



EESC Info

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A bridge between Europe and organised civil society

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EDITORIAL

Standing Up for Democracy, Speaking Up for Europe



Editorial

By EESC President Oliver Röpke

When I took office in April 2023, Europe was at a crossroads. War had returned to our continent, trust in democracy was under strain and citizens were facing a cost-of-living crisis, high inflation and the twin green and digital transitions. From the very first day, I made clear that our pledge would be to stand up for democracy and speak up for Europe. This was not a slogan but a mission.

In these two years the EESC has proven it is more than an advisory body. It has become the voice of Europe's civil society, speaking up for democracy, social justice and sustainability. We launched the Enlargement Candidate Members initiative, giving 147 civil society representatives from nine candidate countries a seat at the table. They shaped opinions, joined debates and showed that enlargement begins not at accession but with participation. With Commission support, the initiative is secured until 2027 and will grow further, including Kosovo in the next phase.

We also defended democracy at home and abroad. Civil Society Week has become a flagship event for participation. We worked with the European Parliament to mobilise citizens for the 2024 elections and supported the Commission's Defence of Democracy package. Through our Rule of Law Group we carried out missions to candidate countries and gave visibility to journalists and activists. The EESC has become a recognised watchdog for democracy, rights and the rule of law.

The social dimension was central to my presidency. We brought housing back onto the European agenda, created the Youth Test, advanced gender equality and built cooperation with UN Women. We placed water security on the map with our Blue Deal. We made sure that young people, women and vulnerable groups had a structured voice in Europe's future.

Looking outwards, we turned the EESC into a Global Gateway for Civil Society. We built a milestone partnership with the African Union, revived the EU Brazil Round Table, strengthened our voice at the United Nations and stood as Europe's democratic voice at the G20 Social Summit. These steps showed that democracy is not only a European project but a global one.

The debate on the next multiannual financial framework has confirmed the need for a strong EU budget that matches our ambitions. The current proposal is not sufficient, especially as enlargement will require substantial new resources. Cohesion policy must remain a strategic investment tool and enlargement must be properly funded.

As my mandate comes to an end, I am proud that the EESC is more visible, more relevant and more united than ever. We stood up for democracy when it was under pressure. We gave civil society a real voice in enlargement. We defended social justice and equality. We projected Europe's values to the world. This is the legacy we leave to the next presidency. Europe needs organised civil society more than ever and the EESC has shown that it is ready to deliver.

DIARY DATES

21-23 October 2025

EESC plenary session



THE SURPRISE GUEST

Our surprise guest is German author Dr Heike Specht, who this summer presented her book, [The First Ones of Their Kind](#), at the EESC Women's Forum. The book tells the stories of women who were the first to step into high political office – and whose bravery and vision opened doors for generations to come. For EESC Info, Dr Specht reflects on what it's like to be a 'first' – as a woman in politics.

***Heike Specht** studied history and literature in Munich. She earned her doctorate researching the family of Lion Feuchtwanger, the famous German Jewish author persecuted under the Nazi regime. She worked for several years in publishing, as an editor. Author of several books, she now lives in Zurich and works as a freelance writer. In October 2025, her first novel 'Die Frau der Stunde' (The Woman of the Hour) will be released. You can read more about her work on her [website](#).*



TO BE A FIRST

By Heike Specht

History loves its 'firsts' but breaking barriers means standing alone. Every woman in power knows this, and lately it's been getting even harder.

Kamala Harris has spoken again and again about walking into rooms where no one looked like her. That is the essence of being 'the first'. Yes, it's a triumph – a crack in the glass ceiling – but it is also an exhausting act of endurance. Every man who came before her in the White House had dozens of look-alikes in the history books. Harris did not. In the list of her predecessors, we find five Johns, three Thomases and three Charleses, but not one woman.

To be the first is to be conspicuous. To have no blueprint. To blaze a trail while constantly explaining yourself and defending your right to even be

there.

Men in suits are rarely asked why they want power. 19th-century historian and unabashed misogynist Heinrich von Treitschke declared that 'authority is male. That goes without saying,' and this way of thinking lingers. As historian Mary Beard notes, the default image of power remains male. As Pierre Bourdieu put it, male dominance endures precisely because it never has to explain itself.

For women, the price of entry is steeper. Along with the grit and talent needed for any extraordinary career, 'firsts' endure relentless scrutiny of their very presence. The bar is higher, the patience thinner, the margin for error smaller. Faith Whittlesey's old line still rings true: 'Ginger Rogers did everything Fred Astaire did, but she did it backwards and in high heels.'

For decades, women's politics was patronised, treated as a niche of 'soft issues'. However, it was women such as Elisabeth Selbert, Käthe Stöbel and Simone Veil who planted the seeds of modern democracy: gender equality, public health, inclusive marriage laws and bodily autonomy. Far from marginal, these policies shaped the societies we live in. Still, even in the 1990s, German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder could wave off the Ministry for Family Affairs as 'all that fuss' ('Gedöns').

The common argument against gender quotas is that 'lawmakers represent everyone'. But women are not a 'special interest', they are half the population. And history shows that when women hold office, there are advances in women's rights – maternity protections, gender equality clauses, legalised abortion, criminalisation of marital rape. The record is clear.

Christine Lagarde once quipped: 'If it had been the Lehman Sisters, not the Lehman Brothers, the world might look different today.' She wasn't arguing that women are better, but that diversity is. Different voices disrupt groupthink. Excluded from male networks, women built new strategies – and with them, new possibilities.

That's why 'firsts' still matter. We still have not seen a female German *Bundespräsidentin*, no female US president, no female French president.

And right now, it feels as though women's way of doing politics is being shoved aside by a return to broad-shouldered bravado – embodied, not least, by the new occupant of the White House. In the fall of 2024, Kamala Harris – America's first female vice-president – ran against Donald Trump to become its first female president. She lost.

The question now is not just what comes next, but who. Harris's mother put it best: 'Kamala, you may be the first to do many things, make sure you're not the last.'



ONE QUESTION TO...

Although often described as the beating heart of Europe's innovation economy, the role of start-ups and scale-ups remains precarious. What conditions must be met for them to play an important role in innovation and economic growth? Mira-Maria Danisman, rapporteur for the opinion [Europe's start-up and scale-ups](#) lists them all.

EUROPE'S START-UPS AND SCALE-UPS: ENGINES OF GROWTH, IF WE LET THEM

By Mira-Maria Danisman

Start-ups and scale-ups are often described as the beating heart of Europe's innovation economy. They are the restless challengers, the ventures that turn fresh scientific discoveries or bold ideas into products and services with the potential to transform industries. From Parisian AI labs to Stockholm's green technology pioneers, these young firms symbolise Europe's capacity to compete globally, and strengthen its resilience and strategic autonomy. When they succeed, they create jobs, attract investment, and inject dynamism into sectors.

Yet their role in the EU economy remains precarious. Unlike in the United States or parts of Asia, too many European start-ups never fully graduate into global champions. Instead, they fall into what we entrepreneurs call the '*valley of death*' – that fragile stage between early innovation and market success. If start-ups are vital to the EU economy as engines of innovation, their ability to scale up determines whether Europe reaps the rewards at home or loses them abroad.

For start-ups and scale-ups to fulfil their potential, a number of conditions for growth must be met. The first is a regulatory landscape that works with, not against, entrepreneurs. Right now, complexity and administrative burdens are cited as the number one obstacle by European founders. Excessive paperwork, payment delays, and fragmented rules across Member States drain time and energy that should be devoted to innovation. Simplifying regulations and truly harmonising the single market would allow Europe's start-ups to act on a continental rather than merely national stage.

