To ensure that housing is not only affordable but also sustainable, renovations and retrofits should be prioritised over new builds. To facilitate such renovations, we call for a combination of mandatory and supporting measures to ensure that fair climate action is taken. Funding tools are needed to enable

everyone to carry out thermal and energy renovations, regardless of their financial situation. At the same time, obligations must be laid down for property owners, in particular landlords, to protect tenants from excessive rent increases due to landlords passing on costs.

Finally, we stress that the housing crisis not only adversely affects European citizens' quality of life, but also threatens the smooth running of the EU internal market. An EU housing strategy is therefore needed to increase the housing supply, introduce measures to reduce construction costs, help upskill the workforce, increase productivity and improve the environmental performance of the construction industry.



ONE QUESTION TO…

In April 2024, Enrico Letta published his long-awaited report on the future of the EU's single market, entitled *Much More than a Market.* At its January plenary session, the EESC adopted an opinion on *How to support social economy entities in line with State aid rules: thoughts following the suggestions in Enrico Letta's report*. We asked the opinion's rapporteur, Giuseppe Guerini, to what extent and why he drew inspiration from Letta's report which, among other points, calls on the European institutions to improve the legal framework for State aid and enable social economy enterprises to get loans and funding more easily. Based on the conclusions of this report, how does the EESC plan to assist those enterprises in complying with State aid rules?



ENSURING FAIR FINANCIAL SUPPORT FOR SOCIAL ECONOMY ENTITIES WITHIN EU RULES

By Giuseppe Guerini

As the title of the Letta Report suggests, the European Union and its economic and business system is much more than a market. This is because, from the outset, the European Union chose to be a social market economy, where economic prosperity entails not only the accumulation of wealth but also the ability to ensure that the wealth which is traded and built up in the market benefits everyone.

In this way, social economy enterprises form an ecosystem which ensures solidarity through business, a useful model for private organisations which nonetheless act in the general interest.

The Letta Report identifies this feature which had already been taken up by the action plan and the recommendation on the social economy. The report calls on the European institutions to recognise the

specific characteristics of social economy enterprises, adapting the rules governing the internal market and competition and improving the legal framework for State aid in order to ensure that social economy enterprises have readier access to loans and financing.

The EESC has contributed significantly to ensuring that the European and international institutions recognise the purpose and role of social economy enterprises. It has participated in many initiatives and adopted many opinions in line with the work which led to the adoption of the Social Economy Action Plan in 2021 and the Recommendation to Member States in 2023. Furthermore, by issuing opinions on competition policy and State aid relating to services of general economic interest, we have shone a light on the need to raise the thresholds for granting *de minimis* State aid, and secured changes to the regulation which were approved in late 2023. The requests, set out in the Letta Report, to adapt the General Block Exemption Regulation and improve financing are in line with the EESC's calls in various opinions issued in 2022 and 2023. We are therefore encouraged to keep working on promoting this opinion in order to boost recognition of the social economy. We want to make more people aware of the benefits of effective regulation on competition and State aid for both social economy enterprises and the entire system of services of general interest.

EESC NEWS



European Council President António Costa calls for civil society's help in realising his vision for a stronger, competitive Europe

António Costa, the new President of the European Council, used his first appearance at the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) to outline his key priorities for the EU.

He emphasised competitiveness as the foundation for Europe's prosperity, underscoring the importance of combining it with social rights to build a sustainable future. EESC President **Oliver Röpke** echoed this, stating, 'Competitiveness must work for the many, not the few.'

Speaking at the EESC plenary session just days after taking office on 1 December, **Mr Costa** called for urgent collective action. 'We are on track. We have made the diagnosis, we have ambitious proposals, but we must have political will. Let us concentrate on growth, jobs and a social Europe, so today's young generation can look back and say: this was the moment we secured our prosperity.'

Competitiveness and tailored reforms are at the heart of Mr Costa's agenda. He proposed renewing the single market, cutting unnecessary regulations and investing in skills and innovation to strengthen Europe's

economy. ‘We need strong companies – not because they are cheaper but because they innovate with ideas and a skilled workforce,’ he said. Mr Costa also called for performance-based reforms inspired by NextGenerationEU: ‘This is sound logic for the future.’ He urged Member States to approach the next EU budget with openness.

‘Competitiveness is not just about economic goals; it’s about creating opportunities for all Europeans and fostering resilience,’ said **Mr Röpke**. ‘Economic growth must go hand in hand with social progress, ensuring that no one is left behind.’

Mr Costa praised the EESC’s role in fostering social dialogue, calling it ‘the European model’ for connecting with the public. ‘Social dialogue enables us to find sustainable solutions through constant negotiation between various representatives of our societies. This is vital, especially now,’ he said.

The plenary debate touched on key concerns, including housing, migration and energy costs – issues Mr Costa identified as priorities. Mr Röpke stressed the need for practical solutions, highlighting investment in education, reskilling, affordable housing and the green transition. ‘The EESC is fully committed to bringing the voice of civil society into the process of shaping a Europe that is inclusive, resilient and prepared for the challenges of the future.’ (gb)



EESC’s first ever Housing Forum says housing must be a fundamental right

Housing must be treated as a fundamental right, ensuring decent and sustainable accommodation for all Europeans, including young people and vulnerable groups.

This is the strong call put forward by the EESC’s Housing Forum, held for the first time at the December plenary session on 5 December 2024. The debate saw the participation of prominent speakers and the adoption of an opinion on the subject.

Following the appointment of **Dan Jørgensen** as Commissioner for energy and housing, the EESC President **Oliver Röpke** welcomed the historic decision to create a specific portfolio on housing within the new Commission. **Mr Röpke** said: ‘Housing is a fundamental right, not a privilege, and we cannot accept the exclusion of vulnerable populations from this essential need. As we confront a severe housing crisis affecting almost every Member State, I emphasise the urgent need to ensure that affordable, sustainable and decent housing becomes a reality for all.’

Calling for a new outlook that sees housing as vital infrastructure for society, on a par with health and education, **Bent Madsen**, President of Housing Europe, said: ‘We welcome the sentiment from the new housing Commissioner when he said that our approach should be based on values, rules and investment. We are ready as a public cooperative and as social housing providers to show the way to deliver the homes our people and our societies need.’

In the opinion *Social housing in the EU – decent, sustainable and affordable*, drafted by **Thomas Kattnig** and **Rudolf Kolbe**, the EESC recognises there has been a market failure in housing. This must be dealt with by improving framework conditions such as data, coordination, approval procedures and land use planning rules, establishing a fundamental right to housing, providing sufficient funding, implementing the 'housing first' approach for homeless people and focusing more on sustainability and the needs of young people. (mp)



Not just Paralympic athletes, but top-level athletes

The EESC held a debate to celebrate both the International Day of Persons with Disabilities and the Olympic spirit during its plenary session on 5 December in Brussels.

The EESC celebrated both the International Day of Persons with Disabilities and the Olympic spirit by inviting guests from the world of Paralympic sport – including Belgian Paralympic athlete and champion **Joachim Gérard**.

Opening the session, EESC president **Oliver Röpke** said that 'This debate highlights the urgent need to address the employment gap faced by persons with disabilities. Despite the existing legal frameworks, far too many people are excluded from the labour market due to persistent barriers. The EESC calls for action to create inclusive workplaces, break down systemic obstacles and ensure equal opportunities for all. A truly inclusive Europe must leave no one behind.'

Mr Gérard, a Belgian wheelchair tennis player and champion, told the plenary that when he first started playing tennis, he was often greeted with surprise and even protests that he would 'ruin the court' with his wheelchair. 'In the last 10 years, we have seen huge progress in the role of people with reduced mobility in the world of sport. I have played in a number of Grand Slams around the world, and through these games and the Paralympics, I feel that I am becoming more and more accepted as a top-level athlete. Not just as a Paralympic athlete, but a top-level athlete.'

Anne d'Ieteren, president of the French-speaking Federation for Disability Sport (*La Ligue Handisport Francophone*), pointed out that despite the great successes demonstrated by the Paralympic Games, there were still many obstacles in the daily lives of people with disabilities. 'A significant number of sports facilities are still inaccessible, with inadequate parking facilities or poor design. These may seem like small problems, but their cumulative effect can exclude and discourage participation.'

