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A bridge between Europe and organised civil society

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EDITORIAL

A stronger enlargement starts with stronger participation



Editorial

Enlargement is once again a priority in the European Union's political conversation. This is good news. But if we want the next wave of enlargement to succeed, we must do more than open negotiations or draft new roadmaps. We need to bring people into the process from the very beginning.

That was the goal of the Enlargement High-level Forum recently hosted by the European Economic and Social Committee. It brought together civil society representatives, youth leaders, social partners and political actors from across the candidate countries. What made this gathering unique was not just the

substance of the discussions. It was the shared understanding that the process of joining the EU must be open, participatory and fair.

Too often, enlargement has been treated as a technical exercise. But democratic reform cannot happen behind closed doors. Civil society and social partners are not just observers. They are essential drivers of change. They build trust in public institutions, speak up for the most vulnerable, and ensure that reforms actually work for people.

Throughout my presidency at the EESC, I have worked to put participation at the heart of our approach to enlargement. We launched the Enlargement Candidate Members initiative in 2023 to give civil society a real voice in our work. We strengthened our Joint Consultative Committees and Civil Society Platforms and held regular exchanges with partners on the ground. The High-level Forum was a natural continuation of that effort.

It gave us a chance to look closely at what needs to happen next. First, we must create long term structures that allow civil dialogue and social dialogue to grow. These are not just buzzwords. They are tools that help societies become more resilient, more democratic and more ready for membership.

Second, we need to give young people a seat at the table. They are often the first to feel the impact of stalled reforms or shrinking civic space. But they are also the most committed to a better and more inclusive future. Employment, education and mobility policies must be built with them, not for them.

What gives me real hope is that this Forum was not just a one-off moment. I am proud to say that with the support of European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, we have secured the continuation of the ECM initiative at least until 2027. This means the dialogue we have started will grow. It will deepen. Concretely, that means more ECMs involved and more opinions. It will continue to shape the enlargement process in a way that reflects the values we say we stand for.

Enlargement is not simply a geopolitical strategy. It is a promise to uphold democracy, rights and dignity for all. If we want to keep that promise, then civil society must be more than a box to tick. It must be part of the foundation we build on.

The EESC will remain a strong partner in this work. We believe that enlargement must succeed and that success depends on making people part of the process. Not after the fact. From the start.

DIARY DATES

15 September 2025

Accessible and affordable housing for all

15 September 2025

AI implications for European Union civil society: perspectives from Denmark

17-18 September 2025

EESC plenary session



THE SURPRISE GUEST

Exiled Belarusian journalist **Hanna Liubakova** writes about the quiet resistance of the Belarusian people, living in a society held hostage by terror and pro-Kremlin propaganda. The recent release of **Siarhei Tsikhanouski** - husband of Belarusian opposition leader **Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya** - has offered a glimmer of hope to Belarusians who often feel forgotten. Yet with 1200 political prisoners still behind bars, the country remains a prison. The EU and the international community must not ease pressure until all are freed and systemic repression ends. This is not charity, but a crucial investment in European security.

Hanna Liubakova is a journalist and political analyst from Belarus. She is a non-resident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council and has written about developments in Belarus for international outlets including *The Washington Post*, *The Economist* and others. Liubakova began her career

at *Belsat TV*, the only independent Belarusian television channel, banned by the regime in Minsk. She also worked for *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL)* in Prague, Czechia. She is currently an advisor for the EESC information report on social media and AI.

Liubakova has received several awards for her work, including the *Freedom of the Media Award* from the *Transatlantic Leadership Network* and the *One Young World Journalist of the Year Award*. She has also been a finalist for the *European Press Prize*. In retaliation for her reporting, the *Lukashenka* regime sentenced her *in absentia* to ten years in prison. She is on the wanted list in Russia and across all Commonwealth of



RELEASING POLITICAL PRISONERS IN BELARUS IS NOT A CONCESSION – IT IS A LIFELINE

By Hanna Liubakova

At the end of June, I had the honour of meeting several men and women just released from Belarusian prisons. Among them was Siarhei Tsikhanouski, husband of democratic leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, who spent over five years behind bars. He was among the first political prisoners of the 2020 uprising. His body bore marks of imprisonment, but not his spirit. I saw resilience - a man still determined to fight for dignity and freedom.

Tsikhanouski's release, along with 13 others – including RFE/RL journalist Ihar Karnei and university lecturer Natallia Dulina – was not a gesture of goodwill. It was the result of sustained diplomatic pressure from the United States, including a rare visit by Special Envoy Keith Kellogg to Minsk. These individuals were not freed – they were expelled. Taken to the Lithuanian border, bundled in black bags, they were told to leave their homeland.

Belarus remains a prison. Nearly 1200 political prisoners are still behind bars. In 2025 alone, there have been over 1700 new political arrests and other forms of repression. These are not just numbers; they are people with families and futures. Some elderly, some seriously ill. Some, like Valiantsin Shtermer, didn't survive. He died earlier this year in detention, denied proper medical care after suffering a stroke. Others died soon after release, worn down by inhumane conditions in jail.

This is both a legal and a humanitarian crisis. And it demands an urgent, coordinated response from the European Union.

Releasing political prisoners gives hope to the people of Belarus, who often feel forgotten. Yet the dictator continues to use human lives as bargaining chips. This is nothing new: the regime has traded political prisoners since the 1990s, since the founding of Viasna by Nobel laureate Ales Bialiatski, now again behind bars.

