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EDITORIAL

Water: the invisible crisis that can no longer be ignored



EDITORIAL

Across Europe and around the world, water is becoming a defining issue of our time. Droughts, pollution, overuse and ageing infrastructure are placing our societies under mounting pressure. Yet despite the evidence, water still does not receive the strategic attention it so urgently needs.

The European Economic and Social Committee was the first EU institution to identify this gap, and responded with a call for an EU Blue Deal. Water is not simply an environmental concern. It is a cross-cutting issue that affects the economy, public health, agriculture, energy and long-term security. If water fails, all other systems will follow.

Since the launch of the EU Blue Deal, we have seen some encouraging movement. The European Commission is now preparing a water resilience strategy, and for the first time in history, we have a Commissioner for water policy. These are steps in the right direction, but the scale of the challenge demands much more.

Across the EU, vast volumes of water are still lost every day due to leaky and outdated networks. Many Member States lack the investments needed to modernise their infrastructure, and several key economic sectors – including many industries, agriculture and the energy sector – remain unprepared for a future defined by scarcity and volatility.

This is why we are calling for a Blue Transition Fund. It would serve as a unified financing mechanism to support the full range of water-related needs, upgrading infrastructure and ensuring access to water for all, deploying new technologies, boosting innovation, reskilling workers and helping regions and industries adapt. Water resilience must be a shared European priority, backed by serious, long-term investments, starting with the next multiannual EU budget.

Effective coordination is essential. No Member State can face this alone. Water crosses borders, and so too must our policies. We need stronger collaboration between the national, regional and EU levels, informed by civil society and based on clear, common objectives. Moreover, we urge the Commission to ensure that water considerations are integrated into all EU policies in a coherent manner. This view is also shared by the European Parliament, who, echoing our EU Blue Deal recommendations, calls on the EU to mainstream the water dimension into EU internal and external policies to ensure long-term water resilience, sustainability and security.

The EESC is also contributing to global discussions on the topic. Ahead of the UN Ocean Conference in Nice, we are working to highlight the interdependence between freshwater and marine ecosystems. These must no longer be addressed in isolation. The science is clear, and our governance models must catch up. We will also contribute to the 2026 UN Water Conference, where we expect the EU to lead with its new vision for water resilience, and with the strong involvement of employers, workers and civil society to ensure the success of the strategy on the ground.

Water is the foundation of everything we value: life, stability and prosperity. To ignore it is to gamble with the future. Europe must lead, and it must lead now.

Oliver Röpke

EESC President

DIARY DATES

23-24 June 2025

2025 Euromed Summit of Economic and Social Councils and similar Institutions (Istanbul, Türkiye)

24 June 2025

ESG Conference 2025

25 June 2025

From trade to water: civil society's soft diplomacies

2 July 2025

Building green and inclusive – Making our communities future-proof (Copenhagen, Denmark)

16-17 July 2025

EESC plenary session



THE SURPRISE GUEST

An integrated, well-funded EU approach to forced displacement is not an act of philanthropy – it is an investment in Europe's own future. With complex crises unfolding at its borders, Europe will need to come up with a bold and strategic response. As talks on the next EU budget begin, the choices made in the next multiannual financial framework (MFF) will shape the Union's ability to manage its borders humanely, safeguard its internal cohesion and be a partner of choice for third countries, writes our surprise guest Jean-Nicolas Beuze, the UNHCR country representative to the EU.

Jean-Nicolas Beuze *is the UNHCR country representative to the EU, Belgium, Ireland, Luxembourg, The Netherlands and Portugal, having previously served as country representative in Iraq, Yemen and Canada.*

He has over 27 years of experience working for the UN in the field and at the headquarters in the areas of human rights, peacekeeping and child protection.



STRATEGIC AID, NOT CHARITY: WHY EUROPE'S FUTURE STARTS BEYOND ITS BORDERS

By Jean-Nicolas Beuze

From the Sahel to Syria, from Gaza to Ukraine, the European Union is encircled by crises that continue to drive mass displacement. These are not distant emergencies and protracted crises – they are Europe's front yard. For EU policymakers, the takeaway is clear: delivering aid to find solutions for populations on the move and investing in regions facing extreme fragility risks is not just a moral duty, it is a strategic imperative. And the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) must reflect that.

No less than 26 countries affected by these crises surrounding Europe are currently under acute strain – grappling with war, economic collapse, climate shocks and other aspects of fragility. Nearly half the world's refugees live in or near these conflict and volatile zones. Nationals from these countries now account for one-third of asylum claims in the EU – and that's without counting the 4.3 million Ukrainian refugees already residing in the Union.

Migration pressures are growing, and Europe's response must evolve. The projected drop in global official development assistance – from €200 billion in 2024 to under €150 billion by 2026 – is, in this respect, a short-sighted decision. While security and business competitiveness rightly receive increased budgets, underinvesting in stability and resilience beyond EU borders is a political gamble Europe cannot afford. While some argue that assisting displaced communities and their hosts is a matter of values and solidarity, it is also fundamentally about Europe's long-term stability and prosperity.

Managing population movements must begin long before people reach European borders. Deterrence at borders – whether through fences or legal hurdles – does not stop those fleeing bombs, persecution or desperation. If Europe wants migration that is orderly, predictable and manageable, it must engage upstream – addressing root causes such as poverty and armed violence; supporting and protecting internally displaced persons in their own country before they feel forced to cross a border; and, finding solutions for refugees in countries immediately neighbouring these hot spots.

This is not about idealism; it is about realpolitik. Aid policy should serve the Union's geopolitical goals – reducing instability, strengthening economic and trade partnerships – and ultimately, preserving EU credibility on the global stage. Being a thought leader for which solidarity still means something, while ensuring benefits for its own people, is what sets it apart from other nations.

The EU's swift and well-funded response to the war in Ukraine and the mass displacement it triggered – both internally and across its border – showed that the Union has learned key lessons from the 2015 Syria crisis. But the current scale, proximity and complexity of the belt of crises now unfolding around Europe demand an equally strategic and sustained response. Mounting security concerns and economic pressures make this even more urgent. EU Member States must meet the moment by equipping the Union with the necessary financial means to deliver on its ambitious but unavoidable goals. That begins with agreeing to an overall budget that exceeds the current 1% of Gross National Income (GNI), so that the EU can act decisively and sustainably in response to today's realities.

This is why calculated, forward-looking decisions on the next MFF are so critical. UNHCR recommends concrete measures to ensure that investment to address forcible displacement is fully aligned with EU priorities:

- Secure a minimum of €2.3 billion annually for humanitarian aid so that when crises emerge, one can immediately respond and stop the suffering.
- Ring-fence at least 10% of the next international partnerships instrument for displacement and migration to stabilise people on the move closer to their home, especially in Mediterranean countries, before people feel forced to embark on dangerous journeys across the sea.

This is not only about spending more, but about spending with foresight – allocating resources in ways that reduce downstream costs of having to deal with a power vacuum, missed economic investment opportunities and increased populations on the move.

With adequate resources, third countries that host displaced people will meet their needs – offering solutions pending a return home. External aid geared towards refugees has often been an opportunity to develop public services and to create jobs for underserved local populations in host countries. Europe's whole-of-route approach requires investments as early as possible – in countries of origin and of transit. The goal is not just to reduce movements for the sake of it, but to find durable solutions for those on the move. This will directly serve European interests of curbing irregular – or what most refer to as illegal – arrivals at its border. But it will also reduce the risk of people to fall prey to traffickers or embark on perilous journeys.

An integrated, well-resourced EU approach to forced displacement is not about philanthropy, it is about making an investment for Europe's own future. When crises go unaddressed, they do not 'just' create human suffering. They destabilise regions and undermine trade and other partnerships. Having people compelled to move to Europe for their own safety are foreseeable outcomes of us having neglected situations earlier on.

At UNHCR, we have embraced the EU's current pivot toward making aid more transactional and mobilising private capital for development through the Global Gateway initiative. We have long recognised that public finance must be used to mobilise private capital in providing sustainable responses to forced displacement. The Global Gateway can be transformative if displaced people and host communities are built into its design, not added as an afterthought.

The international system is evolving, and the housekeeping starts at home. With the Humanitarian Reset and UN80 on the horizon, we have a real opportunity to reform how aid is delivered against its promise – making it more efficient and effective at the same time. The EU is right to push for more accountability and

better results. But without proper financial support, we will for sure fail on both counts.

The choices made in the next MFF will shape the Union's ability to manage its borders humanely, safeguard its internal cohesion and be a partner of choice for third countries. External aid must remain a strategic priority. It is the foundation for a more stable and prosperous Europe.

UNHCR's latest recommendations for the next MFF are available here.

TO THE POINT

Disruptions in international trade networks contribute to the ongoing cost-of-living crisis affecting millions across Europe. Dimitris Dimitriadis, rapporteur of the opinion *Fragmentation of supply chains and impact on the cost of living*, lists the efforts that should be made to repair the broken supply flow. The opinion is part of a broader package of EESC opinions that collectively address multiple facets of the cost-of-living crisis, offering comprehensive recommendations to European policymakers and civil society.

FROM SHELVES TO WALLETS: DISRUPTED SUPPLY CHAINS ARE HITTING EUROPE'S LIVING COSTS

By Dimitris Dimitriadis

The fragmentation of global supply chains directly impacts businesses and households through escalating costs and growing economic uncertainty.

Fragmented supply chains directly raise costs through increased tariffs, logistical disruptions and limited access to essential raw materials and intermediate goods. These issues affect sectors crucial for daily life, including pharmaceuticals, electronics and food production. Consumers ultimately bear these additional expenses, facing reduced purchasing power and restricted access to vital products. Moreover, these disruptions disproportionately affect lower-income households, exacerbating economic inequalities and social vulnerabilities across Europe.