Aurel Laurenţiu Plosceanu, EESC Vice-President responsible for communication, welcomed **Mr Gérard** and **Ms d'Ieteren**, and said that 'Their presence and track record remind us just how inspiring athletic excellence can be for all of us who strive to achieve our full potential, while also showing the vital role that persons with disabilities play in our society and in the sporting world in particular.'

Christophe Lefèvre, president of the EESC's Permanent Group on Disability Rights, argued for the establishment of an EU accessibility mechanism with accessibility indicators, covering areas such as sustainable housing, sport, justice and education, while **Pietro Vittorio Barbieri** (a member the Permanent Group) added that 'It is essential that all people with disabilities living in Europe have access to sport and

education, so that we are all guaranteed the same privileges within society.’ (lm)



Civil society driving change on the African continent

At its December plenary session, the EESC hosted a debate on democracy in Africa with representatives from the African Union Economic and Cultural Council (AU ECOSOCC). Both sides agreed that civil society is the driving force for a successful EU-Africa partnership based on equality, fostering civil and social dialogue.

At the plenary debate, at which it also adopted the opinion *Democracy in Africa – current situation and future perspectives. What role for the EESC?*, the EESC reiterated its commitment to enhancing the strategic partnership with the African Union, supporting the initiative for a joint undertaking to promote the values of democracy, inclusive dialogue and sustainable development. Earlier last year, the EESC and AU ECOSCOCC signed the Memorandum of Understanding.

Kyeretwie Osei, Head of Programs at the African Union of ECOSOCC, in his delivery statement on behalf of the Presiding ECOSOCC Officer **Khalid Boudali**, explained: 'We have an important job in institution-building to entrench democratic institutions around the continent, making sure that we are able to establish good governance by eliminating and reducing corruption and creating spaces for citizens' expression, among other things. Civil society is at the heart of this goal'.

Oliver Röpke, EESC President stressed: 'Cooperation with the AU ECOSOCC is key in promoting the role of civil society in Africa. Civil society should take part in the decision-making process and tackle further challenges, such as climate change, sustainable development and migration'.

In its opinion, the EESC addresses these challenges and takes the view that, together with recognised representatives of African civil society platforms, it can help promote democratic values, advocate for human rights and help defend democratic regimes in Africa.

Carlos Trindade, EESC member and rapporteur for the opinion, mentioned that the European approach to developing democracy in Africa should be based on a relationship between equals, taking into account the continent's complexity in terms of economic development, diversity and geopolitical interests.

Sifa Chiyoge Buchekabiri, Regional Director and CEO of the International Cooperative Alliance-Africa (ICA-Africa), spoke about the importance of empowering women in Africa. 'Promoting women's empowerment is key as women are often the backbone of their households. Therefore, by empowering women we are not just helping individuals, we are also empowering entire communities'. (mt)



A just transition for Europe: EESC calls for fair and inclusive green policies

The EESC calls for a fair and inclusive transition as the EU moves towards climate neutrality. In a recent opinion, the EESC stresses the need for coordinated efforts to ensure that, when meeting ambitious climate goals, no one is left behind. These recommendations align with the European Commission's 2024–2029 priorities, addressing jobs, skills, social welfare and regional disparities.

The EESC is advocating a comprehensive just transition policy package, allowing flexibility for Member States to address their own particular circumstances. Singling out social dialogue and collective bargaining as key tools, the EESC also proposes mapping skills gaps, inclusive training programmes, transparent company transition plans, greater worker consultation and the integration of just transition principles into EU frameworks such as the European Pillar of Social Rights.

'We want the just transition to be a story where fairness, resilience and sustainability pave the way for a greener, more inclusive future,' said **Dirk Bergrath**, rapporteur for the opinion.

To achieve Europe's climate ambitions — 75% emissions cut by 2030 and net-zero by 2050 — fairness needs to be embedded into policies, the EESC stressed in the opinion. Prioritising decent work, social inclusion and poverty reduction is vital to sustain public support and ensure the success of the European Green Deal.

Furthermore, the EESC emphasises targeted support for regions disproportionately affected by the green transition. Mapping regional needs and sectoral transitions is critical, with the Just Transition Observatory monitoring progress and ensuring no community is overlooked.

To bridge funding gaps, it is essential to scale up the Just Transition Fund, leverage private investment and align EU financial instruments. Social and environmental conditionalities will ensure equitable allocation, focusing on training and protection for vulnerable groups. (ks)



EESC European Consumer Day: EU should stay committed to the Blue Deal

European Consumer Day 2024 focused on *Water challenges: Exploring consumer perspectives - Moving ahead with the EU Blue Deal.* The event stressed the need for sustainable water management, improved infrastructure and consumer education to make sure water remains affordable to all Europeans

As revealed at the European Consumer Day held by the **European Economic and Social Committee (EESC)** on 9 December, with the price of water expected to rise by 25% by 2030, the EU will need to invest more than EUR 250 billion to meet Europe's water needs and build a society in which everyone has access to clean, affordable water.

Water is becoming a scarce resource, even in Europe: as many as 30% of Europeans face water stress at least once a year. This means that consumers, who on average still see water as an expendable commodity, will have to change their behaviour to use it more efficiently, both by becoming more aware of their water footprint and by using smart water-saving technologies.

However, the major polluters should also pay the price and not leave consumers to shoulder their hidden expenses.

With 15 000 litres of water used to produce just one kilo of meat and 8 000 litres for one pair of jeans, big water spenders (such as manufacturing and especially agriculture, which accounts for 72% of all water withdrawals) will also have to bear the cost of their environmental impact and invest in better production facilities.

'Water should be seen as a fundamental part of the European Commission's forthcoming flagship policy initiatives. We would like to see the new Water Coalition launched to help implement the European Blue Deal, and we are currently working on the creation of the European Blue Deal Stakeholder Platform,' said **Milena Angelova**, rapporteur for the EESC opinion on *Waterefficient consumption and consumer awareness of their water footprint.* She underlined the importance of the EU Blue Deal as a key initiative of the EESC, a 'pioneering EU institution' when it comes to water issues.

In his keynote speech**, Gaetano Casale**, Director of the Liaison Office of the IHE DELFT Institute for Water Education, said that water is still undervalued in Europe. In his view, a sustainable approach to water is now absolutely essential, and calls for increased awareness of the environmental costs, the challenges of a growing world population and climate change.

'I would be glad if we all together—citizens, governments, agencies, scientists, industry, and lawmakers—seized this unique opportunity and took a comprehensive leap forward to make one of our most valuable resources, water—in the ground, in the sea, and in the sky—future-proof', said **Hildegard Bentele**, the European Parliament's shadow rapporteur on the Water Framework Directive. (ll)



EESC standing with the people of Belarus

On 13 December 2024, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), the European Endowment for Democracy (EED) and Press Club Belarus jointly organised a seminar on the role of Belarusian independent media in fostering a resilient and democratising society. Being the only source of information for people in the country, Belarusian independent media need to be supported financially and involved in partnerships with western media to keep Belarus high on the international news

agenda.

By taking part in the ‘Belarus Days’ initiative (9-13 December 2024), organised by the European External Action Service and the Commission’s Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations, the EESC demonstrated its unwavering commitment to a democratic Belarus that respects human rights and freedom of speech.

Opening the event, EESC President **Oliver Röpke** said: ‘Independent media are the backbone of a free and democratic society. Today, as part of Belarus Days, we reaffirm our solidarity with the Belarusian people and their courageous fight against disinformation and oppression’.

EED Executive Director **Jerzy Pomianowski** stressed: ‘The result of the election on 26 January is predetermined, and the regime will try to turn the page, try to legitimise itself in international affairs and whitewash the oppression. However, independent Belarusian media seem to be successful in engaging their audience’.

Hanna Liubakova, a freelance journalist in exile who was sentenced to 10 years in jail in absentia on four criminal charges, is thrilled by the Belarusian people’s motivation to stay informed and have access to independent media, highlighting that 50% of the traffic for Belarusian-run websites located outside the country comes from inside the country. She confirmed that up to 90% of the social media platform audience is inside Belarus. ‘Independent media in Belarus is the best antidote to Lukashenko’s and the Kremlin’s propaganda,’ she added.