Some argue prisoner releases should be rewarded with eased sanctions. But listen to survivors of the regime's prisons. 'Lifting sanctions in exchange for hostages is like making a deal with a cannibal,' Dulina said. Her words are hard, but necessary. Since January, 105 political prisoners have been released through pardons, while 167 new prisoners have been added to the list. This cycle is blackmail, not progress.

We must not ease pressure until all political prisoners are free and systemic repression ends.

Meanwhile, Lukashenka continues to aid the Kremlin's war on Ukraine. Belarus hosts Russian troops and drones, produces military parts and allows Russian nuclear weapons, violating non-proliferation norms. The upcoming Zapad 2025 joint military exercises represent another provocation and threat.

But the Belarusian people have not given up. Despite propaganda and terror, they resist quietly and bravely. They learn the Belarusian language. They teach banned history. They speak the truth. Polls show that 97% of Belarusians oppose joining Russia's war. Most oppose missile launches from Belarusian territory and hosting nuclear weapons on Belarusian soil. This is not a pro-Kremlin society – it is a society held hostage.

It is crucial to distinguish the regime from the people. Supporting civil society, media and youth initiatives is not charity – it is a long-term investment in European security.

The European Economic and Social Committee has already played a leading role, highlighting repression, supporting free media and defending the rights of the Belarusian people. We appreciate the EESC's recent memorandum with Belarusian democratic forces. It is a meaningful gesture of solidarity and an essential recognition of the legitimacy of our struggle.

We must go further. The EU should stand firm: no sanctions relief without substantial, verifiable change. Continue to expose the regime's crimes. Offer protection and professional opportunities to Belarusian exiles in Europe. Engage closely with democratic actors who are building alternative structures and support systems – even in exile.

Change can come swiftly. Authoritarian regimes can collapse in an instant. But we must be ready. That means keeping hope alive and standing firmly with those still imprisoned.

Belarus stands at a crossroads today. In the hands of its people, it can become a peaceful, democratic European nation. In the hands of dictators, it remains a source of instability and aggression.

Let us help tip the balance toward freedom, justice and Europe.

The first, simplest and most urgent step: demanding the release of all political prisoners.

This is not a concession. It is the beginning of everything.



TO THE POINT

In Romania, a record youth turnout in the 2024-2025 elections helped block the rise of extremist candidates. But the vote was largely a defensive act, driven by rejection of populist excesses rather than hopeful support for democratic values. Polarised media, disinformation and unchecked digital platforms continue to undermine democratic confidence, not only in Romania but in the EU in general. Civic mobilisation matters - but without deeper reforms, democracy remains exposed, writes EESC member Cristian Pîrvulescu.



DEMOCRATIC EUROPE AT A CROSSROADS: BETWEEN RESILIENCE, HYBRID WARFARE AND ALGORITHMIC RADICALISATION

By Cristian Pîrvulescu

One year after the 2024 European elections, the European Union is facing growing tensions between civic mobilisation and an illiberal offensive. On the one hand, high voter turnout in several Member States - including my own country, Romania - confirmed a renewed public interest in Europe's future. And I will pause briefly to reflect on the Romanian case as an instructive experiment. On the other hand, this mobilisation has taken place in a context of polarisation, disinformation and systemic attacks on democratic values.

The 2024 elections brought historic gains for the far right in France, Germany, the Netherlands and Austria, forming a significant obstructionist bloc in the European Parliament. What we are witnessing is not only an internal political realignment, but a *coordinated illiberal offensive*, fuelled by transnational networks and supported by geopolitical actors such as Russia. Identity-based, Eurosceptic and anti-rights narratives are circulating simultaneously across digital platforms, aiming to undermine pluralism, the rule of law and European cohesion.

The nature of conflict has shifted from the military to the informational and psychological sphere. Today's *hybrid warfare* uses disinformation campaigns, cyberattacks, deepfakes and manipulative algorithms to erode trust in democracy. The targets are clear: young people, minorities, independent media and electoral authorities. At the heart of this assault is a battle over perception - a *mental and symbolic siege* designed to foster confusion, cynicism and democratic apathy.

Algorithms as agents of radicalisation

Digital platforms - especially TikTok - mechanically amplify polarising content. It is no longer just about human users spreading disinformation, but about *algorithmic systems* that select, prioritise and normalise extremist rhetoric. This *cognitive disorder* directly undermines public reason, replacing deliberation with emotional reactions and confirmation bias.

TikTok has become a key tool for political mobilisation among young people, particularly in central and eastern Europe. Recent campaigns in Romania, Portugal, Germany and Poland have used the platform intensively to spread identity-driven, conspiratorial or anti-European messages. Its short, emotionally charged video format makes it an ideal medium for *emotional radicalisation*, operating beyond the reach of democratic control or effective regulation.

Romania: A case of fragile resilience

In Romania, the 2024-2025 elections saw record voter turnout, especially among young people. This helped defeat extremist candidates. However, this outcome should not be romanticised: *democratic resilience*

manifested itself defensively, under the pressure of media polarisation and toxic disinformation campaigns, especially on TikTok and Telegram. Voting was often driven by rejection – a ‘no’ to populist excesses – rather than by active support for democratic values.

Romania continues to struggle with a severe budget deficit, deep social inequalities, an education system ill-equipped for civic and digital literacy, and a media space dominated by partisan and oligarchic interests. In this context, *disinformation networks* exploit social frustrations, especially among young people and minorities. Worse still, some political elites display a dangerous ambivalence, tolerating or even instrumentalising *illiberal rhetoric* for electoral purposes.