The second condition is access to funding that grows with ambition. Many European ventures secure initial seed capital, but financing often dries up during the critical scaling phase. As a result, too many founders turn to foreign investors or relocate entirely. If Europe wants its brightest ideas to flourish locally, it must unlock capital at scale – through dedicated EU

investment vehicles, deeper capital market integration, and tax systems that encourage long-term risk-taking. Without this financial backbone, the EU risks becoming a talent incubator for ecosystems elsewhere.

A third requirement is talent. Europe's start-ups face an acute shortage of skilled workers, whether in advanced tech fields, entrepreneurship, or research. Visa hurdles and slow procedures for highly skilled workers from outside the EU only add to the challenge. To compete globally, Europe must both attract international experts and invest in its own long-term pipeline – through stronger STEM education,



entrepreneurial training, and flexible labour markets that reward mobility and innovation. Put simply, ideas are abundant, but without people to build them, they remain unrealised.

Finally, start-ups need access to cutting-edge infrastructure and markets. World-class research labs, supercomputers, and digital networks are no longer luxuries but prerequisites in the race for technological leadership. Equally, Europe's internal market is still failing to live up to its promise: 70% of SMEs operate only within their home country, with only a quarter exporting to another EU state. Turning the potential of the single market into concrete market power would dramatically expand opportunities for scaling businesses.

If Europe is serious about making start-ups and scale-ups the drivers of prosperity, it must go beyond celebrating innovation and start building the conditions that allow it to grow. There have been encouraging first steps, such as the EU's start-up and scale-up strategy and scoreboard, that suggest momentum – but they must translate into lived reality for founders.

Europe has everything it needs to lead – what it lacks is the political will. The time for half-measures is over. If Europe dares to match the ambition of its entrepreneurs, it can turn today's start-ups into tomorrow's global champions, shaping not only markets but the future itself.



TO THE POINT

AI algorithms are the invisible gatekeepers of today's information space, shaping what citizens in Europe see and what they don't. By amplifying sensational content while sidelining independent voices, they create space for disinformation and reinforce harmful stereotypes. EESC member Tatjana Babrauskienė, rapporteur of the information report [Social media](#)

[and AI algorithms: ensuring the right to accurate information and the visibility of high-quality content across Europe, especially about Eastern and Central Europe](#), explains why greater transparency and stronger EU action are needed to protect media pluralism and democratic debate.



THE SILENT GATEKEEPERS: HOW AI ALGORITHMS SHAPE THE EASTERN EUROPEAN NARRATIVE

By Tatjana Babrauskienė

In today's digital era, AI algorithms are the unseen gatekeepers of information, wielding immense power over what we see and what we don't see. Designed to maximise engagement, these algorithms often amplify sensational and divisive content, a trend that disproportionately affects Eastern European voices. The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), in its [report](#), has starkly revealed how this digital ecosystem

suppresses independent journalism while enabling foreign disinformation to flourish.

This algorithmic bias creates a damaging feedback loop. Platforms, driven by their relentless pursuit of likes and shares, drown out nuanced, fact-based reporting. The result is a distorted reality in which stereotypes are reinforced and 'filter bubbles' hinder public discourse. This is acutely felt in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), where foreign influence operations - notably from Russia and China - cleverly exploit local languages and cultural contexts to sow discord.

The case of Belarus is a powerful example of this dynamic. The oppressive regime has used digital suppression and algorithmic bias to systematically marginalise independent media. Social media platforms often default to Russian-language content, silencing independent Belarusian voices and reinforcing state propaganda. This problem is further compounded by platforms like Telegram and VKontakte, which operate outside EU regulatory frameworks, creating dangerous blind spots in content moderation.

To reclaim the digital narrative, a multi-pronged strategy is essential. It must begin with algorithmic transparency from platforms, with public disclosure of how content is prioritised to ensure accountability for diverse voices. This is a key principle of the Digital Services Act (DSA). Furthermore, a standardised framework for algorithmic audits is crucial. The EESC is pushing for a dedicated European Oversight Authority for Digital Information - an autonomous body that would enforce the DSA and the AI Act, specifically targeting systemic biases that threaten media pluralism and fundamental rights.

The EU must also financially support independent CEE media. A dedicated fund could provide journalists with the resources needed for investigative reporting and media literacy programmes, empowering them to effectively counter disinformation. Combating foreign information manipulation is another vital front. The EU must impose stricter penalties on platforms that fail to address manipulative content, and require the platforms to proactively develop measures to detect foreign interference, supported by partnerships with cybersecurity firms and data access for researchers.

Finally, language sensitivity is paramount. Platforms must employ moderators with deep regional and socio-political knowledge to ensure fair treatment of local languages and dialects. The EESC emphasises that it is time to move beyond reductive labels like 'post-Soviet' and embrace narrative frameworks that honour the unique histories and identities of the Eastern European nations.

In conclusion, the dual nature of AI algorithms presents both a challenge and an opportunity. By prioritising transparency and accountability, platforms can become allies in the fight for a balanced digital space. At the same time, the EU must actively champion independent media and the rich narratives of Eastern European

nations. Only through these concerted efforts can we build a resilient and inclusive digital landscape that reflects the complexities and realities of the region.

EESC NEWS



Candidate Countries commend EESC for elevating civil society in enlargement process

At its plenary session on 17 July, the EESC held an enlargement forum focusing on *Building an inclusive future in the Enlarged EU: The role of social dialogue, civil society and youth engagement*. The civil society representatives from candidate countries commended the Committee's Enlargement Candidate Members initiative as a vital tool for shaping their countries' European integration process and bolstering public support for EU accession.

The event opened with a high-level debate featuring **Maida Gorčević**, Minister for European Affairs in Montenegro, **Orhan Murtezani**, Minister for European Affairs in North Macedonia, and **Antoine Kasel**, Director for Labour Mobility and International Affairs at the European Commission's Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion.

The forum brought together approximately 75 representatives from social partners and civil society organisations across the EU candidate countries. It formed part of the EESC's pioneering [Enlargement Candidate Members Initiative](#) (ECMI). The project's success has already led to additional financial backing by the European Commission for its reinforcement and permanent implementation.

EESC President **Oliver Röpké** said: 'We are trying to build a successful enlargement that puts civil society in the driving seat. Enlargement is not simply a geopolitical strategy: it is a promise to uphold democracy, rights and dignity for all.'

The Minister for European Affairs of Montenegro, **Ms Gorčević**, highlighted the close cooperation between the government and civil society organisations in the accession process and stressed that 'citizens are more likely to support reforms when they see members of their civil society organisations actively engaged in government policy.'

On the other hand, the Minister for European Affairs in North Macedonia, **Mr Murtezani**, described his country's story as complex but transformative and added that 'it is not easy to wait in line for 20 years, but this could be the example of resilience and persistence in achieving the final goal.'

Moved by the optimism and enthusiasm shown by the representatives of the candidate countries, **Mr Kasel** of the European Commission said: 'Talking to young people is key in this process, as building social dialogue and dialogue with the EU institutions is a matter of trust.'

The EESC opinion [*The importance of institutionalising civil and social dialogue in EU candidate and partner countries*](#), adopted following the discussions in the forum, calls for a genuine civil and social dialogue which must be a central pillar of the enlargement process.

The EESC members and rapporteurs for the opinion, **Ionuț Sibian**, **Decebal-Ștefăniță Pădure** and **Dumitru Fornea**, stressed that a structured and properly institutionalised civil and social dialogue is essential for ensuring stability, economic development and social cohesion in candidate and partner countries. (mt)



Danish Council Presidency will work for 'a strong Europe in a changing world'

The EESC's July plenary session hosted a debate on the political priorities of the current Presidency of the Council of the European Union, which started on 1 July and will come to an end on 31 December 2025. Under the motto 'A strong Europe in a changing world', the Danish Council Presidency will work for a secure, competitive and green EU, making sure that the EU takes more ownership of its own security and strengthens its competitiveness.