Natalia Belikova, who works for Press Club Belarus said that the aim of the government’s new propaganda is to provide a new understanding of what elections are, so they are trying to unite people and encourage them to show their patriotism. ‘Such tactics are how they change the entire population’s perception about what democracy is,’ said Ms Belikova.

The seminar ended with the screening of the feature film *Under the Grey Sky*, inspired by the true story of **Katsiaryna Andreyeva**, a jailed Belarusian journalist, attended by the film’s director **Mara Tamkovich.** (mt)


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Under the Cruel Belarus Sky

In December, the EESC held a screening of the film *Under the Grey Sky*, about Belarusian journalists who have paid a terrible personal price for reporting on political turmoil in their country

Under the Grey Sky, a debut feature film by Belarusian-Polish filmmaker **Mara Tamkovich**, tells the heartbreaking story of Lena, a Belarusian journalist who ends up in prison after livestreaming the government crackdown on peaceful demonstration at the Square of Changes in Minsk. The year is 2020 and an unprecedented wave of protests sweeps Belarus following the rigged elections which saw Aleksandr Lukashenko re-elected for the sixth time.

Lena and her camera operator Olya are arrested after they continue filming the protests despite being tracked down by a police drone. In a plot twist of Kafkaesque absurdity, Lena is first accused of ‘organising riots and disrupting public transport’ only to see her accusations changed into high treason. What was supposed to be a seven-day administrative detention turns into an eight-year prison sentence following a secret trial. Her colleague gets two years. Lena’s husband Ilya, himself harassed by the regime’s police, is desperately trying to get her out of jail, even trying to persuade Lena to plead guilty in exchange for freedom. But Lena cannot do it.

The film is inspired by the true story of Belarusian Belsat TV journalists **Katsiaryna Andreyeva,** her husband **Ihar Iljash** and her colleague **Darya Chultsova**. Whereas Darya completed her two-year sentence, Katsiaryna and Ihar are currently in prison, with her serving a prolonged prison sentence of eight years and three months. They are far from being the only ones: at the end of 2024, the Belarusian Association of Journalists put the number of media workers who are still behind bars at 45. Many face the pressure even after fleeing abroad.

The film had its world premiere at Tribeca festival in New York in June 2024.

On 13 December, *Under the Grey Sky* was screened at the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) in the presence of Ms Tamkovich and as part of a seminar on the role of Belarusian independent media in fostering a resilient and democratising society.

EESC Info spoke with **Ms Tamkovich** about the film:

How accurately does the film follow the real-life events and fate of Katsiaryna Andreyeva? Did you use some actual footage from the 2020 protests and Ms Andreyeva’s case?

The actual footage is used in the film several times. The protest the characters are broadcasting at the beginning of the film was actually filmed by Ms Andreyeva and Ms Chultsova; those are the real images we have incorporated into an acted scene. The detention of Raman Bandarenka the characters see on their laptop also is real footage (op.ed. activist Raman Bandarenka was beaten to death by masked thugs after he tried to stop them from cutting down red and white ribbons symbolising Belarus’s flag before Soviet occupation). At the end of the film, as sort of an epilogue I show a montage of Katsiaryna’s livestreams from the protests.

The basic plotline is strongly connected to reality: the way the journalists were arrested and prosecuted and the punishments they got. But my goal was not to give an exact breakdown of events, but rather to provide the emotional truth of the choices people had to make and the painful choices they had to face. The characters have different names to put some distance between them and their real-life inspirations, but also to invite the audience to think about that story as one of many, as a metaphor for what had happened to the entire nation.

Does the wider public in Belarus know what happened to Ms Andreyeva and other journalists like her? Do you know how many people suffered the same or a similar fate to hers?

Political arrests and repression have occurred on such a broad scale in Belarus that it is hard not to be aware of the situation. At least 130 000 people have suffered different forms of repression and around 500 000 left the country after 2020. It is simply too massive to be hidden.

The official count of political prisoners (those accused or convicted on criminal charges) in Belarus has held steady at around 1 300 people for the past several years, but you have to understand that hundreds if not thousands have already served their punishment, some have been granted earlier releases and a lot of newly convicted are afraid to claim political prisoner status. It is a factory chain of repression that is in constant motion, with new prisoners replacing those who are released.

What was the main motivation for you to make this film? What are you hoping to achieve with it?

As a Belarusian I felt the urge to do something when the Belarusian regime brutally cracked down on the protest of 2020. As a former journalist I could strongly relate to the perspective of my characters. As a filmmaker I saw a strong, deeply moving story that I just had to tell.

What do you hope a viewer will take away as the main message or emotion after watching your film?

I really hope people will think a bit about what freedom actually is, how much it can cost and whether they actually appreciate what they have. I do hope they think of Kacia and Ihar and every person who is behind bars, as freedom is something a lot of people here in Europe take for granted.

What should the EU – its institutions, civil society, journalists' and human rights associations and national governments – do to help?

I urge the EU not to forget about Belarus and not to write it off as a lost cause. The EU's support is what allows our culture, our media and civil society to survive under this tremendous pressure and, although it might feel like a long-term investment, it will be worth it. (ll)



'If it didn't exist, it would have to be created' – EESC Liaison Group celebrates its 20th anniversary

On the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the EESC's Liaison Group, the founders and current members of the Group called for active steps to defend European democracy, open public space and a just Europe.

On 11 December, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) hosted the 20th anniversary of its Liaison Group with European civil society networks, the only permanent body for political dialogue and structured cooperation between civil society organisations (CSOs) and the EU institutions. Over its two decades of existence, the Liaison Group has played a major role in amplifying the voice of organised civil society and bringing its concerns to the European agenda. The group comprises 45 civil society networks active at European level, fully embodying the principles enshrined in Article 11 of the Treaty.

'As we celebrate 20 years of the EESC Liaison Group, we honour not only its remarkable achievements but also the enduring partnerships that have shaped participatory democracy in Europe. Over two decades, the Liaison Group has grown into a vibrant platform, amplifying civil society voices and fostering collaboration between diverse stakeholders. As we look to the future, let us continue to stand together to strengthen democratic values, expand civic space, and create a Europe that truly serves all its people,' said EESC President **Oliver Röpke** in his opening address.

'Our journey has not been easy,' explained **Brikena Xhomaqi**, Co-chair of the Liaison Group, 'but we have learned to trust each other. And I hope we will strengthen our cooperation to fight together for a coherent European civil society strategy'.

In her keynote speech, **Katarina Barley**, Vice-President of the European Parliament, responsible for relations with civil society organisations declared that 'As the European Parliament, we are ready to strengthen our cooperation with the Liaison Group. We need increasingly structured cooperation with civil society organisations. Together, we must do more to counter the threats to democracy in the European Union, which are greater than at any time in the EU's history,' adding that, when it came to the Liaison Group, 'If it didn't exist, it would have to be created.'

The vibrant event marking the 20th anniversary of the Liaison Group was attended by more than one hundred invitees, including several key figures of the civil society sector. They included representatives of civil society organisations from Serbia and Moldova, in line with the EESC's policy of inviting representatives of EU candidate countries to participate in its work. Also in attendance were four former presidents of the EESC, **Staffan Nilsson**, **Henri Malosse**, **Luca Jahier** and **George Dassis**. Mr Jahier emphasised that the EESC has the responsibility to establish and maintain a platform for civil dialogue, while Mr Dassis stated that 'the main thing is to have peace, and to achieve peace we must be strong and stand together.'

Were you unable to attend? Catch up with the recording of the event, the joint statement by the Liaison Group presidency, the wrap-up video, pictures and press release on the event page here. (lm)



Copyright: Polish Presidency. Council of the European Union

Hot off the presses: The EESC's activities during the Polish presidency

On 1 January, Poland picked up the baton from Hungary at the helm of the EU and will hold the presidency of the Council of the EU during the first six months of the year. The Polish presidency comes at a transformative time for Europe, coinciding with the start of the new European Commission mandate.

With the Russian aggression on Ukraine continuing relentlessly and geopolitical tensions at their highest in Europe’s recent history, Poland is focusing its priorities on the overarching theme of security. This includes

external, internal, economic, energy, food and health security as well as ensuring the rule of law.