It is essential to diversify supply chains to enhance economic resilience and maintain open trade channels. We must forge deeper economic partnerships with diverse global partners, particularly those aligned with Europe's commitment to sustainable and equitable trade practices. Strengthening such relationships will reduce Europe's vulnerability to single-source dependencies and external economic shocks.

Technological innovation must be the engine and the goal of all these efforts. Investing in advanced digital solutions, such as artificial intelligence and blockchain, can optimise supply chain efficiency, improve transparency and reduce operational costs. These technologies not only facilitate smoother trade operations but also bolster the competitive position of European industries globally.

Pursuing these objectives does not and must not mean renouncing sustainability. Aligning supply-chain strategies with sustainability objectives, such as supporting the circular economy and promoting local production networks, can further enhance long-term resilience and reduce environmental and social impacts.

Finally, regulatory simplification is essential. We need clear, effective rules that maintain robust protections for consumers, workers and the environment, and also enable European businesses, especially SMEs, to adapt swiftly and remain competitive amid global disruptions.



ONE QUESTION TO

How can the EU ensure that its industrial strategy brings tangible benefits for both businesses and citizens? EESC member Andres Barceló Delgado, rapporteur of the opinion on reindustralising Europe, gives the answers.

EUROPEAN INDUSTRY IS BACK

By Andres Barceló Delgado

While industry never planned to leave Europe, the reality is that since the 2024 European elections, EU institutions have come to a clear conclusion: without a strong industry, Europe cannot secure strategic autonomy or achieve the essential competitiveness of its economy. A strong industrial base is imperative not only for quality jobs for Europeans, but also for progress, innovation and high-value-added services.

In response to the cost-of-living crisis, the EESC has launched an initiative – an 'umbrella opinion' – addressing the crisis across different policy areas and offering targeted recommendations to EU and national policymakers. As part of this, the EESC's Commission for the Study of Industrial Change (CCMI) has zeroed in on reindustrialisation as a key approach for helping to counter the impact of the cost-of-living crisis on European citizens and businesses.

Our opinion on the ***Reindustrialisation of Europe – opportunity for businesses, employees and citizens in the context of the cost-of-living crisis***, set to be adopted at the EESC plenary in June, highlights the vital role that reindustrialisation must play in improving the situations of individuals and companies across Europe.

The main conclusions of the opinion are as follows.

While we welcome the Commission's initiative to launch a 'competitiveness compass', we call for the inclusion of clear benchmarks and performance indicators to ensure that these efforts don't just exist on paper, but are brought to life.

In the field of energy (which currently acts as a disincentive to European industry and the broader economy), we call for rapid measures, both short- and long-term, to ensure secure, stable and predictable energy at prices that allow businesses to be competitive and that do not burden households.

Strategic autonomy must be at the heart of the reindustrialisation process and must benefit not only the companies directly involved, but also the entire value chain. European industry is facing a shortage of skilled workers, which is why we call for reduced red tape and streamlined EU legislation for granting work permits. We do not want to 'import' cheap labour, but rather attract skilled workers who will enrich European society.

The aim of industrial policy must be to restore the EU's attractiveness and make it once again a favourable environment for industrial investment, leveraging legal certainty, the skills of its workers and, of course, the benefits of the single market.

Social dialogue must be fully integrated into the reindustrialisation process, as it affects not only large companies, but SMEs as well, which make up the vast majority of European businesses.

There is one issue, however, that is particularly sensitive in some social and political groups: simplifying bureaucracy. In the words of the president of the EESC Employers' Group, **Stefano Mallia**, 'simplification does not mean deregulation. It is not about dismantling the Green Deal or essential social safeguards ... It is about removing bureaucracy that benefits no one.'

As always, the devil is in the details; but far from being discouraged, we must deepen the reindustrialisation process, which will involve investment across the entire chain, from public investment in infrastructure to business investment in industry, promoting high-quality jobs, encouraging lifelong professional retraining, maintaining the social standards that are at the heart of the EU *acquis*, and promoting business innovation as a means of continuous improvement and the development of high-value-added services.

This is no easy task, but I firmly believe that a strong industry, established throughout the EU, can be one of the main drivers for improving the competitive position of the European economy and substantially improving the situations of Europeans and their families.

EESC NEWS


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Silence is not consent

By Andrey Gnyot

On 18 June, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) is holding a plenary debate with Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, leader of the Belarusian democratic forces. The debate will also welcome Belarusian filmmaker, activist and journalist Andrey Gnyot, who has lived in exile since 2023 following his arrest in Serbia, where he spent a year in extradition detention. We bring you Mr Gnyot's personal testimony about the climate of fear and repression in Belarus and his ongoing struggle to obtain international protection in the EU.

'We talk on the phone, for example on WhatsApp or Viber, but we never mention him by name. We speak in vague terms. My mother says, "That's enough, child, later, later, don't." Everyone speaks like that. Even when you leave the country, when you talk about him (meaning Lukashenko – author's note) *or about what's going on, you whisper. Subconsciously, you lower your tone – God forbid someone should hear you.'*

Maria (*I was forced to change her name for safety reasons*) spoke to me in a quiet voice. That's how everyone who stayed in Belarus speaks nowadays. It is the only way to survive, a reflex that has become automatic. It is fuelled by a total, paralysing fear. Maria was arrested for the second time in her life in December 2024, right at the border, when she was returning home to Belarus from the EU. She simply wanted to see me. We met only once, in a typical loud German beer hall, so that we could disappear into the drunk, cheerful crowd, among beer and pork knuckles. That was enough for KGB officers to remove Maria from the bus at the border and accuse her of extremism. On her phone, they discovered a subscription to an Instagram channel labelled 'extremist' by the regime – a subscription that appeared there from who knows where. Maria was sent behind bars. She was very lucky – she spent only one day in a cold cell without food, water or bedding. A judge from a small provincial town did not want to spoil his Christmas and New Year dealing with such a dubious case and released her before the 15-day term had expired. A deep sense of guilt settled in me, although I know that it is Lukashenko and his regime who are to blame.

'I clearly remember a person, a girl, when I was taken at the border. They also took her phone – she was led away for interrogation, and we sat in the back seat with her mother, talking. And when they didn't return my documents or my phone, when I realised that they were going to take me, I asked... I said, please, you know, they probably won't let me go. I said, could you give me your phone, so I can call my mum? And she said: "I don't need any trouble." And that was it. That is, a person who had also been through the same interrogations – that was her reaction.

Now it's simply our mad ability to survive under the most horrific conditions, just like in the past we survived and endured the Nazis on our territory. That is exactly how we live now, as if he has occupied our country and we just need to lie low and hide, to pretend that we do not exist. To go out and protest... We have more prisons than theatres. It will simply be one more place in a cell – occupied by you.'

I was in prison, and I know: there are no protests in prison. A protest in prison is a riot. A riot will be suppressed, with blood and victims; no one and nothing will get beyond the prison fence. The inmates will be returned to their places, the rioters will be punished in the harshest way. Another fence will appear in the prison, more guards will be added, and next time they will shoot to kill right away. The prison governor will never shut down their own prison or release the innocent. That can only be done by a third force, from

beyond the prison fence. Belarus in 2025 is an occupied territory, a prison-concentration camp with external governance and external funding. Can prisoners protest openly there?

'You know, when we went out to protest, we could tell by the eyes who was one of us, right? And that still exists. That is, you understand who you can talk to and who you can't. But we haven't surrendered. We have gone underground. We simply do not know what to do. We are just surviving now. We are just breathing. As if the body has temporarily shut down its vital functions.

But it is very important for us to know what's happening over there (in Europe – author's note). We follow, we watch. A voice from the "mainland" is very important to us. So that we are not forgotten. Because here we are cut off from the whole world. We feel as if we live on another planet. We try, we scream with a voiceless cry. So that we are heard, so that we are helped. Because the regime no longer considers us human. We feel that inaction will come back as a great misfortune for everyone. And not only for us.'

I met Maria in Berlin after a year spent under arrest in Serbia. We hadn't seen each other in 15 years, and we might never have met again if I had been extradited. I lost my health, my family, my successful career, but not hope – I stayed alive, and that means I can continue to fight for the freedom of my country. That was the main feeling I had when I found myself free on 31 October 2024.

I admit, my struggle has not stopped for a single day. 'The status of an asylum seeker (and the "Geneva passport") would constitute a completely different legal track to the one including the Section 22.2 visa and it is thus legally and structurally not possible to combine them,' stated the official letter from the German Foreign Ministry. When I received this e-mail on 17 January 2025, it was like a cold shower. Three days later, I applied for international protection in Warsaw, and a few months later I received a notification that the Polish authorities had made a preliminary decision, 'which may not meet my expectations' (*quote*). Lawyers warned me with concern that if I were deported to Germany under the Dublin Regulation – and that is exactly what was discussed in the letter from the authorities – it was highly likely I would be placed in a refugee camp for up to two years. Another official notification, received by mail at the end of May 2025, stated that my case would be under review for up to 15 months.

On 4 March 2025, Belarusian emigrant Stanislav Brykin died by suicide in the Pabradė refugee camp in Lithuania after being deported from Germany under the Dublin Regulation, according to an article published by NGO Human Rights Without Frontiers. Such news keeps me awake at night, although that may also be a result of my acquired traumas – clinical depression and PTSD. I cannot get rid of them; neither the circumstances nor the limitations of 'refugee' medical insurance allow it. I could solve this problem quickly and by myself, but since October 2023 I have been deprived of a source of income. Even now, the law prohibits me from working. In Warsaw, I have no family, no loved ones, no friends. A modest one-room apartment on the outskirts of Minsk in occupied Belarus would barely cover my debts, but it is subject to a ban on sales anyway; all of us Belarusians are hostages of the regime.

Yesterday I received my allowance (about EUR 170), which is paid once a month to migrants like me. This morning, I paid almost EUR 100 in fees at the Belgian embassy.

I found myself free on 31 October 2024. Since then, every day I try to understand what that means.