Romania offers a clear example of *conditional democratic resilience*: civic mobilisation can defeat populism, but it cannot replace public policy. Without structural reforms, critical education and effective digital regulation, democracy remains vulnerable. The lesson is clear: *the electorate cannot be the only line of defence*.

What can Europe do?

Europe can take multiple actions: enforce the *Digital Services Act* ambitiously, create an independent *European information watchdog*, invest heavily in civic and media literacy, support independent journalism, promote institutional counter-narratives adapted to younger audiences and include *democratic resilience as a core criterion* in the evaluation of EU funding.

Europe is not in democratic collapse, but it is traversing a zone of strategic vulnerability. It is subject to a permanent hybrid assault and a crisis of legitimacy, especially among younger generations. To defend democracy, the European Union must *renew its tools, rethink the digital public space* and actively support those societies on the frontline of this cognitive confrontation. *Romania is one such case* – not just a national test, but a true barometer of Europe’s democratic future.



ONE QUESTION TO...

Poverty remains one of the EU's most pressing and persistent challenges, affecting over 93 million people and undermining social cohesion across the continent. We asked Krzysztof Balon, rapporteur for the EESC opinion on a [European Anti-Poverty Strategy](#), what the Committee recommends to tackle the root causes of poverty and promote a rights-based, coordinated approach at all levels.

TOWARDS THE ERADICATION OF POVERTY

By Krzysztof Balon

Eradicating poverty enables people to live in dignity and is therefore at the heart of the EU's values, while also serving as a prerequisite for stable democracy. However, [statistical data](#) show that poverty remains at an unacceptably high level: in 2024, an estimated 93.3 million people, or 21% of the EU-27 population, were at risk of poverty or social exclusion.

Although the total number of people affected has dropped by 1.1 million since 2020, the poverty rate has declined by just 1%. At this pace — around 283 000 people lifted out of poverty each year — the EU will fall more than eight million short of its own 2030 target to reduce poverty by at least 15 million people. The statistics further highlight a gender gap: in 2024, 22% of women were at risk of poverty or exclusion, compared to 20% of men. Children remain Europe's most vulnerable group, while older adults continue to face a persistent poverty risk. Persons with disabilities experience disproportionate poverty and exclusion, and the ongoing housing crisis is a major driver of both poverty and public anxiety. Last but not least, employment is no longer a reliable safeguard, as the quality of work now plays a critical role in determining poverty risk. All of this underscores the urgent need for a comprehensive, rights-based EU Anti-Poverty Strategy (APS).

Consequently, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) calls for the urgent adoption and implementation of the first-ever EU Anti-Poverty Strategy, alongside effective enforcement of the relevant principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights. The EESC believes that the APS should be based on a

multidimensional definition of poverty, taking into account not only material deprivation but also social, psychological, political and gender-related aspects. The strategy should recognise poverty as both a violation of fundamental rights and a form of systemic injustice, aiming to eradicate extreme poverty while establishing ambitious, measurable targets — such as reducing poverty by 50% by 2030.

Key elements of the APS should include:

- Binding standards for adequate income and social protection across Member States;
- Fighting in-work poverty through social dialogue, including the effective implementation of the Directive on Adequate Minimum Wages;
- Universal access to affordable, high-quality public services such as healthcare, social work, housing and education and support for life-long learning;
- Support for the development of the social economy;
- Involving people experiencing poverty in all stages of the strategy cycle, as well as providing sustainable funding for civil society organisations to advocate on their behalf.

While the primary responsibility for fighting poverty lies with the Member States, the implementation of the APS should also be supported at European level, aligning with the goal of eradicating extreme poverty. A dedicated EU Coordinator should be appointed to unite the efforts of the EU, Member States and civil society in this mission. The EESC, for its part, will remain actively engaged in promoting these efforts in the future.

EESC NEWS



EESC and Belarusian democratic forces deepen strong strategic engagement

The European Economic and Social Committee reaffirmed its unwavering support for a democratic Belarus by signing a Memorandum of Understanding with Belarusian democratic forces, represented by Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. This new Memorandum of Understanding formalises a new phase of structured collaboration to support Belarusian civil society and its European aspirations.

At its June plenary session, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) hosted a debate on the [Democratic future of Belarus](#) with **Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya**, the leader of the Belarusian democratic movement, **Maksim Pazniakou**, acting chair of the Belarusian Congress of Democratic Trade Unions, and **Andrey Gnyot**, Belarusian journalist and filmmaker. The Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), which was signed during the plenary debate, formalises the cooperation between

the EESC and Belarusian civil society.

The EESC's support for Belarusian civil society was commended by **Ms Tsikhanouskaya**, who said: 'We are delighted to sign this Memorandum of Understanding with the European Economic and Social Committee. This partnership marks an essential milestone for Belarus on its path towards a European future.'

In the same vein, EESC president **Oliver Röpke** underlined the Committee's engagement and support for Belarusian civil society, saying: 'Today's plenary debate and the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding are a clear expression of the EESC's deep and lasting commitment to the democratic future of the country and its people. This is not just about symbolic gestures; it is about giving space, voice and visibility to those who are silenced at home.'

The MoU will focus on the implementation of joint initiatives and events to raise awareness of the internal situation in Belarus with respect to human rights violations, with more than 1200 people currently in prison. Another of the main objectives of the agreement is support for and promotion of independent media representatives and journalists.