These priorities resonate with the European Economic and Social Committee's commitment to fostering cohesion, safeguarding democratic values, and ensuring stable prosperity. 'At the EESC, we are proud to stand as a reliable and engaged partner for the Polish presidency and are committed to playing an active role in shaping the political priorities that will define this new European cycle', says EESC president **Oliver Röpke**.

At the request of the Polish presidency, the EESC will draft 14 exploratory opinions. Consult our new brochure and find out more about them and other EESC work during the first half of 2025. You can also discover who the EESC's Polish members are and which organisations they represent. The brochure is available exclusively online in English, Polish, French and German. (ll)



'Rebranding Europe'

If the EU wants to survive, it has to communicate effectively, especially in the current context of thriving disinformation, the rapid rise of AI and an increase in authoritarian tendencies. To reach everyone, communication about the EU needs to go local.

Rebranding Europe, the new book by communication strategist and author **Stavros Papagianneas,** sets the scene for a critical discussion on the EU's role on the global stage, which has Europe standing at a crossroads in the face of the Russian aggression against Ukraine, which is entering its third year, the war in the Middle East and a series of geopolitical and economic challenges.

The book presentation took place on 3 December at the Residence Palace in Brussels, attended by EESC Vice-President for Communication **Laurenţiu Plosceanu**, who took part in the debate on Europe's positioning in a turbulent global arena and the EU's need to communicate its values effectively.

'The EU is at a defining moment. To secure its future, Europe needs to communicate a clear and compelling vision to its citizens and the world. It's not about politics – it's about trust, identity and shared purpose,' said Mr Papagianneas.

The participants in the debate stressed that effective communication is not just an option but a necessity for the survival of the EU, especially in the contemporary era of disinformation, AI and growing authoritarianism. Europe has to lead the way in promoting democracy and human rights. The role of the media is essential in shaping Europe's public sphere, as **Colin Stevens**, editor-in-chief of the EU Reporter and moderator of the discussion, acknowledged. 'We, the media, have to explain again and again that Europe concerns everybody. And we have to do this every day of the week,' he said.

Experts agree that it is very difficult to combat misinformation or 'fake news' at the root, in particular with the emergence of AI. The most effective counter-measure is to create resilience within the population.

Mr Plosceanu flagged that ‘it is time to listen more to people than talk to them. People want more involvement and participation.’ He stressed the importance of cooperating with the regional press and urged the EU institutions to develop partnerships with regional media and invite regional journalists to Brussels. He concluded that Europe needs to go local, to the grassroots level.

As the vast majority of Europeans first think local, then regional, then national, and only at the very end European, communication about Europe needs to adapt to this reality by recognising that the narratives to reach people need to be local, regional and national. (mt)



Mark your calendars: EESC Civil Society Week 17-20 March 2025

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), as the institutional partner of civil society, proudly returns with the second edition of Civil Society Week!

Focussing on the theme of ***Strengthening Cohesion and Participation in Polarised Societies,*** the four-day event will feature sessions led by the EESC Liaison Group with European civil society networks. Highlights also include European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) Day, the Civil Society Prize award ceremony and contributions from national economic and social councils, youth representatives, journalists and civil society organisations from candidate countries.

Registration opens in February 2025. More information coming soon on the #CivSocWeek webpage and social media channels. Stay tuned!



Secondary schools: get ready for Your Europe, Your Say 2025!

For this year's *Your Europe, Your Say (YEYS),* the EESC has received hundreds of applications from secondary schools across the EU, the candidate countries and the UK.

The YEYS organisers carefully examined and assessed all the applications, selecting 36 secondary schools which will take part in YEYS 2025 on 13 and 14 March!

YEYS, which is the EESC's flagship annual youth event, will this year bring together nearly 100 students and 37 teachers. To be held under the title "Giving Youth a Voice" and taking place over 1.5 days, YEYS will focus on the role young people can play in shaping a resilient future. It aims to empower them to take part in civic action and actively contribute to participatory democracy, both in their communities and beyond.

As the EESC prepares to welcome all the YEYS participants, EESC members will visit the selected schools in early 2025 to meet and exchange with them ahead of the main event.

The opening and closing sessions on 14 March 2025 will be live streamed. The link to watch will be published on the EESC website, on the YEYS 2025 official webpage Your Europe, Your Say! 2025 | EESC, where you can also find more information and updates about the event.



Flow Makes Waves at the EESC

On 23 January, the EESC will host a screening of "Flow", a contender for the 2025 LUX European Audience Film Award.

Directed by Latvian filmmaker **Gints Zilbalodis**, this critically-acclaimed animated film is a co-production between Latvia, France and Belgium. It has garnered global recognition, winning the Golden Globe Award for the Best Animated Feature and top prizes at festivals such as the Annecy International Animation Film Festival, the New York Film Critics Circle Awards and the European Film Awards.

Follow the journey of Cat, a solitary survivor of a post-apocalyptic flood, as he navigates a new reality and learns to collaborate with fellow animals on a lifeboat.

The event is part of the EESC's ongoing film screening series, organised in partnership with the European Parliament's LUX Audience Award, with the goal of promoting cultural diversity and sparking dialogue on pressing social issues.



Meet the interactive version of the European Democracy Passport

Thousands of copies of the latest edition of the EESC´s popular brochure, *European Democracy Passport,* are now being distributed across Europe. You might be wondering if the European Democracy Passport is also available in electronic format. The answer is yes!

The **interactive online version**, featuring videos, quizzes, maps and much more, is already available in 13 languages, with additional language versions in the pipeline! Check it out and discover how you can truly make a difference!



The EESC’s success stories

The European Economic and Social Committee’s latest publication features a series of 11 stories about its recent achievements.

They show how the EESC has worked to ensure that key economic and social issues, identified by social partners and civil society, are discussed and addressed at European level.

These stories also demonstrate how, through its consultative work, the EESC influences EU legislation and monitors that it is properly implemented.

You can read more about these 11 stories or download them on our website: Recent EESC achievements | EESC.

To obtain paper copies in English and in French, please send an email to vipcese@eesc.europa.eu.

NEWS FROM THE GROUPS



Unlocking Competitiveness for Shared Prosperity: Employers' Group new priorities

By Stefano Mallia, EESC Employers' Group President

"Unlocking Competitiveness for Shared Prosperity" is the core objective of our Group's newly adopted priorities.

In the face of current global challenges, prioritising **competitiveness** and creating a business-friendly environment must be at the forefront of the political agenda, supported by concrete policy actions.

In a business-friendly EU, competitiveness is based on excellence and sound competition instead of subsidies or protectionism, and businesses have competitive access to all necessary production resources. A business-friendly EU also means having a regulation that is conducive to business and productivity, where the administrative burden is minimised, and where the **Single Market** is fully functioning. In addition, solid trust between enterprises and policymakers is key to attracting investment, just as it is necessary to safeguard the interests of EU businesses in relation to international competitors.

This is why we are calling for 10 sets of business-friendly policy actions as top priorities:

1. Radical reform of the regulatory approach
2. Productive Innovation Systems focusing on investment and innovation
3. High Technological Capacity in defence, security and the green transition and support for technology start-ups
4. Strong Industrial Base
5. Integrated Financial Markets by developing the Capital Markets Union and the Banking Union
6. Adequate Access to Labour
7. Effective Energy and Transport Systems
8. Equal Trading Conditions
9. Business-oriented Green Transition
10. Efficient Public Finances

These actions are urgent if we want to harness the positive impact of competitive businesses on a robust economy and a globally influential EU.

The Letta and Draghi's reports were a wake-up call: either the EU restores its competitiveness, or it may face difficult trade-offs on welfare, environmental standards and core freedoms.

We cannot afford this.



A clean industrial deal for Europe, for its workers?

By the EESC Workers' Group

Europe's industry is facing many different challenges, including extremely high energy prices, difficulty attracting skilled workforce and access to funding. In 2023, the EU put forward the Green Deal Industrial Plan, focused on achieving carbon neutrality. In her presentation of political guidelines last autumn, President Ursula Von der Leyen mentioned a 'Clean Industrial Deal' for competitive industries and quality jobs, in the spirit of Draghi's report.

Industry is an essential part of the green and digital transitions, and of our economic system. But what does this new deal mean for workers? Having a strong, unionised workforce, well paid and with good working conditions, is not just a question of trade unions, but of society at large, democracy and social stability, and productivity of companies too.

