



EESC Info

European Economic and Social Committee

A bridge between Europe and organised civil society

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EDITORIAL



Editorial

Bridging divides: How civil society can combat harmful polarisation

At a time when our societies face growing polarisation and trust in democratic institutions is waning, civil society must rise to the challenge. Polarisation, in itself, is not always negative; democratic debate thrives on different viewpoints. However, when polarisation leads to hostility, disinformation, and division, it threatens the very foundations of our democracies.

During this year's Civil Society Week, we have seen remarkable examples of initiatives that fight harmful polarisation. The EESC Civil Society Prize has highlighted organisations working on media literacy, countering disinformation, and fostering intergenerational dialogue. These are the types of projects that must be supported if we want to build resilient, cohesive societies.

Across Europe, we are witnessing increasing societal fragmentation. The challenges are numerous: economic inequalities, social exclusion, digital misinformation, and political extremism. The recent rise of populist movements across Europe, shrinking media pluralism, and declining trust in institutions illustrate how polarisation fuels discontent. These trends weaken democratic structures and erode social cohesion. In such times, civil society is not just a participant in the democratic process—it is a guardian of its resilience.

Civil society organisations have long been at the forefront of defending democratic values. They act as mediators, bringing diverse voices to the table, countering misinformation, and fostering informed public debates. They provide a platform for those who feel unheard, advocating for inclusive policies that bridge divides rather than deepen them. Through civic engagement, fact-based discussions, and initiatives that promote tolerance, civil society actively combats the forces of division.

The EESC firmly believes that strengthening participation and dialogue is the only way forward. We see this in our work every day—our members, representing employers, trade unions, and NGOs, engage in robust debates, yet always with the goal of finding common ground. Our strength lies in consensus, and this is the model that must be expanded across Europe.

Civil society must be empowered to play its full role in addressing polarisation. This means ensuring their access to funding, protecting their ability to operate freely, and fostering an environment where their contributions to democratic life are recognised and valued. Participatory mechanisms, whether through citizen consultations, grassroots initiatives, or deliberative democracy tools, must be reinforced to ensure people feel included in decision-making.

The future of Europe depends on its citizens feeling represented, engaged, and heard. Civil society is not an accessory to democracy—it is its backbone. As we navigate an era of division, we must equip it with the tools, recognition, and space it needs to continue safeguarding our democratic values. By fostering dialogue, promoting social inclusion, and countering extremism, civil society can be the force that turns polarisation from a source of conflict into a driver of constructive debate and social progress.

Let us work together to ensure that division does not define our future. Instead, let's build a Europe where diversity of opinion strengthens our unity, where engagement rebuilds trust, and where civil society leads the way in bridging divides.

Oliver Röpke

EESC President

DIARY DATES

3 April 2025

Making Social Dialogue Work for Improved Quality of Life and Work in the Western Balkan Region, Tirana (Albania)

10 April 2025

Towards an EU action plan on rare diseases, Warsaw (Poland)

29-30 April 2025

EESC plenary session



THE SURPRISE GUEST

Our surprise guest is Nicolas Gros-Verheyde, a journalist, author and expert in defence and foreign politics. He breaks down the five proposals of the ReArm Europe plan, recently presented by the European Commission to beef up European defence amid rising concerns about the US commitment to the European security.

Nicolas Gros-Verheyde has been a journalist since 1989. He worked for Ouest France, ARTE, LCI and France Culture as EU and NATO correspondent. He is known and respected in European circles for his extensive knowledge of European affairs and foreign and defence policy. He is editorial director of [B2](#), which was founded in 2008 and is the leading and most comprehensive media outlet on European defence and

diplomacy. It is managed by a non-profit association in the form of a cooperative of journalists, and funded by subscriptions.

Author of the books *Défense européenne à l'heure de la guerre en Ukraine*, *La politique européenne de sécurité et de défense commune*. Parce que l'Europe vaut bien une défense, and *Europe de la défense*, and political news pundit on LN24, France-Info and RTBF.



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THE REARM EUROPE PLAN

By Nicolas Gros-Verheyde

The ReArm Europe plan was presented by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and endorsed by the 27 Member States at a special summit on 6 March. It contains five main proposals; they are certainly interesting, but also worthy of further discussion.

The first proposal is flexibility in the Stability and Growth Pact.

The Commission is proposing to activate the escape clause of the Stability and Growth Pact, which would allow Member States to increase defence spending by 1.5% of GDP without risking the opening of an excessive deficit procedure. The expected savings? 'Close to EUR 650 billion' over four years. Europe needs to 'significantly step up its defence spending', argues Ursula von der Leyen.

The second proposal is a new defence lending instrument.

This instrument would be worth EUR 150 billion, financed through loans from the EU budget under a system similar to macro-financial assistance. It is intended to be used in priority areas where there are serious shortcomings: air and missile defence (the German European Sky Shield initiative), artillery systems, missiles and ammunition, drones and anti-drone systems, strategic enablers, critical infrastructure protection (including in relation to space), military mobility, cyber, artificial intelligence and electronic warfare.

To speed up the process, the Commission proposes to use Article 122 of the Treaty: used in exceptional circumstances, this simply requires the agreement of the Member States within the Council of the EU, with the European Parliament just being informed. That is a circumvention of the democratic process that could be disputed. The plan to bolster Europe's defence was endorsed at the Versailles summit in March 2022 – three years ago! It seems difficult to justify calling this 'urgent'.

The third proposal is to dip into regional funds.

In the short term, the Commission insists, the European Union 'can do more' with the European budget by redeploying funds from certain budget headings. It proposes giving the Member States the option 'to use cohesion policy programmes to increase defence spending', and wants to 'facilitate the process for voluntary transfers to other EU funds with a defence objective'.

This represents a major cut in the current multiannual budget plan (2021-2027). The question is: should we sacrifice social or regional cohesion for the sake of defence? It's up for debate.

At the same time, the STEP platform for strategic technologies could be further mobilised by extending it to all technologies in the defence sector. Another possibility, according to the Commission, is relaxing existing restrictions, such as competition rules or pre-financing and co-financing rules.

The fourth proposal is EIB loans.

The European Investment Bank (EIB) and its shareholders (the Member States) have repeatedly voiced their opposition to any further move towards lending to the purely military sector, preferring the dual sector. The Commission is therefore insisting on changing the EIB's policy.

The fifth proposal is mobilising private capital.

The aim is to give defence companies 'the best possible access to capital, to finance' – a recurring problem for the industry. This idea should be included in the communication on a 'Savings and Investment Union'.



TO THE POINT

EESC member Marcin Nowacki, rapporteur of the opinion [Defence funding in the EU](#), lists the EESC's recommendations for strengthening the EU's security. With security threats rising and alliances shifting, the EESC is calling for a unified and robust EU defence mechanism. Europe can no longer rely so heavily on non-EU arms suppliers, as is currently the case. But it is not just about spending more—it is about spending wisely and efficiently.



EUROPEAN DEFENCE: IT'S ABOUT SPENDING WISELY AND EFFICIENTLY

By Marcin Nowacki

As Europe faces a rapidly evolving geopolitical landscape, a key question arises: how can the European Union ensure its security in an increasingly uncertain world? In the opinion [Defence funding in the EU](#), the EESC presents a comprehensive roadmap to strengthen the EU's security and prepare for both current and future challenges.

This opinion arrives at a time when security threats are escalating. At the heart of the EESC's stance is a call for a unified and robust EU defence funding mechanism. The current funding structures are inadequate, and change is necessary. Without a more coordinated approach to defence funding, the EU risks falling behind in protecting its interests. Among

the concerns mentioned in the opinion is the fact that '78% of the EUR 75 billion spent by EU countries on defence procurement went to non-EU suppliers', as stated in the Commission's report [The future of European competitiveness](#). This growing dependence on external providers cannot be ignored.

However, it is not just about spending more—it is about spending wisely and efficiently. The EESC recommends strengthening EU-NATO coordination, increasing funding for initiatives like the European Defence Fund (EDF) and the European Peace Facility (EPF), and focusing on joint acquisitions to streamline resources and reduce costs. Moreover, the EESC advocates for European NATO members to commit at least 2.5% of their GDP to defence, a step that would strengthen Europe's response to current geopolitical threats. This higher spending target ensures that NATO's European members contribute more effectively to collective security, while retaining full sovereignty over their armed forces.

Furthermore, initiatives such as the Act in Support of Ammunition Production (ASAP) and the European Defence Industry Reinforcement through Common Procurement Act (EDIRPA) are essential in strengthening the EU's defence capabilities. These efforts will allow Europe to pool resources effectively, ensuring both military and civil preparedness.

Technological advancements, including artificial intelligence, drones and cybersecurity, are becoming increasingly vital to national security. The EESC stresses the importance of investing in these areas to stay ahead of emerging threats. Public-private sector collaboration is key to driving innovation, particularly in AI, drones and cybersecurity systems.

The opinion also calls for a resilient European defence-industrial ecosystem, encouraging stronger cooperation between enterprises, SMEs and governments. Fostering innovation and ensuring Europe remains competitive will reduce reliance on external suppliers, building a more self-sufficient defence industry.