Europe is currently undergoing significant change, with uncertainty, global competition and increased conflict in a number of areas. 'For this reason – said **Marie Bjerre**, Denmark's Minister of European Affairs – we need a strong, competitive and green Europe. A Europe that is able to take responsibility for its own security. And a Europe that is able to innovate and compete at global level. Supporting Ukraine and moving forward on enlargement will be key'.

For his part, EESC President **Oliver Röpke** stressed that 'the Danish presidency arrives at a defining moment for Europe. Its priorities on security, competitiveness and the green transition closely align with the EESC's core concerns. We stand ready to provide practical expertise and reflect the voices of Europe's organised civil society in support of a resilient, values-based Europe that is connected to its people.' (mp)



EU Youth Test, first implemented by the EESC, hailed as a model for inclusion

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) has underlined its role as a frontrunner in youth participation, with EU Commissioner Glenn Micallef praising the body's pioneering Youth Test during a debate in Brussels.

Speaking at the EESC's July plenary session, **Mr Micallef** – Commissioner for Intergenerational Fairness, Youth, Culture and Sport – said the Committee was showing how young people could be treated not just as consultees but as equal partners in shaping EU policy.

'The challenges of housing, mental health, quality education and youth employment are not future concerns: they are today's priorities. Trust from young people is not automatic; it must be earned with real power and responsibility', he said.

The Youth Test, launched in September 2024, examines whether new EESC opinions adequately reflect young people's needs. To date, 40 opinions have undergone the process, with 27 adopted, and more than 70 youth organisations from across the EU and candidate countries are now involved. The initiative has inspired the European Commission's own forthcoming Youth Check in 2025, and has already been recognised by both the Commission and Parliament.

Commissioner Micallef pointed to new measures, including a proposed 50% increase in the Erasmus+ budget, as evidence of the Commission's determination to move from consultation to concrete policies.

Oliver Röpke, president of the EESC, said the EESC's Youth Group had been vital in driving change: 'We must ensure that young and older people alike can fully participate in society and the economy. The future of Europe is not something we wait for – it's something we build together'.

Set up in 2023, the Youth Group – made up of 12 EESC members – oversees the Youth Test and coordinates youth involvement across EU policy-making. Its president, **Katrīna Leitāne**, said the project had been demanding but was already 'resonating across Europe'.

Youth leaders also pressed for deeper reforms. **Rareș Voicu**, head of the European Youth Forum, urged the EU to make the Youth Check a formal part of its Better Regulation toolbox, while **Ozer Sahoglu**, from the EESC president's Youth Advisory Council, warned of worsening poverty, unaffordable housing and underfunded education and said that 'young people must be prioritised, not just heard'.

The EESC has a long track record of youth initiatives, including its Youth Delegate to COP scheme and the Your Europe, Your Say! programme. Its COP delegate scheme, launched in 2021, remains unique at EU level and drew almost 500 applications this year. (ks)



EESC demands a strategy to empower civil society across Europe

In July 2025, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) adopted a pivotal **opinion** urging the European Commission to develop a comprehensive EU strategy to support, protect and empower civil society. This comes amid growing threats to democratic values and shrinking civic space in several Member States.

The EESC's strategy proposes three pillars:

1. **A safe and enabling environment** – legal protections and safeguards to prevent erosion of civic space
2. **Sustainable and independent funding** – multiannual, flexible financial support and removal of legal and administrative hurdles
3. **Strengthened civic participation** – a new interinstitutional agreement and a civil society platform hosted by the EESC to foster dialogue on democracy, rights and the rule of law.

‘Civil society is a cornerstone of democracy. We must ensure it has the space, resources and recognition it needs to thrive,’ said rapporteurs **Pietro Barbieri**, **Peter Schmidt** and **Christa Schweng**.

The proposed platform would host annual conferences, monitor progress via a scoreboard and biennial reports and be piloted jointly by the European Commission, the EESC and its Liaison Group.

Positioning itself as the EU's ‘house of participatory democracy’, the EESC calls for regular reviews with the Commission, stronger engagement from the European Parliament and Council, and clear benchmarks to assess the quality of civil dialogue.

The opinion affirms that civil society is central to democratic renewal. By investing in structured dialogue and empowering CSOs, the EU can build a more inclusive and resilient EU. (Im)



[Towards an EU free from poverty: EESC calls for a comprehensive EU Anti-Poverty Strategy](#)

At its July 2025 plenary, the EESC adopted a landmark [opinion](#) urging the European Commission to develop a robust, rights-based EU Anti-Poverty Strategy. Poverty is framed not as an economic by-product but as a systemic injustice and a violation of fundamental rights.

The strategy calls for a multidimensional approach – addressing not only material deprivation but also social, psychological and gender-based inequalities. It proposes ambitious targets, including halving poverty by 2030 and improving measurement tools like AROPE and EU-SILC.

‘21% of people living in the richest part of the world are experiencing poverty: this is extremely unjust and a serious blow to human dignity.

The aim of the EU Anti-Poverty Strategy should therefore be the

eradication of poverty – here and now!’, said rapporteur **Krzysztof Balon**.

‘National governments need to finally take responsibility and step up measures to tackle poverty. Work should provide a solid foundation, which is why we call for active labour market policies, quality jobs and living wages. At the same time, access to services of general interest – such as water, electricity, housing and healthcare – should be guaranteed,’ co-rapporteur **Sophia Reisecker** stated.

The EESC supports full implementation of the Council Recommendation on Adequate Minimum Income and urges action on non-take-up of benefits due to administrative and digital barriers.

The opinion highlights growing in-work poverty and calls for fair wages, secure contracts and inclusive labour market policies. It also advocates lifelong learning and equal opportunities amid green and digital transitions.

Universal access to services is key, with support for the European Child Guarantee and an EU homelessness strategy. The EESC warns against digital exclusion and energy poverty, calling for inclusive national plans.

Intersectional vulnerabilities – linked to gender, migration, disability and age – require better data and anti-discrimination safeguards. The Committee opposes criminalising poverty and calls for equal access to justice.

To ensure impact, the EESC proposes appointing an EU Anti-Poverty Coordinator, aligning funding with progressive taxation and involving affected communities in policy-making.

With over 93 million EU citizens at risk, the EESC calls for bold, coordinated action to build a fairer, more inclusive Europe. (Im)



EESC proposes a roadmap to ease cost-of-living pressures and build resilience

The EESC has adopted recommendations to tackle Europe's cost-of-living crisis, stressing the need for both immediate relief and long-term reforms. Rising energy bills, soaring food prices and unaffordable housing are hitting households hard, exposing structural weaknesses in Europe's economic and social systems.

In its [opinion](#), which is part of a broader EESC package, the EESC calls for urgent EU and national action to protect vulnerable groups, promote fairness and strengthen resilience. 'Although inflation has started to slow, prices remain well above pre-crisis levels. This is hitting not only the most vulnerable but also the backbone of our society,' warned rapporteur **Thomas Kattnig**.

The EESC argues that short-term support must be combined with structural change, highlighting five key areas: ensuring access to essential services such as housing, energy and healthcare; reforming energy markets and phasing out fossil fuel subsidies; rebuilding Europe's industrial base and supply resilience; simplifying regulation to cut costs without lowering standards; and providing targeted social support, including minimum income schemes and rent subsidies.

The opinion places emphasis on housing, with rapporteur **Krzysztof Balon** urging a large-scale increase in affordable and social housing and more flexible EU State aid rules. Employment and skills are also central, with calls for fair wages, inclusive policies, support for the social economy and lifelong learning opportunities.