'Preventive arrests for contact with dissidents are common under this regime. The regime destroys the ties between those who escaped and those who stayed,' **Mr Gnyot** said, adding: 'People inside the country face arrest just for talking to those who have managed to escape. But they do not turn away from their friends or beliefs. They still find secret ways to stay in touch.' (at)



[EESC calls for stronger, fairer European Pillar of Social Rights that leaves no one behind](#)

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) has called on the European Commission to adopt a more ambitious and inclusive approach to implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR). First introduced in 2017, the EPSR sets out 20 principles aimed at promoting fair labour markets and strong welfare systems across the EU.

While the current action plan (2021–2025) has led to progress in employment and social inclusion, the EESC believes the next phase must go further. EESC president **Oliver Röpke** stressed that the EPSR should be a practical tool for building a people-focused Union. He urged the Commission to deliver a new action plan that produces concrete results and strengthens the EU's social dimension.

European Commission Executive Vice-President **Roxana Mînzatu** supported this vision, saying that a public consultation was being launched on the next EPSR action plan. She described the EPSR as both a 'compass and shield', essential for guiding citizens through employment challenges and societal changes.

Representing the Polish Presidency of the Council of the EU, Deputy Minister **Katarzyna Nowakowska** acknowledged recent progress in reducing poverty — 2.8 million people had been lifted out of poverty last year — but said that more work is needed. She also noted that shifting geopolitical dynamics demand renewed focus on social policy.

In the opinion [The New Action Plan on the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights](#), the EESC calls for binding measures, stronger governance and actionable proposals to ensure that social rights are fully realised across the EU. It positions the EPSR as a key instrument for creating a fairer, more inclusive Europe that truly leaves no one behind. (Im)



[The EESC is the first EU body to endorse the Declaration of principles for a gender-equal society](#)

At its June plenary session, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) became the first EU body to formally endorse the [Declaration of principles for a gender-equal society](#), backing the European Commission's Roadmap for Women's Rights. This move sends a clear signal that urgent, concrete action is needed to close persistent gender gaps.

According to its [Global Gender Gap Report](#), it will take another 134 years to close the gender gap worldwide if progress continues at the current pace. EESC President **Oliver Röpké** stressed this urgency: 'We don't have 134 years to wait for gender equality – and we won't. The EESC reaffirms its unwavering commitment to closing the gap, standing with our EU and international partners to ensure women's rights are firmly embedded in every EU policy.'

In a video message, European Commissioner for Equality, Preparedness and Crisis Management, **Hadja Lahbib**, thanked the EESC for its leadership, stating: 'Achieving gender equality takes all of us. It is no longer enough to say that equality is at the heart of our Union. We must defend it.'

Belén Sanz Luque, UN Women Regional Director for Europe and Central Asia, added: 'Thirty years after the Beijing Platform for Action, social barriers still block gender equality across the world. The EU must lead by example, building stronger solidarity and investing in real progress for women and girls everywhere.'

The European Commission's [Roadmap for Women's Rights](#), together with its Declaration of principles for a gender-equal society, sets out concrete principles to advance gender equality and protect women's rights across the EU: ending gender-based violence, closing the pay gap, ensuring fair working conditions, protecting health, promoting political participation and supporting inclusive education.

To support these goals, the EESC adopted a [resolution](#) committing to real action. It pledges to work with civil society and young people, address overlapping discrimination, defend key rights such as access to reproductive health and care systems, and push for inclusive policies backed by data. The EESC will now work closely with EU institutions and Member States to turn these principles into real progress. (gb)



[EESC wants stronger, binding action for second half of EU Disability Strategy](#)

At its June 2025 plenary session, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) adopted a [forward-looking opinion](#) urging the European Commission to take more ambitious and binding action in the second half of the implementation phase of the [EU Strategy on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities \(2021-2030\)](#). The strategy aims to ensure full inclusion and equal rights for persons with disabilities across Europe, aligning with the [UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities \(UNCRPD\)](#).

The EESC welcomed the Commission's ongoing commitment and acknowledged the positive impact of initiatives such as the [EU Disability Card](#), the [AccessibleEU](#) Centre and guidance on independent living.

However, it criticised the lack of legal force behind many of these actions, which has limited their effectiveness in practice.

Rapporteur **Ioannis Vardakastanis** emphasised that the strategy must not stall halfway through its 10-year programme. He called for new, tangible action that improves the daily lives of persons with disabilities, combats discrimination and promotes community-based services over institutionalisation.

To ensure meaningful progress, the EESC proposed several targeted measures: a Disability Employment and Skills Guarantee, modelled on the Youth Guarantee; a directive on freedom of movement for persons with disabilities; establishment of a fully-fledged EU Accessibility Agency with regulatory powers; greater protection for women and girls with disabilities, including a ban on forced sterilisation; a Fund for Accessible Housing to address housing challenges; mutual recognition of assistive technologies across Member States and anti-discrimination safeguards in AI and algorithmic management.

The EESC also called for a dedicated budget under the next Multiannual Financial Framework and for meaningful consultation with persons with disabilities and their representative organisations throughout the strategy's implementation phase. (Im)



Civil Society Speaks: Public Diplomacy – in Brussels and beyond

On 25 June, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) organised an event as part of European Public Diplomacy Week, held for the first time by the European External Action Service (EEAS). The participants highlighted a fundamental dimension of European action: the contribution of civil society to public diplomacy, from international trade to water, through enlargement.