Furthermore, we should not forget about regional initiatives within the EU. Strengthening regional collaborations will help tailor defence strategies to address the specific security challenges faced by different

Member States. This approach ensures that regional concerns are adequately addressed within the broader EU framework.

Strengthening the EU's defence is not just about security—it is about upholding EU values. We believe that by following the roadmap outlined in our opinion, the EU can secure its future and safeguard its peace and economic interests.



ONE QUESTION TO...

We asked Javier Garat Pérez, rapporteur of the EESC opinion [*Civil society's vision for a European Oceans Pact*](#), about the EESC's most important recommendations on the European Commission's initiative which sets the comprehensive vision for all ocean-related policies. What specific action is to be taken to protect the oceans from devastation and pollution, and to preserve their biodiversity? What are the greatest threats to the well-being of the oceans and what solutions does the Committee propose?



EESC'S VISION FOR THE EUROPEAN OCEANS PACT – A BLUEPRINT FOR COMPETITIVENESS, RESILIENCE AND PROSPERITY

By Javier Garat Pérez

In response to President Ursula von der Leyen's European Oceans Pact initiative, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) has put forward key recommendations to promote a comprehensive and balanced approach to ocean governance. Its vision focuses on ensuring healthy and productive oceans, boosting the EU's blue economy, strengthening

marine research and innovation, and safeguarding marine ecosystems for future generations.

Unlocking the potential of the blue economy

The EESC underscores the importance of developing a robust and competitive blue economy. This involves simplifying regulatory frameworks, ensuring strategic autonomy, promoting innovation and advancing towards decarbonisation.

To secure a prosperous future for the maritime industry, we advocate urgent investment in e-fuels, offshore renewable energy and innovative marine technologies. Additionally, establishing a strong maritime cluster with clear sustainability goals will help maintain Europe's leadership in marine industries. This is why it is imperative to set up an 'Industrial Alliance for Blue Economy Value Chains' and to strengthen the EU Maritime Security Strategy.

On top of this, we recommend that existing policies such as the Common Fisheries Policy should be evaluated. Sustainable fishing should receive continuous support, while seafood dependency should be reduced. Imports should be subject to the same social and environmental standards. The EESC also urges the European Commission to develop an EU action plan for 'blue foods' by 2026.

Enhancing marine knowledge, research, and innovation

The EESC is pushing for more funding in marine research and innovation, stressing the need for global scientific teamwork and better technology in the maritime sector. To make this happen, we suggest setting up blue economy hubs and launching an EU Ocean Observatory.

Boosting investment and financing for ocean sustainability

We are stressing the need to mobilise significant public and private funding to support SDG 14 (Life Below Water). To this end, dedicated budget lines for ocean-related projects should be created within EU funding programmes such as Horizon Europe. The European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund (EMFAF) should also receive stronger financial backing to support competitive and decarbonised sectors.

A socially inclusive and just transition

A resilient ocean economy must ensure fair treatment for maritime workers. The EESC recommends measures to address labour shortages, encourage generational renewal, and provide vocational reskilling opportunities. Comprehensive social support systems should be in place to protect workers, particularly those who cannot transition to new roles due to technological changes.

Ensuring healthy and resilient oceans

Our oceans are under many threats from climate change, pollution, plastics and human pressures. We are therefore calling for stronger marine restoration and protection efforts, and sustainable conservation aligned with global biodiversity commitments. Achieving 'Good Environmental Status' is also crucial for economic stability and climate resilience. Additionally, we should urgently invest in green infrastructure, pollution reduction and a European Climate Adaptation Plan, while reinforcing EU leadership in global marine governance.

Ensuring a comprehensive ocean governance framework

To boost economic prosperity while respecting our planet's limits, the EESC calls for regional cooperation with local communities to keep policies aligned. It is also pushing for better international agreements,

stronger EU ocean diplomacy, and dedicated maritime-focused working groups within the EU institutions.

Finally, the EESC also recommends improving maritime spatial planning (MSP) to balance different interests, such as offshore energy expansion with fisheries and aquaculture. The goal is to promote coexistence and sustainability while making sure that traditional fishing communities are both preserved and involved in decision-making.

EESC NEWS



Civil Society Under Fire: Why the EU must act now

Civil society organisations (CSOs) are under attack across Europe and America. The EU must act now to defend them and safeguard democracy. At its plenary debate on the International Day of NGOs, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) sent out a clear message: CSOs are democracy's frontline defenders. With funding cuts threatening their survival, the EU must take immediate action to protect and support them.

On 27 February, the EESC held a debate on *The EU and Civil Society: Strengthening Democracy and Participation*, giving representatives and experts from civil society organisations and Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) an opportunity to discuss and evaluate the role of the CSOs in this vital area.

Raquel García Hermida-Van Der Walle, MEP from Renew Europe, pointed out that CSOs often contribute to checks and balances. CSOs also provide different methods of social interaction, potentially replacing government services which may be lacking. As a result, CSOs are the first to be targeted, as they can prove politically inconvenient to some governments.

Nicholas Aiossa, director of Transparency International Europe, said 'there is an orchestrated political campaign in the European Parliament to discredit, defund and disrupt the role and function of the CSOs. No evidence of financial irregularities has been found.'

In January, the centre-right European People's Party (EPP) in the European Parliament accused environmental and climate NGOs of being funded by the European Commission to lobby the Parliament, other EU institutions and MEPs, sparking outrage among Europe's CSOs.

Criticism of CSOs is nothing new, but the recent attacks have been amplified by fake news and misinformation. As **Brikena Xhomaqi**, co-chair of the EESC Liaison Group put it, the situation is a wake-up call for all CSOs to stand together and make a change. 'People should know that most CSOs depend on volunteer work, so we do not waste taxpayers' money.'

The participants also called on the European Commission to speak out more strongly about this topic, and proposed a number of solutions to reinforce the role of CSOs.

Ms García Hermida-Van Der Walle said that she would push for the role of CSOs to be more acknowledged and strengthened in the rule of law report and the conditionality mechanism as an enabling condition.

Michał Wawrykiewicz, MEP from the EPP, said his mission was to raise awareness about these fundamental topics inside his group. Another point he raised was informing decision-makers that CSOs and NGOs are organisations operating on the ground, providing crucial services that directly affect people's lives.

EESC president **Oliver Röpke** embraced the positions of the CSOs representatives, stating: 'we must resist efforts to delegitimise these organisations or restrict their access to the resources essential for democratic participation. From funding constraints to increasing political pressures, it is clear that civil society organisations require stronger and more predictable support to continue their vital work.' (at)



Challenges are immense but so is the power of civil society

More than 800 participants from citizens' organisations and stakeholders across Europe, including youth organisations, NGOs and journalists, joined the Civil Society Week, held by the European Economic and Social Committee from 17-20 March 2025. The opening session signalled the protection of the civic space through legal action, reaffirming the key role of civil societies: hold power accountable, build bridges, support social resilience and give a voice to those who are too often ignored.

The theme of the 2025 edition of Civil Society Week was [*Strengthening cohesion and participation in polarised societies*](#). With its three major initiatives, namely the [Liaison Group panels](#), the [European Citizens' Initiative](#) and the [Civil Society Prize](#), the event aimed to:

- address the growing polarisation that has been fuelled in recent years by the impact of the financial crisis, climate change and growing income inequality;
- highlight the key role that civil society can play in this context;
- gather civil society's solutions and demands for EU policy-makers in order to help depolarise Europe by strengthening societal cohesion and democratic participation in key areas for society.

In his opening speech, EESC president **Oliver Röpkke** stressed: 'Civil society must rise to the challenge. Participation, dialogue and solidarity are not just ideals – they are the foundation of a resilient and united Europe. As we gather for Civil Society Week, let us reaffirm our commitment to inclusion and active citizenship. A strong democracy depends not just on institutions, but on the engagement of all its people.'

Albena Azmanova, Professor of Political and Social Science at City St George's, University of London, talked in her keynote address about the growing economic insecurity faced by the majority of people – what she called an 'epidemic of precarity'. She explained why civil society holds the key to a breakthrough in times of massive insecurity.

'Massive economic insecurity has drained most people of the will to fight. Civil society has the will to fight. Civil society activists are driven by a sense of purpose defined by a specific grievance. They are the visible legs and arms of democracy,' she said.

As **Younous Omarjee**, Vice-President of the European Parliament, put it 'We need civil society as a glue between citizens, in this context of rising individualism, and as a rampart against the far-right ideas that are spreading.'

The crucial role of NGOs in social resilience and their support for vulnerable and remote groups was raised by **Adriana Porowska**, Minister for Civil Society, from the Polish EU Presidency, who also shared the Polish experience with civil society ensuring national resilience.

Brikena Xhomaqi, co-chair of the EESC Liaison Group with European civil society networks, stressed that unity in diversity, the EU's proud mantra, is cultivated at the grassroots level. However, Ms Xhomaqi mentioned that civil society organisations and NGOs are under attack, with their funding and role coming into question. 'Without resources, civil society organisations cannot function. We need the institutions to protect civil society; we need legal protection for the civic space to keep our society together and united in diversity.'



Slovak Debate Association wins EESC 15th Civil Society prize for combating harmful polarisation

The EESC flagship Civil Society Prize highlights the outstanding contribution of civil society to maintaining and strengthening European identity and citizenship. Each year, the prize takes a different theme of pressing societal importance related to the work of the EESC.