Without proper guidance and sufficient public funding, this deal could end up relying on the parts of Draghi's report and competitiveness agenda that are most in favour of deregulation. This could jeopardise the European social model by promoting a harmful competition model that fuels a race to the bottom in wages and working conditions.

To address this concern, on 14 February, the EESC Workers' Group and the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) are organising a joint conference on the European industrial policy for quality jobs at

the EESC premises. We welcome all parties interested in the discussion to mark their calendars and join the discussion.



The EU needs a pan-European policy response to its housing crisis

By the EESC Civil Society Organisations' Group

Increasing digitalisation in the construction and housing industries and involving social economy actors in housing provision services can help address current challenges related to housing affordability and sustainability in Europe. Since housing is not just a need but also a human right, a pan-European response to the various challenges is needed, according to a recent conference at the EESC.

On 21 November, the EESC's Civil Society Organisations' Group organised the **conference *Protecting Europe's most vulnerable through sustainable and affordable housing***, where discussions centred around how the EU and its Member States could make housing conditions across Europe more inclusive, affordable and sustainable.

Séamus Boland, President of the Civil Society Organisations' Group, stressed that access to adequate housing constitutes a human right that requires a pan-European approach. He highlighted the link between increasing housing prices and poverty levels, pointing out that 'the provision of affordable and sustainable housing is central to poverty eradication'.

Mr Boland also underlined that 'the EU anti-poverty strategy and European Affordable Housing Plan proposed by the European Commission President-elect must be part of a cross-sectoral policy approach to end poverty. This approach must involve civil society organisations throughout the entire process of designing, implementing and monitoring solutions. Sustainable housing must be examined from a broader perspective that encompasses resource efficiency, circularity, resilience, adaptation and economic accessibility'.

The event also showcased the new EESC study *Affordable sustainable housing in the EU*, commissioned by the Civil Society Organisations' Group. The study explores policy solutions for achieving affordable and sustainable housing across the EU. It investigates two emerging trends: digitalisation and involving social economy actors in housing provision. The study examines innovative initiatives in six Member States, assessing their potential for broader application across Europe.

You can learn more about the medium and long-term policy recommendations of the EESC study here.

You can also consult the **conclusions and recommendations** of the conference.

FOCUS ON MIGRATION



European Migration Forum showcases how civil society can help implement the Pact on Migration and Asylum

The 9th European Migration Forum (EMF), organised by the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) and the European Commission's Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs, focused on how civil society can play a key role in the forthcoming implementation of the Pact on Migration and Asylum, while highlighting the direct work of civil society organisations on the ground.

The EMF, held in Brussels in late November, shone the spotlight on the Pact on Migration and Asylum, which entered into force in June 2024. Participants explored its forthcoming implementation and how civil society can help support and apply the pact humanely. The event also took a closer look at the new permanent solidarity mechanism, creating closer links between asylum and return procedures, adequate reception conditions and the Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027.

Kicking off the opening session, the outgoing European Commissioner for Home Affairs, **Ylva Johansson**, said: 'I am glad that one of my last public duties as Commissioner will be to speak at the European Migration Forum, a vital platform for civil society organisations, EU Member States and policy-makers to address challenges and opportunities related to migration management. Our discussions over the years have always been inspiring. Together, we can build stronger, more resilient communities, upholding our values and ensuring that Europe remains a place of refuge and opportunity.'

The EESC President, **Oliver Röpke**, thanked Commissioner Johansson for her dedication to reforming EU migration policy. 'We must ensure that the migration pact is implemented in the most humane and sustainable way possible and the only way we can do this is by listening to civil society organisations on the ground. Although the pact has been adopted, the work is far from over – in fact, one could say the real work starts now,' he warned.

The EMF was established in 2015 as a platform for dialogue between civil society, institutions and authorities on issues relating to migration and the integration of third-country nationals. It meets once a year to discuss the latest policy developments and to gather and exchange information on how European policies are implemented at regional, local and grass-roots levels.

Each year, the forum focuses on a different theme, which is chosen on the basis of input provided by civil society organisations during consultation processes undertaken in the months leading up to the event. It has

so far covered topics such as safe migration routes, migrants' access to rights and services and to the EU, a more inclusive European labour market for migrants and the role of young people.

The EESC has already adopted key opinions on major themes relating to migration and asylum, including on the setup of the Pact on Migration and Asylum, on asylum and migration regulation, on the Security Union package/Schengen package, and on the Action plan on integration and inclusion 2021-2027. The EESC also set up a permanent group on immigration and integration in 2009, which helps give tangible form to the EESC's role as a facilitator between civil society and the EU institutions on migration issues, while striving to promote the development of a common European immigration and integration policy. (lm)



Photo from 'The Jungle' project: Trench foot, a fungal infection that affects the feet, is one of the most common health problems among refugees attempting to cross the Bia?owie?a Forest (October 2022). Copyright: Hanna Jarzabek

The Jungle

Hanna Jarzabek, a Spanish-Polish documentary photographer and nominee for the Investigative Journalism for Europe (IJ4EU) Impact Award 2024, paints a bleak picture of the situation at the Polish-Belarusian border where thousands of refugees are trying to cross the Białowieża Forest nicknamed 'The Jungle'.

By Hanna Jarzabek

Since November 2021, thousands of refugees, primarily from Middle Eastern and African countries, have attempted to cross the Białowieża Forest, the last remaining primeval forest in Europe, situated along the border between Poland and Belarus. The forest, nicknamed 'The Jungle' by some refugees, is a perilous and difficult place to traverse, particularly for those who are unfamiliar with the harsh climate of north-eastern Europe. Many refugees become trapped in the forest for extended periods of time, where they face extreme conditions such as lack of food and water, and a high risk of hypothermia and death during the winter. If caught by Border Guards, these refugees are usually forced to cross back over the border, which involves being left in the woods on the Belarusian side, often at night, without witnesses and with their phones destroyed to prevent communication with the outside world. These forced returns, known as pushbacks, occur even in extreme conditions, with no exceptions made for pregnant women or individuals on the brink of hypothermia, who are still expelled to Belarusian territory. Some of the refugees have claimed to have suffered these push-backs on several occasions, reaching up to 17 times.

The previous Polish government built a border wall topped with concertina wire and reinforced at the base. Like similar barriers elsewhere, it fails to stop people from attempting to enter Europe but instead exposes

them to other severe injuries. Border Guards have also installed camera traps in the forest to detect movements of refugees and aid workers. Without refugee camps, refugees hide in the forest to avoid pushbacks to Belarus, and the growing military presence hampers access to humanitarian aid.

Since the beginning, providing humanitarian aid at this border has faced significant challenges. After the far-right government lost power in October 2023, hopes for migration policy change arose, but violence, rejections and limited access to medical care have persisted. Currently, Doctors Without Borders operates with just three part-time staff to offer medical care along the 400-kilometre border. The organisation lacks a permanent base, unlike in other border regions with similar migratory flows. They face difficult conditions, often providing help in the dark and without the proper equipment to make an accurate diagnosis. They adapt their treatment to forest conditions, for example giving intravenous infusions at night or providing urgent medical attention in severe cases such as miscarriage.

After the construction of the wall, in addition to health problems, various types of fractures are now taking place, as people trying to climb over the wall sometimes fall from heights of up to 5 metres. Some of the fractures require complicated operations and months of recovery. In these cases, as well as in cases of hypothermia, the only solution is to call an ambulance, knowing that the person will be arrested and watched by the Border Guards during his hospital stay. After the person is discharged from the hospital, the Border Guards decide, based on their own criteria, whether to send them to a closed centre for foreigners or to an open one. According to what several interviewees told me, there were situations where some refugees, after finishing their stay in the hospital, were transported by the Border Guards back to the forest and pushed back to the Belarusian side, and the story started all over again from the beginning.