During **Public Diplomacy Week**, which took place in Brussels from 23-27 June 2025, different institutions engaged in discussions and presented public diplomacy and international people-to-people initiatives. As such, the event *From trade to water: civil society's soft diplomacies*, organised by the EESC's External Relations section, brought together EESC members and experts from trade, water and enlargement to talk about

the engagement of civil society in these three areas.

Opening the event, EESC Vice-President for Communication **Laurențiu Plosceanu** said: 'When official diplomacy has limited outreach due to political or other issues, civil society can provide added value.'

In her keynote speech **Vesna Kos**, EU Ambassador to the Council of Europe, described civil society as an engine of soft power shaping diplomacy in real time, where power should not only be measured in tanks, tariffs and treaties, but in the trust built by civil society.

Civil society's soft power in the area of trade agreements is undeniable, but, as **Tanja Buzek**, EESC member and Vice-President of the EESC's International Trade Follow-up Committee, pointed out 'there is a gap for civil society to engage during the negotiations and this is a gap that needs to finally be closed.'

Discussing how civil society can play an active role in EU accession, the participants stressed that enlargement is not merely a technical process of legislative harmonisation. It is a human dynamic, a rapprochement between citizens, workers and organisations that share the same democratic and social values. In this process, the involvement of civil society is crucial, as enlargement also means transformation of societies.

The event concluded with the panel on the theme of tackling water scarcity together with the Global South.

EESC member **Milena Angelova**, rapporteur on Blue Diplomacy, and **Thomas Rebermark**, Director of the Swedish Water House at the Stockholm International Water Institute (SIWI), mentioned that water can become an instrument for peace and development, because civil society organisations are the connective tissue in the global water and climate landscape, ensuring that water resource management is rooted in the realities of those most affected by water scarcity and climate change. (at)



Housing and social progress at the heart of high-level civil society talks

Top representatives of organised civil society have met in Warsaw to call for stronger EU action on living and working conditions.

On 25 and 26 June 2025, the presidents and secretaries-general of the EU's Economic and Social Councils (ESCs) and the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) held their annual meeting to discuss how to improve living and working conditions across the EU. ESCs from 13 Member States participated, alongside officials from the Polish Presidency of the Council of the EU.

Under the theme *Improving living and working conditions across the EU: the role of organised civil society*, discussions focused on economic governance, housing and employment.

EESC president **Oliver Röpke** stressed the need for civil dialogue, calling it 'a necessity' in the face of growing social and economic challenges. With housing becoming increasingly unaffordable, especially for young people, low-income families and the elderly, participants called for coordinated EU and national action. Key proposals included investing in social and affordable housing, tackling homelessness, reforming EU fiscal rules to allow more public investment and supporting energy-efficient renovations.

The ESCs and the EESC also called for policies that anticipate labour market changes driven by digitalisation and demographic shifts. Priorities included boosting reskilling and digital skills, improving work-life balance and promoting decent, secure jobs.

The meeting concluded with a call to keep social progress at the heart of EU policymaking. **Magdalena Sobkowiak-Czarnecka**, representing the Polish Presidency of the Council of the EU, commended the way civil society was being substantially involved, saying that this was 'invaluable in shaping our agenda and influencing progress at EU level.'

The annual meeting, which took place in Warsaw, was organised jointly by the EESC and the Polish Councils, the Social Dialogue Council (RDS) and the Council for Public Benefit Activity (RDPP) under the Polish Council Presidency. (tk)



Energy production must be more inclusive and affordable, in both urban and rural areas

On 11 June, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC)'s Section for Transport, Energy, Infrastructure and the Information Society (TEN) and the European Commission's Directorate-General for Energy (DG ENER) joined forces to hold a conference on [Delivering affordable energy in Europe](#) in Brussels.

The event emphasised that the EU must be able to produce energy more inclusively and affordably and Europeans must be able to play an active role, including in rural areas. To this end, the EU must focus on consumer engagement, protection for vulnerable people and sustainable investment.

Speaking at the conference, TEN president **Baiba Miltoviča** said: 'People at risk of poverty or social exclusion are confronted with disproportionate challenges in accessing energy. In recent years, the vulnerability of our energy system has become more than evident. Our aim is to boost Europe's strategic autonomy and competitiveness and achieve a greener and more sustainable economy and society. We are committed to developing a strategy for affordable, secure and sustainable energy that promotes the active role of consumers and ensures fairness for the most vulnerable.'

The EESC has been working on these issues for a long time and has held an annual conference since 2021 to take stock of the situation.

Energy poverty remains a major concern for Europeans, although in 2024 EU measures resulted in a fall in the number of Europeans unable to keep their homes warm enough for the first time since 2021. According to [Eurostat](#), in 2024 energy poverty impacted 9.2% of Europeans, compared to 10.6% in 2023, 9.3% in 2022 and 6.9% in 2021.

To try to protect vulnerable consumers from having their electricity supply disconnected, the European Commission presented the [Affordable Energy Action Plan](#) in February 2025 as part of the Clean Industrial Deal. The plan focuses on reducing energy prices for citizens, businesses and communities across the EU and proposes a series of measures to lower energy bills, fast-track cost-saving and step up structural reforms for our energy system.