On 20 March, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) honoured three civil society organisations from Slovakia, Belgium and France, for their groundbreaking projects that tackle rising levels of harmful polarisation across the European Union.

The prize money of EUR 32 000 was shared among the three front-runners.

The EESC awarded the **top prize** of EUR 14 000 to the Slovak Debate Association for [The Critical Thinking Olympiad](#), a pioneering initiative that builds resilience to misinformation among Slovak youth. The project runs a student competition across three age groups, in which students take on real-world media challenges and assess content for its trustworthiness.

The two runners-up each received EUR 9 000.

France's [Reporters d'Espoirs](#) placed **second** with their *Prix Européen Jeunes Reporters d'Espoirs*, a French-language training scheme for solutions journalism.

The **third prize** went to [FEC Diversité asbl](#) in Belgium for their project "ESCAPE GAME EXTREME DROITE pour se désintoxiquer", an immersive game that counters far-right ideologies.

About the 15th EESC Civil Society Prize

The 15th EESC Civil Society Prize highlighted non-profit projects led by individuals, private companies and civil society organisations that helped combat harmful polarisation across the European Union.

In recent years, Europe has been struck by multiple crises, from Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine, rising energy prices and costs of living, and the continued economic and social aftermath from the COVID-19 pandemic. Such crises can erode trust in public institutions, and breed harmful polarisation throughout society.

While polarisation can be part of an open, pluralistic society, rising populism and negative polarisation represent significant challenges for European democracies. Europe also faces a continued fracturing of the traditional media landscape, rising misinformation and attacks on media freedom, all of which pose further threats to democratic values.

This year's winners were selected from a strong and diverse range of over 50 entries from 15 Member States. The winning projects were chosen for their extraordinary creativity, enthusiasm and dedication in

combating harmful polarisation in European society.

'Organised civil society plays a fundamental role in safeguarding European democracy, as has been proven yet again by this year's remarkable and wide-ranging projects' said EESC Vice-President for Communication **Aurel Laurențiu Plosceanu**.



Three years into Russia's war on Ukraine: Defining the EU's geopolitical future

As we mark the third anniversary of Russia's brutal and unprovoked war of aggression against Ukraine - an attack not just on a sovereign nation but on fundamental values of democracy, human dignity and the rules-based international order - we stand in solidarity with the Ukrainian people, EESC president Oliver Röpke said in a statement issued at the EESC plenary session in February.

Since the first day of this invasion, we have stood by Ukraine – not just symbolically, but with concrete action. Today, we reaffirm our unwavering commitment to supporting Ukraine's sovereignty, democracy and European future. We call on the EU to sustain and strengthen its political, economic, humanitarian and military support.

The Ukrainian people have demonstrated extraordinary courage and resilience in defending their country and the principles that bind us together as Europeans. Since the first day of this invasion, the EESC, its members and the European civil society it represents have stood by Ukraine - not only symbolically but with concrete action.

At a time of growing geopolitical uncertainty, recent statements by U.S. representatives questioning NATO's collective defence commitment are deeply alarming. Europe cannot afford to be complacent.

Ukraine is fighting not just for its survival but for the security of the entire European continent.

The EESC urges EU leaders to seize this moment to bolster European security and defence capabilities, redefine strategic autonomy, defend multilateralism and deepen cooperation with the United Nations, while forging stronger global partnerships with democratic allies beyond Europe.

Europe must act now.

Indecision is not an option. Autocrats and aggressors thrive on hesitation.

Democracies must stand united and firm.

The EESC calls on the EU to reinforce its strategic autonomy, defending both democracy and fundamental rights, and standing resolutely with Ukraine. The time for strategic geopolitical action by the EU is now.

You can read the full statement [here](#). (at)



Polish EU Presidency priority: strengthening European security and keeping Europe united

The main task of the current Polish Presidency of the Council of the European Union will be to keep Europe united, move forward and take rapid decisions

At the February plenary session, the European Economic and Social Committee held a debate on the Polish EU Presidency priorities with **Magdalena Sobkowiak-Czarnecka**, Polish Undersecretary of State for European Union Affairs.

Referring to the EU's external security and, in particular, to the war of aggression against Ukraine, Ms Sobkowiak-Czarnecka said: 'Our objective is to keep the help to Ukraine going and maintain unity inside the EU.' She mentioned the 16th package of sanctions against Russia as one of the initial achievements of the Polish Presidency.

EESC President **Oliver Röpke** stressed that Poland was taking over the rotating EU presidency at a time beset by difficult challenges such as geopolitical tensions and energy crises.

He added that 'today's debate has reaffirmed the critical importance of stability, resilience and unity in shaping the future of the European Union. The Polish Presidency's priorities align closely with our collective ambitions, particularly in fostering a multi-dimensional approach to security. At a time of global uncertainty, our commitment to decisive and cooperative action remains unwavering.'

Following the slogan 'Security, Europe!', the Polish EU Presidency will work on seven dimensions of security – external, internal, economic, food, energy, health and information.

In the past few past months, the [cooperation between the Committee and the Polish Presidency](#) has been strong and productive. The EESC has drawn up 15 [exploratory opinions](#), which have already been adopted or will be soon. (mp)



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[Bold investment and NATO collaboration are key to stepping up European defence](#)

Faced with rising security threats, Europe urgently needs a unified defence funding strategy. In response to a request from the upcoming Polish EU Presidency, the EESC has adopted an opinion calling for bold action: increased investment in modern systems, deepened NATO cooperation, and greater funding within the EU's financial framework.

Europe's security risks are growing, exposing its reliance on external defence suppliers – 78% of the EUR 75 billion spent by EU countries on defence procurement over one year went to non-EU suppliers. Strengthening the European defence technological and industrial base (EDTIB) is crucial to reducing this dependency.

‘The EU's defence funding mechanisms must be overhauled to meet contemporary challenges,’ explains rapporteur of the EESC opinion on

[Defence Funding in the EU](#), **Marcin Nowacki**. ‘Existing budgetary rules limit military spending, and while initiatives like the European Defence Fund (EDF) and the European Peace Facility (EPF) represent progress, they remain insufficient to address the scale of current threats.’

NATO cooperation is essential for interoperability and a unified strategy. Joint procurement, cyber and space security partnerships, and the IRIS2 satellite project will enhance resilience. Defence funding must align with broader EU priorities without compromising social and environmental goals. Strategic investment, innovation and long-term planning are key to ensuring Europe's security and autonomy. (tk)



[From words to action: EESC sets priorities to combat gender inequality and violence against women](#)

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) held a High-Level Forum on Women's Rights, which brought together leading voices to address pressing issues around women's rights and outline key priorities ahead of the upcoming UN Commission on the Status of Women session.

The message from the EESC High-Level Forum on Women's Rights was clear: progress has been made, but that is not enough. While the EU has taken steps to protect women and girls, structural forms of inequality, gender stereotypes and backlashes against women's rights continue to

threaten hard-won gains in Europe. As long as structural barriers persist, women's full participation in society will be limited.

The high-level forum, held on 26 February during the EESC's plenary session, brought together president of the EESC Ad hoc Group on Equality, **Sif Holst**, EESC president **Oliver Röpkke**, and the European Commissioner for Equality, Preparedness and Crisis Management, **Hadja Lahbib**, as well as **Carlien Scheele** (Director of the European Institute for Gender Equality), **Florence Raes** (Director of the UN Women Brussels Office), **Ayşe Yürekli** (EU Representative at KAGIDER – Women Entrepreneurs of Türkiye), **Mary Collins** (Secretary-General of the European Women's Lobby) and **Cianán Russell** (Senior Policy Officer at ILGA Europe).

The forum featured two dynamic panels addressing urgent gender equality challenges, each tied to key EESC opinions adopted during the session. Experts, advocates and policymakers came together to share insights, propose solutions and reinforce commitments to advancing women's rights in Europe and beyond.

The first panel focused on the upcoming 69th session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women (UNCSW69) while the second panel centred around violence against women and girls as a human rights issue. Two related opinions were also adopted in plenary following the forum: [EESC contribution to the EU's priorities at the UNCSW69](#) and [Violence against women as a human rights issue](#). (Im)



[EESC and AU ECOSOCC reaffirm commitment to gender equality at UN CSW69](#)

On the occasion of the 69th session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (CSW69) in New York, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) and the African Union Economic, Social and Cultural Council (AU ECOSOCC) reaffirmed their unwavering commitment to advancing gender equality and women's empowerment.

As the international community marks 30 years since the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action, the EESC and AU ECOSOCC acknowledge both the progress achieved and the ongoing challenges that continue to hinder full gender equality.

Their second [joint declaration](#) highlights key priorities, including increasing women's leadership through gender quotas, ending gender-based violence via international conventions, bridging the digital gender divide, and promoting women's economic empowerment.

The declaration urges stronger policies on unpaid care work, women's inclusion in peace efforts, and data-driven policy-making. It also emphasises global cooperation to dismantle systemic inequalities and uphold women's rights. The EESC also calls on the EU to combat gender-based violence, ensure gender parity, and

defend civil society's role in advancing equality.