Don’t let Big Tech rewrite EU law: the EU must stay the course on ground-breaking tech regulation

To safeguard its democratic and social model based on freedom, equality and inclusion, the EU must resist attempts to water down its pioneering legislation regulating digital space.

With growing pressure from parts of the tech industry to dilute hard-won regulatory advances, EU leaders and civil society are calling for unity to protect Europe’s democratic values and digital sovereignty, as highlighted by the speakers at the debate on *Democracy and Digitalisation* held during the EESC plenary session on 29 April.

The debate came days after the EU fined Apple EUR 500 million and Meta EUR 200 million for breaching the EU’s digital rules – the first penalties issued under the Digital Markets Act (DMA), which regulates how tech giants operate in the EU market. Together with the Digital Services Act (DSA) and Artificial Intelligence (AI) Act, the DMA forms a digital rulebook shaping the EU’s tech governance.

‘The EU’s leadership in the digital domain is more crucial than ever – especially at a time when parts of the tech industry are beginning to push back against regulatory efforts,’ said EESC **President Oliver Röpke.** ‘The DSA and DMA have the potential to become historic milestones – provided that the EU, Member States, civil society and the business community remain committed to their robust implementation.'

‘With transparency and rules in the digital space, we aim to prevent the interests and profits of a few from prevailing over the public interest,’ said MEP **Brando Benifei**, co-rapporteur on the AI Act.

The discriminatory potential of AI is well documented. **Iverna McGowan,** from the Office of the UN Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights, pointed out that there have been cases where algorithmic decision-making unfairly penalised people, such as candidates being downgraded due to maternity leave.

Udbar Tiwari, Vice-President for Strategy and Global Affairs at the Signal Foundation, warned against regulatory loopholes that weaken encryption. Encryption remains under threat from global legislative developments – such as client-side scanning – which could turn personal devices into surveillance tools.

The speakers concluded that, if used responsibly, digital technologies can create enormous opportunities. Left unchecked, they can cause lasting damage to democracy and the EU’s core values. (ll)



EU can turn geopolitical challenges into new opportunities

Europe must strive to invest in its defence and security while also preserving its social model. Financial trade-offs might be needed due to geopolitical challenges that require us to rethink

European priorities. The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) can facilitate honest social dialogue on the EU's new needs.

The EESC's April plenary session addressed EU foreign policy in view of the new geopolitical climate and complex and growing threats for Europe. In this context, the EESC is stepping in as a partner grounded in social and democratic dialogue.

EESC President **Oliver Röpke** stressed: 'The EESC will continue to ensure that citizens' concerns shape concrete policies that protect our social model and reinforce Europe's role on the global stage. Europe must take greater responsibility for its own security and defence in a rapidly changing world.'

The debate incorporated input from the EESC's ad hoc group on the new geopolitical order, which was represented by **Elena Calistru**, **Winand Quaedvlieg** and **Sophia Reisecker**. The group's paper reflects on the cost of maintaining Europe's strategic autonomy, which is imperative for strengthening the EU's resilience.

The debate highlighted the fact that these new geopolitical challenges could lead to new opportunities and beneficial cooperation among EU Member States. The Chair of the European Parliament's Committee on Security and Defence, **Marie-Agnes Strack-Zimmermann**, stressed how important it was for Member States to work together on joint defence procurement.

Iratxe García Pérez, head of the European Parliament's Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats, warned against negotiating on EU values and encouraged European citizens to defend truth and the rule of law.

In his statement, **Fabian Zuleeg**, Chief Executive and Chief Economist at the European Policy Centre, cautioned against 'falling into the progress illusion', explaining that Europe had not done enough to prevent a future war, including 'Russian boots in the Baltic states'. To address this, **Pierre Haroche**, Associate Researcher of Defence at the Jacques Delors Institute, called for new defence coordination in Europe, as 'we have no NATO to defend Ukraine'. (at)



The EESC urges a fairer, more resilient cohesion policy in talks with Commission Vice-President Fitto

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) has adopted an opinion on the European Commission's mid-term review of cohesion policy 2021-2027. In a debate with Commission Vice-President Raffaele Fitto, the EESC stressed that, while the EU must adapt to new priorities, cohesion policy must continue to focus on reducing regional inequalities.

Cohesion policy, the EU's main tool for promoting economic, social and territorial unity, is being reassessed to address major changes across Europe.

‘Cohesion policy has been vital in responding to both long-term structural challenges and urgent crises’, said EESC President **Oliver Röpke**, ‘but as we adapt to new priorities, we must keep its core mission at the forefront: supporting the most vulnerable regions and reducing inequalities. This is not just a question of solidarity, but of strengthening the Union’s long-term social and economic fabric’.

‘With the proposal on the mid-term review package, we are giving Member States and regions the opportunity to invest in new, specific areas – a voluntary choice that introduces flexibility without compromising the core principles of cohesion policy’, added Commission Vice-President **Fitto**.

The EESC supports aligning cohesion policy with new priorities – such as competitiveness, defence, housing, energy and water resilience – but insists these should enhance, not replace, the focus on solidarity.

A key concern is how to finance these ambitions. ‘Without a reformed and reliable funding model, the Union could find itself ill-equipped to respond to future crises or to invest adequately in long-term priorities’, explained EESC rapporteur **David Sventek**.

The EESC recommends:

- keeping cohesion’s core mission of reducing inequalities
- using a balanced mix of grants and financial tools
- ensuring fair access to funding, especially for disadvantaged regions
- coordinating the review with the EU’s overall budget
- reforming the funding system to make it more stable
- prioritising climate, digitalisation and infrastructure investment

As the EU looks beyond 2027, the EESC calls for a fair, flexible and future-ready cohesion policy for all regions. (tk)



EESC kicks off work on Cost-of-Living Crisis Package

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) has launched work on a major package of recommendations to tackle the cost-of-living crisis, starting with four new opinions adopted at its April plenary session. This is the first block in a series of eight opinions focused on a specific aspect of the crisis — from economic fallout to social cohesion, employment, sustainability, and more.

The goal? To propose a coordinated, cross-cutting strategy that goes beyond short-term fixes and helps build real, lasting resilience across the EU. The process will conclude in July 2025 with an umbrella opinion summarising all of the proposals in one policy message.

First set of recommendations:

- The opinion ‘Measures for a resilient, cohesive and inclusive European economy’ calls for a shift from crisis response to long-term resilience, urging coordinated EU action to address inflation’s lasting impact, especially on vulnerable groups. Key proposals include a resilience monitoring system, investment in infrastructure and skills, stronger labour standards and aligning competitiveness with social and environmental goals.
- The opinion ‘Phasing out fossil fuel subsidies while ensuring European competitiveness’ urges a socially fair phase-out of fossil fuel subsidies, starting with the most harmful. It calls for clear EU guidance, better reporting and strong job protection. The opinion also recommends ending support for new fossil fuel infrastructure, revising tax and State aid rules, and boosting clean energy investment and international cooperation.
- The opinion ‘How single market dysfunctionalities contribute to the rising cost of living’ pushes for action to address dysfunctions in the single market that drive up prices. It targets barriers and advocates for stronger enforcement of EU law, completion of the Capital Markets Union, better labour mobility, improved infrastructure and access to healthcare. Housing market rules should also be assessed for their impact on affordability.
- The opinion ‘Price hikes in transport, energy and housing: the role of quality public services in tackling the high cost of living ’ underscores the importance of services of general interest in easing crisis impacts. It calls for greater public investment in social infrastructure, housing and transport; reform of State aid rules; and the repurposing of fossil fuel subsidies to fund greener solutions. It stresses the need for decisive action against energy and transport poverty, and calls for faster progress on renewables, grid expansion and permitting. (tk)



EU budget – The next Multiannual Financial Framework should be strong and ambitious to deliver European public goods

At its April plenary session, the EESC adopted the opinion *The road to the next Multiannual Financial Framework* in which that would provide the EU with the financial resources needed to achieve its political priorities.

In the opinion,drawn up by **Elena-Alexandra Calistru, Konstantinos Diamantouros** and **Stefano Palmieri**, the Committee stresses that the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) must be strong and ambitious, and must be seen as an investment in delivering EU priorities and European public goods.

More specifically, the EESC is in favour of a significant, real-term increase in the MFF in order to address the huge challenges facing the EU. This means that the mechanism for adjusting the MFF in line with inflation, which has traditionally capped the annual increase in contributions to the budget at 2%, should change in order to preserve the real spending power of the MFF.

Speaking during the plenary debate, EESC president **Oliver Röpke** said that ‘In times of transition and uncertainty, Europe needs a future-proof budget that empowers us to act, protect and transform. We need an MFF that is an investment tool for European public goods. We need to mobilise investment to foster our green, blue, digital and social transitions’.

He continued by pointing out that ‘Simplification and accessibility of EU funding is crucial. The next MFF must streamline funding instruments, harmonise rules and reduce bureaucracy to deliver real results on the ground’. (mp)



EU Green Week 2025 closes with a clear message: circularity must drive Europe’s future

EU Green Week 2025 wrapped up on 5 June following three days of focused debate, practical case studies and policy discussion that placed the circular economy at the core of Europe's environmental agenda. From biodiversity and climate resilience to construction and bioeconomy innovation, the sessions made it clear: circularity is not a side strategy — it is the direction Europe must take.

The European Circular Economy Stakeholder Platform (ECESP) — a joint initiative by the European Commission and the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) – played a key role in shaping the week’s discussions, acting as both organiser and host of several sessions that brought together public authorities, civil society, business and research. One of the week’s central themes was how to translate circular principles into structural change, something ECESP continues to facilitate across sectors and regions.

Two of the leading voices behind this shift were EESC members **Peter Schmidt** and **Cillian Lohan**, long-standing drivers of the circular agenda within the EU institutions.