It also stresses the need for a future-ready economy. Rapporteur **Krister Andersson** underlined that strengthening the single market, promoting investment and managing the green and digital transitions fairly are vital to competitiveness and cohesion. (tk)



How cohesion policy, the Urban Agenda and civil society can help make housing affordable again

The EESC has called for urgent action on Europe's housing crisis, warning that rising rents and house prices are undermining social inclusion, labour mobility and economic competitiveness. In a recent [opinion](#), it argued that affordable housing must become a cornerstone of EU cohesion policy.

Between 2015 and 2023, average house prices and rents in the EU rose by 48%, while wages lagged. More than 10% of urban households now spend over 40% of their disposable income on housing. The upshot of this is that many workers cannot afford to live near where they work, and labour shortages are worsening in sectors such as healthcare, education and public services.

'This is not only about access to housing, but also about access to opportunity,' said **Elena Calistru**, rapporteur for the opinion. 'We need a shift in how we understand housing: from a commodity to a pillar of competitiveness, inclusion and cohesion.' The EESC warns that without

decisive action, inequality will deepen, and regional resilience will suffer.

While housing remains largely a national competence, the Committee calls for a stronger EU role through cohesion policy, improved coordination of funding tools, innovative financial models and greater engagement with local authorities, NGOs and civil society. It welcomes initiatives such as the Housing Task Force and the European Affordable Housing Plan but calls for broader stakeholder involvement.

The opinion also supports an EU-wide framework defining affordable housing in all its forms to give investors certainty and enable policies to address diverse regional needs. Looking ahead, the EESC wants housing investment to be a strategic priority in the post-2027 cohesion policy, with a focus on climate-resilient, sustainable homes.

It also recommends revisiting State aid rules, broadening financial instruments and redirecting unused national recovery funds towards housing. Public investment in affordable housing, it argues, should be excluded from EU debt limits.

For the EESC, the message is clear: housing is about fairness, opportunity and Europe's social fabric. Affordable housing must be treated as a fundamental right and a shared responsibility at all levels. (tk)



Financial literacy and capital markets to unlock Europe's wealth

The EESC has adopted two complementary opinions aimed at building a more resilient and financially empowered Europe. By backing the Commission's plan for a Savings and Investments Union (SIU) and calling for a major push on financial literacy, the Committee stresses that integrated markets and citizen empowerment must go hand in hand.

One [opinion](#), led by rapporteur **Petru Sorin Dandea**, supports the Commission's strategy to mobilise Europe's untapped wealth, more than EUR 10 trillion in bank deposits, and channel it into investments for businesses, innovation and infrastructure. The EESC calls for stronger supervision, harmonised tax and insolvency rules, and safe, transparent and cost-effective investment products, alongside a reinforced European Securities and Markets Authority.

The second [opinion](#), by rapporteur **Giuseppe Guerini**, focuses on financial literacy as the missing link for the SIU. With only 18% of Europeans demonstrating a high level of financial literacy, many citizens lack the tools to manage their money, avoid scams and plan for the

future. The EESC sees financial education as a social right and calls for it to be taught in schools, supported through adult education, and targeted at vulnerable groups, young people, the elderly and new entrepreneurs.

The Committee warns that without trust and understanding, citizens will not participate in financial markets. With digitalisation fuelling new risks such as online 'finfluencers' and AI-driven scams, the EESC calls for a clear regulatory framework and stronger action against fraud. Financial literacy is also key to preparing for ageing societies, ensuring people can navigate pensions, long-term care and savings.

Better financial education, the EESC argues, promotes inclusion by reducing inequality and empowering groups often left behind. To measure success, it recommends Key Performance Indicators such as increased retail investment and reduced costs.

In the EESC's view, Europe must invest not only in capital, but also in people. Without financial literacy, there is no inclusion, and without inclusion, the SIU cannot succeed. (tk)



[EESC supports SAFE instrument and calls for a broader EU defence strategy rooted in peace and resilience](#)

At its July plenary session, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) backed new EU proposals to strengthen Europe's defence readiness, while stressing the importance of preserving democratic values and building a long-term strategy for peace.

In a recently adopted [opinion](#), the EESC expresses strong support for the Security Action for Europe (SAFE) Instrument, designed to finance joint defence procurement and reinforce the European defence industry. It urges Member States to make full use of SAFE, underlining its potential to boost investment in European-made technologies, improve security of supply and enhance strategic autonomy.

'EU initiatives on defence industry must urgently strengthen the capacity of the EU and its Member States to safeguard peace and security,' said EESC rapporteur **Maurizio Mensi**.

The SAFE instrument responds to growing geopolitical instability and the urgent need to scale up Europe's defence capabilities in a coordinated and cost-effective way. The EESC stresses that funding should address the most urgent capability gaps while also strengthening the EU's industrial base. High-value, complex systems should be sourced from within Europe to ensure control over product design and long-term adaptability.

The Committee also supports limited third-country participation in joint procurement, restricted to partners with formal defence agreements with the EU. Currently Ukraine, Norway and the UK are explicitly welcome, while wider participation is seen as a risk to Europe's technological independence.

In a second [opinion](#) on the *Joint White Paper for European Defence Readiness 2023*, the EESC calls for broader action beyond SAFE. It highlights the need for a comprehensive EU defence strategy, warning that limited flexibility in national spending rules could create trade-offs between defence investments and essential social policies. Security, it argues, must go hand in hand with democratic resilience.

The Committee therefore urges the EU to accelerate work on a common defence policy with stronger legislation, more funding and closer cooperation with global partners. It also calls for greater involvement of research institutions and more support for SMEs working in the defence sector. Defence readiness must be part of a wider strategic agenda that includes civil infrastructure, digital resilience and social cohesion.

Together, these opinions present a vision of EU defence policy that is pragmatic and forward-looking, focusing on readiness and anchored in peace, democracy and collective responsibility.

Marcin Nowacki, rapporteur for the opinion, concluded: 'With rising threats and war on Europe's doorstep, the EU must act now. Defence is more than weapons – it is innovation, industry and resilience. We must build our own defence technology – supporting industry and research, and cutting red tape.' (gb)



Boosting productivity with a stronger voice for workers

The EESC is calling for stronger trade unions to help Europe close its productivity gap, especially with the United States. In a recently adopted [opinion](#), it argues that productivity is not only about investment in technology and capital, but also about empowering workers, strengthening social dialogue and encouraging workplace innovation.

The EESC emphasises that productivity and wage growth can go hand in hand. Collective bargaining, consultation and worker participation can boost business performance, with trade unions well placed to improve practices and support training.

'By involving workers in shaping decisions, we are not just protecting rights, we are unlocking potential,' said rapporteur **Philip von**

Brockdorff. 'Stronger trade unions can help businesses innovate, reduce absenteeism and retain skilled employees.'

The opinion highlights the positive role of workplace bodies such as works councils, which increase job satisfaction, raise wages and reduce staff turnover. It also calls for closer cooperation between employers, unions and governments a) to develop continuous training and upskilling programmes, particularly in sectors undergoing rapid transformation, and b) to set productivity benchmarks that reflect quality, sustainability and innovation rather than short-term cost savings.

The EESC underlines the fact that unions can contribute directly to fairer wage structures, stable employment and solutions to labour market challenges such as skills mismatches and limited mobility. Recognising their role in supporting workforce adaptation to technological change and digitalisation is vital.