EESC president **Oliver Röpké**, said: 'As we commemorate 30 years since the Beijing Declaration, we must turn words into action. Gender equality is not a privilege but a fundamental right, and its achievement is critical for sustainable and inclusive societies. The EESC stands firm in its commitment to breaking barriers, ensuring women's full participation in decision-making and fostering economic empowerment. Now is the time for governments, institutions and civil society to act decisively – there is no equality without accountability.'

The Commission on the Status of Women is the main international and intergovernmental body fighting for gender equality. This was the second time that the EESC took part in the UN's largest annual gathering on women's empowerment. (tk)



[Urgent action needed for an EU industrial strategy](#)

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) is urging the EU to implement a robust industrial strategy that enhances competitiveness, creates quality jobs and aligns with the Green Deal. To succeed, this strategy must be closely monitored and adapted to emerging challenges.

'Europe faces a serious risk of deindustrialisation. Industry and climate action must go hand in hand,' stated **Andrea Mone**, rapporteur for the EESC opinion on [The future of EU industry in the face of high energy prices and transition costs](#), adopted at its February plenary session.

In the opinion, the EESC stressed the need for a strong economic and regulatory framework to tackle high energy and raw material costs, investment challenges in the green transition, infrastructure gaps, skills shortages and weak internal demand. A competitiveness policy focused on investment and innovation is key to fostering social and territorial cohesion.

The EESC's call for urgent action comes amidst rising concerns for Europe's economic security and its external dependencies. In an era of such growing geopolitical and trade uncertainties, a resilient EU trade policy is necessary to safeguard industrial sustainability amidst asymmetric decarbonisation goals, global overcapacity, and rising trade tensions. Greater autonomy in securing critical raw materials is essential to achieving this goal.

Increased investment, as highlighted in the Draghi report, and governance reforms are crucial. A unified single market, particularly in energy, will strengthen the EU economy. Reducing regulatory burdens, refining electricity market frameworks and improving financial tools such as power purchase agreements will support industry transitions.

A just transition demands strong social dialogue and collective bargaining. Industrial policy must align with education and workforce strategies, emphasising research, innovation and skill-building. Investment in

energy infrastructure, renewable energy and circular economy initiatives will help achieve climate goals.

The EESC also adopted a supplementary opinion on [The future of EU energy-intensive industries \(EIIs\)](#), proposing tailored solutions to ensure their long-term sustainability. Addressing the specific challenges they face is vital for the EU's industrial future. (II)



EU needs fairer and simpler rules to stay competitive

Expanding across borders in the EU means navigating a maze of conflicting VAT rules and paperwork, driving up costs. Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) face disproportionate compliance burdens, making it harder to scale up and compete. The EESC calls for urgent reforms in two opinions adopted during its February plenary, building on the Letta and Draghi reports. Proposals include harmonised financial regulations, AI-driven reporting and a coordinated industrial policy.

‘The single market is the backbone of European economic prosperity, yet it remains incomplete in key sectors such as finance, energy and digital services,’ said EESC president **Oliver Röpke**. ‘Today’s debate highlights the urgent need for reforms to remove barriers and strengthen the services sector, ensuring a level playing field for businesses across the

EU.’

Maria Luís Albuquerque, Commissioner for Financial Services and the Savings and Investments Union, backed this call: ‘My vision for the Savings and Investment Union is to create wealth for our citizens and growth for our companies by bringing them together in a safe, competitive, well-regulated and well-supervised environment.’

The EESC’s opinions have identified two critical challenges to competitiveness: [fragmentation in the single market, highlighted in the Letta and Draghi reports](#) and [excessive bureaucracy that particularly burdens SMEs](#). Both of these factors stifle innovation and economic growth.

What’s the problem?

Businesses across Europe are overwhelmed by complex and overlapping regulations. This wastes time and money, slows down the Green Deal and restricts access to financing for mid-sized companies. It results in frustrated businesses, higher consumer costs and weaker economic growth.

Beyond regulatory burdens, Europe faces deeper structural challenges that undermine its competitiveness. Slow progress in completing the single market, disparities in digital and energy infrastructure and a lack of coordinated industrial policy are limiting the EU’s ability to compete globally. While other economic blocs

move swiftly to attract investment and foster innovation, Europe risks falling behind.

How can it be fixed?

Strengthening competitiveness requires a comprehensive approach, which includes removing barriers in key sectors like finance and energy, accelerating digital transformation and ensuring that SMEs can scale up and compete on a level playing field.

The EESC opinions propose:

- Simplifying regulations without lowering environmental and social standards.
- Creating a single AI-powered platform to streamline reporting for SMEs and mid-sized companies, making compliance faster and easier.
- Harmonising rules across sectors to cut down on repetitive paperwork.
- Standardising financial regulations across Member States with a coordinated EU industrial policy.
- Reforming the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) for a fairer, less burdensome system. (gb)



Is the Clean Industrial Deal fit for purpose?

On 6 March, the EESC hosted a debate on the European Commission's Clean Industrial Deal, just days ahead of the Council's 12 March discussions. Policymakers, industry leaders and civil society examined whether the plan can truly support Europe's clean-tech sector, energy-intensive industries and strategic autonomy.

With geopolitical instability and shifting transatlantic relations, Europe's need for strategic autonomy is more urgent than ever. The Clean Industrial Deal aims to accelerate decarbonisation and circularity, while boosting industrial competitiveness, starting from lowering energy prices. Questions remain over its feasibility and funding.

'The question is not to choose between strategic autonomy, competitiveness or the twin transition. All industrial sectors are concerned and must adapt, at their own pace but with clear commitments,' said **Pietro de Lotto**, President of the EESC's Consultative Commission on Industrial Change (CCMI), framing the challenge as a balancing act.

The Commission has emphasised the geopolitical necessity of becoming energy-independent from Russia, but Europe's industrial decline is a growing concern. Industrial output and foreign direct investment inflows have both dropped significantly in the past two years.

Funding will be a major challenge. Achieving the plan's objectives requires cooperation between EU institutions, Member States and industry. While the European Investment Bank has pledged €500 million in counter-guarantees and €1.5 billion to improve energy grids, national governments must mobilise additional resources.

The social impact of the transition is also a key issue, particularly in energy-intensive industries that have seen significant job losses. Civil society representatives questioned whether reducing energy taxes, a key proposal of the Deal, could come at the expense of education and healthcare funding.

Despite the optimism surrounding the Clean Industrial Deal's long-term goals, experts raised concerns about its ability to address short-term challenges. Speed and simplification are crucial, as high energy costs and regulatory barriers could slow down progress. Fragmented national policies remain a challenge, and the Clean Industrial Deal risks missing a crucial opportunity to align industrial policy across Europe.

Technological neutrality is also a concern, with debate over the right balance of renewables, hydrogen and biofuels. While the focus on renewables is welcomed, strong commitments to energy efficiency are needed. Renewables have already saved European consumers €100 billion between 2021 and 2023, a success the EU should build on. (jh)



EU farmers need urgent support to survive volatile markets

European farmers face mounting crises, from extreme weather to market instability and unfair competition. The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) warns that current EU policies fail to protect farmers and calls for urgent reforms to secure incomes, strengthen bargaining power and ensure sustainable agriculture.

In an [opinion](#) requested by the Polish EU Presidency, the EESC called for a more resilient agricultural system, with farmers at its core.

'Farming is a noble profession with two key objectives: produce top quality safe food to feed the people and maintain and enhance the environment. All we ask for in return is an honest day's pay for an honest day's work and respect and a fair price for the food we provide,' said **Joe**

Healy, one of the three rapporteurs of the opinion.

The common agricultural policy (CAP) is ill-equipped to handle today's challenges, according to the EESC. The financial tools it recommends to support farmers include public insurance for natural disasters, counter-cyclical aid and direct payments. Mutual funds, already used in some EU states, could provide an additional safety net, funded collectively by farmers, industry, regional governments and the EU.

With the CAP set for review after 2027, the EESC advocated restoring its budget to at least 0.5% of EU GDP. Stricter trade regulations are needed to ensure that imported products meet EU environmental and labour standards.

Another key concern is below-cost selling, a practice that puts farmers under extreme financial pressure. The EESC is urging EU policy-makers to seriously consider banning below-cost purchases to prevent large retailers from squeezing farmers out of business, using Spain's food chain laws as a model.

To improve transparency and farmers' market power, the EESC proposed an EU digital centre to monitor prices, costs and profits. It also advocated collective price negotiations and increased support for cooperatives and producer organisations. There is a need for greater economic independence and competitiveness across EU agriculture.

While climate goals are essential, farmers cannot bear the costs alone. A sustainability fund could help them transition to greener practices. The opinion warned of the risk of carbon leakage, where strict EU rules put local farmers at a disadvantage compared to non-EU competitors.

The EESC highlighted the importance of investment in rural development, innovation and simpler CAP rules. With farmers under increasing pressure, the urgency is clear: EU leaders must act before more farms disappear. (ks)



Strengthening resilience and competitiveness in the 2025 European Semester

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) has issued key recommendations on the 2025 European Semester - Autumn package, urging strategic investments and stronger cooperation to enhance the EU's resilience and competitiveness.

The EESC put forward its recommendations in an [opinion](#) adopted at its plenary session in February, placing the emphasis on sustainability, labour market reforms and better alignment between national and EU policies, while calling for greater civil society involvement.