‘Circularity is a policy, anxiety is not,’ said Mr Schmidt, calling for stronger political will. ‘Circular businesses cannot compete with fossil-based industries on their own. If we are serious, we have to change the market rules.’

He pointed to the need for the EU to ban unsustainable products outright and make planetary boundaries the basis for economic decision-making, not profit margins. ‘This is about fairness too,’ Schmidt added. ‘The circular transition must bring people together — it cannot leave communities behind.’

Mr Lohan emphasised the need for system-level solutions. ‘We need structural reform, not more pressure on consumers,’ he said. ‘Real sustainability is only possible when it is built into the system, not when it depends on individual action.’

From vision to practice

At EU Green Week, participants explored how to advance circularity across key sectors. Sessions covered topics such as reducing primary resource extraction to ease pressure on ecosystems and help meet climate targets. It was stressed that circular thinking should be mainstreamed into climate and land-use policies.

Projects in the bioeconomy showed promising innovations — such as turning human waste into fertiliser — but they are often stalled by regulatory hurdles.

Across all discussions, one message stood out: the EU has the tools and ideas — what is needed now is coherence, investment and the courage to scale up.

ECESP calls for new leadership

Looking ahead, the ECESP is preparing for its next phase. During Green Week, the platform launched a call for applications to form its next coordination group, which will begin a two-and-a-half-year mandate in October 2025.

Applications can be submitted until 17:00 CEST on 30 June 2025. (ks)



Communities play a key role in the fight against disinformation

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) held a conference underscoring the importance of community engagement in the fight against disinformation. By fostering media literacy, encouraging critical thinking, promoting active communication and leveraging AI as an ally, societies can become resilient to false information and toxic propaganda.

The conference *Citizens can defeat disinformation* held in Lisbon on 22 May 2025 was the fourth in the EESC's ongoing project to combat disinformation with the help of civil society. It was organised in cooperation with the Portuguese Economic and Social Council and with the support of the European Commission Representation and the European Parliament Office in Lisbon.

Stressing the crucial role of citizens in this fight, EESC president **Oliver Röpke** said: 'To counter disinformation, we must empower citizens and civil society, not only as watchdogs, but also as active participants in democratic resilience.'

As disinformation plays with emotions, it is important to pause and distance oneself before engaging. Participants noted that when something speaks to the audience's heart, it is important to question the intention and source of the information. Only by not engaging can we reduce the visibility and virality of this content.

As reiterated by the president of the Portuguese Economic and Social Council, Luís Pais Antunes, not only are misinformation and a lack of information challenges for our modern societies, but so too is an excess of information.

The conference signalled the importance of joining forces, stressing that only by acting together, engaging civil society in a systematic way, putting forward action plans for media literacy and ensuring robust legislation can disinformation be defeated, giving way to trustful, fact-based information.

‘Media literacy needs to be taught in schools. This is where the state plays a key role. Democracy means credibility,’ said **Aimilios Perdikaris**, chair of the Board and General Manager at Athens Macedonian News Agency.

‘Democracy cannot survive without free information and without free, impartial and critical media,’ said **Carlos Abreau Amorim**, Portugal’s Deputy Minister for Parliamentary Affairs, adding that the Portuguese government would strengthen journalistic ethics, since ‘a lack of credibility in journalism is the greatest ally of disinformation.’

Referring to AI as a massive challenge in the fight against disinformation, **Niko Efstathiou**, journalist fellow at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism in Oxford, said that AI can create convincing, deepfake news to spread campaigns to the most vulnerable populations. However, AI can also be incredibly useful in scanning through content, so as to detect misinformation in real time. (at)



10th Western Balkans Civil Society Forum: Accelerating socio-economic convergence with the EU for a better life

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) held its 10th Western Balkans Civil Society Forum in Budva, Montenegro, gathering over 100 participants to discuss how to accelerate socio-economic convergence with the EU to improve living standards across the region.

The two-day forum, held on 13–14 May, was organised with the support of the European Commission, the Open Society Foundation-Western Balkans (OSF-WB), the Western Balkans Fund (WBF) and the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC). Hosted in Montenegro, the event aimed to reinforce the country’s ambition to become the next EU Member State by 2028 and to serve as a model for the rest of the region.

Nik Gjeloshaj, Deputy Prime Minister of Montenegro for Economic Policy and Minister for Economic Development, said: ‘We are confident that we will be able to close two chapters at the intergovernmental conference during the Polish presidency in June, and that additional chapters will be ready for closure by the end of this year.’

Oliver Röpke, President of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), underlined: ‘This forum sends a strong signal – the future of the Western Balkans lies in the European Union, and civil society must be at the heart of that journey. The European Economic and Social Committee will continue to stand firmly beside our partners in the region, every step of the way.'

Amer Kapetanović, Secretary-General of the Regional Cooperation Council, stressed: ‘Regional cooperation is no longer a nice-to-have, it’s a need-to-do. The Common Regional Market is coming into focus, with the potential to accelerate convergence and unlock up to 10% GDP growth through practical reforms and solutions. More than 500 civil society organisations have been directly involved in shaping it, because meaningful change only happens when people are part of the process.’

Andi Dobrushi, Regional Director of the Open Society Foundations – Western Balkans, explained: 'This Forum is about more than policy – it is about the people whose relentless work has carried the region forward through decades of transformation. At OSF-WB, we support a broad range of actors who bring both grassroots legitimacy and policy insights to the table.'

H.E. Johann Sattler, Head of the Delegation of the European Union to Montenegro, said: 'Together, we can ensure that this once-in-a-generation opportunity for the Western Balkans is not missed.' (at)



Serbian students complete 2 000 km ultramarathon to Brussels, welcomed by EESC Vice-President

On 12 May 2025 a group of Serbian students arrived in Brussels after completing an 18-day, 2 000-kilometre relay ultramarathon from Serbia to Belgium. Their journey, dubbed 'From My Village to Brussels' (#trkadobrisela), aimed to raise awareness about democratic backsliding and corruption in Serbia. Their initiative has garnered international attention, highlighting the role of young people in campaigning for democratic reform.

On 13 May, the students were hosted at the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) by the Vice-President for Communication **Laurenţiu Plosceanu**. In his welcome speech, the Vice-President commended their dedication to democratic values and civic engagement. (at)



EESC marks Pride Week, champions LGBTIQ rights

Discrimination is far from over for Europe's LGBTIQ community. While there are significant variations across Member States, 37% of all LGBTIQ respondents to a recent EU-wide survey felt discriminated against due to their identity. Despite gradual progress on equality-related issues over the years, there is still much work to be done.

The EESC is at the forefront of such efforts. It has actively supported the European Commission's LGBTIQ Equality Strategy 2020-2025, which aims to reduce discrimination and ensure the safety and fundamental rights of LGBTIQ individuals throughout the EU. Even before the strategy was issued, in 2012 the EESC called for the extension of the Equal Treatment and Employment Directive to protect transgender, non-binary, intersex and queer people against discrimination in the workplace and beyond.

The Committee adopted an opinion on the strategy in 2021, urging Member States to develop and execute national action plans. Furthermore, under the umbrella of the strategy, the Committee has adopted a series of related opinions in defence of LGBTIQ rights including:

- **No place for hate: a Europe united against hatred (2024)** – in the opinion, the EESC recommends increased support for civil society organisations (CSOs), improved coordination to combat disinformation, and inclusion of hate speech and hate crime in the EU crime list. It also calls for a network of national law enforcement contact points and full implementation of the 2008 Framework Decision on racism and xenophobia.
- **Measures to fight stigma against HIV (2023)** – The EESC proposes awareness campaigns, workplace equality for people with HIV and better access to pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP). It emphasises the role of community-led organisations in prevention and accountability.
- **Initiative to extend the list of EU crimes to all forms of hate crime and hate speech (2022)** – The EESC advocates a unified EU legislative framework, consistent definitions across Member States and stronger roles for CSOs. It also highlights the need for law enforcement training, targeted public space actions and collaboration with social media platforms to combat online hate.

The full list of opinions related to the LGBTIQ Equality Strategy 2020-2025 is available here.

The EESC has set up an Ad hoc Group on Equality (AHGE or Equality Group), which has been in place since 2020, tasked with promoting a cross-cutting culture of equality within the Committee, including all aspects of this principle. It also regularly organises hearings, conferences and forums to discuss and promote LGBTIQ rights. (lm)



Europe Day 2025: A Celebration to Remember

Held on Saturday 10 May 2025, the EU Open Day at the EESC was a celebration of 75 years of peace and cooperation in Europe, inspired by the visionary Schuman Declaration.

Thousands of visitors from around the world came to learn about the EESC's role in shaping EU policy. Visitors had the opportunity to explore stands hosted by the EESC's three groups, six sections and the CCMI. Volunteers and members engaged directly with guests, answering questions and explaining the Committee's work. Speed voting sessions and a simulated plenary meeting, including interpretation and electronic voting, offered an immersive look at EU-level decision-making.

There were many other fun activities too! From digital quizzes and a wheel of fortune to live music, a caricaturist and a kids' corner with hat-making and face painting, there was something for everyone. Our photo booth and EU-themed postcard station were also a hit.

The EU Open Day 2025 at the EESC was a true celebration of unity, bringing together people from around the world to mark this special milestone.

Click here to see photos from the EU Open Day 2025.

Click here to see the video from the EU Open Day 2025.

Celebrating 75 Years of Unity: Europe Day 2025 at the EESC | EESC

#EuropeDay (ps)



EESC at Brussels 20 km

The Brussels 20 km race is one of the city's most anticipated annual events, uniting people of all ages and abilities. In its 45th edition, this event showcased the vibrant diversity of Brussels as thousands came together to challenge themselves and celebrate healthy living.

On 25 May 2025, a record-breaking 48 928 participants from 80 countries and of 140 nationalities took part in the race. Joggers, walkers and athletes with disabilities covered the 20-kilometre route through central Brussels, with a nearly equal gender split.