The Committee concludes with a clear message: in today's competitive global economy, workers are not a cost to be reduced, but rather a resource to be valued. Trade unions – through dialogue, participation and partnership – are essential for delivering fair wages, good jobs and sustainable growth. (tk)



EESC urges a rethink of EU law-making in the digital age

The EESC is the first EU body to offer concrete recommendations on using digital tools to improve law-making - an area still plagued by complexity and opacity

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) has issued a set of recommendations to EU institutions on the responsible use of digital tools in law-making.

In an [opinion](#) adopted at its July plenary, the EESC called for the benefits of technologies such as AI and automation to be harnessed to improve transparency and efficiency, while putting strong safeguards in place to prevent discrimination, bias and inaccuracies in the legislative process.

This could significantly enhance legal consistency, reduce single market barriers and administrative burdens and, most importantly, improve compliance and increase trust in public institutions.

‘In the era of cloud computing and AI, it is paradoxical that Europe’s legislative machinery still operates with a mindset reminiscent of Napoleonic times’, said the rapporteur for the opinion, **Alena Mastantuono**.

Over the decades, laws have accumulated, creating unintended bureaucratic burdens and rendering the system increasingly opaque.

Figures show that the EU generates 18 000 pages of new binding legislation every year. It would take the average citizen about 720 hours a year to read all these legal texts – that’s equivalent to two hours per day. In 2022 alone, recurring administrative costs across the EU were estimated at €150 billion.

Ms Mastantuono highlighted that the EESC was the first EU institution to set out how digital tools should be used in making laws: ‘The EESC offers solutions and puts forward recommendations on how the EU’s law-making process should evolve – leveraging digital tools and mapping legal obligations more effectively.’

‘A general review of EU law should be citizen-focused and data-driven. We must ensure that laws remain fit for purpose – for citizens, SMEs and the environment,’ said the co-rapporteur **Tymoteusz Zych**.

The EESC recommended that all new legal acts – be it at EU, national, regional or local level – come with an easy-to-understand and concise summary of what they require. These summaries, written by regulators to ensure accuracy and clarity, would also be formatted to work with digital tools. This would allow artificial intelligence to step in – spotting overlaps, inconsistencies and gaps by connecting related rules and showing how different legal norms interact. The same should be done for existing legislation to make it more accessible to the public.

Another recommendation is to set up a unified, interoperable EU digital platform for law-making, which would centralise texts and metadata, enable real-time consistency checks and encourage the use of harmonised language. (II)



[EESC urges the EU to act for a fair and competitive future for the automotive sector](#)

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) recently adopted an [opinion](#) welcoming the European Commission's Industrial Action Plan, designed to help Europe's automotive industry navigate a period of profound change. The shift to cleaner and more digital vehicles must be managed in a way that protects jobs, supports businesses and ensures no worker or region is left behind.

The automotive sector employs 3.5 million people directly and another 4.5 million in related services, with a trade surplus of nearly EUR 90 billion in 2024. However, it faces rapid technological change, evolving consumer expectations and rising global competition.

'The automotive sector is moving from hardware to software, from mechanics to electronics, and from conventional to electric powertrains. The automotive industry should seize the opportunities of the green and digital transformation of the automotive ecosystem and turn it into a competitive advantage,' said co-rapporteur **Guido Nelissen**.

While the EESC supports the EU's climate goals, it warns that the transition to zero-emission vehicles requires strong social and economic measures. It calls for a European strategy centred on skills development, innovation, infrastructure and the circular economy, with special focus on SMEs, which form the backbone of the supply chain. Large-scale reskilling, backed by EU funds such as the Social Climate Fund, will be vital to avoid disruption. The Committee proposes an EU skills passport and stronger cooperation between industry and education.

Innovation is a key strength of the automotive sector, with 15% of its value added invested in R&D, but Europe still lags behind in software and digital technologies. The EESC therefore calls for more investment in batteries, autonomous and connected vehicles, and common software standards.

It also emphasises the need for better coordination of electrification policies, including faster deployment of charging infrastructure, integration of smart grids and support for the repair and maintenance sector.

The Committee highlights trade pressures, with imports from China challenging EU competitiveness. It calls for stronger trade defence, reshoring of key parts, and sustainable new trade deals. (gb)



Bratislava roundtable brings Youth Test closer to national policy-making

On 29 July, a roundtable in Bratislava brought together youth leaders, policy-makers and civil society to explore integrating the [EU Youth Test](#) into Slovakia's national decision-making. Developed by the EESC in 2024, the Youth Test assesses how legislation affects young people and promotes their structured involvement in policy design. The Youth Test was the focus of a [high-level debate](#) during the last EESC plenary in July.

The event in Bratislava, co-organised by the EESC and the European Parliament's Liaison Office in Slovakia, marked a key step in adapting the EU-level initiative locally. Over 30 participants discussed barriers and opportunities for deploying the Youth Test in Slovak ministries and agencies.

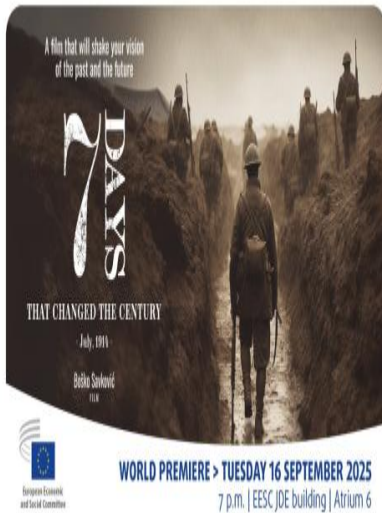
'We must ensure that young people are not just a target group but active participants in the design of future-facing policies,' explained EESC member and co-host of the Bratislava roundtable, **Miroslav Hajnoš**.

'Young people are experts on their reality, and our policies should reflect their lived experience – not only their future, but their present,' said **Lucia Yar**, Member of the European Parliament.

Ján Hrinko, State Secretary at the Ministry of Education, stressed that youth participation enhances policy legitimacy. Civil society leader **Juraj Lizák** praised the Youth Test for deepening cooperation between grassroots organisations and institutions.

The Youth Test is built on three pillars: meaningful consultation, impact assessment and mitigation of negative effects. It has already influenced EU bodies, prompting initiatives like the European Commission's Youth Check. Since its launch, 40 EESC opinions have undergone the Youth Test, with 27 adopted, supported by a network of over 70 youth organisations.

The Bratislava roundtable demonstrated strong engagement, even during summer, reinforcing the relevance of youth participation. Plans are underway for further joint activities to strengthen democratic involvement. (Im)



The EESC offers space for reflection on Europe's past and present through film

On Tuesday 16 September, the EESC hosts the world premiere of the documentary *7 Days That Changed the Century*, directed by Serbian filmmaker and public figure **Boško Savković**.

This powerful and thought-provoking film explores the beginning and the end of the First World War, tracing how decisions made in 1918 continue to shape the world today. Drawing on both historical and newly uncovered documents, Savković presents a compelling narrative that challenges viewers to reflect on the long-lasting legacy of the Great War.

Hosting this world premiere reflects the EESC's continued commitment to promoting dialogue and democratic values, and highlighting European unity. It also aligns with the Committee's efforts to support initiatives that encourage critical engagement with Europe's history and its lessons for future generations. (ck)

NEWS FROM THE GROUPS



Competitiveness on trial: Europe must accelerate the pace of transformation

By Stefano Mallia, President of the EESC Employers' Group

When Mario Draghi delivered his report on European competitiveness last year, he warned: either Europe reforms radically or it drifts into decline. A year on, the question remains: have we changed course?

The Commission has rightly put prosperity and competitiveness at the top of its agenda for 2025. Initiatives such as the Clean Industrial Deal, a European Competitiveness Fund and InvestAI show the Union is responding. Regulation is also being streamlined through six 'omnibus packages', tackling areas from sustainability reporting to defence.