The EESC regretted the absence of the Annual Sustainable Growth Survey, a crucial policy document. It highlighted the need for EU institutions to prepare for geopolitical risks affecting trade, inflation and growth.

The EESC threw its support behind the Competitiveness Compass initiative and called for investments in the energy and digital sectors, including a European Fund for Strategic Investments. Additionally, it called for stronger civil society participation, a pragmatic review of the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), and enhanced Member State cooperation to improve economic policies and productivity. (tk)



Modernising cohesion policy for a stronger, more resilient EU

Cohesion policy has long been a pillar of European integration, promoting economic, social and geographical unity across the EU. As the post-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) takes shape, it is essential to modernise cohesion policy to increase efficiency, sustainability and responsiveness to new challenges.

In its recently adopted opinion on [*Strengthening the results orientation of post-2027 cohesion policy*](#), the EESC stressed the need to take a results-oriented approach to ensure that cohesion policy continues to deliver tangible benefits while reducing inequalities and promoting sustainable competitiveness.

‘Cohesion policy must remain the EU’s key instrument for regional development. A results-oriented approach ensures that every euro spent contributes to economic and social well-being,’ said the rapporteur for the opinion, **David Sventek**.

The MFF 2028+ will need a major overhaul to support regional development, the green and digital transitions, and economic competitiveness. With investment needs exceeding EUR 750–800 billion annually, strong EU funding is essential.

The EESC calls for fiscal capacity to be maintained at 1.8% of EU GDP and for cohesion policy funding to be increased. Key priorities include shared governance, tailored regional policies, results-based funding, and simplified processes.

A results-driven approach enhances efficiency but requires better implementation and oversight. Balancing competitiveness with social investment, strengthening technical support, and ensuring transparency will make cohesion policy more impactful, fostering economic resilience and reducing disparities across Europe. (tk)



EESC calls for regenerative tourism to strengthen the economy and the environment

Tourism is a powerhouse for the EU economy and can strengthen Europe's competitiveness. It is time to rethink the way tourism works and move beyond sustainability towards regenerative tourism - where destinations don't just survive but thrive.

The **European Economic and Social Committee (EESC)** is urging the European Union to transform its tourism sector, emphasising sustainability and regeneration to ensure long-term economic and environmental benefits.

As tourism remains a vital pillar of the EU's economy, particularly in regions heavily reliant on the industry, the EESC is advocating an accelerated transition to sustainable tourism and a shift towards regenerative tourism strategies, as outlined in its opinion on [*Tourism in the EU: sustainability as a driver for long-term competitiveness*](#).

'We must ensure that tourism plays a role in reviving European competitiveness. This is essential, given that tourism is such an important part of the GDP of many Member States and regions, as well as their value chains,' said the rapporteur for the opinion, **Isabel Yglesias**.

Ms Yglesias said that the opinion built on the Palma Declaration, adopted during the Spanish Presidency of the Council in the second half of 2023, which had generated broad consensus on how to ensure that sustainability is at the heart of the future of tourism.

To achieve this, European institutions and national, regional and local governments must actively support the sector in its transitions, ensuring continuous dialogue with all relevant stakeholders and strengthening social dialogue.

While sustainability efforts in tourism have come a long way, the post-pandemic travel boom has been putting pressure on many popular destinations. This surge is making it harder for regions to balance economic growth with sustainable development, all while grappling with staff shortages and a mismatch between available jobs and workers' skills.

This is why the EESC is also calling for a move toward regenerative tourism, and for it to be included in the European Strategy for Sustainable Tourism, which the European Commission will present in the coming months.

Unlike traditional sustainable tourism, which focuses on reducing environmental harm, regenerative tourism aims to restore and enhance natural, social and economic capital. This forward-thinking approach integrates circular economy principles and seeks to leave a lasting positive impact on destinations and local communities. (II)



Generative AI and foundation models in the EU: Uptake, opportunities, challenges, and a way forward



New EESC Study on Generative AI: Strengthening Europe's AI Competitiveness

The EU stands at a critical crossroads in AI development. While U.S. companies dominate the generative AI (GenAI) market—capturing 80% of global private investment—China is advancing rapidly. To identify what is needed to ensure Europe remains competitive, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) has published a new study in collaboration with the [Centre for European Policy Studies \(CEPS\)](#).

Prepared under the umbrella of the EESC's Section for the Single Market, Production and Consumption (INT) and regularly discussed at the [EESC's Digital Single Market Observatory](#), the study explores the key opportunities, challenges and policy measures needed to augment Europe's AI landscape.

Key Recommendations for the EU:

Boost AI investment & computing power – Europe must increase investment in AI infrastructure to foster innovation.

Focus on three high-potential sectors – AI can drive growth in **the car industry, clean energy and education**.

Promote open-source AI – Encouraging open AI models will enhance accessibility and competition.

Better integrate R&D efforts across the EU.

Empowering Civil Society in AI Governance

The study highlights the importance of civil society organisations (CSOs) in shaping AI policies and governance. To enhance inclusivity and ethical AI adoption, the report recommends:

- **AI literacy programmes** – Training and social dialogue initiatives to empower workers and the public.
- **"Social by Design" approach** – Ensuring AI development is human-centred and aligned with society's needs.
- **Increased funding for CSOs** – Supporting non-profits that bridge the gap between AI technology and public understanding.
- **Ethical AI adoption** – Prioritising trustworthy AI systems that align with European values.

Harnessing the EESC's Potential in AI Policy

The EESC is well-positioned to facilitate structured CSO involvement in AI policy. The study recommends advocating open-source AI and promoting ethical innovation through public procurement and funding schemes, with the EESC serving as a central hub to collaborate with CSOs and open-source communities and raising awareness about AI's impact on society.

The study also introduces a **unified AI glossary** to establish a common language, ensuring effective communication among policy-makers, developers and users—crucial for responsible development, governance and deployment of AI across sectors.

This study will be shared with key EU institutions and is expected to feed into future AI policies. Read the full report [here](#). (vk)

NEWS FROM THE GROUPS



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A Closer Look at the EU Clean Industrial Deal: Urgency and Reform Needed

By Michal Pintér, delegate of the EESC's Consultative Commission on Industrial Change (CCMI)

The recently unveiled Clean Industrial Deal (CID) acknowledges the strategic importance of energy-intensive industries for the EU economy and correctly identifies their key challenges. While it includes noteworthy ideas like green lead markets, circular economy support and funding for decarbonisation, the measures lack the necessary urgency and boldness to reverse the decline of Europe's energy-intensive industries (EIIs).

In its recently adopted opinion [*The future of EU energy-intensive industries \(EIIs\) in the face of high energy prices and transition costs*](#), the **European Economic and Social Committee** recognised a significant competitiveness gap between EIIs in the EU and those of global competitors. The Commission has correctly named energy prices as the main culprit. However, the Deal and the Action Plan for Affordable Energy propose no reform of the electricity market design. Marginal pricing worked while the EU was benefitting from relatively cheap and stable piped gas from Russia. Unfortunately, the reality has changed, as we are now exposed to expensive and volatile LNG supplies, and likely will be for years to come. In spite of an increasing share of low-cost, fossil-free electricity in the EU energy mix, fossil fuel prices continue to set the tone for electricity price formation.

Policy efforts to increase renewable energy sources are welcome, but they do not lower electricity bills due to the current market design. Immediate measures are needed to transfer the cost benefits of renewable electricity to industries and assess all price mitigation options, including electricity price decoupling.

The Deal also recognises loopholes in the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (no export solution, resource shuffling and circumvention) and trade protection instruments. However, it tells us regrettably little about how the EU market will be protected, leaving EIIs unsure in a global trade war.

The EESC urges the EU institutions to implement decisive measures in sector-specific action plans, in order to prevent further deindustrialisation and maintain the EU's capacity for industrial transformation.



No defence without social investment

By the EESC Workers' Group

Defence and social expenditure should go hand in hand—the welfare state must not be sacrificed to boost defence spending. A strong welfare state remains a key tool in stopping far-right parties in their aspirations to replicate Kremlin-style autocracies in the EU.

As the fourth year of war in Ukraine begins, many voices are calling for increased defence expenditure, particularly after the political changes in the US. The protection of European countries no longer seems guaranteed. This has already broken many taboos, not only regarding discussions on military matters at EU level but also on increased indebtedness.

However, some of these voices have also framed it as a zero-sum trade-off with the welfare state—as if the strength of the US military were due to the country's lack of proper social protection, or as if our weakened armies were a result of pensions and social security.

From the Workers' Group, we want to highlight two issues:

- The EU as a whole is the second-largest military spender in the world. While in some cases common or additional expenditure may be needed, what is truly necessary is coordination and joint projects to ensure strategic autonomy. We need to defend ourselves, not compete globally with the US.
- A well-functioning welfare state, along with efforts to combat poverty and inequality, is a key tool in preventing a far-right takeover in many Member States. These far-right parties, which are on the rise, have little appetite for democracy, are openly hostile to most of our values, aspire to replicate the Kremlin's autocracy in our Member States and, if in power, will ensure that no coordinated defense policy can emerge.

Therefore, Member States must view defence and social investment as mutually reinforcing, each making the other possible.