EESC Vice-President **Laurențiu Plosceanu** gave the starting signal to the crowd, which included Belgian Queen Mathilde. The EESC has maintained a strong presence at the race since 2018, with its vice-president representing the Committee each year.

Patrick Nimubona from Burundi won the men's race, finishing in 59 minutes and 26 seconds. Britain's **Naomi Taschimowitz** was the fastest woman, completing the course in 1 hour and 9 minutes.

The 46th edition of the Brussels 20 km race is scheduled for Sunday 31 May 2026. (ehp)



Film Soirée: Animal, a LUX Audience Award nominee, comes to the EESC

On Thursday 19 June 2025, the EESC will host a screening of *Animal,* a contender for the 2025 LUX European Audience Film Award.

Directed by **Sofia Exarchou**, this powerful drama is a Greek, Austrian, Romanian, Cypriot and Bulgarian co-production that has captivated audiences and critics alike. *Animal* has received international acclaim, including awards at prestigious festivals such as Locarno and Sarajevo, for its raw portrayal of contemporary social and economic realities.

Set in a Greek resort town during the off-season, *Animal* follows Kalia, a middle-aged woman working in the entertainment team of an all-inclusive hotel. As the season wears on, and tensions simmer beneath the surface, the film explores the complexities of labour, identity and human endurance in a world driven by spectacle and survival.

This screening is part of the EESC's ongoing series, in partnership with the European Parliament's LUX Audience Film Award, promoting cultural diversity and sparking dialogue on pressing social issues. (ps)

NEWS FROM THE GROUPS



Employers' Group and Polish presidency team up to shape security-driven competitiveness

by Stefano Mallia, President of the EESC Employers' Group

On 16 May, the Employers' Group held an extraordinary meeting in Warsaw on the topic *Time to unlock a security-driven competitiveness*. The aim was to make it quite clear that security – broadly understood as economic, technological, energy, social and geostrategic stability – is becoming a key component of competitiveness.

The event was co-organised with Poland's Ministry of Development and Technology under the Polish Presidency of the Council of the EU, and the organisations represented by the group's Polish members: Business Centre Club, Lewiatan Confederation, Employers of Poland, the Polish Craft Association and the Union of Entrepreneurs and Employers. It brought together employers and government leaders from all over Europe.

The main takeaway was that restoring Europe's competitiveness is not simply an economic necessity: it's a matter of security, sovereignty and survival.

With rivalry between the United States and China getting fiercer, the European Union stands at a strategic crossroads and must develop its own strategic autonomy. On the one hand, there is a clear need for deeper economic integration; on the other, the EU faces growing geopolitical threats, trade tensions and ever stiffer competition from third countries. In this new context, security, understood broadly to comprise economic, technological, energy, social and geostrategic stability, has become part and parcel of competitiveness.

Strategic autonomy cannot be achieved without a strong industrial base, an efficient single market and a regulatory environment that fosters investment and scaling up.

This goes beyond mere ambition: it is essential for preserving the European economic and social model. We need to invest in innovation while safeguarding expertise, critical infrastructure and technological sovereignty. At a time of deep uncertainty, the economic aspect of security – encompassing access to raw materials, energy and infrastructure – is paramount.



Decent work, cost of living and the future of Europe

By the Workers' Group

As far as the social agenda is concerned, the first two weeks of June 2025 were dominated by the ILO Conference in Geneva. Among many pressing issues of social justice, platform work was one of the items featuring high on its agenda.

The current cost-of-living crisis, worsened by recent events but with roots that go much further back, cannot be understood without looking at decent work – or more precisely, the absence of it. Decoupled from inflation almost everywhere, wages have not just stagnated but, in many cases, have actually decreased over time.

Cheap industrial mass production abroad, often carried out with complete disregard for labour, environmental or human rights, has enabled a relatively high level of consumption to coexist with this reality. In many European countries, a lack of savings, rising indebtedness and the inability of young people to move out of their parents' homes have helped sustain these consumption levels among younger generations. Whether due to unemployment or poor working conditions, many have turned to platform work as either a supplementary income source or a way out.

As the EESC determined, platform jobs can indeed be flexible and worthwhile employment alternatives in certain situations. However, they must be clearly distinguished from genuine self-employment and require strong protection of workers' rights, safeguards around data protection and access to management algorithms for social partners. The Workers' Group also commissioned a study for the EESC, building on the idea of a comprehensive definition of worker and a presumption of an employment relationship.

The Platform Work Directive, once fully transposed, will mark another important step in the right direction. There are many reasons why this is important, but two stand out in particular: first, allowing working conditions to worsen in one sector will eventually affect others; and second, the absence of decent work, combined with the deepening cost-of-living crisis, is fuelling the fires of the populist far right, threatening the future of Europe and democracy itself.



Conference: The role of civil society organisations in ensuring the health security of children and young people within the EU

By the EESC Civil Society Organisations' Group

The topic of the conference, held on 15 May, was the mental and physical condition of young Europeans and the role of civil society organisations (CSOs) in supporting it. The event was organised in the framework of the Polish Presidency of the Council of the European Union, on the initiative of the Polish Minister for Civil Society, Adriana Porowska, and the Civil Society Organisations' Group at the EESC.

The conference welcomed representatives of Polish and other EU Member States' civil society organisations, as well as scientists, practitioners and other stakeholders engaged in the broad field of child and youth development.

- The event's theme was directly aligned with the Polish Presidency's overarching motto: security.
- The goal of the meeting was to exchange experiences and raise awareness among EU and Member State decision-makers about the potential and role of CSOs in health-related activities for children and young people, including areas such as education, prevention, physical activity and early response to threats.
- A panel addressed global issues such as environmental pollution and climate change, as well as societal challenges like childhood cancer.

"The unpredictability and volatility of new threats raise questions about society's and administrations' ability to protect their youngest [members] from harm and to provide them with optimal conditions for stable development", **Ms Porowska** said before the event.

"We are witnessing the long-term effects of the pandemic and the war in Ukraine on our society – trauma, family separation and displacement. Many Polish families are suffering from poverty and extreme hardship. Each of these brings immense difficulties and consequences for the mental well-being of younger generations. In this context, we must also focus on digital security. Protecting children from harmful or fake content, including climate disinformation, is just as important as safeguarding their physical health", emphasised Deputy Minister **Marek Krawczyk**, representing Ms Porowska at the conference.

"Health security must be a key strategic priority at European and national level. Investing in the well-being and health of children and young people, notably in their mental health, means investing in a sustainable future. Prevention, early intervention, education, social networks and community-based initiatives play a crucial role. This is why civil society organisations must be more involved in defining, evaluating and monitoring health security priorities. We all experienced the added value of their activities during the COVID-19 crisis, and the power of civil-society-driven innovations has been presented again here today,' said **Séamus Boland,** President of the Civil Society Organisations' Group at the EESC.

Read the full press release

Read the conclusions and recommendations of the event

IN FOCUS: WATER RESILIENCE STRATEGY


Copyright Alexander Louvet

Facing the Unknown: a documentary highlighting the global water crisis

Water scarcity, food security and sustainable energy supply are among the greatest challenges of our time. These interconnected issues are at the heart of *Facing the Unknown*, a multi-award-winning documentary produced by EESC member Paul Rübig. The film, directed by Dieter-Michael Grohmann, premiered recently in Brussels and has been recognised at several international festivals.

Facing the Unknown follows Luna, a young Belgian student, as she explores the growing global water crisis and its implications for Europe's future. Through her journey, the documentary examines how water scarcity threatens not only the environment but also economic stability, food security and energy supply. Featuring insights from experts and industry leaders, the film sheds light on how water shortages affect people, businesses and communities, while exploring solutions at local, national and global levels.

The documentary is inspired by *Emergency Preparedness*, the book co-authored by **Paul Rübig** and **Achim Kaspar**, which outlines strategies for the smarter and fairer use of global resources. 'In the film and book, we show how global resources can be used more intelligently and equitably. This has been a personal concern of mine for many years,' said Mr Rübig.

Since its release, *Facing the Unknown* has won six international awards at film festivals in the USA and Venezuela, including Best Environmental Documentary at the Los Angeles Film and Documentary Awards.

The documentary's message strongly aligns with the EU's recently published Water Resilience Strategy and the EESC's call for an EU Blue Deal. The strategy marks a significant step forward in addressing Europe's growing water challenges, and the film provides a powerful reminder of why immediate and coordinated action is essential.

*In the photo after the film premiere in Brussels, from left to right: co-producer **Adam El Meziani, Paul Rübig**, lead actress **Luna de Mesmaeker** and director **Dieter-Michael Grohmann**.*



Water crises in the EU's outermost regions demand more than symbolic action

Home to over 3 million EU citizens and accounting for 97% of France's maritime space, the French Overseas Territories (FOTs) make France the world's second-largest maritime power and the EU the first. Yet, despite advanced EU legislation, these regions face water conditions that would be unacceptable elsewhere in Europe. EESC Info spoke to Sabrina Cajoly, an international human rights lawyer and NGO founder from the French Antilles. A member of the team behind the European Citizens' Initiative

(ECI) for a Water-Smart and Resilient Europe, Ms Cajoly highlighted the severe impact of water scarcity and pollution on the EU's outermost regions — and outlined what the new EU Water Strategy would need to include in order to make a real difference in these territories.

From your perspective, how do water scarcity and pollution affect the daily lives and rights of people living in overseas territories?

Water scarcity and pollution disproportionately affect people in the French Overseas Territories (FOTs), often invisibly. These are not isolated issues, but structural problems driven by poor governance, chronic underinvestment and environmental degradation, and are increasingly worsened by climate change. Aside from daily inconveniences, these issues threaten fundamental rights like health, education and human dignity.