In recent months, the number of soldiers stationed at the Polish-Belarusian border has also steadily increased, reflecting escalating tensions in the region. In June 2024, a migrant at the border stabbed a Polish soldier, who later died from his wounds. In response, the new government intensified its anti-migration campaign and introduced a law permitting soldiers to use weapons whenever they deem it necessary, without facing accountability for their actions. This decision raises significant concerns, particularly in light of previous alarming incidents involving the use of force. For example, in October 2023, a Syrian refugee was shot in the back during daylight hours, sustaining severe injuries. Similarly, in November 2023, humanitarian volunteers reported that Border Guards fired in their direction without prior warning while they were attempting to provide aid. The new law not only risks normalising such dangerous practices, but also creates a climate of impunity, further endangering both refugees and those offering humanitarian assistance. By granting unchecked authority to soldiers, this policy undermines basic human rights and could escalate violence in an already volatile border region.

Donald Tusk seeks to project an image of being more open and aware of human rights, yet his government continues to perpetuate the previous administration's narrative of portraying migrants at this border as a threat to Polish society, dehumanising and labelling them as terrorists or criminals. The previous government also tried to classify humanitarian helpers as aiding human trafficking — a crime punishable by up to eight years in prison. It seems this policy will continue under Donald Tusk's government. On 28 January 2025, five humanitarian volunteers who assisted a family from Iraq and an Egyptian individual in 2022, will face trial, risking the same harsh penalty.

Furthermore, little optimism can be drawn from the newly announced migration policy (October 2024). The buffer zone, introduced last July, remains in effect, severely restricting access for humanitarian organisations, including Doctors Without Borders, as well as journalists, thus obstructing the delivery of aid

to refugees and the documentation of human rights abuses by Polish authorities.

The most contentious aspect of this policy however, is the plan to suspend the right to asylum at this border — a measure that blatantly contradicts fundamental human rights recognised across Europe. Moreover, this policy will have far-reaching implications for the local population in the border region, yet it has been developed without any prior consultation with them or humanitarian organisations. These organisations, which have been tirelessly working to provide aid, have also amassed critical knowledge about the situation, the needs of refugees attempting to cross and the challenges they face. Ignoring such insights not only undermines humanitarian efforts but also risks exacerbating an already dire situation.

This investigative report has been conducted with the support of a grant from the Investigative Journalism for Europe (IJ4EU) fund.

Hanna Jarzabek is a Spanish-Polish documentary photographer based in Madrid, with a background in Political Science and experience as a political analyst for UN agencies. Her work focuses on themes like discrimination, gender identity, sexual diversity and migratory flows along the EU's eastern borders with a sensitive and respectful approach. Her work has been published in major outlets like El País and Newsweek Japan, exhibited internationally and recognised with numerous awards, including a nomination for the IJ4EU Impact Award 2024 and the Leica Oskar Barnack Award 2023.


Copyright: Robert Gašpert

Unmarked graves at Europe's outer borders

Barbara Matejčić, a freelance journalist from Croatia, has had the 'List of Refugee Deaths' - a record of people who tried to reach safety in the EU from 1993 to present day - printed out on her desk for a long time. This 'catalogue of refugee despair and the cruelty of Europe's border regime' has served as a reminder that she needs to do something about it. In 2024, she took part in a major award-winning cross-border journalism project that confirmed over 1 000 unmarked graves of migrants across Europe over the last decade. Her story *Unmarked monuments of EU's shame in Croatia and Bosnia* chronicles state-linked deaths along the treacherous Balkan route.

By Barbara Matejčić

As I write this, on 13 January, in Zagreb, the odds are high that someone out there on the so-called Balkan route is dying. The temperatures are below freezing; the rivers are icy, swollen, and fast-flowing, and the mountains and forests are covered in snow. People have no other way to reach the European Union and ask for asylum, so they take high-risk routes. And they do not die 'only' because they drowned, fell fatally or froze to death. They also die because the police shoot at the boats in which they cross rivers, as happened to 20-year-old Arat Semiullah from Afghanistan, whose funeral prayer I attended in Bosnia and Herzegovina. They also die because the police refuse to respond to their repeated cries for help, as in the case of three minors from Egypt who froze to death in a Bulgarian forest in late 2024.

The root of my journalistic work on migrant deaths along the Balkan route lies in the 'List of Refugee Deaths' , compiled by UNITED, a European network of activists and non-governmental organisations. The list documents information from 1993 to the present, about who has died, where, when, how and under what circumstances, while trying to reach Europe or somewhere within Europe. Many of those on the list were refugees fleeing the wars in the former Yugoslav countries. Eleven-year-old Jasminka from Bosnia died in 1994 after her Roma family was set on fire in a refugee centre in Cologne. Lejla Ibrahimović from Bosnia took her own life on 4 December 1994 in Birmingham after the British Interior Ministry refused to grant a visa to her husband Safet. Many people on the list tragically died by suicide.

Many did so after their asylum applications were refused, or before they were due to be deported from the European country they had managed to reach or in protest of the long wait for their asylum requests to be resolved. In the summer of 1995, Todor Bogdanović from Yugoslavia was shot by French police in the mountains near the border with Italy. He was eight years old. Refugees from former Yugoslav countries crossed the borders with documents and received protection in European countries, similar to Ukrainian refugees since the war in Ukraine began. But even then, some could not cross the border legally and tried to reach safety in Western Europe by any means they could, just as non-European refugees have done over the past decade. We don't know about those deaths from the 1990s, just as we don't know much about the ones happening today.

Twelve years ago, I printed out that list, and it has been sitting on my desk ever since as a reminder that I need to do something about it. For me, no photograph, no text, no documentary about refugees is as heart-wrenching as that bare list of dead people. Those densely written pages are a catalogue of refugee despair and the cruelty of Europe's border regime.

As a reporter, I have covered various aspects of migration, including illegal pushbacks and police violence, particularly by the Croatian police, over the past decade. I started focusing on deaths in 2023. I toured cemeteries with activists in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, sent hundreds of inquiries to state bodies, spoke to the loved ones of the deceased. It is the activists, not the police, that migrants call when their life is in danger. It is the activists who help relatives find those who have disappeared after losing contact with them. It is activists who try to identify the dead, and put up permanent gravestones. This network of compassionate people does the work that should be done by institutions.

The text *Unmarked monuments of EU's shame in Croatia and Bosnia* is part of what I published, and it was created as part of an international journalistic investigation into migrant deaths at the external borders of the European Union, which I conducted together with colleagues from Greece, Italy, Spain, and Poland. The series titled *1000 Lives, 0 Names: The Border Graves Investigation* won the 2024 Special Award European Press Prize and Investigative Journalism for EU Impact Award (IJ4EU).

Based in Zagreb, Croatia, Barbara Matejčić is an award-wining freelance journalist, non-fiction writer, editor, researcher and audio producer focused on social affairs and human rights in the Balkan region. She has won several awards, including the Investigative Journalism for Europe award (2024) and the European Press Prize (2024). The Croatian Journalists' Association named her best print journalist in Croatia for her features about post-war societies in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. She writes for Croatian and international media and produces multimedia projects. She lectures in Journalism Studies at the University of VERN in Zagreb. You can find out more about Barbara's work at ***barbaramatejcic.com***


Copyright: UNHCR

EU countries must not force Syrian refugees to return amid ongoing instability

UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, is ready to support Syrians who feel it is safe to return home. But for all others, it advises against forced returns to a country marked by political uncertainty and grappling with one of the world's worst humanitarian crises, where as much as 90% of the population lives below the poverty line, writes UNHCR's Jean-Nicolas Beuze

By Jean-Nicolas Beuze

As the political landscape in Syria rapidly evolves following the downfall of President Bashar al-Assad, the debate surrounding the world's largest refugee population has taken centre stage across Europe.

An increasing number of EU countries are pausing decisions on asylum applications for Syrians, with some announcing initiatives that include chartered flights and financial incentives or 'return bonuses' to encourage refugees to go back home. Others are even reportedly planning to deport Syrians currently on their territory, regardless of their asylum status.

For EU states to make informed asylum decisions, they need to assess whether Syria is safe for Syrians currently residing in Europe to return to. Given the rapidly evolving situation on the ground, it is impossible to make definitive judgements about safety at this time. The security landscape in Syria remains uncertain, as the country teeters between the possibility of peace and reconciliation and the risk of further violence.

Millions of Syrian refugees living outside of the country are grappling with what the evolving situation in their homeland means for their own future. They are asking themselves: Will Syria be safe for me? Will my rights be respected? For some, the prospect of returning may seem more feasible, but for others deep concerns remain.