Civil Society Organisations' Group calls for turning up the volume for civil society

By the EESC Civil Society Organisations' Group

The EESC must be involved from the outset in the European Commission's initiatives to step up engagement with civil society. The EESC's upcoming study on *Mapping civil dialogue practices in the EU institutions* can provide valuable input, according to the EESC's Civil Society Organisations' Group.

Following the start of the EU's new political cycle, and the announcement of an *EU strategy to support, protect and empower civil society* for the third quarter of 2025 in the [Commission Work Programme](#), the Civil

Society Organisations' Group held a [conference](#) to highlight key actions needed for the 2024-2029 term. The event on 3 March was attended by around 100 representatives from national and European civil society organisations (CSOs) and citizens.

Séamus Boland, the President of the Civil Society Organisations' Group, said that CSOs have a role to play in ensuring that policy-making is informed and responsive to people's needs. He reiterated the Group's and the Committee's call for the EESC to be involved in the Civil Society Platform planned by the Commission.

'The EESC, with its experience and the platform it provides, must be involved from the outset in the European Commission's initiatives to step up engagement with civil society. The EESC must take part in the governance and be a key part of the initiative on the creation of a Civil Society Platform,' Mr Boland maintained.

He argued that structured, regular, transparent and inclusive civil dialogue should be built on existing structures and bring together all relevant stakeholders. Consequently, the European institutions should create a working group on civil dialogue, facilitated by the EESC.

'A working group on civil dialogue could create a blueprint for a more enabling environment for civil society organisations in the policy-shaping process,' Mr Boland said. This could be a first step towards more structured civil dialogue and tackle the following questions: who is consulted, on which topics, along which timelines, with what outcomes?

The proposed working group could furthermore draw on the EESC's upcoming study of existing dialogue practices, entitled *Mapping civil dialogue practices in the EU institutions*.

The study was commissioned by the EESC at the request of the Civil Society Organisations' Group. Results are expected to be available as of July 2025. The study undertakes a comprehensive mapping of civil dialogue practices within the EU institutions: which processes of involving CSOs are currently being organised and using what kind of methodology? Knowledge on existing practices should inform and support the work towards more structured civil dialogue in the new legislative cycle. The preliminary findings of the study were already presented at the conference by **Berta Mizsei** from the Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS).

The conference also highlighted that the financial health of CSOs is a precondition for dialogue and connecting policy-makers with the needs of people. Their financial stability and independence must be guaranteed.

The [conclusions and recommendations](#) of the conference are available on the EESC website.

FOCUS ON YOUR EUROPE, YOUR SAY! (YEYS)



YEYS 2025: Active citizenship and fighting corruption are high on the youth agenda

The 2025 edition of ***Your Europe, Your Say! (YEYS)***, the European Economic and Social Committee's (EESC) annual youth event, took place on 13 and 14 March under the theme 'Giving youth a voice', focusing on the role of young people in collectively shaping a resilient future.

This year's event brought together nearly 100 young people from across the EU, the EU's nine candidate countries, and the UK. The participants represented youth organisations, national youth councils and secondary schools, highlighting the concerns of a wide range of groups. While many are experienced youth advocates, for others, this event marked an important first step in engaging with participatory democracy in their communities and beyond.

During several workshops, young people, guided by facilitators, identified the most pressing issues they believed political actors should address. These issues ranged from the fight against corruption to developing a coherent climate strategy and ensuring equal rights for all. As corruption erodes trust in institutions and weakens democracy, it is imperative to support investigative journalism and to improve transparency in the use of taxpayers' money.

'We must ensure accountability. We cannot afford to be bystanders because the cost of inaction is too high. We must fight it and win it,' one YEYSer said.

Young people also expressed the need for common goals in the fight against climate change, highlighting the need 'to enshrine an existence free from the adverse effects of climate change.' They called for a values-based curriculum design, which would positively impact online behavior and mitigate disinformation. The YEYS participants also advocated equal rights, treatment and opportunities, in addition to inclusion for everyone in all spaces. Regarding the lack of youth representation in political decision-making processes, they stressed that a democracy requires all voices to be heard.

The one-and-a-half-day event culminated in the closing youth plenary, where a committed and engaged crowd presented their recommendations to EESC president **Oliver Röpke** and EU youth coordinator **Biliana Sirakova**. Following a vote, YEYSers ranked five focus points in order of importance.

- (1) Fighting corruption through transparency and youth participation.
- (2) Active citizenship: from classroom to community.
- (3) IN for equality.
- (4) Youth deserves a seat.
- (5) Developing a coherent climate change strategy.

President Röpke stressed that these recommendations could shape the EESC's advisory work, highlighting gender equality as a key priority for the Committee. Ms Sirakova noted that these recommendations would also help inform the work of the EU. (cpwb)



Encourage to Empower

By Kristýna Bulvasová

In a precarious world where long-standing beliefs are crumbling, and previously shared values no longer unite but divide us, young people must be given opportunities to engage meaningfully here and now to address the many pressing issues that continue to grow before our eyes. The YEYS 2025 discussions clearly showed that there is no one topic that can be called the 'youth topic' and that young people are rightfully concerned about many different problems - ranging from fighting corruption and promoting equality to tackling climate change, writes Czech student and YEYS participant Kristýna Bulvasová who represented YEYS at the EESC's Civil Society Week.

How many times have I, as a young Gen Z person, heard the words 'your generation is facing unprecedented issues', or 'it's up to your leadership to help solve the current challenges'. The stakes are high, but so are the challenges we face: unprecedented democratic backsliding, polarisation of our societies over matters that have previously been 'shared values', the destabilisation of long-standing beliefs and systems, along with increasing precariousness.

The high expectations place demands not only on young people but also on underfunded civil society organisations and their crucial role in guiding youth values, as well as on educational systems. Formal education should have the power to equip young people with the skills and tools they need to become the problem-solvers and leaders of today and tomorrow. I am afraid that many education systems are too rigid to stand up to the 21st century, with schools failing to offer education on climate change or comprehensive health matters – be it mental or reproductive. They also lack state-of-the-art-technology and proper access

for vulnerable groups.

Even the question of who is considered vulnerable has become politicised – or worse, weaponised – placing additional strain on those who can least afford it and should not be left behind.

Our societies no longer agree on what vulnerability means or how to recognise it, something I experienced first-hand while leading a workshop at a school near the Czech-Slovak border, where I addressed the gender pay gap and other gender-related inequalities. Students and teachers reacted with utter disbelief, outright rejecting the idea that any inequalities exist in our society. This makes me believe that we need more discussions and capacity-building on existing vulnerabilities and inequality, regardless of age group.

Equal access to education and opportunities for youth – including disadvantaged women and girls, people with disabilities, young people with migration backgrounds – continues to be an elusive dream. If our shared goal is to provide young people with a strong foundation to fulfil their potential and dreams, we need to start taking action. Proposing a solution is not simple, but strengthening EU Member States' ties with civil societies – especially those in informal education – could help bridge gaps once a thorough geographical and social assessment identifies the most vulnerable areas. The subsequent reskilling of teachers and all youth workers in community-building practice might provide a framework for some of the targeted and systematic solutions.

Civil society has taken on the role of encouraging active civic participation, but youth engagement in decision-making and democratic governance remains low. There is a clear gap between young people's aspirations and the spaces and opportunities available to achieve them. Elections alone are not delivering the desired results, as fighting against political cultures and disinformation in some countries remains challenging. However, not voting does not mean lacking an opinion or issues to address. To encourage active citizenship, young people need not just positive experiences of democratic action but tangible results – without youthwashing, tokenism or selectiveness. I remain hopeful that EU Member States will be able to create these spaces and maybe move past the point where young people have to wait to be given opportunities to meaningfully engage and co-create. But this must not happen in three, five or 10 years. Change must happen now to prevent societal divides from widening further.

At YEYS 2025, I had the pleasure of participating in the drafting of one recommendation related particularly to climate change as I personally believe the triple planetary crisis is one of the biggest challenges for humanity. Development of a coherent climate change strategy for the EU was one of the five YEYS recommendations, alongside fighting corruption through transparency and youth participation, active citizenship, equality and the idea that 'youth deserves a seat'. Since it made the list of commonly endorsed recommendations, it is clear that young YEYSers see it as a crucial challenge to address. However, this reflects the perspective of an already somewhat empowered group of young people and cannot be considered representative of all EU Member States. Some might have thought that this particular recommendation would be the most important for the YEYS 2025 participants, yet it ranked last in the final vote. Let this serve as a reminder that there is no one topic that can be called the 'youth topic'. Young people are rightfully concerned about all current issues and the youth agenda is inherently broad and intersectional.

Some young people recognise the importance of environmental protection and sustainability, while others cannot afford to prioritise it as they are struggling to meet their basic needs. I have mentioned the triple planetary crisis as one of humanity's major challenges, but when we consider the need to address all major issues at once for effective solutions, the picture changes. The current geopolitical context and the EU's fight

for global competitiveness are diverting attention and slowing down transition processes. But at the end of the day, neither we nor future generations have a planet to B to solve these issues on, and we can no longer afford to exceed planetary boundaries.