Yet these steps are incremental when compared to Draghi's call for a transformation. The Capital Markets Union has still not been implemented, savings flow abroad and start-ups struggle to scale up. No ARPA-style innovation engine exists and governance reform – essential for faster

decision-making – has been ignored.

Meanwhile, global dynamics are harsher. The USA is turning protectionist, China is intensifying its state-led industrial strategy and wars are fracturing supply chains. Europe risks remaining large but powerless, unable to convert aggregate wealth into influence. Businesses already feel the cost: start-ups depart in search of deeper US financing, SMEs remain fragmented and major firms hesitate to invest. Decline happens not through collapse, but via a steady leakage of capital, talent and opportunity.

The way forward requires acceleration, not hesitation. Four priorities stand out: making competitiveness the guiding principle of policy-making; channelling savings into productive equity; completing the single market; and launching a genuine skills revolution.

President von der Leyen's State of the Union address is the chance to highlight the urgency. Entrepreneurs and investors will look for tangible outcomes: lower administrative costs, easier up-scaling for SMEs and stronger flows of capital into productive investment. Without this shift, strategies alone will not restore confidence.



Europe is burning, and we need the means to tackle it

By the EESC Workers' Group

This summer, the debate on 'preparedness' and 'readiness' has once again been brought down to earth by the harsh reality of wildfires. Beyond the obscure jargon of the EU, hard truths about our societies remain and they concern real, pressing issues.

As of 27 August 2025, [more than one million hectares have burned across the EU, almost five times as much as in 2024](#). Extensive droughts, extreme heat and severe weather conditions have made the already deadly toll of every summer even worse, particularly in Southern Europe, including the deaths of workers and volunteers on the frontlines fighting the fires.

Climate change has already shown its effects, and its impacts are becoming self-reinforcing. The 38.68 Mt of CO₂ emitted from the fires so far is equivalent to more than eight million cars' worth of emissions in one year. This shows once again that climate change policies are not optional – the consequences are already here.

The issue, nevertheless, goes beyond climate change: years of austerity and budget cuts, short-sightedness and political bickering have left EU countries ill-prepared to deal with even normal wildfire conditions (let alone the extraordinary challenges that are alarmingly quickly becoming the norm). [While the solidarity shown at EU level through resource sharing is very positive](#), the level of political fragmentation within Member States, the lack of resources and manpower, and constant political infighting have seriously

weakened the capacity of emergency services to operate.

As climate change worsens and budget debates intensify – particularly around defence expenditure – it is more important than ever to recognise the need for adequate staffing levels and resources for firefighters and all emergency workers. Over and over, they prove vital in times of crisis (as we saw during the pandemic), yet too often they receive only lip service and are forgotten once the crisis passes.

Civil dialogue: new EESC study published

By the EESC Civil Society Organisations' Group

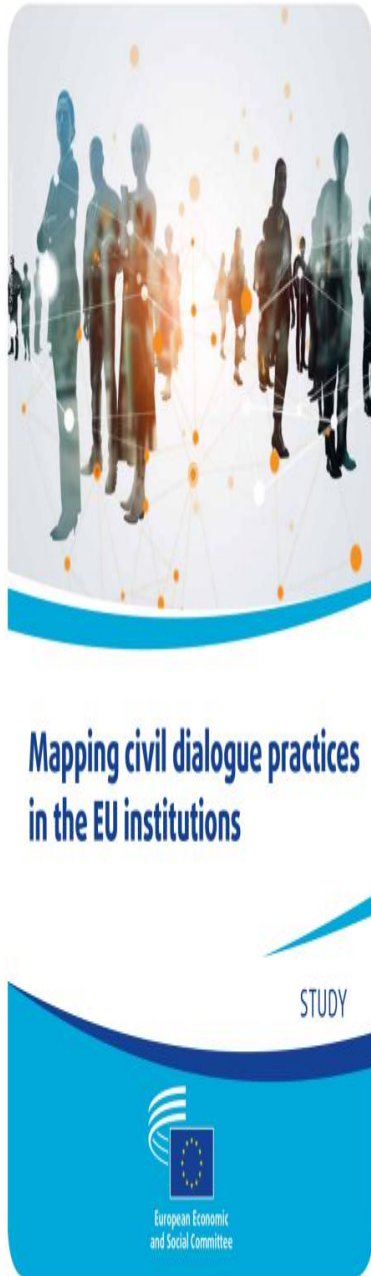
The European institutions should jointly develop unified guidelines for civil dialogue. An interinstitutional agreement could help, for example by assigning distinct roles and objectives to each institution according to its competences. The European institutions must also address capacity issues that prevent civil society organisations and institutions from fully engaging in dialogue.

These are some of the main recommendations of a **new EESC study** on [*Mapping civil dialogue practices in the EU institutions*](#) that was released on 16 July. The study was requested by the [Civil Society Organisations' Group](#) and carried out by the **Centre for European Policy Studies** (CEPS). Two of its co-authors, **Berta Mizsei** and **Timothy Yeung**, presented the study's key findings and recommendations at the launch event.

Séamus Boland, president of the Civil Society Organisations' Group, said his group commissioned the study because an overview of current practice is essential for advancing civil dialogue in an efficient, sustainable and inclusive way at EU level.

The study identifies an increase in civil dialogue over the past 10 years but also that some challenges remain: 'The study on current civil dialogue practice in the EU institutions found that the institutions and their departments still have different understandings of what structured engagement between them and civil society means. They organise civil dialogue differently and, in some cases, there is perceived competition between civil dialogue, direct democratic initiatives and elected representation.'

The study not only takes stock of civil dialogue practice, but it also provides concrete recommendations for next steps. The co-authors, Ms Mizsei and Mr Yeung, said: 'We agree with existing calls for the EU, including the EESC, to settle on a definition of civil dialogue and provide guidelines for implementing it, and that this should lead to an interinstitutional agreement on civil dialogue. The guidelines could be integrated into the Better Regulation toolbox to reflect the unique nature of civil dialogue.' This agreement could also assign roles and objectives



according to each institution's competences and harmonise existing initiatives.

The publication of the EESC study comes at a crucial time. The European Commission has pledged to step up engagement with civil society and better protect civil society in its work during its 2024-2029 term. In addition, civil society faces numerous challenges in the face of geopolitical and socio-economic changes.

Read the full [press release](#) on the study.

The study and an executive summary are available on [the EESC's website](#).

IN FOCUS: INCLUSION



© Homeless World Cup

ONE BALL, A THOUSAND DREAMS – USING THE POWER OF FOOTBALL TO END HOMELESSNESS

[The Homeless World Cup Foundation](#) has been changing lives through football since 2003. Its mission? Using football to support and inspire homeless people to transform their own lives; and to change the attitudes towards people experiencing homelessness. A charity registered in Scotland, it operates a global network of some 70 grassroots organisations whose year-round work culminates in the Homeless World Cup, the landmark women's and men's international street football tournament. The movement, which has so far helped over one million people globally, has served as inspiration for the Netflix film [The Beautiful Game](#).

EESC Info spoke with the co-founder and president of the Homeless World Cup, Mel Young, about this extraordinary movement.

How does the Homeless World Cup use football as a tool for social inclusion, and what kinds of changes have you seen at grassroots level?

The Homeless World Cup uses football as a powerful and universal tool to engage people who are experiencing homelessness or social exclusion. By participating in structured training sessions and eventually in the Homeless World Cup, a global international tournament, players rebuild confidence, develop discipline, reconnect with others and often begin to see a path forward.

At the grassroots level, we've witnessed remarkable changes: individuals recovering from addiction, finding stable housing, pursuing education and securing employment. Many players also return as volunteers, coaches or mentors, helping others on their journey. Football provides a sense of belonging and routine, which is often lacking in the lives of those affected by homelessness.