What does the future hold for those belonging to ethnic or religious minorities, holding differing political views or identifying as part of the LGBTQ + community in today's Syria? The answer is still unclear.

But for those who feel it is safe to return, we must respect their judgement – and potentially support them in returning and reintegrating into their communities of origin. However, for all others, UNHCR advises against forced returns due to the ongoing instability and political uncertainty in the country.

Forced repatriation from the European Union would violate the rights of Syrians as refugees, putting them at risk of serious and irreparable harm upon return.

The ongoing armed violence in various parts of Syria, combined with uncertainty about how the new authorities will address the needs of the population, especially vulnerable groups, makes it premature for many to consider returning. It is important to respect their judgement in this matter. Therefore, the EU Member States, along with countries neighbouring Syria that have generously hosted most Syrian refugees for more than a decade, must continue to uphold their commitment to providing protection for Syrians on their territory.

Of the 1.1 million people internally displaced by the escalation of hostilities at the end of November, approximately 627 000 people remain newly displaced, 75 per cent of whom are women and children.

Premature returns pose significant risks, not least fueling a cycle of displacement – both within Syria and across borders – ultimately deepening the crisis.

Aside from mass displacement, Syria is dealing with one of the world's worst humanitarian crises. Large portions of Syria's infrastructure have been destroyed in the conflict, including hospitals, schools and housing. Most refugees have no homes to return to. Many regions are still experiencing shortages of food, clean water and medical care. The lack of basic services, economic opportunities and safety makes it challenging for returnees to rebuild their lives in a sustainable and dignified manner. A striking 90 per cent of the population in Syria lives below the poverty line.

In the past few weeks, the voluntary returns of Syrians from Lebanon, Türkiye and Jordan have noticeably increased, with preliminary estimates showing 125 000 or roughly 7000 per day. While these returns are driven by individual choices, UNHCR is committed to supporting those who decide to return now.

As many Syrians in Europe and neighbouring countries consider whether it is safe to return and question what they will find in terms of basic services and opportunities to rebuild their lives, they deeply long to reunite with loved ones. For this reason, many wish to return home for short visits to assess the situation on the ground. They need to be able to do so without the fear of losing their refugee status in Europe. These 'go and see' visits are essential for people to make informed decisions that will lead to better outcomes, including safe and durable returns.

Patience and caution are essential as Syrians await the right conditions for a safe return and successful reintegration into their communities. As many Syrians begin to consider returning home, UNHCR is ready to support them. After years of displacement, this could be a long-awaited opportunity for many to end their refugee journey and embrace a lasting solution by returning to Syria. Just as the European Union and UNHCR have stood by them throughout their exile, we will continue to stand with them as they return and rebuild a new Syria.

Jean-Nicolas Beuze is the UNHCR country representative to the EU, Belgium, Ireland, Luxembourg, The Netherlands and Portugal, having previously served as country representative in Iraq, Yemen and Canada. He has over 27 years of experience working for the UN in the field and at the headquarters in the areas of human rights, peacekeeping and child protection.


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Implementation of the new Pact on Migration and Asylum may put the European project to the test

Praised as a historic milestone upon its adoption in May 2024, the EU's new Pact on Migration and Asylum has yet to prove its worth. But the challenges awaiting it in 2025 will not be easy: in an exceptionally uncertain geopolitical environment, the Pact's inherent complexity and the tight deadline for its implementation will require caution and lots of balancing - an analysis by Camille Le Coz of the Migration Policy Institute Europe (MPI Europe)

By Camille Le Coz

The start of 2025 brings pressing questions about the future of migration policies in the European Union (EU). The new European Commission has set a clear course with its implementation plan for the new Pact on Migration and Asylum, yet shifting circumstances threaten to divert political focus and resources elsewhere. Germany's upcoming elections have added a layer of uncertainty, alongside the fallout from the Assad regime's collapse and the unpredictable trajectory of the war in Ukraine. Discussions around externalisation models continue, but these efforts often run as isolated political manoeuvres rather than as part of a cohesive European strategy. Meanwhile, migration remains weaponised at the Polish border with Belarus, with this instrumentalisation increasingly leading to deviations from EU law. This year will be pivotal in determining whether the European Union can pursue an approach that fosters confidence and delivers much-needed collective action, or whether it will face further fragmentation.

In May 2024, many European policymakers hailed the adoption of the Pact as a historic milestone, after years of arduous negotiations. Just ahead of the European elections, this agreement showed the bloc's ability to unite and tackle some of its most challenging issues. Central to the Pact's goals were addressing tensions over responsibility and solidarity, resolving the perception of a perpetual migration crisis, and harmonising discrepancies in asylum procedures across the Member States. While the new framework largely builds on the existing system, it introduces stricter measures, such as systematic screening, enhanced border asylum and return procedures, and exceptions to common rules during a crisis. The Pact also upholds greater Europeanisation, featuring mandatory solidarity, enhanced roles for EU institutions and agencies, and increased European funding and oversight.

This boost in the EU's credibility when it comes to managing migration as a bloc could, however, be short-lived if Europeans fail to implement the new rules by May 2026. This tight deadline is particularly challenging as the Pact requires the establishment of a complex system, resource mobilisation, and the recruitment and training of staff—especially for those Member States on the front line. While Member States have drafted national action plans, much of this work has been done behind closed doors, with a lack of political messaging. This gap poses an increasing risk, as political steering is crucial for maintaining the fragile equilibrium at the EU level.

Moreover, the implementation of the new system requires the formation of coalitions of stakeholders. National asylum agencies are central to translating complex legislative texts into practical frameworks, with EU agencies—particularly the EU Agency for Asylum—already playing a pivotal role in this process. Equally important is the involvement of non-governmental organisations in order to harness their expertise

and ensure access to legal counselling and oversight of the new procedures, among other things. To support these efforts, more collaborative approaches are needed, including regular consultations, robust information-sharing mechanisms, and operational task forces that convene regularly.

Meanwhile, significant attention has turned toward externalisation strategies, with an increasing number of European capitals viewing these as fixes to the EU's migration challenges. The Italy-Albania deal has sparked numerous debates about its potential to better manage mixed migration, positioning Giorgia Meloni as a leading figure in this area across Europe. However, it has not yet yielded any results, and remains a bilateral agreement, excluding contributions from other European partners. In the meantime, other governments are coming up with other, alternative models, such as return hubs, and ways to integrate them into an EU-wide approach.

Return is precisely set to take centre stage in the political debate in the coming months. Indeed, part of the Pact hinges on improving the speed of returns, especially for individuals undergoing border procedures in frontline states. The Commission and Member States seek to tackle this urgency while leaving space to pilot return hubs, with proposals to review the Return Directive expected in March. Given the short timeline, the risk is that Europeans fail to fully reflect on the lessons learned from the ground, despite the progress made over the past decade in areas such as outreach, counselling, reintegration support, and mutual learning at the EU level. Moreover, Europe needs to be cautious that experimenting with externalisation models does not damage its relationships with countries of origin and weaken its broader standing.

This delicate balancing act is unfolding in an exceptionally uncertain environment, positioning the implementation of the Pact as a test not only for migration management but also for the broader EU project. The situation at the Polish border, in particular, highlights specific challenges in upholding binding rules under the pressure of a hostile neighbour. With regard to Syria and Ukraine, European capitals need to be prepared for unforeseen developments. In the year ahead, it will be crucial to foster strong leadership at the EU level in order to implement new rules and continue exploring innovations that align with and strengthen a joint approach. This involves focusing efforts on building resilient partnerships with priority countries and avoiding the diversion of resources to political tricks.

Camille Le Coz is Associate Director at the Migration Policy Institute Europe, a Brussels-based research institute seeking more effective management of immigration, immigrant integration, and asylum systems as well as successful outcomes for newcomers, families of immigrant background, and receiving communities.


Copyright: Schotstek

Schotstek: Promoting equal chances and diversity in management positions

Origin and social background should never be barriers to success, writes Evgi Sadegie, Managing Director of Schotstek, an organisation based in Hamburg and Berlin that promotes equal opportunities and cultural diversity in the professional world. Schotstek's unique scholarship programmes aim to support intelligent, ambitious and motivated young people with migrant backgrounds on their journey to leadership positions in research, business and society. By helping them build strong networks and equipping them with the right skills, Schotstek empowers talented students and young professionals to reach their full potential.