Returning to the high stakes, young people in all their diversity should still be able to embrace their youth with all its privileges, challenges and beauty. However, a recent UN report shows a clear decline in life satisfaction and happiness among young adults over the past decade. Even with the serious challenges we face, I firmly believe that if we can inspire young people through tangible results from their actions, we stand a fair chance of addressing pressing issues and improving quality of life for all.

Kristýna Bulvasová is a member of the European Sustainable Development Youth Network. She has served as a Youth Delegate to the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe and as a Czech UN Youth Delegate. A former spokesperson of the Czech-German Youth Forum, she remains actively engaged in strengthening Czech-German cooperation. A youth activist focused on future-oriented education and sustainability, Kristýna currently leads the Czech NGO MOB – Young Citizens while completing her studies at Charles University in Prague and the University of Regensburg. Apart from taking an active part in YEYS, Kristýna was also a speaker at the EESC's Civil Society Week during the session on [Foresight for inclusive just transition and green-blue growth](#). As a YEYS representative, she will also address the EESC plenary in March.



Young Moldovans at YEYS 2025: building a generation that sees beyond limitations

Young Moldovan Mădălina-Mihaela Antoci was one of the representatives of EU candidate countries at this year's EESC annual youth event [Your Europe Your Say! \(YEYS\)](#). She also took part in the EESC's [Civil Society Week](#) where she delivered an inspiring speech during the opening panel *Still united in diversity*. President of Erasmus Student Network Moldova and a board member of the country's National Youth Council, Mădălina-Mihaela shared what the EU means for young Moldovans and told us about her mission to encourage young people from her country to study abroad and embrace a global mindset.

Is the National Youth Council of Moldova engaging young people in discussions about EU integration? How do young Moldovans perceive the EU?

Absolutely! The National Youth Council of Moldova ensures that young voices are heard in Moldova's EU integration process through consultations, advocacy campaigns and direct engagement with policymakers. For many young Moldovans, the EU represents progress, new horizons, and a future where their talents are recognised and valued. However, there are still gaps in awareness, and that's where we step in – turning curiosity into active participation.

We are organising forums, debates and workshops on EU integration, policy and youth rights.
We are calling for youth inclusion in national decision-making processes.
We are launching campaigns to inform and educate young Moldovans about the benefits of EU membership.

Could you briefly introduce your work with the Erasmus Student Network (ESN) Moldova?

As President of ESN Moldova, I'm on a mission to connect young people to life-changing international opportunities. Our team works to promote mobility, create a welcoming environment for exchange students, and advocate international education. One of my key initiatives is *Erasmus in Schools*, where we inspire high school students to dream beyond borders and embrace a global mindset.

Could you share any figures on how many Moldovan students have benefited from the Erasmus+ academic programme so far, either in total or annually?

Right now, Moldova does not host incoming Erasmus+ students, but our young people are making waves abroad! Every year, between 500 and 700 Moldovan students study or do traineeships in top European institutions through Erasmus+. Since the programme's launch, thousands have gained international experience, bringing back innovation, leadership and a fresh perspective. Through *Erasmus in Schools*, I strive to make mobility a reality for even more young Moldovans, proving that the world is theirs to explore.

In your view, what is the value of such academic exchange programmes for young people in a candidate country like Moldova?

Erasmus+ is not just a study programme – it's a launchpad for Moldova's future. It gives young people more than an education; it gives them adaptability, resilience and a European perspective. In a candidate country like Moldova, it's about building a generation that sees beyond limitations, that innovates, collaborates, and is ready to lead our country into the European future.

What were your expectations for YEYS and Civil Society Week?

I expected powerful discussions, bold ideas and real commitments to youth inclusion in policymaking. These events are more than just meetings – they are platforms where young change-makers challenge the status quo and push for a stronger, more inclusive Europe. For Moldova, this is another step toward bridging the gap between the local reality on the ground and European ambitions, proving that our young people are not waiting for the future – we are creating it.

Mădălina Mihaela Antoci is a 21-year-old youth leader passionate about education, civic engagement and youth empowerment. She currently serves as the President of Erasmus Student Network Moldova and is a board member of the National Youth Council of Moldova.

A tireless advocate of the Erasmus+ academic programme, she has achieved remarkable success in encouraging young people to explore international opportunities while also emphasising the value of education at home. Through her efforts, she has inspired hundreds of students to engage in academic mobility and contribute actively to their local communities.



Ukrainian youth is truly powerful

Your Europe, Your Say! 2025 (YEYS) brought together around 90 students from the EU, candidate countries and the UK. Valeriia Makarenko came all the way from war-torn Kharkiv in Ukraine to represent her country at the event. She told us why participating in YEYS was very important for young Ukrainians and shared her hopes that her generation, shaped by resilience and unity forged during the war, would lead Ukraine towards a brighter future.

Why do you think it's important for young people to attend EU events such as *Your Europe, Your Say*?

I believe that attending EU events like *Your Europe, Your Say!* is crucial for young people because it gives them a platform to voice their opinions, engage in meaningful discussions and actively shape the future of Europe. These events provide truly priceless opportunities to learn about

decision-making processes, develop leadership skills and connect with peers from different countries. As for young Ukrainians, participation is even more significant as it allows us to share our authentic experiences, advocate Ukraine's European integration and foster solidarity among European youth.

How do you think the war has impacted young people in Ukraine?

Without a doubt, the full-scale war has significantly changed the lives of young people in Ukraine, affecting their education, mental health and overall sense of security. For instance, many have had to adapt to studying online or relocating, often in unstable conditions. However, the war has also fostered resilience – young Ukrainians have become not only symbols of power and strength, but also more engaged in volunteering, activism and rebuilding efforts, such as urban planning projects. Despite the difficulties, we remain determined to protect our identity and contribute to our country's future.

What are your hopes for the future of young people in Ukraine?

For sure, the question of the future is complicated for almost every Ukrainian teen. My community and I hope that all young people in Ukraine will have access to quality education, opportunities for professional growth and a secure future within a strong, independent Ukraine. I also hope that the international community continues to support Ukraine in rebuilding so that young people can thrive rather than just survive. Ukrainian youth is truly powerful, so it's inspiring to see more and more young people participating in various projects in education, science, infrastructure restoration and other fields. Most importantly, I hope that our generation, shaped by resilience and unity, will lead Ukraine towards a brighter, more innovative and democratic future.

Your final thoughts on the event ?

I was really inspired. Even by chatting, listening and analysing what other participants were saying, I can tell that, yes, it's a really powerful scene, and just by uniting, we can show what we're really capable of. For example, some projects that we did really helped us to understand other countries better. I heard so many facts about different countries that I hadn't heard before. I'm delighted, I was proud to be there.

Valeriia Makarenko is a 16-year-old student from Kharkiv, Ukraine. She attends the 10th grade at Kharkiv Lyceum #99.



[My YEYS 2025 experience – Young people can make a difference!](#)

Seventeen-year-old student Adam Mokhtari was one of Ireland's representatives at [Your Europe, Your Say! \(YEYS\)](#). He later presented the YEYS recommendations at EESC's Civil Society Week where he spoke in a session titled *Charting Europe's course - Reconnecting polarised societies through community learning and citizenship education*. Adam describes what he liked about YEYS and shares his personal story to highlight why he wants a Europe where everyone feels included.

By Adam Mokhtari

Hi, my name is Adam Mokhtari, and I had an amazing experience representing Ireland at *Your Europe, Your Say! (YEYS) 2025*. Around 90 young people from across Europe came together to share ideas and

shape the future.

One of my favourite parts was working in groups to discuss important issues and make decisions. I also really enjoyed the activity where we took turns being a listener, speaker and observer, discussing what Europe meant for each of us personally. Each of us had seven minutes to speak—it made sure everyone's voice was heard.

At the end, we agreed on **five key recommendations**. They are to make governments more transparent and include young people, teach active citizenship in schools, ensure equality for all, give young people a real say in politics and create a strong climate action plan.

I was honoured to represent all YEYS participants at EESC Civil Society Week, sharing our recommendations with policymakers. It showed me that young voices matter!

The power of education

Education plays a huge role in helping young people get involved in democracy. It teaches us how to think critically, spot fake news, and take action. Without my school's support, I wouldn't have had this opportunity. Now, I want to encourage others to get involved too.

At YEYS, EESC President **Oliver Röpké** and the EU Youth Coordinator **Biliana Sirakova** listened to our ideas and encouraged us to keep pushing for change.

My story & why inclusion matters

I was born in Ireland, but my parents moved here in the late 90s. When they arrived, they experienced love and respect from the Irish people. My mum and dad told me that during that period, there was very little diversity in Ireland. Despite this, my parents thrived in the 90s.

I am Irish and I am European. I have Algerian heritage. Sometimes, I have felt different from others, but most of the time I feel like everyone else. I have learned a lot from different cultures, and I think that's what makes life better. If we were all the same, it would be boring. It's all about being open to differences and understanding of others.

Unfortunately, some migrants and young people today face discrimination, hate and unfair treatment, which can be encouraged by social media. It needs to change. It makes me unhappy to see this. Some immigrants in Ireland now have a bad time, living on the streets, and they are seen as a problem. It's not easy and it is so sad.

I've been lucky to attend schools where everyone feels included, but not all young people have that experience. We need to make sure all young people feel accepted and that they belong, so they don't feel left out or disconnected from society.