**YOUTH
AT THE
EESC**

[European Parliament commends EESC's youth engagement efforts in 2023 discharge report](#)

In significant recognition of youth participation in EU policymaking, the European Parliament (EP) has officially commended the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) on the [EESC Youth Test](#) in the 2023 discharge report.

The **EESC Youth Test** is designed to ensure that the voices and perspectives of young people are systematically considered when the EESC draws up its opinions. It represents a forward-thinking model for inclusive governance and is already influencing how institutions approach youth participation. The European Commission has based its Youth Check on the EESC's model and the Parliament has requested multiple meetings with the EESC as they begin to plan its version of the tool.

In the [2022 discharge](#), the European Parliament had already 'welcomed the efforts made by the Committee to enhance youth involvement in policymaking'. However, the [2023 discharge](#) goes a step further. In addition to the Youth Test, it explicitly commends the EESC on its proactive and innovative approach to youth participation. This is thanks to the work of the EESC Youth Group, launched in 2023, and initiatives by EESC sections such as the [youth delegate to COP](#) and the [Youth Climate and Sustainability Roundtables](#).

This commendation by the European Parliament not only validates the EESC's work but also sets a precedent for other EU institutions to follow suit in integrating youth perspectives into the heart of EU policymaking. (epv)



Young voices, big ideas: EESC youth test brings energy to EYE2025

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) attended the European Youth Event (EYE2025), organised by the European Parliament in Strasbourg. With over 9,000 participants from 160 nationalities and more than 450 activities, EYE2025 was full of energy, ideas and youth-led action.

At the heart of the EESC's participation was a dedicated session on the EU Youth Test at the EESC, featuring **Katrina Leitane**, Youth Group president, and **Chloe Cauchi**, Board member of the European Youth Forum (YFJ). It focused on climate change and its economic impact, echoing one of the final recommendations from this year's EESC flagship youth event, Your Europe, Your Say (YEYS): to develop a coherent strategy on climate change.

The session attracted young people from across the EU and candidate countries, including members of national youth councils, local organisations, and young people keen to have their say in EU decisions.

The Youth Test is designed to ensure that young people's voices are heard when new EU laws and policies are developed. At EYE2025, young participants had the chance to learn about the Test, share feedback and explore how it could help shape the future. One participant even shared that he felt inspired to join his local youth council after the session—a true testament to the power of meaningful engagement.

Beyond its dedicated session, the EESC's work was acknowledged in several high-level discussions throughout the event. **Commissioner Glenn Micallef** referenced the Youth Test during his Youth Policy Dialogue, while **MEP Marcos Ros Sempere** highlighted the EESC's role in amplifying the voice of civil society during a panel on youth challenges in urban and rural areas. The EESC was also mentioned during the

hemicycle session on fair employment pathways.

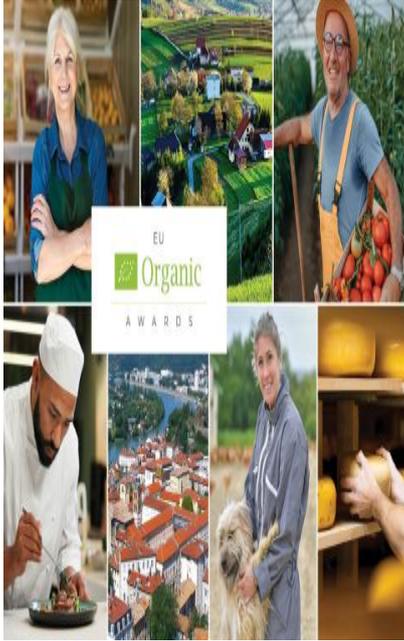
Throughout the event, participants joined sessions with EU leaders, including Vice-Presidents **Sabine Verheyen, Nicolae Ștefănuță and Pina Picierno**. In her final speech, Ms Picierno called for a 'youth check' to be included in every stage of EU decision-making. 'The future belongs to you,' she told the audience, 'so your voice must be part of every law we create.'

Outside the Parliament, the EYE Village, co-organised with the European Youth Forum, was full of creative spaces, youth-led projects and organisations sharing their work.

EYE2025 was more than just a two-day event. The ideas shared by participants will be compiled into a Youth Ideas Report, set to be delivered to EU decision-makers later this year. Many expressed hope that the Youth Test will become a regular tool to ensure young people are part of every political conversation—not just at

events like this.

As Europe faces big challenges, EYE2025 showed that young people are ready to lead. They are not just talking about the future; they are helping build it. (ks/epv)



[EESC celebrates finalists in organic excellence awards for SMEs, retail and gastronomy](#)

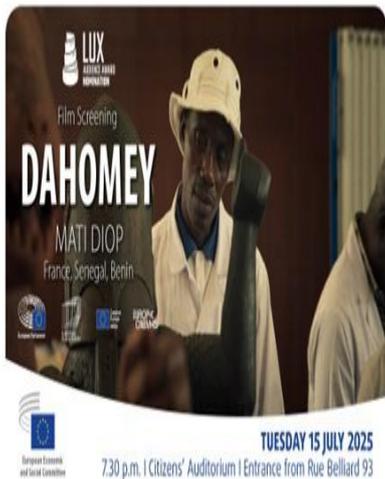
The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) has announced the finalists to be honoured in the 2025 EU Organic Awards, spotlighting innovation and sustainability in three key categories: best organic SME, best organic retailer and best organic restaurant/food service. These awards recognise impactful contributions that connect organic production with everyday consumer experiences.