One of your goals is to challenge public attitudes towards homelessness. Have you seen a shift in perception as a result of your work?

Yes, absolutely. By showcasing the talents, resilience and humanity of people experiencing homelessness, the Homeless World Cup challenges the often-negative stereotypes associated with this issue. When spectators, media and communities see players representing their nations, united through football, it humanises the issue in a unique and powerful way.

We've seen shifts in how local communities, media outlets and policymakers discuss homelessness – moving away from blame and stigma and towards empathy, support and action. The tournament acts as a platform not only for players but also for social change.

Cities Ending Homelessness is an initiative we introduced in 2023 with an ambitious aim – to bring together policymakers, social innovators, those with lived experience and academics from across sectors to discuss how to end homelessness. In Oslo, we held a forum over the 7 days of the tournament.

What kind of support structures are in place for players once the tournament ends? How do you help them stay connected and involved throughout the year?

The tournament is only one part of the broader Homeless World Cup movement. Each member country (team and players) which is part of the Homeless World Cup network works year-round to support players through housing assistance, education, employment pathways, mental health support and addiction recovery programmes.

After the tournament, players often remain connected through local leagues or volunteering opportunities, or by taking on ambassadorial roles. Some return as staff, coaches or part of future delegations at tournaments. The network ensures that participation in the tournament is not the end but a launchpad for longer-term transformation.

Your network relies on a strong civil society backbone. Could you share how local organisations help make participation in the tournament possible?

Local partner organisations in our 70 member countries across the world are at the heart of the Homeless World Cup. They deliver grassroots programmes in their communities, identify and support players, provide coaching and life-skills training, and manage all the preparation involved in sending a team to the Homeless World Cup tournament.

These organisations understand the unique challenges in their local context and ensure that support is sustainable. They are also crucial in maintaining long-term relationships with players and providing continuity well beyond the tournament. Without our member countries and the work they do, the Homeless World Cup simply wouldn't be possible.

Based on your experience, is there anything you believe the EU institutions or the Member States could do to better support inclusive sport initiatives?

Firstly, there needs to be a policy shift in terms of the role of sports as a force for change. Initially, when we started the Homeless World Cup, no one could understand why we were using football as a mechanism for changing the lives of the most marginalised people. Yet we have proved year on year that it has a widespread and qualitative impact. There is plenty of evidence from other NGOs working in the 'sports for development' sector showing how successful this work can be.

Evidence needs to be collected that demonstrates the impact across the sector. Policy then needs to shift so that governments include 'sport and development' initiatives within their plans to tackle poverty and marginalisation.

Secondly, sport needs to be integrated across other departments more widely. Too often, the department become isolated and underfunded because it is seen solely as being about high performance; yet sport has much to offer. For example, it should be part of health departments because, once again, there is plenty of evidence to show that sport encourages people to keep active, which is much better for health and in turn reduces the pressure on overall budgets. Sport should be integral to every aspect of government policy.

Mel Young is a serial social entrepreneur who founded the Homeless World Cup in 2003, along with Harald Schmied. Chair of the Homeless Word Cup, he co-authored the 2017 book [Home Game](#), which tells the story of the movement and went on to inspire the Netflix film *The Beautiful Game*. Passionate about the power of sport to change lives, he has set up various social initiatives over the years.



© Andreas Haubjerg

BE THE PERSON YOU ARE

Diana Magling is the face of the photo exhibition *To Belong* by Danish photographer Andreas Haubjerg, recently shown at the EESC and powerfully capturing the realities of people living with disabilities. Diana is a passionate media contributor at TV Glad, Denmark's first television station run by and for people with disabilities, where she interviews Danish celebrities for the popular programme *En Særlig Samtale* ('A Special Conversation'). Speaking to EESC Info, Diana shared what makes her feel like she 'belongs' and what it takes to make people with disabilities feel heard and understood.

How did you end up working for TV Glad?

At my old school, I wasn't treated well – it wasn't a good place. But then my father found TV Glad, and I've been very happy there ever since.

How did the idea for *En Særlig Samtale* [a series of interviews conducted by Diana - ed.] come about?

There's a media company called Strong Productions that collaborates with the Danish national broadcasting corporation, DR. TV Glad partnered with them and they prepare thoroughly by learning about the person

being interviewed. It's a thoughtful and respectful process.

Were there any interviews during *En Særlig Samtale* that stood out to you?

Yes, several. One that really moved me was with the famous Danish singer Thomas Helmig. He had lost his son six months earlier and opened up about it for the first time during our interview.

Do you think your personality and journey give your interviews a special quality? Do people open up more to you?

Yes, they really do. It makes a difference. I get responses that you don't find elsewhere.

You said TV Glad made you feel like you 'belong'. Should there be more projects like this across Europe?

Yes, a thousand times yes! It would be amazing and so important. Projects like TV Glad help people with special needs be heard and understood.

Would it help bridge the gap between people with special needs and the general public?

Yes, definitely.

Should projects like TV Glad receive more direct support from the EU?

Yes, definitely. I've never seen any clear involvement from the EU in my career. If there was, it wasn't visible.

If you could speak directly to EU leaders, what would you say?

I would tell them to listen to and respect people with special needs. Understanding us better is the most important thing.

You mentioned that people didn't understand your situation at school. Should educational institutions do more to support students with special needs?

Absolutely. I had a lot of anxiety, had two panic attacks and even started losing hair because I wasn't being listened to. Teachers need to understand that some needs aren't visible and they must really listen to their students.

The photo of you in the exhibition is very striking. How does it feel to know so many people will see it?

It's amazing. People come up to me and talk about the picture. It's very emotional, and I'm so happy it will be seen at the EESC.

In the photo, you're hugging someone. What's the story behind it?

That moment was very special. The person I'm hugging has Tourette's syndrome and didn't want to be touched by anyone. But he let me hug him – it meant a lot.

You're a big fan of the Melodi Grand Prix, the Danish competition determining the country's entry for the Eurovision Song Contest. What do you love about it?

It means so much to me! I'm a huge fan of Roberto Bellarosa. I love the music, the costumes – it's a big party, and the party never stops.

Do you think culture plays a role in inclusion for people with special needs?

Yes, it's really important.

Do you feel like you serve as an example now?

Yes, I do [smiles]. But I hope I can be an example for everyone.

What message would you give to someone who feels excluded or has had similar experiences?

Be the person you are. That's it: just be the person you are.

***Diana Magling** is a 24-year-old TV host from Denmark whose work spans journalism, cultural advocacy and inclusive storytelling. Diana has Williams syndrome, a rare genetic disorder. The photo exhibition by Danish photographer Andreas Haubjerg, in which Diana is also featured, will run at the EESC until 19 September. The exhibition was launched to mark the beginning of the Danish Presidency of the Council of the EU.*



The voice of blind and partially sighted people in Europe

200 YEARS OF BRAILLE: A TESTAMENT TO ITS GENIUS AND IMPORTANCE

The year 2025 marks the bicentenary of Braille, a revolutionary invention that continues to empower blind and partially sighted people with literacy, knowledge and independence. Created in 1825 by a 16-year-old blind French boy, Louis Braille, this tactile script of raised dots remains indispensable today, even with all our rapid technological progress. Yet there is still an urgent need to integrate braille more widely into public life and embed it in universal design — from product packaging to transportation and everyday environments. That is why the bicentenary is not only a celebration, but also a call to action, write Reiner Delgado, Judit Gombás and Michal Tkáčik ([European Blind Union](#)).