By Evgi Sadegie

Germany is a culturally diverse country, but this is still hardly reflected at all in its economic, scientific, cultural and political leadership. People with a migrant background often face barriers that exacerbate social inequalities, leave innovation potential untapped and undermine social cohesion. Prejudices, unequal educational opportunities and lack of role models and networks hinder the career progression of many talented people.

Schotstek was founded in 2013 by Sigrid Berenberg and friends. Sigrid Berenberg is a lawyer, and for many years has been committed to promoting social justice and diversity. Together with like-minded people, she set up Schotstek, specifically paving the way to leadership positions for smart, ambitious and motivated young people with a migrant background. She has promoted high-performing scholarship holders who will become future movers and shakers and decisionmakers. For many years, Sigrid Berenberg was fully involved in running the programme on an entirely voluntary basis.

Schotstek is a non-profit company supported via donations and joint initiatives with other companies. The programme is strongly supported by a network of partners, advisory bodies and friends – all high-level decisionmakers from a wide range of sectors and cultures. Worth particular mention is that three of the seven partners and the current managing director are themselves alumni of the Schotstek programme. This shows how Schotstek increasingly passes on responsibility to the talents it supports, thus having a lasting impact.

Schotstek offers unique support to students and young professionals through two parallel programmes. Panels admit up to 25 students each year in Hamburg, and up to 20 young professionals in Hamburg and Berlin. Following a two-year compulsory programme, participants remain in the network and can take part in events.

At the heart of Schotstek lies the building of strong networks: many young people with a migrant background do not have access to the professional and social links that are crucial for career opportunities. Schotstek puts them in touch with alumni, advisory bodies and experts from business, science, politics, culture and society. Regular events such as themed evenings and talks with leading figures promote

exchanges and broaden their horizons. These links open up career opportunities and create a community that allows for long-term support and mutual success. Alumni now play a key role by sharing their knowledge and networks, and continuously expanding the scope of Schotstek.

Schotstek offers workshops and coaching that specifically prepare participants for leadership positions. Training strengthens key competences such as communication skills, self-confidence and leadership. Participants also receive personal support through mentoring. They are put in touch with experienced professionals and managers who can provide valuable insights into the professional world, support them in planning their careers and help them deal with professional challenges. The mentors act as role models, encouraging participants to pursue professional goals and overcome barriers.

Another specific feature of the Schotstek programme is the promotion of cultural participation. Participants visit museums, theatres, operas, galleries and other cultural institutions. This strengthens cultural education, personal development and identification with their home towns and cities. These experiences broaden the outlook of scholarship holders and foster a sense of belonging.

Schotstek seeks to promote diversity at management level. Origin and social background should no longer be barriers to success. Since it was set up, Schotstek has already supported hundreds of young people, with more than 240 participants and alumni remaining active. Many are involved in the Alumni Advisory Board, are ambassadors, support social media work or share their experiences as buddies or mentors. Anyone who has been a *Schotsteker* scholarship holder remains a permanent part of the network – a model that allows for lasting success. The expansion of the programme to Berlin in 2023 shows that the Schotstek concept can also be successfully implemented in other cities.

Schotstek is more than a support programme – it is a movement that impressively shows how high-performing diversity can be specifically promoted and made visible. Schotstek opens up and creates opportunities that go beyond individual success and provides an example of how Germany can fully exploit its potential as a country of immigration. By promoting outstanding talent and removing barriers, the programme plays a crucial role in shaping a fairer and future-proof society, something that is essential in a globalised world.

Evgi Sadegie, M.A. Turkish Studies, is the Managing Director of Schotstek gGmbH and herself an alumna of its 2014 cohort. Before her current role, she led the mentorship project ‘Yoldaş’ at the Hamburg Civic Foundation, which supports children from Turkish-speaking socio-economically disadvantaged families. In doing so, she promoted equal opportunities at another important end of the equality spectrum. With her extensive project management experience, particularly in the fields of mentoring and intercultural cooperation, she is actively engaged in promoting diversity and integration in society.


Copyright: Almir Hoxhaj

No Albanians Allowed: One Immigrant's Story of Challenges, Adaptation and Hope

Albanian immigrant to Greece, Almir Hoxhaj, now speaks Greek as well as his mother tongue. After over 30 years in Greece, he feels part of the country, but adapting to Greek society where the word 'Albanian' is even used as an insult has not been easy. This is his personal story.

By Almir Hoxhaj

I was born in a small village in the district of Avlonas, where I lived until I was twelve years old. My family moved to Tirana, but in 1997 I made the difficult decision to look for a better future in Greece. It was common at that time, after the borders were opened, for Albanians to seek safety in Greece as, supposedly, the land borders made it easier. I crossed the border on foot eighteen times. I was afraid of the sea. I even remember my final trek of five days to Veroia where, despite the non-stop rain, I was incredibly thirsty. When I finally held a full glass of water in my hand, it wasn't enough to satisfy me. This is how my life in Greece started. With a full glass of water in my hand.

My first contact with the country took place when I was 15 years old when I crossed the border secretly for the first time with friends. It didn't even cross our minds that we were doing something illegal. If I could have flown to Greece, I would have. Greece, its language, its mythology, and its history were particularly appealing to me. In the summer I worked hard, trying to support my family. My definitive move to Greece was full of challenges: legal uncertainty, racism and problems integrating. I distinctly remember one incident in the beginning. There illegally, without insurance, I did not know the language – and one of my teeth broke. My only option was to take it out myself, pulling it out in front of a mirror with some pliers I used at work. My mouth was full of blood.

Adapting to Greek society was not easy. As a first-generation migrant, I felt like a foreigner – as if I constantly had blood in my mouth. I was there illegally and I was afraid to go out for a walk or coffee. I experienced racism everywhere, in many forms. A father threatened his small child that he would get the Albanian to eat them if they did not keep quiet. I was refused entry to cafés, clubs, and other places, some of which, when I first went there, even had a sign saying 'No Albanians'. They called us dirty because we were from a different religion. Relations between Greeks and Albanians are better now, although stereotypes remain. The word 'Albanian' in Greece is even used as an insult. There was racism, and there still is, but it is milder now. Times have changed. Nevertheless, racism persists, amplified by financial difficulties and lack of education.

Prejudices and discrimination are deeply rooted and often give rise to extreme political and social patterns which expand and even reach as far as the European Parliament. This is sad! Although the situation has improved, it remains a reality. However, there is hope for the younger generations. Our children will have a better chance of being fully accepted. This is also the case for my 12-year-old daughter.

Today, working as a building contractor, I look back with mixed feelings. The difficulties in adapting and the lack of acceptance I experienced were a daily reality. Nevertheless, through these challenges, I developed a deeper understanding of life and the importance of integration.

Albania remains forever a part of me. I remember clearly the years of the Communist regime. It was a time of paranoia, fear, insecurity and extreme poverty. The fall of the regime brought relief, but also new problems such as unemployment and crime. These experiences shaped me; they taught me to appreciate the stability and freedom I have found in Greece.

Personally, I feel connected to Greece. Even though my heart lies in my village in Albania, my life is here. My Greek is as good as my mother tongue. My experiences, my battles and my achievements make me feel part of this country. I hope that, with time, Greek people will fully accept us, acknowledging our contribution to society.

Migration is a test full of challenges, but also opportunities and, as an Albanian migrant in Greece, there was no way I could avoid it. My story is one full of challenges, adaptation and hope.

In the years to come, I see myself continuing my life in Greece, which is my home, and Albania as an equal member of the European Union. This is now the homeland of all of us.

Almir Hoxhaj *is 47 years old. He lives and works in Tripoli, a small town on the Greek Peloponnese peninsula. He has a 12-year-old daughter. His favourite city is Berlin. He speaks and writes Greek fluently and has translated the book 'The Saga of the Stars of Dawn' [Το έπος των άστρων της Αυγής] by Albanian author Rudi Erebara into Greek. The book was awarded the European Union Prize for Literature in 2017 and describes the tragedy of the Albanian people in the 20th century. Although the story unfolds in the previous century, the essence of totalitarianism, fascism, and irrationalism unfortunately remains relevant today, in more 'modern' forms.*

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