Building a better future

To make Ireland and the European Union more inclusive, we need better education about different cultures and what the EU does for us. This will help with understanding and improve inclusion.

We need community events to bring people together and interact in a positive way with each other. More young people need to be involved in decisions at a local level, even in youth clubs, sports clubs or school or at EU level. This will make them feel included in the things that are important to them. Show young people how to get involved.

We need support from the EU to make inclusion a priority. It was great to hear that inclusion was a priority for the EESC.

What I want for Europe

Many young people don't know much about what the EU does for them. The EU should do more to help us get involved in politics and voting.

I want a Europe that is united, fair and welcoming—where everyone feels included, no matter their background.

YEYS showed me that young people can make a difference. Even if our ideas aren't all accepted right away, at least they're being heard. As an Irish young person with Algerian heritage, I feel that my voice matters—and I want others to have the same opportunity.

Education can help bring people together, fight discrimination, and give young people a voice. I'll be taking this experience back home and encouraging others to get involved. The future is in our hands! It is our Europe and we have a say!

Adam Mokhtari is a 17-year-old student from Ireland. He attends Bremore Educate Together Secondary School in Balbriggan near Dublin. Passionate about the EU and about making societies more inclusive and successful, Adam took part in YEYS 2025 and was a YEYS representative at this year's Civil Society Week.



Events like YEYS show Ukrainians that Europe has not forgotten about them

Under daily bombardments, when their main goal is to stay alive, young Ukrainians cannot afford to think about the distant future, says 18-year-old Yevheniia Senyk, YEYS 2025 participant and youth activist from Ukraine. She shares how the war has affected youth organisations in her country and why it is important to give them a voice on the European stage.

How do you think your organisation has been impacted in the last three years by the war in Ukraine, and how have your operations changed?

Formed in 2013, the goal of SD Platform is to protect values such as freedom, solidarity, equality and justice because we believe that these are the most important values to create a progressive future in

Ukraine. We also have a lot of foreign branches to maintain the engagement of Ukrainian youth abroad who have been forced to leave their homes.

First of all, the war has impacted the work of the regional branches because we have a lot of branches, for example, Odessa and Zaporizhzhia, that are very close to the front-line areas and the people there experience bomb shelling every day. It's hard for them to think about organising events when their main goal is just to stay alive. Daily bomb shelling affects youth all over the country because you can't afford to think about the distant future, because you don't know what will happen tomorrow or even what will happen in two hours.

Also, because of the war, the financial situation in Ukraine is unstable, resulting in a lack of employment for young people. Young people must find a job while also trying to study and to be involved in youth organisations, it's a difficult balance to achieve.

After the full-scale invasion, many young people started to fight against Russian aggression with weapons in their hands instead of through youth councils or youth organisations. As a result, young people do not have political experience. It will be hard in the future to make sure that everyone is able to participate in politics properly.

At SD Platform, we provide free, non-formal, political education to make sure that young people know how they can influence politics at regional and national levels.

Why do you think it's important for youth organisations or representatives of these organisations to come to events such as YEYS?

First of all, these international events show Ukrainians that Europe has not forgotten about us. It's important for us to be here, to have a voice, to ask others about their experiences and to bring new ideas back to our country.

Also, it shows that we are able, and we are committed to becoming part of the European Union because if we are here, then European youth can listen to us and we can listen to them. It's like a partnership between all of us.

What do you think young people need as support, as help, to encourage them to stay involved in youth work and youth activism?

I think it's very important for the European Union to consult with Ukrainian youth. I think if the European Union continues to provide us with these opportunities to have a voice in shaping EU policy, we will reach common conclusions that will be beneficial for both sides because we are part of Europe, so it must be a common conclusion in all policy areas. Also, if the European Union continues to provide financial support to Ukrainian youth to participate in events such as this one, it will encourage them to stay engaged in politics as the financial burden will not pose such a big barrier to participation.

***Yevheniia Senyk** is a youth activist with SD Platform, a member organisation of the National Youth Council of Ukraine. She is an international relations student at Lviv Polytechnic National University.*



Engaging youth should go beyond just ticking a box

Never before have we had such an educated generation with so much potential, yet also under so much pressure and facing so many doubts about what lies ahead, says youth expert and keynote speaker at YEYS 2025, Bruno António. He talked to EESC Info about how to amplify the voices of young people and why, at a time when discrimination and xenophobia are on the rise in Europe, it is crucial for future EU youth programmes to continue teaching them about the importance of democracy.

Are young people today passive or active in political and community life? In what ways can young people be more engaged in policymaking?

Different studies show that young people care and actively participate. If we define political engagement as being aware of critical societal issues, it is evident that young people are taking action to drive change. What's particularly interesting is how they choose to engage. Traditional ways of participation include voting, volunteering in NGOs or joining the youth wings of political parties. Today, these seem to be less popular among young people, who prefer to influence public policymaking by signing petitions or by participating in protests and other innovative ways. At [DYPALL Network](#), we explore these engagement tools, which include consultancies, participation in local youth councils, and other local youth dialogue mechanisms. We see strong interest among young people to participate, but most mainstream mechanisms remain neither youth-friendly nor truly meaningful.

Recent European election results and national polls show that many young people have voted for right-wing parties. Why do you think this is so and do you see this as a worrying trend that

could jeopardise European values such as equality and inclusion?

The rise in right-wing votes among young people is a worrying trend. We believe it stems from dissatisfaction with mainstream politics, a deep distrust of political institutions, a desire for a strong national identity, and fears about economic and social security. We have to be able to understand the root causes of these alarming voting tendencies. This generation has grown up in a time of constant crises and uncertainty about their future. Never before have we had such an educated generation with so much potential, yet also under so much pressure and facing so many doubts about what lies ahead. Social media algorithms amplify polarising content, shaping perspectives.

All this creates uncertainty about the future. Voting for populist parties may be both a form of protest and of general dissatisfaction on the one hand. But on the other, it can also reflect the desire for a strong voice in power that brings a sense of security. However, history has shown that when such populist right-wing parties gain power, young people often lose their hope and feel betrayed. Often this is too late when they realise that rights, freedoms and other important values to them are being taken away or put in question.

This trend is already jeopardising our European values, we can see this not only in political discourse but also in the daily lives of people in our communities, where acts of xenophobia or discrimination towards those who are different are becoming normalised. Therefore, it is essential that future EU youth programmes continue to support young people in understanding the importance of democracy, learning about it and experiencing it, while also helping them to develop the skills needed to build resilience against the threats posed by anti-democratic movements.

How aware are young Europeans of what the EU does for them? How can they be encouraged to take a greater interest in the EU? How would you assess the EU's communication efforts?

We can easily say that young people's awareness of what the EU does for them is definitely higher than in older generations. Youth programmes such as Erasmus+, ESC, and DiscoverEU contribute to building this sense of belonging to a European identity, and they should be reinforced and made available to all young people in Europe.

But are they truly aware of what Europe does for them? In our opinion, no. The EU's ability to demonstrate its impact on society —especially on young people—still needs to be more visible and better understood. The decisions made by EU institutions have a huge impact, and this should push young people to take a greater interest in EU affairs. How? Two ideas come to mind: EU institutions need to send an eye-opening message that what is decided at the EU level directly affects their lives. Also, they should expand programmes that offer young people more opportunities to learn about, experience and discover the EU. This can increase a sense of belonging, empathy, connection and friendship among Europeans.

Despite an enormous effort undertaken by different EU institutions to reach out to citizens, and despite significant improvements in various campaigns and tools, we cannot say that they are enough. In practice, they are often far from the realities of young people.

While the EU has made strides in social media presence and youth-targeted campaigns, its messaging still lacks relatability, especially for the diverse young people in our societies. The EU's communication efforts need further development and structuring by incorporating new outreach methods, such as hiring youth NGOs as ambassadors of young people's voices, developing decentralised platforms for outreach, and structuring storytelling campaigns that connect EU policies to relatable everyday experiences. In this context, it is essential to experiment with new communication approaches and to have young people directly involved in creating and implementing campaigns and other communication efforts.

How can we amplify the voices of young people?

By taking them seriously and recognising their value. Institutions have the power and capacity to amplify young people's voices, but what is sometimes missing is the willingness to provide the space, support, opportunities and tools to engage them meaningfully. Youth participation should not be treated as a checklist: inviting young people to public events, taking pictures for social media, and then neglecting their contributions. Youth participation needs to be impactful, meaning young people need to see the results of their engagement and the changes that follow.

Amplifying young voices requires institutional support, such as youth representation in decision-making bodies. It also requires building trust, which takes time, quality spaces and processes to work together. For this to happen, proper funding must be allocated, and institutions need the capacity to work better and engage young people in decision-making. This demands investment, genuine commitment and time.

Bruno António is Executive Director at DYPALL Network, a European platform of civil society organisations, local authorities, and research institutions for promoting youth participation in local decision-making. For the past 12 years, Bruno has been working as a youth expert and external consultant for several institutions, such as the European Commission and the Council of Europe. He previously served as Secretary-General of Youth for Exchange and Understanding, as well as Executive Director at ECOS – Cooperativa de Educação, Cooperação e Desenvolvimento. He has a degree in Social Education from the University of the Algarve in Faro, Portugal.

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