Finalists include outstanding projects from Austria, Romania, Spain, Germany, Slovenia and Greece which range from artisan bakeries and local farmers' markets to organic restaurants and dairy producers in rural communities.

Part of the EU's push for more sustainable food systems, the awards aim to boost visibility for organic best practices and support the goal of 25% of EU farmland being farmed organically by 2030.

The winners will be announced at the official ceremony in Brussels on 23 September 2025, during EU Organic Day.

For full details of the finalists, the award categories and the upcoming ceremony, visit the [EU Organic Awards webpage](#). (ks)



Film evening: Dahomey, a documentary on artefacts looted in the colonial era

This summer's film screenings at the EESC continue with the screening of a Golden Bear winner which looks at France's efforts to confront its colonial past and make restitution. The film screenings are organised in collaboration with the LUX European Audience Film Award.

The European Economic and Social Committee has hosted the screening of *Dahomey*, a documentary by director **Mati Diop** and winner of the Golden Bear at the 74th Berlin Film Festival.

Dahomey tells the story of the return of 26 royal treasures, stolen by French colonial troops in 1892, from Paris to present-day Benin. For some students at the University of Abomey-Calavi, France's restitution efforts are seen as a drop in the ocean given the number of artefacts yet to be repatriated to their countries of origin.

French-Senegalese director Diop, known for the film *Atlantique* ('Atlantics'), which won the Grand Prix at the Cannes Film Festival in 2019, has masterfully woven elements of fiction into *Dahomey*, creating an immersive experience for the viewer.

The EESC regularly hosts film screenings as part of its ongoing support for European cinema and ongoing appreciation of the creative industries. Nominated for the 2025 LUX European Audience Film Award, *Dahomey* was shown on 15 July at the EESC's Citizens' Auditorium. (cwb)



EESC marks support for disability rights through photo exhibition

The EESC is hosting *To Belong*, a photo exhibition by Danish photographer Andreas Haubjerg that powerfully captures the lived realities of people with disabilities.

Already shown in Copenhagen, Paris and Berlin, the exhibition will be on display at the EESC from 16 July to 19 September.

To mark the start of the Danish Presidency of the Council of the EU, twenty remarkable photographs, curated and held by the Disabled People's Organisations Denmark, each offer a glimpse into the experience of a person living with a disability. In the accompanying descriptions, the subjects share the challenges they have faced, while also expressing their wish to be seen beyond their disability. Photographing the subjects in settings familiar to them, Andreas Haubjerg has captured the innate

human need for connection and community.

Aligning with one of the EESC's 2025 communication priorities, *Inclusive Societies*, this cultural initiative seeks to raise awareness of the barriers many individuals face, while also emphasising the shared values and experiences that bring us together. (cwb)



[Photo exhibition on sustainability in construction inspires visitors](#)

On 2 July, the Civil Society Organisations' Group of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) opened the photo exhibition [Giving form to the future](#) at the [Danish Society of Engineers \(IDA\)](#) as part of its conference '[Building green and inclusive - Making our communities future-proof](#)'.

The Civil Society Organisations' Group organised this exhibition in partnership with IDA and the Danish architecture firm [BIG - Bjarke Ingels Group](#), which, over the past 20 years, has grown from its founding to a company of 700 employees, with offices in Copenhagen, London, Barcelona, New York, Shanghai, Los Angeles, Zurich and Oslo.

The exhibition focuses on sustainability in construction and presents nine projects coordinated by BIG - in Copenhagen, Seville, Gelephu and beyond, ranging from a container terminal and an industrial building to a museum and affordable housing. The exhibition consists of a series of panels and animations and was on display at IDA from 2 to 8 July.

With its annual cultural event, the Civil Society Organisations' Group aims to raise awareness for future-relevant issues. This year's initiative complemented and supported its work on promoting inclusive and equitable societies, decent, sustainable and affordable housing and the achievement of the [Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#).

Séamus Boland, President of the Civil Society Organisations' Group, opened the exhibition together with representatives of the two partner organisations, **Juliane Marie Neiiendam**, Member of the Civil Society Organisations' Group, Chair of IDA Copenhagen and Chair of IDA's Self-Employed Members, and **Kai-Uwe Bergmann**, partner at BIG.

More than 100 participants attended the opening event, expressing enthusiasm for the initiative and being impressed by the projects on display.

Mr Boland said: 'The works on display demonstrate that the Golden Ratio is no longer the benchmark for architects. Architects and construction professionals are already incorporating the United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals'.

The Group organised this exhibition to highlight the need for sustainable construction and to showcase good practices. 'Sustainable construction is an efficient tool for building inclusive, climate-resilient communities and advancing the SDGs,' Mr Boland concluded. (jk)

NEWS FROM THE GROUPS



[Tackling societal challenges through trusted partnerships](#)

By Stefano Mallia, President of the EESC Employers' Group

The EESC Employers' Group held an Extraordinary Meeting in Copenhagen entitled *Tackling societal challenges through trusted partnerships*, under the Danish Presidency of the Council of the EU. The event offered a platform to examine how trust-based cooperation between governments, employers and social partners can enhance Europe's competitiveness in the face of structural transformation. The message is clear: Europe cannot afford to treat competitiveness, security and sustainability as separate tracks. They are interdependent pillars.

Denmark's leadership sets an example in reconciling climate ambition with economic dynamism and labour market cohesion. The deeper lesson

lies in governance: the Danish model shows what is possible when trust, dialogue and long-term planning replace fragmentation and short-termism.