In Guadeloupe, water insecurity is a daily reality. Despite abundant water sources, residents can go for over a month without running water. When available, the water is often unsafe to drink. Schools and hospitals suffer repeated service interruptions. Children miss an average of 1.5 months of school each year due to water shortages, infringing on their right to education.

These shortages stem not just from infrastructure failures, but also from multiple forms of pollution. In Guadeloupe and Martinique, over 90% of the population has been exposed to chlordecone, a toxic pesticide used for decades in banana farming, long after it was banned in the USA and mainland France. For instance, between December 2024 and January 2025, a Guadeloupean municipality experienced five consecutive weeks without safe drinking water due to chlordecone contamination.

In French Guiana, mercury pollution from gold mining disproportionately harms indigenous communities, threatening their health, environment and way of life. In La Réunion and Mayotte, severe droughts and natural disasters have deepened inequalities. Hurricane Chido, which struck Mayotte in December 2024, devastated half the island – and many survivors still lack access to clean water today.

Residents bear the brunt of these crises. In these regions, where poverty is 5 to 15 times higher than in mainland France, families are forced to buy expensive bottled water and filtration systems – at costs far exceeding those on the continent.

This is not just a legacy of the past; it is ongoing. In June 2025, a court in La Réunion awarded compensation to 89 000 people for having endured years of undrinkable tap water. This landmark ruling highlights the scale and systemic nature of this issue.

Where do you see gaps in the EU's water governance when it comes to addressing the specific needs of the outermost regions, and what could be done to improve this?

The EU's water governance still shows significant gaps when it comes to addressing the specific needs of its outermost regions, including the FOTs.

FOTs are home to over 3 million EU citizens, span four oceans and represent 97% of France's maritime space, making France the second-largest maritime power globally, and the EU the first. French Guiana alone is the size of Portugal; French Polynesia, the size of Western Europe. These regions house 80% of France's biodiversity and play a key role in the EU's economy, geopolitics and environmental footprint.

However, this strategic importance is not reflected in water policy outcomes. Despite advanced EU legislation, FOTs face chronic water insecurity, unaffordable services and deteriorating infrastructure – conditions that would be unacceptable elsewhere in the EU. For example, while water loss due to leaking systems averages 20% in continental Europe, it exceeds 50% in most FOTs. In Guadeloupe, it averages 60% and can reach 80%.

Key structural causes include:

- underinvestment in infrastructure and maintenance;
- delayed and uneven implementation of EU water directives;
- lack of disaggregated data reflecting local realities;
- limited inclusion of local stakeholders in EU policymaking; and
- insufficient political prioritisation.

Addressing these issues requires systemic, urgent and tailored action. This is not just about infrastructure; it's about equality, dignity, human rights and climate resilience across the EU.

This is why, as founder of Kimbé Rèd – French West Indies (F.W.I.), I joined the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) for a Water-Smart and Resilient Europe, launched in October 2024. Coordinated by Volonteurope and backed by organisations in 11 countries, the ECI calls on the European Commission to implement resilient water policies that inclusive of the outermost regions.

With the EU Water Strategy newly published, what do you hope it will achieve for the French Overseas Territories in practice?

The recently published EU Water Strategy is a positive step:

- It acknowledges the infrastructure gaps and climate challenges faced by the outermost regions and highlights the need to reduce inequalities in water access.
- It reflects several priorities raised in the ECI, in particular guaranteeing universal access to safe, affordable drinking water as a human right for all, including for those living in the outermost regions.
- It also makes provisions for investing in climate-adapted infrastructure and providing technical support to less-developed regions with limited administrative capacity.

However, the strategy lacks specificity when it comes to the outermost regions. To ensure the strategy has real impact for FOTs, the following are essential:

- **Disaggregated data and specific targets**: The strategy should include data reflecting local realities. Measurable, location-specific targets are crucial for progress and accountability.
- **Climate-adapted solutions:** The outermost regions face outsized climate impacts. Solutions should prioritise contextualised interventions (e.g. mangrove restoration), advanced water filtration and targeted infrastructure investments.
- **Inclusive governance:** The outermost regions must be actively involved in shaping EU water policy. Their representation in decision-making platforms like the biennial Water Resilience Forum (launching in 2025) is vital to ensure their effective and meaningful participation in the implementation and monitoring of the strategy.
- **Timelines and emergency measures**: Concrete short- and medium-term timelines for action are critical. Emergency measures must be deployed to address urgent water access needs while broader plans are still being developed.

In conclusion, while the EU Water Strategy marks a positive development, for it to bridge the existing governance and infrastructure gaps it must go beyond symbolic commitments and adopt concrete, inclusive and tailored measures that address the deep-rooted water crises in the outermost regions. Their true integration – what Kimbé Rèd FWI calls 'overseas mainstreaming' – is essential to ensure they are not 'left behind' in the implementation of the EU's Water Strategy. It means embedding their needs and potential in every policy objective, action and outcome. These regions must not be treated solely as beneficiaries of EU aid, but acknowledged as essential contributors to Europe's economic, environmental and geopolitical strength.

Sabrina Cajoly *is an international human rights lawyer from the French Antilles. In 2023, she founded Kimbé Rèd – French West Indies (FWI), a civil society organisation advocating for human rights in the French Overseas Territories, through actions based on international human rights law. Key priorities include the human rights to safe drinking water and to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment. Previously, Ms Cajoly has served as an expert on human rights, child protection and gender on three continents with the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and the Council of Europe.*



The new Water Resilience Strategy falls short of restricting harmful PFAS uses

EurEau, the European Federation of National Associations of Water Services, advocates for a ban on the use of PFAS, widely used manmade chemicals that are also found in water. PFAS are known for being extremely persistent in the environment and for having potentially harmful effects on human health. We talked to EurEau's Oliver Loebel and Sébastien Mouret about why 'clean-up' measures proposed in the new Water Resilience Strategy may not be enough to eliminate PFAS and about what they expect from the Strategy in general.

How do you assess the Water Resilience Strategy (WRS) and what are your expectations? What are your main objections?

It is very positive to see a truly holistic approach to water resilience in this Strategy. In the water sector, water resilience is our full-time job, but we cannot achieve it all on our own – households and services only account for 13% of water consumption, for example. The other 87% go to agriculture, industry and power generation. This is why we were expecting the Commission to respond to the need to mainstream water protection into all policy areas, not just water-focused legislation, and this is what we are seeing with the WRS.

The objective to improve water efficiency by 10% by 2030 is a step in the right direction, but it is regrettable that it wasn't accompanied by a target to reduce overall freshwater use. Water efficiency should not be a goal in itself but a tool for reducing pressure on Europe's increasingly stressed water resources.

The WRS also rightly emphasises the link between water quantity and water quality, recognising that we cannot solve water scarcity without addressing water pollution at the same time – but it outlines very few actions to follow up on this assessment. Most pollution-control policies listed in the Strategy are already in place, and on PFAS no control-at-source measures are mentioned at all. We fully support the Commission's call for better implementing existing legislation, but more is needed.

Finally, it is good to see the water sector's important investment needs recognised in the Strategy. The renewed emphasis on directing available EU funds towards water infrastructure is welcome, and raises our expectations for the place given to water in the next Multiannual Financial Framework.

In light of that, it is essential to ensure that the Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) scheme under the revised Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive is fully established and delivered on schedule. Wastewater treatment operators need to plan investments well in advance and rely on both regulatory and financial certainty. Therefore, the newly announced assessment of EPR-related costs in the Water Resilience Strategy must not delay the scheme's implementation. EPR is crucial for enabling the additional treatment required under the new directive. Polluters must pay for the pollution they cause. Otherwise, the Water Resilience Strategy will fail to support the needs of water services.

EurEau advocates for a prompt and far-reaching PFAS ban instead of 'clean-up' measures, such as those outlined by the WRS. Could you explain the importance of this ban for public health and the potential consequences of not implementing it?

PFAS are 'forever pollutants', most of which do not break down naturally. If we keep using them, the levels of contamination in the environment will keep increasing. What is problematic about the approach outlined in the WRS is that it strongly focuses on clean-up measures. It is unrealistic to think that we can decontaminate thousands of square kilometres of farmland to keep PFAS out of our food products. And it is virtually impossible to decontaminate our aquifers. It may take decades until a polluted groundwater body recovers from PFAS pollution.

Clean-up measures will not solve the PFAS problem and will expose our children and grandchildren to unacceptable pollution levels. The health risks related to this exposure are well documented and range from impacts on the immune system to cancer.

At least in theory, we have the technologies to remove all PFAS from raw drinking water, although this entails massive economic and environmental impacts. But how will we remove PFAS from our food? After all, the vast majority of human PFAS intake comes from sources other than drinking water – between 73% and 94%, according to figures from the Netherlands.

It may sound dystopic but due to PFAS pollution, certain health authorities advise against the consumption of eggs from chickens living in private backyards. They also advise parents not to let their children play with sea foam. This can't be the future we all want.

While water operators will take all measures to protect public health and the environment, the only sustainable way to address the PFAS crisis is to stop using these substances. We are disappointed that the WRS does not mention the tremendous work of the European Chemicals Agency ECHA in the context of the Universal PFAS restriction proposal. Moreover, the WRS falls short of announcing a ban of all non-essential PFAS uses as stated in the Chemicals Strategy for Sustainability

On the other hand, PFAS are used because they offer specific properties. Replacing them can be challenging. Innovative European companies work on PFAS-free alternatives, and it is encouraging to see that many less hazardous substitutes have already been identified. A clear phase-out pathway will help these companies to bring their solutions to the European and to international markets.

We should also recognise that alternatives may not be available today for certain uses which are critical for society. In such cases, time-limited derogations could be envisaged, accompanied by strict risk management measures.

This exercise is currently underway at ECHA. We therefore hope the European Commission will restrict PFAS uses based on the ECHA recommendations.

The Forever Pollution project estimates that decontaminating Europe could cost up to €100 billion per year if PFAS are not banned. How does EurEau assess the economic impact of focusing on remediation instead of control-at-source measures?