The bicentenary of Braille in 2025 offers a valuable opportunity, not only to reflect on its immense contribution to the lives of blind people, but also to evaluate how its potential is being used today and how it should be strengthened for the future. Braille is written by hand with a slate and stylus or with a mechanical writing machine; it is also used with modern technologies such as electronic embossers, electronic braille displays and advanced tactile multi-line devices for computers and smartphones. Braille is not only embossed on paper but also printed with UV lacquer or 3D printers, or produced with CNC milling. In its 200th year, Braille presents itself as more flexible and adaptable than ever.

Learning to read and write in braille is just as essential for the cognitive development of blind children as learning print is for sighted children. The crucial difference lies in exposure. Sighted children encounter letters and written words everywhere – on toys, in books, on food packaging, in games and on television. For them, reading is a natural, constant, and almost invisible part of life. It is the foundation of all further learning. In contrast, braille users have very limited access to texts. Braille materials are far less available than print books; product packaging rarely carries braille; and, in most cases, the presence of braille in a child's environment depends to a great extent on efforts undertaken by relatives or specialised institutions.

Using both traditional tools and modern technology, blind children can take part equally in education, blind professionals work as effectively as sighted people – sometimes even more so – and blind people play their role in social and political life. With good training and the support of modern devices, they can access information, create content and communicate in various ways in any area of society.

Making use of all the available channels of perception – reading tactile braille and hearing synthetic speech alongside sight – blind people are nowadays able to work exceedingly efficiently.

Technical development also means that braille has been modernised and updated over the decades. Its use is compatible with electronic devices and it can even be entered speedily on smartphone touch screens.

Blind people use computers and mobile devices with office applications, the internet and social media; they can also produce media with screen reader software and an external braille display. In this way, they can undertake major projects and carry out many different kinds of work.

Braille is also easy to use to enable an inclusive environment, providing information for blind people on pharmaceutical packaging, lift buttons and handrails. Nothing is a faster or more reliable source of information for a blind person than braille that can be touched directly.

The history of braille also shows that national and international legislation can improve everyone's participation in society; inclusive design is a European Union goal in many fields.

Thus the bicentenary of braille is a moment not only to celebrate its importance, but also to call on manufacturers, service providers and policy-makers to recognise its true value. Braille must be integrated into packaging, technical devices, public spaces and transportation systems as part of universal design.

In this way, braille can show its potential for ensuring everyone can fully participate in and contribute to society, politics and the economy. Now that really is a reason to celebrate!

Reiner Delgado (Germany), Judit Gombás (Hungary) and Michal Tkáčik (Slovakia) are members of the European Blind Union's braille Working Group. You can find more information on this topic at the [Euroblind website](#) and on the [livingbraille.eu](#) platform.



INTEGRATING THE MOST VULNERABLE: IT'S A TOUGH TIME FOR EMPATHY BUT WE ARE NOT GIVING UP

Romanian non-profit organisation **Ateliere Fără Frontiere (AFF)** champions both social justice and the circular economy. It gives a chance to marginalised people, such as refugees, Roma or the homeless, to get into the world of work and it does so in an environmentally responsible way. Its longest standing project 'educlick' has been employing vulnerable people since 2008, by having them refurbish used computers and other electronic devices, which are then donated to underfunded schools. In 2021, educlick won them the EESC Civil Society Prize.

In the past four years, AFF has not stood still - educlick went on to expand and the organisation has launched three more integration workshops. AFF's managing director, Cristina Bîcîilă, told us more about her outstanding organisation.

Your project, educlick, earned you the EESC's Civil Society Prize on climate action in 2021. Could you tell us more about the project and how it has evolved since?

educlick is the first workshop Ateliere Fara Frontiere set up back in 2008 to integrate vulnerable people into society by providing them with the professional and emotional support they need to access the labour market. Here they are part of a circular economy model that collects waste of electrical and electronic equipment (WEEE), which is then sorted and directed towards either recycling or refurbishment. The reused devices are then donated to educational institutions in disadvantaged areas.

Winning such a prestigious award has played a big role in our growth, as the EESC's Civil Society Prize stood as a sign of recognition and value for our partners in the private and public sectors.

Since receiving the award in 2021, we have welcomed 56 new colleagues into our work-integration programme, with 26 of them already securing employment in the open labour market or enrolling in educational pathways aligned with their goals. In terms of environmental impact, we estimate that we prevented 720 tonnes of CO₂-equivalent emissions in 2024 alone, thanks to the 4000 refurbished computers we donated to underfunded schools.

As for challenges, the war in Ukraine forced us to adapt quickly. We welcomed vulnerable Ukrainian men and women into our workshops, many of whom faced language barriers. To support them, we brought in Russian and Ukrainian-speaking counsellors to provide tailored assistance.

In your workshops, you employ marginalised people. How many have been given a chance to work with you so far? How do you find them? Do you follow up with them after the project ends? Do you have information on whether working with you has helped them to better integrate into the labour market and society?

So far, more than 300 marginalised people have found support at educlick, most of whom were referred to us by partners offering social services in both the public and private sectors.

At educlick, our colleagues join a multi-step social integration programme: starting with a needs assessment interview, we design a personalised pathway that includes accommodation, stabilisation, professional development and, ultimately, employment in the open market.

After this two-year process, we continue to monitor their progress for at least six months to support their integration. Our goal is to help them become independent and confident in their abilities, ready to enter the job market or pursue education aligned with their long-term goals.

Apart from educlick, what are your other projects through which you employ people from marginalised communities, including refugees? Could you describe one you are especially proud of?

educlick is only one of our four work integration workshops, all of which are designed to offer the best available support for the employment of our vulnerable colleagues:

- ‘remesh’ collects meshes from advertising campaigns and repurposes them into clothing and home products. It is an upcycling model in a workshop that best suits women who are single mothers or victims of domestic violence searching for stability.
- ‘bio&co’ is a farm outside Bucharest where we grow organic vegetables and deliver them weekly to our urban customers to create healthy alternatives to the fast-paced life of the city (‘farm-to-fork’ model). Here our colleagues are mostly people from the local rural community where access to the job market is limited.
- ‘logitetic’ is our latest workshop where we respond to the increasing need companies have for logistics and packing. Here we hire people with disabilities, as the overall workplace is best suited to their needs,

Beyond our daily work in the four workshops, we are particularly proud of the projects we designed specifically for Ukrainian refugees. This was a new experience for us, and being able to act and adapt so quickly is something we're proud of, even though the very context of war goes against everything we stand for. Still, the stories and heroes we've met along the way have left a lasting mark on us and revealed the deeper role we can play in our community.

You are a grassroots organisation working to help vulnerable communities integrate into the labour market in a sustainable and environmentally responsible way. Given the current political climate - especially the rise of right-wing parties and declining concern for the environment - do you observe less solidarity and growing prejudice towards these communities? Has there been any impact on your work? As an organisation working on the ground, what do you think would be a successful recipe for lasting inclusion?

To put it mildly, it's a tough time for empathy. Unfortunately, we have also observed that the most vulnerable tend to be blamed for most of contemporary society's problems.

However, our very foundation was based on acting in times of need: to be a model of coexistence between people who come from different backgrounds, despite all the animosity communities might have towards each other.

Therefore, we continue to do what we have always done: we see ourselves simply as a launchpad helping our colleagues in difficult situations regain their self-confidence and combat the stigmatisation they face by challenging themselves and taking responsibility for their future, choosing not the easiest path, but the most fulfilling one.

Cristina Bîcîlă is managing director at *Ateliere Fără Frontiere*, a Romanian non-profit and social enterprise dedicated to the socio-professional integration of vulnerable people through four social businesses that combine inclusion with circular economy solutions. She is also vice-president of the European Network of Social Integration Enterprises (ENSIE).

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