The first panel focused on Denmark's labour market model, widely seen as a benchmark for balancing flexibility and security, while the second panel examined Denmark's green transition, exploring how early stakeholder involvement and strong public-private partnerships have allowed Denmark to decouple growth from emissions.

A recurring theme was the role of technology and lifelong learning. As AI reshapes workplaces, Denmark's system of autonomous training rights — ten days per year negotiated via collective agreements — was cited as an innovative response.

Regarding the green transition, there was scepticism about consumers' willingness to absorb higher costs associated with sustainable products. While Danish surveys show high support for climate action, 'at the supermarket checkout, price still wins,' one participant noted.

Denmark's experience offers a source of transferable lessons. Social trust, mutual accountability and regulatory coherence emerged as essential ingredients to navigate the green and digital transitions while remaining competitive.

The event was also a call to strengthen the role of social partners in shaping EU policy. We must stop asking whether social dialogue and competitiveness are compatible. They are inseparable. If we want a strong

Europe in a changing world, we must build it on cooperation, not confrontation.



[The cost of living crisis demands a comprehensive rethink of the EU's economic model](#)

By the EESC Workers' Group

The cost of living is a main concern for EU citizens, impacting their quality of life and economic well-being. Factors such as housing prices, energy and food costs, and inflation, can strain household budgets, particularly for low- and middle-income individuals and families. To address this, the EESC adopted a [package of seven sector-specific opinions](#), culminating in a [comprehensive umbrella opinion](#). Together, these opinions underscore the EESC's belief that the challenges and uncertainties the EU faces demand not incremental adjustments but a deeper structural and strategic shift in Europe's economic model.

The goal is to provide clear, actionable guidance and recommendations for EU institutions, national governments, social partners and civil society. Key priorities were:

1. ***The importance of social dialogue and collective bargaining***: supporting the role of trade unions and collective bargaining in negotiating fair wages and working conditions;
 2. ***EU action to address the causes of cost-of-living increases (i.e. global factors, corporate profiteering, inadequate social protection, tax policies favouring the wealthy)***: strengthening social safety nets to support workers during periods of economic hardship or unemployment;
 3. ***Calling for clear EU guidance, better reporting and quality jobs with strong worker protection***, ensuring that wages keep pace with inflation and the rising cost of living, allowing workers to maintain their purchasing power. The EU must lead by example in ensuring that all jobs are good jobs, and that no worker is left behind;
 4. ***Actions to address dysfunctions in the Single Market that drive up prices***: 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;
 5. ***Underscoring the importance of services of general interest in easing crisis impacts, calling for greater public investment in social infrastructure, housing and transport***: promoting policies that make housing more affordable and accessible, particularly for low- and middle-income workers;
 6. ***Energy poverty***: has become a critical dimension of the cost-of-living crisis across Europe. With energy and transportation costs rising sharply in recent years — due to global market volatility, the green transition and geopolitical tensions — the burden falls heaviest on low- and middle-income workers, who already face stagnant wages and limited financial margins;
 7. ***Avoiding returning to austerity and more focused European Central Bank (ECB) policies***: this means the ECB should not only focus narrowly on inflation and austerity policies but consider the broader impact of its decisions on jobs, public investment and everyday living costs – especially for the most vulnerable.
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[The future of housing in the EU must be greener and more inclusive](#)

By the EESC Civil Society Organisations' Group

Reimagining the design of cities, communities and housing is essential in order to face current challenges. Civil society organisations (CSOs) have a key role to play in steering this transformation. Sustainability and the right to housing must be at the heart of future strategies. The EU could contribute to this by increasing European funding for affordable housing and supporting the social economy.

Making housing, public spaces and communities in the EU future-proof was the focus of a [conference](#) organised by the [Civil Society Organisations' Group](#) of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) on 2 July. The event was one of the first high-level conferences to be held under the Danish Presidency of the Council of the EU, which began on 1 July. It took place at the [Danish Society of Engineers \(IDA\)](#) in Copenhagen.

Séamus Boland, President of the Civil Society Organisations' Group, said: 'In the face of climate change, increasing inequalities and the housing crisis, there is no choice but to embrace change in the way that we design, build and develop urban housing and public spaces. There is much that other countries could learn from Denmark, whose equitable housing policy, accessible to everyone irrespective of income, goes back over 100 years. Today, the Danish non-profit housing sector accounts for a fifth of the market and is characterised by high energy standards and mixed, inclusive communities'.

Mr Boland emphasised the need to create spaces that serve both environmental objectives and social cohesion. Sustainability and the right to housing should be at the centre of future housing strategies. Co-creation and co-ownership must go hand in hand to build greener and more inclusive housing and public spaces. The president of the group, representing civil society from the 27 EU Member States, added that the EU could help by 'increasing European affordable housing funds, strengthening EU renovation programmes and supporting the social economy, notably cooperative ownership models'.

Sophie Hæstorp Andersen, Danish Minister for Social Affairs and Housing, said: 'Affordable and sustainable housing is a top priority for me – also during our EU Presidency. By building greener and more inclusive communities today, we're not only addressing today's challenges, but laying the foundation for stronger, more resilient societies tomorrow. It's part of building a safer, more competitive and greener Europe. I look forward to continuing this important conversation at the conference I'll be hosting in September on affordable and sustainable housing'.

Read the full [press release](#).

The conference conclusions and recommendations will be available [here](#) shortly.

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