These figures represent a worst-case scenario. However, such a scenario can no longer be excluded given the rapidly increasing TFA concentrations in soil and water, and the continued resistance against a rapid PFAS phase out.

The overwhelming part of this amount would fall upon the shoulders of water operators and the municipalities who own the infrastructure. Ultimately, these costs would need to be passed on to the water consumers, thus jeopardising the affordability of water services. With a view to avoiding such a situation, we call on decision makers to implement the polluter-pays principle for all continued PFAS emissions.

We are convinced that a PFAS phase-out is cheaper overall than trying to fix the problem 'at the end of pipe'.

The strategy seems to overlook wide-spread soil pollution. What steps should be taken to address soil pollution comprehensively within the framework of the Water Resilience Strategy?

Healthy soils are a prerequisite for health drinking water reserves and sustainable food production. A couple of years ago, we had high expectations for what the Commission at that time said would be a European Soil Health Law to address this problem. In the end, what the Commission proposed was a Soil *Monitoring* Directive with a much reduced scope. The co-legislators are finalising its adoption now, having removed most of the few provisions in it that could have actively improved soil health, rather than just monitor its decline. Although EU-wide monitoring requirements are better than nothing, we see this text as a missed opportunity to tackle soil pollution.

As the Strategy points out, much could be achieved by fully implementing existing legislation including the Nitrates Directive and the Regulation concerning the placing of plant protection products on the market. It is unacceptable that we still find excessive contamination levels in the groundwater bodies of many European regions.

Soil pollution is also caused by contaminants contained in rainwater. According to the German environmental agency UBA, every litre of rainwater now contains on average 335 ng/L TFA, an ultrashort-chain PFAS, mainly stemming from fluorinated gases. As outlined above, no remediation measure can solve that problem.

Achieving water resilient societies is a complex endeavour that requires close cooperation and strong governance. The water sector is willing to step up its own efforts and work with all societal stakeholders to ensure that future generations will have access to sufficient quantities of clean water.

Oliver Loebel *is Secretary General and* ***Sébastien Mouret*** *is Policy Officer at EurEau, the European Federation representing national drinking and wastewater service providers from 33 countries, spanning both public and private sectors. EurEau unites water professionals to shape European policies on water quality, resource efficiency, and access to water. EurEau took part in the EESC's Consumer Day 2024 that focused on water.*



Water resilience is the linchpin for Europe's future prosperity

For Water Europe – the EU's leading platform promoting innovation and cooperation in the European water sector – the European Commission's newly unveiled Water Resilience Strategy is not just another policy document: it represents a pivotal acknowledgment that water is becoming a central pillar of Europe's future, writes Water Europe's Executive Director Durk Krol.

The new Water Resilience Strategy is built in part on the Water Europe community's longstanding and persistent commitment and mobilisation. Through continuous advocacy, co-creation – anchored in our network of water-oriented living labs and aligned with European initiatives such as the Water4All Partnership – and sustained efforts to build political momentum, we have helped make this vision a reality. Since launching our position on the EU Blue Deal and publishing our manifesto for the 2024 EU elections, we have consistently called for a European Water Strategy, a dedicated Commissioner for Water, and a dedicated Water Fund in the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF). We have actively contributed to the positions of the European Economic and Social Committee, collaborated closely with Members of the European Parliament, and formed a coalition of over 30 organisations to urge the Commission to maintain its commitment to water resilience.

Today, this strategy sends a clear and urgent signal: Europe's water resilience is non-negotiable. As droughts intensify, pollutants accumulate and competition for water grows, particularly in industry and agriculture, it is no longer possible to treat water as a passive resource. The strategy's ambitions to guarantee clean, affordable water for all, accelerate investment in infrastructure and integrate water into the Green and Digital transitions reflect a shift in mindset that is both necessary and overdue.

One of the most transformative aspects of the strategy is its embrace of the water-smart economy, a concept that Water Europe has long championed. The economic sectors with the highest water abstraction levels also have the potential to save the most water (EEA, 2025), with several benefits for their activities:

- Critical industries – hydrogen, batteries, semiconductors and data centres – are projected to triple their water consumption by 2030, growing from €192 billion today to nearly €1 trillion (Water Europe, 2024).
- With 29% of the EU's territory already experiencing water scarcity, this poses a serious threat to our competitiveness and strategic autonomy (EEA, 2019).
- Europe's water infrastructure is also under pressure. Meeting existing EU water legislation alone requires at least €255 billion in investment to ensure water and sanitation for our society (Water Europe, 2024).

A water-smart economy should be understood as the economic dimension of a water-smart society. It implements the societal vision by embedding the value of water into how we grow, produce, invest and innovate. Together, a water-smart economy and society represent a holistic model where social equity, environmental integrity and economic vitality are interdependent drivers of water resilience.

Although the strategy signals an important transition, this transformation won't happen without dedicated financial instruments. Our new white paper on water financing shows that a water-smart economy is not a concept, it's a financial imperative. By recognising water's value across key sectors, Europe can unlock nearly €1 trillion in added value by 2030. At the same time, investment in water will help utilities close the €255 billion funding gap needed to comply with EU standards.

Water resilience must not be seen as a niche concern but as the linchpin for Europe's energy transition, food security and industrial leadership.

The strategy takes an important step forward by recognising the transformative potential of digitalisation, water efficiency, reuse, public procurement and research & innovation. We particularly welcome the announcement of a Water Resilience R&I strategy to address the fragmentation of EU R&I initiatives, as well as the Digitalisation Action Plan, aimed at ensuring data transparency, interoperability and harmonised methodologies across Europe.

Water Europe reaffirms its readiness to support the Commission, Member States and local actors in translating the Water Resilience Strategy into tangible progress for citizens, ecosystems and economic actors. We stand ready to help turn this strategy into action. In doing so, we support the regional deployment of innovative solutions and help close the gap between EU ambitions and local realities.

Durk Krol *is Executive Director at Water Europe, a Brussels-based non-profit organisation that acts as the pan-European voice and promoter of water-related innovation, research and technology development. Water Europe focuses on the entire water value chain and advocates creating a water-secure, sustainable and resilient water-smart society in Europe and beyond. Water Europe took part in the EESC Consumer Day dedicated to water, held in December 2024.*



Water: A human right at risk – placing consumers at the heart of the EU Blue Deal

By Paulo Fonseca

Protecting consumers in the water sector goes beyond economics – it's about public health, environmental sustainability and human rights. Any EU strategy on water resilience must put people first, with binding national commitments and a clear framework for water justice, writes Paulo Fonseca, advisor on strategy and public affairs at the Portuguese Association for Consumer Protection, DECO.

Water is a human right, as formally recognised by the United Nations since 2010. Beyond that, it is a fundamental resource for human life and our ecosystems.

However, this vital resource is increasingly coming under pressure, both globally and in certain European countries. Persistent droughts and extreme weather events, over-exploitation, pollution and weaknesses in management and distribution systems are today a tangible reality for millions of people. The recent EU Blue Deal, presented by the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) in 2023, marks a decisive step towards placing the water sector at the centre of EU policymaking. Nevertheless, for this or any other initiative to be truly effective, it is essential that the rights and needs of consumers are placed at the heart of all related decisions.

First and foremost, as with energy poverty, it is crucial to tackle water poverty. This concept must be fully integrated into EU policies on cohesion, social justice and consumer protection, as many citizens still lack access to water in sufficient quantity and quality to ensure a dignified life. Others, due to economic vulnerability or exposure to climate change, face the real risk of losing that access altogether. This implies that both physical access and economic affordability must be treated as core principles, particularly to ensure that water tariffs reflect not only the cost-of-service provision but also the principles of social justice and consumer protection.

Similarly, the increasing risk of droughts calls for a joint and preventive European response. The climate crisis is making drought episodes more frequent, prolonged and severe. Water scarcity cannot be managed solely through restrictions on domestic consumption. Instead, it requires comprehensive action involving all sectors – from agriculture and industry to tourism. Efficient water use must become a strategic priority, but this also calls for clear commitments and safeguards from policymakers.

Safe water constitutes another critical dimension. The Water Framework Directive and the recent recast of the Directive on the quality of water intended for human consumption represent significant legislative progress, but their implementation remains uneven across the Member States. Pollution and the effects of climate change pose serious threats that must be urgently mitigated. In addition, access to information, transparency in monitoring and the right of consumers to be informed about the quality of the water on their bills must be strengthened at the European level.

It is also important to point out that water is delivered through a complex system, characterised by different governance and management models across Europe. For this reason, it is vital to apply the ‘quality by design and by default’ principle by developing a concrete consumer framework regarding contracts, billing, complaints handling and dispute resolution schemes, especially when the service is provided under natural monopoly conditions. A robust model must be put in place at European level to hold providers accountable, ensure transparency, prevent water losses and ensure compensation for consumers when obligations are not met.

The EU Blue Deal calls for an integrated approach, linking water policy with the green, energy and digital transitions. We strongly support this comprehensive perspective, but it is imperative that consumer rights are not diluted in the process. On the contrary, multiple opportunities exist to make the sector more resilient. One such opportunity lies in digitalising the water sector, including the use of artificial intelligence to reduce water losses, rolling out smart meters to help consumers monitor and manage their water consumption more effectively, and developing different tariffs adapted to individual consumption profiles.

The Portuguese Association for Consumer Protection, DECO, plays a pivotal role in safeguarding consumer rights in the water sector. Through awareness campaigns, tariff monitoring, consumer engagement and close cooperation with companies and regulators, we have consistently advocated for fair tariffs that are aligned with household income and the real cost of the service, for the provision of safe services with positive impacts on efficiency and for the active involvement of consumers in water governance mechanisms.

In December 2024, DECO participated in the EESC's European Consumer Day themed *Water challenges: Exploring consumer perspective - Moving ahead on EU Blue Deal*. The event shed new light on protecting consumer water rights and promoting water-efficient consumption by encouraging changes in consumer habits, supported by innovative tools and technologies to make water use more sustainable.

Protecting consumers in this sector goes beyond any economic or social goal. It is also a matter of public health, territorial cohesion, environmental sustainability and respect for human rights. For this reason, any EU water resilience strategy must place consumers at the heart of every decision. It is urgently necessary to ensure binding commitments from Member States, ambitious national policy measures and a framework of water justice for all.

Paulo Fonseca *is advisor on strategy and public affairs at DECO, the Portuguese Association for Consumer Protection, DECO, is the country’s largest independent non-profit organisation dedicated to defending consumer rights through legal support, education, advocacy and nationwide services.*



United for water: Addressing the water crisis demands collective action

By Harriet Cullum

Water is in every product we make. For Diageo, managing our impact on water – and being good stewards of this precious shared resource – is integral to achieving our performance ambition, to maintaining our licence to operate and to our response to the climate risk. We report fully and transparently on our water risks and performance – including in our Annual Report and accompanying ESG (Environmental, Social and Governance) Reporting Index – and are consistently rated high performers in external indices and rankings.

Diageo therefore warmly welcomes the EU Water Resilience Strategy: together we can accelerate adaptation and lead the transition towards sustainable water management.

However, we might be the most water-efficient distillery or brewery, but it would unfortunately not be enough. The climate crisis is a water crisis, and it is disproportionately impacting the most vulnerable in society. The only way to tackle it is to adopt a holistic, whole-of-society approach. Collaboration and collective action are essential for building broader supply chain resilience. Companies, governments, civil society, communities and scientific experts need to work together at global, country and local levels to advocate a fair and inclusive response to the crisis. Together we can share knowledge, exchange good practices and technological expertise in water management, and pool resources to identify and implement concrete solutions for addressing our shared water challenge.

Synergies could be created with the Water Action Hub, a global online collaboration and knowledge-sharing platform developed by the UN's CEO Water Mandate to help companies and other organisations address water risk, advance sustainable water management and build collective action from an economic and shared water risk perspective.

A water-resilient Europe is a climate-resilient Europe, with a thriving, innovative agricultural sector which relies on efficient water use and water-efficient ingredients**.** If we want to address the water crisis effectively, these pillars cannot be mutually exclusive. Water, carbon, soil health and biodiversity are all inter-connected. As a result, the key to achieving better outcomes for water is to consider the broader landscape, the players operating within it, and their co-dependencies.

We believe that regenerative agriculture and landscape management have the potential to generate combined benefits, such as reducing and storing carbon emissions, optimising fertiliser use and addressing water quality challenges and nature loss over the longer term. To get there, digitalisation – coupled with education and upskilling – will be pivotal. We look forward to partnering with the EU to ensure that our supply chains take account of the transition towards sustainable agriculture and efficient water use.

Finally, innovation and new technologies are critical for improving water-use efficiency and building climate resilience. For example, we are continuously improving our operational excellence through investment in less water-intensive processes and technologies (such as water-less cooling towers and optimised water use associated with clean-in-place systems through sensor technology), as well as in water reuse and water

recycling projects.

We are doing our part: for more than twenty years, Diageo has been investing in water, our most precious resource, adopting a holistic strategy which incorporates the interdependencies between water security, climate change risk, access to drinking water, gender equality, nature and regenerative agriculture in order to help unlock the investment needed to address the water crisis.

A key pillar to our approach to water is that it should remain people-centric. We strive to provide access to clean water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) in water-stressed communities near our sites and in water-stressed areas that supply our raw materials. Since 2020 we have implemented 35 WASH projects, benefiting nearly 200 000 people, mostly in rural communities.

While we are well positioned to meet our water efficiency targets for our direct operations, addressing water recycling and upcycling beyond the four walls of our sites presents untapped potential for securing water resilience in Europe. Together we can promote, incentivise and reward water reuse and recycling. There is therefore a strong business case for investment in water, not only to accelerate and scale up the combined impact we can have together, but also to help build resilient, inclusive communities. As a result, we see the EU Water Strategy as a key enabler for European industry to partner with the EU so as to accelerate the transition towards sustainable water management.

To conclude, a water-resilient Europe will be a competitive Europe, as it will be driven by sustainable innovation, technology development and job creation. European industry has accumulated decades-long expertise and can play a leading role in supporting this transition. We are excited to be part of this project and to contribute to this journey.

Harriet Cullum *is a sustainability leader and Global Head of Water, Agriculture and Nature at Diageo, a global leader in premium drinks, across spirits and beer. She previously served as Global Head of ESG (Environmental, Social and Governance) Insights and was in charge of ESG reporting.*

Diageo *is Europe's leading global premium drinks producer that owns and produces over 200 brands (including internationally renowned names such as Baileys, Guinness, Tanqueray and Johnnie Walker) and operates across more than 180 countries.*

The Flow project: connecting young generations with water

The EU Horizon two-year project FLOW, *Future Lives with Ocean and Waters* tackled the problem of the emotional disconnect between people and waters, which was highlighted by the European Commission's Mission *Restore our Ocean and Waters*. FLOW specifically focussed on connectedness of young generations and it did so through co-creation: it was not about them, but *with* them. FLOW's coordinator Riyan van den Born spoke to us about the project on behalf of all FLOW partners.

The FLOW project reveals surprising emotional and cultural ties that young Europeans have with water. What key insights stood out and how should these shape EU water policies going forward? And what is the most effective way to genuinely engage young people in shaping

Europe’s water future?

Emotions we encountered when talking with young people about problems related to oceans, water, nature and climate varied from joy, hope, love and care to anger, frustration and sadness, with some people expressing feelings of depression, despondency and helplessness.

Many young adults who participated in FLOW have a hard time dealing with these emotions.

Some develop coping mechanisms, such as avoiding news. However, many of the young adults involved in the water initiatives studied still have hope that things can change for the better.

Peers and collective action play an important role in inspiring hope. Many young adults realise that individual strategies alone do not solve complex problems, and that collective action is needed to make a real impact.

Those young people who connected with peers and worked together with them in (mostly local) projects, found a sense of purpose in their actions and believed that collective efforts can make a real difference. Moreover, many young people said that intergenerational solidarity inspired them to take action for water.

Our research shows that connectedness with water is rooted in childhood experiences. Different approaches based on different dimensions of connectedness (Ives at al., 2018) speak to different people, for instance focusing on experiences or on intellectual interests.

Drawing from these key insights, we recommend bringing young adults closer to EU water policies by:

- creating and facilitating opportunities for building different forms of connectedness with nature and water, from childhood onwards;
- promoting a broad variety of frameworks and approaches in European initiatives to motivate young people to take action for water;
- encouraging policies that facilitate youth participation in conservation efforts. This includes hands-on initiatives such as citizen science projects and volunteering where young people actively engage with conservation projects;
- creating conditions for finding likeminded peers, as working together builds trust in others and hope for the future of oceans and waters.

What have you learned about how water is portrayed in the media and culture, and how do these portrayals affect young people’s views on water and its protection? How can this inform how the EU talks about water issues?

FLOW’s foresight study, analysing fringe and popular cultural sources from different media (such as movies, podcasts, books, games), revealed signs of potential change in human-water relations. Water is often depicted as both a resource to be exploited and a powerful force worthy of respect and protection. Some cultural expressions focus on the beauty and fragility of oceans, emphasising their vulnerability to human actions, while others highlight the ocean’s role as a threat—a force that must be managed or controlled. In this regard, young people’s views are often a continuation of ‘older’ ways of knowing and relating to oceans and waters.

An interesting sign of potential change that emerged from the analysis of cultural sources was a shifting away from a human-centred worldview. Both the cultural sources and the initiatives studied showed a growing interest in ‘more-than-human’ perspectives, revealing the interconnectedness of humans and nature, fostering a sense of connectedness that is vital for environmental conservation.

Themes of stewardship, blue innovation and rights-based approaches — such as granting legal rights to water bodies— emerged as significant sources of optimism. These hopeful signs reflect a growing belief in humanity's capacity to not only restore and protect aquatic ecosystems but also to partner with water to solve challenges (what we call nature-based solutions).

Moreover, the analysis revealed a deep sense of urgency among young generations regarding the precarious future of aquatic ecosystems. Climate change, pollution and the collapse of marine biodiversity are perceived as existential threats, with many cultural indicators expressing a fear of 'losing nature'.

These findings suggest that Mission Ocean should:

- engage young generations in initiatives that emphasise the interconnectedness of humans and aquatic environments. Strengthen stewardship visions, fostering responsibility for protecting ecosystems;
- link to youth culture and use media that resonate with young generations to promote positive human-water relations;
- find innovative ways to include more-than-human perspectives instead of only a human-centred worldview.

If you had to pick a bold, youth-led innovation from FLOW that could transform EU water policy, what would it be? In what ways should young people be included in the EU's work on oceans and waters?

Inspiring examples are **Embassy of the North Sea** (Netherlands) and **Parlement de Loire** (France).

Include young people in transforming EU water policy. Build on their sense of urgency, engagement and connectedness with water to co-create EU water policy. That way, their trust in other people and institutions will be increased, generating hope for the future of our oceans and waters. It is important that these initiatives combine different routes for strengthening connectedness: for instance, experiential, affective and reflexive in different forms based on heritage, philosophy and art.

Riyan van den Born *is the coordinator of the FLOW project.* ***Max Priebe, Zoheb Mashiur, Bernadette van Heel*** *and* ***Melania Borit*** *also contributed to the interview.*

FLOW brought together engaged young adults from many European countries with five pioneering water initiatives, three research organisations, Radboud university (The Netherlands), Fraunhofer ISI (Germany), UiT The Arctic University of Norway and the civil society network Volonteurope (Belgium). FLOW has received funding from the European Union's Horizon Europe research and innovation programme.

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